

Sanctified Prostitution as Exploitation in Disguise: A Feminist Reading of Arun Ezhuthachan's *Vishudha Papangalude India*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the influence of religion on prostitution as portrayed in *Vishudha Papangalude India*, a travelogue by Arun Ezhuthachan. Through the examination of joining faith, morality, and socio-economic conditions, the study delves into how religious beliefs shape societal perceptions and the lived experiences of sex workers. Through a critical analysis of the text, this research highlights the contradictions between religious ideals and the realities of marginalized communities. The results indicate that religious beliefs not only condemn prostitution but also, ironically, sustain it, providing a complex view of its function in Indian society. This study contributes to the discourse on religion and social marginalization, emphasizing the complexities of moral policing and systemic oppressions. *Vishudha Papangalude India*, is in the form of a Travelogue. Travel books include documentary, literary, as well as the journalistic, and from memoir to the humorous to serious. They are often associated with tourism and include guide books. Like other languages, in Malayalam also travelogues occupy a prominent place. The first travelogue written in Malayalam is *Varthamanappusthakam* by Paremmakkal Thoma Kathanar published in 1936. S.K Pottakkad is one of the most famous travel writers in Malayalam. He visited many foreign countries and wrote about the places. Nowadays, travel writers write about sex workers and their lives. Prostitutes were common during the period of Pandavas and Kauravas. Kautilya's *Arthasasthra* contains rules for prostitutes and their activities, and gives an account of how prostitutes should behave and how their lives are ordered. They have definite liberty, rights and duties. Religious prostitutions were attached to the famous temples of Mahakala of Ujjain and thereafter the system of holy prostitution became very popular. These sacred prostitutes were sacrificed by their parents to the temple in service to the God and temple.

Key words: *Devadasi Tradition, Religion and exploitation, Social Marginalisation, Marginalized women, Socio Religious Practices.*

Vishudha Papangalude India is a famous Malayalam travelogue penned by Arun Ezhuthachan. He is a Malayali Journalist and his work highlights the influence of religion on prostitution as a profession in India. The travelogue shows the role of religion has become a major reason for breaking down thousands of lives. The banned 'devadasi' system in which women who are dedicated to temples for the service of the divinity were forced into sex trade, still exists in many parts of the country, as noted in *Vishudha Papangalude India*. The book says that many of the 'devadasi' are forced into the sex trade to have their daily bread as they are denied normal life and marginalized. It is shocking to know that women are still exploited in the name of centuries old rituals and religious customs. The painful life of widows in Vrindhavan in Uttar Pradesh, who decide to live as Lord Krishna's beloved Radha, is also not different. The interview with some of the widows of vrindhavan, who reached there after being rejected by their families and society, portrays the harsh realities faced by marginalized women in contemporary India.

Arun Ezhuthachan wanted to know the life of bar dancers after dance bars got banned in Mangalore. He started his investigation from a former bar dancer named Suma, she is now working as Sex worker in a hotel. Through this investigation he got to know her past as well as present, from that he understood that she was a devadasi from Dhavankara. Devadasi are known as prostitutes of priests, and others belonging to higher caste. She was forced to sleep

with a number of men both inside and outside the temple, and she was thrown out after their use. Even if the customer paid five hundred, she was only paid two hundred for her service. Such women only need to satisfy their and their kids' tummy. As a throwback to the history of devadasis is that, they were the women who enjoyed high social status, because they were addressed as the wife of God. Some women are considered as the Dasis of God.

Uchangi is a rural village in Northern part of Karnataka. "Maakha Purnami is considered as a special day in the temple, and on this day the young girls are forced to be a devadasi. Laws can't do anything against such practices. The Devadasi system was supported by some of the lower caste and also upper caste people. Lower caste people supported because of their poverty that they can't escape from. Parents were forced to send their daughters to temple hoping they could at least satisfy their stomach. Dhavankara's people believed that this is God's will and no one can remove this even from the books of law made by man. The people over there were instructed to keep the rituals secret. Arun Ezuthachan's narrative is based on real interviews with devadasis such as Jogammas, Yellamas etc. From these women some of them were so proud for being Dasi of God. All these women have the same story to tell, the same struggles. They are thrown out from temple to street after being used and no God will give them money or shelter. Here women are considered as a commodity. Criminals are protected by society and the poor are thrown out to suffer more.

The rituals associated with the devadasi system at Uchangi temple are quite different. Young girls are taken to the top of the hill where they dip themselves in a sacred pond called Anahondai on the Amavasi while remaining entirely naked. After this practice the young girls are adorned with a specific type of chain. And the girls start a new life as a sacred prostitute. During 'Makha Purnami' former Devdasis also come to Uchangi hills for the blessings. Their belief in god never gets shattered even if they are in the darkest phase of life. They even believe that they are going to pay for disobeying God.

Arun Ezuthachan meets advocate Basandhalal and he explains the myth behind the temple. The belief is that Kali had killed a demon. When demons became a threat to others. Uchangi Devi killed the demon by urinating on him from the hilltop. Even though the advocate is highly educated, he also believes in this myth.

Arun Ezhuthachan interviewed some of the victims of the devadasi system. Renuka is a volunteer of Devadas Vijayana Samithi, she denoted devadasi system as a mere prostitution. "Devadasis are the servants of God in daylight and take the role of wife of the rich in the darkness of night" (Ezhuthachan 45) this really portrays the exploitation of devadasis. They are forced to share a bed with a number of people behind the curtain of religion as it is to fulfill the wish of men and at the same time the women who sell their body for food outside the temple are viewed as immoral beings. Devadasis are cruelly exploited inside the four walls of the temple, in the presence of a stone Goddess, powerless to wipe the tears of those poor souls. Sirimani's life was a little better than others. She belonged to the Brahmin community, and her parents wished her to be a devadasi and she considers that as her luck. Her only duty was to entertain God with her knowledge in dance and music. She is very proud to be a devadasi. The ultimate truth is that fate is the same for everyone.

Vrindavan is a home for rejected married women who can be accommodated there, as a woman can become Radha only after their marriage. It is believed that every woman came running to Lord Krishna listening to the magical music produced by his flute. They stopped everything, even feeding their own children. Krishna asked whether this would disturb their husbands, women replied that only Krishna can protect them forever and Krishna was beyond everything to them. Holding the same faith, women come to Vrindhavan hoping for the shelter and protection of Krishna. Dr. Lakshmi, who aims at the welfare of Radhas, expressed her anger on the NGOs working in Vrindavan. Most of the Radhas were denied their rights. The government has allowed three thousand rupees for the funeral ceremony of Radhas in Vrindavan. But these NGOs snatch this money and many Radhas' bodies are thrown into the Yamuna River covered in a sack. Even their corpses are not given enough respect. Dr Lakshmi's life changed when her daughter gave birth to a girl child. Her daughter and child were rejected by her husband which was an extreme shock for her. This made her begin a journey for the helpless women who are dragged to the street cruelly by their own parents and relatives.

Arun Ezhuthachan visited the brothels in Sonagachi as a customer and he interviewed a young girl named Koyal. She is a Nineteen year old girl from a rural village in Maharashtra, her parents sold their two daughters for ten thousand rupees to a woman named Didi. Koyal says that she used to get three or four customers each day and they pay money

to Didi, she also says that she can never escape from this prostitution.

The author interviewed Nandha from Ujjain, to share her story and her life was much different from others. Nandha recollects the image of Suneetha, the leader of devadasis who instructed them to practice mujra. Their knowledge in mujra earned them a huge amount of money. Young girls were the main attraction and they earned more. Suneetha added many girls to their group from different poor families and money started flowing to them. She is very famous for entertaining rich people with new and young female bodies and was known as queen of Ujjain among the zamindars there. The life of Mujra dancers, who were former devadasis changed with the arrival of Maha Kumbh Mela, in which famous saints participated.

Around ten years back when sages visited here the then

The government displaced us by saying that our presence will spoil the holiness. We have given time but we haven't left. Where should we go? (Ezhuthachan 170).

This portrays the helplessness of prostitutes. They are always considered impure and they are not accommodated in any place in India. So the government ordered devadasis to leave the place, fearing that the purity of that festival would get ruined if sanyasis started visiting them. The former queen of Ujjain can now be spotted on the roads of Ujjain as a mad beggar woman searching for a loaf of bread.

Another woman was Vijaya. "When it was not obeyed, he would yell at her and pull her hair" (Ezhuthachan 181) in most parts of the world we can see that women are physically abused by men for their needs, here Vijaya faced the same from a customer who visited her. She is a member of a rescue operation in Kamathipura. After her father's death, her uncle brought her to one of the brothels under the control of a transgender. After three days she was forced to share the bed with a stranger.

Vijaya couldn't be recognized as a woman until her voice came out. Because she is dressed up as a man and her hair is cut short. She had to bear a lot of pain due to her hair which attracted more customers. She was dragged through the floor pulling her long hair whenever she refused to sell herself. She hates every womanly character and organs in her because they gave her nothing other than immense pain and sufferings. After escaping from the brothel, she started working as a volunteer of an NGO named Navajeevan for the welfare of sex workers. Society sees them as shameful creatures. People spit on them without knowing her life stories.

Vishudha Papangalude India gives us a clear image of how society views the same practice through different perspectives. Sacred prostitutes are approached with high respect. Using the name of God, they turn temples into sacred brothels where the female body is marketed for money. Both devadasis and sex workers in red-light districts are doing the same job, but devadasis are protected by the shield of religion until they are expelled from the temple. In reality, God doesn't earn anything from the devadasi system. Such systems are the ideas of rich men who are longing for sexual pleasure outside their bedrooms.

Prostitution is not a new word to the world. Sex work is considered as the most immoral job. Prostitutes sell their body to win their daily bread. In rural villages of the States like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan etc exists various blind religious beliefs that can break down many lives. One among them is the devadasi system, which still exists. No one dares to question such systems; they are made to believe that they are a way of serving God.

Caste has a major role in raising such blind systems. Girls from poor and low caste families are forced into the devadasi system. Lower caste people faced a strong marginalization, but women were more victimized. Religion is the main weapon used by the upper class to control the lives of poor people according to their desires. Devadasis who later turned to street prostitutes are the victims of such blind religious rituals. Devadasis are thrown out of the temple once their charm is lost. Vrindhavan where Lord Krishna spent his glorious youth is also a place where women are exploited.

Widows have always been a burden for everyone including the society and their family. The painful saga of the women who are fated to live as Krishna's beloved Radhas are also not different. But they were provided with shelter till they died. Sonagachi, the place where such blind beliefs still exist. Sex workers believe that what they are doing is for the

blessings of Lord Kali. Women serve more than three or four men in Sonagachi. The religious concept in Sonagachi is a trick to attract former devadasis who have dedicated their lives to god. The Devadasi system has changed many women's lives and it was the beginning step to prostitution for many. As per the law devadasi system is not in practice anywhere, but there are a number of young women who had dedicated their life to god in rural villages of States like Karnataka, in Arun Ezhuthachan's book. Devadasis were not allowed to marry or lead a normal family life. *Vishudha Papangalude India* penned by Arun Ezuthachan had found forty six thousand devadasis in Karnataka. Even in the twenty-first century, religion secretly supports sacred prostitution. We also see that laws shut their eyes before such criminal offences.

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