

Dashamahavidyas

# ***Shakti, the Supreme: Mother Goddess in Hinduism***

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**I** USE THE WORD 'HINDUISM' in a broad sense to cover all periods of its development right from Vedic times. Though the religion came to acquire the name 'Hinduism' very much later during British times in India, the roots of Hinduism as it evolved through the ages go back to Vedic times; it is therefore appropriate to look for the origins of some of its ideas in Vedic literature.

## ***Truth Is One***

The groundbreaking contribution to religious and spiritual thought in the Rig Veda is the idea that the ultimate Existence or Truth is 'One' and can be described variously by wise people: '*ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti*; the truth is one and the sages call it variously.'<sup>1</sup> We take this oft-quoted saying so much for granted that its great significance

has been lost to posterity. Even today when bitter struggles rage over the superiority of one God of a particular religion over another, the Vedic sages were able to express the nature of this ultimate reality in an abstract manner calling it just Existence or Truth. It is not only that the ultimate reality does not have a single name but it is also not defined by any gender; this in my view is an intellectual feat of the highest order in that time and age.

We thus find that the hymns dedicated to female deities like Vak, Ushas, or Ratri were no less important than the ones dedicated to male deities. It is also significant that the *Kena Upanishad* mentions a female goddess Uma Haimavati as the one who instructs Indra about Brahman.<sup>2</sup> All these examples make it clear that in the early Vedic age both female and male deities enjoyed the same status. This attitude was facilitated by the open ended way of looking at religion, which enabled the Vedic sages to view the entire cosmos

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as endowed with divinity. Thus everything in the universe was imbued with the presence of the divine and the question of distinguishing the female from the male or according superiority to one over the other would not fit into the overall scheme of Vedic philosophy. This tendency would later blossom into the concepts of Brahman and Atman in the Upanishads where the outer reality Brahman got to be identified with the inner reality in everything that exists called Atman. It is also echoed in the *Ardhanarishvara* concept where Shiva is viewed as half male and half female emphasising the importance of both male and female in Nature.

The absence of defining the ultimate in terms of gender allowed for a freedom to conceptualise the reality in many ways without a gender bias. For instance the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* describes the ultimate reality in the following manner: ‘You are the woman, you are the man, you are the boy, (and) you are the girl too. You are the old man tottering with a stick. Taking birth, you have your faces everywhere.’<sup>3</sup> It is also significant that in the *Bhagavadgita* Sri Krishna declares: ‘Of this world I am the father, mother, ordainer, (and the) grandfather.’<sup>4</sup> It is later in the tantra literature and the many Puranas which are dedicated to Shakti worship that this tradition reaches its culmination. In these works Shakti is the supreme deity responsible for the manifestation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe. Moreover she is not depicted as the consort of one of the male divinities but is independent and is supreme in her own right.

### **Female Deities**

Amongst the major world religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism—it is only in Hinduism that one notices a profusion of female deities. As an embodiment of energy, Shakti is always pictured as female and one can say that without this energy the male deities cannot exercise their power. It is also significant that

while in general one worships all deities for blessings, when it comes to achieving certain specific blessings like prosperity and good fortune, knowledge, and power or energy, one prays to Lakshmi, Sarasvati, and Devi respectively.

There are a profusion of mother-deities that dot the Hindu landscape. Thus you have the *Ashta-Mahalakshmis*, *Sapta-Matrikas*, *Dasha-Mahavidyas*, and many more, which are varied aspects of Parvati.<sup>5</sup> One also notices that these female deities are by and large representations of Parvati. (81). While the Vedic heritage does accord respect to female deities it is in the little tradition that we find the great importance that female representations of the divine received in the form of village deities. It is these village deities that protect the villages from pestilence in the form of ailments such as small pox, and measles. The profusion of female deities, all subsumed under the name of ‘mother’, is a testimony to this fact. It was this phenomenon which helped the heroine of the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi, acquire an iconic status called *Draupadi-amman* in the south Indian ‘amman’ cult, even when the North has ignored Draupadi in its pantheon of female divinities. Moreover, Shakti has come to be recognised as the supreme deity in the Shakta school of worship and is given equal importance as that given to the male deities like Shiva and Vishnu, as already mentioned.

It is not possible to state definitely when this supremacy accorded to Shakti came into being. Depiction of female figurines on seals are available from the Indus Valley civilisation around third and second millennium BCE and later on in the Mauryan period, around the third to second century BCE, which by then had both masculine and feminine divine representations. It is with the age of the Puranas, that one notices written documents which accord this supreme status to Devi. She is celebrated as the one who killed the demon Mahishasura and one can boldly assert

that there can be no region in India which is not familiar with the Mahishasuramardini narrative of the Devi slaying the demon Mahishasura. This is celebrated in one form or the other in almost all the regions in India. This narrative is depicted in great detail in the *Devi Mahatmyam* of the *Markandeya Purana*. It is in this text that we find the identification of the Devi with *yoga-nidra*, yogic sleep, as well as the origin of the all-powerful Shakti who combines within herself all the shaktis of the other male deities as well.

The *Devi Mahatmyam*, considered to be of sixth century CE, recounts in detail the exploits of the Devi who has been described as *Mahamaya*, Prakriti, and Shakti. David Kinsley argues that it is in the depiction of Kali, Devi in her ferocious aspect, that each of these terms comes alive.<sup>6</sup> Kali, also known as Durga, is generally associated with the fearsome aspect of Shiva as evidenced in the Shumbha and Nishumbha legend narrated in the *Devi Mahatmyam*. As Kali, she has a number of temples known as *kalibadi*, house of Kali, in Bengal and Assam, where she is depicted in a fearsome form during the autumnal worship of Durga in these places. I shall briefly address the significance of the three terms—*Mahamaya*, Prakriti, and Shakti—before going on to highlight the uniqueness of the Devi, a female divinity, considered as the ultimate reality in the Hindu pantheon. She is also responsible for the creation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe as already mentioned and also rewards devotees for their devotion to her, much like what the male gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva do.

*Mahamaya*: The word ‘maya’, as we all know, goes back to the Rig Veda, associated with magic and the power of delusion. In late Upanishadic philosophy and the later Vedanta schools, maya has the power mainly of ensnaring humans to the mundane world and distracting them from attaining liberation. However in the Puranic



*Mahishasuramardini*

literature the sense of ego associated with maya gets more importance as emphasised by David Kinsley (82). It is this taking over of the ego in our mundane worldly lives that obstructs the path to moksha and ultimate liberation. In that sense it is appropriate that she be designated as *mahamaya*.

Prakriti: In Sankhya philosophy Prakriti is the material reality responsible for the evolution of the cosmos. If one needs to attain moksha one needs to transcend the world of Prakriti by the practice of discernment which is not an easy proposition. People are bound to the world of Prakriti in general. By the time of popular Hinduism represented by the Puranas, Prakriti is associated more with human behaviour, which invariably drags humans into the vortex of worldly activity. No wonder the Gita says, ‘It is Nature that acts’<sup>7</sup>

and associates behaviour with the sattvic, rajasic and tamasic qualities, which are the constituents of Prakriti 'born of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*' (17.2). Just as behaviour following the natural inclination of Prakriti is difficult to resist so is Kali, who represents the darker side of Shakti, difficult to control says Kinsley. Perhaps this is the reason behind her being called Kali, the dark one, who is Prakriti or Shakti in her not so benevolent aspect according to Kinsley. While Kinsley associates Kali with the dark colour, another understanding is that Kali is derived from the word 'kala' meaning time. She is therefore the power associated with time.<sup>8</sup> Either way what Kali signifies is that humans are not in full control of their lives and evil in many forms impacts their lives at unforeseen moments. This is an acknowledgement of the helplessness of humans in the face of difficulties.

Shakti: While all the deities like Shiva, Vishnu, and others have their *shaktis* who are always represented as female, Shakti also has her own *shakti* which she channelises not only to destroy the demons and asuras but also to bestow 'grace on her devotees'. So while *mahamaya* and Prakriti have emphasis predominantly on the binding nature of Devi, Shakti has a dual function of benevolence and destruction which comes into play at appropriate moments.

In whatever way Devi is worshipped, there is no gainsaying the fact that she has a large number of devotees throughout India. She has attained a paramount status and a festival exclusively devoted to her is the nine-day Navaratri festival and the grand Kali puja in Bengal apart from the many other ways in which she is celebrated throughout India. The entire *Durga Saptashati*, another name for the *Devi Mahatmyam* that has seven-hundred verses like the Gita, is recited during the Navaratri festival. I still remember the voice of Birendra Krishna Bhadra over the All India Radio reciting the verses from this Purana

on Mahalaya day, the first day of the fortnight that contains Navaratri. One of them which has a special meaning for me is: '*Ya devi sarvabhuteshu buddhirupena samsthita namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namah*'; I bow down repeatedly to that Devi who is the very embodiment of learning.'<sup>9</sup> In fact this Purana attributes all that exists in the universe as a representation of Devi Herself. Coming from Indian society, which is patriarchal in so many ways like almost all societies round the world, it is no small achievement for Hinduism to have accorded this exalted position to Shakti. This has had a domino effect in the West and Western feminists are trying to emulate this model and striving to bring in changes in Christianity with emphasis on the worship of Mother Mary juxtaposed with that of Jesus Christ. It is also reflected in a more conciliatory approach to admitting female bishops and rabbis into Christianity and Judaism respectively. In Hinduism while the Vedic tradition has preferred male pujaris for temple worship there have always been female pujaris for the wayside shrines and in some non-Vedic shrines mainly dedicated to Shakti worship.


Shakti has been identified with *yoga-nidra*, yogic sleep, and the reason for this is narrated in the following manner in the *Devi Mahatmyam*: Vishnu has entered his *yoga-nidra* and the demons Madhu and Kaitabha use this moment to start tormenting Brahma who tries to awaken Vishnu from his *yoga-nidra*. The same story occurs in the Mahabharata, which version is slightly different and it does not give due importance to the Devi. Thus the Mahabharata mentions Brahma shaking the lotus, in which he is born from the navel of Vishnu, in order to wake Vishnu up from his *yoga-nidra*, who eventually wakes up and then slays the two demons. But in the *Devi Mahatmyam* Brahma prays to the Devi addressing her as *mahamaya*, who then agrees to

withdraw herself limb by limb from Vishnu, who then wakes up and kills the demons. The emphasis of the *Devi Mahatmyam* is on the grace shown by Yogamaya to a devotee and by granting the wishes.

In the story of the slaying of Mahishasura, the story goes that in the long protracted war of a hundred years between the devas and asuras, Mahisha, the leader of the asuras, defeated the devas who were led by Indra, and in a sense, took over Indra's position. Faced with this situation the devas went to Shiva and Vishnu and explained their plight. Filled with anger there arose a light from the faces of Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma. There also arose energies from the other devas like Indra and they all gathered in one place and transformed themselves into a fiery mountain. That same energy then became a woman called Devi who was also given various weapons by the devas. Equipped with all this, the Devi was able to defeat Mahishasura and restore peace in the world. If one reads between the lines it becomes clear that the *Devi Mahatmya* extols the tremendous power of Devi, who surpasses all the individual male deities. Moreover one notices that she is not one of the consorts of the male devas like Shiva and Vishnu but is independent and is capable of removing all obstacles of her devotees.

When one talks about the supreme Mother Goddess in Hinduism one cannot ignore the tantra tradition in which women are given great prominence. In fact to be initiated by a woman guru is considered more meritorious than being initiated by a male guru in the tantra lineage. Sri Ramakrishna himself was initiated by a woman tantric as is well known. While there are Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Shakta tantra literature, increasingly tantra has come to be identified with Shakti over the years. Tantra nowadays is also associated with the awakening of the dormant kundalini power, which lies in the *muladhara* chakra at the base of the spinal column and making it

ascend through the five chakras—*svadhishtana*, *manipura*, *anahata*, *vishuddha*, and *ajna*—to finally merge in the *sahasrara* chakra situated in the top of the skull. It is a highly esoteric philosophy having many divisions and needs to be dealt with separately in its own right.

I have briefly dealt with the importance accorded to the Mother principle in Hinduism and have demonstrated how widely she is worshipped in this tradition. Shakti worship spans both the great Vedic tradition as well as the little non-Vedic schools that proliferate throughout the length and breadth of India. One could safely say that there are an equal number or maybe more worshippers of one or another form of Shakti as there are those who worship male deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, Sri Krishna, and so on. 

## References

1. Rig Veda, 1.164.46.
2. See *Kena Upanishad*, 3.12–4.1.
3. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 4.3.
4. Gita, 9.17.
5. See Swami Harshananda, *Hindu Gods and Goddesses* (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1994), 98.
6. See David R Kinsley, 'Kālī: Blood and Death Out of Place' in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, eds John S Hawley and Donna M Wulff (Berkeley: University of California, 1996).
7. Gita, 5.14.
8. See *Hindu Gods and Goddesses*, 118.
9. *Devi Mahatmyam*, 5.20–2.

Lord Vishnu in Yoga Nidra

