

## The Impact of Sudha Murthy's Work on Ancient Devdasi Tradition

Vasantha Pillai

Research Scholar, Dr. C V Raman University, Kargi Road, Kota, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh

Dr. Manisha Dwivedi

Professor, Dr. C V Raman University, Kargi Road, Kota, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh

### Abstract

A woman plays a vital role in every historical era from the Vedic civilization to the present stage of the world. However, the status of women has not been changed to date. She is been portrayed as weak and soft both emotionally and in physical nature soul with the human nature, whereas men are considered to be strong and hard by dominating the women. Even though the world has grown with trending technology and science it is only one thing that has not changed is the ancient traditional practice. However, the portrayal of women has been broken by many feminists and the women from Purana like Seetha in Ramayana going for vanavasa with Rama through their ability to overcome the hardness in their day-to-day life. In the ancient days when kings ruled their kingdom, they gave more importance to the Art and dance forms which were also the domination powers held by them against women. India is one such country for all multi-cultured nations with all kinds of the practice of old tradition. One of them is the Devdasi system which has been practiced since the period of the seventh century in the region of Cholas, Cheras, and the Pandya's. In these practices, women were treated as female slaves of God for kings and these practices existed in one of the southern parts of Karnataka until one powerful woman stood up against it by making revolutionary literature. Sudha Murthy a prominent and courageous social worker broke the gender disparity and practices through spending time with them and making them come out of it for a normal life in flying colors. This was an evidential proof in one of her books named "Three Thousand Stitches". Let us see in detail, how women have come across the barriers of crossing the evils in the society from ancient practices.

**Keywords:** Devdasi, Sudha Murthy, Gender, Tradition, Ancient, Woman, Feminists.

### Introduction

India is a land of traditions and cultures. Known for its diversity, Indian history comprises vivid practices that hail from centuries ago. But as times pass, every practice, tradition, and culture undergoes reformation. It could either end up being good or bad. Many such reformations are penned down in the books of history. One such age-old practice or tradition is that of Devdasi. The Devdasi tradition has been dated back to the 7th century during the period of the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas. This practice is majorly seen in the parts of southern India, especially in states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and

Maharashtra. Apart from these locations, we can also see this practice followed in places like Odisha, Assam, and others. The Devdasi system in Karnataka was seen in the Belgaum District of the state. The Devdasi system was giving away young girls to the temple as offerings. This practice involved the tradition of getting young girls married to the deity. These young women were taught rites and rituals of the temple along with dance and music. They spent their time in service to the temple and their lord. The Devdasi had a high position in the community back in time. These women were considered "Akhandasoubhagyavathi" (to be eternally

married and free from widowhood) and hence they were a vital part of many ceremonious ongoings. The Chola Empire supported the Devdasi system and encouraged its growth. But later, the Devdasis lost their artistic selves. Centuries later, when the British came into rule, these Devdasis were seen and interpreted to be Temple Prostitutes. The practice diminished and lost its chastity. Since then, the Devdasi tradition has seen a downfall reformation. In the times of the late 20th century and early 21st century, the Devdasi practice has evolved to become unscrupulous. The Devdasi community is now comprised of lower caste women from the Valmiki and Madiga tribes. The Devdasis has now become synonymous with sex workers. As and when a girl in the community attains her puberty, she is given into prostitution. Girls as young as 11 years are sent into the system. Sadly, the family members themselves become pimps and agents who lead the girls into this system. The younger the girl is, the higher she is paid. These girls have their first sexual partner when they are aged between 11 to 15 years. A woman aged mere 30 years is considered to be old for this system. The community has made this system their means of livelihood. The community, especially these women are so downtrodden that they do not see any other way to earn a living except for prostitution. The Government has taken several measures to help educate the community and show them different means of earning a living. But the community seems to be so innocently ignorant that they are not prepared to accept any changes. Yet there are certain people and organizations who no matter how difficult, try to bring in change, in the lives of these Devdasis.

### **Sudha Murty's Work**

A prolific Indian author, social worker, a computer science and engineering professional- Sudha Murty, is the Chairperson of the Infosys Foundation and an active member of the Gates Foundation for public health care initiatives. She has given a prodigious amount of contribution to literature in both Kannada and English languages. She explains concepts of self-realization, societal taboos, women in the progressing world, and many such topics in a fictional manner in her writing. She also focuses on minutiae details explaining the environment and surroundings of scenes in her writing, which gets the reader even closer to her writing. Few among her notable works are: Dollar Bahu, Mahashweta, Wise and Otherwise, Gently falls the Bakula and the list goes on. She has been honored with many awards for all her works in different fields. A few out of them are as follows: The 'Ojaswini' award for social work in 2001, Daana Chintamani Attimabbe Award was given by the Government of Karnataka, and many others. She was also felicitated with India's fourth highest civilian award- The Padma Shri in the year 2006 for her incredible social work by the Government of India.

Three Thousand Stitches- is another literary work of Sudha Murty which exclusively talks about the Devdasi system in Karnataka and how she contributed to the betterment of that community. It all started when she started working in the non-profit organization of the Infosys Foundation. The main objective behind the foundation was "Bahujan hitaya, Bahujan sukhaya" which means (the welfare of many is the happiness of many). The foundation engaged itself into many social causes like malnutrition, rural development, education, and many

others and so did Sudha Murty. Yet, she thought about one major issue all the while—The Devdasi System. She begins her narration by recalling one of her visits to the Yellamma Gudda (Renuka Temple), Belgaum. She elegantly expresses her first visuals of the Devdasis, and quotes about their green saris and bangles, the smears of turmeric powder, their thick long hair with coconut, neem leaves, and Kalash (metal pot) which she gazed at as she entered the temple. She then thinks of making the Devdasis her first project. She decided to proceed and went to meet them with a plan and with all her zeal. She was dressed in a pair of jeans with a t-shirt and a cap on. She wore no accessories instead carried a notebook and pen. As she walked towards the temple, she saw a group of Devdasis sitting under a tree, chatting and picking lice from the each-others head. She went up to them and greeted them which interrupted their conversation. She told them that she was there to help them and asked them to share their problems with her and she would pen them down. They seemed less interested and asked the author to leave, but she persisted. She tried telling them about the dangerous illness AIDS and how they could be exposed to it, but in no time one among the Devdasi throws one of her chappals at the author. The author felt humiliated and fled from there. She later decided that she would never go back to them. But a couple of days later, the author felt that the Devdasis would have not had a good state of mind on that day and hence they reacted in that manner. She thought that she must visit and try to speak to the Devdasis once again. It was the season of the tomato harvest and all the Devdasis had baskets of oval-shaped red tomatoes that they were sharing among themselves. She

went up to them and asked them to hear her out. This time they denied her with a smile and instead asked her if she would like to have some tomatoes. She was not interested in the tomatoes and they were not interested in her. She again tried to speak about AIDS and how the government was creating awareness about it. But in return, they asked her if she was a government agent or belonged to a political party. And one among them felt that she might be a journalist, hearing this the others started throwing tomatoes at her. This time the author broke down, she sobbed her way back home. She thought that the field of social work is a misfit for her and decided to resign. On reaching home, she sat down to draft her resignation letter. As she was drafting the letter, she was noticed by her father. He comes up to the author and asks her what was happening? She tells him the entire episode. On hearing the story, he does not sympathize with the author rather corrects her way of approach. He gives her ice cream and tells her to narrow her expectations because the Devdasi tradition or the practice of prostitution is not a small issue. He further explains to her how people have been trying to eliminate the practice but has not worked. He tells her not to change the world but reduce her goal. Hence, he tells her “I will feel very proud knowing that I gave birth to a daughter who helped ten helpless women make the most difficult transition from being sex workers to independent women.” The author counter questions her father by telling him how she was attacked with chappals and tomatoes and how the Devdasis would not be ready to listen to her. He told her to dress in a sari, with mangalsutra, bindi, and a tie on her hair and that would make her more receivable. He also said that he would join

her too. But she was reluctant in changing her appearance, to which he said that she will have to change first before changing them. She thought a lot about changing her look and what she needed for her field. She realized that the field of social work does not demand glamour, money, or language. Thereafter, she decided to change her look. This time when she had to meet the Devdasis, she was dressed in a sari with a big bindi, glass bangles, and a mangalsutra. She tied her hair and adorned it with flowers. She said that she had transformed herself into a stereotypical 'Bharatiya Nari (Indian Woman) and took her father along with her. They went together to the Devdasis. On seeing the author's father, the Devdasis greeted them with a 'Namaste'. The authors' father introduced her to the Devdasis. He said that she was his daughter and a teacher by profession. He made up a story and told them that the author was here for a holiday and told them that she could help them get scholarships for their children and guide them through if they were willing to. He told them that they could think about it and get back to them in ten minutes. The father-daughter duo left from there and went a short distance away from the Devdasis. The author was not very happy with what had happened. Upon reaching, she asked her father why did he do that? Why didn't he speak to them about AIDS? He replied telling her that she should be starting such things with a positive note and not a negative one. And he told her to first work on scholarships and then think of AIDS. She also questioned him as to why did he introduce her as a teacher? He answered that teaching was considered to be a very respectable job and hence he did so. Later, when they reached back the Devdasis after the ten minutes break, the group was ready

to listen to the author. They addressed her as Akka (elder sister) and so the journey began. As promised the author first looked into educating the Devdasis children and aiding them with scholarships. Months passed, and now the author began to get closer to the clan. The author said that it took three years for her to establish that rapport with the Devdasis. And by now their mutual relation had gotten so strong that the Devdasis would share their heart-wrenching stories with the author. Each one had their own story of how they landed in that profession. Some were sold by their own near and dear ones, while some others hoping to earn some money for living, and a few others were cheated into the profession. They were told that they would get a proper job and were pushed into prostitution. The author used to get emotional hearing them but it was them who used to console her. She understood that each of them there was filled with disgust and shame within themselves. By then, the author realized that donation of money would not help them in any way. She wanted to make them strong, build their confidence levels and their self-esteem. Undoubtedly, the Government of Karnataka had many schemes that would aid them financially but the author wanted them to have a voice and an identity of themselves. Hence, she thought to set up an organization through which they could unite and help each other and in the process, they would, in turn, become strong, bold, and self-sufficient. Thus, the organization of the Devdasis and for the Devdasis was set up. This is when, the author met Abhay Kumar, a young man from Delhi who wanted to intern with her. So, she decided to give him one of the toughest jobs, to test his passion for social work. She told him if he

worked there for eight months and survived then she would think about making him the lead for the project, and so did he do. After eight months one day, he walked into the authors office. She looked at him. He had gone thinner but had a grin on his face. She appreciated him and told him that he could go back to Delhi now. He replied to her in Kannada stating that he was to stay in Karnataka and finish the project. The author couldn't stop his passion and zeal. She ran out of words. Abhay tells how he had come there expecting a desk job and how things changed. He said that working with the Devdasis would be his best job. The author could not do anything but accept his plea. She offered him a stipend which he denied by saying that he had his basic needs. The only things he wanted were two meals a day, a shelter and some money for petrol. She was amazed. He became the lead for the project and the author assisted him along. Later, one day when she met the Devdasis to inquire about their wellbeing they told her that their difficulty lied in educating their children, and if they ran out of money for the same the only option was to get back into sex work to earn quickly. The author promised them that all the children's education regardless of which class and stream they are pursuing will be taken care of and she strictly warned them not to get back into that profession. Many children were given education. There were street plays and camps organized to educate the Devdasis about AIDS. Gradually, they were helped with loans and the author became their guarantor. She said that for once a rich person could cheat her but not these Devdasis. The relationship had mutual faith. On the other side, the author and Abhay were receiving death threats from goons, pimps, and others. The author

arranged for police protection but Abhay refused and said that the Devdasis would be his protection. Sometime later, a few pimps attacked three Devdasis with acid. They were treated and the plastic surgery they underwent built up their confidence even more. These women by now hated the profession and that became the change-makers strength. The women started working on small scales though they were helped by the government schemes. As time passed, night schools were set up for the women. After twelve years, a group of women went up to the author asking her to help them out to start a bank for themselves. On listening to them, the author and Abhay sat down and explained to them the basics and the whereabouts of banking. Further few professionals in the field were consulted and the bank was established. The bank restricted itself only to the Devdasi community. Now the women could save through fixed deposits and could take up loans at very low-interest rates. In the next three years, the bank had a deposit amount of 80 lakh rupees and employed former devdasis. The bigger achievement was that around 3000 women were out of the Devdasi system. On the third anniversary of the bank, the author receives a letter which says that as a mark of celebration the women had organized a small get-together and requested their beloved Akka to join them. They had rented a hall and had arranged lunch for all. They wanted to give their Akka "an all-expenses-paid-trip". Hence, they had booked air-conditioned Volvo bus tickets and room accommodation for her. They said that they had earned this money legally and ethically. This gesture over-whelmed the author. On the day of the celebration, she was present there with Abhay too. There were no long

speeches, unlike the other events. The Devdasi women and their children were present. The celebration started with a song by the Devdasis and continued with the children talking and thanking the organization for what they are now. Some women came up and narrated their journey through the change and then it was the author's turn to speak. Generally, the author is a spontaneous speaker but that day words failed to express her feelings. She could hear her father's words alarm in her ears: "I will feel very proud knowing that I gave birth to a daughter who helped ten helpless women make the most difficult transition from being sex workers to independent women." She felt that for all the blessings God had bestowed on her, she had given something back to the lord- '3000 of his children. She freed them from the cruel Devdasi system. The gathering awaited to listen from her, but she was spellbound. The only thing that came to her mind was a quote that her grandfather had taught her: "O God, I don't need a kingdom nor do I desire to be an emperor. I don't want rebirth or the golden vessels or heaven. I don't need anything from you. O Lord, if you want to give me something, then give me a soft heart and hard hands, so that I can wipe the tears of others." On that note, she rested. Post her talk an old Devdasi went up the stage and stated that they (the devdasis) wanted to gift her something. It was an embroidered bedspread and all the devdasis had stitched some part of it. The old woman said it may not look beautiful but it is "from our hearts to yours" Thus, the author feels that the three thousand stitches were the best gift she ever received.

### **Conclusion**

This journey of Sudha Murty was filled

with ups and downs and it was a rollercoaster ride indeed. Her journey started with tears of embarrassment, humiliation, and insult but ended with tears of joy, pride, sense of achievement. Such a journey cannot happen overnight. It has taken up to seventeen years for her to attain this success. The catch here is that it takes a lot to maintain the zeal throughout. It requires patience, an attitude of never giving up, standing strong in the worst torments, being humble and kind during the journey. The author has left deep messages and is a person of admiration. She has given inspiration to all the young women out there. One can draw inspiration not only from her personality but also from the characters in her stories. For instance, in the story of three thousand stitches, the Devdasi women did not break down and go back to sex-working when they were acid attacked. Instead, they became even more confident and grew with double optimism. One should learn to be confident and optimistic in difficult times through this instance. Apart from the message, the author also gives out another takeaway for the youngsters that in a country like India, many social ailments persist. One must try doing something of their level best to the nation. Paths through such journeys are indeed thorny and difficult, but one must not fear and sit back. Instead, get into the ocean with an honest desire to bring in a micro difference and the waves will lead you through. You will face ups and downs, but never give up and try finding opportunities in every step you take. When great kings and queens like Rama and Sita could withstand the Vanavasa, why can't we? After all, we are humans. Such literary works not only enhance the literature but also give away effective messages to the

readers.

**Reference:**

- [1]. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devadasi#Ancient\\_and\\_medieval\\_period](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devadasi#Ancient_and_medieval_period)
- [2]. Sudha Murty, Three Thousand Stitches from 'Here, There and Everywhere: Best-Loved Stories of Sudha Murty' 2018
- [3]. <https://www.sampark.org/the-present-day-devadasi-system-sexual-exploitation-of-women-in-the-name-of-tradition/?fbclid=IwAR0qg0ABlv9kILyIe19zARDoEiqG-kUme6SRNS0D-HksK5BqnTS8iRh77-A>
- [4]. Secondary sources from articles