

Against Her Will: Devadasi Culture In South India

In her five month stay in India's southern state of Andhra Pradesh, Erin Albritton lived, observed and worked with a women's organization called SAMSKAR that struggles to release local women from a system of hereditary concubinage and bondage.

By Erin Albritton

Parvavva turned six last month. Today she sits before an altar adorned as a bride. Braided into her long, black hair are garlands of fragrant jasmine flowers. Dark kohl lines her frightened brown eyes and crimson henna stains her hands and feet in the most intricate of patterns. Parvavva and her four brothers live with their parents in a small Harijan community in Southeastern India. They hail from one of the lowest castes in Indian society—her mother, father and four brothers are all bonded labourers who work from dawn till dusk in the surrounding paddy fields.

Today, however, is a time for celebration and the family's cow dung hut has been festively decorated with mango leaves and branches. The altar before which Parvavva sits is made of two bundles of straw. In her hands she clutches a green coconut to be offered as a gift to her groom. On this occasion, however, her "groom" is not a nervous young man, but rather a deity of the village temple. She waits patiently with her eyes lowered while the priest mutters his prayers and then finally ties the leather Mangal Sutra around her neck. With this gesture, Parvavva's marriage is finalized and her new life as a Jogini begins.

On the day Parvavva turns fourteen, the local landlord arrives at her family's hut and requests her sexual services. From this point forth Parvavva works not only as a casual labourer but also provides services (sexual and otherwise) to

the landlord upon his request. Her expected duties as a Jogini include dancing around dead bodies as well as dancing and singing for the entertainment of villagers during festival time. Rupees tossed by spectators are considered supplemental pay to the meagre amount of money or grain which is provided, only on occasion, by the landlord.



[Electromap, Inc.]

Parvavva bears two children by the time she is twenty. Neither one is accepted by the landlord as his own. Parvavva is one of many young women trapped in a life of concubinage. It is not unusual for the landlord who serves as her "master" to seek the service of several other Jogi-

nis as well. Indeed, the more Joginis patronized, the more prestige he will receive in his community. Like other Joginis in the village, she and her children have no legal rights to the property of their father. Parvavva, who is already "married" to a deity, is forbidden to marry a mortal man.

Parvavva dies shortly before her thirtieth birthday. Her son is now a field labourer. In a few years, if he so chooses, he may marry a girl providing she belongs to his caste. According to tradition, however, her daughter is not given this choice. Like her mother, she is destined to live a life of degradation and oppression. Her future, and that of generations of daughters to come, is clearly defined as that of a Jogini.

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In September of 1992, as a volunteer for Canadian Crossroads International, I had the remarkable experience of travelling to the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. For four months I lived with and closely observed the work of SAMSKAR, a group of people dedicated to the emancipation of women like Parvavva. Although marriages like the one outlined above were abolished by the Andhra Pradesh government in 1988, freedom for the Joginis requires much more than paperwork and stamps on legal documents.

Throughout my stay in India and particularly during the time I spent observing the work of SAMSKAR, there were many instances in which I questioned my role as a white, upper middle class, basically

Christian, North American woman. My lack of knowledge with regards to the caste system as well as many of the religious beliefs which underpin the Devadasi culture left me ill-equipped to even begin to understand the lives of the Jogini women. I often felt out of place and am certain that others found my presence perplexing if not downright offensive. I have struggled against the tendency to project my experiences of oppression as well as my visions of liberation onto a particular group of women whose lived realities are very different from my own.

Devadasi (Jogini) Culture: A Tradition Now Old and Defunct

In ancient India, promotion and patronage of the arts were considered to be a luxury of the state, the king and regional princely regents. The practice and cultivation of these arts were relegated to the domain of the Brahmins (a Hindu caste traditionally assigned to the priesthood). Music, dance, sculpture, painting and literature were, therefore, incorporated into the activities of temples and the active pursuit of these arts was undertaken in the name of gods and goddesses.

A separate caste came into being which took as its profession the performance of music and dance on temple premises. These arts were considered to be sacred and temple dances and musical concerts came to be highly respected cultural events. A sub-caste of this group of temple performers were called "Devadasis" (or, literally, women servants of God). These women were considered to be, in a sense, property of the temple and were obliged to offer their services to God and dedicate their lives to the profession of temple performance. Unlike the Christian Nun, a Devadasi was permitted and even encouraged to engage in sexual activity with temple patrons. Temple prostitution was a cultivated practice, particularly in the South. The fascinating and highly erotic architecture of the Khajuraho and Konark temples emerged as the Devadasi culture reached its pinnacle.

For centuries the culture of the Devadasis was nurtured by and confined to the temples of the rich castes. Eventually, however, the practice began to trickle down into the strata of the poor castes. The landed gentry in rural villages began to emulate the nobles from temple towns. A crude form of the Devadasi sub-culture

soon began to engulf women of the lowest castes and a rigid type of village concubinage came into being.

Jogini Culture In Andhra Pradesh

In Telugu, the language spoken in the Southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh, the term "Jogi" is a derivation of the Sanskrit word "Yogi." A Yogi is a revered member of society (usually a man) who accepts alms as a gesture of respect. In its vulgarized form, however, the word "Jogi" refers to a beggar who is given alms, not out of societal deference, but rather out of sympathy. The Telugu word "Jogini," as it has been used to label women dedicated into the Devadasi culture, is a derogatory term intended in part to strip women of their identity and undermine their sense of self-worth. Unlike the "privileged" temple dancers of an earlier era, Joginis are seen as little more than beggars who prostitute and humiliate themselves for virtually no remuneration.

Although it is not known precisely when the Jogini custom percolated into village societies of Andhra Pradesh, social scientists have concluded unequivocally that this system of concubinage emerged in direct correlation with the pauperization of the lowest castes. It is particularly important to note that in modern day India, 95% of the women dedicated into the Devadasi practice come from Scheduled Caste groups—the most

deprived social groups in Indian Society, they make up a large part of the forty-three percent of India's population who live below the subsistence level. The majority are landless and spend their lives as bonded labourers, trapped in an endless cycle of loans and debts.

Today, at least 10,000 Joginis live scattered throughout isolated villages in the Nizamabad district of Andhra Pradesh alone. While, initially, I had difficulty seeing a justification for such blatant exploitation of women, I soon came to realize that a family's decision to dedicate their daughter into the Jogini system is deeply rooted in their socioeconomic status. Faced with unbearable economic conditions, a family will often turn to the local landlord for some type of financial assistance. In return for a loan the landlord, who invariably hails from an upper caste, requests that the family's daughter be dedicated as a Jogini. Tangled as they are in a complex system of power and hierarchy, the family often feels it has no other choice but to sacrifice their daughter in accordance with the landlord's wishes.

If economic vulnerability does not first succeed in prompting a family to dedicate their daughter into concubinage, then, in small temple villages, religious superstition often plays a key role in the decision making process. When someone in a village community falls ill, it is not uncommon for a landlord to circulate the



*The author with some Joginis and their children. Nizamabad district, India. October, 1992
[Photo courtesy of Erin Albritton]*

rumour that the illness is a result of the village deity's wrath. According to superstition, the deity's anger can be pacified through the dedication of a young girl. Hoping for appeasement, a family might choose to dedicate their daughter into the Jogini system. It is not difficult to see how religion, poverty and centuries of gender inequality act together to ensure the continued existence of Jogini culture.

SAMSKAR: Social Reform and Jogini Welfare

Established in 1986 by Hemalata Lavanam, the organization SAMSKAR dedicates itself to working with the Jogini population in the Nizamabad district of Andhra Pradesh. Its early efforts were aimed primarily at studying the living conditions and terms under which the Jogini culture operates. Indeed, Hemalata engaged in extensive tours of villages, visiting Joginis and their families and compiling numerous case studies.

In April of 1987, SAMSKAR opened its operating centre known as Chelli Nilayam (or "Sisters' Home") in the village of Varni in Northwest Andhra Pradesh. It is at this centre that women who once practiced the Jogini custom can now come for literacy programs, health camps, individual counselling and occasional meals. With the financial assistance of groups such as HELPAGE, U.K. and OXFAM, pensions for elderly Joginis as well as educational programs for the young now flourish. In fact, more than six hundred Joginis, along with their children and aging parents, find their way to Chelli Nilayam at least once each week. Here, the women pledge not to engage in any Jogini practices and vow not to dedicate their daughters into the system of concubinage that has ensured their slavery for generations. In addition, Joginis are encouraged to break the Mangal Sutra or "holy thread" around their necks which serves as a physical reminder of their dedication to a deity and servitude to a landlord.

The most important aspect of SAMSKAR's social reform philosophy is its dedication to awareness and education. The organization actively tries to raise

awareness and educate Joginis with regards to existing progressive laws and how these laws can help to overcome social and economic hurdles. In addition, SAMSKAR believes that people must be supplied with the instruments of literacy, self-confidence and social consciousness in order for them to realize that the traditions and forms of exploitation can be broken.

From the onset, the organization stresses that they do not wish to impose occupational alternatives on Jogini women nor do they promise paradise should the Joginis chose to abandon their old way of life. Rather, SAMSKAR assists women in mobilizing their own strengths and places prime importance on the Joginis' own rehabilitation proposals. For this reason, much of SAMSKAR's

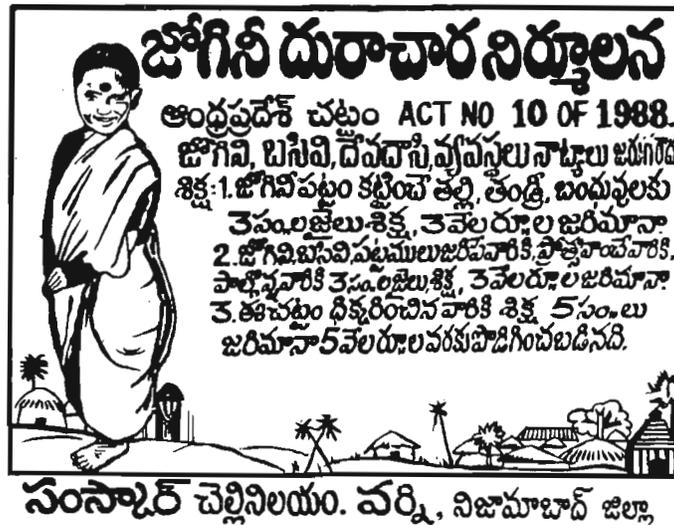
age the women's economic independence through the cultivation of paddy.

In 1988, the Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act came into effect. The Act condemns the existence of all Jogini/Devadasi systems in the state of Andhra Pradesh including the ritual dances connected with the custom. To publicize the Act, thousands of posters with captions specifically mentioning that violations of the Act are punishable, were pasted on huts and trees. In addition, meetings were conducted in the presence of village elders to explain the legal content of the Act.

As is the case with most legal documents, the Act has its limitations when it comes to practical application. Although the Joginis themselves are not at risk of being punished for involvement in their own dedication ceremony or for performing their ritual dances, the Act does little to ameliorate the dire economic situations or the corrupt power hierarchy which often place families in the position to dedicate their daughters. Nevertheless, it does serve as a protective measure which has worked to prevent wealthy village men from taking punitive steps against Joginis and their families who want to shed the tradition.

Today, within the Nizamabad district of Andhra Pradesh, dedications of young girls into the Devadasi system no longer take place. Although conditions for the women remain far from ideal, SAMSKAR stands dedicated to improving their standard of living. To my knowledge, there are as yet no other organizations of

this type in areas where the Devadasi culture continues to exist. During my one month field visit to Chelli Nilayam, I asked Hemalata Lavanam if she planned to expand the work of SAMSKAR to include Joginis throughout India. Her project in Andhra Pradesh has only just begun, she responded. She is dedicated completely to her work with women in the Nizamabad district and expects to be involved in that region for many years to come.



The Devadasi Prohibition Act (1988), displayed throughout Andhra Pradesh. [SAMSKAR]

work is aimed at re-establishing women in occupations which will allow them to become self-sufficient and yet remain in close contact with their family and village support networks.

Jogini Practices Outlawed

Since SAMSKAR began its work in 1986 they have received surprising amounts of support from government bodies in Andhra Pradesh. In 1987, a National Convention on Jogini Welfare was hosted in New Delhi. Since that time more that five million rupees has been granted by the government towards the purchase of goats and sheep for the Joginis and land has been donated to encour-