

Caste, Gender, and Poverty: An Intersectional Analysis of Devadasi/Jogini Identity in Telangana and Karnataka

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Abstract: *The Devadasi system, known regionally as Jogini in Telangana and northern Andhra Pradesh and retained under its older name in Karnataka, has continued in parts of South India despite more than seven decades of legislative prohibition. This article applies an intersectional analysis, arguing that caste, gender, and poverty operate together rather than as separate causes. Drawing on government survey data, Supreme Court directions, state legislation, and recent policy developments in Karnataka (2025-26) and Telangana, the article traces how the dedication of girls, overwhelmingly from Scheduled Caste communities such as Madiga, Madar, and Holeya, to temple deities intersects with caste status, sexual exploitation, and restricted economic options for the women concerned and their descendants. The article closes by examining existing rehabilitation frameworks and Karnataka's 2025 Devadasi (Prevention, Prohibition, Relief and Rehabilitation) Act as a test case for survivor-centred, intergenerational rehabilitation.*

Keywords: *Devadasi, Jogini, intersectionality, caste, Dalit women, Telangana, Karnataka, ritual sexual exploitation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Institutionalised religious prostitution in South India cuts across the usual single-axis categories used to study it. Dedications are concentrated almost entirely among Scheduled Caste sub-castes, making it a caste practice; only girls and women are dedicated, making it a gendered practice; and dedication has historically functioned as a survival strategy for destitute families, making it an economic practice. This article uses intersectionality, developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and extended to the Indian context by Dalit feminist scholars, as a frame for examining why the Devadasi/Jogini system has persisted in Telangana and Karnataka, the two states where it remains most entrenched.

The term "Devadasi" means "servant of god." In some regions and periods, Devadasis held recognised status as temple dancers, custodians of classical art forms, and property owners. The contemporary practice differs from this history. In the villages of northern Karnataka and Telangana's erstwhile Mahbubnagar region, girls, typically pre-pubescent, are ritually "married" to a deity, most commonly the goddess Yellamma/Renuka. After this, they are barred from legitimate marriage and made sexually available to men of the community, frequently from dominant castes. Regional names for the same practice include Jogini and Basavi in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, Devadasi in Karnataka, Maharis in Kerala, Muralis in Maharashtra, and Thevaridiyar in Tamil Nadu.

2. Theoretical Framework: Why Intersectionality

Scholarship and policy on the Devadasi/Jogini system have largely used single-axis explanations. Colonial-era and early nationalist reform movements framed the issue mainly as one of sexual exploitation, which left its caste dimension unaddressed. Some caste-based analyses, in turn, have treated the practice as one more instance of upper-caste domination over Dalit communities without addressing why it is specifically women within those communities who are targeted, and through a sexual-religious idiom rather than through labour exploitation alone.

Intersectionality addresses both gaps by treating caste and gender as co-constitutive rather than separable, additive categories. Poverty operates as a third axis determining which families, within already-marginalised caste groups, become vulnerable to dedication. Field studies consistently find that it is the poorest households within Scheduled Caste communities, often those facing acute illness, debt, or the absence of a male heir, that dedicate a daughter, frequently in fulfilment of a vow made during a family

crisis. Dedication is concentrated among specific SC sub-castes living in conditions of landlessness and indebtedness rather than randomly distributed across caste and class.

3. Historical Background and Legal Trajectory

Organised reform against the Devadasi system began in the early twentieth century, led substantially by Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, herself born to a Devadasi mother, whose advocacy led to the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947. This law criminalised dedication and affirmed Devadasi women's right to marry, but its jurisdiction was limited to the Madras Presidency.

Karnataka enacted its own prohibition in 1982 through the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, followed by Andhra Pradesh's Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act in March 1988, commonly called the "Jogini Act," which extended coverage to present-day Telangana. By 1988 the practice was formally illegal across India. Maharashtra's Devadasi System (Abolition) Act followed in 2005, the most recent state-specific legislation before Karnataka's 2025 overhaul.

Implementation has remained weak. In *Vishal Jeet v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court noted limited progress in enforcement and directed both central and state governments to evaluate existing measures. In February 2014, the Court separately directed the Karnataka Chief Secretary to prevent the forced dedication of women at a temple function at the Uttarang MalaDurga Temple.

Legal scholars have identified a structural weakness in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989: though nominally applicable to dedication as an atrocity, it only permits prosecution of non-SC/ST persons for the act of dedication itself. Because dedications are typically carried out by family members who are themselves SC/ST, this provision has proven largely unusable against the people who carry out the ritual, even where it is effective against the men who subsequently exploit dedicated women.

4. The Caste Dimension

The caste concentration of the Devadasi/Jogini system is documented in multiple studies. In Karnataka, an estimated 95 percent of Devadasis belong to Dalit communities, principally the Madiga, Madar, and Holeya sub-castes. A study in Telangana's Mahbubnagar district found that 83 percent of Joginis were from Scheduled Castes, with the remainder drawn from Other Backward Classes and, in a small minority of cases, general (forward) castes; some Karnataka-based studies find the practice almost entirely confined to Scheduled Caste households.

Once dedicated, a woman is excluded from claiming the protections of ordinary marriage. Her children are frequently denied paternal recognition and, as a result, the government benefits and school admissions that depend on documenting a father's name. She and her descendants continue to carry the "Devadasi" identity across generations.

Activists working on Karnataka's 2025 legislative reform have flagged the exclusion of paternal identity as a source of ongoing harm: because most administrative and educational forms require a father's name, second- and third-generation children of Devadasi women are frequently excluded from entitlements otherwise available to them.

5. The Gender Dimension

Only girls are dedicated, typically before puberty, which forecloses their own consent to what is subsequently framed, communally, as a religious "marriage" to a deity. Dominant-caste women are not subject to dedication; the practice specifically involves girls who are both female and Dalit.

Dedicated women are typically barred from legitimate marriage, so they lack a husband's economic support and, historically, inheritance protections that marriage might afford. Widowhood-equivalent stigma without its accompanying, limited, social recognitions leaves many ageing Devadasi women in Karnataka and Telangana without reliable economic support in later life, a gap that recent Karnataka rehabilitation proposals have tried to address through pension and healthcare provisions.

6. The Poverty Dimension

Field studies consistently identify economic distress as the immediate trigger for dedication. Families facing chronic illness, especially of a male family member, recurring crop failure, landlessness, or the absence of resources for a daughter's dowry have turned to dedication both as a religious vow, often to a goddess associated with healing, such as Yellamma, and as a practical calculation: a dedicated daughter, unlike a married one, remains within the natal household and can contribute earnings to it rather than requiring a dowry to leave it.

Poverty drives dedication; dedication forecloses the woman's access to stable income, land, formal employment, or a husband's economic support; and the resulting economic precarity is transmitted to her children, who, lacking recognised paternity and facing caste stigma, often have restricted access to education and government schemes. Government estimates of the affected population

vary widely: Andhra Pradesh's Social Welfare Commission reported over 24,000 Joginis in the undivided state in 2012, with figures for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana combined reported by other sources at closer to 80,000. The National Human Rights Commission has separately estimated that more than 70,000 women remain affected in Karnataka alone, though the state's own official survey counts have varied enormously, from roughly 23,800 in 2007-08, to over 80,000 by 2018 in some accounts, before a 2025-26 resurvey identified 23,395 women across fifteen districts. Activists dispute this last figure as an undercount resulting from the exclusion of women dedicated after 1982 and of deceased women's family members who continue to bear the practice's economic and social consequences.

These figures have been unreliable and volatile across multiple surveys, which researchers attribute to the difficulty of locating, counting, and serving affected women even where rehabilitation resources exist.

7. Telangana and Karnataka in Comparative Perspective

Telangana and Karnataka share the core features of the practice but differ in implementation and current policy direction. In Telangana, the Jogini system remains most documented in the former Mahbubnagar district (now split into several smaller districts), and enforcement has relied primarily on the 1988 undivided Andhra Pradesh Jogini Act, inherited by Telangana at bifurcation in 2014. A one-man commission headed by Justice Raghunath Rao, appointed under the undivided Andhra Pradesh government, found the practice present across all districts of both successor states.

Karnataka has moved toward a distinct, survivor-informed legislative response. The Karnataka Devadasi (Prevention, Prohibition, Relief and Rehabilitation) Act, 2025, passed by the state legislature in August 2025, was drafted following seven months of research by a National Law School of India University team working alongside NGOs, activists, and more than 15,000 Devadasi women. The 2025 Act provides a legal definition of "Devadasi" intended to reduce disputes over beneficiary eligibility, and extends rehabilitation measures across social, educational, and economic domains, including proposed financial incentives for inter-caste marriage of former Devadasi women and their descendants, removal of mandatory paternal-name requirements on school and college forms, expanded health coverage including Ayushman Bharat enrolment, and self-employment and skills training support.

A resurvey conducted between September and December 2025 across fifteen districts- Belagavi, Vijayapura, Bagalkot, Raichur, Koppal, Dharwad, Haveri, Gadag, Kalaburagi, Yadgir, Chitradurga, Davanagere, Shivamogga, Ballari, and Vijayanagara- was intended to generate updated beneficiary data to guide implementation of the new Act. NGOs and legislators involved in drafting the Act, including academic-activist RV Chandrashekhar of NLSIU, have publicly disputed the resurvey's findings, arguing that its methodology, largely restricted to women dedicated before the 1982 ban and conducted via mobile applications that proved inaccessible to many affected women, produced an undercount, and that it excluded younger Devadasi women in their twenties, thirties, and early forties who remain affected by the system today.

8. Rehabilitation: Achievements and Structural Limits

Existing rehabilitation infrastructure in both states, including Karnataka's Devadasi Rehabilitation Centre under the State Women's Development Corporation and comparable Telangana welfare schemes, has been described by scholars and activists as under-resourced, in part because eligibility has depended on state surveys that have repeatedly undercounted affected women.

The 2025 Karnataka Act extends rehabilitation entitlements across three generations rather than to living former Devadasis alone, and targets the paternal-name requirement that has excluded Devadasi children from mainstream welfare and educational entitlements. Whether this succeeds will depend on implementation: legislative reform from 1947 through 1988 shows that formal prohibition alone has not translated into either the end of the practice or effective rehabilitation of those already affected.

9. Conclusion

The Devadasi/Jogini system has continued in Telangana and Karnataka nearly eighty years after the first legal prohibition. Karnataka's 2025 legislative reform, developed with input from affected women and extending rehabilitation across generations, is a notable policy change, though its disputed 2025-26 implementation survey shows how administrative processes can still undercount the women a law is meant to help. The practice has been formally illegal since 1988; what remains at issue is whether rehabilitation frameworks are resourced and designed to address caste, gender, and poverty together.

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