

Devadasi: An exploitative ritual that refuses to die

A. Mathamma of KVB Puram worshipping at a Mathamma temple in Tirupati. | Photo Credit: [Umashanker Kalivikodi](#)

It's a practice that is widely believed to have been abandoned decades ago. But NGOs and activists have been bringing to light accounts of young women being initiated into the Devadasi system.

The practice of "offering" girl children to Goddess Mathamma thrives in the districts of Chittoor in Andhra Pradesh and Tiruvallur in Tamil Nadu, forcing the National Human Rights Commission to seek report from the two States.

As part of the ritual, girls are dressed as brides and once the ceremony was over, their dresses are removed by five boys, virtually leaving them naked. They are then forced to live in the Mathamma temples, deemed to be public property, and face sexual exploitation, according to the NHRC.

Mathammas can be found in the villages of Chittoor district, on the border areas with Tamil Nadu but also right in the heart of Tirupati. The system is prevalent in 22 mandals of Chittoor district, mostly eastern mandals, such as Puttur, Nagari, Nagalapuram, Pichatur, KVB Puram and Srikalahasti, Yerpedu, Thottambedu, B.N. Kandriga, and Narayanavanam. The western mandals where the practice is prevalent include Palamaner, Baireddipalle and Tavanampalle and Bangarupalem.

The Mathamma system has its equivalent in other regions of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

The system is called 'Basivi' in Kurnool and Anantapur districts, 'Saani' in Krishna, East and West Godavari districts, and 'Parvathi' in Vizianagaram and Srikakulam districts. Women are unable to leave the exploitative system due to social pressures.

A. Mathamma, 40, of KVB Puram mandal said though she wanted to leave her hamlet and settle at Srikalahasti as a domestic help, the village youth would not allow her to do so. Nor would they let her stay with her 'owner', making her retreat to her home.

A daily wager, Mathaiah, father of a 14-year-old Mathamma at M.R. Palli in Tirupati, said his daughter has had a heart condition since birth.

"We dedicated her to Goddess Mathamma, when she was three, and she survived. She will live without marriage for life. It is painful, but we have to honour the divine powers," he said.

Social activists say the girls are exploited, and forced to live as sex workers. Many die old and lonely and sick as they are forced to sleep in the Mathamma temples or outside the homes where they work as domestic help.

A survey by the Mother's Educational Society for Rural Orphans based in Chittoor district says a number of awareness camps were organised by voluntary groups between 1990 and 1992. The society has worked with these women for over two-and-a-half decades after the abolition of the practice with the passage of the Women Dedication (Prevention) Act, 1988.

The organisation found a number of Mathammas had ventured into the red light areas of Mumbai and other metropolitan cities. Since 2011, seven of them died of AIDS in Chittoor district. At

present, there are an estimated 1,000 Mathammas in the district. Of them, 363 are children in the age group of 4-15. The Dedication of Women (Prohibition) Act has had no effect on the Mathamma system in the district. So far, just one case was booked in Puttur in 2016 and another in Thottambedu. Only in 2016 were rules formed for the Act. R.K. Roja, Sugunamma and D.K. Satyaprabha, MLAs from the district, raised the issue in the Assembly last year.

The Child Development Project Officers of the Puttur and Srikalahasti divisions said though the Mathamma system was still in vogue in several mandals, no scientific rehabilitation measures were possible due to lack of proper data and non-cooperation from the victims and village elders.

After the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh, there are no stipulated guidelines for the implementation of the Act. As it is linked with the sentiments of the community, the official machinery and the political parties shy away from taking on the tradition. Moreover, the victimised community is largely viewed as a minority group, with no influence on vote-bank politics, said N. Vijay Kumar, MESRO chairperson.

Former Union Minister Chinta Mohan, who represented Tirupati Lok Sabha constituency for nearly three decades, told *The Hindu* that the Mathamma system was a testimony to centuries of exploitation of the Madiga community. He said the practice would continue as long as the community was deprived of economic development. "In the name of rehabilitation, the governments just provide them a pittance, amounting to cheating the unfortunate women, which is as bad as the system itself," the former MP said.

S.V. Rajasekhar Babu, Superintendent of Police, Chittoor, said he would initiate a study of the living conditions of Mathammas and bring the facts to the notice of the government. Voluntary organisations estimated that there are as many as 2,000 Mathammas in various Madiga villages. Of this, those aged 19 to 30 would be around 400; and children below 15 years would be about 350.

The system is, however, slowly disappearing in certain mandals such as Varadaihpaalem and Satyavedu, thanks to Sri City Special Economic Zone which has allowed women and girls to move into the labour force. There are instances of Mathammas marrying and having children in Srikalahasti and KVB Puram mandals with the intervention of voluntary groups. A negligible number of Mathammas were provided with small economic benefits between 2000 and 2010.

At Kurmavilasapuram, a village in Tiruvallur in Tamil Nadu, a group of villagers were discussing the controversy outside the Mathamma temple in Arundhatiyar Palayam. "It was an enactment on the life of Sage Jamadagni and Renuka Devi (Mathamma) that kicked off the controversy," A.K. Venkatesan, former president, Kurmavilasapuram village panchayat, says.

The villagers say the Mathamma festival was held in the village from August 2 to 6. "On the fifth day, we held a drama to explain to the new generation the life of Mathamma. A little girl plays the role of Renuka Devi who takes food to Jamadagni. Four boys act like robbers who prevent her from doing so by different means, even an attempt to disrobe her," Mr. Venkatesan says. The villagers say the boys only touch the sari and not the girl. "It is part of our mythology. It was this drama that people mistook as disrobing the little girl," says A.S. Dhandapani, president, Arundhatiyar Viduthalai Munnani.

"The practice of offering children was present more than 50 years ago when superstitious belief was common. But it is no longer being practised here," claims Mr. Venkatesan.

Apart from children, even cattle are offered to Mathamma, if the calves are cured of their illness. "This is done by people from other castes too," Mr. Venkatesan says.

Tiruvallur Collector E. Sundaravalli said a detailed inquiry was under way.

(With Vivek Narayanan in Tiruvallur)

Says BJP will campaign against corruption, law and order problems and lack of development work in Himachal Pradesh

The process of holding the requisite Board Meetings and Shareholder Meetings has been completed in phases in September 2017.

Ruben George is staying at Ram Nath Kovind's house at Kalyanpur, near Kanpur

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