

Document Citation

Title	Devi
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Source	<i>Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)</i>
Date	1981 Jun 25
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Devi (The goddess), Ray, Satyajit, 1960

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FILM INDIA: Part I

Satyajit Ray

June 25 - July 24, 1981

Friday, June 26 at 6:00

Tuesday, June 30 at 2:30

DEVI (THE GODDESS). India. 1960. Produced and Directed by: Satyajit Ray from a story by: Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee, on a theme by Rabindranath Tagore. Photography: Subrata Mitra. Editor: Dulal Dutta. Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta. Music: Ali Akbar Khan. Sound: Durgadas Mitra. Production Manager: Anil Choudhury. In Bengali; English subtitles. Courtesy Macmillan Audio Brandon. 93 mins.

With: Chhabi Biswas (Kalikinkar, the father), Soumitra Chatterjee (Unaprasad, the elder son), Sharmila Tagore (Doyamoyee, Unaprasad's wife), Purhendu Mukherjee (Taraprasad, the younger son), Karuna Banerjee (Harasundari, his wife), Arpen Choudhury (Khoka, the child).

"The heroine, who is 17 years old, has a shyness with her husband that is without the sense of threat that generally underlies English reserve, and there is no analogy that I can think of anywhere in Western culture to her father-in-law's religious love for her, which is enough to convert his gratitude for her attention into a sudden calamitous conviction that she is an incarnation of a maternal goddess called Devi.

"In India it often seems as if domestic life is seen as an imitation of divine virtues. The way Indian women carry water or serve their families with food is imbued with something very different from the spirit of giving a meal man-appeal or opening the fish-fingers. There are two sequences in THE GODDESS that carry identical charges of feeling, one where the girl is carrying out Hindu rituals at the family shrine and another where she is tending her father-in-law; it isn't surprising that, to a deeply religious old man who has lately lost his own wife, the sacred and the domestic should therefore suddenly become confused in a vision of the girl as Devi that he declares to be the clearest he has ever had.

"What makes the situation tragic is that the girl is too submissive to do anything but accept other people's views of her, and her father-in-law's view turns out to conflict fatally with her husband's. When the old man has his vision his first reaction is one of horror. He kisses the ground in front of her feet, and her toes curl up instantly like the reflex of a dying bird. But her more sensible husband is away for the moment, and while he is gone it would be unlike her not to fall in with what the head of the family wants. The servants start drawing aside from her in awe, and her prankish small nephew grows awkward. The only dissenter in the reverential household is the wife of her drunken brother-in-law, a fast-spoken rationalist who says irritably that the whole thing makes her sick.

"By the time her appalled husband returns, he finds her doing her best to preside as a goddess and perform miracles for the villagers who are traipsing for miles to see her, in pitiful queues burdened with sick children. She adores her husband

as much as she reveres her father-in-law, but the effort to please them both splits her psyche in two like a tomahawk going through a skull.

"The three men in the film--the feminine old patriarch, the plump, sottish brother-in-law and the husband--have a subtle likeness that seems to be a matter not only of family but also of class and history, a mixture of fineness and self-indulgence that is differently balanced in each of them but runs through all three. The actress who plays the heroine was the wife in THE WORLD OF APU, Sharmila Tagore, and she is unforgettable.

"Visually, I think this is the most beautiful film that Ray has made. It is much more formal than the others, composed in stiff patterns and brilliant black and white that makes jewels and watch-chains stand out like starched lace in the dark. It seems marvelous that he should have been able to register such sweetness of spirit in a film without allowing a trace of softness, and looks so harshly at the destructive effects of superstition without ever mocking the roots of it. It is the achievement of an integrity as clear as a piece of glass."

--Penelope Gilliatt in The Observer (August, 1964)

"DEVI (THE GODDESS) evoked considerable controversy in India. But for Ray's script being based on the story by a Hindu and not a Brahma author--the late Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee--the attacks made upon the film might well have been more personally abusive towards Ray as a Brahma. For a time, DEVI embarrassed the Union Government and resulted in a disinclination to send the film abroad.

"Numerous officials thought it distasteful that India's most noted director should choose a theme which the Government regarded as outmoded. That the theme of a zamindar dreaming in the late 1860s that his younger daughter-in-law is an incarnation of the goddess Durga was not outmoded was proved about a fortnight after Ray announced the subject. A young village wife in Western India was declared to be the incarnation of a minor local deity. Her parents-in-law were convinced and word of the girl as a devi began to spread. Thousands of people, as thousands will flock anywhere in the world at the report of a miracle, streamed into the village to see the girl and take darshan of her. A stampede resulted and a number of people were trampled to death.

"Ray's theme of the idea of a deity incarnate in spirit within the body of a human being living today or a thousand years ago, has been an engrained aspect of Hindu thought. The dual mother goddesses, Kali-Durga, wives of Shiva, Lord of Destruction, have ever absorbed intense religious emotions within Bengal. Even in the latter part of the last century, the holy man, Ramakrishna, now the deity of a sect, declared his wife to be Kali incarnate.

"Those people who were to condemn DEVI as an attack upon religion itself, as opposed to an examination of superstition, did not enquire about the views of Satyajit Ray. Had they done so, they could have learned that he holds no aversion to celebrating the traditional religious festivals of Hinduism. He is not a strict Brahma who continues to condemn the worship of deity figures. As an artist appreciative of Indian culture, Ray sees the beauty in such worship. But he rejects dogma.

"He has said: 'Until Man can create life himself, I am prepared to believe in the Sages and that there is a central intelligence within the Universe.'

"The family attitudes which emerge in DEVI were common in nineteenth-century Bengal when the confrontation of Hindu orthodoxy and rational reformism was at its most intense. This conflict had entered the zamindar class from which, as the Ray family history reveals, many reformers sprang. DEVI embodies through its characters the conflict between the acceptance of orthodox Hindu superstitions and the growth of scepticism and revolt....

"The original last shot of Daya was to have shown her drowning as a parallel to the submerging of the Durga figure with which the Desserah festival at the opening of the film is climaxed. The drowning shot unfortunately was spoiled and could not be re-shot. In consequence another ending was resorted to--that of Daya dying near the river bank just as her husband reached her. This death scene left unexplained as to cause, was followed by the enigmatic smiling face of a Durga figure, a shot that also leaves speculative questions in the mind as to its meaning....In 1960, when Ray's American distributor, the late Edward Harrison, arranged for DEVI to be invited as an entry for the Cannes Film Festival, Ray reviewed the film and removed the shot of Daya's death. Thus revised, she is only seen rushing into the misty field before the final shot of the enigmatic goddess."

--Marie Seton in "Portrait of a Director:
Satyajit Ray" (Indiana University Press, 1971)

FILM INDIA is made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, D.C. Additional support has been provided by Air India, the Smithsonian Institution Foreign Currency Program, and the Asian Cultural Council. The Museum's film program is made possible with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts.