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"What is the use of getting a cow if you can't make any money from it?"

The Reproduction of Inequality within Contemporary Social Reform of Devadasis

TREENA ORCHARD

Devadasis, from the Sanskrit terms *Deva* ("God") and *dasi* ("servant or slave"), were generally women dedicated through ritual marriage to a deity or an object (i.e., a sword) who serviced local temples and their citizenry in various ways, depending on their ritual status. The *Devadasi* system originated between the third and sixth centuries throughout India, predominantly in the South (Shankar 1990). These women sang, danced, and performed significant religious functions (Kersenboom 1987; Marglin 1985), including begging to temple patrons and people in their home communities in the name of the deities with whom they were associated. They also adopted roles as sex workers who, ordained by their union with the Gods, were believed to transfer good fortune and spiritual harmony through sexual intercourse (Tarachand 1991). Corrupt temple administration and priestly conduct, the rise of androcentric forms of worship, and temple rivalry for tourists who were attracted by "dancing girls" during the prosperous Chola Period (850–1300) began a process of marginalization among *Devadasis* that came to a head during colonial times (Orr 2000), beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. During debates over Indian independence and cultural integrity, *Devadasis* were labeled either as tarnished remnants of a "golden age" or "fallen women" of a barbaric tradition, with the latter taken to decisively mark a nation as unfit to rule itself (Kannabiran 1995).

The system of dedicating young girls to deities for the purpose of sex work and temple service continues today in northern Karnataka and neighboring states; approximately one thousand to ten thousand girls (predominantly of the lower castes) are inducted into the system annually (Giri 1999; Jordan 1993). Upon attaining menarche, a "first client ceremony" is held where the

girl is deflowered by a client who offers gifts to her family (e.g., sarees, gold, money, bed sheets, jewelry), and after one or two years she begins conducting sex work. *Devadasis* generally live with their families and work in their home communities, sometimes with sisters or other female relatives (O'Neil et al. 2004). The basic starting pay per client is Rs 50 (U.S.$1) for penetrative sex, and their daily earnings range from Rs 0 to Rs 500 (U.S.$ 0–118).

Although women and girls customarily traveled to Mumbai (Bombay) or other large cities in the past, either by coercion or voluntarily to garner better income, the fear of HIV/AIDS and the higher costs of urban living have affected this pattern of migration for younger women today. *Devadasis* in the contemporary rural setting are more likely than other sex workers to migrate out of state, but this appears to be linked to their rural location rather than their membership in the *Devadasi* tradition (Blanchard et al. 2005). We interviewed a number of *Devadasi* members, most of whom expressed a desire to put an end to the *Devadasi* system, which was associated with their growing awareness of HIV. Some women and girls indicated, however, that sex work makes vital contributions to the family economy and is valued as a signifier of mature female status within their communities (Orchard 2007). These contradictory views reflect some of the complex perceptions that *Devadasis* have about their participation in this traditional system.

The *Devadasi* system is, in a real sense, a sacred cow within Indian culture. For centuries, *Devadasi* women have embodied significant cultural values and knowledge (i.e., the sacredness of sex, dance, and singing as worship), and yet their very possession and enactment of this cultural wisdom seems to single them out as somehow deviant and dangerous. Their ability to occupy definitive spaces at both the apex and margins of society can be attributed to several factors, beginning with the way in which female sexuality has been constructed in India. As in most patriarchal societies, women's sexuality is perceived as instrumental to the reproduction of the family and, as such, something that must be controlled to maintain familial purity. Indeed, in India, the management of female sexuality underpins the workings of the caste system; women must adhere to a barrage of rules in the pursuit of a "proper" sexuality which includes virginity before marriage, marital fidelity, and obedience to one's husband and his family (Marglin 1985).

Given the paramount cultural and religious importance placed upon female sexuality as something that could disrupt the foundation of the caste system and the organization of Indian society, it is also often framed as a dangerous force. Women are believed to drain men of their power during sexual intercourse through the man's loss of semen (O'Flaherty 1980; Wadley 1988),

and this is tied to a system of thought where bodily fluids are important in maintaining bodily harmony and life in general. Women are also thought to have excessively "hot" bodies as a result of menstruation which involves the monthly shedding of blood, a heated substance that is taken as proof of women's overheated bodies and sexual passions (Beck 1969; Reynolds 1980). Taken together we can see how *Devadasis* were at once an anomaly and a prototype of feminine portrayals; they were set apart as wives of Gods and as women with autonomous control of their sexuality, but they were also aligned with "normal" women through their powers to weaken men through sexual intercourse.

These women's dual socio-sexual status was also affected by and played into the European imagination of Oriental sexuality (backward but bawdy) and prostitution, which underwent intense state regulation during the colonial period. In mid-nineteenth-century India, International Social Purity campaigns and rising rates of venereal disease (VD) among British troops stationed in the colony dovetailed to produce an image of prostitutes as degraded, dangerous, and a moral threat to national health, security, and modernity (Arnold 1993; Raj 1993). *Devadasis* occupied a complicated position within legislative and social discourses of that time, as they fell outside the jurisdiction of the Contagious Diseases Act of 1868, which was applied throughout the colonies to regulate prostitution because of the British policy of noninterference in religious matters. Although during this period the *Devadasi* system was understood to be connected with religious ideology and practices, the Social Purity movements and the profound cultural disruption ushered in by colonial rule inflicted significant changes in the system and it became discredited within Indian society. This led to a major decline in the socioeconomic and religious status of *Devadasi* women and their loss of temple-related revenue, as well as the dismantling of the traditional patronage relationships between the women and their clients, which often forced the women into purely commercial forms of prostitution. As a result, and despite their tenuous association with religion, many Indian and British reformers, as well as Indian society more generally, began to place all these women in the general category of prostitutes (Kannabiran 1995; Shankar 1990; Srinivasan 1985). The forces of social regulation and colonization worked to create and reproduce the idea of *Devadasis* as once sacred but now fallen, and, in most accounts from the time, this was encapsulated in what I refer to as the "divided *Devadasi*"—that is, they were portrayed as either nuns or prostitutes.

Examining the complicated, contested, and culturally divisive position of *Devadasis* within Indian society is not a new undertaking, but it is cru-

cial now to include the perspectives of "real" *Devadasis*, whose voices are all too often excluded within the social reform and *Devadasi* literature more broadly. Their experiences belie the image—often conjured up within the social imagination, contemporary discourse, and much academic work—of victimized but also degraded participants in a backward system that has been ritually, sexually, and politically devalued to the point where it is equated with commercial prostitution. These women and girls often hold conflicting ideas about their position within society and within the evolving *Devadasi* system itself, evincing contradictions that are reasonable given the oscillating and intervening factors of state control, ritual significance and status, economic necessity, and the work of modernist discourses in the regulation and representation of their lives. In this complex world they do not simply possess a single identity or only one idea about their lives; rather, they straddle and position themselves across a variety of socioeconomic, political, and religious terrains. This multiplicity does not contradict but rather imbues their everyday existence within a unique and culturally ambiguous tradition of sex work, particularly in a time of neoliberalism and the ever intruding role of state legislation and social reform campaigns.

Methodology

We conducted an ethnographic assessment of sex workers in northern Karnataka to determine the general characteristics of the sex work environment and specifically the organization of the *Devadasi* system. Our work was facilitated with the cooperation of representatives from a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), the Belgaum Integrated Rural Development Society (BIRDS), which had been conducting HIV/AIDS education in the region since 1997.

The four northern districts of Dharwad, Belgaum, Bagalkot, and Bijapur were the focus of our investigation, because these regions have traditionally been home to the largest numbers of *Devadasis*. BIRDS counselors were the first links to women and girls in the different communities and helped to build rapport and select key informants. From February 2001 to November 2002 we conducted interviews with ninety *Devadasis* in numerous villages and small towns throughout northern Karnataka. The participants felt most at ease with group discussions, which were carried out with women and girls between the ages of fourteen and fifty in the local *Kannada* language and then translated into English. We also conducted several interviews with BIRDS fieldworkers and counselors, physicians at district hospitals,

employees of other NGOs, and members of government agencies such as the Karnataka State Women's Development Corporation (O'Neil et al. 2004). A workshop was held at the end of the project, providing an opportunity to check the validity of the data and to allow the *Devadasis* present to voice their opinions on the research findings and their experiences in the process.

"Hygienic Mistake," "Social Injustice," "Moral Monstrosity," and "Religious Crime": Representation and Reform of Devadasis during the Colonial Period

As noted above, the Contagious Diseases Act of 1868 did not apply to *Devadasis* because the policy of the British Crown was noninterference in religious matters. Although the colonial government remained hesitant to intervene in the *Devadasis* issue, many Indian women's groups and social reform organizations that were formed during this time took the lead in trying to abolish the system (Forbes 1996). Established by educated and upper-caste men and women who supported Victorian ideologies, many of these early-twentieth-century organizations viewed *Devadasis* as not only degraded women who were a throwback to a lost "golden age" but as impediments to national progress. A strong foundation within reform efforts was the idea embodied in the popular national slogan of that time: "India cannot be free until its women are free and women cannot be free until India is free" (Sinha 1998). The most outspoken and politically effective proponent of this position was Muthulaskhmi Reddy, a physician and the first Indian woman legislator and leader of the All-Indian Women's Congress from 1927 to 1936 (Kannabiran 1995; Sinha 1998; Whitehead 1998).

Reddy was determined to fight the dangers posed to national health by venereal diseases, perceived unhygienic practices of Indian mothers, and the *Devadasi* system (Whitehead 1998). Following her election to the Madras Legislative Council, which governed much of South India, including present-day Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, she introduced the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act (1929). This was the key legislation that spelled the end of the traditional *Devadas*i system, as it unlinked temple service from the receipt of *inams,* which were land grants and heritable rights in revenue from temple lands that were customarily granted to *Devadasis.* Although the Act was introduced to allow these women to own property without fear of extortion of their services, it ended up benefiting the men of the community who often intervened to inherit assets formerly set aside for the sole benefit of women (Srinivasan 1985). Threads of eugenic and "scientific" discourses

ran through Reddy's speeches; the following section from an address to the Legislative Council during the debates regarding *Devadasi* land grants illustrates how she tied ideas about the polluting sexuality of individual *Devadasis* with the decay of the body politic and racial purity:

> It is beyond my comprehension how in a country which can boast of innumerable saints . . . irresponsibility in vice has been ignored and even encouraged (through the devadasi system) to the detriment of the health of the individual and of the future race . . . Modern science has proven that continence is conducive to the health and well-being of the individual, family, and the future race, and that sexual immorality harms both the individual and the community. Venereal disease is responsible for fifty percent of child blindness and deafness, much insanity, and other diseases such as paralysis, liver and kidney disease and heart disease . . . and it is a racial poison capable of being transmitted to one's children, the second, or even the third generation. (Cited in Whitehead 1998, 98)

The reaction of most *Devadasis* to these reforms was categorically against the legislative and social changes. Through such bodies as the Madras Devadasi Association, the women participated in debates and lobbied hard to defeat the reforms through protest meetings and memoranda sent to governments. One of their main objections was that the reforms equated devadasis with commercial sex workers (Jordan 1993; Raj 1993; Whitehead 1998). Indeed, in their defense they adopted the cultural grammar of the "divided *Devadasi*" discourse (i.e., prostitute or nun), focusing almost exclusively on their ritual and religious duties to the exclusion of any consideration of their participation in prostitution, in which most of them did indeed participate, along with carrying out their own religious duties.

The Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act of 1929 was an essential first step in dismantling the *Devadasi* system, but its silence on dedication and prostitution itself meant that it did not really succeed in curtailing the practice. Queries into the status of the *Devadasi* system during the late 1930s from the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene in London once again engendered legislation, and in 1938 the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Bill was introduced (Sundara 1993). The outbreak of World War II and persistent colonial concerns about intervening in religious matters stalled the Bill, which was finally passed in 1947. The Bombay Presidency passed its own act against the system in 1934, which is significant because most northern districts of what is now Karnataka were part of the Bombay

territory at that time. Passed by the British government, it made *Devadasi* dedication a crime and included a plan for government enfranchisement of the women's temple lands and the legalization of marriages of former *Devadasis* to men (Chakraborthy 2000; Datar 1992; Jordan 1993). The 1934 and 1947 acts, both of which were applied in most of present-day Karnataka, proved ineffective in preventing new dedications, and several decades passed before the issue was again raised in parliament.

As with earlier initiatives, in the 1980s legislation and reform activities were spearheaded by various women's groups, NGOs, and voluntary organizations. The driving force behind contemporary efforts to ban the *Devadasi* system is the Joint Women's Program (JWP), a voluntary organization based in the capital city of Bangalore, that was primarily concerned with the issues of rape, dowry, and discrimination against women. In 1981, amid controversy over a rape case linked to the *Devadasi* system and the government's denial that the *Devadasi* system even existed, the JWP took up the cause (Epp 1997, 226), launching an impressive media campaign to publicize the issue and pressure the state government to pass legislation against the system. Despite the many national and local press releases, magazine pieces, and public meetings, the state government did not pass such legislation until late 1982.

The Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Bill, the first to be presented in the local *Kannada* language, nullifies the dedication of any woman to a deity, either before or after the passage of the bill (Jordan 1993). As with previous legislation, it legalized the marriage of any woman previously dedicated and declared the children of such unions to be legitimate. It makes performing, permitting, participating in, or abetting dedication a crime punishable by up to three years imprisonment and a fine of up to Rs 2,000 (U.S.$475) (ibid., 273). Parents or guardians found guilty of dedicating a girl in their care may receive a harsher penalty of up to five years in jail and a fine of Rs 5,000 (U.S.$1,180). The bill empowered the state government to make rules for the enforcement of the Bill and, unlike earlier laws, it also included provisions for the women's care, protection, and rehabilitation. Most important, whereas previous laws could only be enforced if someone filed a complaint, the 1982 legislation made dedication a crime against the state (ibid.).

Although the government envisioned that the cost of reform activities would be offset by revenue generated by the fines imposed on those found guilty of dedicating girls into the system (Jordan 1993; Shankar 1990), the exact opposite occurred. Counter to expectations, the main beneficiaries of the reforms have been corrupt police officers, religious officials, and certain

unsavory organizations formed to "help" these women, all of whom engaged in monetary extortion and sometimes forced sex from the women and girls involved. The widespread systemic corruption and the fact that no one has been prosecuted under the Bill means that the income needed for reform activities has not been generated as originally envisioned. Instead, the activities of these unscrupulous organizations and individuals have spawned new economic and sexual black markets that are directly related to the perpetuation of the *Devadasi* system, despite the existence of the Bill. This problematic situation and the paucity of government funds available to fund the rehabilitation system translates into reform programs and activities that are largely ineffective and in no way offer long-term, sustainable alternatives to sex work.

Government programs for rehabilitation have four main objectives: financial assistance and incentives for men to marry *Devadasis*; rehabilitation through self-employment; scholarships and hostels for the women's children, especially girls; and assistance to institutions that will offer "moral education" to *Devadasis* (Datar 1992). Unfortunately the implementation of these programs has been incomplete. However, teasing out the guiding moral and social principles embodied in the reform discourse about *Devadasis* and the system (i.e., evil practice, cult, and victims) and their approaches to rehabilitation (i.e., short-term loans and training, and a focus on individual women) does help to expose some of the problems of *Devadasi* reform.

One of the best examples of current reform tactics in Karnataka is a voluntary organization called Vimochana. It was established in 1985 by B. L. Patil, a lawyer who became a staunch advocate for *Devadasi* reform after learning about the practice from Jogan Shankar, author of *Devadasi Cult: A Sociological Analysis* (1990). From Patil's viewpoint, the system is a "euphemism for prostitution [and is] . . . deep-rooted under the façade of dogma, superstition and religious cult" (*Hejjegalu* 2001, 5). He believes that the best way to fight "this social evil is through the children of *Devadasis*, by education, health care, vocational training, employment, [and] marriage; to ensure their rehabilitation and integration into the mainstream of society" (ibid., 6). To this end, Vimochana has adopted 1,024 children from 960 towns throughout northern Karnataka and established the Kannada Medium Residential School (1990) and Residential High School (1992) for *Devadasi* children, the first in India (ibid., 6). Vimochana has also arranged the marriages of 180 girls and provides free care (education, medical needs, and food) for all children attending its schools. Although the focus is on female children, the organization has introduced income-generating activi-

ties geared toward adult *Devadasis,* including dairy, garment, and rope-making units, as well as wool spinning and a Handloom Development Centre (ibid., 7).

Although well intentioned, the lack of funds and moralizing attitude that pervades Vimochana's activities lead to situations of greater economic dependence on charity. For instance, trainees in the garment unit receive a daily stipend of Rs 20 (U.S.$0.04), of which they may save Rs 5 (U.S. $.50) after purchasing bus fare, tea, and tobacco. One *Devadasi* who participated in this scheme sums it up well, "But we are not doing too well here, there is no regular power supply, water and raw materials. Most houses have caved in with the rains" (*Hejjegalu* 2001, 10). In addition, Vimochana's reliance on the monetary support of groups like the Christian Children's Fund (CCF) makes them vulnerable to the forces of international donor profiles and annual program preferences. This is painfully clear in Patil's response to an interviewer's question about the potential cessation of CCF funding: "If they stop I'll go insane" (ibid., 11).

In another interview Patil discusses the roles of deep-seated religious faith and poverty, and the hold this combination has on many *Devadasi* women's decisions to dedicate their daughters. In his words:

> It was very difficult to convince the women of their plight. Here strong deep roots in religion and faith in the Goddess along with poverty and illiteracy made people bow to legend. Every girl child was a potential bread winner if she could be dedicated and sold into prostitution. (Menon 1997, 2)

Although Patil identifies the religious, economic, and gender-related push-pull factors behind the *Devadasi* system, by sponsoring short-lived, demoralizing, and often useless petty programs the organization may be exacerbating the women's economic dependence on sex work. Furthermore, he does so with absolutely no consideration of the cultural and religious importance that the system still has in many women's lives.

The "blame the victim" idea and piecemeal economic approach of this particular organization is no different than the broader discourse and activities of *Devadasi* reform in Karnataka today. This was clear during interviews we conducted with project officers of the Devadasi Rehabilitation Project (DRP), which works through the Karnataka State Women's Development Corporation (KSWDC) that was established in 1991. The DRP's main objectives are to stop *Devadasi* initiations and abolish the system altogether, but

their central activities are health and "awareness camps." The health camps are intended to monitor the women's health status and are conducted at the primary health clinics in each district. When asked for more details about the awareness camps, one officer said they are designed to inform the women that "the tradition is bad and that they should lead a normal life." When asked what "bad" referred to, three "superstitions" were mentioned: dedication, dreadlocks (*jati*), and begging in the name of the Goddess. The women view *jati* as an embodiment of the Goddess and an especially powerful call to service within the *Devadasi* system, but reformers have constructed it as a fungus or infection that is the result of poor hygiene and improper grooming, thus reinforcing the medical-moral ideology within reformist discourse. These same reformers have also taken part in statewide hair-cutting campaigns, forcefully removing the *jatis* from the heads of *Devadasi* women, a severe violation of both human rights and ritual status (Ramberg 2006).

Additional examples of the neo-Social Purity beliefs that define the DRP emerged during discussions about the procedures *Devadasis* have to undergo prior to being approved for a loan, which is the organization's chief means of helping women become rehabilitated. The women told us that when they apply for a loan a program staff member takes them to a local hospital for a checkup, which involves a urine test and some kind of blood test. They also have to make a "self-declaration," which they described as similar to swearing an oath to tell the truth in a court of law. Placing their hand upon a sacred Hindu text, they must swear that they will quit doing sex work once they participate in a loan scheme under the DRP. Only when they pass the medical exam and make their declaration, which has to be on bond paper, can they be considered for a loan.

Five kinds of loans are offered by the DRP. The first is a housing loan, which is only available to *Devadasis* who have a plot of land in their name and can prove this claim with the appropriate legal certificates. The second loan program pertains to small industry and training, and involves the sum of Rs 10,000 (U.S.$ 2360), of which Rs 4,000 (U.S.$950) has to be repaid within a year. Cattle loans are the third type, and these usually entail a 60 percent subsidy on Rs 12,000 (U.S.$2,832). A fourth kind of loan has to do with vegetable farming and operate along the same lines as the small industry and training loan (60 percent subsidy on Rs 10,000 [U.S.$240]). The last loan type is for sweater knitting and includes nine months of training and the donation of sewing machines. The number of *Devadasis* per village and the number of loans available in each category also bear on the distribu-

tion of support. In 2000–2001, a total of three hundred housing loans were approved.

A consistent refrain we heard from *Devadasi* women about DRP or other government programs was that they were not useful and did not provide enough of a return to allow them to stop doing sex work. Common assertions during one interview included the following: "they are there and others have used them, but I don't use them because I can't return the money from the loan"; "no, because if we take a loan we can't return the money and the interest grows, we don't make anything from it"; and "what's the use of getting a cow if you can't make any money from it?"[1] During another interview, we learned that a group of women who had been struggling for the past eleven years to get DRP loans were swindled by men who promised them support through the state organization. Similar experiences are described by Menon (1997) in her article about *Devadasis* involved with the DRP. She found that the houses they received have almost all been defective and cannot withstand the constant shuttling of the heavy looms provided under the sewing program. Women Menon interviewed also admitted that because of the dismal economic return through the loan programs they continue working as prostitutes. Like many of the *Devadasis* with whom we spoke, those featured in this article feared the loss of their income, property, and status as a result of their participation social reform programs.

Since they were clearly aware of the insufficiency of the loan schemes, we asked the women what they thought about rehabilitation generally. Some said that it has raised awareness about the *Devadasi* tradition and helped them become more educated, which was explained as a collective realization that they do not "need" to initiate young girls into the system. Many of these same women have adopted the language of reform, which was evident when they talked about *jati* as a disease and the result of improper care of the hair. However, those who continue to view the dreadlock hairstyle as a strong link with the deity resent the medical approach taken by the DRP. When describing her feelings about this issue, one older woman shook her head, looked up to the ceiling, and raised her arms, illustrating with her body both her resistance to reform and her enduring bond with the Goddess above. Whether or not they adopt reform rhetoric, virtually all *Devadasis* who receive loans use the income to supplement, not supplant, the income they receive from sex work, which is impossible to quit given the major economic burdens most women assume within their household (e.g., financing weddings, medical care, and basic amenities). Still others are totally unaware of the government offering any reform activities.

Bottom's Up: Collectivization as an Alternative to State-Run, Top-Down HIV Interventions

Prostitute-run collectives have existed throughout the world since the 1970s, when they were part of the women's struggles against police harassment and state abuse, and for the decriminalization of sex work (Bell 1994; Kempadoo 1998). As part of "second-wave" feminism, these groups experienced both support and controversy in the wider domain of women's political protests over issues such as reproductive rights, child care, wage parity with men, gender and racial discrimination, and sexual freedom. Although groups like COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) in San Francisco and CORP (Canadian Organization for Prostitute's Rights) in Toronto, Canada, were able to mobilize various sex worker communities and politicize the issue of sex work, their achievements applied mainly to women in "First World" countries.

Indian sex workers have also been coming together in small groups since the 1970s to assert themselves and fight for safer working conditions, mainly in large urban centers in the northern part of the country. In 1972 a group of sex workers and women previously involved in the trade formed a registered organization called Nari Kalyan Samiti in Calcutta (Sleightholme and Sinha 1997). The women mobilized out of their shared frustration with the violence and morally degrading abuses directed toward them by a local political figure, who almost killed one of the group's leaders (ibid.). Although they were successful in having the man arrested, the organization dissolved as a result of the members' differing political views. In 1980, again in Calcutta, several women joined forces to set up the Mahila Sangha (Women's Organization) and focused on exposing and prosecuting a local criminal who extorted money from them (ibid.). Several years later, in 1992, the Abahelit Mahila Samiti was established by former leaders of the dissolved Nari Kalyan Samiti, who now work to secure educational access for the children of sex workers as well as better legal protection and social support for women selling sex (ibid.).

Based in Sonagachi, Calcutta's oldest and largest red light area, the STD/HIV Intervention Programme (SHIP) is the best-known sex worker project in India. Launched in 1992 by the All-India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health along with community-based organizations and local NGOs, SHIP's main objectives are to provide health-care services, HIV/STD education and awareness, and condom promotion (Jana et al. 1999, 58). Working against the traditional medical- and state-intervention models of "rescuing" or "rehabilitating" the women, SHIP concentrates instead on promoting peer educa-

tion as the principle means to develop an empowering environment, help the women achieve a sense of self-definition, and establish sustainable programs (Jana 1999; Jana et al. 1999). The "three Rs" approach—Respect, Reliance, and Recognition—has worked remarkably well, and rates of STDs and HIV among the women have dropped significantly and condom use rose from 27 percent in 1992 to 86 percent in 2001 (Jana et al. 1999). Their commitment to involving clients, police, and other local players in sex trade-related interventions is another important component of their success, especially because the initiative was seen as a partner in helping the women remain healthy and work longer, rather than as an obstacle or competitor to the established sex trade system.

As noted above, our research team worked with the Belgaum Integrated Rural Development Society, an NGO that began as an agricultural cooperative. BIRDS began doing their HIV-related work in 1996, and in 1997 a sex worker collective, or *sangha*, was formed in the district of Belgaum. The organization's efforts in the area of sex work began in 1996–1997, when BIRDS was selected as a model NGO collective for sex workers, based in part on the organization's successes in cooperative activism at the grass-roots level. HIV/AIDS prevention is one of their prime objectives, and they have established the peer-education system to train and educate the women. Peers are selected by and from the women, in collaboration with BIRDS representatives. The representatives help with technical coordination and the development of appropriate training strategies to educate the women about HIV/AIDS, condoms, collectivization, legal advice, and other health issues.

Belgaum, the first collective (*sangha*) to be established, is based in the city of Gokak and at the time of my research had 135 members, representing all the women in northern Karnataka. The group in Bijapur district soon separated, however, followed by the group in the town of Mudhol (Bagalkote district). These fissions were not the result of interpersonal problems but of natural geographic and logistic practicalities. Each collective has eleven board members who are elected annually and meet weekly to discuss developments in the field and the women's concerns, and to receive condoms. All the *sanghas* have two bank accounts: one is held jointly by the elected president and secretary and is the source of the wages for peer educators, and the other is a self-help group account that BIRDS initiated which consists of weekly donations from the women. Sometimes these donations are collected at the end of the month and are available as a loan for a woman in particular need. As of 2006 fourteen collectives were registered throughout the state, and several more are in the process of being established (Halli et al. 2006).

Despite the dedicated work of BIRDS organizers and counselors and of peer-educators, a number of issues appear to be impeding the NGO's ability to go beyond its central activity of condom distribution. The topics raised below are based on data gleaned from notes taken during *sangha* meetings, BIRDS workshops, and observations in the field. I include them here because they expose some of the structural factors contributing to the continuation of certain socio-sexual and health inequalities among *Devadasis* and other sex workers who receive assistance from BIRDS.

In a spring 2002 meeting it was revealed that some clients still do not want to wear *nirodhs* (condoms), claiming that they will not be sexually satisfied, and this is causing the *Devadasis* to lose clients and money. This is not unexpected, but that women have received condom distribution for more than five years in this area speaks to the persistent difficulties they experience when trying to enforce their use with clients. This is troubling because, in their interviews, the women and girls described a different picture: they all said that they *always* used condoms, particularly with non-regular clients, that they did not have problems getting clients to wear them, and if they ever encountered problems they would just "send them off." Clearly, after five years of intensive condom distribution and education, this is not the case, and, unfortunately, it is a common experience among sex workers in various settings (Campbell 2000).

Going beyond condom distribution is important, especially with respect to gaining political presence and strength for the collectives. What is impeding the *sanghas,* and what is the impact on *Devadasis*? Four interrelated factors appear to be at play in preventing the *sanghas* from moving beyond condom distribution toward broader and more self-sustaining programs. First, BIRDS is a male-run organization. Although the *sanghas* operate largely through networks of women, their funding, training, supplies, and direction all stem from the parent NGO, which was founded and run by men. This contrasts sharply with the female-directed and feminist/human rights ideologies guiding the DMSC in Calcutta and other similar organizations, many of which insist that no men are involved after incidents of unwanted sexual advances and disruptive affairs between women and male staff members. The second factor is the limited experience of BIRDS organizers and counselors with women in prostitution. Groups of sex workers in Calcutta have existed since the early 1970s, whereas BIRDS has been in the field of sex work and HIV prevention for a relatively short time. This point is not intended to belittle the organization's influential work but to draw attention to the challenges involved in becoming well equipped to deal with the population(s)

and issues in question, especially given their extended areas of focus from agriculture to sex work and HIV/AIDS.

The third issue is the lack of broader programs that could reach several of the other populations that the women deal with at work and in their personal lives (i.e., clients and *khiams,* or long-term lovers). Initiatives such as literacy and leadership training, housing programs that actually work (versus those under the DRP), and the development of alternative employment opportunities could reduce the women's socioeconomic dependency on sex work. This is a daunting task, however, given that BIRDS has to work under the constraints of a mainly foreign-funded program that does not want to provide funds for general social welfare programs but wants, instead, to fund programs with the specific aim of achieving high rates of condom use and distribution (Orchard 2002).

The final factor relates to the ideological and programmatic influences that have impacted BIRDS. As the name Belgaum Integrated Rural Development Society implies, this NGO borrows heavily from the program structures implemented under the national Integrated Rural Development Programs (IRDP) introduced in the late 1970s and the 1980s (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998). Although it differed from other antipoverty schemes by envisioning tangible assets (e.g., cows and sewing machines) that its beneficiaries could use to make a better living, the implementation of the IRDP has been "little short of a nightmare" because the government assumed that thousands of habitually poor, usually illiterate people could become mini-entrepreneurs (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998, 162). Although BIRDS is trying to establish more effective strategies for development and empowerment among the women than offering cows or sewing machines, it has not yet been able to transform its organizational structure and implement programs to help this become a reality.

Discussion

This chapter has examined some of the historical and contemporary impacts of social reform on *Devadasi* women and girls, demonstrating the largely moral-medical and individualistic discourse operating within both approaches to providing services for *Devadasis*. We have seen how state and NGO reliance on these tactics, far from helping the women and girls to any great extent, may in fact lead to new forms of inequalities in socioeconomic, health, gender, political and sexual spheres. Alternatives to these top-down tactics have developed, such as the formation of sex worker collectives orga-

nized by peers within the women's communities to fight the spread of HIV and cope with other pressing socioeconomic and sexual issues.

Two fundamental ideas that have defined *Devadasis* within reform movements are that prostitution is a necessary evil and that the women and girls who participate in this system are victims of barbaric traditions and patriarchy, or they are marginalized in a presumably powerless status as "Third World" sex workers (Doezema 1998, 2001; Whitehead 1998). Since the mid-nineteenth century, several shifts occurred in how these women have been represented and regulated, many of which involved far-reaching extensions of state power through legislation and broader political objectives geared toward presenting India as a modern nation. For instance, the International Social Purity campaigns and the rising rates of venereal disease among British nationals stationed in India combined to produce an image of prostitutes as degraded, dangerous, and a threat to national health and security because of their "natural" tendencies to spread sexual disease. *Devadasis* were not "just prostitutes," however, and their complex association with religious traditions and practices, not to mention their relatively powerful status compared to other Hindu women, presented the colonial project in India with particular challenges over issues of sexuality, culture, and administrative control. Rising to these challenges involved not only sweeping social reforms and legislation but also a radical transformation of Indian beliefs and ideas about the *Devadasi* system. In many ways this significant shift can be viewed as resulting from the process of internal colonization, which perceived the institution as a tarnished remnant of a more uncivilized time and the women themselves as impediments of modernity.

Many current social reform efforts operate through tropes similar to those of the past, including "rescue" and "rehabilitation," but newer concerns, including child prostitution and HIV/AIDS, have added fuel to what is now termed a "burning issue" (Orchard 2007), and now these concerns often exacerbate the women's already disadvantaged socioeconomic, religious, and sexual status. Moreover, the state's alternative to sex work is little more than the classic strategy of blaming the victim, while a medical-moral discourse and short-term loans often lead to greater economic dependency on insufficient government handouts and a deep sense of betrayal among the women regarding the displacement of their beliefs, practices, and identity, both at the individual level and in the collective realm.

In response to these top-down, state-run programs, some NGOs have assisted sex workers, including *Devadasis,* in establishing their own collective organizations through which they educate one another about HIV, dis-

tribute condoms, obtain legal advice, and help to mobilize the community. Despite such efforts, however, structural factors that include gender, police brutality, and predominantly individualistic models of development hamper the NGOs' ability to achieve "real" empowerment; sometimes the NGOs may even replicate some of the existing socioeconomic, gender, sexual, and health inequalities that work to marginalize *Devadasi* women and girls.

This chapter has explored contemporary techniques of social reform in the context of the current neoliberal period, highlighting the implications of the state's strategies for exercising power over *Devadasi* women and girls and their families. As Ramberg (2006, 126) has asserted in her account of ethics, kinship, and ritual among modern *Devadasis*, contemporary social reforms produce new kinds of subjects and new relations to the state. These new relations are partially the product of a particular historical relationship that has long existed between *Devadasis* and certain power structures, including the state and temple administration, and are partially the result of new forms of resistance to government programs and state intervention, primarily through the establishment of collectives. Today many *Devadasis* in Karnataka are engaged in collective mobilization efforts through which they hope to make socioeconomic and political improvements in their lives. Although these endeavors are not always easy or without their own inequalities, in the process and contrary to associations with a backward tradition, the *Devadasis* have shown themselves to be adept, creative, and most certainly modern citizens of India.

NOTE

1. For a similar example, see Ramberg 2006, 125.