The Mathamma system

What is the issue?

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Devadasi system is still prevalent with a name of Mathamma system in few parts of south India.

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What is Devadasi system?

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- It’s a practice that is widely believed to have been abandoned decades ago.
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- In South and parts of Western India, a devadasi is a girl "dedicated" to worship and service of a deity or a temple for the rest of her life.
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- The age group of a girl to be converted as devadasi is 8–16 years.
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- Originally, in addition to taking care of the temple and performing rituals, these women learned and practiced classical Indian artistic traditions like Bharatanatya and Odissi dances.
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What are the actions taken against devadasi system?

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- During colonial times, reformists worked towards outlawing the devadasi tradition on grounds that it supported prostitution.
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- The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act is a law that was enacted on 1947 just after independence.
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- The law gave devadasis the legal right to marry and made it illegal to dedicate girls to Hindu temples.
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- Before the bill became law, devadasis were not allowed to marry due to society taboo, and continued prostitution.
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- In 1988 Andhra Pradesh passed Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act and Dedication of women act.
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What is Mathamma system?

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- The practice of “offering” girl children to Goddess Mathamma which is widely practiced by Madiga community and other adjoining communities.
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- It thrives in the districts of Chittoor in Andhra Pradesh and Tiruvallur in Tamil Nadu.
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- As part of the ritual, girls are dressed as brides and once the ceremony was over, their dresses are removed by five boys, virtually leaving them naked.
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- They are then forced to live in the Mathamma temples, deemed to be public property, and face sexual exploitation.
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- At present, there are an estimated 1,000 Mathammas in the Chittoor district, of them 363 are children in the age group of 4-15.
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- The Mathamma system has its equivalent in other regions of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.
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How girl children are affected by this system?

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- Girls are exploited, and forced to live as sex workers, and are unable to leave the exploitative system due to social pressures.
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- Few girl children are dedicated to the system right from age of three and live without marriage for life.
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- Many die old and lonely and sick as they are forced to sleep in the Mathamma temples or outside the homes where they work as domestic help.

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Why government cannot take any action against Mathamma?

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- The Dedication of Women (Prohibition) Act has had no effect on the Mathamma system in the district.
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- After the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh, there are no stipulated guidelines for the implementation of the Act.
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- No scientific rehabilitation measures were possible due to lack of proper data and non-cooperation from the victims and village elders
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- As it is linked with the sentiments of the community, the official machinery and the political parties shy away from taking on the tradition.
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- The victimised community is largely viewed as a minority group, with no influence on vote-bank politics.
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What can be done?

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- State and Union governments need to take strict actions on this regard.
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- NGO’s role in spreading awareness through street plays and other remunerative methods is most significant, and community participation is required to abolish such kind of practices.
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- The affected girls needs rehabilitation and proper alternative livelihood opportunities.
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Source: The Hindu

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