

# DEVADASI

~Mrinalini Prusty

“Amma,<sup>1</sup> are these beautiful sarees for me?”

“Yes! Since your father has fallen ill, you’ve to ‘work’ to support our family of 8”.

This is what 7 year old, Sitavva asked her mother. Little did Sitavva know that in exchange of these glamorous sarees, she would have to forfeit her innocence.

Devadasi, a Sanskrit term, which means slaves of the God, has been prevalent in the southern parts of our country. Since they were married to God, they were treated as equivalent to Goddesses and used to hold a high position in the society. But with the passage of time, this practice became a pretext for priests and rich people to exploit these women, specifically of lower classes. The word “term” is undermining the agony they’ve been through behind the curtains.

Sitavva Joddati is one of those women, who became the prey of this age-old practice at the age of 7. I came across her when I was in school through a fundraising programme. I was only 16 at that time and was grappling with the thought of being sold to someone. After being provoked with thoughts about her story, I knew I had to fathom the exact depth of pain Sitavva’s words carried and how she made life better for them.

Sitavva’s arduous journey started at Saundatti festival<sup>2</sup> where the venomous grasp of this custom arose first owing to labile thoughts of the society paired-up with hegemonic masculinity.

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<sup>1</sup> Colloquial word means mother in South India.

<sup>2</sup> Hindu festival celebrated in the state of Karnataka

Followed by 9-day ritual, all it took was a red-white beaded necklace to declare the girl as Devadasi before the community.

Being a girl of 7, Sitavva was unaware of the happenings.

Her Amma forced this to the subsequent pattam<sup>3</sup> of this custom. She pleaded. She begged. She cried. She insisted to work in paddy fields and support the family. But in the end, her Amma sold her to a man and took money from him. Parents gave birth to them and imprisoned them in this inevitable cycle of misery and humiliation.

Basivi! Jogini! Muralis! These are few of the names with which people like her are addressed as. But let me tell you, these are the names which have allowed people to take sexual advantage of them. Because of these names, their children get alienated. And because of this custom to respect Goddess Yellamma and God Khandoba, they were proclaimed as Devadasi.

By the age of 17, she already has had 3 children without a surname, it is when she had an epiphany and her child was the reason behind, who asked, 'If you are married to God that makes God my father. How can I marry my father?'. This was the turning point. She was about to take a step outside the dark life of Devadasi, but meeting Latamala, the then managing director of Women Development Corporation was the last straw. That is when she decided to join Mahila Abhivrudhi Samrakshana Samsthe(MASS) in 1997 to save girls like her who were forced involuntarily into this system.

Her voice against the practice saw a rise in the dissenters within a week. Till now, the committee has over 3000 members. Sitavva toiled hard to elevate the status of ex-Devadasis and Dalit families who are more susceptible to this custom and has created 300 SHGs for their financial freedom and has saved 4000 women.

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<sup>3</sup> Level or phase

Sitavva went a whole nine yards to ensure that no child loses its childhood and access to education and that no other Sitavva is born.

The biggest barrier faced has been the societal mindset. The incapability to look beyond principles taught by our ancestors and its preservation in the name of culture is what makes people unable to look beyond the confines. No superstitions can immobilise those who are educated.

Sitavva, the Padma Shri Awardee-2018. For what she has done to break free-out of the shackles of the age-old custom, she deserves this more than anyone else.

Hearing Sitavva's story tears rolled down my eyes. Hats off to her bravery. She is a torch-bearer for many girls. She is an embodiment of empowerment and ensures no other girl becomes a victim of lust in the garb of Devadasi. She now spreads message of olive branch and dignity.

## **BRIEF BIOGRAPHY**

Hello. My name is Mrinalini Prusty and I belong to the Republic of India. I am currently pursuing a masters in Public health entomology from ICMR- Vector control research centre, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu. According to the vedas, my name signifies a lotus. Even though a lotus has its roots in the mud and mucky areas of the ponds, despite of that it evades the water currents to emerge as the most divine beautiful flower. And that's what makes a woman.

And here I'm, on behalf of women, women who have been forced into the vicious cycle of superstitions and taboos. Writing for women and standing for them has piqued my interest ever since I was a teenager. But besides that, I'm fond of reading novels. Some of my favourite writers are Kavita Kane, Khaled Hosseini, Jhumpa Lahiri.....

To cue in... "Marriage can wait, education cannot"

-A Thousand Splendid Suns, Khaled Hosseini