

## **Intergenerational Trauma in the Evolving Lives of Devadasi Women**

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<sup>1</sup>**Ms. Laya Sudheer K V**

Post Graduate Student, Department of English, PSG College of Arts and Science,  
Coimbatore- 641014, Tamil Nadu, India.

<sup>2</sup>**Dr. S. Jayanthi**

Associate Professor in English, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore- 641014,  
Tamil Nadu, India.

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### **Abstract**

This research mainly focuses on the intergenerational traumas faced by the Devadasi women, who were once considered as the sacred dedicators or the servants of the gods, especially in the Southern parts of India. The Devadasi women were early temple dancers and celebrated figures. The custom which was once considered sacred turned out to be a mere social exploitation, making the next generation also suffer the same. Through an intimate and systemic lens, it explores the cultural normalization of exploitation and the silence, suppression and structural violence that create these intergenerational traumas. This is a qualitative research that dives into the culture and the core of dance in relation to the Devadasi system. Trauma theory, stigma theory and intersectional feminism are also applied for a detailed study, which are the theories of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman and Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart. The changes that happen during the transitional periods actually do not change much of the things. The traumas are always passed from generation to generation. Evolution should happen without disturbing the core and imposing the traumas on the next generation.

**Key Words:** Devadasi system, intergenerational trauma, embodied trauma, stripped identities, collective wound, stigma.

### **Introduction**

“I have lighted a lamp inside my body,  
and pushed the wick up to make it burn bright” (Apar).

The Devadasi system is an age-old tradition that existed in India, especially in the southern parts. The Devadasis were known as temple dancers or temple prostitutes, who dedicated themselves to the god. They were not supposed to get married. At times, they had to satisfy the sexual desires of the landlords, priests and men of upper class. The Devadasi

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women were celebrated figures at those times, and things got changed after colonization. They were marginalized and reduced to mere prostitutes by the British. After banning the system by the British government, they did not have any other ways of living other than choosing prostitution. The generational practices of Devadasi women and their dedication transformed into something else, which turned into slavery at present. The generational role continues with or without personal interest.

Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next, impacting both emotional and mental health. It is also called transgenerational or multigenerational trauma. It was first studied among the Holocaust survivors' children in the 1960s. Trauma is also transmitted socially and culturally through narratives of victimhood, collective memory and cultural practices. The children of the devadasis suffer a lot. The repetition happens without any clear cause. Through trauma theory, one could understand the traumatic experience undergone by individuals, communities and cultures. The children of the devadasis undergo this trauma.

### **Embodied Trauma**

"Trauma is perhaps the most avoided, ignored, belittled, denied, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering"( Peter Levine).

The trauma experienced through the body psychologically, emotionally and culturally is termed as embodied trauma. The body of a Devadasi woman becomes a site of ritual violence and commerce. The young girls are often dedicated to puberty, which leaves a deep mark behind, early from the childhood itself. They undergo a lot of physical and emotional pain, which is also reflected in their children. The daughters of the devadasi women grow up watching the mother's worse situations and are supposed to lead a life similar to that. The non-consensual encounters pave the way for the detachment from one's own body; that is, loss of bodily autonomy. The body is also stigmatized as polluted and impure.

In ancient times, devadasis danced on most of the temple occasions. It was the dance that attracted most of the people to the temples. Temples became institutions of political competence. The temples hired the best dancers for political and economic gain. Dance had the liberatory power associated with it. But later, their dance became linked to just survival.

According to the trauma theory of Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub, trauma is not always remembered, but re-experienced through the body. The trauma is not only stored just in memory but also in the body. Our own body feels no more like ours. This can be seen as a conflict between matriarchal inheritance and patriarchal oppression. The concept of Judith Butler's gender performativity also plays a role in analyzing the issue. Society always expects a certain group, category or gender to perform in a certain way. The expected gender roles are imposed on the Devadasi women by religion, caste and patriarchal system. Looking through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of Habitus', the body learns trauma through repeated

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social conditioning which forms unconscious body dispositions. The women always lack bodily autonomy. A woman's body is always linked to culture. Society does not allow the cultural loss with body autonomy.

### **Children of Devadasis**

The identities of Devadasi women had been stripped away after colonization. The collected trauma creates collective wounds. Generational trauma is passed down both genetically and culturally. A lot of girls stepped into this system even without their own knowledge. In the name of devotion and sacrifice, they later end up in the brothels of Indian streets. After independence, this became the common practice. The Devadasi women also work as sex workers, and some of them even drag their daughters into this when they become old. They are trapped in this system from which they cannot although even if they want to. Children living in the streets of India like the Red Street of Mumbai and other areas of Delhi and so on are used to the daily lives of the prostitutes. But because of being brought up in such a place, the price they have to pay is their own future. A few women are married, and they continue to do the sex work to support the family. Children grow up watching people coming and going and the struggles. They mentally suffer a lot. The future turns apart in other ways when they do not have control on their own lives. It is not their fault. Who is to be blamed? We the society or each individual who lands up in such a profession without any other choice?

In a documentary covering the lives of the people living in the G B Street of Delhi, they share about their harsh environment. They cannot go properly to the schools because of their identity. Identity plays a major role in shaping a person's living standard. They have to hide their address when they go to other schools or other places because of growing up in such a place. It's difficult for them and the others to accept the identity and the place they belong. Nobody can choose their fate. They are forced to hide their identity. All they have to tolerate is insult without any dignity, savings and escape. Even after having the child, some of the women continue to work, to feed the family. Both the girl and boy suffer the same way. Their identity limits their social roles. The trauma is both personal and political. Observing through an intimate lense, the issues of family and sexuality can be traced. And through systemic lens, the issues of caste, patriarchy and state negligence can be traced.

The children are abused in the system, sometimes by their own family. Mostly, the father and other people decide to dedicate their daughter's life for a good family life, to be free from disease and have a good relation with upper-class people. Earlier the Devadasi women had the credit of being one. They were respected and celebrated.

But now things are entirely different. They do not enjoy that position anymore as it becomes the same reason be exploited. The word itself no longer hold special power. The only word attributed to them is the 'prostitutes'. In school, the children hide their identity cards from the other students to cover their 'identity' or address. Some of them even don't

know their father's name. Most of the children won't even sit on the same bench with them, They always have had to bear shame and insult because of their birth. They will have dreams of marriage, but it remains a distant dream as most of them are not ready to marry the daughters of the devadasis. They won't get any decent jobs also. A lot of women suffer from STDs. They don't take any safety measures to prevent such diseases. This is a job where one has to maintain their beauty and energy. After a particular age, they are not able to move on with the same job mainly because of old age difficulties. At this time, the next member from the family get into this and the cycle continues.

### **The Passing of Trauma**

The distressing or victimizing stories can create trauma in the minds of next generation. They are not healed and they unknowingly pass them to the other generation, which can be traumatic on its own. Apart from individualism and competition, colonization taught the ultimate goal of gaining power over other peoples' bodies and resources. The oppression and trauma teach us to overlook ourselves in the service of institutions and corporations by disconnecting, erasing, silencing and murdering ourselves. They are also worthy of liberation.

The trauma is passed on to the next generation because of various reasons. Firstly, the economic vulnerability/ displacement that forces them to repeat the cycle. Secondly, the repetitive patterns of gender exploitation and sexual violence. Thirdly, the loss of once-sacred identity where they are disconnected both from their ancestral tradition and the mainstream society. Fourthly, the cultural silence where they remain unspoken as they have no space for healing. Finally, the social stigma which makes them face both the caste-based and gender-based discrimination through which they are exposed to inherited shame and identity trauma. According to Dori Laub, the famous Israeli- American psychiatrist, the survivor's trauma becomes collective history when voiced and acknowledged. The systemically embedded tradition creates unspoken wounds. They fall silent because they think their words are of no use and consideration. Even after the formal abolition of the system, one could witness the repetitive compulsion.

### **The Stigma of Oppression**

The stereotype, stigma, surveillance and racial battle fatigue make the devadasis exhausted. The stigma is mostly stuck to the bottom of the caste. The people who were great performers during a particular time were criminalized by the British. The groups who lived their life depending on their performance (certain tribes), did not have any other go. The Devadasi system cannot be considered as a tradition according to the case that exists today. It is a systemized oppression. The various government acts pushed them into marginalization- not only single marginalization, but double marginalization.

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The caste- based stigma is explicitly clear. The bodies the men own at night is completely ignored during the day time. This is because of the fear of the society. The things that they do in the absence of light is not at a problem for them. But everyone wants the acceptance of society to live a well- respected life. But what about the lives dishonored by the society because of its own deeds. Each and every individual is part of society and is responsible for every incident that is happening here. It is a collective entity and the society is the one who creates collective wounds on the devadasis. The sexual stigma is another part to be considered. After the legal abolishment, the perception of the “prostitutes” continues to cling to devadasis and their abolition. The post- abolition struggles make them to continue the same thing. Even if some systems are legally abolished, it is still practiced illegally in many rural areas of India. Much of them are not at considered which completely makes it isolated and erase from the mainstream of the society. The government is turning its face when it comes to the post- abolishment struggles. The Covid- 19time was hectic for these people. There was no one to lend a helping hand for them.

The intergenerational stigma is one of the main area to be focused. The children, who are innocent are treated like culprits just because of their birth. They are denied proper education, bullied by peer members and others and are forced to live in isolation. The social rejection becomes a form of trauma. It may create deep impacts in the minds of children. Children always want them to be accepted and appreciated. These children are denied even the basic desired of their life. This may lead them to depression, social anxiety and even to suicide. Sometimes they feel themselves unworthy and find no meaning in living. The internalized stigma makes the women feel themselves guilty and shame absorbed into the body and psyche. When something is repeatedly told for a long time or some rules exist, it will automatically create a perception in our unconscious mind.

### **Multiple Layers of Marginalization**

The multiple layers of marginalization can be understood with the help of Kimberly Crenshaw’s Intersectional Feminism. Intersectional feminism examines how oppression of certain systems happen through the overlapping of caste, class and gender. The Devadasi women mostly belong to the Dalit or lower caste. So, it is both gendered and caste- based issue. The dominant landlords and higher class men have historically exploited Dalit women based on this, especially claiming the rights on their bodies as part of ritual and religious terms also. They considered them as a property to satisfy their sexual needs. Even most of the married men had a Devadasi women with them whom they approach often and sometimes that would be known to everyone. Still, men walk with pride and power. They always carry the superiority complex with them. Poverty and religion legitimized social exploitation. They don’t have any other alternatives other than sex work due to systemic neglect. The root cause is always not addressed and the institutions fail to identify that. The old devadasis have fought for their rights and it has not been given much importance till date.

**The Devadasi System Across India**

In India, the Devadasi system was widely practiced in states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Maharashtra and parts of Odisha. In Karnataka, this system is still practiced without much public awareness. It is practiced in districts of Ballari, Bagalkot, Belagavi and so on. The Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1982 did not bring much changes in the lives of the devadasis.

They still suffered. Most devadasis belong to the Madiga community. They dedicate themselves to the goddess Yellamma, the mother of Parasuram. Recently, the Karnataka government has decided bring out a law which would consider the children of Devadasi women as legitimate or legal. They don't have to mention their father's name while applying for driving license or aadhar card anymore.

Tamil Nadu is famous for Devadasi system as a practice of temple dance, which later paved the way for Bharatanatyam. The anti-Nautch movement left women without livelihoods. Mostly they belong to the Isai Vellalar community. They are dedicated to lord Shiva/ Vishnu. In Andhra Pradesh, the Jogini system is similar to the Devadasi tradition. The girls are dedicated before puberty and they enter into sex work later. The Lambada community mostly belongs to this. They also dedicate themselves to the goddess Yellamma. In Sangli, Solapur and Kolhapur regions of Maharashtra, it is known as Jogini or Murali system. The Maharashtra Devadasi Abolition Act was passed in 2006. The system in Odisha is somewhat different from the Devadasi system. They had gendered control which led to specific expectations and restrictions on their personal lives. The Maharis were temple dancers in Jagannath temple and it was mostly ritualistic. They were considered servants of Lord Jagannath, dedicating their lives to spiritual pursuits and temple service.

**Conclusion**

It is necessary to bring positive intergenerational change through active resistance. Events like abuse, war, oppression, racism and violence create trauma in the minds of people. It is the need of the hour to come out of the traumas that hold us back. We have to set boundaries and protect our peace in order to heal from the traumas. Healing can be passed down like passing down the trauma and pain. So, it should not be the passing down of pain, but passing down the healing. The Devadasi system is one of the best examples that shows how the attribution of a single identity or term socially taints their entire identity. Culture should not be something which becomes one when practiced for a long period of time. It should be implemented through proper understanding and interpretation. Everything should evolve without disturbing the core.

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