

Thread of Resilience: A Socio-Ethical Analysis of Sudha Murty's Two-Decade Crusade against the Devadasi Pratha in Three Thousand Stitches

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Abstract: This research paper explores the ethnographic and philanthropic dimensions of Sudha Murty's work, *Three Thousand Stitches*. It specifically investigates the titular essay, which documents Murty's 20-year journey to rehabilitate 3,000 Devadasis in Karnataka. By employing a lens of Social Constructivism and the Ethics of Care, this study examines how Murty navigated systemic religious dogma and social inertia. The paper argues that her "relentless effort" serves as a pedagogical model for social change, moving beyond mere charity toward sustainable liberation and financial autonomy. It further analyzes the semiotic significance of the quilt presented to her, viewing it as a collective subaltern archive of reclaimed dignity.

Keywords: Devadasi Pratha, Social Reform, Empowerment Theory, Sudha Murty, Socio-Religious Reform, Human-Centric Intervention, Subaltern Agency.

I. Introduction: The Literary as a Tool for Social Engineering

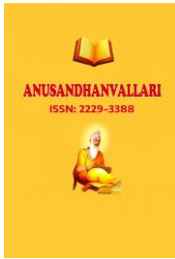
Sudha Murty's literary contributions are often categorized as simplistic narratives or moral fables. However, a critical reading of the titular essay in *Three Thousand Stitches* reveals a complex framework of social engineering and grassroots activism. The "Devadasi Pratha"—a sanctioned system of religious servitude that historically devolved into organized sexual exploitation—remains one of India's most entrenched socio-religious challenges. Despite the legal safeguards of the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act, 1982, the practice survived in the shadows of the Saundatti Yellamma temple, sustained by poverty and the absence of social alternatives (Nair 3158).

This paper analyzes Murty's two-decade crusade not merely as a philanthropic venture but as a documented case study in dismantling systemic oppression. Through persistent engagement, Murty demonstrates that individual agency, when coupled with cultural empathy, can successfully challenge institutionalized marginalization. Her work provides a bridge between the state's legal mandate and the lived reality of the marginalized.

II. Theoretical Framework: Constructivism and the Ethics of Care

To understand the depth of Murty's intervention, one must apply the lens of Social Constructivism. This theory suggests that our realities are shaped by social consensus rather than objective truth. For the Devadasi community, their identity was constructed through a "Divine Contract"—a belief that their bodies belonged to the Goddess (Murty 12).

Furthermore, Murty's methodology aligns with Carol Gilligan's "Ethics of Care." Unlike the traditional "Ethics of Justice," which focuses on abstract rights and legal enforcement, the Ethics of Care emphasizes relationality and responsiveness. Murty's approach was not to lecture on the law, but to address actual needs such as health, food, and education, recognizing that these women were not "criminals" under the 1982 Act, but victims of a historical construct (Gilligan 17).



III. Navigating Hegemony: The Challenge of the Initial Decade

The primary hurdle in Murty's mission was the internalization of the Devadasi identity. In academic terms, this is viewed through the lens of Hegemony, as defined by Antonio Gramsci, where the oppressed group accepts their exploitation as a natural order (Gramsci 12).

The "Tomato Incident" as a Point of Analysis The incident where Murty was physically assaulted with vegetables and footwear serves as a critical point of analysis. It illustrates the resistance encountered when an "outsider" attempts to disrupt a community's perceived status quo. To the Devadasis, Murty represented the "Other"—an elite woman who threatened the only survival mechanism they knew. Murty's "relentless effort" during these first few years was focused on trust-building through "Reflexive Ethnography"—immersing herself in the community's daily struggles without immediate judgment. By refusing to retreat, Murty slowly deconstructed the "Us vs. Them" binary.

IV. Strategic Intervention: Health, Education, and Intergenerational Mobility

Once trust was established, Murty moved toward a "Development Model" of intervention, as conceptualized by Amartya Sen, where freedom is viewed as both the primary objective and the principal means of development (Sen 3).

Healthcare as an Entry Point The high prevalence of HIV/AIDS within the community acted as a catalyst. However, Murty used healthcare as more than just a medical service; it was an act of acknowledging the women's human rights. By treating their bodies with dignity, she countered the system that viewed them as disposable properties of the temple.

Breaking the Cycle of Dedication The core of her long-term success lay in her focus on Intergenerational Mobility. She recognized that the Devadasi system was a self-perpetuating cycle. By prioritizing the education of the daughters of these women, she effectively "sterilized" the system of its future recruits. This represents a transition from a "Relief Model" to a "Development Model," transforming the identity of the community from "religious property" to "independent citizens."

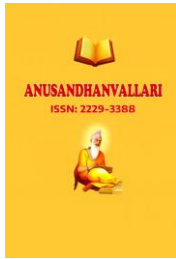
V. Economic Autonomy: The Restoration of Agency

The apex of Murty's twenty-year crusade was the establishment of a dedicated bank for the former Devadasis. Economic dependency is the bedrock of exploitation. By introducing financial literacy and cooperative banking, Murty provided the women with "Agency"—the capacity to act independently and make free choices (Batliwala 15). This move directly challenged the economic dependency that forced these women back into the system.

The Quilt: A Semiotic Symbol of Liberation. The quilt presented to Murty, comprising three thousand unique stitches, is a powerful semiotic symbol. In a research context, each stitch represents a qualitative data point—a life that has been successfully rehabilitated. The "relentless effort" was required precisely because economic independence is not achieved through a single donation, but through years of teaching and institutionalizing new financial habits.

VI. Critical Discussion: The Subaltern Voice

In Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", she questions the ability of marginalized groups to express their agency within dominant discourses. Murty's narrative provides a counter-narrative to Spivak's skepticism. By the end of the twenty-year period, the Devadasis are no longer spoken for by Murty; they speak through their bank, through their educated children, and through the symbolic quilt.



However, a critical analysis must acknowledge the limitations of individual philanthropy. While Murty's intervention was successful, it highlights the gaps in state-led social welfare. Her work suggests that for social reform to be effective in India, it must be "culture-sensitive"—addressing the religious myths that sustain exploitation rather than merely passing laws.

VII. Conclusion

The study concludes that Sudha Murty's work in *Three Thousand Stitches* provides a blueprint for social advocacy in the 21st century. Her journey proves that the dismantling of deep-seated social evils cannot be achieved through legislative force alone; it requires a sustained, twenty-year commitment to human dignity. Murty's legacy serves as a testament to the power of persistent, empathetic engagement in achieving true, systemic liberation. The three thousand stitches are not just a gift; they are a map of a community's journey from the margins to the center of social existence.

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