

Revisiting the Devadasi System

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Revisiting the Devadasi System: Survey, Rehabilitation, and Social Justice

Context

The **Karnataka State Human Rights Commission (SHRC)** has recently directed the state government to complete a **fresh survey on the Devadasi system** and submit **recommendations by October**. Though the practice has been legally banned, its persistence in some regions and flaws in earlier surveys have highlighted the need for updated, accurate data to enable proper **rehabilitation and support mechanisms**.

Introduction

The **Devadasi system** involves the ritualistic **dedication of young girls**, often **before puberty**, to a deity, especially in temples across **North Karnataka**. Despite being **prohibited under the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982**, the practice continues in certain areas under social and cultural pressures. The absence of reliable data and continued social stigma have hampered **effective policy interventions** and **rehabilitation efforts**.

Legal Status and Previous Surveys

- The Devadasi system has been **banned since 1982** under the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act.
- **22,873 Devadasis** were identified in the **1993-1994** survey.
- **46,660 Devadasis** were identified in the **2007-2008** survey.
- Both earlier surveys set the **age eligibility at 45 years and above**, although recent circulars have not clarified age-related criteria.

- Activists have raised concerns about the **inclusion of ineligible persons** in past surveys and the **exclusion of genuine Devadasis**, especially those initiated after the legal ban.
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New Survey Initiative (2024-25)

- The new survey was announced in the **2024-2025 State Budget**.
 - It will be conducted by **taluk-level child development officers**.
 - The survey aims to collect **house-to-house data** to identify all current and former Devadasis.
 - **Social stigma** has prevented many from identifying themselves as Devadasis.
 - Fear of **legal consequences**, despite the goal of rehabilitation, has also limited participation.
 - Migrant women from North Karnataka, unaware of the survey, are at risk of being excluded.
 - Activists argue that only a **transparent and inclusive approach** can ensure accurate results.
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Continuation of Practice Despite Ban

- The Devadasi practice still persists during **annual temple fairs** in many parts of **North Karnataka**.
- Despite legal prohibition, **cultural sanction and economic vulnerability** continue to sustain the practice.
- The absence of stringent enforcement mechanisms contributes to its continuation.
- The lack of **awareness campaigns** and **supportive environments** discourages self-identification.

Need for Comprehensive and Accurate Data

- A fresh survey is essential to:
 - **Identify all affected women**, including those initiated after 1982
 - Ensure **equitable distribution** of rehabilitation benefits
 - Prevent **misuse of welfare schemes** by ineligible individuals
 - Facilitate **targeted policy responses** based on real-time, verified data
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Devadasi Rehabilitation Program in Karnataka

- The program is implemented by the **Social Welfare Department** of Karnataka.
- It aims to provide **financial support** and promote **social reintegration** of former Devadasis.

Key Features:

- A **monthly pension of ₹30,000** is directly transferred to the bank accounts of eligible ex-Devadasis.
 - **Marriage incentives** are provided to **children of Devadasis**, particularly from **Scheduled Castes**, if they apply within **18 months of marriage**.
 - Support for **income generation** includes **financial assistance** and **skill development** initiatives.
 - All beneficiaries undergo **spot verification** before final approval.
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Conclusion

Despite decades of prohibition, the **Devadasi system continues to exist** in hidden forms, driven by socio-economic vulnerabilities and cultural norms. A **transparent, inclusive, and sensitive survey** is crucial for enabling accurate identification and designing effective **rehabilitation and empowerment programs**. Ensuring awareness, preventing exclusion, and safeguarding rights must be central to any policy aimed at **eradicating this centuries-old practice** and supporting those affected by it.



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