

DECONSTRUCTING THE POLITICO-CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY OF DEVI-ISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the existential pastiche of 'Devi' in India as a point of departure, and constructs a continuum which interfaces with the lived lives of Indian women; within which the issues interrelated to her development, empowerment and identities are reconfigured in the present day discourse. The all – pervading rhetoric of 'Devi' is a part of the male hegemonic discourse, and the modern day paradox lies in the desirability of a Devi, aka, 'superwoman', in terms of recognisable roles, images and models.

Beginning from the colonial period, the construction of a sacrosanct image of the Devi became one of the counterpoints to refrain the British from legislating internal affairs of the Indian family. Devi in her 'spouse' version metamorphosised the wife/daughter/sister model, and was marked by roles within the impregnable fortress of homes and domesticities. The women suffixed 'Devi' to their names, seeking an identity in the symbolisms of a created hegemonic patriarchal discourse.

Inspite of projection and interpellation through print and television media, different literatures and cinema, the image of modern Indian women is derived from the age old motif of the Devi. Not only is an attractive and desired self-image of women constructed, it also provides a normative model of citizenship for the gendered female. The construction of the brand new woman as urban, educated and independent excludes a vast number of women in the rural areas. In this paper I engage with the nuances of this construct.

Keywords: ***Historiography, Devi, Traditions, Social Markers, Empowerment, Marginalisation, Deconstruction.***

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Devi – A Brand New Woman

Culture is an enterprise that imposes procedural, categorical, restricted and ideological control on its subjects over a period of time. The cultural negotiations from the past based on caste lines, linguistic differences, regionalisms dominated and interfaced with the fledging nation state for a long time. The negotiations often aimed at a paradigmatic shift in the mediums of expressions in a concentrated effort to bring about a homogenising effect in a diversified nation. One such idiom of expression entrenched insidiously in the woman's question was that of the Devi, the great Indian Goddesses. Academic discourses on the Devi had predominantly searched for an essence of a goodness/goddesses in an anglicised tradition of rationality by analysing the 'source' and 'original component' of a mythical glorious womanhood (Bader 1925; Speir 1973; Colebrooke 1805). Any detour from the homogenous stratified theme of women unlike the 'Devi' personified was termed as marginal and peripheral, a deviance. This grounding resulted in the creation of a central /peripheral conceptualisation of the Devi, which reflects on the binaries like – good girl/bad girl, housewife/career woman, docile/liberated, married/free clichés in India. This deconstructs the grounding of the concept of Devi, and raises a question that does the concept of 'Devi' stand for the women of India?

The thematic resonance of Devi in India that arises from numerous images of heterogeneity or deviances situated right within a rigid, restrictive, elitist Sanskrit discursive practice is not only self-contradictory, but also polyvalent. Contrary to an image of a virginal, demure, pure and beautiful goddesses, the Devi for instance sustains on the physical marginality of possessions, blood and death in a system that emphasises on bodily integrity and purity, the geographical marginality of the goddess haunts like the cremation grounds, cross roads, and hilly regions. In a symmetrical structured system which glorifies the fair and the refined, the Devi also thrives upon trance, magic, possession and menstruation, celebrating beauty as a dark primordial raw animalistic form. Sunder Rajan notes that ' Hindu goddess worship is radical in so far as the goddess is not inscribed in the mainstream deities and her devotees are largely drawn from lower castes , women and non-Hindus ,thus clearing certain spaces of alternative belief and practices in the monolith of Brahmanical Hinduism'(Rajan 1993).

However, the role models for the Indian women are carved from the typical stereotypical imagery of a haloed, caricatured model of a Devi. The religious texts and the production of images, the transmission of such images and literacy, and the appropriation of a high art for nationalistic causes and finally a part of the struggle wherein image and texts were put together on a sanitised symmetrical page as a part of morally dictated guideline for women transform

the Devi discourse into a site for feminist politics (Appadurai Korom and Mills 1995). The position in fact subverts the feminist positioning and questions the interlinked issues of women and their growth viewed perpetually from the vantage point of the role model Devi.

The Burden of being Devi – Cultural and Political Ramifications

In the treatment of women, the construction of the woman is virginal, set in an imagined image of ancient goddess, and there is an apathy or antagonism towards anything that challenges the prototype of this Devi. The construction of a highly selective history, in its transmission and perpetuation of tradition and culture remains a strategically executed process of deliberate culling of certain concepts from the lives of women. The concept of Devi as ‘Mata Rani’ or the queen mother of an imaginary kingdom, mythical powers and non-existent subjects is the first step towards building up an ambivalent attitude towards political power, political stature for the women of India. The conspicuous absence of state and its coercive machinery, armed forces and its ideology of dominance, political maneuverings in the discourses of Devi ensures a non-authoritarian, caring, maternal and pacifist role of women in the sphere of social and political activities. This assigns an alternative social order outside political structures.

For instance, the Devi is said to have achieved powers through the largest congregation of men in the ancient Puranas like the Markandya Skand Shiva and Vishnu Puranas and a later day Devi Bhagwatam (Banerjee 1995). The script bears uncanny similarity with most of the women in politics who seem to derive their authority through succession, divine sanction or attributes of race and castes which are a part of the patriarchal baggage. Moreover, successful elite women, similar to the image of Durga who ‘make it’ to the top do so by internalising male norms and in turn are conferred honorary male hood in a gesture of tokenism. Indira Gandhi, and her representation as a Devi in the 1975 Bangladesh war comes as an immediate recall. Such women are popular choices during periods of crisis, *à la* Devi, accompanied by a period of the grooming process and a coterie of male sympathisers in the guise of father, sons or male relatives.

The bipolar identity of Devi is associated with the ‘other’ like the bandit queens, *dayans*, possessed hysterical women, generally from the marginalised sections of the society, who constitute an integral portion of the women population of India, but whom the constructed history tends to forget. The sharp disjunction of such women from the collective psyche of the nation both in terms of status and solidarity contrasts sharply from the urbanised

educated economically empowered women in relation to political participation and political decision making processes. United Nations Development Fund for Women, (India, Bhutan , Sri Lanka and Maldives) note that ‘ Women are underrepresented as voters, as well as in leading positions, whether in elected offices, civil services, the private sector or academia. This occurs despite their proven abilities as leaders of change and their right to participate in democratic governance.’² Despite the Indian constitution hailed as a progressive one, the below mentioned repressiveness highlights the real scenario of the state and the Devi.

1. Men outnumber women in all population censuses
2. There are fewer women in paid workforces than men
3. Women are underrepresented in governance and policy making positions
4. Women are made responsible to manage affairs of home and children
5. Education is higher in boys compared to the girls in the country.

Post-Independence, the situation for a majority of Indian women have remained the same, confined to glorified wife sister mother roles only. Promoting and celebrating excesses against women who have diverged from the set patriarchal ‘lakshman rekha’ continues to be a part of the ritualistic baggage from the past. For instance, ‘Holika Dahan’ constitutes a major part of the Hindu festival Holi, wherein the act of burning a women is reenacted with pomp every year, or worship of ‘Sati’ who had burned herself on a pyre, furthermore eulogising ‘Savitri’ who without giving a damn about her life had followed her husband into the land of death. In contrast we hardly find festivals where celebrations are held for men dying for their women on pyres, or following them unto death. This raises the question of the practices related to worship of torturing women and its religious sanctions. Also relating women goddesses with illnesses like Kokalamman with cough and colds, Shasti with measles and childhood diseases, Shitala with pox, Kali with her companions with trance possession and witch craft (Erndl 1993) (Hildebeitel and Erndl 2000) leads us to the absence of the male gender in such contexts. Swami Vivekananda characterisation of the identity of women echoes with similar sentiments when he extolled on the virtues of the Indian women like Sita who suffered abandonment during her pregnancy, and of Sati who cheerfully climbed the pyre of her dead husband in contrast with her western counterparts at the Parliament of the World’s Religion at Chicago in 1893. From then to now, mythologist Devdutt justifies the abandonment of Devi Sita in his book *Sita: An illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana* ‘you feel your Ram has abandoned his Sita, don’t you? She asks gently. But he has not. He cannot.

² There is no mention of the author, however it was found as a general statement on the website of UN women. Accessed from <http://www2.unwomen.org> on September 10, 2015.

He is God. He abandons no one. And I am a goddess. I cannot be abandoned by anyone' (Pattanaik 2000).

The identities of women in India have been viewed from the lens of a construct termed 'Devi' and inspired by Sita, Sati, Savitri, their biggest duties tied to the 'Pati Dharma', or at the service of their husbands. The idea of the Devi as first encountered in the Ambhrini Sukta in the Rig Veda, the tenth Mandala, hundred and twenty fifth Sukta, is however an interesting one. She is described to be in control of the universes, of gods, men, ancestors and their ancestors'. She is the supreme leader of nations, and giver of wealth and knowledge. However down the ages, in the later day literatures like the Puranas, epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, witnesses a gradual decline in the strong position of women, in contrast to the Ambhrini Sukta. She weakens, is always made a companion or a spouse to a strong male god is accompanied by a troop of children and marked with certain symbolisms like pretentious clothing, sindoor³ and ghunghat⁴. The medieval India followed by the British rule was a witness to even a sharper decline, where women in general were kept out of education, economic activities, sports or political activities. Polygamy was prevalent and grievance redressal was almost nonexistent. A Devi in a household had transformed into a child bearing machinery, and the difference between the genders increased manifold. Not only was she the unpaid ill-treated neglected keeper of the house, she was also ousted from all activities that involved the nation and its questions.

Almost during the same time, and on the other end was an alternate space being constructed for the semi divine category of Devis, aligned to women who did not fit into the homogenous mould of the persistent patriarchal dictums. They were marked by identities like free living, bloodlust or aggression, having multiple partners and independent, in short the ones that could not be tamed. They were aligned to the Devis from the periphery, akin to the various forms of the naked Kali⁵, both the discourse took recourse to mythology for sanctions (Coburn 1994). Moreover since the second imagery of the Devi was deemed to be dangerous, the women who were characterised thus were burnt or hounded as witches, or as women who practiced black magic through trance and possession rituals (Caldwell 1994). They were not allowed to assimilate with the other women in the main stream society, and the sexuality of such women was coerced by some powerful sections who felt threatened. This two pronged policy served the patriarchy fine as it enabled a certain section of people, and totally disabled the other by either annihilating them, or pushing them to the periphery. Thus in order to fit in, a homogenous Devi-esque attitude had to be adopted by certain sections. This resulted in an

³ Vermillion worn on the head by Indian women as a marker for being married

⁴ A kind of covering on the head worn by the women in India as a mark of showing respect

⁵ Dark Hindu Goddesses portrayed with a protruding tongue standing on top of shiva.

either-or situation for women, where either they had to choose from the good mother/benevolent Devi to belong, or they were marginalised and kept on the peripheries of a society seeking homogenisation.

In the essay Diesel (Diesel 2007) notes that unlike the Brahmanical Goddesses, the semi divine creatures are often represented not by anthropomorphic features, but by natural ones which depict their close association with the natural world, they are violent and punishing, they are not accompanied by male consorts (although this does not reflect a sexual inexperience but un-dominated selfhood) and finally due to their ambivalent sexuality often involving unjustified treatment, sometimes through sexual assault they transform into a goddess.

The Devi Brand: Consumerisms and Commodification

The different cultural texts which shows a prolific rate of engendering in the advertisements on television, serials and newspapers which depict a construction of woman which is not only demanding like that of a Devi, but is supercharged like a Superwoman in action (Sangari and Vaid 1993). Equipped with ten hands, impeccably dressed, she is the one in control. This ten handed entity maybe be westernised in her clothing, but is still dictated by the patriarchal norms. She is a wife, can cook instant noodles in a jiffy and can serves troop of children in five minutes in perfectly ironed clothes and well-manicured nails. She is always perfectly dressed, at ease using the bathroom sanitiser and bedroom freshener at a moment's notice. She is conversant in all matters regarding finances and home management, can join the husband at a moment's notice for an impromptu jig, contributes to the family finances in a big way, teaches the children and the neighbourhood children, does community service and whips up perfectly cooked meals for her in laws. In short, she is the Devi, the all-conquering. Women who actually buy into such stereotypes are plagued with a feeling of life long inadequacy and stress throughout their lives. Interestingly when the Devi diva sets out to work in a scooty she quips vivaciously '*why should boys have all the fun?*'

The general trends in the advertising shows that

1. Prevalent female roles are maternal and aesthetic
2. Women have a different set of characteristics than of men
3. Minimal representation of rural women and their job roles
4. Women are dependent and form a projection of men's ambitions.

The modern acquisitive society propels women into consumerism which eventually benefits a class that is already privileged. The male dominated advertisements are not driven by ideologies but a principle of profit. The

discourses which have been built upon the idea of salvation, or shame makes women buy on the grounds on which such contestations takes place (Pintchman 1994). The tendency is not only a result of a desire to satisfy the male gaze, but also a narcissist self-gaze, an adherence into an interregnum set up by the panopticon called the civilised society. The complete absence of one such segment in such constructions are the rural women, who though lacking in western education and mannerisms are perfectly knowledgeable in their areas of expertise. But the pertinent 'lack' arises in such a scenario is that of a deliberate culling of her image in a Devi .Would the Devi be ever visualised as tending to pigs and goats? Or weeding the lands? Or wiping the faces of mud caked children? Or even hitting a 'high on toddy' inebriated husband? Such deliberate omissions not only create gaping distances in the overall representation of women, but also manufacture marginalisation and unnecessary difference in the holistic development of women as a long term goal (Butalia and Sarkar 1995).

Do Women In India Need 'The Brand Devi?'

The answer to the question lies in the debatable situation of the strange sense of pride wherein an overwhelming gratitude accompanies an Indian heart reading the tale of a male draping yards and yards of clothing on a naked woman in an assembly of men. The 'deprived Devi' had been solicitously 'taken care of' by a band of another set of depraved men! The process of 'taking care' by the society and setting standards that are not only impossible but biased, unevenly distributed and turmoil ridden creates a difficult road map for the woman of India (Mani 1993) writes that 'tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of women was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: women infact became the site on which traditions was debated and reformulated. What was at stake was not the women but the tradition.'

What are the repercussions of viewing women under such an imagined construct Devi? Are women questioning such portrayals or taking false pride in such contradictory valorisations? Are women thinking of new terms to re-define themselves or are they cocooned in the constructs of 'real and imagined' women which allows further vivisection of identity and selfhood by defining her as a goddesses?

The tradition of the Devi' discourse comprises of contradictory, opposing theories and tremendous emotions, it stands at the cross roads of intellectual rationality and social conservatism. The issues at hand currently involves are that of 'citizenship of women' and not a prototype of a Devi, towards an universalisation of genders. The religions or paths that one follows should strive towards a quest to evolve a sustainable design for growth and

development, an informed divinity within us to give life a sense of meaning and purpose.

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