Cursed goddess

Vijaylakshmi Kathawate

MPH student, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Deonar, Mumbai 400 088 INDIA e-mail: vijayalaxmikathawate@gmail.com

***Jogwa*. Dream Productions, 2009. Director: Rajeev Patil. Marathi. 114 minutes**

Even in the twenty-first century, some pockets of India are in the grip of superstition; this is particularly true for oppressed vulnerable sections of society. Though the *Devdasi* system has been banned, it persists in several regions of South India.

The film exposes the malpractices in the name of Goddess Yellamma by the so-called interpreters of religion in one such village. The film blames society in general, and the villagers in particular, for their double standards. On the one hand, they welcome with respect the people dedicated to the service of the goddess. On the other, society ruthlessly exploits them as prostitutes and eunuchs. They are known as *Devdasis*, those who are dedicated to the service of God. The saying in Marathi goes, "*Devdasi devachi, bayako sarya gavachi*," meaning that she is the servant of God but wife to the whole town. Devdasis are exploited at various levels. They are vulnerable not just to sexually transmitted diseases, but also to the trauma of stigmatisation, violence and unequal treatment. The movie demonstrates how *jogtas* (males) and *jogtins* (females) suffer till the end of their lives

Jogwa is a movie about the life of a *Devdasi*. The film's story revolves around two characters. In the case of a young girl Suli (Mukta Barve), her mother discovers a knot while combing her hair. Her mother consults Akkubai, a *jogtin*, who tells her to offer Suli to the goddess. In another case, a man, Tayappa (Upendra Limaye), is unwell and finds that he is passing blood with his urine. Tayappa is also compelled to become a *jogta* against his will. Suli becomes friendly with a stranger, Anu, and hopes to marry him and settle down, but is betrayed by him. Tayappa has a soft corner for Suli and she reciprocates his feelings, after her lover abandons her. Finally, both the victims come together for a common cause and revolt against society. The film conveys a clear message: to fight against the shackles of superstition.

The movie throws light on the heart-wrenching plight of the *jogtas* and *jogtins*. The *jogtins* are considered to be goddesses of fertility but they can never have a married life. Hence, they are perpetually vulnerable to the bait of a 'respectable' settled life. Their lack of awareness results in unwanted pregnancies and unsafe, sometimes illegal abortions. The realisation that they will always be sexually exploited can lead them to depression and even suicide. Even when a child is born, it is not accepted by the father and is denied basic human rights.

The *jogtas*' lives are also miserable. They must go through life draped in a sari. They face emotional and physical trauma as they are forced into the sex trade. The film effectively depicts how this community faces an identity crisis and natural sexual desires are suppressed.

The film helps in understanding the situation of *Devdasis*. This can be a step forward in sensitising society to the issue. The movie clearly shows violations of the right to health in both the protagonists' lives. The practice of dedicating *Devdasis* was declared illegal by the Government of Karnataka in 1982. Yet, sick children are dedicated to the goddess instead of being given medical treatment. The movie focuses on the custom that girls who have knots in their hair are to be dedicated to the goddess. This even violates child rights.

Director Rajeev Patil has presented a realistic picture of a village influenced by superstition. The film concludes with a teacher explaining the difference between faith and blind faith. He educates the villagers to stay away from wrong practices and also emphasises that he is not against worshipping the goddess, but that the practice of offering human beings to the goddess is wrong.

The film is noteworthy for tackling the issues of emotional, physical and sexual abuse of *Devdasis*.