

# **Devadasi Families Survey Report**

## **Introduction**

Since its inception in 2002 Sakhi has been working with women and youths belonging to the underprivileged sections of the society in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The organization has managed to make an impact in different regions with its policy of indirect intervention, the main instrument of which is their drive to propagate education.

Between June and August 2015, SAKHI -Resource Centre for Women conducted a survey within 20 villages of Bellary district in Northern Karnataka. The survey was carried out to comprehend the living conditions prevailing for the families of devadasi women with reference to their socio-economic surroundings. The results are based on the responses from the survey participants who are or have been a part of the devadasi order. Many of the participants have been associated with MYRADA , while a few have been members of SAKHI for a long time however, the survey was sponsored solely by the Sakhi Trust. The main reason behind carrying-out the survey was to identify the necessary areas of intervention and advocacy for the devadasi families. More importantly, it also intended to understand the ways in which the devadasi system has impacted the youths and the children belonging to these households.

The participants were telephoned and personally approached by the Research and Community Programme coordinators of Sakhi. A semi-structured interview consisting of 47 questions was administered through the course of the survey with the idea of formulating a hypothesis based on the findings in the field.

Key Terms: Devadasi, Madiga, Nayikka, bhutta, Huligemma

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### **Executive Summary**

The State of Karnataka banned the Devadasi system in *the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982*. This has led many to believe that the devadasi system is a feature of an era gone by. However, the ineffective implementation of the act has resulted in the continuation of the system with more than 20,000 devadasis mostly belonging to the Schedule Caste or Schedule Tribe groups. In present times however, there are two fundamental elements of caste and socio-economic background that influence the initiation of young girls as devadasis. Families of the devadasis are one of the most vulnerable groups in the local village communities because of the level of socio-economic discrimination they face. As a result of their economic burdens most of them have to take to other professions and usually end up providing labour in agricultural fields or the local mines.

With the rise of the Chinese demand of iron-ore, India has become the third-largest exporter of iron-ore in the world. Around 20 percent of this supply comes from the state of Karnataka. Following the economic liberalization of the country in 1999 the Bellary region became one of the primary sources for the satiation of this hiked demand. According to Karnataka DMG around 64 iron ore mines operate in the Bellary district. The smallest of these are run by the upper caste land owners where small quantities of iron-ore is present close to the surface. On the other hand, MSPL which one of the largest mining companies in Hospet and has also been accused of illegal mines in various press reports.

In the Bellary district of Karnataka the mining boom is the result of the governments' zeal to promote the private sector. This has led to further commercialization within the region. An amalgamation of the mining boom and the persisting discrimination against the devadasis has led to an increase in their exploitation. In addition to this most of these poor women are exposed to highly unfavourable work conditions which have resulted in several health problems for them ranging from basic joint pains to diseases as severe as silicosis and tuberculosis.

The main purpose of the survey is to assess the impact of mining industry upon the lives of the underprivileged devadasis who are forced to work as labourers in the mines. A Devadasi who is subjugated on the grounds of caste, gender, profession and poverty is an ideal point of analysis which would provide us with an idea of the basic social structure persisting on the village level. Furthermore, it is important to analyze the devadasi system vis-à-vis mining because the industry's supposed potential for 'development' is a factor influencing the evolution of rural society within this neo-liberal context.

### **Background and Objectives**

The term 'devadasi' or 'jogini' literally refers to a female servant of the deity. In practice these were young girls attached to the temples. In ancient times, dedicating young girls in the temple was a common practice. Many scholars have elucidated that in the past the number of girls attached to the temples was a symbol of their wealth and prestige. During these times devadasis came from the upper caste groups who and formed a community of artistes who in addition to their duties would sing and dance for the gods. This was a highly regarded profession. The reverse side of this tradition was that these girls were supposed to provide sexual favours to their patrons.

Most of the upper caste devadasis ended up marrying their patrons after the formulation of the Indian Penal Code by the British legislators who sought to ban this prostitution instituted by the religious traditions. As a result of this the devadasi system within the untouchable caste women was criminalized. In addition to lower caste status and moral degradation, legal criminalization of the system led to further abasement of the devadasis in the 'modern times'.

[OBJECTIVES]

### **Survey Method**

Mixed Method with the use of a semi-structured interview

### **Survey Results:**

**A. Family tradition coupled with economic disparity is a major factor leading to the induction of young girls as devadasis.**

- In many cases parents force their daughters to become devadasis to sustain the family traditions. Sometimes the absence of any male members in the family becomes a reason for the girl to become a devadasi. Through this the daughters who are eligible for inheriting property would not marry and their share would remain within the family.
- The consent of young girls is never taken before inducting them into the devadasi order due to the fact that most of the girls are inducted into the order at a very young age
- After becoming devadasis these girls have to bear the financial responsibility of the entire family. As a result of this many of them are forced to work as labourers on agricultural fields or in the local factories and mines. There have been instances when the per day wages of a worker would amount to a rupee per hour which would eventually result in them earning Rs.10 after a day's hard labour.
- Most of the devadasis belong to *Madiga*, *Nayikka* and *Kurba* castes. However, the survey also showed one case where a muslim woman had taken to the devadasi order. Their partners often belong to the same caste as theirs. As shown in the figure below 50% of the respondents had companions who belonged to the same caste as theirs. Despite belonging to different caste the relationship between the two did not involve the practice of caste in 43% cases.

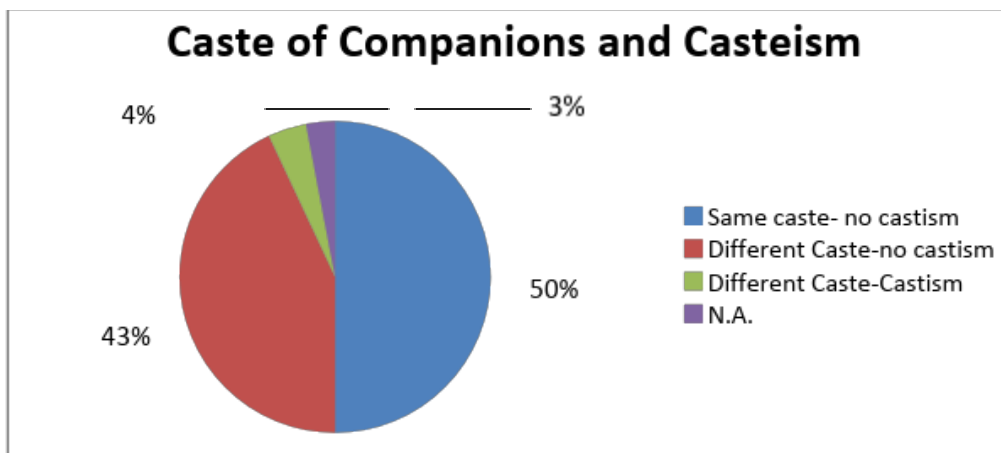


Figure 1

**B. Who are devadasis?**

- Many victims of sexual abuse, forced abortions and violence who are cast out of the society become devadasis.
- The male companions of the devadasis mostly exploit them sexually and pay them ten or twenty rupees for their time. Most of the them have complained that these companions do not provide any financial support to their households. Out of 100 respondents 59 claimed that they received no help from their partners whatsoever. Whereas 21 of them revealed that the companions had provided little help at the initial stages of the relationship. Only 15 of them replied that their partners had actually extended financial help to them.
- Devadasis are not acknowledged as wives because quite a lot of their companions are already married and have their own recognized family. Many do not even recognize the children as their own. 50 percent of the respondents revealed that their companions refused to give them the status of a wife or acknowledge the children as their own. Most of the children continue to use the name of their mothers in the school records. (Fig:2)
- Many devadasis who do not have a stable relationship with companions or live alone are often targeted by the men in the village and become susceptible to sexual violence. In many such cases the perpetrators are upper caste men. Mostly it the companions of the devadasis who inflict violence upon them. Out of 100 respondents 53 complained about experiencing violence either at the hands of their husbands or their families or the other members of the village community.
- The larger patriarchal structure is being reinforced by the upper caste members of the village society.

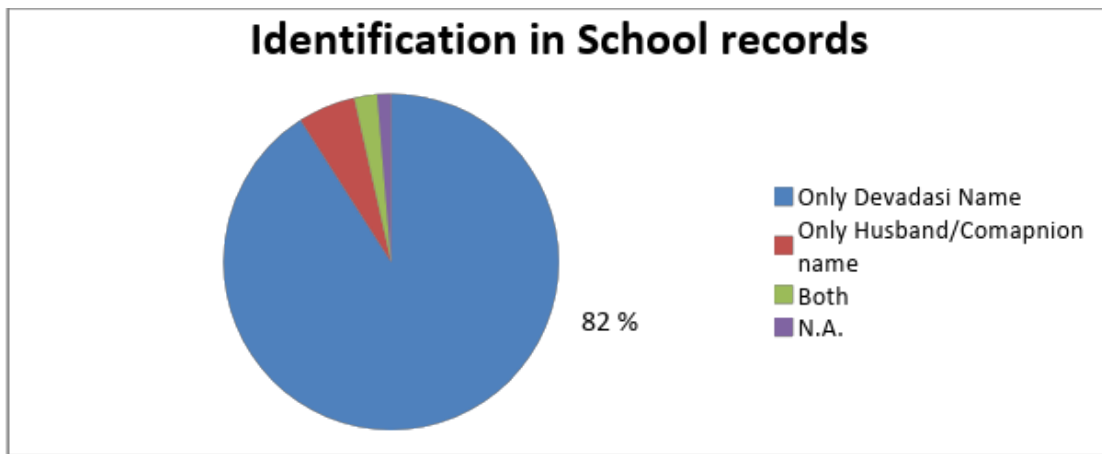


Figure 2

### C. *Alternate occupations of devadasis*

- The traditional occupation of devadasi is to beg and collect items for the days when they worship the deity to whom they are wedded. However, a huge percentage of devadasis work as agricultural labourers on the fields of other villagers.
- Many of them also work in the mines and provide cheap labour at construction sites.
- There are older devadasis who still go around begging in the village to collect the commodities for praying to the deity and running their livelihood.
- The survey shows that many devadasi households are not sufficiently provided for because the wages that they earn are often exhausted in paying the interest of the loans that they have borrowed either from banks or from different self-help organizations. Around 45 devadasis have responded in the affirmative to have taken loans for the education of their children, domestic requirements or health.
- Many of the respondents of the survey had been members of self help groups like Sawitri Phule Stri Shakti Swasahaya Sangha (SKDRDP). Out of 100 respondents 53 are associated with specific self-help groups. These self-help groups also provide loans to the members in the time of need. 36 (80%) respondents have mentioned having borrowed money from self help groups.

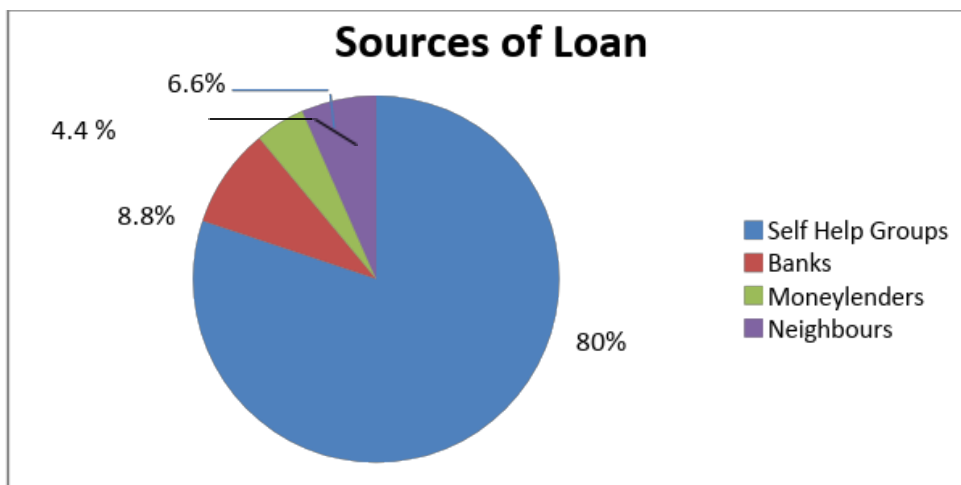


Figure 3

***D. Devadasi Institution challenging the marriage institution***

- Devadasi system poses a threat to the monogamous institution of marriage. In its basic essence it promotes the independence of the women who bring up their children and run their households on their own steam. Some children of the devadasis openly proclaim their mothers to be the head of the families. However this independence comes at a great price because the social trauma and rejection that these women face makes their situation precarious. As mentioned before, without any support from their male companions the larger village community views them as vulnerable and often tries to take advantage of that.
- As a result of this most of the devadasis believe that the institution of marriage is one of the best alternatives to the life of devadasi with 98 respondents favouring a married relationship.

***E. More girls are becoming commercial sex workers under the label of the devadasi system in the areas with the increase of industrialization and commercialization***

The rise of the mining industry in Bellary district has provided an alternate means of livelihood but it has also led to an increase in the devadasi women. With the entry of these neo-liberal industrial elements within the rural lives it has become more important to distinguish devadasis from commercial sex workers. This has also contributed to a spike of HIV – AIDS among young girls. However the survey yielded only two cases of women suffering from the disease. In the first case

the disease led the victim to become a devadasi. In the second case however, the victim contracted the disease only after being inducted into the order.

Despite the fact that almost all the respondents equated the devadasis with prostitutes, the companions of the devadasis often become a part of their households which is usually not the case with commercial sex workers. There are many devadasis who spend their life with a single companion. It is only when their companions abandon them in poverty and distress do they

**F. *Health Problems for devadasi women:***

- *Poor reproductive health:* The general trends pertaining to reproductive health of the devadasis are poor due to the fact that many of them are forced to conceive and abort their pregnancies at relatively young age. The distressing financial conditions in most of the households contribute to the poor quality of health care that they receive.
- With the rise of the mining system, the spread of HIV-AIDS is becoming more rampant among young age girls.
- *Tuberculosis*
- Many devadasis face the problems of malnutrition and a lack of sufficient food and clean water for them and their children. Many of them have their ration card but do not get sufficient amount of grains. A huge percentage of devadasis are addicted to alcohol and also suffer from severe mental stress.
- In some cases devadasis and their children have turned out to be severely anemic.

**G. *The label of belonging to a devadasi family***

The primacy is accorded to the identification of father. This in the long run becomes primary tool of humiliation used to deprive the children of devadasis from the resources that they are entitled to avail.

- Most of the devadasi women live to bring up the children with whom all their hopes and dreams are tied.
- Children belonging to the devadasi families face a lot of humiliation in schools and rest of the village community. During the survey has many as 74 respondents revealed that their children had faced humiliation at some point of time in their life for being the offspring of a devadasi household
- Despite the stigma many children come out in the open and acknowledge that they and their siblings are born of different fathers.



- The humiliation faced by these children is two-fold as most of their devadasi mothers belong to the untouchable caste.
- Name based-identification of these children often leads to them being ill-treated within the village communities and by the authorities. As a result of this many youngsters belonging to devadasi households change their names and often migrate to different places in search of work.

**H. Lack of government facilities:** A huge percentage of devadasis do not have access to proper housing and their children do not get the scholarships that they are entitled to. The figure given below illustrates the data gathered from the survey among 100 devadasi participants about the basic government facilities available to them.

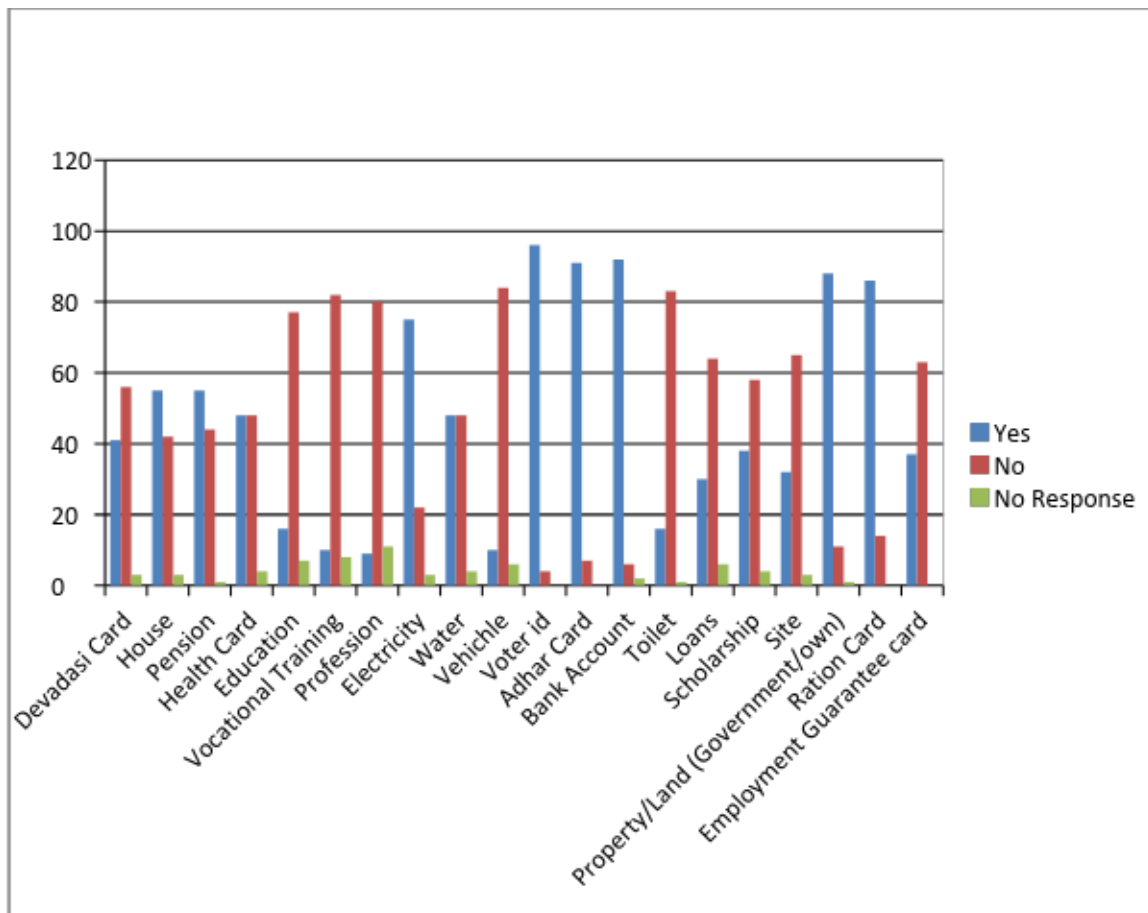


Figure 4

## ***I. Education for children belonging to the devadasi households***

- The children belonging to the devadasi households often grow up in the fear of the upper caste elements of the village community and often suffer from inferiority complex which inhibits their intellectual development. In the survey 16 respondents have mentioned that their children have been treated as untouchables within the village community and schools at times.
- 31 respondents revealed that even though their daughters have been educated no one family from the village community comes forward to accept them as a part of their families due to the fact that their mother is a devadasi. In many cases women elaborate that educating one's daughter adds insult to injury because the parents become liable to pay greater amount of dowry.
- In many cases the children of the devadasis do not have any right to inherit any property because the families are landless. Many non-governmental organizations have observed that the land allotted to most of the devadasi families got reverted back to the local landowners as they used their structural influence to force these families to take meager compensation for their land.
- The percentage of dropouts increases in the case of devadasi families as many children have to give up their education to work and support the family. In many cases girls are also forced to drop-out of the school to proceed along the path of a devadasi. 90 respondents had dropout children in their families. Various reasons such as poverty and lack of interest were mentioned. (Fig 4)

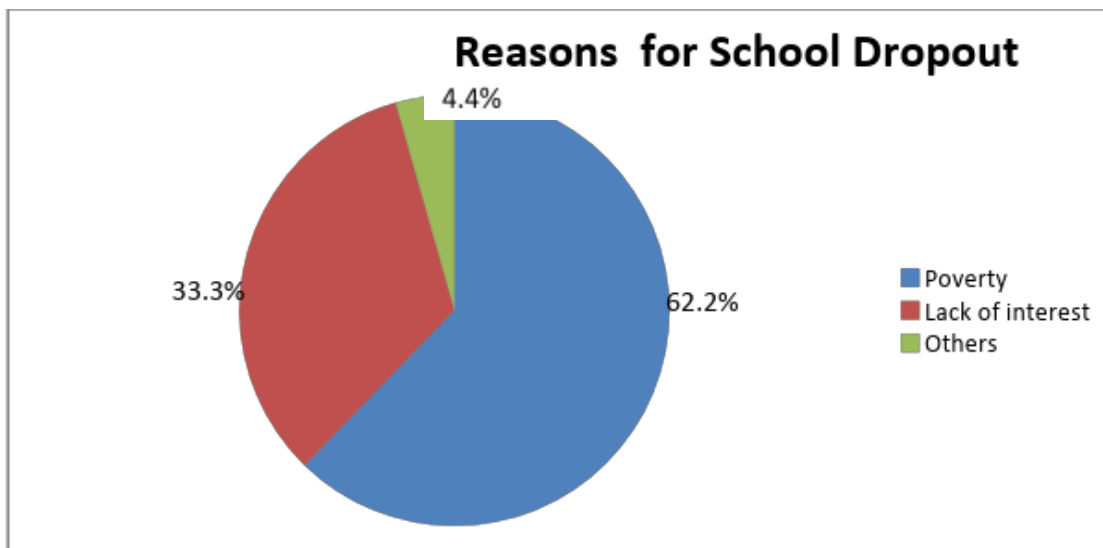


Figure 5

**J. No implementation of the Devadasi Prohibition Act**

- During the survey when the women were asked whether they were aware of the act banning the devadasi system and 79 of them replied in the affirmative. However, they further elaborated that they did not have a say in their own initiation as devadasi. 76 out of 100 respondents were below the age of 15; out of these 34 were less than 10 years at the point of their initiation into the devadasi system.
- A great number of devadasis commented that the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982 has not been implemented properly. 65 devadasis revealed that the system continues to thrive within the rural areas of Karnataka.
- The Devadasi Rehabilitation Programme run by the Karnataka State's Development Corporation has failed to provide housing and pensions to many devadasis. Figure 4 shows that out of 100 respondents who participated in the survey only 55 have received housing from the government. Furthermore, census has reported the presence of 9,722 devadasis in Bellary district out of which homes have been sanctioned only to 3,500 devadasis. About 6,222 of them remain without a house. Moreover, the authorities have managed to sanction only for 6,782 devadasis. Given below is the data from Prajavani newspaper (\_\_\_\_\_) that shows that how many devadasis received pension in different Talukas of the district:-




1. Do you know who practiced Devadasi system? How this system started?
2. What kind of sufferings and agony you underwent when you became Devadasi ? What are the effects of Devadasi system? How it affects on health?
3. At what age you were made Devadasi? Who made it? Whether it is a outside pressure or from the family? How?
4. Have you seen any incident in your place that somebody has been forced to accept Devadasi system? If so, what are its effects?
5. How long is your family this system being practised in your family? How many generations in your family is this system being practiced?
6. How many Devadasi families are in this village?
7. What are the rituals and in which temples they are being practiced?
8. How many companions did you lead the life with?
9. How many children do you have? What is the age of your first child?
10. In your opinion Marriage system is good or Devadasi system? Why?
11. What do you mean by 'Devadasi'? Why they practiced for women?
12. In which castes do these systems prevail? Why?
13. Is Devadasi system being practiced at present?
14. What is the caste of your companion? Is castism prevalent here?
15. How your companion did help you? Did you get love from him? Have you been ill-treated from him?
16. Can Devadasi women woman get married or not? Why?
17. Is it right to get married or to become a Devadasi? Why?
18. Do you think that marriage is not an answer, those who get married do not lead a happy life. They suffer in their in-laws-house?
19. Do Devadasi, Lesi, Basavi, Prostitute mean the same or is these any difference among them?
20. Does not married man come to you feel guilty consciousness and fear of the society? What is the attitude of his family members towards you?

21. Do they give you the status of wife as you accept him as your husband? Do they accept your children as their own?
22. What are the problems faced by your children? How does the society treat them?
23. What kind of food you eat? Do you get enough rations for you earning in a month? Is your earning sufficient for you?
24. Have you barrowed loans? For what purpose you borrowed loan? Who pays the loan to you and where?
25. Is your name and companion (husband) name mentioned in the school admission register of your children? Why do you mention the name of your companion though you are a Devadasi?
26. Who come forward to marry your daughters who received higher education? Are there any problems regarding marriage?
27. What kind of work do you do now?
28. What type of work did you do from your young age? Have you migrated any where?
29. Where do you leave your children when you go to work? Do you have crèche in working place?
30. What were the facilities you got from the government? Did you get rehabilitation facility?

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31. Do you and your children have right to property? What is your dream about your children?
32. Are you a member of any women group/organization? Which group? How many members are there? What is your savings?
33. Have you barrowed loans from organizations? Why? How do you repay it? What is the rate of interest? What do the women do with their loan amount?
34. Do you have toilets at home? If not where do you go? What are the inconveniences?
35. Do you have monthly periods regularly or not? Are you suffering from white discharge?
36. How many times did you have miscarriage? Was it intentional or accidental?
37. Do you have any mental stress or problems? (related to witches, god etc)
38. Have you sensed menopause? At what age?
39. Do you consume alcohol? Daily or occasionally?
40. Do you have handicapped children? What type of handicap?
41. What is the problem faced by you due to Devadasi system?
42. What were the haunted experiences when you were studying in school/college/hostels?  
What are your future dreams? What are the obstacles? And what are your efforts?
43. Why are the reasons for discontinuing your education? At what age you left the school?  
What kind of works did you do later?
44. If you do not want Devadasi system, what kind of change do you expect?
45. Do you know about the law which abolishes Devadasi system? Who is to be held responsible for this?
46. How can this be prevented? What kind of legal procedures required?

**Survey Gaps:-**

1. No account of the women subjected to the unnecessary uterus removal operations by the local doctors

2. “More girls are becoming commercial sex workers under the label of the devadasi system in the areas with the increase of industrialization and commercialization” – No data to support this hypothesis.
3. “With the rise of the mining system, the spread of HIV-AIDS is becoming more rampant among young age girls.” – No data to support this
4. Despite tuberculosis mentioned to be a major disease prevalent among these groups there is no data to ascertain exactly how many people are affected by the disease.
5. No data to ascertain how many young individuals changed their names to escape persecution.
6. Many non-governmental organizations have observed that the land allotted to most of the devadasi families got reverted back to the local landowners as they used their structural influence to force these families to take meager compensation for their land. – No data to support.
7. Only the occupational questions are related to mining. Question no. 2 occasionally gives a peek into the health problems faced by devadasis who are or used to work in the mines.
8. There is a hidden nexus between the politicians, bureaucrats, mining mafia and the capitalists which operate through the class gaps and contribute to their sustenance. The only shift that has come about has been in the site of exploitation which in the earlier days used to be on land and now it happens in the industries. (The observation needs to be supported with hard data)
9. No proper segregation of questions based upon the kind of violence inflicted upon the women. The 2nd,3rd and 43rd: these questions are extremely ambiguous if one needs hard data about the type of violence these women have went through either along the lines of caste or gender or both.
10. No data about the average household income

Discuss the objectives

Focus to bring the mining in the spot light.