



## BIGGEST DISTRICT

Gulbarga is the largest district of the state and was founded by the Bahamani Sultanate in the 14th C AD

# Devadasi dilemma in Koppal

**SOCIETY** Progress on one hand, and age-old practices such as the devadasi system on the other - talk of paradoxes. A 13-year-old girl in a Koppal village is married off by her mother, a devadasi, much against Smita Premchander's attempts to convince them against it.

We had visitors from Italy. They wanted to see the 'good' work we do; the women who have come up above the poverty line. The 'success stories'. More support would then flow. Yet, to me, the ones that motivate the most are those that have remained poor. We provide the same support for Shobha as we do for Lakshnavva. Shobha makes a success of her business, while Lakshnavva remains at the same level. We need to understand: Why is Lakshnavva not able to overcome her poverty?

Without this understanding, we cannot help the most vulnerable women. As we arrived in Chikanahalli village, the photographer proceeded to see the flour mill, vermicompost production, and women's sewing machines, and the cows, buffaloes, goats and sheep they have bought with their loans.

## Devadasis at the periphery

Three of us headed towards the periphery of the village; the outside, the extreme end. Here live the devadasis, all in one street, in one-room houses provided by the government years ago. In the same room is a small mud stove.

Sometimes they separate this little kitchen from the sleeping place with a mud wall. They just tie a rope to hang the few clothes they possess. Outside this one room is usually a thatched enclosure 3ft x 3 ft, which serves as the toilet. If they have cattle, they are tethered outside to the poles which have thatched roofs to protect them.

As we head towards the home of Yamunavva, several women follow us. They are members of self help groups who wanted to reactivate their groups.

As we spoke about the groups, my eyes searched for little Saroja, who had dropped



out of school at the age of seven. Her mother, a devadasi, has three children. First the elder son left school to tend to the buffalo, while the mother went for agricultural labour. Later, he too went for farm work, and the second son took the animal for grazing. Saroja left school as the teacher often scolded her for lack of understanding.

## Thirteen, and set to marry

Saroja appeared, with a golden bordered red sari, and sat near me. The mother said, "She is 13 now, and will be married next month" My heart stopped. "She is all of 13 years old! Why?" "After puberty, girls must be married as soon as possible. The groom

is 24 years old. He is a coolie and earns Rs 80 to 120 per day. He is a good match for the daughter of a devadasi. We are happy."

I tried to convince them she was too young. They argued: "We are devadasis, and scheduled castes. If our girls do not marry soon after puberty, we have to pay a huge dowry for them. Every year the dowry increases... Look at Malawva, that girl in the green sari... she is 18 now, and not married. Now, her mother will have to pay Rs 50,000 to get her married. Where will she get so much money from? There is already social pressure to make her a devadasi. How long will she withstand it?... Saroja is lucky. She has found a match." We re-

turned from the village, and next morning, found that none of us had slept. We could not just sit there, and see this happening. We cut short the programme for the day. We invited some of the devadasis and their daughters to talk to us.

## Plan? What plan?

In Chikanahalli village alone, there are 11 girls belonging to the scheduled castes, who are in the age group of 13 to 18, and are unmarried. Their families cannot afford the Rs 50,000 for their dowry. There is pressure on their mothers to make them devadasis.

When asked what her plan is, one devadasi said, "Plan? I have no plan. I have not yet made her a devadasi, that's all. I will resist as long as I can. But how long can I hold on?" She gets drunk in the evenings, sometimes even during the day, and this is how she evades thoughts of what the future holds for her daughter.

The girl, however, was interested in what we had to offer. Would she join a literacy class? Would she be interested in learning some skill, so that she can earn more than the unskilled farm wage rate? She agreed to come for literacy and skill training, provided there was a stipend, that will compensate for the wage loss every day. In conversation with them, Sampark designed a social protection scheme for them, with a monthly stipend of Rs 1,000, for two years, during which they will educate themselves and learn skills to become economically independent. Two of the Italians decided to finance the scheme, with their personal funds. These girls would be economically empowered in a year or two.

## What next?

And yet, Saroja's fate bothered me. I could not rest and requested the Sampark staff to talk to her mother. She did not meet them. The staff also reasoned: "She will have a husband, a home. If we stop her marriage now, who knows what fate awaits her. Can we guarantee that a few years later, someone will marry her without dowry?" Saroja was married last week. I cried again, tears of sadness, tears of frustration, of belonging to a society that does not care.

The next job to be done, I tell myself, is not with the girls, but with the young men who will be their suitors. Can we convince some of them that they should marry without asking for a dowry? If we can convince even eleven young men, the girls of Chikanahalli have a chance.

The author has been in the field of rural development for the past 20 years. She is the secretary of Sampark, an NGO that works for poverty reduction in Koppal.

## Uprooted coffee shrubs have their uses!

If you are passing through the Bangalore - Mangalore NH 48, you will notice a collection of ornamental items on the roadside in Ballupet, Marnahalli, Baage, Sakleshpura and Donigal in Hassan district.

Sakleshpura, known for its scenic beauty, is also famous for coffee. These ornamental items are made of uprooted coffee stems. There are several people in and around the town who are into this business. Coffee planters uproot the plants once in 20 years. Also, coffee plants affected by berry borer are used. After harvesting in the months of December and January, planters uproot the coffee shrubs and traders collect these stems and dry them. They are smoothened and dried yet again. Then they are used to make varieties of ornaments. Owing to a huge demand for these coffee stem ornaments, factories have also started to take up manufacturing of the products. Vishva Kala Kendra in Ballupet and Ex-Service-men's Handicrafts Centre near Baage are also producing coffee stem ornaments.

Traders prefer the robusta variety as its stem is long and the curves are more when compared to the Arabica coffee variety. The crafted pieces last at least 20 to 25 years. They are priced in the range of Rs 250 to Rs 5,000.

Ornamented coffee stems are also exported to Bangalore, Mysore, Chennai, Kerala, Nasik, Goa, and Dubai.

Ashok Uchangli



## MISCELLANY



**STEPS TO THE TOP** The Venugopala swamy temple at Ambale celebrates the first anniversary of its re-consecration PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

## Coffee town's temple stands tall

Apart from the hundreds of temples famed for their religious importance and architectural beauty that dot the state there are some significant temples hidden in obscure villages. These lesser known shrines do have their own interesting stories and are revealed on a closer study. The Venugopalaswamy temple in Ambale village close to Chikmagalur is a shining example.

Ambale (pronounced Amble), is a pleasant sleepy settlement hardly five kms away from the coffee town. Right in the middle of the township stands a newly done up temple on a high platform reached by a series of wide steps. There are no tall towers or sculptural extravagance here.

But the unique attraction of the shrine are tall idols of mythological hero Krishna along with his consorts. This temple is a rare one where the six-foot-tall idol in blackstone of Venugopala flanked by Rukmini and Sathyabhama adorn the sanctum.

The *sukhanasi* and outer *manatapa* complete the simple structure. The *manatapa* has a marble flooring and four stone pillars with rectangular base painted white. There is a large courtyard outside with a place for *yaga*, but interestingly no *Dhwajastambha* though a pedestal remains.

**A 1,200-year history of legends** Going into its history, Kumar, the priest here says the temple has a history of 1,200 years.

In those days this place on the banks of

Yagachi river, was called Yamalapur and the whole area was a Gondaranya, the dense jungles with wild animals. The place was chosen by Narayana Maharshi, a disciple of the Agasthya the legendary saint for penance.

Legend has it that as he meditated incessantly for years an anthill grew up around him and he merged with it.

Another story that revolves around the temple is that during the time of King Somaraja people found that a cow used to go and milk on this anthill.

Also, the king had a dream that the deity lay embedded in the anthill and that a temple be built here for devotees. The king ordered for excavation and found the images. The temple was built in a simple style without much decoration.

That of course, is one of the little legends that revolve around the temple. Meanwhile, in the recent past, a committee formed to renovate the temple has taken a lot of interest in improvising the structure and thanks to many local philanthropists, the temple has been spruced up.

It was only last year that the temple was re-consecrated and a *Mahakumbhabhisheka* was offered by the Jagadguru of Sringeri Sharadapeetha.

The first anniversary of the occasion is being celebrated here on a very grand scale on May 10.

## A R Krishnashastry's birthplace

Ambale, incidentally is the birthplace of noted litterateur, A R Krishnashastry and his memorial which serves as a library stands next to the temple. The village can be reached easily by bus or auto from Chikmagalur in about 10 minutes.

**B V Prakash**

# Street children of Bangalore get some help

**NGOS** Those most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS are often those who know least about it. Rienke van Nieuwland reports on a programme that's educating Bangalore's street children about the taboo topic of sex.

This is the story about Raju. Raju is 15. He lives on the streets of Bangalore, after his mother died and his alcoholic father was incapable of taking care of him. Choosing to live on the streets because of the freedom it seemed to offer him, Raju takes care of his little brother and survives through rag-picking. At some point, Raju became HIV-infected.

This story is not just about Raju, though. The target group is hard to define and hard to find, so accurate facts and figures today are unknown, but one thing is certain - Raju is not the only street kid facing the spectre of HIV/AIDS.

Estimates of street children range from about 20 million to well over 100 million worldwide. Street children often engage in sexual activity at a young age, but lack knowledge or the skills to take preventive measures - which consequently makes them highly vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. Reaching out to these children is a difficult task. Most are disconnected from existing social and health services, such as families, local communities, hospitals and schools. Many have problems stemming from a lack of adult support, a life-history of neglect and abuse, and engaging in risky behaviour.

## Street children of Bangalore

Meindert Schaap, a clinical child and adolescent psychologist from the Netherlands, has dedicated a great part of his life to tackle such challenges. During 2001 and 2002, he conducted in-depth research into the sexual life of 25 Bangalorean street children aged 12 to 16. He found many

of them became sexually active early on. The reasons they gave for their behaviour varied. From immediate satisfaction to material gain - for drugs, money or just food.

Programmes to tackle these problems are few and far between, but in 2005 the Sexual Health Intervention Programme (SHIP) was launched in partnership with APSA (Association for Promoting Social Action), a child-centred community development NGO. The project's goal is to provide a sexual health intervention programme for street children and a training programme for social workers.

The team works together with eight partner NGOs in order to reach as many street children and facilitators as possible.

The programme addresses teenage sexual development and general sexual health. It covers topics including other sexually transmitted illnesses, sexual abuse and coercion, and unwanted pregnancy. The exercises aim to increase the children's knowledge, build up their self-confidence and improve their social skills and coping strategies.

## Toolkit of activities

The programme comes with a 'toolkit' of activities and resources specifically developed for street children.

The exercises are suitable for illiterate or semi-illiterate children and those with a short attention span, because of the active methods and visual materials. Some of the exercises are variations on games such as 'Simon says', 'spin the bottle', 'hide and seek' or board games. Other



**REACHING OUT** The SHIP team works together with eight NGOs in order to reach as many street children and facilitators as possible. PIC FOR REPRESENTATIONAL PURPOSES.



**“BASICALLY ALL THE TOOLS ONE NEEDS TO GUIDE AND SUPPORT THESE STREET CHILDREN TO LEAD A HAPPY, HEALTHY, RESPONSIBLE LIFE CAN BE FOUND IN THIS BOX”** SCHAAP

games include drawing the male and female bodies, discussing statements or acting in a play or puppet show. The positive and playful approach keeps them motivated. "Basically all the tools one needs to guide and support these street children to lead a happy, healthy, responsible life can be found in this box," Schaap says.

The SHIP team has trained social workers in three states of South India: Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

The eight partner NGOs have field-tested the 35 half day sessions and the results are promising. Schaap believes this programme is more likely to succeed because it is evidence-based and takes into account the reality of a life on the streets.

## Good response

Sonia J Cheruvillil, the current Programme Manager, is buoyed by the programme's early success.

"The responses from partner NGOs and the children themselves have strengthened our idea that this programme is needed," she says. One of the facilitators said the youths had really enjoyed the programme. "It made the boys get into their personal lives and also come forward to share their similarities, even in terms of their sexual behaviours." "Why did we not get a programme like this earlier?" asked another NGO.

The next phase will be to expand the programme's reach to many more NGOs and street children.

It is a first step, but a huge step, towards helping Raju, and children like him, stay a little safer on the streets. If you would like to know more about the programme visit [www.streetkids-SRH.org](http://www.streetkids-SRH.org) (The author is a Dutch psychologist.)