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The Devadasi inhabit the border of two of India's most progressive states: Maharashtra and Karnataka. Despite the legal banning of dedication every year over 5,000 girls continue to be dedicated to the goddess Yellamma. On the night of the full moon in January, thousands of young girls join in a religious procession to the temple of goddess Yellamma in a remote village of Karnataka. After being dedicated, they are auctioned to the highest bidder and enter the world of prostitution.

Slide Captions : Slaves of the Mother



1. Silhouetted against the Karnataka sky, *harijans* flock in their bullock-driven covered wagons to the festival of "The Mother" Yellamma.



2. Surrounding the temple, *harijan* families, evoking pioneers from the wild west with their covered bullock carts, huddle around fires, preparing the evening meal.



3. On the threshold of the inner sanctum, throngs of devotees strain for a glimpse of the unadorned deity. No photographs are permitted of *abhishek*, the “bathing of the deity” ritual.



3_A. The major occupations here are farming and cattle rearing, but the lull is by the annual Yellamma festival when hundreds of thousands of people gather at the tiny village of Saundatti in a rare blitzkrieg of passion and ritual. A *harijan* family travelling in their bullock cart on the way to the festival.



4. On the mud roof of the temple, pilgrims toss pleasing and purifying hunks of camphor for the goddess into the fires.



5. Each year in January, thousands of poor, low-caste farmers go on pilgrimage to the temple of Goddess Yellamma for her annual festival. Snaking line of devotees waiting eagerly for a glimpse of the 600-year-old black-faced stone idol housed in the inner sanctum of the temple.



6. The women carry a *kalash*, a brass or copper vessel holding a brass image of Yellamma emblazoned with peacock feathers and tiny hands and feet cunningly executed in metal. The ambiance is carnival-like: Red and yellow vermillion, turmeric, mounds of coconuts and bananas, and garlands woven with yellow flowers.



7. Devotees prostrating Goddess Yellamma.



8. Dressed in pristine white, a blaze of yellow turmeric *tikas* against their dark skins, these two devadasis have travelled down from Bombay to worship at Yellamma's shrine.



9. A mother carries her young daughter to the temple for dedication. According to her followers, Yellamma is a strict deity. "She marks out the chosen girls with white patches on the skin or matted hair. If they aren't dedicated, the family is visited with terrible misfortune." For the chosen girl, however, the future is grim: once ritually offered to the deity, they have few career options open to them save prostitution according to social dictates.



10. Covered in purifying *neem* leaves, this girl had been gravely ill. Her family came to the Yellamma shrine last year and prayed for the deity to spare her life. In penance and thanks for their answered prayers, she wears the neem leaves and walks toward the central shrine.



11. A devadasi with the trademark matted cobra-like hair.



12. Village *harijan* women wait patiently for their chance to worship Yellamma. Perhaps this is the only time that impoverished village women are allowed to express such states of ecstatic frenzy, a form of sanctified madness allowing their repressed wildness—the source of fertility—to manifest.



13. Senior *hijras* wait with to enter the temple. They are among the most ardent devotees of Yellamma. Devotees of the goddess Yellamma saturated in turmeric



14. Drenched in purifying turmeric, shouting praise to The Mother, a village contingency escorts their village Yellamma shrine to the temple. Due to their androgynous sexuality, *hijras* are both feared and revered in Indian society. They are considered auspicious at the blessing of babies, but are feared for their aggressive begging tactics that include clapping and exposing their mutilated genitals.



15. Devotees dance wildly to the pulse of the village drums as they experience the force of Yellamma's spirit rising within them.