

HINDU CONCEPT OF DEVI (GODDESS)

In Hindu Mythology Mother Goddess comes before Trinity—Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Before starting any vedic ritual, mantras are chanted to the presiding deity of the holy waters. The presiding deity is Goddess in the form of the river. Any kind of creativity of bestowing of life seems to evoke a symbolism of motherhood. This correlation explains the common practice of calling the rivers “mothers” a custom which is most noticed in the case of “Matha Ganga” but common for other rivers as well. The prayer is addressed to the rivers such as Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswathi and others. The holy waters are prayed to make their presence in the waters, to purify the place where ritual is done, to purify one who takes bath in it and the assembly who witness the ritual etc. This is expressly stated in the Mahanarayanopnishad and the popular verse “Ganga cha Yamuna chaiva Godavari Saraswati; Narmadaa Sindhu Kaveri jalesmin sannidhim kuru--Oh Goddess Ganga, Jamuna, Saraswati, Godavari, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri, please make your presence in the water used for the ritual”. Vedas consider river water as primordial womb—“he who was born of old.....was born of water—right from waters, the soul drew forth and shaped a person”—Kathopanishad. The kalasa sthaapana (pot filled with water) puja starts with one such worship of mother as the first step of in all pujas normally.

Worship of Mother Goddess is known as “Srividya” and occupies a special place in Hindu spiritual practice. This is a very ancient system that has a long history tracing back to Vedas. Puranas, poetic verses and shlokas praise the Mother-goddess and give a detailed account of her powers. Hindu Goddess is uniquely popular and is a positive figure of feminine piety, grace and power in India, in the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal and wherever Hinduism flourished and practiced.

Durga, the militant Mother Goddess, is the most popular of all incarnations. She is worshipped as Mahishasura Mardini (Killer of Mahishasura) during autumn festival of Dussehra-also called Durga Puja in Bengal, where it is the most important of all Hindu annual festivals. Durga is then represented as ten-armed woman warrior, brandishing her weapons, riding on a lion and vanquishing the demon-buffalo, Mahishasuri. The image refers to a well known mythical event narrated in the Devi Mahaatmya, a text dating back to 7th Century AD, which is being recited as an essential component of Durga Puja, singing the glory of Goddess Durga. The righteous Durga has indeed another face, that one of the more ambiguous Kaali, the “Black One”, a figure of fury and destruction-although Kaali, too, ultimately fights evils.

In the Devi, Mahatmayam, Kaali is born from Durga’s fury; she seems to embody Durga’s furor, surging when she loses control or when she faces an awesome enemy. Despite her fearful appearance, Kaali, the most important of Hinduism’s Goddesses, is widely worshipped in most of North India, particularly in Bengal and Assam regions, where she is the object of Shakti cult. In Southern Culture of India (the so called Dravidian culture), Kaali is worshipped and popularly called Mariamman. There are many famous temples in the South exclusively built for Mariamman, including one in Singapore, where Tamilians dominate the Hindu population. She is worshipped

especially by caste followers of Sudra Varnashrama Dharma. Animal sacrifice was once very prevalent among them, which is now banned.

The belief among Bengalis is that Durga, a manifestation of Parvathi, daughter of Himavan, a spouse of Shiva, leaves her husband's place on the 7th day of the month of Aswin (sept/oct) and comes down to earth for her devotees' sake and stays for 10 days i.e. till Vijaya Dasami, after which, she returns to Kailasa, where she and Shiva have their abode. The worship of Shakti dates back to Rigveda where she is praised as the supporter of the earth living in heaven. Uma of golden hue of Kena Upanishad is the 'Great Mother of the Universe'. The shaivas made her the consort of Shiva. She is known as Shakti, Devi, Chandi, Chamundi, Durga, Uma and Mahaamaaya. Shakti is the Power of Existence, Knowledge and Bliss of Brahman (the Supreme) and is inseparable form "It". Shiva is the pure indeterminate Brahman, while Shakti, the Power of Maaya, makes him determinate, endowed with the attributes of Knowledge, Will and Action. Saundarya Lahari of Sankara says: "Shiva when he is united with Shakti is able to create; otherwise he is unable even to move. Maaya or Prakriti, the matrix of the world, lies within Shakti. The souls mistake themselves as "finite and many" due to the influence of Maaya. Liberation is due to Knowledge that the so called soul is non-different from Brahman. Knowledge of Shakti leads to the above knowledge. The shakti Aagamas or Tantras glorify the Supreme as the Mother of the Universe under one of the names and forms of Devi. In the Tantras, the female aspirant is looked upon as an embodiment of Shakti and, she is worshipped through rituals like "Kumari puja" (virgin worship) and Shakti upaasana (goddess worship).

Shakti is Power in general and includes every particular form of it like motion, kinetic, gravitation, heat, elasticity, electricity etc. Force is power translated to material plane. Energy and power are represented by subtle mind and gross matter respectively. Mother Goddess breaks into Power and becomes active for creation, maintenance and dissolution. Worship of 'Parabrahman' as 'Paraashakti', the feminine form, especially as Mother yields quick results; it is in the nature of Mother to forgive faults of her children. This is the basis of Shakta Philosophy.

Vedas glorify goddesses in various mantras--Sri Sooktam, Deevie sooktam, and Saraswathi Sooktam in Rigveda Samhita; Neelaa Sooktam and Bhoosooktam--in Taittareya Samhita and Durgaasooktam in Taittareya Aranyakam. Sankara, Vedanta Desika and several other gurus have composed devotional hymns in glorification of Goddessess, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, Annapoorna and others. Thus goddesses have been glorified and worshipped from very early vedic period to the modern days.

Worship of Goddess has found favor with great spiritual leaders like Adishankara, Vedanta Desika and Ramakrishna Paramahansa etc. Paramahansa is a person who has attained Samaadhi, the superconscious state of mind. Ramakrishna Paramahansa said: "when you desire anything, pray to Mother Kaali in a lonely place, with tears in your eyes, and your wishes shall be fulfilled". He also said it is possible to attain Self-realization within three days. Mother worship, in brief, consists of mantra Panchadasi, the Yantra, Srichakra and Tantra of the ultimate union with the Supreme.

Saraswati is glorified and worshipped in vedic rituals as Devi and sacred river as seen in Rigveda Samhita-“Ambitamae nadeetamae devitamae... Ima Brahma jushaswa vaajineevati”. In Puranas, Saraswati is wedded to the creator Brahma. The creator needs to be associated with the Goddess of knowledge, since creation has to be supported by the knowledge to create. All creative endeavors can spring forth from and sustain themselves only by knowledge of what and whom to create. Saraswati means, one who gives “saara” (essence) of “sva” (own self).

Lakshmi Gayathri in Srisooktam of Rigveda Samhita glorifies goddess Lakshmi and offers prayers to her, and, refers to her as the consort of Vishnu-“Mahalakshmi cha vidmahe vishnupatnee cha dheemahi; tanno Lakshmee prachodayaat”--we meditate upon Mahalakshmi, the consort of Lord Vishnu, the resplendent lady; May that Lakshmi prompt us in all our deeds. Wealth besides material prosperity includes the noble values of life, the power of the mind and the intellect, moral and ethical qualities etc. In order to maintain life, one must possess the wealth to do so. The God of Maintenance Vishnu has, therefore, necessarily to be associated with the Goddess of Wealth.

In Kenopanishad, Parvati is addressed as Uma, the daughter of Himavaan, resplendent with many ornaments. Indra approaches Uma to get the knowledge of Brahman as he considers her, the most knowledgeable and authoritative amongst gods. He thus came to know Brahman through Uma.

Earth is addressed as Goddess Earth and offered prayers in the following mantra of Maha Narayanopanishad (30), “Oh Goddess Earth, you bear the trampling of horses and chariots and the strides of Shri Mahavishnu. I bear you with reverence on my head; protect me always.... You are well known as Bhoomi, Dhenu, Dharani and the supporter of all the worlds”.

Mahanarayanopanishad glorifies and offers prayers to Durga in Durga Gayathri Mantra (gaayanat traayati iti--that which protects you by singing/chanting) “We meditate upon Durga who belongs to Katyayana gotra (lineage) and who is the resplendent maiden. May that Durga prompt us ” Here Durga is given the same status along with the male deities of Narayana as in Vishnu gayathri, Rudra in Rudra gayathri, Ganesha in Ganesha gayathri etc, in the same Upanishad.

The Gods and Goddesses are the first self revelation of the Absolute, the male being the personification of passive aspect of the female, the activating energy (Shakti). Uma represents Prakriti (matter). Uma and Parvati are her maiden names. She is also popularly referred as Annapoorna meaning “Bestower of Food”. ‘Anna’ though translated as ‘food’ has a wider connotation and includes all material objects of wealth, which are food for five sense organs.

All three Goddesses (Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvati) together are represented by the fierce looking Goddess Durga or Kaali. Kaali is worshipped by a seeker to invoke his/her latent power of destroying and thereby meaning annihilating all his/her negative tendencies and qualities which veil his/her Higher self. The benign aspects of Shakti are

Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati. The terrible aspects of Shakti find expression as Kaali and Durga.

The role of the Goddess in Indian political life has been fairly documented as it is associated to two themes which have generated a number of researches:

1. Women's participation in anti-colonial movement from 1880 to 1947 (the image of Mother India, Bharat Mata and Sita, the distressed).
2. Political careers of Indira Gandhi and Jayalalitha in a male dominated politics. The Goddess is brought on the political stage only in times of crisis, big or small, civil disobedience, war, emergency, electoral campaign and political change of guard. The transgression permitted by the reference to the Goddess does not persist once a more normal situation is back.

During Dasain, the Nepalese equivalent of Durgapuja festival Goddess is worshipped as Durga, a fearful woman warrior and the triumphant one. In the other face of the Goddess, a little girl is chosen to embody the Goddess for few years (until puberty), as the living image of Durga. Each year, the Kumari puts a Tika, i.e. Red auspicious mark on the forehead of the King, a gesture which signifies that she, the Goddess protects his legitimacy over the kingdom.

It may not be too far from truth if we conclude that it is undeniable that the lone male symbolism of deity has been a major contributor to the exclusion of women from positions of respect or authority in western society and religion. If approached critically and carefully, the Hindu Goddesses are the greatest stimulant to peoples' imagination and to peoples' speculation about the meaning of the Goddess to those societies where females had been denigrated and denied in the imagery theological tradition. If one only calls God "He" then such a God is not the Supreme Being but a personification of a male centered view of reality. As our culture is dominated by male energy, not of a higher but lower order, naturally we project this idea upon God as well.

God is both male and female and beyond both male and female. One can call the Divine "he" relative to masculine qualities of the Cosmic Being like strength, justice, will or discrement. One can call God "She" in reference to its feminine qualities like, love, devotion and receptivity. One can call God as "It" (Brahman /Atman) relative to its neutral qualities like infinity or pure existence. In Hinduism, God is symbolized and represented by attractive power of He, She, It, Bisexual (ardhanaareeshwara, linga- yoni union etc), Hermaphrodite images (Narasimha, Hayagriva etc) with the ultimate goal of "Ekam viprah bahuda vadanti"--the One the wise call or represent by many names and forms"

This lecture has been prepared by extracting, abridging and editing texts by N.R.Srinivasan for Vedanta class, at Sri Ganesha Temple Nashville, from the following sources:

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