



Mains Practice Question

Q. Examine the reasons and impact of 'devi-dasi' dichotomy prevalent in Indian society. (250 words)

26 Mar, 2019 GS Paper 1 Indian Society

Approach:

- Briefly define the idea/dichotomy of devi/dasi concept.
- Locate the cultural, political, social and economic reasons behind genesis and continuity of this idea. Include examples to substantiate.
- Elaborate with impact with its broad ramification on Indian society
- Conclude in brief with focus on this idea's irrelevance in modern society and way forward.

Answer:

Introduction:

Devi-dasi dichotomy may be used to refer to the duality - amounting to duplicity, in the treatment meted out to female gender in the Indian society. Devi, here refers to the divine while dasi signifies the subordinate or the servile.

Body:

Reasons behind prevalence of this dichotomy are as follows:

- **Cultural:** The Indian society celebrates the womanhood in many of its stories, epics, dramas, rituals - even rendering divine qualities over them but simultaneously has celebrated cultural traditions marked with inequality, powerlessness, marginalization and servitude. For e.g. the idea of goddess Lakshmi as the divine figure has practically coexisted with the unequal treatment to girl child and dowry problem.
- **Political:** The women leadership in the political arena has only come as an exception in the Indian society rather than being the norm. While there are examples of effective women leaders to quote from history to contemporary times, in general the absence of women from political leadership has further contributes to their marginalization.
- **Socio-economic:** The ideal woman as the protector of moral universe of community and the nation - serves as the perfect device to perpetuate the devi-dasi dichotomy as the women then has to be protected from being 'polluted' to keep the society 'healthy'. This has allowed our society to keep women out of certain leadership roles in society, polity and economy, with restrictions on their very fundamental freedoms required for a dignified life. For e.g., the respectability to mandatory purdah system, veils the oppression it marks for a vast majority of our womenfolk.

The **impact** has been disastrous for the womenfolk in particular and our society in general, though there have been voices of resistance as well :

- **Internalization of oppression:** Cultural and collective legitimacy given to marginalization of the womenfolk has resulted in internalization of oppression at a mass-scale even by the womenfolk. It has resulted in making less aware political, economic and social life-choices and well as carrying

over various forms of injustices to next generation. For e.g., many a times familial rivalries and discord among old and new female members of the family after marriage on questions of traditions vs. their critique provides an inkling of how such internalization manifests.

- **Glorification of regressive ideas:** The devi-dasi dichotomy has for long obliterated the urgent need for dissent and reform. Actually, it has led to glorification of certain regressive ideals in the garb of protecting traditions and culture. The resistance which RajaRam Mohan Roy had to endure in his movement against Sati or in our times, the triple talaq controversy are glaring examples of upholding the regressive ideas.
- **Legitimization of violence:** The devi-dasi dichotomy also helps legitimize various kinds of violence which is understood to be legitimate to keep the moral and social boundaries for the womenfolk intact. Enforcing codes on dressing, trivialization of stalking, harassment and rape-culture, etc don't seem to evoke a unified response largely due this latent legitimization.
- **The disenfranchisement of womenfolk** in areas of economy, politics, and practically all corridors of power has led to emergence of a skewed and dehumanized world - in which the emotions and ideas which have feminine connotations have been given a secondary status to the machismo and masculine ideals which have been excessively valorized in the day to day life. (Interestingly and sadly it skips the irony of valorization of devi in the ideal of devi-dasi dichotomy).

Conclusion:

Ultimately, the devi-dasi dichotomy has legitimized the certain kinds of violence against women even though upholding their ritual-token superiority. The idea in a modern constitutional society should be to provide an enabling atmosphere to all gender identities including men and women to achieve their personal potential which will then enrich the society and nation as well.

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