


Chapter 4

Temple Prostitution in India: An Exploitative Practice in the Name of Religion

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ABSTRACT

The practice of ‘marrying’ young girls of lower castes to gods and goddesses is one of the oldest cultural practices in India. This practice is called the devadasi system in which minor girls belonging to the Scheduled Castes are sexually exploited by temple priests and other high caste men in the name of religion. The term ‘devadasi’ is a Sanskrit word which means ‘female slave of God.’ The devadasi system is also seen as religious sanctioned prostitution in India. Note that, despite the practice being abolished by various state legislations in India, there are approximately more than 48,000 devadasis in the country according to the data by the National Commission for Women, New Delhi. Further, as per the National Human Rights Commission, the state of Andhra Pradesh, India alone had over 25,000 devadasis in 2015 with girls as young as 12 years old who were being pushed into prostitution in the nearby states of Karnataka and Maharashtra. This chapter therefore aims to highlight the reasons behind this social evil considering the broader interconnections between law and religion.

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INTRODUCTION

Indian society, similar to other patriarchal societies in the world, is governed by a system where men control and dominate women socially, politically and economically (Behl, 2019). Patriarchal values and beliefs subjugate women at every stage of their lives. For instance, young girls are constantly pressured to remain within the confines of their homes and are taught to behave in an ‘appropriate’ manner, they are often not allowed to pursue education after a particular age, they are also discouraged from taking up high paying jobs or continue to work post marriage (Jacobsen, 2015). It is even possible to argue that societies which believe in male superiority and favour practices that place male authority at the centre of the family structure are the ones more prone to violence against women (Kalra and Bhugra, 2013). This particular line of argument is supported by the constant control and restrain over women’s thoughts and movements in male-centred societies that do not leave any scope for dissent and punishes those women who either question the ‘status quo’ or try to break free from their stereotyped roles (Gangoli, 2007). As noted by Dagar (2014),

‘Violence against women and girls was not the pathological behavior of a few ‘sick’ men; rather it was an extension of a system of practices and laws which sanctioned men’s rights to regard women as their property and therefore keep them under their control.’

Violence against women is not new to India, one example is the disproportionate gender ratio resulting from female infanticide. As per the 2011 Census of India, the sex ratio stands at 940 females per 1000 males (Chandramouli, 2011). The recent National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 2020 also revealed a decline in the sex ratio. This decline was recorded in states which had shown gains in previous years (Tandon, 2020). In India, violence against women appears to have been largely accepted as normal and is often justified. This is mainly because of society’s own understanding of violence against young girls and women and how it chooses to respond to it (Johnson and Johnson, 2001). One example is the Delhi gang rape case of 2012, wherein a 23 year old woman was raped by six men and brutally assaulted when she was returning home after watching a movie with a male friend. When the incident came to light, people in the national capital came out on the streets demanding stringent laws to protect women in the country. As a result, amendments were brought especially to the offence of rape under the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860 with new crimes also being added to the list such as stalking and acid attack.

Despite the amendments to the IPC in the aftermath of the Delhi gang rape, violent crimes against young girls and women have not stopped in India. As per the data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the Indian agency

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