

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF DEVDASI TRADITION

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION:

Indian society faces a multitude of myriad social problems, which have impeded its around social and economic growth.

'Devdasi' is one such complex problem, caused by the social milieu in which males are domineering and females are subservient. Literally, 'Devdasi' means a "handmaiden of God (or Goddess)". The Devdasi tradition is deeply entrenched in the States like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. These are known by different names in different parts of the country, such as 'Devdasi' (male/female) dedicated to Goddess Renuka (or Yallamma) in South Maharashtra and North Karnataka, 'Potaraj' dedicated to Goddess Laxmi all over Maharashtra, 'Murali' (female) and 'Vaghya' (male) dedicated to God Khandoba in Central Maharashtra, 'Bhavin' or 'Devali' (females) dedicated to numerous local deities in Konkan and Goa, 'Kalavantin', 'Basavi' and 'Kasabin' (all females) in some parts of Maharashtra and 'Naikin' (female) in Uttar Pradesh and South India [1]. In reality, the tradition serves as a large conduit for the supply of new flesh to the country's commercial sex trade.

In antiquity, these young boys and girls were offered to the temples and shrines of Hindu deities, so that they would

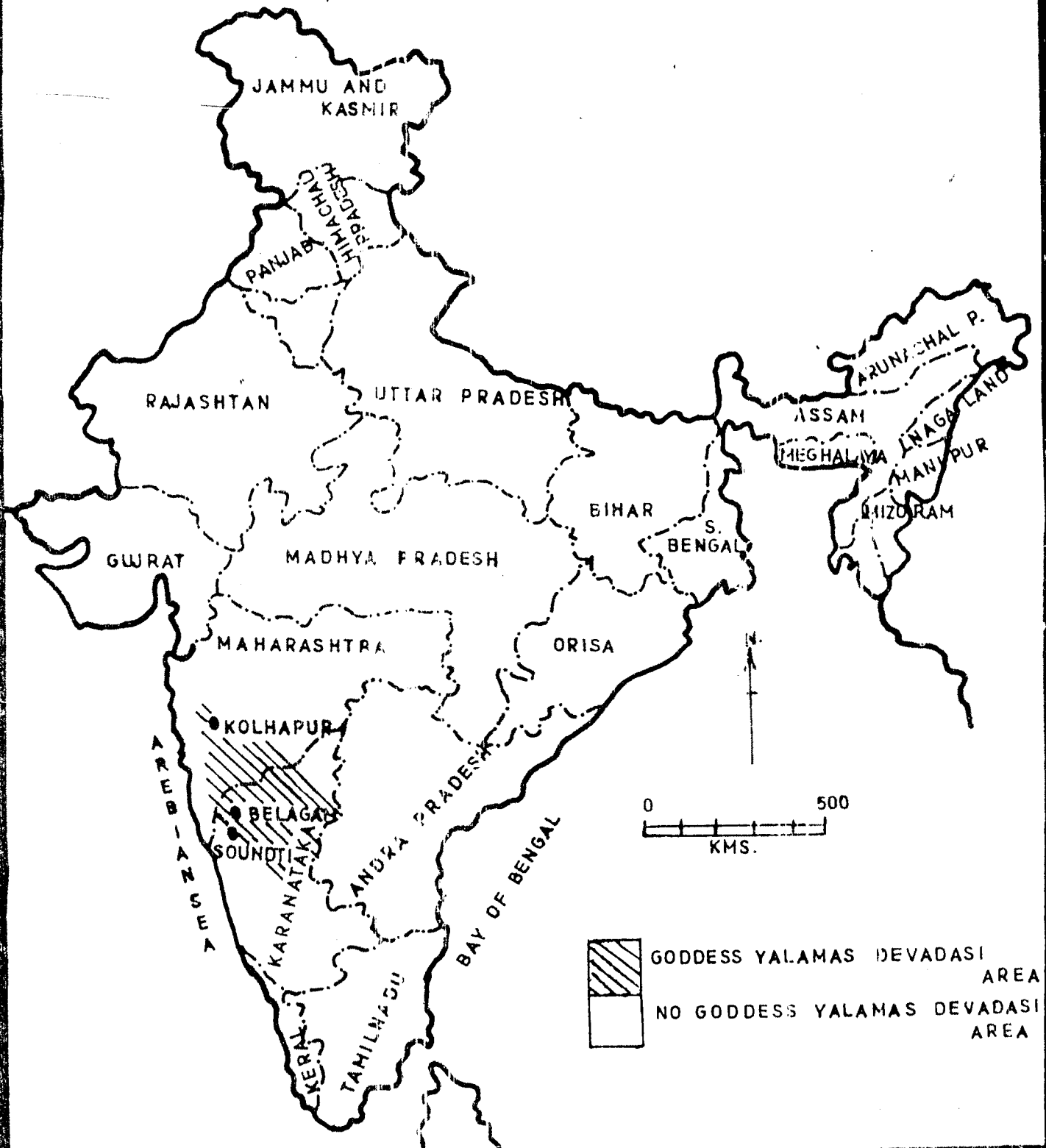
keep the temple premises clean, assist the priest in performing his rituals, look after the comforts of patrons and worshippers when they visited the temple and generally act as servants of God.

With the passage of time, the practice changed into an organized social system and the noble intention of serving the God changed into serving the priests, the patrons and the worshippers. Particularly, the young girls came to be exploited for physical pleasures by all and sundry. Warped minds in the society encouraged the practice as it would ensure free supply of unattached young maidens. Predatory males also were not long in devising ingenious ways for heightening their pleasures: 'Angbhog' (sexually caressing a Devdasi bedecked in fine clothes and ornaments), 'Bangbhog' (enjoying the company of a singing and dancing Devdasi) and 'Shayanbhog' (actually sleeping with a Devdasi).

Generally, the origin of this practice in Kolhapur District of Maharashtra and Belgaum District of Karnataka is traceable to the Shrine of Goddess Renuka (Yallamma) at Soundatti in Belgaum district. Even a conservative estimate shows that the population of Devdasi's in Kolhapur district alone is around 4000 [2] and their number certainly exceeds in Belgaum District. Another estimate shows that every year, about 4000 young girls between the age of 4 and 22 years become Devdasis during Goddess Yallamma's fairs held at Soundatti.

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## YALLAMA'S DEVADASI SYSTEM



It has also come to light that out of 4000 or so new Devdasis every year, about 90% enter the tradition under the pretext of fulfilling the vows taken by their parents; while the remaining 10% become Devdasis under the twin influences of customs like being a daughter of a Devdasi or family tradition of offering atleast one daughter to the Goddess.

Goddess Yallamma's fairs are held twice a year on the occasions of 'Randgunam' (a particular fullmoon day) and 'Mahipunam' (the annual festival and fair time in Southern Maharashtra). The ritual of offering the girl or boy to the Goddess begins with a ceremony in which they are symbolically married off to the Goddess or to her dagger ('Khanjir'). After this marriage, the boy undergoes a symbolic gender change (in rare cases, even a crude castration is performed, using country liquor for sedation and mixture of holy ash and herbs for healing the wound). While the female is called 'Devdasi', the male is called 'Jogata'. These terms, however, are interchangeable; a 'Jogata' is sometimes called a 'Devdasi' and a female 'Devdasi' called a 'Jogatin' - feminine form of 'Jogata' [3]. The Devdasi life begins with the oath that thenceforth, she will maintain herself and her dependents strictly with the begging of 'Jogwa' with the help of a 'Paradi'. A Devdasi is forbidden for marrying any other young man or woman after the ritual marriage to the Goddess Yallamma, but as a temporal and moral support, she is allowed to taken in one or two male companions without formal marriage. She is also made to wear a 'Darshan' (a white and

red glass bead necklace), which is symbolic of her availability to anyone interested in free sex.

Soon after her initiation and whether or not she has come off the age, a female Devdasi must sexually gratify the male worshippers of the Goddess. Some even pay her handsome money for her deflowering and maintain her until an agent of the flesh trade buys her off and send her to the brothels in cities like Bombay or Calcutta to carry on the oldest profession in the world. Later on, when she has lost her charms and beauty, she returns to her home village and works there as an 'Akka' (supplier of young girls to the commercial sex trade). Occasionally, when it serves her demonic purposes, this 'Akka' [4] pretends to be a 'possessed' woman and a medium for delivering the Goddess's messages to the worshippers. Through this trick, she catches young girl in the village by telling her parents that the Goddess wants their daughter to become a Devdasi [5]. This is how the cycle of bringing in young girls into the Devdasi tradition goes on and every year, thousands of innocent young girls become Devdasis to satisfy the male lust, all in the name of the Goddess.

In another twist, even the unborn babies are pledged as Devdasis by their parents because of a vow taken to evade some calamity or for obtaining fulfilment of a certain wish.

## 1.2 DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF A FEMALE 'DEVDAASI':

There are certain features by which male and female Devdasis are identified. The following features identify a female

Devdasi in Kolhapur District:

1. Jat (a thickened bunch of hair):

In the superstitious atmosphere of villages, a girl or a woman who grows a 'Jat' in her hair must necessarily become a Devdasi. The 'Jat' appears because of unkempt hair and unclean habits, but it is interpreted as a summons from the Goddess to become a Devdasi. Other Devdasis in the village frighten the girl's parents that if the girl is not offered in marriage to the Goddess, the whole family would be destroyed under a curse from the Goddess. After becoming Devdasi, the 'Jat' is purposefully cultivated and made into a thick wad of all the hair on the head and bandied around proudly. From body hygiene point of view, this sticky, smelly, dirty and muddy wad of hair is crawling with the lice and bacteria, giving rise to skin diseases and mental agony. Those men who still wish to have a sex with the doomed woman must have really perverted minds.

2. Darshan (a necklace of white and red glassbeads)

A proclaimed Devdasi wears a 'Darshan' around her neck. As already stated, this announces her availability for sex.

3. Paradi (a small hand-held bamboo basket):

Devdasi uses this as a begging bowl. The Paradi carries in it the metal idols of Goddess Yallamma and a small cloth pouch with twin compartments, one containing yellow turmeric powder and another red Kumkum. She accepts money, pounded rice or the available grain as an alm and liberally applies turmeric powder on the giver's forehead.

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4. Jag (a large bamboo basket carried on head):

This too is a begging basket and contains sever or more small metal idols of assorted Gods, a dried cobra head and one large idol of Yallamma. The alms received are put in this basket.

5. Suti Choundak (a chord musical instrument):

While beginning, Devdasi carries this under her left armpit and beating time with right hand fingers, sings devotional songs praising the Goddess.

6. Jogawa (Begging):

Jogwa is the traditional right of a Devdasi. As per her oath taken before the Goddess, she must maintain herself by begging only. On reaching the door of the would-be almsgiver, she hollers 'Akkandi Jogwa', meaning "continuous begging". The yell is associated only with the Devdasis and not with other beggars. An unattached Devdasi may beg throughout the week, but a housewife Devdasi would beg only from five houses each on Tuesdays and Fridays, the days marked for the Goddess.

7. Bhandara (Turmeric Powder):

Bhandara is another name for the turmeric powder, which Devdasi applies to the forehead of the almsgiver.

8. Observances:

Devdasis generally observe Tuesdays and Fridays by begging, as the days of the Goddess. Some of them also do a fast on these days.



A DEVADASI WITH A WELL FORMED  
' JAT '



A BAMBOO ' PARADI ' WITH RICE  
AS ' JOGAWA '

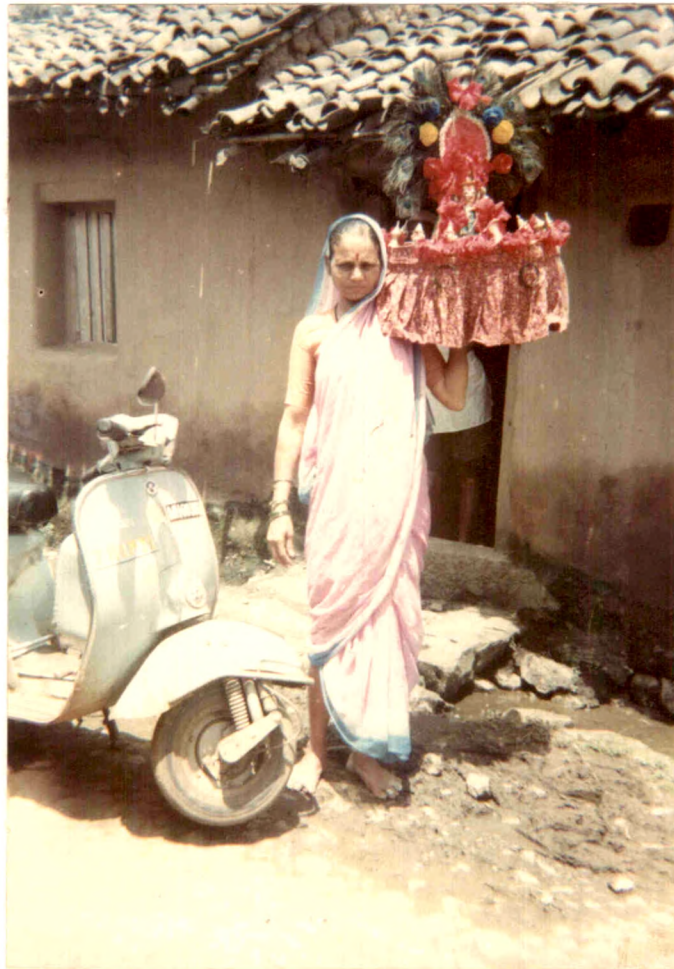


A YOUNG DEVADASI WITH  
A ' PARADI ' IN HER HAND





A PICTURE OF A ' JAG ' OF  
GODDESS YALLAMMA.



AN ADULT DEVADASI WITH  
A ' JAG '



THE PICTURE OF ' SUTI & CHOUNDAKA '  
A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT OF DEVADASI.



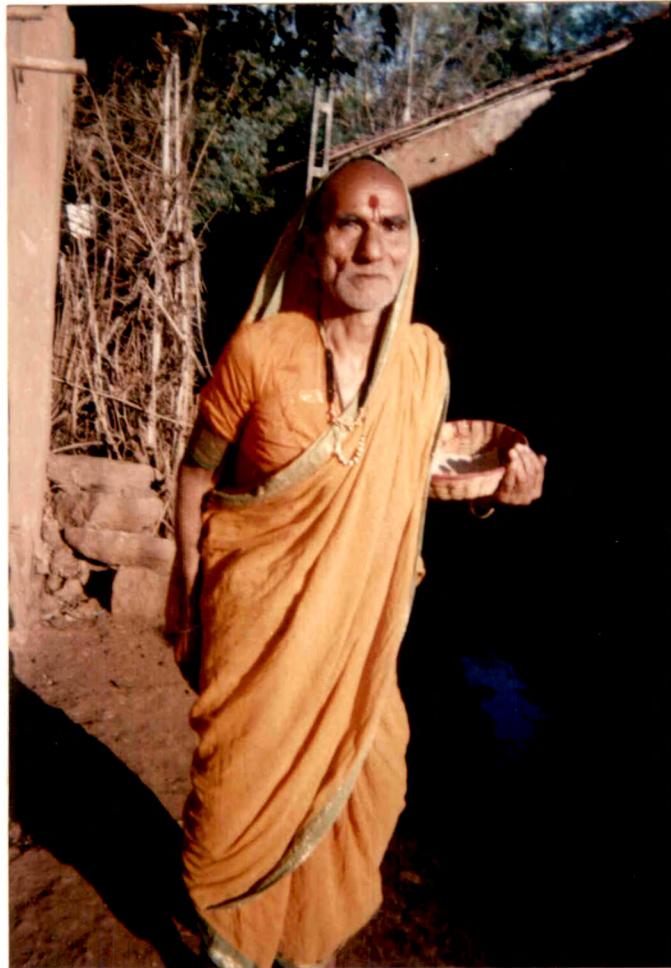


A SHRINE FOR THE IDOL OF 'YALLAMA'  
AND OTHER GODS AND GODDESSES.





A ADULT ' JOGATA '



A OLD 'JOGATA' WITH 'PARADI'

9. Possessed:

Some female Devdasis put on a show of being possessed on certain occasions and days. When in trance, they prophesize about future events concerning a person. Superstitious people accept these as pronouncements uttered by the Goddess herself.

1.3 DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF A MALE 'JOGATA'

All the distinguishing features that appear in a 'Devdasi' are found in a 'Jogata' also. Some features, however, are particular to them. These are being described below:

1. Use of Sari:

A male becoming a Jogata is made to wear a sari at the time of his initiation, which he continues for his life.

2. Feminine Gestures:

A Jogata tries to behave like an accomplished woman and overdoes his gestures and facial expressions. He also pretends to be attracted (or may be really is attracted) towards men. In any case, alongwith his sari and pretended femininity, he really is a pathetic figure.

3. Liberal Use of Cosmetics:

Jogatas overuse facial cosmetics to hide facial hair and shaving marks as also different skin creams on hands and feet to soften it up.

4. Menstruation:

Due to acutely developed female psyche, a few Jogatas claim that they too undergo menstruation - an anatomical impossibility.

5. Change in Name:

Many Jogatas change their original male names and only respond to an adopted female names.

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