



The Devadasi System in South India: Origins, Historical Transformation, and the Evolution of Government Intervention

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Abstract: *The Devadasi system dedicated women to the ritual and artistic service of South Indian temples, and over more than a millennium it moved from a position of religious and cultural prestige to a hereditary structure of caste-based sexual exploitation. This article traces the origins of the practice in early medieval temple economies, examines its disruption under colonial rule and the reformist anti-nautch movement, and follows the arc of post-independence legislative intervention across Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Particular attention is given to the persistence of the practice despite statutory prohibition, to the findings of government and civil-society surveys, and to the recently enacted Karnataka Devadasi (Prevention, Prohibition, Relief and Rehabilitation) Act, 2025, which marks a shift from a purely punitive framework to one grounded in rights and rehabilitation. The article argues that the system's endurance reflects not a failure of law alone but the deeper entrenchment of caste, poverty, and gender subordination that legislation has repeatedly struggled to dismantle, and it closes with recommendations for a more integrated policy response.*

Key Words: Devadasi, History, Transformation, Legislation, Anti-Nautch Movement.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The word "Devadasi" comes from the Sanskrit deva (god) and dasi (female servant), and it denotes a woman ceremonially dedicated to a temple deity, historically through a rite that resembled marriage. The institution was once bound up with classical dance, temple ritual, and courtly patronage, but over the past two centuries it has come to stand for something very different: the coerced dedication of girls, disproportionately from Scheduled Caste and other marginalised communities, into lifelong sexual exploitation carried out under religious sanction. Understanding why the system has proven so resistant to reform requires grappling with this gap between its ceremonial origins and its contemporary social reality. This article looks at three connected dimensions of the Devadasi system: its historical origin and evolution within South Indian temple culture; the colonial and nationalist reform movements that first pressed for its abolition; and the long body of government intervention that followed, stretching from provincial legislation in the 1930s to Karnataka's landmark law of 2025. The analysis centres on Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra, the four states where the practice has been most extensively documented, legislated against, and studied.

2. HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND EARLY EVOLUTION:

Temple dancers appear as early as the Sangam-era Tamil epic Silappadikaram, dated to roughly the third century CE, which suggests that some form of institutionalised female service to temples predates the medieval period by a considerable margin. Most historians, however, place the consolidation of the Devadasi system as a formal temple institution between the ninth and thirteenth centuries CE, under dynasties such as the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas, and later the Vijayanagara Empire. The clearest evidence of the system's institutional character comes from temple inscriptions of this period. The Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur, built by the Chola ruler Rajaraja I in the early eleventh century, is recorded as having maintained several hundred dancers along with their musical accompanists, sustained through regular grants of oil, turmeric, and other provisions. Tamil sources refer to these women as Devar Adigalar, or "servants of the divine," a title that points to a status woven into temple administration rather than a marginal or clandestine role. Similar institutions took shape under different regional names: the Mahari tradition at the Jagannath Temple in Odisha, the Basavi system linked to the Yellamma cult in Karnataka, and later hereditary community structures such as the Kalavantin in Goa and the Natavalollu in the Andhra region.

In this earlier period, Devadasis held a socially recognised, if structurally subordinate, position. They trained in classical music and dance, performed at temple festivals and royal courts, and were regarded as auspicious figures whose ritual service was believed to secure divine favour for their patrons and for the wider community. Yet their status was always conditioned by dependence on temple and royal patronage, and by a social order that withheld from them the conventional marriage and inheritance rights available to other women.



3. COLONIAL DISRUPTION AND THE ANTI-NAUTCH MOVEMENT:

Temple patronage declined steadily under the Delhi Sultanate, then under Mughal expansion, and later under British colonial administration, and this erosion steadily undercut the economic base that had sustained the Devadasi institution. As temple endowments shrank and princely patronage collapsed, many Devadasi communities lost their traditional livelihoods and grew increasingly dependent on wealthy individuals outside the temple structure, a shift that gradually blurred the line between ritual service and commercial sexual exploitation.

By the late nineteenth century this transformation had become the target of a reform campaign known as the anti-nautch movement, "nautch" being an Anglicised rendering of dance performance. The movement brought together colonial administrators, Christian missionaries, and Indian social reformers, though their motives diverged considerably. Colonial officials and missionaries read the practice through the lens of Victorian sexual morality and portrayed it as inherently immoral, while Indian reformers folded their campaign into a broader nationalist project of remaking womanhood for a modern nation, alongside contemporaneous movements against sati and child marriage and in favour of widow remarriage. The most consequential figure in this campaign was Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, a physician and legislator in the Madras Presidency and herself the daughter of a Devadasi mother and a Brahmin father. Reddi first introduced a bill against dedication in 1927, and the resulting Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act of 1929 removed the obligation of temple service by allowing a monetary settlement in its place. Her efforts came to fruition two decades later in the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947, passed within months of Indian independence, which criminalised the dedication ceremony and, notably, granted Devadasis the legal right to marry, a right custom had long denied them.

The reform movement did not go unchallenged. Devadasi associations in Madras organised formal opposition, arguing that the proposed legislation misrepresented their community as inherently tied to prostitution and ignored the artistic and religious legitimacy of their traditions. A parallel debate played out over the classical dance form now known as Bharatanatyam: while Reddi pursued abolition of the social institution, contemporaries such as E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale worked to "revive" the dance form itself, detaching it from its association with Devadasi communities and re-establishing it as a respectable art practised by upper-caste performers. The result of this split was that the artistic legacy of the Devadasi tradition was largely absorbed into mainstream classical dance, even as the women who had originated and sustained that tradition were left with diminished economic and social standing.

4. POST-INDEPENDENCE GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS:

Legislative efforts against the Devadasi system did not stop at independence; successive state governments pursued the issue piecemeal over the following eight decades, a reflection of how the practice persisted in regions beyond the reach of the original Madras and Bombay-era laws. Table 1 sets out the principal legislative milestones.

Table 1: Key Legislative Interventions Against the Devadasi System

Year	Legislation / Instrument	Jurisdiction	Key Provision
1924	Madras Devadasi Bill (first attempt, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi)	Madras Presidency	First legislative attempt to outlaw dedication; met with resistance.
1934	Bombay Devadasi Protection Act	Bombay Presidency (Maharashtra, parts of Karnataka)	Criminalised dedication of women into the Devadasi system.
1947	Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act	Madras Presidency (Tamil Nadu, parts of Andhra Pradesh)	Outlawed dedication; granted Devadasis the legal right to marry.
1956	Madras Anti-Devadasi (Suppression of Immoral Traffic) Act	Madras State	Extended prohibition to associated commercial sexual exploitation.
1982	Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act	Karnataka	Criminalised dedication; penalised abettors, including temple functionaries.
1988	Andhra Pradesh Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act	Andhra Pradesh	Prohibited dedication; included rehabilitation provisions.



Year	Legislation / Instrument	Jurisdiction	Key Provision
2005	Maharashtra Devadasi Protection and Rehabilitation Act	Maharashtra	Combined prohibition with a rehabilitation mandate.
2009	Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Amendment Act	Karnataka	Strengthened penal provisions of the 1982 Act.
2025	Karnataka Devadasi (Prevention, Prohibition, Relief and Rehabilitation) Act	Karnataka	Repeals the 1982/2009 laws; introduces survey-based identification, generational classification, paternity and inheritance rights, and land/housing/healthcare-based rehabilitation.

Beyond dedicated Devadasi legislation, the practice has also been addressed under general criminal and welfare law, including provisions of the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, and child-protection statutes where the dedication involves a minor. The Supreme Court of India has likewise weighed in: in *Vishal Jeet v. Union of India* (1990), the Court directed central and state governments to set up advisory committees to examine the eradication of the Devadasi system, child prostitution, and related practices, and to formulate rehabilitative schemes for the women and children affected. That judgment is cited often in later policy documents, though implementation of its directions has been uneven across states. The National Commission for Women (NCW) has periodically surveyed the prevalence and welfare conditions of Devadasis, and its findings, together with subsequent studies from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, the National Law School of India University (NLSIU), and the non-governmental organisation Sampark, have consistently confirmed that the practice persists in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Odisha, notwithstanding decades of statutory prohibition.

5. CONTEMPORARY PREVALENCE AND STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

Government and civil-society data show that the number of women formally identified as Devadasis in Karnataka alone rose from an estimated 22,000 in 2006–07 to roughly 43,000 in more recent counts, though officials attribute part of this apparent increase to outdated baseline data rather than to an actual expansion of the practice, which underscores the absence of reliable, continuously updated official statistics. Related regional forms of dedication, such as the Jogini system in parts of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh and the Basavi tradition in Karnataka, continue to be documented by researchers and human rights bodies. A finding that recurs across the literature is the close association between the Devadasi system and caste. The overwhelming majority of women dedicated under the practice belong to Scheduled Caste or other historically marginalised communities, and economic distress, rather than religious conviction on its own, is repeatedly cited as the proximate cause of dedication. Once dedicated, women are frequently shut out of legal protections available to other citizens: their children have historically lacked recognised paternity and inheritance rights, and the women themselves have often been unable to access welfare schemes tied to conventional marital status.

A 2019 policy brief by the Centre for Law and Policy Research (CLPR), reviewing how Devadasi prohibition laws have been implemented in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra, identified weak enforcement, low conviction rates, inadequate rehabilitation infrastructure, and the absence of survivor-centred survey mechanisms as the main reasons the practice has continued despite prohibition. Witness intimidation, together with the social and economic dependency of dedicated women on the very networks that sustain the practice, has made prosecution particularly difficult; officials in Karnataka, for instance, have noted only a small number of convictions under the 1982 Act across several decades.

6. THE KARNATAKA DEVADASI ACT, 2025: A SHIFT IN LEGISLATIVE APPROACH

In 2025 the Karnataka government enacted the Karnataka Devadasi (Prevention, Prohibition, Relief and Rehabilitation) Act, repealing the 1982 Act and its 2009 amendment. Drafted with the involvement of the Centre for the Study of Social Inclusion at NLSIU, Bengaluru, the law reflects a deliberate move away from a narrowly punitive model and toward a rights-based, rehabilitative framework. Several features set the 2025 Act apart from earlier legislation. First, it mandates a fresh state-wide survey to identify affected women and classifies beneficiaries generationally, as Devadasis, their children, or their grandchildren, for the purpose of targeted welfare delivery, and issues identification cards on that basis. Second, it introduces provisions that allow children born into the system to establish paternity and secure inheritance rights, addressing a long-standing gap that had left such children without legal recognition of fatherhood or any corresponding claim to property. Third, it strengthens penal provisions, including escalated imprisonment terms and fines for repeat offenders, particularly those within temple management who facilitate dedication. Fourth, it commits the state to rehabilitation measures spanning land, housing, and healthcare support, intended to reduce beneficiaries' economic dependence on the practice.



The Act has nonetheless drawn scholarly criticism. Commentators associated with NLSIU's transgender and non-binary discourse programme have argued that the law's framework, by defining eligible beneficiaries and paternity claims in binary, cis-normative terms, risks excluding or legally destabilising the Jogappa community, a gender-diverse group historically dedicated to the Yellamma cult alongside cisgender women. This critique points to a broader tension running through Devadasi legislation: a law drafted to protect one vulnerable population can end up marginalising another vulnerable and overlapping community if it is not attentive to gender diversity within the tradition itself. As of late 2025 the Act still awaited presidential assent, a procedural stage that is routine for state legislation touching on personal law and criminal provisions.

7. CRITICAL ANALYSIS: WHY LEGISLATION ALONE HAS NOT ENDED THE PRACTICE

The eight-decade gap between the first Madras legislation of 1947 and the documented persistence of the Devadasi system today points to structural limitations that run through this entire body of law. Three factors recur throughout the scholarship reviewed for this article.

- Caste and economic dependency: dedication is concentrated among Scheduled Caste and economically distressed households, and punitive statutes aimed at dedication do little to address the poverty and caste discrimination that make the practice look, to some families, like a survival strategy.
- Weak enforcement architecture: low rates of prosecution and conviction, driven by evidentiary difficulties, social pressure on witnesses, and a reluctance among local administrations to intervene in practices framed as religious custom, have blunted the deterrent effect of successive Acts.
- Fragmented and belated rehabilitation: early legislation, particularly the 1947 and 1982 Acts, focused on prohibition with little attention to the economic and social reintegration of women already within the system, leaving many without viable alternatives and, in some cases, without formal recognition or benefits at all.

The 2025 Karnataka Act attempts to address the second and third of these limitations through survey-based identification and rehabilitation entitlements, but its cis-normative drafting shows that even reform-oriented legislation can reproduce new forms of exclusion. What this suggests is that durable eradication of the Devadasi system will require not a single statute but a sustained, cross-sectoral policy commitment, one that spans caste-based affirmative action, girls' education, economic support for vulnerable families, and continuous, survivor-informed monitoring, rather than periodic legislative correction on its own.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Institute periodic, independently verified surveys across all affected states to replace outdated and inconsistent prevalence estimates.
- Strengthen conviction rates through witness protection mechanisms and specialised training for police and prosecutors handling dedication cases.
- Extend Karnataka's 2025 model of generational identification and rehabilitation to other affected states, with statutory provisions drafted to include gender-diverse community members rather than assume a binary framework.
- Integrate Devadasi rehabilitation with existing Scheduled Caste welfare, education, and livelihood schemes rather than treating it as an isolated legal category.
- Support community-based monitoring involving survivors and local civil-society organisations to improve early identification of at-risk girls.

9. CONCLUSION:

The trajectory of the Devadasi system, from an institution of temple prestige to a target of colonial-era reform and then to an expanding but unevenly enforced body of state law, illustrates how difficult it is to legislate away a practice rooted in caste hierarchy and economic vulnerability. Nearly eighty years after the first post-independence prohibition, the practice persists in disguised and localised forms across Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra. The Karnataka Devadasi Act of 2025 marks a notable shift in legislative philosophy, moving from prohibition alone toward identification, rehabilitation, and intergenerational rights, but its shortcomings, particularly around gender-diverse beneficiaries and the perennial problem of enforcement, suggest that legal reform must be paired with sustained social and economic intervention if the system is to be genuinely eradicated rather than merely pushed further from public view.

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