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# Female Erotic Men and Male Ascetic Women: Goddess Yellamma and Her Agents / Victims

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**Abstract:** This article is a study of the cult of the Goddess Yellamma and women/men/eunuchs called devadasis who derive a sense of agency through their worship of the mother Goddess. I have conducted a participant observation of the devadasis in and around Kolhapur; this work is an indepth study of their lives and their struggles. The word devadasi, as defined by the Encarta dictionary means a Hindu temple dancer, a member of a hereditary class of women dancers in a Hindu temple. In Kolhapur today, it is a very well known fact that a majority of these devadasis are Dalit women. Sheer poverty and destitution force them to accept this lifestyle, which inevitably culminates in the oldest profession of the world – prostitution. Society and culture has worked hand in hand to ensure that these devadasis are degraded to a dreaded existence and gradually they succumb to the dictates of religion and patriarchy. Rather for a devadasi, existence as a woman is secondary to her existence as a devadasi. She is first a devadasi, only then is she a woman. This is the manner in which, her denigration is complete. My interviews at Saundatti and Kolhapur (with its temple complexes) have revealed interesting conclusions about the system of dedication. The devadasi system is one that is still persisting, despite all kinds of prohibitions on the practice. It is an evil nexus of priests, administration and the local people. In spite of all this exploitation in various aspects of their lives, they are not losing hope. Devadasis are agents of the Goddess -this gives them a social prestige. The agency of women in “religious prostitution” can be articulated - the fact that the Goddess to whom they are dedicated blesses them and communicates her wishes through them has endowed them with a huge sense of authority in their everyday lives. Human agency being that inherent capacity in each person to think, make choices and act, within and based on the socio-economic, political and cultural forces around them, in order to improve themselves and their families and communities; the devadasis are showing a great deal of agency in making visible efforts to improve their lives. In Kolhapur today, they are realising that their children shouldn't be subjected to this degradation anymore and while possible, trying to make choices, acting within and trying to mould the socio-economic, political and cultural forces around them.

**Keywords:** Religious Prostitution, Devadasis, Goddess Yellamma, Agency, Kolhapur, Exploitation

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## 1. Introduction

Anagha Tambe [1] asks, “*How can the agency of women in prostitution be articulated when the “lower caste” women enter prostitution not merely because of physical coercion or economic necessity, but because of the social injunction linked with dedication that deny them the options of marriage or stable sexual relation and even non-sexual work, and brand them as “sexually available”?*” Tambe is referring to the devadasi system (a form of caste-based exploitation) as being the third dimension of prostitution. In the sex war, it is yet another voice that is articulated, she opines. This is more

so as the devadasis in Maharashtra are seen as a major source of recruitment to prostitution, [2] both in urban brothels and in rural areas as ‘religious prostitutes’.

In this context, I will specifically refer to the cult of the Goddess Yellamma and show how these devadasis (downtrodden women) derive a sense of agency through their worship of the mother goddess as female erotic men and male ascetic women.

The word devadasi, as defined by the Encarta dictionary means a Hindu temple dancer, a member of a hereditary class of women dancers in a Hindu temple. Etymologically speaking, the word means slaves of the Gods i.e. dasis of the

devas, or *devadasis*. From time immemorial, the *devadasi* served the Gods (deva) and men who assumed Godly status. The *devadasi* shifted through the vicissitudes of temple, court and social life. She could not falter in either of these arenas, her training had to be perfect to acclimatize herself in all the spheres of her existence. [3]

In the Maharashtrian language, there are several words that are used to denote temple women and they are *bhaveen*, *devlee*, *naaikeen*, *bhakteen*, *jogteen*, *muralee*, *aaradheen*, *sulee*, *basavee* and *janee*. Some of these words owe their origin to languages as varied as Kannada, Hindi and Goanese. [4] There are many ways in which a person can be made to serve the deities,

a) *Devadasi* – Defined as a female dancer or a courtesan, these are women servants of God, who are married to the God itself.

b) *Vaghya*- In Maharashtra, *Vaghyas* are also called *Kalabhairavs* and after they are dedicated, they are considered to be the dogs of the God *Khandoba*<sup>1</sup>. In fact, they act as dogs during *jataras* (village fairs) and also perform a circular dance to the beats of drums. In the middle of the dance, coins are thrown by the devotees on a black woollen blanket and the *vaghyas* pick them up with their mouths, which also serves as a form of entertainment for the devotees. This money is later on used by the *vaghyas* for their sustenance. Of the Dalit castes, a *vaghya* is generally a member of the Dhangar (a Dalit) caste and is equipped with a spear and a begging bowl, whenever he goes out to beg. Over his shoulders are a blanket and a chain and he carries a pinch of turmeric powder.

c) *Murlee/Muralee* – *Bhaktees* and *Muralees* are girls who are devoted to the Gods *Khandoba* and *Bhairoba*, an incarnation of the God Siva. Let me cite Anupama Rao's [5] definition of a *muralee* to elaborate this further. *Muralees* were young girls from the *Mahar*, *Mang*, *Kunbi*, and other nomadic communities who were married off to the God *Khandoba* at his temple in Jejuri in fulfilment of a vow. *Muralees* wore a *mangalsutra* of seven cowrie shells, and although human marriages were denied them, as nominal wives of the God they were obliged to provide sexual services to men. In Maharashtra, people from castes such as *Mahars*, *Mangs* and *Kunbis* usually dedicate their daughters as *Muralees*. Theirs too is a life of shame, and they support their old parents with their earnings out of prostitution. Most of the time, a *muralee* is married to a dagger that is supposed to belong to God *Khandoba*. On the occasion of *Jagaran* or night-long vigil, a *Muralee* is expected to stay awake the entire night and sing obscene songs about *Khandoba*.

D) *Jogteen/ Jogin* – *Jogtees* are the devotees of the Goddess *Yogeshwari*

(*Yellamma /Renukaa* [6]) who are similar to the *devadasis*

as far as the tasks they perform are concerned. V. Lalitha comments on a particularly deplorable aspect of the *jogins* which relates to the 'funeral dance'. She says that a detestable feature of the *jogin* system is that *jogins* are expected to dance before the corpses of the feudal lords and collect the small change people throw on the corpses. When one *jogin* is initiated, all the *jogins* worship *Yellamma* in the shape of a stone decorated with flowers, turmeric powder and kumkum. An interesting aspect of the *jogin* system is that this sort of flesh trade does not have any place for middlemen. A *jogin* lives with her parents and she will be visited by men for sexual favours. Instead of being a matter of shame, rather for these people it is a matter of pride as social ostracism does not accompany the *jogin* or her family.

E) *Potraj/ Potharaju* – The *potraj* is the priest who officiates on behalf of the Goddess and acts as a proxy husband thereby tying a *mangalsutra* around the neck of the girl who has been dedicated. Usually he grows his hair long, carries a whip in his hand, and wears a bangle called *kada* around his wrist. Usually belonging to the Maang (dalit) caste, they are supposed to absorb the evil spirits that might affect others. In some cases, the *potraj* has to be naked and is supposed to wear neem leaves to cover his body.

## 2. Renuka Yellamma

K. C. Tarachand [7] writes that the shrine of Sri *Renuka Yellamma* Purnya Kshetra at Saundatti in Karnataka is in much news recently for its association with the initiation of girls to 'devadasihood' and thus contributing to commercial prostitution in places like Pune, Belgaum, Hubli, Kolhapur and Bombay. The Goddess *Yellamma* is a very powerful name in the world of the *devadasi*; so deep is the connection between the two that as an expression, 'Yellamma character' suggests a woman of loose character. Though she is worshipped by the *devadasis* on all days, Tuesdays and Fridays are considered to be auspicious days for the worship of the Goddess.

Myths abound regarding the legend of *Renuka/Yellamma*. Some of these myths belong to the Little Tradition (Non-Sanskritic) and some of them are a part of the Great Tradition (Sanskritic).

According to the Little Tradition, there was a deity by the name of *Yellamma* *Yellamma* meant 'mother-of-all' or *Yallara-amma*. She was believed to be the sister of the headman of Ugragola – a small village on the other side of the hill which houses the main shrine. As she was suffering from leprosy, she was kept in isolation; however, she came to the border of the village daily to collect her food from her brothers. One day, on the hillock, she met two Sakta saints-Ekayya and Jogayya. On hearing her plight, they treated and cured her of her disease and employed her. A part of her daily routine became visiting the villages around the hillock and collecting food and alms for the holy men. Through her, stories of the ritual power of the holy men spread far and wide; people started visiting them with their mundane problems. They also brought offerings of food, materials and

<sup>1</sup> Khandoba may be traced to a prototype of a God found all over the Deccan and has protective functions like Rudra and Bhairava. Khandoba is called the Lord of the Mountains and the headquarters of Khandoba worship in Maharashtra is at Jejuri in Pune district. In Kolhapur, he is called Mallayya, 'Lord of the Mountain'. Khandoba is also identified with a tree. Leaves of the bilva or bel tree are sacred to Khandoba.

goods for the men. As the men aged, they taught the secret of their power to *Yellamma* – later, she acquired authority and respect from the innumerable devotees of these men. By the time of her death, she was widely worshipped and the belief was widespread that any vows taken in her name can solve the problems of mortals, including diseases of all kinds.

As far as the Great Tradition is concerned, myths abound there too. The *Brahma Purana* says that she is the daughter of *Renuka*, King of *Ikshaku* clan; the *Harivamsha* states that she was born in a lotus flower and taken by the childless King *Renuka* and got his name. However, the *VayuPurana* states that *Renuka* was the daughter of sage *Savana* and she was known by the name *Kamali*.

According to the Mahabharata, another well-trusted source, *Renuka* married sage *Jamadagni*, who belonged to the *Bruga vamsha* clan. At a very young age, of eight, at the advise of *Agastya* saint, *Renuka* was married to *Jamdagni* (the son of *Ruchik Muni* and *Satyavath*). Together, *Renuka* and *Jamdagni* co-operated in performing various rituals and *poojas* (worship). Every morning *Renuka* would go to the *Malaprabha* river to have a bath. There with complete devotion, she would fill the pot that she used to prepare out of the sand on the bank of the river. One day, when *Renuka* went to the river to have a bath, she came across a *Gandharva* angel called *Chitarta* playing in the river, with his wives. For a moment, she lost her concentration, and imagined herself playing in the river with her husband. When she regained her consciousness, she realised that she couldn't make the pot any more. Disappointed she returned to *Jamadagni*, empty-handed, at which her husband immediately realised what had happened. Seeing her thus, he cursed her and ordered her sons to kill her. When the first four of them refused, the sage cursed them to become eunuchs. Finally, he had her beheaded by her fifth son, *Parashuram*. On beheading, her head multiplied by tens and hundreds and moved to different regions. This miracle brought her innumerable followers, including her eunuch sons. As *Parashuram* had followed his father's command, he got a boon from his father. He wanted his mother's life back. However, as he was cutting off his mother's head, he also chopped off the head of a lower caste, *matangi* woman. As his mother was being restored to life, he interchanged the heads. In other words, he put his mother's head on the body of the *matangi* woman, and he put the *matangi* woman's head on his mother's body. Ultimately, both of them came to be worshipped – the Brahmin headed woman came to be worshipped as *Renuka* or *Mariamma* and the low-caste headed woman came to be worshipped as *Yellamma*.

*Yellamma* is known by different names such as *Ellavva*, *Renuka*, *Saktimata*, *Jagadamba*, *Elukolladavva*, *Ekavira*, *Hemlamma*. Lalitha says that the main deity is known in Andhra Pradesh as *Elu kollada Yellamma*, the deity of seven valleys, as the shrine is situated at the meeting point of seven valleys. The mode of worship in a *Yellamma* temple is a Dravidian ethnic tradition, not Sanskritic. This is very interesting because *Yellamma* is a Dalit Goddess and her worship is very much representative of local culture. The

priests in her temple too are non-Brahmins. Just as girls from backward class communities were bought and dedicated to the temples which followed the Brahminical order, likewise women of *mala* and *madiga* (Dalit castes) communities began to dedicate their daughters to *Yellamma* temples. Moreover, in small *Yellamma* temples, the daily priestly functions are carried out by the ritual mendicants such as *Jogappa* and *Jogamma*. However, '*Yellamma Devadasi*'s' (by this, I am referring to *devadasis* dedicated to the Goddess *Yellamma*) are undergoing a traumatic change in that the practice is degrading into commercial prostitution, with an ever-increasing number of prostitutes finding themselves in the brothels of Mumbai and Pune. In fact, to top it all, dedication to the Goddess *Yellamma* is becoming a sort of licence for the practice of prostitution and is very much sanctioned by the society.

*Yellamma* is also known as '*Lajja Gauri*', mentions, V. Lalitha. Again at some places she is also referred to as *Renuka*. Now the Goddess *Lajja Gauri*, though known to a few, elicits immense curiosity; there is a strange connection between her and a 'fallen' *Devadasi*. *Lajja Gauri* descends from a group of ancient and popular symbols like lotus and *purna kumbha* or a brimming pot. In her images, she is described as a mother goddess; a nude squatting goddess; a displayed female. A pot was worshipped from the ancient times as a symbol of "Yoni" or womb and this was later recognized as a form of the Goddess, and this is also a symbol of *Renuka/Yellamma /Lajja Gauri*. The *devadasis* in Saundatti, Belgaum are of the opinion that the Goddess they worship is akin to them in many ways, her fate too is cruel like theirs. This was mentioned by one of the prostitutes, Rani Bai in an interview with William Dalrymple [8] at Belgaum, Saundatti. In fact, the worship of the cult of *Yellamma* or *Renuka* or even *Lajja Gauri*, gives some sort of psychological satisfaction to her followers.

I am referring to another of her myths that abound in the Little Tradition to understand the relation between *Renuka Yellamma* and the *devadasi* woman. After *Renuka*'s life was restored due to the fulfilment of a boon of her son, *Parashuram*, she started living with her husband, *Jamadagni*, along with her children and the divine cow, *kamadhenu*. *Renuka* was known as *Matangi*, the low-caste woman as her head had interchanged with that of *Matangi* when *Parashuram* was putting it back. *Matangi*, is the form of *Renuka* that is worshipped by the *devadasis*.<sup>2</sup> Both the days,

2 It was during this time that the King of Mahispati, Karthaverarjun visited the sage with his men. The sage entertained the king and all the meals were arranged due to the enormous help from the divine cow, *Kamadhenu*. The King was amazed at the capacity of the cow and wanted it for himself. When his request was turned down, he killed *Jamadagni* by stabbing him eighteen times and took the cow away with him. Thus, *Matangi* became a widow... it was a full moon day known as *Banada / Rande Hunnime* in the Hindu month of *Kartika* (October-November). At this time, *Jamadagni*'s son *Parashuram* was away meditating. When he came to know of his father's death and of the fact that his father had been killed by a king, he vowed to wipe out the entire race of *Kshatriyas*, the ruling caste from the earth. It is henceforth believed that he went round the earth eighteen times to kill all the kings and brought all their women and children to serve his mother. It took almost three months for *Jamadagni*'s own father (who

i.e first of *Renuka* becoming a widow and secondly of her attaining the status of *Muthaidethana* (having a husband who is alive) are commemorated by her devotees on full-moon days. The *devadasis* celebrate both these festivals in a grand manner.

### 3. Saundatti, Belgaum

Saundatti, in Belgaum district neighbouring Kolhapur has acquired the dubious distinction of having the very famous *Renuka Yellamma* and *Parashuram* Temples at *Yellamma Gudda* (*Gudda* means Hill in Kannada). At a distance of five kilometres from the city, there is a big mountain on which the temple is situated. The mountain was earlier known as *Siddhachal Parvat*. The temple is built in the *Chalukyan* and *Rashtrakuta* style and its carvings show glimpses of Jain architecture.

The entire area of the temple was under the local chiefs called Saktas, around the third century A. D – they were worshippers of the Mother Goddess – *Yellamma*. Initially, the Goddess was worshipped by virgin priestesses. During the second half of the twelfth century, the region came under the Vijaynagara rulers of Hampi. The Hampi rulers, being Vaishnavas, attempted to convert the shrine into a Vaishnavite one. They appointed Brahmin priests who removed the Sakta tradition and installed the idols and tradition of *Renuka*, *Jamadagni*, *Dattatreya*, *Parashurama* and other Aryan deities. The Marathas of Satara conquered the territory from the Muslim rulers, who took over from the Hampi rulers and brought about significant changes. They successfully installed the idols of *Parasurama*, *Dattatreya*, *Laxmi Devi* and also formally changed the name of the deity from *Yellamma* to *Sri Renuka*. When the British came over, the Saundatti area was with the Desai of Sirsangi, under whom the present fort at Saundatti town was built. The Desai was a Virasaiva Lingayat, and it was during his time that the ancestors of the present day priests of the shrine (who are also called Lingayats) were appointed as *Sthanika* and given the right to manage the shrine. Gradually, the Brahmin priests departed and made way for the Lingayat priests and the *Sthanika*. Even today, the descendants of those *Sthanika* continue to hold priestly status and temple management rights and claim the benefits from the shrine.

Today, the entire temple complex houses many deities belonging to the Great and Little Traditions – in all around sixty-one Gods and Goddesses are said to have temples on the hillock. Of them, twenty-four are female, and thirty-seven male; ten belong to the Little Tradition and fifty-one to the Great. Interestingly, the temples of *Jamadagni* and *Matangi* too, are outside the *Yellamma* temple enclosure, on the other bank of the rivulet. The adjoining area has three springs which have been made into holy bathing ponds or *Hondagalu*. They are *Kumkumada Honda* (pond of vermilion powder),

*Enni Honda* (pond of oil) and *Arishinada Honda* (pond of turmeric powder). When *Yellamma* is given a ritual bath, water is used from all three tanks. The names of these tanks coincide with the three essential ingredients necessary for her bath – oil, turmeric and kumkum. Devotees too apply these as ritual holy material on their foreheads to identify themselves. However, of the three, *Enni Honda* is taken to be the holiest, as it is also a perennial one. Near the temple, is the temple of *Renuka Yellamma's* son *Parashuram*. Next to it is the shrine of a *Veerasaiva* saint, *Ravana Siddheswara*. In the neighbourhood, there are some more temples, those of *Jamadagni*, *Renuka's* husband and that of *Kalabhairava*. The mode of worship in the *Renuka* temple does not follow Sanskritic rituals; though today, efforts are going on to introduce these. However, no special worship or service – *Archana* or *Seva* is offered to the Goddess. The priests are allowed into the inner chamber of the temple, and the devotees, irrespective of their caste are required to make their offerings from the door-steps of this inner hall. The Goddess is worshipped twice a day – once in the morning and again in the evening.

Devotees from Maharashtra, Goa and Andhra Pradesh come here especially during the time of *jataras* which are held twice in a year. The administration of the *Yellamma* temple is now covered by the provisions of *Sri Renuka Yellamma Temple Administration Act of 1974*, which came into force on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, 1975. Saundatti today, when I visited the shrine in the year 2010 is a hub of devotees, who come to worship the Goddess in tens and thousands. What is interesting is that each and every work in the *Parashuram* temple near the holy tank, is done by the *devadasis*. They look after the devotees requirements of *puja* ingredients, they tie the holy neem leaves, take them for their ritual bath and then accompany them throughout all the other tasks. Had it not been for these *devadasis* (both eunuchs and women), a large part of the temple activities would have remained incomplete.

As per the ritual calendar of the temple authorities, the ritual year starts from the full-moon day in the month of October-November (*Banada Hummine*); following which every full-moon day is a festival day. However, the full-moon days in the months of October-November and January-February are especially important as they mark the change in the marital status of the deity. All *devadasis* are under an obligation to visit the shrine during this period to observe a few rituals and offer their vows since it marks the active state of the deity. On *Banada Hummine*, in the month of October-November, it is believed that *Jamadagni* dies – to mark his death, all his wives (initiated *devadasis*, sexually active *devadasis* and retired *devadasis*) converge at the shrine and observe the custom of removing their sacred necklace and bangles to symbolise their widowhood. Three months after this, all the *devadasis* reassemble at the shrine on the full-moon day of *Muthaide Hunnime* to celebrate the resurrection of *Jamadagni*. This day is a very auspicious one as *Jamadagni's* wives regain their marital status. New girls or *devadasis* are a part of the offerings to the deity on this day.

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was away meditating in the hills) to receive the news of his son's death. He came all the way to revive his son; *Jamadagni* was resurrected on another full-moon day, *Muthaide* or *Bharat Hunnime*, in the Hindu month of *Phalgun* (February-March).

Particularly famous is the *Yellamma Devi Fair (Yellamma Jatra)* that is held at the temple. Even though the fair is held on many occasions between October and February, the biggest celebration takes place on the full moon day of Margasira. On this day, the famous *Neeramanavi Yellamma Jatra* is also taken out. It is at this time that the goddess *Yellamma* is worshipped in the manner of *shakti puja*, together with its attendant rituals. During this fair, women are dedicated as *devadasis* or servants/slaves of god. More than thirty thousand devotees mostly from Karnataka: Raichur, Bellary, Bagalkot, Bijapur, Gulbarga, Bidar, Belgaum and various districts of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Goa participate in this festival. The devotees carry pots, *neem* leaves and cocks; this is also an occasion when womenfolk go into a trance and begin to dance. Not only that, during the annual festival, there was a time when naked women with matted hair used to go around the *Renuka devi* temple.

Though there is absolute silence on the issue of dedication today, yet indications are there that it goes on, if not overtly, very covertly. Even as far back as 2004, in Saundatti, two thousand girls were about to be dedicated to the Goddess *Yellamma*, but the event was nearly ruined due to the timely intervention of the Government. Nevertheless, the temple authorities were not deterred by this; they very quickly and quietly shifted the dedication ceremony to smaller *Yellamma* temples nearby. An interview with a priest at Saundatti<sup>3</sup> revealed great disparities between what I already knew and what he told me. Conflicting accounts of the prevalence of the *devadasi* system prevails in present-day Saundatti.

#### 4. Agents/Victims

Saundatti today is nothing less than a commercial hub. On my last visit there I saw women, pregnant women, eunuchs and even children carrying baskets on their heads with pictures of the goddess on their heads- asking for *Jogwaa* (alms in the name of the goddess). It is a custom among the mendicant ritual functionaries of *Yellamma* who are eunuchs to wear the attire of their opposite sex such as women mendicants wearing the dress of the males and vice versa. Apart from assisting the pilgrims in worshipping the Goddess, they have many other functions such as singing, dancing and playing on a variety of musical instruments. They divide the area amongst themselves and spread the glory of the deity in their allotted area, thereby earning a living through that too. Sometimes, men too dedicate themselves to the deity; they may be sexually afunctional or functional; married or unmarried. All of them grow long hair and wear religious marks on the body when they go out to propagate the glory of the deity. Some of the men may wear sarees, shave off their moustaches and beards, grow long hair, wear ornaments and jewellery used by women (including the *mangal sutra*) that symbolises their marital status. Women who become religious mendicants carry several ritual objects with them such as a tuft of bear hair (*chowri*) that they use for fanning

the deity, metal pot and the image of the face of the deity at the top and an empty basket.

My conversation with a *devadasi* eunuch at the *Parashuram* temple below revealed certain interesting facts - begging has become a means of livelihood for these *devadasis*; they are very well conversant in English (owing to the huge influx of foreign and Indian tourists who throng the temples); and the problem of HIV/AIDS too has reached alarming proportions among the *devadasi* community, especially among the eunuchs. During the *Sankranti* festival, they have to collect alms from at least five houses each. Moreover, he/she continued, when the *devadasis* become old, and they can no longer work as farm labourers or sex workers, begging is the only alternative left to them.

a) The Erotic Man:-

I will never forget the sweet smile that used to light up Sureka's alias Suresh's face whenever she spoke to me. Her hair was piled up behind her head in a sort of top knot; she had a *reddish – orangish bindi* made out of *sindoor* on her forehead and her attire was manlike.... a plain shirt and trousers. When I met her, she was sitting with a young girl on the corner of an alley, packing some white – coloured ash in pieces of paper. On inquiring about it, she told me that it was ash or *angaara*... to be used in the *pujas*. Her name was Suresh Aarvekar and she lived in a house at Mangarvaar Peth, Belbaag, near Mangal Karyaalay, Kolhapur, Maharashtra.

Nearby, another *hijara* (eunuch) was washing clothes, eyeing us with suspicious eyes, her eyes kept darting here and there. When I wanted to talk to her, she refused. Parvati alias Paro was draped in the traditional Maharashtrian woman's attire – the nine yard saree and was wearing her hair in a bun, and her face was devoid of make up except a big maroon coloured plastic *bindi*. Suresh called for Parvati to come to talk to us, but she refused blatantly. Suresh went on convincing Paro that we had come to write a report on their lives, we had no intention of taking photographs or flashing them on some news channel, we were not journalists, but it was of no use.

Paro and Sureka were *jogappas of the God Khandoba*. *Jogappas* are generally men (*devadasi* eunuchs) who wear a sari and blouse and grow their hair long. Among other pieces of jewellery, the must-haves are an anklet and a necklace of cowries. They will always apply *bhandara* on their forehead and dance and sing in praise of *Yellamma*. When young, these transvestites (they usually cross-dress) are busy in earning a livelihood. They are called as *Yellamma* and *Yellappa*. But when they grow old, they undergo religious mendicant status and are addressed as *Jogappa* and *Jogavva*. The vermilion mark on their foreheads is very important for them – the men like Sureka shave their faces clean every day, wear feminine attire and go out in group carrying pots on their heads. On the top of the pots (they may be of copper or brass) they put the face image of the deity along with some neem leaves. They also carry a variety of musical instruments along with them – a *Chaundaka/ Chowdiki* and an *Ikanada* – they sing and dance in a particular way in honour of the *Yellamma* deity. As per the legend, these eunuchs are the cursed sons of

<sup>3</sup> Interview conducted on 11<sup>th</sup> June, 2010.

Jamadagni, who had refused to obey their father and kill their mother. They being cursed have no ritual roles either towards the deity or the devotees who throng the *Yellamma* temples. Their binding/duty is that they go into the society singing and dancing, and, spreading the glory of their mother, i.e. *Renuka*. However, being the children of *Renuka* and Jamadagni, they are considered to be a part of the divine family - so they do not need anybody's permission or assistance to visit the shrine or holy temples. They also do not have to take any vows or offer material goods to the deity - instead they collect alms and use it to beautify themselves and eke out subsistence. As far as the devotees are concerned, they offer alms generously in the hope of pleasing their mother, i.e. the Goddess *Yellamma*. It is also this group of mendicants who have the sole right to stop devotees and ask for alms as they go on their way to the *Renuka* temple at Saundatti. Today, with the ban on dedication, the religious mendicants of the shrine, such as the eunuchs are delegated with powers by the local administration and the priests to perform the rite. They conduct the rite from outside the shrine and after reporting the matter, deposit the money collected from the candidates.

The *hijara* world is remarkably structured and hierarchical. There are seven *hijara* gharanas in India - like the families we know of from mafia movies, though far less powerful, far less ruthless and far more vulnerable. At the head of each *gharana* is a *naik* or *guru*; and these are scattered across India. This family structure is what gives a *hijara's* life meaning; and constitutes its greatest appeal. One of their biggest hurdle is getting hold of a ration card; if you can get hold of one, a treasure. And without a ration card, or an income tax card, or a voter identity card, or a bank account, you don't exist, and the state can ignore you. This is what Sureka told me; they fear not only policemen, but hospitals too. Then there is the problem of the *naqli hijaras*, who dressed as women in the daytime, rob and steal, giving these eunuchs a bad name. 'Of course, we can all tell the *naqlis*... they run when they see us', he laughed.

Normally, both Paro and Sureka led very busy lives, that very day they did not have any programme to attend to, so we had got a chance to meet them. Sureka said that it was true that the *devadasis* got Rs. 500/- as pension, but it was only after they had left their "*dhandaa*" (business). But, according to Sureka, their *dhandaa* was far more profitable than the governmental pension. When I asked about the help they got from the Government or any NGO, the answer was in the negative. Eunuchs like Sureka also doubled up as homosexuals and prostitutes to augment their income by night-time. The answer to my next question also stunned me, I asked them whether there had been any HIV/AIDS related deaths in their community, to which the answer was "Oh yes, plenty of people among us have died." Here, we are reminded of the words of Rani Bai, a *devadasi* of Belgaum, Karnataka, interviewed by William Dalrymple [9]. When asked about the disease of AIDS and their feelings about it she remarked desolately, "... *there is always fear. We know that even if you persuade all your clients to wear a condom, one broken one can infect us. And once we are infected there*

*is no cure. We will die - if not today, then tomorrow*".

Inspite of all the misery in their lives, devotees of *Yellamma* like Sureka feel empowered by the Goddess. Eunuchs, criminals and sex workers too become *Jogappas*. Once they become so, they will be empowered to beg in the name of the Goddess and accordingly, their social status too, will overcome a change, as they will be looked up with respect as representatives of the Goddess. Every year, in the month of December, the *devadasis* go to the temple of *Renuka Yellamma* in Saundatti, Belgaum district of Karnataka. Sureka and Paro too, accompany the innumerable throngs of *devadasis* in this yearly ritual. At *jatara* (annual fair) time, these eunuchs are also treated as deities and they can even spit toddy on anyone's face including that of Brahmins and this is regarded as an auspicious sign. When I asked Sureka the reason behind his dedication, he merely shrugged his shoulders and casually said that if it had not been for the Goddess, who would have taken care of people like him.

#### b) The Ascetic Woman:

Nanda Shanta Bai is another *devadasi* whom I met at the famed temple of *Renuka Yellamma*, at Saundatti, Belgaum. While we were looking around and hoping to converse with some of these *devadasis*, we stumbled across Nanda Shanta Bai and her daughter, sitting in their makeshift shack.<sup>4</sup> Nanda Shanta Bai, originally from Kolhapur, was a middle aged lady, with a big oval face and a figure that matched the face. Dressed in a plain saree, she wore the traditional red and white *mangal sutra*. In fact, the sacred prostitute is identified on the basis of the necklace or *mangal sutra* that adorns her neck. Nanda was a *Jogati Muttu* i.e. a religious mendicant. On her begging rounds, she would be equipped with a *parade*, a bamboo basket in which the idol of *Renuka* and *Parashuram* is taken together with a bowl of vermilion powder.

Strangely enough, she was one among the few persons at the temple premises who was bold enough to speak the truth - the truth that there are *devadasis* and even today, they are dedicated in large numbers. She remembered that almost twenty years back, around the year 1990, as many two thousand girls were dedicated to *Yellamma* at the very place where we were standing. This took place on a full moon day in the Hindi month of *Magh*. She confessed that the *devadasi* tradition was something that was traditional ("*paramparagar*")... also that she had dedicated her one and only daughter to the profession of a *devadasi*. Normally, the age at which a child is dedicated is between six and nine, before reaching puberty. Afterwards an auspicious day is selected and the head priest usually officiates during the ceremony.

But when I asked her about the issue of sexual or bodily exploitation, surprisingly enough, she denied the entire fact - anything like it had never ever existed. However, as I spent more time at Saundatti, one thing became clear... the sexual exploitation of the *devadasis* has a purpose. Once we dare to look into this abyss of violence, do we realize that men in

<sup>4</sup> Interview held on 11/06/2011

power and status engineer this silence and make certain that this silence reigns forever.

Attending the yearly *jataras*, confessed Nanda was a mandatory aspect of their lives. Most of these annual festivals are held in the month of *Magh* and in Shimoga district of neighbouring Karnataka, at the Chandragutti temple<sup>5</sup>, even today (though no one will own it publicly) *devadasis* (called *basvis*) go to the temple naked. On the death of a *devadasi*, among them the custom of honouring the corpse was widely prevalent. The corpse would be adorned as if it were a bride, a garland from the deity would be used to decorate it and only then would the body be taken for cremation. Whenever a male member of their families died, it would be the duty of the eldest *devadasi* to act as a man and carry out all the rituals. When I enquired about the fate of her daughter, she said the custom being *paramparagat*, her daughter would carry on in her footsteps.

When I wanted to know the story behind wearing the neem leaves, Nanda divulged into *Renuka's* life story. It so happened that once, the goddess was afflicted with leprosy. She was advised by two wise saints, *Ekayya* and *Jogayya* to take a bath at the *Jogulabavi* well at the foot of the hill. Accordingly, she did and got cured. People who suffer from skin diseases do likewise; not only do they take a bath at the well, they also wear neem leaves as a sort of antiseptic dress and then only do they go up the hill to have a *darshan* (glimpse) of their Goddess.

Both Sureka Aarvekar and Nanda Shanta Bai belonged to the lowest of the low strata of society. They are by profession beggars – begging in the name of the goddess is a part and parcel of their lives. It is customary for the devotees of *Yellamma* like Sureka to go to at least five houses and beg on auspicious days; usually on Tuesdays and Saturdays. As Anagha Tambe [10] mentions, like other entertainer and beggar castes who are either nomadic or settled in a village as per its requirement, *jogtins* and *jogtas* are condemned as parasites who live by begging. Normally, beggars are looked down upon by the society at large; it is only because they are blessed by the goddess do they acquire such a social standing. *Yellamma* and her various forms are part of the Little Tradition and their devotees are largely rural and unlettered folk whose social standing owes a lot to their magical powers. The most crucial aspect of *Renuka* worship is that there is no intermediary between the village deity and her devotees – Sureka and Nanda Shanta Bai. This very aspect is a great sense of empowering these low caste people, whose societal status suffer an upward mobility due to the intervention of these goddesses. Rather, mentioned Sureka, they speak to the Goddess as if they were speaking to a human being about their lives, and its joys and sorrows. V. Lalitha [11] confidently asserts that the Scheduled Castes are worshipping *Yellamma* only now, and that too, the Sanskritisation process is largely responsible for it. The Dalits, she claims, have had a relationship with *Yellamma* for a long

time. In fact, they do not maintain this kind of relationship with other Gods. This is exactly what, I feel, gives the dalit *devadasis* a sense of authority, a sense of agency.

Anagha Tambe [12] too feels that though a *jogtin* is stigmatised and condemned by the village as a sexual object, she is revered as a ritual specialist and as the representative of the Goddess. The texts also reveal how *jogtins* sing during ritual begging and dance when they are possessed by the deity during ritual ceremonies and ceremonial visits to the deity, and thus provide religious entertainment to the village. As ritual specialists, some *jogtins* take weekly rounds in the village for alms or *jogwaa*; they give blessings to the villagers; as the representative of the Goddess they deliver guidance and advice to the people and even officiates over rituals in the worship of the deity. Some people of the 'upper castes' consider it to be prestigious to be accompanied by a *jogtin* for the *yatra / jatara* to Saundatti, Belgaum. In fact, a *jogtin's* ritual labour depends on the amount of religious power she has to talk to the deity and in order to claim such power; she has to be 'pure'. Tambe also mentions that there are tussels among *jogtins* to claim more religious power by going into a trance on ritual occasions so as to attract public attention. Often, the *jogtins* compete over offerings, over performing rituals, or delivering messages of the deity through 'possession'.

## 5. Conclusion

*Devadasis* are facing exploitation in all aspects of their lives... However, what is of significance is that the Goddess to whom they are dedicated blesses them and communicates her wishes through them; this has endowed them with a huge sense of authority in their everyday lives. Human agency being that inherent capacity in each person to think, make choices and act, within and based on the socio-economic, political and cultural forces around them, in order to improve themselves and their families and communities; the *devadasis* are showing a great deal of agency in making visible efforts to improve their lives. In Kolhapur today, the agency of women in "religious prostitution" can be articulated – as they are realising that their children shouldn't be subjected to this degradation anymore and while possible, trying to make choices, acting within and trying to mould the socio-economic, political and cultural forces around them.

In a way, *Yellamma* worship is a huge source of empowering these illiterate, naïve and ignorant *devadasis*. In fact, *Yellamma* belongs to the Little Tradition of the rural and unlettered folk who believe that she has magical powers and these endow the *devadasi* women with unbelievable courage. The following are the many ways in which these *devadasis* exhibit power and authority in their degenerate lives:-

The *jat* in the hair – Often women who are *Devadasis* and dedicated to *Yellamma* are said to develop a knot (or a *jat*) in their hair. This is a sign that the Goddess has empowered them and they are duly blessed by her. This may change the life of a person as it did in the case of Suley, a poor girl,

5 In the month of February-March, a cart festival takes place at Chandragutti. It is a five-day festival and on the fourth day, nude worship used to take place. Even though nude worship was banned by the Karnataka Government in the year 1986, some people claim that it continues in the neighbouring villages.

depicted in an award winning Marathi film, Jogwaa.<sup>6</sup> Set in a rural area of Karnataka, Saundatti, to be precise, 'Jogwaa – The Awakening' is a Marathi film that deals with the *devadasi* system as it prevails in present-day Karnataka. The story is adapted and based on three novels by Dr. Rajan Gavas - Chaundak, Bhandar Bhog and Charuta Sagar. When a girl discovers a *jat* in her hair (as happened in the movie) everybody in her community feel that she has been blessed and empowered by the Goddess. What is more, during festivals and *jataras*, she is even treated as the Goddess. Thus this aspect of the divine empowers the *devadasi*.

Divine Possession – Kapadia mentions that possession, in the non-Brahman context, is essentially an exhibition, or display. It is a manifestation of a deity's power and grace. It is also a demonstration of the possessed person's claim to moral status in a society where moral status carries an enormous value. Further, possession, in this context, is generally a demonstration of the social prestige of a caste-group and is testimony to the ability of the group to co-operate and to organize. [13] While possession among the Brahminical (upper caste) women is relatively rare, possession among the Scheduled Castes i.e among the untouchables, is very common. This is particularly seen in the Tamil month of *Adi* (mid July- mid August) and some goddesses demand a great sacrifice, which is willingly given. For the act of possession to be satisfactorily performed, a medium 'of sorts' is required. In most cases where possession is by the Goddess *Yellamma*, the medium is a woman, preferably a married woman whose husband is alive, who wears her hair loose around her face, in emulation of the Goddess. Worshipping a Goddess is an everyday practice, and possession too, is a part of worship. Often it can be neglected and ignored as yet another 'drama', but the fact that it has enough durability to sustain itself over time makes it important for us. *Yellamma* worship empowers the *devadasi* woman by choosing a medium in her -in the entire act of Divine Possession the focus is on the individual self – but possession of an individual self is hugely connected to the collective – as it demands respect and awe from the collective. It is, reiterates Jennett Diane [14], a way in which individual men and women go into a trance, allowing the

Goddess (she refers to the Goddess Bhagawati) to continually communicate her wishes. Moreover it is a means by which the disempowered gender may be rendered significant and may be given due status, which under normal circumstances is denied to them. It may be an outlet against the everyday insecurity that possesses this 'disempowered gender'. In our understanding of Divine Possession, we realize that it is a direct means of empowering the possessed. The possessed is not a victim, as some may feel, but rather an agent. The power of belief transforms the possessed and holds her in high esteem by the rest of the members of the community. Not only is she held in great awe, but a kind of fear develops in the mind of the common man towards her. She will not be disrespected easily, now that she is a direct means of communicating with a goddess. There are occasions where the possessed woman herself is considered to be a goddess.

The Caste Question:- the *Yellamma* temples are managed by socially backward classes because the rituals and festivals celebrated by these dalit castes are a shock to the supposedly naïve upper Brahmin castes. For example, the upper caste Brahmins cannot stand the dreadful sight of animal sacrifice which is so common to these castes. Among some Dalit castes worshipping the goddess, the animal to be sacrificed is not cut with a sword, but bitten off bare teeth and the blood is tasted by these castes. Then, as if this is not enough, the intestine of the animal (a goat) is worn like a garland by the worshipper round his neck, and is definitely a macabre sight. Toddy and other intoxicants flow freely on these occasions, which are generally a part of the rituals of low castes. *Devadasis* play a very important role in the worship of the goddess, mainly eunuch *devadasis* (I witnessed eunuch *devadasis* assisting pilgrims in the *Yellamma* temple at Saundatti, Belgaum). This right to minister and assist during temple worship (so long the privileged domain of the Brahminical elite) is a huge means by which the *devadasi* exercises a sense of agency.

Rural Cultures:- is mainly a folk story, not a poet's creation. This story has evolved from the poor castes, their daily life struggles, their happiness, sorrows, desires and dreams. The responsibility of propagation and performance of the *Yellamma* epic is largely the responsibility of the untouchable castes. Rather, all the artists enacting the story of *Yellamma* belong to backward classes. They recite her story during *Yellamma* jattras and festivals. Often these stories are accompanied along with musical instruments. The very fact that these *devadasis* are reciting tales of the goddess; asking for alms in Her name fills them with a prestige hitherto unimaginable. Various ethnic groups preserved the mythologies of goddesses as a part of their oral traditions and these formed an important aspect of their everyday worship. This has also helped them to face numerous challenges in their day to day life as they worship the *Gramadevata* who protects them from all sorts of evil and hazards. *Yellamma* and her various manifestations are worshipped as *Gramadevis* (Village Goddesses) and they were mainly worshipped for family well-being. Infact as V. Lalitha [15] states, the village deities and their worship are vastly

6 Suley, aged 16-17 years is a carefree and happy village girl, whose life changes for ever when her mother happens to find a knot in her hair. This revelation has a great and terrible consequence- The matted hair being a sign of evil, Suley has to be dedicated to the Goddess *Yellamma*. Tremendous societal pressures coupled with superstition and fear turn Suley into a jogtin / devdasi and she is torn between her dreams of a "normal settled" life and that of a jogtin. She joins Raghu's troupe and meets Tayappa, who has also been made a "jogtaa". A bout of epilepsy in his childhood had made him bleed from his reproductive organs. On being taken to the local *Yellamma* temple priestess, he too, it is decided has to be dedicated to the Goddess. Tayappa is forced to abandon all male costumes and is forced to wear a saree. He too is tortured immensely by the society around him, but somehow, from the beginning he shows a determination to survive.. and survive on his own terms. Both Suley and Tayappa are reluctant to accept their fate of begging for food (i.e Jogwaa) and allowing the use of their bodies for frustrated villagers. Life for them is like living on a double-edged sword. On one hand is the fact that they are invited to every auspicious occasion to perform their cult's song and dance; on the other hand, they are treated as sex slaves and find themselves bound inside the four walls of their socially dictated enslavement.

different from the popular Hindu deities in the sense that, i) they symbolize local history ii) they are largely (with very few exceptions) female iii) after the advent of Aryans, female deities were relegated to a subordinate position iv) these *Gramadevis* or village deities were almost always worshipped with animal sacrifices v) the *pujaris* or priests who were in charge of performing these rituals were not Brahmins, but drawn from other backward castes, including Scheduled Castes. Worship of feminine goddesses by these *devadasis* (many *devadasis* relate to the goddess *Renuka Yellamma*, as recounted by William Dalrymple) enable them to reclaim their lost status; they do not feel alienated from *Yellamma* worship, rather they feel as if they belong to the goddess and are her children (which they might not feel in the worship of an upper-caste Brahminical goddess, such as Saraswati, Durga or Laxmi).

The *devadasi* system has not faded away despite the storms that have threatened to wreck its foundations – the Renuka Yellamma temple is the only major temple where this kind of an illegal activity thrives till date. The *jogtins* and *jogtaas* continue to be dedicated to *Yellamma* at Saundatti, Karnataka – they operate on the peripheries of the temple and are engaged in ritual, cultural and sexual labour for the village. Tarachand clarifies the issue to a certain extent. He says that the dedication rites of girls as *devadasis* bring a lot of income to the agent. In the past, when it was not legally banned, it was like any other vow fulfilled at the shrine and the agent collected a nominal fee to perform the rite. Today, due to the imposed ban on *devadasi* dedication, the agents have fixed an unofficial price which ranges from five hundred to five thousand rupees or even more, depending on the urgency and status of the people involved. A major fact is that today, the ritual agents do not publicly accept their involvement in the deal. A handful of them who do accept state that they have to share this income with the senior *devadasis*, or mendicants who have groomed the girls, the temple committee officials, the temple priests, the police etc. who in turn pretend ignorance about the rite. [16]

Even today, girls are dedicated to different deities. But, with all the publicity and the media exposure with the Acts that have banned this practice after the Government has taken serious steps, I feel that the entire activity has become a bit specialized, secretive and mechanized, to use, Lalitha's terms. In fact, awareness among the exploited groups also has brought about a change in the scenario.

The Dalit Movement rather than the Women's Movement has attacked and challenged the issue of prostitution as caste based exploitation. What is traumatic is that in the ultimate analysis, the cost of maintaining this institution is borne by women and that too, by women from the Dalit and most backward communities.

- [2] Anagha Tambe "Different Issues/Different Voices – Organization of women in prostitution in India" in Rohini Sahni, V. Kalyan Shankar and Hemant Apte (2008) (ed) *Prostitution and Beyond – An Analysis of Sex Work in India* New Delhi: Sage p. 73.
- [3] Lakshmi Vishwanathan (2008) *Women of Pride – The Devadasi Heritage* New Delhi: Lotus Collection, p. 1.
- [4] In order to find out the entire gamut of words that are used to refer to prostitute, please see Hemant Apte and Rohini Sahni, "What does a language have to say? Words for Prostitution in Marathi vocabulary" in Rohini Sahni, V. Kalyan Shankar and Hemant Apte op. cit, pp. 302-311.
- [5] Anupama Rao (2010) *The Caste Question – Dalits and the politics of Modern India* New Delhi: Permanent Black/Orient Blackswan, pp. 61-63.
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- [10] Anagha Tambe (2009) *Reading Devadasi Practice through Popular Marathi Literature* in Economic and Political Weekly, April 25, 2009, Vol. XLIV No. 17, p. 88
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- [14] Jenett Diane *A Million Shaktis Rising: Pongala, a Women's Festival in Kerala, India* in Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Volume 21, Number 1, Spring 2005, pp. 43.
- [15] Vakulabharanam Lalitha (2011) *Women, Religion and Tradition – The Cult of Jogins, Matangis and Basvis* Bhopla, Rawat Publications, pp. 34-35 and p. 23.
- [16] K. C. Tarachand (1991) *Devdasi Custom: Rural Social Structure and Flesh Markets* New Delhi Reliance Publishing House p. 86.

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