

Gospel Offers Hope to India's Temple Prostitutes

Prostitution is a serious problem in India, especially among the poor. But there is a branch of the profession hidden deeper underground with an even darker side to it.

Temple prostitution was banned in India 30 years ago, but that doesn't mean it has gone away, reports the International Mission Board. The practice, called *devadasi*, continues to exploit women who were thrown away as infants.

Devadasi is mostly a last resort for desperate parents seeking the favor of the gods. Poor families will dedicate their daughters to the goddess Yellamma with the hope that she will bring favor to them. For starving families hindered by the financial burden of a newborn daughter, this may appear to be the best option.

Devadasi literally means "god's female servant." The women certainly are servants but typically know nothing of the one true God. When a girl is dedicated, she is considered to be married to the goddess and can never marry a man. When she reaches physical maturity, she is forced to live as a prostitute.

"From the very beginning, they're being exploited as babies," a humanitarian aid worker in India explained to IMB. "Then when they hit maturity, their bodies are exploited by men. Even when their bodies are no longer desirable to men, they are still exploited and abused because that stigma is on them. They can never escape from it. It's a trap that they're stuck in; it's a living hell that they're experiencing."

This has been practiced in the open for more than 5,000 years. Because devadasi has been forced underground now, however, women work mainly from their homes. Many are trafficked to the

red light districts of major cities like Mumbai and Bangalore.

The effects are still the same: Women are thrown away and they know it.

“Our parents gave us birth and threw us on the street. Men come and use us, finish their job and go,” one former devadasi, who are now being supported by an NGO, told IMB.

Estimates range from tens to hundreds of thousands of devadasi in India. For most, it's a hopeless existence. But some faithful and persistent believers are dedicated to sharing with these daughters of God how precious they are in their Father's sight.

A devadasi who discovers a relationship with Christ becomes a powerful witness in her community, according to one Christian worker. These new lives in Christ become witnesses against the practice that enslaved them and for the Savior who set them free. The worker describes it like the woman at the well who, once she realizes she's talking to Jesus, goes out telling all other women about Him.

Many Christian workers are sharing the gospel message with these victimized women, equipping them, empowering them, mentoring them, training them and discipling them. They are bringing light to souls that have known only darkness their entire lives.