

# **ABOLITION OF DEVADASI SYSTEM**

## **1. THE BROTHELS BILL**

The Select Committee on the Brothels Bill has met during the last week, and several witnesses have been examined. We understand that the Committee will meet again in July or August in order to consider the Bill in the light of the evidence gathered. Almost all the witnesses, have dwelt, in the first place, upon the imperative necessity of some sort of legislation in this matter. There are only differences in methods of the "Suppression of brothels and immoral traffic". Though we cannot be sanguine about the success of completely rooting out this vicious practice, we are sure the passing of this Bill will do a great deal towards the Devadasis Bill, which is on the anvil of legislation. It is an indisputable fact that the brothels are a curse to Hindu society. They have multiplied enormously, in towns and cities. Youths fall a prey to this enticing demon, and young girls are ruined for ever. If Miss Mayo's statistics reveal an appalling figure of people suffering from venereal diseases, especially in cities, it shows but the degeneration of our society. By this, we do not mean that other countries are entirely free from this vice.

The witnesses have given their suggestions as to how the brothels are to be closed. Two of three witnesses have stated that licensed brothel houses may be recommended as a first step. Though a wise suggestion, it will not serve the purpose of the Bill, for the licensed prostitutes themselves (who will be naturally very small in number) will in course of time, become the storehouses of disease. Moreover, it will only entail a concentrated attention on a limited scale, which will in no way serve the purpose of the Bill. Some of the witnesses have stated that the Bill shall be confined for the present to Madras, where there are better facilities for trying the experiment than in the mofussil. When it is made why that poverty is potent cause for the increase of commercialized vice, it is essential that the application of the Act is extended to the mofussil also. The act, we suppose, is not intended to reform the morals of the people. It is an impossibility. Morality cannot be forced upon a people, but it is a thing which should be felt instinctively. The aim of the Bill is to protect the public from annoyance and from vices anti social. The passing of this Act will also minimize, to a great extent, the abnormal increase of people suffering

from venereal diseases. This will be a boon to our society at least so far as it checks open commerce at the expense of minor girls.

Another point at issue is whether the Devadasis may also be brought under this Act. Queerly enough one of the witnesses has stated, that the Devadasis should be exempted as they are following the profession in accordance with the Hindu customs. Another has stated that they follow the Gandharva system of Hindu marriages, and hence should not be classified as prostitutes. Perhaps these witnesses hold that the Devadasis being the mistresses of "the heavenly father" will not stoop to be so low, as to entice ordinary mortals. Fanciful indeed! Let not the advocates of Hinduism try to establish their reputation in this sphere also. It is enough if they direct their well merited attention towards other things. Though some of the witnesses have distinguished between a Devadasi and a prostitute, we are of the conviction that it is only the institution of the Devadasis that has encouraged prostitution in the country. The dedication of girls to temples has attracted bigger crowds to these places, and consequently the profession has extended to other communities also. In this connection, we like to refer the readers to Gandhiji's criticism of Hindu temples, as the homes of prostitutes. When such is the case we wonder how there can be a distinction between a Devadasi and a prostitute. Both are identically the same, so far as the vice and its effects are concerned. The Devadasis may be earning from the temples, but it is undeniable that they earn through the temples. This is the special advantage which the Devadasis have over the prostitutes. Hence the greater necessity for wiping out the former.

As regards the vesting of power in the hands of the Commissioner of Police, the witnesses have been a little reluctant. Certainly too much of power in the hands of the police in general, as regards social matters, may tend to its misuse. But it cannot be denied that the police is the only department which can handle the problem at all, with some amount of success. It is also necessary that all social workers and other organization like the Vigilance Association should actively participate in the work, and help the Commissioner in all possible ways. The services of the Public Health Department should also be utilized with great benefit.

The constructive proposals of the Bill, such as starting vocational training schools for women, establishing Industrial Homes, and training the victims as nurses and midwives, need the special attention of the government. It is only these constructive methods that can save the situation. It is only these that can effectively handle the problem. These are the only methods by which suitable provisions can be made for the custody and proper treatment of rescued girls. Compulsory medical treatment of diseased prostitutes is also quite essential. The disease is eating into the very vitals of Hindu society, and the degradation of the race has already begun. If the Bill really aims at the stopping of indiscriminate sexual intercourse, if it really aims at wiping out commercialized vice, and keeping away minor girls from environments which lead to prostitution, the constructive proposals mentioned above, should receive the immediate attention of the government. The penalizing of the keeping of brothels, and inflicting fines and punishments on the brothel keepers will be very effective in checking the overgrowth of brothels in all towns and cities. As it is the police is not vested with adequate power to take the initiative in the matter.

The main object of the Bill, we understand is “to remove the removable causes of the temptations”. As we have pointed out already, the evil cannot be entirely suppressed without the goodwill of the people. Srimathi Ramamirithammal, one of the witnesses, has wisely pointed out that the law should be very rigorous and should come into force immediately. About the institution of Devadasis, she says, “the number of Devadasis, who had taken to the profession purely for religious reasons, would be very small. None except a few rich people a few temple trustees and those who traffic in the prostitutes support the institution. The dedication of girls to prostitution in the name of religion should be abolished by means of strict legislation”. We hope the Select committee would use the materials it has gathered in the best possible ways and do its utmost in ridding the society of its age long curse

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## **2. SEX EQUALITY LEAGUE**

A Reuter's message reports the proceedings of a Conference in London of the British Commonwealth League, which aims at securing sex equality. Mrs. Jinarajadasa spoke on the evils of the system of Devadasis and prostitution in India and said that the majority of the people in India were anxious for social reform, but whenever any regulation or Bill was introduced in the legislatures, Government always opposed it. She appealed to the various women's organisations of the Empire to pass resolutions urging the Secretary of State and the Viceroy to yield to the people's wishes. A resolution was passed congratulating Dr. Muthulakshmi of the Madras Legislative Council on the introduction of her Bill dealing with devadasis and abolition of the system of dedicating infants to Hindu temples.

*-Revolt, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1929*

**3. A SOCIAL WORKER PROSECUTED.**  
**CASE AGAINST MISS RAMAMIRTHA AMMAL.**

Our correspondent from Mayavaram writes: Miss Ramamirtha Ammal, well known in Mayavaram district as a Congress worker and later as a propagandist of the Self-respect movement is now conducting a campaign against the institution of Devadasis and has already brought about hundreds of marriages of girls dedicated to the immoral trade. Her enthusiasm for the cause of fallen women has involved her in a criminal prosecution.

It appears that Miss. Ramamirtham attempted to persuade one Dasi-Thangam, resident of Moovalur, aged twenty and a relation of Miss Ramamirtham promised to help Dasi Thangam in securing a decent husband.

The mother of Dasi Thangam however got incensed at the prospect of the daughter leaving off the profession and a quarrel seems to have ensued.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of last month the mother of Dasi Thangam filed a complaint in the Mayavaram sub-magistrate's court against Miss Raamamirtham and six others alleging that the

accused used criminal force against the complainant and her two sons in an attempt to carry away Dasi Thangam with a view to rescue her from the profession .The case in posted to the 17<sup>th</sup> September for hearing. Much interest is aroused here in the case.

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