THE 'DEVI AND DASI' DICHOTOMY: FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS OF GENDER, CASTE AND POWER IN INDIAN SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION:

The roles assigned to women in Indian society have long been demarcated by the opposingideas of the Devi (an idealized figure with moral strength) and the Dasi (representing subjugation and servitude), standing in obvious contrast.Feminist historiography critically examines the duality of the Devi (goddess) and Dasi (servant) images of women as part of patriarchal constructions that both idealize and marginalize women. This binary reflects broader societal roles assigned to women, especially in the context of caste and gender.Feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Tanika Sarkar enquired into historical texts, religious epics, and social practices and sought to deconstruct these reductive categories, to show how these archetypes were constructed within a patriarchal system that upheld caste, class and gender hierarchies (Backelin-Harrison, 2018; Chakraborty, 2003).They argue that these representations were used to control women's roles, restrict their autonomy, and maintain social order. The ideal Devi image which is glorified denies women of any agency. Likewise, the Dasi image objectifies women reducing them to cheap labourers or sexual objects, mainly those from oppressed castes. This dichotomy indicates power imbalance that allows upper-caste women to be adored while simultaneously oppressing lower-caste women through exploitation and control.

THE IDEAL WOMAN

Indian society celebrates womanhood through its stories, epics, rituals, and festivals like Navratri and Durga Puja, often attributing divine qualities to women. Still together with these celebrations, cultural practices rooted in inequality, marginalization, and servitude continues. The concept of Purusha (male principle) and Prakriti (female principle) represents two complementary forces that sustain the universe. This idea as rooted in Hindu mythology, philosophy, and ritual, recognizes gender as a dynamic principle that can overlap, transform, and manifest in various forms, both divine and human, but not as a fixed biological category. It's a metaphysical concept that sees masculine and feminine principles as interconnected that exist simultaneously within individuals or entities. Shiva represents the static,

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unchanging force (consciousness, stillness), while Shakti is dynamic, representing energy, movement, and creation. The two are interdependent.'Hindu gender ideology admits gender overlap, gender transformations and alternative genders in myth, ritual and human experience' (Nanda, 1990, p. 145). In India, one can notice a consistent sense prevails regarding the idea of Devi and Dasi throughout the country, regardless of regional languages. These conceptual bifurcations originated from their historical use across India, especially in pre-modern times, to differentiate higher and lower caste women. The use of the suffix devi for women of Brahmin community and dasifor women from non-Brahmin communities is an example of such bifurcation.(Tanika & Bandyopadhya?a, 2022). Later on these terms shifted to reflect class rather than caste. In western India, bai was used for lower-caste or working-class women. This suffix represents a deeper social reality, revealing a complex hierarchy visible at various levels-sacramental, social, cognitive, and economic, particularly concerning work status.

Social imagination is fashioned by power structures, subjective to power dynamics, cultural boundaries, and contradictory norms. This influence cuts across caste and class, with dominant groups-like the upper classes and castes-imposing their ideals onto society, shaping perceptions such as the "ideal" Indian woman. Judith Butler argues that gender identity is not an innate quality but rather the result of repeated acts and performances. She states that "the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 2011, p. 179). Therefore, the body of a woman is not just a natural entity; it carries political significance shaped by systems of governance, power dynamics, and surveillance. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of power, it becomes clear how dominant groups construct the "ideal" based on their own values. The concept of Devi or Dasi reflects these gendered expectations, prompting the following questions:

F   How do the concepts of Devi and Dasi reflect gendered expectations?

F   What do we mean when we refer to the "ideal Indian woman"?

F   Is she characterized more as a Devi or a Dasi?

DEVI AS THE IDEAL WOMAN

The Indian texts that contributed to "the construction of the Devi figure are - Dharmashastras, the laws of Manu, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, rather than tribal myths and folklore"(Wangu, 2003). Although the terms originated in antiquity, they have taken on different meanings across various epochs and historical periods.In Hindu mythology and religious texts, Devi is portrayed as the epitome of womanhood. Durga,

Lakshmi, and Sita symbolize various virtues associated with femininity, including strength, purity, and devotion;a protector, capable of combatting evil and upholding dharma (moral order) within the family and society. However, while these goddesses are celebrated for their power and virtue, they also reinforce traditional roles that women are expected to emulate, often relegating them to the domestic sphere and subordinating them to patriarchal norms.

The Devi ideal reinforced a patriarchal understanding of women as dependent figures who derive their value from their relationships to men (as wives, mothers, daughters) and from their adherence to religious and social norms. Maintaining social order and religious orthodoxy was women's main responsibility, and these standards determined their ideal conduct. Women were supposed to be chaste, silent, and obedient, for example-qualities that guaranteed their deference to male authority. By linking women's religious and social value to their capacity to support the family, protect virtue, and act as the moral foundation of society, the Devi ideal contributed to the continuation of the feudal-patriarchal system. Consequently, the Devi served as a means of upholding patriarchy in addition to being a sacred symbol.

India during the colonial era saw the rise of the British-influenced middle class, known as the bhadralok (comparable to the British gentleman), marked a significant social development. Mostly consisting of upper-caste/class educated men in Western ideals emerged and equivalent to them women were treated as 'bhadramahila'. Specially the Bengali society was swayed by the standardmodel of the devi as the "saintly, virtuous and dutiful"(Banerjee, 2014, p. 162). The 'image' of Hindu, Bengali, elite, educated upper-class woman became an ideal encompassing in the term 'bhadramahila', literally, 'genteel woman'. The Devi as the ideal woman can be connected with the concept of Bhadramahila. The growing middle-class Bhardralok claimed that owing to the superiority of spiritual nature, the West could not colonise the inner, essential identity and thus challenged the Western civilization (Banerjee, 2014, p. 162).Who are the upholders of this spiritual culture? - Thewomen,bhadramahilas - epitome of modesty, virtue, domesticity, and moral integrity and guardians of cultural values. Sumanta Bannerjee writes how"the middle class women of colonial Bengal were cultivated as refined, spiritual and goddess-like as compared to both the western women and the women of the lower classes of Bengali society, 'the maidservants, washerwomen, barbers, pedlars, procuress's, prostitute'" (Banerjee, 2014, p. 244).

PARALLELS BETWEEN DEVI AND BHADRAMAHILA

Both the Devi and the Bhadramahila represent idealized versions of womanhood -

celebrated for her strength, purity, and nurturing qualities, serving as a divine role model for women. Bhadramahila embodies the virtues of a good wife and mother, reinforcing traditional gender roles that define femininity in moral and ethical terms.Both figures symbolize a form of authority that is often linked to their roles as nurturers and caretakers, yet lack agency.Unlike the unmarked 'universal' body, the female body is marked by its gender identity as a social construct. As Simone de Beauvoir points out "one is not born a woman but, rather, becomes one" (Beauvoir, 1997). The upper class women become Devi whether they want or not is not important and put onto a pedestal. Butler highlights how woman were forced into the 'compulsion of becoming' a woman (Butler, 2011, p. 11). Thus the body of the woman is a social and cultural symbol and becomes the carrier of many symbolsat the cost ofher autonomy. Colonialism, nationalism, and caste dynamics have prejudiced the construction of gender identities and objectified them as either Devis or Dasis.

The Bhadramahila, although a creation of colonial modernity, was contested by both colonial and indigenous patriarchies. The colonial authorities promoted her as an ideal of womanhood aligned with Western education and morality, using her as a tool for control. While she symbolized social reform, her empowerment was constrained to serve colonial interests, denying her genuine agency or equality.Traditional Indian patriarchy, especially in rural areas, viewed the Bhadramahila as a disruptive figure, alien to indigenous cultural values and a threat to patriarchal norms. Her embrace of modernity clashed with the ideals of the Devi, upheld by traditional communities. Social reformers promoted women's education as a marker of modernity and a means to improve their roles as wives and mothers, but these efforts rarely reached rural areas, where education was often seen as a threat.JasodharaBagchi writes in this context: "It was also supposed to encourage women in becoming immodest, indisciplined and un-controllable, especially when it became clear to the patriarchs that western education and school as the recognised institution of learning had come to stay […]. The basic fear was that of girls losing their submissiveness through education" (Bagchi, 1993, p. 2217).

Even though educated, her space and public role were often limited to social service or reform movements that were deemed suitable for women, such as education, health, or charity works as done by Swarnakumari Devi (Rabindranath Tagore's sister), Kadambini Ganguly, the first female doctor in South Asia, and Sarala Devi Chaudhuraniwho promoted education and women's rights. These women moved beyond the confines of domesticity and contributed to public discourse. Yet the major concern remained the same- the purity of a Hindu women's body, the control over the female sexuality. Under no circumstances the defilement of the bodies of women was permitted during the colonial period. The women who wrote and edited journals expressed their independent views on issues specific to

women only or about upper-class women's problems related to child marriage, age differences of spouses, and widow remarriage, neglectingeconomic backwardness, exploitation and the problems of existence faced by lower-caste women. More and more female authors began to write on social issues, often under male pseudonyms or within the safe bounds of domestic fiction, questioning the patriarchal systems.

POLITICS AND THE IDEAL WOMAN IMAGE

As the Indian independence movement gathered momentum in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a new image of the ideal Indian woman emerged and got intertwined with notions of Indian identity and resistance against colonial rule. The image became symbolic of moral superiority of the Indian nation over the corrupting influences of British colonialism. Her modesty, virtue, and educational status became symbols of national pride. In 1905, Abanindranath Tagore created a painting of an ordinary yet chaste and ascetic woman, depicted with four hands, which he titled "Banga Mata" (Mother Bengal). Partha Mitter describes how art historians later interpreted this painting as a significant and deliberate act of myth-making. During 1930s, image was reinterpreted and embraced as a symbol of the Indian nation, referred to as "Bharat Mata" or Mother India (Mitter, 1994). Tagore's interpretation of "Mother Bengal" became a powerful symbol for both Bengal and the larger Indian nation, framing the nation as a nurturing maternal figure personification of love, strength, sacrifice and nourishment. Sadly the focus was only on the upper-class Hindu woman which limits this representation, neglecting the lower-caste and non-Hindu communities. Majumdar(2021)examines how"the intersection of nationalism and gender took place with thisnovel image of women 'Banga Mata' who is more than just a representation of Bengal; she sights it as a complex symbol that embodies the ideals of the nation. This figure of 'Mother Bengal',depicted with qualities such as nurturing and sacrifice, supportsthe traditional notions of femininity, reinforcing the idea of the motherland as a sacred and protective figure(Majumdar, 2021).

The Tensions between the "Devi" and the "Bhadramahila"

The Devi and Bhadramahila ideals, though both constructs of femininity, were fundamentally antithetical. The Devi ideal, entrenched in religious orthodoxy and feudal patriarchy, confined women to domestic roles, emphasising submission to male authority, and was widely accepted in rural and religious communities as the natural model of womanhood. The postcolonial feminists like GayatriSpivak and Chandra TalpadeMohanty, argues that colonial constructions of womanhood, though aimed at "reform," were still embedded in colonial ideologies that sought to control and subjugate Indian women under the guise of progress. The Bhadramahila, despite representing a new kind of woman,

remained part of the colonial project that ignored the realities of women outside the elite, urban classes and did little to challenge the deeper social structures of caste and class that shaped women's experiences. The Bhadramahila image gained importanceonly in urban, educated circles; it was contested by both colonial authorities and traditional social systems, leading to a social divide in which she was either viewed as a symbol of empowerment or as a threat to established cultural norms. Writers and historians like Nivedita Menon and Tanika Sarkar argue that the Devi/Bhadramahila ideal is not 'liberatory' but is a construct that reinforces women's subordination by assigning them a narrowly defined set of roles-wife, mother, nurturer-without regard for their individual agency. The Devi ideal, according to these scholars, serves to justify women's oppression by cloaking it in religious reverence and cultural sanctity, making it difficult for women to challenge their limited roles in society.

DASI AS THE SUBJUGATED WOMAN

In contrast to the gracious status of the Devi, the Dasi represents the marginalized and subjugated woman. Traditionally, the term Dasi refers to women in positions of servitude, often from lower castes. These women faced exploitation and were subjected to societal norms that devalued their contributions and autonomy. The association of the Dasi with servitude and sexual availability reflects the broader social hierarchies that have persisted throughout Indian history, limiting women's rights and agency. Dasis (servants) were particularly subject to this exploitation, being both economically and sexually oppressed. The lower class and specifically working women were both exploited and considered exploitable. Unnithan-Kumar shows how, 'the projection of an uncontrolled sexuality onto women of a community other than one's own is often connected with the desire to maintain a distinction and hierarchy between the two communities'(Unnithan-Kumar, 1997, p. 23).The ideal concept asproposed is nurtured by upper-class values of the dominant groups of society. Dasi is constructed from these ideological structures of caste society; these hierarchies are maintained by the labour and services of lower castes, often referred to as the "service castes."

Sumanta Banerjee shows how "exclusive focus on women in the antahpur (which he calls andarmahal) hides a vast majority of working women in the nineteenth century who were either self-employed [women] like naptenis, sweepers, owners of stalls selling vegetables or fish, street singers and dancers, maidservants, or women employed by mercantile firms dealing in seed produce, mustard, linseed etc"(Banerjee, 2014, p. 129). These working-class women navigated multiple challenges yet found ways to assert their presence and influence. In "Sexual Politics", Kate Millett explains how unequal sexual relations support

patriarchal power structures (Millett, 2000). The ideal of fidelity and chastity serves to regulate and restrict women's sexuality. The dasicarries the burden of both imagined and real "pollution" imposed by upper castes. The upper castes seek to preserve their "purity," hence the dasi's body becomes a container for absorbing all impurities and negativities regarding sexuality.The sexual desires and needs that could not be accommodated by the "pure" bodies of upper-caste women are redirected toward the dasis' body. In this way, her body functions as a pitcher, absorbing the "excesses" of caste and gender hierarchies.

Despite their marginalized status, many Dasis have resisted their oppression in various ways, reclaiming their narratives and challenging societal norms. Some have engaged in spiritual practices that empower them, while others have sought social reforms to improve their conditions.Meera Bai serves as a profound example of a woman who navigated the Devi-Dasi dichotomy. A royal princess married into the Mewar dynasty, her spiritual journey led her to reject the constraints of palace life in favour of becoming a devotee of Lord Krishna(Patel, 2024). Her poetry expresses her desire to be Krishna's Dasi, allowing her to transcend the limitations imposed by her royal status.Similarly Akka Mahadevi, a 12th-century saint from Karnataka, known for her radical beliefs, rejected the conventions of marriage and societal norms(Ramaswamy, 2023). She referred herself as a Dasi of Lord Shiva, using this identity to assert her spiritual autonomy. Her poetry and teachings highlighted the importance of devotion and self-realization, challenging the binary roles of Devi and Dasi and providing a powerful voice for women's spirituality.

FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF THE DEVI-DASI DICHOTOMY

There is anobvious difference in the approach of Indian and western feminism. Few who tried to imbibe the Western idea of feminism were labelled as 'being a feminist' 'too Western', 'elitist' and 'non-feminine', were stigmatised by both men and women in the Indian society. Those women were neither classified as devis, as they can be categorised as dasi, due to their educational status.Indian feminists tried to apply an intersectional lens to highlight the diverse realities of women based on caste, class, and religion. They showed that the experiences of upper-caste women who may be idolized as "Devi" differ starkly from those of lower-caste or working-class women, who are often reduced to "Dasi" roles. This approach, drawn from the works of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Kumkum Sangari and Arvind Sharma and others, emphasizes that women's experiences cannot be understood in isolation from their socio-economic and caste backgrounds.Sangari's work critiques the traditional roles assigned to women, she argues that the idealization of the Devi often comes at the expense of women's agency. Her essay "Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti," examines how the narrative of Mirabai serves to reinforce the idea of self-sacrifice

and devotion as the primary virtues of womanhood.

Kamala Das, a prominent Indian poet and feminist writer, critiques the dichotomy through her literary works. In her poetry, Das often explores themes of sexuality, desire, and identity, challenging the expectations placed on women to conform to the roles of the Devi or the Dasi. Her poems convey the struggle of women to assert their desires within a patriarchal society that seeks to confine them to specific identities. Sharmila Rege's essay "The Politics of Sexuality and Feminist Activism," critiques the binary understanding of womanhood through the lens of sexuality and agency. She argues that the Dasi figure is often dismissed as morally inferior, a stigma and discriminated. She emphasizes the need to reclaim the Dasi identity as a source of strength and resilience rather than as a symbol of shame. Gita Mukherjee reviews the glorification of the Devi as archetype, which leads to the commodification of women's roles and shows how Devi becomes a political symbol, co-opted by patriarchal systems to uphold traditional values while ignoring the realities of women's oppression.In "The Politics of Gender in India", Rajeswari Sunder Rajan critiques the way the Devi-Dasi dichotomy shapes societal perceptions of women's roles. She argues that the Devi is often idealized in a way that excludes women from more diverse and contemporary roles, such as those in politics, education, and professional fields.

CONCLUSION

Gender identities and roles are deeply influenced by social hierarchies, making it impossible to view gender in isolation. Butler questions the very existence of gender and women, and even questions the existence of a 'body' behind the construction and that the substantive effect of gender is produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence (Butler, 2011, p. 34). The constructs of femininity-personified in the figures of the Devi, the Bhadramahila or Dasi-are deeply entrenched in patriarchal, colonial, and religious ideologies that restrict women's agency and individuality. These constructs, whether shaped by feudal-patriarchal norms or colonial modernity, continue to confine women within rigid, predefined roles that prioritise their relationships to men and the state, rather than recognising their full humanity. In order to move out of the narrowed restrictive paradigms, it is crucial to redefine the social constructs of gender, so that women are not merely positioned as submissive symbols of tradition or reform, but are instead accepted as complex individuals with autonomous identities and diverse experiences. In doing so, we can challenge both the colonial and indigenous patriarchal construction of identities like "ideal woman" Devi or Dasi that have historically circumscribed women's roles and create a more comprehensive and democratic framework in which women can truly express their subjectivity and engage in the social, cultural, and political spheres on their own

terms. Such a shift would not only dismantle the oppressive binary of idealised femininities but also pave the way for a broader understanding of womanhood, one that is no longer defined by external, patriarchal impositions but by the self-determined lives of women themselves.

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