MARRIED TO GOD-
THE JOGIN SYSTEM IN INDIA

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Abstract

This paper uses the material from a Project of the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare, which we undertook in 1991-92, related to the study, rehabilitation and organizing of Jogins in Andhra Pradesh in India. As researchers, we faced a lot of dilemma while making the research design and evolving a methodology for the study. Jogins are the modern form of the traditional Devadasi system, which existed in India from the 10th century. Dedicated to the temple to carry out various temple-related duties, these girls were married to an immortal God, and since they could never become widows, they were regarded as auspicious ones. Centuries later, by the time India was colonized, all these girls were practicing prostitution. The system was finally abolished in 1947 by law. In spite of this, a large number of women and girls, especially from the lower castes, continue to be dedicated to God in different regions of southern India, especially in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. These girls become the keep of the village headman through whom they have a number of children. Since the whole system is institutionalized under the wraps and cover of religion, the exploitive aspect of the institution is often missed. As most of these women are from marginalized sections of society and are also employed as wage labourers and live below the poverty line, they are merely seen as labourers. Their main identity gets subsumed under this category, but here too they are invisible and are marginalized and often missed by policy makers and researchers. This paper documents the experiences of these marginalised and often forgotten women.
Keywords
Jogins, Devadasis, oppression, exploitation, marginalized, sacred.

The Project

This paper draws upon material from a Project of the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare, Government of India, which we undertook in 1991-92, related to the study: rehabilitation and organizing of Jogins in Andhra Pradesh in India. Jogins are the modern form of the traditional Devadasis, girls dedicated to a temple, a centuries-old system going back to the 10th century. These girls are doubly exploited through this institution. They carry the stigma of being born in low castes; later, they are sexually exploited by the village headman, the Patel or Reddy with whom they have a number of children who are never recognized by their fathers. Jogins are quickly replaced when they get old or when the headman fancies a new arrival.

Abandoned by their masters, the older Jogins end up practicing prostitution in the village or in some urban area. Interestingly, their huts are designed in such a way that they have a back entrance to facilitate an unnoticed entry of the village headman or of other men. Although high-caste male clients have sexual relationships with these women, the men would not drink water touched by Jogin hands. Their children are known as children of the Jogins with no questions asked about the father. Thus under the cover of religious traditions, this historic system of female exploitation remains in vogue. As most of these women are from marginalized sections of society with no skills to earn their livelihood, most exist in acute poverty. Some work as daily wage labourers with minimal earnings. Whether as sex-slaves or as labourers, they remain invisible, often missed by policy makers and researchers.

Issues related to the Research Design

We wanted to see these women first as Jogins and then as agricultural labourers, though they are often recognized only as agricultural labourers (Pande, 1993, Mimeographed Report). We all started our work in the Nizamabad District with a lot of enthusiasm. We strongly felt that most research is largely on women and not for the women. We wanted to break this stereotype and wanted to do research which takes these women’s needs, interests and experiences into account and becomes an instrument in improving their lives. We therefore wanted to follow a new methodology in studying these women so that our research does not just become static, rigid and dogmatic or merely an academic exercise. However, all these explorations and ideals were put to a severe test when we struggled with the problem of finding an appropriate methodology for studying the Jogins. The moment
the down-to-earth task of conceptualizing our research came, including the choice of feminist methodology, we had problems.

The first question that came up was how we should study these women and their lives and experiences. We had nagging doubts that we would not be taken seriously in academic circles if we did research which demands conscious subjectivity and acknowledges the women’s feelings, emotions and intuitions. We wondered how our quest for feminist knowledge, in which woman’s concern are central, would shape our questioning methodology. We were clear that the aim of our Project was not just to collect knowledge for the sake of knowledge but to put this knowledge into practice to induce change for the better. By making these women talk, we wanted to highlight the complexities of the social, psychological, economic and religious issues that they constantly address in their lives. We had a clear idea about what was exploitation, and being outsiders, we could clearly spell it out. However, we soon realized that what we understood as oppression, exploitation, was very different for these women. It was very interesting to see the women’s perception of their own situation. They did not see themselves as exploited and could easily explain their situation in terms of religion. Many, in turn, questioned us about what other alternatives they had. They were happy that they and their children were taken care and had food. Thus, our foremost challenge was posed by the self-perception of these women in which they ignored exploitation under the misconception of self-preservation.

We needed to help them distinguish the differences between exploitation, oppression and self-preservation. How could we integrate their repressed, unconscious female subjectivity and our own experience of oppression and discrimination into our research design? How do we identify and understand both the similarities and the differences with our own oppression? The methodological principle of a value-free, neutral, uninvolved approach to a hierarchical, non-reciprocal relationship between research subject and research object did not really fit here. Our aim was to document these women’s life histories as individuals and record their collective experiences, which would lead to theories and strategies for change. We felt that by sharing their lives and discussing religion, these women would be relieved from guilt. Perhaps this consciousness-raising would help in changing their life situation. Studies by economists see these women more as casual labourers who largely remain otherwise invisible. We wanted to understand not only the economic dimensions of their lives but their social and emotional lives too. How could we make them understand that a change in these women’s life situation, rather than social welfare or charity, was the aim of our Project.

Methodology

Our data was collected by observing the Jogins from very close quarters and conducting in-depth interviews with 35 Jogins, developing a holistic view of their life situations. The
unstructured interview questions focused on some broad issues. Our interactions with the Jogins were spread out over a compact stretch of time in 1991 and 1992 when we were working on the Project and staying with Samskar, at Varni in Nizamabad District. During this period, about 200 to 250 of these Jogins attended our various sessions. Samskar is a non-governmental organization (NGO) founded by Mrs. Hemalata and Mr. Lavanam Gora, which through its Chelli Nilayam (Sisters Home) works for the emancipation and rehabilitation of the Jogins and their children.

Gaps in the interview schedule and our return to teaching gave us an opportunity to re-examine, among other things, the validity of oral history. Among these, the first was problematizing the question of integrating non-existent categories, like the magical powers ascribed to the hair of potrajus, the village priest, that were absent in historical literature but were a central part of popular culture in the Deccan and were closely linked to the Jogins. Thus the paradigm of Clifford Geertz that “a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (Geertz, 1973), was sought to be problematized. We also realized that one of the central problems is the fundamental disconnect between the representation of an institution, in this case the Jogins, in normative literature and the received meanings of the same in popular culture and academia.

**Origin of the Jogins**

Before proceeding with our research, a thorough understanding of the historicity of the Jogin system was quintessential. The etymological origin of the term Jogin is said to be from the Sanskrit term Yogi or Yogini, which is frequently mentioned in ancient and medieval texts. The female gender is yogini, which is translated into Telugu as Jogini. The Jogins mostly hail from the most deprived social groups of Indian society. The large majority of them are landless, their labour is underpaid and they are a socially distinct group with alternate mores and values; in adherence to the same, some girls are married to a village deity. Inherited social traditions suck these girls into the vortex of concubine age to satiate the lust of the village landlords. Once the landlord abandons them, they turn from concubine age to prostitution. The Devadasis, who once were temple dancers and were appointed in temples to take care of the Gods and their comforts, are now controlled by a variety of local traditions. However, there is a lot of difference between the Devadas of the past and the Jogins of today.

**The Devadasis: a precursor to the Jogins**

The Devadasis or temple girls were the precursors of the Jogins. The Devadasis played a centralized role in the religious and cultural life of India from the 10th century onwards as the numerous texts and inscriptions show. Emerging from the concept of divine fecundity
as an integral part of agrarian societies, this institution continues to flourish and is in existence even in the 21st century. In records of the medieval period, temple girls are hardly referred to as Devadasis, a title which became synonymous with them in the later period. In medieval literature, they are referred to as Sanulu, Sani, Sampradayamuvuru, and Gadisanulu. Sometimes, they are referred to as Munuti Sanulu, Pedamunnuti, Sanulu, Sani or Munnuri, indicating numeric status (South Indian Inscription, Vol. IV). They were employed in the temples as dancers, singers, musicians and offered certain services to the deities. Some of them were responsible for the smooth functioning of the temple administration. The Tirumala Tirupati inscription mentions the temple dancers as Tiruvaidhisani, who were women attached to the temple; they accompanied the procession of deities through the streets, with their set of pipers, drummers, dancers and dancing masters, and exhibited their skills in dancing in the streets and before the deities (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam Inscriptions, Vol. II, No. 86, p. 167).

Historically, the temple dancers of India were influential women who were not only acclaimed for their artistry but also for their untold wealth and influence in politics. In some instances, they enjoyed very high status and often shared betel leaf with the wives of kings and conversed with royalty as equals (Paes, 1985, 267). They were honoured in public and were even offered seats alongside members of royalty. Modern classical dance forms, such as Bharatnatyam, and originally Sadir, Kuchipudi, Mohini Attam and Odissi, owe their origin to these temple dancers. Married to the immortal God, and not to a mortal human being, the Devadasis could never be widowed and thus were considered as ever-auspicious women. There is no conclusive proof that they practiced prostitution, although it cannot be denied that depending on their status they cohabited with men of their class (Pande, 2004, 25).

The temple girls were products of the feudal medieval world where the production of art and all aesthetics reflected dominant ideas and hierarchies. As a mirror image of royalty, the divinity was furnished with regalia and consorts. In this period, a number of attempts were made to authenticate and legitimize the new feudal polity of the period through parallelism between the deity and the king (Narayana, et. al., 1987, pp. 348-373). In fact, the deity in the temple was equated with the king and a parallel world of authority reconstructed on the spiritual plane. The temple girls, therefore, were the link between God and the king and served to establish the power of the over-lord and give it legitimacy in the eyes of the people (Pande, 2011, 260). In fact, we often find the distinction between the Devasthanam and the Rajsthana court diminishing with the inter change ability of women in the temple services with those of the king’s court. In this medieval background, these girls crossed from one boundary to another with ease and were the objects of ritual exchange between the king’s court and the temple. These girls also easily crossed another boundary set up by traditional scriptures that of an ideal traditional woman who is a pati-
vrata and tied to the home, by not being tied to one man but to an immortal god and the temple (Pande, 2004, 30-31). All the Devadasis were regarded as Nityasumangali, women who were auspicious, since they were married to an immortal; there was no chance of their ever-becoming widows and being deprived of their marital status and the toe ring, which symbolized that status (Pande, 2006, 493).

The temple girls performed a variety of duties. They were in charge of maintaining temple properties, supervising grants or other endowments of the temple, mobilizing temple resources, through leasing out lands and cattle, and performing various tasks connected with the day-to-day running of the temple (Pande, 2004, 33). The temple girls were paid generally in kind, with a share in temple property. They were often given a part of the prasada offered to the deity. Many times donors specified the manner of the girls’ enjoying shares in temple lands and deposited certain amounts in the temple treasury for their maintenance. The temple dancers acquired a lot of wealth as can be seen from the numerous grants made to the temples (Mysore Epigraphical Reports, 1914, No. 354). The girls also paid taxes to the State. Indeed, such was the prestige and status of the dancing girls, especially the ones that came from elite sections, that kings and noble men had no hesitation in marrying them (Kunjanpallai, 1970, p. 279).

In addition to temple-assigned responsibilities, the Devadasis also participated in other works, such as charities, public utilities work and elaborate ritualistic services. As they came from different social backgrounds, each performed the rituals according to their varied backgrounds and status. The most important ones came from elite and royal families and attached themselves to the service of the temple and the deity. The king himself made these appointments and often they were daughters of nobles and other elites of society (Temple Inscriptions of Andhra Pradesh, Vol. I, No. 264, Srikakulam District). A record dated 1390 AD records that the king Achyuta Raya ordered the daughter of Ranjakam Kuppasanito serve as a dancer in the temple of Sri Venkatesa at Tirumalai in the year 1531 (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam Inscriptions, Vol. III, No. 2, p. 23). Probably their public appearances were restricted to certain ceremonial occasions.

When a girl was dedicated as a Devadasi, all the ceremonies of an orthodox Hindu marriage were gone through; the priest officiated on behalf of the deity and tied the tali, consisting of a triangulate bottu bearing the image of Ganesa with a gold bead on either side around the girl’s neck. (Thurston, et. al., 1987, 143-44). She was also initiated into the act of dancing. The celebrations of marriage like feasting lasted for two days. The girl was also taken out in a procession through the streets to make everyone aware of her identity. With the loss of patronage to the temples, these women lost their regular income and this system withered away (Jeevanandam & Pande, 2017).
Banning the Devadasi System through Law

With the coming of the British, orientalist fantasies encroached on both academic and popular worlds through the persona of the Devadasis. Operas and ballets cast the Devadasis in romantic love stories (Kersenboom, 2013, p. 773). The first legal initiative for stopping the Devadasi system dates back to 1934 when the Bombay Devadasis Protection Act was passed by the British Government. This Act covered Bombay state, as it existed then. This same act was adopted in 1947 by the then Mysore state, renamed Karnataka in 1972. This act abolished the dedication of women as Devadasis to Hindu deities, idols and objects of worship in the temple and religious institutions. It stated that such a practice, however ancient and pure in its origin, leads many of the women so dedicated to lives of prostitution (Madras Act, XXXI of 1947). Hence, by 1947, most of the Devadasis or temple girls were truly leading lives as prostitutes.

Social Reform Movement in Andhra in the 19th century

During the 19th century, the coastal districts were the site of a powerful social reform movement whose central focus was the improvement of women’s status. This reform was in consonance with larger social trends in the rest of the country. Child marriages, Kanyasulkam (the practice of marrying very small girls to older men), widow remarriage, abolition of the dasi (women from lower castes made bonded slaves in the houses of upper-caste rich landlords) and devadasi (temple dancing girls) systems, and above all women’s education, became the major foci, with women also taking an active part in these debates. The assumption was that this education was to enable woman to play her traditional roles of mother and wife more efficiently. (Pande et. al. 1987, 392) It must be remembered however, that most of these discussions and issues were confined to the upper castes of Andhra society. The reformers were only tangentially concerned with the large mass of women who were lower-caste and engaged in agriculture.

In the Telangana region, (which was a part of the princely state of Hyderabad until 1948, when it joined the Indian Union), also witnessed a literary and social renaissance during the first half of the 20th century. As a part of this cultural rebirth were other political movements of self-assertion, which questioned the feudal and authoritarian structures that operated within the Nizam’s dominion. The outcome of this awareness was a powerful left movement, which culminated in the Telangana Armed Struggle, a resistance that resulted in the abolition of various oppressive feudal systems and finally contributed to the dismantling of the Nizam’s rule. In several areas, the people were able, to put an end to vetti (forced labour), illegal exactions, compulsory grain levies, and reoccupy the lands seized earlier by the landlords, while also “resisting the landlords’ armed goondas [goons]” and facing “the armed police and the military forces of the Nizam” [Sundarayya, 1972, PP.
The struggle against the feudal state has left a deep impression in the countryside of this region and a fair degree of political consciousness is seen until this day. There were some social practices which were abolished during the course of the struggle, like the Ada papa system, whereby young girls were given in bondage to the landlord’s family and served as his concubines (Sundarayya, 1972, P. 14).

The Jogins today

Despite these very impressive and powerful movements in various regions of the state, many more systems oppressive to women continue to exist in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Although the Andhra Pradesh Government through legislation in 1988 abolished the Jogin system, the institution has continued to prevail. A number of regional variations of this institution are practiced. In Kerala, they are known as Maharis, Natis in Assam, Muralis in Maharashtra, Basavis in Karnataka, Bhavanis in Goa, Kundikarson the West coast, Thevardiyar in Tamil Nadu and Jogins in Andhra Pradesh. Most of these women come from the lower sections of society and practice prostitution.

Due to poverty, ignorance and slavery, a number of poor and untouchable families dedicate one of their girls to the local goddess, Yellamma, Mallamma, Pochamma and Mattamma, due to superstitious beliefs. A dedication takes place at the age of six months to six years. Later, there follows a second dedication, which is celebrated like a marriage. A village priest, Pothuraju, who keeps his hair long and knotted, performs the ceremony. A holy thread is put around the girl, which symbolizes her dedication. The girl then becomes the mistress of the village headman. The village headman keeps her as long as she attracts him, and after that, she becomes the keep of the village. Such girls have to beg in the village, dance before the dead and subject themselves to the lust of the village headman and others in the village. Many of these women earn their livelihood through street performances, begging or prostitution.

The National Commission of Women (NCW) conducted a survey and wrote to the various State Governments to inform them about the number of Devadasis in their states. The Government of Orissa intimated that there were no Devadasis except one in Puri. The Government of Tamil Nadu also intimated that there were no Devadasis in that state. Maharashtra informed the Commission that for “Devadasi Maintenance Allowance”, a total of 8,793 applications were received, and after conducting a survey 6,314 were rejected and 2,479 Devadasis were declared eligible for the scheme. At the time of sending the information, 1,432 Devadasis were receiving this allowance. The Commission in its report said although the AP Social Welfare Commission had submitted information that there are 24,273 Devadasis (Karimnagar-5,861, Nizamabad-5,666, Mahbubnagar-2,879, Warangal-1,059, Anantapur-2,686, Kurnool-2,197, Medak-1,145, Adilabad-906, Hyderabad
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740, Chittoor 544, Nellore284, Rangareddy231, Nalgonda-40, Prakasam-26, Visakhapatnam-7, East Godavari-1, and Kadapa -1), the actual number could be more than 80,000. The problem is more rampant in Telangana and Rayalaseema. Moreover, this system has many names, including Joginis in Medak and Warangal, Mathamma or Matangi in Nellore, Ongole, Prakasam, Balavi in Kurnool, Anantapur and Chittoor, Shiva Parvati, and Paravathulu in Karimnagar, Thayaramma in Vizianagaram, Ambabai in Rangareddy, and Devadasi in coastal districts (SribalaVadlapatla, 2015).

Differences between the Devadasi and the Jogins

There is a great deal of difference between the Devadasi system, as it existed in the past, and the Jogin system of the present. The historical Devadasi system was not confined to a particular caste. Devadasis never had a caste but instead followed a way of life. Unlike the Jogins, the Devadasis in the past were not treated as untouchables. The Jogins, on the other hand, are from the castes of Malas and Madigas, considered the lowest even among the scheduled castes. Some Scheduled Caste communities and some Backward Caste Communities, mainly from the Fishermen, Tenugu and Naikpod castes, practice the Jogin System. The semi-arid tropics of the south are prone to constant droughts which push people to new levels of poverty. In addition, people from the low castes do not own land and hence remain dependent on the landed gentry and moneylenders. This situation leads to prostitution. Large-scale commercial prostitution developing in industrial cities extends its tentacles in search of easy victims and the tradition provides legitimacy for this profession (Datar, 2003, p. 12).

Besides parental poverty, other major causes for converting young girls into Jogins are superstition and religious beliefs. If there are recurring deaths of children in a family, regular occurrence of disease in a house or a village, outbreaks of disease in the village or the pure lust of landlords, young girls are dedicated as Jogins. The nexus between caste and forced prostitution is quite strong and the Jogin system is no exception. Most Indian girls and women in India’s urban brothels come from lower-caste, tribal, or minority communities. Like other forms of violence against women, ritualized prostitution is a system designed to kill whatever vestiges of self-respect the untouchable castes have in order to subjugate them and keep them underprivileged. By keeping Dalit women as prostitutes, and by tying prostitution to bondage in rural areas, upper-caste men reinforce their declaration of social and economic superiority over the lower castes. The girl who is made a Jogin is given some money but still works in the fields. Used for sexual purposes by all the men, including Dalit men, she lives separately and alone in the village. The number of Jogins who enter prostitution suggests that this custom is one of the causal factors for recruitment of particular women to become prostitutes. It is appropriation of this feudal custom by the capitalist market economy and the urbanization process. The regional
A Few Case Studies of Jogins

In this section are presented a few case studies constructed from the interviews that we conducted. Laxmi lives in Taglepalli village in Nizamabad district. She was identified as a Jogin at the age of 5 and initiated into it at the age of 11. As a Harijan by caste, she lives in the Harijanwada of the village. When Laxmi reached puberty at the age of 11, a grand ceremony was organized in the village temple and everyone in the village attended it. There were many decorations with festoons, lamps and incense. A sheep was also sacrificed. Potharaju, the traditional priest performed the ceremony, whereby Laxmi was married to the Goddess. Laxmi thinks that it is normal that though she was married to the Goddess, she had to first have sex with the priest and then be the keep of a toddy-tapper, who brought her a Mangalsutra and new clothes. In her childhood, Laxmi had chicken pox. Her grandmother and mother then made a vow to god that if she survived the mishap, she would be given to Goddess Pochamma, as a prospective Jogin. That happened when she was five years old.

She is now the keep of a toddy tapper, who visits her whenever he feels like it, but she is never allowed to visit his house or even touch his wife and children because of her caste background. Though the toddy tapper has physical relations with her, he will not even drink water in her house because she is an untouchable; she finds nothing wrong in this. She is quite aware that he is free to leave her whenever he decides and this she attributes to her fate of being born a woman. After Samskara, a voluntary organization working in the area, started literacy classes, she attended and goes to these sometimes, although she is not very clear about what learning means to her life. Samskara has brought some awareness to the village and asked the Jogins not to dance in front of dead bodies. It has also prevented new Jogins from being initiated. All this had made Laxmi very insecure and alienated. She feels that if the toddy keeper cannot visit her, she does not know how to support herself and may have to look for another man to support her. Laxmi is completely locked into the social world that made her a Jogin.

Jangamani was twelve when she was made a Jogin. Her village had a severe drought and her parents, on the advice of upper - caste Hindus in the village, dedicated her to the local goddess, Yellamma. She was married to a potharaju (priest representative of the local deity) and declared a Jogin. The same night, a village landlord took her virginity. He stayed...
with her for three weeks, after which he declared her available to other men in the village. The drought ended soon but Jangamani’s life continued following the new pattern. She had three children and took care of them through the earnings she received from prostitution. She did not have any land so that she could not pursue any other way of livelihood. She sees her daughter also becoming a Jogin because she feels that her job is very noble and she commands a lot of respect. We tried to talk to her and explain the exploitative system, but she is convinced that this is what the Gods have destined for her. She asked who is she to question the God's doings. Had there been no drought in her village, she would not have become a Jogin, she said thoughtfully.

Synamma is a sex worker in the town of Bodhan. She was five years old when her grandmother was combing her hair and discovered a knot in her hair that was matted. To the grandmother this was a sure sign that God had wished her to be a Jogin. When she was thirteen, a marriage feast was organized and all the villagers took part in this celebration. She remembers being very happy because she was the centre of attention and she was given new clothes. There were drums played and she was married to the village God. After the marriage, the Pothraju forced himself on her; the only memory she has is of him reeking with liquor and her experience being very painful. However, she had no respite and soon on other nights, there was a new man from the village. She remembers sleeping with many men; many times she refused to entertain men, but her parents would not listen. Her father became her procurer and decided on the price. Her earnings, however, were not enough to take care of her family of three, two boys and one girl. She then moved to Bodhan town and took a room on rent. She started moving around the roads and soon she found a large clientele, and until the time we met her she was quite satisfied with her life and stated that this was the only skill she had. She wanted a different life for her children but was not sure that she will be able to give this to them. She does not want to go back to the village or even be associated with the work of Samskar and other Jogins.

Jayamma is in her early 30’s and belongs to Rudrur village. She was destined to be a Jogin because her family had vowed that if their fourth-born was a son they would make their eldest daughter a Jogin. When she was eleven, she was dedicated to goddess Pochamma. She saw the other girls in her village being married and she had thought that she was also being married like them. She was very excited about her marriage and did not know what the future held for her. The only memory which she has now is of sleeping with the Patel of the village and then with the Pothraju, to be followed by a series of village men. She was given a separate room in the hut and everyone in the village recognized her as a Jogin. In return for her services, she was given food and clothing. Most of her customers left her grain and clothes and she survived thus. She then started working at construction sites, for her earnings given by these various men were not sufficient. At the construction site too, because everyone knew who she was, she could not say no to the contractor who
Rekha Pande started visiting her by night in her hut. The moment she became pregnant the contractor removed her on the pretext that she was taking too many leaves and was not attending to work regularly. She then moved out to another town and started doing construction work. At night when a labourer visited her and left some money with her, she found this useful and she began to work as a sex worker.

Shobana is from Govvur village. When she was ten years old, her brother had fits and this continued at regular intervals. Her mother thought dedicating her 10-year-old daughter would cure her son; though she was made a Jogin, the son was not cured of his fits. Shobana remembers her marriage very clearly. The outcaste hamlet of the Madiga community (Harijan Community) was invited to the wedding. The small hut was decorated with mango leaves and branches. A *pandal* was erected with palmyra leaves. The guests drank arrack and danced to elevate themselves from the agonies of their social reality. Shobana was decorated as a bride. She was brought to the dais and placed before the deity, made of two bundles of straw. She remembers a *mangalsutra* (marriage symbol in the form of a necklace made with a thread, yellow in colour) being tied around her neck. Her first memory after the marriage is of the landlord, Dora, arriving in the hut and taking her into his possession. He would often send across grains and vegetables for her and this was much welcomed by the family, as they were better off than the other villagers who did not have the luxury of eating like them. She was now the main breadwinner of the family, as her father would spend his time in drinking arrack supplied by the landlord and working in his fields as a daily wage-labourer whenever this work was available.

She bore the landlord two children but he never claimed her children as his own. Soon the Dora became interested in a younger Jogin; his visits to her hut became irregular and stopped after some time. She was determined that her two children would have a better life, and she strove to give them an education. She then came in touch with some volunteers of *Samskar*. In *Chelli Nilayam* she met several other Jogins who had left prostitution and whose children were being taken care of by the organization. She also decided to stay back, has learned some techniques of agriculture, and is now working in the fields. Her daughter now works as a teacher in Hyderabad, but she does not keep in touch with her mother. Shobana feels that probably she does not want to acknowledge the fact that her mother is a Jogin. She feels it is good for her daughter to leave her past behind; otherwise she will never get respect in her life (Pande, 2008, 114-117).

The *Potharajus*

The *Potharajus* are the only people who can convert a girl to a Jogin. This is believed to be so because of the divine power the priest has in his tuft of hair, which is not cut since his birth. If any family desires to offer their daughter as a Jogin, they will approach the
Village elders may sometimes advise a household to offer a Jogin to the village for the betterment of the village as a whole. The Potharaju will perform the marriage of the young girl to the local deity along with the yellow thread ceremony, Mangala Suthram and adorning of a leather token having the holy footprints of Yellamma, called Yellamma Paadalu, around her neck. The entire village celebrates this moment as a festival. The transformation of an ordinary girl to a Jogin is made in three stages: at the first instance the Jogin girl’s age will be three to six years, and she will be married to the God. At the second instance, the Jogin will be offered to the Village headman, i.e., Patel, Patwari, Dora or the landlord, after attaining the age of puberty. Then onwards, at the third stage the Jogin will be treated as the village asset. The Potharaju is regarded as her Guru.

In village festivals such as the Oorapandaga, the Jogin plays an important part, along with the Bindala and the Potharaju who are non-brahmanical priests. Today, many Bindalas consider themselves Brahmin priests and operate Facebook pages (Facebook Page). This festival is celebrated during the monsoon season, which is a season of epidemics and disease and also the start of the sowing season. The villagers will pray to the village God or Goddesses (namely Mysamma, Mahalaxmamma, Pochamma, Pothanna, Yellamma, etc.) to make their villages free from epidemics and give good crops. The Bindala and Potharaju belong to the SC community and the Kolupula or Jogin belongs to SC or BC community. The Bindala will perform the priestly duties at Oorapandaga. He will be assigned villages based on the number of villages and availability of Bindalas. The Bindala will chant the mantras and oversee the proceedings. The Kolpula (Jogin) will perform the “Rangam” (telling a forecast for the village on behalf of the God or Goddess). Based on her predictions, sacrifices would be made.

Potharajus have to perform different duties like giving amulets (Thayathu), dancing around a dead body and converting young girls to Jogins. Potharajus reside in villages, where they are respected for their divine powers supposedly stored in their hair. One Potharaju will be identified by a group of prominent persons in the village, such as Patwari, Patel, landlord, and representatives from different village-level artisan communities like Potter, Goldsmith, Blacksmith, Carpenter, Fisherman, Neeradi, and Medari.

The Potharajus are poor. They will not get any payments for their role in the above festivals, except toddy. On normal days, they will go begging in their villages or survive on superstitious practices like Thanthrik poojas, banamathi (witchcraft) etc. Their livelihood depends on annual alms in the form of grain during the harvesting season. After the grain is exhausted, they are forced to beg, along with their family members. Their performance of dancing during Pochamma festivals and before dead bodies is compulsory in the village, although they get only country liquor in return. If they refuse to perform, the
villagers will force them to do so by intimidation or beating. During this festival, the villagers will offer a goat or sheep to the God, through the Potharaju. Amidst the beat of drums and noise, the Potharaju will perform the sacrifice by biting the neck of the lamb with his teeth, until it bleeds to death. The blood will be offered to God. This process is called Gavu (Kumar, 2014).

With intensive efforts taken by the district administration in 2001-2002, almost all Pothuajus have been rehabilitated. It was in 1988 that Smt. Kumudben Joshi, the then Governor of A. P., took an initiative and got many Jogins married. Nearly 250 Pothraju came and cut their hair and these Pothurajus have been rehabilitated under various schemes of the AP SC Development Corporation by the district administration. On 1st August 2002, forty-one Pothurajus removed their tufts and another 235 relinquished their trinkets, lashes and whips to join the mainstream. With these steps, almost all Pothurajus have been mainstreamed and one can say that the Pothuraju system has almost been wiped out from the district, although the same cannot be said of the Jogins.

The centuries-old jogini system is still prevalent in the State capital today. This startling revelation came from Ashraya, an NGO working in Hyderabad, at an interactive meeting organised by the government-appointed commission to study the problems faced by Jogins. These women had migrated from other districts and were staying in slums. In 1987-88, the district administration had identified 740 Jogins and spent over Rs. 25 lakh for their rehabilitation under the SC action plan. Each family got over Rs. 20,000 financial assistance, including Rs. 10,000 as government subsidy. The scheme continued until 2006-07 and since then there has been no aid extended to these families. (The Hindu, 2012).

Conclusions

The institution of the Jogin system, rooted in the religious and cultural domain has a strong connection with the past traditions of village structures, which serve the interests of the elite upper-caste and upper-class men. Regional histories and traditions continue acting as dead weights on society, although the Naxalites and other groups contest these in Telangana. An understanding of the past, particularly of the evolution and transformation of village communities, is vital to the understanding of the Jogin system. To sum up, the Jogin system is both the product as well as the producer of the socio-economic exploitative system that continues in Telengana, particularly the rural areas. This system is built and sustained by the worst form of dominance over women, which goes unrecognized as women’s worst exploitation. Even worse is the fact that the cost of maintaining this historic institutionalized abuse of women is borne by women themselves.
In the economic context, the decline of the traditional Zamindari houses and concurrent impoverishment has led to two sets of developments, i.e., a newer and wider base of patrons who emulate the culture of their masters by maintaining women as keeps to bolster their prestige and satiate lust. Secondly, impoverishment has forced a large number of women to become Jogins. The Jogins are more numerous and have a larger clientele, a reflection of the emergent dominant groups and expression of politico-economic power in the cultural domain. The rise of intermediate and non-zamindari castes as prime social actors has also contributed to the perpetuation of this institution in Telangana in its most debased form.

The present Jogins are considerably different from the Devadasis of yesterday and are more a public property with few choices. Thus, the Jgin is ultimately converted to a lowly prostitute, selling her body for survival. The only redeeming feature is the nomenclature of the Jgin, which links her to a historical and religious past and portrays her mildly in the popular discourse for reasons of legitimacy, which patrons draw from this relationship. In actuality, this distinction is only a linguistic one as the ground reality is harsh where the Jgin is simply a prostitute selling her body for money.

It is sad to notice that studies of rural indebtedness in India that point to the vicious circle of agrarian poverty, drought, exploitative interest rates and the subjection of the peasantry, have not included the presence of the Jgin system in their studies. Agrarian poverty and the subsequent subjection of the peasantry is a phenomenon that is pan-Indian, one which has drawn a great deal of attention and hence has been theorised adequately. However, most of these studies, taking a cue from the field, i.e. grassroots movements like anti-arrack and loan waiver movements, have not adequately focused on the pitiful status of the Jogins, who surely need the attention of academics and grassroots workers.
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