

Kamala Maushi: Salute to a proud Devadasi

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In memory of a proud Devadasi, a relentless activist who fought for sex workers rights, a natural leader and a compassionate comrade – Kamala Maushi (11-2-1950 to 11-2-2015)

By Meena Seshu

“Unlike gharguti [household] women I am married to a Goddess! In my culture, I have become a man. I am a Kaka (paternal uncle) to my nieces and nephews! All

property in the house will be distributed equally among my brothers and me. Upper caste people in the village have to treat me with respect,” said Kamalabai Pani, explaining the Devadasi custom.

I met Kamalabai in April 2000 when she came to the office of Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM) office in Sangli with Bhimawa Gollar. They were best friends: both ‘big’ Gharwalis (Brothel owners) in Sangli. They came because Sidharam a local thug had targeted Kamalabai, pulled her out of a running auto rickshaw and physically assaulted her. They approached us to intervene because the police refused to file a case against Sidharam. We went and filed the case together and from then on all our lives changed.

Kamala Maushi was proud to be a Devadasi. She always believed that she was in a much better position compared to married women, because she felt more in ‘control’ of her life. She loved her jewellery and wore it for almost any occasion. “I am not a poor woman,” she often said.

Her understanding about the Devadasi system defied argument. She was perplexed by the opposition to the Devadasi system. Her argument was that she was superior because she was married to a goddess and thus would never be a widow; she was considered a ‘male’ in the family; she was the head of her household; she had control over her earnings and her property; her children were her own and did not belong to the man who fathered them; she was allowed to have multiple sexual partners among other freedoms.

She disagreed with the analysis that the Devdasi system was established in order to ensure that upper caste and upper class men always had access to women from the Dalit castes with societal sanction. She argued that in her own personal life she had 'kept' and had access to many men from all castes and classes of society. She paid to keep them and left them when she wanted to do so. Her present malak (live in lover) was an upper caste landed farmer who she 'maintained' till her death.

Kamalabai was a natural leader who had the respect of various levels of people she interacted with, District Magistrate, Police, Dean of the Civil hospital, Municipal Councillors, MLAs, lawyers, NGO leaders, Trade Union leaders, community leaders, feminist leaders both national and international. When the Collector of Sangli had a meeting on income generation projects for sex workers she told him, "Sir, the government should have income generation for persons who are unable to earn on their own. Sex Workers already have an income." The DM immediately instructed his officers to stop the compulsory rehabilitation of sex workers, in Sangli.

Her arguments with police officers and health officials in Sangli were legendary: "Are we not human?" is a question she asked every official who violated the rights of sex workers.

Her understanding of the right to be treated as a human being irrespective of the legality of her work (brothel keeping is illegal) never failed to impress me. She argued that criminalisation of her work did not give law enforcement the right to violate her dignity.

At the community level she coined the term "Anyay sehan karnar nahi". Will not tolerate injustice! She mobilised to root out money lenders who charged exorbitant interest, in Gokulnagar first and then on the idea spread to all the areas in which the Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP), the sex workers' collective, was active. A staunch supporter of collectivisation, as an effective method in the struggle for rights, she nurtured many a young leader in VAMP. She talked about rights of young women in sex work to both brothel owners and third parties involved in the management of sex work.

She played a huge part in stopping minor girls from entering the business. Talking to brothel owners, explaining issues of consent, deception, debt bondage and economic exploitation within the trade she convinced her opponents that trafficking was an injustice against the community and fought to oust dalals (agents) and money lenders.

The most endearing trait of this indomitable woman was her ability to forgive her enemies. She repeatedly told us all to control our anger. "Anger kills the collective spirit," she always said. VAMP and SANGRAM will miss her wisdom, kindness and warmth. We only hope we have the strength to continue this struggle that means so much to all of us.

Kamala Maushi, Zindabad!