



## *Cast-'e'ing* the Body - Devadasi Self Narratives

A study by  
Sakhi Trust  
Dhaatri Trust



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We dedicate this study to the Devadasi women who were participants of this research and to all the Devadasi women who are raising their collective voices for eradicating this exploitative practice.

With sincere thanks to all,

Dr.Bhagyalakshmi, Sakhi Trust, Hospet  
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## ***Cast-'e'ing the Body - Devadasi Self Narratives***



### **Chapter I: Introduction:**

The history of the Devadasi institution, the problems of Devadasi women and the social reform demanded of Devadasi women have been a subject of extensive research. Its relevance to the forms of South Indian art and the characteristics of the Devadasi institution became the focus of many a research project in colonial and post-colonial academic writings from the various angles of the theological, sociological, literary and feminist genres. The majoritarian social construct of monogamy as the legitimate brought the need for correcting the social deviance in the institution of the Devadasi practice through social reform and constitutional protections. While the lobbies for reform went so far as to ensure a legal ban in many states of India, confronting the complexities through the rigour of law and social reconfiguration have been irreverent to the women who stand accused of dismantling propriety. Identifying the suffering around the invisibility of the banned practice, civil society and academic groups working on ground interventions as well as policy recommendations have again renewed the advocacy for bringing seriousness into state accountability instruments and societal consciousness. Today, research and policy recommendations for addressing the problem are being put forth, with greater perseverance.

Working with women and their children from Devadasi families is an emotional challenge. This study started as a living project to bring a convergence in the lobbying and advocacy for the rights of Devadasi women and their children, not only in presenting the complex problems faced by them, but also in presenting these problems from the lived experiences and self-referential perspectives of the women themselves. As Devadasi women have never had the opportunity to write their own stories, this research is an attempt to bring the self-narratives of Devadasi women and their sons and daughters into the public sensitivity. As a civil society platform working with the women directly, the narratives of the women we have been hearing as part of our work vastly differ from the societal prejudices and patronizing interventions of the state. We have often heard bitter and humiliated responses from these women and children who are ridiculed and chastised for their aberrant behavior. Therefore, we wanted to unpack these experiences of 'aberrant behaviour' by co-authoring this self-representational research that is largely based on first person narratives of the women themselves. This research brings the voices of these angry, anguished and much maligned women into the public domain in order to challenge and to dialogue on the current politics of development economics and social exclusion.

### **Purpose of the study:**

The study began as part of the community project of Sakhi Trust, an NGO that was founded with the purpose of preventing children of Devadasis from being dedicated and helping them through long term educational, emotional and economic support. Dhaatri Trust, as a working partner of Sakhi, took the lead in undertaking this research as part of our collaborative efforts to lobby on legal rights and state accountability. Working since the year 2007, Sakhi has supported several youth and children through multiple interventions from the framework of a feminist approach to understanding the intersections of caste, gender and the economics of feudal and neo-feudal patriarchies. These ground level strategies of interventions for the prevention of dedication in a few villages of Hospet taluka of Bellary district in Karnataka, were initiated from the realities of lived experiences of Devadasi women and their children.

Yet, the persistence of the institution in the backdrop of the transitions from the feudal to the mining economy that dominates Bellary district has posed complex challenges, despite these interventions. This experience of working with a large community of Devadasis and their families opened up a dialogue with the women whose social exclusion and sexual exploitation have been invisible and misrepresented, especially with respect to policy and governance approaches. State interventions are found to take an approach of denial and underplay the prevalence of this deeply entrenched institution which continues to be practiced both overtly and covertly. Public opinion appears to be largely based on societal prejudices that posit the women as a scar and a threat to the stability and values of the institution of marriage. Efforts to address this gender based exploitation therefore, are often found to be located in fragile and prejudicial welfare approaches that not only steal the dignity of the women but have scorned the evidence of a persisting institution of abuse. The critical question is, why this institution persists in certain regions and among certain feudal structures even today, despite the larger society considering it a social stigma and the state instruments declaring it illegal.

The study attempts to understand the contemporary social compulsions where young girls are today forced into dedication and to identify the fractures in the systems and agencies, whether public, private or political, that surround these girls and continue to fail them. State and public discourse on the women's body as an instrument of social anarchy rather than as an entity that has been used and abused for social convenience and social paranoia (whether of cosmic or spirit wrath or of paranoia of morality) more than in the historical past, needs to be challenged today. It speaks of a history of appeasement of the gods through sacrificing and offering animals and women. The obsession for atonement of social evils and mischief through ways that attack the most vulnerable- sacrificing dalit women (through sexual abuse) continues in the contemporary psyche of patriarchal licentiousness.

Today, the lobbying for policy changes and legal accountability, in collaboration with several other civil society and academic institutions in the state of Karnataka, is confronted with political resistance to implementing legally effective administrative and regulatory mechanisms for punitive and preventive actions. Further, social prejudices against the Devadasi rooted in patriarchal concepts distract rather than address the causality of perpetration.

This study was conceived with the purpose of putting the Devadasi in the centre of the narrative rather than in the centre of accusation so that tools for justice emerge from the cause of the problem rather than from the victim. The focus of the research is to address the contemporary challenges, factors contributing to its prevalence and understanding of the current politics of caste and resource economics that implicate dalit women as offenders of sexuality. The study brings out these stories at a juncture when the civil society in Karnataka is engaging with the governance institutions for effective rules and regulatory systems for eradication of the practice. These stories are intended not as a display of pathos and victimization but as a first person evidence of patriarchal crimes and an urgency to call for state accountability beyond welfare incentives.

The stories are a compendium of Devadasi self-narratives and voices of lived experiences in Hospet taluk of Bellary district where one finds this system actively practiced despite the Karnataka (Prohibition of Devadasis) Act, 1982 (KPSA). It is located in the present socio-political dynamics of a region that witnessed historical extremes of prosperity evident even today in the ruins of the Vijayanagara empire, and the economic boom and collapse more recently witnessed through the plunder of illegal mining. The narratives tell us about the conveniences of patriarchy in re-crafting and re-defining culture and religion of neo-liberal Hinduism which astonishingly universalizes patriarchy and conveniently overlooks the trespassing over the dalit woman's body which remains an object of caste convenience.

### **Methodology of the study:**

This is a qualitative research based on the self-narratives of Devadasi women and their children. It was perceived that the current dynamics of the Devadasi institution can be understood better through a micro level study of the prevailing conditions and challenges at the community level. Therefore, this study tried to capture ground realities of the social dynamics from the standpoint of Devadasi women. The study brought the Devadasi women themselves as the principal participants and researchers through documenting almost two hundred self-narratives of personal lives and perspectives that are representative of their problems in Hospet taluka and that determined the ideological framework of this research. The core research team was formed from the daughters and sons of the Devadasis who tried to move between the realms of being the insiders as well as the third person interviewers in order to facilitate an atmosphere of privacy and confidentiality in the conversations with the women. Some of these interviews were structured interviews and some were anecdotal narratives of lived experiences. Group discussions with elderly Devadasis, adolescent sons and daughters of Devadasis who are also members of Sakhi community youth groups, and group discussions with the animators and staff of Sakhi Trust were used as first and second person narratives of the challenges, anxieties, demands and aspirations on legal safeguards and social change. The action research was conducted in 12 villages of Hospet taluka – Kadirampura, Basavandurga, Papanayakahalli, Karignoor, Naganahalli, Malpangudi, Bailwudgeri, Tallur, Danapur, Kondanayakanahalli, Anantasayanagudi and Kampli that were mainly chosen due to the villages falling within the geographical area of the work of Sakhi Trust.

Participants were selected based on their voluntary interest in sharing their life stories in these villages. Identifying older Devadasis as participants in the study was not difficult due to the

physical appearance and rituals they perform and also due to their active participation in Sakhi collectives. Younger Devadasis were more difficult to identify as they do not practice customary rituals and attire themselves like any other married women instead of having the 'muttukattu' and matted hair. Some of them are active in Sakhi workshops and field programmes which helped in inviting them to participate in the study. They were also approached through informal acquaintanceship based on the information from the field animators of Sakhi. Self-narratives included interviews recorded by the children of Devadasi women. Interviews included open ended as well as guided questions. The subject being sensitive, the interviews were conducted after intensive training given to the field researchers on issues of ethics. The language, terminologies and drafting of questions, scheduling of interviews, physical environment while conducting interviews to ensure that privacy was maintained, prior permission and discussion with the women for recording their narratives, anonymity in research participants, and boundaries of enquiry into the private and personal lives, especially with respect to partner details and sexual abuse, were strictly maintained. The interviews were transcribed by the field researchers and translated with the help of volunteers. No photographs were taken of the women participants. Rituals were documented only from a distance. Focus group discussions with the sons and daughters of Devadasis were conducted after their permission was taken and exclusively with their peer group with whom they were comfortable in sharing their experiences.

Anonymity of the narrators is maintained throughout – of the Devadasis and their children who shared their stories. This has limitations in disclosing or extracting some information that would strengthen the arguments and perspectives, yet it is essential to the rights of privacy. Information and perspectives were also drawn from the team of field researchers from Sakhi who participated in the state level study on the status of Devadasi women led by National Law School, Bangalore. Some of the information is drawn from the interventions and first hand experiences of the staff and animators of Sakhi who live and work in the community and witness the intersections of caste, economic and gender based violence. Interviews were also conducted with counsellors and professional psychiatrists who have been advisors to Sakhi on clinical counselling and rehabilitation of the women and their children. A major challenge is the enumeration of Devadasi population as accurate data is not available with the government, even at the panchayat level. Hence, village level data was mainly based on the head count by the Devadasi women themselves and by the field staff of Sakhi. Stories were also collected from the youth workshops conducted by Sakhi during the period of this study, which included youth from neighbouring districts.

Secondary data was mainly based on the historical evidence of Devadasi practices, theories of culture, art and religions and the colonial and post-colonial interventions on law and practice. Secondary information also covered the data and schemes related to state interventions, reports, law and policy documents, NGO reports related to Devadasi rehabilitation and protection and basic statistics on the socio-economic indicators for Bellary district.

### **Numbers - a shocking revelation!**

On the one hand, it is impossible to get an accurate or even a guesstimate of the number of women who are forced to live as Devadasis. Officially, the records are predictably outdated as there is a

deliberate denial from state institutions responsible for the protection of women regarding the status of Devadasi practices. It is assumed that numbers have dwindled and that there are no Devadasi dedication cases since the enactment of the law which bans the practice. Hence, official enumeration is flawed and inaccurate if we were to merely estimate the numbers based on pensions and identity cards in official records. Therefore, this research had to largely rely on the Devadasis' own head counts of their population in their respective villages to help throw some light on the enormity of the practice.

Numbers mentioned from the women's narratives:

- *I think there are 30 or 40 Devadasis in our group in this village*
- *There are around 50 or 60 Devadasi women in this village.*
- *We have a group –about 30 Devadasis, we have a cooperative;*
- *We were told that there are more than 300 Devadasis in Kamalapura village alone*
- *There are 12 women in my colony who are Devadasis and 5 of them are living in my street alone, but I think there are many more in the village as I cannot count;*
- *In my village there are 33 Devadasi families and 3 of them already died.*
- *In my village there are 20 or 30 Devadasis, some are very young*
- *There are around 25 Devadasis in this village, 2 are dead. There are 5 old Devadasis and the rest are middle aged or young.*
- *In my village Danapura, I think we are more than 87 Devadasis*
- *We are 10 Devadasis in my query<sup>1</sup>- we all go to temple together and do ritual*
- *Last time I went to meeting there were 27 Devadasis in our group, but now they tell me there are only 21 left-some people died*

These casual references to numbers by the Devadasis themselves, present a glimpse into the alarming nature of a custom that continues to defy legal prescriptions and public scrutiny. In Karnataka the practice is reported even today in 14 districts with some districts indicating alarming numbers and challenges - Raichur, Bijapur, Belgaum, Dharwad, Bellary, Gulbarga, Koppala, Kalburgi, Shivmoga, Davanagere, Bagalkot, Gadag, Chitradurg and Yadagiri.

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<sup>1</sup> Dalit/SC colony is usually referred to as query in Hospet

Table 1: Statistics of Devadasi Population in Karnataka - According to Government Records of Devadasi Mothers located in the 14 districts of Karnataka

Sl. No.	District	Number of Devadasi Mother's
1	Belagavi	4724
2	Vijayapura	4103
3	Bagalakote	7827
4	Raichur	3949
5	Koppala	6035
6	Haveri	990
7	Gadaga	2900
8	Bellari	9733
9	Kalburgi	1445
10	Yadagiri	1169
11	Chitradurga	406
12	Shivamogga	24
13	Davanagere	2592
14	Dharavada	769
Total		46666

Source: Karnataka

In our current research sites, we were informed of the high prevalence of the custom in villages like Kamalapura, Papinayakanahalli, Karignoor, Malpangudi, Danapura, Bailwudgiri and Nagenahalli, most of which are also villages which have the mining dependent daily wage labour from the landless dalits. Kamalapura and Hampi on the other hand, have a higher number of sex workers, considering the location of the tourism industry here. It is, however, incorrect to assume that sex workers are from Devadasi families alone, although some may have made the shift to sex work in the backdrop of the sex trade demands posed by tourism in Hampi.



## Chapter II: Background and History



### **A Journey into an artless institution- tracing the contemporary myths of the Devadasis**

Devadasis are women who were, in ancient Indian cultural practice, dedicated to God and dictated to remain unmarried in order to serve the temple and the patrons of these temples to which they were dedicated. Historical records of the prevalence of the Devadasi institution report that it may have existed in several countries in varying forms and roles of art, religion and sexuality. References to temple dancers/courtesans/ are found in Tamil literature dating back to around 1000 AD (Anandhi 1: 1991 ) and some date it to the fifth and sixth centuries A.D, at the beginning of the medieval period in Indian history (Prasad 1: 99). The Devadasi institution has been historically traced to the Hindu tradition of temple management that combined bhakti, art and sexuality. Women dancers/courtesans whose responsibilities included performing rituals, dancing, singing and religious ceremonies were dedicated to temples and were said to have received patronage from upper caste, royal or princely families for these services. In South India, the Devadasi institution is believed to have been promoted broadly during three main periods: the rule of the Pallavas and Pandyas, the Cholas and, by the Vijayanagara empire (Kersenboom 41: 1984).

However, the Devadasi institution may also have existed in other forms in pre-Aryan and pre-Vedic religious practices among the Dravidian people in South India in the form of worship to Matangi/Mathamma that many Devadasis draw their origin from (Elmore 22: 1915; Thurston 130: 1909). While the conquest of the Dravidians was politically victorious for the Aryans, religious domination was not so complete. Strong elements of Dravidian deities and worship were supposed to have been integrated into the Brahmanical form of Hindu religion with a blurring of boundaries between the two (Elmore 15: 1915) (Gazetteer of Madura District I, 84) (Gazetteer of South Arcot I pg94). These reports show that the integration of these two cultures encompasses the present modern form of Hinduism in South India as an amalgam including pre-vedic Dravidian animism, village deities, and the later religious movements (Elmore 1915; Whitehead 1925). So also, the history of the Devadasi institution and dedication practices which some trace to the Mohenjodaro times, emerged in its different roles of animism, temple worship, sexuality and religious superstitions overlapping into the gendered domains of exploitation, sentiment and culture.

*“In connection with the Basavi system, it is recorded, in the Madras Law Report, 1892, that "upon the whole, the evidence seems to be to establish that, among the Madigas, there is a widespread*

*custom of performing in the temple at, a marriage ceremony, the result of which is that the girl is married without possibility of widowhood or divorce” (Thurston, 131:1909)*

The religion of the Dravidians is said to have evolved from worship of nature/animism and village deities and spirits who were largely represented by several female deities or Shaktis (Elmore 18: 1915) in contrast to the Vedic exoticism of Gods as descending from celestial abodes. Dravidian life revolved around agriculture and the deities were mainly female, given that the feminine was symbolic of fertility, reproduction and agriculture (Whitehead 15: 1921). Further, it was surmised that Dravidian priests were mainly female as they could easily enter the spirit of the deities or communicate with the female deities to propitiate them (Whitehead 15: 1921). A close association was drawn between the female cosmic power, Shakti, and the role of women inducted into performing rituals at the village shrines in the notion of insulating society from evil forces. The principal objective being appeasement of deities whose wrath was believed to be the cause of calamities (Elmore 23: 1915) like drought, diseases like small pox or cholera, cattle deaths or human deaths, the Devadasis were instructed to play the interceptor. Hence, the role of the female priests/Basavis/Devadasis was to protect the villagers from the fury of the goddesses.

These other genres of research on religions in South India indicate the origin of the Devadasi institution to an irrevocable blending of the Dravidian and Aryan religious practices and beliefs where young girls from the Madiga caste were selected for the appeasement of Mathamma who may bring evil into the village (Elmore 23: 1915). Colonial researchers who documented the history of India through tracing religions and religious practices demonstrate that Devadasis as custodians of art and dance could have been vastly different from the Madiga women who were ordained to act as social cleansers for purification of societal sins (Whitehead 46: 1921) more than to entertain. These narratives spoke of Devadasis who came from lower caste Madiga families but without much of the talents or arts and with no patronage from rich families. These different narratives link the origin of the Devadasis, not in reference to the prominence given to illustrious temple dancers who may have also come from the lower classes, but not exclusively from the Madiga caste.

Dravidian deities are generally considered to be a pantheon of seven sisters who were worshipped in different hierarchies of prominence and context. Of these the names of Renuka and Matangi are often associated with Devadasi rituals and history in many South Indian states. Especially the latter, Ellamma, or Matangi or Mathamma were considered as the deities of the Madigas and this practice demonstrates a medley of the Dravidian and Brahmanical worship (Elmore 28: 1915). Young girls were called upon to perform dances during the Ellamma jatara, and the girl who became possessed by the goddess during this festival was declared a Matangi by the Brahmin, and rituals were performed to officiate her role (Elmore 24: 1915). This elaborate ritual is considered as some form of marriage and henceforth, as a license for ‘leading a life with no moral restrictions’ (Elmore 24: 1915; Thurston 130: 1909). This Dravidian form of Devadasi dedication does not indicate any specific caste reference in earlier records and perhaps, the convergence of the Hindu-Dravidian practices when the Brahmins took over the ceremonies of initiating the Matangis brought an emphasis on the Madiga girls being declared as Matangis.

There are several mythological permutations to the reference of the origin of the Matangi or Ellamma practice. These folklore are narrated by the Devadasi women in the research villages who consider Yellamma/Mathamma as their patron goddess. As documented in the archival texts, the Devadasis narrate the story of Renuka, wife of Jamadagni, a rishi, endowed with supreme powers of vision. The attempts to disrupt her virtuous repute by Vishnu who distracted her on her way to meet her husband Jamadagni, brought his suspicion on her. Wanting to punish her for her deviance and on suspicion of her chastity, he orders his sons to behead their mother. When they decline his orders, each of them is cursed along with their mother. Jamadagni's instructions are obeyed by his youngest son, Parasuram who beheads her but the chaste mother's head multiplies quickly and gets scattered in several places turning into shrines and which later came to be worshipped as the temples of Ellamma/Matangi/Mathamma. The other sons of Renuka who refused to kill their mother were said to have become the first devotees of Ellamma (Thurston 129: 1909).

Another interesting variation of this story is of the Brahmin Renuka who is accompanied by her female slave from the Madiga caste, to fetch water from the river. Parasurama, upon instructions from his enraged father beheads his mother and along with her, her slave, by accident. He later tries to get a boon from Jamadagni to restore life to both the women but by accident, reverses the heads of the women where the slave woman's head is attached to the Brahmin woman's body, and Renuka's to the Madiga woman's body (Elmore 101: 1915). Jagmadagni is supposed to have accepted the restored body of the woman having his wife's head and provides a secondary place to the latter. Yet another mythology traces the Matangi to the legend of Renuka who, on being beheaded, falls in the house of a Madiga and the lineage henceforth came to be known as children of Matangi (Thurston 129:1909).

These references to mythology not only provide glimpses into the origins of religious rituals in South Indian society but also to the social stratification and hierarchies of caste since the domination of the Brahmanical practices of Hinduism. The Aryan invaders who considered these (Dravidian) wild forms as barbaric, tried to exert their political and religious dominance (Elmore 15:1915). The domination of modern Hinduism with the merger of the Dravidian customs formed a rigid hierarchy of caste that was broken through occasional licenses given to the Madigas as, perhaps, a means of neutralization of sins. They also provide glimpses into the probability of fear and superstition experienced consciously or unconsciously by the Brahmanical caste for their oppressive practices, where they allowed themselves to be addressed in the most obscene forms of curses to the extent of Matangi women spitting on them during religious ceremonies, to absolve them of their sins. The mythological story of the rishi Jamadagni and his acceptance of the half Brahmin-half Madiga as his wife seems to provide an excuse for the selective nature of caste hierarchies. Whereas the Madigas are considered untouchable, the sexual abuse of Madiga women is condoned through religious legalization. The mythology of Renuka, the Brahmin wife, being considered unchaste just by her mere distraction through glancing at a Gandharva, calls for a severe punishment. Whereas the creation of a sexual license for Brahmin and upper caste men, using the same mythology of Renuka's conversion into Matangi is demonstrably gendered in its prescriptions of sexual privileges, drawing caste hierarchies in its gendered sexual obligations demanded of lower caste Madiga women as well as of Brahmin women.

Yet, the more popular image of Devadasis is inducted from the history of the Hindu kingdoms, where the role and performances of the Devadasis seem to have been strongly influenced by the politico-religious contexts dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. It was found that in medieval South Indian history, the shift in domination of religions from the earlier Jainism and Buddhism to a merger of the Tamil Dravidian deities with the Indo-Aryan Brahmanical worship (Kersenboom 42: 1953) also brought about a convergence of the symbolism of Nityasumangali<sup>2</sup>. Association with the temples and glorification of the kings and their warfare played a central role in the music and dance forms of these women dedicated to God. As Brahmanical Hinduism gained ground in the medieval period of agricultural and feudal prosperity, the emphasis on social and moral obligations led to patronage of temples by the royalty and feudal landlords (Prasad 129:1999). The political scenario of warfare seems to have given way to more subdued forms of artistic and poetic patronage where the Devadasi services were brought into the centrality of the temple under the rich patronage of the Pallava-Pandya dynasties. Girls as young as 12 or 13 years of age were conferred with this role and descriptions of their beauty and ornamentation demonstrate the wealth and indulgence with which they received patronage (Domingo Paes 70: 1520). Thus, their role became deep rooted in the rituals and festival celebrations of the Hindu kingdoms where the imperial court and the temple were parallel centres of power (Domingo Paes 70:1520). Each kingdom and the king's palace had several hundreds of Devadasis, who were hierarchically organised with varied nomenclatures and arts performed by the different types of dancing girls associated with the temples (Paes 70: 1520). Their central role was satisfying the sentiments of kings by symbolic rituals for protecting the king from evil while also adorning their courts with dance and music. During the Vijayanagara empire, the Devadasi institution was guided by the political determination to consolidate South Indian Hindu culture from the brutalities of Muslim invasions. The consolidation of Hindu rule to overcome Muslim aggression led to both caste consolidation as well as cultural assertion through the emergence of literary genres in distinctly local languages, arts and religious cults which deeply shaped the Devadasi institution and its role in upholding these arts (Kesenboom 74: 1953).

The religious practices of the Matangi culture are described by Edgar Thurston on how an unmarried Madiga woman called Matangi is chosen to partake of rituals during the festivals. Her role was to perform wild dances along with the male priests, consume toddy and while dancing, spit on the people assembled, including the Brahmin and princely men, and insult them with the choicest of invectives. The Matangi (also associated with the deity of Kali), has to walk around the village from house to house, cursing and using obscene language, spitting on every one, in order to cleanse all people of their sins and pollution (Thurston 129: 1909). The creation of the role of the Matangi was primarily to act as a purificatory conduit to the gods for sins committed by society. While the Madigas as Dravidians became subordinate to the Aryans, they were considered to be given a social license to abuse the upper castes including the Brahmins on certain ceremonial occasions.

As Edgar Thurston described, *"She is an "unmarried woman of the Madiga class, chosen after a most trying ordeal, unless she happens to be descended from a previous Matangi, to represent the*

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<sup>2</sup> A term given to Devadasis to denote a life of immortal marital bliss as she is married to the god

*goddess. She must vindicate her fitness by suitable prophetic utterances, and her nomination is not confirmed till she has obtained divine approval at the temple.” “She is unmarried, but without being bound by a vow of celibacy. Her business is to preside at the purificatory ceremonies that precede all festivities”.*

References to the Matankis/Basavis can be found in Tamil texts such as Yapparunkalaakarikkai which explained the role of these female performers as swinging the sword, singing the praise of the king or the chieftain, and thirdly, beating the tannumai (drum). She was to have performed fierce dancing and singing behind the king’s chariot, extolling his heroism thereby implying that the form and role of these Matankis was wild and energetic as against the role of artistry and bhakti in the temples (Kersenboom 49: 1953). These stories somewhere reflect the blending of the Dravidian and Hindu religions and the alternating spaces of untouchability and ‘acceptability’ accorded to the lower caste Madigas in order to sanctify the sexual exploits by the upper castes metaphored in the acceptance by the Brahmin Jamadagni of his wife Renuka as well as the Madiga slave. This mythological story seems to justify the sentiment to impose the practice of Devadasi dedication in the name of Mathamma on the Madiga caste, which, to this day, exists in the post-modern context of social dynamics in South India. This version of the role of the Devadasi prevails largely in the research sites as against the image of Devadasis as accomplished temple dancers with wealth, grace and power.

*“All the chuckler girls of the village, between the ages of eight and ten, who have not attained puberty, are assembled before the shrine, and the invoking hymns are chanted amid a flourish of trumpets, drums, and other accessories. The girl who becomes possessed--on whom the goddess descends--is the chosen vessel, and she is invested with the insignia of her office, a round sieve, a bunch of margosa (Melia Azadirachta) leaves, a snake-headed bamboo stick, a piece of cotton thread rope with some cowries (Cypraea moneta shells) strung on it, and a small vessel of kunkuma (coloured aniline powder). A vow of lifelong celibacy is also administered to her. Curiously enough, this shrine is venerated by all castes, from the Brahman downwards”.*

Similarly, Ananthkrishna Iyer describes in Tribes and Castes of Mysore, “This is invariably done after the girl attains her puberty. (Iyer 147: 1931) The Brahmin priest hands over to her a cane, a begging pouch, which she hangs on to her left shoulder. She is then branded with a sankhu and chakra on the shoulders, and sometimes a chakra mark is branded on her breast, but this is dispensed with if the Basavi is not a virgin. Such a girl may consort with a man of any caste except a Holey, and her children are treated as well as if they were legitimate in all respects.” (Iyer 148: 1931) The description of the Matangi and Basavi seems to fit more closely with the present practice of Devadasis among the Madigas in Karnataka, especially Bellary district where this study was conducted. They can be recognized by these physical accompaniments and rituals. This role was further extended to Devadasi services at the time of marriages for prosperity of the bride, the Devadasi being considered the auspicious one – the *Nityasumangali*. Some earlier Census records document the following castes- Kurubas (Shepherds), Lingayats, Bedas (hunters), Gandlkara Okkaligas, Banajigas (telugus) who were often considered a class of their own with their own rules of inheritance and codes of conduct, including their own panchayats (Sudhamani 667: 1999).

The etymology of the word in medieval Karnataka, some historians noted, was denoted with the Dravidian terms like *Basavi*, *p tr*, or *su le*, *su eyar*, *bhoga or bhogada* and not Devadasi as in Sanskrit. These terms convey a meaning that these women were considered harlots, entertainers of gods and royal patronage or, dancing girls who were meant to be enjoyed (for sexual pleasure) by the gods rather than the more brahmanical derivative of bhakti as servants of god or slaves of god (Hunt 185: 2010). The number of dancing girls dedicated to each temple depended on the wealth and patronage received in the temple by kings, traders and feudal patrons. Districts that were more prosperous like Dharwad had many temples and many Devadasis dedicated and blessed with endowments. These inscriptions also indicate that dedication of girls was symbolic of the motive of brahmanical and feudal royalty in providing for themselves a social legitimacy to maintain dancing girls for their sexual enjoyment in the name of religion (Hunt 188: 2010). The hierarchy of girls in this profession also indicates that the least skilled came from the lower classes and the arrangement of their residences, endowments bestowed on them and other privileges were accordingly in that order of class and caste that today is reflected in the remnants of this system among the lower caste dalits.

These girls were supposedly hired to communicate through dance and song, the messages of the various religions that were patronised by subsequent rulers, whether of Jainism, or the later Saivism which became more popularised (Hunt: 2010). Religious inscriptions on temples give some indication of the different categories of dancing girls who were endowed with gifts, based on the nature of their service to the temple.

In some parts of South India like Tumkur, it is reported that there were male counterparts to the Matangis, called the Asadis (again from the Madigas) whose role was that of musicians, singing the songs of Ellamma and performing the festival rituals while the Matangis/Basavis danced to their singing. Such men can be seen in the research sites, although very few in number, and they call themselves Jogappas.

The songs and performances of the Devadasis reflect the confluence of the folk music of the Dravidian culture with the scholastic artistry of the Hindu religion, thereby demonstrating the pre-Aryan and Aryan distinction in the talents and practices of the Devadasis. Bringing a synthesis of the eulogies of heroism, eroticism and grandeur of the kings to the shift in emphasis to devotion to god came with later Hinduism. Performing the Aarti to cast away malignant forces and evil eyes from bringing ill-omen to the kings, made these female performers, servants of the kings as well as of the gods promoted by the kings (Kersenboom 52: 1953). Further, the Brahmanical influence on the literary scholarship of the Devadasis seems to have forced a shift into a more moralistic confinement of their role through emphasis on piety, bhakti and devotion, dominating and trying to erase the earlier more erotic and energetic performances of the Dravidian female performers (Kersenboom 53: 1953).

The flourishing of the patronage given to Devadasis and temples by the Vijayanagara rulers is also attributed to the political consolidation, maritime trade and wealth inherited from the Cholas leading to an amalgamation of a distinct South Indian culture (Kererboom 72: 1953). In eighteenth century Census records they came to be reported under the category of dancers (both male and

female) and were considered to have enjoyed extensive privileges of wealth, property, land and even administrative power. The temples were also richly endowed with land and wealth which were enjoyed by the Devadasis who wielded power, not only through their sexual proximity to the rulers but which helped them often exercise vast influence over the politics and state-craft. They had irrevocable stakes to land, property and assets of the temples that they could pass on to their daughters or chosen ones. They were often remunerated in kind with land, jewelry and a retinue of slaves (Kersenboom 56: 1953). The significance of the Devadasi women's role is described at length by Domingo Paes through the nine day festival ceremonies in the kingdom of the Vijayanagara rulers (Paes 70: 1520). Further, the principal streets of high privilege where the Devadasis were located close to the palace, the symbolic privileges enjoyed by the Devadasis in the presence of the kings like chewing betel leaves or remaining seated in front of the king and such other licenses of familiarity reflect their high positions of power (Keserboom 75: 1953).

These elaborate ceremonial roles and the prominence enjoyed by the Devadasis was at its peak during the glorious period of the Vijayanagara empire, and subsequently with the fall of this empire, shifted mainly to Tanjore, the independent Hindu kingdom. But towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it lost its lustre with the decline of these kingdoms (Sudhamani 1999). It is believed that with the decline in princely states and fall of the Vijayanagara and Tanjore empires, the aristocratic patronage enjoyed by the Devadasis of the temples lost all their several privileges, wealth and power at the courts of the Kings. Without this patronage, it is admitted that the Devadasi institution slipped back into its pre-Brahmanical Dravidian structure of village bards and ritual performers with little glory or wealth (Keserboom 96: 1953).

These plural narratives demonstrate the parallel characteristics, hierarchies and roles of the Devadasis as glorious temple dancers on one side, and the Basavis as the more rural lower caste women dedicated to local shrines and deities, on the other. The Basavis as a genre of Devadasis may have had some parallels to the Devadasis as temple dancers patronized by royalty, where Matangis were entitled to land and property of the shrines they were dedicated to as in:

*“Matangis enjoyed considerable respect and also had rights to land and property”. “There are some permanent inam (rent-free) lands belonging to this shrine, and there is always a Madiga 'vestal virgin' known as Mathangi, who is the high priestess, or rather the embodied representative of the Brahman-chuckler goddess, and who enjoys the fruits of the inams. Mathangi is prohibited from marrying, and, when a Mathangi dies, her successor is chosen” to inherit the property of the Matangi (Thurston 130:1909).* As was the case with the privileged Devadasis, the complete disappearance of societal obligation to provide Basavis/Matangis/Devadasis with land and property of the village shrines as was noted by Thurston among the Matangis he encountered, reflects the selective transformations in caste and gender politics of South India.

Yet, there are clear differences as mentioned earlier, not only in the attire and location of the Devadasis, but also in the shifting roles and purposes of dedication among the Madiga practices. The traditional Matangi from the lower caste Madiga and her festival performances are depicted as wild, fearsome in appearance, consuming alcohol, possessed by the goddess, dancing that is neither graceful nor artistic, but rather evoking the wild wrath and energy of the Shaktis, spitting

on everyone and using obscenities and curses. The temple dancers were acclaimed for their beauty, artistic talents, piety, and with movements and adornments that reflected richly aesthetic appearance (Paes 70: 1521). While the Matangis and Mathammas were made to carry bamboo baskets and bowls for begging, sticks and cheap beads, the Devadasis in the courts of kings exemplified in musical skills, were decorated with rich diamonds, silks and jewelry and possessed both power and wealth.

In the following record of the Mysore state, Iyer mentions the reasons why girls from the Madiga caste were dedicated to god, that perhaps determine the changes in the social dynamics of caste and religious mutations. He mentions that *“practising the tradition of Basavis or Devadasis for the purpose of ensuring for themselves a son-role for the eldest daughter in the absence of male heirs where the daughter is obliged to take responsibilities of the family as well as inherit the property of her father and grandfather”*. Further, he states, *“Dedication of girls as devadasis is common in this lower caste. Some families have the custom of devoting the eldest girl to this life, while in many cases, a girl so dedicated in pursuance of some vow taken at the time of illness or other distress.”*

These draw similarities to the current practices and reasons how young girls among the Madigas became Devadasis, from the narratives of the women in Hospet. The above description by Iyer suggests compulsions of care giving during old-age and prevention of land and property being snatched by other male members in the absence of male heirs as a primary reason for dedication. Other reasons being superstitious beliefs like vowing to dedicate a girl in the family in desperate moments of ill-health of a family member or in times of a calamity that may befall upon a village, as an appeasement of the deities. While these were reasons that many of the participants of this research narrated, there were other socio-cultural obligations and superstitions mentioned that link their dedication to the temples of local deities. The fundamental association with temple and the rights over temple property being legitimate in both cases, the reality of contexts seems to vastly differ. Devadasis of royal patronage had enjoyed rights over Muzurai lands and properties which came into focus of conflict during colonial and post-colonial revenue matters and which initiated the movement to ban the custom. Basavis or Devadasis from the Madigas dedicated to the local deities exercised very little privileges of wealth or property either from the temples they were attached to, or from their maternal families, Madigas being mostly marginal farmers or landless outcastes.

Hence, the decline had different implications and manifestations some of which this study throws light on, through the self-narratives of the Devadasi/Basavi women's stories. Hence, also, implications of the social taboos, legal battles and interventions of social movements. The decline of the Devadasis since the colonial restrictions on temple performances and Muzurai inams to them, is largely reported to have taken the course of prostitution and sex trade. Their locations have now moved away from temples to the brothels and streets of sex worker colonies while some tried to reinvent their past glory by entering the South Indian film industry.

A section of post-colonial reformists advocated for upholding the Devadasi institution and criticized the legal ban on the practice of Devadasis. They argued that the artistic skills and a genre

of art practitioners whose ability to sustain these art forms were dependent on the custom of Devadasi practice. This was deliberately degraded to the definition of sex work to vilify the institution. They have looked at Devadasis as custodians of art and the delegitimisation of these women as a symbol of bringing an end to these rich art forms.

On the other hand, colonial and Gandhian notions of morality and social perceptions looked down upon the sexual fluidity of this institution that challenged the purity of a patriarchal social order rooted in the monogamous family system. Religious and cultural Hindu perceptions over the Devadasi system, however, shifted between an acceptance of such an institution (that allowed for windows of male promiscuity, not excluding priests and religious leaders) yet with a sense of discomfort and threat due to the power wielded by Devadasis through their property rights, wealth and influence (overt and covert) over administrative matters. Religion, art, culture and ritual stood on one flag-post of defense while morality and ethical cleansing denounced the system whereas patriarchy floundered between a willful social license for male sexual promiscuity and a fear of destabilizing the patrilineal rights over property outside of the family and patriarchal system. Feminist discourse challenged societal prejudices and steered the debates over the politics of the gendered domains of sexuality, the body, sex work, property and choices.

However, the realities for many Devadasis who live in Hospet taluk as they exist today, and especially of the dedication practices imposed on women from the Madiga and lower castes, is neither sex work nor as practitioners of art and dance forms. It primarily exists as a cultural practice of ritual performances at local shrines and as a cultural property of a society that panders to patriarchal values of using the lower caste woman's body for male polyamory or male culturally legitimized non-monogamous sexual relationships. This practice continues to be on the fringes of social consciousness and state accountability as dedications are considered to have stopped. As social customs today continue to be tolerant to male sexual promiscuity without providing the right of claim to inheritance or property for their Devadasi partners, the practice of dedication has had no hurdles in its journey into the present deceptive modes, whether of transitions into sex work or as ritual performers. The ban on Devadasi dedication came with the KPD Act in 1982 and hence the enumeration of Devadasis for protection and rehabilitation is restricted to women who were dedicated prior to the enforcement of the Act. Young Devadasis remain cast out of any state support and protection as enumeration is flawed when acknowledgement of the practice itself is absent. This study, therefore, brings to attention the lives of young dalit women's stories of vulnerability and contexts of dedication in order that the urgency and vulnerability are better understood for contemporary sensitivities of state and societal actions. It also brings to context the political economics of resource exploitation from a traditional feudal shifting to a corporate modern system of illegal extraction dynamics that directly and indirectly impact the Devadasi women's vulnerability to sexual abuse.

There is also a problem with the definition of Devadasi which is interchangeably used without distinguishing the two genres of Devadasi practices and the current context in which they are linked to cultural abuse. What we witness among the Madiga women dedicated as Devadasis, are poor women who never seemed to have enjoyed any privileges and who have remained as part of the community and continue to oblige the rural Hindu society in the performance of temple and

social rituals. Their traditional sexual roles and obligations have largely remained as earlier –open to men of all castes, but has not taken any new forms or shifted to the role of sex workers or sex work as an economic occupation, atleast in the current research sites. Today some may have shifted to sex work or into the entertainment industry (whether artistic or rustic) but in the research sites in Hospet, what we find to a large extent, is a cloistered societal web of prescriptions related to ritual and sexual performances. She is the subject of sexual promiscuity allegations where one often hears that she has to be chastised and reformed in her sexual behaviour, as if she is the instrument of immorality and a perpetrator of an anarchic social practice rather than the victim of a societal pretension or abuse. This often borders on perceiving the Devadasis as sex workers eking out a living from multiple sexual partnerships either, due to circumstances of poverty or as habitual offenders. Therefore, it is expected that social reform be located in the behavioural change of the Devadasi herself and of providing her with monetary and welfare incentives, so that she retires from active sex work. Yet, the reality of the lives of Devadasi women in the north Karnataka region of Bellary is a living testimony of a hegemonic practice that is not sex work. The debate here is not meant to dwell into the domains of rights to sex work as against societal conformity to the ethics of patriarchy and gendered prescriptions over monogamy, caste hierarchies and development economics.

Thus, this study premises that the customs and origin of the Devadasi role in Indian society could have not only been an amalgam of the Brahmanical and the Dravidian religious structures, but also had plural streams of practices leading to the present journeys into obscurity and societal misinterpretations. This study specifically wishes to bring to dialogue the form of Devadasi custom that the Madiga women who were socially instructed to carry the burden of societal purification and the sexual fluidities of rural patriarchy in Hospet.

The self-narratives reiterate the unscrupulous exploitation and the absence of choices in a deceptively glorified institution layered in patriarchy and culture. Further, far from being eradicated, the invisible continuity of this custom among the younger generation is witnessing several complex changes in the social role of the Devadasi and the administrative hypocrisy in denying its existence. This pre-empt any predictions of change in the formal sphere of state and societal accountability. The self-representational narratives emphasise that the Devadasi practice is not a profession or a commercial activity of women belonging to a certain profession. They neither have multiple sexual partners nor do they get economic sustenance from their partner as a result of dedication. Neither is this merely an exploitation due to economic reasons, as there are women from other castes who suffer from economic vulnerability and poverty. That this is more a cultural license for sexual plurality and deviance for, what began as an upper caste privilege and expanded into a polygamous lenience for men of all castes is obvious from the pattern of partners that Devadasis of this study engaged with. This fundamental basis for the continuity of the Devadasi dedication which is rooted in the intersections of caste and patriarchy has to be recognized in its neo-feudal corporate patriarchy of the modern present.

### **Chapter III: Mapping the Current Context: The Politics of the Body**



#### **a) Myth and Mythology of Devadasi dedication:**

The word Devadasi is associated with several other names such as Jogtin, Rajadasi, Alankaradasi, Rudradasi, Devasule, Hogathi, Basavi, Nityasumangali, Bhavin, Devali, Nayakasani, Rangasani, Gangasani, Muttukattikondavalu, Devara Sule, Kasabi, Patradavalu, Jogini, etc. There are subtle variations in the types of Devadasis and their dedication - Mudre aakodu, Hoosuduvudu, Manetaneki Ittukovudu, Thimmappanemudre, Anjaneyani mudre, Bharatunnime (this dedication is during the festival on Amavasya/no moon night on Fridays and Tuesdays). Some of the well-known temples of dedication are in Davanagere (Ucchengiellamma), Huligi temple, Kushtigi (Koppala taluka) in Belagavi.

Women who are called by any of these names undergo a ritual of dedication where young girls are 'married' or offered to the temple or a deity through a religious ceremony. They are expected to offer sexual services to men from the community as well as perform certain social rituals in daily life considered necessary for the well-being of society. After being initiated into the role of a Devadasi, these women are associated with certain symbolic practices and identified with physical characteristics. These are, having matted hair (jat), wearing a certain necklace called muttu which denotes their immortal marriage to the god (Nityasumangali), carrying a bamboo basket (bidarina parade) as a begging bowl called hadalgi, paradi or jog, carrying a string instrument called suti, choundak or chowdki and applying turmeric powder on the forehead. (draft Karnataka Devadasi (Prevention, Prohibition, Relief and Rehabilitation Bill, 2018)).

Under this practice, young girls, often before their puberty, are forced into a social 'profession' that instructs them to perform a religious and sexual role in society for their entire life. This role prescribes their duty to perform religious and social ceremonies related to festivals, marriages, birth and death rituals as well as duties related to sexual services. They have to lead a life of poverty, through begging, fasting, singing, and eke out a living from daily wage labour or bonded labour. They are strictly prohibited from marriage and are expected to live as single women, accepting sexual partners of the opposite sex and to be the sole care-takers of children from these partners as well as of their maternal family members. While married women are strictly prohibited from having multiple sexual partners, Devadasis are expected to take sexual partners as demanded by their families and their community. Their institution is based on certain culturally prescribed beliefs that define their role through a complexity of culture, caste, economics and patriarchy.

Being errant or deviant from any of these roles is attributed to bringing the wrath of the gods that leads to calamities, social ill-health and economic destruction which therefore, places a moral, emotional and social obligation on the women dedicated into this institution.

In the past, dedication rituals were openly conducted with the community participating in the ceremonies. The girl would be bathed, given new clothes and taken to the Huligamma temple where the priest and older Devadasis perform pujas. The priest ties the mangalsutra on behalf of the goddess (which in the case of Devadasis is considered a permanent life of marriage without the curse of widowhood-*Nityasumangali*) and gives her a begging bowl, some beads and instructs that she follow strict rules of Devadasi life. Often, the priest gets the first privilege of sexual rights over the Devadasi before she takes on other partners. Once she is known to have become a Devadasi and has attained puberty, her family receives enquiries from prospective suitors, and depending on the negotiation of payment, her father or brothers or grandparents make the choice of her sexual partners. Most often, middle aged men, married and with children, take fancy for young Devadasi girls and as it is common in feudal India for men to enter into polygamous relationships, there is no 'illegality' in the social sphere of such arrangements.

With the legal ban on the practice of the Devadasi institution, the dedication of girls has become a more secretive and discreet process where often, even the immediate neighbours are not privy to the ceremony. Whereas in the past, it was important to perform the dedication in the temple of the goddess, it is now hastily performed within the four walls of the home, often at night, and with tokenistic performance of rituals to avoid any suspicion. Only when men start visiting the girl does the neighbourhood come to know that the girl has been dedicated. Nowadays, young girls are not even tied the 'taali' that signifies dedication, and the younger generation do not follow all the rituals of the elderly Devadasis like begging, singing songs or performing community rituals.

Young girls who are forced into dedication feel ashamed of their role, and refrain from performing rituals or displaying any physical identity of being Devadasi. Instead, they wear a mangalsutra like other married women, do not keep matted hair and do not go begging, chanting or performing rituals. They are often intimidated by the older Devadasis who accuse them of disrespecting the goddess and therefore, bringing upon the village, her wrath and in turn, calamities and disease. This also makes invisible the culture of forced dedication of younger women, and therefore provides an opportunity of denial for the state institutions.

#### **b) Religious Roles and Festival Rituals performed by Devadasis:**

There are two important festivals during the year that are considered most sacred to the Devadasis. These are Ankamma Jatara, when all Devadasis gather at the Ankamma temple to sing songs and, Huligamma Jatara when all the Devadasis gather at the temple of Huligamma. They are expected to perform Saake Aritara – collective singing, where all Devadasis congregate in each others' houses, singing songs, fasting, following a very rigorous period of abstinence from meat, alcohol and sex on these days. There are different goddesses (considered as siblings of the goddess) with names such as Maremma, Nijalingamma, Uchchengiyellamma, Kenchamma, Taayamma, Renukayellamma, Nagamma, Gaalamma, who are similar to Huligamma. Rituals are

performed on different days of the week for each of these goddesses. They are expected to perform rituals not only in the temples but also in the village. Being “nityasumalgali” gives them the license as well as duty to attend marriage, birth, puberty and all other ceremonies as a symbol of bringing fertility and prosperity to women of all castes. They have to perform purification rituals like Deedinamaskara (rolling in the temple in wet clothes holding a stick as a mukkubadi/purification for illness in the village). Such sentiments of religious and cultural significance accorded to the Devadasis, binds them with a sense of loyalty, pride and obligation not only to the rituals but to the obligation of bowing to the Devadasi custom despite all hardships.

*“The Devadasi system has many traditional beliefs. For example if I go to a house and someone gives me rice, money or other things I have to invoke god’s blessings on them. Devadasis have to beg at the temples and houses”.*

*“In my village there are around thirty Devadasi women, and all together we celebrate "Dussehra" and "Ugadi". On every new moon and full moon days I go begging in the streets. We Devadasis perform a puja on every Tuesday and Friday for the goddess Huligemma. Sometimes Huligemma enters my body and then answers all the questions of the village people. Then I can see the goddess Huligemma with my very own eyes. Once a year there is the Jatara of the goddess Huligemma. At this time, the goddess will possess the body of a Devadasi and the male priests perform a puja. This Jatara continues for three days with a grand celebration. On Hunnime (Full Moon Day), we always go to the temple of the goddess Huligemma and we offer coconuts to her. I have a "hadaligi", a small basket, in which I place a photo of the goddess, some kumkuma, rice and green bangles. If there is some money with me, I offer some bananas and coconuts. Sometimes, if we do not have any money, we just pray to the goddess and light two incense sticks. She will protect us.” Then I carry the basket around the village begging, but I do not like this because people gossip about me that I am lazy and accuse me that I make money from begging and by stealing husbands. I know this is the ritual but they still scold me. My father wants me to go and beg and tells me that there will be bad luck for the family if we do not beg, but I feel very shy to do this and I hate it. I go to five different houses for begging and later I come back. When I was small I did not know what it means to be a Devadasi. But everyone in my village told me: “You are Devadasi, so you have to do puja!” So with time I accepted it, that people address me as ‘Devadasi woman’.*

*“There is Madiga temple-Basawangudi temple, other castes don’t come here, only Madigas-*

*The Brahmin priests have a different role, whereas we Devadasis also perform pujas, but it is different from the Brahmin priests. Mostly the pujas are performed for the Madiga caste as Brahmin priests don’t perform rituals for Madiga death rituals. They come only for birth, house warming where money is more-Devadasi women are called to sing songs during birth ceremony, hair removal ceremony, puberty, marriages, house warming and death”.*

*“When the upper caste calls us to perform in their houses, we are made to stand outdoors and sing the songs. We are given food and bangles from outside but not allowed to enter their houses. Even when we go singing together during Gowri festival from house to house we are made to stand outside the upper caste houses and sing for the goodwill of their families”.*

**c) A Goddess to Curse: a bond of infinite servitude between the Devadasi and Huligemma**

The sentiment of Huligemma deeply entrenched into the belief in the Devadasi system makes the dedication a compulsion, obligation and duty on the part of those dedicated. Huligemma is the 'intidevata' or the family deity of the Devadasis. They are torn between loyalty, bitterness and resentment at this accursed goddess of social and religious belief, yet fear the wrath of the goddess and the consequent calamities that they believe may occur if they expressed any resentment. Their social, caste and economic vulnerability compounds the superstitious naivete of the women and binds them to obey this custom. They desperately sway between resignation to the might of such godly power and hope in the benign nature of the goddess – the custodian and fulcrum of their existence.

*“Sometimes, when I have to face a lot of problems I cannot stop shouting at god, I used to scream - Mindirigudvane. Later on, I always beg her to forgive me”.*

*“My grandmother said that it was compulsory for us to do this work and that it is important work for the Huligemma”.*

*“The goddess will possess the bodies of those women she has selected as the chosen ones and she will come into their bodies and informs the women’s families that they should make her a Devadasi. If they do not listen to the goddess and marry their daughter to a man, the marriage will be very unhappy and bad. The goddess will show her revenge”.*

*“Once I was so fed up of being a Devadasi, so I removed my "Muttukattu" from my neck. But my parents told me that if I go on doing this, the goddess Huligemma will get very angry and I will never be happy again. They scared me a lot, so I put the "Muttukattu" back again. I prayed a lot to Huligemma and asked her why the people devoted me to her. I believe in the goddess, but I do not believe in the rituals, our society made those rituals, not the goddess”.*

*“I can see the goddess Huligemma in my dreams, but some people can see the goddess with their naked eyes”.*

*“I believe in god, she gives happiness and from time to time sadness”.*

*“I go to the temple everyday and do a pooja. Going to the temple relaxes me. I don’t know how to sing a song, but I listen to songs about gods”.*

*“If we are angry or if we have a lot of problems we pray to the goddess and when our problems are solved, then we go back and we, thankfully, perform a Pooja and ask her to forgive us for all our sins”.*

*“I have to look after my relatives during festivals, functions or ceremonies, buy clothes for them. If I do not, they will comment on that in a bad way, saying that I do not care for them. My daughters ask how I manage all those things, but I only say that god will look after us, he will protect us,*

*and he will feed us. I tell them to believe in god, always. But the god also treated me unfairly.....”*

*“I believe in god. Yes I know, I faced a lot of difficulties, but I believe in god, god looks at us, from everywhere. Without Huligamma we cannot survive”.*

*“I believe in god and the goddess Huligemma. The goddess never discriminates anyone, she selects the persons she wants.....”*

*“If we don't perform puja we become sick. I go temple with faith in god and I have fear that I may get sick if I don't have faith. For this reason I go to temple regularly and perform puja. I sing the praises of the goddess so that she may bless me and give me hope and some intelligence to lead my life”.*

The songs of the Devadasis, reflect these sentiments of allegiance to the Huligamma and her diverse names and powers:

*“I bend with humility before you, O Kenchamma  
You are filled with colour  
You are swinging in the golden swing  
I bring these offerings to you  
I bring you the coconuts and kumkum and flowers for your blessings  
I bend with humility before you, O Anklamma  
You are swinging on the golden swing  
When I play the musical instrument, She (Anklamma) comes and blesses me*

*I bend with humility before you, O Glemma  
If I have faith in you, you will always protect me  
I am bearing the palanquin to carry you  
I am bearing the chariot to carry you  
Every week I carry the basket with your murti to the temple  
I want to offer you gold ornaments,  
Come (to the Talavar/goldsmith) and listen to my song while you make the ornaments for me  
O Glemma, please come, I will adorn you with beautiful leaves  
Please come walking, I can hear you walking into my house  
I see your foot-steps at my door, I see the diamonds sparkling at your feet  
I see you are wearing a saree shining with diamonds  
You are the daughter of Harlayya (daughter of a dalit),  
I can see you coming to my door  
I see you wearing a saree with the small border  
I can see your saree shining with diamonds*

*In this incredible village of Papinayakanahalli*

*You are wearing a saree with the small border  
You are wearing a saree with sparkling diamonds*

*I take you to the river, wait for me to take you  
O Glemma, wearing the saree with the small border  
You are wearing the saree with sparkling diamonds  
I hear you walking with the jingling of your anklets  
I hear you walking to my house*

*They have brought the tender coconut for you  
The holy fire is still alight for you  
O Glemma wearing the saree with the small border  
You are wearing the saree with the sparkling diamonds*

*Break the coconut at the temple threshold and give to all  
I can hear the jingling of Her anklets coming  
I can see Her wearing the saree with the small border  
She is coming wearing the saree with the sparkling diamonds  
Maremma is flushed and sweating with the presence of the crowd,  
I can see her coming with the jingling of her anklets..... ”*

#### **d) The Irony of Birth and Death:**

Devadasis are obliged to perform several rituals in their villages from time to time. While they are custodians of the well-being of all castes, they themselves face discrimination and the stigma is passed on to their children who are not spared the humiliation and abuses.

*“We have to observe many customs like birth and death ceremonies. If a child is born in the village we are called to bless the child. But they ill-treat our children and call them names, demean them and scold their children if they play with our children!”*

*“During the marriage ceremony they call five Devadasi women to perform all the rituals of the ceremony as we are the Nityasumangali. This means that if the husband of a married woman dies, she becomes a widow and they have to remove their bangles and the marriage chain. But Devadasis can never become widows in their life – we are immortal wives and therefore any woman we bless at the time of marriage is believed to have a long married life. We prepare the bride for the wedding - we give her a bath, dress her up in a saree and apply all the necessary things to her so that she can be happy in her life together with her husband. People invite us for marriage ceremonies as they consider it auspicious if, before the groom ties the ‘tali’, we bless it so as to bring the bride a long life of marital bliss. We have to prepare the tali by putting all the beads and gold coins into the chain and conduct prayers before we hand it to the groom-they believe that only when we bless this tali, the girl will have a long and prosperous life with her husband”.*

*“The irony is, we can never get married and we are told that we are not destined to have a husband*

*or family life. We bless the married couples with a good future but Devadasi means, we do not have a good future for ourselves. We are only eligible at night for pleasure. People make dirty jokes at us like my brother in law keeps telling me, - you can come with me and then I will marry you. And then teases me saying, 'Oh stop wait. I can't marry you because you are a Devadasi, but you can still come and sleep with me!' Upper caste people call us to bless the bride during the marriage ceremonies but always look down upon us and they insult us during the ceremonies. Some relatives come and quarrel with me because they know I am alone even when they need my services during festivals and marriages”.*

*“No one wants to marry our children and people look down upon them that they belong to a Devadasi, but we have to provide our rituals to the society for all their children's prosperity!”*

*“If someone dies in the village, then all the Devadasi women have to fast that day until the funeral is over. We fast for the dead to go to heaven, because we are told that we are the children of the goddess. But when a Devadasi dies, there is no ritual performed, no one fasts for us! The Devadasi has to clean the place after the dead body is removed. The Devadasi has to sit all through the night near the dead body. After performing all these rituals for the village, we are called 'Sule' and 'Basavi' and they do not invite us or our children to their houses”.*

*“When people build their house, they call us on the auspicious date for the house warming ritual. The irony is that we do not have a house for ourselves. I did not get any government loan for a house. When my children go to their friends' houses, the mothers shout at them and tell them to go away. They tell their children not to play with our children. I tell my children to avoid these houses but they feel very bad that I have to perform these rituals and then they are shooed away.”*

#### **e) 'Caste'ing the Body: Madiga as the Immortal Bride:**

*“I belong to the Harijan caste”.*

*“I am from the Valmiki caste”.*

*“I am a Harijan”*

*“I am SC”.*

*“I am 40 years old. I am from the Madiga caste. I live in Byluvaddigeri”.*

*“I am Madiga. Only women of the Madiga caste become Devadasi because this is what happened for many generations in the community”.*

*“I am 36 years old and belong to the Madiga and sub caste Bandardur”*

*“My name is Manjula, I am 19 years old and I belong to Harijan caste”.*

*“My name is Maremma and I am 28 years old. I belong to the Madiga caste”.*

*“There are 15 Devadasi women in this village. We Devadasis are from Valmiki and Harijan caste”.*

*“Some upper caste people say that we have custom of making girls Devadasi, that's why madiga girls become Devadasis”*

**Table 2: Castewise details of Devadasi participants**

Sl. No.	Village Name	Devadasis interviewed	Caste				Details Not available
			Madiga	Nayaka	Kuruba	Others	
1	Danapura	13	13	0	0	0	0
2	Basavana durga	28	14	12	0	0	2
3	Bailu Vaddigeri	31	31	0	0	0	0
4	Kaddirampura	15	8	7	0	0	0
5	Kariganuru	25	15	7	3	0	0
6	Kondanayakana Halli	17	16	1	0	0	0
7	Malapanagudi	25	25	0	0	0	0
8	Nagena Halli	26	26	0	0	0	0
9	PK halli (Papi Nayakana Halli)	40	40	0	0	0	0
10	Kapli	2	2	0	0	0	0
11	Anchen gudi (Ananteshayanagudi)	3	3	0	0	0	0
12	Talluru	22	22	0	0	0	0
	Total	247	215	27	3	0	2

Source: Primary data, Hospet Taluka

The universality of the Devadasi practice found among the scheduled castes and particularly the Madiga sub caste, casting the dalit female as the Nityasumangali, is a historical social construct of the female dalit body that dominates all the narratives from the women. Of the nearly 250 Devadasis who narrated their stories, majority of them were from the Madiga caste in all the 12 villages. The other social group which practices Devadasi dedication in Hospet taluk was found to be the Scheduled Tribe, Nayakas, who are also economically landless and marginalized, although the stigma of untouchability is not prominent. It is mainly prevalent among the untouchable community whose untouchability, the women bitterly comment, disappears in the nightly pursuits of sexual exploitation. Although the Devadasis are from the lower caste, the partners of Devadasis are from all castes and backgrounds, including from within the scheduled castes.

*“My partner was already married and he is from the Kuruba caste. He has a wife and children. His wife is always shouting at him: “You don’t live with me and how can you go to the Devadasi woman. She is from the Madiga caste.”*

All the arguments and superstitions in support of this system, are justified by applying it to the women of the scheduled caste alone. Poverty, ill-health, dream revelations, disability, illicit affairs, premarital pregnancies and a horde of other ‘faults’ are given as an excuse for the decision to dedicate a girl as a Devadasi. While these become a strong and compelling justification to arrange for rituals of dedication where a scheduled caste girl is concerned, such complications, ‘errant behaviour’ or problems found among girls in other castes do not necessitate a social compulsion to dedicate girls as Devadasis. Other surreptitious solutions are devised to overcome these complications.

In the region of Hospet one barely finds the remnants of nautch girls or Devadasis being maintained by wealthy patrons of art and dance. None of the Devadasi women interviewed have even basic literacy, leave alone artistic talents that justifies a patronized existence of this institution for the promotion of art forms. As far as the oldest of the Devadasi women interviewed could remember, there is no association with any art form known to them. Majority of the women interviewed were illiterate or barely literate, working as landless labourers and having no knowledge of any literary genres beyond mere rustic rituals, temple pujas and songs associated with Huligamma, the patron goddess of the Devadasis.

There is, no doubt, a strong history of art and literary achievements of courtesans in pre-colonial periods of the region's history, and some traces of this practice are surreptitiously reported today even in Bellary district, where women from upper or non- dalit castes are heard to be secretly patronized by some feudal and political patriarchs. However, the large majority of Devadasis are from the poor scheduled caste colonies of every village. In the past, girls from the Scheduled Caste barely attended school and they joined the labour force in the family right from childhood. Where child marriages were the norm in non-dalit castes, child dedication into the Devadasi custom was the norm for many girls from the scheduled castes.

Families of Devadasis consider it a privilege when men from the upper castes propose to become partners. It is seen as a symbol of upward mobility in the caste hierarchy for the family, when upper caste men walk into the colony of the untouchables and visit the Devadasi. Some even boasted of having partners from 'distinguished' upper caste and economic backgrounds like judges, politicians, police officers and Brahmins.

*"My first partner used to give me money, but only once in six months. He was a CID inspector (Central Investigation Department); he was a Brahmin and well educated. He never cared for me; he just came and went as he pleased. He was physically, a very strong person and when people saw him, they were always afraid of him. I was also very afraid. My parents did not ask me if I wanted him or not, they just selected him for me. He was physically very violent and I was petrified of him. So I hated him all the time".*

This distinction in caste rarely reflected any dignity of behavior from their partners who always abandoned them or the Devadasis themselves had to reject them due to the extreme forms of abuse experienced from some of these upper caste men. Many narrated breach in financial commitments given to their families by these men. Given their status and power, the men always manage to escape responsibility, using intimidation or by shifting their interests to other Devadasis.

Although formal matrimony between a Madiga girl and an upper caste boy is strictly opposed by the upper caste families, sexual partnership with a Devadasi is tolerated or pretentiously ignored. Further, an illicit sexual relationship or romance between an upper caste boy and a Madiga girl becomes an immediate cause for dedicating the girl as a Devadasi due to her becoming sexually 'impure' and 'ineligible' for marriage. Whereas the upper caste boy can choose to completely abandon the girl or marry a girl of his caste but is also allowed to continue maintaining a sexual liason with the Madiga girl after she is made a Devadasi. The wives and families of the partner

may often get into a quarrel with the Devadasi for 'enticing' their husbands, and the constant disputes usually end with the partner leaving the Devadasi after a few years, having dispensed with her sexual services. This leaves the Devadasis in a highly vulnerable and mentally traumatic state of having to deal with both the sexual exploitation by the partners and the social humiliation from the partners' families. It is a constant threat of abandonment which eventually becomes a reality in majority of the cases.

As Bellary has a predominant Muslim population, many Devadasis also reported of having Muslim partners although the behavioural patterns of partners of different castes and religions interestingly, is, nuanced. Pretentiousness formed the core of partnership with Muslim men. Devadasis with Muslim partners shared their experiences that they came surreptitiously, always late in the night, disappearing before the break of dawn, to avoid being identified in the company of Devadasis. Children of Devadasis having Muslim partners mentioned how they never got to see their fathers or would never know who their fathers were until, subtle references to them were made by neighbours and family members. Their fathers avoided acknowledging them when they crossed paths in public spaces, pretending to have no relationship with their own children. Thus, although polygamy is an accepted practice among the Muslims in this region, there appears to be a sense of uncertainty and unacceptance when Muslim men cross the lines of religion for sexual alliances. Whether this emerges from a sense of shame or a sense of insecurity in facing any likely social conflicts from the majority Hindu community, could not be understood from these narratives.

The recent trend demonstrates that more partners are from the scheduled castes. Many enter into liason with the Devadasi while at work (as agriculture labour, mine labour, construction workers, migration, etc) or drivers, cleaners, masons and semi-skilled labour, through their connections with the brothers or fathers of the Devadasis. This has changed the discourse of caste discrimination and feudal hierarchies. For the Devadasi, resisting internal patriarchal abuse and internalization of caste based violence complicates the politics of caste, gender and the female body when both the promoters and the perpetrators of the Devadasi custom are increasingly located within their own caste.

Today this provides an escape from responsibility for upper caste and state structures of law and custom and the Devadasi has little support or protection from her own caste given this increasing trend in internalization of oppression. Often within the scheduled caste patriarchy, the men increasingly consider it a prerogative and as their first right to the women in their community. More so, many narrate, was the sudden rise in wages and availability of money among the mine labour, who mostly belong to the scheduled castes.

Seasonal migration to neighbouring districts has been forcing more women and adolescent girls to be exposed to greater risk and a few cases of girls from outside the Madiga caste being forced to become Devadasis were reported during the interviews. These changes have further caused greater transience and impermanence in the traditionally impermanent nature of sexual partnership with Devadasi women. These alliances within the dalit castes where landlessness among the male abusers and the abused women has not only created lesser social support structures for the women

both within their community and from the upper castes, but also complicated the discourse on the politics of caste. Most Devadasi women do not see much value in demanding for their rights from their partners within their resource-less and property-less dalit community.

Notions of morality and the fear of fragmentation of land and property had brought the demand for eradication of the Devadasi system during the colonial period and the independence struggle. As the power of the mining lobbies over the politics of the state and the complexities in the partnership with Devadasis among the different castes and particularly the dalit castes has increased, the upper caste demand for social reform in the practice of the Devadasi system has almost disappeared. While she continues to be stigmatized and the practice is repeatedly brought into usage at the convenience of male privileges, her rehabilitation has been reduced to promises of welfare measures of a chosen few. Her rights have been completely pushed into oblivion as she has faded into the shadows of both upper caste and dalit appropriation of her body.

#### **f) A Self-Chosen Path of Sex Work? The Life of a Devadasi:**

##### Devadasi Song

*“I don't know how this happened – this vanavasam, this Devadasi life-it is a struggle for me, it is a struggle for god, it is a struggle for society, it is a struggle for any girl who becomes a Devadasi. Only god knows what my suffering is. No one sees my tears. No one sees my plight-not my father, not my grandmother, not my partner-no one can see the pain I and my daughters have. The sky is my father, the earth is my mother, I am the miserable daughter of my parents, so they have made me a Devadasi. I have no one else, this society does not want me.....”*

*“I was only 9 years old when they devoted me to the goddess Huligemma”*

*“When I was eight, my father died and my mother forced me to become a Devadasi”*

*“My grandmother got a dream, when I was eight years old, that I am the chosen one of the Goddess Huligamma”*

*“My mother said that she didn't like the Devadasi system because it is the cause for our struggles in life. But my grand-mother insisted that I should become a Devadasi”.*

Devadasi as the protagonist of offence stands contested when one studies the rituals and contexts of social processes that lead to a girl's dedication. In this study we tried to capture the present day practices of decision-making and dedication and the subsequent life of the Devadasis once dedicated. Most of the women who gave their life stories informed that their parents, extended family members or male siblings took the decision to offer them to Huligamma much before they attained puberty. Most of them were barely ten years of age. There are patterns one can discern in the stories of decision-making. For many, there is a history of Devadasi dedication in the family (mother, grandmother, sister, aunt) and when there is more than one daughter, the family often chooses to distribute the roles and give away one daughter to the Goddess while the others are given in marriage.

*“My name is Gangamma, I do not know my father because my mother is a Devadasi and I was made a Devadasi”*

*“In my family, my paternal aunt was a Devadasi too and after her death they made me become a Devadasi.”*

Most of the older women were initiated into this practice in their childhood, much before they even understood the significance of the term or had any choice of decision-making. To them, at the time of dedication, it was a blurred memory of being taken to the temple by their elders and put through rituals, given a new sari (‘which was exciting’) and getting ‘a lot of attention for a brief moment’. To them, at that age, it merely appeared to be a celebration and a festival until puberty set in and partners were thrust upon them, usually much older and much before the girls had any understanding of sexual matters. Their fathers, grandparents or mothers or aunts enter into negotiations with adult males who approach the families with monetary incentives.

*“My parents devoted me to the goddess Huligemma when I was only seven. They forced me into the system because they did not have any knowledge of it. At the ceremony, they performed a lot of rituals, it was like a marriage. By then, I had three male and three female siblings, but it was clear that I had to become a Devadasi because the goddess Huligemma chose me. Many neighbours, relatives and poojaris came to dedicate me”.*

*“My parents forced me to become a Devadasi at the age of 8. I had to sit on "Suragikartiduru" and then they tied "Muttukattu" on me and devoted me to the goddess Huligemma. It all took place in a small shrine named "Peerappa" near my home”.*

*“I do not know exactly when I became a Devadasi, but I know that I was very young at that time and that it happened during the day time. They devoted me to a god, Ajinayappa (Hanuman), but they did not tie "Muttukattu" to me. Instead of that they branded me with fire to make a "Muddare" (branding) and later on they tattooed me with the symbol of the hand in front of god Anjianappa.*

*Another older Devadasi says, “they didn’t take me to the temple. Instead the ceremony was held in my home where there was a goat butchered. Some Devadasis came to my house and did pooja and gave me a saree”.*

*“I became a Devadasi when I was eight and I was devoted to goddess Huligemma. It was a big ceremony in a Huligemma temple with fifteen people of my village as well as my family members. Five Devadasi women also joined that ceremony. They helped me wear a new sari, tied a “muttukatto” on me, and gave me silver bangles, foot rings, earrings as well as a nose ring. After the puja we had a simple lunch with all people who joined the ceremony”.*

*“We stayed in the temple for one night and in the morning we went to the lake and took a bath and did a puja and five Devadasi women came and did a ritual. They put a necklace on me. My grandmother is also a Devadasi. One time the god Nagappa and Thayamma went into my grandmother’s body and spoke through her that her granddaughter - me - should also become a Devadasi”.*

*“They forced me to become a Devadasi, because I had matted hair since I was five years old and when I was twelve years old, we went to a temple to remove my matted hair. After this, my parents went to an astrologer and he told them that my marriage will be an unhappy one. So my parents forced me into the system”.*

*“My mother and my aunt pushed me into Devadasi custom when I was very small and I did not know anything. My aunt is also a Devadasi. The god went into her body and said through her that I should become a Devadasi. They simply sacrificed a goat and told me I became a Devadasi on that day”.*

*“My maternal grand-parents made their three daughters Devadasis”*

**d) Contemporary Compulsions: Is the Devadasi Dedication a figment of the unreformed past?**

*“There are many Devadasis in my village, many are old, but some are also young. They have only one year old child, some of them”*

Of late, the age at which girls are being dedicated has been changing. In the past, dedication was during childhood whereas in the present, the practice has moved to adolescence or when the girls are in their early twenties, thus implying that reasons for dedication in the current social contexts vary from the superstitions of the earlier days. In the present day, inter-caste romances, adolescent pregnancies, adolescent widowhood, lure of money, assurance of having a permanent care-giver for the family and domination of male authority within Madiga families have forced the more recent situations where girls have become victims to this custom.

Madiga girls found to be in illicit relations with boys of their own caste or other castes, or when the girl becomes pregnant, the family immediately uses this ‘dishonour’ as a cause for addressing the social stigma through a permanent sexual abuse on the girl. She is forced to become a Devadasi on the pretext that she has shamed her family, especially when the boy’s family refuses to accept her. It is assumed that her body which she ‘misused’ can now be ‘normalised’ by making it an instrument for public use by any male, irrespective of caste, age or economic status.

When there is a failed romance or when the boy is from an upper caste and is prevented from marrying a Madiga girl, the young couple are making the choice of getting into a relationship through Devadasi partnership. This way, the boy can get married to another girl and still continue to have his lover as a sexual partner outside of marriage. We came across two such girls in the research sites who have made these choices. Kamakshi was a very strong and healthy girl at the time of taking this decision but now that she has a child and she faces tensions with her partner’s family, her health has been failing due to stress and neglect. In another case from a neighbouring village, the girl was forcibly dedicated for having a relationship with another boy from her village, but unable to resist this decision by her family, the girl had committed suicide on the day of her dedication. In a very different case, the girl refused to marry the boy she loves although they have a child together as she does not want to leave her family fearing harassment from the boy’s family if she married him. Although the boy persists in his interest to marry her, the reality is uncertain for a Madiga girl. The decision to leave her home and marry a boy whose family may ill-treat her or to remain with her maternal family and forego her lover so that she can at least have the assurance of a maternal home – these are difficult choices confronting poor Madiga girls. They

have no education or skills and very limited economic sustenance to risk the security of their homes for forbidden lovers. Whereas for the boys, nobody finds fault with them for multiple relationships, Madiga girls incur ridicule and revenge from their partners' families and from the community around them.

In one such case in PK Halli village, a young widow is under pressure from men in her village to become a Devadasi, although she does not want it. Her complaints to the police have fallen on deaf ears, as the police ask her for evidence to prove her case. She continues to be harassed. In another situation, a girl from the Madiga caste who has dropped out of school due to her father's death, has been in a relationship with a boy from the same caste. He is the son of a Devadasi. They have a one- year old child but the boy is under pressure from his mother to marry another girl. He is unable to go against his mother's wishes and, despite being the son of a Devadasi, he is asking his lover to remain a sexual partner while he also gets married to the girl chosen by his mother. When she complained to the police, the boy's mother beat her up and refused to accept her although she had pleaded that she be allowed to marry him. Since the girl already has a child, her family has forcibly dedicated her as a Devadasi as a solution to her curse of rejection. She has thrown away the 'Tali' which she was forced to wear when she was dedicated, and lives with the hope that the boy will come back to her one day.

Eswaramma's mother is also a Devadasi. Eswaramma fell in love with a boy from the same village but the mother did not want to give her in marriage to him as he is worthless. Nevertheless, the girl has a relationship with him and now has two children from him. The boy's family did not accept her and got him married to another girl. Now Eswaramma works on her own to take care of her children. Her partner comes to her at night but does not give her any money. She allows him to be her partner, and considers herself his wife, living with the hope that one day, he would permanently live with her.

Once the girls get into a relationship they consider their partner as a husband even if the man doesn't treat them as a wife. Later on in life, they get into a depression when they experience the reality of not being accorded the status of a wife and having to live as single parents.

In the research sites, it was reported that Naganahalli and Basavandurga have many new cases of dedication. *In Naganahalli, of the 36 odd Devadasis, 7-8 Devadasis are in their early twenties. In PK Halli, of the 45 women, 4-5 girls are less than 20 years of age..... In Kadirampura, the animators have come to know of a young girl who could not pass her class 10 exams, and is at risk of dedication but they were unable to act on it due to lack of evidence..... In Malpangudi village a 20 year old disabled girl was dedicated in 2016-17..... There is a rumour from Hampinakatte village that an 8 year old girl will soon be dedicated but it is difficult to get the offenders red-handed as they deny it and they are willing to pay a fine, if caught..... Recently, in Heeremukartinaal village of Koppala district, the youth reported that 4-5 girls were dedicated between the ages of 19 and 25..... In Bailwadgiri village, a girl studying PUC is reported to have been dedicated..... In Danapura village a 14 year old girl was recently made a Devadasi.....*

**Table 3: Age-wise details of Devadasis**

	Village Name	Devadasis interviewed	Age			
			50 yr and above	40 to 49	30 to 39	Less then 30
1	Danapura	13	3	4	6	0
2	Basavana durga	28	9	5	9	5
3	Bailu Vaddigeri	31	13	8	7	3
4	Kaddirampura	15	9	4	2	0
5	Kariganuru	25	15	6	3	1
6	Kondanayakana Halli	17	10	4	3	0
7	Malapanagudi	25	14	2	5	4
8	Nagena Halli	26	6	10	2	8
9	PK halli (Papi Nayakana Halli)	40	17	11	8	4
10	Kampli	2	1	0	1	0
11	Anchen gudi (Ananteshayanagudi)	3	0	0	0	0
12	Taluru	22	7	6	5	4
		247	104	60	51	29

Rama is twenty seven years old and has two children. She was made a Devadasi when she was 20 years old and had just dropped out of class 12. Her uncle wanted to ensure that the family income was met by forcing her to take partners and pressurized her mother to dedicate her. She had little knowledge of the intentions and mistook the preparations for marriage proposals. When she realized the intention of her uncle, she had no support systems that she could approach for help and having no power to oppose, became a victim to a man much older than her and who was already married. Her partner initially provided financial support but within five years, got weary of her and stopped visiting her. Rama has to now take care of her children as well as her mother and uncle. Thus, the lack of support structures that could provide advice and shelter to vulnerable girls in the present context continues to pose a serious threat to young adolescent girls among the Madigas.

The new generation of Devadasis are almost invisible as their dedication is no longer a public announcement. Fear of legal action prevents families from revealing the identity of Devadasis where the social rituals are conveniently compromised. Young Devadasi girls may not wear the *Tali* or the *muttukattu*, do not go out begging or singing or performing most of the ceremonies attributed to their social roles. They prefer to wear the mangalsutra as any married women and want to be treated as such. They feel too ashamed to be visible in public and neither do their families force them into these rituals any more. However, young girls who refuse to perform rituals or consume alcohol are considered to bring curses on their community or are called prostitutes.

*“The older Devadasis curse me that my tongue will be cut off for not chanting the hymns or not wetting it with alcohol”.*

In the present context, benefits to the girl’s family from the sexual services she provides to her partners seem to be the only major factor of intent in dedication. This also proves a situation of

convenience to the state machinery which finds this invisibility an opportunity of denial and escape from responsibility. Even for local social workers or the community youth vigilance teams in Sakhi, timely intervention and prevention are difficult due to the surreptitious nature of dedication. Only when the girls start taking on partners do neighbours come to know of the dedication and by this time, the girls feel it is too late to retrace their situation as they carry the social stigma and ridicule.

Another context of dedication is among people with multiple sexual identities or members of the LGBT community. Transgendered persons are also forced to become Devadasis as the community interprets their sexual orientation as a pretext for dedication. Male persons with orientation to female identity are made Jogappas but they are allowed to tread between the two worlds of marriage and sexual partnership outside of marriage.

Lack of economic resources for Devadasis who are single parents, often compels them to dedicate their daughters too, despite their own suffering. Not having the means to provide for dowry and marriage expenses and not having any family support to either help them financially or find grooms for their daughters poses a situation of vulnerability to daughters of Devadasis.

*“I made my daughter Devadasi because I did not have money with me to give dowry or pay for the marriage expenses of my daughter. She was already grown up and I was not able to raise enough money. So I did not have any other option with me.”*

If they did manage to get their daughters married, there were few options to choose from ‘eligible’ men. For many this did not appear to be a better option than becoming a Devadasi.

*“Even my sons in law are poor. I performed the marriage of my daughters with very little choice. My elder daughter had to marry a man who was double her age and was already married. My younger daughter I got her married to a handicapped man. What else can I do. I just performed their marriages and left them to lead their lives.”*

### **g) The many justifications: Disability as Sexual Flexibilities**

Madiga girls who are born with physical or mental disabilities are considered a burden for the family and since the family anticipates poor prospects of marriage for these girls, they decide to give them the ‘honour’ of being a Devadasi. This way they feel that they fulfill the social opportunity of ensuring a sexual partner and legitimizing any likelihood of sexual encounters leading to ‘illegitimate’ pregnancies. They also hope that she is not left alone to cope with her disability, when the parents are too old to take care of her. The disability often becomes an easy excuse for using the Devadasi institution for families to live off a girl through sexual contracts on her behalf.

*“My aunt’s daughter is a dwarf and hence fearing that she will not get a husband, her mother made her a Devadasi”.*

*“I had a small eye problem when I was a child-my grandmother got a dream that since I am having a problem, I should be made a Devadasi-so they declared me a Devadasi when I was a child. I did not even know what it was and I don’t remember when I was made a Devadasi as I was too small at that time. Then my mother and grandmother started bringing men to me”.*

*“One of the main reasons why I became a Devadasi was that my leg got burnt one day, so I was not ‘pure’ anymore for marriage”*

*“My sister’s daughter is handicapped. So my sister decided that she also has to become a Devadasi because most men don’t want to marry a handicapped woman”.*

A similar excuse is given for dedication when a girl is considered to have crossed the marriageable age and she has few chances of getting any suitors. Instead of remaining single and sexually inactive (or be a constant source of anxiety for the family over her sexual fluidity), the family thinks it a wise option to make her a Devadasi. An illness in the family or an epidemic in the neighbourhood becomes a cause for declaring one of the girls as a Devadasi in order to appease Huligamma. Usually these come in the form of dream revelations where grandmothers are the culprits responsible for interpreting their dreams as instructions from the Goddess. Such superstitious interpretations are never ignored, no matter what the age or condition of the girl.

*“In my family, my brother fell very ill in my childhood. The neighbor came and told that he got a dream and Huligamma said she wanted me to be sacrificed to her and made a Devadasi. If he dedicates me to Huligamma, then he will be cured. My father did not like to do this, but all the neighbours convinced him that I should be made a Devadasi and that is how I became a Devadasi”*

*“I became a Devadasi because I had health problems. I’d like to marry, but because of my health problems nobody wanted to marry me”.*

*“Devadasis have many problems, so I will not make my daughters become Devadasis. But I think my disabled daughter has no possibility for marriage. Nobody wants to marry her and she has no chance of getting a job. So if I also put her into the system, maybe she will be freed of her disability after death. I know that she will face many problems. But since few men want to have sex with her because of her disability, she will have it a little easier than me. She only has to eat and sleep”.*

*“My friend’s daughter is mentally disabled, that is why she was made a Devadasi”.*

#### **h) Son-Role: A Privileged Burden of Equality:**

Where Madiga families have no sons, there is a preference to retain one of the daughters in the maternal home in order to take on the family responsibilities and for entirely selfish reasons of having an assured care giver in old age or simply for male members to have a lazy and alcoholic life. Often male members of Madiga families find the Devadasi system a route to upward caste mobility as well as a source of income (the family bread winner) by offering a daughter in honour

of the Goddess and forcing sexual partners on the girl in return for financial transactions with her partners.

*“Some people make their daughter Devadasi because they have property. If they perform marriage then property will not remain with them, so for this reason they make their daughter Devadasi.”*

*“Many times I thought that it is a good thing that I am a Devadasi, especially when my father fell sick. If I would have been married, then I would not have given my income to him”.*

*“When I was 10 years old, my mother died, so later I used to take care of my father who dedicated me to Huligamma”.*

*“My paternal grandparents advised my parents to force me to become a Devadasi, because I was their only child and they wanted someone to look after them in their old age”.*

*“My name is Manjamma, my father’s name is Poojariappa and my mother’s name is Lakshmi. I am their only child. I live in Basavanadurga. My father forced me to become a Devadasi because I am the only child and he wanted someone to look after him in the future. I was 14 when I became a Devadasi”.*

*“I was five years old when my parents made me a Devadasi. They had two reasons- there were no sons, only daughters, so they chose me from the daughters so that I can look after them like a son. And they had no money, so they could not afford to get me educated or married”.*

*“I had six brothers, but all of them died. My parents decided that I should become a Devadasi as they feared having to live alone in old age. If I got married and left them for my husband’s house there will be no one to take care of them”.*

*“My mother forced me to become a Devadasi, because I was her only child and no older male child could have looked after her in the future. When my father was alive, we were happy, but when my father died, we had to face some difficulties”.*

*“My father died when I was eleven years old. There was no male child in my family to look after all of us, so they decided that I have to become a Devadasi. I started working as an agricultural labourer from the time I was a child”.*

*“My father died of cancer. My mother is not a Devadasi. I have two siblings. She had four children all of whom died before we were born. My brother and sister are younger than me. My mother made me a Devadasi, so I can take care of all of them”.*

*“My parents had only one condition to the man who chose me as his partner: that he should stay with me for the rest of his life”.*

*“My mother was a Devadasi. When I was a child, there were a lot of problems in my family; we had financial problems, so sometimes we did not have a proper meal during the day, falling asleep with an empty stomach”. And now, she has forced me to become a Devadasi because if I get married who will look after her?”*

*“My mother had seven children but they all died and only I survived. That is why my parents pushed me into the Devadasi system. Once a boy wanted to marry me, but my mother said that she was not going to marry me off since I should become a Devadasi to take care of her and my father”.*

*“My mother gave birth to eight girls. She herself was a Devadasi. I don't know my father. All of my sisters died in their childhood. That is why my mother put me in this system and I have to take care of the family”.*

*“I became a Devadasi at the age of 24. They wanted me to look after my brothers in the future, so they forced me to become a Devadasi. They thought that if I marry someone, I might go away to my husband's home and will not take care of my family anymore”.*

*“The main reason to make me Devadasi is that I am the only daughter for my parents and I have to look after my parents when they get old. My mother was sick I use to take care of her. She died six months ago and now I have to take care of my father.”*

*“Currently I am working in Hampi in a park cleaning the grass and cutting trees. I earn Rupees 300 per day but we receive the money only at the end of the month. My mother used to do agricultural work but now she is not able to work anymore. My brother also lives with me. He does tailoring work occasionally, but as he has health problems, so I take care of the family”.*

*“Because of no rain while monsoon, most lakes and rivers are dry. So farming gets more and more difficult. That's why I have to find other ways to feed my family. For example, I collect drumsticks in the hills. One day while doing this work I had an accident. I had to stay at home for one month. During this time I was not able to work and earn money and it was really hard to survive”.*

*“My father made me Devadasi as I was the only child and so I have to look after my family. I took this responsibility seriously but I have also chosen my own partner. He is from the same caste. He was not married when we met. He did not want to get married but I persuaded him and his mother to find a wife for him. After all, I am a Devadasi and my children belong to me, not to him. He also should have his own children.”*

Thus, the role of performing the duties of a male progeny becomes a compulsion for many. Some take pride in this as in the above narrative, and believe that they are the head of the family for their parents as well as for their children. The above narrative also reflects a position of an independent woman who takes complete ownership of her children and takes pity on her partner by facilitating his marriage in order that he also has his paternal rights to children not belonging to her.

On what basis the siblings are selected depends on the situation and temperament of the girl. Sometimes, a girl who demonstrates strong qualities of independence, competence, ability to lead the family ('male' qualities) qualify her to become a Devadasi so that she takes on the role of the son and becomes a permanent and an assured care giver for the parents and grandparents.

*"I often scold my father for forcing me to become a Devadasi, but he does not understand me, he is just interested in the money. He does not think about me".*

*"My mother has three sisters and my eldest aunt was made a Devadasi. But my mother was very pretty and bold – so my grandmother thought that she is bold like a man and can manage the family affairs-it will be good to make her a Devadasi, so my mother was forced to become a Devadasi at the age of eight. Even when she tried to run away, they beat her up and forcibly brought partners for her."*

*"Our parents force us to become Devadasis because they want someone to look after them when they are old. Some Devadasi women face physical and sexual harassment, but they do not reveal it. Some girls can escape in the middle of their lives. My grand-daughter was a Devdasi, but when she was in school, she fell in love with a boy and eventually she ran away with him. By now, she is leading a happy life; they have a car and two children. If I get a chance like that, I will take the same steps as she did, but what about my parents? Now they are old, I cannot leave them alone. Sometimes I say to them: "I would like to flee with some man, but for your sake I am not going anywhere".*

*"There are seven Devadasis in my family. Four of them are my grandmother and my mother and her siblings. Another aunt fell in love with a boy from an upper caste who is our neighbor. Neither his family nor mine were happy with their affair-his family because we are from the Madiga caste and, my family, because my grandmother fears losing the earnings from my aunt if she gets married. My grandmother wanted my aunt to take care of her two younger brothers and the parents during their old age. Hence both families have prevented them from getting married although the boy insisted on marrying her and they already have a child together. My youngest aunt, in a rare situation, has herself taken the decision to become a Devadasi, much against the wishes of her family. As all three siblings are daughters and as the mother is dead, she fears that there will be no one to take care of her father. She is a strong independent willed person and is the sole breadwinner in the family. She has not taken any partners yet, but has decided to remain a Devadasi to take care of her father".*

In some instances, the extension of the son role for Devadasis in the context of property due to the lack of male children justified the purpose of dedication. Dedicating a girl was a way of ensuring that property remained with the family as a Devadasi is considered equivalent to a male progeny and the patrilineal property rights were extended to her. Although in theory this was an opportunity for gaining assets for daughters, in reality these were very rare cases. Majority of the Devadasis are from the Madiga caste which is mostly landless or has only marginal land and most have no house of their own.

*“All Devadasi women are poor, very poor. We have no land or property. We only survive on daily wage labour”*

This is the constant refrain that we heard from all the Devadasis who participated in this study. From the more than hundred Devadasi women whose narratives we heard, only one woman stated that she stopped working from the time her partner started living with her. All of them were child labourers and continued into old age surviving on daily wage labour. The cultural norms allow the Devadasi woman to inherit property along with their male siblings whereas daughters who get married are not entitled to demand for any share. However, there are no wealthy Madiga families for Devadasis to inherit property or land. In many cases, they barely get anything substantial to survive when the land is fragmented. But some Devadasis reported that even within these fragmented inheritance opportunities, economic arrangements are devised to ensure that the Devadasi gets some part of the income. In some cases, the siblings cultivate the land in rotation and enjoy the proceeds. In a few other cases it was found that the male siblings allow the Devadasi to retain the jewelry of the mother or the maternal house, while the brothers take the land.

However, a Devadasi experiencing property rights is a very remote opportunity compared to the vulnerability of abuse and stigma.

*“My mother made me Devadasi because she thought I should get property of my father. But now my uncles are not giving me my share. If I ask to them they scold me in very bad language and threaten me if I demand it. So I have kept quiet.”*

This role of the son is more a notional form of authority where sometimes Devadasis with more assertive capacities play a dominant role in dispute settlement in family quarrels and this role sometimes gives them a sense of pride in their power of a ‘patriarch’ status. The son role is more of a burdensome responsibility of care giving for the entire family than a privilege of inheritance rights or male benefits.

*“Here in my area all Devadasi women do not have property with us. We have almost nothing. We are landless agriculture labour and have to earn our daily living from labour work.”*

Thus, the Devadasi as an individual with rights and choices over her body in the ritual of dedication, does not arise. Her path is chosen by her family members for various reasons and often at an age when she has no knowledge of the implications of dedication. There were only two reasons cited where the Devadasis said it was voluntary and dedication happened with their ‘consent’.

The prospect of never leaving one’s maternal home where the man comes to stay with her instead of the woman leaving her family and staying with her husband’s family in a situation of marriage (which usually is considered a cause of dread and a negative experience by most Indian girls) makes some girls consent to being dedicated.

*“I thought it would be the best way to stay back with my mother and grandmother, so I was excited that they were making me a Devadasi“.*

The social institution of Hindu marriage where physical and psychological abuse at the hands of the husband and his family continues to be widely experienced by most girls, this becomes a source of hopeful escape in an alternate institution of the Devadasi system. Poor rural girls from the lower caste may hope to find the institution of Devadasi an escape from the oppression of parents-in-law. Yet, later in the course of their relationship with their partners, most have expressed remorse that the protection expected from the institution of the Devadasi custom is a mirage and their life is caught in layers of other forms of exploitation and neglect.

The other reason that give girls an initial thrill of becoming a Devadasi is the fuss, attention and gifts received from the partners in advance (a saree, some bangles, sweets and other small items of pleasure) which, for a poor lower caste girl, appear highly attractive. It is too late when the real life implications descend on them and the harsh problems of having to deal with the vagaries of a sexual partner who has no responsibilities or obligations towards the Devadasi but only rights over her physical and sexual services, pushes them into lifelong abuse.

### **i) Male the Provider? Patriarchy as the Predating Promiscuity**

....And then they were told that this was their destiny, the instructions of Hulgamma that cannot be disobeyed.

*“The problems started after my puberty. Boys used to follow me and asked me if I would like to come with them. My father noticed this and thought that it might spoil me, and that I would sleep with everyone, so he decided to find a partner for me when I was 16. I often scold my father for forcing me to become a Devadasi but he does not understand me, he is just interested in the money”.*

*“I do not know about the history of the Devadasi, I just know it the way it is today. When my children come to hit me, I feel really bad and tears run down my cheeks and when the village people start to stare at me when I am walking on the road, I always run back to my house”.*

*“Ramanjiappa does not care about me, not emotionally or financially. But his wife suspects that he is spending money on me and my children even if he does not give us anything. After some time, he stopped coming altogether.”*

*“When I gave birth to my first child, my mother used to take care of me, but my partner’s wife did not allow him to even visit his own child. There are a lot of difficulties I have to face in my life, but now I cannot speak about them. My brothers do not invite me to any ceremony, function or festival and if they invite me, they look down on me. My brother’s children received a good and proper education, but mine could not get any education and my sisters in law sometimes even force me to wash the dishes after they eat, so I really do not like to go to my brother’s house”.*

*“Two of my children are prone to alcohol and when my brothers saw them drinking they scolded me that I am unable to offer a good life for my own children”.*

One of the major social prejudices that we tried to explore here is the relation between economics, poverty and Devadasi dedication - whether poverty was the primary reason that allows such a custom of violation of the woman's body as a means of survival. Poverty does present a factor in inducing greed among the family members, especially the fathers or brothers of the Devadasi who see an opportunity for a financial transaction with the partners. The partners have to pay an advance to the family in return for the commitment of sexual services. Particularly when the girls are young and have greater chances of attracting partners, the families willingly trade the girl's body for cash deals. A partner is solicited by the family who is allowed to visit the girl as long as he wished. There are neither written nor oral obligations of commitment on the side of the partner and he is at will to abandon her at any point of time after which the family looks for another partner or leaves her to fend for herself and her children.

The girl herself receives little direct monetary benefits except for initial gifts, jewelry or sarees that the partner may indulge in her, as the family as a whole survives on her services. These are again, privileges she enjoys at the beginning of her Devadasi services when in youth. These taper off within no time partly because the partners themselves may not be from economically well-to-do families and have their marital families to take care of. The partner's own family may tolerate his visits to the Devadasi but are usually intolerant to the upkeep of the Devadasi or the children she begets from her partner.

Hence, in almost all the cases, the Devadasis are single women and single parents who bear the entire burden of raising their children and taking care of their own survival. But for the initial payments received by her family, there is no regular maintenance paid to her by the partner. On the other hand, he visits her empty handed and expects her to take care of his food, liquor and other expenses.

*“I gave birth to my children in my own home; I did not go to a hospital. I was 25 when I gave birth to my first child”.*

*“I am working as a daily wage labourer. I have only one partner and three children, two boys and one girl. My daughter also goes to work as a daily wage labourer. My partner, a labourer, comes and goes, he is from Anchanagudi. He is married and has children”.*

*“If I go begging by taking “padlagi” to one area in the village, I get two baskets full of rice. I eke my survival by begging which helps me run my life for four to five days, otherwise who will feed me”.*

*“Mostly I do some sugarcane cutting and harvest. Here I only earn 100 rupees per day. This money is really not enough. Because of the hard work I have many health problems. I can't pay for a doctor or even for medicine. I don't fear death because death brings me freedom - freedom from*

*pain, suffering, and freedom from bad feelings. Daily I try to forget my pains and problems by drinking alcohol and chewing tobacco and betel”.*

*“I take part in the NREGS work. I spend thousand rupees per week only for food. That means that I need 4000 rupees for a month to take care of my children. I work in others’ farms for sugar cane cutting and picking out weeds. My partner does not give me any money, I have to take care of everything for me and my children.”*

*“He took little responsibility for my children - their basic needs like food and clothes. I got some money for my children’s marriages and I used that money to pay back the loans. I get a monthly pension but the major part of the pension goes to my partner”.*

*“I suffered a lot from poverty. I had nothing to eat, survived many times just drinking the water from the well. Even to draw the water I had no bucket or string, so I used to wait for others to come and draw water and take some water from them. I had no clothes to wear, so my saree was always dirty. I used to wash half the saree at a time and wear it that way. I worked in many places as an agricultural labourer. I cooked whatever I could find in the fields where I worked - even when I had delivery, it was at home with no one to help and I went back to work immediately because my partner was not interested in giving me anything-what can we expect from our partners anyway”.*

*“When I was younger I was working for a daily wage of five rupees per day. When I was doing agriculture labour work from six in the morning until late in the evening, they only gave me ten rupees. I used to shout at my partner because he didn’t help me during this time and I spent all of that little money that I received on food”*

*“I am really worried about my children’s future. I have three daughters. I was hoping for a male child as my partner expected a boy. Once I went to a hospital but they said that I cannot bear another child. Anyway three children are enough as I have to take care of them, go for construction work and raise them alone. After I had my tubectomy operation, I took rest only for a month and had to go back to work. I pray to god that he gives me strength to work and to take care of my children as I have to manage everything on my own”.*

*“I had so many problems because of being a Devadasi. Sometimes I picked some green vegetables outside to have something to eat, sometimes I didn’t have food at all and I worked from morning to night. When I gave birth to my first child, I suddenly understood everything: I understood our society, why the people treat me like they do, I understood that I must care for my children and also myself. My children take good care of me nowadays.”*

*“I have a piece of land and if it rains, we can grow sugarcane and then we are able to pay the loan but if the rain does not come, we have so many problems”.*

*“I work every day and get daily wages all of which I have to spend to cover the costs of food. Sometimes there is no agricultural work because of drought. Then we have to just wait for the*

*rains and during that time we don't get wages at all and our financial situation becomes very critical."*

*"Sometimes a financier comes to the villages and asks for us to pay the loans back but most of us can't because we have no work".*

*"Who can trust our partners – they will leave us when they get fed up of us and then we have to alone take care of our children-what do you know what we Devadasis suffer in our life-we have to do everything on our own."*

*"My partner lived with me till I had my child. He was rich and I had gone to work in his house. His parents introduced me to him. They came to me and told me to be his partner as his wife was still young and had not matured. Once she matured, he left me and went to his wife. My partner promised me he will take care of me and his wife also as he has a lot of land and property and cattle. But he left me. As I was young, another partner started living with me. But he also left."*

*"My children are young and they are in the right age for marriage now but we are in a bad financial situation and we don't get any help. I am working as a daily wage labourer and get hundred rupees per day. This is not enough to buy food and also put aside money for our children's marriage expenses. Because of these problems my children have to face, I am often sad and cry a lot."*

*"I am 60 years old I think. I work in the canal where I take mud out. I earn 15 rupees only. I do a lot of odd jobs like stone cutting, agricultural work, mining work and construction work as I don't have any land or proper wages".*

*"I spent two lakhs on the delivery of my daughter's child. Actually, she is not my real daughter because my four children are only boys. But she is my sister's daughter and I take care of her, too, since my sister's husband is also my partner. I had two own daughters but both of them died. I love my sister's daughter and help them because I also have a responsibility for her. I have to do so many tasks".*

*"All Devadasi families have so many problems, I gave birth to several children but my partner does not feel responsible for my problems and does not help me enough".*

*"The problems, which I had to face in my life are many. Every Devadasi struggles a lot to survive. Often I have to fall asleep on an empty stomach because we do not have the money to prepare food. Sometimes there was less rice.....we did not even have oil to prepare our vegetables".*

*"Sometimes I have to migrate to find work and other people talk badly about me which makes me sad".*

*“Sometimes I even didn't have anything to eat. My partner and my children are not taking care of me. I came back home and I took some green vegetables from another agricultural land. I mixed them with red chili powder and salt and ate it with one roti.”.*

*“When my first daughter was one month old, I started to work in the field again, the village's midwife helped then to give birth to my other children. All on my own I handle the things in my life. At the age of 16 I became a mother, even my father did not take care for me, he was an alcoholic, often drinking a lot with my money.”*

The self-narratives of the Devadasi women are indeed heart-wrenching descriptions of their plight to survive, cope with hunger, long hours of hazardous work as labourers for very low wages, tedious journeys as migrant labour as they have no one to turn to. Society provides privileges to males to take Devadasis as their sexual partners, and even allows them to have multiple partners simultaneously in addition to their family through marriage. There is no expectation that the men take responsibilities for the maintenance of the Devadasi and his biological children from her. It is a completely one-sided arrangement where the male partner has all the rights of demanding not only sexual services but also sexual loyalty from the Devadasi he visits, whereas she has no rights to demand that he take care of her and the children. If he does contribute partially, it is considered charitable and a blessing for the Devadasi but never as her right. In most cases, the partners completely abdicate all responsibilities with only the rights to her body and labour. Even when the Devadasi is pregnant, she gets no financial support from the partner. She single-handedly goes through her child-birth and is forced to return to work within a few days of delivery as she and her children would otherwise starve. Many reported that partners take their pregnancies so callously that they are not present at the time of delivery and only come to see their children later at their leisurely pace.

Very few men are evoked by any feeling of sentiment towards their children and rarely acknowledge their existence when they visit the Devadasi, except to send them on errands or get services from their children like cooking or washing clothes or fetching liquor. If the Devadasi is too tired or unwell to provide sexual services, it leads to violence and suspicion from her partner, who accuses her of entertaining other partners in his absence. Devadasis fear that if they demand any decent or responsible behavior from their partners, they would simply shift their attention to other Devadasis and leave them.

In our study we found that most of the partners are themselves from lower castes and poor economic background like agricultural labourers, truck drivers, vendors, masons and unskilled labour and entering into a partnership with the Devadasi has little correlation with their financial capacity to provide for multiple families. Some partners who are regarded as good and decent partners would have provided an occasional support for school fees or marriage expenses (very marginally) or if they were masons, would have helped in the construction of a house.

On the other hand, Devadasis and their daughters have narrated how the partner imposes his control over her wages, pension, the house that she would have received under the government welfare scheme, grabs the loans she may have taken and such other material demands. Similarly,

they impose control over the daughters' education, marriage, employment or mobility and all other affairs of the Devadasi's economic and social life with absolute impunity from any responsibilities. Further, Devadasis often tend to contribute to the partner's own family needs from time to time whenever the partner expresses a shortage of cash to meet the domestic responsibilities of his marital family.

Devadasis reported that it is common for male partners to have multiple sexual partners but unlike the public prejudice of Devadasis being sex workers or having multiple partners, they have only one partner in a whole life-time, or only one partner at any given time. Change in partners happens only if the partner dies or abandons the Devadasi or from a sense of vulnerability, when she is forced to take a partner in order to protect herself from the harassment of other men in the community. However, partners who abandon feel entitled to come and go whenever they choose to. They often mentally and physically torture the Devadasi that she has taken another partner in his absence, even if she remains without one.

The wives and families of the partners accuse the Devadasi of being free from encumbrances of family, parents in-law, or pressures from performing the role of a wife. Devadasis report that this is not true as the partners abuse them, that domestic violence is high but they cannot demand for maintenance or fidelity as they do not have the status of a wife. Nor can they complain or take legal action as this relationship is assumed not to exist and they have no documents to prove who their partners are.

*“My mother who is a Devadasi and I used to go to Hospet to work as domestic help. Even after my father left my mother, he used to come and go at his pleasure and was always suspicious when we came back home late after work, demanding who her sexual partners were. At work, the men in the house where we worked used to trouble my mother and make passes at me because they knew that she was a Devadasi. So we had trouble from all sides.”*

#### **j) Truths of the Body and Mind-the violence of patriarchy**

It is ironical that the Devadasis perform rituals at the temple and may also be providing sexual services to the priests, but they continue to remain, till today, as much outcastes from the inner sanctorum of the temples as the rest of their scheduled caste members. Hence, the pretentious boundaries of caste and untouchability are most discernible in the practice of the Devadasi system where the woman's body is cast-e in at night and caste out during the day. It is this very abuse-physical, sexual and emotional- that forms the core of the bitterness in the Devadasi narratives recounted in village after village. Sexual abuse has been more often described as the daily way of life of the Devadasi, more than an experience of sexual pleasures or joys of enticing men into the trap of promiscuity outside the sanctity of marriage.

*“When I became a Devadasi at the age of 8, my life changed completely. Now I cannot trust any men in my life, they might be good, but I cannot trust them anymore. They may cheat on me, they may harm me”.*

*“Even though I was menstruating, my first partner forced me to have sex with him, it was really painful, and afterwards he ran away quickly. He always had three telephones with him, he never used to speak to me, he just came to my home and sat on a chair, mostly he phoned someone, even while using all the three phones together. He never enquired about my well-being, not even about my health (nearly laughing)”.*

*“I came to know what it means to be Devadasi when I gave birth to my child, and realised I have to look after my children all alone”*

*“My partner comes and goes whenever he wants to; I do not treat him like a part of the family. He does not help us; he has his own family to take care for”.*

*“He used to take me to a lodge to sleep with me, because he did not feel comfortable with doing it at home. So he used to tell lies to my family, that he wanted to take me to a temple and things like that. We went to Hospet at night and he sent me back alone to my village late in the night. He just paid the bus ticket and told me to go. It hurt me a lot when he sent me back to my village all on my own, but I did not inform my family. But things got worse. He just wanted to sleep with me and when it was over, he always said that he just wanted to go to the toilet but then he did not come back. I hated his behaviour and I did not accept him anymore. He was nearly 40 years old, so much older than me and not nice. Every time I think of him I cry a lot.”*

*“My aunt told me: "age does not matter that much, you have to think of your family's future and so you have to give birth to many children and then you can leave him". He never helped me. For example, when my son was not feeling well, I called him, but he said that this is my problem and he cannot do anything about it. He does not love his children; he does not care about them. He just comes to sleep with me, gives me some money and then goes away as fast as he can.”*

*“The partner in the traditional system wants a virgin –they make enquiries about the girl and if they are satisfied about her character, they come to ask for her and bring gifts to start the relationship-even if they are already married and are having multiple relationships, they still want a virgin girl as a partner.”*

*“Sometimes alcoholics come to me and ask me if I want to sleep with them and say that they want to give me some money. Most of the girls do not have the strength to face such things, but I do. “*

*“Being a Devadasi means a lot of problems. I have to manage our daily life; I have to look after my family alone. I dream of a proper marriage, but it will not happen”.*

*“Our partners come and go as they please. Sometimes my partner took care of us, but he has his own wife, and she is more important to him”.*

*“Once my partner's whole family came and we had a quarrel because they wanted him to stay with them and to have his own family. Later on he got married and he has children by now. But our relationship continued”.*

*“When I was giving birth to my second child, I thought that I’d die, I even wanted to die, but god did not listen to me (she is crying). I have to be strong. Some boys come to my father and ask him: “Would your daughter sleep with me? I will pay her 300 rupees”, (she is quiet for some time, crying). Before I met my first partner, once there was a man who came near me all the time and harassed me saying: “What is your problem; you can sleep with me, can’t you?” I informed my father about it and asked him to send him away. But the man was very clever. He offered 10000 rupees to my father and promised that if I sleep with him, he will look after me. I knew that he only wanted a physical relationship and then leave me. But my father was greedy, he did not care for me or my feelings, he just wanted to do business using me (crying again). The man gave him only 2000 rupees and my father forced me to sleep with him. I wanted to get rid of him but my father made me continue with him hoping that he will pay the rest of the money. He never did. I did not accept this person as my partner, but he came back sometimes. I feel really bad when I think of all those experiences”.*

*“When I was pregnant I went to agricultural work in the morning and then delivered the child in the evening. Another time when I was pregnant, the child died during pregnancy. Again I got pregnant and that time I developed serious mental problems. When I delivered the child, it died shortly after birth”.*

*“My partner’s wife and his family thinks that her husband or their son goes to the bitch whenever he comes to me – I feel very bad when people refer to me like that”.*

*“People used to gossip about me when I go to work, they used to curse me that I should starve. I try not to listen to them and to remember my god. Sometimes some men used to insult me. I struggled a lot in my life, I worked as a daily wage labourer and when I was a teenager some boys used to pass comments on me, many times I scolded them for doing such things and said: “Don’t you have any sisters and a mother at your house? After that they do not reply anymore”.*

*“Women in my village say ‘If I go with a Devadasi woman, then the other people won’t respect us anymore’. ‘When I go to the general store to buy provisions for my home the shop owners always look down upon me or insult me. When I walk on the road, people insult me and call me names”.*

*“My partner does not care about me; he just comes to me to has sexual intercourse with me. But sometimes he buys clothes for me”.*

*“My partner came to me at the age of 18, until that time I was alone. When my children or me do not feel well, we do not have enough money to go to a hospital, I take a loan from the money lenders and later on I pay it back on my own, but my partner never helps.”*

*“Sometimes I am running around, searching for work desperately, from one to another place. My partner only visits me when he wants to and leaves me when he wants to and now he has totally abandoned me. I went out to work in order to cover my children’s basic needs”.*

*“Because I am a Devadasi, some of my relatives never accept me and the women are always suspicious, it hurts me a lot. My partner never considers me his wife, he just sees the Devadasi in me; it really hurts me a lot. Even if he takes care of us and gives some money to my children, he never admits that they are his children in public. He even looks down upon us sometimes just because I am a Devadasi and I always fear that he will leave one day”.*

*“I have to face a lot of problems, my sisters in law treat me badly all the time, they do not respect me and look down upon me. So later on I got seperated from my family, I was alone at that time. I was alone for three years. Some men used to call me to have sexual intercourse, but when I called my uncles, they shouted at them. I feel very bad when men call me to have sex with them; sometimes I even want to hang myself”.*

*“We think about attempting suicide but I have children. That is the reason why I can't commit suicide. I don't tell anybody about my feelings because they will only listen to me but they won't help me. Sometimes my feelings hurt me a lot and I have headache and tension”.*

*“Being a Devadasi is really a hard life. You don't have any rights and our partner does not give money. I needed money for the marriage of my son and my daughter. I also have health problems. I have to pay the doctor who is really expensive. Because I have no money, he checked my health and told me that everything is fine, but it wasn't. Even now while talking to you I feel very ill”.*

*“Sometimes he gives us some money for food and daily needs but mostly comes empty-handed. Whenever I ask him why he doesn't pay to take care of his children, he stops visiting us for a long time after that. So I stopped asking him. Many times I meet his wife near the village common toilets and she scolds me with bad words because she thinks her man gave me money. She accuses me of having stolen her husband”.*

*“When my children fall sick, there is no one who helps us and I do not have enough money to go to a hospital. So I used to go to the general store to get some tablets in the hope that my children will recover very quickly. Once I even got an injection from a doctor. My partner had enough money to bear our expenses, but because he had to take care of his wife and children, he could not take care of us too. At that time I had to face a lot of difficulties, because they used to pay a female labourer only 5 rupees a day and a male labourer received 10 rupees a day. We had to go walking from here (Basavandugra) to Hospet for labour”.*

*“My first partner forced me to sleep with him in a very bad way, it hurt a lot and sometimes I used to cry. He just wanted to fulfill his physical desires. I hope that I forget him some day, but I know that I will not. I can only forgive him when I look at my son, because without him, my son would also not be there”.*

*“Only when I work there is food for my children. I have five children. My partner has a wife and two daughters. When he doesn't have enough to feed his own family where will he give me money? I have to bring up my children on my own. I don't have parents now and my partner doesn't feed us. When I go to agriculture labour work, I have lot of body pain and am not able to work hard.*

*The landlord scolds me that he is paying wages but not getting enough work from me. What can I do, I feel like dying. All my life I have worked hard and now I feel too weak for any work. When I was pregnant, I had no food to eat as my partner didn't give me anything. Then I had miscarriage many times. It is a curse for me and for my children. I have no respect from my family. My partner's family is always scolding me. My neighbours have no respect for me and my children face many insults when they are in school or playing. This is my story, what can I say about devadasi life – it is too painful to explain.”*

*“My partner is from another caste. I have to take responsibility for everyone in the house-I have to get the ration, I have to take the loan and then I cannot repay, so they come to fight with me – what is the point in telling anyone about my problems, who will solve them, why should I tell anyone who have no solution for my devadasi life”.*

The stress that Devadasi women experience sometimes leads to mental illnesses and nervous break-down, especially during childbirth. *“When I was pregnant I became paralyzed and I felt really bad. One time there was a festival in my village and people were celebrating. At that time the paralysis got worse”.*

*“We went to the hospital and I had a caesarean delivery. Then I said to my mother that it was not my baby. My mother took me back to the village and cared for me and she treated me with herbs. Now I don't want to accept any partner in my life. My mother always says that she is an old woman and she is going to die soon but I have a long future ahead, so I should give birth to another child. When she dies, she doesn't know who is going to take care of me”.*

**Some stories are less traumatizing:**

*“My partner does not discriminate me and even his wife does not look down upon me. My partner came to me when I was 16”.*

Sometimes the partner is not as abusive as in this case: *‘My first partner was a Muslim and he was from Kamalapura. He treated me well. He loved me a lot. He was taking care of my family and he also worked in agriculture. But now he is dead”.*

*“I have only one partner whom I met when we were working as daily wage labourers. I had a good relationship with my partner's family, his parents used to come to my home and we ate together. My partner visits me regularly. He loves my children and he never discriminated them in any way, he just treats us equally with his marital family and sometimes he gives some money. I am happy to be with him”.*

*”My partner was from the same village and the same caste. Now he is dead but when he was alive he took care of me and my children. We worked together in the sugar cane fields, paddy fields, making jiggery and harvesting banana. My partner used to look after my whole family”.*

*"Sometimes my second partner understood me, but now he is old and he will die. His children are married; one of his daughters is older than me. Once I asked him: "Why do you spoil my life?", and he replied: "What can I do? Things happen that way".*

*"My current partner did not visit me when I gave birth to my son, because he had to work and to earn some money. But when I gave birth to my daughter recently, he came to the hospital and he gave me 1000 rupees. He is a contractor".*

*"I had only one partner in my life and we had a good relationship and we were like a married couple although he was older than me. But in all our legal documents we have to write the name of our god because we are Devadasis".*

*"My partner is a married man. I and his wife have a very good understanding. He spends six months with me and six months with her and he looks after me as if I were his wife. I take care of his children's expenses also and his wife sends me some gifts sometimes".*

Despite some Devadasis having reasonably positive relationship with their partners who continued their relationship for several years and Devadasis felt they were like a husband, the stigma of being Devadasi has always remained a scar and they reported to have faced several instances of humiliation.

*"my partner takes care of me, but it's difficult to lead a life as Devadasi".*

### **k) Devadasi - Sex worker or wife? Prisms of Identity**

The self-narratives from Devadasi women convey their hopes and aspirations of a marital life. A Devadasi does not consider herself a sex-worker nor have a livelihood of a sex worker, as is often the public bias. On the other hand, their aspirations, imagination and behavior with their partners are that of a traditional married woman in India where they perform all the duties of marriage, including adhering to monogamy and fidelity to a single partner at any given time.

Majority of the women who participated in the study portrayed themselves in the imaginary role of a wife. They live with the constant hope that the partner would one day accept them as a wife even when the partners do not perceive them as wives or do not take responsibilities for the children they beget. They take on the traditional duties of a wife, taking care of their partners' physical, emotional and sexual needs, begetting children through him, performing rituals for his good health and prosperity and remaining sexually faithful. Girls who are dedicated do not realise the implications and dream of having a husband like all other girls in their village until their families force partners upon them. Throughout their life they go through bewilderment and bitterness as they are made to feel responsible for the social 'evil' of being women sorcerers stealing the husbands of other women through their vile and promiscuous ways.

Devadasi women and their children face multiple forms of humiliation and stigma where the social system prevents them from claiming legitimacy or relationship to the partners' name, caste or

assets. Thus, the notion of a marital relationship with their partner remains a figment of imagination for the Devadasi. The study revealed that the Devadasis did not provide sexual services for commercial purposes nor do they maintain a constant flow of multiple male partners. In reality, they live a life like any other married rural women but without the rights and privileges of a wife.

Sometimes, they find that the patriarchal behavior and violence exists even within a relationship of marriage which makes them take a more pragmatic approach about their status of being single women. Many expressed a sense of resignation to male irresponsibility and therefore, a few prefer to remain outside of the marriage system. Even where the Devadasis had a relatively positive relationship with their partners and had more lasting relationships, the inevitability of the partner leaving them and going back to their wives is a given. Ultimately, the Devadasi has to live alone in old age, taking care of her children all by herself and remaining a woman without an 'identity' 'status' or dignity. This duality in culture, of creating an institution that dictates her stigmatized role brings to question the intersectionality of caste, patriarchy and the current politico-economy of a neo-feudal order.

*"I kept only single partner, if I change partner then there will be no respect in this society, so I had only partner. We can't ask our partner anything, because we don't have power to ask them anything, because he is not my husband".*

*"I have single partner. From him I gave birth to three children. Now I am 45 years old, I matured at the age of 15 when my partner came to me. So from that time my partner is with me and he still lives in my house with me. Now I have five grand children".*

*"Sometimes girls ask me who my husband is. I tell them the name of my mother's brother "Siddappa". I would never tell them the name of my partner. All Devadasis would never mention the name of their partner, because officially they are married to someone else although for us personally, we consider our partner as our husband".*

*"When my partner died of an accident, I did a pooja. Women are different from men because women think of our partners as husband and do so many poojas".*

*"I have a partner, but he lives in another house with his wife and his three children. Because I am not married, my children got my name as second name and not the name of their father. He does some department work at the university".*

*"I have only one partner in my life and I think of him as my husband. Some women have more than one partner, but not all".*

*"Now it is 21 years he is in relationship with me, so believe him like he is my own husband".*

*"I had one partner. From the time that I became a devadasi until now I had only one partner. He lived with me and my daughter in our house but now he is dead. He was already married and he*

*is from the Kuruba caste. He has a wife and children. His wife was always shouting at him: "You don't live with me and you go to the Devadasi woman. She is from the Madiga caste." He has been staying with me for 40 years. My oldest son is 40 years old. When he was born my partner started living with me".*

*"I was very young and did not know anything when my partner came to me. He was only 25 when he became my partner. But he died after one year. I thought I can get married to someone. But they told me I cannot marry, I am Devadasi. So I have been alone as I had only one partner and after he died, I did not take any partners".*

*"I lost all of my hope because there are so many really old men who come to me and they will never be able to care for me in the future. When I was young, I used to work in the fields and at that time I thought: "Whoever I take a liking for in the future, my parents will perform a marriage for him and me". I never thought that my life would be ruined because I became a Devadasi. When I used to go to the fields, boys and men used to follow me, but, thank god, they never did any harm to me. People look down upon us Devadasis; they always think that we do not only have one partner but three or four at one time. They blame me for infidelity of their husbands and call us "basavi" and "sulle" because we hold a bad image in society. But they also say that we are the children of the goddess, then why do they treat us badly? We are like goats, used by society and which gets slaughtered for the god".*

*"I dream of a proper marriage, but it will not happen. I will not force my daughter to become a Devadasi. If we get married, then our husband will take all the responsibilities, but we Devadasis have to handle them on our own".*

*"It's very nice that my daughter has a husband she can stay with. I had no husband, only a partner who already had children and a wife. Because of that I faced many problems. People shout at me that I snatched someone's husband. But how is it my fault when they made me Devadasi and pushed me into this system?"*

*"I had to learn that a Devadasi will never marry, it hurts me a lot. In my village there are around 30 Devadasis, young and old ones. All of my friends are married, and now they are living happily. I cannot have this good life for me".*

*"I was only 5 when I was made Devadasi as my parents had no sons. When I was sixteen my partner came to me. He was from another caste and was also poor like me. He lived with me since then until he died eleven years ago. When he died I removed my Tali as I believed that we were like a married couple. But sometimes we used to quarrel and at that time I used to tell him to leave me. We Devadasis have the power to reject our partners, you see. But he never left. Now I am old. Whenever I see his photo on my wall, I think of him."*

*"My partner always says: "now I am old, so I cannot visit you anymore and I may die soon". If he would have been younger, then he might have stayed with me for a whole life time. But when he dies, I am very afraid that I have to choose another partner. I really want to live without any*

*partner, but if I live alone people start to gossip and harass me, especially some boys or men will taunt me saying "Come with me, now!"*

*"If you are married life is much easier. Then people accept you and your family. It's also easier because you have someone you can talk to and someone you can share your problems with. If you are a Devadasi, you are completely alone".*

*"Some women may have another partner if their old partner leaves. But I did not do that. I am told you can get dangerous diseases like HIV or some serious illness".*

*"Sometimes, men who come to us behave well publicly. The neighbours think that he is taking good care of her. But in the private space, he misbehaves, tortures and gets violent. We women feel compelled to continue with the same man as otherwise people will make negative comments on us and say that we are making demands like a wife, or finding excuses to turn him away for another man".*

*"Sometimes I used to ask why I could not get married and I got really angry and sad because I am so alone and I have to take care of my family on my own. If I would have been married, my husband would have taken care of us".*

*"Devadasi cannot get married. But I know one young girl who was made Devadasi. But there was a boy who liked her. So she threw away her muttukattu and both of them ran away to another village and they got married. This is very rare."*

Although most wives tend to be against their husbands partnering with a Devadasi, and often quarrel with the Devadasi, they settle in to other domestic forms of bringing pressure on their husbands, and often eventually, persuade them to leave the Devadasi.

*"Timavva is a young girl; she studied up to the 10th standard. Her older brother and her mother forced her to become a Devadasi. She gave birth to two girls. At that time she was very young. But when her first partner left her, she went into a relationship with another person, but this person was already married. His wife came to know about their relationship and picked up a fight with Timavva. Soon after, Timavva died. Some people hold the belief that the wife used black magic to kill her."*

The Devadasis who participated in this research in the villages where this study was conducted, had not made any shift to sex work from their traditional role of ritual performances and sexual partnerships. This may not be representative of the lives of Devadasis across the district or in other districts. Yet the public prejudice against Devadasis remains as an image of all Devadasis being sex workers or practicing prostitution, which is also reflected in the assumption stated in the KDP Act 1982. It is a one sided sentiment of the relationship with the partner where the Devadasi behaves like a wife who regards her partner as a husband and lives with the hope of marriage whereas for the partner, she is merely a conduit for sexual pleasure. The distinction between wife and marital family as against the relationship with the Devadasi and his children through her, is

clearly maintained and the boundaries of legitimacy and privileges are strictly drawn. It is critical that this distinction is understood regarding the status and problems of Devadasis and in identifying the contexts in which Devadasi women are compelled to make the shift to sex work. In either of the situations, the abuse and problems need to be recognized and dealt with separately, depending on the choices of sex work or the need to be rehabilitated from the Devadasi practice, with legally recognized rights for both streams of Devadasi women.

### **1) Humour and Agency: Resilience in the face of scorn:**

*“Right from my childhood I learnt that I was different. People used to whisper about me. I went to school upto third class, but I dropped out. I did not have friends as I was constantly reminded by the older Devadasis what I should do and the rituals I should learn. Today we are more than 10 Devadasis in my colony. We are like sisters not like friends. They give me support and when we have problems, we go to the temple and pray and do rituals. I cannot sing or dance, but other Devadasis sing and dance and then I feel better that goddess Huligamma is with me.”*

*“People say many things, and I feel sad when they call me names. But when I sit in my group and we go begging with our hadlaji and we do rituals, it’s ok. Some people are bad, some people are good.”*

*“Whenever I feel bad, we go to the temple with some bananas and coconut. If we don’t have money for bananas, we can just take a lamp and light it in the temple. We do puja. And then I know, Goddess Huligamma will take care.” We sing together to drown our sorrows and this singing along with my sister Devadasis, somehow makes me calm again.”*

*“I am a house without a mother  
I am not surprised that I am an orphan  
There is no Tali round my neck  
No one to throw rice on me, as I am an orphan  
I am a burden to this earth  
This pregnancy is my burden  
My destiny is testing me and life feels like death a million times  
I am an orphan and I am not surprised*

*Whom have I cheated that I should have this destiny  
I am suffering every day with this kind of boon  
We are all alone in this world  
Even if I have anyone, there is no eye, no mouth  
No mercy, no kindness, voiceless is my state  
I am a burden to this earth*

*Why have to you written my destiny like this giving me a million deaths  
If I had a mother she would have protected me  
But she is not there, so I am appealing to you,*

*Be my mother so I can have the love and protection from you, as  
I am living in sadness each day  
I am a burden to this earth  
I am all alone between this earth and the sky  
I am not surprised that I am an orphan  
I am pregnant, neither able to live or to die  
This destiny is troubling me*

*Only women can make this world complete”-Devadasi song*

In another song, they invoke the good feelings and omnipresence of the goddess and her splendor:

*To Kampli, Kamalapura I went and paid my tributes to the goddess  
I will go to Jaditaata (god) and will tell the story from the very beginning  
I hold a paper of six feet, I will tell the story from the very beginning  
In front of a hundred people I will submit this story  
In the village Anklamma, in the query (dalit colony) Kenchamma, in the street Jaditaata  
I remember Jaditaata and tell you the story  
If you come in the morning, I will stand at the doorway, I will go from lane to lane  
I will remember, Suryadeva  
If you come in the evening Suryadeva, I will remember each moment  
Every moment, I will remember, dear Chandruda (Moon)*

*In the lakes and the ponds, everywhere it is our song (of Maremma)  
Wherever you go, it is our song  
Where there is knowledge, there is our song  
In the cattle-shed also it is our song, if you sing on the hill also it is our song*

*Wherever you sing it is our song of Siddamma  
In the good feelings it is Mahadeva, in integrity it is Saraswati,  
You write and read the song aloud  
You are in Allurgi (village), I have come with the sesame sweet and the peanut sweet  
Offer it (to Siddamma)  
Take this and give me knowledge  
Oh you, with the big belly, I have brought the sajje sweet (with millets) for you  
Take this and give me some intelligence*

*Oh god with the dual body, I brought jonnalu (millets) and peanuts for you,  
Please give me intelligence atleast the size of the jonnalu grain  
I got the sweet with the horse-gram from the field  
Please give me intelligence atleast the size of one horse-gram  
You were born in stone and brought up in stone, I pray to you from here  
O Sharani Jambayya, I implore you again and again  
Oh Nagaraja, (snake god), who were born and brought up in the ant-hill, I bow to you*

*I bow to all who are singing, those who are listening,  
For those who gave birth to you, blessings from Lord Shiva.....”*

While this collective agency and emotional support from their own fraternity helps Devadasis cope with anxiety and sorrow, some of them shared their stories of humour and retaliation as a strategy of survival in the midst of humiliation.

*“ My friend was made a Devadasi when were still studying. She has a partner from another caste. But she has a good relationship with her partner’s wife and they have a clear understanding of how they share his time and attention. They send gifts to each and to their children. Both the women keep a watchful eye on him. My friend also dresses up very well and when she goes out people comment that she looks sexy. Her partner got suspicious of her and started scolding her. But she only humours him as she is very loyal to him. Once when he got interested in another woman, my friend scolded him that it would be an insult to his wife and got him thrashed by her brother. After that he has been faithful to her and his wife.”*

*“My grandmother was a Devadasi. She was like a leader. Whenever there was a dispute in the village, she would intervene. Especially when there was a marriage dispute, she could dominate the debate and as she is neutral, people listen to her. She could handle the men easily and because she is a Devadasi, she took advantage of her role by talking in public and giving her opinions. She could curse and abuse and embarrass others as she has a license to shout and use curses. This usually made people embarrassed and shut their mouth. She would joke with us later.”*

*“The older Devadasi women sometimes make jokes at married women and embarrass them with dirty jokes about their sex life. They openly ask women about what happened in the night or what did their husband do to them. They also tease the men openly”.*

*“Who wants to get married. These men are the same. I am atleast free from the trouble of in-laws and abusive husbands. If I want I can reject my partner, but you can’t reject a husband”.*

### **m) Sons and Daughters: Gendered Humiliations**

Of all the humiliations faced by Devadasis, the most painful is the social stigma and suffering encountered by their children. The life of Devadasi children is a life of anguish at every stage starting from the lack of an identity in their name. The provocative jibes from neighbours and relatives, ridicule and inquisitive questions from peers and teachers at school, the rejection by their fathers who refuse to acknowledge them in public and the difficulties faced by both sons and daughters of Devadasis in finding partners for marriage pushes them into depression. The vulnerability they face right from childhood, the accusations of being born to single and stigmatized mothers forces them to grow up defenseless and defeated. Torn between a hatred for their mothers who are considered by the society surrounding them as sinners and abettors of crime, and an acute sense of sorrow witnessing the suffering of their mothers, the children narrated how they live their childhood as a curse and an apology. Both genders shared their constant fear of sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Especially for the girls, the fear of being pushed into

dedication prevails all through their childhood and adolescence. They also seek routes of escape, often through the hope of finding marital partners in their anxiety to not simulate the life of their mothers. This makes them sometimes fall into the trap of sexual abuse and forces them into the very practice of Devadasi dedication that they are trying to escape from.

*“When I was pregnant, doctors asked about my surname and when I tell them that I am Devadasi, they insult me. They advice me, "you can make your life better" of ‘why don’t to live a decent life’”.  
“Recently, when I gave birth to my child, the doctor asked me: "Do both of your children have the same father or not?" This hurts me a lot”.*

*“I do not want to force my daughters to become Devadasis so that my name "Huligemma" will not remain as their surname for the next generations”.*

*“I was always very embarrassed when they asked me about their father’s name, sometimes I even used to laugh, what else can I do?”*

*“I have a partner, but he lives in another house with his wife and his three children. Because I am not married, my children got my name and not the name of their father.”*

*“Sometimes people ask my oldest son who his father is, especially when he gets involved in any village disputes. They taunt him by calling him "Sulle Maganne" and call out to them as ‘children of a Devadasi’ or ‘basavi’. When he returns home he is really angry and starts to argue with me. He blames me that society does not accept him and sometimes he even beats me. On such occasions, I remain silent because there is nothing to say”.*

*“When my children were young, they did not face any kind of discrimination and some people really cared about them and in school they studied upto 8th standard. Later on, I had to force them to stop their studies because there was not enough money to buy food for ourselves. I felt very sad for them but as I said before, my companion did never offer any help to me”.*

*“My son asked me if he could go to an English medium school, but we do not have enough money, it hurts so much. My biggest sin in life is that I am a Devadasi, and sometimes I want to die. This ritual must stop, it ruins lives. When my son plays with other kids, they sometimes ask him: "Prashanatha, when will your father come? And he comes to me with this question. It hurts, every time. We should not follow blind beliefs, we have to stop this custom for our children’s sake”.*

*“My daughter is very smart and good in studies. But she dropped out of school in 9th standard as she was losing interest and other girls and boys asked her many questions about her father. She doesn’t like this”.*

*“Some people also do not want their sons to be married to my daughters, because then some people may say that they are also related to Devadasis”.*

*“My children always cry when they have to sleep on an empty stomach, it really hurts me a lot. Sometimes I want to die. People call me “Sulle”, mostly the landlords do that”.*

*“I never had money to take my children to hospital when they were sick. I only went to the medical shop in Hospet and asked for medicine and prayed that they would get well. Only once I managed to get injection for my son from a doctor.”*

*“In all the government documents, even when I gave birth to my children, I have to mention that I am a Devadasi. All the village people know that I am a Devadasi”.*

*“The other morning my son asked me: “Mummy, when does Papa come? I have to go to the doctor with him” (Renuka is crying). It hurts me a lot when my son asks such questions; I always worry about his future. My daughter will never be a Devadasi; I want to provide a good education for her”.*

*“My sons used to ask me where their father is. I show them pictures of their father, but, of course, there is no bonding between them. Nevertheless, even though my partner did not spend a single rupee on them, my older son started to visit his father from time to time, and sometimes he gets something to eat while staying at his house”.*

*“Sometimes my children question my being as a Devadasi. They say that I should have opposed my father and that I should have got married. What can I say to them?”*

While Devadasis recounted many such painful incidents in the life of their children, the children who participated in this study shared several of their life stories that cause them anguish each time they recollect these humiliating memories. They mostly grow up with a colossal sense of being inferior, the rejects of this society who have to lead an apologetic life, even when trying to defend themselves against other bullying children or adults. They are the cross bearers of the ‘sins’ of their mothers and the intersections of caste and sexual abuse is no more as brutally revealed as in the stigmatized lives of Devadasi children. Their sense of shame and humiliation creates complex relationship conflicts with their mothers, fathers and siblings that often results in behavior problems, criminalization and violence as they grow up into adults.

Poverty, malnutrition and social stigma together mark the Devadasi children’s physical and emotional cavities in their self-construct and esteem. All three factors play a dominant role in snuffing out opportunities for education or growth beyond their stigmatized status. From early on, they experience the pain of ostracisation whether in the neighbourhood, or at school and later at the work sites as informal labourers. Of the dalit children, the most vulnerable are the children of Devadasis, right from the stage of primary education where we find that most either never went to school or dropped out at the elementary levels, cursed by poverty and the vulnerability of being children of single and stigmatized mothers.

Children of Devadasis are very malnourished as much as the Devadasi herself. When children plead for food or money the mothers feel very bad. Initially they take a partner thinking he will

provide for her and her children. The reality is different as the Devadasi is neither a sex worker where her sexual services provide for her sustenance nor a married woman whose husband has domestic obligations.

The stories of the sons and daughters and of the Devadasis themselves convey their dominant memories of hunger, persistent illnesses, chronic weakness and dropping out of school due to their inability to cope physically and academically with the demands of learning.

*“My older son studied upto 5<sup>th</sup> class and my younger son upto 7<sup>th</sup>. My older son had to leave his education because of his poor health. So now he is working as agricultural labourer and my younger son is lorry driver”.*

Their casual reference to skipping meals, going to bed on an empty stomach, trying to find ways to stave off hunger (*I gave them some rice with only chilly powder with no oil or vegetables as I could not provide them anything*) came from many of the narratives. Prolonged periods when there was no labour work available either in agriculture or in mining, the callousness of their fathers in not providing even basic food - these are a constant refrain in all our dialogues with these families. Both boys and girls are found to be malnourished and in a constant state of anxiety regarding their poverty and social stigma. Most girls and boys disclosed their suicidal anxieties and fears of the future that are often manifested as chronic headache, acidity, depression, white discharge, irregular periods and other reproductive health problems, and addictions to tobacco and alcohol. Majority of the older women who participated in the study are addicted to one or both these substances. This has often had an impact on the children, where sons are also found to be alcoholic and violent. The women expressed inability to deal with this violence and living with a life-long emotion of guilt as the sons blame the mother for their situation. Therefore, most drown their sorrows along with hunger through addiction to tobacco and sometimes, cheap liquor.

### **Self-Narratives of sons of Devadasis:**

Out of the eighteen adolescent sons and daughters of Devadasis who directly participated in the peer exchange dialogues for the study, only one of them was not from the Madiga caste. All of them had a history of Devadasi dedication in their family –grandmothers, aunts, mothers, sisters. Both boys and girls had painful stories of suffering and humiliation to share. These narratives also gathered from youth who came from other districts to participate in Sakhi youth exchange workshops. It was almost the first time for most of the boys who participated in this study, to speak out and share their emotional wounds or to express the many suppressed anxieties and bitter experiences of growing up. These self-narratives exchanged within their peer group alleviated their pain that was bottled up within, especially as they have struggled to battle with the pressures of masculinity and caste oppression. These narratives also bring out the different dimensions of psychological abuse faced by boys and girls of Devadasi families.

*“The two cruelly dominant self-images imposed on us by society from our birth are: that we are fatherless and that we are children of a sex worker or a defiled woman with no dignity in this world either for her or for us”.*

*“We face a lot of cruelty from our peers. Other boys tease us a lot, ask about our fathers even though they know our situation. They call us ‘sulemaga’ in any fight with other children so as to humiliate us and convey a message that we have no right to justice, fair-play or decent interaction from other boys. They provoke us with taunting challenges like, ‘we are born to a father, who are you born to’, ‘how many men does your mother sleep with’, ‘tell us the name of your father’, and such other cheap jibes. In such situations, our reaction as children is always to withdraw from fights and feel defeated. Our mothers also dissuade us from getting into fight with other children to avoid these humiliating remarks. In such situations, we curse our mothers for not being married. Many times we went home and abused our mother or even beat her up in our anger. Not only our peers but also adults, panchayat leaders, relatives –all of them look down upon us and when there are disputes, nobody supports us.”*

### **Relationship with fathers- conflict between hate and hope**

*“My father lives near my house but I did not know for a very long time that he was my father. I never used to speak to him after I came to know the truth. My neighbours tease me a lot and ask why I don’t talk to him. But my father also never acknowledged me as his son. He used to avoid meeting me on the street and when I used to pass by, he always pretended that I was a stranger. My mother took care of us all by herself, worked very hard as an agricultural labourer and sent us to school. My father never contributed any money for our expenses, even when my sister had to get married and my mother was struggling alone to meet the expenses. He simply announced in front of others that he would bear the marriage expenses, but never did. All these have deeply wounded my heart. Why should I talk to my father or even address him as my father? Now, when my father finally accepted me as his son and calls me to his house, I don’t like to talk to him. I saw how he and his family tortured my mother and even now he does that. He comes to her at night, and even when she complains of body pains, he does not care about her. He just wants to exploit her for sex and whenever I heard her crying with pain in the other room while we had to sleep outside the hut, I have also cried a lot and wanted to beat him up. But looking at my mother, I always stopped myself. I hated the man for tormenting her. I also hate it when his wife comes to our house and shouts at my mother. I have a little sister and feel very bad for her when she has to hear these things. When my neighbours tease me that I resemble him, I hate to hear it. I never wanted to see his face, but when he fell sick, on my mother’s pleading, I gave him 500 rupees. Now that I am grown up, I find that nobody wants to marry the son of a Devadasi. Even the daughters of Devadasi women are reluctant to marry us as they fear that we may leave them and behave like our fathers”.*

### **Daughters of Devadasis:**

For the girls, the social humiliation right from childhood carries with it the potential risks of being forced to become Devadasis like their mothers or other female relatives. Vulnerability to sexual abuse is high including from their own fathers and mothers’ partners. A common narrative that came from both boys and girls is the dropping out of school to avoid humiliation.

*“This society is to be blamed for my dropping out of school. They used to call me names - that I was a Devadasi’s daughter, that my father is muslim-so I went into depression”*

*“During our childhood, when we are playing in the neighbourhood, people taunt us asking who is our father or when my father would come, knowing my situation very well. As a child it is very confusing and humiliating and we start avoiding going outside, especially to school. When teachers ask us why we have no surname or carry our mother’s surname, we find it humiliating. We drop out of school as we get into middle school because we do not want to reveal our identity to our friends. To avoid socializing or uncomfortable questions from friends, we prefer to drop out of school. People look at me and my siblings suspiciously and ask whether we have the same father. I try to protect my younger siblings from these jibes but it is difficult.*

*“We do not like our mothers to come to school, then everyone will know that she is a Devadasi. We avoid taking our friends home. We get into a depression when people call us names, and we perform poorly in school because we cannot concentrate or are too shy to go to our teachers for help. Society is to be blamed for our poor performance in school”.*

*“My mother was in a relationship with a muslim but the man died after three children. He had land and property but his family did not give us anything. My mother loved him a lot and she went into depression after his death and got addicted to alcohol. All the neighbours came and told her that she should live like a Devadasi. My father’s brother came and pressurized her to be his partner. For many years I found it repulsive that my mother has taken another man as her partner and has sex with him. I hated to even touch her or talk to her. My mother tried to tell me that he has paid for my school fees, but I resent that even more. I used to hear her crying in pain whenever he forced himself upon her and this used to make me feel very cold and bitter. She is trying to overcome her sorrow by drinking more and more. I myself was in a very depressed situation. I failed in my exams and dropped out. Only after the counselling and fees support from Sakhi for my education, I was able to gain confidence and self-esteem. I realized why my mother was like this. Now I am friendly to her and help her a lot. Sometimes my mother’s partner gets some gifts –like saree or jewelry for my mother –and she gives it to us to wear, but we feel horrible wearing it as his wife will come and curse us that we are grabbing his money and enjoying. That is why, even if he gives money for our education, we don’t like it. People think that because I am a Devadasi’s daughter, I also will become a Devadasi when they see that I am working with an organization and going out of my village. Even now I am very affected by what people say, but I have become strong and try to be a role model in my village so that other girls don’t become dedicated. Today my mother is very proud of me, especially when she listens to me counselling other girls. I have now completed my journalism course and am helping my brother and sister in their higher education. I have changed so much after this journey with Sakhi that I can face any situation with confidence. With the help of Sakhi, I got my mother some sheep for her livelihood and am trying to get her out of alcoholism. My life has a new meaning after being very depressed and angry all these years. I have changed so much that I was able to bring myself to visit my mother’s partner when he was ill and gave him money for his medicines.”*

*“My mother faced many problems all her life. My grandmother is a very superstitious woman and forced my mother to become a Devadasi as she had matted hair. When she refused, she was beaten, her clothes were torn away and she was locked up and made to starve for many days until she agreed. My grandmother made sure that she did not have food or oil or soap, so that she looked*

*ugly and could not get suitors for marriage. She forced her to take a married man from Basawandurga village as her partner who used to beat and torture her. We were three children from him. His wife used to come to the fields where my mother worked and beat her up for stealing her husband. So my mother shifted to Naganahalli village to avoid her partner and his wife. I don't like my father as he really tortured my mother. My grandmother is not happy with my mother for not taking a partner and has threatened to not give any property. My mother feels like committing suicide. My sister is also very depressed and tried to commit suicide. She cut her hand with a knife, unable to bear the abuses of my grandmother. She wants to join a hostel and be far away from home so that she can escape the humiliation. My uncle is taking advantage of my mother's vulnerable situation and is demanding that he get all the property. He beats up my mother and my sister. If I retort or speak up, they abuse all of us and suspect my character as I am going for meetings and meeting people. When I come to Sakhi office, I keep smiling and forget the problems in the house. That is why I come to Sakhi office. If I cry people will know there is a problem, so I don't cry. I am worried for my siblings as they get depressed and I worry for their safety in case they get cheated by others. I keep telling them how to behave and how to be careful as we are all young and my grandmother or uncle may try to force us also to become Devadasis. I was under a lot of pressure, but fortunately, I was rescued by Sakhi and I am strong now."*

*"As long as we are in boarding school there is some protection, but after school, we cannot afford to go to college and when we go back to the village, there is a lot of pressure on us to become Devadasi."*

*"My mother is always strictly monitoring me. In our family for five generations, we have Devadasi women. She is afraid that I may get into trouble, fall in love or get pregnant which will put me under pressure from our villagers to push me into the system. So she is constantly scolding me or restricting me –this is also very annoying."*

*"It is psychologically very traumatic for us to see our mother having a man coming and sleeping with her, beating her up, calling her names, suspecting her of illicit relationships. It is a strained relationship for us with our mother. We hate her, we also call her names in our frustration, but now I understand why she has such a life."*

*"The partners don't give my mother anything, but they want her pension, the house she gets, they want to decide how to use it or what to do with it"*

*"My father used to come and go at his will. Once he asked me who I was even when he knows he is my father. I used to get very angry and never liked talking to him. He used to make me do the cooking for him, but didn't want to accept that I was his daughter. I never acknowledged his presence in the house when he came and my mother used to plead with me to be decent. I used to get angry with her that he was making her suffer. I know that my mother worked very hard doing daily wage work to bring us up. Even when she was pregnant, she had to work very hard, walking long distance for daily wage labour but he never gave her anything. When I asked her why she allowed him to visit her, she said that it was a way to avoid other men. Now my mother is dead. He is coming now to demand for rights to her house which she got from the government and*

*worked very hard alone to build it. My father has five acres of land which he distributed to his brothers' children but not to us, not even to my brother. When my sister was 21 years old, my mother asked my father to take care of her. She left her in my father's house but he sent her to work in a rich man's house as he wanted her earnings. She got pregnant there at this house and delivered a boy. My father did nothing to get her justice. Instead, she was forced to become a Devadasi. Both my sister and son died soon after, due to neglect. How can I look up to this man as my father?"*

### **Stories of resilience-stories of change:**

*"My grandmother is a Devadasi. She is very competent and had the qualities of taking care of the family, siblings, doing a lot of work for the family's survival that indicated that she was like a son to the family. So her parents made 'manetaneki ittukolluvudu' (another variation of devadasi dedication but this is male god in contrast to Huligamma goddess, indicating that she is like a son and is eligible for property). My mother had a child marriage. She had worked as a child labourer in the mines and in collecting firewood. When she was sent to her husband's house when she was still a minor, she did not like his behavior. So she came back to my village and then she fell in love with a muslim and they were in a relationship like husband and wife. Because he was a muslim, my uncles and aunts did not allow them to get married, so they made her a devadasi. They did the Thimmappa mudre (branding her as a symbol of becoming a devadasi and signifying that she is like a son). He died after the three of us children were born. My mother was so much in love with him, was so completely fixed on him, that she could not reconcile to his death and to, drown her sorrow, she became an alcoholic. Her husband's brother came and pressurized her to take him as her partner. This pained us a lot, that she took another man and that she slept with another man. Every time he came home and she would get up from our bedside and go sleep with, I used to be very angry. Afterwards I did not like to touch her. I never touched her for many years because of this aversion. People used to call us all kinds of names. When my father was alive they always referred to us as the children of a Devadasi, that we had a muslim father and they called my mother all kinds of names. I always asked people what was our fault, what did we do wrong that they called us contaminated. After my father died and my mother took a second partner, people badmouthed all of us. We hated my mother for it. But we were also pained to see her being abused by her partner. He used to get drunk, beat her up and was very violent. But she continued to take him. I saw her being beaten up by his mother and his family members and saw them calling her a whore. I felt really bad for her and I also was very angry with her at the same time. I told her she deserved the injuries she got from that man. His blows had damaged her eye and even now she cannot see properly. Even when she had no energy, he used to force himself on her. She tried to tell me that he contributed in small ways for our food and education. In my anger I told her that I will return all the money he gave for us, the very thought of taking his money was revolting. Once he got some jewelry for her and she told me to wear it. I told her that this will make us more vulnerable as his wife would abuse us for stealing her husband's earnings and shamelessly walking around with the jewelry. These were only the occasional times I remember him giving anything. In truth, he rarely gave even small money to help my mother. My father had land and property but his family gave us nothing after his death. We children had many problems – we had no food to eat many times, I could not complete my education as I was very depressed*

*and could not concentrate on my studies. I gave tuitions in the village for our survival and then I came into contact with Sakhi. I went through a lot of counselling and support for my education. This helped me understand my mother, her life and her struggles. Now I am able to come to terms with my mother. I asked my mother forgiveness and now I take care of herself, especially as she is an alcoholic. I am counselling her to bring her out of it. We have now worked hard together in our family and built our own house and toilet. I supported the education of my siblings by working in Sakhi. My mother is proud of me and tells all our neighbours that I am educated and working and support the family. She is very proud when I go back and tell her that I was asked to speak in a meeting or when I have attended a big workshop. I have experienced the pain of being a Devadasi's daughter and I don't want to see any children having this experience. The main problem nowadays is that young boys and girls are getting into sexual activity at a very early age, getting pregnant and then they are forced to become devadasis. I have meetings with the youth in my villages and tell them all that I learnt from Sakhi about life, sex, relationships and how to become confident human beings, get education and create a purpose for ourselves. I try to counsel young Devadasis that they still have the opportunity to come out of the custom, learn skills and become economically strong so that they don't feel insecure about their life. I tell them that they should not succumb to the sentiment and fears that the elders place on the devadasis to make them continue in the custom. I tell them to break away from it and we will help them from Sakhi to find an alternative. I am doing a lot of community work, documenting our life stories and attending meetings to convince the government that we need to have stronger laws and programmes to stop this abusive system. I feel I must do everything I can to tell our stories so that it helps us come out of this horrible institution. ”*



## Chapter IV: Mining – Economy of Neo-Patriarchy



The mining boom and the parallel black market economy in Bellary district ‘created’ income opportunities, especially for the men in the surrounding villages. This sudden creation of wealth led to rise in crimes, vices and exploitative practices among different classes and castes that most brutally manifested in the abuse of women. Men who labored in the mines were found to spend their money by taking Devadasi women as partners for sexual exploitation, among several other vices like alcoholism, gambling, purchase of motor-bikes and other consumer items. Considerable number of these men were from the dalit and poor communities while contractors, mine owners, police personnel and other upper caste men were active in entering into partnership with poor dalit girls who were forced to become Devadasis.

The mining boom during the early years of 2000 brought migrant workers pouring into the innumerable illegal mines. The research sites are mostly located in mine workers’ villages and the flow of single male workers into these villages led to a fresh increase in Devadasi dedication. The sudden increase in wage rates also created a new opportunity for ‘disposable’ income among the local men who began to indulge in alcohol and multiple sexual relationships. Vulnerable Madiga girls from the very poor communities thus became victims of this new menace as their families saw opportunities for income through them. Many of the partners of the new Devadasis are truck drivers, cleaners, wage labourers in the mines or even mining contractors. Accurate data on this aspect was difficult to obtain as Devadasis are reluctant to reveal the identity of their partners.

*“Nowadays, there are bulldozers and vehicles coming to load the stones... the men wear short pants and shirts and they drive the bulldozers to the top of the hills where they load the vehicle and then they come back down and unload the stones here. Then the women put the stones into machines and take the men’s help. I receive small amounts of money for every basket of stones that I fill...I don’t know exact amount as we work in groups. During this time, Tamilians, Muslims, railway and other migrant employees became our partners.”*

*“Mariamanahalli has many Devadasis, I think more than 300, as it is in mining region and near the highway. My grandparents had land but the government took it away for dam and highway. We became very poor. Then mining came. My grandmother is Devadasi, my mother also. They wanted to make me and my sister also Devadasi. My brother fell in love with another girl but her family wanted to make her a Devadasi as there are many men coming with money. She committed suicide the night they dedicated her. Our village elders are very corrupt. And they have lot of*

*money from illegal mining contracts....I tried to expose these using RTI but they cannot tolerate that a Devadasi's daughter has studied M.A and is questioning them. They put lot of pressure on me, so I stopped now as people from my own community are also not willing to support. This mining makes people divided and corrupt."*

In Tallur village particularly, cases of minor girls sexually abused by both rich contractors and poor migrant labourers were reported. Some of the girls who became pregnant were taken to hospitals in Hospet town for termination of their pregnancies, and these girls, who were scorned by their community for being 'spoilt' were forced to become Devadasis by their families. One case of a minor girl being murdered was reported in a mining area near Hospet. Devadasi and dalit women working as daily wage labour in the mines reported that they were constantly under pressure for sexual favours. Medical camps conducted by Sakhi Trust brought out illnesses related to stress and sexually transmitted diseases at the mine sites among the women in these villages. Especially Devadasi women with children, whose survival and shelter at the mines were a constant struggle, reported that they were most vulnerable to these pressures as they had little choice if they had to keep their children out of hunger. When the mining industry collapsed, their partners stopped visiting them and they were completely left to fend for themselves and their children.

Mining brought in privileges for dalit men that put dalit women at risk of exploitation from within their own communities. However, men having a hike in wages and taking partnership with Devadasi women did not necessarily imply providing financial support to these women. The women did not report having experienced relief in the upkeep of their families through these partnerships. On the other hand, it brought greater vulnerability to girls from dalit, and particularly Devadasi families who went out for mine labour. They were constantly exposed to working with single migrant men who sought alliances with them, although most were short-lived. Those that continued resulted in traumatic experiences for the women who were faced with men who were alcoholic, abusive and idle once the mining boom collapsed. The men no longer had consistent wages. Unable to face the reality of post-mining wage decline, the men were unwilling to settle for lesser paying work but began to force their wives and partners to bear the burden of their excessive expenditure and vices that they had got addicted to during the mining period.

Devadasi girls fear getting abused or facing misbehavior from men when they go for mining or construction work. So they hide the muttukattu and other identity marks.

*" if a man gets to know, he will publicise my identity and then I have a lot of problem from men. They misbehave and start demanding sexual favours."*

Thus, increase in the gendered violence through dalit patriarchy became the contribution of the mining economy in Bellary district while entrenchment of the traditional caste hierarchy has become deeply scaffolded in the casting of the iron ore pits. The deprivation of wages and employment left behind by the abandoned mines has generated greater impoverishment among the dalit landless where women have to go longer distances in search of labour.

*“My father drinks a lot and doesn't look after us. My grandmother and aunt made me a Devadasi. When my mother became very ill and there was no food, my uncle took me to work in the mines and he got me a partner saying that God is instructing us to become Devadasi. I don't believe it is God, it is my people who betrayed me. Now I have no choice. I take care of my siblings with the wages from the mines. Now the mines also stopped. I have to go for daily wage labour very far.”*

*“Nobody here is working in agriculture because we do stone cutting during the times of the mining work. People are also going to mud cutting work. When they go to the construction and building work, the employers sometimes tell them that there is no work on that day so they don't have work every day and sometimes must return back home. That day we have nothing to eat. These days, we often have nothing to eat. Sometimes I wish the mines are working again, then atleast we have daily wages.”*

*“We don't have land and jobs and we are digging out stones and load them in a vehicle. My children and all the people in this area also did the same work. We reach early in the morning with our children and all of us are breaking stones”*

*“When the mines came, my mother took all of us four children from our native village to Sandur where everyone was going for mine labour. We lived in small make shift tents at the mine pits. My mother and I worked the whole day breaking stones. My younger sister looked after the two little ones, did the cooking, fetching water and other house work. When it rained, the water would come into our tent and we would all stay wet the whole night. One night a snake also came into our tent, but my mother killed it. We lived like that for some years. Even we children knew how to identify the different grades of iron ore. We would compete with each other to collect more 'puttus' of ore each day to get more money. Our hands were always blistered and sore, we could barely hold our own food. And the dust would not allow us to swallow the food we cooked as our throats were always choked with iron ore dust. I remember we were always sick those days but my mother had nowhere else to take us. She would feel very bad for us, but if we did not work, we had no food to eat. I don't know what I would have done if Sakhi did not come into our lives at that time. I would have continued being a child labourer and so also all my siblings. My mother suffered a lot as she was single and had to manage not only all of us children but also her own safety because we were surrounded by migrant men, mostly drunk at night, after each day's labour. There were many migrant families and children living in tents like us. Suddenly the mines closed and everyone left.”*

*“I always cover my muttukattu with my saree when I go to the mines-otherwise, if the men see me that I am Devadasi, they trouble me a lot. They want favours.”*

*“Some of my friends who are Devadasis, I saw how the mine owners or contractors harass them at work. Some of them enter into relationship with them, but I feel bad for them because they behave badly and leave them.”*

*“Money earned from mining was a lot during the boom –some families who had daughters and who used the daughters' earnings, they thought of making her Devadasi as many men were eager to have partners”*

*“After working for many years in the mines, my body is very weak. I cannot survive without tobacco or alcohol. My children tell me to stop, but I cannot. I get headache all the time. I can survive without food but I need my alcohol. You don’t know what is the stress and tension for Devadasi. That’s why you are telling me to stop.”*

*“My son felt very bad seeing me suffering from body pains with all that work in the mines. So one day he told me, you stop working, I will go for work. And he dropped out of school and joined the labourers. I felt so much grief at this-but what can we do, there was no food to eat.”*

*“I got a house from the government and some land. But the mining contractors came and forced me to sell it to them. They wanted to dig up my land. Everywhere everyone was digging up their own land to become rich. I don’t even know what is the value of the land. I just took whatever they gave me. Now I have no house and no work. My land is a big pit now. That is what mining did to my life.”*

*“ I worked with my mother in wagon loading and unloading. The coal came by train at all odd hours. Mostly, the wagons would come in the middle of the night. Then the contractor used to call us and we had to hurry to do the unloading. We worked in groups but by the time we finished the work, no one could recognize anyone-we used to be so black, covered in soot that we often joked at each other. At night sometimes, the men used to misbehave in the dark. I was always woken up by my mother in the middle of my sleep – I hated it, but I had to go. They paid us very little but we could also steal some coal for our own cooking as we don’t get firewood these days. My mother drinks a lot and she also sells liquor secretly, as she needs the money for her addiction (please don’t tell this to anyone). I am a Devadasi’s daughter, so I have to deal with all this on my own. I scold my mother that she is selling liquor and drinking liquor, but she tells me she is so weak after all these years of working in the mines. She keeps telling me she will stop, but I am always worried for her. Sometimes the boys in the village tell me they love me-I fell in love atleast three times, but I am not sure about the boys, so I didn’t go further”.*

*“My mother’s partner drinks a lot. He used to work in the mines. That’s how she met him and he promised that he will marry her. He is now living with us – with my mother and sister and myself. My mother now sells vegetables or works in the farms or just goes hungry when there is no work because the mines in my village closed down. Her partner does not do any work –just sits around the whole day. But she does not let us shout at him, she just tolerates him.”*

After the closure of mines in the district due to the illegal nature of extraction and trade in iron-ore, the villages in Hospet taluk have witnessed a complete collapse of economic options for the local communities as well as for migrants. The sudden boom which led to a high influx of outsiders and a rapid growth in the black market economy during the years of 2000 to 2010, crashed with the abandonment of mines by contractors and illegal mine owners. This affected the dalit communities the most whose livelihood and survival were dependent on the daily wages from land based activities in the region –whether of agriculture labour before the mines opened up or of mine labour when land management was drastically shifted to digging up mine pits for ore extraction. The lack of accountability given the illegal nature of mining operations both during the period of extraction and post the closure of mines have left a long term impact on the local economy for

daily wage labourers. With no source of livelihood, migrant men left the area and the local dalit population has been forced to seasonally migrate to other districts in search of work.

Devadasi women have been seriously affected in these transitions in economy and development neglect. Partners of Devadasis who came from outside, abandoned them and their children and left the area. Those who have remained and the local male population who enjoyed a sudden surge in wages during the mining boom, refused to confront the realities of loss in wages and employment after the mines collapsed. Yet, their expenditure patterns which had witnessed a swift curve of excesses, could not be contained nor could they readjust to the modest and irregular wages from local agriculture or construction labour. Most of the dalit colonies in Hospet taluka today experience the impacts of these extremes in income leap and fall, with women facing the repercussions of male frustration, anger and violence. Most houses are found to have alcoholic men sitting idly and refusing to take up petty jobs and wage labour. The women complained how they are forced to travel longer distances in search of work for lesser wages that has severely affected their physical, financial and psychological well-being. The traditionally marginal dalit communities have been further marginalized with most families having lesser number of meals or mostly facing starvation.

Mine closure, the post-mining glut in local economy and the non-implementation of land reclamation, environmental rehabilitation or economic revival of the region from mining to other sustainable alternatives of land use has crippled the survival opportunities for daily wage dependent poor. The sustainable mining framework which is the new ideology of the national mineral policy based on which the MMDR (Mines and Minerals Development and Regulation) Act has been amended in order to commit to rehabilitation of mining affected areas has not demonstrated any concrete due diligence in the implementation of the District Mineral Fund (DMF). The utilization of the DMF in Ballary district has been negligent in relation to identifying the impacts and losses from mining vis-à-vis annual expenditures. There is a strong emphasis of the DMF on utilization of resources for the rehabilitation and welfare of women and children. Yet, the randomized expenditure of DMF does not reflect a structured process of identifying core impacts of mining on women, particularly on dalit and Devadasi women who face the direct losses of environmental degradation from mining and post-mining. There has not been any specific programme or livelihood rehabilitation provided to dalit or Devadasi women from the DMF fund to cope with post mining economic crisis. Except for a scattered outreach to women's self-help groups that do not substantially provide any improved incomes from such inputs, there is no discernible attempt to address the violations on Devadasi women that escalated during the mining boom and that has left them further impoverished.

Devadasi women being single parents, are faced with the double brunt of irresponsible partners and destroyed livelihoods. Most Devadasis reported that they are addicted to chewing tobacco as a way of suppressing hunger and the muscular skeletal pains from back breaking mine labour. Their single source of regular income is the meagre pensions some of them receive. However, only the Devadasis who have been registered with the government receive pensions. Young Devadasis are neither registered nor receive any welfare schemes from the government. Seasonal migration which has increased post mining operations, has put them in constant threat of male sexual abuse and harassment to take new partners. Women narrated several instances of these invisible forms of

violence and humiliation in the recent years due to economic vulnerability and forced mobility. Those whose lands were grabbed for mining cannot provide proof of being cheated. In some villages as in Karignoor, mine-worker families among the dalits do not have registered house site pattas as they have had to settle down in village common lands or private land for which they constantly receive eviction notices. Many colonies do not have electricity as they have no eligibility or proof of ownership of the houses. Of them, the most vulnerable are Devadasi women who did not receive any house site pattas or housing subsidies. Due to forest being destroyed by mining, fuelwood has become scarce and so also their sources of water. This forces women to 'steal' water and coal from the wagons that transport the fossil fuel to the captive thermal power plants of the mining companies like Jindal Steel, as we saw in Karignoor village. Devadasi women have to evade abuses and demands for favours in return for being allowed to steal the coal or water. These daily travails of Devadasi women are hidden in the social and economic chaos that has been created by the mining economy sometimes drawing a thin boundary between Devadasi life and sex worker life as a distress form of livelihood, especially in the slums of Hospet.

Majority of the Devadasi women who participated in this study and worked in the mines also spoke about their children working as child labour in the mines or their adolescent sons working as cleaners or truck drivers for the mining contractors. As the mining contractors have become bankrupt and the trucks are lying idle in the villages, these boys have become unemployed and do not have the skills for agricultural labour to make the shift into other means of survival.

*"I am a strong women and I have worked hard to enable my son and one of my daughters to study. Sometimes I had to take my children with me to work, otherwise I could not feed them. That felt really hard because you have to manage being a mother, father and worker at the same time.*

*"Many women brought their children to work in the mines. The older children took care of the younger ones while their mothers were working on the minefields".*

*"What else can we do, we had to take the children with us-where can we leave them-yes, they also helped us doing small tasks. Children used to break the stones and collect them in puttus. At the end of the day, if they filled one puttu of stones, they got six rupees. "*

*"It is very hard work for adults even. I used to feel very bad for my children but what can I do. For small children who started learning how to break the stones, the hands would be fully blistered and they cannot eat with their hands. I had to feed my children. Because we were living and working in the mines all the time, the iron-ore dust would get into our throat and then we cannot breathe or swallow. We could not swallow food or even saliva. My children suffered a lot-sometimes if I could afford it, I bought them bananas because you can swallow your food only after first eating a banana"*

*"My children were always dirty and red. They always had running noses and loose motions as they were playing in the dusty iron-ore where we worked and lived. I was always scared that they will get bitten by some insects or snakes as we were living next to the pits. I had to constantly keep a watch on my child-one day somebody's child was playing near the pit and fell down and died. The contractor did not bother to do anything or even give money"*

*“As I am busy working in the mines, I don't have time to fetch water. I have to send my daughter to another farmer's field to get some water. Sometimes trucks come with water and we have to stand in line for long. I was always afraid for my daughter as there are bad men around the mines and they tease the girls.”*

*“My son dropped out of school and told me he will work as a cleaner in the truck as we have no money to buy food. I felt really bad but what could I do.”*

*“Suddenly all the mines started closing down, we had no work any more and people started leaving. Now most of us have no work. I go by auto paying ten rupees one way to another village for agricultural labour. I get eighty rupees only and I come back late because we have to get autos to return. Most of my money goes in paying for transport. When I come back, I have no energy to cook or do other work. But there is no choice, otherwise we can't feed our family.”*

Alternative livelihood options for this region destroyed by mining are frugal today. While some women have managed to find partial livelihood from schemes like MGNREGS, some of the mining affected villages like Karignoor fall within the Hospet municipality where MGNREGS Act is not applicable. Nor are they able to gain benefits of employment or economic activities from the urban municipality, as Hospet town witnessed a sudden growth and collapse from the mining economy.

Group discussions with the women on their economic survival demonstrated a universal demand – that government provide for opportunities of consistent daily wage labour. They often demand for a return of the mines despite the complex problems and illnesses that the mines brought demonstrating the stark poverty and desperate appeals for any form of labour, however exploitative. Despite the government of Karnataka having two large sources of funds for rehabilitation of the mining areas – the KMERC funds for restoration and rehabilitation for the damages from illegal and irresponsible mining, and the DMF for the environmental and social rehabilitation from mining, Hospet taluka reels under post-mining trauma. For the Devadasi women, it left behind memories of partners who came to work in the mines and abandoned them and today struggle with physically battered bodies both from working in inhuman conditions at the mine pits and facing the sexual abuse of contractors and migrant labour. The post mining vacume in employment and livelihood may actually be driving Devadasi women into sex trade in order to keep out of starvation.

That the evaluation committee to study the status of the Devadasi women concluded with recommendations that Ballary district should be opened up for large industries in order to improve the economic situation for Devadasis. However, the degeneration in their social security as well as the negative impacts on their health and economic sustenance that the mining industry brought during its boom and after its collapse, needs to be reviewed before such economic policies are pursued as a solution to poor vulnerable women like Devadasis. The extremes in wealth and poverty induced by mining resonates the extremes in prosperity and deprivation of the earlier feudal economy in Ballary, starkly reflected in the extent of landlessness among the dalits as a historical politics of caste discrimination and sexual exploitation. Therefore, the urgency to review the policy framework and the templates of accountability vis-à-vis the Devadasi dedication practices and state laws.

## **Chapter V: A State of Un-Being: The Fault-lines of Law**



The state of Karnataka passed the Karnataka (Prohibition of Dedication) Act in 1982. It declared dedication and abetment to dedicate as a legal offence with punitive actions. Appropriate rules for the purpose of investigation into offences related to dedication and for the protection, care and rehabilitation of women dedicated were to be proposed in order to set up a structure of accountability and action. The Act was further amended in the year 2010 bringing additional clauses to some of the sections for more stringent punitive actions and welfare measures for rehabilitation. It gave powers to the district magistrate and Devadasi Prohibition Officers to take up legal and regulatory actions in identifying and dealing with complaints and in taking action against offenders. The amendment committed to stronger rehabilitation measures for care and protection of dedicated women and in creating awareness among communities to respond to or prevent offences related to dedication.

Although Karnataka is reported to have launched a number of much appreciated welfare schemes for the rehabilitation of Devadasi women, the state rules for implementation of the Act have not been enacted so far. Interventions through the Department of Women and Child Welfare under the Karnataka Mahila Abhivruddhi Yojane, have mainly centred around pension, housing, social awareness programmes, and dovetailing of existing women welfare schemes into Devadasi rehabilitation incentives. (KSWDC, ND). In an evaluation conducted by the Karnataka State Women Development Corporation on the implementation of the rehabilitation programme, the report primarily refers to the purpose as to 'mainstream the Ex-Devadasis' as if they are on the margins of crime and sin. The evaluation concludes that the Ex-Devadasis have been successfully rehabilitated, are aware of the schemes for their welfare and that the Devadasis are 'satisfied' with a strong sense of gratitude for the efforts of the DRP (Devadasi Rehabilitation Programme) that has helped them today lead a 'contented life'. According to the findings of the evaluation, the women identified that their rehabilitation could be completed with further support in the form of enhanced pensions, house sites, agricultural land and income generating programmes. Therefore, the evaluation committee recommended for sustaining these efforts through state investments in more welfare schemes such as pensions, rations, income generation schemes, welfare of children, increased surveillance and staff welfare benefits for the DRP volunteers. Although the committee recommends for re-survey of Devadasis, it is not clearly spelt out whether assessment should study new cases of dedication as the report findings point to dedication being given up due to successful intervention by the DRP. In 1993-94 identification and enumeration of Devadasis was undertaken by the KSWDC.

Table 4: Number of Devadasis identified during 1993-94 survey

Sl. No.	Districts	No. of Devadasis
1	Bijapur	1964
2	Bagalkote	4804
3	Belgaum	3600
4	Bellary	1635
5	Koppal	4880
6	Raichur	2494
7	Gulbarga	991
8	Gadag	1407
9	Haveri	617
10	Dharwad	481
Total		22873
<i>Source: KSWDC documents</i>		

A subsequent evaluation commissioned by the Karnataka Evaluation Authority in the year 2017 reported that there were 46660 Devadasis in 14 districts, identified and having registration numbers, which data is also based on earlier records of 1993-94. This evaluation also concluded that Devadasi dedication was given up and that Devadasis are well aware of their rights and entitlements. It however admitted that some of the welfare measures were inadequate or inaccessible to the Devadasis due to implementation hurdles and hence, recommended for more rigorous

investments in Devadasi welfare schemes. Particularly, the focus of the recommendations centred around securing enhanced pensions, shift in schemes from Devadasi women to their daughters, improved systems of monitoring and tracking, better income generation programmes and reduction in corruption at the lower administrative level by strengthening the role of the DRP personnel. It also recommended for setting up of large industries in districts where the practice is prevalent with the premise that labour opportunities would reduce the dedication practices (Karnataka Evaluation Authority, 2017).

Contrary to the claims made in these two evaluation reports, the field study in Hospet revealed that the dedication has not stopped. Instances of girls being forced into Devadasi practice continue, based on the narratives of young Devadasis in this study. Rather, the nuances of dedication rituals and the contexts of dedication have changed to further the cause of the current politico-economic dynamics that complicate caste and gender discrimination.

As the two evaluation reports suggest, rehabilitation measures through welfare schemes are still inadequate. The response from the participants of our study to the questions related to government benefits received by them clearly demonstrates this. While a good number of the elderly Devadasis do have identity cards and receive pensions, the other schemes have been largely out of their reach. Primary among these is the entitlements to land and housing. Very few reported that the houses they live in were built with government support. Fewer still reported that they received any land as a means of supporting their livelihood. Where women reported having toilets constructed, this was rarely with government funds.

Table 5: Details of Government Schemes Received by Devadasis who participated in this study:

Sl No	Village	Interviewed	Devadasi card	Devadasi pension	Land Given by Govt	House from Govt	NREGS Card	Own Toilet
1	Basavana Durga	28	11	25	0	0	24	13
2	Bailu Vaddigeri	31	6	20	0	0	31	5
3	Danapura	13	0	0	0	0	0	0
4	Kaddirapura	15	0	14	0	0	0	0
5	Kariganuru	25	0	20	0	0	0	0
6	Kondanayakana Halli	17	2	12	0	3	0	3
7	Malapana Gudi	25	0	2 Old Age	0	0	14	11
8	Nagena Halli	26	11	17	0	0	0	0
9	P.K. Halli(Papi Nayakana Halli)	40	0	32	0	0	38	0
10	Kampli	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	Talluru	22	0	15	0	0	0	0

Interviews with local officials in charge of implementing Devadasi schemes, especially with respect to schemes like pensions, housing and subsidies for these women, revealed that there is a complete vacuum in the enumeration of Devadasis. Official denial of the practice is indicated in the refusal to register new cases and lack of data after the period 1993-94. The two evaluation reports also rely on data from the KWDC for this period. The pensions being received from the participants of the study are by older Devadasis and so also in relation to house site pattas and land allotment. The micro level situation demonstrates that, while the dedication practices have reduced, it has not disappeared. New cases of dedication were identified in the study area that cause concern as state is abdicating its responsibility at all levels, including providing welfare measures and protection.

There are several vulnerabilities that dalit women and girls face, where dedication continues incognito and in deceptive ways. It is important to analyse these current contexts of dedication and the reasons for failure of state institutions in effectively eradicating this barbaric practice. The two evaluation reports rightly point to the inadequacy of welfare schemes and the ground level corruption in administrative machinery that prevents full utilization of these incentives by deserving women and their children. These inadequacies have been raised by the Devadasi women themselves in the study sites.

*“I am Maremma, I am 28 years old from Madiga caste and I am a Devadasi. They told me I am not eligible as they only give pension to old Devadasis. Since I am young, they don’t believe me and think I am saying lies to get pension”.*

*“I don’t get any pension. Then I came to know that someone is taking pension in my name.”*

*“I am dependent on the fifteen hundred rupees pension from the government. The problem is that*

*for this pension I have to go to some meetings. Here I have to pay travelling costs and also for food. This is very expensive. Another problem is that the government doesn't pay regularly”.*

*“I get pension for Devadasi and for disability-some people scold me for getting two pensions. But even this is not enough. Most of it is taken by the people in the office who give me the pension”.*

*“But I am part of a Devadasi group that stands up for its rights because grama panchayat did not provide any information about government facilities or give us proper work. We have no choice but to participate in the sangha and to demand for our rights.”*

*“I receive some money as a pension from the government of Karnataka but it is not enough to survive. Still I am happy about this pension because no one takes care of me.”*

*“Once a minister came to our village and asked all the Devadasis a lot of questions and asked why we do not go to school, but no one dared to answer him really truthfully”.*

*“I pray to god that he gives me strength to work and to take care of my children. From the government I get 1000 rupees as a pension. The government assured us that it will provide houses for us, also land for agriculture, but they never gave it to us. For at least 12 years I am attending every meeting, but I did not receive anything from anyone.”*

*“I am officially married to my mother's brother Siddappa – this is how my family has escaped getting caught. But I was made a Devadasi. I asked my family to get me married to Siddappa, but they refused because they wanted me to stay at home and be the care taker. Infact, none of us Devadasis ever tell the name of our partner as we are not officially married to them and we are told that it is illegal. So how will government know if I am Devadasi? So I don't get pension”.*

*“Many people come to us and take photos of us and then they assure us that they will provide homes for us with the help of the government, but in the end we receive nothing from them. I get 1000 rupees as a pension. We should get a home from the government, but they do not reply.”*

*“No politician will come forward to help us. Just during elections they us 100 rupees for going behind them. But they do not speak about Devadasi women afterwards. No one will give awareness about government schemes.”*

*“I went to government office to ask for pension and to give me Devadasi card. The men in the office looked at me cheaply and scolded me for being a bad woman. They asked me why I am doing prostitution. One man asked me if I sleep with him then he will help me get pension. I felt so bad I did not go again.”*

*“They make us come again and again to the taluka office to register my name. I don't have money to go so many times, so I gave up”.*

*“In my village one lady Aruna (name changed) comes from Hospet. She says she is a social*

*worker. She is coming for many years now. She tells us that we should form a group and she will help us get pension and housing. She took money from us several times. But so far, I did not get anything. She says she has to pay many people to get us these schemes."*

*"I don't want to apply for Devadasi pension. Then everyone will know I am Devadasi. Anyway, they don't give my age women any pension. They are saying there are no Devadasis now."*

*"Suddenly I stopped getting pension. I came to know afterwards that in the government office they wrote that I was dead."*

*"I thought I could build a house with the government scheme. But it comes so late and I have to show many things. As I could not complete my house, I did not get the next instalments and I don't have any money to build it."*

*"I participated in a Grama Panchayat election and I won actually. I only participated because some people told me to do so. I used to go to all the meetings of the Grama Panchayat, but all the decisions used to be taken by men. In some villages they gave me 20 rupees, in some villages they gave me 200 or even 300 rupees, but I was never really involved in their discussions. Some people offered money to me, so that I would stop going to the discussions".*

*"I don't have any properties. I have only one house. Here I live with my mother, my aunt and other people. The government didn't give me a home or any financial support. We built this house by ourselves."*

Narratives of the women reveal the administrative and procedural irregularities which pose constant challenges for Devadasis to access welfare schemes. A major problem in the present context is the invisibility of Devadasi practice which makes it impossible for young women who continue to be dedicated, to prove their dedication. Refusal by the state to take up enumeration of Devadasis conveys a clear message that the government refuses to acknowledge the prevalence of the practice and the suspicion that dedication is falsely presented in order to avail of welfare schemes. This is a fundamental lapse in state accountability towards Devadasi women where the politics of contemporary patriarchy and development economics are underplayed. It is again the Devadasi who has to prove her 'eligibility' to incentives and evidence of her dedication which is physically impossible as dedication is increasingly taking place within the confines of the home. This inadequacy also creates a situation of abuse by the local government personnel who use their power to humiliate the women or ask for favours in return for welfare incentives. Such instances were reported by many of the Devadasis in this study.

Loyalty to her family puts the Devadasi in a vulnerable situation if she has to bring the abettors of crime to the police and law enforcement agencies. The societal contempt towards Devadasis compels young women to further force themselves to live incognito within the folds of invisibility. As they do not carry on their body any physical appearance of Devadasi dedication as defined by law – of the muttukattu, or branding or performance of rituals, this gives the governance bodies an opportunity to deny the practice in its contemporary form.

The blanket closure of accepting any new applications for Devadasi identity cards has legally and socially illegitimized the existence of Devadasi women. The village vigilance groups initiated by Sakhi narrated their experiences of facing intimidation from the families of the Devadasis when they try to serve as whistle-blowers or complain to the police. The inaction or poor action taken by the police who merely warn the family or do not reach the place of dedication on time to prevent the act, have posed more problems to the youth who complained than aid preventive actions.

Further, the synonymous use of the terms Devadasi and prostitute interchangeably even in the KPD Act which states that, “whereas such practice leads women so dedicated to a life of prostitution”, and therefore, ‘expedient to put an end to the practice’, resonates the public image and prejudice against Devadasi women. In drawing such a universal assumption on the lives of Devadasis, the law distracts the context, causes and persistence of the practice by applying remedies that address but the surface. Almost all the Devadasis who participated in the study claimed to have no livelihood from sex work and that their sexual relationship is confined to a specific partner whom they consider their husband or with whom they hope to get into a marital relationship. The social context in which women practice sex work as against the traditional system of a Devadasi’s role is therefore vastly different. For the latter, it is not a practice or an economic activity. It is a way of life forced upon them by societal decree.

Therefore, the rights of sex workers and the protection of sex workers that is legitimately in need of state and societal accountability is also different from the rights of Devadasis and the prevention of dedication in regions like Hospet where Devadasis have not converted to sex work. Particularly in the contemporary situation, dedication appears to be a purely sexual convenience of culture and religion using caste as a platform for its exploitation. The current nuances of caste and patriarchy need to be challenged which is today complicated by exploitation coming from within the dalit caste where the victims and the perpetrators are mostly dalit. This does not imply that upper caste patriarchy has become less sexually exploitative or have reduced their sexual aberrations into more monogamous social customs but that the imitation of upper caste patriarchy has penetrated into dalit patriarchy both of which need to be challenged today. While sex work is not only legally but also socially ‘illegitimate’, Devadasi practice is only legally banned but socially and culturally an accepted arrangement within the structure of the Hindu religious rituals and social system of sexual relationships in a patrilineal structure. However, in the past, Devadasis were bestowed with resources and properties both for their artistic learning and for their economic well-being, through quasi-legal procedures and rules that are clearly evident from temple edicts about Devadasi entitlements. However, with the ban on Devadasi dedication and with only intentional rules for punitive action, and without any rights and entitlements to Devadasis, the ban has merely led to stigmatization and criminalization of Devadasi women. All the state laws related to Devadasi dedication treat the Devadasi as the perpetrator of crime and offer solutions through providing charitable doles as a way of weaning her away from this evil practice. The short-term punitive actions on the perpetrators either through imprisonment or fines seem to hardly provide any deterrence to the abettors. Very rarely have there been any cases of imprisonment or punitive action for such practice of dedication to be stopped. While the incentives may have in some cases, rehabilitated older Devadasis who are anyway abandoned by their partners, to have some form of survival, this does not prevent the dedication of young Devadasis as the context and intent to

dedicate lie in patriarchal power structures that continue to prevail. It is these power structures that need to be challenged and changed and not the Devadasi.

One of the fundamental opportunities that Devadasi dedication offers is the lack of accountability on the part of partners. While those who dedicate, who are often the family members of the Devadasi, are sometime pulled up or fined, the partners mostly manage to escape the scrutiny of law and legal accountability.

*“At the time when my parents made me Devadasi it was illegal, so my parents paid a fine of 600 rupees. Not only my family but rest four families in my village also paid 600 rupees as fine. After making me Devadasi and paying fine, we left our village and stayed for one month in another village. And after that they just forced me to remain a Devadasi”.*

They have no responsibility, either laid out by the very culture which promotes Devadasi practice, (“even if he has some property then also he is not ready to give share in it to us”) or by law which is silent on legal rights of Devadasis and their children, especially with respect to the KPDA. The law merely treats Devadasis as victims and beneficiaries but not as rights-holders. The Act of 1982 makes no commitment to Devadasis having property rights to their partners’ property and assets or to their children’s rights of inheritance to their biological fathers. The law does not lay emphasis or even insist upon paternity identification rights for children of Devadasis although the draft bill prepared by the civil society groups has demanded for the right of DNA testing and inheritance rights to father’s property. The law also does not make any provision for the responsibility of maintenance, education and financial responsibility of fathers towards their children from Devadasis.

**Proposals by the draft bill prepared by the civil society groups: The Karnataka Devadasi (Prevention, Prohibition, Relief and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2018:**

The draft bill prepared by the civil society groups reviewed and including several features to address the gaps in the existing Act. It tried to strengthen the definition and identification of Devadasis as well as the definition of welfare measures required for rehabilitation. For instance, it defines, in Chapter 1:

*“a) “conscientisation” means the process of unpacking dominant and oppressive thought currently prevailing in the devadasi system which results from the issues of power in relation to privilege and oppression in different spheres of influence.”*

It clarified the definition of land as

*h. “agricultural land, that is to say, land which is used or capable of being used for agricultural purposes or purposes subservient thereto and includes horticultural land, forest land, garden land, pasture land, plantation and tope but does not include house-site or land used exclusively for non-agricultural purposes.*

It proposes rights and entitlements including the right of a child born to a Devadasi to ascertain

the identity of the father. The right to ascertain the paternity of the person the child believes to be the biological father; the right of maintenance from the father, the right to inherit property of the biological father as per the Hindu laws on inheritance; and, the right to mention or not mention the name of the father are some fundamental entitlements. Preceding these rights is the right of a child born to a Devadasi to be deemed as a legitimate child.

The draft bill demands for state responsibility towards Devadasis and their children in the areas of health care, housing, education, marriage and other preventive and protective responsibilities along with insisting on formal duties of the biological fathers of the children of Devadasis. Right to marriage, right to live independently, and rights to custody of children are some of the entitlements for Devadasi women as inalienable rights provided in the draft bill, in addition to more stringent punitive actions against offenders. The bill also lays emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of local authorities in awareness creation and prevention of Devadasi dedication.

Although notionally, the purpose of dedication is sometimes based on son-role of retaining maternal property rights, most Devadasis barely inherit any property from their maternal families and not at all from their partners. And therefore, it is a convenient cultural connivance of patriarchy where sexual plurality without responsibility remains the crux of male privilege. As long as this window of cultural opportunity remains, dedication of vulnerable dalit girls will continue in order to accommodate male sexual promiscuity and irresponsible partnership. The proposed bill for the amendment of the 1982 Act in Karnataka drafted by the collaborative platform of academic, civil society and Devadasi representatives strongly recommends for the inclusion of property rights to Devadasis and their children. However, this is a legal commitment that state governments are unwilling to include but rather choose to increase monetary and other forms of benefits. One suspects that this could be a strong reason for the draft rules not receiving approval from the state cabinet. Unless legal rights for Devadasi women and their children to their legitimate identity to the partners' and their property are admitted within the Act, the ban on the institution remains an ineffective paper instrument.

That dedication continues to take place, and primarily among the dalit families with the context of dedication undergoing changes in the circumstances and reasons mooted by the perpetrators, demonstrates an interconnection between caste and sexual abuse as a neo normal social custom. Mere poverty as the main purpose for dedication does not provide the sole argument for the custom to prevail. Poverty is prevalent among other castes as well although the Madigas are largely poor and landless. Rarely has any Devadasi, from the study sites, appears to have become economically better off or managed an assured source of income from the practice of maintaining sexual partners. That an untouchable caste becomes sexually legitimate only demonstrates that the custom emanates from other reasons for dedication. The cultural opportunity for legitimizing male privileges of multiple sexual partnership arrangements posits itself as a stronger reason for dedication than economic or artistic improvement of Devadasi lives. These contexts need to be understood along with the dynamics of development economics of the current forms of resource exploitation. The feudal glory of erstwhile kingdoms demonstrated their wealth not only in the form of cavalries and infantries and infrastructural majesty of their palaces, but also in the number of Devadasis patronized. The neo-liberal economy of mining feudalism that controls north

Karnataka, and particularly Ballary district, merely demonstrates the transition from agri-feudalism and feudatory kingdoms to mafia controlled feudalism of illegal extractives who dictate the political mandate of the state. In the modern context, patronization of Devadasis has been extremely covert and exploitative, unlike the royal indulgence received by Devadasis as evidenced from the region's historical records. It is disturbing that the evaluation reports of the ministry recommend for industrial expansion as a means of addressing the livelihood needs, and thereby preventing economic compulsions of dedication. These recommendations do not analyse the historical extremes of poverty, illiteracy and resourcelessness on the one hand, and the domination of the upper castes and classes on the other, that have shifted to neo-corporate forms of abuse on the dalits projecting high commercial and industrial projects as development needs for the region.

Almost all the Devadasis who were interviewed are landless labourers with erratic and low incomes. The universal situation of hunger, anaemia, malnutrition and related health problems reported by them demonstrate not only the deeply entrenched feudal system of economic extremes but also the limited impact that state benefits have brought to these women. Even among the dalits, Devadasis are the poorest and most marginalized. In spite of receiving pensions, they barely manage to keep out of starvation indicating that pensions and other welfare schemes have a minimalistic impact in bringing effective changes in either the economic or social status of Devadasis. Most of the Devadasis interviewed reported that their children dropped out of school at middle and high school level, if they ever enrolled in school. The reasons were mostly related to Devadasi incomes being grossly insufficient to feed their families and the social stigmatization that their children face.

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## Conclusion:

### Our Dreams- Our Demands:

Devadasi women have been made to feel that they cannot demand- they have no rights, and deserve only pity and charity. Therefore, their demands are based on what the government supports, the definitions, numbers and trends it chooses to restrict its understanding and outreach, and the extent to which it is willing to provide as incentives of rehabilitation. Yet, the Devadasi women have dreams and aspirations, for themselves and their children. Despite their suffering, they humour themselves and the world around them and give hope to their children.

*“I dream that I am able to construct my house and I can get enough money to perform the marriage of my daughter. Then I have nothing to worry”.*

*“My dream is that we can live a good and happy life, that I have some gold jewellery and many other things. I pray to god for this. I did never study anything, because we used to go to field work from the very beginning as daily wage labourers. If we would have been going to school, then we would have been hungry all the time. So it was necessary to earn some money, but it was never enough to buy a book or something like that.”*

*“My children must be happy in the future. Sometimes I want to die very soon, but if I die, what about my children? They will be orphans; no one will take care of them. I have to fight for them. Once I attempted suicide, but I stopped it in the very right moment. I scolded my god and the goddess, but later on I begged them to forgive me. I hope that my family god will protect us and that he will take care of me and my children”.*

*“The Devadasi rituals must stop, nobody should follow. If I see some people who force a girl into the system, I always try to do anything against it and I call the police. I had to learn that a Devadasi will never marry, it hurts me a lot, so I will save other young girls”.*

*“Sometimes I really want to die but then I think about my children and I know that I have to stay alive, for them. I want to see my daughters settled very well, only by then I can die”.*

*“The whole ritual must stop at any cost. There must be some strict laws for it, because if not, many lives will get spoiled totally”.*

*“People say that Huligemma has selected us and that she will be angry when the chosen ones will not become Devadasis. These are all blind and stupid beliefs, all of those rituals were made by humans, not by a god or a goddess. If I would have been a little bit older, I would have stood up for my rights....”*

*“If someone wants to make a girl a Devadasi then I will inform the police about this”*

*“I did not go to school, but my children are studying. My daughter studied up to the 7th standard, later she dropped it. But if one of my daughters studies a lot and has a good job in the future, then she can care for me.”*

*“People have to change their perspective concerning women here in my area, they think that women are like dirt, but women can do anything if they want to. There is more strength in women compared to men. They can achieve anything they want, society should respect them properly.”*

*“We have to live our life with a lot of confidence; we must not lose our hope. I am never afraid of problems; there is no other way than to solve them for my family”.*

*“One of my wishes is that I can learn how to write and read a little bit. For example I want to learn how to write my name and my signature”.*

Dignity, education and an economic stability are the three aspirations that every Devadasi dreams of. Education and employment for their children without the stigma of illegitimacy and eradication of this culture of dedication is a universal demand that resonates in all their dialogues. Many of them have even made efforts at personal and collective levels starting with education of their own daughters and sons, and, making representations for entitlements for themselves. However, most of their demands centre around welfare schemes as that is what they have understood as the duty of the state, from their engagement with the governance institutions.

Whereas supportive welfare schemes in order to redress the social abuse and discrimination are very much necessary for the rehabilitation of women who struggle alone for their and their children's survival, rights and entitlements are an area of neglect. Although the Devadasi women are emotionally connected to their sexual relationship with their partners as if it were a marriage relationship, this does not happen vice versa, nor does it entail any legal or economic responsibilities. This being the case, sexual promiscuity with a cultural license is a male privilege that patriarchy would desire to have a strong-hold over. No matter what welfare measures are provided, the situation of dalits in India, and specifically in north Karnataka, portends a long term vulnerability of this caste, and especially the women of this caste.

Without legal responsibilities on the part of male partners with respect to their property and share in their incomes, Devadasis and their children will continue to face injustice where younger women are constantly susceptible to this practice. Pretentiousness being an accepted norm where the biological fathers deny their paternity, rights to identity and inheritance should be enforced as a legal right as the draft bill proposes. The district committees should not only play the role of implementing welfare schemes but also provide a legal support for legitimate claims to identity and property. The bill also proposes mechanisms for identification, enumeration and support interventions with administrative structures made more effective and with representation of the Devadasis themselves at different levels of these structures. Rather than closing down enumeration and entitlements to young Devadasis using the pretext of misuse of schemes, state should take greater responsibility with more systematic

and representational structures that can reach out to genuine victims. The role of the district committees and their representative functioning can vastly strengthen more fool-proof mechanisms of identification and implementation.

With the growing atrocities on women, young dalit girls are most vulnerable to sexual abuse (findings from a survey conducted by Sakhi in the research sites) which is a common excuse for families of dalit girls to dedicate them. Without these legal entitlements to inheritance and maintenance for the Devadasis and their children, no welfare schemes can address the fundamental causes that culture legitimises in patriarchal crimes against women. Moreover, monetary benefits are usually grabbed or controlled by the family members of the Devadasis, including their partners.

Both the ancient and recent histories of Hospet taluka demonstrate the link between economic extremes and women's vulnerability. The history of the Vijayanagara empire carries with it, its glories of wealth and splendour as well as the culture of Devadasi dedication, where the streets of Hampi even today have evidence of Devadasi slaves maintained by the royals. The more recent extremes in economic high tide due to the flourish of the illegal mining industry that exploited a large landless dalit community of labourers and left them further marginalised, has perpetrated many crimes against Devadasi and dalit women. Hence, the larger politico-economy of the state has a strong impact on the socio-cultural and economic security of women, especially from the most vulnerable castes. Any development extremes of black economy that creates complexities for regulation and constitutional validity have negative connotations on women's safety. Particularly for Devadasi women who are confronted with societal prejudices, crimes against them are difficult to prove or get punitive actions. In the contemporary situation where sexual abuse, teenage pregnancies and inter-caste romances have become the more primary reason for dedication than son preference or religious beliefs, the need for development policies that balance social security with economic development become a greater necessity of state responsibility.

The mining boom and collapse has left irreparable damages to people's sustenance and women's security. With natural resources destroyed due to abuse of the land, the survival for landless dalit families has become a greater challenge, leading to migration. With the increase in social vices like alcohol and domestic violence from the sudden wealth brought by mining, the vulnerability of dalit girls to sexual abuse whether at home or when they are forced to migrate for labour has exposed them to new threats of dedication. The need for state accountability at the micro level in corrective measures to rehabilitate Devadasis and at the macro level, in enabling policies that prevent the creation of neo-social contexts for dedication, are both urgently required. The mining story of Ballary is not only a lesson in bad economics leading to an unregulated state, it is also a story of bad economics leading to social insecurity and human rights violations. Devadasis have been the most invisible in these layers of unscrupulous economics.

The development economics planned for the district, and not the compensatory welfare measures or incentives, would largely determine the fate of dalit girls. As we have stopped

enumerating the vulnerability, the correlation and degree of criminalisation would go unaccounted. The Devadasis' demands are basic – sustainable access to wages so that they can take care of themselves and their children. Hence, the larger GDP indicators that mining tries to demonstrate is irrelevant when these indicators are unstable and inaccessible to these women. The post-mining economics that they desire for is the creation of labour opportunities that do not collapse like mining but have a long-term sustainability for wages. The state duty to utilise the mining rehabilitation fund (DMF) and other programmes would be primarily to undo the destruction from mining and reclaim lands, natural resources and plan for alternate development policies for sustainable land use and sustainable livelihoods. Otherwise, continued poverty makes it a challenge for Devadasis to educate their children and redeem them from the web of dedication.

The age at which dedication is happening today has shifted from childhood to adolescence. This vulnerable age has to be a focus of state preventive actions. This is also the age where education opportunities are reduced for girls (and for boys) and therefore, support for higher education and vocational skills that lead up to employability need to be taken up with a lot of seriousness and planning at the local level. The successful stories of Sakhi's interventions are an evidence of how interventions at adolescence through long-term handholding with education support, counselling, facilitating employment opportunities, and providing a space for dialogue in building dignity and self-esteem are constructive models which could be scaled up and diversified by the state and well as civil society.

We hope that these voices of the Devadasi women reach the larger public and policy makers both for stronger constitutional mechanisms for enforcement of rights and for the social responsibility in recognising the Devadasis' right to dignity of life and rights to property inheritance and identity.

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