Let the “Dirty” Women Speak:
The Agency and Divergent Aspirations of Devadasis and Development Interventions in Karnataka, India

Nicole Aaron

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Otago
Dunedin, New Zealand

March 2015
ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I examine the relationships between development organisations and religious beneficiaries through an ethnographic exploration of devadasi women in rural North Karnataka, India. Contemporary devadasis are both religious and poor. As Hindu, Dalit women, they are dedicated to the goddess Yellamma by their mothers, and practice sex work to support themselves economically. Their histories are bound up in colonial interventions and reform movements, but their pre-colonial histories are largely unknown. The early twentieth-century saw a rise in debates around the “woman question”, largely centred on “respectability” and “morality”, which had significant consequences for devadasis, who were slowly forced out of the temples, where they are said to have once acted as priestesses. The process of this transition out of the temples is unclear, but today’s devadasis are seen by NGOs and reformers to be nothing more than prostitutes—understood to be “dirty” women lacking respect. Since 1982, the devadasi practice has been criminalised in Karnataka, and the government has implemented reform and rehabilitation schemes purportedly to help the women out of sex work. Additionally, the rise in HIV/AIDS amongst the group has led to an increase in development interventions, seeking to mitigate both HIV/AIDS and poverty. Through the influence of these reform and development interventions, I argue that the devadasi practice is changing, and the women’s identities are changing.

Utilising life stories of devadasis, interviews with staff of development organisations, focus groups between the two, and participant observation over the course of twelve months, this thesis seeks to reveal how devadasi women use their new identities to negotiate poverty with the organisations trying to help them. I argue that, while these new identities have previously been portrayed negatively, we may detect the agency of devadasis in the various narratives they use to get what they need from these organisations. Moreover,
while these organisations advance their own religious beliefs onto the
devadasis, the religious importance of the devadasi practice continues to be
seen as irrelevant and/or superstitious. The findings from this research indicate
that development organisations are patronising towards devadasis and
uninterested in listening to them. Consequently, I demonstrate that divergent
aspirations emerge between development interventions and what devadasis
express as their needs, which prevents interventions from being effective in this
context. Development organisations do not tend to consider devadasi paddhati
(tradition) in development interventions.

This research contributes to existing scholarship in religion and
development, through an analysis of the divergent aspirations that exist
between religious beneficiaries and development interventions. Using
postfeminist theory, I explore alternative conceptions of agency, which
recognise the difference that exists between devadasis and their desires. I also
examine how postdevelopment theory provides a space for understanding the
place of religion in development and focuses on agency and subjectivity as
priorities when carrying out development interventions. In doing so, I employ a
method of “speaking with” (Nagar and Geiger 2007) devadasis to argue that
devadasis display agency through speech, where they are able to negotiate
poverty. Depending on their particular needs and their assessment of their most
beneficial course of action, they will choose either to express their exploitation
or to boast of their empowerment.
In memory of

Laurence Taylor

1929-2012

&

Jasminder Virdee

1980-2010
# Table of Contents

Abstract ii

Glossary viii

Abbreviations and Acronyms x

Maps Index xii

Figures Index xiii

Boxes Index xiii

Preface xiv

Acknowledgements xv

Chapter one: Introduction 1

Sacred servants, profane prostitutes, Dalit sex workers 4

The geographical setting of Karnataka 13

Government and non-government presence in the field 20

- Karnataka State AIDS Prevention Society (KSAPS) 21
- Mahila Abhivraddi Mattu Samrakshana Samsthe (MASS) 21
- Operation Mercy India Foundation (OMIF) 22

Entering the field 23

- Reflexivity and positionality 29

The chapters 32

Chapter two: Religion, Gender, and Development 35

India and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs):

- Gender Equality and Education 39
  - MDG 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women 40
  - “Developmentspeak” and the neglect to define “empowerment” 41
- MDG 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education 43

Postdevelopment: a space for religion? 45

The “cultural” problem of gender and religion in development 50

- Religion and patriarchal hegemony 50
- Challenging reformers: marriage as the solution 53

Religion and development as method 56

- Religious boundaries, religious incompatibilities 57
- The contribution of taking a religious studies approach to development 59
- Religion and (post)development theory in practice 63

The difference between faith-based organisations (FBOs) and non-government organisations (NGOs) 66

- Keeping it “holistic” 69
- The importance of prayer 70
- “Sinful” sex workers 73

Limitations of a religion and development method 74

Chapter three: Abolitionism, Feminisms, and the Decline of Devadasis 79

Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century:

first-wave feminism, reform, and abolitionist movements 82
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British noninterference of religion and abolitionist movements</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism and right-wing feminist movements</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muthulakshmi Reddy and the Self-Respect movement</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 1970s-80s: second-wave feminism and other social movements:</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 1980s and the rise of social movements:</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the “Chandragutti Incident”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late twentieth and early twenty-first century:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neo-abolitionist and feminist interventions in sex trafficking</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devadasis speaking in a postcolonial, postfeminist era</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postfeminism and the idea of difference</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-examining agency through speech rather than action</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter four: Single and Suffering: Devadasis, Marriage, and Poverty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The stigma of being low caste and “impure”</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedicating girls to escape grinding poverty, or “the feminisation of poverty”</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The truth about trafficking in the devadasi context</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt bondage as a solution to poverty?</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “struggle” of being alone</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage as the solution to the devadasi “problem”</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women “without husbands”</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty and material conditions</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The (non)difference between devadasis and non-devadasi Dalit women</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter five: Changing Identities and Practice Among Devadasis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the difference between devadasis and sex workers?</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is respect all that matters?</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian ideas of sexuality: “good” sex and “bad” sex</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Greedy” sex workers and “poor” devadasis</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of devadasi paddhati in dedication</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition, practice, and ritual</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellamma devi provides a sense of sisterhood</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do dedications continue?</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ritual behind dedication</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminishing dedications and changing identities</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The changing status of devadasis</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter six: NGO Rehabilitation: Development and Missionary Interventions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increasing HIV / AIDS, declining numbers of devadasis</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stigmatised and alone: devadasis and HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eradicating the devadasi practice and mitigating HIV / AIDS through NGO interventions</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahilaa Abhivraddi Mattu Samraksanaa Samsthe (MASS)</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka State AIDS Prevention Society (KSAPS)</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation Mercy India Foundation (OMIF)</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian efforts through Christian missionary interventions</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pentecostal conversion mission</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Christians on a humanitarian mission</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The impact of sporadic missionary functions on long-term faith-based development</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What do devadasis say about these types of interventions? 246

Chapter seven: Devadasis, Development Schemes, and Divergent Aspirations from the Top-Down 248

Investigating divergent aspirations through focus groups 249
  Milking buffaloes, (not) making money 252
  Working from home: the realities of skills trainings 256
Education as a burden or a tool for “empowerment” 258
  Education and reduced fertility 260
  Don’t dedicate, Educate! 261
  Lack of infrastructure, lack of money: the case of school dropouts 267
  Challenging patriarchal hegemony through education 269
Self-help groups, microfinance and microdebt 271
  In praise of microfinance and SHGs 272
  Microfinance leads to microdebt for devadasis 273
  SHGs and microfinance in Karnataka 279
“Do not depend on the others to help you” 282

Chapter eight: Conclusion 285

References 299
Glossary

Bettale seva: nude worship

Bhajans: devotional songs

Bhandara: coloured holy powder

Bharatanatyam: classical Indian dance

Brahmin: the highest social group in the caste system

Dalit: the lowest social group in the caste system, also referred to as Untouchables or Scheduled Caste.

Devadasi: servant of god. Also sometimes called jogati, jogamma or basavi

Devi: goddess

Dhandha: business, used to refer to sex work

Gharwali: pimp, madam

Hunnime: full moon (festival)

Jatre: festival

Jogappas: male to female transgender devotees of Yellamma

Kannada: local language of Karnataka

Matangi: faithful follower of god

Marathi: local language of Maharashtra, commonly spoken along the border of Karnataka and Maharashtra

Muthaide: a woman whose husband is alive, used to refer to the auspicious status of devadasis

Muttu: necklace tied around the necks of devadasis indicating marriage to Yellamma

Muttu kattu: the ceremony of tying the muttu

Nityasumangali: auspicious married woman

Nirod: condom

Paddhati: tradition

Pallaki basket: Pallaki means palanquin, and is the vessel used to carry Yellamma, and collect offerings for her.
Puja: worship, ritual
Pujari: priest(ess)
Randimunde: abusive word for widow
Rasam: simple hot soup
Samaja: community
Sangha: self-help group
Sati: self-immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands
Sule: prostitute
Thali: necklace of the wife, indicating heterosexual marriage
Taluka: refers to the central town of a district, usually more developed than surrounding villages
Vesya: prostitute
Yellamma: mother of all, goddess worshipped by devadasis
ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ART  antiretroviral therapy
BBC  British Broadcasting Company
BIRDS Belgaum Integrated Rural Development Society
BRIC  Brazil, Russia, India, China
CD  contagious diseases
CD4  cluster of differentiation 4
DFID  Department for International Development
DMSC  Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee
DSS  Dalit Sangharsh Samiti
FBO  faith-based organisation
GDP  gross domestic product
GOI  Government of India
HDI  human development index
HIV/AIDS  human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome
KSAPS  Karnataka State AIDS Prevention Society
KSWDC  Karnataka State Women’s Development Corporation
MASS  Mahila Abhivraddi Mattu Samraksanaa Samsthe
MDG  Millennium Development Goals
MYRADA  Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency
NABARD  National Bank of Agriculture and Rural Development
NACO  National AIDS Control Organization
NGO  non-government organisation
OMIF  Operation Mercy India Foundation
PLWHA  people living with HIV/AIDS
POW  Progressive Organisation of Women
RA  research assistant
Rs.  Indian rupees
RUDSET  Rural Development and Self-Employment Training
SANGRAM-VAMP  Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha-Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad
SDB  social-desirability bias
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEWA</td>
<td>Self-Employed Women's Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHG</td>
<td>self-help group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STI</td>
<td>sexual transmitted infection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB</td>
<td>tuberculosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNAIDS</td>
<td>Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Maps Index

1: India 15
2: Karnataka districts 16
3: Karnataka agro-climatic zones 18
4: Karnataka literacy rates 2001 263
Figures Index

Figure 1: Yellamma Gudda, Saundatti 59

Figure 2: Pallaki basket 183

Figure 3: Jade, matted hair of Yellamma devotee 201

Figure 4: The “Wordless Book” 241

Boxes Index

3.1 Legal Changes to Devadasi Practice 96

3.2 Feminist Slogans 99

4.1 Bonded Labour: Sumitra 141

4.2 Devadasis and Partners: Tipavva and Shaila 156

4.3 Daughters of Devadasis: Kalavathi 158

5.1 Devadasis are more respected /
Sex workers are more respected 171

5.2 Faith, Healing, and Dedication: Bagirati 189

5.3 Stopping Dedications: Indiravva 200
Preface

References and footnotes follow University of Chicago Press Staff, The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), with some exceptions. Quotations follow the British style of logical punctuation (noted in Chicago Manual of Style 13.28 and 6.9). All direct translations used in-text of interviews and focus groups from Kannada to English have been translated by Jayashree Jagannath. This research was approved by the University of Otago ethics committee and conducted in accordance with the University of Otago Code of Ethical Conduct for human participants.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would have never had the courage to embark on this project were it not for my grandfather, Laurence Taylor. Although he did not live to see me complete it, I am most grateful to him for all of his support, both financial and emotional.

I owe my sincerest gratitude to the staff of OMIF, who provided me with the necessary help to live in rural North Karnataka, and to the University of Otago who provided me with the funding to be able to do so. Without this assistance, I would not have had the opportunity to speak with so many devadasis, whose time and patience has been essential to the completion of this project. I am forever grateful to each and every one of them. They always welcomed me into their homes with open arms and shared their stories, tears, and laughter with me. Even when they were unsure about my purpose, they trusted me. I am thankful to MASS staff for linking me to devadasi self-help groups and inviting me into their homes, and to KSAPS staff who cooperated with me and helped me to speak with devadasis outside of Belgaum, which lent significant perspective to the pages ahead. Thank you also to VAMP, and Vishtar who opened their doors to me in the earlier stages of this research and took the time to talk to me and introduce me to devadasis in Karnataka and Maharashtra.

The Karnataka State Women’s University in Bijapur, and in particular S.A. Kazi, were absolutely instrumental in helping me with the practical side of undertaking fieldwork in the area, and connecting me to women at the university who assisted me with translations in the field. My opportunity to speak with devadasis as I did would not have been possible without all of you—thank you especially to Parveen and Rahmani. Hema Latha and Jamdaar, thank you for spending such an extensive amount of time talking to me and taking care of me. Your support and guidance was truly invaluable. Jamdaar,
the time I was able to spend in the comforts of your home, and the conversations that we had, helped me to think about the complexities of caste politics and government rehabilitation projects. Hema Latha, the fond memories I have of sharing mango lassies on your roof and discussing feminism and women’s rights will never be forgotten. You are an inspiration to every single-by-choice Indian woman today. May the women at the university see you as an example of how to live independently amongst patriarchy.

Thangaraj, Amudha, and Bhimasen, your consistent willingness to help me whenever I needed it did not go unnoticed. You truly treated me like family; like a sister. Thank you for helping me set up, for saving me from faulty water taps, and for feeding me. Thank you Bhimasen for our many conversations shared in the hallway, which truly helped me to think about devadasi interventions in a wider context. Thank you Thangaraj and Amudha for letting me sleep at your house, for making sure I was always healthy, for talking with me continuously, and consulting with me about the direction of OMIF. Thank you also to Sarah, Savitri, Yashoda, Mala, Sharda, Wilson, and all of the OMIF staff for your relentless support to help me undertake this project. You all went out of your way to travel long distances and talk to devadasis with me, and I am extremely grateful for this.

Liz Mount and Caleb Simmons, your friendship in the field sustained me. I feel so blessed to have had you with me during such a challenging time. Thank you for staying with me in the hospital and watching unbearably bad movies with me, while I recovered. I am especially grateful to Liz for connecting me to Jayashree Jagannath, whose translations of my cloudy recordings of interviews and focus groups has been monumental to the direction that this thesis has been able to take.
The friends I made in Hukkeri were so special. Lalith and Ashwini, thank you for inviting me into your families and your homes. Thank you for providing me with company when I was alone, and for educating me on local customs.

I am thankful to Leslie Orr, whose guidance in the earlier stages of this research was essential to helping me think critically about what I was doing, and my understandings of devadasis. Our multiple exchanges were influential in reflecting on my own positionality, and moving beyond more traditional representations of devadasi women and temple women in South India.

Robert Zydenbos, thank you for helping me to laugh my way through basic Kannada in the Bavarian Alps, and your initial guidance on Kannadigana customs. RVS Sundaram, thank you for your daily help with conversational Kannada leading up to my entry into the field, and your insightful lessons about Indian culture, and Karnataka history and mythology. Thank you also to Chaisit Suwanvarangkul for helping me through Sanskrit, which made Kannada that much less difficult.

I owe a special thanks to all of my support at the University of Otago. My supervisors, Doug Hill and Will Sweetman, have moulded me into a South Asian Studies scholar. I walked into their offices young, naive, and extremely ambitious, and they believed in me. Thank you for always believing in me, even when I didn’t believe in myself. Thank you for helping me to think through my data, and shape it into the pages that follow. Will, thank you for giving me the opportunity to spend a summer delving into colonial representations of devadasis with you, and for your patience as I worked through the data we collected. Doug, thank you for every conversation we have shared—these conversations in your office have lent significant understanding to my knowledge about Indian politics, caste politics, and privilege, and have
significantly shaped the direction of the thesis. Thank you also to Ben Schontal, whose small comments on some of my earlier data analysis have had a significant influence in helping me shape the language I have used to form my arguments. Elizabeth Guthrie, thank you for providing me with any practical support you could, whenever I asked. Finally, the completion of this dissertation would not have been as tidy and coherent were it not for the beneficial editorial feedback I received from Deane Galbraith, for which I am sincerely grateful.

On a more personal note, I want to thank all of my family, but especially my mother, Wendy Aaron, who has been my number one cheerleader. Your emotional and financial support has kept me going during this time, and is the reason that I have finally made it to the finish line. Thank you. Linda Zampol D'Ortia, our endless conversations about gender, sexuality, race, and privilege have been invaluable. Thank you so much for expanding my mind on these topics, and for being my support in the final stages of getting the words on the page. Danilo Giambra, thank you for making sure I was always fed and watered, and for sharing insights in the finishing stages. I am grateful to both of you for reading through earlier work and providing me with feedback. Ben Payne, your constant encouragement and ego boosts were much needed—thank you. You have always had more confidence in me than I had in myself. Everybody deserves a friend like you.

I would like to acknowledge the New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women, who sent me to Croatia to participate in a workshop on Transnational Feminisms, where I met Nadiya Chushak. Nadiya, our continued discussions around feminist politics and neoliberalism have helped me work through many of the arguments that I have made around postfeminism and agency. Thank you for your support and friendship, and to all of the other amazing feminists I
had the pleasure of meeting and engaging with at this workshop, whose feedback helped me think more critically about postcolonial feminism.

Declan Smith, your love, friendship, and never-ending smiles have kept me calm and grounded during this crucial finishing up stage. Thank you for this gift. Eddie and Vianney Santagati, you have not only welcomed me into your home, you have welcomed me into your family and provided me with unending support, for which I am forever grateful.

Although I have spent many solitary hours carrying out this research and writing down these pages, all of you have contributed in a very special way to helping me complete this project. I have experienced the loss of two amazing souls while undertaking this work—my dear friend, Jazz Virdee, and my loving grandfather, Larry Taylor. It is to them that I dedicate this dissertation.
We all sat gathered around in a circle, with dust flying, lorries full of sugar cane speeding by, and the smell of chai in the distance, as we waited for the others to arrive. Yemannavva played with my hair, and tears started streaming down my face as I realised this would be my final day in the field. As we sat there, one of the project coordinators from a non-government organisation (NGO) that I had spent extensive time with, and grew quite close to, said to me, “I’ve been really impressed with how humble you’ve been during you’re time here...Sitting on the floor with them (the devadasis), eating with them, sleeping at their houses...” Being overwhelmed with my own emotions, I did not think too much of this at first, presuming it to be a nice thing to say. However, as I reflected on her comment, I was reminded that even those who spend their days working to help devadasis view them as “the other”, “the Dalits”, “the dirty women”. Her comment reflected her surprise at my willingness to associate with such women, and the humbleness she felt I displayed in doing so. This small comment summed up many of the tropes about devadasis that I had spent one year listening to and processing.

The reasons for these tropes will become evident throughout the dissertation. In large, they are a part of the array of research and reports on devadasis which span across academic scholarship, media journalism, and NGO and government publications. As Dalit sex workers, devadasis are usually part of specific agendas located in arguments about morality and respectability. Consequently, we hear little from devadasi women, who are represented by stereotypes revolving around Gayatri Spivak’s (1988, 296) analysis of “white men saving brown women from brown men”, through sensational
documentaries such as VICE’s *Prostitutes of God* (Harris, 2010) or BBC’s *Sex, Death and the Gods* (Kidron, 2011).¹

This thesis poses three research questions: *Are devadasi women empowered by their “single” (e.g., not married to a man) and/or religious status in society? Do development organisations take into consideration the religious importance of the devadasi practice when implementing intervention projects? Do these intervention projects subscribe to the aspirations of devadasis?* Larger implications in the subfield of religion and development, where research focuses primarily on the relationship between faith-based development organisations and beneficiaries of the same faith group (usually either Christian or Muslim), envelope a contribution towards our understanding of how people of different faiths interact in a development context. This thesis advances existing scholarship on religion and development through an examination and comparison of the interactions between Hindu beneficiaries and both Christian and secular development organisations.

In the pages that follow, I examine how devadasi *paddhati* (tradition) in rural North Karnataka has changed through the influence of various social reform movements and non-government and government organisation interventions, which seek to eradicate the devadasi practice and mitigate HIV/AIDS. Using a religion and development approach, thereby focusing on the reality that devadasi women remain both religious and economically poor, the thesis investigates the relationships between devadasi women and three development organisations through an analysis of the discrepancies between the aspirations of these organisations and the aspirations of devadasis. In doing so, it will become evident that there is a narrative of development initiatives not

¹ *Sex, Death and the Gods* is available to watch for free at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zL67d0-82PA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zL67d0-82PA) and *Prostitutes of God* is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GFaN9-1iz0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GFaN9-1iz0), accessed 27 October 2014.
working in this context because the aspirations of the organisations do not match those of devadasis. This will be demonstrated through an analysis of: 1) the historical processes which have led to a delegitimisation of the practice; 2) societal assumptions about the agency of (single) women which create difficulties in the everyday lives of devadasis; 3) the fact that devadasis are from classes that condition their (lack of) opportunities; 4) the faith of devadasis in the goddess Yellamma which provides them with a different outlook on life as well as access to other resources; 5) the development organisations whose specific agendas are patronising.

Although previous research has investigated similar themes, scholars have often found themselves in search of the “bona fide” devadasi. Consequently, I began this project in search of something similar, but quickly found myself confronted with a reality unlike this scholarly construction. Every devadasi is different: some are sex workers, some have quit sex work, some were never sex workers, some have religious importance, and some do not. What makes this dissertation unique is that it is primarily told through the voices of devadasis, who discuss difference rather than social cohesion. Through the voices of my informants, I reflect on how devadasis have created new identities and changed their identities through the influence of reform and development. While Spivak (1988, 287) has argued that the subaltern can never speak, because she is influenced by colonialism and patriarchy, I argue that through these colonial and patriarchal influences, devadasi women have taken on new and equally important identities.

While Priyadarshini Vijaisri (2010) has been searching for a true historical identity of devadasis in Andhra Pradesh, as it was before the influence of NGOs, my approach places value on the new identities that devadasi women

---

2 Vijaisri (2010, 68) argues that “there is an urgent need to recover the ritual identity of the outcastes”.
have formed, recognising the way they use these new identities as agentic.

Feminist scholarship on devadasis by Lucinda Ramberg (2006), Treena Orchard (2004, 2007), and Linda Epp (1997) has greatly influenced this dissertation, and laid the foundations for drawing the conclusions I have. Epp investigates the effects of various reform movements on devadasis in Karnataka, while Orchard analyses the influence of HIV/AIDS on the practice, looking specifically at devadasis under eighteen years of age, and Ramberg demonstrates that religion and paddhati are still important for devadasis. I have bridged this information together, through an examination of religion and development, listening to the narratives devadasis tell of how these reform movements and HIV/AIDS and poverty intervention projects have contributed to changes in their religious practice and identity. I relay these narratives in the pages that follow, demonstrating how devadasis use their new identities to negotiate poverty.

**Sacred servants, profane prostitutes, Dalit sex workers**

Devadasi translates as god servant in Sanskrit, but is often also translated as slave of the god. Devadasis in North Karnataka are Hindu women who say they come from Dalit Madiga and Kamble caste families. As Dalit women, their history is largely unknown (Soneji 2012, 8-9). This unknown history has resulted in a popular trend of equating Karnataka devadasis to a history in South India of temple dancing women, who also worked as courtesans. In doing so, scholars denote the idea that devadasis in Karnataka used to be part of a highly prestigious religious tradition of dancing women, but are now prostitutes, exploited by religion and upper caste elite men (Dalrymple 2009;

---

3 Ramberg published her dissertation into a book right before the submission of this dissertation, and it is therefore, unfortunately, not included here. See Ramberg (2014).

4 This idea of devadasis as slaves is a topic that is expanded on in chapter three.
Orchard 2007; Jordan 2003; Shankar 1990; Tarachand 1991). This argument is framed around the belief that devadasis used to be empowered temple women, or “sacred servants”, but as a result of colonial influence, have become “profane prostitutes” (Kersenboom 1987; Jordan 2003; Tarachand 1991; Evans 1998; Srinivasan 1983, 1988). It is unclear if this argument can even be applied to devadasis in North Karnataka, whose history is unknown, but such an argument also disregards the reality that these historical temple women had a sexual courtesan role in the temples in the pre-colonial period (Parasher and Naik 1986; Bor 2007; Tawney 1924). Davesh Soneji (2012, 10) suggests that such associations between temple dancing women and Dalit devadasis “obfuscates the complexities of Dalit women’s experiences and does little in terms of foregrounding issues of gender justice for Dalit women”.

Parasher and Naik (1986) present some of the rare epigraphic research on historical temple women in North Karnataka before the reform period. For the most part, we do not learn of devadasis in North Karnataka until the beginning of colonialism when reform movements began to take force. By contrast, in North Karnataka, most devadasis are sex workers, though some older devadasis are temple priestesses in rural areas (see Ramberg 2006). The necessity in mentioning these historical temple women of South India, despite their disconnect from contemporary devadasis of North Karnataka, lies in the reality that during the reform period, all women who were dedicated to a god, goddess, or temple, became known as devadasis and were subsequently

---

5 In discussing Karnataka, devadasi scholars erroneously draw on the contemporary works of Frederique Apffel-Marglin (1985), Saskia Kersemboom (1987) and Leslie Orr (2000) to elaborate on a historiography of South Indian temple women dating back to the ninth century according to Kersenboom (1987, 16), and the tenth century according to Orr (2000, 3).

6 There are inscriptions in Karnataka dating back to the ninth century which mention women in the temples called *sule* or *vesya*, meaning prostitute (Orr 2000, 49; Parasher and Naik 1986, 64-66), however, the connection these women have to devadasis of today is not clear.
lumped into reform movements concerning the “woman question” and “respectability” (Jordan 2003). These women have consequently been affected by longer processes of regulatory change and interventions concerning temple women more generally, which has impacted the practice that remains today.

In Karnataka, the devadasi practice became criminalised in 1982, and dedication to the goddess was henceforth worthy of five years’ imprisonment and a fine of Rs.5,000. Devadasis in Karnataka have traditionally been called jogati, jogamma or basavi, but have now adopted reform rhetoric which is prominent in the language of the organisations helping them, and therefore usually refer to themselves and identify as devadasis. Contemporary devadasis in Karnataka follow a matrilineal practice of dedicating their daughters to the goddess Yellamma. This marriage to the goddess means that they are nityasumangalis (ever-auspicious married women) or muthaides, and it is also an indication of the reality that religion remains an important part of the lives of many devadasis. It is their marriage to Yellamma that brings them together as a community, and for this reason I sometimes refer to them as a “religious group”. All devadasis in North Karnataka are Dalit women, and most of them

7 The Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act took two years to go into effect, meaning that the practice was not actually criminalised until 1984.
8 As of March 2015, one New Zealand dollar was equivalent to approximately 45 Indian rupees.
9 In her attempt to recover the pre-reformed “bona fide” devadasi, Ramberg (2006, 24) chose to call devadasis “jogatis”. In the field, Yellamma devotees who are not devadasis explained to me that the temple priestesses that Ramberg writes about are known as jogammas (though Ramberg does not make this differentiation). Jogammas do not practice sex work, which differentiates them from devadasis. Due to the obfuscation of the use of these various terms, I choose to use devadasi. Although this is a term which has been adopted from reform rhetoric, it is nonetheless the term that the women now use for themselves.
10 Being dedicated to the goddess as young children, sometimes babies, has created a moral debate about whether or not devadasis are forced into sex work against their will.
11 Muthaide is the Kannada word which is used similarly to sumangali. It literally means “a woman whose husband is alive”, which is a title devadasis receive because they are married to the goddess, who will never die.
come from poor families. Their dedication is similar to a marriage ceremony between a man and a woman, with the man who is willing to pay the most, financing the ceremony and having sex with the devadasi once she reaches puberty. When devadasis are dedicated to Yellamma, they have a necklace of red and white beads tied around their neck, called a muttu, signifying their ritual status and connection to the goddess. Their dedication also leads to them taking on the role of eldest son in their family, and becoming financially responsible for their natal family. Many women practice sex work to fulfil this financial obligation, with the fact that they cannot marry a man also being a factor, and see their muttu as their license to practice sex work without judgement. Through sex work, the goddess is believed to provide material wealth and protect the family. Yellamma is therefore necessary for the sex work economy of devadasis.

In addition, once devadasis are dedicated to Yellamma they become responsible for Yellamma worship on behalf of their family. Devadasis call their practice devadasi paddhati. In Kannada, paddhati means custom, practice, usage, or tradition.\textsuperscript{12} For devadasis, tradition comes in the form of a historical practice of dedicating the eldest daughter in the home to Yellamma, so that she can continue to take care of the family deity. Taking care of Yellamma in the home, performing Tuesday and Friday begging with a pallaki basket,\textsuperscript{13} and going to the temple, are the responsibilities of the eldest female in the home. While there are sometimes other women in the home who are dedicated to Yellamma, it is the eldest who will take care of this obligation in the home. Although there are times when families will dedicate their daughters for other reasons, if they did not already practice Yellamma puja, they will begin to at this time.

\textsuperscript{12} I have used the common translation of tradition, rather than practice or custom, to emphasise that there is some religious element in this practice.
\textsuperscript{13} Pallaki means palanquin in Kannada, and is the vessel used to carry Yellamma, and collect offerings for her.
With the criminalisation of the tradition, most devadasis are not particularly interested in talking about these religious practices, because they do not like that dedication to Yellamma and sex work are often tied together. Additionally, organisations and other devadasis focused on reform and rehabilitation have taught them that Yellamma has nothing to do with sex work, and Yellamma is a goddess for everyone—therefore they should not perform these specific devadasi rituals. Some of them still do, but they made a special effort to convince me that it had nothing to do with being a devadasi. However, many women also choose not to talk about these practices because they are now criminalised by the government, and devadasis are constantly under surveillance by members of MASS, a rehabilitation organisation of ex-devadasis. Women who are more distant from MASS are more likely to maintain a connection to the goddess and uphold obligations to perform specific Yellamma worship on Tuesdays, Fridays, and large full moon festivals from November through February.

As sex workers, devadasis in North Karnataka have suffered great loss with the rise of HIV/AIDS in the region. They continue to be in the spotlight of international anti-trafficking agendas, and on a smaller scale, they remain targets of respectability movements (previously through social reform but now through development interventions). As Dalit rural women in the second most arid location in India, they are poor, landless, illiterate, and lack access to resources. Within the framework of government and non-government development interventions, the primary solution to the devadasi “problem” is the marriage of devadasis to men. In these competing narratives, it remains unclear who the bona fide devadasi is, or if she exists at all. Is she an empowered sex worker, an exploited sex slave, a disrespected single woman, a poor Dalit woman, or a respected muthaide?
Despite extensive research on historical devadasis in South India,\textsuperscript{14} research that focuses specifically on devadasis in North Karnataka is minimal. Although Nicholas Bradford (1983) primarily focuses on jogappas,\textsuperscript{15} his in-depth discussion on Yellamma worship and ritual in Karnataka is useful as a background to the devadasi practice. Jackie Assayag’s (1992) monograph on contemporary devadasis in Karnataka provides one of the first insights into the contemporary ritual role of the women in Karnataka. He spends an extensive amount of time visiting Yellamma temples and observing devadasi ritual, while simultaneously witnessing the onset of reform movements in the 1980s. He refers to devadasis as sacred prostitutes, and discusses their role as sex workers, but is primarily concerned with their ritual roles. Jogan Shankar (1990) reveals a shift in the devadasi practice away from ritual importance and religious practice. Focusing on devadasis as “exploited sex slaves”, Shankar finds that out of the eighty-five devadasis he interviewed, all of them were forced into sex work, and were involuntarily dedicated to the deity. In contrast, K.C. Tarachand (1991) claims that none of the devadasis he interviewed were forced into their position as sex workers by their parents or other community members.


\textsuperscript{15} Jogappas are born with bodies that were assigned male at birth, and are later dedicated (by their parents or themselves) to Yellamma, at which point they begin to dress in saris. They are usually spoken of in the context of being male to female transgender devotees, but there is very little research on jogappas and their identity seems to remain unclear to scholars. The little scholarly knowledge we have of jogappas is limited to (mostly brief) studies by Bradford (1983), Assayag (1992), Reddy (2005), Ramberg (2006), and Lowray et al. (2011). Due to time constraints, I was unable to include jogappas into my fieldwork for the thesis.
However, he argues that the current economic, social and political situation has forced them into commercial prostitution.\textsuperscript{16}

Epp’s (1997) doctoral thesis details a close investigation of social reform on devadasis as a subaltern group, incorporating Ambedkar and Gandhi into her larger argument around reform and Dalits. Entering into the field with two female Indian “reformers”, Epp reveals that devadasis feel degraded in society, and that the government, and reformers such as those with her in the field, give false hope to the women. Chhaya Datar (1992) also provides significant insight into the reform of devadasi women, arguing that reform was patriarchal and contained a Brahminical bias. She discusses the shift that devadasis experienced with the introduction of Nehruvian politics and social reform into India, and how government attempts at reform failed to address the larger issues of ritual and spirituality. She also assesses the claim that marriage should be seen as the solution to the devadasi problem, and provides convincing reason why the devadasi position is a more empowering one than the status of a Hindu wife. While she does believe that the devadasi practice involves coercion and exploitation, she holds the opinion that it should be up to the women to decide what is best for their tradition, rather than male reformers and leaders with a patriarchal agenda. Datar (1992, 89) provides support for this conclusion through analysis of government reform movements which have proven unsuccessful, claiming that “the design of the schemes shows the uncomfortable ‘moral’ attitude [the] Government is nurturing under the pressure of male reformers”.

\textsuperscript{16} Since the criminalisation of the practice, devadasis are hesitant to reveal their status to anybody, out of fear that they may be arrested. This makes it difficult to collect statistical data about which devadasis are practicing sex work and which are not. Consequently, while the Karnataka government claims there are around 46,600 devadasis in Karnataka (Nayak 2011), all of who have stopped practicing sex work, NGOs estimate that there are an upwards of 200,000+ devadasis in South India (see \url{http://www.dfn.org.uk/component/content/article/42-information/slavery/94-ritual-sex-slavery}, accessed 19 August 2014).
Research discussing influence of development interventions on devadasis has primarily been concerned with HIV/AIDS mitigation and prevention. Orchard (2004, 2007) shifts this argument of forced prostitution by Shankar and Tarachand, investigating what it means for young devadasis to enter into this religious tradition and begin practicing sex work. She suggests that some devadasis (especially young devadasis) feel empowered through their position as sex workers and breadwinners to their families, and thereby retain control over their own lives as nityasumangalis. Ramberg (2006) sets out in search of devadasis in Karnataka who remain untouched by reform and development interventions, in an attempt to demonstrate that devadasis maintain a ritual importance in society, and display agency through their various kinship roles. Believing that devadasis who have been influenced by reform movements have distanced themselves from these traditions, Ramberg contends that those who have not had much influence from development intervention remain unchanged. Finally, she demonstrates that even if devadasis join rehabilitation programmes and become “ex-devadasis”, they continue to worship Yellamma.

John O’Neil et al. (2004) have suggested that it is necessary to look more closely at the religious elements behind the devadasi practice in order to provide appropriate health care to devadasi women, and they have now started to investigate the consequences that have ensued from this neglect (Gurav and Blanchard 2013). Krishna Kandath (2001) reveals that government intervention in North Karnataka operates more as a problem-solving scheme than an initiative to facilitate grassroots projects. He claims that without hearing the voices of devadasis, the government (and the subsequent NGO which took over this project) acts as the voice for devadasis, portraying the women as helpless victims. Kandath finds that devadasis constantly ask him to be a voice for them to express their desires to the organisation. Devadasis in his study feel that they lack the literary skills to take part in social welfare initiatives; the intervention
programmes do not meet their basic needs, and they continue to engage in prostitution whilst feeling unable to express their needs to those in power. While Ramberg (2006) argues that devadasis who do enter into rehabilitation programmes continue to worship the goddess, Kandath (2001) demonstrates that women who enter these programmes continue to practice sex work. In line with other researchers, such as Krishna Kandath (2001) and Ramberg (2006), Orchard (2004, 250) suggests that the “state’s alternatives to sex work are typically little more than classic ‘blame the victim’ strategies, whose medico-moral discourse and short-term loans often lead to greater economic dependency and a deep sense of betrayal among the women regarding the displacement of their traditional beliefs and practices”.

There is a consistent disconnect between devadasi women, religion, and rehabilitation. As poor women in an arid-agroclimatic region, devadasis have few livelihood options. Meena Seshu has argued that, as Dalit women, devadasis have created their own economic system through their connection to the goddess and sex work (Kidron 2011). Rehabilitation schemes, and subsequently “development” interventions, have encouraged women to stop practicing sex work, while failing to provide them with any livelihood alternatives. Therefore, devadasis have continued to practice their tradition in some form or another, while development interventions continue to work against devadasi paddhati, advancing economic reform as more valuable. This is part of the wider belief by development practitioners and scholars that religion and economic development are incompatible.17

Leela Gandhi (1998, 90) argues that “the ‘gendered subaltern’ disappears because we never hear her speak about herself. She is simply the medium through which competing discourses represent their claims; a palimpsest written over with the text of other desires, other meanings.” We rarely hear

17 This will be discussed in more detail in chapter two.
from the devadasi herself, but rather from those who speak for, after or "nearby" (Ramberg 2006, 21-22) her. It is precisely this shortcoming which this thesis seeks to address. This ethnographic study investigates the relationship between religion and development in the context of devadasis, recognising their various positioning narratives as agentic, as devadasis navigate their way through conflicting narratives of poverty, exploitation, and empowerment, to negotiate what they need from development organisations. The arguments which are made throughout the dissertation are a product of the narratives which devadasis have kindly shared with me, and the images which they have chosen to portray to you.

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING OF KARNATAKA**

Devadasis find themselves in an environment of mixed features. On the one hand, India now has one of the fastest growing middle classes in the world, is included in the BRIC countries as a rapidly growing economy in the world market, and is striving toward becoming a global superpower (Beinhocker et al. 2007; Hult 2009; Nanda 2009). On the other hand, devadasis live in rural areas where they remain very poor, and continue to lack access to basic amenities such as water and toilets. Simultaneously, India’s GDP has increased nearly seven times since 2000 and, after the US and China, it now has the world’s third largest economy, with nearly $1.8 trillion annual GDP (Tandon 2013, 22). However, since 2000, India’s ranking on the Human Development Index (HDI) has dropped from 124 to 136 (2012), and has remained stagnant on the Gender Inequality Index with a ranking of 132 (2012). Forty percent of the world’s malnourished children live in India, and the country’s Public Distribution System is providing food to more than sixty-five million people (Banik 2012,

---

18 Brazil, Russia, India, and China make up the BRIC, a term coined by Goldman Sachs in 2001 to refer to the emerging economic markets of these four countries, which cover 25% of the world’s landmass, have 40% of the world’s population, and are increasingly seen as global market economies (Hult 2009, 1).
With a population of 1.2 billion people, one-third of the world’s poor live in India—living below the poverty line on less than US $1.25 per day (2012, 153). This means that nearly 350 million Indians continue to live in poverty, yet, as the country continues to grow economically, today it is easier for Indians to access mobile phones than toilets (Tandon 2013, 24, 27).
Map 1: India

Copyright http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/india/india-political-map.htm#
Map 2: Karnataka districts

The devadasis in this study come from rural North Karnataka, in the
districts of Belgaum, Balgalkot, and Bijapur. They are chronically poor, with few
livelihood options accessible to them outside of agricultural labour. In addition
to practicing sex work, or as an alternative to sex work, many devadasis work
as agricultural labourers, for minimal income. However, Karnataka is full of
rich, natural resources and an information technology hub, making it more
developed than many of India’s states. It has the ninth largest population in the
country, and is situated on the west coast of South India. With Bangalore as the
state capital in the South, Karnataka is now a world leader of information
technologies, accounting for 40% of India’s software exports (UNDP 2005, 3-5).
However, significant hunger and lack of infrastructure and opportunity remain
a problem in the state, with inland North Karnataka suffering from severe
poverty in both urban and rural areas (Mehta and Shah 2003, 496). While
poverty varies widely across the state, it is concentrated in these inland agro-
climatic regions (the “Northern Dry Zone”). Gulbarga (Kalburgi) and Belgaum
divisions are comprised of 40% of Karnataka’s population, with 60% of the
state’s poor population living in these areas (Murgai et al. 2003, 405).19

---

19 In Murgai et al.’s (2003) study, Belgaum division includes Belgaum, Bijapur,
Dharwad, and Balgolkot.
Map 3: Agro-climatic regions of Karnataka

Copyright http://agricoop.nic.in
Karnataka is the second most arid state in India after Rajasthan. From March through June, North Karnataka is extremely dry and arid, with agricultural output depending heavily on the Southwest monsoon (UNDP 2005, 4). While drought is a problem across the state, the North is more prone to severe droughts lasting for a longer duration (2005, 5-6). Agricultural labour is the primary employment opportunity in North Karnataka, with most agricultural labourers living in rural areas and being economically poor (Murgai et al. 2003, 406). Sixty-six percent of the population in Karnataka live in rural areas and the majority of agricultural labourers here, like elsewhere in India, are rural women, making rural women heavily dependent on agricultural production (UNDP 2005, 4). Agriculture is the primary economic opportunity which continues to create employment for women, though India’s increased modernisation and population is making this more difficult. There are now more female labourers than employment opportunities (2005, 177). At the same time, it is difficult for women to leave agriculture and enter into other kinds of work (Banerjee 2002, 44-51).20 The gender gap continues to leave women at a disadvantage in the (informal and formal) labour markets; in Karnataka, there is a 19% difference in wages between males and females (UNDP 2005, 179).

Approximately 10% of household land in Karnataka is owned by women, either jointly with their husbands, or individually, while 7% of women in rural Karnataka live in households that do not own land (UNDP 2005, 83). However, many devadasis now own houses through the government, which was providing housing subsidies or land plots to women during the early stages of devadasi rehabilitation in the 1980s and 1990s. Many people in North Karnataka, including devadasis, are both very poor and chronically poor. Though not necessarily the poorest, the chronically poor are characterised as

20 The opening up of new employment opportunities for women in agriculture, despite the decrease in agricultural productivity, stems from the fact that men are moving to other occupations, thereby creating space for women to enter (Banerjee 2002, 52).
having “low variation in income/expenditure (in absolute terms) over time...due to low or negligible endowments (e.g., cultivable land, labor power, skills) and/or inability to augment substantially the earnings from such assets” (Mehta and Shah 2003, 493). Casual labourers constitute the largest group of the chronically poor, and cultivators are the second largest. In Aasha Mehta and Amita Shah’s (2003, 493) study, most of the chronically poor are landless or near landless and are illiterate.

Most devadasis are casual labourers who work for farmers. As previously mentioned, some of them do this alongside sex work, though many in Belgaum have now stopped practicing sex work, and work solely in agriculture. The chronic poverty they face is one of the many reasons that devadasis continue to dedicate their daughters to Yellamma. Sangha (self-help) groups have provided one outlet for devadasais to access microfinance schemes, which are praised as an initiative to help the poor out of poverty. Some women have been able to apply microfinance loans towards educating their children, but most of them are forced to spend the money on food and medical emergencies. As will be discussed in more detail in chapter seven, this focus on temporary survival through borrowing money to overcome food insecurity and pay for emergencies has consequences for long-term potential to overcome poverty (Mallick and Rafi 2010, 594).

**Government and non-government presence in the field**

Since the 1980s, there has been an ongoing presence of development organisations in North Karnataka who are working with devadasis to mitigate poverty and HIV/AIDS, and eradicate the devadasi practice. This study focuses specifically on three different organisations, both government and non-government, whose initiatives and interventions are simultaneously competing and similar. The thesis is framed around the interactions of devadasis with the three following organisations:
• Karnataka State AIDS Prevention Society (KSAPS) (government organisation)
• Mahilaa Abhivraddi Mattu Samraksanaa Samsthe (MASS) (NGO, run by ex-devadasis)
• Operation Mercy India Foundation (OMIF) (NGO, Christian faith-based)

*Karnataka State AIDS Prevention Society (KSAPS)*

KSAPS is a government organisation working to empower sex workers and prevent HIV/AIDS. It is formed of various sanghas throughout the state. These sangha groups consist of sex workers, and many of the members also work as staff, primarily as peer educators. The number of non-devadasi sex workers far outweighs the number of devadasi sex workers who are members. However, meeting with various sanghas around North Karnataka provided one of the only opportunities to meet with devadasis who continue to openly practice sex work. Devadasis are members of KSAPS as sex workers. This means that they cannot practice sex work as devadasis, but they can practice as sex workers.21 Sex workers who are eighteen years of age will not be arrested for practicing sex work in brothels, but it is not legal for them to solicit on the streets. KSAPS is focused on promoting safe sex through condom distribution and regular testing for STIs. They also hold regular HIV/AIDS awareness camps.

*Mahilaa Abhivraddi Mattu Samraksanaa Samsthe (MASS)*

MASS was started by the Karnataka State Women’s Development Corporation-Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (KSWDC-MYRADA) in 1992, with the goal to eradicate the devadasi practice in Belgaum district. KSWDC-MYRADA was a government-run organisation which organised devadasis into sangha groups and began encouraging them to leave the devadasi practice, becoming ex-devadasis. When they had a strong enough

21 The differences between devadasis and sex workers will be unravelled and explained in chapter five.
membership, the government created MASS, a non-government organisation which would take over the role of the government, and continue working towards devadasi eradication. Since its inception, MASS has been run by ex-devadasis. Through sangha groups, devadasis have access to microfinance loans, and MASS also takes responsibility for helping the women to avail themselves of various government schemes for devadasis, such as housing subsidies, and monthly pensions. MASS’s current funding comes through EveryChild UK, an organisation “working to stop children growing up vulnerable and alone”.

Operation Mercy India Foundation (OMIF)

OMIF is a Christian faith-based organisation, with a variety of initiatives across India that are both secular and faith-based. The outreach project they run in Belgaum district is centered on providing healthcare for devadasis and other community members, with a specific goal to mitigate HIV/AIDS amongst devadasi women. Additionally, it is focused on empowering devadasis to stop practicing sex work, and encouraging them to send their daughters to school. This outreach takes place through what they call a “holistic care” model of doing individual visits to devadasis’ houses, and counselling them to leave the practice. Prayer is also an important part of this model. OMIF partners with Dalit Freedom Network, an international NGO whose primary donor funding comes through churches in the US and UK.

OMIF’s medical clinic was new when I entered the field, and the research therefore represents the early days of this outreach project. Unlike KSAPS and MASS, OMIF displayed particular interest in hearing from devadasi women their aspirations for development intervention, and was the only organisation willing to carry out focus groups with devadasis for the purposes of this

research. Additionally, as my house was based close to the OMIF medical clinic, I spent more time with OMIF than with MASS or KSAPS staff.

ENTERING THE FIELD

“Can I get your contact information? My friend wants to make a documentary about devadasis, but he said it’s impossible to get in contact with them!”

The above quote relays an encounter I had at a conference in New Zealand after I was finished my fieldwork. Gaining access to speak to women who are criminalised and live tucked away in rural India is not easy. However, unlike scholars before me, a significant amount of time has now passed since government rehabilitation was fervent in the area, and it seems that devadasis are generally less skeptical and increasingly more comfortable talking to foreigners. When people asked what I was doing in rural North Karnataka, I always told them that I was writing a book about devadasis. This was the narrative I used because it was the easiest thing for me to say when I was still becoming comfortable in Kannada.

This research was undertaken over the course of two fieldwork trips, over a period of twelve months. Having entered the field without any contacts in South India, I first did a preliminary trip from March-May 2011 for three months. During this time, I met with any NGOs working with devadasis that I was capable of contacting, as well as a couple of government organisations involved in devadasi eradication, rehabilitation or HIV/AIDS prevention. Additionally, I used this time to meet with local scholars in Karnataka who have done previous research on devadasis, and many who have not, and accessed local university libraries. I found it particularly difficult to discuss devadasis or my research with anybody in India, but especially with local scholars. Local people did not feel that, as an outsider, I could possibly understand the complexities of the devadasi practice, and would spend extensive time explaining their opinions of devadasis to me. In reality, many of
these people have never spoken to devadasis, including some of the people who have worked on devadasi eradication and rehabilitation projects for the government. Nonetheless, by the time I left India in 2011, I had organised three NGOs who agreed to work with me, only one of which I decided to maintain contact with for my data collection.

After my preliminary trip I flew to Germany where I did an intensive introductory course in Kannada language training, before returning to New Zealand. In June 2012, I returned to Karnataka to continue studying intensive Kannada for three months. When I entered the field, I discovered the differences that I had been warned about between Kannada in South Karnataka, and Kannada in North Karnataka—a Kannada-Marathi blend, which I eventually became more comfortable with. Being constrained by both time and money, it was not possible to pursue enough language training to avoid the assistance of a translator, nor was it possible to pay a professional to help me in the field. Therefore, I had to organise a research assistant through my local affiliated university, which was complex and time consuming.

I chose to affiliate myself with the Karnataka State Women’s University in Bijapur—the only women’s university in the state. However, for practical reasons, I based myself in rural Belgaum. The distance between my house and the university was about 150 kilometres, and took four-and-a-half hours by bus. It was challenging to find any women who were willing to come and stay with me as translators. Unfortunately, this meant that I did not have one person helping me for my nine months in the field, but a series of women. It was difficult to find a female translator who was comfortable to travel alone, or who was allowed to leave her family (parents or husband) to travel alone and help me. It was also difficult to find a female who was not concerned about the reputation she may form by being seen with devadasis. As a consequence of not being able to find anyone who could stay with me for nine months, I lived
alone. With the assistance of OMIF staff, I entered the field in September 2012, and moved to a rural area which was central to the offices of KSAPS, MASS, and OMIF. However, my living situation was not very comfortable, and I experienced some harassment from younger boys in the area. Consequently, after three months, I moved to another area eighteen kilometres away, where I lived in proximity to OMIF staff members and the OMIF medical clinic.

In October 2012, I attended a three-day research methods seminar in Pondicherry, where, to my dismay, I learned that statistical methods are seen as the only reputable form of data collection in India. Despite this news, I continued in the field using qualitative methods. My research assistants displayed great frustration with my lack of a set questionnaire, but later expressed gratitude for the opportunity to learn more about qualitative methods. My primary methods for data collection were participant observation, life stories with devadasis, open-ended interviews with NGO staff, and focus groups with devadasis and NGO staff together. Although Orchard (2004) and Ramberg (2006) have used similar methods, as previously mentioned, their approaches are slightly different from mine. Similar to Lila Abu-Lughod (2013, 202), my primary method is to listen openly, yet critically.

Despite having spent extensive time in the research area, devadasi women are scattered throughout villages with large distances between them, making it difficult to form the relationships I had hoped for. Therefore, I eventually decided that it was less important for me to have strong relationships with individual women, and more important to simply listen to as many women as I could. One limitation to not building a strong rapport with every informant is that some of the responses devadasis gave may have been framed around social desirability-bias (SDB). SDB occurs when the subjects feel the need “to obtain approval by responding in a culturally appropriate and acceptable manner” (Crowne and Marlow 1960, 353). This study is particularly vulnerable
to such factors, largely because the translators helping me often framed my questions in a way which implied that devadasis are dirty, that sex work is dirty and not respectable, and that it is better to be in a heterosexual marriage than to be single (as devadasis are). These discrepancies are reflected on throughout the dissertation.

Early into my fieldwork I travelled around to MASS sangha group meetings with the intention of observing how these groups and meetings function as a tool of empowerment for devadasis. However, as I will discuss in later chapters, I discovered that these meetings now only take place for the purposes of loan repayment, and participant observation in this setting did not prove fruitful—women in attendance expected me to show up with questions. Being based close to the head office and medical clinic of OMIF, I regularly attended medical clinics and staff meetings there, which included Friday prayer meetings. Along with participant observation on the premises of NGO offices and sangha meetings, I attended a variety of public meetings and gatherings (locally referred to as “devadasi functions”) held for devadasis by both NGOs and Christian missionaries. I also visited the main Yellamma shrine (Yellamma Gudda) in Saundatti, Belgaum on multiple occasions, including two of the most popular full moon festivals during the months of November and January, which receives hundreds of thousands of devotees over a one month period.

Between September 2012 and May 2013, I interviewed 39 devadasis (some who are also NGO staff), 8 NGO staff members who are not devadasis, 1 local Christian pastor who is not affiliated with any NGOs, and 3 Christian missionaries from the US. From March through May 2013 I ran three focus groups between OMIF staff and devadasis. The intention of focus groups was to locate any discrepancies between what kind of assistance devadasis wish to avail, and what kind of assistance they are actually receiving. Some of these
devadasis were women whom I met frequently and who were also interviewees, and others I had never met before.

Individual interviews with devadasis took place in the houses of the women, but in some cases, I met with KSAPS beneficiaries in the KSAPS offices. Travelling around to meet with devadasis in their houses was time consuming. Most of the time, my research assistant and I took the bus, which often took many hours. We then spent a full day in one village moving around to a few different houses before returning home. Interviews usually lasted about one hour, as most women grew impatient after this amount of time. Although the interviews were organised in the manner of life stories, it was usually necessary to ask follow-up questions. It was clear that some women had told their stories many times before, while others were unclear how the process worked and what its purpose was. A few times after the interview started, informants changed their minds about the interview and asked to stop, and only once did a participant express such skepticism about our intentions that we decided to stop the interview.

All the Kannada interviews and focus groups were translated by a professional translator in Karnataka. This is a limitation to this research, which has implications for my larger arguments around agency. While I have done my best to present to you the voices of devadasis, the reality is that not even my translators would listen to the devadasis. This is a problem which I come back to throughout the dissertation. Although I had a translator with me in the field and someone transcribe my interviews, most of the time I was working without a translator, and as time passed, translation discrepancies became less of a problem, as I began to understand Kannada and Marathi more easily. I took thorough notes during interviews and compared them to the translations that were given to me at the end of my field work. It became evident through transcriptions that there were some discrepancies during earlier interviews.
between what I intended to ask, and what the translator asked. These discrepancies became an important part of my analysis, and are reflected upon throughout the thesis, as they highlight the way that devadasis and single women are viewed in society. Even though these translators had biases against devadasis, the way that devadasis present themselves reflects their own positions under such circumstances. Additionally, given that many NGO staff maintain similar biases, I argue that these representations reflect the attitude of devadasis in the NGO environment.

Analysis of my interviews was done through the extraction of recurring themes. One question which I asked every devadasi was, “What is the difference between devadasis and sex workers?” The answers to this question are discussed in chapter five. Other recurring themes include topics of poverty, “suffering”, marriage, paddhati, reform, and children. Analysis of the focus groups was done in a similar fashion. Recurring focus group themes include poverty, buffalo rearing, education and microfinance loans.

Throughout the dissertation I write frequently of devadasi identity. Identity in this instance refers simply to how devadasis understand themselves and their practice, and how they identify (e.g “respected” or “disrespected”, “practicing” or “non-practicing”). Practicing devadasis refers to devadasi women who continue to practice sex work and worship the devi (goddess) through special rituals reserved for devadasis. Non-practicing or ex-devadasis refers to women who no longer practice sex work, and subsequently, who usually have also ceased to perform any special rituals. However, ex-devadasis is a more political term used by devadasis who are members of MASS, who have ceased to practice sex work or any special rituals as a result of MASS’ influence. In the translations of my interviews, I have kept “God” with a capital “G” when respondents are expressing their convictions towards a particular
faith. Finally, throughout the dissertation I alternate between “prostitute” or “prostitution” and “sex work(er)”. When prostitute or prostitution is used it refers to a specific position of reformers, abolitionists, and some academic scholarship which does not view sex work as a job, but rather as exploitation of some kind, in need of eradication. Sex work(er) denotes my own positionality, understanding sex work as a form of respectable work, that people make the choice to practice. Finally, many devadasis have similar names, all the names of my informants have been changed for their anonymity, though I have kept the names within their caste group.

Reflexivity and positionality

While my being a white foreigner in the field did give me some privileges, I was nonetheless a woman, and often felt the oppressive effects of this. However, my presence as a middle class white foreigner never went unnoticed, and I was always viewed as both an “outsider” and a knowledgeable person who could help. My own subjectivity means that I am undoubtedly interpreting my informants “under western eyes” (Mohanty 1988). Though researchers coming from outside are often accused of reviewing their informants as “the other”, as was similar to Elizabeth Chacko (2004, 60), my informants often put me in the position of the other. They would ask me questions about where I was staying, how I was managing, and what it was like where I came from. These conversations became part of a reciprocity of exchange—devadasis gave me their time through telling me their life stories, and I gave them my time by sharing some personal information about myself. I frequently spoke to NGO staff and local academics about reciprocity, and expressed my concern about wanting to give back, but not having the funds to do so. In Belgaum, when I was interviewing devadasis in their homes, I took fruits and sweets with me to share. In Bijapur and Balgalkot, I used these exchanges and my position as the

23 I have also done this with “Goddess” and “Devi”.
other to share my own stories with my informants. However, every informant shared a similar request from me—reciprocity should come through making sure their stories are told, and that their voices are heard in the spaces of NGO and government offices in charge of devadasi rehabilitation.

Based on Sarah Radcliffe’s (1994, 31) suggestion for “an analysis of difference without either privileging ‘authentic experience’ or western authority”, I have used direct translations of quotes from devadasi women to form my arguments. Following Radcliffe’s (1994, 29) proposal to “take on board critiques by [South Asian] and Third World feminisms, especially in relation to notions around the family, patriarchy and the state”, I have been forced to unlearn and relearn where agency and empowerment are located in this oppressive postcolonial context. The arguments I present by devadasi women are analysed at the expense of wider understandings of postcolonial feminisms, which characterise patriarchy and the domestic space as oppressive and unagentic. While recognising that the voices of devadasis may have gotten lost as I worked them around my overarching research agenda (Raju 2002, 174), I have done my best to avoid this, and reflect throughout the dissertation on moments when I was forced to abandon my research agenda because it did not suit the aspirations of devadasis.

In chapter three I make an argument against middle class and elite Third World women’s representations of devadasis. The dichotomy of “First World” and “Third World” is uncomfortable and problematic. Devadasis are economically poor, and in comparison I am not. While acknowledging that my middle class positionality is no more suitable to represent devadasis than elite or middle class Third World women, I argue that many of these women have

---

24 This discussion will be expanded in chapter three.
25 In the limits of this thesis, I will not discuss gender theory or sexuality. Ramberg (2006) has already done an interesting job of analysing how devadasis contribute to various understandings of gender theory and sexuality.
not actually listened to what devadasi desire. Devadasi women often commented in sangha meetings, interviews and focus groups on the reality that many people come and collect their information, but nothing ever changes for them. They talk and talk, but their voices are never heard. Despite this discouraging reality, they continue to talk and share their stories, in hope that one day something might change—which, for them, means that they will be provided some kind of assistance to improve their socio-economic status. Looking towards postfeminist theory I argue for alternative understandings of agency that allow for a separation of the researched from the researcher (Chacko 2004), as the researched become represented through their voices rather than their actions. Presenting agency through action and resistance leaves the researcher in a particularly vulnerable position to interpret her observations according to her own biases. However, presenting agency through speech provides a space for devadasis to represent themselves. Here, I consider myself the mediator, rather than the representative. I do not claim to be doing a better job at portraying devadasis than those before me—but I am trying something new in this context, something different.

I would have liked to present to you empowered religious sex workers, who are also single women in a patriarchal society. However, the biases I had towards wanting women to talk to me about their experiences as single women were quickly shut down by both my translators, and the devadasis, who, for the most part, do not wish to be represented as (disrespected) single women. Instead, what flourished was a variety of different narratives from different women. As I will demonstrate throughout the dissertation, devadasi women have (almost) always been seen as a group with the same needs and desires, though there is great variety among them. Many of them requested that I tell you they are poor and suffering, others want you to know that they feel it would benefit them if the Indian government would decriminalise sex work.
Most agree that educating their daughters will present them with better opportunities than living as a devadasi, and a large number of devadasis simultaneously believe that marrying their daughters to men would ensure a better sense of economic security.

THE CHAPTERS

Chapter two provides a critical investigation into the benefits and pitfalls of a relatively new subfield of religion and development. First, I present the Millennium Development Goals, and discuss why these neoliberal top-down approaches are mismatched against the aspirations of devadasi women. I then turn to postdevelopment as a theoretical basis for considering religion in development theory. Finally, in comparing the different development organisations in the thesis, the chapter looks closely at the differences between non-government organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs). In doing so, I advance previous research in religion and development by demonstrating that there are some discrepancies underlying the interests of different faith groups which reflect how they carry out development projects.

Chapter three is directed towards the lack of devadasis’ voices in reform and rehabilitation movements that have centred around the women since the early nineteenth century. Looking at abolitionism, reform, feminisms, Neo-abolitionism, and the contributions they have made to legal regulations against the devadasi practice over the past 150 years, I argue that these movements which have sought to help devadasis have disregarded the aspirations of devadasis. Larger discussions around respectability and immorality have dominated social movements that work to end the devadasi practice. I then turn to postfeminist theory as a platform to focus on difference, and investigate alternative understandings of agency which focus on speech rather than action, to argue that the subaltern can and does speak.
In chapter four I turn to the devadasis, to present the everyday lives of the women from their own perspectives. Devadasis frequently speak of their “struggles” and how they are “suffering” and express their lack of heteronormative marriage as the primary reason for this. Therefore, they feel that having a husband will take away many of these sufferings. This chapter focuses extensively on these discussions of singledom versus marriage, and the struggle of being alone. Reform and rehabilitation movements by the Karnataka government and MASS have contributed significantly to the belief that marriage is the solution to the devadasi problem, and OMIF continues to promote marriage as the ideal as well. Although devadasis feel that their lives would be better if they were “respectable” married women, I argue that in many ways, devadasis are not any different from other Dalit women in rural Karnataka who are married with husbands.

Chapter five shifts to a more direct focus on the role that reform movements and NGOs have played in the change of devadasis’ identities and their practice. Movements seeking to eradicate the devadasi practice have consistently focused on devadasis as exploited prostitutes. Therefore, I analyse through the voices of devadasis what the differences are between devadasis and sex workers. Reoccurring themes of respect, marriage and auspiciousness envelope these discussions. I then take the reader through the religious practice of devadasis to demonstrate the remaining components of the practice that are separate from sex work. Finally, I investigate the projection of a false devadasi history onto devadasis, and the ways in which devadasis have adopted these stories and incorporated them into their changing identities and practice.

In chapter six, the devadasis discuss the stigma they face as a result of the spread of HIV/AIDS amongst the community and the deaths that have resulted from this. The chapter then shifts to a more thorough overview of MASS, KSAPS and OMIF, and what they are doing to mitigate HIV/AIDS and poverty
amongst devadasis. I then present two scenarios of different Christian evangelical missionary groups who came into the field to hold devadasi functions, and discuss the implications this had for OMIF, as a Christian organisation with long-term social outreach commitments. The overarching narrative of the chapter is one of divergent aspirations between devadasis and the organisations seeking to help them.

These divergent aspirations are expanded on in chapter seven, where I bring in narratives from focus groups and personal interviews to compare the aspirations of devadasis to MASS, KSAPS, and OMIF. However, I primarily focus on OMIF in this chapter, because focus groups were held with OMIF and devadasis. The chapter looks specifically at buffalo rearing, education, microfinance loans, and self-help groups, to discuss the positives and negatives of these different interventions. I demonstrate that although devadasis are directed towards understanding these sorts of development projects as useful, and therefore express the desire for these sorts of solutions, they simultaneously recognise that these various solutions are problematic and ineffective.

Chapter eight concludes the thesis through a presentation of the results and answers to the three research questions. I discuss the contributions that this research makes to existing scholarship and propose areas that need further investigation. Furthermore, I discuss the implications of the findings and how development organisations might consider these results in their future interventions with devadasis and other religious groups.
CHAPTER TWO:
RELIGION, GENDER, AND DEVELOPMENT

Of all the dimensions of the uncertain revolution now underway in the new states of Asia and Africa, surely the most difficult to grasp is the religious... It is not only very difficult to discover the ways in which the shapes of religious experience are changing, or if they are changing at all; it is not even clear what sorts of things one ought to look at in order to find out (Geertz 1968, 1).

The “liberal assumption” that religion declines as incomes rise is a gross oversimplification; religion is patently not dying out. The persistent presumptions of religious decline, in the face of stark evidence to the contrary, highlights the need to build and present more evidence about trends and dynamics of religious change in different world religions” (Marshall 2011, 43).

Development approached through the discipline of religious studies reveals the existence of many levels and points at which religion makes a significant impact on people’s lives and on development outcomes (Bradley 2011, 7).

Many devadasis continue to value their connection to Yellamma. Those who now identify as ex-devadasis do not have this same relationship with the devi, but nonetheless maintain a connection to the goddess, believing that Yellamma is for all people,¹ not only devadasis. Devadasis have been targets of reform and rehabilitation schemes for decades now, yet interventions which seek to “help” devadasis consistently ignore the religious. In personal interviews, devadasis (both practicing and non-practicing) always refer to their practice as devadasi paddhati (tradition). Devadasis are unsure why the practice ever was or is, all they know is that it continues because of this matrilineal tradition of (grand)mothers dedicating their (grand)daughters to the devi: one female in the family should always be dedicated—this is the paddhati, the tradition. The Karnataka government and NGOs view this as superstition and

¹ In Kannada, ella means “all” and amma means “mother”—Yellamma is literally “mother of all”.

35
ignorance,\(^2\) claiming that the devi has no such power over these women, advocating that if only devadasis would cut their jades (matted hair), they would realise their own ignorance. John O’Neil et al. (2004, 859) suggest:

Attempts to eliminate, rehabilitate or criminalize these traditions have been successful in the past and only serve to further demean women who now must struggle to develop healthy sexual practices in the context of the dual stigma of sex work and HIV/AIDS. Interventions are needed which take into account the social and cultural contexts of traditional sex work, and which are designed to empower women to adopt healthier sexual behaviours and reduce their risk of HIV/AIDS infection.

Though reformers have had the biggest influence in the elimination, rehabilitation and criminalisation of “traditional sex work”, development initiatives have adopted similar approaches in their initiatives to help devadasis. This is done by either disregarding tradition and working with devadasis only as sex workers, or enforcing the elimination of the practice through encouraging eradication of the tradition in hopes that this will also lead to an end in sex work.

This chapter and subsequent chapters will delve further into the ways that development and reform have influenced a change in how devadasi paddhati is practiced, and how the women now understand themselves through the influence of reform, rehabilitation, and development. Moreover, do development practitioners see these changes or the current religious practice of the women as relevant? In this chapter, through reviewing the literature, I will demonstrate how approaching development from a religious studies and postdevelopment perspective may be a more effective way to help devadasi

\(^2\) While devadasis refer to their practice as tradition (paddhati), and the government refers to their practice as superstition, I refer to it as religion. This is because devadasis follow a certain set of practices connected to the goddess, including specific rituals at home and within the temple, which they view as essential for the continuation of devadasi paddhati. They maintain a belief that material transformation comes through this religious devotion to Yellamma.
women out of poverty. Following an overview of how OMIF, MASS, and KSAPS (do not) understand devadasi women as a religious group, and the differences in OMIF’s outreach as a faith-based organisation, I will discuss some limitations to approaching development from a religious studies perspective.

The lack of consideration for devadasi paddhati by development practitioners is correlated with the reality that until recently, development policymakers have seen religion as irrelevant to development. There are two main reasons for this: (1) secular development organisations have tended to assume that religion will disappear or become irrelevant as societies “modernise”;³ (2) because religion supports worldviews and ways of living that run counter to “progressive” and egalitarian worldviews, religion has been seen as a problem for development (Tomalin 2011a, 1; Ter Haar 2011, 5-6). However, religion does not inevitably decline as incomes rise and society becomes more modern, but remains an important aspect of people’s lives regardless of development (Marshall 2011, 43; Bradley 2011, 23). By the dawn of the millennium, India had approximately 2.5 million places of worship, but only 1.5 million schools and 75,000 hospitals (Nanda 2009, 71).

Though the topic of religion is still limited in development studies, faith first became a point of discussion in development when the World Bank opened to new actors and partnerships in the 1990s, creating a space for engagement with FBOs and communities (Marshall 2011, 34); the World Faiths Development Dialogue was influential in this regard (Van der Wel 2011, 349). As a result, the twenty-first century brought with it the realisation that religion is patently not dying out, but progressively growing, particularly in developing countries. For most people in the developing world, religion is integral to their vision of the “good life”, and focus has shifted in development thinking to acknowledging

³ For an overview of the secularisation thesis in this context, see Deneulin and Bano (2009, 52-57).
that progress is not limited to material or economic well-being (Ter Haar 2011, 5, 11). Consequently, a substantial body of research, primarily by development scholars and anthropologists (Tyndale 2000, 2011; Haynes 2007; Bradley 2006, 2011; Clarke 2013; Ter Haar 2011; Tomalin 2011a, 2013; Clarke 2006, 2008; Deneulin and Bano 2009; Eade 2002), focuses on challenging the idea that when “development” is reduced to economic prosperity, it is at the expense of other nonmaterial indicators of well-being (Tomalin 2011a, 1). According to Emma Tomalin (2013, 83), these nonmaterial indicators of well-being include “‘spiritual’ development, aesthetic pleasure or community cohesion—considerations for the so-called affective dimensions of life, and ones that are generally important within religious traditions”.

This relatively new subfield of religion and development is saturated with research on the impact of FBOs in development, primarily concerning itself with Christianity and Islam. By and large, scholars have demonstrated that FBOs are not all detrimental to development and progress, and that they usually do have a positive impact on developmental goals. However, limited consideration has been given to how FBOs interact with people of other faiths, or how secular organisations interact with people of faith. Devadasis are Hindu women; even those who now consider themselves ex-devadasis maintain a strong faith in the goddess Yellamma. Therefore, the reality that those who are working to help devadasi women do not view this relationship as relevant is problematic. Matthew Clarke (2013, 7) argues:

it is not necessary for those implementing development initiatives to share the same religious belief as those they are targeting or indeed hold any religious beliefs or convictions. What is necessary is a willingness to accept that if people to whom such development interventions are targeted do have such beliefs, that this affects both their social and personal understanding of poverty and their response to it.
For devadasi women, it is MASS (a secular NGO), which is constituted of women who share the same beliefs (ex-devadasis), that has been the least accepting of devadasi paddhati, while OMIF (a FBO) and KSAPS (a government organisation) remain largely disinterested in understanding devadasi paddhati and its relevance to continued dedications and poverty.

The government, NGOs and FBOs continuously use religion as an excuse to victimise devadasi women, regardless of the reality that some devadasi women display agency and empowerment through their religious roles. Through an investigation of how development projects have approached this in the past and the consequences this has had for devadasi women, it becomes more clear that current development projects are taking the same, detrimental approach, and do not display any awareness of the religious elements of devadasi paddhati. Current neoliberal development initiatives, consisting of education, microfinance loans and sangha groups, are the primary initiatives being used to help devadasi women out of poverty. However, as chapter seven will demonstrate more clearly, for the most part, these strategies have not been particularly beneficial for devadasi women, whose families remain very poor.

India and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs):
Gender Equality and Education

Empowerment has become a “motherhood” term, embraced by development practitioners from the World Bank to the smallest NGOs. It seems that empowering the poor (including women) to improve their lives has become stock practice and an uncritically accepted goal of most of the development community (Parpart 2002, 41).

In 2000, 189 countries, including India, signed the Millennium Declaration under the United Nations, which outlines a set of development goals and targets to be achieved by 2015. These goals lay the foundations for the approach taken by government and non-government actors seeking to help people out of poverty. Consequently, local beneficiaries are rarely consulted on their thoughts about these goals, and in the case of devadasis, such development approaches
remain largely unsuccessful in helping the women out of poverty. These eight MDGs are:

- **MDG 1**: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger
- **MDG 2**: Achieve Universal Primary Education
- **MDG 3**: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women
- **MDG 4**: Reduce Child Mortality
- **MDG 5**: Improve Maternal Health
- **MDG 6**: Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and TB
- **MDG 7**: Ensure Environmental Sustainability
- **MDG 8**: Develop Global Partnership for Development

The Government of India displayed great ambition when they agreed to sign onto the MDGs, and while they claim to be on track to achieving some goals, such as universal primary education, environmental sustainability (drinking water but not sanitation), and an increased role in global partnership through the spread of technologies (e.g., Mobile phones), they are lagging behind in goals related to hunger, health and sanitation (e.g., Toilets), and these goals are unlikely to be met by 2015.\(^4\) Though the percentage of people who live below the poverty line is decreasing, the amount of people who continue to go hungry everyday is not, with persisting large numbers of malnourished and underweight children (GOI 2011, 14-15). Additionally, according to the 2001 HDI report, the development process has largely neglected Scheduled Castes (hereafter referred to as Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes, whose human development status is now ten years behind the rest of the state (UNDP 2005, 26, 27).

**MDG 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women**

The indicators that have been created to set an achievement target for MDG 3 are limited and lack context. MDG 3 has one target: “Eliminate gender

\(^4\) This progress is discussed thoroughly in GOI (2011). However, Tandon (2013, 23) also outlines (in a more succinct manner) these goals and targets with a summary of progress achievement according to the Government of India.
disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education, no later than 2015” (GOI 2011, 11). In order to reach this target, there are four indicators:

- Indicator 9: Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary, and tertiary education
- Indicator 10: Ratio of literate women to men, 15-24 years old
- Indicator 11: Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector
- Indicator 12: Proportion of seats held by women in National Parliament (2011, 11)

Women’s access to education, access to paid employment, and fertility decline are the three main development indicators. The Government of India (GOI 2011, 17-18) claims that in primary education, elimination of gender disparity has been met, but not in secondary schools, though it is believed that the ratio of literacy for males and females between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four will be 1:1 by 2015. Women’s share in wage employment remains disparate and will “at best” reach 23% by 2015. On this indicator, the GOI Report (2011, 18) concludes, “Labour markets in industry and services sectors in India are heavily male dominated and a 50:50 situation for men and women is too ideal to be true given the market dynamics and existing socio-cultural framework”.

“Developmentspeak” and the neglect to define “empowerment”

Despite the main focus of many of these goals being to “empower” people, the report never defines empowerment, but has indicated that women entering the non-agricultural sector may lead to empowerment. However, in order for most rural women to enter the non-agricultural sector in the current

---

5 This is a common problem in “Developmentspeak”, with buzzwords continuously being created but not defined; catchphrases that are “simultaneously descriptive and normative, concrete yet aspirational, intuitive and clunkily pedestrian, capable of expressing the most deeply held convictions or of being simply ‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’” (Eade 2007, 468).
rural economy, which is primarily restricted to agriculture, they would be forced to completely uproot their families and move to urban sprawls in an attempt to enter into the formal labour market. Ines Smyth (2007, 584-585) notes that “when the term empowerment is used, the emphasis is often on the idea of ‘processes’ leading to broader outcomes”, as the MDGs have done by “quantifying as they do women’s empowerment in the specific and rather limited fields of education, waged employment, and participation in formal politics” (emphasis in original). However, empowerment is more of an ongoing process than a long-term goal. Development programmes cannot empower women; it is the women themselves who must act as agents in enacting change (2007, 585).

When somebody is disempowered, they have been denied choice. In its most simple form, empowerment implies change, and “refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer 2005, 13). According to the UN Millennium Project (2005a, 3):

The core of empowerment lies in the ability of a woman to control her own destiny. This implies that to be empowered women must not only have equal capabilities (such as land and employment), they must also have the agency to use those rights, capabilities, resources, and opportunities to make strategic choices and decisions (such as are provided through leadership opportunities and participation in political institutions). And to exercise agency, women must live without the fear of coercion and violence.

Empowerment encompasses agency, resources, and achievements, and the interrelationship between the three. Naila Kabeer (2005, 14) explains that agency is the process undertaken to make choices and put them into effect; agency is enacted through the use of resources; and achievements are the result of agency. However, agency can be both positive (the power to make ones own life choices, sometimes in oppressive contexts) and negative (power used to
exercise authority and control over somebody else’s choices). As will be discussed later, agency must not only be about choice, but also challenging power relations. In this context, whether women taking up wage-labour constitutes evidence of progress of empowerment depends on whether such work was started because a new opportunity arose, or as a requirement because of limited opportunities, what Naila Kabeer (2005, 15) calls “a ‘distress sale’ of labour”. Kabeer argues that making the switch to wage-labour is likely to be empowering if it is not only done for economic survival, but provides a sense of independence.

MDG 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education

The target of MDG 2 is “ensure that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike will be able to complete a full course of primary education” (GOI 2011, 11). MDG 2 has three indicators:

- Indicator 6: Net Enrolment Ratio in primary education
- Indicator 7: Proportion of pupils starting Grad 1 who reach Grade 5
- Indicator 8: Literacy rate of 15-24 year olds (2011, 11)

While education is an important step towards achieving gender equality, it does not directly tackle the patriarchal hegemony of India. MDG 3 (to achieve gender equality and empower women) has been overshadowed by MDG 2 (to achieve universal primary education). The focus on education has become so great, but also so terribly decontextualised, that it has led to a disregard for the fact that it is not the only possible way to achieve gender equality, especially in patriarchal contexts where girls are valued for their reproductive abilities. The correlation between an increase in education and a decrease in patriarchy remains unknown, although some correlations have been indicated in previous research. While MDG 3 is to promote gender equality and empower women, some sense of equality may be achieved through MDG 2 and an increase in

---

6 See Dreze and Sen (2002).
equality in primary school enrolment, but MDG 3 neglects to tackle what is creating this inequality. According to the GOI Report (2011, 18), the key factor is a “heavily male dominated...socio-cultural framework”. In 2005 Nirupam Bajpai, Jeffrey Sachs, and Nicole Volavka made public a working paper titled *India’s Challenge to Meet the Millennium Development Goals*, which discusses the progress of tackling poverty, hunger, education, and health. Gender is not mentioned at all in this report as a separate entity. It is recognised that achieving female empowerment and gender equality is complex, but no solutions are offered. Education in patriarchal contexts such as India, where women continue to be valued by their reproductive abilities, is more of a means of equipping girls as better wives and mothers, and increasing their prospects of a better husband (educated men want to marry educated women). Education does not typically encourage girls and women to question the oppressive and subordinate context in which they find themselves (Kabeer 2005, 17).

The MDGs are not the first development goals to be set. In 1990 the UN Summit set a goal to achieve universal primary school enrolment by 2000. The goal was not met, and has now been extended to 2015 through the MDGs. Nobody was held accountable for these goals that were never achieved (Easterly 2006, 9-10). There are many ways to achieve gender equality, however, there must be a political will to do so, and leaders to guide the process. The UN Millennium Project (2005a, 1) states:

> gender inequality is deeply rooted in entrenched attitudes, societal institutions, and market forces, political commitment at the highest international and national levels is essential to institute the policies that can trigger social change and to allocate the resources necessary to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment.

MDG 3 is dependent on how much each of the other seven goals also address gender issues and the constraints that come with them (2005a, 1). The increased focus on education as a gateway towards gender equality has
transferred to rural Karnataka, where devadasis now value educating their daughters, and work hard to send them to school. However, the arid agro-climatic geographical setting and lack of infrastructure of this area is a disadvantage to its population, and makes it challenging for individuals to use their education due to lack of opportunities.

**Postdevelopment: a space for religion?**

*While changes in consciousness and agency of individual women are an important starting point for such processes, it will do little on its own to undermine the systemic reproduction of inequality. Institutional transformation requires movement along a number of fronts: from individual to collective agency, from private negotiations to public action, and from the informal sphere to the formal arenas of struggle where power is legitimately exercised (Kabeer 2005, 16).*

*If we are to name the one philosophical thought that has acquired the force of a “religion”, a “faith”, it would be development (Kamat 2002, 1).*

Neoliberal development strategies like the MDGs, which promote solutions to poverty such as education and microfinance, have not been particularly beneficial for devadasi women. Previous research presents a scenario in which devadasis were doubtful of these strategies (Kandath 2001, Datar 1992). However, as I will discuss later, in my own research devadasis speak enthusiastically about development initiatives (such as microfinance loans and education), and continue to see these opportunities as the way forward. This is not necessarily because these strategies have been helpful, but more so because this is the only help they are receiving, and the only help they can access. Extensive research now demonstrates that neoliberal development policies such as these have been detrimental to “progress” and bring into question what progress and development even mean outside of the Western context (Rahman 1993; Escobar 1995, 2000; Kapadia 2002; Gibson-Graham 2005; Ziai 2007; Jeffrey et al. 2008; McGregor 2009).
Postdevelopment theory claims that development supports a Western control over the “Third World”; this categorisation of Third World in itself suggesting that the Western world is somehow better (Storey 2000, 41). The influence of development and the belief that it is the end all solution to poverty has been so fervent that some scholars have referred to development as the “new” or “secular” religion of “Western modernity” (Deneulin, and Bano 2009; Kamat 2002; Rist 1990). Similarly, development has been compared to a sort of neocolonial initiative, and has led to “a political imperative to distance the international aid industry from the colonial encounter so as to avoid tarnishing what is presented as a humanitarian project far removed from the supposed exploitation of the colonial era” (Kothari 2005: 51). This Eurocentric, neocolonial attempt to help “the other” has led to much critique of the rise of development that began after World War II (Matthews 2004, 375).

More recent theoretical frameworks, such as postcolonial geography and postdevelopment, attempt to overcome Eurocentric development practices, but both theories remain controversial due to their lack of clear methodology (Raghuram and Madge 2006; Radcliffe 2005; McGregor 2007; Ziai 2004). However, the weakness of mainstream development theories that affects devadasis is the lack of consideration that has been given to what the women believe would be useful for them, the continued disregard of patriarchal hegemony, and the believed ignorance and superstition by outsiders of the religious practices which remain important to devadasi women. Postcolonial development theory concerns itself primarily with uneven development in politics and statehood, looking to subaltern voices for solutions (Raghuram and Madge 2006; Radcliffe 2005). On the other hand, postdevelopment theory remains less concerned with these larger power relations, while looking closely at local issues of tradition and culture (Escobar 2000; Ziai 2004; Tomalin 2013).
However, due to its lack of clear methodology, postdevelopment theory has a series of critics, as well as critiques of these critics.

Earlier postdevelopment theorists have used the “post-” in postdevelopment to indicate a complete rejection of development, suggesting that local people have the agency to decide what progress means to them, and how to attain this without the assistance of outsiders from the West (Escobar 1995). Progress in this regard is seen as highly Westernised and not applicable to non-Western contexts where development is practiced. Andrew McGregor (2007, 156) claims that “development has artificially naturalised an ideal state, modelled upon the ‘developed’ West, and promoted this state as universally desirable and achievable for all peoples and cultures”. Therefore, postdevelopment begins from the belief that development is too Eurocentric and imperialistic, because the goal of development is to attain a middle class lifestyle for the majority of the world, and that this is not only unrealistic, but impossible (Pieterse 1998, 360; Ziai 2004, 1045; Sidaway 2007, 347). Development initiatives are considered to be postdevelopment when they attempt to deconstruct current development programmes and establishments in order to create space for new local, more grassroots initiatives to flourish. This involves a complete decolonisation of previous understandings of development to empower people to enact their own thoughts and ideas (McGregor 2007, 157, 161).

Postdevelopment theory tends to emphasise the failures of development, rather than the successes: poverty is still a large problem around the world; global inequality is getting worse; and most people have not seen the positive impact from the continued technological and financial growth of the West (McGregor 2009, 1693). Those who critique postdevelopment argue that it neglects to acknowledge the positive effect that development has had around the world (Matthews 2004, 373). Emma Tomalin (2013, 21) suggests that
postdevelopment does not (always) reject the undertaking of positive social change, but simply rejects that social change must come through development, which is “associated with the global aid business”. In the case of devadasis, whether or not development initiatives have been helpful is debatable. Therefore, in looking towards alternative or postdevelopment in this context, the “post-” in postdevelopment is used to shift away from traditional top-down development initiatives which have been implemented to help devadasis, and suggest that an alternative approach to development may be more effective in oppressive and rural contexts.

Postdevelopment has been criticised for not recognising the ways that development now includes concepts such as participation, empowerment, and bottom-up initiatives (McGregor 2007, 157). Postdevelopment places more emphasis on agency and subjectivity, rather than institutional changes (Pieterse 1998; McGregor 2009). However, chapter seven will reveal some problems and downfalls of these praised approaches: neglecting to define what these terms even mean; the patriarchal context in which participation takes place; and the hierarchies that happen even within bottom-up decision making. One reason that postdevelopment may be useful for devadasis is because it looks to the local context for answers. Emma Tomalin (2013, 21-22) explains:

From a postdevelopment perspective, a genuine engagement with religions would probably challenge many of the underpinnings and priorities of current dominant global development paradigms, giving rise instead to approaches based on the promotion of localized, culturally appropriate socio-economic systems that incorporate religious values and recognize the importance of the “spiritual” in people’s lives.

Postdevelopment advocates argue that development programmes work against traditional modes of living, thinking and doing, leading people to believe that their traditional ways are what have caused their poverty and
“underdeveloped” state of being. It is then believed that in order to escape grinding poverty, one must become modern to be in a more respectable and civilised position; modernity and tradition are seen as incompatible (Rahnema 1997, 384).

Development has also imposed this understanding on devadasi women: the development mantra is that they must stop the devadasi practice if they are to improve their livelihoods. While some acceptance of tradition may be a more balanced approach to helping devadasis, Andrew McGregor (2009, 1694) cautions postdevelopment enthusiasts who misrepresent the agency of development beneficiaries, characterising them as helpless victims of development, who have lost their culture and traditional ways due to imposed modernity, essentially disregarding the agency that beneficiaries display through seeking out the help of development programmes and negotiating development in local ways. Throughout this thesis, I argue that devadasis display agency through their various positioning narratives to negotiate poverty and development assistance, while simultaneously recognising that development has contributed significantly (and at times, violently) to a change in traditional practice and identities amongst the women.

Taking a postdevelopment approach to religion and development requires looking at religions more holistically, rather than forcing religions to change to suit development agendas (Tomalin 2013, 21). However, there are some dangers in doing so. In positioning tradition as superior to modern progress, postdevelopment tends to ignore the oppressive, hierarchal, and violent contexts which can be a part of tradition, especially for women (Ziai 2004, 1056; McGregor 2009, 1694). Postdevelopment does not provide clear models of how change can come about through traditional and local means, but it does contribute to raising awareness about the social context of development theory (Storey 2000, 44). Microfinance loans, self-help groups, and education are
intended to act as development initiatives from the bottom-up, empowering people to think for themselves. In the case of devadasis, there has been a hope by the government and NGOs that in doing so, women will leave their traditional practice of dedicating their daughters to Yellamma, and seek different, more respectable employment opportunities. However, lack of opportunities due to poor infrastructure and arid agro-climatic geographies, along with chronic poverty and increasing debt due to microfinance loans, have unfortunately left devadasis further burdened by poverty.

THE “CULTURAL” PROBLEM OF GENDER AND RELIGION IN DEVELOPMENT

Culture, and the way religion has fed into it, are highly significant for successful development to take place, and while it is by no means wrong to see religion as a spiritual force, in the context of development strategy and in seeking to influence its agencies we must focus on the social and structural side to religion (Selinger 2004, 538).

Religion and patriarchal hegemony

Religion is often patriarchal, meaning that simply focusing on the relationship between religion and development may result in a bias towards religious leaders, who are typically upper-class males. However, most of the people in powerful leadership roles in global and transnational agencies tend to also be middle- or upper-class males, and usually Western, if not local actors trained and sponsored by the North (Bradley, 2011, 4; Edwards 2008, 309). Therefore, it becomes necessary to more specifically consider gender relations within this paradigm. Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano (2009, 21) argue:

the role of women in social, economic, and political life remains one of the most contested areas of debate between secular and religious traditions. Closer examination reveals that specific notions of appropriate women’s actions in Islamic and Christian traditions are heavily influenced by the patriarchal structures of the surrounding society in which these religions emerged and developed.

---

In many regards, the patriarchal structures of religious life is cultural, and this patriarchy is not limited to Islam and Christianity, but is also predominant in Hinduism.

Previous research has demonstrated that NGOs typically speak on behalf of devadasi women (Kandath 2001). If NGOs begin blindly incorporating patriarchal religious values into development without a critical eye, it may worsen pre-existing gender inequalities (Bradley 2011, 5). This will usually occur in cases where male religious leaders are the primary voices for a community. Such leaders are not so prominent within the devadasi community, however, most of the leaders for government and non-government organisations and village leaders, who often speak on their behalf, are men. Within the devadasi system, religion and gender both become problematic, with devadasis usually understood to be oppressed and exploited by men under the guise of religion. Despite these drawbacks, taking a gendered approach to religion, and to development, does allow for recognition that the voices of women need to be acknowledged and targeted in order for sustainable change to take place, and that their religious values may need to be included for this to be successful. This perspective presents a challenge to the traditional hegemonic discussions which have overpowered the development field (Bradley 2011, 4).

Devadasis have been the targets of development agendas which focus on empowering women, while either not considering religion, or seeing it as problematic. Taking a gendered approach to development and religion in the context of devadasis allows space for recognition that some devadasis are single women, living in matriarchal households. Development initiatives targeting devadasis have neglected to take this into consideration, imposing heterosexual

---

8 This will be expanded on throughout the dissertation, where it will become evident that OMIF and KSAPS do not consider the religious practice of devadasis in their outreach, and MASS sees this connection as problematic, labeling it “superstitious” and “ignorant”.

51
marriage on the women as a way to progress. As a result, the neglect of religious practice for devadasi women has led to increased inequality in communities, and increased stigma against devadasi women. For example, devadasis have explained that before the practice became criminalised, the women had more respect in their communities. When advocates against the devadasi practice began speaking out, and the government took on initiatives to eradicate devadasi paddhati, the women went from a respected status to no status at all, being viewed as nothing more than prostitutes.9

Although organised religion can justify a set of values and rules which disempower women, the fact that religion remains an important element in the lives of millions of poor women around the world often leads to secular feminist agendas being understood as both Western and lacking in cultural relevance (Tomalin 2011b, 37; Peach 2000). As the next chapter will discuss in more detail, these secular feminist agendas have largely disregarded religion as an intrinsic part of devadasi paddhati. In the Indian context, gender relations are embedded in cultural traditions which means that challenging gender roles leads to challenging the traditional culture (Mukhopadhyay 2002, 174). Therefore, the assumption that secularism is good for women, or is the solution to the devadasi problem disregards ways in which the private life of the home is often a politically patriarchal and submissive space for women, completely out of their control (Tomalin 2011a, 133). Maintaining cultural sensitivity whilst trying to empower individuals is complex. Amartya Sen (1999, 31) offers a possible solution by suggesting that sometimes it is necessary to sacrifice tradition in order to rise out of poverty, but in these instances, the people who are directly involved need an opportunity to decide a new direction; the people who are being developed must be at the forefront of initiatives which seek to develop and empower them. In this framework, as postdevelopment theorists

---

9 See also Jordan (2003) for a more detailed account of the changing status of devadasis through colonial reform.
have also advocated (Escobar 2000; Ziai 2004; Tomalin 2013) devadasis must have a say in what initiatives they believe will be the most beneficial for themselves and their daughters.

For many devadasi women religion is a source of empowerment. Despite their best interests or desires, they continue to practice their tradition, especially in oppressive patriarchal environments and poverty-stricken regions, regardless of the fact that it is (in some cases) also contributing to the problem. Therefore, while some devadasis feel exploited by men in their positions as sex workers, they continue to practice this work in dedication to the goddess, who they believe will provide material wealth for them. As with many women around the world, their tradition gives them something to identify with, and provides them with motivation to push through difficult situations (Pearson and Tomalin 2008; Bradley 2011, 29). While this may be viewed as superstitious behaviour, the empowerment that religion can provide individuals is valuable.

Challenging reformers: marriage as the solution

As previously discussed, MDG 3 aims to achieve universal gender equality by 2015, but India is not on track to achieving this goal. Overall, the MDGs are problematic because they use a top-down framework, with the social elite (typically men) holding the most power, and pay little attention to local culture and pre-existing religious frameworks which tend to underlie developing communities (Ter Haar 2011, 20). Additionally, development initiatives focusing on gender in patriarchal settings have largely failed to consider single women and mothers. Of course, one cannot consider women without considering men. However, in India, a primary “solution” for lifting single devadasi women out of poor and exploitative situations is by eradicating the practice. It is believed that the most efficient way to eradicate the practice is by encouraging men to marry devadasi women, and encouraging devadasi
women to marry men. This implies that women can only “progress” in life if they have a man by their side. Chhaya Datar found this to be the case more than twenty years ago, and I would argue that not much progress has been made in shifting this mentality today. Datar (1992, 82) writes:

The problem with male intellectuals and reformers...is that they are not able to understand the patriarchal nature of present-day society. They also do not see the link between monogamous marriages and prostitution which are merely different faces of the same system of control over women. Most reformers, therefore, begin with the proposition of reforming prostitutes. They believe that devadasis are viewed by society as prostitutes and are subjected to similar hazards as prostitutes are, and so the devadasis are in need of help from the state, from society. They see the number of devadasis coming forward demanding government help, as proof of their view that they are victims and want to resist oppression inflicted upon prostitution. The kind of solution these men offer flows from the basic premise that marriage will give the devadasis stability and security, both economic and social, though some of them...do insist on their economic independence in case the marriage fails.

Problematically, we come back to Mukhopadhyay’s (2002) remark that challenging gender roles in India also means challenging traditional culture. Marriage or cohabitation between men and women is part of India’s culture. It is not culturally acceptable, particularly in rural areas, for single women to live on their own, independent of men. Lillian van Wesemael-Smit (1988, 272) explains the difficulty faced by women in search of autonomy who live in an oppressive society:

It is true that, particularly with regard to improvement in the position of women, respect for a certain culture is characteristically advanced as an argument for leaving the existing man-woman relationships unchanged. This “cultural relativism” is then used to justify and uphold the present situation where women are subordinate to men. Further, it is sometimes suggested that autonomy is a purely western concept.
The balance between cultural imperialism and cultural advancement is not clear. Perhaps the biggest threat that devadasis present to society is the fact that they are not married to a human being, though they are now legally allowed to marry men. However, entering into a relationship with a man, and subjecting oneself to the control that comes with it, can provide more financial security than women have on their own (Elson 2008, 316). This is one of the downfalls of current rehabilitation schemes and development agendas being imposed on devadasi women in a patriarchal culture. In fact, in this instance women from the Third World (both devadasis and those seeking to help them) are not advocating for autonomy at all, but are upholding patriarchal hegemony by insisting that marriage is the solution to the devadasi problem.

While the Karnataka State Government has demonstrated a shift away from simply offering money to men to marry devadasi women, now supposedly offering more long-term financial opportunities to women, many devadasis now believe that marriage is the answer to their poverty. They have been convinced by reformers that their dedication to the goddess deprives them of the opportunity to enter a heterosexual marriage. According to reformers and most development practitioners, if marrying the goddess has not worked to pull devadasis out of poverty, then marrying a man must be a better solution. Either way, the mentality remains that devadasi women cannot succeed on their own. This is part and parcel of the patriarchal hegemony that dominates Indian society. Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (2002, 274) argue, “While values may be culturally influenced...it is possible to overcome the barriers of inequality imposed by tradition through greater freedom to question, doubt, and—if convinced—reject.” Development initiatives which aim to bring about gender equality may seek to challenge the traditional hegemonic culture of India. Problematically, however, most organisations are overrun with men. Emma

---

Tomalin (2013, 183) has noted that in mainstream literature, scholars have neglected engagement with the variety of ways that feminists around the world seek to transform gender relations by engaging with feminist understandings of their tradition, and have also demonstrated little concern for the ways that religion can sometimes provide alternative, more culturally sensitive understandings of development, such as sex work as a viable employment opportunity for devadasi women, and remaining unmarried as a possibility for increased autonomy.

**Religion and development as method**

We are challenged by the question of how we can be aware of and integrate the mental and spiritual ideas of the actors/beneficiaries into cooperation projects. And how do we do this without instrumentalising religion and spirituality and diverting them from their real purpose for the sake of our programmes’ objectives? (Holenstein 2005, 24).

India presents a challenge to development practitioners who refuse to accept religion as an important part of people’s everyday lives; it is impossible to escape the religious in India. For devadasi women, their tradition has been treated as a problem in need of eradicating since the colonial period. However, when India gained independence in 1947, entering a postcolonial Nehruvian era which focused on modernisation and secularisation, devadasis became seen as a threat to these larger political goals, and the practice became criminalised in Madras. Devadasis’ voices have remained unheard during this time; their desires considered irrelevant. Frédérique Apffel Marglin and Stephen A. Marglin (1990) have suggested that economic development can be detrimental for some groups because, through current economic development, certain traditions and cultural heritage or knowledge are eliminated completely. Amartya Sen (1999, 31) argues that such objections have been quickly rejected under the pretence that “it is better to be rich and happy than to be impoverished and traditional”. Sen (1999, 31) disagrees with economists in this regard, suggesting:
If a traditional way of life has to be sacrificed to escape grinding poverty or minuscule longevity (as many traditional societies have had to for thousands of years), then it is the people directly involved who must have the opportunity to participate in deciding what should be chosen.

Pridyadarshini Vijaisri (2010, 71) has argued that this lack of consideration for religion in devadasi rehabilitation has resulted in a disassociation with the women’s traditional identities, as they have come to adopt reform rhetoric. Believing that such a loss is “distressing” because it leads devadasis to provide interview responses “guided by artificial or ambiguous reorientation of their consciousness”, Vijaisri (2010, 71) feels it is time recover these lost identities. However, I argue that these new identities are important, as devadasis learn to navigate their way through government and NGO rehabilitation, and negotiate their identities based on what they need from these organisations. Therefore, I seek to uncover to what extent development organisations have demonstrated interest in the desire of devadasis as a religious group, and how devadasis’ desires have changed through the influence of outsiders. Using their new identities, to what extent have devadasis been directly involved in deciding what should be chosen for the future? In some ways, devadasis have been directly involved, but at the same time, they have merely been puppets to larger goals which view modernity and faith as incompatible. My initial arrival to Belgaum set the stage for the ways in which I would be confronted with religion, religious boundaries and religious incompatibilities in the field.

Religious boundaries, religious incompatibilities

I arrived in Belgaum on the bus from Bijapur, where I had been diligently trying to organise a new research assistant. The OMIF staff picked me up at my hotel and took me to their home to get acquainted. As we drove past a Hindu temple in their van, we witnessed a festival taking place, and crowds of people gathered around performing various puja (rituals). One staff member bowed
their head and said something along the lines of, “Oh Lord, I pray for those heathens, may they find salvation through you.” As I listened to this, I thought, is this how OMIF staff understand all Hindus? How helpful can the organisation be to devadasi women if they see the women as nothing more than “immoral heathens”? Having just met these individuals, I remained silent as I questioned their intentions; but this incident never left my memory. I question here how productive such thinking, of us and them (the heathens), can be in this context of trying to help the other.

When we arrived to their home, the women migrated to the kitchen to prepare afternoon tea. After a few exchanges, one of the staff members asked me, “What church do you attend in Bijapur?” Through a series of events, it became clear that there was an assumption that I was a Christian on a mission. Is this why they felt so comfortable to pray for the heathens in front of me? I then began to realise that they had never before had a foreigner come who was not Christian; in their minds white skin and Christianity (and of course money) go together without fail. Even after nine months it was hard for me to break free of these stereotypes. I rarely discussed my own religious convictions with people during my fieldwork. In many other countries I have travelled to, people always ask what religion I practice; in India they just assume that I am Christian, and never bother to ask. This sometimes made it difficult to navigate my way through the field, particularly in situations where there were Christian pastors and/or missionaries present. Devadasi women approached me on multiple occasions asking me to pray for them or their children—I politely refused and sent them to the pastors. One time I had an informant who began telling me of how she came to believe in Jesus, as I sat and stared at her Yellamma devi in her kitchen. People often saw Christianity as a way to relate to me, regardless of their own religious convictions, or mine.
In a land where religion is so important, what determines which rituals and beliefs get to stay and which have to go? It is unfortunate for devadasi women that the dismantling of their tradition began before the pro-prostitution lobby took precedent. Devadasis are now left in a precarious position, coerced into the devadasi practice against their will as children, but making the choice to practice sex work (or not) as adults.

The contribution of taking a religious studies approach to development

A development process which does not leave people free to choose the way they wish to live, according to the precepts of their religious or cultural communities, is not legitimate (Deneulin and Bano 2009, 41).

Eelke de Jong (2011, 112) describes two ways in which religion and religious activities influence society in a positive manner:

First, religious activities such as church attendance, are social activities and thus comparable to meetings of football or tennis clubs, or of scouts and political parties, etc...A second channel through which religion influences society is by the values that are taught by adherents or most important leaders of the religion concerned.

In the context of Hinduism and devadasis, the temple is a beneficial place for networking to happen. Devadasi paddhati requires devadasis to go to the temple every Tuesday and Friday, and during festival times they may spend up to one week at Yellamma Gudda in Saundatti. Temple visits are religious activities which double as social activities. Unofficial meetings take place, which foster economic connections and trading relations between community members. The other way in which de Jong believes that religion influences society in a positive
way is through the morals and values that it prescribes for the lives of believers. These values influence behaviour and actions which in turn affects the economic performance of the society, a causality originally presented by Max Weber (1963).\textsuperscript{11}

Religion and spirituality are integral to many people’s everyday lives and rituals, and as such, challenge development practitioners to consider how they can remain aware of these nuances, and integrate the mental and spiritual ideas of actors and beneficiaries into humanitarian projects. More important is the question of how to do this “without instrumentalising religion and spirituality and diverting them from their real purpose for the sake of our programmes’ objectives?” (Holenstein 2005, 24). Tamsin Bradley (2011, 35) outlines two ways in which a religious studies approach can contribute to development:

First, some scholars argue that there are insufficient ethical guidelines for development work, which is problematic because it means that practitioners are not accountable to a set of professional codes of conduct or moral principles. However, since a moral and ethical framework underpins religious traditions, a study of how religious ethics guide those working for FBOs may reveal the potential role of religion in helping to construct a moral framework that different secular organizations could adapt.

Second, critics of development also stress the lack of real communication between development partners... Practitioners working with religious communities should heed the centrality of faith in the lives of many local people. Acknowledging the religious identities and lives of others is a first step towards building sensitive dialogue. Silently witnessing others express their faith could be taken as a sign of respect for them. It could demonstrate an outsider’s willingness to engage in and understand the lives of others.

Unfortunately, as Bradley (2011, 3) has suggested, and I have also witnessed, development practitioners tend to disregard rituals which are

\textsuperscript{11} According to Weber (1963, 1), “Religious or magical behavior or thinking must not be set apart from the range of everyday purposive conduct, particularly since even the ends of the religious and magical actions are predominantly economic".
important for beneficiaries. However, Bradley’s second reason for using a religious studies approach to understand development offers a solution for this problem, providing a way of sensitively building dialogue with beneficiaries. For devadasi women, this lack of consideration towards local people’s faith and culture by reformers and development practitioners has resulted in unsuccessful development initiatives thus far, and has also contributed negatively towards the changing identities of devadasi women.

While OMIF is more interested in searching for long-term alternatives, they also show little interest in devadasi tradition or ritual. The OMIF project coordinators have never been to Saundatti, and have chosen to have their medical clinic on one of the only two days of the week that devadasis partake in specific puja to Yellamma. In my own research I found that Indian Christians are ignorant about Hindu culture and practice, though they have compassion which drives them to want to help the other. However, Bradley (2011) argues that this motivation through compassion does not necessarily equate with them being culturally sensitive or even interested in the other.

Even though MASS is a secular NGO run by ex-devadasis, it will become evident in later chapters that the initiatives of the organisation have lacked cultural sensitivity and respect towards devadasi practices and rituals. Although they have been working to eradicate devadasi dedications for nearly thirty years, the practice persists. Being an NGO of primarily ex-devadasis, the staff members are arguably familiar with the worldview of devadasis. However, as an organisation initially formed by the government, they have been heavily influenced by reform initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s which saw no place for religion, and have come to believe that all devadasi practices are superstitious and ignorant. Though they are “insiders” to the culture, their heavily reform-based approach to helping devadasis lacks sensitivity to the devadasi practice. This is evident through the approach they take towards cutting the matted hair
of devadasis. Therefore, unlike OMIF which lacks sensitivity towards the devadasi practice, but displays compassion, MASS displays neither of these characteristics, forcefully cutting off the matted hair of devadasis, believing that this will enlighten the women to the reality that devadasi paddhati is only superstition. Lila Abu-Lughod (2013, 226) suggests, and I would agree, that asking women such as devadasis to renounce their faith and their identities as devadasis, or “their deep sense of belonging to their families or communities” displays a lack of respect.

Sabina Alkire (2002) presents a case study demonstrating how consideration of religion and spirituality can have a positive impact on rural women. A group of women in rural Pakistan were given a choice between goat rearing and rose cultivation. They chose rose cultivation because they can use the roses for religious ceremonies, and walk in the rose fields, which provides peace of mind and unity with their creator. Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano (2009, 46) suggest that development is not restricted to improving the things people value, but rather the things that “they have reason to value” (emphasis in original). Therefore, the values which direct development must be critically examined with all parties involved, through a process of reasoning that allows for the perspectives of all people involved to be heard. Within the context of devadasis in Karnataka, KSAPS sangha groups are the only development initiative at present that has approached devadasis in this manner, empowering the women to continue to practice sex work, as they have presumably always done, because this is the lifestyle choice they have elected. However, for KSAPS, tradition is irrelevant; devadasis are not seen as “traditional sex workers”, and there is no space for women who desire other employment opportunities outside of sex work.

12 For more on this, and the way that this campaign developed, see Ramberg (2009).
If NGOs were more open to understanding and accepting devadasi paddhati they may be able to source ways of implementing initiatives which allow women to continue dedicating their daughters as part of a matrilineal line and security measure, without the assumed future of sex work, or child prostitution, as the case may be. Wendy Tyndale (2011, 213) explains that religious individuals understand poverty as a “lack of spiritual fulfillment”. Devadasis usually dedicate their daughters to the goddess in search of some kind of material or spiritual fulfilment from Yellamma. Families who dedicate daughters usually suffer from disease, infertility, and poverty. It is believed that the spiritual act of dedicating a daughter to the goddess will lessen the burden of material hardships. This is an example of Gerrie Ter Haar’s (2011, 14) theory. She explains:

religion frequently manifests itself as a form of active engagement with a world of invisible powers, it has a bearing on people’s views of the material world and affects the way they deal with it. This is why development workers or agents need to be familiar with religious ideas and the practices derived from them, since this will enable them to understand popular mentalities and will equip them to explore ways of using religious resources for purposes of development.

Some devadasis continue to believe that they are serving the goddess through sex work as well, however it is the act of dedication and diligently performing the specific rituals involved which satisfies the goddess and reaps reward. To outsiders, this is superstition; to devadasis, this is survival. It is problematic that development practitioners working with devadasis will typically belittle these activities, labelling them as “superstitious” and “ignorant”.

Religion and (post)development theory in practice

Lisette Van der Wel (2011, 359) has argued that, while efficiency and effectiveness of development schemes are important, development is also about “people re-connecting to themselves, to others and to the great web of life”. For
Van der Wel, when individuals feel dignified, worthy, connected to others in similar situations, and group to fight for what they want, development becomes an internal force. Development requires building networks and partnerships between a variety of actors who can acknowledge that life is made of not only material realms, but also social, political, and spiritual realms of life, and who are receptive to the value that different groups and thought processes bring to development (Haynes 2007, 62). In being open to these possibilities, Jeffrey Haynes (2007, 62) offers three ways in which religion and spirituality can make an important contribution to the human development of religious believers: “by (1) giving life metaphysical meaning and hope of well-being (2) helping mould individual and group behaviour in relation to culture, way of life, and work, and (3) facilitating development of positive social, developmental and political values that encourage community cohesion.” However, Haynes (2007) argues that while religion and spirituality can be peaceful socio-cultural motivators, the spiritual and material resources that religion provides can also be misused in violent or deceptive ways. As previously discussed, postdevelopment theory looks to bridge the gap between religion and development. However, postdevelopment theorists also caution that in looking to local communities for solutions, these violent, oppressive contexts that are part of tradition are often ignored (Ziai 2004, 1056; McGregor 2009, 1694).

The religious practice of dedicating one’s daughter to the goddess for economic and material benefit is viewed by outsiders working in development as superstitious behaviour, which supposedly blinds individuals to the reasons for which they suffer from poverty and oppression. In contrast, advocates of a religious studies approach to development, as well as postdevelopment theorists, argue that people should be encouraged to use their religious resources as part of development strategies. Religion need not always be assumed positive, or negative. Ter Haar (2011, 8) argues that if development is
to build on people’s own resources, then it should not be limited to material and intellectual resources, but should include religious/spiritual resources. In this context, religious resources include, but are not limited to: religious ideas, religious practices, religious organisations, and religious experience.

Leah Selinger (2004, 539) suggests that religion is an important part of culture and social identity which has been excluded by development theorists, agencies and practitioners who have undermined this importance by forcing an individualistic and private system of beliefs and practice on beneficiaries. Religion has been understood in development theory and practice as a spiritual or institutional force, rather than a cultural and social practice that dictates people’s worldviews, and therefore can have a direct influence on social and economic development. Selinger argues that the ignorance of disregarding the important role that religion has as a practical and cultural force has harmed the development process; Kurt Alan Ver Beek (2002, 68) has called this process “anti-developmental”.

Postdevelopment theorists agree, viewing development as a Eurocentric, neocolonial attempt to help the other (Kothari 2005; Matthews 2004; Ziai 2004). In the case of devadasis, the worldviews of the women have been viewed as irrelevant and, nearly three decades later, little progress has been made by development agencies. If the women’s understandings of their own livelihoods and their experience in their practice were to be considered in development initiatives, it is possible that more progress would have been made. If devadasis have found a way to ensure economic survival through sex work, why have development practitioners been so quick to tell them they need to do something different; that sex work is not an acceptable livelihood? Acknowledging the importance of religion as a cultural and social force, whether in mainstream development practice or postdevelopment, fosters a space for devadasis to practice traditional sex work. On the other hand, many devadasis have been
forced to practice sex work against their will, and have been exploited in this work. Perhaps one of the more difficult elements of devadasi paddhati for development is the fact that the practice is different for every woman; it can be both empowering and exploitative.

**The difference between faith-based organisations (FBOs) and non-government organisations (NGOs)**

*“Is teaching ‘no sex before marriage’ a religious thing? It’s also proven to be the most effective way to prevent HIV” (OMIF staff, Hyderabad).*

Since the onset of colonialism, missionaries have been central in running schools, hospitals, and poverty relief services in India, long before the age of “development” (Deneulin and Bano 2009, 84). Many of these establishments are still pivotal to helping locals, but are now run through FBOs. FBOs have many positive characteristics which differ from secular organisations. Tamsin Bradley (2009, 105) suggests that in order for an organisation to be faith-based, faith needs to have embedded itself in the organisation’s operational structures rather than just existing as a source of personal motivation for individual employees. Gerard Clarke (2006, 845) outlines these differences, claiming that FBOs are distinguishable from secular organisations because:

They draw on elaborate spiritual and moral values that represent an important and distinct adjunct to secular development discourse. As a result, they have a significant ability to mobilise adherents otherwise estranged by secular development discourse. They are highly networked both nationally and internationally and are highly embedded in political contests and in processes of governance in both horizontal and vertical terms. They are less dependent on donor funding and they have well-developed capacity and expertise in the key areas of development practice.

Similarly, Gerhard Hoffstaeder and David Tittensor (2013, 404) claim that FBOs are in a better position to provide aid than secular organisations because they are more committed to their cause, they have better access to communities through pre-existing networks and similar cultural backgrounds, they
command greater credibility and trust from the community, they provide holistic care, and generally experience less conflict. In general, FBOs are believed to have gained more trust within the local communities where they work (Tomalin 2013, 225), though this idea is restricted to the notion that FBOs are working within communities that share the same religious convictions. This is significant, because beneficiaries receiving help from their same faith community may benefit in a different way than those beneficiaries from a different faith community.

My research contributes to religion and development methodology by looking more closely at how FBOs work in multi-faith environments. In this context, I found that Hindus are understood by Christians to be open to receiving help from any god, because, according to some Christians, Hindus do not understand the Christian god to be different from any other Hindu god. In talking to devadasi women, it became evident that this is true for some of them, while others view Jesus as a god strictly for Christians. However, this understanding that devadasis are willing to worship any and all gods helps OMIF openly justify praying with devadasis and reading them the Bible. Additionally, as Clarke (2006) has proposed, the Christian networks that OMIF have are beneficial for the organisation as a whole, as they provide support and a funding network through local pastors and international churches. However, OMIF has limited networks (even in their own community) with other faith groups.

Unlike secular NGOs, FBOs are inspired and guided by faith, though some FBOs will downplay their faith, focusing more on social outreach and identifying as an NGO (Jennings 2013, 364). In large, this is what OMIF strives to do, but it is obvious that their faith is very much a part of their motivation and inspiration, and is incorporated into their outreach. According to Gerard Clarke (2008, 32-33), there are four ways that FBOs use their faith through social
or political engagement, or within development or humanitarian projects. These
categories are: passive, active, persuasive, exclusive.

- **Passive:** The teachings of the faith are secondary to larger humanitarian
  objectives, used as motivation for action and to mobilise staff and
  supporters. Faith is subsidiary to how the organisation carries out their
  humanitarian objectives with beneficiaries and partners.

- **Active:** Faith is a primary motivator in how humanitarian objectives are
  carried out, and how staff and beneficiaries are mobilised. While faith is
directly related to how beneficiaries and partners are identified and
  assisted, there is no blatant discrimination against people of other faiths,
  and the organisation encourages multi-faith cooperation.

- **Persuasive:** Faith is a primary motivator in how humanitarian objectives are
  carried out, and how staff and beneficiaries are mobilised. Faith is
  important in identifying and assisting beneficiaries and partners, and is
  the main reason for engagement. It is focused on conversion to the faith
  and/or attempts to promote the interests of the faith to the detriment of
  other faiths.

- **Exclusive:** Faith is the main and ultimate motivation for action and in
  mobilising staff and supporters. It is the only consideration when
  identifying beneficiaries. Any social or political engagement is grounded
  in the faith, and is usually militant or violent and can be directed towards
  other faith groups.

OMIF lies somewhere in between Clarke’s description of a passive FBO
and an active FBO. Most of the time, faith comes secondary to larger
humanitarian goals. However, donor outreach is primarily through church
networks, and prayer is frequently incorporated into events and house visits.
Clarke’s description of FBOs concerns how donors understand and engage with
FBOs, rather than beneficiaries. He suggests that the first two variables (passive
and active) are relatively unproblematic for donors, but the second two
(persuasive and exclusive), which tend to focus on conversion, can be
problematic. Donors aside, my research demonstrates that problems lie within
the way these various types of FBOs interact with beneficiaries, and with each
other.
The faith of OMIF staff members lends to a particular kind of compassion which secular NGOs are lacking, and provides a source of commitment for FBOs. However, this compassion for beneficiaries does not always correlate with poverty alleviation. Bradley (2011, 14) contends that “faith can result in blindness that prevents its members from really seeing the local people they claim to help”. Nonetheless, advocates of faith-based development believe that FBOs tend to be more committed to long-term development, in comparison to secular NGOs, who need fast results, often lack oversight in what locals need, and frequently neglect to consult the community. OMIF staff in Belgaum displayed an urgency to produce results, focusing primarily on HIV/AIDS prevention for devadasi women, although most devadasi women in this district no longer practice sex work, and many of those who had AIDS have now died. However, it is also the only development organisation in the area that expressed interest in sitting down and listening to what devadasi women had to say, and took the feedback on board seriously and began implementing change quickly.

**Keeping it “holistic”**

There are a few specific faith-based characteristics of OMIF that distance the organisation from secular NGOs working with devadasis. The project coordinator of OMIF frequently refers to his outreach vision as “holistic”, which is typical of FBOs because they take into account both the material and spiritual dimensions of their beneficiaries’ lives (Hoffstaedter & Tittensor 2013; Clarke 2008). For OMIF, this holistic approach comes in the form of doing house visits, and supposedly providing individual counselling to devadasi women. This is a key area which MASS, a secular NGO, admitted to be lacking in. In theory, house visits are a positive way to hear first hand from devadasis. However, in practice, OMIF house visits often turn into quick phone calls or just briefly stopping in to invite beneficiaries to events. During my fieldwork, house visits were primarily reserved for people living with HIV/AIDS, who need practical
assistance with CD4 counts, Antiretroviral Therapy (ART), hospital visits, medication, and so on. Devadasis who are not HIV+ are a secondary priority to non-devadasis who are HIV+. Though OMIF’s social outreach programme in Belgaum is supposed to be secular, the project coordinators of the programme are Christian, and prayer is a very important part of the outreach process, and is also part of the holistic approach which the FBO strives for.

The importance of prayer

Another way in which OMIF stands out as faith-based is that it is heavily networked through churches. Most of the funding comes from churches in the US and UK. As well, it frequently collaborates with local pastors, and has also trained the local pastors in HIV/AIDS awareness. However, the main difference between OMIF outreach and the outreach of MASS and KSAPS sanghas is prayer. Prayer is a major component of OMIF’s work. During OMIF functions for beneficiaries, staff always call on pastors to attend. In the first and only devadasi-specific function OMIF staff had during my fieldwork, the focus was primarily on pastoral care and prayer. There was no discussion of sex work or HIV/AIDS prevention. Male pastors stood up and read from the Bible, while devadasi women sat on the ground and listened. Following this, pastors made themselves available for individual prayer with those who were interested.

Before each Tuesday clinic, all the staff gather around the doctor’s desk and say a prayer for the clinic. On Fridays they hold staff prayer meetings; all of the peer outreach workers are expected to attend at least every other Friday, but most attend weekly. Weekly attendance appears to take place because it means that outreach workers do not have to do house visits. A couple of the outreach

---

\[13\] CD4 tests measure a person’s white-blood cell count. When the white blood cell count of people living with HIV/AIDS is below 400, patients are at risk of contracting AIDS, and are therefore required to start Antiretroviral Therapy (ART), which involves a series of medications to help boost the immune system and stop HIV from progressing into full-blown AIDS.
workers also regularly attend Tuesday clinics, likely for the same reason. Though the majority of OMIF’s work is in collaboration with the church-planting evangelical team, Friday prayer meetings are the one time when all members of the church planting team are required to attend.\textsuperscript{14} During Friday prayers, all staff are required to pray out loud for a part of the NGO which is requested of them by the project coordinator, and they are also allowed to ask for prayer requests, both personal and beneficiary related, for which the group then prays together. There appears to be an expectation that staff members should adhere to Christian practices while in the office. Each prayer meeting, one of the staff members is requested to read a passage from the Bible and discuss it, regardless of whether they are Christian or not. However, it is not seen as an imposition to ask Hindus to pray to Christian god, because, as one OMIF staff member told me, “Hindus happily pray to the other gods”.

One Hindu staff member of OMIF told me in an interview that she is Hindu, but that I should write down that she is Christian. Erica Bornstein (2005, 58) explains that when organisations evaluate employees according to their faith, the act of conversion becomes a source of empowerment, as the individual is no longer a subject of conversion once they do convert. Conversion is then an “act of discursive power”. Though this OMIF staff member has not officially converted, Bornstein’s analysis is applicable to this case. This staff member uses a Christian identity within the organisation because she believes that she is more respected by other staff members. If she identifies as a Christian, she is seen as equal to them, rather than a Hindu heathen.\textsuperscript{15} While staff members are not known targets of conversion in OMIF,

\textsuperscript{14} The church-planting team is one branch of OMIF, focused on evangelical mission work. Members of this team are responsible for going around the households of local villages to talk about Jesus, read from the Bible, and pray together with household members.

\textsuperscript{15} I use this expression here to denote the idea that she a “sinful” woman, both through her decision to practice sex work, and as a woman who has not accepted the Christian god as the True god.
acting as a Christian in front of team leaders, through prayer and scripture reading, is well received.

The same OMIF outreach programme which runs outside of Hyderabad is completely secular; the majority of the staff are not Christian, and there is no prayer or pastoral care involved in its outreach, though most of the funds for the programme come from churches. Hyderabad staff explained to me that because the head staff in Belgaum are Christian, the programme becomes Christian by default. The project coordinators in Belgaum told me that they do have one mission to serve God, alongside a social mission to serve the people. During an interview with two staff members at the head office in Hyderabad, they expressed support for this mission by confirming that because Belgaum staff are followers of the Christian faith, it is normal and expected that evangelical outreach is a part of their mission.

Although OMIF do not see it as problematic to run their initiatives this way, Tamsin Bradley (2011, 123) has cautioned against it, advising that “it is inappropriate to attempt to unite two such dissimilar religions through the Christian concept of prayer.” In Bradley’s (2011, 124) case study, as well as in my own:

the prayer used in these village gatherings was a one-sided dialogue, the only benefit of which was to make [FBO] members feel that they were following in Christ’s footsteps. Prayer in this context gives the [FBO] representatives the illusion that they have made a deep connection with the poor and needy.

Bradley (2011) argues that this kind of Christian compassion that draws FBOs to help beneficiaries through prayer must be connected with an ability to critically recognise what kind of impact these development initiatives have.
Outside of the entrance door to the OMIF HIV/AIDS prevention clinic there is a sign which contains a message that sex should be reserved for one partner in marriage. While my research assistant and I both felt this was very much a Christian message, I was surprised to see that on World AIDS Day, OMIF was handing out KSAPS (government) pamphlets which were giving the same message. However, government clinics and sanghas are stocked full of condoms, and encourage women to always use condoms. On the other hand, while OMIF is not against condoms, it does not distribute them, nor does it have them publicly available. A staff member in Hyderabad explained to me in an interview that this may be because condoms come with the stigma of having promiscuous sex, and people are embarrassed to take them. The project coordinator in Belgaum told me he is not against condoms, and is working to get them in the clinic. A different staff member told me that there are condoms in the drawer at the clinic, and they will give them to anybody who asks (very few people ask, and women never ask). Séverine Deneulin (2013, 58) points out that “inseparability of the material from the spiritual dimension of life introduces a fundamental difference between a Christian and a non-Christian perspective on international development at two levels: humans are called to be in communion with each other and God, and human actions are marked by sin”. While condoms may be available, or may be recognised as important, the reality is that sex before marriage or outside of marriage is viewed as sinful and ungodly. It is believed by some OMIF staff that once devadasis faithfully come to believe in Jesus as their saviour, they will stop practicing sex work, no longer valuing the higher wages that come with it.

These characteristics are specific to OMIF as an FBO. NGOs such as MASS and KSAPS sanghas are not concerned with holistic care, and have received
most of their funding from the government. However, because MASS is primarily run by ex-devadasis, and most of the women are religious (Hindu), it does incorporate the singing of Yellamma songs into the annual meeting at Saundatti, while the KSAPS sanghas in contrast are strictly secular.

LIMITATIONS OF A RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT METHOD

As 2015 approaches and it becomes obvious that the MDGs will not be met, the extent to which current neoliberal development initiatives are beneficial to very poor rural women is questionable. Devadasis have been the targets of reform and rehabilitation initiatives for more than thirty years. Having come to believe they are “dirty” and disrespected, they desperately seek an alternative life, and are happy to take any kind of help they can get. Moreover, they find themselves stuck in poverty traps in an economy which presents few opportunities for them outside of agricultural labour. However, as wives and devotees of Yellamma, many devadasis continue to have their own economic system through Yellamma, using their marriage to the goddess and their muttu as a license to make money through sex work. The Karnataka government and NGOs are adamant about taking this economy away from devadasis. Yet, stuck in neoliberal development schemes, the future of devadasis without this income, as Dalit women in a patriarchal society which values men and upper-class individuals, remains bleak.

Development organisations, both secular and faith-based, have not taken into account ways in which devadasi paddhati may be beneficial for poor, rural, Dalit women. Though they are aware of the reasons that women continue to

---

16 More recently, MASS is being funded by an international organisation, EveryChild UK.  
17 The muttu is the necklace of red and white beads which is tied around the neck of the devadasi when she is dedicated to Yellamma. It is the material representation of her divine marriage, or muthaide status. See Ramberg (2006) for more on this idea of “fertility economics”.
dedicate their daughters to the goddess, which are largely to do with issues of poverty and lack of access to resources, they are not focused on this connection between the belief in material benefits through spiritual devotion. It becomes more straightforward for organisations to view devadasis as trafficked victims, or exploited sex workers in need of rescue. Rather than asking devadasi women what they want, organisations have imposed solutions on the women. However, in many regards this is a practice embedded in a patriarchal society, where men do use religion to exploit devadasis, sometimes having sex with them without paying any money, or showing up drunk and abusing them. Additionally, the fact that this is a matrilineal practice has left some young girls without a choice: they are dedicated as young children and later forced to practice sex work, or fall into sex work because of their devadasi dedication. Therefore, in one regard, using religion and development as a methodology is necessary to consider the benefits and positives of the devadasi system (e.g., increased autonomy, justified alternative employment opportunities to agricultural labour), including the recognition that perhaps this religious practice is exploiting women for the sexual benefits of men. Thierry Verhelst (1990, 85) warns of the dangers of using tradition as a way to understand development:

Some people are currently speaking of “basing development on tradition” and of considering culture as “a tool for development”. Such an approach is well-meaning but ambiguous for it is an invitation to manipulation. By means of anthropological data, the values and rationality of other societies would be used to shape the members of these societies into the monocultural development mould. This would involve my making use of someone else’s culture in order to include him or her more easily in my project (emphasis in original).

In the case of devadasis, this kind of risk is quite high because the data can be skewed in multiple directions. Additionally, challenging patriarchal hegemony, whilst remaining sensitive to local voices and desires, is not always
well received in the field. My research assistant told me when we first met that Indians have a set mentality, and are not willing to change. She warned me that my belief that some devadasis may not be exploited would lead people to say to me “you are not a good feminist”. As an “outsider”, it is often believed that I cannot possibly understand what is happening, or that I am not educated on local issues. However, Mukhopadhyay (2002, 175) explains that even as an “insider” to the culture, her “liberal” feminist views were not well received by locals. To overcome this challenge, and understand the position of devadasis and their personal desires for the future of devadasi paddhati in development, the voices of devadasis are prominent through most of this thesis. However, even in this framework, I am only “speaking with” (Nagar and Geiger 2007) devadasis, through transcriptions of our exchanges, which have come through a translator.

Kurt Alan Ver Beek (2002) argues that in order to approach development initiatives more holistically, practitioners must first attempt to engage with local knowledge systems in order to better understand how the community thinks. Talking to people about local beliefs, observing their behaviour, and participating in local practices and ceremonies will help to better understand people. He also suggests that a space should be created where locals are able to discuss their communal goals, and how their practices and beliefs, as well as new alternatives may be useful or counterproductive to accomplishing these goals. Finally, similar to Sen’s suggestion, Ver Beek (2002, 75) proposes that it is the people directly involved who must decide on their goals and how they will achieve these goals, what kind of help they may need from outside, and how their traditions will have a role in this process. Odhiambo Anacleti (2002, 173) suggests that involving people in this way will lead to a clearer understanding of why such an engagement is necessary to bring about long-term and beneficial change. Presently, researchers and development practitioners often
speak on behalf of beneficiaries, presuming that they know the answers and have the best solutions to help people, forgetting that in fact they need the collaboration of local people in order to achieve any of these goals. After nearly thirty years of NGO influence in the lives of devadasis, the women have adopted a reform rhetoric, and now express what development practitioners and reformers have led them to believe will be better for them.

Undeniably, faith is a key motivator for people in development, igniting positive change in the lives of many, and is usually more focused on long-term development than secular organisations. However, this urgency to demonstrate the positive influence that faith can have on development has also led to a disregard for particular kinds of faith activity that can be detrimental for development. These multi-faith interactions between Christian development workers and Hindu beneficiaries tend to be one-sided, with OMIF making an effort to share their personal religious convictions with devadasis, but showing disinterest in hearing the religious convictions of devadasis. While holistic care, prayer, and the upholding of Christian morality are all seen as important and necessary parts of social development by OMIF, the religious practices of devadasis are seen as nothing short of sinful and in need of eradication. Yet, because of its sense of compassion and long-term commitment, OMIF is the only organisation in this research which demonstrated an interest in listening to devadasis through focus groups. Nonetheless, OMIF sees devadasis as victims in need of rescue, which is similar to the approach of most reformers, feminists, abolitionists, and development workers.

Research in religion and development is largely restricted to FBOs and the concerns they present for donor-funding. However, in this chapter I have demonstrated that there are problems with the ways that development organisations are interacting with religious beneficiaries, both in instances where the organisation is secular, and when beneficiaries practice a different
faith than the organisation. Using postdevelopment theory may be one possibility for creating a space where religion has more of a place in development, as local peoples’ voices and opinions are seen as necessary to the development process. As I will argue further in the following chapters, the lack of space for the voices of devadasis is significant to the role that development and rehabilitation plays in this context. More research is needed examining how development organisations work with religious beneficiaries, rather than simply how religious organisations operate.
Chapter three:
Abolitionism, Feminisms, and the Decline of Devadasis

For the British, the devadasi was not the servant and wife of the gods, but a slave to unharnessed human desire and a profound threat to Victorian readings of the marriage contract (Levine 2004, 161).

Sex trafficking isn’t a poverty issue but a law-enforcement issue (Gary Haugen, International Justice Mission, in Landesman 2004).

In feminist writing...questions of agency have been of particular concern in postfeminist and neoliberal contexts in which women (particularly young women) are often presented as autonomous, agentic and empowered subjects, and in which, even in feminist scholarship, an older vocabulary that spoke of structures, domination, inequality and oppression sometimes seems to be giving way to something more celebratory, as though feminist theorizing were itself inflected by a postfeminist sensibility and had come to believe the hype. Thus, while some scholars insist that we must think female agency in a wider context of persistent coercion and inequality, others deploy a more upbeat language of freedom and choice (Gill and Scharff 2011, 9).

The sexual subaltern subject creates possibility of crossing sexual, cultural, and geographical boundaries. But her agency is not free and unfettered. She is constantly negotiating the experiences of violence, racism, and marginality, negotiating hegemonic feminist constructions of sisterhood and the imperialist manoeuvres that deny her subjectivity. Yet, by focusing on the marginal location of the post-colonial sex worker, the third space, we come to understand the disruptive potential of this subject, through her agency, her mobility and the pursuit of her desires (Kapur 2000, 885).

Thus far, I have argued that the disregard for religion in development interventions, and the top-down development approaches that are typically employed on devadasi women, have been problematic. I have also discussed the problem of gender when thinking about religion and development, and the reality that religion can be gendered in a way that results in women’s voices being lost, with religious leaders typically being elite males. Finally, I have argued that postdevelopment theory provides a space for thinking about religion in development, and recognising the importance of subjectivity and agency in development processes.
I have previously suggested that the history of devadasis in North Karnataka is unclear. Despite this lack of clarity, this chapter will demonstrate that devadasis have been affected by longer processes of regulatory change and interventions concerning temple women more generally, which has impacted the practice that remains today. As I will discuss, in addition to reform and rehabilitation, devadasi women have been the targets of abolitionist and feminist movements since the nineteenth century. Understandings of devadasis continue to be grounded in a belief that the women are a coherent group with similar desires. In reality, the aspirations of devadasis remain unclear, as reformers, abolitionists, and feminists have continuously projected certain desires onto devadasis, assuming they are exploited and unhappy. Debates around choice and agency dominate this argument—devadasis are believed to be denied any choice or agency, because they are dedicated to Yellamma as young girls, and because they are extremely poor. Consequently, abolitionist, feminist and reform movements over the past 150 years have been trying to “free” devadasi women, but have been largely unsuccessful. In this chapter I argue that whether or not sex work is an “ideal” choice for devadasis, it is nonetheless their choice, and denying them this choice further suppresses them. As sex workers, devadasi women are frequently the subjects of a moral agenda, particularly in debating whether sex work is exploitative or empowering, but more recently with the growth of sex trafficking as the latest humanitarian “problem”. Consequently, abolitionism, feminisms and other social movements have contributed to a decline in the devadasi practice.

This chapter will first examine the implications of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial abolitionism on devadasi women, drawing on parliamentary papers and primary sources. These abolitionist reforms contributed to a change in the social status of devadasis and were subsequently followed by local social reform movements, headed by middle-class and elite
Indians. With the rise of cultural nationalism also came a rise in feminisms in India, and an increased focus on devadasis and respectability. While it is likely that these social reform and feminist movements were not directed at the devadasis of Karnataka, whose history remains unknown, lost with the many other subaltern voices we are unable to recover, they have had larger implications for devadasis in Karnataka today, which will be discussed throughout the chapter. By the 1980s, reform and rehabilitation efforts began to focus more specifically on devadasis in Karnataka. The turn of the twenty-first century saw the introduction of Neo-abolitionists, with Christian groups and feminists taking up similar concerns to abolitionists of the nineteenth century, referring to devadasis as victims of “modern-day slavery”. The reoccurring theme throughout the chapter, is that within all of these agendas, devadasis remain voiceless and unheard. Subsequently, I turn to postfeminism and different conceptions of agency to discuss possibilities for hearing devadasis and including them in agendas which seek to eradicate their tradition, but do not offer any alternative livelihood options.

As will become evident in later chapters, the decline in the devadasi practice is now correlated with a change in the way that devadasis identify. One complexity of the devadasi practice is that the women do not have a space in any of these movements, which have been primarily middle class and elite attempts at gender equality and female “respectability”, neglecting to address poor rural nonwhite women or give devadasis any agency. Even when feminists portray devadasis as agentic subjects, they are portrayed in a way which does not reflect devadasis’ personal desires, which (as a consequence of reform and abolitionist movements) now include heterosexual marriage.

Postfeminism allows for a shift towards self-empowerment, recognising each woman as an individual rather than as part of a group. Instead of focusing on equality, postfeminism shifts to focus on difference (Pilcher and Whelehan...
2004). This stance becomes important in the context of devadasi women, because many women have different stories, different feelings, and different desires. What unites them is their dedication to the goddess, and (almost always) their desire for the practice to end with their generation. To date, movements to help devadasis have not considered the women as individuals with different needs. Postfeminism also provides a space to recognise that devadasis display agency through negative freedom. Negative freedom, or “unfreedom” as Amartya Sen (1999) calls it, “refers to the absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action” (Mahmood 2001, 207), and occurs in the face of poverty, lack of access to resources, oppressive religion, etc (Sen 1999, 1).

LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY: FIRST-WAVE FEMINISM, REFORM AND ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENTS

British noninterference of religion and abolitionist movements

The early nineteenth century marks an increased concern around issues of slavery by the British. British Christian evangelicals formed the Anti-Idolatry Connexion League, to argue that the British government in India should remain only “neutral” towards “native institutions”, while supporting Christian missions in India (van der Veer 2001, 21). Therefore, slavery in the West Indies was seen as “less brutal” than slavery in the East Indies, because it was a “native” practice (Major 2012, 249). Similar to debates around sati, slavery was initially presented as a religious practice, but later argued to not be an “authentic” Hindu religious practice, so that the British East India Company could abolish such practices under the pretence that they were maintaining religious neutrality (2012, 250). In the 1820s and 1830s, Hindus began to protest

---

1 This will be discussed later in the chapter. For an analysis on positive and negative freedom see also Berlin (1969) and MacCallum (1967).
2 See Mani (1997, 1998) for further discussions on debates around sati.
against this rhetoric, which they felt was anti-Hindu, arguing that Hinduism was under attack by the British government and Christian missionaries.

Under this framework of religious neutrality, discussions concerning devadasi women during the colonial period were largely secular, revolving primarily around issues of slavery, and were dominated by European men. In Parliamentary papers from the nineteenth century, dancing girls, also called nautch girls, are commonly referred to as slaves. It is unclear whether there is a direct connection between the women of the nineteenth century and the women now labelled devadasis, but it appears that this slave rhetoric referred to the class of women who later became the focus of larger social reform movements around the “woman question”. In these reports the terms “prostitutes” and “slaves” are used synonymously, and the Anglo-Indian judiciary frequently refers to devadasis as prostitutes. Amalgamating the various terms used to refer to devadasi women, and simply resorting to prostitute or slave was the beginning of a “silent reform” movement by the judiciary to completely eradicate what was understood to be a fallen and immoral practice (Parker 1998, 562-563).

In a Parliamentary paper from 1828 titled *Slavery of India*, Sir John Malcolm (1826, 427) recounts:

The dancing women, who are all slaves, are condemned to a life of toil and vice, for the profit of others, and some of the first Rajpoot chiefs and Zamindars in Malwa, who have from 50 to 200 female slaves in their family, after employing them in all the menial labours of their house during the day, send them at night to their own dwellings, where they are at liberty to form such connections as they please, but a large share of the profits of that promiscuous

---

3 For example, see Dubois (1906, originally 1777), Buchanan (1807), Short (1870), and Thurston (1906).

4 “Silent reform” is a term Kunal Parker (1998, 559) uses to describe reform movements that took place through the judicial reform of Anglo-Indian legal conceptions.
intercourse into which they fall, is annually exacted by their master, who adds any children they happen to produce to his list of slaves. The female slaves in this condition, as well as those of the dancing sets, are not permitted to marry, and often very harshly treated, so that the latter, from this cause and the connections they form, are constantly in the habit of running away.

In Malcolm’s (1826) account of slaves, a connection is made between dancing girls, prostitution, and exploitation. Similar features to devadasis are that the slaves cannot marry. There is an assumed dissatisfaction presented through the fact that girls are “in the habit of running away”. In 1841 a second Parliamentary paper titled Slavery, released by the East India House, James Melvill (1841, 39), debates whether or not the life of dancing girls is a form of slavery. He relays the process of buying and selling slaves in India in the nineteenth century, confirming that those being sold are girls who are raised for prostitution.

The prohibition of the traffic in slaves, whether it be announced in a prohibition of the sale, or a prohibition of the importation, must undoubtedly occasion a certain degree of dissatisfaction; but it is amongst the worse orders of the community, amongst the professed dealers in human flesh, whose abominable livelihood is affected by the abolition, and amongst that detestable class of wretches who bring up slave-girls from the earliest age for public prostitution.

Given the crossover of terminology, it is likely that he was referring to temple women or dancing girls. However, Melvill’s (1841, 66) concern here is less to do with dancing girls, and more about the trafficking of children. Additionally, a parliamentary paper from 1828 quotes N.J. Halhed (1826, 134) referencing nautch women who buy girls as “bona fide slaves”. These reports from the nineteenth century indicate that devadasis were buying young girls against their will who were particularly beautiful, to dedicate them as devadasis—a behaviour understood as slave trade.
With increased pressure from the anti-idolatry activists, Queen Victoria began speaking in favour of a noninterference of religion policy in India, and by 1863, a noninterference law was passed (Cohn 1983, 165; van der Veer 2001, 21). However, this did not stop Christians speaking out against what they felt were “sinful” practices. Subsequently, similar arguments continued into the early twentieth century, when a few notable female voices began to elicit concern for the sinful practice of devadasi paddhati. Amy Carmichael (1909) and Katherine Mayo (1929), both female Christian missionaries in India, deprecated Hindu beliefs and practices in their attempt to save young devadasi girls from a life of “despair”. Carmichael (1909, 100) recounts that babies and young girls who are taken by temple women are thrown automatically into a life of evil. She contends that regardless of the circumstance, it is better that the babies are motherless, living with Carmichael and her fellow missionaries, than raised to understand “evil” as good, with the temple women. Mayo (1929, 123) believes that children are dedicated to the gods and taken by Brahmins against their will. She speaks of a Christian woman who dedicates her life to rescuing “little Slaves of the Gods.” As Mayo describes, through Christian prayer, devadasi girls are enlightened to realise that their lives would be much better out of the temple, and the girls run away to be with the missionaries.

Though devadasi women were working as courtesans long before the colonial period, the influx of the British in the 1800s led to the increased sexualisation of devadasi women, which resulted in an inevitable change in devadasis’ social status. The notion of a religious system that made a connection between the sexual and the spiritual was incomprehensible to the British, and as such, they began referring to the devadasi tradition as “temple prostitution” (Metcalf 2008, 102). British soldiers in India were not allowed to marry, which led many of them to enjoy the services of sex workers. It is

---

5 See Jordan (2003) for an overview of archival research on this transition.
uncertain whether these sex workers were necessarily attached to the temples, however, as British soldiers became interested in the services that these women provided, the Raj justified the relationships between the soldiers and the women on the grounds that the profession was hereditary for specific castes of Indian women, and therefore it was not shameful (Levine 1996, 603). Increased sexual activity of British soldiers with Indian sex workers resulted in venereal disease rates going up amongst the soldiers (Collingham 2001, 183). Prostitutes were blamed for the increase in venereal disease, and were therefore seen as being in need of regulation. This led to the implementation of the Contagious Diseases ordinances which were common in British colonies at the time. Lock hospitals had been established as cantonments in the late eighteenth century to control venereal disease, and were used in the nineteenth century to control prostitutes by requiring them to register, attend fortnightly examinations for STIs and receive hospital treatment (Levine 2003, 38-40). According to Linda Epp (1997, 177), “the British thoroughly dismantled the Lucknow courtesans’ material and cultural life. Their song and dance was declared ‘immoral’ yet many courtesans were forced by law under the Contagious Diseases Act (CD Act) to serve as prostitutes for English soldiers”.

Official reform and abolition efforts against devadasis began in 1861, with the establishment of Penal Codes 372 and 373 by the Bombay/Madras High Court (Parker 1998; Kannabiran 1995). These Penal Codes were intended to stop the trafficking of people under the age of eighteen for the purpose of prostitution, and targeted individuals involved in buying and selling young girls for this purpose. The Penal Codes do not mention devadasis specifically,

---

6 Metcalf (2008, 103) adds that, as well as being “a hereditary caste profession...prostitution was...so the British commonly believed...recognized in the Hindu law books.” Parker (1998, 567) makes the comment that many legal colonial sources acknowledged the difficulty in defining dancing girls as a caste.
nor do they address prostitution of individuals over the age of eighteen.\textsuperscript{7} However, these laws were later used against devadasis in order to prevent future dedications of girls as temple servants. Other issues of the time which revolved around devadasis included how to define their marital status, as well as their adoption rights and ability to own property (Parker 1998; Jordan 2003; Natarajan 1997). Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran (2003, 20) suggest:

It was the independent possession and use of property and wealth by women, and the dependence of men on wealth acquired by women, that insulted the community. This immediately created a crisis of sorts in the changing order, because the new norm made for a further entrenchment of patriarchy and patriliny in matrifocal communities. Adoption of girls by women, the root cause, had to be eliminated.

To this extent, devadasi women were a primary focus, as adoption of young girls sustained their practice. It was therefore believed that changing adoption laws, making it illegal for women to adopt young girls, would assist in eradicating devadasi dedications.

The implementation of Penal Codes 372 and 373 led to further ambiguity of the devadasis’ legal status by the late nineteenth century. Although there was an attempt made to change the legal status of the devadasi from a religious right to a secular wrong, it was recognised that the religious customs of the women could not be ignored (Kannabiran 1998; Jordan 2003). This was happening at the same time that the British Raj began taking a noninterference of religion stance. Therefore, the High Court initially argued that the Penal Codes were intended to give young girls a choice of married life upon reaching sixteen years of age (Parker 1998, 562). However, the priority quickly became eradication of the tradition, and by ignoring religion and focusing on

prostitution, they were able to justify abolishing the devadasi system (Kannabiran 1995; Jordan 2003). By this time both British and Indian middle class and elite women began associating prostitution with poor livelihoods, child marriage, the unacceptability of widowhood, and arranged marriage (Forbes 1996, 188). Association was rarely made with attachment to the goddess, and if so, was merely interpreted as superstitious behaviour. Moreover, “controlling women’s sexuality, exalting maternity and breeding a virile race of empire-builders was widely perceived as the paramount means for controlling the health and wealth of the male imperial body...” (McClintock 1995, 47). By the 1920s, community hygiene and national morality were commonly equated by reformers, nationalists, and colonial administrators under a system used to control the population and impose respectable moral behaviour (Whitehead 1998, 92). All temple women, dancing girls, and courtesans were seen as the same immoral woman—the devadasi. As women with a variety of practices and desires, devadasis became a target of this reform to control women’s sexuality, and force them to work as sex workers under certain regulations. Within these debates, devadasis remained unheard.

Nationalism and right-wing feminist movements

[Hindutva has] provided women access to the nation by shoring up and manipulating traditional ideas of family and womanhood. Thus women feel a sense of belonging, a stake in the nation, without actually challenging many of the fundamental assumptions of the family. Resistance within tradition offers the thrill of nationalist activism without the accompanying loneliness accruing to radical social critics who stand on the margins of the nation as they defy the foundations of the imagined community (Banerjee 2005, 150).

The relationship between women and the rise of nationalism in India is an extensive topic which many scholars have covered in depth (Mosse 1985; Sangari and Vaid 1989; Chatterjee 1993; Sarkar 1999; Natarajan 1997; Mani 1997; Sinha 2000; Banerjee 2005). Some feminisms in India emerged as part of cultural nationalism and right-wing political movements. This has had implications for
devadasis, largely concerning respectability, which remain today. More specifically, the ways that masculinity influenced the place of women at the time, as “heroic mother” and “chaste wife”, and reinforced Brahminical forms of conjugalitity (Mosse 1985; Sarkar 1999; Banerjee 2005), has created ideals which contemporary devadasis now greatly desire.

Though seeped in Hindutva values of fundamentalist Hinduism, nationalism was largely a middle class movement, with respectability at its core. The women involved did not consider themselves feminists—feminism was seen as a Western phenomenon (Kapur 2000, 859; Sinha 2000, 625). However, some of these nationalist women may be considered right-wing feminists, because they played a significant role in advocating for a particular kind of femininity, which was framed around the Victorian patriarchal values of middle class Indian men who had been educated by the Western elite. The emergence of nationalism in the nineteenth century opened an avenue for introducing new conceptions of womanhood. Sikata Banerjee (2005) explains:

the “woman” underlying Hindutva female activism is a Hindu, middle- to upper-caste, fairly well-educated woman. Integral to this identity are notions of virtue and chastity linked to an idealized vision of a harmonious Hindu family. This is the essentialized female identity Hindutva women draw on as they enter the discourse of masculine Hinduism as heroic mother, chaste wife, and celibate warrior. Whether or not the reality of their lived experience expresses this identity, it remains an ideal worthy of emulation (Banerjee 2005, 145).

Those who were part of the nationalist movement upheld the chaste and modest woman as the ideal in order to exemplify their own nationalist goals. This contributed to the underpinning of middle class notions of respectability that seeped into the social classes of the time (Mosse 1985). A clear distinction

8 See Banerjee (2005) for a more detailed account of the relationship between Hindutva and nationalism.
was made between what admirable qualities constitute respectable middle class women, and what lewd qualities lower class women possessed (with prostitutes being just one example of this) (Chatterjee 1993). Partha Chatterjee (1993, 130) suggests:

The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination.

Using this framework, Indian middle class women ousted devadasis from their role as dancers and temple servants in the name of respectability. Respectability was based on morality and social well-being, though this varied across regions. However, reformists, revivalists, and traditionalists shared a general concern for socioreligious reform and the upholding of chaste and moral behaviour, especially for women, who should ensure the home was always well kept. Therefore, respectable women should educate their daughters to be good housewives, and respectable men should care for their families, and stop engaging with concubines and dancing girls (Anagol 2005, 123). It was this middle class respectability movement that resulted in the devadasi practice being viewed as immoral, and these dancing women becoming understood as nothing more than prostitutes (2005, 125). This being the effect of patriarchy on the middle class women at the time, Padma Anagol (2005) argues that placing blame on men (or patriarchy) takes away the acknowledgement that women have acted as agents of change throughout history. Rather, women had their own agenda in advocating for an end to the devadasi/dancing girl institution. Anagol (2005, 126) suggests:

By condemning [devadasis] as ordinary prostitutes, the women belonging to this movement were able to secure two objectives: preventing men from engaging in the practice of keeping mistresses by making the practice socially unacceptable and improving the
status of their own role as housewives by assuming attributes traditionally associated with [devadasis], such as the ability to sing or play musical instruments...

Although these alternative roles for which nationalist women were fighting displayed some sense of empowerment, Banerjee (2005, 113) argues that in the end, they were incomplete. This is because “woman is never imagined as an active, sexual being within this discourse of nationalism” (Banerjee 2005, 113). These middle-class virtues that were at the forefront of the nationalist movement denied any sexuality; sexuality was found in “the other”—the Muslim man, woman, or lower caste woman, who “embodies uncontrolled sexuality and threatens Hindu female virtue” (2005, 141). Furthermore, the prostitute was the primary symbol of sexuality, the opposite of the chaste ideal, and was a threat to the nationalist movement (2005, 141). Given that feminism in India emerged in solidarity as a middle class movement which further oppressed the subordinate, lower-class, women by advocating a married and domesticated life as the ideal for all women, it is not surprising that the ability of lower-class women to use their sexuality for pleasure and profit was seen as a threat by the middle class (Natarajan 1997, 75-76). The Indian middle class took away the rights of devadasis to put on dance performances in order to create a new, more respectable image of dance, which they named bharatanatyam, and began performing for the public, thereby “forcing [devadasis] into lesser-status occupations such as the theatre and urban prostitution” (Anagol 2008, 614). Therefore, “the victim status conferred on the sex worker is essential to the survival and the purity of the nation and the preservation of Indian womanhood” (Kapur 2000, 864).

*Muthulakshmi Reddy and the Self-Respect movement*

The Self-Respect movement was an anti-caste movement in the Madras Presidency formed in 1926, which challenged the nationalist movement’s
neglect in acknowledging class, caste, and gender hierarchies within India (Sinha 2000, 626; Whitehead 1998, 100). One of the pioneers of the movement was Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, who was also a member of the Women’s India Association (Whitehead 1998, 98). Additionally, she was the first female member of the Madras Legislative council, and subsequently the only woman to be elected to the anti-Brahmin Justice Party9 (1998, 98). In 1927, Reddy began speaking out against social reformers and women activists, whom she felt were not inclusive of public opinion or India’s social diversity. Reddy’s father was a Brahmin, and her mother was born into the Isai Vellala caste. Women of the Isai Vellala caste danced and sang in the temples, but her father went against this tradition, sending her to school to be educated (Forbes 1996, 103). Speaking as a non-Brahmin, Reddy (1931) believed:

the only way to bring the Brahmans, the women and the pariahs together on a common platform is by enfranchising the women and the depressed classes on equal terms with others. If the women and the depressed classes are given freedom, power and responsibility, I am sure that they would very soon learn how to rectify the present social evil.10

Reddy’s goal through the Self-Respect movement was to bring equality to both gender and caste, which she believed could only happen “through a radical restructuring of society” (Sinha 2000, 637). However, her entrenched beliefs in respectability, as the solution to the devadasi problem meant that the way Reddy went about this task was not much different from women of the

---

9 In the late colonial period, the anti-Brahmin movement took hold in Madras politics. “Anti-Brahmin activists in early twentieth-century Madras promoted the nationalist idea of a separate country, Dravida Nadu, which would encompass all non-Brahmin castes in the region, theoretically excluding South Indian Brahmans and all North Indians. The Anti-Brahmin movement became an important political and intellectual force in the Madras Presidency at the turn of the century, and remained so throughout the twentieth century” (Whitehead 1998, 100).

nationalist movement. Speaking on behalf of the oppressed classes, such as devadasis, Reddy subsequently silenced the subaltern.

In Mysore State, devadasi *paddhati* was criminalised in 1909 (Reddy 1964, 72). Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was one of the leading elite women heading the abolition of devadasi practice in the early twentieth century. She used the rise in venereal disease as a tool to advocate against the devadasi tradition. As part of the Self-Respect and anti-Brahmin movement, devadasis were seen as being exploited by Brahmins. Reddy and others in these movements argued that “women who were dedicated to temples and trained in classical dance and music were almost invariably from non-Brahman castes. Their patrons, however, were usually Brahmins, and indeed a wealthy Brahman patron was the desired ideal of most devadasi households” (Whitehead 1998, 101). This meant that devadasis were believed to represent the prostitution and concubinage of low caste women for Brahmin men, which was seen as exploitation (1998, 101). Whitehead (1998, 101) explains that even though the anti-Brahmin movement seemed to support women’s liberation, the ideology of the movement focused on controlling lower caste women’s sexuality. A conglomeration of colonialism, nationalism, and Reddy meant that by the 1920s devadasis had become regularly associated with commercial sex workers (1998, 102-103). In 1927, when Reddy became the first female legislator, as part of the Madras Legislative Council, she subsequently proposed a Bill to prevent the dedication of girls to temples, which was established as the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act in 1929. This was the first major step in Madras Presidency to abolish the devadasi system. Reddy (1964, 64) was adamantly against the devadasi practice, arguing:

[the devadasi system] was a great piece of injustice, a great wrong, a violation of human rights, a practice highly revolting to our higher nature to countenance, and to tolerate young innocent girls to be
trained in the name of religion to lead an immoral life, to lead a life of promiscuity, a life leading to the disease of the mind and the body.

She was convinced that the practice was wrong, and was not interested in hearing the voices of the devadasis. Reddy believed that it was her responsibility to rescue Indian women and girls who were lacking in the entitlements which she possessed (Hubel 2010, 168). Srividya Natarajan (1997, 114) points out that in reality, devadasis had access to many of these entitlements (“literacy, skill, self-government, property ownership and personal freedom”), which would have undermined the justification offered for the imposition of reform movements. Natarajan (1997, 115-116) argues that Reddy used this sexual agency that devadasis had and reframed it as victimhood and helplessness. The ability of devadasis to have control over their sexual relations with men was interpreted as sexual exploitation in order to create a justification for rescuing the women and girls.

In 1927, the South Indian Devadasi Association was launched in protest against Reddy’s proposed Bill of 1927, intended to prevent future dedications (Natarajan 1997, 107). Devadasis wrote letters, arguing that they were temple servants, with the specialised practice of song and dance, and should not be degraded by being identified as prostitutes. Janaki Nair (1994, 3158-3163) explains that, in the early twentieth-century Mysore Presidency, the Muzrai (department of charitable endowments) retracted the funding to temples which helped devadasis sustain their livelihood; a sly way to slowly rid the temples of devadasis permanently. Twelve devadasis from a temple of princely patronage wrote petitions in which they defended their position with religious texts and customs, believing that their “hereditary occupation” must be respected and protected. They argued that they should be allowed back in the temples based on their family traditions, but expressed willingness to accommodate societal changes. However, the Mysore administration rejected their petition and
manipulated their words, reading the texts in a different light, claiming that devadasis had violated sacred texts, not fulfilled them. Natarajan (1997, 124-125) cites one letter written by the South Indian Devadasi Association and sent to the government in 1927:

> Popularly our caste is styled by the name of dancing girl probably due to the reason that most of our caste women are experts in dancing and music. Such a hoary name is now unfortunately mingled up and associated with an immoral life. It would, we submit, be easily conceded by every one that the institution of dedicating one’s life to a temple has nothing to do with prostitution...Hence, we make bold to question the implied identification of Devadasis with prostitutes.

Unfortunately, the association made between devadasis and prostitutes had already become entrenched. As prostitutes, devadasis had no voice, and Reddy spoke for them, but in doing so, did not relay the message they desperately tried to express. Even in instances when devadasis expressed their desires, it was interpreted as some sort of false consciousness— they were treated in a manner which indicated that they did not know what they really wanted, or what would be best for them.

Reddy’s solution for the women was marriage and a domesticated life (Nair 1994, 3165). This solution resulted in devadasis losing their rights to own property, which was beneficial for the men who gained control, and disadvantageous for the women who lost it (Natarajan 1997, 139). By the 1930s Reddy had transformed the image of the devadasi to prostitute, which resulted in the women experiencing raids by the police, and public humiliation. This

---

11 John Jost and Mahzarin Banaji (1994, 3) define false consciousness as a system of beliefs that go against group interest, and therefore contribute to the upholding of a personal and group disadvantage. This may happen through adjusting to material insecurity or hardships, forming needs which maintain a cycle of misery, injustice and suffering, taking comfort in the belief that your own suffering is unavoidable or deserved and believing that individuals have a particular social status because of some sort of “intrinsic worth”.
was happening before the 1947 Devadasi Act was implemented, at a time when devadasis were being grouped under the Immoral Traffic Act of 1930 and treated as prostitutes (Natarajan 1997, 123). It became apparent that devadasi women did not agree with Reddy. Groups of women collaborated to fight for the right to continue practicing devadasi paddhati (Nair 1994, Natarajan 1997, Jordan 2003, Hubel 2010). In 1947, with the implementation of the Madras Devadasi Prevention of Dedication Act, dedications to temples became criminalised and invalid, allowing devadasi women to enter legal heterosexual marriages. This act officially prohibited certain classes from participating in nautch dances. From this point forward, devadasis who participated in nautch dances were understood to have been dedicated to a life of prostitution.

### 3.1 Legal Changes to Devadasi Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Legal Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>Penal Codes 372 and 373 were passed to stop trafficking of people under eighteen years of age for the purpose of prostitution, targeting those who were buying girls for this purpose (usually older devadasis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>The practice of dedicating girls to temples became illegal in Mysore State (North Karnataka was part of the Bombay Presidency)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Reddy's Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act is passed to prevent the dedication of girls to temples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>The Immoral Traffic Act was passed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Madras State passed the Madras Devadasi Prevention of Dedication Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Karnataka State passed the Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act (which officially came into effect in 1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Protests in Shimoga district, Karnataka took away the rights of devadasis to practice bettale seva (nude worship) in Chandragutti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although Reddy had a different interest than the nationalist movement, her understandings of equality remained engrained in right-wing ideas of respectability. Banerjee (2005, 147) argues:
this discourse of middle-class virtue obscures the fact that lower-caste and poor women along with sex workers have absolutely no recourse to any kind of redress in Indian society and will continue to have no protection in a Hindu nation defined by ideas of chastity and virtue because their lower social status defines them as inherently “unchaste”...

Natarajan (1997, 16) argues that when the nationalists and the middle class hijacked the devadasi dance tradition in the name of respectability, renaming it sadir/bharatanatyam, they created “a new definition of correct gendering”: the more respectable woman. To this extent, women who did not live up to the ideals of respectability were viewed as a threat to society (and thereby the nation and the nationalist movement). Devadasis threatened the societal order that women were responsible for upholding. It was not acceptable for women to take on the role of revolutionaries, hence nationalist women adopted patriarchal feminism—feminine values of respectability were located within the domestic sphere (Mosse 1985). To this extent, the men who were in the forefront of shaping India as a nation, whose values weighed heavily on what the British upheld as “moral”, redefined the “good woman” as the domesticated wife while changing the image of devadasis into prostitutes, and ultimately the “bad woman”.

Promoting the home as a respectable space for women is a notion which does not conform to more leftist feminist movements. However, the family and domestic sphere remain highly valued in Indian society, and feminists have been unable to provide alternatives that simultaneously empower women, and get them out of the home (Menon 1999, 12). Alternatively, right-wing feminist groups in India have found a way to promote women’s rights in India, while placing value on the importance of the home for women, and as such, they have been quite successful (1999, 12). For other Indian feminists, particularly more present-day movements, the home and the Hindu family are spaces which should be restructured: women should be out of the home, they should not
desire to be in the home, or the nation, under these patriarchal dynamics (Banerjee 2005, 150). Banerjee (2005, 149) rightly points out that “the dilemma for feminist activists can be located in the fact that so many Indian women resonate to this female identity disseminated by [Hindutva women]”. Indeed, devadasi women adhere to more right-wing ideologies, understanding heterosexual marriage and the domestic sphere as a more empowering position than being single, working as sex workers. Significantly, it is likely that these social reform and feminist movements were not directed at the devadasis of Karnataka, whose history remains unknown, lost with the many other subaltern voices we are unable to recover. However, these reform movements have had large implications for contemporary devadasis in Karnataka, many of who now believe that respect is more important than socio-economic status, and understand this respect to come through heterosexual marriage and a domesticated life.

THE 1970S-80S: SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM AND OTHER SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

After the devadasi practice became criminalised in Madras in 1947, the following two decades were relatively quiet periods in India for feminists. In the Western world, the 1970s brought with it a growing awareness of the lack of women in labour markets, as well as the sexual division of labour and household production. Similar movements took place in India as well, with the realisation that the Nehruvian development model, which claimed to create social equality, was not working. “It was only in the late 1960s and ‘70s that signs of crisis in the Nehruvian model of state-led development planning became palpable, leading to the first loss of legitimacy for the Congress government and the rise of a range of new social movements, all of which culminated in the imposition of a state of Emergency in 1975” (John 2005, 109).
Such social movements included a group of Maoist female students at Osmania University in Hyderabad who formed the Progressive Organisation of Women (POW) to begin organising against gender oppression. Mary John (2005, 110) explains, “For those women who had taken the claims of Nehruvianism and the constitutional guarantees of equality seriously, the biggest shock of the 1970s was the realisation of the invisibility of women in the overall development process”. Within the “Nehruvian imaginary”, the middle class believed itself to be modern, elite, and privileged in society. Consequently, these feminists who wanted to represent all of India’s women, including rural underdeveloped, poor women who did not benefit from leftist politics, have done so without making transparent their own identities in a hegemonic system which privileges the middle classes (2005, 137).

As a movement led by middle class women, the POW was concerned with issues of dowry, “eve teasing”, sexism in advertisements, and so on, and strived to mobilise female students for their own safety against attacks on women (Sen 2004, 198; John 2005, 111). They wrote a Manifesto outlining their goals to fight the “the sexual division of labour, and the culture which rationalized it”; rather than being anti-patriarchal as earlier feminist movements had done, they expressed a desire to achieve equality amongst men and women (Kumar 1983, 104). The POW organised the first protests against dowry in 1975, but were quickly shut down by the declaration of Emergency (Kumar 2011, 310). Similar movements followed in Maharashtra;[12] posters were created, displaying slogans

3.2 Feminist Slogans

“Come on sister, let us forge unity
To wage war for women's liberation
O, Venubai, why do you remain subjugated?

Come on
Join our rally
Till now injustice prevailed
Today we refuse to live like slaves
We are afraid-no more!
We tolerate male domination-no more!
O, Venubai...”
(Kumar 1983, 106)

---

such as that in text box 3.2. However, the declaration of Emergency put a halt to these movements, and the lifting of the Emergency in 1977 brought with it a new set of feminist movements, mostly organised by women associated with the Left, who saw feminism as middle class and at odds with the aspirations of most women. Yet, the women who formed these new groups were urban, educated, and middle class. Aware of this, they recognised that feminist movements offered less for them, and more for the rest of the women in India who came from lower working classes, and began taking up initiatives focusing on poor women at the grassroots level (Kumar, 1983, 106; John 2005, 111).

The 1970s also marked the starting point for larger movements around issues of both caste and feminism. The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) was the first women’s self-help group of its kind, and has been a model for subsequent sangha groups in India. It continues today as a successful example of how women can come together to ignite change. However, some of the primary founders of SEWA, such as Ella Bhatt, were middle class women. SEWA was (and continues to be) an organisation of women who were all working in the informal sector for low wages and in poor conditions in Gujarat (Kumar 1983, 102). SEWA provides SEWA Bank, health care, insurance, capacity building, housing and infrastructure, legal services, and child care across India and creates videos to spread their initiatives. However, in its early days SEWA did not associate with other feminist movements of the time, and some feminists viewed SEWA as more reformist. Radha Kumar (1983, 103) suggests that it is possible that SEWA kept their distance from feminist associations because they saw them as “Westernised” or radical in their approaches. Nonetheless, SEWA has been praised as a solution to poverty for rural women in Gujarat. However, Mary John (2005, 124) argues:


With their emphasis on women’s economic agency, processes of decentralization, increased levels of financial and managerial participation by the “beneficiary” population, and the reduced role of the state, it is perhaps not surprising that SEWA has been picked up as a model by international agencies such as the World Bank—and not just for Third World countries, but even for First World nations who are themselves seeking to dismantle their welfare systems in favor of neoliberal policy orientations. SEWA is therefore at the hub of a number of highly contentious issues.

John (2005, 127) therefore questions whether “the heavy emphasis on representations of poverty—at the cost of a parallel understanding of class dynamics—[has] also become one of the weaknesses of the women’s movement”. Though SEWA is highly praised for its work with rural women, many of these neoliberal policies which it seeks to implement are not useful for poor rural women. However, coming from middle class backgrounds, the women who lead these movements continue to see modernity and neoliberalism as important and representative of successful “development” (Bhatt, Murty, Ramamurthy 2010, 128). Radhika Govinda (2013, 615) argues that because these women come from middle-class high-caste Hindu backgrounds, they use religion as a way to relate to and mobilise other women. However, these representations focus on idioms and symbols which are familiar to their upper-caste backgrounds, and therefore alienate Dalit women and other women from religious minorities. Though a variety of women and men from all classes came forward to stand up for equal rights during this time, it was primarily urban middle class women affiliated with the Left who began to demonstrate concern for the rights of low-class and rural women. However, these initiatives did not benefit devadasis, who continued to silently and secretly dedicate their daughters and maintain temple roles in Karnataka until the 1980s.

14 This will be discussed further in chapter seven.
The 1980s and the rise of social movements: the “Chandragutti Incident”

The 1980s brought with it a new wave of reform, which became increasingly popular with the influence of three social movements: 1) Dalit political parties seeking to abolish caste hierarchies and domesticate Dalit women in order to establish respectability and honour within their families and communities; 2) Local and international feminist uprising against sex work and migration for sex work, viewed as violence against women (devadasis began to enter into UN documents on sex trafficking, child prostitution, and sexual slavery); 3) The increase of NGOs and government initiatives to stop the spread of HIV, which was targeted at devadasis and sex workers (Ramberg 2006, 10). These pressures, especially from Dalit groups and feminists, led to the passing of the 1982 Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Bill, officially making it a criminal offence for devadasis to dedicate their daughters to temples in Karnataka, as well as practice any public rituals associated with the devadasi practice. Similar themes from the colonial period emerged again, focusing on female respectability, domesticity, the lumping of devadasis into the category of prostitute, and the refusal to acknowledge the religious freedoms that come with the practice (2006, 10-11).

In 1986, devadasis became the focus of media attention with the “Chandragutti Incident”. In Shimoga district, Karnataka, devadasis had an annual festival called bettale seva (nude worship) in which they would go to the Yellamma temple at Chandragutti and bathe naked in the sacred river. They would then walk four kilometres naked, shouting “Yellamma, Udo, Udo, Udo (Praise to God!)” (Epp 1992, 145). Devotees paraded around nude as a vow to the goddess, in hope for answered prayers. Despite nude worship being removed from the official list of Seves (Services) in 1928, the practice continued (1992, 145). The Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS), comprised of educated young Dalit men, held a protest against nude worship on the premise that nudity is
shameful and therefore not respectable. The devotees would tell the 
protestors, “See, our goddess has given this. Let it be. What harm will it give? If 
you stop this, the goddess will become angered, give all the Devi’s curse to us”, 
but they were not heard, and the DSS continued to rally support against them 
(1992, 146). The DSS looked to the government for support to pass a law ending 
nude worship, but the government refused to intervene. Two hundred DSS 
supporters waited at Chandragutti on the morning of bettale seva and blocked 
devotees from entering the river to bathe. There was an argument about the 
forceful approach taken, but on the second day, six hundred protestors arrived 
in the face of 60,000 to 80,000 devotees (1992, 153). Subsequently, a riot broke 
out, resulting in the arrest of some devadasis, and the suicide of others (out of 
them in protest against the attempt to prevent nude worship (1992, 154). 
Journalists flocked to the scene to take and publish photos of nude worshippers. 
According to one female reporter, “Nude worship by women at Chandragutti 
was sincere, but this ‘traditon’ violated normative female modesty” (quoted in 

This was not the first time that bettale seva has come under attack. In the 
1830s, with the rise of the Anti-Connexion Idolatry League and the “non- 
interference of religion” activism, the British began retreating from the 
administration and maintenance of Hindu temples in India (van der Veer 2001, 
21). Consequently, they started investigating what sorts of temple rituals were 
happening, in order to justify their decision to hand over financial 
responsibilities to local Brahmins. In 1835, a letter was written to the Bombay 

---

15 Dalit youths first joined DSS in 1972 in the midst of the development of previously 
mentioned social movements, and was started as a movement targeted towards anti-
caste protests, but later became directed solely towards Brahmins and Brahminical 
values (Epp 1992, 148).
Presidency (which included North Karnataka at the time), notifying them of a the practice of *bettela seva* at Yelamagud temple in Belgaum. The letter reads:

The following notice of the Yellama temple is from a report of the Belgaum Mission aries, lately printed. “In July, Mr. Beynon visited for a second time this year, the Yellamma *jatra* and witnessed the most horrible and revolting scenes. The remark which a native Christian who was with him, made in reference to them was, ‘Come let us flee, this is Sodom and Gomorrah.’ Among other disgusting spectacles, was that of males and females, promiscuously and indiscriminately walking the distance of about a mile; some with girdles made of the branches of neem or margosa with their clothes loosely thrown over them, others with girdles without any clothes, and others in an entire state of nudity, which together with their dishevelled hair and bodies besmeared with a mixture of turmeric gave them a most frightful appearance. In passing through the crowd they received the same homage from the deluded spectators as Yellamma herself. When reasoning with them and showing to them the debasing nature of their ceremonies; many appeared to feel, and many declared that they would not fulfil the vows they had taken upon them, some of swinging, others of going naked, &c. We are happy to say that Government has relinquished the revenue which it derived from this festival; and it would be well if it had nothing to do with it. In consequence of some disagreement between the *poojaries*, who are *shoodras*, and the *koolkurnees*, who are brahmins, about the apportioning of the fees, Government has appointed four brahmins as a kind of trustees to collect and take charge of the offerings. The *poojaries* are dissatisfied with the arrangement, and say, that they have a claim to all, and receive nothing. The impression produced in consequence on the mind of the people, was that the fees were collected by the authority of Government” (The Oriental Spectator 1838, 252).

Familiar themes surrounding the immoral and lewd behaviour of lower castes emerge again here. Although the British did not interfere with *bettale seva* beyond temple administration, they did hand over all responsibilities to Brahmin accountants (*koolkurnees*), regardless of the fact that lower caste priestesses (likely devadasis) insisted that they were the ones responsible for offerings made to the temple. It appears that in light of this disagreement, they
left the pujaris (priestesses) with the impression that the government would maintain control of the finances, though in reality it was the Brahmins who became responsible.

Similar to the Chandragutti Incident, caste politics, initiated by men, leads to a silencing of devadasis. The issues surrounding respectability which were so fervent in the nineteenth and early twentieth century resurfaced in the 1980s in Chandragutti, and once again directly attacked devadasis. However, the concern this time was not whether women were dedicated to the temples or practicing sex work. Instead, in both 1835 and 1986, the religious ritual of bettale seva was directly attacked, and the only concern within the protests was the nudity of Dalit women (though in the 1835 reference, naked men are also mentioned).

The 1986 Chandragutti Incident resulted in questions as to why only Dalit women would be asked by the goddess to parade around nude. Again, a morality which viewed nudity as inappropriate was projected onto an innocent group, bringing widespread media attention. The desires of devadasis continued to remain unheard and irrelevant, and for the next few years following this 1986 incident, no devadasis were legally allowed on the temple grounds and all puja at Chandragutti was banned (Epp 1992, 157). The 1980s were the beginning of a more active reform effort to dismantle the devadasi system throughout Karnataka.16

**LATE TWENTIETH AND EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: NEO-ABOLITIONIST AND FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS IN SEX TRAFFICKING**

The nineteenth-century depiction of devadasis as slaves has continued into the twenty-first century, where devadasis are now portrayed as victims of “modern-day slavery”. Like eighteenth- and nineteenth-century missionaries to

---

16 For more on the “Chandragutti Incident” see also Assayag (1992, 30-37).
India, evangelical Christians and second wave (radical) feminists of today remain focused on rescuing devadasis from a life of slavery. This rescuing mission has now been reframed as sex trafficking. The scope of trafficking is vast, and does not constitute the basis of this thesis. Therefore, I simply wish to highlight the impact that present day anti-trafficking movements by Christian evangelicals and radical feminists have had on devadasis by continuing to portray them as victims of (now) modern-day slavery. Both evangelical Christians and radical feminists view the world as an evil (male-dominated) and immoral society, full of sexual exploitation and abuse, with prostitution being viewed as violence towards women and sexual exploitation of a woman’s body by men. In sharing this worldview, evangelical Christians and feminist organisations have come together to fight against human trafficking (Shapiro 2006, 5). As Jennifer Lobasz (2012, 220) argues:

In the same way that feminist abolitionists highlight trafficked women’s accounts of violence and degradation to establish sympathy for a marginalized group, religious abolitionists rely on the force of victims’ personal testimonies as a call to action for evangelical churchgoers and the broader public to support abolitionist policies and social services.

Third-wave feminism is broader than its predecessors. Its primary goal is to include women of all classes and races; something which previous feminist movements have largely neglected to do. In doing so, women of the Third World gained attention, and feminists have become divided between victimising Third World women or seeing them as empowered women. In the debates around sex work, this has resulted in some groups (usually second-wave feminists) continuing to argue that sex work is exploitative, and that all sex work is a form of sexual slavery/human trafficking (Barry 1995; Dworkin 1993; MacKinnon 1993) while others argue that sex work is work, no different than any other work women do (Kempadoo 2012; Kotiswaran 2011; Doezema 2002). In the 1970s, trafficking and “sexual slavery” became a hot topic of
discussion amongst feminists expressing concern about the social impacts from
the reconstruction of Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War (Kempadoo 2012, xiii). While the 1980s saw the early stages of anti-trafficking movements with
the development of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, the movement
against trafficking and sex work flourished from the 1990s onwards. From this
time, activists began fighting for a space for gender and sexuality in human
rights doctrines, and the United Nations began to take the issue more seriously
(Soderlund 2005, 69).

In feminist debates concerning sex work, abolitionists approach sex work
as sexual subordination and are against prostitution as a form of work, instead
understanding the use of the term sex work as violence against women and an
embodiment of gender inequality. For abolitionists, sex workers are victims
who lack agency “in the context of pervasive institutional violence” (Kotiswaran 2011, 10). On the other hand, the pro-prostitution lobby
is indifferent to whether or not sex work terminology is important, (though
understands the reason some women may view it as important), and “view[s] sex workers as agents with some ability to negotiate within the sex
industry” (2011, 10). Similar to abolitionists, radical feminists view prostitution
as a way to subordinate women in this male-dominated society (Barry 1995;
Dworkin 1993; Kotiswaran 2011). Kathleen Barry (1995, 71), one of the leading
radical feminists of the anti-prostitution lobby argues that because prostitution
is oppression and objectification of women by men, those who support sex
work “assume that sexual dehumanization is the original human condition”.
Barry’s 1979 Female Sexual Slavery played a large part in reviving feminist
interest in anti-sex trafficking movements and paving the way for
contemporary feminist abolitionists (Lobasz 2012, 158). However, Lobasz (2012,
523) points out that in order to make her argument, Barry does not quote any
sex workers who claim that they are not victims of prostitution, ascribing this
position as “a testimony to false consciousness”. In Barry’s (1979, 79) view, there is no such thing as freedom or choice when one is in an oppressive condition. Lobasz (2012, 140) also notes, “While radical feminist epistemology is used to validate women’s experiences as authoritative grounds for knowledge, in doing so radicals necessarily exclude or marginalize women with divergent testimony, introducing a major fault line in feminist abolitionism”.

The two most important outcomes of abolitionist efforts came in 2000 with the implementation of the UN Trafficking Protocol and the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act (Lobasz 2012, 172). By the twenty-first century, the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, was established and the United Nations labeled human trafficking as a transnational crime, seen as one of the world’s three “evils”, alongside terrorism and drug trafficking (Kempadoo 2012, vii, xvi). Sexual slavery as terminology to describe sex work has now been replaced with sex trafficking and modern-day slavery. According to Kamala Kempadoo (2012, xv), “The modern-day antislavery approach dwells on the abolition of institutions and conditions of force and violence that enslave humans, prostitution being identified as one of the main institutions that violates women and girls and restricts freedom”. Elizabeth Bernstein (2007, 129) describes contemporary abolitionism as “the growing cadre of evangelical Christian and secular feminist humanitarian projects that have emerged to reclassify all or certain forms of sexual labour as ‘slavery’, to press for laws that punish the individuals who are deemed responsible for this captivity, and to vigorously pursue sex workers’ rescue.” The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, which has been at the forefront of anti-sex trafficking movements, holds that even if a woman does give consent to travel and do sex work, without any sort of deception, she has
been trafficked, and her consent to enter into sex work is irrelevant; she has been “prostituted”\(^\text{17}\) (Doezema 2002, 21).

These rescue efforts now dominate the construction of sex workers in postcolonial countries, who “are represented as sexually-constrained, tradition-bound, incarcerated in the home, illiterate, poor and civilizationally-backward, and notably as the real or most authentic victim” (Tambe 2007, 81). It is then believed that these “victims” lack the insight to understand that they have been trafficked, and are therefore in need of rescuing (2007, 81). Classifying sex workers as victims implies that women are not responsible for their enslavement and oppression, instead labelling this victim status as a consequence of patriarchy and male dominance, which takes away any agency or subjectivity that women have (Kempadoo 2012, xxix). Victimising women and stripping them of agency or subjectivity is significant to how change is imagined and implemented by outsiders. Since victims are passive and unable to help themselves, they are in need of “rescue” or “saving” from their current positions by those outside of the sex work and trafficking industry, who are assumed to know what is best for the women (2012, xxix). Sensationalising sex workers as victims has made it easier for activists to lobby for governmental and media attention, and also gives women in other countries something they feel they can relate to; the media is less inclined to relay stories of how women in developing countries are succeeding in the global economy (Soderlund 2005, 69, 71).

Of course, there are many women who have entered into sex work under false pretences and do wish to leave. However, in some cases more than 40% of those who were rescued view rehabilitation schemes as another form of

\(^{17}\) The term “prostituted” is used to describe women in sex work on the official website of the Coalition Against Trafficking Women: [http://www.catwinternational.org/WhoWeAre](http://www.catwinternational.org/WhoWeAre), accessed 15 November 2013.
imprisonment, and have escaped to return to the brothels they were rescued from (Soderlund 2005, 66). A counter movement against anti-trafficking initiatives is exemplified by Empower Foundation, an NGO in Thailand seeking to empower sex workers, whilst ensuring that no woman is practicing sex work under the age of eighteen, or against her will. After a rescue effort in Thailand in 2003 by an American funded anti-trafficking NGO called Trafcord,\footnote{18 Trafcord is an NGO in Thailand, also known as the Anti-Trafficking Coordination Unit Northern Thailand. For more information, see their website \url{http://www.trafcord.org/}, accessed 15 November 2013.} whereby twenty-eight women were forcefully removed from a brothel and taken to a rehabilitation centre, Empower Foundation (2003, n/p) reported the similarities between rescue efforts and police arrest:

As soon as they had their mobile phones returned women contacted Empower. They are only permitted to use their phones for a short time each evening and must hide in the bathroom to take calls outside that time. They report that they have been subjected to continual interrogation and coercion by Trafcord. Women understand that if they continue to maintain that they want to remain in Thailand and return to work that they will be held in the Public Welfare Boys Home or [a] similar institution until they recant. Similarly they understand that refusing to be witnesses against their “traffickers” will further delay their release.

The report continues to explain:

The focus on trafficking in persons has meant many groups with little or no experience on the issues of migration, labor, sex work or women’s rights have been created to take advantage of the large sums of money available to support anti-trafficking activities. Their inexperience and lack of contact with the sex worker community has meant they are unable or unwilling to differentiate between women who have been trafficked and migrant workers (Empower 2003, n/p).

Indeed, in the eyes of the rescuer, there is no such thing as a migrant sex worker. An example of this position is shown in the 2014 film \textit{Not Today}
produced by an American anti-trafficking NGO Not For Sale in collaboration
with Dalit Freedom Network (the umbrella organisation for OMIF),
International Justice Mission and other anti-trafficking NGOs. Filmed in the US
and Hyderabad, the film tells the story of a white American college boy who
goes to India as a result of a drinking game with his friends. He comes from an
evangelical Christian family, and has been struggling with his faith. His journey
in India leads him into rescuing a homeless Dalit girl whose father sold her into
what he believed would be an opportunity for education and a roof over her
head. After refusing to give the man and his daughter money, the American boy
feels a sense of guilt, and begins trying to rescue this young girl. Coming from a
wealthy family, he buys the information he needs to get closer to where the girl
may be. After entering into various brothels full of supposedly trafficked girls
and women, he determines the location of the girl, which is in the headquarters
of the traffickers. He calls family in the US who then call an anti-trafficking
NGO, and the movie portrays NGO vehicles and police cars speeding up to the
premises, and young girls running away frantically. These scenes of Anglo men
raiding brothels in Asia have become more frequent since the beginning of the
twenty-first century when faith-based human rights groups began advocating
in favour of the enforcement of the 2000 Trafficking Victims Protection Act
under the Bush administration (Soderlund 2005, 68). When I spoke to the head
of the OMIF Anti-trafficking Unit in Hyderabad, she had no idea that this
movie had been made; she was never consulted about the on-the-ground
realities of trafficking and rescue in Hyderabad.

Prostitution is often viewed as synonymous with human trafficking,
especially in the US, and sex trafficking has been labelled as an “affected
population” on the UNAIDS website (Pisani 2008, 213). However, as other
scholars have noted, and I also found in my own research, sex trafficking is not
very common; most women make the choice on their own to enter the sex trade
(Pisani 2008, 217; Cohen 2005, 12). Even in countries which are labelled as trafficking heavily, such as Myanmar, research has shown that most women choose sex work because they have so few livelihood alternatives (Pisani 2008, 219; Murray 2003, 417-418). Huge amounts of money have been funnelled into anti-trafficking initiatives, especially by the American government during the Bush administration. In 2005, the American federal government spent US $91 million dollars combating trafficking, with most of the money going to NGOs and government organisations in other parts of the world which were working towards ending human trafficking (Shapiro 2006, 12). Action against trafficking has become a business for international development communities, with NGOs such as Anti-Slavery, Not For Sale and International Justice Mission establishing themselves as active participants in the fight against slavery. Even organisations which started with other goals, such as Dalit Freedom Network (which strives to free Dalits from oppression) and locally based NGOs in India seeking to empower sex workers, have now taken up the trafficking agenda.\textsuperscript{19} However, with the inability to come up with accurate statistics of how many people are being trafficked, some organisations have received hundreds of thousands of American dollars to combat trafficking, but report having very few annual cases of trafficking to spend this funding on (Shapiro 2006, 11).

While trafficking is of course a serious issue, and many devadasi women I spoke to said that they felt deprived of a choice to marry,\textsuperscript{20} some devadies do choose to go to Mumbai on their own, often lured under the pretence of seeing other devadasis with glittering saris and expensive jewellery. Additionally, as adult women, some devadasis are making a choice to practice sex work rather than coolie work, while leaving sex work for an agricultural job in the informal sector is a choice which many devadasis have also made.

\textsuperscript{19} I am thankful to Kimberley Walters for insights on this.

\textsuperscript{20} In the eyes of rescuers, this lack of choice to marry is one of the primary reasons they use to argue that devadasis are victims of trafficking.
However, most devadasis practice sex work from their homes in their villages; yet even these women are considered trafficked. It is common that in the Global South women who enter sex work usually do so because they are uneducated and illiterate, therefore lacking the skills to acquire any other kind of employment which would pay nearly as well as sex work does (Ditmore 2008, 54). While I do not wish to deny the importance of sex trafficking initiatives, the current approach to helping women who are seen as victims of sex trafficking is one which also denies sex workers agency by suggesting that all sex workers are victims. Soderlund (2005, 83) succinctly suggests:

> Freedom, as either utopian quest or bedrock of democratic thought, has apparently been downgraded to the ability to engage in wage labor. It seems to me that rather than participating in conservative projects that criminalize either indigenous or migrant prostitution or remove existing medical and legal support, feminists should be working toward creating conditions where all women and men can envision and ultimately participate in their own liberation.

When sex work becomes seen as synonymous with trafficking, it is not activists, lobbyists or policy-makers who are affected. It is the sex workers, usually poor, uneducated and far removed from the offices which decide their future, who suffer the most; they are completely denied agency to choose (Ditmore 2008, 55, 63). The anti-prostitution lobby projects ideas of false consciousness onto sex workers, arguing that if women are uneducated and living in poor conditions in a patriarchal society, practicing sex work is still not a choice; poverty is forcing women into prostitution. However, this view is not only Anglo middle class, but it neglects to acknowledge that poor women in these conditions still make the choice to practice sex work over other occupations (Doezema 1998, 43). In the case of devadasis, “other occupations” are restricted to intensive physical conditions with petty wages. Martha Nussbaum (1999, 278, 283) outlines examples to display why many of the choices available to poor women are “so heavily constrained by poor options”
that they are not choices at all. While prostitution might not be a choice, most other forms of available labour are also exploitative and equally not a “choice” under such circumstances. Therefore, denying devadasis and other poor women the limited choices they have further suppresses them.

For conservative Christian rescue NGOs and FBOs, the high attention given to sexual slavery is posited around a renewed agenda to enforce traditional and patriarchal sex and gender roles which understand sex as an act reserved for marriage, and as “dirty” when performed outside of marriage. For radical feminists, this interest lies in breaking down these traditional sex and gender roles, in which a patriarchal society creates male domination over women, and sex work is male exploitation of women. In holding these two opposing views, the two groups agree that all sex work is forced and discriminatory and understand all sex workers to be victims of sexual slavery (Kotiswaran 2011, 7). With this belief, evangelical Christians and radical feminists have come together as Neo-abolitionists to fight the evils of sex trafficking. So where does this leave devadasis? Not only does this abolitionist framework assume the position that all devadasis are sex workers, it also assumes they are all victims because they are denied the choice to marry a man. It disregards all religious and cultural factors involved in the devadasi practice and is particularly blind to the patriarchal hegemony under which devadasis find themselves. Feminists leave no space for devadasis: either they are victims of sex work or victims of domestication and heterosexual marriage. Abolitionists only provide them with one alternative: marriage. Abolitionists are even willing and have been known to arrange marriages for devadasi women. Women who leave sex work become “poor but free”, yet remain stigmatised in society as “women without husbands”. These complexities make it impossible to propose a solution to this “problem”. 
The victimised subject so prominent in this discussion is created through the belief that “the other” lacks the agency to make her own choices, which is used as a justification for rescue and rehabilitation efforts. These efforts are familiar to the slave rhetoric of the nineteenth century, all of which contributed to the justification that was used by the British for colonisation and establishing an Empire (Kapur 2000, 870). Where Third World feminists do theorise on sex work, it has been directed towards the implications that this hegemonic Western script on prostitution has for sex workers in the Third World (Kempadoo 1998, 12-13); this is primarily discussed in relation to Third World sex workers’ agency (Kapur 2005). However, Prabha Kotiswaran (2011, 225) argues that “agency is too narrow and incomplete a lens through which to examine the hegemonic script”. Lucinda Ramberg (2006, 213) explains:

many women in prostitution are escaping what they found to be worse conditions in their families, a fact which belies the oft invoked notion that it is always better to be returned home. Or, and along similar lines, the equally dubious idea that returning women from the metropolis to the village constitutes a form of rescue. This notion is ridiculous to most of the world’s rurally located people who are not suffering from nostalgia for their own difficult conditions of rural survival under conditions produced by an increasingly globalized post industrial economy.

Migration to urban areas has become a natural part of globalisation. Rescuing women from sex work under the pretence that they have been trafficked romanticises an idea that women must have had better opportunities which they were forced or tricked out of. However, migration from rural to urban locations is becoming the norm in a time when India’s agricultural sector is decreasing, and information technology is increasing. Simply because sex work is not considered moral work in the eyes of some does not make it less valid work than driving an auto rickshaw or running a tea stall in metropolitan areas. Moreover, in these oppressive postcolonial environments, arguing a traditional understanding of agency as action or resistance neglects to consider
an array of factors which contribute to the reasons that women make the choices they do.

**Devadasis speaking in a postcolonial, postfeminist era**

Feminism in India first began with nationalism, and later shifted to a post-independence focus on poor rural women, though all the while led by middle-class and elite Hindu women. Postcolonial writing by (Indian) women was spearheaded by Gayatri Spivak in the 1980s, who introduced us to the problem of representation for subaltern women, asking, “Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 1988). Postcolonial feminism in India has now taken an interesting shift to looking at its own middle-class location (John 1996). Most of the thinking and writing around women in India continues to be dominated by urban, educated, middle-class women (1996, 127). Lila Abu-Lughod (1998, 6) questions:

How are we to think about those discourses that borrowed from Europe, were supported by Europeans, or were shaped in response to colonial definitions of the “backwardness” of the East?... [W]ho becomes involved in debates about the “woman question” and what relationship does their involvement have to consolidating class projects and identities?

Abu-Lughod (1998, 25) continues:

One must also be careful not to accept uncritically the terms of the upper-middle- and middle-class women involved in most feminist projects—the notions of “awakening”, “women’s rights”, and “empowerment” that are part of the narratives of progress and enlightenment that still have currency among secular progressives...

Abu-Lughod presents us with two critical problems in postcolonial feminist theory in India. The first is the embedded Eurocentric approach to asking questions about women, and the continued victimisation of women in

---

the Third World. The second problem is that this is not only an occurrence that happens in the West but, through postcolonial influence, now includes Third World women writing about Third World women. While Spivak’s (1988) narrative of “white men saving brown women from brown men” continues, there is a new narrative of middle class brown women saving “poor” brown women from brown men, from the comforts of the neoliberal “ivory tower”. In this paradigm, the subaltern does not speak, but continues to be spoken for.

While postcolonial feminism’s main purpose is to bring attention to the differences in women in terms of race, gender, religion, and social class (Mills 2003), women who are the targets of postcolonial feminism do still tend to be grouped together—all devadasis continue to be seen as one group with similar ideologies. As Benita Parry (1995, 36-37, 40) notes, Spivak herself was guilty of such categorisation:

From the discourse of Sati Spivak derives large, general statements of woman’s subject constitution/object formation in which the subaltern woman is conceived as a homogeneous and coherent category... Spivak’s deliberate (sic) deafness to the native voice where it is to be heard, is at variance with her acute hearing of the unsaid in modes of Western feminist criticism which, while dismantling masculist (sic) constructions, reproduce and foreclose colonialist structures and imperialist axioms...

Ania Loomba (1998, 221) points out that the subaltern woman lacks presence in discussions about her. According to Spivak the subaltern can never speak, because she is influenced by colonialism, which is oppressive and intersected with patriarchy (1998, 233-234). This argument truly strips women of any agency to create new/changed identities through colonial influence.

---

22 For more on this, see Parry (1995), Brooks (1997), Dirlik (1994).
24 See also Loomba (1998, 233-236).
Similar themes arise in postcolonial studies, with scholars arguing that
development is a Eurocentric byproduct of postcolonialism, and that, more
generally, postcolonialism is a Western term used to describe “the
other” (Prakash 1990; McClintock 1994; Dirlik 1994; Loomba 1998; Sylvester
1999). Arif Dirlik (1994, 356), describes postcolonialism as “the condition of the
intelligentsia of global capitalism”. Dirlik (1994, 331) insists:

The complicity of postcolonial in hegemony lies in postcolonialism’s
diversion of attention from contemporary problems of social,
political, and cultural domination, and in its obfuscation of its own
relationship to what is but a condition of its emergence, that is, to a
global capitalism that, however fragmented in appearance, serves as the structuring principal of global relations.

Christine Sylvester (1999) argues that the postcolonial subject is allotted
little space in development studies, which concerns itself more with
postcolonial writing of identity and subjectivity than the starving subaltern.
“The subaltern not only cannot speak in much of development studies but she is rarely asked to do so in a way that might contradict what a development agency has already framed or decreed” (1999, 717). This “middle class modernization, or ‘developmentalism’, represents the renovation and redeployment of ‘colonial modernity...as economic development’” (Dirlik 1994, 334; Prakash 1990, 393). Devadasi women face similar struggles, with development organisations imposing schemes on them, without asking the women what might be useful. As I will demonstrate throughout the thesis, even when devadasis directly told NGO staff that certain schemes were ineffective (such as education and buffalo rearing), the NGO insisted that these schemes are what it can offer the women, regardless of how effective they may or may not be. As a way forward, Sylvester (1999, 718) proposes a turn to alternative or postdevelopment, which, as previously discussed, looks to the voices of

25 For an exploration of critiques on the term “postcolonial” see Sidaway (2000).
“ordinary people”, and scholars with significant experience providing aid in oppressive and difficult postcolonial geographies.

As a white Western woman, I am seen as invariably vulnerable to taking a similar postcolonial feminist approach. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988, 80) claims that Western female scholars are incapable of seeing Third World women through the structures that define them, always looking at these women as subjects outside of social relations, and judging (with “Western eyes”) these legal, economic, religious and familial structures that constitute Third World women. I would argue that, at large, such perspectives are perpetuated by the belief that we must “speak for” Third World women. Lucinda Ramberg (2006, 21-22) employs the possibility of “speaking nearby”. However, even in these speaking contexts, agency continues to be displayed through action and resistance. Perhaps this postcolonial feminist idea of agency is at the forefront of this dilemma of who is speaking for who. The continued insistence that women display agency through action and resistance, rather than through speech, is a weakness of postcolonial feminism, which leaves the subaltern in need of somebody to speak “for” or “nearby” them.

This understanding of agency being enacted through action or resistance is problematic in the context of devadasi women. Treena Orchard (2007), Lucinda Ramberg (2006), Lynda Epp (1997) and Chaya Datar (1992) present postcolonial feminist understandings of devadasis which demonstrate ways that devadasis may be empowered where other women are not. Despite the consistent responses in my research of devadasis, in which they expressed their wish for the practice to end, Orchard, Ramberg, Epp, and Datar have shown that devadasis have more freedom to leave the home; if a partner is abusive or disrespectful, they have the freedom to leave him; they have special religious roles in society which empower them to feel good about their devadasi status; they can spend their own money and some women enjoy the responsibility of
taking care of their families. In this context, I believed that devadasi women would also admit that in many respects they are better off than married women in India, but they did not. When I discussed these various possibilities for agency which other scholars have touched on, devadasis did not see these possibilities as agentic in the oppressive patriarchal context where they find themselves.

In order to carry out this project, my desire was to have close contact with both devadasis and NGOs, and therefore, I chose a locality to base myself in which was close to both. Due to the declining numbers of devadasis, the women are scattered throughout many villages. Therefore, unlike Ramberg, who based herself in one village, and spent extensive time talking to a limited amount of devadasis in one area, I spent my time moving around to an array of villages throughout Belgaum, Balgolkot, and Bijapur. My eagerness to want to talk to a variety of devadasis meant that I spent less one-on-one time with each of them. Therefore, I did not spend as much time observing the daily activities of individual women, but was instead able to speak to many devadasis. This meant, for the most part, that I observed devadasi women’s agency through spoken communication, “speaking with” devadasis, as Richa Nagar and Susan Geiger (2002, 2007) have suggested.

Postfeminism and the idea of difference

We should want justice and rights for women, but can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or even chose, different futures from ones that we envision best? (Abu-Lughod 2013, 43).

Postfeminism rejects the assumption that feminism is based on the ideas of “unified subjectivity” and “a universal sisterhood”, and seeks to implore alternative methodologies to end women’s subordination (Genz 2009, 17). “Post-” in this instance does not indicate the ending of an era of feminism, but rather is used to discuss going beyond traditional understandings and previous
waves of feminism, which, as I have demonstrated, have been largely middle-
class Eurocentric movements (Brooks 1997, 1-5). However, extensive
discussions with feminist colleagues has revealed that the use of the term
“postfeminism” is controversial, and causes many feminists to recoil, who fear
it implies an abandonment of feminism. Therefore, I quote at length here Ann
Brooks’ (1997, 4) definition of postfeminism, which resonates with my decision
to shift towards postfeminism as a more available space for devadasi women.

Postfeminism as understood from this perspective is about the
conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a
focus on debates around difference. It is fundamentally about, not a
depoliticisation of feminism, but a political shift in feminism’s
conceptual and theoretical agenda. Postfeminism is about a critical
engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts
and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social
movements for change. Postfeminism expresses the intersection of
feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-
colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of
challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks. In
the process postfeminism facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic
conception of the application of feminism, and addresses the
demands of marginalised, diasporic and colonised cultures for a non-
hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and
postcolonial feminisms.

Using a postfeminist framework, the attention shifts from locating
devadasis as a group, to acknowledging that each woman is different. Previous
movements have neglected to recognise this difference amongst the women,
which has often happened due to a neglect to listen to devadasis. By keeping
the women voiceless and attributing their desires to a false consciousness,
reformers, abolitionists, and some feminists have managed to uphold their own
agendas, while ignoring the aspirations of devadasis. In the mid-twentieth
century, first-wave feminisms in India succeeded in lumping all women
dedicated to a temple or goddess into one category, and labelled them all as
devadasis, in an attempt to rescue them and make them respectable women.
Second-wave feminisms emerged in the 1970s in India, focusing largely on using mass movement to ignite change, while more recent third-wave feminist movements are interested in getting women out of the home, becoming independent of men. Where these current trends do not consider poor and/or rural individuals, Neo-abolitionist movements pick up the slack through a focus on prostitution as nothing more than sex trafficking and modern-day slavery. In these more recent movements, devadasis are all seen as victims of trafficking in need of rescuing (Bernstein 2007).

Re-examining agency through speech rather than action

Within feminist literature, agency is often used as a term tied to liberation, in a manner which implies that people only exert agency when they are resisting or subverting patriarchal power (Madhok, Phillips and Wilson 2013, 6). The agency of women in oppressive contexts is a topic which is rarely addressed, with Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005), Holly Wardlow (2006), Sumi Madhok (2013a) being a few exceptions. However, in oppressive religious contexts, this topic becomes even more contentious. Even for Mahmood, who has written extensively on agency in oppressive religious contexts such as Egypt, agency is a form of action and resistance if agency is employed “not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create...” (Mahmood 2001, 203).

Saba Mahmood (2005, 31) asks, “How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject’s own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject’s potentiality?” As Davesh Soneji (2012, 13) has rightly noted, the structural inequalities that rural Dalit women such as devadasis face daily
largely make agency, as it is presented in feminist terms, unattainable for these women. Feminists therefore define devadasis’ agency in a way which I found most devadasis, as well as my female graduate student research assistants, do not understand. Lila Abu-Lughod (2013, 20), continues this discussion, arguing:

we must situate...and ground our thinking about the meanings of freedom in the everyday lives of individuals, on the one hand, and the imperial politics of intervention, on the other. We will find that it is rarely a case of being free or oppressed, choosing or being forced. Representations of unfreedom and others that blame the chains of culture incite rescue missions by outsiders. Such representations mask the histories of internal debate and institutional struggles over justice that have occurred in every nation. They also deflect attention from the social and political forces that are responsible for the ways people live.

When collecting life stories, the tales which are told by respondents depend on varying factors: what they want to present is based on what their story is being used for, and an analysis of agency is notably vulnerable to these factors (Wardlow 2006, 89). Holly Wardlow (2006, 89) explains that a powerful mode of agency is when actions have consequential effects. She continues, “an examination of agency often requires privileging the actor’s point of view; it is only through documenting the way in which actors interpret and act upon the social structures around them that the researcher can ascertain how actors reproduce or change the structures that animate and constrain them” (2006, 89). Sumi Madhok (2013b, 116) refers to this understanding of agency as “action-bias” and suggests that when thinking about agency of persons who are in oppressive contexts, reliance on negative freedom and free action should not be undermined. However, rather than looking to action as the primary site of recognition and analysis of agency, we should include speech practices as a possible way in which agency is exercised.
My analysis has led me to the conclusion that the subaltern can speak. Devadasi women’s agency comes from their different positioning narratives used to negotiate poverty. In some cases, women may have been presenting narratives of victimhood in hopes of gaining some sort of benefit, and at other times they voiced stories of empowerment through sex work and singledom. My research is particularly vulnerable here because it focuses not only on women’s life stories, but also on their relationship to organisations seeking to help them. As my intention is to identify discrepancies between what women said and how organisations are helping them, respondents often viewed me as a person who could also help them, and spoke to me as such. The voices of devadasis are prominent throughout the duration of the dissertation. Though I am presenting their words, and analysing them from my own perspective, I have made an effort to share the voices of a variety of devadasi women, who display varying positioning narratives. However, as I have already cautioned, despite having pursued extensive training in Kannada, I nonetheless relied on a local to transcribe my interviews for me. Additionally, the questions which were asked of devadasis and the way in which my translators worded questions has no doubt had a significant impact on the kinds of responses which devadasis gave. In part, this is why I argue that devadasis’ responses are reflective of what they want to get out of the interview: they are using this platform to negotiate poverty.

Sumi Madhok (2013a, 5) succinctly sums up the various meanings of agency as: “free will, free action, resistance, practice, praxis, performativity, motivation, desire, behaviour, choice, preference, individuality, dignity, independence, critical self-reflection, liberty, self-rule or sovereignty, and moral authenticity”. Problematically, agency can be projected upon an individual by an outsider, based on their own perceptions and subjectivity. This can result in the imposition of Eurocentric understandings of agency. Lucinda Ramberg
(2006) argues that devadasi women’s agency comes through their special kinships, which result in devadasis taking on the role of mother and father to their children, and eldest son to their parents. Within this role they have more responsibility towards their family. This free will and behaviour is understood as agency. A few issues lie within this conception of agency. First, Ramberg (2006, 25) is transparent about the fact that she draws her conclusions from the lives of only four devadasi women. This very limited basis allows her to make claims about agency which I did not find in my own research. Most devadasis that I spoke to expressed that they do not view the practice as respectable and feel a loss of dignity as sex workers without husbands. Additionally, the majority of the women I interviewed said that they would prefer to be “women with husbands” than devadasi women. While it can be argued that being single gives devadasis more independence, they also feel a huge sense of obligation to their parents to provide for them. One young devadasi who practices sex work told me that if she does not return home at the end of the day with money, her family will beat her. Therefore, I question Ramberg’s analysis of agency here; while it is true that devadasis do take on various familial roles, the stories they told of these kinships were sometimes more oppressive than agentic.  

As a feminist, I found it difficult to accept that devadasis now believe heteronormative marriage is the solution to their impoverished lives. While Ramberg (2006) believes devadasis exude agency through their connection to the goddess and their special kinship roles, the devadasis I spoke to were unable to comprehend how these roles really benefit them. Mary Evans (2013, 60) explains the meaning of agency within such a context:

It is all too easy to blame women for refusing forms of agency that may well be to their advantage yet at the same time it might also be necessary to acknowledge that what is at work is a complex mix of what women perceive (however, mistakenly from other perspectives)

26 This is discussed in more detail later in chapter five.
as their own best interest and institutional pressures and discrimination. In this mix, women are making calculations about their interests in terms of relationships with others as well as being pressured by social conventions and individuals to conform to those stereotypes that ensure the continued existence of both conventional gender difference and gender inequality. Explicit coercion against the agency of women is easy to recognise (and as such can be challenged by other forms of agency), but implicit forms of coercion are much harder to detect and define. Yet within them, we might have to identify the refusal of women to abandon those social and cultural “ties to others” that make up an individual sense of identity. Acquiring agency, and/or following the example of those who appear to possess their capacity, may appear to carry with it loss as much as gain, loss not just of the possibilities of various forms of cooperative action but also of a place in a community. Agency, we have to acknowledge, carries with it the possibility of risk.

It will become clearer in later chapters that devadasi women value marriage and married women highly. They refuse to abandon these social norms, and rather believe that embracing them would be advantageous. While Ramberg describes a form of agency within the devadasi practice which may be advantageous in an oppressive context, the women perceive that marriage is in their own best interest against institutional pressures and discrimination, and so reinforce conventional gender difference and gender inequality. However, this refusal to conform to the devadasi practice and insistence on entering the world of heterosexual marriage provides women with a sense of identity, and is therefore agentic.

Changes to the devadasi practice have prevented women from the freedom to practice their religion. According to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18 states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his (sic) religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in

---

27 “Implicit forms of coercion” being similar to “negative freedom”, as discussed earlier.
public or private, to manifest his (sic) religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance”. While Article 4 of the Declaration addresses slavery, there is no definition of what constitutes slavery or the slave trade. A moral debate ensues in the case of the devadasis, and it is inevitably the influence of Anglo morality which dominates legal enforcements. Being viewed as victims of modern-day slavery, devadasis are no longer entitled to freely practice their religion. As victims of slavery and religion, devadasi women are denied any agency.

Over the past 150 years, devadasis have been silenced, as their religious practice remains under attack by outsiders who deny the women any agency. However, I argue that devadasis have a great deal to say about their practice, and that by listening to them, they display agency through their different positioning narratives. They now use these narratives to negotiate their way through poverty, and access as many resources as they can through the organisations trying to help them. Looking beyond the typical action-bias approach to agency and honing in on speech rather than action provides a space for agency that is often ignored. It is undeniable that most devadasis enter the practice against their own will, being dedicated by their mothers or grandmothers when they are too young to understand. However, this is not the issue which any of the above movements have chosen to take up, instead focusing specifically on the fact that these girls end up in prostitution, remain there as a result of false consciousness, and never really make the choice to practice sex work. It raises the question, if girls were dedicated to the goddess and then entered into agricultural labour, would anybody notice?

“Well, suffering means, madam you think about this; how will it be if one were to live with one man who is married to her or having sex with many different men? You tell me” (Sundaravva).

“I don’t want to be hungry. That is why I do sex work. I have two children. If I stop doing this work then how can I feed my children or send them to school? Am I not supposed to eat?” (Kasturi).

In a society where a woman is traditionally considered to be complete when she marries—preferably to a groom of her parents’ choice—singledom can be cruel and oppressive (Jha 2014).

Devadasis are constantly under regulation by the State, NGOs, feminists, reformers, and Neo-abolitionists. All of these groups express a similar desire to help devadasis. The advocacy of marriage and respectability as a solution to the devadasi practice has infiltrated discussions around finding a blanket “solution” to the devadasi “problem”. Within these debates, the voices of devadasis remain unheard, with outsiders believing that they know what is best for the women. While postdevelopment theory advocates listening to local people and letting them decide what is best for themselves, postfeminist theory emphasises difference amongst women. Through postfeminist theory, devadasis are no longer seen as a group with similar needs. Rather, it is recognised that each woman has her own individual needs and desires. This approach opens up new possibilities for understanding agency in oppressive contexts, where women often remain unheard. I have argued that by “speaking with” (Nagar and Geiger 2007) devadasis, the desires of the women become clearer, and their differences more evident.

That devadasi women view sex work as a form of suffering as well as a solution to poverty is a dilemma and contradiction which continues to divide both NGOs and academics. Thus far I have discussed these divisions from a
more theoretical perspective, giving particular attention to how religion is perceived in development, and how devadasis have been understood by social reformers, abolitionists and feminists. I have focused on how these perceptions and theoretical positions have, for the most part, had a negative effect on the position of devadasi women in society. In the remainder of the thesis, I will use fieldwork and the voices of devadasis to analyse how devadasis themselves understand their position as being a form of both suffering and empowerment. Drawing on field work interviews, this chapter will introduce the reader to the everyday lives of devadasi women through an investigation of their thoughts on poverty, marriage and husbands, material conditions, and what it is like to be a devadasi woman in today’s society. It will then draw comparison to other poor Dalit women in India who are not devadasis and demonstrate in what ways today’s devadasi women are different, but also very much the same.

Devadasi women often talk about the “struggles” and “sufferings” they have been through as if one should know exactly what these struggles and sufferings are. They feel the devadasi practice is “bad” because of the difficulties they have had to face, though sometimes they do not identify any specific struggles. Like many women in rural India, devadasi women are very poor. Chronic hunger continues in the daily lives of many individuals, with one-third of the world’s poor people living in India (Banik 2012, 153). As will be discussed in more detail in later chapters, through the assistance of sangha (self-help) groups and microfinance initiatives, most devadasi families live in a perpetual cycle of debt that enables them to eat two or three meals a day. Many devadasi women are taking loans simply to buy vegetables for immediate survival, rather than investing it in something which may help them or their families long-term. This type of assistance perpetuates the cycle of chronic poverty for the poorest of the poor, rather than helping them to get out of it.
Devadasi women who practice sex work are often able to avoid this poverty, but it does not necessarily mean that their lives are any easier.

**THE STIGMA OF BEING LOW CASTE AND “IMPURE”**

The devadasi women with whom I had contact come from Madiga and Kamble scheduled castes families and are usually extremely poor. As the lowest caste in society, Dalits have historically been denied access to basic material rights, economic rights, and education. This has, in part, been enveloped in wider issues of purity and impurity, but also domination and subordination and exploitative and oppressive practices benefitting higher castes (Chakravarti 2003, 21). Though endogamy is expected amongst Hindus (with people marrying in their own caste), this does not apply to devadasi women. K.C. Tarachand (1991, 8) describes devadasi marriages to the goddess as theogamy: marrying divine beings. Devadasis are both married to a divine being, and are sex workers, and sex work is seen as being practiced under the guise of religion. Anagha Tambe (2007, 91-92) explains that this religious justification for practicing sex work was argued by Dalits to be caste-based exploitation, as previously discussed in relation to the “Chandragutti Incident”. This framework did not acknowledge sex work as work, but as sexual exploitation of lower castes used to rid lower-caste women of self-respect, and suppress them and keep them in a less privileged position. Meena Seshu¹ (2007, 197) claims that women are bounded into a caste-class of their own. She continues, “This caste-class occupies the lowest rung in the hierarchy and is structured ‘outside’ the hierarchy. Mobility therefore is almost impossible, except through deceit and/or money”.

¹ Seshu is a social worker and activist, but is primarily known as the founder of a sex workers collective in Sangli, Maharashatra called Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha-Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (commonly known as SANGRAM-VAMP).
According to Jogan Shankar (1990, 91), the devadasi practice is limited to particular caste groups for two possible reasons: 1) upper caste men simply wanted to enjoy the beauty of these women and use them to fulfil their own sexual needs; 2) upper castes wanted to rid lower castes of any self-respect they may have had in order to keep them in a lower and less privileged position. Undoubtedly, these may be reasons why upper castes have traditionally supported and defended the devadasi practice. However, I would argue that Shankar’s viewpoint does not acknowledge that these women carry any agency. It also neglects to acknowledge the notion that perhaps these Dalit women, with few or no other opportunities, forged their own economy which simultaneously gave them a new kind of respect amongst higher castes. This is an issue which Seshu addresses in the BBC documentary *Sex, Death and the Gods* (Kidron 2011). Seshu believes that devadasis are a group of women who have found a way to economically strengthen themselves through sex work. She argues that because people are against sex work, they are unable to see that any alternatives provided will be something that outsiders do for devadasis, rather than something devadasis do for themselves. The sex work paradigm is something that devadasi women have figured out for themselves as a method of economic survival, and Yellamma is necessary for their economy to function, because it is their dedication to her which justifies their decision to practice sex work. However, this economy is a threat to upper castes. Linda Epp (1996, 21) explains, “Although Dalit males felt humiliated when upper caste males came to Dalit households to visit the devadasi(s), disputes between co-resident women were also common because devadasis who earned an income enjoyed a status that married women as wives did not”. Not surprisingly, upper-caste women exhibit behaviours of jealousy towards lower-caste devadasi women who can freely move around, spend time in upper-caste homes, and have sexual relations with upper-caste men.
In reality, though Dalits are seen as impure, devadasis break down the barriers of purity and impurity. They do tell stories of being denied access to the water tap by upper castes because of issues of purity, however, they have transcended caste in other ways through their sacred connection to the goddess. Clients of devadasis have always come from castes equivalent to or higher than her own. Because of their ritual status, devadasis are able to transcend barriers of purity, and are also invited to eat in the homes of upper caste Brahmins. Additionally, lower-caste women are generally said to have more freedom of movement than upper-caste women. However, being at a disadvantage to dominant castes, often combined with a patriarchal setting, places higher-caste men in a position to assert their power against lower-caste women (Khanna 2011, 37). Dalit women do, nevertheless, have more possibilities to leave their abusive husbands, and they can also remarry without the same stigma upper-caste women receive (Chakravati 2003, 35; Kapadia 1995, 174). Devadasis face two realities in the hands of the upper castes: the men benefit from their degradation and exploitation, and the women feel threatened by it.

**Dedicating girls to escape grinding poverty, or “The feminisation of poverty”**

Female-headed households are often assumed to be poorer than male-headed households. “Feminisation of poverty” is a term used by Cecile Jackson (1998, 43) to suggest that women are overrepresented amongst poor populations, and that poorer families are usually headed by females. It is often thought that female-headed households are believed to be more food insecure than male households because of the “triple burden” they carry: 1) the female head is the main income earner for the family, but faces many disadvantages in the informal labour market because of her gender; 2) in addition to acting as the breadwinner for the home, she is responsible for all household duties, as well as raising her children, and thereby becomes “activity burdened”; 3) as the sole earner of the home, she has more people depending on her (this is especially
pronounced in the case of devadasis) (Mallick and Rafi 2010, 593). However, it is difficult to measure poverty in female-headed households, and there is limited statistical research to prove that female-headed households suffer this triple burden (Buvinic and Gupta 1997; Dreze and Srinivasan 1996), with some studies demonstrating that female-headed households are not always the poorest of the poor (Mallick and Rafi 2010; Meenakshi and Gupta 2000).

Along with this triple burden of running female-headed households, some devadasis have a further burden of being HIV+, resulting in an increased economic burden on the family (for medical expenses, but also due to the loss of labour) (Falleiro & Noronha 2012, 495). Many devadasis have now stopped practicing sex work, especially with the onset of HIV, and tend to work as agricultural labourers in surrounding villages. Dedicating a daughter as a devadasi and marrying her to Yellamma, thereby keeping her within the home, often happens in order to ensure some financial and material security for the girl’s parents. However, there is also a religious factor involved, in which dedications may sometimes be made as a vow to Yellamma, in hopes that if they give their daughter to Yellamma, the goddess will protect them spiritually, physically, and materially. Margavva is an ex-devadasi and MASS member. She no longer practices sex work, and in her village she believes that there are no new dedications taking place. We met her at her petty shop near to her house, where she and her daughter now earn their wages. She has a very big house, which she was able to build through the Karnataka government housing subsidies for devadasis. She lives with her sister, her mother and her daughter, in a house run by women. Her story of dedication is similar to many other women to whom I spoke.

To get me married off money was needed, no?...Our life when I was a child was a very difficult life. We had problems to get food. My grandparents were poor, my parents were poor. We could not get clothes to wear. We have lived such lives. No one wanted to make me
a devadasi. The life of poverty is very bad. So my grandparents prayed to God and they dedicated me to God for the sake of God. I did not voluntarily become a devadasi myself. Life was very hard in those days...Now we are working and earning our living. Now still there are difficulties but the situation is not as bad as it used to be (Margavva).

Margavva did not want to speak about her history, her time working in a brothel in Mumbai, or the man who took her there deceitfully. She considered these to be painful experiences of the past. She did not attribute her present-day circumstance of having a big house and her own shop to her devadasi status. Rather, she gave all the credit for this to MASS. She concluded, “People used to treat me with disrespect because I am a devadasi. They used to talk bad behind my back. Now I am not like a devadasi. I am like any woman who does a job.” This is different from many women, who compare themselves to women with husbands. For Margavva, she is now a “woman who does a job”, and this has helped her out of the poor situation that led to her devadasi dedication initially.

Ranavva is a devadasi who continues to practice sex work, though she never wanted to do sex work. She was dedicated when she was two years old because of health problems. According to her, “The tradition was such at those times that an old woman came and suggested that I should be dedicated as a devadasi so that I will get better. Those were the superstitious beliefs”. When she was thirteen, she was raped by her first client, having no idea what being a devadasi entailed. After this incident, she explains:

I refused to do this work for two years. I kept saying no, but my parents scolded me. They asked me, “Why do you think we dedicated you? You cannot say no. You have to do this. We allowed you not to do this for two years because we thought you were young. But now we need you to give us money”. So they forced me. They would make me feel guilty that I wasn’t caring for my parents.

For devadasi women, it is the fact that parents often force their daughters into this practice that makes them so unhappy; their destiny was set out for
them at a young age and they were given no choice. Seshu (Kidron 2011) explains that “choice is a very cruel mirage for all women from the Third World”. She expresses the sentiment that women in the Third World are constantly devaluing their own lives with the Western introduction of choice and the belief that Third World women do not have any. Having been convinced that they have been deprived of choice, Third World women, such as devadasis, now harp on this loss and underestimate their abilities to rise above it.

While there are cases of families’ economic situations improving by having their daughter enter the sex work trade, there are many stories where women feel that they are no better off, or sometimes even worse off than they were before they were dedicated as devadasis. Dowry is not the norm amongst poor lower-caste families in North Karnataka, because nobody wants to pay to have their child marry a poor uneducated spouse. However, both families do require finances in order to throw the wedding party expected of them by society. This can often come at quite an expense (Rs.30,000-1 lakh can be expected in poor families) and mothers are not willing to make any compromises in this regard because the more grand the wedding, the more societal respect they receive. One way to avoid this expense is to dedicate one’s daughter as a devadasi. Traditionally when the daughter is wed to Yellamma, a wedding party will be had, and the expense of the party will fall onto the highest bidder, who will also have the satisfaction of fulfilling the young girl’s “first client ceremony”, in which she will often be forced to have sex for the first time with the much older highest-paying man, against her will. Some parents will allow their daughters to wait until they are older, but in many cases girls as young as twelve years with no knowledge of sex or devadasi practice will suddenly find themselves in a locked room with the man who has paid the most (as in Ranavva’s case above). Though some women talk about this
occurrence as rape, not all women have enough knowledge to understand that they have been raped. In the patriarchal setting of India, it can be seen as a woman’s duty to adhere to the obligations and desires of a man which can extend to fulfilling his sexual desires (Sangari 1999, 351). In this setting, if the twelve-year-old girl refuses to have sex with the man who has already paid for her services, he will beat her violently.

The truth about trafficking in the devadasi context

I have already discussed trafficking at length in chapter three, and will therefore not go into detail in this section. However, I raise the topic of trafficking again here for two reasons: devadasis are the targets of anti-trafficking campaigns, and three respondents did mention incidences of trafficking. In truly dire situations parents will sell their devadasi daughters to brothels in metropolitan cities. Though very few women told stories of their parents selling them to gharwalis (pimps) in Mumbai, and most women say that they went to big cities and brothels by choice, rare cases of trafficking have been used by NGOs and the government to present the devadasi practice as a form of sex trafficking. OMIF lists their outreach project at the Belgaum clinic under “Anti-Trafficking Projects” on their website. In reference to devadasis, the EveryChild (now a project under MASS) website says, “The girls are also extremely vulnerable to being sold or trafficked into urban brothels in Bombay, New Delhi, or other main cities”. Publications by Christine Joffres et al. (2004) and Indushree Rajan (2011) on sex trafficking use examples of devadasi temple exploitation, which has not been practiced for three decades now in Karnataka (if ever, though Joffres claims it may still be legal and is socially accepted), in

---

2 Three out of thirty-nine respondents in this study were trafficked to Mumbai; two of them were sold by their parents and one may have been deceived into believing she would have a different kind of job.

order to argue that all prostitution is exploitative and violent, and therefore a form of sexual slavery and trafficking. This approach is sensationalised and paints a false picture of a very complex practice, embedded with religious beliefs and matrilineal tradition. This portrayal of devadasis not having any agency or choice in their decision-making is a “cruel mirage” which presumes that no woman would chose to practice sex work. Additionally, this approach to sex trafficking does not acknowledge that in dire poverty the decision to send their daughters to Mumbai can prove to be very fruitful for the family (Dewey 2008, 133).

Shanta is a devadasi who continues to practice sex work. In very casual conversation, she explains why she was sold to a gharwali in Mumbai.

My parents were poor. So they dedicated me. They tied the muttu to me when I was fifteen and I started doing sex work at eighteen. My elders did that to me...There was not much to eat. So my parents tied a muttu to me because of their poverty...My brothers left home and went away. There was nobody to look after my parents. So the people forced me to wear the muttu and take care of my parents. I was not aware of many things. My parents made me start practicing sex work considering the poverty that we were in. I did not know what it meant to do dhanda.4 They paid Rs.50,000 to my parents to send me to Bombay.

During her time in Mumbai, Shanta earned Rs.10 lakh in ten years (approximately $23,000NZD), an unfathomable amount of money for a poor Dalit family. She remained HIV free, and she continues to happily practice sex work. For many devadasis, working in Mumbai is a way out of poverty, but they are usually unaware of how difficult the work is until they get there. Shaila is a devadasi who continues to practice sex work. Her story is similar to Shanta’s, but she spoke of the deceit she felt, believing that because devadasis

4 Dhanda means business, and is used to refer to sex work.
returning from Mumbai were wearing a lot of jewellery, they were living the “good life”. She explains:

There was this gharwali from our village. My family sent me to Bombay along with her...she paid Rs.30,000. She paid before I left to Bombay with her. My parents promised to send their eldest daughter, which is me, with her. I was happy because I had seen her coming back from Bombay with lots of bangles. But I had no clue what she undergoes when she is in Bombay. I would look at the anklets and the gold jewels that these kinds of women wore and I used to wonder what business they did in that huge place called Bombay. I went there blindly.

Every year when I used to come for visits from Bombay I would not talk about my story to anyone. I would wear expensive saris and I would come to show off my arrogance and I would go back. But actually I was facing difficulties in Bombay. We had to run and hide whenever there used to be raids. It was torture. I was not doing sex work on Tuesdays (the devi’s day) but surely on Tuesdays clients would demand to be with me. The gharwali would get annoyed with me and she would snap at me. I would suffer for that. So I decided that the next time I go home I would not return. I bought seven acres of land when I was in Bombay for five years.

These stories told by Shanta and Shaila are not typical. Most women stay and practice sex work in their villages and remain poor. By using stories of trafficking such as these to promote anti-sex trafficking initiatives and stop the devadasi practice, NGOs disregard the financial gain that comes from such decisions. Dedicating girls to the goddess can be a way to escape grinding poverty, and avoid “the feminisation of poverty”. However, alongside this, women often have to face exploitation and abuse in brothels. Both Shanta and Shaila have now invested in land for their families, and both women are now members of sex workers’ collectives through KSAPS. Additionally, while Shaila was sold by her parents to a gharwali, she admits that she was excited about this prospect, because she knew that she would make good money, she just did not know what the job would entail. While it may be argued that choices such as these are not really choices at all, this denies women any agency. Women do
make a choice: they either choose to stay in Mumbai and earn enough money to purchase land, or to stop practicing sex work and remain “poor but free”.

Debt bondage as a solution to poverty?

All respondents believe that sex work is not ideal work and if other job opportunities were available (which earned the same amount of money as sex work), they would prefer an alternative. When asked what a better alternative to sex work would be, one devadasi suggested bonded labour (or debt bondage); another “social evil” according to NGOs and governments. Anti-Slavery International defines bonded labour as:

probably the least known form of slavery today, and yet it is the most widely used method of enslaving people. A person becomes a bonded labourer when their labour is demanded as a means of repayment for a loan. The person is then tricked or trapped into working for very little or no pay, often for seven days a week. The value of their work is invariably greater than the original sum of money borrowed.6

This limited definition implies that no person chooses to enter into bonded labour, or is ignorant to the realities of their decision, very similar to the definitions applied to sex trafficking. In some cases, lobbyists against sex-trafficking argue that women who have been trafficked into sex work are “debt bonded sex worker(s)” (Murray 2003, 419). However, there are many reasons that poor people choose to enter bonded labour when in need of money, as it can provide instant financial relief and help families in emergency situations. Unfortunately, taking a large loan in exchange for labour can result in a system

5 This response may reflect social desirability-bias (SDB), in which the respondent believes I want them to express negative feelings towards sex work; more likely there is a sense of shame or embarrassment in front of the female translator. Of course, there are women who genuinely do desire other work, and many of them have now stopped practicing sex work.
of labour which is difficult for many to come out of. The 1956 Supplementary
Convention Against Slavery defines debt bondage as:

the combination of a credit and a labour contract in which the value
of labour services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the
liquidation of the debt (e.g., only interest is repaid by the labour but
principal is never repaid) or if activities are neither defined nor
limited (e.g., the labourer can be required to work at any time of day
or night) (Daru, Churchill et al. 2005, 133).

In this case it may be said that the person who has borrowed the money is
deceived into believing their work will repay it, when it never does. As young
children, individuals often enter bonded labour with the hopes of one day
owning their own cattle, but they can spend their entire lives working for the
cattle owner and often never come to own anything. Kamala Marius-Gnanou
(2008, 129) argues that in India debt bondage is specific to rural areas and is
based on hierarchy and the existing relationship between castes, whereby
higher land owning castes rely on lower castes to work on the land. In certain
circumstances, individuals may borrow a specific amount of money in exchange
for an allotted time of work. See text box 4.1 for an example of this; a case in
which bonded labour becomes a useful option for poor families, including
devadasi families, in emergency situations. Though this only provides a limited
understanding of bonded labour, I simply wish to highlight examples of ways
in which devadasi women have found bonded labour to be useful, and argue
that it may be an alternative to dedications.

Many Western organisations are dedicated to rescuing children from the
“slavery” of both sex trafficking and bonded labour. When children are saved,
they are usually placed in a boarding school setting and provided education,
school supplies, and three meals a day. NGOs have taken up these tactics with
devadasi children in Karnataka, and OMIF, as well as some independent
Christian missionary groups, continue to express interest in starting similar
rehabilitation projects. While this is beneficial for the child, who will receive an education and thereby presumably have greater access to a higher standard of living, it can be detrimental for the families who are left without the earnings of their children. NGOs often do not address this larger economic web, concerning themselves solely with the livelihoods of the children, and disregarding the parents who are left behind. In some cases mothers of devadasis have been said to frequent these facilities in order to collect their daughters and take them back to their village. As Anagha Tambe (2007, 78) has noted and I have discussed previously, the rescuing of sex workers often fails to “reintegrate these women socially and economically in the society”. In this regard, huge efforts to prevent women from entering sex work may not be successful because of continued financial burden or lack of knowledge to pursue other alternatives (even after completing secondary education).

4.1 Bonded Labour: Sumitra

“The gharwali had to make the new girls do sex work with the local rowdies first. Only then they would let them do dhandha. I refused...He kept asking that I should be sent. Somehow I spent eight months in that place. He came back from jail after eight months and he again started to ask for me. Again I refused. After two days ten men came in two autorikshaws...He was very angry that I had refused to have sex with him for all those days. He went out and got a long cane from a person who was making baskets nearby. Then all of his friends stood outside. He entered the room. He beat me up till the cane broke into pieces. He would come running towards me and kick me with force on my stomach...A few more times he kicked me...I started to bleed as if I was urinating...He got scared, so he left me and went away. None of the gharwalis of the street tried to stop him when he hit me. I got up myself and went away.

[One gharwali] wanted to take me to the clinic but I had no money at all. I took out my earrings and asked her to pawn them and take me to the clinic. She gave me Rs.2,000 and arranged a vehicle to take me to the hospital. No clinic would see me because I was all covered with blood. Finally one last hospital took me in. If I wanted to come to my mother they were really poor. They could not get me treated. I was in that government hospital for about a month. I had gone down totally. Yet, I did not stop bleeding even after a month. After a month I called home to a phone in a shop of that village. I told them that I was unwell and that I wanted to come home. I did not tell my mother the truth. She asked me to go to her. When I came home my mother could not recognise me. I was in that state...My mother did not even have one rupee. My brother pledged himself as a bonded labourer in a rich person’s house for four years and brought money because his sister was unwell. He was paid Rs.15,000 for one year. He brought Rs.60,000” (Sumitra, devadasi who now continues to practice sex work, despite these difficulties).
The “struggle” of being alone

Women frequently say that not having a husband is their greatest struggle, and feel that if they had a husband, the burdens they face daily would reduce. One reason for this is that married women get respect in Indian society, while single women of marriageable age do not. In India, societal respect is a top priority for many people, and they live their lives in such a way as to ensure respect is received. A second reason for feeling that having a husband would be better is because without a husband, devadasi women are alone. There is nobody to share their sorrows with, and when they are older and alone, life becomes quite taxing. Even women who continue to practice sex work and feel happy and satisfied to be independent express similar sentiments. Lakshmi is a devadasi who continues to practice sex work. She is happy with her life and does not feel that she has any difficulties. She explained, “But one thing is true. There will be nobody who will respond to my woes. We worry about our sisters, our brothers and our parents all day. We care for them and we are concerned about them, but there is no one who thinks of us.”

I came to learn of the importance of respect through my own experience of living alone in India. During my field work, I spent three months living in one village, and then shifted to another village eighteen kilometres away for six months. The first village is always described as being very “rough”. People were not very friendly, and it is extremely dusty and dirty. When strangers asked about my married status, I would usually say I was engaged. My elderly male neighbour was quick to inform my research assistant in Kannada of his opinion of me—a dirty and loose woman roaming around alone. When I moved to the second village, which had a much nicer reputation, I had a coinciding visit from a male friend, who took on the role of my fiancé or husband. The residents of this village came to know me as a respectable woman with a husband, who was temporarily separated from her family for her research. In
addition to the change in villages, visually carrying the respect of a married woman resulted in people being far more friendly to me, I made many friends, and everybody treated me as family and was always willing to help me. This personal experience lent significant understanding to what it is like for single devadasi women on a daily basis.

Despite the slavery rhetoric that often takes place within the debate over the devadasi system, more often than not girls are dedicated as devadasis simply because it is a tradition within the family. As a devadasi, her duties may be limited to religious engagements, with her family never expecting her to enter sex work. However, due to unforeseen circumstances later in her life, such as the death of her parents or illness within the family, she may choose to enter sex work to help her family financially. Devadasis who enter sex work for such reasons are often able to overcome financial distress within the family. Devadasi women are able to subdue economic strain through sex work, particularly if they are willing to travel to metropolitan areas. This used to come at a great risk, with KSAPS claiming that many women would return from Mumbai HIV+. However, with an increase in condom awareness and a 57% decrease in HIV prevalence in India over the last decade (a high percentage of new cases being amongst men who have sex with men) according to the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO 2012, xvii), it is likely that the risk of contracting HIV in Mumbai is no longer as high for devadasi women as it used to be. Devadasis who work in the villages doing coolie work earn on average Rs.65 daily, which they may do four or five days a week. If they supplement their income with sex work, it can increase from around Rs.1,100 to Rs.2,000-4,000 monthly. However, sex work in more populated areas can easily bring in Rs. 8,000-10,000 per woman monthly, especially if she is willing to spend a couple of nights a month in Mumbai (where she can earn Rs. 2,000 per client). Many devadasi women also have partners who buy their rations for them and
sometimes also pay their bills, meaning that the money they earn through sex work can go towards other necessities. Devadasis who are members of KSAPS and practice sex work, frequently spoke of how practicing sex work allows them to manage their finances with more ease.

Now I manage all the expenses of the household. If I had done some other job it would have been very difficult to run the household. Now I get enough money by doing sex work and with that money I take care of my family. I have taken up all the responsibility of my family. I have paid for my sisters, I have gotten a house made for my brother and I have gotten all my sisters married off (Lakshmi).

I was about eighteen when they tied the muttu to me. Before that I did not wear shoes and I used to work in the fields under the hot sun. I was in such dire situations and my clothes used to be torn and I did not have coconut oil on my hair. I used to work but the salary was low. After, they tied the muttu and I was dedicated as a devadasi. I used to watch the other devadasis and think, “those women are doing so well. My situation is so bad. I also must do something. I also must rise to the level of the others.” They told me, “Our work is not bad work. We do work and we get paid.” I understood. My parents did not dedicate me. They had already died. That is the reason I went down to this level...For my children’s food, clothes, school, uniform, shoes and the school fees all have to be bought. Because of this pressure I do the work of devadasi. I am sending my children to school and giving them good food. I give them chicken and mutton. Now [since starting sex work] there is improvement in my earning. I can provide the food of my children’s choice. I can buy them good clothes and good shoes. I can buy oil for their hair, soap and toothpaste. My work has been useful (Limbavva).

The hands that eat decide how many to be dedicated. There are hands that eat at home. There are women who buy cars and houses by doing sex work. They bought lands. Because girls do sex work, their families have bought all these in the village (Indiravva).

Knowing that the earnings of a sex worker can be quite high, and following the devadasi tradition of the dedicated daughter taking on the familial role of eldest son, thereby becoming financially responsible for the family, it has been difficult for poor families to resist an opportunity to dedicate their daughters. A common response to my question on why women were
dedicated, was poverty and lack of sons. Renuka told me that her dedication happened because of both poverty and no sons.

There were no sons. There was no one to work and earn. The parents thought that if the muttu is tied then the girls will stay at home. They will earn either by sex work or by doing coolie work, but they will not go away. Somehow the household should run.

It should be noted that there are many devadasi families who do have sons, and not all devadasis are the eldest child in the family. However, the family still holds the devadasi financially accountable for taking care of her family. In some cases brothers encouraged women to stop practicing sex work and offered to help financially, but devadasis often express that this offer was never permanent and responsibility would eventually fall back onto the devadasi. It is an unfortunate reality that devadasi women are sometimes seen as nothing more than money for a family. Indiravva told me, “My parents are not good. They just want money from us. Nothing else. That is why I got separated from them.” Ranavva expresses similar sentiments about her family, explaining:

We don’t have husbands. That is difficult. Nobody takes care of us. I have a 16 year old son and a 13 year old daughter. No one cares for them. As long as I was paying money to my parents, the family was good to me. But now my children go to school, I take care of my own children and so we are not wanted by my family.

One of the biggest struggles for devadasi women is that they are alone. They are not married to a man in order to keep them as an earning member within the natal family. Through sex work or sometimes through a more

7 In rural India, when a woman is married, she will go to live with her husband’s family: usually his parents and his other brothers and their wives and children. Her responsibility within the joint family involves cooking, cleaning and puja. In this setting, there is no opportunity for her to earn money and give it to her parents. If she is a working woman, all of her money will go to her husband and his family. Dedicating one’s daughter relieves her of this responsibility and enables her to provide for her own parents.
permanent partner, devadasi women will inevitably bear children whom nobody else will feel responsible for. It is difficult for a single parent in any country to earn enough money to take care of children without the responsibility of also having to take care of other family members. Single parent families are so rare in India that research on this topic is limited to widows, with some data on female-headed households, often in relation to food insecurity. In Karnataka, female-headed households constitute 16% of rural households (Vepa 2009, 28). It has been argued that because women do not earn as much as men in the same job, households which are based on female earnings have a higher probability of being poor and food insecure (Mallick and Rafi 2010, 594).

If a devadasi has a partner who contributes towards her monthly expenses, she may feel less financial burden when children are born than women who do not have partners. When she does not have a partner and is the sole earner, she can often no longer afford to contribute to her parents’ financial needs once she has children. Once the devadasi has taken on the role of eldest son in the family, other children will not feel obligated to help the parents in the same respect. Unfortunately, once devadasis shift their earnings to their children rather than their parents, their parents will often cut off contact with their devadasi daughter or the daughter may be forced to cease communication with her parents. However, most women interviewed did not correlate having a husband with food security or decreased poverty. They spoke more of respect, sharing sorrows, support (both emotional and financial), and the triple burden they carry that makes it difficult for them to take care for their children, maintain a job, and take care of household duties alone. However, practicing sex work is one way for them to mitigate this common triple burden placed upon poor women in the Third World. In addition to this, devadasis are entitled
to government benefits which non-devadasi women are not, such as housing subsidies and a monthly pension of Rs.400.

The financial gains of dedicating girls to the goddess remain appealing for poor families, and even today there are women who say that if it were necessary, they would dedicate their daughters. The obvious alternative livelihood for devadasis is agricultural labour (coolie work), and many women say that this kind of labour is far too difficult for them and they would prefer to do sex work. “If I go do coolie work I get Rs.100 per day after working the whole day. But this (sex) work, even if I do just two clients, I will get much more money. My life becomes much better” (Sundaravva). With sex work, if they are independent (many are), they can make their own hours, set the price, and have control over which clients they take. In return they get a decent amount of money which can be used to buy necessary material items, and often at a higher quality than women surviving from agricultural labour or other informal sector jobs. While women believe that having a husband would take pressure off them, it is unclear whether or not this would be true. Some women told stories of eldest sons in high paying jobs in the sugar cane fields (a lucrative business in North Karnataka), who would spend their earnings on alcohol, rather than contributing to the family financially. Despite this, when asked if they feel it would be better to have a husband even if he was an alcoholic or abusive, women usually say yes, it would still be better to have a husband; they feel that at least with husbands, society would view them as respectable married women.
Marriage as the solution to the devadasi “problem”

In 1997, the women of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC)8 created the Sex Workers’ Manifesto. In this excerpt, the women clearly outline why they feel stigmatised in Indian society, and why they disagree that heterosexual marriage is better than being a “single” woman.

In the perception of society we sex workers and in fact all women outside the relation of conjugality are seen as threats to the institution of family. It is said that enticed by us, men stray from the straight and narrow, destroy the family. All institutions from religion to formal education reiterate and perpetuate this fear about us. Women and men too, are the victims of this all pervasive misogyny. We would like to stress strongly that the sex workers’ movement is not against the institution of family. What we challenge is the inequity and oppression within the dominant notions of an “ideal” family which support and justify unequal distribution of power and resources within the structures of the family...The basis of a normative ideal family is inheritance through legitimate heirs and therefore sexual fidelity. Historically, the structures of families in reality have gone through many changes. In our country, by and large joint families are being replaced by nuclear ones as a norm....In most cases women do not have the power or the resources to opt out of such marriages and families. Sometimes men and women both remain trapped in empty relations by social pressure...But when do most of us women have access to choice within or outside the family? Do we become casual domestic labourers willingly? Do we have a choice about who we want to marry and when? The choice is rarely real for most women, particularly poor women (DMSC 1997, 5).

Here, the dilemma of the devadasi and her perceived threat to heterosexual marriage reappear; though not all devadasis are sex workers, none of them are in heteronormative relationships because they are married to Yellamma. As heterosexual marriages are seen as the only respectable

---

8 DSMC is a sex workers collective in Kolkata with 65,000 members. The organisation is run by sex workers, though they have educated English speaking employees who publish articles and press releases on their behalf. See www.durbar.org, (accessed 5 June 2014) and Jana et al. (2002) for more information.
relationship in India, devadasi women feel cheated of the opportunity to be married to a man, and feel that if they did have a husband, their everyday struggles would reduce drastically. Lucinda Ramberg (2006, 184) suggests that because devadasi women are sexually active with multiple partners, and simultaneously married to a deity, they are both a wife, and a non-wife, and therefore a threat to the difference that exists between the two categories. Joyce Flueckiger (2007, 35) explains that the ambivalence of devadasi women not marrying a human “may be created, in part, by the perceived threat to the social order posed by a woman not “tied down,” who moves across, thereby challenges, traditional social, gendered boundaries.” The devadasi does embody the wife, but she is the wife of a female deity, not the wife of a human man. The simplest way to solve this problematic and confusing dilemma is to get rid of it. The easiest solution to the problem is to encourage heterosexual marriage amongst devadasi women.

As previously discussed, the most recent law to attempt to enforce heterosexual marriage of devadasi women was the 1982 Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act (effective as of 1984). This Act made it illegal for devadasis to marry the devi, and women now face fines of up to Rs.5,000 and five years imprisonment if they are caught dedicating their daughters. At this time, the government began advocating for the marriage of devadasis to men, and was initially offering money to men who would marry the women. Criminalising devadasi women and promoting the normative family as the solution implies that this heterosexual relationship is the only possibility for reproductive sexuality, and publicly and legally denotes that the non-monogamous “single” woman is living a lifestyle which has historically been

---

9 Rs.5,000 has been the fine since the Act first took effect in 1984. Regardless of inflation this price has not changed, however it would have been much more arduous to pay Rs. 5,000 thirty years ago.
frowned upon by the middle-class and nationalist reformers (Ramberg 2006, 186-187).

Chhaya Datar’s (1992, 88) interviews more than twenty years ago with devadasis revealed that the women were concerned that being married would take away their freedoms. She explains:

The devadasis I met, wondered that after being married, will they be allowed by their husbands to sing and dance in public? If their husbands beat them, can they leave them as they are free to abandon their zulwa, the man they keep?10 Their status of a concubine along with their status as a ritual person offers them a different space in life, which many of them are not willing to trade off.

Ramberg’s (2006, 40) “sexual economy” of the devadasi system is evidently different from the marriage economy: “the circulation of gifts, women and gendered obligations is different”. Women are married to the goddess, they take on the role of a son, and any income they earn remains within the natal family (2006, 179). Hence, encouraging devadasi women to enter into heterosexual relationships not only breaks down the foundational ties of their marriage to the deity, it completely uproots their entire understanding of family and ways of functioning within the familial realm.11 This has now happened, and although some women still consider themselves married to Yellamma, and value that relationship, many do not. Devadasis in North Karnataka now understand family in the context of heterosexual marriage and have come to believe that their single parent family is not sufficient.12

10 It is not uncommon for devadasis to have one man live with them for an extended amount of time, in their home, under their control. Often, these men may stay for a few months, a few years, or a lifetime, but will maintain a family of their own elsewhere, and therefore not take financial responsibility for the devadasi’s family. They may buy her clothes or jewelry, or leave some money before departing.
11 See Ramberg (2006) for a detailed account of ways in which devadasi mothers take on the role of husbands and fathers, while their daughters take on the role of sons.
12 This will be discussed further in chapter five.
The social pressure to marry in India is demanding for both parties, male and female. Even today, it continues to thrive in the context of a patriarchal society which imposes responsibility on the man to take care of the woman and act as the primary care giver for the family. Women usually do not have access to land, though devadasis do. It is therefore of no value to keep a woman in the family, particular a single woman who may fight her brothers for property. Consequently, the solution is to marry the women out of the family, so that they become a burden on their husband’s family. However, as was mentioned earlier, devadasis have found value in keeping their daughters in the home by dedicating them to a life of financial responsibility for the girl’s parent(s).

In a patriarchal society like India, heterosexual marriage has sometimes been compared to sexual slavery, with married women being completely submissive to their husbands.\textsuperscript{13} Therefore, it has been argued that entering into a heterosexual marriage may take away the woman’s autonomy over her own body, as she relies completely on her husband for food and shelter and therefore must do as he says. In this regard, sex workers may be understood as more empowered than some married women (Gangoli 2007). The onset of devadasi practice in Karnataka may have been a way in which Dalit women formed their own job sector and found their own system of earning and survival outside of the shackles of marriage and “familial patriarchal control” (Sangari 1999, 359; Seshu in Kidron 2011). Even though nearly every devadasi has the desire to marry, women express that being a sex worker is her life now and she must

\textsuperscript{13} I choose the word “slave” cautiously, but also consciously, wanting here to connect the “slavery” of the wife to the “slavery” of prostitution. As previously discussed, Victorian feminists who argued against prostitution (see Doezema 2001), as well as colonialists in India, often identified prostitution as a form of slavery, grounding abolition efforts in discussions around slavery. In this regard, perhaps the wife and the devadasi are/were not so different.
fulfil her duty. Additionally, though women may dream of having a “good” husband who respects her and is not abusive or an alcoholic, their experience with their partners or clients opens their eyes to the realities that in some regards, life is easier being alone. Women who continue to practice sex work or who are not affiliated with MASS are quicker to express satisfaction without husbands. The following three quotes are by devadasis who are KSAPS members, and continue to practice sex work. Here they compare their lives to women who are married.

If I were to get a good husband then it would have been better. But if he made me work hard and if he were to drink and beat me up then that life would have been very bad, right? I can’t say this work is better. In one way what I do is wrong. But we console ourselves by saying that our situation is like this, this is what is written in our fate. We go on living. It is not that we want to do this but we do it because of the force of the circumstances...Now I don’t have a partner. I am a sex worker. I cannot have a partner. If I keep a partner he would boss over me. He will question me when I go out. He will drink and come and beat me. I don’t need a partner (Limbavva).

I think being as I am is better. Because by being a wife, I must obey what the husband says, I must be linked to him all the time, and I must lead a life according to him all the time. I have to make everything he expects me to make. I must wake up early in the morning. It is a bother. I must be under the control of my husband. Whatever decisions I take, it will be in accordance with my thoughts (Lakshmi).

I feel both the feelings. When I watch the people thinking of us as devadasis, so a bit lowly women, then I feel that it would be good to be married. But when I watch the husbands beating and abusing their wives then I feel that my life is more hassle free. I can think either way (Durgavva).

---

14 Fulfilling one’s duty, or dharma, is a Hindu ideology connected to caste. It is often emphasised amongst lower caste individuals who believe that their low position in society is based on karma from a previous life. Consequently, by living out one’s dharma (or duty) to god dutifully, Hindus hope that they will be rewarded in their next life (Hiltebeitel 2010). Should they not follow their dharma, they believe they risk facing negative consequences (Flood 1996).
Some women are more than aware of what a married life may be and went as far as to say that even if their husband killed them, they would still prefer a husband, because they would have the respect of a wife and “married woman”. They then continued to tell me that husbands in their village are not bad, they only beat their wives when they do something wrong. Following my earlier discussion on gender inequality in India, these kind of responses may not come as a surprise. Women are often at a disadvantage and men usually have the “power and decision-making authority” (Dreze and Sen 2002, 18). However, it is significant that there are devadasis who are able to recognise that with a husband comes diminished freedom and loss of control over one’s life. The conventional upholding of the heteronormative family is so ingrained in Indian society that any single woman, be she a widow or a divorcee, is often an outcast in her community. However, Mary John and Janaki Nair (1998, 12) suggest a counter-approach to the feminist understanding: “it is clear that many of the feminist narratives fail to acknowledge the ways in which wife/non-wife are constituted by the same patriarchal authorities, so that they are structurally yoked in fundamental ways, making the securities and pleasures of one domain unavailable to the other.” In this regard, devadasis and sex workers represent “the other” to the wife, which may be a threat to the heteronormative family, though this does not necessarily mean that one is more empowering than the other; each category presents different opportunities and expectations.

One translator who was helping me with interviews is in an inter-religious love marriage, which led me to believe that she was quite “liberal” and open-minded, as both inter-religious marriages and love marriages tend to happen against the will of parents in India. However, when it came time to ask questions about marriage and husbands, the way that she chose to word questions and comments was a clear indication of her belief that heterosexual marriage is the only respectable kind of relationship. Below are two examples of
questions which were translated by two different translators at early stages during the research.

Example 1:

**Nikki**: Does she feel that it is better to live alone than with a partner who is not good?

**N**: [After trying to ask the previous question many times] Does she think that it is better to live as a single person instead of having a bad husband or is it better to live with a bad husband?

**Translator**: Imagine you have a good partner, and you also have a bad husband. With whom would you like to live?

Example 2:

**N**: You can tell her that I was brought up by a single mum and I watched her struggle while I was growing up. I understand that it is difficult, and I feel very fortunate that I have come so far in education.

**T**: Her father was in another town. He would come regularly and give money to her mother. He just lived in another town because of his job. So she understands your pain. Because she lived with her mum at home. When the father is there but lives in another town it is different, right? She understands you, and she is happy she got educated so much.

In Example 1 the translator does not give the respondent the option of living alone. Her question was formed in a way which the respondent was pressured to display social desirability-bias in her answer. Many devadasi women do live alone, and my intent was to analyse whether women recognised that this single life may have some advantages in a society where married women are often restricted to the home and abuse is not uncommon. As previously discussed in chapter three, Treena Orchard (2007), Lucinda Ramberg (2006), Lynda Epp (1996), and Chhaya Datar (1992) present postcolonial feminist understandings of devadasis which demonstrate ways in which devadasis may be empowered where other women are not. With this
framework, I believed that devadasi women would also admit that in many respects they are better off than married women in India; but they did not, perhaps as a result of the obfuscation that occurred through the nuanced translations given by female interpreters.

It became evident to me early on in the research process that trying to create such categories of married woman versus single woman was not going to be possible in a society where a married life is recognised as the only respectable option for women. Again in Example 2 this was emphasised when the translator was unable or unwilling to recognise that there is nothing wrong with being a single parent. It could have also been that the translator was simply embarrassed and felt that acknowledging the interviewee as single would be disrespectful. My attempt to relate to the woman being interviewed failed miserably because of the translation which was given. The language barrier also made it difficult for me to get unbiased answers regarding how women feel about living a single life, because translators often asked questions in a way which implied that being married was the better position to be in. Women were not always given an unbiased or open platform to think for themselves in this regard because the answer was already decided for them: marriage is better. These examples are from early on during my field work when my Kannada was not yet advanced enough to recognise such a horrible translation. However, after these incidents, I retreated from directly asking questions about singledom for the duration of my fieldwork, despite improvements in my own language skills, and decreased reliance on translators.

Women “without husbands”

Having been married to the goddess Yellamma at a young age, devadasi women are not given the option to marry a man. Consequently, many of them,
especially MASS members who have stopped practicing sex work, value marriage quite highly and believe that being married to a man is the answer to their struggles. Since the Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act came into effect in 1984, it has been legal for devadasi women to marry men. Most devadasis, especially those who work in their villages, tend to have permanent partners from an early age. This man is often the father of their children, and sometimes women will stay with this one man all their lives. However, in most cases the man will leave once children are born, once his parents force him to marry someone else, or if his wife becomes upset that he has a mistress. Many women spoke of being with partners who wanted to marry them, or of having brothers who wanted to arrange marriages for them, but devadasis usually refuse such proposals, or her parents and/or his parents refuse to allow the marriage. In cases where she refused, it is often because of the stigma she places upon herself as a devadasi, believing she is not meant to marry a man given that she is already married to Yellamma. A second reason to refuse a marriage proposal is because, as a devadasi, the woman is expected to earn for the family. If she marries, she is concerned that she will lose this freedom, as her earnings

4.2 Devadasis and Partners: Tipavva and Shaila

“I had already been labelled as a prostitute. My parents had agreed that I should do this work. If I did not do this work then how can I send money to my parents? That is why I left this man (her partner) and came away. Just eat food and buy sari, should I become his wife? I did not like to live just with one man. He would provide for my food and clothes but what about my family and parents who are depending on me? Don’t I have to send money to them? I have to support them. My brother has already thrown them out of his house. Now I have to earn money and send it to them” (Tipavva).

“So two years after my return I gave birth to a baby girl. The father was my first partner. Even now he is with me. He has a family. I have taken the lead and made him get married to a Kuruba girl [of his community]. I have told him that a devadasi’s children cannot be your true children and that he should have his own children to “light the lamp” of his house. And my children will be for my own family. So I have a girl and his wife has two girls and a boy. He pays Rs.4000/5000 per month...I am a devadasi so I cannot get married to any man. My family insisted on that fact. He told my family that he wanted to take me to his home. He offered them whatever money they wanted so that I could be taken away. My family refused. They told him that they have dedicated me voluntarily and so they would keep me with them. He was ready to marry and take me with him. He tried to visit the courts in Belgaum too. But it was not possible...It is the rule that devadasis cannot marry. But still I could have married him even being a devadasi. But there is this pot of God in our home, no? If we keep that at home we cannot marry. My parents asked ‘who will look after us?’ Did we have the strength to leave all this and go and work somewhere else? No. We were not educated” (Shaila).
will have to go to her immediate family with her husband, or she will be restricted by her husband from working altogether and her duties will be reduced to cooking and eating. (See text box 4.2 for interviewees quotes on partners.) A couple of women also discussed incidents where they made the decision to arrange for their partners to marry somebody else. In these instances, usually they maintain their relationship with their partner, and have close contact with his wife and their children. Although some devadasis feel that they are better without husbands, nearly all of my informants believe that if they were not devadasis, and simply the wife of a man, their life would be more secure. As devadasis, even if they have a partner, they can never trust him to stay, because she is a devadasi, not a wife. Malamma spoke briefly about the dilemma she feels as a single woman, and the problems she faces with her partner.

Whether the husband is blind or lame, he is her husband. He works and brings in the food. Even if we are sick he will earn or he will beg or borrow for me. If I earn to feed myself, then sometimes I can do dhanda sometimes I cannot. What about my hunger? However the husband could be, he is still a husband. He will earn. Look at my life. Every day there are irritations, fights and quarrels. There is no proper food.

He (the partner) is married. He doesn’t have children though he is married since 4 years. I took the lead in arranging his marriage. Look, we don’t have sons. That is why I made him marry again. His family had been fighting because he was staying with me and she has gone back to her mother’s place...we are both from the same village. Now that woman is fighting and asking him to leave me. But I am a devadasi; I cannot trust the man to be with me all my life. I do sex work, so it is definite that he will leave me, if not today at least after a year. He worries that his wife is fighting with him. He is my permanent partner but he is going to leave me for sure (Malamma).

Without a husband or immediate family, some women feel that in order to avoid being alone later in life, it is necessary to have children in order to secure their future.
As long as my parents are alive it would be fine. But after that who would be my support? I thought that this would give me a better life. So I came to this profession. I used to refuse to do this. But the people who were wise explained to me, “Look, if you just remain single then once your parents die you will have no partner to live as a couple. Yours will be a lonely single life. What will be your fate after your parents go away?” For the devadasis children are the real support. So they counselled me and told me that having either daughters or sons would be a great support to me in the future. That would allow me to lead an independent life later in life. So I began doing sex work (Sundaravva).

By force they made me have my first night. I was about 16. After that I decided to kill myself to avoid such difficulties or I would stay single all my life and that I would not want to do this work. I also decided that I did not need any children either. I did not do sex work for two years after that. But we do need children, don’t we? If not I would be totally alone in life (Lalitha).

Though there is no guarantee that children will take care of their old devadasi mothers, it is a risk most women are willing to take. It is a paradoxical

### 4.3 Daughters of Devadasis: Kalavathi

Daughters of devadasis are also at risk of facing abuse from their husbands because their mothers are devadasis. Marrying within the family is sometimes seen as a safe solution to this problem, as the husband and his family will be aware of the mother’s status and agree to marry the daughter regardless. However, after many years, the daughters of devadasis may suddenly find themselves being treated by their husbands with complete disrespect. Kalavathi is the only daughter of a devadasi that I interviewed, because she is a staff member for an NGO. Her story of being a daughter of a devadasi helps to explain the stigma that devadasis' children continue to face.

“The man I have married is also my relative in the maternal side of my family. That family was fine during the wedding but now they have started to speak bad about me. They blamed me for having a mother who is a devadasi and so they accused me also of having similar morals. For that one reason I have left my husband’s home and I have returned to my mother. My husband, my mother-in-law and my father-in-law say such bad things. Just for that one accusation, I walked out and I told them that I was capable of working and earning my bread. Just for that one reason I have not spoken to him till today. How would they understand with how much difficulty a mother would have brought up her daughter and sent her to school? They knew that my mother was a devadasi and still they had come to my home with a proposal of marriage. My mother thought that I will be close to home and also that I will be married to someone who is a relative and that is the reason she got me married to him. But after I gave birth to two children, this problem arose. I was married to him and lived with him for about ten years. In those ten years he used to fight with me but he never had made this accusation. Maybe he used to fight because this fact was bothering him but he had not told me so. But suddenly he said, ‘You are the children of prostitutes and so you are also a prostitute.’ I felt very sad. What value do I have as a daughter of a prostitute? I came out of his house and I was crying bitterly” (Kalavathi).
reality that women are dedicated to Yellamma to take care of their parents, but then feel that if their parents die, they will truly be alone; so they have children, and in order to care for their children, they can no longer afford to care for their parents. For many devadasi women children are the most important part of their lives, and they often stop practicing sex work once their children are old enough to understand what they are doing; this is especially so if women have daughters, as they feel that if their daughters see them practicing sex work, they may also end up in sex work. Devadasis highlight their children’s education as a primary concern, and there are a couple of NGOs in Karnataka which have focused on sending the children of devadasis to school.

During personal interviews I spoke to a sex worker who is a staff member of KSAPS and a devadasi’s daughter who is a staff member of another NGO (see text box 4.3 below for more on daughters of devadasis). Both of these women have been married, but left their husbands because of physical and verbal abuse. In each of these circumstances, the women expressed that being single was better for them and they were happy with the choice they have made. They did have to face stigma within their communities as single women, but eventually overcame it and found solace. Some devadasis also agree that it is easier to be single, but usually these women are outside of Belgaum, and have not had any association with MASS. Shanta is one example of this; she is a devadasi who continues to practice sex work, and she is not concerned about being in a heterosexual marriage.

We do sex work outside because of money to live and to eat. I don’t think about those (married) women. I don’t waste my thoughts on the partner, neither on a husband. The truth remains that I am a prostitute and I have to work to eat. Dhanda is the only truth. No one cares about me, why should I analyse their (women with husbands) lives? We can have more clients than just the original partner. But the others may not respect us. Why should I care about anyone? We are the people who say “come” if one is ready to pay and tell those who
have no money to get lost. Does he give me a share in his property? Why should I stress about him? To solve the tension of my parents I have come and stood on the streets. Now why should I take up his tension? Does he care about my life? He will come to me when I have the good days. When my life is ending will he come to me? Will he? No. So why should I be concerned about him? No need. Some women could worry about the men. I don’t. I don’t bother. I work and I eat. That is all (Shanta).

Often not having a husband is one of the first “problems” that devadasi women talk about. It is rare that they do not mention marriage or husbands, in which case I felt inclined to ask them about it. Though it is not common, there are devadasi women who do not think about marriage or consider husbands to be of any value to them. They simply live their day-to-day lives and appreciate not having to rely on anybody else or adhere to a husband’s demands. They feel that as a devadasi, they would never find a husband who respects them as a wife, regardless of the legality of the marriage, simply because they have this devadasi status. Therefore, they disregard the institution of marriage altogether.

**Poverty and Material conditions**

Finding themselves outside of the conventional family, devadasi women are often excluded from government benefits which other women are not. Simultaneously, devadasis receive benefits that are only available to devadasi women, and non-devadasis have been known to dedicate themselves or claim dedication in order to receive benefits. Though devadasis will never carry the social status of a widow, they might be compared to widows economically, because they are single women, and in this respect, widows in India are more susceptible to poverty than married women (Dreze and Sen 2002, 263).

Devadasis come from rural areas and typically remain in their villages for sex work and/or agricultural work. In Karnataka, more than 50% of women are engaged in agricultural labour (these statistics may also include devadasis who are sex workers, as they are known to pursue agricultural labour alongside sex
work) (Vepa 2009, 30). According to Swarna Vepa (2009, 31), states which have low to moderate wages tend to employ more women, indicating that women have more presence in the informal job sector when wages are lower. This may either be because their participation in the labour market is needed, or because if there are higher paying jobs, they are often done by men.

Devadasis do sex work from home, though some will leave for metropolitan cities such as Mumbai and Pune for a period of time, eventually returning to their villages. Many women who have stopped sex work now do coolie work in nearby fields for Rs.30-100 per day. Only a few women who live in more populated villages have used loans to start petty shops close to their homes. There is little opportunity for other employment in this area outside of farming, which is seasonal. In part, this is why sex work presents a good opportunity; it is a reliable income all year round. Some women also prefer sex work over coolie or other labour because they claim labour work is too difficult for them, they cannot handle the hot sun, or they have some sort of physical disability which makes it impossible. According to Elizabeth Hill (2010, 1):

earning low incomes as daily labourers, vendors, home-based artisans and industrial outworkers, or as providers of myriad local services, many women find themselves on the fringes of what is commonly recognised as “the economy”. They do not conform to orthodox conceptions of “a worker”, and their labour is not always counted as “productive” activity. This places them in a kind of economic twilight zone, often unaccounted for in official labour statistics and without access to the kinds of basic social security services available to those employed in more regular and formal modes of employment.

At the moment, sex work in brothels in India is decriminalised, and the Indian government is debating full decriminalisation or legalisation of sex work (Kotiswaran 2014). Employees of Belgaum Integrated Rural Development Society (BIRDS) and KSAPS expressed to me the opinion that decriminalising
sex work would greatly benefit sex workers in India, as it would place them into the formal job market and possibly remove them from the “economic twilight zone” that they currently find themselves in.

Devadasi women are eligible for Rs.400 pension per month from the government. In Belgaum district it seems that every woman who is registered with the government is receiving a pension. In Bijapur and Bagalkot, a pension is only available to women over forty-five years of age. Though the rules are not any different, it appears that MASS may allow women in Belgaum to lie about their age in order to receive one of the few benefits available to them. Women who are not registered with the government as devadasis do not receive any pension. It is now quite difficult to rectify this; the Karnataka government did a survey in 2007 which they declared as the final survey, given that they have “eradicated” the devadasi practice (Nayak 2011). Any woman who did not complete the form or whose village was missed in the survey have unfortunately been denied access to devadasi pension. This Rs.400 pension is intended to help devadasis with the income they are lacking as a result of not having husbands. However, devadasis are not satisfied with this amount and have been fighting to have their pension increased to Rs.1,000. When asked what kind of assistance the women need, most were quick to request that I have their pension increased.

It is difficult for devadasi women to acquire a ration card. As part of India’s food security system, ration cards have been established to provide access to essential commodities (rice, kerosene, wheat, and sugar) at an extremely cheap price. Devadasis have recently seen their ration allotment of rice increase from four kilograms per month to thirty kilograms per month; but

---

15 This survey revealed that, according to the Karnataka government, 46,600 devadasis remain in Karnataka. This would not include all women who did not participate in the survey for various reasons (Nayak 2011).
they continue to demand more. Problematically, in order to obtain a ration card in Karnataka, individuals must have a house in their name. In Belgaum, many women have received housing subsidies and now own their own property, but this is not so in Bijapur and Bagalkot where many women do not own land or property and are therefore not eligible for subsidies. MASS has played a large role in lobbying the Karnataka government to take action in Belgaum district, but the same cannot be said for other districts. Despite the fact that devadasis are entitled to land rights, many families are so poor that they do not own land for their children to inherit.

Some women have received land and houses from the government rather than subsidies to build their own, and women in Bijapur and Balgalkot feel that this would be a better option given that they are not eligible for the subsidies. However, a group of women in Belgaum district have reason to believe that in some circumstances, subsidies may be better. There is a government plot which was built around 1992 and given to twenty devadasi women and their families. I visited this plot multiple times to discuss devadasi life with the women and listen to their needs and desires for a better future. We would sit on a mat under a nearby tree with sunflowers in our hands and sunflowers seeds in our mouths, spending long hours in the hot sun discussing the state of this plot of land. It was the only place I would visit where they would not offer me tea. This was not because they are rude, but because they are too poor, and water is so scarce. The group explained to me that since moving into the houses twenty years earlier, they have been fighting to have the titles of the houses in their names. Some women have died, and their children continue to live there, but none of the residents in this plot have their homes in their name. They fear the consequences that may ensue from not having any rights to the only land they have. Employees of MASS who live on the same plot explained to me that after twenty years, the house title is automatically supposed to be in the name of
whomever has lived in the house for the duration of that time, but the government is failing to provide the paperwork. Additionally, nobody has come to inspect or repair the houses since they were built, and all of them have leaking roofs and flood during monsoon rains. The location of the plot is very inconvenient; either it was not thought through or it may have been marginal land that the government could not sell, and therefore allocated to devadasis. It is outside of the main town, in a very dry location on a hilltop. The women have to travel quite far to do coolie work; they cannot afford the travel costs to get to the city centre; the land is not sufficient to graze animals; and they completely run out of water during the dry season. With this example, I discussed with devadasis in other districts the problematics of lobbying the government for plots rather than subsidies.

The nemesis of subsidies are all the government employees who come between the money and its recipients. Unfortunately corruption plays a huge part in this process, with every hand that touches the money taking a cut. Though devadasi women are entitled to a Rs.50,000 house subsidy, by the time the money gets to them they are lucky to get Rs.30,000. As this is no longer enough to build a home, they are then required to take out a loan in order to cover the cost of the subsidy they never received.

The only way for poor women to access many facilities, including loans, is through a sangha group. In 1992, MASS created sangha groups as a result of a government survey which determined who all the devadasi women were at that time and where they were located. Sangha groups developed primarily in locations with large populations of devadasis. No additional groups have since been organised and no new members have been invited to join existing groups. There are a substantial number of women today who are not members of any group and therefore cannot access any loans or subsidies.
Walking down the street, it is near impossible to differentiate a devadasi from any other rural Dalit woman. Few women wear their muttus in public anymore, and most devadasis look exactly like any other rural Dalit woman. They wear inexpensive saris and some wear excessive gold jewellery to the Western eye (women often told me I was very “simple” due to my lack of jewellery). Most of them also wear a thali and toe rings, indicating that they are married, and usually have a tattoo mark or scar on their face. Some women still have matted hair, though most have now been forced to cut it off by MASS. No matter what the woman does to hide her identity, and despite physical similarities with married women, everybody in society knows that she is a devadasi: this is a reality she cannot escape. She is a single woman for life, and though she will never carry the respect of a married woman, she will also never carry the disrespect of a widow. They explain, “If a husband dies the wife becomes a widow. And a husband is pitied when his wife dies. They sympathise with him that his wife was good and now he became a poor widower. The wife also becomes a randimunde (abusive word for a widow). She will not be allowed to come near any auspicious functions. But we are muthaides (auspicious married women) till we die. Till the day we die we have the control in our hands” (Rema). According to Saskia Kersenboom (1987, 197), this muthaide status, which she calls nityasumangali can be interpreted “not only as a woman whose auspiciousness is like that of a great goddess, but as a woman whose auspiciousness is lasting because she is the great goddess” (emphasis in original).

As muthaides, devadasis have a freedom which married women lack. As sex workers, many women travel to populous metropolitan cities, while most rural women do not travel more than a few hours away from their villages, if they are lucky. Many married women live in the same village all their married
lives, rarely leave their homes, and are unaware of what shops are at the end of their street. Husbands often take care of everything outside of the home, including shopping. A wife’s duty becomes taking care of her husband and children, and this is what she spends her day doing. While the wife is serving her husband a hot meal, waiting to eat yesterday’s leftover rice, the devadasi is eating a freshly prepared meal and relaxing. Many devadasis do not appreciate this freedom.

One day I showed up at Jayashree’s house somewhat unplanned, but this did not prevent her from rearranging her day around me, taking me with her to the bank, and preparing an abundance of food for me. Together with one other woman from the neighbourhood, the two of them sat preparing food, occasionally allowing me to assist them when I insisted upon it. When the food was prepared, her neighbour left, and Kasturi got out the mats for us to sit on. She turned on the television, an activity reserved only for special occasions to conserve electricity costs. As the two of us sat together on her living room floor eating fresh, warm food and watching an English cooking show which she could not understand, it occurred to me what a lovely and unusual experience it was to be able to share a hot meal with the woman who cooked it. Though devadasi women are presented with a different way of looking at the world and afforded opportunities that married women cannot access, they long for the life of the married woman. However, it is possible that given the opportunity, they would miss their single status; their opportunity to eat warm fresh food, and move freely.

Devadasi women often describe their lives as a constant state of suffering. As poor, Dalit, “unmarried” women, they are outcasted by society, and left alone to overcome the problems they face. While many of these problems are not different from those of other poor, Dalit non-devadasi women in society, the imposition of reform which has subsequently fed into NGO interventions has
created a space in which devadasis feel their only option for a better life is to completely renounce their connection to the goddess and become respectable married women. Most devadasis are unable to see that their single status provides a more mobile life, one that would be much more difficult, or impossible, in the shackles of heterosexual marriage. Luncinda Ramberg (2006, 126) notes that “reform projects imagine they are remaking forms of life, however these lives are at the same time remaking themselves and not necessarily toward a teleology of the same progress”. While many NGOs and anti-trafficking initiatives victimise devadasi women in the name of eradication, devadasis have come to operate in a new fashion within these reinvented identities that they create for themselves. Their agency is found in unexpected spaces, such as how they negotiate poverty and use their various identities, simultaneously being victims and empowered women, to get what they need.
Chapter five: 
Changing identities and practice among devadasis

“I am a woman with a muttu. Nobody can question me making my livelihood” (Shanta).

“The clients prefer devadasis over other women. They think that other women do business, we do tradition. We are as good as the married women for clients” (Reka).

“The main difference between the sex workers and devadasis is that for the sex workers money is the world but not so for the devadasis. For the devadasis their children are their world” (Kalavathi).

“They forbid us from wearing the beads (muttu) because we will beg if we have the beads. We should not wear those. That is the rule. They also confiscated our baskets and other articles of the ritual” (Ranavva).

Devadasis suffer from poverty, lack of resources, and downward social mobility. Feminists leave no space for devadasis: either they are victims of sex trafficking and slavery or victims of domestication and heterosexual marriage. Abolitionists and reformers (many of whom function under the guise of NGOs) only provide them with one alternative: marriage. These longer processes of regulatory change and interventions targeting temple women, and consequently devadasis, have contributed to the changing identities and practices of devadasis. Devadasis have reacted in different ways to these changes. Postfeminist theory argues in favour of difference, recognising that even within groups of women, each woman has her own thoughts and opinions. Previous chapters have discussed how these interventions have led to devadasi women desperately desiring marriage and respectability. Perhaps it therefore does not come as a surprise that even when comparing themselves to sex workers, who are also not seen as respectable in society, devadasis continue to focus on respectability as both a strength and a weakness of their devadasi status. This belief that respect and an end to suffering comes through heterosexual marriage is part of the reinvented and reformed identities that devadasi women have created for themselves. However, not all devadasis feel
this way. Some devadasis express empowerment and auspiciousness through their devadasi status.

In “speaking with” (Nagar and Geiger 2007) devadasis, this chapter will demonstrate, through the voices of devadasis, how the devadasi practice has changed and what this means for devadasis today. There is a widespread belief in society and the media that devadasis are not different from sex workers. However, Treena Orchard (2007) and Lucinda Ramberg (2006) have presented alternative interpretations which indicate difference from sex workers. I will advance this previous research by focusing in the beginning of this chapter on analysing what devadasis say is the difference between themselves and non-devadasi sex workers. Not surprisingly, respect and marriage are the most frequently mentioned differences that the women talk about. Subsequently, this chapter will also discuss why a sense of importance continues to surround the auspicious status of the muttu, and the religious roles that devadasis maintain as a result of dedication. However, government and non-government organisations have played a central role in the decline of devadasi dedications and devadasi identity, which has also contributed to a change in the social status of devadasis. This will become evident through an analysis of devadasi explanations of how these organisations have been “helping” them through eradication initiatives.

**What is the difference between devadasis and sex workers?**

*Is respect all that matters?*

Contemporary devadasis in Karnataka are understood to be prostitutes by all organisations seeking to assist them out of the devadasi practice. In many cases, as they create these new lives, reinventing themselves through reform in search of respect, they slowly distance themselves from their religious rituals. Consequently, according to society, the government, and most NGOs, there is
no difference between devadasis and sex workers. A staff member from OMIF told me, “Devadasis and prostitutes are all the same, but it is just the word. In the villages they are referred to as prostitutes and less as devadasis...Prostitutes are those who would have gone to the cities like Bombay and Poona.” This view comes from an understanding that having sex outside of wedlock is not respectable sex, and is therefore prostitution.1 Regardless of whether or not any money is exchanged, or if this is the only man she has ever had sexual intercourse with, she is a prostitute. Unpacking the distinction between devadasis and sex workers is complex, and devadasis themselves have conflicting views about what constitutes the two. In some regards this has to do with whether or not the woman is practicing sex work. Devadasis who are practicing sex work talk more about rituals that they practice and how society views them in comparison to sex workers who are not devadasis, and are therefore (according to devadasis) married women (or have been married at one time). Even then, there is discrepancy with some women believing devadasis are more respected and others believing sex workers are more respected. Devadasis who are not practicing sex work provided different responses, often being unclear about what the difference is between the two, or not really understanding why the two should be compared. Non-practicing devadasis, or ex-devadasis, do not tend to mention ritual, because along with stopping sex work, they have stopped nearly all aspects of the devadasi practice, including ritual, though this does not mean that they have ceased to worship the devi. Below is a table comparing the two points of view: the left side lists quotes by

---

1 On 17 June 2013, The Hindu (2013, 1) published an article titled “Couples who have premarital sex to be considered ‘married’, says HC.” The article states, “If any unmarried couple of the right legal age “indulge in sexual gratification”, this will be considered a valid marriage and they could be termed “husband and wife”, the Madras High Court has ruled in judgment that gives a new twist to the concept of premarital sex.” This may benefit devadasi women who desperately wish to have a legal marriage, but unfortunately it is not likely that such a law will have any effect on their rights.
devadasis who argue that devadasis are more respected; the right side lists quotes by devadasis arguing that sex workers are more respected.2

The table demonstrates that within the question, “What is the difference between devadasis and sex workers?”, the common theme which continues to come up is that of husbands, marriage and the muttu or muthaide (auspicious married) status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5.1 Devadasis are more respected</th>
<th>Sex workers are more respected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. All devadasis are not sex workers. All sex workers are not devadasis...devadasis have their own particular status and honour. Look, I have been dedicated as a devadasi by my family and so I get half of the property share...I take part in all the functions and celebrations...But those who begin to do sex work do so due to different reasons. The reason could be that they became widows or they got divorced. Or it could also be that their love fails. A man takes a girl away and after a few days leaves her. Such girls also come into sex work. For all such women the family need not give any share in the property. They cannot touch anyone or anything during the weddings and such celebrations...They could be widows and so they are not allowed to touch. Such women face such problems. They would have to earn all their property by just doing sex work alone. But it is not the same for devadasis. We get the share (Lakshmi).</td>
<td>1. Those sex workers usually are married women. They would have gotten into this profession either after the husband dies or if he leaves her. But we the devadasis are looked down upon as prostitutes. Earlier that disrespect was much more. Now it is not there. We did not enjoy any respect in the society. But the women who do sex work being wives are much more respected. They are the women who have their husbands, you see (Tipavva).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 In a few cases, respondents feel that in some instances devadasis are more respected and in other circumstances, sex workers are more respected in society.
### 5.1 Devadasis are more respected

2. The *muttu* gives us more respect. But there are other women who would have left their husbands. They are neither with the husbands nor are they devadasis. They don’t get any respect. True that those women would be married but due to the circumstances of their families or due to some other reasons they would have left their husbands and they would have come out to do this profession. The married women who do sex work are less respected than the devadasis. Married women who live only with their husbands get the most respect in the society (Renukavva).

3. We have the rights. We are the daughters and we have the mothers from whom we can demand all the rights; we can fight with our brothers and acquire all the rights. They must give me a part of the house, a part of the land and also they must give me a status equal to the rest of the family. But those who leave their families and come out to do sex work due to many circumstances, such people do not have that advantage. For such women there is no acceptance into the family, there is no share in the property and also the family cuts off all relationship with such women thinking of them as good as dead...We have power. We, the devadasis have human rights. We are valued...Yellamma is like our husband...Our path is right (Shaila).

### Sex workers are more respected

2. The other sex workers could be the women, whose husbands have left them, or they could be widows or they could be those who could not have sex with their husbands. The society doesn’t disrespect them like they look down upon us. Whereas even if a devadasi does sex work or even if she doesn’t do sex work, the society criticises the system and practice. Isn’t that a difference? They label us as the women who are meant to do sex work. We as a community are shown disgust. I think being a devadasi is a very lowly position (Sundaravva).

3. I have no known problem. But the sex workers will face problems if people come to know about them. There is also the difference between our partners. The sex workers will have a husband who would look at them with compassion and love. He would be tender to those women. But my partner would have paid to be with me for a night. So he would want to get his money’s worth from me. He will not care later about my children or me (Lalitha).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5.1 Devadasis are more respected</th>
<th>Sex workers are more respected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. They might do sex work in our names, but they are totally different from us... These days I have started to feel that my value has diminished and their value has increased. I can say that I have the permission to do sex work because I have this muttu tied. I have the right. So I can do sex work either at home or I can even go with him and do sex in other places. The sex workers would not have this value to what they do. They just do sex work. I have the right to tell anyone who asks me that I am here to do sex work. And it has been given to me by the society and the community. The responsibility of what I do is on the community. What I do is the doing for the people of this society... No one will talk rubbish about me if I have this muttu. No one will kick us or fight with us. If they fight I can beat him with my foot wear. I have the right to do what I do with my muttu round my neck (Kasturi).</td>
<td>4. If I declare that I am a devadasi they will refuse to be my clients because they will think that I go with many men. I say that I am a married woman and that I have been called to do this work because a very special and close client has come. No one would feel like being with me if I say that I am a devadasi. I will have to tell some lies... being a devadasi is within a tradition. Those who are on the streets are different from us. Those women will do sex work randomly with whoever they can find and they roam the streets. But devadasis do sex work with some dignity and discretion. Devadasis would be having a partner, like a husband. Because they do not want that partner to find out that they are doing sex work, they will keep it within the limits of decency and respect. But the sex workers stand around and wait to do only sex work. They keep on the look out to do sex work with any client that they can find... Devadasi practice is the better one. If I am a sex worker I will have to stand around all over the town. As a devadasi I can do this work discreetly (Ranavva).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. If I am just a sex worker then I get a bad name. But if I am a sex worker others will not trouble me much. The reason is I never had a husband, and this is my profession. So they will not object to what I do. If I start to do sex work and I also have a husband then the people will treat me very badly (Limbavva).</td>
<td>5. We do more sex work. They cannot do more because they stay with their husbands. They call us as prostitutes, they show disgust towards us. They move away from us and they take their husbands away from us. But they live with their husbands. What names can the people call them? (Indiravva).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Every respondent who believes that sex workers are more respected stated that sex workers have husbands, and therefore receive more respect in society. On the right hand side of the table under “Sex workers are more respected”, respondent number four tells two sides of her story, first stating that if she tells clients she is a devadasi, they will refuse her services, assuming she is with more men than a sex worker. In this view, she claims that outsiders think sex workers are more respectable. However, she later says that in fact it is better to be a devadasi because sex workers are with more men, roaming the streets in search of clients, while devadasis are more cautious about arranging clients,
which therefore makes devadasis more respectable. Believing that men think devadasis are with more clients than sex workers, but having her own belief that sex workers are with more clients, shows a discrepancy which is intertwined in how devadasis are identified in society. Her response is not surprising, and both angles she presents are valid, even if somewhat contradictory. There will be some men who will still view devadasis more respectably than sex workers, and others who will not. Whether or not one goes with more clients than the other will change according to the woman, regardless of her devadasi status. The respondent concludes by clarifying that despite what society thinks of her, she feels that it is better to be a devadasi than a sex worker, because her personal practice is more respectable: only having sex with regular clients and making each of them feel that they are “special” clients.

Multiple women stated that the advantage of being a devadasi is that the muttu gives them the freedom and “right” to openly practice sex work. A muttu is seen by many women as a license to openly practice sex work without any problems from society. In this regard, they feel that they are more respected than non-devadasi sex workers. It is a sanction from a society which has dedicated her to Yellamma and held a ceremony for her in her village. Some women believe that their support and encouragement from society to practice means that people have no right to complain about her practicing sex work. This is rarely a problem; more common would be for community members to take advantage of her dedication and force her to practice sex work. In some cases because of this muttu license, clients feel that it is their right to have sex with the woman and in other cases there will be very little or no money at all in return. Nevertheless, most women no longer wear their muttus in public because they fear that they may face trouble due to the practice now being criminalised. Both MASS and KSAPS have forced the women to remove their muttus; women cannot enter the offices of these organisations with their muttu
visible. Some women still wear their *muttu* discreetly, while others put it on when in the home or before meeting with a client. This decision to wear the *muttu* to negotiate their needs from the NGO and respect from their clients gives the women agency, which has become part of the reinvented identities they have created through reform and rehabilitation. This is one example of how devadasis now display agency in a new way in order to make the most of these rehabilitation schemes, though the government and NGOs seeking to “help” devadasis and eradicate the practice have represented devadasis as having no agency through their dedication to the goddess.

On the left hand side of the table under “Devadasis are more respected”, respondent number two gives an unusual response that devadasis are more respected than married women who practice sex work. This is an opposing viewpoint to respondent five who believes that she is respected as a sex worker because she is not married, whereas if she were a married woman practicing sex work she would lose that respect. It is unclear if the disrespect of the married woman is because she has left her husband or because she is practicing sex work. A woman who is married but has left her husband does not carry the same respect as a woman who stays with her husband. Ultimately, respondent two sums up her argument by stating that married women who do not practice sex work are the most respected in society, and in my own research I found that this is what most women desire.

Some devadasis argue that they are more respected than sex workers because they have property and religious rights. Having equal rights within the family and the right to argue for land gives devadasis a sense of dignity and honour that they sometimes feel is lacking in other ways. No other women in society have the right to argue for property as devadasis do, and women value this privilege highly. Though women have the right to fight for property in the case that their brothers do not share it, the process is so arduous that many may
never succeed. Women have been educated on their rights and have access to a lawyer through NGOs such as MASS, but they simply file their case and never follow up. When I asked MASS staff why one woman had been fighting for her property share for seven years, they failed to give a clear or credible response to the situation, stating that the woman likely did not follow up with her case, and it is therefore her fault.

When women speak of religious rights, this comes in the form of being considered a *muthaide*, or auspicious married woman. As divine married women, devadasis are able to participate in certain rituals, particularly marriage rituals, where widowed, divorced, or abandoned women would not be permitted. In Belgaum, where devadasi practice has largely ceased, devadasi women are no longer afforded this right. Rather, they stated that because they do not have husbands they are not allowed to participate in certain rituals. Frédérique Marglin (1985) and Saskia Kersenboom (1987) portray the auspicious status of devadasis as giving women symbolic meaning and identities. However, later research by Leslie Orr (2000) and Davesh Soneji (2012) has demonstrated that such an understanding complicates the realities of the changing and varying practices of devadasi women, and has been used to reify a revived temple dance in South India. When women speak of their *muthaide* status being significant, it is used as a social justification for practicing sex work, rather than a religious symbol of importance. Kersenboom (1987) has argued that devadasis are more auspicious than married women because of their divine marriage. Although most devadasis would quickly trade their property rights, religious rights and “freedom” for a heterosexual marriage, they still frequently claim that their *muthaide* status gives them more respect, as presented above.

In Rebekah Tilley’s (n.d., n/p.) article “Saving women or policing sex?”, Lucinda Ramberg has argued that claiming marriage as a safe space over the violence of sex work disregards the violence which occurs within marriage
itself, and I would agree with her. However, she takes it a step further when she says:

If we’re thinking broadly and deeply about wellbeing, it’s not clear that respectability is synonymous with wellbeing for women...Certainly it conforms to bourgeois femininity, but respectability does not ensure freedom from violence and does not establish economic security and sustainability...what kind of a feminist politics are we pursuing if we’re just trying to establish respectability for women?

In this regard, I also agree with her, but would argue that there is a proximate goal to establish a feminist politics which recognises that what the women believe will give them respect and agency is marriage, and it is not the responsibility of the outsider to decide otherwise. Through the influence of the government and NGOs, this belief that respect and an end to suffering comes through heterosexual marriage is part of the reinvented and reformed identities that devadasi women have created for themselves, and is therefore valuable.

Victorian ideas of sexuality: “good” sex and “bad” sex

Only one devadasi, Parvathi, told me that the difference between devadasis and sex workers is the kind of sex they do. She said:

We don’t do the same way like the sex workers do. We do how it (sex) is generally done in life. We don’t do bad kind of sex. We just do sex in the way husbands and wives do. If they come to do that kind of sex with us, we will not get that done. Then they have to go to the sex workers. We tell them directly. We say that we don’t do all those things. If only you want regular sex then you can come to me. Instead if you need other kinds of sex then they could go to those women. I will not agree for all that even if they offer me the world.

Though Paravathi was the only woman I spoke to who made this differentiation, Heather Dell (2005, 199) found similar understandings amongst sex workers in Calcutta. She explains that this difference between good sex and bad sex relies on the wider Western or “English” understandings of sex, which
includes oral and anal sex. Good or “ordinary” sex is restricted to vaginal intercourse. According to Dell (2005, 188), “The shift in the sexual division of labour between prostitute and wife has now made it possible for an interesting inversion to occur in the opposition between wife equals home and prostitute equals foreign world...the prostitute is now capable of becoming a bearer of ‘home’ by her ability to refuse ‘English’ sex...” In this example, the colonial understanding of respectability and the construction of the good domestic wife reemerges, and it is again evident that devadasi women are doing what they feel they have to do to uphold this image of respectability, despite their disrespected status as “women without husbands”. Although they may never be married women, Shaila describes her work in a way which she feels is more respectable, and more representative of how a married woman (which she longs to be) should behave.

“Greedy” sex workers and “poor” devadasis

Devadasis define sex workers as women with husbands, which may emphasise their dismay over not having a husband. However, they do not always speak of married sex workers with the same respect they do of married women who are not in the business. In some regards devadasis speak as though they are the original sex workers with the rights to the profession (through their muttu), and mention married women as if they have hijacked sex work from devadasis. Sex workers who are not devadasis, and are therefore said by devadasis to have made the choice to practice sex work are believed to only be doing so for the sake of money and materialism. Mahadevi is a devadasi who claims to no longer practice sex work, but continues to value her muthaide
status. She explains, “The women who do not have the muttu tied are different madam. They are those with husbands. They would be doing this work for greed. They are different and we are different.” Devadasis claim that they have been forced to practice sex work because of poverty, while sex workers do it by choice for money. They often do not acknowledge that perhaps sex workers who are not devadasis are making this choice because they are also poor, and therefore do not see it as a choice at all.

One example of this is Rasmani, who is an older woman, unsure of her age, but believes she is around sixty years old. She has been living in a government plot for devadasis since 1992. For most of her life, her maternal uncle was her only partner. He was married to another woman, and went back and forth between their homes. They had five children together, and he paid for all of their food and arranged and paid for the marriages of both of their daughters, and eventually he left and she never saw him again. It is unclear why he left, though she says that she continued having sex with him until MASS came and told her what she was doing was dirty, at which point she stopped. As we sat outside on her porch in the hot dry sun, she explained to me that some women get married, and enjoy all of the “pleasures” that their husbands give them, until his alcoholism and abuse becomes a problem, at which point she leaves and goes to work as a sex worker in Mumbai. She clarifies, “They are not the devadasis. They are those who get married. Now

---

3 Some of the interviews I did ended up being with a research assistant (RA) in Bijapur who I retained out of respect for the university who was helping me, but they really did not go very well. The RA was extremely judgmental against the women and not afraid to tell them her opinion of their disrespected status. Unfortunately, in some circumstances I believe that the informants simply did not trust us and chose not to reveal very much information. Mahadevi expressed being scared about the interview, but still chose to participate. She then repeated many times that devadasis who were caught would be arrested, and that they were always concerned that people were spying on them. However, based on the rest of the interview, and the context in which we were in, I believe that Mahadevi likely continues to practice sex work, despite saying that she has stopped.
there are no devadasis as such.” Similar opinions from other women came out about sex workers and greed for money and materialism, as well as marital dissatisfaction. Kasturi is a devadasi who continues to practice sex work, as well as work as a peer educator. In her opinion, there is “a huge difference” between sex workers and devadasis.

The sex workers would have probably had problems with their husbands, or they would not be happy with their husbands. It is possible that their husbands cannot fulfil their desires of having silver, gold and money (Kasturi).

Hollevva is an older devadasi who is now HIV+ and no longer practicing sex work. She was dedicated when she was in her thirties to take care of her much younger brothers. As such, she similarly believes that choice and money are the main differences between sex workers and devadasis. We sat on the floor, and she explained:

I was tied a muttu and made a devadasi because the situation demanded it. [Sex workers] started doing the job because they cannot get good sex from their husbands. We did this because we wanted to eat. We wanted to help our brothers. But some women do sex work because the sex from their husbands doesn't work well. They cannot be called as devadasis. Only we can be called as devadasis. Some women do sex work just to earn more money, just to buy better saris. But some have to do sex work due their sad situations in life. Some women love another man and they do sex work to get better sex or more sex. How can we say what is the reason?

Though my question of defining the difference between a devadasi and sex worker automatically creates categories in need of description, women are quick to create differences which are not always so definitive. For example, devadasis often begin by saying their parents dedicated them because of poverty, even if in reality they later express that it was because of a health issue. Simultaneously, they are quick to say that sex workers are only concerned about money, and are therefore greedy, disregarding that they may also be poor Dalit
women looking for an alternative livelihood outside of coolie work. Few women acknowledge that sex workers who are not devadasis may face similar difficulties to them. These competing narratives, of sex workers having more respect, but also being greedy materialistic women, allows women to play the victim, which they may do in order to receive sympathy and support. However, they are simultaneously claiming more respect. Agency for devadasi women is displayed in the manner in which they use their different positioning narratives at different times to negotiate poverty and claim respect.

This idea of sex workers being greedy also extends to an argument made by some women that devadasi women are more concerned with the livelihood of their children, while sex workers are only concerned with money. Having been forced into the business, devadasis say they value their children over money. Devadasis who are no longer practicing sex work typically mentioned their children and their children’s education in interviews, while women practicing sex work were less likely to emphasise the importance of their children’s future. However, in some cases women saw their children’s livelihoods and money as being dependent on each other. One practicing devadasi in Belgaum district brought her value for her children and her need for money together by explaining that if she had enough money, then her children would have a better life; the two were seen as inseparable. For her, sex work is survival. However, other circumstances are also acknowledged, particularly the reality that some women enter into bad marriages and feel forced to leave. Once they leave their marriage there is no possibility for them to remarry, and sex work becomes a viable way for a single woman to sustain herself and her children.

As most devadasis in Belgaum district no longer practice sex work, the attitude towards sex workers is slightly different that those of Bijapur and Balgalkot. Many women assume that nobody in their villages practices
anymore, or this is the story they initially give, as it is what MASS wants to hear, and has trained them to believe. Having stopped practicing sex work, they call themselves ex-devadasis. Though they express that women are “free” to do as they want, they often speak about sex workers in a lowly manner. As we sat in her small one-room house on plastic chairs, Kalavathi, who is a daughter of a devadasi and now works for an NGO working to eradicate the devadasi practice, explained to me that sex work only happens in metropolitan areas now. For her, sex workers are not devadasis, sex workers are married women. “Real” devadasis do not exhibit “cheap attitudes” like sex workers, who are willing to sleep with any man for money, she told me. She believes that once devadasis have children, they will stop practicing sex work, because their children are their priority, whereas for sex workers, money is their priority, and they will never stop practicing sex work. She also explained to me that sex workers are lazy and do not want to do hard work, so they continue practicing sex work because they can easily make a lot of money. Her attitude toward sex workers is not uncommon. I also recall a conversation with an established professor who worked for the government on devadasi rehabilitation schemes. He told me that any devadasi who claims to have stopped practicing sex work is lying; no woman will ever stop practicing sex work. This was different from my conversation with Kalavathi in that he does not feel there is any difference between devadasis and sex workers, and referred to devadasi women as “lazy” and unwilling to do hard work (similar to the words that Kalavathi used to describe sex workers). Therefore, in his opinion, devadasis do not value their daughters as highly as Kalavathi believes, and he told me that the only way to rehabilitate devadasis successfully is to isolate them from their children completely. However, most devadasis in Belgaum district told me that once their children were old enough to understand, they stopped practicing sex work. For some women, their children demanded it.
In the same village as Kalavathi is Jayashree. Jayashree and I shared many stories together, but one that I will always remember was when she told me that her children once beat up a man who was coming to the house for sex with Jayashree. She told us, “When the father of my children stopped coming, one more man used to come. My children beat him up. My daughter was just ten then. She and her brother planned and beat up that man at night. Before that when the children were smaller and when they went to school men used to come. But at night I used to have children next to me. I could not.” Jayashree emphasises that once her children were old enough to understand what sex work is, she was forced (by her children) to stop practicing. She then resorted to coolie work for economic survival, and began taking loans from MASS in order to pay for her children’s education. She remains very poor, and in a cycle of microdebt, but now feels that she is living a more respectable life.

The importance of devadasi paddhati in dedication

Apart from respect and husbands, devadasis often differentiate themselves from non-devadasi sex workers by emphasising their tradition. The muttu is the material evidence that the devadasi practice is part of a tradition, and it signifies their obvious difference from non-devadasi sex workers. Their sacred marriage to the goddess is the major spiritual difference. Additionally, many devadasis keep a pallaki basket in their home and are required to beg at five houses on Tuesdays and Fridays. Devadasi women in Belgaum who have

Figure 2: Pallaki basket
stopped practicing sex work as well as ceased to perform any specific devadasi rituals (these two often go hand in hand) do not associate devadasis with Yellamma, but argue that Yellamma is a goddess whom all people worship, not only devadasis. Guralingavva, who is an ex-devadasi and MASS employee believes:

Yellamma is connected to all people. She is not only connected to devadasis. God is for everyone. We have understood that our path is wrong. Is it wrong to dedicate oneself to the Goddess? All castes have Gods and God is in everyone. We also have Gods. The married women have Gods and devadasis have Gods. Devi is not just for us. She is for all the people.

Guralingavva’s point of view is represented in the approach that MASS takes to persuade devadasis to no longer practice sex work or dedicate their daughters. However, women who practice sex work are more adamant about their relationship to Yellamma because it justifies their choice to practice. They argue that other women should not practice sex work because it is not part of their tradition. Women also express that doing sex work is expected of them as devadasis, so even if they do not practice sex work, they allow people to believe they do. In some cases, if the village comes to find out the woman is not practicing, they may force her to practice. Emphasising the importance of devadasi paddhati, women again express that while sex workers enter the trade voluntarily, devadasi practice is in the name of Yellamma.

Malamma is a devadasi who is nearly blind and unable to work very much, either as a sex worker or a coolie worker. For her, the devadasi practice is part of a tradition, and this is what differentiates devadasis from sex workers.

[Sex workers] do it even though it is not their traditional profession. I think that it is wrong for the sex workers to do this profession. The two things are different. Devadasis are different and what the sex workers do, that is also different...Being a devadasi even if I don’t do sex work, they will say that I am doing sex work anyway. So I say that I am doing sex work, but mostly I do coolie work itself (Malamma).
This quote is an interesting expression of how devadasi women are viewed in society, and how they view themselves. While this woman shows value in her connection to the goddess, society sees her as a woman who must do sex work. Hers is not an unusual case. Other stories arose of women trying to do different work and get married, but being harassed by society about their devadasi status so extensively that they eventually gave up trying to do something different and more respectable (in the eyes of the devadasis and society) and turned to sex work.

While most women do not see a connection between Yellamma and devadasi practice, there are cases of women who believe Yellamma is like their husband, and they perform devadasi rituals with great faith and follow the tradition dutifully. These women believe that the way that society views them, as dirty women, or exploited women, is completely wrong. “Our path is right” said Shaila. However, most women are unable to explain the devadasi practice. They understand that there is a tradition of women in their family being dedicated, which has been around for many generations. However, these days many women feel that the tradition is far removed from any religious practice or ritual performance. Though their dedication ceremony involved particular rituals, they have now ceased all of these activities which are specific to devadasi paddhati. The rituals which they practice, such as going to Saundatti for major festivals, are also practiced by lakhs of other Yellamma worshippers. It is only in some villages that devadasi women are still needed to complete the ritual cycle after visiting Saundatti. For this reason, they do not understand the practice as having any religious significance; it is merely a tradition, which they view as separate from religion.

In circumstances when women would tell me that there was no difference between devadasis and sex workers, I would sometimes ask them about their muttu, and point out that their muttu was one difference. Those women who did
not initially recognise their muttu as a difference, did not emphasise its importance when I mentioned it. However, other women felt it was of great significance and importance that they have a muttu and non-devadasi sex workers do not. It was not until half way through my data collection that I began to hear more detailed accounts of existing rituals within the devadasi practice. Once I began doing interviews outside of Belgaum, stories of ritual began to be told. Devadasi practice in Belgaum is now so regulated that women are unable to perform any of the rituals they were once taught by their elders. By forcing devadasi women out of temples and onto the streets, the tradition drastically changed and is slowly fading away.

**Tradition, practice, and ritual**

*Yellamma devi provides a sense of sisterhood*

It has been suggested by scholars such as K.C. Tarachand (1991) and Jogan Shankar (1990) that the devadasi practice has nothing to do with Yellamma or religion, and that religious practice has been used as a guise for sex work. This is a common view throughout Karnataka, where many people will use the words “superstition” and “ignorance” to describe the devadasi practice. Lucinda Ramberg’s (2006) thesis demonstrates clearly that the women maintain a connection to the goddess, while Treena Orchard’s (2004) thesis reflects the women’s lives as sex workers. Having identified varying perspectives on the difference between sex workers and devadasis, this section will lay out what rituals are left of the devadasi tradition, demonstrating the ways in which devadasis are different from sex workers.

Devadasis always refer to the practice as paddhati (tradition). For them, this means that dedicating daughters to Yellamma is something that has happened for many generations. When asked why their parents dedicated them, it is common for women to say that they do not know, it was just the tradition in their family. Devadasis have various ways of relating to Yellamma
and finding security through her. This is part of the Yellamma myth, according to devadasis:

1) Since older days there is a history of Yellamma. When she was younger she married the ascetic Jamadagni. She takes the pot and goes to the river to collect water. She watches a couple, a pair of fish who would be enjoying the conjugal bliss. She desires the same pleasure. So her mind wavers. So when the husband returns he tells her that her pot made of sand was broken and her pot-stand made of snake was torn. That was the proof that she lost the concentration of her mind in being a pure person and that her mind had wavered. So he cursed her. She gets leprosy. Her husband curses her. Jamadagni. She was one of our communities, the Mada community. So she was a matangi (faithful follower of God). We the people of this community would be making bani katte and taking bath in the temple. That is our tradition. So she comes to the temple and takes a bath there and pays obeisance to the God. Then she gets cured by Yellamma. That is why we have so much faith in Yellamma. She takes care of us, like her own sisters, she who was a matangi. So we have this relationship with her (Lakshmi, devadasi who continues to practice sex work).

2) Yellamma was the daughter of a big King. An ascetic comes to bathe in the well. She watches him, likes him and marries him. He sends her to bring water for the puja. Her husband’s name is Jamadagni. When she goes to collect water from the well she watches a couple bathing together there. Watching that she wonders how she also would have bathed with a man if she had married someone else. While thinking so her mind wavers. Her pot made of sand breaks. Jamadagni would be shouting for her to get water for the puja. But the pot was broken. He curses her for this sin. She comes and hides in the house of one of our community. That is why they call us as jogammas (Jayashree, ex-devadasi).

After Yellamma becomes sick and leaves her home to beg, she eventually returns. When she returns Jamadagni insists that one of her five sons behead her. One son agrees to take on the task, and in return Jamadagni offers him a boon. The son requests that Yellamma be revived. William Dalrymple (2009, 59)

---

4 Bani katte means a small pit with a sapling. Big pots are kept in that pit.
eloquently makes the connection between Yellamma’s story and the lives of the devadasis, when he writes:

Though the story is full of sadness and injustice, devadasis...tell the story as they believe that it is uniquely sympathetic to their fate. After all, their lives are little better than hers: cursed for crimes of love outside the bonds of marriage, rejected by their children, condemned like Yellamma to live on the roads, begging for favours, disfigured by sadness and without the protection of a husband.

There is no recorded evidence of when Yellamma and the devadasis of North Karnataka became connected. As previously mentioned, while there are inscriptions of temple women in Karnataka dating back to the ninth century CE (Parasher and Naik 1986), there is no indication that these women have any relation to the present day devadasi or Yellamma.

**Why do dedications continue?**

Despite the lack of historical clarity, Yellamma is mother of all. People feel a sense of security and hope through her and come to her for various issues, though she is most revered for her ability to cure illness and heal the sick. This is the most frequent reason given for dedication, followed by tradition, and lastly poverty. A friend and devadasi from one of the local NGOs met with me one day to talk about the devadasis that the organisation works with. Typical of the many devadasi stories which followed, hers was told in the plural (*namma*, “our”), making it difficult to determine when she was talking about herself, and devadasis as a collective. The theme of devadasi *paddhati* was reoccurring, so I asked her to explain to me what *paddhati* really means for devadasis. She told me that every devadasi home has a Yellamma and *pallaki* basket for whom the tradition is passed down. In each home where Yellamma resides, one devadasi must be there to carry the goddess and perform *puja*. Usually this is the oldest woman of the house, and no other woman can carry out such rituals, so it is necessary that one woman continue to be dedicated in each generation to carry
Yellamma. As such, the intention in dedicating her was not necessarily to put her into sex work. There are many devadasis who have never done sex work and are only *pujaris*. The practice of sex work became increasingly popular, likely due to the geographical challenges of living in a rural environment where coolie labour is the most accessible livelihood opportunity. In comparison, sex work is more profitable. Many women had stories of not knowing why they were dedicated, and reasons of poverty and tradition becoming their story. Sometimes other women would chime in and remind them of an illness they may have had at the time of dedication.

Health problems are a common reason for dedication (see text box 5.1 for one example). It is believed that if a person becomes sick, especially with skin problems, it is because the devi is angry. Yellamma speaks to her devotees through their health, particularly by cursing them with skin boils and infections which she was once cursed with by Jamdagni. Girls who are sick and dedicated to the goddess will usually see their skin problems go away once they are dedicated. It also happens that the girl may be dedicated because her health problems are preventing her from any marriage alliances. While some devadasis acknowledged that they were simultaneously receiving medical treatment when they were dedicated, their parents remain faithful that their daughter’s curse was lifted because of her dedication. The pressure to

5.2 Faith, Healing, and Dedication: Bagirati

“I had both a father and mother. After having five sons they wanted a girl child. So they took a vow to Yellamma Devi. Maybe I would have been [born] anyway, I don't know, but anyway after that I was born... Some alliances for my marriage started to come from some families. But at that time some health problems like getting boils and itching in the skin started to happen, and it made us superstitious. My mother started to think that since I was a child born after a vow to Yellamma Devi these ailments had begun to come forth as soon as the alliances for my marriage started to come. So she got this suspicion. She told her sons to think of me also as a son of hers so that she could keep me at home with her. She told them that she was scared that Yellamma would harm her since she had begot me by praying to Yellamma. So we went to Yellamma Gudda on a *Bharat Hunnime* (the full moon festival) [to tie the *muttu*]. At that time I was about 11 years old” (Bagirati).
dedicate their daughter often comes through other people in the community or family who convince the family that the problems they are experiencing are the wrath of the angry goddess because a vow was taken which was not followed through with the tying of the muttu. The ritual duties of the devadasi may commence immediately, or after her mother dies in the case that her mother is also a devadasi. Though there is no limit to how many devadasis may be in one home, it is generally the eldest who holds ritual responsibility. Stories of illness and vows to the goddess are quite common, but one particular story stands out. I quote at length here, a story told to us in Bijapur, which demonstrates the wrath of the goddess, and the role she plays in the lives of many devadasis. As soon as we sat down, Rema, a middle-aged devadasi who continues to practice sex work, began telling us her story.

The first three boy babies of my mother died as soon as they were born. They suffered these deaths of three sons and so they assumed that this was due to a curse of some Gods. So they took up vows to please many Gods. They did many rituals and penance to overcome the wrath of Gods. When I became five years old the Goddess started to trouble me a lot. I used to regularly get fever and would have difficulty in breathing. The Gods started to show their anger on me, so my parents had to spend Rs.5000 at the clinics in Sangli to get me treated. Then an old woman told us that God is punishing us for some sins and that we should take a vow that we would bring a special thread and tie the muttu to me. They made a promise to the Goddess that they would dedicate me. When they made that vow the same evening I started getting better and by the next morning I was fine. Then I started to eat and play. I started getting much better. So I continued to pray to the Goddess who made me good. I stayed fine till I came of age. Later my parents started to look out for a bridegroom to arrange my wedding because they forgot that I was dedicated to be a devadasi. As a result I fell seriously ill again. I got fever and I became very tired. My symptoms were so intense that I looked as if I was possessed by a ghost. I would loose consciousness and fall down...They had not tied the muttu yet, they had taken a vow and had left it at that. People warned my parents to fulfil the vow and have the muttu tied to me. So they decided to tie the muttu to me as per their earlier vow. So we went to Yellamma Gudda and
they made me tie the muttu. The person who has accepted the muttu can tie it round his or her neck if the Goddess starts to punish them with diseases. If there are no problems and if the Goddess doesn’t show her wrath to them, then they need not do that.

Many devadasis say that Yellamma demands that they continue dedicating their daughters to her. They see it as foolish to try to force people to stop, because the power of the devi forces them to continue the tradition. Ramberg (2006) argues that the devadasis in her study attribute most prosperous outcomes to the power of the devi. Devadasis have great faith that if they are suffering, the devi will protect them. These attributes are not special to devadasi women, but they do support a continuation in dedication amongst families in North Karnataka. Many new families enter the system in this fashion, usually due to external influence from the whole community.

Once girls are dedicated to Yellamma, they take on the role of eldest son in the family. One reason that families will dedicate their daughters is to keep them as an earning member within the natal family. Ramberg (2006, 178) argues that this sacred marriage and the crossing of gendered boundaries within it, increases the value of daughters. Similarly, Treena Orchard (2007, 2386) writes,

Unlike non-sex working girls, Devadasis are not raised to be wives and typically do not leave home. They are able to participate in peer activities with friends who are maintained over long periods of time, usually become heads of families, have opportunities to access property, and partake in dhandha. These particular facets of growing up are unique compared to their female counterparts and they provide evidence of what could be termed “positive” aspects of being a Devadasi. While being a household head and doing sex work to support family members is not always or only positive, strong kin and peer networks and opportunities to manage their income and property make for supportive communities in which the girls’ work is highly valued, as both an economic resource and a socially validated stepping stone into adulthood (2386).

My own field work revealed that this value that Ramberg and Orchard project onto devadasis depends strictly on the financial contribution the
daughter is making to the family. If she ceases to give money to her parents, or
shifts her priorities to educating her children, she loses value within the family,
and in some cases her family no longer associates with her at all. When I asked
devadasis if they feel that these “positives” outlined by Orchard are true of their
own lives, many women felt it was irrelevant, and are not interested in
implying in any way that there is any reason to value the devadasi practice.
Some women did acknowledge that there are positive aspects of the practice:
they enjoy that they have more freedom to roam around, and control over their
finances, but they feel that these positive characteristics do not outweigh the
negatives, such as pressure from family to earn, and abuse faced if they return
home without any money from a day’s work. Based on what devadasi women
told me about their lives, I would argue that both Ramberg and Orchard
present Eurocentric views, which give devadasi women agency where they
would rarely recognise themselves as agents. Few women feel happy in their
position as a devadasi. While Ramberg and Orchard are accurate in their
positive assessments of the practice in some regards, most women do not voice
feeling empowered through these practices. Presumably, if women recognised
themselves as agents through their connection to the goddess or their role as sex
workers, they would desire to dedicate their daughters as devadasis as well.
However, in my research only two women told me that they would consider
dedicating their own daughters as devadasis, if it became financially necessary.
Nearly all women were adamantly against this suggestion.

For most respondents, the relationship between Yellamma and devadasis
is the muttu, which binds them together. Sometimes women seem uncertain
about why they were dedicated to Yellamma, which is expected given that

---

5 When I asked women if they enjoyed dancing, and would be interested in dancing for
me, they explained to me that they could only dance if there was money involved.
Their time is too valuable for such activities, and the only time they dance for free, or
for themselves, is at Saundatti for the devi.
many are dedicated at a very young age. They may initially say tradition, and later say poverty, or initially say poverty and later say health. It is also possible that it later occurs to women that they should respond in a certain way in order to please the interviewer. Again, this is where we see devadasi women display their agency, and negotiate poverty through various positioning narratives, being both empowered through their religious status, and disempowered through their poverty. If they say that they were dedicated to the goddess because of poverty, perhaps it will make me more sympathetic to their cause.

Women often change their story completely. Shanta, a devadasi who practices sex work, told me, “Muttu is my husband and children. My whole life is muttu.” I dug into this a little more, trying to get her to elaborate, asking if she had any relation to Yellamma. She said, “Because there is a relationship we have to earn our living in this way till we die; and we go to do her rituals once a year.” She continued by contradicting herself, “Muttu is not my husband. Muttu just denotes that I am a woman who does sex work. Muttu is my permit which declares that I have been dedicated to a life of sex work. It is not of any great importance or significance.” In a very short timeframe this woman’s story changed from her muttu being her whole life to it being insignificant. Perhaps this is also a consequence of the tradition diminishing and devadasis beginning to lose the connection they once had with their tradition. While the muttu is significant, representing their auspicious and divine marriage, and acting as their “license” to practice sex work, many women do not place value on it any longer. The muttu has been labelled by organisations seeking to rehabilitate the women as one of the many superstitious practices of devadasis.

Tradition, poverty and health are the main reasons that devadasis say they were dedicated to Yellamma by their parents. Some exceptions lay within these stories, but they are rare. However, poverty, financial responsibility to her parents, and the burden of being a single mother lead most women to enter sex
work, regardless of their initial reason for dedication. One additional difference that devadasis believe they have from non-devadasi sex workers is their ritual role, and the amount of ritual which is undertaken when they are dedicated to the devi.

*The ritual behind dedication*

While non-devadasi women enter sex work due to a variety of circumstances, devadasi women enter in a very meticulous way. The girl’s *muttu kattu* ceremony, when the *muttu* is tied around her neck, is done on an auspicious day, and special rituals are carried out, which are similar to a wedding. Today there are fewer devadasis in Belgaum district than there once were, and this decrease in dedications has also meant a decline in ritual. Many women feel that the rituals they perform are no different from any other Yellamma devotee. Though the dedication ceremony they had when they were young followed a tradition, they have now left all of this behind. Some women reiterated their dedication ceremony in detail despite it having happened at a very young age. Many women were under five years of age when they were dedicated, though for some the ceremony happened later, when they were closer to ten years old. Despite their age, some women are able to tell elaborate stories of their dedication ceremonies, perhaps passed down from other family members.

They did celebrate a “wedding” for me, that is a celebration similar to how they would have done if a bride and bridegroom were to be married. I was made to sit on a special seat and they do the rituals with rice just like they would for a bride. Then five elderly jogathis / devadasis come tie these ten beads around my neck. This *muttu kattu* ceremony makes me dedicated as a devadasi. I was two years old then. They took me to Yellamma Gudda and they filled up the baskets of five elderly devadasis. They brought such a basket and kept one in front of me too. They filled that also with the goodies and sweets that they cooked. Then they had the *muttu* tied around my
neck. Then they brought me back (Ranavva, devadasi who continues to practice sex work).

There the priests of Saundatti and the ex-devadasis spread a woollen rug and put a basket. They brought the red and the white beads. They brought the yellow and red powders and other traditional materials. They made me sit on the rug and preached to me thus: “You should not eat till a dead body is cremated. You should not eat in any home where a girl has started to menstruate for the first time. You should not eat if there is no light. You should do puja to the Goddess on Tuesdays and Fridays.” They made me wear a green sari and green blouse and green bangles. After that they tied the muttu to me. They made me devadasi (Bagirati, ex-devadasi).

When devadasis are older and reach puberty, they will then have a “first client ceremony”, where the highest bidding man will pay to have another wedding-like celebration, and then have sex with the young girl. Unlike married women, after this wedding-like experience, the men will keep changing for devadasis. Indra, a practicing devadasi, sat with her grandchild on her lap and told me, “We are like a railway station or a bus service; allowing many to get in and get out”, as she laughed hysterically at herself.

Though each girl’s dedication ceremony may vary in ritual, it is certain that they will always have the muttu tied and should also receive a pallaki basket in order to go begging on Tuesdays and Fridays. Because Tuesdays and Fridays are the devi’s days women should perform specific devi puja and also beg at five houses, though this varies from woman to woman. The rules differ for some women according to their personal or regional tradition. Shaila explained to me that at least four times a year they must go and beg at a few houses on their street. However, most women said it was necessary to go to five houses weekly. In some cases the women will have specific houses to go to in order to

---

6 Bagirati’s association with MASS has influenced her decision to refer to these women as ex-devadasis, but what she means here is that these women were older and no longer practicing sex work.
fulfil vows which the members of that household have made to the goddess. In the past, begging was a ritual which all devadasi women participated in as part of their dedication to Yellamma. Therefore, when the government criminalised the tradition, begging was one of the first practices that they regulated, and as a result most women in Belgaum have now stopped. Through begging, people are obligated to give something to the devadasi in the name of the devi, but women said that they do not acquire much through this ritual. Some devotees give a few rupees, and others will give rice. However, many older devadasis come to rely on begging as a source of survival. Too old to work and no family to support them leaves them with few other alternatives.

At all times of the year, the main shrine of Yellamma Gudda is lined with older devadasis and their *pallaki* baskets. The women flock in groups towards devotees, fighting their way to bless everyone exiting the temple with yellow turmeric powder, and demanding a few coins in return. At busier times of the year, when there are big full moon festivals, it becomes a sport to avoid having one’s forehead constantly blessed with the yellow turmeric powder of the devi. In addition to this, devadasis roam the temples with cowrie shells and small cowrie shell boxes they have made in search of people who will allow them to tell their fortune. They offer this service in Kannada and Marathi.\(^7\) I first came across this in the early stages of my research, when I had not yet had any language training. Regardless of my lack of language skills, I was forced to sit on the stairs and listen to this woman recount my fortune in Marathi, and then demand that I pay the fee. Having understood nothing, I gave her four rupees, which was unsatisfactory and made her very angry, my fortune was not looking good anymore. Devadasi women continue to negotiate their dedicated and auspicious status to provide blessings and ritual services to all those who will

---

\(^7\) Most women do not speak more than one of these languages, but the diversity of women offering the service results in a variety of language possibilities.
pay money in return. As is also the case with women practicing sex work, time is money, and women expect to get paid in return for their services.

Other women told stories of being revered in the community, and still holding a necessary role in community ritual. Devadasis still maintain special roles in society during popular full moon festivals. Many groups of people who attend the jatre (festival) believe it is necessary to take a devadasi with them to perform the rituals. Devadasis are often given saris and money during these times, and it is not uncommon for some women to pretend they are devadasis in order to receive the benefits. Every year devadasi women have a tradition of breaking their bangles, at which point they become widows for one month. After a month’s time they have a ceremony and put new bangles on for the following year, once again becoming muthaides. However, this practice is now diminishing, with fewer women participating every year. Some women continue to be invited to attend full moon festivals with other families in their village in order to perform specific devadasi rituals at the temple. When they return from a festival at Saundatti, upper-caste families and farmers alike will call on five devadasis to enter their homes. Ranavva told us, “They believe that only after we five women go and eat a banquet in their house and wash our dirty hands in their house they will get the benefits of going to Yellamma.” She continued, “At such times when other people depend on us for their religious rituals we feel good about being devadasis. But we also go through an equal amount of hardships.” In Bijapur and Bagalkot, upper-caste families continue to invite devadasis to their homes for specific functions and festivals, honouring their muthaide status; this is not as common in Belgaum anymore.

There were a few ritual practices that were spoken of, but not by all women. Devadasi women do embody Yellamma devi and the puja she performs. The food that the devadasi blesses and the rituals she undertakes, are all seen as the devi’s doing. If somebody accidentally touches the feet of a
devadasi, it is believed that they have touched the feet of the devi. Under such circumstances, there is a special ritual which takes place for the lay person to seek forgiveness and for the devadasi to purify herself once again. Some women are also called on for marriage, birth and death rituals. It is not common for women to speak of birth rituals, and this may now be fading out and restricted to particular locations. However, one woman did tell me that devadasis are the first people invited to visit the new mother after she gives birth. They are given milk, yoghurt, and ghee, and only after the devadasis have eaten these foods will the mother eat them. They will also give the devadasis a small amount of money and some material gifts, such as a sari, and after this time other people are able to visit the new baby.

The extent to which I had to ask women questions in order to get information about religious roles of devadasis was unexpected. Lucinda Ramberg’s (2006) account of devadasis, in which she told women she was there to learn about Yellamma, revealed that women still had an important pujari role and temple connection. Having made the decision to learn about devadasis through the perspective of religion and development, it was important for me to speak to women who have a connection to a government or non-government organisation. Because of this connection, women view themselves as a social problem, and they therefore spoke to me as a group in need of assistance, rather than a religious group. However, it is also possible that over the ten years between my fieldwork and Ramberg’s fieldwork, there has been a decline in the religious importance of the practice. In Belgaum district, women often spoke in a way which implied that they were stigmatised now for performing specific devadasi rituals, and they overemphasised the importance of Yellamma being a goddess for everyone, and the rituals they perform being the same as any other Yellamma devotee.
Since the formation of MASS in 1992, it would appear that devadasi dedications have nearly completely stopped in Belgaum district and have subsided in other areas, though it is still believed that a large number of dedications continue to take place in Bagalkot. This ban on dedications has also contributed to a loss of tradition and ritual. As dedications became criminalised, MASS also forced women to stop their practice of begging. Many devadasi women have matted dreadlocks, and sometimes girls are dedicated because they are said to be born with this hair. MASS and other NGOs have counselled women into understanding that such beliefs and practices are superstitious and ignorant. Interestingly, most MASS employees are ex-devadasis and remain religious, holding onto their rituals dearly and practicing with great faith. However, any beliefs associated with the devadasi practice are considered superstitious and ignorant regardless. This is a byproduct of the reality that alongside faith and ritual also comes sex, and the two are seen as synonymous within the devadasi practice. As sex outside of marriage is seen as dirty, any beliefs which may encourage such a practice are not viewed as respectable.

Regardless of the government’s attempt to eradicate the practice, some devadasi women continue to claim that their beliefs in Yellamma are Truth. If they abandon their rituals, Yellamma creates problems for them, usually in the form of health and skin infections. They feel that the goddess calls them to this work and they must continue for her. Other women feel that as long as they do their work respectably, they should not be policed. As the government now claims that the devadasi practice is eradicated, there is not as much forceful action to try to make women stop. It is believed that awareness has been given and as long as no new dedications take place, the government is satisfied. However, women do continue to practice, especially outside of Belgaum, where they typically show more connection between the devadasi practice and
Yellamma. The following two quotes come from devadasis who are practicing sex work in Bagalkot.

She is our Goddess, Yellamma. We are dedicated in her name. You people tell us not to dedicate as per law. But she tells us to dedicate. The government has tried to stop. There will be sores, and illnesses and infections. But at least in every village two to three dedications take place every year. Because the wounds and sores go away as soon as her bhandara (coloured holy powder) is smeared. So they dedicate the girls as devadasis for our Goddess. It is all because of our faith and belief (Parvathi).

All those things of people trying to make me stop have finished. They did try in the beginning and now they have stopped. I am continuing. They should not fight with us and we should also not rebel against them. We are doing this within the limits of decency (Sundaravva).

Though some women attempt to carry on the practice, police are now quite strict about ensuring that dedications do not take place. Women who are practicing sex work can do so as long as they are not soliciting, though the legality of this is complicated. However, for dedication purposes women have had to relocate from Yellamma Gudda in Saundatti to smaller temples, where they can perform dedications more secretly. Additionally, most devadasis do not want other young girls to have to experience the “sufferings” they have

5.3 Stopping Dedications: Indiravva

“In some villages they are still doing [dedications]. There are some elders. They come to few villages and stop the dedications. That happens in some villages. In my village it has stopped. If we come to know that a girl is being dedicated—for example my uncle’s daughter was supposed to be dedicated. We heard about that. She was sent to Kolhapur. It had been three months. The elders asked her father whether he had sent her to Poona. He said no. They threatened him that they would put a case on him. They warned him that by evening his daughter should have returned home. She was brought back by the evening. Now she is at home. She must be fourteen years old, her parents are greedy and bad...People told her father to get her married. But he got angry and he said that the people around him were jealous because his daughter would earn money and he would get that money. He said that all other people were earning similarly. Now she is sitting at home. He cannot send her. She is very pretty and young. We have told her not to go. But she listens to her parents” (Indiravva).

8 See Kotiswaran (2014).
had, and are adamant to ensure that no new dedications take place. If they see or hear of anybody dedicating or planning to dedicate their daughter, they will call the police and have them arrested. Jayashree, a MASS member and ex-devadasi explained to me, “They used to take us to Saundatti and do this puja. But these days that is not there. Now the police do not allow us to do that there. They still do puja there but there is no muttu anymore.” Many women, especially in Belgaum district, faithfully follow the teachings of MASS, believing that the devadasi practice is superstitious and ignorant. They do not understand beyond this and are not able to elaborate; their understanding only extends as far as MASS’s teachings. As we sat outside in the hot sun of a government plot allotted by MASS, Yellammavva, an ex-devadasi described her understanding of the devadasi practice as it has been told to her by MASS.

Goddess has not asked us to tie the muttu in her name and become devadasis for her sake. Yellamma did not say that to us. The belief goes like that. Earlier people have made this superstition. It is not the fault of the Goddess. It is our tradition to believe so. The people in the old days made it this way. Now we shall not give any chance for that to happen. The tradition or the word, devadasi has no meaning now (Yellammavva).

Many devadasis used to have matted hair (jade), which was seen as a gift from the goddess and automatically led to dedication. However, few women today have matted hair, which is largely because of government initiatives to eradicate the practice through the promotion of matted hair as unhygienic and superstitious. Women from MASS were taught that matted dreadlocks are dirty and that this type of hairstyle has nothing to do with the goddess. MASS had the women partake in forcibly cutting other
devadasis’ matted hair off and reporting them to the police. Devadasi women never questioned this approach, but took it at face value that it was the correct thing to do—that it was necessary to do whatever was needed to eradicate the practice in order to ensure their children had a better livelihood, free of the sufferings from the life of a devadasi. Beeban Kidron’s (2011) *Sex, Death and the Gods* demonstrates how MASS undertook this act, and clearly shows an older devadasi being very resistant to having her hair cut off, proclaiming that it is all she has left. However, MASS feels that it is important for others to see that once the hair is cut off, nothing changes. In this regard they are very proud to show the world they have entered into a sacred space and forcibly rid the premises of what some women consider to be sacred, as matted hair is an embodiment of the goddess.⁹ In the following excerpt, Rasmani, an ex-devadasi and MASS member, describes how this process used to take place.

So the people from the organisation used to shout at us and make us cut [the matted hair]. They would shout that, “Forget about your Yellamma and other goddesses, please cut off your dirty hair.” Then they were given shampoo to wash and they would look very nice afterwards. Why should those knotted hairs be there? So it was cut off and they will not get knotted again. When we used to go to the jatre we would catch the women who used to have knotted hair and we would bring them to get a haircut. Instead of watching the jatre we would be looking out to catch such persons. We would bring them, cut their hair and scold them...The police would say that they would arrest anyone who helps the women to do these practices. They would take the women with knotted hair who were taken by us and let us go. After they did all these procedures the tying of muttu stopped. We used to go on Randi Hunnime and break the bangles. All that has stopped now. Now nobody can tie the muttu. Also what to do with muttu now? This disease (HIV) has started to attack.

Clearly working for advocates against their own tradition, reform movements slowly shifted the way that devadasis identified with their auspicious status. It is undeniable that the influence of MASS, which was

⁹ For more on jade cutting campaigns see Ramberg (2009).
organised by the Karnataka State Women’s Development Corporation (KSWDC) and undertaken by the Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA), has had an impact on the shifting identities and changing status of devadasi women. Scholars and lay people alike have typically applied the history of devadasis and dancing women in other regions of South India to Karnataka devadasis. It appears that devadasis in Karnataka never identified with this history. An increasingly popular narrative of this comes through Chinmayee Manjunath’s (2004, n/p.) article, where she recounts an exchange she had with a group of devadasis at Yellamma Gudda.

I bring up the topic of how devadasis used to be, hoping that it will ignite memories. But I end up telling them their own history. The story of how devadasis were once accepted in society, how their forms of dance like sadir evolved into bharatnatyam and how their children inherited property from benefactors. How they were sanctified prostitutes, traded by priests and wealthy patrons. “We never knew that devadasis were even respected,” gapes Rajeshwari. “People don’t even talk to us in our village”.

Devadasis have now gone through two generations of people recounting false histories (e.g., both the above example by Manjunath and below by MASS) to a group whose history was sadly lost long ago. Through the introduction of the sangha, not only has the government forced other women to stop practicing, they have also reinvented the history of devadasis, and created a history which justifies eradicating the practice. Below are two examples, both told by ex-devadasis in Belgaum who are members of MASS, which illustrate how the MASS sangha has influenced the devadasis’ understanding of themselves, and contributed towards ending this tradition.

They tied the muttu earlier because there was poverty. So to make it convenient to the rich landowners of the village this devadasi system was made. Because those rich farmers needed girls. They encouraged this practice among the poor families. I have heard about this. There is also this caste system, right? People of this caste are not aware and
not intelligent. They have no education, they don’t know how to progress. Because of poverty they would have taken loans. So those who lend money have to use the daughters of these families because of the loan. That is how this system prevails in the poor families. It is neither because of the parents nor because of God. It is just because of poverty. Because of poverty we would have taken loans from the farmers. We cannot return it as we are poor. They get repaid back by using the girls of the family. But their daughters cannot be used by the others. *We learned this by the training they gave in sangha* (Renuka).

After I joined the sangha they told us not to follow the tradition. The office of the devadasis has told us not to do any devadasi customs; singing the *jogati* songs and begging, or tying *muttu* etc...I stopped wearing [the *muttu*], when I joined the sangha...We take it off when those people come and we put it back when they go back. *They forbid us from wearing the beads* because we will beg if we have the beads. We should not wear those. That is the rule. *They also confiscate our baskets and other articles of the rituals* (Ranavva).

In these two instances, it is clear that women have been presented with an understanding of devadasi history that is likely invented, as there is no written or oral history remaining. Devadasis have now adopted this reform rhetoric and use it in their everyday lives to defend their participation in eradicating their own practice. While it is evident that one contributing factor to the decline in dedications has been the onset of HIV/AIDS, these lessons and legal enforcements from various organisations have also contributed to the decline, and in turn a reinvention of devadasi paddhati. Those who felt that the devadasi practice was violent and exploitative, told devadasi women their own opinions about the practice, persuaded them to stop, and used forceful methods to ensure it happened. Through the organisation of sangha groups, MASS and the government Devadasi Rehabilitation Programme were able to raise awareness against the devadasi practice. MASS gave women training, but not in practical things like employable skills. Rather, they trained them to believe that they are doing dirty work and that their life would be much better once they stopped practicing. They connected the women to bank loans, lawyers and government
schemes so that they could leave this “dirty” practice and become “aware” and “empowered”. Having come to believe that what they were doing was wrong and dirty, the women now have positive perceptions of how MASS has influenced their practice. In many cases, they were much more excited to talk to us about these things, than about their own personal stories.

We sat in Koshavva’s one room home with her and her sister, as they told us about their experience with NGOs. Like most devadasis in Belgaum, they feel grateful that MASS has encouraged them to stop practicing sex work. She told us about the initial approach by sangha leaders to train women into understanding that the devadasi system is wrong. “They used to ask in the sangha, ‘Do you like doing this? Are you proud of having a sangha for yourselves?’...They told us to stop this work. They told that this was a dirty work which brought about many diseases.” Nearby, we found Margavva busy working at her petty shop close to her home when we arrived. She took us to her house and sent her daughter to replace her. We sat down on the floor with her to discuss her relationship with OMIF and MASS, and hear her story. According to her, there was a teacher who went village to village to do a survey on devadasis and tell the women about MASS. She explained to them that it was necessary to start sangha groups in order to save money, and they would organise the women to go to various jatres and watch for any dedications. The staff from MASS gave the women a lot of “information and awareness” about their tradition and told them about the negatives of their own practice which they had not realised before. They took this information and began telling the other devadasis what MASS had taught them, and according to Margavva, they all started doing other work and sending their children to school once MASS came along. Guralingavva, who is a devadasi, and a MASS staff member, said,

Our life was going on in darkness till this MASS came to give us some light. If not for that organisation we would have been dumped
in the gutter. The people from the Karnataka government’s department of Women and Child Welfare and MYRADA came and made us aware of many legal aspects. They told us, ‘Devadasi is a horrible practice and that we should come out of that.’ After that we became aware. If not our lives would have been in the dark. What else is there in our lives?

Due to MASS being an organisation for devadasis, by devadasis, it could be understood as culturally sensitive. However, the message they gave to practicing devadasis was very much one of colonial and patriarchal influence. Women came to believe that what they were doing was dirty, that they were not respectable, and that they would no longer be wanted by any other men now that they had practiced sex work. They were encouraged to leave sex work, and carry on life as single women (the least respected position in Indian society). Devadasi women were persuaded to believe that they had come to this practice because they are uneducated, lacking knowledge, and ignorant. They now degrade themselves and lack confidence to do any other kind of work. MASS’s approach implies that there is no respectable answer besides “No” when asked if the women enjoy sex work. They are shamed out of admitting that perhaps they enjoy the higher salary, or even more disgraceful (in the view of MASS), that women may actually enjoy all of the sex they get by doing sex work.

Though the government and MASS deny any new dedications taking place, other organisations are aware that there are still regular dedications taking place, and many young devadasis practicing. Bagalkot is well known for having underage devadasis, though it is not easy to speak to them, and many of them end up going to metropolitan areas where they can make more money. Most of the women I spoke to in Balgalkot district are in their late 20’s and mid 30’s. They explained to me that although there are girls who continue to be dedicated, the intention and practice has now changed. An excerpt from one interview explains this new process.
Nikki: In Bagalkot are there young girls being dedicated even now?

Tippavva: Yes. They don’t directly and openly tie the muttu nowadays. They get them married off and if the husband ill treats them then they will bring the girl back to their home. Then if men come for them they collect money from them and keep their daughters at home.

N: So if they come back from a marriage she has to be a devadasi?

T: If the women come back after leaving their husbands then there is no use for them to the family. But we the women who have the muttu are like men to the family. We cannot go away from the family till the day we die. Those women are addressed in abusive words such as ‘Rande’; they are not included in any good functions of the society. They do not get any share of the property. They get nothing.

It is not clear if women are traditionally being dedicated to the devadasi practice, or simply entering into sex work. Though I was asking about dedication, Tippavva compares herself to these new dedications by her muttu and respect, which the newly dedicated girls do not have in her view. It is common for women who leave their husbands to enter sex work because they can earn a decent salary this way as a single woman. By first claiming that the young girl is dedicated and later stating that she receives none of the benefits of being a devadasi, Tippavva presents a response which continues to complicate the realities of the contemporary devadasi practice.

Alongside the influence of MASS in reducing dedications, HIV/AIDS has also contributed in a very negative way to the transition of the devadasi practice that has taken place. Kaveri Gurav and James Blanchard (2013) interviewed gharwalis in metropolitan areas that once had high numbers of devadasis in brothels, and found that not only the deaths from AIDS, but also the stigma placed against sex workers because of AIDS, has led to a decrease in brothel-based devadasis. They also suggest that these changes have left devadasis in a more vulnerable position for contracting HIV (Gurav and Blanchard 2013, WJ4).
The changing status of devadasis

As devadasi paddhati changes, and women become further removed from ritual, they begin to view themselves in a new light. Though devadasi women have maintained a sexual role far beyond the colonial period, the nineteenth century brought with it an emphasis on the sexual aspects of devadasi practice, and it is said that women became increasingly exploited by men at this time. As the belief that women were being exploited became seen as truth, the devadasi practice was slowly dismantled in an attempt to help the women out of exploitation. There are two ways in which the devadasi practice has been dismantled. As previously discussed, the first is through the 1982 Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act. This Act made it illegal for devadasis to marry the goddess, and women now face fines of up to Rs.5,000 and five year’s imprisonment if they are caught dedicating their daughters. At the time that this act was created, the government began advocating for the marriage of devadasis to men, and was initially offering money to men who would marry the women. The second way in which the devadasi practice has been dismantled is through the establishment of sangha groups, which has given the government and those seeking to eradicate the practice a platform to impose reform rhetoric upon women through educating them about the negatives of their tradition, be they real or imagined.

Devadasis who have stopped sex work and “left” the practice, now labelling themselves as ex-devadasis, continue to live their lives as single women, and usually no longer have a partner. They have removed their muttus, they have stopped performing any specific devadasi rituals, and as such, society no longer treats them in a respectable manner. Though they have become ex-devadasis because they understand it to be a more respectable life, this choice has come with diminishing respect in other ways. This group of devadasis is no longer invited for any special pujas or ceremonies. They are no
longer allowed to attend weddings as married women, but have to stand back with all the young unmarried girls. While some women still value their muthaide status, others have renounced it along with all other aspects of the tradition. These women exude no confidence and are much quieter than women who continue to practice.10

In Chhaya Datar’s (1992) interviews with devadasis more than twenty years ago, the women expressed concern that succumbing to the heteronormative institution of marriage would take away their freedoms as devadasis. In the Sex Workers’ Manifesto women argued that marriage is not a better option than sex work, and requires submission to a husband where sex work does not. This chapter contributes to my larger argument that “development” in the context of devadasis has often done more harm than good. The effort of NGOs and reformers to eradicate the devadasi practice has created a shift in the mentality of the women, perhaps even induced their belief that marriage is the solution and will lead to a more secure livelihood. In part it is true that in rural society women who are married receive more respect. However, the Karnataka government strongly enforced marriage in the 1980s, and NGOs “educated” women to believe that marriage was the solution, therefore leading them to believe that marrying their daughters is the solution to a better life. Previous research shows that even as late as the 1990s and early 2000s, not all women shared this mentality. Whereas in Krishna Kandath’s (2001) thesis more than a decade ago devadasis were still quite hesitant to succumb to rehabilitation schemes and doubted the benefits that would come of them, by the time Treena Orchard (2004) completed her thesis it was evident that women had began to adopt this “reform rhetoric” which was so prominent within my own research. Though previous research (Datar 1992) presents the reader with an image of resistant devadasis, this is no longer the predominant

10 These quieter women who no longer practice sex work are typically also MASS members.
reality. With the onset of rehabilitation schemes, women lack confidence and have become disempowered and disenfranchised.

In an attempt to empower devadasis, NGOs have disempowered the women in a new way, by taking away their source of livelihood and identity, without providing them with any other options. Ex-devadasis often express lack of respect as being a major negative characteristic of the devadasi practice. When I asked follow-up questions to clarify that women do not feel respected, they responded by emphasising that they are respected, their families and society do show respect towards them and the respondents emphasised that they are not at all disrespected. It is possible that women express lack of respect as a negative element of the practice because NGOs and reformers have engrained it into the women’s heads that the devadasi practice is not respectable. Even if they feel they are respected, they will always label being a devadasi as a disrespected position in society. Women who continue to practice sex work are less likely to discuss societal respect. As sex workers they are part of collectives through KSAPS which empower them in the business; they know how to handle themselves if they are harassed, they are educated about their rights, and they know where to go if they have any problems. There is one downside to this approach of empowering sex workers, which is that such organisations neglect to offer any alternative livelihood options to sex workers who wish to leave the business. There are many women who are not members of any other organisations, and they wish to pursue other work, but they are unsure how to go about making the shift.

Chhaya Datar (1992, 91) writes, “As part of the process of integration, [the devadasi] is losing her traditional self image and feels humiliation at the hands of both the elite section of society, the men and also the reformers. She is confused at present, she is getting submerged in the cultural modernisation.” Sadly, Datar predicted the future accurately. Women have been submerged into
“cultural modernisation”, and feel humiliated by their devadasi status. Devadasi women are now left believing that practicing sex work is wrong. There is a larger percentage of women who have stopped practicing than women who continue, and there are few alternative livelihood options for either group. In reality, today’s devadasi is arguably similar to any other rural Dalit woman, except that she receives a devadasi pension of Rs.400/monthly and is never eligible for a widow’s pension.

The Karnataka government, and now MASS, have played a significant role in inventing false histories of the devadasi practice, in order to persuade the women to stop sex work and cease dedicating their daughters. Devadasis carry an auspicious status which, in some regions, continues to grant them access to things that non-married or non-devadasi women are unable to access. However, many of them have now come to believe that these privileges are causing them more harm than good, and, as a consequence of reform, understand heterosexual marriage to be a solution to their problems. Devadasis have now adopted reform rhetoric, feel disrespected and dirty, and wish for nothing more than marriage to a man. Through these changes they have reinvented themselves, creating new identities. They now display agency through the way they use these changes to negotiate their needs through the same organisations who continue to work towards eradicating the practice. Consequently, each devadasi is different, with different ideas about the practice and rehabilitation efforts. This has implications for the reality that development organisations continue to treat devadasis as a group of women who share the same desires. The following two chapters will discuss the continued discrepancies between devadasi desires and development aspirations with a closer investigation into what kind of assistance OMIF, KSAPS, and MASS are providing devadasis.
Due to the disease (AIDS), our samaja (community) is losing respect and dignity. People from other samajas blame us and they say that we spoil the society by spreading disease. For that reason, our leaders do not like to continue this system (devadasi dedication), and they say that it is a bad and superstitious practice (Gharwali, quoted in Gurav and Blanchard 2013, 29).

These reform and rehabilitation interventions which I have previously discussed now take the form of NGO interventions. Many of these intervention projects continue to see devadasis as dirty and not respectable, believing heterosexual marriage to be a solution to the devadasi problem. However, alongside this reform rhetoric, I argued in chapter two that NGOs are also focused on carrying out top-down development interventions which adhere to State interest in achieving MDG targets by 2015. Occasionally, evangelical Christian missionary groups also display interest in devadasis, sometimes with the sole interest of conversion, and other times with a dual purpose of conversion and humanitarian outreach. Within each of these types of interventions, whether NGO, FBO, or government run, devadasis remain silenced. The types of projects which are carried out by each of these groups are largely unconcerned with what devadasis might be interested in, focusing instead on the group’s own particular agendas, similar to the approaches of the reformers, feminists, and Neo-abolitionists mentioned in chapter four.

Consequently, the devadasi practice is now changing, dedications are diminishing, and devadasis have adopted this reform rhetoric, believing themselves to be dirty women lacking respect. Yet, devadasis do not find themselves in a better socio-economic status. In fact, in many instances they are worse off now, having stopped practicing sex work and thereby losing the better income that sometimes comes with it. While some women express sentiments of exploitation in the devadasi practice, others feel empowered.
Previous chapters have demonstrated that devadasis have an array of opinions about their practice and their position in society.

I have thus far discussed the reality that devadasis live in rural areas, with poor living conditions and lack of access to basic resources such as water, food and sanitation. Carrying the triple burden of running female-headed households, a variety of organisations now seek to help devadasis out of poverty, but also aim to eradicate the devadasi practice entirely. With the onset of HIV/AIDS, there has also been an increase in organisations working to prevent and treat HIV/AIDS amongst this high-risk group. However, the evidence I present in this chapter and the next suggests that these organisations, both government and non-government, tend to be run by people who decide what devadasi women need, without ever asking devadasis. The complexities of devadasi paddhati make this task more complicated, with organisations seeing tradition and “progress” as incompatible. In the last two chapters, I have analysed how devadasis speak about their lives when they are away from these leaders: how they understand themselves and how they understand the organisations. In this chapter, I take this conversation further by first providing an overview of how HIV/AIDS is affecting devadasi women, followed by an outline of what kind of services MASS, KSAPS, and OMIF are providing to devadasi women to both help them and (in some cases) simultaneously dismantle their tradition. Additionally, I present two experiences of one-off Christian evangelical missionary events in the field, and discuss the consequences these events had for OMIF as a Christian FBO with long-term commitments to humanitarian outreach.

**Increasing HIV/AIDS, Declining Numbers of Devadasis**

HIV/AIDS outreach in India has focused largely around sex workers, men who have sex with men, truck drivers, and drug injectors. Within this framework, devadasis have been targeted as an at-risk group and development
programmes have sought to help them through initiatives directed towards helping sex workers. In addition to now carrying the stigmatised status of being a devadasi, women who are HIV+ face double stigma, leaving them particularly vulnerable. Multiple government and non-government organisations have been working to help mitigate HIV by empowering sex workers to use condoms and regularly get tested for STIs. Recent intervention programmes have resulted in increased condom use and reduced HIV prevalence (Ramesh et al. 2010, i21-22). However, a belief remains in India that having sex with a virgin will cure HIV/AIDS, and men are willing to pay more money for this opportunity (Orchard 2007, 2387). In this scenario young girls will often not yet have knowledge of the importance of condom use, and many mothers will profit from this lack of knowledge and understanding about HIV by dedicating their daughters to the devadasi tradition. Therefore, “first client ceremonies”, which occur when a devadasi reaches puberty, often bring in a large profit, and typically do not involve condom use, contributing to the increase in HIV amongst this group. There are many adverse socio-cultural affects that HIV/AIDS can have on a household. It becomes a downward cycle, whereby the poor and marginalised (especially females) are typically the most vulnerable, and paying for medical expenses, compensating for loss of household labour, etc., can further indebt a family. For devadasis, continuing to dedicate daughters becomes a desperate solution to acute poverty, and thereby risks continuing the cycle of contracting HIV. However, Kaveri Gurav and James Blanchard’s (2013, 30) more recent study reveals that the increase in AIDS has led to a decrease of devadasi presence in brothels, and dedications in general due to an awareness that sex work presents a risk for contracting HIV, which has resulted in increased deaths, fear, and stigma.

As HIV/AIDS increased, so did the number of NGOs trying to mitigate the spread of HIV/AIDS. Sex workers were put on the list of high-risk groups,
and devadasis automatically fall into this group. The spread of HIV/AIDS amongst sex workers in Karnataka led many NGOs and government organisations to travel from village to village running HIV/AIDS awareness camps, distributing condoms, and convincing women that they should stop dedicating daughters to avoid contracting HIV. Women often express that they should not practice sex work any longer because of the “dirty disease” which is spreading. Along with the AIDS epidemic has come an increased stigma against female sex workers (O'Neil et al. 2003, 852). Stigma against HIV/AIDS makes it difficult to implement successful intervention programmes, particularly long-term alternatives to sex work (Halli et al. 2006, 740).

Stigmatised and alone: devadasis and HIV/AIDS

Information about HIV and ways to contract it tends to focus on high-risk groups; this means that those who are not at high risk of contracting HIV are not educated about how it is transmitted, and continue to hold onto misconceptions about the disease. Jessica Ogden and Laura Nyblade (2005) suggest that stigma and discrimination are used by dominant groups in society to create and justify inequalities in society, and they use these inequalities to deploy social control and exclusion over stigmatised groups. This contributes to internalised stigma within the individual (Ogden and Nyblade 2005, 8). Stigma is often held against people with some sort of “undesirable difference” (Li et al. 2009, 1007). People living with HIV/AIDS (hereafter referred to as PLWHA) not only carry with them a deadly disease, but are usually perceived to have engaged in immoral behaviour in order to contract HIV. Stigma has an array of negative effects against PLWHA, including limited access of resources, decreased psychological well being and lack of social support (Nyblade et al. 2003; Ogden & Nyblade 2005). Consequently, women are sometimes not comfortable informing their family members of their HIV+ status, taking all of the burden on themselves.
Devadasis who are HIV+ express a sense of loneliness and rejection because of their status. Women are uncomfortable to publicly access services which they are entitled to, such as extra ration on rice, because they fear the stigma from onlookers. They are also concerned about the stigma from others that their families (children and siblings) will receive if her HIV+ status is publicly known, in part because they have come to believe that sex work is dirty work and HIV/AIDS is therefore also dirty. Some women were ashamed to share their status with us, and at times I would only discover they were HIV + through a staff member. Sadly, when women contract HIV and choose to stop practicing sex work, thereby losing their income, they are no longer seen as valuable to their family, since they cannot contribute financially. Shanta is a devadasi who practices sex work secretly, in addition to working a small job for KSAPS. She is HIV+, which she says happened after an emergency blood transfusion. Though she is in a legally registered relationship with a partner (neither are married), she nonetheless feels that life is very difficult, and her HIV+ status has increased the hardships she faces on a daily basis:

Now we are like orphans. Our mothers and sisters do not care for us. No one looks after us. If I have money everyone will care for me...If I try to practice sex work when I have HIV I lose health. I have no energy to work. I feel tired. We have no help. We get clinic help, medicine and tablets. I hear that some HIV patients get rice and ration. I get nothing. If I work I get money, but if I don’t work my son will not care for me. If I earn and give [money] to him he will look after me. If some people arrange [ration and other benefits] for me then I might get it. I hear that the other HIV+ patients take 2-3 kilos [of rice] from that school. I did not get it yet. If I go and ask then the neighbours will look at me with a bad look. Then some people will not like to mingle with me. Instead of me going and asking, it would be good if [the government] provide me those rations in the place where I am staying; then it will be good. If I am made to go there [to collect the ration] then my tension will increase. Then they will taunt my children by saying that their mother is such a woman who has done these bad things. That will be painful to the children.
Shanta shares in this story the burden she feels because her community associates HIV/AIDS primarily with sex work, which is seen as dirty work. Therefore, she fears that onlookers who know she is HIV+ will disrespect her. As previous chapters have demonstrated, most devadasis feel disrespected in society simply for being devadasis. Shanta’s story extends this disrespect, demonstrating that those who are HIV+ experience this judgment of disrespect twofold, as both devadasis and PLWHA. This double or compound stigma is one which plagues all PLWHA who were already stigmatised against in society because they are sex workers, drug users, queer, or come from a particular minority group (Nyblade et al. 2003, 9; Herek and Glunt 1988). Consequently, when devadasi women find out they are positive, they may choose to remain secretive about their status in order to avoid any increased stigma by their family or community. The stigma against HIV/AIDS will often prevent individuals from having a test done, while those who have not been tested tend to carry more stigma towards PLWHA (Mahajan et al. 2008, 7).

Hollevva, a KSAPS staff member who conducts HIV/AIDS awareness programmes shared with us her story of living HIV+, and her decision to keep her status a secret from her family. She is an older devadasi who no longer practices sex work. She is HIV+ and lives alone, very distanced from her family. She has not informed her children about her HIV status because she feels that it would only create a burden for them, and their potential reaction to this news may lead to an increased burden on her. She told us about the fear she has that her family will not understand how HIV is contracted (although her daughters-in-law are nurses), and that they may fear contracting it from her. We sat together on the floor as she told us her story.

[My children] come, ask me to go with them and live with them, but it is better to live independently than being at someone’s mercy. They speak good words and they give me clothes when they come. Why should I go to them and be with their children? They are all big
officers. Why should I go to them? I have not told them about this fact [of being HIV+]. This is the result of my fault. We just keep visiting each other. I have just come to know about this fact recently. I am fine on my own. Two daughters-in-law are staff nurses. I don’t go close to them. I started ART six month ago. I take nine [tablets] at night and nine [tablets] in the morning. Earlier they used to give one in the afternoon to get strength. Now I don’t take that. Now it has come to the level so I take it just two times. When they first started ART they asked me to take a relative along with me...This comes to another person only if there is a relationship. It doesn’t come if there is exchange of food and clothes. We knew and we told those people, but what do they understand? Only those who are aware will understand. So I did not take any person from my family. If they come to know about me it would be difficult. So I don’t want them to come. I know how to take treatment. I did not tell anyone and I did not take anyone with me (Hollevva).

After she told us her story, the translator, a female postgraduate student in social work from the local university, was quick to give her opinion on the respondent’s decision to remain secretive about her HIV+ status. The translator replied, “You did the right thing. Very good. I like it.” This discriminatory response unfortunately emphasises the reality of stigma against PLWHA, even amongst those wishing to pursue social work careers, and those already in them. In addition to this, devadasi women tend to have a certain stigma against themselves, despite knowing that others cannot contract HIV/AIDS from touching. For example, Hollevva explained that her daughters-in-law are nurses, and she does not go near them because they may fear contracting HIV from her, despite being unaware of her HIV+ status. Unfortunately, this perceived stigma has serious long-term effects, leading to internalised shame, which is a predecessor of mental instability and depression (Li et al. 2009, 1010).

At times, respondents are very hard on themselves for being HIV+. Hollevva was very open about her life, and continued to tell us that she was only having sex without a condom with her regular partner, who she believed
was being faithful to her. She elaborated her story, explaining why she now feels that sex work is dirty work, and condoms are always essential:

I don’t go to do sex [work] now because I don’t want to give my disease to any other person. They gave us training. I am ruined but I don’t want to kill ten more with me. I tell them to use condoms even if they start doing sex work. The husbands would have come to us after sleeping with their wives and leaving them. How are we sure that they would not have gone to the other women? We think that our lovers will not go to other women. Because I believed so, I am sitting here with this disease. What is the guarantee that they don’t go to other women? If we make them use condoms in any situation then it will be helpful to their family and children too. Their disease will not come to us, and ours will not go to them. One must use condoms compulsorily. We must get the partners to get a blood check up for HIV. I can eat what I eat happily even with just Rs.1500. By “changing the bed sheets” if I earn Rs.10,000-20,000 that doesn’t become true lives.¹

In response to this, the same translator mentioned above chimed in, “Now you know what is right and what is wrong...You must tell the others.” It is unclear if the implication by the translator was that sex work is wrong, or sex work without condoms is wrong. Regardless, this implicit judgement brought the respondent into defence mode, as she began defending women who continue to practice sex work. Devadasis often feel vulnerable in society, and the double stigma of HIV/AIDS only further embeds this vulnerability within them. Poor, HIV+ devadasis float on the margins of society hoping for a better chance next time. Society has attached a stigma to devadasi women, as women who spread HIV to the rest of society, and this stigma has contributed to an influx of organisations trying to stop the practice (Gurav and Blanchard 2013, 29). Gurav and Blanchard (2013, 31) warn that the negative attitude being held against devadasis by society and community leaders, and their paternalistic

¹ In this final statement, she is explaining that even if she earns Rs.10,000-20,000 doing sex work, she does not feel that this is the way to live (what she considers) an honest life, or a “real” life.
approach towards sex work and the devadasi practice will only increase the stigma against devadasis and could increase their risk of contracting HIV, as they avoid testing and asking for condoms to avoid judgement from outsiders.

Eradicating the devadasi practice and mitigating HIV/AIDS through NGO intervention

MASS, KSAPS, and OMIF are all very aware of the stigma that devadasi women face daily, and seek to help reduce this stigma by providing some sort of support, whether emotional or economical. Each organisation has different initiatives and intentions, but what they all have in common is their disregard for the different desires of devadasi women in terms of support. This section will provide a more thorough overview of how MASS, KSAPS and OMIF are working to help devadasi women out of poverty and mitigate HIV/AIDS, which sometimes also involves an attempt to dismantle and eradicate the practice.

Mahilaa Abhivraddi Mattu Samraksanaa Samsthe (MASS)

MASS is a government-organised NGO run by devadasis, for devadasis. It initially began as the Karnataka State Women’s Development Corporation (KSWDC), and partnered with the Mysore Rehabilitation and Development Agency (MYRADA); when the KSWDC devadasi project closed the work was handed over to MASS. Through KSWDC-MYRADA and MASS, devadasis were registered with the government, organised into sangha groups, and linked to government schemes (especially monthly pension and housing subsidies). These organisations also educated the women about legal rights and human rights, and they continue to provide them with a lawyer. However, MASS is

2 The effectiveness of the service provided by the lawyer is questionable. As previously mentioned, one woman told me that seven years ago she filed a claim with the lawyer to get her share of the property from her brothers, but nothing had come of it. When I asked MASS staff about it, they blamed it on the woman, saying that women often submit claims and never follow through afterwards, so there is no progress.
most popularly known for its role in stopping any new devadasi dedications from taking place. Initially, communities showed hesitation to MASS’s eradication outreach. The project coordinator explained:

We faced a lot of hindrances from the villages while we were doing these awareness programmes. They would question us, “Why do you stop us from becoming devadasis, when you yourself are a devadasi?” We faced all those obstacles and we did overcome those because we did not want the injustice which we underwent to befall on the other women (MASS project coordinator, Belgaum district).

Although there was community resistance, MASS continued pushing its agenda to eradicate dedications in Belgaum district, and have been largely successful. KSWDC’s initial approach to eradicating the practice (with the same approach continuing by MASS) has been viewed as problematic by Krishna Kandath (2001) because it targeted devadasi women as a problem in need of a solution. In its early days, it was also made very public, and the media and academics began focusing on devadasis as exploited, victimised women practicing an immoral tradition (Kandath 2001, 94). KSWDC and MASS continue to be focused on creating a more “modern” India through eradication of religious practices and traditions which are believed to be “backward”. According to Krishna Kandath (2001, 106), it has “situated intervention programs as extensions of Western interest in global hegemony”. With the introduction of MYRADA, much of the money for these intervention projects came from Western based church organisations, and initiatives focused on eradicating “backward” traditions, which is seen as necessary for India to enter the global market and become a modern nation. However, as I have previously discussed, this idea that modernity and religion are incompatible is inherently wrong. Consequently, while India has become more modern, devadasis continue to dedicate their daughters as part of devadasi paddhati, despite MASS’s efforts to stop them.
In order to eradicate the devadasi practice, one of MASS’s current project coordinators claims that MASS provided women with self-employment skills training in making chalk pieces, camphor and sandals, working the hand loom, and weaving mats. In contrast, the only training which MASS members spoke of was the hand loom training which they deemed ineffective because the material was not of good quality and they were unable to sell the products. The project coordinator claims that all of these attempts to provide skills training failed “because the cloth made from the looms did not get sold. The same thing happened to the camphor and the other products. Even though quality was there they were not sold, because there should have been marketing done from the Women’s Corporation (KSWDC) according to demand”. This is a recurring story with devadasi women: they received the training but lacked knowledge and resources to market the products.

When I met with a group of MASS members they asked me to arrange skills trainings for them, but the project coordinator became very defensive towards this request. She suggested that MASS has already given the women multiple trainings, which the women have not used. The project coordinator, herself an ex-devadasi, argued:

We gave them looms and they had to pay back the money. We fought with the government and got the money to repay the loans on their behalf. So there is no loan on them. The loans are cleared. Do they tell you about that? Do they tell you that on behalf of them this organisation repaid the loans? They don’t say that (MASS project coordinator, Belgaum district).

This project coordinator also believes that this particular group of women is not organised, motivated, or united, explaining that MASS has invested money in the women in the past and the women have not repaid the money, nor applied themselves to increase the money. This group of devadasis is quick to repay loans to outside sources, but not to their own sangha, and then they
asked me to connect them to outlets for more loans. I would often see devadasi women attending meetings for various organisations and sangha groups in their area, hoping to maximise their access to benefits/loans.

Believing that they have built up awareness about the negatives of the devadasi tradition, and subsequently put a stop to the practice, MASS now considers the devadasi practice eradicated in Belgaum (as does government-run KSWDC from which MASS developed). However, they continue to run their eradication project out of fear that stopping may lead to renewed interest in dedications. MASS now has very little direct involvement with devadasi women, besides holding them accountable for their loans, and inviting them to an annual general meeting at Yellamma Gudda. Once a month a staff member from MASS will attend sangha meetings in order to take care of the accounting and ensure that devadasis pay their loans back. However, MASS does not have an organised system for ensuring women repay their loans, and members are capable of forgoing their loan repayments for extended periods of time.

The organisation continues to raise awareness about the devadasi practice through documentaries and television. The annual general meeting which is held at Yellamma Gudda in Saundatti is a time to remind the women of the progress made in eradicating the system, and discuss ways forward, through children’s education and pension increase.3 MASS continues to play a role in advocating for a better life for devadasi women in whatever way it can; over the past few years this has been in the form of a pension increase, which it is fighting to have raised from Rs.400/monthly to Rs.1,000/monthly. Government funding of MASS has now ended, and the organisation is funded by EveryChild, a UK NGO fighting to end devadasi dedications through

---

3 Women attend these meetings in part because MASS transports them from their villages to Yellamma Gudda by jeep, and provides them with two days of accommodation and food. The real interest of the devadasis appears to be receiving the blessing of the devi, rather than listening to the meeting.
developing “child tracking systems and child protection committees...promoting and supporting quality education to Madiga children through activity centres...[and] income generating schemes”\textsuperscript{4}. Through EveryChild, MASS is now focusing on Dalit children, but it does not focus specifically on devadasis. It is running tuition centres, and assisting children to get an education. It provides counselling to the children and their families, and has now organised sanghas in Dalit communities, which are separate from devadasi sanghas. MASS has extended its initiatives beyond the devadasi community and now seeks to help all Dalit women. Staff members of MASS are very proud that they are able to assist all women, not only devadasi women. Where devadasi women need a different approach than other Dalit women, MASS believes it has given it to them by counselling them into eradicating dedications. However, in providing assistance to all women, MASS is acknowledging that in many ways, devadasi women are not different from any other poor Dalit women.

An interview with one staff member, Gurulingavva, an ex-devadasi, brought acknowledgment that there are still many needs amongst devadasi women, and MASS is only able to do what is within the framework of the project. She explained, “The general opinion from that region (Belgaum) is that they should be offered more subsidy programmes. When such schemes are not there the organisation has done all the help that is within its power to do. There is no freedom to act beyond those limits. We cannot go off the path of the organisation.” This is when it is useful for other organisations to come in, particularly Operation Mercy India Foundation (OMIF) which is in the early stages of developing its devadasi outreach programme. Though MASS has many development initiatives in progress, its focus on devadasis has admittedly diminished, and remains only until all devadasis have died and no

new devadasis are reported. Gurulingavva discussed MASS’s continued efforts in great detail, explaining:

MASS as an organisation was started to eradicate the devadasi practice, but as long as the old devadasis like us are alive, MASS should remain. It has to do more work towards the women, because this practice of the devadasi system has been in place for many generations. Now if we leave [the project], there is a fear of this practice again taking birth. Therefore till all the old devadasis die, this should go on. Our children and grandchildren should be much more aware. At that point nobody will agree to be devadasis. We cannot claim to help the devadasi women in resolving all their problems through MASS. Now we are 3,000-5,000 in [membership] number. Out of them just one-fourth are leading a fairly good life. All the rest have problems. They are in dire poverty. They cannot take care of their children. Some don’t have children or land...Everyone has personal problems. How can MASS solve all their problems? From MASS it was possible to get them a pension of Rs.400/monthly. We get them loans and make them repay them. From MASS we cannot make them find their livelihoods.

In the above quote, it is acknowledged that the approach which MASS has taken did not focus on long-term development and poverty alleviation after dismantling the devadasi practice. They admit that 75% of MASS members are still living in dire poverty, yet MASS is unable to get any funding to continue helping devadasi women. The MASS project coordinator that I spoke to in Belgaum did express the desire to get another devadasi project, though her concern seemed less about devadasis and more about her own career. She recognises that there is little work left in creating awareness about the practice, and is unable to obtain funding that would allow skills training with provision of market access. She expressed concern about finding another donor-funded project which would allow her to keep her position of power. While she would still qualify as poor, she is not in dire poverty—owning two houses, and having an educated son with a motorbike. This type of scenario is not limited to this woman; in Richa Nagar’s (Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006) *Playing with Fire*
similar issues of NGO hierarchy and the way that women rise up through their NGO positions are discussed. Though this MASS project coordinator had a few years of schooling, she is also a poor, Dalit devadasi woman, like all of the women that MASS seeks to help. Yet, she is now the project coordinator, she has flown to London, she goes to Bangalore for conferences, and she is respected within the community as a powerful person. Other devadasi women are afraid of her, they ask her permission before attending outside meetings, and they do as she says. If she does not get another donor-funded project, she risks losing this position of power. It is not to say that she is not genuinely concerned about continuing to help other poor Dalit women, but, after leaving the interview, we felt strongly that her concern was more personal than humanitarian.

MASS as a whole does not concern itself with PLWHA, though it uses HIV as a motive to encourage women to stop the devadasi practice. In the past, it portrayed HIV as a dirty disease which was killing many devadasis, but did not provide medical assistance or distribute condoms. Now believing that all devadasis have ceased to practice sex work, it does not feel there is a need to address HIV as an issue of concern. Though MASS has made efforts to provide economic relief to devadasis as an alternative to dedication, these efforts have not helped devadasi women overcome poverty. Many women have lost relatives to AIDS, or are themselves HIV+ and unable to work. Despite this, MASS has not focused on any kind of medical intervention or support. Though it knows that HIV/AIDS is a huge burden for devadasi women, it is not part of the outreach or seen as a concern. Instead, it is left to the government, and this is where Karnataka State AIDS Prevention Society (KSAPS) fills an important gap in MASS’s work.
KSAPS is a Karnataka government organisation focused on AIDS prevention, especially amongst sex workers. It has sangha groups for sex workers scattered across the state. Devadasis are registered with KSAPS as sex workers, and can legally work as sex workers but not as devadasis.\(^5\) KSAPS’s offices always maintain an abundance of Nirods (condoms), and provide rooms for sex workers to rest, freshen up, do their makeup, and receive counselling. KSAPS offers its offices as a safe haven for sex workers to retreat to when they need, and many women do so. Most of the staff members are sex workers and devadasis. They perform regular HIV awareness camps and medical clinics, and members of KSAPS are tested every six months for STIs. KSAPS also assists women in accessing any government schemes for which they are eligible, such as devadasi pension, housing subsidies, and rations cards, though many women complained that they still were not able to access these services. KSAPS does not provide women with any treatment, they must go to hospitals for this, nor does it provide nutrition packs. Though KSAPS is an organisation for AIDS prevention, all members are (or were) sex workers, and many are not HIV+.

My involvement with KSAPS is restricted to offices in Belgaum, Bagalkot, and Bijapur districts. Though I initially wanted to focus my research strictly on non-government organisations, many NGO devadasi outreach projects have now ended, and most of the devadasis who continue to practice sex work are members of KSAPS sanghas. The president of one of the sangha groups in Belgaum said that the job of the sangha is to collect information pertaining to all available government facilities, find out which members are receiving which

---

\(^5\) Sex workers cannot solicit on the streets, but sex workers over eighteen years of age are allowed to work in brothels—this is \textit{not} a criminal offense. Devadasis can work as sex workers under this paradigm, but they cannot publicly identify as devadasis who are practicing sex work—this \textit{is} a criminal offense.
benefits, and who is still in need of particular services. Women below forty-five years of age are not entitled to a pension, but through sangha groups they can access loans, and KSAPS is currently opening co-op banks to assist with this. Non-devadasi sex workers are not entitled to any pension unless they are widows; sex workers whose husbands have left them are not entitled to any special benefits. Additionally, KSAPS is playing a role in trying to have sex work recognised as a legal profession in India, and it is also fighting to have the devadasi pension raised to Rs.1,000/monthly. Members of KSAPS generally express more overall satisfaction than other devadasis, which may be correlated with their higher (than other devadasis) socio-economic status as sex workers.

Some members interviewed initially claimed to no longer be practicing sex work, but usually revealed later in the interview that they do occasionally continue to practice when they need the additional income. The majority of employees are illiterate, and function as community peer educators, earning Rs. 1,500/monthly plus Rs.400/monthly for travel expenses. They enjoy this work and would prefer to do it full-time, but the income is not enough; they all requested I assist them in getting a salary increase. Though KSAPS project coordinators have offered free computer training to any of the members’ children if desired, KSAPS is largely uninvolved in linking women to alternative livelihood options, despite many women voicing a desire to stop practicing sex work. Shaila is a devadasi who practices sex work, and is also a staff member for KSAPS in Bijapur. She discussed the process that KSAPS has gone through to give training to women in candle and incense making, but after the women made the products they were unable to sell them.

We give training for the women to develop and progress. We send women to RUDSET (Rural Development and Self-Employment Training) Institute for such training. The women in the brothel ask “give it to me madam, give it to me”. They had told them to make ten packets of that by giving the raw materials, but they did not
know how to sell that. They were asking to buy one each. I told them to take it and that I would lend money. Somehow we have to sell that. There was a subsidy of Rs.25. I took it all from them and sold them for Rs.10 and gave them the money (Shaila).

This recurring problem of lack of market access is something that all organisations struggle with. Though the intention to help women find other jobs is positive, the trainings they receive are often a waste of time, because women cannot sell the products that they learn to make. In order to gain market access women need to be willing to either travel or move to more urban areas, and many are not willing to do so. Consequently, they prefer to continue doing coolie work, though recognise that it does not bring in enough money for them to survive. In Belgaum, most women prefer to remain in their villages because they own houses. However, in Balgalkot and Bijapur this is less common.

In Bijapur, most KSAPS members I spoke to do not have their own house. Though KSAPS has tried to help them obtain houses, members told me that they are unable to access subsidies unless they are willing to pay a bribe of Rs. 5,000-6,000 to the panchayat which has access to the money. Some KSAPS members are familiar with MASS, but few or none have had contact with organisations outside of the government. KSAPS staff were not particularly interested in trying to run focus groups, and most members did not have requests beyond finding them a KSAPS job, having their current KSAPS salary increased, or assisting them to access a house and have their pension increased—both of which are already being done by KSAPS offices. However, most devadasis I spoke to through KSAPS have a better socio-economic status than other devadasi women, because they continue to practice sex work and/or they are working a small job for the organisation.

The main difference between MASS, KSAPS, and OMIF is that KSAPS generally does not work with devadasi women as devadasis; devadasis
primarily receive assistance from KSAPS because they are sex workers. This is similar to other NGOs in the area working with sex workers and HIV/AIDS prevention. For example, the Belgaum Integrated Rural Development Society (BIRDS) is popularly known to be working with devadasis as a high-risk group of HIV/AIDS. However, the project coordinator at BIRDS insisted that the NGO has nothing to do with devadasis anymore, and sent me to KSAPS. This disregard for devadasis as both sex workers, and a religious group in need of a particular kind of assistance, continues to be problematic for many devadasi women. OMIF attempts to bridge this gap by providing both medical care and personal counselling to devadasis.

**Operation Mercy India Foundation (OMIF)**

OMIF is, in Gerard Clarke’s (2006) terms, a passive faith-based organisation (FBO) and is one of the more recent organisations to begin working with devadasis. OMIF is a passive FBO because: seven out of ten of the staff members identify as Christian; it is heavily funded by Churches in the United States of America and United Kingdom; it holds regular prayer meetings in which staff pray for their beneficiaries; and it includes pastoral care and prayer in functions for the beneficiaries. Though OMIF has been raising awareness about the devadasi practice in Belgaum district for around five years, it began a new project in August 2012 focusing on the medical needs of devadasis. During my fieldwork from September 2012-May 2013, the clinic was the sole focus of this project. It is a much smaller team than MASS or KSAPS, with approximately ten core staff members. Four of the members are peer educators who are responsible for daily visits to the homes of PLWHA and devadasis. However, at the time of my research the focus was primarily on PLWHA; taking them for hospital check ups, Antiretroviral Therapy (ART), and CD4 tests. The main outreach is to uplift devadasis through healthcare. In the past it has given out some financial loans, but as nobody repaid them, it is
unable to continue providing this assistance. The project coordinator is very 
adamant on providing microbusiness training to women so that they will be 
better able to manage their finances, but simply trying to explain this concept to 
uneducated and illiterate individuals was far too complex for them to 
comprehend.

On 30 October 2012 the clinic held its first “function” (event) for devadasi 
women. Peer educators were responsible for organising their beneficiaries’ 
attendance. There were a few local pastors who were also invited to attend, as 
well as the regular clinic doctor. Women received a free check up and medicine, 
lunch, and pastoral care. The pastors told Bible stories and prayed with the 
women. The project coordinator explained to the women the purpose of the 
clinic, and initially there was a plan to have these functions for devadasis once 
monthly. In the seven months following, the only other function for devadasi 
women was over Christmas—an important holiday for Christian OMIF staff, 
but observed by all faiths in India. Otherwise, the monthly functions which the 
clinic ran became specifically for PLWHA.

OMIF expresses desire to provide individual counselling and holistic care 
to devadasi families, which involves short visits (or sometimes a phone call) to 
devadasi houses by peer educators. Multiple staff members told me that OMIF 
provides books, rice, and loans for beneficiaries, but this is not something which 
I ever witnessed in practice, despite nine months’ of hands-on fieldwork. As 
most of the staff for this project are Christian, outreach is heavily Christian-
focused, with prayer and pastoral care being a priority. Though the intention is 
of a secular social work nature, staff will talk to beneficiaries about their 
personal stories of Christian salvation and how they have “come up” through 
god. Staff also inform them of the nearest church and sometimes distribute 
Bibles as well. One staff member who is a converted Christian from a devadasi
family, and has previously worked for other organisations, emphasised her opinion on the importance of OMIF offering a Christian service.

Even in our office they talk about God. We start by praying and singing hymns. They give free treatment in the clinic. They also show love and affection. The most important and proud thing about this office is that because of this office we learn more about God. Through the office the women get love and affection. They realise that they get free treatment, awareness and also they get preaching. The reason I feel so proud of this office is because here we get the bonus of God’s words whereas in the other organisations we just do work and go back home. But here we work and after that we get preaching and awareness. We get whatever is needed by us to feel comforted and consoled. I feel very proud about OMIF because through this organisation the services reach the people (OMIF peer outreach worker 1).6

Some women expressed to me that they thought OMIF could not help them because they are not HIV+. The organisation is not known in the community for doing any specific devadasi outreach, because it is not doing any social outreach projects beyond the medical clinic. As well, by concentrating its work in Belgaum district where most devadasis have ceased to practice sex work, raising awareness about safe sex (e.g., waiting until marriage to have sex) appears to be less urgent, but staff members express it as a focus of the NGO. A different peer educator explained:

They tell those women who are not HIV+ to take preventive measures so that they do not get HIV; and for those who are positive they tell them to take good treatment, nutrition. The doctor comes once in a week to check their health. They provide the nutrition packets. They have also said that they would talk about getting loans to the devadasis so that they could buy buffaloes and trade the milk in the villages. They have already given Rs.20,000 each to the women from [another peer educator]. During the meetings they tell them also verses of God...They say: God loves you but you cannot do this profession. If you do, God will blame you, but Jesus will help you

6 In order to preserve anonymity in an organisation with so few staff members, I will refer to staff members as “peer outreach worker 1”, “peer outreach worker 2”, etc.
because he considers all of you as his own. They tell the fable [of Biblical creation and the resurrection of Jesus]. They show the [video] cassette [of the story of Jesus] and explain with the story to the women. They say that God doesn’t think that we are bad even if we do very bad things (OMIF peer outreach worker 2).

There is a certain Christian ethic which overrides the outreach that OMIF does, though devadasi women do not have much to say in regards to OMIF having a Christian focus. During my fieldwork, there were no functions which involved showing a video to explain the story of Jesus. However, it was explained to me that the devadasi women in this area are now familiar with this; they have seen the video, have understood the importance of condom usage, and so forth. According to OMIF staff, as there are no new devadasis in this area, it would not garner interest to review these topics again with devadasi women. OMIF seeks to fulfil both spiritual and material needs, and believes that through showing love and guiding people to follow Jesus, the FBO will stop the devadasi practice; this is believed to be the first necessary step to a better life. India is rich with a variety of religious traditions, and while all devadasis are Hindu women, they do respect Christians, and many adopt Jesus into the pantheon of gods and goddess they worship daily.

While staff members consider the spiritual message OMIF provides to be one of the highlights of the NGO, the material advantage of attending this clinic over the government clinic is that the fee to see the doctor is a mere Rs.10, the medicine is all free, and it is possible for PLWHA to obtain nutrition packs, which neither the government nor other organisations distribute. However, when we discussed these advantages in a focus group meeting in Belgaum, Renukavva, a devadasi and OMIF beneficiary, voiced her concerns about how beneficial these services are:

Look, we will not be able to come every time we need to all the way here. It costs us Rs.200 bus fare to reach here. You tell us that you will
provide good medicines and care here and you tell us that the
government hospitals are not useful to us. But if we manage to go
there then they will give an injection for only Rs.10 and they will also
give us tablets. They will do some level of help. Why should we
come all the way to you, after spending so much? We wish to get
some help like getting some more salary, help to educate our children
or some job to stay at home and do. We came here because after
getting a bad name by everyone as devadasis, at least now we can do
some work, become smarter and live a decent life just like other
married women. Why should we come for food all the way here? We
could have stayed at home and eaten there, couldn’t we? You should
do more help than what the government is doing. With that hope we
are coming here (Renukkavva, OMIF beneficiary).

There is an apparent disconnect evident here between the services OMIF is
providing, and how beneficial these services are for devadasis. It is difficult to
run these kinds of initiatives because devadasi women are now scattered
throughout various villages in the district, making it near impossible to
determine a central location. Additionally, devadasi women are unable to justify
traveling such a long distance to receive medical assistance, regardless of
whether or not it is better than the services that the government hospital
provides. However, OMIF remains adamant on setting up its clinic for
devadasis.

In August 2012, OMIF opened a medical clinic for devadasis and PLWHA,
though the outreach is specifically intended for devadasis living with HIV/
AIDS. During my field work the clinic was open from 10am-1pm on Tuesdays,
though this changed in May 2013 to 11:30am-1pm because it was impossible for
the doctor to arrive from Belgaum city before that time. However, since my
fieldwork ended it has been looking for a suitable local doctor. In the clinic’s
first six months, the number of patients remained low, and the team began
doing medical camps in surrounding villages in order to spread awareness
about the clinic. With a number of devadasis in Belgaum having died of HIV/
AIDS and old age, and few to no younger devadasis continuing to practice, the
number of devadasis living with HIV in this area may not be as high as OMIF had previously witnessed. Furthermore, OMIF has not considered that Tuesdays and Fridays are considered the devi’s day, and devadasis are required to perform specific puja in the home in addition to going house to house begging with their pallaki basket. Though I told OMIF many times that perhaps women do not attend the clinics on this day because of other religious commitments, they remained uninterested in changing the day, because Tuesday suited the staff members.

The events which the staff organised for HIV patients brought low numbers of devadasis and events for devadasis brought only a few PLWHA. Though OMIF is set up to test patients for HIV, in May 2013 the only tests available in the clinic were expired. As previously discussed, condoms are available for patients, but are not made public and must be asked for. As sex workers are seen by society as the only women who need condoms, and sex work is not seen as respectable work, women are not comfortable asking for condoms, nor are they empowered to do so. PLWHA are welcome to come to the clinic for nutrition packs as needed, and devadasis also have access to nutrition packs regardless of their HIV status.

In April 2013 OMIF staff attended an HIV/AIDS awareness training, which some staff had already attended three times previously. Despite having received the training multiple times, I witnessed staff members who were still unaware of how HIV is transmitted, believing that cooking food, sharing utensils, and even hugging are ways which HIV spreads. I recall in detail an incident when I had to explain to two of the female staff members that men can contract HIV by having sex with men, and more specifically how men have sex with men.
One day, a few months later, we were all at the clinic for a meeting. Each time there is a meeting, staff members take turns preparing lunch for the group. On this particular occasion a group of staff members were in the kitchen cooking, one of whom is HIV+. One of the head staff members began showing concern that this person was participating in the cooking, whispering to us, “They aren’t cooking are they? Because you know they are positive.” Even though staff are trained to counsel PLWHA and spend time talking to positive patients who are stigmatised, they are blinded to the stigma they impose on PLWHA, including their own colleagues.

Both MASS and OMIF advocate against sex work, and educate women to believe that prostitution is dirty work which should be stopped. One staff member of OMIF told me that women who truly come to believe in Jesus will inevitably stop practicing sex work, because they will understand that it is immoral. I have previously discussed ways in which sex work can be empowering for women. Therefore, encouraging women to stop practicing sex work is not viable if women are not presented with alternative livelihood options. Thus far, neither MASS nor OMIF have successfully implemented schemes which provide devadasis with an alternative income that improves their socio-economic status, or even maintains it to the level of many sex workers. Unfortunately, devadasi women in Belgaum district who believe sex work is dirty work and have now stopped are very poor. Even if women in Belgaum were interested in re-entering sex work for financial gain, they are not likely to receive many clients in the villages or talukas any longer, with the onset of HIV and the shared belief that the devadasi practice is a bad practice which must be stopped. Though some women from KSAPS also expressed that sex work is bad, or that they may prefer another job, they continue to practice in order to avoid the dire poverty that ex-devadasis face. As previously mentioned, most respondents and NGO staff assumed I am Christian because
of my white skin and blue eyes. Therefore, it is possible that sometimes respondents may have been expressing that sex work is “bad” or “dirty” because they wanted the respect and acceptance from me (assuming I held a particular moral position) and the translator, and this is what they felt they needed to say in order to receive it. Despite what they may say, women in Bijapur and Bagalkot continue to practice sex work regardless of whether or not they voice negative feelings towards it. However, because of MASS’s outreach, devadasis in Belgaum district have received the most attention, and it is here that humanitarian outreach remains strong, regardless of the decreasing numbers of devadasis.

**Humanitarian efforts through Christian missionary interventions**

Christian beliefs are inseparable from a community of people who follow Jesus Christ and aim at continuing his mission of revealing God in the world (Deneulin 2013, 51).7

While MASS, KSAPS, and OMIF are some of the main organisations working with devadasis in North Karnataka today, the presence of humanitarian outreach is not limited to these three organisations. During my fieldwork, there were a few unexpected visits from Christian missionary groups seeking to help devadasis in a variety of ways. There is an undeniable urgency amongst faith-based organisations (FBOs) and evangelical Christians to rescue devadasi women from what they understand to be exploited and oppressed livelihoods, and there is now a stronger church presence in Belgaum than a secular NGO presence. There is an abundance of male church pastors, and most, if not all, have a connection to devadasi rehabilitation. Those who work independently spend their days traveling to the houses of devadasis, praying with them and inviting them to their local churches. For the most part, women do not have a problem with this, and some of them attend their local churches.

---

7 Unlike the more recent phenomena of faith-based “development”, Christian evangelical mission groups have been working in India since the onset of colonialism. For more on the history of this kind of activity in India see Frykenberg (2008).
However, very few have converted to Christianity (I only met one); most attend both church and the temple, tapping into all resources which may bring prosperity. Although some devadasis believe Jesus to be a god in a pantheon of gods, many believe that worshipping the devi (in a variety of forms) is of utmost importance to ensure peace and prosperity. Christians are motivated to help devadasis through their personal convictions that Dalits will find freedom through Christian conversion.\textsuperscript{8} They believe that within the hierarchy of the Dalits, devadasis are at the lowest rung of society, which sometimes leads to unethical attempts to convert devadasi women.

During my fieldwork, two missionary teams came to Belgaum: one national and one international. The following case scenarios present these visits, and demonstrate how religion sometimes continues to be dangerous for development. This type of intervention is also detrimental for organisations such as OMIF which are Christian but focused on more long-term social outreach. According to Gerard Clarke’s (2008, 32-33) breakdown of FBOs, while OMIF is a passive/active organisation, these types of Christian evangelical missions are persuasive because faith is a primary motivator in how they carry out their objectives, and how staff and beneficiaries are mobilised. Faith is important in identifying and assisting beneficiaries and partners, and is the main reason for engagement. These missions were focused on conversion to the faith and attempted to promote the interests of Christianity, sometimes at the detriment of the beliefs of devadasis.

\textit{The Pentecostal conversion mission}

The first missionary function took place in October 2012 in a main function hall in a very central but rural location, accessible by rail and bus. It

\textsuperscript{8} Christians in India view Christianity as a way out of the caste system, and have historically targeted Dalits on their quest to convert non-believers. For more on the relationship between Dalits and Christianity, see Heredia (2010).
was held by a national missionary team, through the Indian Pentecostal Church of God. The name of the conference was “The Women’s Work Conference”. Local pastors who regularly go to the villages praying with the people managed to mobilise around 400 devadasi women under the pretence that there was a “devadasi function” happening. In reality, the function was about “learning how we are precious in the sight of God”. The people running the event could not speak Kannada, and had to have everything translated from English. The function lasted for three days, and devadasis were required to stay for the duration of the function if they wanted their travel money reimbursed. During this time, they had to sleep on the floor. Many women brought their children with them, and some also brought their cattle. I did not attend the first day of the function, but quickly learned that I had not missed anything.

When I walked into the function hall, many of the women were extremely excited to see me, as they were already familiar with my presence in the area. The missionaries were all very curious about who I was, and skeptically questioned my presence. Some of the women who were not familiar with me thought I must be married to the only other foreigner in the room. Hands waved from all directions, signalling for me to come and sit beside them. In my (still somewhat) broken Kannada I told the women that I was writing a book on the stories of devadasis, and my relationship with some of the local OMIF staff also present helped me to gain a rapport with the other women. I spent the first half of the day waiting for things to get started, until I finally realised that the only intention of the function was to tell the women Biblical stories and sing gospel songs. There was absolutely no other message, nothing about health, poverty, devadasi life, etc.; only Jesus. Many women willingly participated in singing gospel songs, covered and bowed their heads during prayer, and shouted “Hallelujah!” on command. The Biblical stories that were recited were out of context and incomprehensible for somebody not familiar with
Christianity—the women were bored. They slowly began leaving the hall to go sit somewhere else and chat. During the breaks, they would talk and talk to me, we would take photos together, and they would try to learn more about who I was. This made the people who were putting on the function, Indians with no knowledge of Kannada, very upset. As they tried to reconvene the disinterested women, one of the organisers looked at me and said in English, “Why are you doing this? You’re ruining everything!” During their breaks, none of the missionaries took the time to speak to the devadasis, they did not say hello, did not shake hands, did not ask how they were doing. They were clearly on a mission to preach the gospel, with little interest in the people they were speaking to. OMIF staff used this opportunity to get contact information for new beneficiaries.

I was struggling to understand why some women would come and go everyday, but I knew they were holding out for their travel reimbursements. However, on the third day of the function, as I was waiting for the bus, Margavva, a devadasi who I had met the previous day, showed up. We entered the bus together and sat down beside each other. Those sitting around us began asking her in Kannada who I was and what we were doing, to which she promptly replied, “We are going to a sangha function happening at the sugar factory.” I then began to wonder if perhaps the women saw this as an opportunity and excuse to all get together and socialise for three days. As the days went on, they spent an increasing amount of time socialising outside of the function hall under the trees on the grass. However, they also had other motivations for attending, such as gifts they would receive, which included prayer and story books. Though the majority of devadasis are illiterate, they were eager to get as many gifts as they could, regardless of what they were. There was, however, one gift which suited the illiterate. A small ensemble of square colours in the form of a book, called the “Wordless Book”. Small squares
of black, red, white, yellow and green were glued together in book format, representing the following:

- Black: Sin | Romans 3:23 | All have sinned
- Red: Blood | John 1:7 | Jesus’ blood covers all sin
- White: Pure | Psalm 51:7 | Jesus washes away confessed sin
- Yellow: Heaven | John 14:2 | Believe in Jesus and receive Eternal Life
- Green: Grow | Peter 3:18 | Grow in the knowledge of the Lord / Spread the Good News

The Wordless Book was passed around generously to all attendees so that when the women got home, they could use the book to go and spread the “Good News” of Christ, and pass on extra books to others who could do the same.

The food that was served for three days was arguably tasteless, and there was never enough of it to feed everyone. Many women had to wait one hour or more to be fed something else very basic such as rice and rasam. At the end of the three days, chaos broke out when it was time for travel reimbursements. There was no organised system for paying the women, and the organisers of the event did not actually have cash available. The last-minute trip to the bank revealed that there was not enough money to cover the costs of the successful attendance. Unfortunately, many women were not reimbursed for their travel expenses and left the function indebted and having missed three days of work.

---


10 A typical meal that the women would have cooked at home.
Evangelical Christians on a humanitarian mission

The second missionary group came in January 2013, and they held their function in a remote area about one hour by bus outside of Belgaum city, followed by a long walk down a dirt road into a pleasant forested area. This group of foreign missionaries has been building a rapport with the devadasi community in Belgaum for a few years, and many women spoke fondly of previous experiences with them. A collaboration of American pastors and teenage missionaries, as well as local pastors, were responsible for the organisation of this event. There were less than fifty women in attendance. When I walked into the main function hall, there were many women that I knew, and I noticed immediately that they were all wearing new saris, which I later found out had been gifted to them as soon as they arrived. Everyone had a bed to sleep in and shower facilities. The food was very substantial and tasty, and the organisers always ensured that they had men serving the food out to all the women, intentionally wanting to display an awareness of women’s oppression in this area, but also to show gratitude for the hard work that is involved in the daily lives of most Indian women.

The group was very interested in learning about devadasis and took my presence as an opportunity to learn more. In their short time in Karnataka, they had made an effort to learn some Kannada, and used their few sentences to engage with devadasis. One of the activities they had on site included female missionaries painting the toenails of devadasis, as a display of Christ’s love and humbleness. There was also a room for the children of devadasis, which always had activities going on to keep them entertained. The main objective of this function was to show devadasis the love of Jesus Christ. Some of the missionaries told stories of their hardships and how they had become Christians; the Kannada translations were overly dramatised and had everyone in the room in tears. It was a bit like watching a televangelist. Devadasis were
also invited up to tell their stories or sing their traditional Yellamma \textit{bhajans} (devotional songs). A safe space was created, and the women were freely dancing and enjoying themselves. On the final day, one devadasi stood up and said that she had never felt love before, she never knew that Jesus loved her and it was the first time in her life that she felt loved rather than outcasted. As tears streamed down her face, missionaries and local pastors took this story as a sign of success. However, this case seemed to be an exception amongst the women. When I later spoke to devadasis about their experience and intention in attending the event, especially after the disaster of the previous function, Jayashree told me that they went for the free transport to Belgaum. In her case, her daughter is in Belgaum, and she went with the intention of seeing her. However, the women were disappointed that the location was far removed from Belgaum city and they were unable to go into the city at the end of the day.\footnote{A few years earlier devadasis had gone to Dharwad for a similar kind of function by the same group. Many devadasis spoke to me about this event, and emphasised how they really enjoyed the opportunity to go out into the city at the end of each day. They had expected something similar by attending the function that they were told was in Belgaum city, when in reality the location site was quite far away from the city.}

The organisers were discouraged by the low attendance compared to the previous functions they had put on. They were disappointed to hear about the previous Pentecostal function which was not targeted at helping devadasis, and that women were not financially reimbursed. However, they felt that they had chosen a very nice location, and had great food, and could not understand why devadasis would have been disappointed in the location, neglecting to acknowledge that the women had ulterior motives in attending. While this group has a more long-term goal than the first group, at the moment, none of their work continues once they leave. They have local pastors who would like to collaborate with them, but nobody is paying them to do so.
The impact of sporadic missionary functions on long-term faith-based development

Those who advocate in favour of faith-based approaches to development also acknowledge that FBOs have their pitfalls. It is believed that religion undermines development when: religious beliefs prevent women from working outside the home, religion ignites violence between religious groups, a woman has an HIV+ partner who is denied contraception on moral grounds, and/or religious education teaches children that other religions are bad (Deneulin and Bano 2009, 105). While it is evident that the above case scenarios are examples of religion undermining development, none of these specific examples apply. Rather, religion has undermined development by: creating a space for unethical conversion through gift giving, not being trustworthy (e.g. failing to reimburse travel expenses), and neglecting to engage with beneficiaries, or limiting those engagements to brief one-off, sporadic events. Jeffrey Haynes (2007, 62) suggests that religion can have both positive and negative roles in development. Religion has a positive role when it “motivates civil engagement in pursuit of socially and developmentally constructive goals”; and a negative role when it “(1) seeks to exclude others, (2) perhaps resorts to conflict and violence, and (3) overall seriously undermines achievement of socially and developmentally constructive goals”. In this case, both groups who put on devadasi functions have seriously undermined the achievement of socially and developmentally constructive goals of other organisations in the area, particularly OMIF, who is the only established FBO working with devadasis.

The first devadasi function in October left a bad impression on the community, and the following OMIF functions over the course of my fieldwork resulted in minimal attendance by the women. This was particularly damaging for OMIF which strives to help devadasis in other ways through medical attention and school supplies. The flow of information in the first function only went one way: missionaries preached to devadasis about Jesus, but remained
disinterested in the beliefs or lives of devadasis. As Tamsin Bradley (2011, 124) has suggested, this type of one-sided dialogue only benefits the missionaries, who feel they are following in the footsteps of Christ, and gives them the illusion that they have made a deep connection with their target group: “the poor and needy”. It is this type of evangelical faith-based work which gives FBOs and religion in general a bad name in development. While the second scenario was less damaging, the discussions that ensued from this event revealed that the main interest of the missionaries is to establish something more long-term to help devadasis. Though I explained to them that many of their ideas have already been implemented in Belgaum, they remain positive that they can make a beneficial change in the lives of devadasis, perhaps through a school or micro-enterprise schemes. Because they have been working with devadasis in Belgaum for a few years now (through one-off visits), they are reluctant to consider that other areas such as Bijapur, Bagolkot or even Andhra Pradesh are more in need of assistance. It was also difficult for them to hear my perspectives on devadasis, because it is the sensational image they have which motivates them to continue this work. Despite local pastors telling them they feel the mission is not sustainable, the foreigners continue to return. When the foreign missionaries are not there, they do not pay any locals to carry out their vision, but simply abandon the project until their next short visit.

Regardless of the failure of the first group to reimburse attendees for their travel expenses, these type of missions, full of material gifts, have left devadasis believing that Christians have a lot of money. Following these two incidents, OMIF was left in a precarious position. Will women be inclined to attend events if they are not going to receive any material benefits? In general, they have mitigated this issue by supplying those who attend special functions with nutrition packs intended for people who are HIV+, though all devadasis also receive nutrition packs. This is something which no other organisation in the
area is offering to beneficiaries. Additionally, as previously mentioned, at Christmas they had a small event where each woman received a gift. However, after January, the OMIF functions which followed brought very few attendees compared to the first function in October. I found similar difficulties in March when I began trying to organise focus groups. Women wanted to know what they would get in return for attending, and in some cases women refused to attend because the lunch would be vegetarian; they wanted chicken, a luxury which is usually reserved for Christian functions.

Though OMIF believes that material transformation can come through spiritual empowerment (Ter Haar 2011, 15), it does not see gift giving as a way to ignite spiritual transformation. Without having to resort to gift giving OMIF has hope that beneficiaries will see its love for god through social outreach, and be inclined to convert to Christianity: prayer and church planting are two key parts of this process. An OMIF staff member in Hyderabad told me that she believes “ethical conversion” is when people are free to learn about different religions, and free to make a choice about their beliefs. Therefore, OMIF does not view gift giving in hope of conversion as ethical, and they do not resort to this method as those before them have done. Their decision to remain ethical however, means that few women see the point in using their medical clinic.

**WHAT DO DEVADASIS SAY ABOUT THESE TYPES OF INTERVENTIONS?**

Devadasis are not lacking in people throwing various types of assistance at them, and they take advantage of this as much as possible by attending an array of meetings and functions held in the name of devadasis. The decline of devadasis is correlated with both MASS eradication efforts, and an increase in HIV/AIDS amongst the devadasi community. While both KSAPS and OMIF are working towards mitigating HIV/AIDS amongst sex workers and devadasis, MASS continues to be focused on devadasi eradication, which
means that their current outreach is relatively silent. They remain active in raising public awareness about devadasis, but are not actively working with devadasis anymore. A common theme across all of these outreach projects by MASS, KSAPS, OMIF, and missionary outreach, is a neglect to ask devadasis what kind of assistance they need or desire. This behaviour is similar to previously discussed colonial, reform, feminist, and abolitionist efforts that have sought to help devadasis, primarily through stopping their practice. Within all of these efforts, devadasis remain in a position of the silent(ed) subaltern. Yet, through these interventions projects and subsequent changes in the practice, devadasis have reinvented themselves. They now attend these various meetings in an attempt to negotiate poverty, and access as many services as they can. However, they frequently mention the reality that although many people come and collect their information in the name of helping them, they are not receiving the assistance that they need. The next chapter looks into this in more detail through an analysis of focus group meetings between devadasi women and OMIF staff.
Chapter seven: Devadasis, Development Schemes, and Divergent Aspirations from the Top-down

“You told us to stop being devadasis and so we did. To bring a good name to you, we sat at home. Now we eat by doing some manual labour, so you must support us [financially and materially]” (Durgavva, focus group participant).

“They (the devadasis) asked us (OMIF) to get them some jobs. We will do that. For the people who are ready to work, there is no dearth of jobs. Since ancient times it is always the one who cannot work is the poor person. There is work available. We must be ready to work” (OMIF staff member, focus group meeting).

“Those who claim to help us, do not provide any help at all” (Mallamma, focus group participant).

In a growing economy with more mobile phones than toilets, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have paved the way for what kind of “progress” India should be making, and how it should achieve these specific goals. In this environment of mixed features, development organisations and the State both look towards the MDGs as a solution to helping women like devadasis out of poverty. Consequently, devadasis are directed towards thinking about development in terms of the MDGs. However, in focus group discussions it became more evident that while devadasis have particular ideas about development, they also feel that many of the aspirations of development organisations are not working in this context, because the organisations are limited by financial constraints, and subsequently more focused on their own ideas, rather than the desires of their beneficiaries. Focus groups provided an opportunity to observe whether OMIF staff actually listen to devadasis. As women who are constantly silenced by reformers, NGOs, FBOs, feminists, and Neo-abolitionists, the desires of devadasis remain unclear. Previous chapters have demonstrated that it is challenging to find local people who will listen to devadasis, as I have revealed through my discussion on difficulties with my translators. Nonetheless, when given the opportunity to speak, devadasis
express varying understandings of their practice and development interventions.

Devadasis are poor, and for the most part, the socio-economic status of individual women has not improved since the onset of development interventions. This chapter will demonstrate, through discussion of focus groups and personal interviews, that devadasis raised three recurring themes of ways they believe development organisations can help them: buffalo rearing, educating their children, and giving them loans (often connected to buying buffalo). Education and microfinance loans are development interventions which adhere to MDGs 2 and 3, focusing on education and female empowerment, as discussed in chapter two. Although devadasis now understand these interventions to be solutions to helping them out of poverty, they also express dissatisfaction with the results that these schemes have had: buffaloes die, educated children cannot get jobs, and loans are never enough. These divergent aspirations remain at the forefront of the continued poverty of devadasis.

**INVESTIGATING DIVERGENT ASPIRATIONS THROUGH FOCUS GROUPS**

Few initiatives aiming to help devadasis have interest in what kind of help devadasis would deem most beneficial. As uneducated and illiterate women, it is often believed by development and humanitarian practitioners that devadasis do not know what they need. However, OMIF does have an interest in revamping its projects to suit the needs of devadasis more directly, though finances are a constant inhibitor. It is aware that there is a need amongst the devadasi community for change. Therefore, through focus groups with both devadasis and OMIF staff, a space was created which allowed for observation of what devadasis say in the presence of NGO staff about facilities they wish to
avail, in addition to observing how staff speak to devadasis: do they empower
them, or belittle them? Is religion ever mentioned?

Having only recently started working with devadasis, OMIF was the only
organisation not only willing but genuinely interested in running focus groups
to find out what devadasis say would be helpful. According to Tamsin Bradley
(2011, 114), FBOs tend to have more long-term commitments to local
communities, which secular NGOs often lack. Comparatively, OMIF staff show
compassion and long-term commitment to helping devadasi women, and are
open to listening to what the women have to say, and changing outreach
projects accordingly. Over the months of March, April, and May 2013, we were
able to have three focus groups. Unfortunately these are difficult months to
organise women in the area, as it is quite hot, and there are many weddings
taking place. Some women do not have phones, and organising them requires
house visits. The goal was to have six to eight women at each meeting, but the
first one only brought four, the second brought eight (two who had also showed
up to the first meeting), and the last meeting brought six women.

The first meeting was somewhat of a disappointment, though it still
proved to be beneficial. I spent two days trying to organise for two devadasis to
come from a MASS government plot, where they are living in leaking houses,
distanced from coolie work, and rely on loans to buy vegetables for their
families. Though MASS claims that these women have had many opportunities
which they have not taken advantage of, the women repeatedly expressed that
they were desperate for help. Krishna Kandath (2001) also found in his own
research that MASS staff were quick to call its beneficiaries “lazy”. I spent half a
day trying to meet one of the peer educators from OMIF to go and visit this
community to invite them to the meeting. When we finally arrived, the women
were off collecting water, because the April drought meant that they had run
out of water near their homes. The following day we caught the train and made
our way to the village again. Upon arrival, the women told us that after I interviewed them in January, they were scolded by the MASS project coordinator who lives on the same plot of land, for asking me to help them and failing to acknowledge all of the assistance MASS has given them. In her eyes, the women were not loyal to MASS. They were now very scared of the project coordinator, quite a tall robust woman who lives on the same plot, and they feared she would not be happy with them if they came to the focus group with OMIF. However, they claimed that they were desperate for help, and would ask her permission to come to the focus group. We took the phone number of one of the sons on the plot, and that evening we called to confirm that they had decided to come. Two days later when it was time for the meeting, OMIF staff went to meet the women at the train station, but they never showed up. After two days of intensive effort, the women did not come to the focus group. This is just one example of the many setbacks faced in trying to organise meetings.

Every focus group session took place at the OMIF office and medical clinic. Women were given travel expenses and lunch for coming to the meeting, and OMIF also gave them nutrition packs. However, as previously mentioned, the women did not feel that this was enough for them to justify losing a day’s work. The set up of each focus group began with one staff member explaining the initiatives of OMIF, its position on the devadasi practice (to eradicate it), and the NGOs intention for the focus group (to find out what help women need). The project coordinator would explain exactly what facilities are currently available through OMIF, which is primarily the medical clinic, and occasionally school books for children. The staff member who ran the first focus group started by telling the women:

Some young girls still practice that (sex work). I mean they do go here and there. What is the reason? Because their stomachs are empty. If the government insists repeatedly that the devadasi practice has to be banned then how can we do that? The same
government doesn’t give anything. I am not going to talk about other things. Even if I talk you would not be able to understand that, because you will say what MASS has taught you to say. It has been five years since we started this OM. So many of you keep coming here. We give you medicines and you go back. Has it been more beneficial than that to you? (OMIF staff member).

In response to this question, all the women answered in unison, “No”. Devadasi women often complain that many people from organisations come and listen to their stories and write down all of their information, but they never see any changes, and NGOs never follow up. One focus group participant, Mallamma, said quite frankly, “Those who claim to help us, do not provide any help at all.” Lambavva followed Mallamma’s statement in confirmation, saying, “They call us and take notes of all the problems by talking to us as if we are children. They patronise us and send us away.” Finally, Renukavva summed up the dynamics between devadasis and NGO staff when she explained:

We respect you because you are persons from the city and we are ignorant village people. If you are going to help us then it will be useful. If not, we will tell everyone that we are not at all devadasis but we live as a married couple. Because once we tell you that we are devadasis and get called in abusive names, you will go away and we have to go back to our villages to earn our living.

*Milking buffaloes, (not) making money*

Devadasi women often lack confidence, and belittle their abilities. However, they are also regularly patronised by NGO staff and told who to be, how to live, and what they need. Head staff members are always more privileged than their beneficiaries—even if they themselves are ex-devadasis, they hold decent jobs and are therefore respected in their communities. Although the staff member running the focus group in this instance repeatedly encouraged the women to speak out about their problems, a disconnect
remained between what the women said, and what the staff heard. Take this example of an exchange between OMIF staff and Jayashree:

**OMIF staff member:** Now you tell us about your problems and the help that you need.

**Jayashree:** I have small children. My cousins and relatives live close to my house. They keep gossiping and complaining about me that I move around a lot, wearing good saris, in the name of working for this or that organisation. My children are small. If they were girls they would somehow have managed house work. I have sons. I have to cook for them. If people like you or madam like her, if you ask us to come here then I have to tell my boys to eat whatever is there and come away. I have worked all my life but now in my older age I have no energy to do manual labour and earn for my children. So if someone gives me work to do at home, I will do it. If they increase the devadasi pension it will be good for all of us.

**OMIF:** So you need a buffalo?

Although Jayashree never mentions a buffalo, but rather suggests that she has no energy for manual labour in her old age, the idea of needing a buffalo is imposed upon her. Prior to this exchange, Jayashree had already shared with the group the difficulties she is facing in the village trying to find work, and why rearing buffalo is not financially beneficial for her:

Let us forget about being devadasis, because that has been solved. We have difficulties. We are from the villages. In this Karnataka there is not much work in the fields to graze the animals. There is also not much water. So even if I plan to rear cattle and sell milk to support my family, it becomes very difficult.

Even though Jayashree has outlined the reasons why buffalo rearing does not work in her village (lack of coolie work and lack of water), OMIF staff still suggested to her that she might like to have a buffalo. After this suggestion, the conversation continued as follows:

**Jayashree:** Give me a buffalo and also give me an hour’s work to do from home. I will do that after I take care of the buffalo.
OMIF: So you will rear a buffalo and also you are ready to do some work after taking training either to make papads, pickle [or] some such thing, right?

J: Yes, I am ready.

Although devadasis are aware that rearing buffalo is difficult and not always economically viable, they will take any kind of support that the NGO is willing to give them. Therefore, while they might prefer something else, such as more lobbying for pension increase, they will gladly take a buffalo in the meantime. However, OMIF does not give buffaloes away for free—they come with a loan. In order to sustain themselves through farm labour, women need to have their own buffalo so that they can sell the milk and many women do speak of the profits of selling milk.

In the last focus group all eight women asked for a loan to buy a buffalo, despite having all owned a buffalo at a previous time. Women expressed that if they had a buffalo to sell milk, all of their problems would go away. Though selling milk is not always a long-term solution to poverty, it is very useful when people are in need of making a large one-off payment, such as marrying one of their children. While buffalo rearing can be a sustainable and constant form of income, most women use it for immediate costs such as food, and healthcare. KSWDC-MYRADA began devadasi rehabilitation with a large emphasis on buffalo distribution. In its early stages, nearly all women received a buffalo (Ramberg 2006, 123). Since devadasis live in villages which thrive on agriculture and dairy, buffaloes are seen as a viable source of income. In my own research I found that all women I spoke to felt that having a buffalo would be profitable, and they requested loans through the sangha in order to buy a buffalo. Yet, all of these women had previously owned buffaloes, which had either died or they had sold. Regardless, this is still seen as a primary solution to immediate poverty or economic strain.
Lucinda Ramberg (2006) heard a story in her own research which was not told in truth, but as an example of the inefficiency of these sorts of rehabilitation schemes. The story was about a woman who received a buffalo as part of the rehabilitation schemes. This woman lived in a small room, where she also had to keep her buffalo. In accepting the buffalo, she was expected to stop sex work, but buffaloes eat quite a bit, and after ceasing to practice sex work, this woman had little money. She ended up having to do twice as much sex work to feed herself and her buffalo. When the buffalo was in heat, she had to get her crossed, which would cost her Rs.100—so she had to do sex work in order to pay for the buffalo to have sex (Ramberg 2006, 124). Morgan and Olsen (2011, 191) rightly note that this initial investment in a buffalo through microcredit by poor people without regular income can increase economic vulnerability and downward mobility, but in some cases it is also a necessary survival strategy investment in the rural context. Initially every women was receiving a buffalo through rehabilitation schemes, despite her housing situation or location. This created further economic strain for women who did not have the infrastructure for the animal. However, for women who are engaged in coolie work, and can bring home food for their buffalo from the fields, and then sell the milk for profit, buffaloes are a worthy investment, especially if they receive the buffalo for “free” through a loan on which they continuously default. The money may then be saved and used for children’s weddings or other such expenses.

When people borrow money to make immediate one-off payments for things such as food, medical emergencies or wedding expenses, or even to fulfil addictions such as drinking and gambling, inability to pay the loans back can lead the debtor into bonded labour (Murgai et al. 2003, 90; Daru et al. 2005, 134). Gopa Samanta (2011, 148) provides an example of a self-help group (SHG) investing in livestock and then losing all their cattle to disease. In these types of circumstances, women may be driven to enter bonded labour in order to make
up for lost income. With the introduction of microfinance and SHGs there has been an increase in cow ownership, especially among the lower classes (Morgan and Olsen 2011, 197). While investing in a cow is a huge cost for casual labourers, it is a risk which people often deem worth taking (2011, 197-198). However, problems arise if the animals end up becoming sick or dying unexpectedly before the loans have been repaid. In an agro-climatic region like North Karnataka, rural poor people feel adamant that owning cattle will help them out of poverty, although they have all owned cattle before, and their economic situation is relatively unchanged or worse.

Working from home: the realities of skills trainings

When I interviewed devadasis outside of the focus group context, women did not speak extensively about buffalo. Alternatively, many women spoke of the desire and necessity to receive some sort of skills training which they could use in their home—such as making candles or camphor. However, in the focus group setting, the women expressed a different view, repeatedly stating that skills training are not effective; very clearly saying, “None of the trainings given seem to work” (Kasturi). However, the OMIF project coordinator persisted with this idea, suggesting, “One thing she can do is, we can give tailoring training to her. Also we can train her to do small business by giving her training to manage microbusiness. Like, candle making or embroidery.” At this point, Ranavva spoke up and again repeated Kasturi’s sentiments, stating, “All those things will not work sir.” She then explained, “We both have four children. It is not possible to leave them at home and go and sell products. We can do something from our homes, sir. If you also help our children to go to school, then [you can help us with] both their education and we can also earn our bread sitting at home.” Devadasi women have already had experience with skills trainings and found that they were unable to sell the products that they made because there is
not a market for the goods in their villages, and they are unable or unwilling to leave their villages to sell the products.

Additionally, the nature of the devadasi practice in itself tends to keep women bound to the home, and they often lack the confidence to function in a different setting. It is not surprising that after years of being told they are dirty and disrespected, devadasi women do not have the minimal amount of self-confidence required to comfortably enter social situations outside of their homes or villages. For this reason, while they are open to skill trainings, it may be necessary to initially provide women with confidence building and empowerment workshops. As has been mentioned previously, ex-devadasis are often shy to speak out in groups and behave in a very timid manner. Previous research has shown that simply attending sangha meetings is not enough to empower women; they must also be trained in self-confidence by learning to effectively participate in discussion through speaking and listening (Samanta 2011, 143). The second reason for requesting training in the home and a skill set which can be used in the home is because women express that without husbands, their required household chores are so time consuming that they cannot afford to leave their homes.

In order to help their children out of these dynamics of being stuck in the home relying on NGOs for skills training, devadasis have now adopted development rhetoric and come to believe that education and microfinance will help them provide their children with other opportunities. However, both of these interventions reflect neoliberal ideas of “progress” according to the State, and continue to have mixed results in this setting.
Education as a burden or a tool for “empowerment”

“This is India’s greatest difficulty. In India we are encouraged to acquire more and more education but there is no corresponding stimulus to create educated jobs” (Male informant quoted in Jeffrey et al. 2008, 175).

“Now I work and my son earns Rs.500 per month. That is our income. I collect the money to send my daughter to school. I collect garbage and even if I don’t eat I will send the child to school” (Jayshree, ex-devadasi).

Devadasis and NGOs working with them strongly value education. Education is universally advocated as a primary solution to poverty, and a way forward for girls in developing countries. According to the GOI Report (2011, 47):

Education will lead to empowerment securing the means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions for social and individual transformation. It develops intrinsic capacity, inner transformation of one’s consciousness to overcome barriers, access resources and change traditional ideologies. Empowerment therefore is possible only with access to education as a fundamental right.

To achieve this goal, the Indian government has implemented a programme called Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan or “Education for All” to target a change in “societal norms and attitudes” through education (2011, 51). The targeted provisions for girls in this programme show potential for increasing school attendance of females. However, they are not sufficient for ensuring “inner transformation of one’s consciousness to overcome barriers’ or a ‘change [in] traditional ideologies”. In many regards, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan promotes the gender binary, training young girls to become good mothers and wives, “providing an education for consent rather than independent thinking” (Jeffery and Jeffrey 1998, 248). Gaining education in this context becomes a means to finding a better husband (1998, 250).

There is a universal assumption that education increases women’s autonomy and will lead to greater self-fulfilment and enrich social and
economic development by empowering women in the home and public life (Obasi 2013, 3; GOI 2011, 47; Dreze and Sen 2002, 143; Swaminathan 2002, 70). However, this argument is made with little discussion of what constitutes autonomy or empowerment (Swaminathan 2002, 70). Education is arguably linked to monetary returns, health benefits, investment in the next generation, social networks, and civil participation (Desai et al. 2010a, 75). Dreze and Sen (1996, 106) claim that “the empowerment value of basic education is so obvious that there is something puzzling in the fact that the promotion of education has received so little attention from social political leaders in the post-independence period”. Education is measured by the years of schooling undertaken, rather than quality of content, and does not consider education that may be gained outside of school (Jeffery and Jeffrey 1998, 248). Attending school is believed to bring about changes that have typically been associated with “modernisation”. Going to school is correlated with learning new ideas, especially through reading, which contributes to a desire to change characteristics of social life, and lead to a deeper understanding and acceptance of the assumed benefits of modern establishments such as Western medicine and banks (Jeffery and Jeffrey 1998, 248). The UN Millennium Project (2005a, 37), which has been set in place to determine what tasks are necessary to achieve the MDGs by 2015, claims that “data from around the world show that increased education is associated with the empowerment of women”. They reference only one publication to support this claim, but in this publication, the authors conclude:

our review indicates that education is a necessary, but not sufficient investment for achieving gender equality or improving women’s wellbeing. Our survey of the empirical literature on the relationship between women’s education and their wellbeing, empowerment, and gender equality yields consistently positive effects of education under varying conditions only for some aspects. For most of the other aspects that we examined, the empirical literature suggests that a range of underlying social and economic conditions need to be favorable in order for female education to have a beneficial effect on
gender equality and women’s well being (Malhotra et al. 2003, 38; emphasis added).

While claiming that education is an empowering tool for women, as the UN Millennium Project (2005a, 38) simultaneously acknowledges, “Education alone may not be transformative in the absence of other normative shifts and changed power relations. In such settings, it takes more than education to reach thresholds of change”. Therefore, while education continues to be hailed as a solution to poverty and inequality, there are significant barriers that prevent education from being the primary solution.

*Education and reduced fertility*

OMIF is providing devadasis with both medical treatment and assistance for education, though it is focusing more on the medical outreach at the moment. Increased health benefits are seen as the most essential outcome of education for women. Education is believed to empower women to access medical care and the use of contraception, thereby reducing infant mortality and lowering fertility (Desai et al. 2010a, 70; Kapadia 2002, 2). Girls who spend more time in school are more likely to get married later, which may lead to fertility decline (Jeffery and Jeffrey 1998, 248). Alternatively, sometimes devadasis expressed more difficulty marrying their daughters because they are educated. This is because men who are not educated are less likely to marry women who are educated. Additionally, finding an educated man to marry her daughter requires a higher dowry cost. Patricia Jeffery and Craig Jeffrey (1998, 245) argue that the amount of schooling a woman has had is frequently correlated with the amount of education her husband has had, as well as his socio-economic status, and urban living. Once rural areas are taken into account, the statistical impact of female schooling on fertility is cut in half.

The correlation between increased education of females, increased autonomy and lower fertility rates is debatable (Swaminathan 2002; Jeffery and
Jeffrey 1998; Jeffrey et al. 2008). Though the UN Millennium Project (2005a, 37) specifically equates women’s education with “control over their own fertility”, Jeffery and Jeffrey (1998, 247) argue:

In many parts of South Asia, indeed, evidence of fertility decline should not be interpreted as a result of higher female autonomy, itself a consequence of girls’ schooling, but as the outcome of the logics of male-dominated family systems in which low fertility has come to be seen as economically rational...In other words, it is a mistake to see schooling for girls as a straightforward panacea for their lack of autonomy, any more than for the “population problem”.

The assumption that more education leads to more autonomy and decision-making power for women, and will therefore lead to reduced fertility, is not always so in the Indian rural context. In oppressive settings, much higher levels of education are required in order for women to gain the autonomy needed to make decisions over their fertility. Minimal amounts of primary school education, outlined by MDG 2 as an indication of success, may perpetuate a male-dominated system, educating women to be good wives rather than independent women.

Don’t dedicate, Educate!

Aside from the above mentioned pro-education arguments of “empowerment” and reduced fertility, in the context of devadasis, education is widely seen as the answer to ending devadasi dedications. However, intergenerational questions remain unanswered, because many daughters of devadasis are the first generation of girls to go to school. Devadasis maintain a positive outlook towards education, but simultaneously express concern that their children are not finding jobs. However, these concerns often continue to be more focused around their sons, than their daughters.

Despite a rise in literacy in Karnataka, it is evident from the UNDP (2005) statistical map (see below) that the northern districts continue to have a lower
literacy rate than the more prosperous southern districts. In 2001, Bijapur and Bagalkot had a 57% literacy rate, while Belgaum had a literacy rate of 64%. This higher number in Belgaum is likely because Belgaum city is the largest and most developed city in North Karnataka, with a high number of schools and tertiary institutions. Despite the gender gap in literacy being higher in northern districts, the decline in gender disparity is more evident in “less economically developed districts”, such as Bijapur and Bagalkot (UNDP 2005, 97, 122). This may be correlated with the increase in females attending school (2005, 97).

Nonetheless, one-third of Karnataka’s population remain illiterate, with illiteracy being more than 58% among Dalit females (2005, 99).

---

1 From 1990-91 to 2003-04 primary school enrollment increased by 1% for boys and 2% for girls (UNDP 2005, 97).
Devadasis think lesser of themselves for being illiterate, and are very proud to have educated children. As we sat down with Shantavva, and asked her if she wanted to sign the ethics approval, or put her thumb print, she responded, “I put my thumb print. I don’t know. I am just a person who rears cattle. Now my son is educated. I have sent him to school until fifteenth class. He doesn’t have a job.” Government and non-government organisations are both spending money to ensure that children of devadasis are educated, but they are not focused on helping educated children find jobs. OMIF has a slew of Good Shepherd schools in rural areas, for which it provides uniforms and textbooks to children. Though there are many positive outcomes of educating children, the number of educated unemployed individuals is high, particularly amongst families living below the poverty line (Soni 2008, 123-125). One devadasi explained that she had managed to pay for her daughter to complete a Bachelor of Education, but in her village she was only earning Rs.2,000/monthly as a teacher. If she moved to a city, she may be able to earn at least twice as much (if she could find a job), but many people are not willing to move to the city and leave their families behind, and pay rent in urban areas when they own a house in their village. Additionally, they expressed fear that even though they have completed tenth standard, their children still lack the knowledge needed to keep up with people in metropolitan areas, who work very fast and think very fast comparatively.

During personal interviews, devadasis spoke positively of their (self-perceived) accomplishments in working hard or taking loans to pay for their children to go to school. Some of them spoke proudly of what kind of jobs their children are doing now: working in local village shops, teaching in schools, working as nurses in urban areas. For the most part, if their children have a job other than coolie labour, they feel happy. However, alongside this they would also complain that after educating their children, their children were not able to
make enough money working in the village. Additionally, devadasis often expressed concern that after their children finish school they do not have any idea of how to go about finding a job. Despite a largely positive perception of education, I vividly recall sitting outside with Shantavva, a devadasi who does not practice sex work, and her eldest son, as she begged us to help find him a job.

My son has done his schooling. Make him get a job somewhere. I tell everyone. I ask people like you to get him job. This life is hard for us. Even when I attend the meetings I ask for the same thing, “Please get a job for my son. He is educated. I have no money.” They say, “Well, let us see”. Till now no one has helped me in this aspect. It is hard for the educated boys to do this coolie work. I have taken the younger one out of school because I was not able to educate him further. He also goes to work. If only he could get a job, since he is educated, it would be good. Otherwise we have to do this hard work and continue to be coolies. I had been to a meeting in Ghataprabha and many other places and I ask for only this thing. I want a job for my son. I have no hope of getting a job for the second one who did not study much. He will do labour work. But I have hopes for this boy. We do coolie work and why should my children also do the same?...I want help. I want to ask for a job to my son. We will come wherever you ask me to. I will bring all the people that are there. I beg you please get my son a job. He can do a job in the bank. What else can he do? If you tell me that there is a job I will send my son (Shantavva).

The rise in accessibility to schools in an economy that does not have enough jobs has led to a new class of people; the “educated unemployed” (Mathew 1995). This is particularly evident for high school and tertiary level graduates. Outside of the modern private sector, there are minimal salaried jobs for the educated, and within the private sector these jobs often remain unaccessible to lower classes and minorities (Tandon 2013; Jeffrey et al. 2004; Thorat and Attewell 2010). In focus groups, devadasis spoke more openly about the difficulties their educated children are now facing. In one focus group session near the end of my research, we began discussing education and the job
market in more detail. OMIF staff explained to devadasis their desire to educate the children of devadasis.

We must provide education to your children. All of you must cooperate with us to achieve that. That is our main aim. If your children get good education, then they will find good jobs. When they find good jobs, your lives will also improve. Maybe your sons will get married and go away but the daughters could help you in your old age. Usually if the children know that their parents went through lot of troubles to bring them up, then they will also try to take good care of their parents. If they get Rs.10,000 salary they could at least pay Rs.500 per month so that your lives are better. With that wish you have to educate your kids. That is why our main goal is to give good education to your children (OMIF Staff).

Though OMIF states here that educating the children of devadasis is its main aim, in practice this is not true. Following from this, an exchange took place between Kasturi and an OMIF staff member which demonstrates some of the disheartened attitudes devadasis share about education:

Kasturi: Even if we give them (our children) education, who will give them, jobs? Do we have money to get them jobs?

OMIF Staff: Who should give those jobs?

K: The government.

OMIF: If your children are educated, why do they have to get only government jobs?

K: But they have to get some [kind of] job. That is the problem.

OMIF: Tell me if your daughter wants to work, I will get her a school teacher’s job. But after getting educated if they refuse to do any work, then we cannot do anything about it. Some of you expect to get jobs in the same village. I know about you people... Many educated people would have learned well, but not know how to make use of their education. If they are not ready to work hard, they may have to be left out in the village.

Without social networks and bribe money, it is nearly impossible to find the government job that many people desire (Jeffrey et al. 2008, 171). Additionally,
although education is imagined “to provide a good job, manners and an escape from the “dust and soil” of the village” (Jeffrey et al. 2008, 20), it is more often men who stay in school for longer, with the expectation of getting secure salaried work, and it is only after completion that they come to face the reality that there is not any work. OMIF staff argued with devadasis in the focus group sessions, telling them, “You people want to keep on living in the same village. Get out of that thinking. I will get you jobs with Rs.5,000-6,000 salaries. Are you ready to accept? You people want jobs in your own villages.” However, previous research has demonstrated that even when there is a willingness to move to urban sprawls for work, it is rarely enough; young educated men end up returning to their villages to take up agricultural labour and informal sector employment (Demerath 1999; Jeffrey et al. 2008).

There is a thriving enthusiasm for education in contemporary India which is spreading through both urban and rural areas (Jeffrey et al. 2008, 1). Young people in India now understand education as a form of development, and a necessary step towards modernisation, which is perceived as needed to come out of poverty (2008, 8). Devadasis spoke fervently about sending their children to school. However, many of them have become increasingly disheartened that their hard work or increased debt to educate their children has not resulted in any economic returns. For the educated unemployed, there is a sense of pride that deters people from entering into the informal sector again after completing school (Jeffrey et al. 2008, 181-182).

Lack of infrastructure, lack of money: the case of school dropouts

In the wave of promoting access to education, there has been a more predominant focus on the lack of access to schools, as well as family factors such as poverty, parental motivation and labour. Policies have therefore focused on accessibility of schools, building more schools, and encouraging parents to
send their children to schools. However, in this rush to send children to school, there has been a neglect in the quality of schools (Desai et al. 2010B, 232). The urgency to achieve MDG 2 of universal primary education by 2015 has led to a rapid increase in the construction of both public and private schools. One unspecified dimension of increased education in MDG 2 is quality; unfortunately, as the quantity of schools has increased, the quality has suffered (Tandon 2013, 27). This poor quality, along with discrimination (especially towards Dalits and other minority groups), has contributed to school dropouts (Desai et al. 2010b, 234). While 90% of children currently enrol in school in India, many do not complete their education due to poor education quality and social inequality (Desai et al. 2010a, 75; Easterly 2006, 8).

Not only is the infrastructure of low quality, but public schools have poor teaching and are often overcrowded. In addition to this, school is not free. Parents still have to pay for textbooks and uniforms, and many poor families are dependent on NGOs to do so. In return for their investments, the achievements of students tend to be low as well. Dreze and Sen (2002, 158) call this the “discouragement effect”, which applies to both the parents and the students. Alienating curriculum, inactive classrooms with a lack of teacher support and guidance, alongside disinterest, social discrimination, and other responsibilities (such as work) all lead to discouragement, and eventually result in children dropping out of school entirely (Dreze and Sen 2002, 158; Desai et al. 2010b, 232). Completion rates are even lower for poor children, whose families’ often cannot afford the fees, or the loss of labour (UN Millennium Project 2005b, 2). Consequently, boys will drop out of school to begin working, as this early entry into the workforce is believed to be a better investment in the future. This is very common with devadasi families. Devadasi women often spend what little money they have educating their eldest children, and are later unable to continue educating their youngest children. In these situations, they express
that the government or NGOs should help them pay for their children to complete their education. Additionally, though they greatly value their daughters, desiring for them to have opportunities outside of sex work, they do give more value to educating their sons. Unfortunately, those who only attend primary school are faced with even more grim job prospects, and are unlikely to receive a decent living wage in the formal sector (Swaminathan 2002, 95).

A belief that completing secondary school will lead to better employment opportunities has resulted in both frustration and embarrassment when it becomes evident that the job market is limited and extremely competitive (Demerath 1999, 165). While girls are more likely to continue their schooling part-way through secondary school, they usually drop out before completion in order to get married (Ramaswamy et al. 2010, 295). Renukavva’s daughter is one example of this. Renukavva is a devadasi who was adamant on sending her daughter to school so that she would have other opportunities besides sex work and coolie work. For twelve years she sent her daughter to school, and then on to complete one year of computer training. However, after that year her daughter received a marriage proposal, and she dropped out of school and Renukavva got her married.

Challenging patriarchal hegemony through education

MDG 3, which focuses on empowering women and girls, has been somewhat disregarded in the wave of expectation that education is the solution to empowerment (as previously discussed). This is because, despite education and employment, the moral requirements of the woman to uphold her status as the “respectable” wife tend to trump her accomplishments outside of her family life (Swaminathan 2002, 129). Parents often send their daughters to school to improve their future marriage prospects “and instill restrictive notions of femininity” (Jeffrey et al 2008, 7). However, Dreze and Sen (2002, 145) claim:
the patriarchal orientation of school textbooks, for instance, does not
detract from the fact that an educated woman is better placed to
liberate herself from the economic dependence on men that shackles
so many Indian women, to gain independent access to information,
and to make her voice heard within the family... Even the act of going
to school, in itself, is often an important challenge to traditional
inequalities.

I do not wish to undermine here the importance in challenging these
patriarchal structures, but more so to emphasise the difficulty that remains in
doing so. Additionally, while schooling may contribute to consciousness raising
(as Dreze and Sen have suggested), consciousness raising is not synonymous
with empowerment. It remains difficult for women to be empowered through
education if they remain in fixed patriarchal structures that do not foster a space
for change and flexibility (Jeffrey et al. 2008, 251). Attempting to leave the home
for work and thereby challenging these structures and ideologies, in addition to
being a young educated unemployed person, creates a sort of “double
subordination” for women on the job market (Jeffrey et al. 2008, 9; Miles 2002).
Therefore, while education does provide an opportunity for women to
challenge patriarchal hegemony, some serious flaws remain which continue to
make this extremely difficult. While most devadasis emphasised the importance
of marriage over education, few devadasis, such as Ranavva, did express
opposite sentiments: “my daughter should get a good husband, most
importantly she has to have good education. She has to go to school. She need
not marry if she doesn’t want to, but she can depend on her job. That is fine too.
She can think of her job as her husband” (Ranavva).

Education can provide valuable skills, knowledge, and confidence to both
males and females, however, these are dependent on certain conditions. This is
not to suggest that we should throw education out the window altogether
(Jeffrey et al. 2008, 209). Rather, the outcomes that education leads to are
debatable because “power and culture mediate people’s access to the freedoms
that education provides” (2008, 3). The question lies in how young people, both male and female, adapt to the unstable and uncertain post-educational globalising economy (2008, 31).

**Self-help groups, microfinance, and microdebt**

*Although defended with a development rhetoric, most support for microfinance seems to be based on simple but superficial poverty relief; it gets some resources to the poor (Ellerman 2007, 149).*

In addition to education, devadasis are very focused on loans as a solution to poverty, and spend extensive time talking about loans, about paying back loans, and about accessing more loans. In fact, the recent promotion of microfinance as a solution to reducing poverty in developing countries through access to loans, has “generated enthusiasm bordering on hysteria” (Mosley and Hulme 1998, 783). Microfinance has been hailed as a solution to poverty, with 2005 being named the “Year of Microcredit” by the United Nations (Coleman 2006, 1612-1613). It was originally founded in Bangladesh in 1983 as the Grameen Bank, and is a Nobel Peace Prize winning initiative. Microfinance has now spread across the world, while continuing to thrive in South Asia.

In 1996, self-help group (SHG) and microcredit linkages were established across India through the National Bank of Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) (Vepa 2009, 131). Most of the microcredit loans from NABARD are dispersed throughout Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala (2009, 132). Ten percent of the country’s total SHGs are based in Karnataka, with more than 4,000 of these groups having been sponsored by the World Bank and DFID (UNDP 2005, 292). According to NABARD, close to two-thirds of these SHGs have been sponsored by the government or multilateral initiatives implemented by the government, with banks, NGOs and cooperative institutions being responsible for the remaining one-third (NABARD 2006 in Pattenden 2010, 491). However, there is increasing debate about whether
microfinance initiatives have a positive or negative impact on women over the long-term. In many circumstances microfinance can present women with both opportunity, and insecurity, giving it the alternative name of “microdebt” (Morgan and Olsen 2011, 190; Hulme 2007, 19). With more than thirty years of active microfinance programmes, there is growing evidence that microfinance does not help the poorest of the poor out of poverty, but instead leaves them in a cycle of debt-bondage.

In praise of microfinance and SHGs

According to the UNDP (2005, 289), SHGs are the most influential economic development strategy for women across the world. The GOI (2006, 19) Report of the XI Plan Working Group on Poverty Elimination Programmes believes SHGs have the potential to “enable the poor to manage...the schemes [intended] for their own welfare and development”. Jamie Morgan and Wendy Olsen (2011, 196) claim that “the introduction of self-help groups and microfinance has ‘democratised’ debt access”. People now have access to loans from various sources, and they are able to chose the lender with the lowest interest rate. This in turn makes it much easier to renew debt by paying off one loan with another loan. While a selection of research has demonstrated that women benefit both socially and economically from SHGs (Swain and Walletin 2009; Parida and Sinha 2010; Deininger and Liu 2012), emerging research demonstrates that microfinance is both poverty alleviating and debt binding depending on how the data is analysed (Hulme and Arun 2011, 23). SHGs and microfinance are viewed by those who advocate in favour of them as a way to challenge traditional patriarchal hegemony in rural India (Pattenden 2010, 505; Samanta 2011, 129; Holvoet 2005, 77). Nathalie Holvoet (2005, 77) has argued that through microfinance, women form group collectives which empower them to use their bargaining skills in community related matters and act as “entrepreneurs”, which will lead to changes in gender roles. Additionally, she
claims that this increased autonomy outside of the home will increase participation and decision making within the home, thereby challenging traditional patriarchal relations. Margavva is one of the rare examples of a devadasi who has received a loan and used it to start a successful petty shop. With a loan of Rs.20,000 from her SHG, and a repayment time of five years, she has opened her own shop and paid off her loan in full.

Overall, it is believed that SHGs will improve anti-poverty schemes by providing a platform for microfinance initiatives to take place (Pattenden 2010, 486). The World Bank (2010, 486) claims that this focus on improving the management of savings and credit will “give ‘voice’ to the poor; promote public sector transparency and accountability; encourage public-private cooperation and participatory approaches; generate social capital at the community level; and help to rein in the influence and reach of central state institutions—a priority of the neoliberal policy agency”. Devadasi SHGs are now simply an avenue for women to access loans which are used for short-term investments, such as weddings and medical costs. This is the main reason that devadasis attend SHG meetings, and it is also the key interest in creating new SHGs in the area. Under this type of framework, without any sort of collective action by devadasis, SHGs are “little more than a substitute for conventional collateral” (Holvoet 2005, 77).

Microfinance leads to microdebt for devadasis

In Sri Lanka and India, agricultural loans have often gone to “farmers in long trousers”—you do not wear long trousers if you grow rice! (Hulme and Arun 2011, 24).

Microfinance and SHGs are frequently seen as a way out of poverty for devadasi women. SHGs are praised as an outlet for devadasis to access microfinance loans, and subsequently invest in self-sustainable businesses (Desai 2006; David 2007; n/a 2014). However, what is rarely mentioned is the
inability of women to repay the loans and the continuous cycles of debt that families often enter through microfinance loans. According to David Hulme and Thankom Arun (2011, 23), “the claims of some [microfinance initiatives], and particularly their leaders, that microfinance reaches the ‘poorest of the poor’ and that all loans are taken for investment in microenterprises are patently wrong”. Vasanth Kannabiran (2005, 3713) is equally pessimistic, suggesting that “self-help as it is largely understood today is a project that aims to provide relief while masking the causes of the malaise”. Microfinance targets the poor and the non-poor, but rarely reaches the poorest of the poor. When it does reach the poorest of the poor, it is usually used has a form of temporary relief in urgent medical needs, or is sometimes invested in motorbikes, education, food, weddings, dowry, etc. Rarely in the case of devadasis are microfinance loans used for long-term business investments, with Margavva being one exception in this regard, as previously mentioned.

Through reform and rehabilitation efforts, devadasis have come to believe that heterosexual marriage is the primary way to ensure that their daughters will not become devadasis. Therefore, it is now common for devadasis to take loans to pay for the weddings of their children. One focus group participant, Durgavva, explained how burdensome such a cost can be, both during the wedding, and afterwards.

I got my daughter married. I need to spend for the times when I have to do more functions and invite her and give her presents. Don’t you know the expenses after you get your daughter married? (Durgavva).

Not only are these expenses continuous, but such high costs often lead women who were once debt free into debt bondage. Yellammavva shared similar sentiments to Durgavva in a personal interview where she discussed the burden of marriage costs.
I got [my children] married off by taking loans. Because of those debts I am reduced to this situation [of extreme poverty]. How I used to be! I took loans; I sold off everything from home, gold, silver, everything. Just to get those two girls married (Yellamavva).

While some women sell their jewels to get loans, other women take loans to buy jewels. When I asked Limbavva, a devadasi who still practices sex work, how the SHG is helping her, she replied:

We all gather here. We are all devadasis. We save money. We take loans when we have difficulties or when we need to buy jewels or clothes or when we need to build a house. We can borrow money when there are weddings. When someone is ill and is suffering or when someone is admitted to the hospital then such people will get Rs.10,000-20,000 of loan.

The pressure to uphold a certain social image in this context creates a setting in which devadasis often take loans to pay for elaborate weddings and jewellery, rather than basic necessities or long-term investments. However, loans are also used for emergencies such as medical expenses. Jayshree is an ex-devadasi who had taken a loan, but then had an accident, and ended up using her loan to pay for medical expenses.

This [giving of loans] is done by [MASS]. If we need a loan from the bank they get it from the bank for us. Also they have given Rs.2 lakhs to all of us from NABARD. It is for us as a group and it is given for us to use. We could buy cattle or we could get our houses built. We can use it for our needs. There is one instalment left of that. They have done this for us. From that money I got the medical treatment for my ailment. I broke my arm after a fall. I needed to pay Rs.9,000. I had borrowed Rs.10,000. I had a fall and I had to have stitches on my head. I also couldn’t see properly, so I got myself a pair of spectacles. I had to spend a lot that time (Jayshree).

Jayshree’s story demonstrates that while the intention of loans is to help devadasis make long-term investments in housing or cattle, it is also the only source of income that very poor women often have access to. Therefore, when emergencies happen, they are forced to use their loans for such expenses. The
idea that women should be using their microfinance loans for long-term investments which create income that allows them to repay the loans is not happening in this context.

Taking on the role of eldest sons in their families, devadasis are not only responsible for the marriages of their own children, but sometimes they are also expected to pay for the marriages of their siblings' children. Gangavva explained that she had taken a loan for Rs.10,000, which she was expected to pay back at Rs.225 a week. This loan has a 25% interest rate, and when I commented on how high this is, she responded, “I know the interest is more. I took the money to get the daughter of my brother married.” The interest rate on microfinance loans is typically too high for poor people to repay, often resting at around 25% (Hulme and Arun 2011, 23). In order to repay these loans, devadasi women sometimes spoke of taking out multiple loans or selling off all of their valuables. Focus group participant, Kasturi, told us, “Look, we get loans if we pawn our gold...If we try to get loans outside, we need to pay interest which is hard. Will we get loans without interest and without pawning our gold? No.” Sometimes women would ask me to help them get another loan so that they could repay an existing loan. Parvathi is a devadasi who continues to practice sex work. She has taken a loan in order to build a house, but she has not managed to repay the loan.

Now I have taken a loan on my house but I do not have the capacity to repay the loan. If you get me some loan that is available for devadasis then it will be possible for me to save that house. These people [at the sangha] have given the loan but all loans have to be repaid. We also have to pay with interest (Parvathi).

Lack of land, minimal job opportunities and food insecurity are not problems which can be resolved when one is in a constant cycle of loan repayment (Kannabiran 2005, 3716-3717). This availability of multiple loans to people who could never before afford loans has been called “the diabetes
effect”; those who once lacked access to loans now try to get as many as they can without considering the long-term effects of becoming heavily indebted (Hulme and Arun 2011, 24). This “hybridity of debt” for economically vulnerable individuals can produce unfavourable outcomes when low incomes result in inability to repay loans (Morgan and Olsen 2011, 191). Dale Adams and J.D. von Pischke (1992, 1463) argue that this new debt from microfinance is not a viable way to help the poorest of the poor overcome poverty, regardless of whether they are small farmers, microenterprises, or poor women. Koshavva, an ex-devadasi and MASS member, explained the difficulties she faces to repay loans, saying, “If we take loans we cannot pay them back. We have nothing to eat. We don’t have good health. What to think? How to manage?...There are many expenses. We have to go to our God too.”

Though it has been argued that microfinance is a tool to empower women to control household finances, in most cases this has not improved through SHGs (Pattenden 2010; Goetz and Gupta 1996; Holvoet 2005). Anne Marie Goetz and Rina Sen Gupta (1996, 60) have demonstrated that the money that women take through microfinance loans often ends up being controlled by men, whether husbands or sons. Nathalie Holvoet (2005, 76, 97) argues that unless attempts to raise awareness about this control are undertaken, women are unlikely to gain more financial and decision making control in the home through microfinance. According to Jonathan Pattenden (2010, 497), people from higher classes are more likely to use their loans for more long-term investments, weddings, and religious purposes. Labouring classes, such as devadasis, are more likely to use their loans for everyday necessities such as food, medical expenses, and repaying other loans. Pattenden’s (2010, 498) findings demonstrate that over a period of more than one year, labouring

---

2 In this final statement, “We have to go to our God too”, Koshavva is referring to the high cost of traveling to the Yellamma Gudda by bus and the finances involved in performing special puja.
classes in Karnataka saw an increase in their income of around Rs.30, or less than one-tenth of 1%, from microfinance loans, while higher classes saved as much as Rs.840 over a six-month period. When devadasis are forced to use their loans for necessities such as food, it is impossible for them to repay the loans. There are a few devadasis living on a devadasi plot in Belgaum district where I spent a lot of time in the field. In this location they have minimal facilities or access to work, and they are all very poor. Therefore, they access loans from whoever will offer loans to them, just so that they can survive. Rasmani, an ex-devadasi and MASS member, explained how this process takes place.

They give this thing from an outside country, to pay back Rs.10,000 in three years? They give a loan of Rs.10,000 and we can pay it back in three years by paying monthly instalments. I have taken that. If I pay two more instalments it will be finished. I did not do anything with that money. I took a loan here and ate it up, and I took a loan somewhere else and spent that too. Now I am paying it back. I did not get any other loans. I did not even get the [government housing] subsidy loans. They just gave a loan that we have to pay back. But then, anybody will give a loan which you need to pay back.

Morgan and Olsen (2011, 201) propose that “since debt levels have risen, the question must surely be asked whether the broad commitment to ‘development’ and sustainable development that is at the core of the SHG ethos is being fully met here” (emphasis in original). The UNDP (2005, 197) acknowledges that while microfinance has the ability to contribute to the empowerment of SHG members, “empowerment” in this case may not be substantial or consistent “if the programme design fails to support empowerment enhancing in a concrete manner”. As is typical in this discussion, what exactly constitutes empowerment and its effectiveness is vague and unclear.
The density of SHGs in Karnataka is above average for the national standards, with approximately one group for every 160 people in 2006 (NABARD 2006, 7 in Pattenden 2010, 491). Devadasi women began establishing SHGs amongst themselves through the assistance of KSWDC-MYRADA, followed by MASS. Initially these groups were a way to help devadasi women become empowered to stop dedicating their daughters to Yellamma, as well as to stop practicing sex work, and to educate them about the dangers of HIV/AIDS. These groups also received some skills trainings and began microfinance projects, however, they are no longer very active and women do not appear to benefit in any way from being in these groups, besides being able to access loans.

When the SHGs first began, women did not believe that this type of organisation would be enough to feed and clothe them. Many women resisted organising and continued practicing sex work (Kandath 2001, 124). Devadasis do not take SHG meetings seriously, and many times they would not have held a meeting if I had not shown up to observe. I went to each meeting with a staff member for the first time, and they would confirm with me their regular meeting time. The next week I would arrive to their homes in time for the meeting. I would ask, “Are you having the meeting today?”, and they would respond, “Since you have come, we will have the meeting”. It became obvious rather quickly that participant observation of SHGs would not be a fruitful data-collection technique, as I had initially hoped it would be. Additionally, when MASS SHG meetings do take place, it is often in the presence of a MASS staff member, who acts as the leader, and whose opinion trumps those of the devadasi members, creating a hierarchy which is disadvantageous for those seeking assistance. According to Kandath (2001, 124), the reason that SHGs have not worked with MASS is because, “What the KSWDC-MYRADA staff
never critically examined was how their identification with these women as people having real needs, rather than as saints or sinners, had become a barrier in their efforts to facilitate the organizing process...” MASS is more concerned with improving (what they believe to be) the poor moral status of the women, rather than presenting them with viable opportunities that may be as economically rewarding as sex work. Women struggle between following MASS in ceasing to practice sex work, and continuing to practice for economic survival. Younger women who continue to practice sex work are typically not members of MASS SHGs; OMIF is trying to fill this gap by organising new SHGs.

In some respects it may appear that microfinance has helped devadasi women in that they now have children who are educated, or have purchased a motorbike for their son. Overall, most money will go towards taking care of other family members and this rarely benefits the devadasi when she is older and her children have been forced to move to urban areas for work, leaving her alone in her village. Consequently, most devadasi women now live in a cycle of perpetual debt. While microfinance has been praised as a positive step to alleviating poverty, improving women’s decision making-agency and empowering them (Mahmud 2003; Holvoet 2005; Swain and Walletin 2009; Parida and Sinha 2010; Deininger and Liu 2012), devadasi women have benefited only short-term from microcredit. Though they have invested some of this credit in the future of their children, the future is bleak with an undervalued Kannada medium public school education and minimal job opportunities. Many educated children continue to work in the fields with their parents.

Research from 1994-2007 on microfinance and SHGs has demonstrated that average debt per household has risen from Rs.13,000 to Rs.20,000, largely due to increased loan access through SHGs and banks (Morgan and Olsen 2011,
196). This system of group-based microcredit through SHGs does not contribute to the various needs of poor individuals besides immediate financial relief. India has focused heavily on microcredit as a solution to poverty alleviation, without much focus on capacity development and investment in skills trainings (Samanta 2011, 132). While some capacity building and skills trainings have been present over the years, microcredit is the only initiative which has remained consistently active amongst SHGs. Every time I attended SHG meetings, devadasis would only discuss loans and loan repayments. When devadasi women speak of positive changes they have received through SHGs, MASS women speak primarily of the “better” life they have now, having ceased practicing sex work. They are also grateful for having been connected to government schemes through SHGs, such as housing subsidies and devadasi pension. Having a house has given many devadasi families a newfound stability, but it also encourages them to stay in their villages where there are few employment opportunities. Since MASS first began, it has been strongly encouraging women to stay in their villages and organise themselves rather than leaving to work in the nearby cities (Kandath 2001, 157).

The social context of established traditions and gender disadvantage needs to be considered in the framework of SHGs and microfinance. SHGs can be beneficial, but they need better monitoring and guidance over a longer period of time to have an effective output (Sinha 2007, 73). As a poverty relief programme, microfinance has been beneficial for poor families, but in long-term development, microfinance seems to have had little effect (Ellerman 2007, 151). This is largely because loans tend to be used by poor people who lack entrepreneurial skills, and for consumption rather than business investment (2007, 152).
Education, microfinance, and SHGs reflect State initiatives and development aspirations to help the poor, but do not reflect the aspirations of some devadasis. Although buffalo rearing is seen as a more locally appropriate option, the arid agro-climactic zones that devadasis live in do not cater to buffaloes, with frequent droughts and lack of decent fields to graze animals. Through insistence by NGOs that these are viable options for coming out of poverty, development organisations are patronising towards devadasis, and focus groups with OMIF provided some examples of these relationships. Although OMIF staff encouraged devadasi women to speak during focus groups, the two men representing OMIF frequently spoke over the women. In some cases, when devadasis did express their desires, staff members did not listen, suggesting easier alternatives (e.g., Jayashree and the buffalo mentioned earlier). The plight of the devadasis was spoken of extensively by staff members, who made it quite clear that they wish to eradicate the practice.

While devadasis attend these meetings in hopes of availing some sort of assistance from the NGO, OMIF, like many NGOs, is inhibited by finances, which makes it difficult to provide extensive assistance outside of the medical clinic. Therefore, the project coordinator told the women in attendance, “do not depend on the others to help you.” In response to this, Renukavva said:

What do you mean by saying “the others”? What is the use of hoping that these people will help us? These men come claiming to represent many organisations. They ask us to give them our identity card and names. They come and take the details from our villages and go away. What use is that? See, we live in villages and we have no peace of mind even if we stop being devadasis. If we were to be married, then the husband would have told us to cook for him and his sons, then he would have protected us. But in my house now I am both mother and father to my children. Also some men come to bully me. All these problems are faced by us. We are village people. How do they plan to make me earn money in my own village? See if I continue to be a devadasi and go to the city to meet men, I can earn
enough money. The same hundred [rupees] you give if I come here, can be earned there and I can also have a “peg” with my man and go away.

Nobody has given us any help. Many come and give us hopes. But only you are left here. All the others went away without doing anything. It is true that we are devadasis. Whether men work or women work it is the same. We can look for a good looking person who has money in his pocket and still earn in the village itself. You people come and claim to teach us savings or bag making but in the end we may end up doing what we do. No one can stop us...Do whatever you want to do, but we should not feel like devadasis anymore. We must lead a peaceful life as though we had been married women (Renukavva).

In this monologue, Renukavva provides an overview of many shared feelings amongst devadasis: they are alone; they feel that a having a husband would greatly reduce many of their everyday difficulties; NGOs and the government spend countless hours collecting information from them, but have yet to provide any adequate assistance; they can make more money as sex workers. Though MASS, KSAPS, and OMIF staff are aware that the services the organisations are providing are not sufficient, they are unable or unwilling to put forth the effort to make changes. Additionally, those seeking to help devadasis rarely acknowledge the tradition behind the practice, unless to say that it is superstitious. Devadasi women tend to have the religious and social views of others imposed upon them, whether it be by NGOs, feminists, reformers, or their community members. Continually victimised as poor Third World women, devadasis now display agency through the ways that they negotiate poverty, using their victimised status to their advantage when they know it will help them to access resources. Yet, at times they display feelings of empowerment through sex work, which can provide them with the finances they need to live more comfortably.

As previously discussed, postdevelopment theory advocates in favour of development interventions which provide a space for local, grassroots
initiatives. This involves a complete decolonisation of previous understandings of development, to empower people to use their own thoughts and ideas to come out of poverty (McGregor 2007, 157, 161). Meena Seshu argues that devadasis are a group of women who have forged their own economic livelihood through sex work (Kidron 2011). This is what devadasis can viably do themselves in a geographical setting where coolie work is the primary income, and India’s increased modernisation is correlated with a decrease in agricultural production, and loss of work opportunity outside of urban contexts. NGOs and humanitarian missionaries who advocate against sex work and in favour of devadasi eradication fail to recognise that any alternatives provided will be something that outsiders do for devadasis, rather than something devadasis do for themselves. Sex work is a livelihood option that devadasi women have figured out on their own, and the devi is essential for this economy to function, because their dedication to her justifies their decision to continue a practice which outsiders and development practitioners often label as not respectable, dirty work (Seshu in Kidron 2011). Conflictingly, while OMIF tells devadasis, “do not depend on the others to help you”, staff members simultaneously discourage devadasis from practicing sex work. These mixed messages have resulted in a situation where devadasis are both dependent on nobody, and unable to sustain themselves without sex work.
If we were to listen more closely, I believe we would discover that matters are not so simple (Abu-Lughod 2013, 202).

In this dissertation, I have examined the dynamics of how people of different religious faiths interact in the development context, through an investigation of the relationships between devadasi women in three districts in North Karnataka and three development organisations seeking to provide assistance to them. The thesis was framed around the realities that devadasis remain both religious, through their connection to the goddess, and poor. The thesis posed three questions: Are devadasi women empowered by their “single” (e.g., not married to a man) and/or religious status in society? Do development organisations take into consideration the religious importance of the devadasi practice when implementing intervention projects? Do these intervention projects subscribe to the aspirations of devadasis? My intention has been to describe these processes through an analysis of the voices of devadasis as they reveal their everyday lives, their changing practice and identities, and their thoughts on rehabilitation efforts. This data advances research related to three areas: 1) the dynamics between beneficiaries and development organisations in multi-faith contexts; 2) the differences amongst contemporary devadasi women; 3) alternative ways of understanding agency in oppressive (religious) contexts.

In order to hone in on these above-mentioned research questions, I pursued a qualitative study, using life stories with devadasis, open-ended questionnaires with NGO staff, focus groups between devadasis and OMIF, and participant observation of both devadasis and NGO staff. As I have discussed throughout the dissertation, my first question, looking at the singledom of devadasi women, produced mixed results. I posed this question because previous research by Lucinda Ramberg (2006) and Treena Orchard (2004, 2007)
has revealed that devadasis display agency through their status as single and religious women. Through my desire to demonstrate that, regardless of reform and rehabilitation efforts, devadasis remain single empowered religious “mendicants” (Ramberg 2009, 507), I was forced to unlearn and relearn what it means to be a contemporary devadasi in North Karnataka. What I have demonstrated throughout the thesis is that, despite previous scholarly indications that devadasis are mendicants and priestesses, this is largely not so any longer. Nonetheless, this first question was intended to be a starting point for my other two questions. I wondered: if devadasis are empowered single religious mendicants, as previously scholars have argued, do the NGOs working to help them consider this important? However, what I found was much different from previous research. In large, I was unable to answer this question. In chapter four I discussed the ways in which my research assistants made it difficult for me to ask questions about being single, and how many of the devadasis were not interested in considering the idea that being single may present them with different opportunities than married women are afforded. Therefore, while some women discussed the more positive sides of not being married to a man, most women emphasised their desires to be “women with husbands”. Similar discussions enveloped the issue of whether devadasis are empowered through their religious roles. Ramberg (2006) discusses extensively the continued presence of devadasis as pujaris in rural North Karnataka. Ramberg’s research supports my own findings only to the extent that women who are removed from the offices of MASS do speak more actively of their continued religious importance in their villages. However, in chapter five it became clearer that many women have now stopped performing religious rituals specific to devadasi paddhati. Therefore, the answer to my first research question is that every devadasi is different. Some are single and loving it, others are single and hating it. Some continue to perform specific Yellamma pujas,
others are indifferent towards these puja, or in some cases, adamantly against them.¹

My second research question, “Do development organisations take into consideration the religious importance of the devadasi practice when implementing intervention projects?” had clearer answers than my first. Here, I argued that development organisations do not tend to consider devadasi paddhati in development interventions. Throughout chapters three and five, I demonstrated that since the onset of colonial intervention in devadasi paddhati in the early nineteenth century, devadasi women have been silenced. This recurring theme of silencing the subaltern continues today amongst government and non-government organisations running devadasi rehabilitation and HIV/AIDS intervention projects. This question produced mixed results and demonstrated that there are differences between religious and secular development organisations.

Chapter five demonstrated the ongoing active and political relationship between devadasis and Mahila Abhivraddi Mattu Samraksanaa Samsthe (MASS). MASS was first started by the Karnataka government, and later taken over by devadasis who have ceased practicing sex work and performing any devadasi rituals, now identifying as ex-devadasis. Therefore, although MASS is a secular organisation, and I have not referred to them otherwise, they may also be considered anti-religious when it comes to devadasi paddhati. The campaigns that the NGO was running more rigorously in the 1990s to cut the matted hair of devadasis is one example of this. In chapter five I discussed the very active role that MASS has had in contributing to the changing identities of its members and the devadasi practice in Belgaum. Not only does MASS not believe that devadasi paddhati has any religious importance, it actively works to

¹ As a point of clarification, these devadasis who are against Yellamma puja are nonetheless still religious, performing rituals typical of other lay women.
eradicate the religious practice completely—a fact that its staff proudly discussed in interviews. Ramberg (2006) and Orchard (2004) have argued that this strips devadasis of any agency. My findings challenge these earlier conceptions of agency, recognising the ways that devadasis reinvent themselves in this context as agentic.

In chapters two and six I discussed the kinds of interactions that occur between Operation Mercy India Foundation (OMIF) as a Christian FBO, and its devadasi beneficiaries. Through participation observation, I concluded that OMIF is very quick to impose its own religious convictions onto devadasi women, but does not display any real interest in learning about devadasi paddhati. Though some of the staff members expressed interest in joining me at Yellamma Gudda during the full moon festivals, they always found excuses not to follow through with this idea. Additionally, members of OMIF displayed assumptions about the validity of imposing Christian ideas of prayer onto devadasis, arguing that Hindus will pray to any god. However, OMIF staff do not ask devadasis questions about religion (they sometimes asked me questions about Hinduism and devadasis), and believe that if devadasis convert to Christianity, they will cease to practice sex work, and their lives will become better. Although OMIF’s outreach involves both HIV/AIDS prevention and devadasi eradication, the religious importance of devadasi paddhati is not treated as relevant to these projects.

As I discussed more thoroughly in chapter six, Karnataka State AIDS Prevention Society (KSAPS) is a government organisation focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention. As far as KSAPS is concerned, devadasis are nothing more than sex workers. The organisation is not concerned with the religious practices of its members, and does not take into consideration that some of its members may be sex workers because they were dedicated to Yellamma as children. However, because many KSAPS members are not members of other
organisations, KSAPS does also try to help its devadasi members connect to government rehabilitation schemes such as pension and housing subsidies. Nonetheless, this is not the focus of the outreach, and does not receive much priority—KSAPS members often complained that they have not been able to access these services.

Although unintended, two one-off visits from Christian evangelical missionary groups, discussed in chapter six, also contributed to answering this question. One of the groups displayed zero interest in devadasis. Instead, their own mission, to spread the word of Jesus, was their sole concern. In fact, they were so disinterested in the devadasis, that they expressed anger at me for talking to the women at their function! The second group was very interested in learning about devadasis, but were not interested in listening to what kinds of humanitarian projects might be best suited for devadasis. However, in the context of the second research question, they did consider the religious importance of devadasi paddhati to be significant in their outreach projects. This is the only example where this understanding flourished, but it should be noted that this group has had very minimal contact with devadasis.

This reoccurring theme of nobody listening to devadasis, or asking them about their practice or their desires for the future is disconcerting. Throughout the dissertation I have demonstrated that, having been silenced for centuries, devadasis have significant perspectives to lend to these ideas that have been formed about them, usually based around respect and morality. In chapter three, before I presented the contemporary devadasis of North Karnataka, I discussed some alternative ways for understanding devadasis’ agency. Some devadasis are single women, but they feel bothered and disrespected by this single status. Some of them maintain a special connection to the goddess which involves specific ritual obligations, and continue to see this as valuable, but subsequently feel that their decision to practice sex work is not respectable. Yet,
as I discussed throughout the dissertation, these are the areas where previous
scholars have projected agency onto devadasis. Therefore, I presented an
alternative way for understanding agency through speech, rather than action, in
this oppressive context. Through speech, devadasis negotiate poverty and their
positions in society. This understanding of agency is significant for answering
the final research question: Do these intervention projects subscribe to the aspirations
of devadasis? I argued that there are divergent aspirations between devadasis
and development organisations which prevent interventions from being
effective in this context.

The answers to this question are found in chapters six and seven, where I
discussed what kinds of interventions are taking place to help devadasis. Additionally, I provided data from interviews and focus groups which
demonstrated that divergent aspirations between devadasis and development
interventions sometimes result in NGO staff speaking to devadasis in a
patronising manner. Treena Orchard (2004, 250) suggests that the “state’s
alternatives to sex work are typically little more than classic ‘blame the victim’
strategies, whose medico-moral discourse and short-term loans often lead to
greater economic dependency and a deep sense of betrayal among the women
regarding the displacement of their traditional beliefs and practices”. My
research supports the first part of Orchard’s statement, but I did not find that
women feel a deep sense of betrayal “regarding the displacement of their
traditional beliefs and practices”. This may be a consequence of an increasing
amount of time having now passed since the onset of these interventions.
Nonetheless, devadasis have become extremely dependent on these
development interventions, while simultaneously recognising that they are not
very helpful.

Buffalo rearing, education, microfinance and self-help groups are the main
initiatives used to help devadasi women out of poverty. These kinds of
initiatives are understood to be necessary since the criminalisation of devadasi paddhati by the Karnataka government in 1982. Recognising that sex work was a viable source of income for devadasis, the State has implemented rehabilitation strategies, which initially focused heavily on cattle rearing. However, these strategies later shifted to adhere more to Millennium Development Goals two and three, focusing on education and female empowerment through microfinance loans and HIV/AIDS mitigation. Subsequently, there is a narrative of development initiatives not working because the aspirations of some devadasis do not match the aspirations of development organisations.

Cattle rearing may be seen as an initiative which adheres to the local context, however, in chapter seven devadasi women expressed some of the problems that now prevent cattle rearing from being an effective way to earn money. They live in arid agro-climatic regions with scarce water supply and lack of land to graze animals, and a decreasing number of farming jobs (where they would normally take their cattle to graze). Nonetheless, even after stating clearly the reasons why owning buffaloes is problematic, OMIF staff suggested giving buffaloes to devadasis as a solution to poverty. In chapter seven, I discussed the ineffectiveness of education and microfinance as long-term solutions to poverty. There are unanswered intergenerational questions about dedications and education, with many of the children of devadasis being the first generation to be educated rather than dedicated. Although devadasis feel strongly that their children should be educated rather than dedicated, they express disheartening feelings about the reality that their educated children are unable to find jobs. Sangha groups are now used as a medium for the distribution of microfinance loans. As Orchard (2004, 250) has suggested, devadasis have become dependent on loans for short-term economic survival, and now find themselves in a cycle of microdebt. They are unable to repay their loans, which is largely a consequence of the reality that they are not in a
position to use their loans in an entrepreneurial fashion, because they need the money for immediate costs such as food and medical expenses. MASS projects the ineffectiveness of microfinance loans onto its beneficiaries. It does not see microfinance as ineffective, but sees its beneficiaries as lazy. Therefore, while it is apparent that these intervention projects do not adhere to the aspirations of devadasis, the State and development organisations continue to promote these strategies as some sort of solution to the devadasi problem. Consequently, while these are interventions which are advocated as being bottom-up approaches, the imposition of these projects onto devadasis regardless of the reality that devadasis express dissatisfaction, makes these interventions more top-down than bottom-up.

John O’Neil et al. (2004, 859) suggest:

Attempts to eliminate, rehabilitate or criminalize these traditions have been successful in the past and only serve to further demean women who now must struggle to develop healthy sexual practices in the context of the dual stigma of sex work and HIV/AIDS. Interventions are needed which take into account the social and cultural contexts of traditional sex work, and which are designed to empower women to adopt healthier sexual behaviours and reduce their risk of HIV/AIDS infection.

My findings support O’Neil et al.’s claim that development interventions are needed which consider the reasons why devadasis continue to practice sex work, which are partly related to the traditional dedication of the practice. However, scholarship on religion and development is still relatively silent on these kinds of dynamics. Therefore, my findings challenge literatures in religion and development, which focus predominantly on the interactions of FBOs with beneficiaries of the same faith, and argue that, most of the time, passive and active FBOs (Clarke 2008, 32-33), are not a problem for donor-funding. While scholars of religion and development have been quick to advocate in favour of incorporating religion into development (Tomalin 2013; Ter Haar 2011; Tyndale...
my findings indicate that this relationship can be one-sided, thereby supporting previous research by Tamsin Bradley (2011). These findings, similar to Bradley’s, advance a relatively new subfield of religion and development, where scholars have rarely considered multi-faith relationships (evangelical missionary activity excluded), and some of the negative consequences of these interactions. Therefore, the more positive findings I presented about OMIF are supported by previous scholarship which identifies FBOs as being more compassionate, having more long-term commitments, and providing holistic care (Clarke 2006, 845; Hoffstaeder and Tittensor 2013, 404). However, some of the more negative consequences of these multi-faith interactions have received minimal investigation. Finally, these results advance existing scholarship by analysing the relationships between beneficiaries and organisations through the perspectives of beneficiaries, rather than organisations (which is more common).

The stories told by the devadasis in this research contribute to the handful of existing English literature on the contemporary devadasi practice in North Karnataka. Previous research has focused on devadasis as victims of exploitation, victims of reform, and victims of the State. Although Epp, Orchard and Ramberg have provided alternative ways of understanding devadasis, they continue to frequently be lumped into categories indicating that all devadasis share the same aspirations. However, Ramberg (2006) argues that there is a difference between devadasis who have been subjected to MASS reform movements, and devadasis who have not. In doing so, she gives the impression that devadasis who are untouched by reform display more religious characteristics, and are therefore somehow more authentic. Both Ramberg (2006) and Orchard (2004) have discussed the realities that devadasi identity is changing as a result of reform. However, these discussions tend to be framed
around the negatives of this change. I advance this argument, and Ramberg’s suggestion of difference, by arguing that as a result of these reform interventions contributing to changing identities and practices amongst devadasis, devadasis now display agency through the ways that they negotiate poverty with the various development organisations and rehabilitation schemes that they have access to. I make this argument through the more specific focus of my thesis, which accentuates the location of devadasis in development interventions. Nonetheless, devadasis often find their engagement with these organisations to be disappointing and far from beneficial, despite their best efforts to get some sort of help.

Mary Evans (2013, 60) argues that agency can be found in the identities that women create in these environments, by refusing to abandon certain social and cultural ties. Throughout the thesis, I have supported this claim, by arguing that devadasis display agency through their new identities they have created (as a consequence of reform) and the way that they negotiate poverty through speech. My findings contribute to emerging scholarship on alternative understandings of agency in oppressive, patriarchal, and/or religious contexts (Madhok 2013a; Madhok 2013b; Evans 2013; Mahmood 2005; Wardlow 2006). The data I collected supports Sumi Madhok’s (2013a) and Mary Evans’ (2013) recognition of agency through speech, and the realisation that sometimes institutional pressures and discrimination contribute to women acting in ways which have traditionally not been understood as agentic.

Overall, these findings suggest that while the subfield of religion and development has helped to advance the positive image that religion can have in development, there are still weaknesses in such relationships. Development organisations, be they faith-based or secular, may note from these results the consequences that development interventions can have on faith-based beneficiaries when religion is seen as irrelevant. As Tamsin Bradley (2011, 35)
has previously argued, and my findings also suggest, “practitioners working with religious communities should heed the centrality of faith in the lives of many local people. Acknowledging the religious identities and lives of others is a first step towards building sensitive dialogue”. This thesis has revealed the implications that development interventions have on entire communities when religious practices are not acknowledged. Identities and practices eventually begin to change, and while devadasis have adjusted to this change, in many regards, they are not any better off than they were before these interventions. In fact, in some ways, they are worse off, due to their loss of income through sex work, and inability to source alternative incomes which pay as much as sex work does.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings have implications for scholars carrying out research in oppressive contexts. The “action-bias” (Madhok 2013b, 116) that exists within scholarship on agency may leave researchers working in oppressive contexts confused about where to locate agency. Through reconsidering previous feminist understandings of agency, and looking towards new conceptions of agency, it is possible to re-evaluate agency through speech, indicating that (in opposition to Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) argument that the subaltern can never speak) the subaltern can and does speak, and in doing so, displays agency in ways that have previously gone unnoticed.

These findings open up a research agenda to look more closely at how development organisations are patronising, and further investigate claims that postdevelopment may fill this gap, with a specific focus on religious beneficiaries. Furthermore, it opens up new ways for thinking about agency and speech, through a postfeminist focus on difference. I have argued that postcolonial feminisms continue to categorise women in a way which is problematic for devadasis, who express differing desires for themselves and their children. As a Western woman writing about Indian women, it is ironic
that I claim to provide a space for devadasis’ voices that has previously been lacking by Indian women. I am aware of these complexities, and more importantly, of my privilege in this context. Through postfeminist theory, I have recognised that each woman I spoke to has a different desire. Although her words may have, at times, been misconstrued through transcriptions, I present a variety of perspectives from devadasi women. Lila Abu-Lughod (2013, 225) suggests:

honest self-reflection about how the privileges of elites or middle-class people might be connected to the persistence of devastating inequalities—whether on distant shores or in our backyards—is essential to any ethical stance toward women’s human rights. Can we trace the lineaments of the particular formations of power and inequality that bind us together? The consistently disappointing results of well-intended interventions—whether military, humanitarian, or developmentalist—are sufficient evidence that we have failed to grasp the character of connections.

In this respect, I have argued that elite and middle-class Indian women have had a specific agenda of their own, which has largely ignored devadasis, or sometimes further oppressed them. Despite my own middle-class status, I have made an effort to reflect on my position in this debate. The devadasis asked me to share their stories, and this is what I have done, to the best of my ability, in the context of my positionality.

This research also contributes to understandings around how people negotiate poverty and how development organisations and the State shape beneficiaries’ understandings of poverty and development interventions. Further research is needed in religion and development which focuses on the centrality of the faith of beneficiaries and the ways in which their beliefs shape their understandings of poverty and how they react to development interventions. I have argued throughout the dissertation that postdevelopment theory opens up a possibility for practically incorporating religion into
development. Development interventions do have consequences for religion. The suggestion that religion will decline as society modernises is grounded in the reality that development interventions continue to ignore religion, or counter it by labelling religion as superstition. Postdevelopment theory places more emphasis on agency and subjectivity, rather than specific kinds of development interventions (Pieterse 1998; McGregor 2009). The argument is therefore less about what kinds of interventions are being enacted, instead placing value on what kind of position local people have in determining which interventions will be most useful. This creates a possibility for considering the reality that some devadasis believe material transformation comes through devotion to Yellamma, rather than material transformation being limited to microfinance loans.

I have approached this research in a way that is innovative for looking at devadasis in the place of religion and development. One of the contributions that this thesis makes to literature on devadasis is that it is built around conversations with a variety of devadasis from different locations. Nonetheless, my arguments around agency being enacted through speech are founded on a larger reality that my informants’ voices are coming through a transcriber, rather than myself directly. However, I argue that these findings have implications for understanding devadasis in a new way, and recognising that blanket intervention projects are not effective. Devadasis remain very poor. They do not all maintain a connection to the goddess, and they do not all continue to practice sex work. The unique insight of this thesis lies in its observation that each devadasi has her own individual practice, and her own desires for the future of devadasi paddhati. In some instances, devadasi women feel exploited, and at other times, they feel empowered. Before development organisations impose specific interventions onto devadasis, it may be worthwhile to consider asking the women, “What do you want?” It has been
suggested to devadasis by OMIF staff, “Do not depend on the others to help you”. Much of what devadasis know has been stripped away in the name of progress and development. They have been told that they cannot depend on Yellamma, who is believed by development practitioners to be superstitious. They have not been provided with adequate resources to prosper without the goddess. They are very poor, Dalit women, living in rural areas, who are beginning to rely less on their goddess, without being provided with any practical alternatives. If devadasis cannot depend on these NGOs who have counselled them away from the goddess, on whom can they depend?

My first research question, “Are devadasi women empowered by their “single” (e.g., not married to a man) and/or religious status in society?”, and subsequent inability to answer it, had significant implications for my position in the research. It contributed to my unlearning and relearning of agency and the power of speech and narrative. This was the point in which I had to start thinking about agency in a wider context, and letting go of the particular feminist convictions that I had when I first entered the field. During this transition, I began to explore my own positionality more, and consider in what ways my subjectivity was shaping the ideas that I had taken into the field with me. It was from this point onward that I realised the only way I could present you to contemporary devadasis, is by “speaking with” (Nagar and Geiger 2007) them, and presenting you with their own narratives. Any narrative which speaks “for” (Spivak 1988) or “nearby” (Ramberg 2006) devadasis only obfuscates their already complex realities.
References

Primary Sources

Parliamentary Debates: Return to an address of the Honourable House of Commons

Halhed, N.J., Vol. 125, 13 April 1826. Slavery in India

Contemporary Tracts and Books

n/a. 1838. The Oriental Christian Spectator.
Shortt, John. 1870. ""The Bayadere; or, Dancing Girls of Southern India."
Secondary Sources


Empower. 2003. A report by Empower Chiang Mai on the human rights violations women are subjected to when "rescued" by anti-trafficking groups who employ methods using deception, force and coercion. Network of Sex Work Projects.


———. 1997. "Violating the Sacred”? The social reform of Devadasis among Dalits in Karnataka, India, York University.


Harris, Sarah. 2010. Prostitutes of God. VICE. Available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GFaN9-1iz0


Raju, Saraswati. 2002. "We are Different, but Can We Talk?" Gender, Place & Culture: A journal of Feminist Geography no. 9 (2):173-177.


transmitted infections following HIV preventive interventions among female sex workers in five districts in Karnataka State, South India.”


