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DEVADASI, POST-TRUTH AND 'SIMULACRA': DECONSTRUCTING THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION OF DEVADASI TRADITION IN SELECT INDIAN NARRATIVES

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Abstract. The narratives around *devadasi* are historically constructed to glorify the dedication of young girls as dancers to various temples across India. Traditionally, a devadasi assumed a pivotal role in executing significant rites and festivities within temple precincts, thereby representing an indispensable contributor to the cultural milieu inherent to these sacred edifices. This side of the *devadasi* legacy is quite popular and known even in the present times, but a discreet silence prevails about the flip side of this picture, a side that is characterised by systemic oppression, exploitation, and enduring bondage, constituting a narrative often hushed up. The present paper investigates the profoundly complex and concealed aspects of the *devadasi* tradition through a study of narratives by Gogu Shyamala, William Darlymple and Sudha Murthy using a post-truth lens and Baudrillard's 'simulacra' to deconstruct the coordinated distortion/asymmetry of/in knowledge/reality of *devadasi.*

Keywords: devadasi, jogini, hegemony, oppression, post-truth, simulacra

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> *In India, a devadasi is a female artist who is dedicated to the worship and service of a deity or a temple for the rest of her life.*
>
> Wikipedia

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1. Introduction

Posterity tends to manipulate facts, myths and other cultural artefacts and traditions deliberately in order to craft a story to serve its purposes. Over the course of temporal epochs, this masterfully created version of a story gets irreversibly ingrained in the communal mind, eventually monopolizing the appearance of the historical reality. This occurrence highlights the malleability of historical narratives when the reconstructed and recognized story tends to overshadow the subtle complexities evident in the reality of things. It leads to the creation of a collective knowledge that is promoted as the 'truth' which is more aligned with one's cultural idealisation than an impartial and objective reflection of the historical reality. The assertion that 'truth' is subjective and can be used to sway the public in favour of a particular ideology, thereby creating a hegemonic narrative, poses serious concerns. In the contemporary world, the distinction between the real/truth and the simulated has become increasingly blurred.

French sociologist Jean Baudrillard's concept of 'simulacra' offers a fascinating framework to understand this phenomenon. According to him simulacra are copies or representations that masquerade as reality and function as self-contained worlds which are divorced from any objective truth. Some socio-cultural and religious groups most notably in control of the power structures, occupy a privileged position traditionally by manipulating information, crafting narratives to suit their interest and fostering hegemonic discourses. Simulacra finds a deep resonance in the making of post-truth societies which tends to privilege personal feelings and emotions over factual evidence. The truth is thus shaped as a result of cultural, social, and religious dynamics which possibly incorporates certain biases, perspectives, or interests of the hegemon. For example, the role of Brahmins in forming the socio-religious-cultural narratives in India is notably significant in this regard. Such cultural, social, and religious dynamics can be understood in all their complexities through the contemporary re-visiting of the *devadasi*[1]. Lakshmidhar Mishra defines *devadasi* as, "A long-standing practice of the consecration of young girls to gods and goddesses in the temples of India. Such consecration has had religious and social sanction" (Mishra 2011: 262). This points to the oversimplification of the practice on the part of historians and scholars which is based on their understanding of existing narratives/simulacra related to this practice and tradition.

Existing narratives/simulations on *devadasi* are inseparable from the politics of temples and palaces and by extension the politics of religion and culture in India. They are the creation of powerful men like kings, priests and patrons associated with the practice. In case of the Brahmin priests, they enjoyed the privilege based on religious sanctions granted to them and used the temple as an institution of control. Thus, *devadasi* was highly impacted by the political power structures of the period which determined how the tradition gets portrayed and perpetuated throughout history. Baudrillard's simulacra becomes a prominent tool to discern truth in the

[1] Italicised *devadasi/jogini* denotes the institution, practice, culture, tradition, community etc., and devadasi/jogini refers to an individual/being.

world of *devadasi* that is saturated with simulations which hold more power than the original truth. The glorified narratives of devadasi as god's wife or *nityasumangali* overshadows the dark realities of a lifetime of victimisation and oppression.

2. The poetics and politics of *devadasi*

The establishment of *devadasi* did not have a spontaneous or organic development, rather it was deliberately created by influential figures such as kings, priests, and patrons who laid the rules and norms of the tradition. It cannot be denied that most of the rules furthered the patriarchal agenda of male domination and control over women and their bodies. As Frederique Apffel Marglin mentions, "at the puberty ceremony the devadasis consummate their marriage to the deity with either the king or a brahmin temple servant" (Marglin 1985: 67). Such ceremonial rules not only regulated the behaviour of devadasis but also dictated their roles, relationships, and interactions within a framework that prioritised male authority. Veenus Jain's *Devadasis of India: tradition or travesty* highlights one such rule as "the deflowering ceremony is not concerned in any way with the deity the devadasi is dedicated to" (Jain 2019: 44). The proprietorship of devadasis depends upon the economic and political stature of the patron. All norms and status associated with *devadasi* are recorded and glorified through various narratives, but gender discrimination, politics and oppression are usually silenced and overlooked. The temple is considered a sacred sanctum and the dedication of girls in its service is a matter of great honour in the society, thus envisioning a post-truth scenario in which the idealised version differs from the multifaceted reality.

Devadasi spins a complex web of gender, caste and class issues, which contribute to the birth of multiple post-truth scenarios and simulacra. One side deals with the golden days of *devadasi*, when the temple culture flourished. Devadasis employed at the temple were the symbols of valour and greatness. Meanwhile, on the flip side, it is said that "Hindu reformers of the late nineteenth century were disturbed by the idea that the *devadasi* institution provided religious sanction for prostitution" (Orr 2000: 15). Western influence and social agitation against traditions like sati and *devadasi* led to the action by government in India, declaring them illegal and paving the path for massive social reform. The *devadasi* truth was now dependent on the subjective interests of people or nation. Bernard E. Harcourt in "Michel Foucault and the History of Truth-Making" notes:

> Realism captures … a decentering from universality, from the idea that one can determine what is true based on the ability to universalize. Universality is replaced by particularity: what is true and certain now turns on personal self-interests or the nation's specific interests. In realism, the one who is biased, who has real interests, is the guardian of truth (Harcourt 2020: 114).

Foucauldian thought suggests that within a realist framework, people with vested interests define and protect reality, and their prejudices become essential in the

process of creating truth. *Devadasi* embodies Foucault's 'de-universalization'[2] as truths generated around it are not simply discovered or documented but actively constructed within the dynamics of a specific historical context. A singular, universally accepted truth regarding *devadasi* is unattainable, and instead, its interpretations and narratives are shaped by the prevailing post-truth dynamics. No narrative is able to represent the perspicacity of the tradition. Some either over-emphasise the rich cultural discourse or account for the contribution of *devadasi* women in shaping the contemporary classical dance scenario. They do not take into account the suffering brought on devadasis through social ostracization and consistent victimisation.

Gogu Shyamala is a prominent Indian Dalit activist and writer who uses her stories to highlight the inherent class and caste politics embedded in the lives of Dalit individuals. Her stories delve into the harsh realities of *devadasi* women's lived experiences. Two of her short stories, "Raw wound" and "But why shouldn't the Baindla woman ask for her land?" provide a window into the world of joginis and offer crucial insights and raise relevant concerns about their status in the contemporary society. William Darlymple is a writer known for his historical research and travel writing which is usually focused on exploring India's rich history, culture, and politics. His story, "The daughters of Yellamma" was published in *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India.* The story sheds light on the evolving role of devadasis in contemporary India and the challenges they face daily through the life of Rani Bai – a *devadasi* dedicated to the goddess Yellamma. Sudha Murthy is an esteemed writer, social worker and philanthropist whose works deeply reflect her commitment to social justice and advocate empathy for the marginalised. The story "Three thousand stitches" documents Murthy's experience working with the devadasi community as the chairperson of the Infosys Foundation. The story chronicles the transformative journey of women who have been part of the *devadasi* and emphasises their struggles, resilience, and empowerment.

The term 'jogini/jogati' is predominantly associated with young girls from Dalit communities who are dedicated into the service of the goddess Yellamma through a ritualistic marriage as a symbol of a religious sacrifice done by their families. This act is performed with an expectation to receive the goddess' blessings in return. Notably, the term 'devadasi' is interchangeably used to describe 'jogini' that signifies a shared understanding and a similar societal perception of both the cultures. In contemporary narratives, this assimilation is elucidated by Davesh Soneji, a historian, who asserts that "contemporary Dalit *jogati*s, on account of the visible ritual dimensions of their lives, are coopted into the 'temple narrative' of *devadasi* historiography" (Soneji 2012: 9). Traditional devadasis were known to lead a lavish lifestyle, while the joginis, at the same time, struggled to make their place in the temples due to caste discrimination. Devadasis enjoyed a certain level of social recognition and economic security within the temple culture but joginis faced marginalisation due to their caste and the unrecognised nature of their dedication. Lucinda Ramberg observes that "Dalit women who transact the favor of the goddess outside the walls of her main

[2] The term 'de-universalization' is used by Michel Foucault to signify a departure from universal or broadly applicable notion of truths.

temple and sex outside the bounds of conjugal matrimony. Their alliance with the goddess, however, is not recognized as a matter of legitimate religion or kinship within the law or by state authorities" (Ramberg 2014: 3). Dalit women/joginis were excluded from the socio-religious legitimacy offered to the devadasis. Though the devadasis might have had a more outwardly glamorous life, but their dedication often restricted their choices and placed them under the control of temples or patrons similar to the joginis who were the victims of class, caste, and gender politics.

However, the post-truth narrative woven around *jogini* avoids debating the intersectionality of caste with gender politics. It downplays the significance of poverty and financial struggles as a driving factor in decision-making that leads to the victimisation of these women. Dalit girls' decision to become joginis was a way out from their exhausting life in utter poverty, and feed their families. For instance, Professor Rekha Pande accounts religious superstitions and village politics as the driving force behind the dedication of Dalit girls as jogins. She contends, "The main causes for converting young girls to *jogins* are recurring death of children in a family, regular occurrence of diseases in the house or village, outbreak of disease in the village or pure lust of landlords" (Pande 2008: 107). The power imbalance at play in *jogini* highlights how women's bodies were used for religious purposes which led to the commodification of the sacred. In the face of poor economic conditions, the Dalit girls perceived becoming joginis as a potential escape from the financial hardships without any moral obligations as their religious beliefs sanctified this decision/religious prostitution.

In both *devadasi* and *jogini*, women's bodies were at the centre of the religious norms. With the replacement of the sacred with a superficial copy the focus became transactional – devadasis and joginis pleasing their patrons rather than a spiritual connection with the deity. The original religious aspects of the practice declined, and the focus shifted towards continuous exploitation of these women. The *Oxford English dictionary* defines 'post-truth' as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion" (Clem 2017: 97). The paper's attempt to problematise the representation of *devadasi*/*jogini* in select narratives lays bare the politics of hegemonic narratives/simulacra and debates its associated issues using a post-truth lens. Gogu Shyamala's "Raw wound" and "But why shouldn't the Baindla woman ask for her land?" unfold against the backdrop of rural Andhra, where the *jogini* tradition was practised across various regions and cultures. In a world where women are trying hard to break the gender barriers, Shyamala's women suffer double marginalisation, exploitation and suffering due to the hegemonic weaving of patriarchal narratives. "Raw wound" and "But why shouldn't the Baindla woman ask for her land?" mainly focus on deconstructing the complex power structures apparent in *jogini*. Shyamala strategically situates the *jogini* tradition in a post-truth context to focus on how the conditions of women always remain tied to the same destiny where they are the subjects of constant exploitation and suffering.

3. Deconstructing the literary representations

The story "Raw wound" originally written as "Radam" in Telugu, depicts an emotional tale of Balappa, a father struggling to find a way out for his daughter Syamamma, who is being forced to become a jogini by the Patel in the village. The story offers a moving perspective on the pervasive class and caste oppression in rural India where "by keeping Dalit women as prostitutes and by tying prostitution to bondage in rural areas, upper-caste men reinforced their declaration of social and economic superiority over the lower castes" (Pande 2008: 107). It is through the character of Balappa, that Shyamala introduces the voice of reform who is keen on freeing young girls like Syamamma from a life of forced sex work. Balappa emerges as a symbolic embodiment of reformist ideals within the *jogini* community which challenges the existing narratives of glorification that promote dedicating young girls to the service of men like Patel. "But why shouldn't the Baindla woman ask for her land?" originally written in Telugu as "Baindla me Bhumadagada Mari?" is a story of Saayamma who unlike Balappa's daughter could not escape the clutches of *jogini*.

In "Raw wound", Syamamma's mother and grandmother who are themselves victims of the *jogini* tradition decide to raise their voice and fight for their daughter and granddaughter. Trapped in the web of caste and class politics, Balappa's mother Sangavva helplessly cries: "It seems someone in the past laid a rule for our family. And we have to follow it – like a rule of god. Curse that god! Does he not have children? A lineage? What sin have we committed? They have come like Yama himself to spoil our child's life" (Shyamala 2020b: 138). These lines reflect how the fate of the lower class is sealed at the hands of the elite because "the notion of ideology … always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth" (Rabinow 1984: 60). The decision of Syamamma's mother and grandmother to stand against the prevailing injustice represents the victim's potential to break the cyclical nature of oppression through collective action. By joining forces against the oppressor's ideology, they present a glimmer of hope to challenge and dismantle entrenched systems of subjugation.

Patel's men beat Balappa brutally, take away his land and ostracize him and his family from the village for not following the village customs. They become 'birds without a nest' (Shyamala 2020b: 157), which is the price they have to pay for freedom. Narratives are frequently used as advocacy or persuasion tactics in post-truth frameworks, with the goal of swaying public opinion in favour of a specific version of events. It may be argued that the narrative is purposefully chosen to centre the plot on the family's fight against the repressive customs and the elite to reflect contemporary attitudes on resistance to structural injustices. The story "But why shouldn't the Baindla woman ask for her land?" presents the struggle faced by a jogini to claim a piece of inherited land that is passed on to her by her aunt and currently possessed by the village dora's[3] cousin. Many prominent devadasis were bestowed with various gifts in the form of property, jewellery, clothes, etc. from kings and patrons that enabled them to spend a lavish life. But in the case of Saayamma, it is

[3] The word 'Dora' in Telugu is used for a leader or village head.

just a source of survival. By acquiring the land, she will be able to feed her children as she has no other source of income. Arguing her case in front of the village elders she says, "I inherited the erpula duties from her (aunt). She was my erpula guru and I am the successor to both her profession and her property" (Shyamala 2020a: 61). It is ironic that the village elders want Saayamma to continue her erpula duties because it is the right she inherited from her aunt, but the same audience ridicules the idea of her having any claim over the material inheritance. The story throughout exposes the hypocrisy in the treatment of joginis who dedicate their lives married to a deity and save others from unforeseen circumstances. Saayamma's outburst as "this village – all of you together – made me a *jogini.* From the times of my ancestors, the girls of my family have been forced to become erpula" (Shyamala 2020a: 62) communicates the repressed anger kept inside for years. It also shows that for ages nobody in her family protested against the tradition and it has continued in the present time also. Her ancestors did not have the option to fight for a way out, unlike Saayamma whose uncle bought her freedom so that she could be spared from being the wife of every man in the village.

Saayamma's attempt to revolt against the village dora in presence of all the village elders for her right is deemed blasphemous as the dora recalls, "If we give her the slightest chance to talk, she starts digging up things from past. She doesn't allow anyone else to intervene. The problem is, she does not know her place and doesn't know how to talk to her superiors" (Shyamala 2020a: 59). Saayamma's courage to speak against the tradition and its keepers is ridiculed as her height of profanity. The dora needs the erpula to perform at the Ooradamma festival like he needs the contribution from the village's other men, so he uses his influential position to manipulate everyone into participating. The naïve villagers agree to his suggestion at once as they hear about Ooradamma's oracle in dora's dream. Playing with one's faith and instilling fear among the masses is the common tool of the upper class that Shyamala has pointed towards quite subtly in both the stories. The elite politics to gain power and feed upon the oblivious masses, uses religion as a fundamental strategy and controls the narrative accordingly. The foundation of *jogini* is laid in faith and religion; it is later exploited by powerful patrons to satisfy physical needs and dominate the lower-class women.

Shyamala's portrayal of the ground realities in rural India exposes the ideology of the upper class that uses religion to manipulate the lower section of the society. Men like Patel/dora abuse their position of power and play with one's faith in order to reap benefits for themselves. Infiltrating one's mind with the fear of God is regarded as a weapon of control and it is used to advocate upper-class propaganda. In the social hierarchy, Patels establish themselves at dominating position based upon their caste and decide the fate of others. According to the norms prevailing in the village, the Patels claim themselves as the first benefactor of a jogini:

> The transformation of an ordinary girl to a *Jogin* is made in three stages. At the first instance, the *Jogin* girl's age will be three to six years, and she will be married to the God. At the second instance, she will be offered to the village head-man, i.e., Patel, Patwari, Dora or landlord, after attaining

> the age of puberty. Then onwards, at third stage the *Jogin* will be treated as a village asset (Pande 2008: 109).

To claim autonomy and remain in authority to exert power over other members of the society, they justify practices like *jogini* in the name of tradition; and men like Balappa who can be a threat are eliminated in the process. The tradition allows Patels an agency to hold a dominant position in society where they feed themselves off the weak and naïve subjects. The stories represent how the truth is less important than what people believe or want to believe and how simulacra in the form of glorification successfully disguises the exploitative nature of the practice. The stories "Raw wound" and "But why shouldn't the Baindla Woman ask for her land?" reveal how oppressive traditions are maintained through emotional and ideological manipulation and are capable of constructing a hyperreality that conceals exploitation. By highlighting the resistance of characters like Syamamma and Saayamma, Shyamala's stories challenge the constructed truths and advocate for a more just and equitable recognition of the rights and identities of marginalised communities.

William Darlymple's "The daughters of Yellamma" transcends the simplistic dichotomy of depicting *devadasi* as either glamorous or exploitative. Instead, it delves deeply into the complexities of Rani Bai – a devadasi's life focusing on the confluence of tradition, societal expectations, and her personal struggles. The narrative is set in Belgaum, Karnataka (India), and unfolds as a conversational travelogue that unveils the human stories behind this controversial tradition. Through Rani Bai's account, Darlymple provides profound insights into the lived realities of devadasis and explains the challenges they confront and also elaborates on the relationship they have with goddess Yellamma. Simulacra create representations disconnected from the fact or truth and bears no resemblance to reality of the world they depict. Dalrymple's narrative diverges from these simulacra and lay bare the hidden realities of the *devadasi*. Traditional narratives frequently portray devadasis as highly revered members of society who are endowed with privileges and respectful status. The tradition equates devadasis with God's wife infusing them with a supposed sanctity and reverence. This representation functions as a form of simulacra that creates a delusion of respect and honour. But the reality of their lives is far more complicated and often fraught with exploitation and marginalisation. "The daughters of Yellamma" provides an example of this dissonance. During a stop at a roadside tea stall on the way to the Yellamma temple, accompanied by Rani Bai and her friend Kaveri, he observes the reactions of onlookers. He notes, "the farmers were loudly speculating at the relationship Rani Bai might have with me, the *firangi*, her cost, what she would and would not do, the pros and cons of her figure, wondering where she worked and whether she gave discounts" (Darlymple 2009: 60). This incident problematises the superficial respect ostensibly conferred upon devadasis by society. It reveals the harsh reality that rather than being revered, devadasis are often objectified and subjected to the male gaze that reduces them to mere sexual commodities and brands them as morally loose women. The incident also underscores the hypocrisy and the dual standards that underpin the perception of devadasis within social and cultural narratives.

Devadasi which is sanctioned by religious beliefs has historically led to the acceptance of women's exploitation and victimisation as a norm under the guise of culture and tradition. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the concept of post-truth, where subjective feelings and faith often override objective truths and facts. Many devadasis, like Rani Bai, are initiated into the tradition at a very young age, sometimes as young as six, by their parents for various reasons. Despite different motivations behind their dedication, almost every girl within this tradition faces a similar fate of exploitation and marginalisation. For example when the nine-year-old Rani Bai was forced into sexual coitus by a twenty-two-year-old man. Nobody thinks of it as child abuse or rape but instead her own aunt pacifies Rani Bai by saying, "You should not cry. This is your dharma, your duty, your work. It is inauspicious to cry" (Darlymple 2009: 61). A tradition that inflicts such atrocities on a child who lacks the understanding of what it means to be a devadasi, cannot be regarded as honourable or respectful. Rani Bai's experiences further highlight the lack of dignity associated with this 'sacred' tradition as she is deceived by a man who fails to fulfil the promised amount to her father after exploiting her body. It is not just the outsiders who betray Rani, but her own family fails her on multiple occasions. First her parents dedicate her without her consent as they saw it solely as a solution to their poverty without considering the consequences for her well-being. Then her own aunt deceives her by taking her to Mumbai under false pretence and sells her to a brothel madam. Later her lover abandons her when she refuses to bear more of his illegitimate children. The hardships that young Rani Bai face serve as evidence of how *devadasi* symbolises a world steeped in simulacra.

It is the illusions created by traditional norms that keep women like her detached from the harsh realities of their situation. The tradition constructs a delusional sense of honour and respect for these women and fills their lives with a semblance of purpose and social standing that disguises their exploitation and victimisation. As shown in the narrative:

> When a child is born, they make a cap for the baby from one of our old saris. They hope then that the love of Yellamma will be on that child. If a girl is getting married, they take a piece of coral from us devadasis and they put it in the girl's mangalsutra [wedding necklace]. If they do this, they believe the woman will experience long life and never suffer widowhood. … unlike other women, we can inherit our father's property. No one ever dares curse us. And when we die, the Brahmins give us a special cremation ceremony (Darlymple 2009: 72).

These traditions create a facade of respect and pride for the devadasis and makes them believe that their roles confer a sacred purpose and social respect. Therefore, they start perceiving their exploitation as an inherent part of the tradition. For devadasis like Rani Bai, life does not become easier after their dedication, contrary to what the dominant narratives suggest. But it is at this point that the true challenges and tribulations begin. Despite the illusion of reverence and respect, the reality of their lives is marred by systemic exploitation and hardship.

Among many realities lies the fact that for devadasis, Yellamma is seen as their saviour and *devadasi* as a cure for their powerlessness. Rani Bai's words explain her vulnerability while keeping her faith intact, "we must continue this work if we are to eat. We have a lot of misery to bear. But that is our tradition. That is our karma. … If it wasn't for [Yellamma], how could an illiterate woman like me earn Rs 2,000 in a day?" (Darlymple 2009: 73) This faith provides them with a sense of comfort but also serves as a distraction from realising their entry into a life full of bondage. It is religion and faith that sustain them in an unjust world. Darlymple also points out that "For the very poor, and the very pious, the *devadasi* system is still seen as providing a way out of poverty while gaining access to the blessings of the gods, the two things the poor most desperately crave" (Darlymple 2009: 70). These women do not question or refute their circumstances but instead accept them as they are, and this later becomes their reality. In *devadasi* system, emotions and faith take precedence over practicality and truth. *Devadasi's* deep rooted religious sanction creates a powerful narrative that both comforts and confines women like Rani Bai and blinds them to the exploitative nature of their reality and reinforces the acceptance of their plight.

Sudha Murthy's "Three thousand stitches" addresses the theme of rehabilitation of devadasis following the official/legal ban on their dedication. The narrative portrays the adversities Murthy encounters in order to earn the trust of devadasi women and highlights their initial resistance and scepticism towards Murthy – an outsider in helping them. Murthy as a representative of the "Infosys Foundation" embarks on a mission to uplift the *devadasi* community but despite her numerous attempts to offer assistance, she was continuously rebuffed by the women she sought to help. This resistance accentuates how these women had come to terms with their circumstances and felt no need for external intervention. They even inform Murthy, "We don't need your help. Our goddess will help us in difficult times" (Murthy 2017: 5). This response echoes the sentiments of Darlymple's Rani Bai who in spite of the exploitation chose to place her trust in Yellamma. The devadasis' steadfast faith and rejection of Murthy's support highlight their entrenchment in a reality constructed by their faith. Devadasis who are the victims of government's decisions and social reforms continue to cling to their faith and perceives it as a more reliable source of support than any other external aid. This belief system is reinforced over centuries and creates a 'hyperreality' where the oppressive nature of their situation is concealed by the appearance of religious sanctity and divine protection.

"Three thousand stitches" addresses the question of what happened to devadasis and their community following the legal abolition of the practice in India. While historical, political, and legal narratives often highlight the social interventions that led to the lawful ban on the dedication of women as devadasis and depict abolition as a pivotal step towards a hope for new beginning. However, these narratives often overlook the difficulties of how the *devadasi* adapted to their new lives post-abolition. They usually emphasise the process of 'new beginning' without offering a detailed account from devadasis' perspective. The romanticised or simulacra driven version primarily focuses on the social sanitisation or moral cleansing that motivated the

anti-nautch and devadasi reform movements. It neglects the issues and continuous struggles faced by the *devadasi* community in forging a new identity and social standing. The reform constructs a binary of good versus evil with the abolition seen as a heroic act of saving women from degradation.

The narrative acknowledges the decline in the status of women who once enjoyed financial independence. Being a devadasi was not just a source of livelihood for them, but it also provided meaning and purpose to their lives. Upon the ban on the tradition, the women were stripped of their economic means abruptly. The moral righteousness behind abolishing *devadasi* and framing it as a liberation from exploitation and degradation appeals to the emotions and moral beliefs of the broader society which was not necessarily grounded in the devadasis' own experiences and needs. This is the reason why the legal abolition of *devadasi* exists more on paper than in practice. The tradition continues to persist in various forms across different regions which as a reality is also highlighted in the narratives of Murthy and Dalrymple. One devadasi informs Murthy, "Our greatest difficulty is supporting our children's education. Most of the time we can't afford their school fees and then we have to go back to what we know to get quick money" (Murthy 2017: 11). This highlights how the economic pressures force many women to continue in the practice despite its legal prohibition and how the lack of viable economic alternatives traps women in a cycle of exploitation. The abolition is presented as a victory for human rights and dignity and creates a simulacrum that overlooks the hardships and identity crises the devadasis endured post-reform. The abolition was seen as an illusion of progress and moral superiority which does not necessarily translate into tangible benefits for the devadasis.

Murthy's narrative recognises the dual nature of the devadasi reform and rehabilitation as she highlights both the potential for liberation and the significant resistance she encountered from within the *devadasi* community itself. Murthy recalls an incident where, "some pimps threw acid on three devadasis who had left their profession for good" (Murthy 2017: 13). The incident presents the stark contrast between the idealised representation of *devadasi* and the harsh realities faced by its participants. It points that severe reprisals can befall those who seek to break free and emphasise the perilous reality that *devadasi* in contemporary practice has become closely associated with 'prostitution' (Murthy 2017: 2). This new constructed reality of *devadasi* is upheld by those who benefit from the exploitation of women. The transition out of this life was fraught with great dangers and difficulty. Despite concerted efforts by social workers to raise awareness among devadasis, there remains a pervasive sense of defeat as faith and the basic human need for survival often outweigh institutional efforts to reform or eradicate the practice.

4. Conclusion

The select narratives deal with the issues related to *devadasi/jogini* with a different focus yet the caste and class politics that affect the characters in the stories are quite similar. Baudrillard claims that "in the media and consumer society, people

are caught up in the play of images, spectacles, and simulacra, that have less and less relationship to an outside, to an external 'reality', to such an extent that the very concepts of the social, political, or even 'reality' no longer seem to have any meaning (quoted in Kellner 2020). The simulacra romanticize the dark realities of *devadasi/jogini* through a portrayal of a glorious life filled with devotion and respect, but the stories deconstruct the exploitation and reveal the underlying truth. In "But why shouldn't the Baindla woman ask for her land?" Saayamma despite being a jogini finds no place in society; she is denied her ancestral land and even the right to cremate her dead husband. The simulacrum of *jogini* creates a false narrative that these women are revered as priestesses, a status that elevates them above their peers. In truth, they are trapped in a cycle of poverty and oppression and are unable to claim their rightful place in society or even perform basic familial duties, as seen in Saayamma's inability to cremate her own husband. In "Raw wound", Syamamma escaped being dragged into the clutches of *jogini* but she and her family lose everything in the struggle. Other characters like Balappa and Saayamma are representative of arduous resistance. Balappa's struggle to keep her daughter away from being a jogini puts into perspective that the *jogini* system doesn't only have women at the centre of victimization, but men too are affected by it.

Society's keepers like Patel and Dora always resort to unnecessary tactics to scare people and create fear so that they can exploit one's faith and run their businesses. Shyamala's world is divided into the binaries of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' where the former defines the latter's identity. In "But why shouldn't the Baindla woman ask for her land?" it is the class and caste dynamics that make the 'erpula' either a priestess for the downtrodden Dalits or the village prostitute for the upper-class men like Patel. The oppressor is deemed capable of spinning traditions in the name of truth to grasp power and continues dominating the subjects. The rules established by the upper class are also used by the Dalits to establish a hierarchy among themselves and the joginis like Saayamma and Syamamma are its multisided victims.

Shyamala exposes duality of caste discrimination in Saayamma's life through the incident of her husband's death who belongs to the "*mudiraju*" caste that ranks higher than the "*baindla*" among the Dalit community. Saayamma being a woman from the lower caste is denied to carry out the rights of a wife after her husband's death and she is labelled as his mistress whose relation was only limited to physical pleasures. It is the tradition that makes a *jogini* woman a priestess among her kin, but the upper-class vultures seek this as a chance to undermine her skills as a keeper of traditions and reduce her identity to the prey object of the male gaze. Shyamala's story writing is not only confined to portraying oppression but also delivers a strong message of resistance. By deconstructing the romanticised and distorted representations of *jogini*, Shyamala exposes the socio-cultural systems that exploit faith and tradition to maintain hierarchical power structures and celebrates the resilience and strength of those who resist and seek to reclaim their lives.

Darlymple and Murthy's narrative are no different from Shyamala's fictional world. Darlymple's conversation with Rani Bai and her friend Kaveri exposes the manipulation of societal beliefs and the perpetuation of a misleading image that

benefits those in power while maintaining the subjugation of devadasis. In Murthy's "Three thousand stitches" the devadasis' unwavering faith in their goddess and their resistance to external assistance suggests how constructed realities can persist even in the face of efforts to dismantle them. In rejecting Murthy's assistance, the devadasis not only affirm their faith but also uphold the simulacrum of their tradition. In both narratives the tradition takes the role of the central character as well as the major theme. These narratives depict *devadasi* as a tradition that has evolved into something far removed from its original cultural and religious connotations. Over a period of time *devadasi* has been distorted into a form of systemic exploitation closely associated with prostitution. The modern reality of *devadasi* as described by Darlymple and Murthy contrasts sharply with the romanticised historical image. This shift exemplifies Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra where representations become detached from reality and begin to perpetuate a hyperreality i.e. a world of representations that precedes and defines the real. Darlymple and Murthy emphasise the problems in addressing social issues that are deeply embedded in cultural and religious narratives, where emotional truths and simulacra can conceal the harsh realities of exploitation and hinder progress towards genuine change.

The fabrication of the narratives around *devadasi/jogini* deviates from the responsibility of carrying the burden of the 'de-universalization' as the narratives are camouflaged in hegemonic colours/simulacra. Prof. Yuval Noah Harari argues, "Homo sapiens have always preferred power over truth and have invested more time and effort in ruling the world than in trying to understand it" (Brahms 2020: 3). Harari's power/truth analogy can also be analysed to depict how multiple micro-narratives shape the current understanding of *devadasi*. Social institutions like religion, culture, and caste supplement *devadasi/jogini* with distinctive myths, superstitions, rituals, customs and traditions that normalised victimisation and oppression. The fragmented stories born out of certain ideologies take shape as individual narratives and therefore, serve as a platform to further hegemonic/patriarchal agendas. In conclusion, it can be said that the artistic and cultural discourses are essential parts of the *devadasi* legacy. Still, if one only concentrates on these aspects, one may unintentionally ignore the harsh historical realities that the women who practice this tradition faced – such as harassment and victimisation. The dominance of a post-truth, simulacra-based narrative can lead to policies and interventions that fail to address the root causes and the true needs of *devadasi*.

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