Conception and Evolution of The Mother Goddess in India

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The Devi as Mother

Devi, the Divine Female, revered by all, as is revered a mother, is better and universally known as the Mother Goddess. Reverence for 'mother' is inherent in any one born, a beast or a man, and is the first pious impulse in a child, which shapes the flesh to a human face. The first man, it seems, while contemplating the idea of the unseen Divine, looked at the face of the woman who bore him, the protective, caring and loving mother, and discovered in her the ultimate 'divinity' and the manifest form of the unseen Divine. Devi, the Goddess, thus, transformed as mother and is now since ages the Mother Goddess. The Mother Goddess is India's supreme Divinity. Myriad are her shrines and unending her boons. Centuries long tradition of worship has woven around her innumerable myths and the devotional mind has discovered in her oceans of mercy. In fury or in frown, she is always the same protective, caring, loving Mother with a benign face and a blessing hand.

Mother Goddess in the Indus Valley

This impulse seeking to combine the Divine with mother seems to have been man's earliest spiritual experience. At some point of time and perhaps for an effective performance of worship rites, which a believing or fearing mind necessitated, this perception of mind was transformed into a material medium. The Indus dweller further magnified it when, for realizing his idea of the Supreme Divinity, he elevated the Mother to the Mother Earth that blessed him with grain, water, air, fire and afforded for him a dwelling. The terracotta figurines of the Mother Goddess, recovered in excavations at various Indus sites (now mostly in Pakistan), are not only the ever known earliest manifestations of the Divine Power in any medium but are also suggestive of a well evolved Mother Goddess worship cult. As appears from the so far recovered figurines of the Goddess datable from 3000 B. C. to the 1st century B. C., this primitive manifestation of the proto Mother in terracotta idols seems to have continued to prevail till almost the beginning of the Christian era.
These figurines, being made of clay and thus defining their kinship with the earth, of which they are cast, represented the Mother Goddess as Mother Earth. As significant and suggestive is her iconography—the large breasts filled with milk, uncovered genital organs, beautifully dressed hair and a good number of bangles on her wrists.

This is the iconic perception of the Being who bears, feeds, takes all calamities on her head and covers the born one under her protective umbrella and, at the same time, defines in the modeling of her form an absolute aesthetic beauty. As suggest her bangles, the traditional emblem of marital state, besides a mother she is also a consort. Thus, in her material manifestation, She represents, with absolute motherhood, also the absolute womanhood. She causes life and sustains it, and is also the cause of life, its inspiration and aspiration, and the reason to live.

**Mother Goddess in the Vedas and Other Early Texts**

In its contemplation, the Rigveda, which seems to have conceded to the idea of the Divine Female, takes two different lines, one mystic and the other traditional. The traditional line was the same as prevailed amongst the primitive Indus community, which perceived the Divine Female as Mother Goddess. The Rigveda calls the Female power Mahimata (R.V. 1.164.33), a term which literally means Mother Earth. At places, the Vedic literature alludes to Her as Viraj, the universal mother, as Aditi, the mother of gods, and as Ambhrini, the one born of Primeval Ocean.

The Rigveda takes a mystic line, when it perceives the Proto Female as Vak or Vani, which, as the creative speech, manifests the cosmos and all existing things. In Vedic mysticism the cosmos and all things pre-exist but are unmanifest. The Vak, or Vani makes them manifest.
The Proto Female has been perceived also as Ushas, the glowing light of early morning. What the darkness of night makes unmanifest, Ushas makes manifest. In metaphysical theorization, which Vedic literature enunciates, 'all things exist but become manifest in Her, that is, in the Proto Female'. The Upanishadas elucidate this Vedic proposition with greater clarity. In their contemplation, the Upanishadas identify this Vedic Proto Female as Prakriti, the manifest nature, which is the material aspect of the Creation. The Upanishadas suggest that She is the all-pervasive cosmic energy inherent in all existing things.

The Vedas and Upanishadas weave around Devi a body of mysticism, but, in popular tradition, as suggests Harivansha Purana, a 4th-5th century religious treatise, when it alludes Her as the Goddess of jungle and hill tribes, She was yet the same simple unmystified puritan Mother Goddess. Her ties with the primitive man were emotional and relatively strong. However, there also emerged, in simultaneity to this worship cult, and obviously inspired by Upanishadas' mysticism, a body of metaphysics, which perceived the Divine Female as Shakti, the guided cosmic energy and the transcendental source and support of all creatures and all created things. The Mahabharata, keeping in line with the Vedic mysticism, alludes Her as the source of all things, the spiritual as well as material. The epic enunciates that all things, material and abstract, manifest and unmanifest, are only the manifestations of the Divine Female. According to the Mahabharata, this metaphysical Being, the Mother Goddess of the primitive man, is the basis, the root and the root cause of everything. She is the eternal upholder of Dharma and truth, the promoter of happiness and the giver of salvation and prosperity but also of sorrows, grief and pain. She removes obstacles and worries and renders Her devotees' path detriment free.

Devi in Puranic literature

During the period after the Mahabharata to the emergence of the Puranic era around the 4th-5th century A.D., the Devi is only the little quoted theme in literature and art of the elite. The worship of Devi was those days a wide spread phenomenon, yet till her elevation to the status of a Puranic deity, such worship was confined to only, or mostly, around the remoter corners of the primitive world of tribes. The tribes like Santhal, Bhumia and others of Bihar, Orissa and Bastar yet have a live convention of announcing their lineage at the time of wedding of their sons as well as daughters. Both sides begin with their origin, which is usually from one of the nature gods and commit themselves to Shiva, the Yogi of hills and their protector, and Mahimata, the Mother Earth, as their Dharini, the upholder. Quite interestingly, it depicts the five thousand year long continuity of the cult of worshipping Shiva, as the Mahayogi, representing the Divine Male and Mahimata, the Mother Earth or Mother Goddess, representing the Divine Female. It was only after She was accommodated into the Brahmanical pantheon, that the Mother Goddess was an object of worship in the world of elite also.
The Devi theme, once it becomes a part of the Brahmanical pantheon around the 5th century A.D., almost explodes the entire body of Puranic literature, with each Purana text coming out with one of Her aspects or the other. Here, She not only occupies the thinking mind but also its the altar. She is invoked not only as the Supreme Power reigning the cosmos and reigning above all gods, but as the cosmic energy incarnate, She is invoked also with greater thrust: "Ya Devi sarvabhuteshu shaktirupen sansthita, Namastasye namastasye namastasye n porno namah", that is, 'O yea, the Goddess who in the entire cosmos stands for energy form, we make our salutations to Thee, over and over we salute Thee' (Markandeya Purana).

Of all texts, the Markandeya Purana is most elaborate in its Devi concept and related rites and is considered as yet the most authentic document on the cult of Devi. It contains a full book, known as the Devi Mahatmya, conceptualizing and adoring Devi. She has been identified in Markandeya Purana primarily as Durga. On the face of it, the Markandeya Purana seems to move away from the prior manifestation of Devi as Mother Goddess, or Mother Earth, but in reality it is only a continuity of the Indus valley tradition. It is, at the most, a departure from the iconic manifestation of the passive Indus Mother Goddess to the operative personified representation of the Divine Mother who abounds with myths of Her origin and exploits, but She is yet the same Mother Earth or the Divine Mother. The Devi Mahatmya part of the Markandeya Purana is narrated by sage Markandeya to king Suratha and merchant Samadhi, who, having lost respectively their kingdom and business, approach the sage for knowing from him how to regain their prior status. After having narrated the significance of the Divine Mother and Her unique power, sage Markandeya asks them to prepare an earthen image of the Divine Mother and worship it. Obviously, even during Puranic era, She best manifested as Earth and in an earthen medium.

**Devi in Metaphysical Perception**

In Puranic literature, religious conventions, anthropomorphic iconography and ritual practices, the Mother Goddess has been diversely conceived and variedly named. There is, however, a wondrous unanimity in Her metaphysical visualization and cosmic perception. In Her metaphysical perception, whether it occurs in myths or legends, rituals or rhetoric, classics or folk traditions, or to the eye of a worshipper, painter, sculptor or poet, She is the Adi Shakti, the proto energy including in it all forms of vitality, strength, might, power, force, proficiency, dynamism and all operative faculties. As Adi Shakti, She represents Prakriti, which operates in and on all things, the manifest or otherwise, materially present or abstract. She is the dynamic factor of the cosmos, and at the same time She is Dhatri, the holder of all things, whether static or moving, and is thus also constant and firm. She is manifest nature and is thus materially present, yet She is also the absolute Consciousness, the thinking Mind, the universal Intellect and the Controller of senses. She is thus the sleep, thirst, hunger, as also the light, brilliance, shadow and darkness. Modesty, contentment, compassion, mercy, beauty, charm, faith, patience, quietude, activity, movement as also vengeance, or even violence are Her aspects. And, above all, She is the Universal Mother.
Devi’s cosmic perception is a mix of metaphysics and mythology. In India's metaphysical perception the Creation has been perceived as comprising of two factors, variedly named as Prakriti and Purusha, Matter and Self, Male and Female and the like. Mythology identifies them as Shiva and Shakti.

Prakriti or Matter, which in metaphysical equation Female represents, is the manifest aspect of Creation while Purusha or Self its unmanifest aspect. In mythological perception this equation undergoes a change. Here Shiva is Shava, the inanimate Being and Shakti, the energy incarnate, His enlivening and operative power. Without Shakti Shiva is the dead mass. Symbolically Shakti is the inherent energy of all things, whether manifest or unmanifest. This Shakti factor, a concept of metaphysics, is perceived in mythological contemplation as Devi and in primitive vision as the Divine Female.

Other Dimensions of Devi Related Mythology

The primitive concept of the Divine Female seems to be that of a non-operative boon giver votive deity who the primitive man realized iconically but did not humanize. The Puranic Devi, or the Mother Goddess, despite the related metaphysics, is more a humanized Being with an abundance of mythology woven around Her. After the Puranas vested in Her operative attributes, they conceived Her not only in various roles but also with innumerable personality aspects and in different manifestations. There grew around Her theories of Her origin, myths of Her manifest and incarnate forms, fables of Her various exploits and annals of Her acts of charity and benevolence.

As to Her origin, there prevail innumerable myths, although only two of them are more quoted and have greater relevance to the over-all Devi cult. One of them points out towards Her exploits against evil and restoring righteousness and in the other She is conceived as preceding all of the Gods-Trio (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva).

In one case, She was created out of the gods' celestial powers with all their attributes vested in Her. In the other, She had always existed but appeared as and when required.
As the tradition has it, a buffalo demon Mahishasura ruled the earth. The tyrannous demon inflicted upon all creatures great atrocities and rendered life miserable. He even invaded heaven, the seat of Indra and other gods and drove them out of the holy place. Under a sanction from Brahma Mahishasura was invincible against any male, a beast or human born. After Brahma made the disclosure of his boon, gods decided to seek a female warrior for eliminating the buffalo demon. When they found none capable to accomplish their object, they decided to create such one out of themselves and by their own powers. They decided to create a female warrior, who was unique in might and unparalleled in beauty and charm, as she could be required to bewitch and beguile the demon also by them. Accordingly, her head was formed by the powers of Shiva, her hair by those of Yama and her arms, breasts, waist, feet, toe-nails, fingernails, nose, teeth, eyes, brows and ears respectively with those of Vishnu, Moon, Indra, Brahma, Sun, Vasu, Kuber, Prajapati, Agni, Twilight and Vayu. Her glittering jewels and ornaments were Ocean's gift and her necklace inlaid with celestial gems that of the great Serpent Shesh.

The Devi emerged with three eyes and eighteen hands carrying in them various celestial weapons, the instruments of war and destruction- Shiva's trident, Vishnu's disc, Varuna's conch, Vayu's bow, Agni's dart, Yama's iron rod, Surya's quiver, Indra's thunderbolt, Kuber's mace, Brahma's rosary and water pot, Kala's sword and shield, Vishwakarma's battle axe and many others. Himvana gave her a lion to ride. The enthused gods rejoiced and in gratitude prostrated before Mahadevi, as they called Her. Mahamuni Narada then narrated to Her the plight of gods, hearing which She proceeded to annihilate Mahishasura and killed him in no time.

As significant is Her other cult. The text called Devi Bhagawat was the first to propound it. After the Great Deluge Vishnu emerged as a child floating upon a fig leaf.

In dismay, he asked himself as to who he was, who created him and why he was there. Suddenly there emerged a celestial voice that announced—all that is, it is me. Me alone is eternal. Puzzled he looked around and saw a celestial female with four hands emerging before him. She carried a conch, disc, club and lotus, wore divine clothes and jewels and was attended by twenty-one powers, more important ones being Rati, the goddess of love and erotic, Bhuti, the goddess of riches and prosperity, Buddhi, the goddess of wisdom, Kirti, the goddess of credibility, Smriti, the memory, Nidra, the sleep, Daya, the compassion, Gati, the movement and pace, Tusti, the contentment, Pusti, the growth and affirmation, Kshama, the forbearance, Lajja, the
grace and Tandra, the lethargy. Vishnu realized that She was the Adi Shakti Mahadevi and bowed to Her in reverence.

**Devi’s Symbolism**

In one mythological tradition, Devi’s emergence has been linked with Mahishasura. Mahishasura is not the beast in man but rather the human face taking to the face of a beast, and that too, to none else but to that of a buffalo, the most insensitive, self-contained epitome of evil. This suggests total human failure, which none of the gods, equipped only with this or that attribute or representing just this or that virtue, could repair. Only Devi, the supreme virtue equipped with all weapons and means of war, the Divine Totality, could change such state of affairs.

The other myth suggests that Devi preceded Gods Trio. She not only annihilated evil and paved the way for virtue and good to prevail but also revealed cosmic mystery. Her multi-arms suggest Her multi-fold protective umbrella and role. When Mahishasura, the male, contains energy, it leads to evil, the self-centered unguided might breeding ego, greed to acquire and possess more, an ambition to conquer and rule, but when contained in a female frame, it is only the guided power eradicating evil, perpetuating good and virtue and despite that She held arms and resorted to killing, She has attending upon Her only virtues and celestial attributes. She is multi-armed but has a single head, that is, whatever the number of operative organs, the guiding faculty that breeds determination, is just one and single.

**The Manifest Forms of the Divine Female**

This Devi form, irrespective of Her origin-cult and evolution, has multiple manifestations, the prime ones being three. The Markandeya Purana and almost all other Puranas perceive Devi, the Universal Mother, primarily in Her role as warrior or destroyer, sustainer and creator, three aspects of cosmic act which vest with Trinity. As warrior, She is Mahakali, the Destroyer who eradicates evil, evil doers and wrongs and restores good and righteousness. As sustainer, She is Mahalakshmi, who bestows bliss, prosperity, wealth and material happiness and yields good crop and abundant grain. And, finally, as supreme wisdom and all knowing intellect, She is Mahasaraswati, who nourishes all creative faculties, arts, music, dance and creativity. In anthropomorphic visualization Mahakali, is the Shaktirupa, the energy incarnate and
is hence multi-armed, their number varying from four to eighteen or even more, and carries in each of them an instrument of destruction. She also grants abhaya and varada and thus, on one hand eradicates evil and on the other protects good ones.

The four-armed Mahalakshmi carries primarily the lotus, which rises from the earth, routes across and above the water and sprouts into the air and sky.

It pervades with its glow and fragrance all three worlds. The four-armed shubhra-vasana, Mahasaraswati, the Goddess clad in white, rides a lotus, and subsequently a swan, both symbolizing purity, chastity and detached knowledge.
The Puranas thus begin personifying Her in various aspects and initiate Her variably conceived iconic and anthropomorphic formations. The warrior and demon slayer Mahakali is perceived also as Durga who for accomplishing Her object takes to other forms and creates for Her aid subordinate powers as Mahavidyas and Matrikas. Different from the black complexioned Mahakali, who wears a ferocious look, Durga, though still the same demon slayer, has golden complexion, a benign face and feminine softness.

The Puranas disapproved renunciation and discovered in family life itself means of salvation. They hence perceived their Divinities not as recluses or mendicants but as householders, as the Divine couples. They perceived the abstract Supreme Being of the Vedas manifest as Gods-Trio, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and associated with each of the Trio one of Devi's manifest form, Durga or Mahakali with Shiva, Mahalakshmi with Vishnu and Mahasaraswati with Brahma.

Shiva is also the proto lover and then Durga, his consort, manifests as the humble domestic Parvati. Parvati, the white complexioned daughter of Himalaya, is also Shiva's loving Gauri. While in exile from Baikuntha to hills of South, Vishnu takes to Venkatesh as his name. Here his consort Lakshmi, or Mahalakshmi emerges as Padmavati. When Vishnu incarnates as Rama his consort Lakshmi emerges as Sita and when he incarnates as Krishna, Lakshmi incarnates as Radha. Brahma's consort Mahasaraswati is better known as Sharada and most of her ancient shrines are devoted to her only in her name as Sharada. The ancient sculptures of Sharada follow Durga's iconic norms.

**Matrikas and Mahavidyas**

The Puranas like Skandapurana, Devipurana, Brahma vaivartapurana, Devibhagawata, Prapanchasaratrantra, Lingapurana etceteras, have conceived of other forms of Shakti to couple other important male gods. The more widely accepted number of such manifestations of Shakti is seven, though in some of these and other Puranas it is eight and even more. They are better known as the Saptamatrikas, or Seven Mothers. In
Matrika cult, Brahma's consort is known as Brahmani, Shiva's as Maheshvari, Raudri or Rudrani and Vishnu's as Vaishnavi. In his Varah incarnation, Vishnu's consort is Varahi and in Narsimha incarnation Narsimhi. The consort of Shiva's son Karttikeya is Kaumari, or Karttikeyani, that of Indra Indrani or Mahendri and of Yama Chamunda or Chamundi.

There prevail two myths in relation to Saptamatrikas. A demon Andhaka had the boon to get every drop of his blood that fell on earth transformed into yet another Andhaka. The demon thus multiplied himself in the battlefield rendering his opponent impossible to eliminate him. Once he attempted to take away Shiva's consort Parvati. Shiva shot an arrow at him. The blood gushed from his body but only to create many more Andhakas. Finally gods sent their Shaktis to assist Shiva. These Shaktis licked each drop of demon's blood before it fell on earth. Another version of the myth is almost similar to it except that demon's name was this time Raktabija and instead of Shiva his consort Durga confronted him. Durga created Saptamatrikas by her own power to assist her in eliminating the demon.

Other significant manifestations of Devi have been perceived in ritual tradition as Ten Mahavidyas. Though a late cult, individually some of the Mahavidyas, say Kali, have quite an early origin. Their number coincides with Vishnu's ten incarnations and is, hence, interpreted as the Shakta or Shaivite version of ten-incarnation Vaishnava cult. In Devi theology, Devi, like Vishnu, has been revered as the creator and maintainer of the cosmic order. Sometimes Vishnu's incarnations are considered as arising from these Mahavidyas, as Kali becoming Krishna, Chinnamasta becoming Narsimha and so on. These Mahavidyas are Kali, Tara, Chinnamasta, Bhuvaneshwari, Bagala, Dhumavati, Kamala, Matangi, Sodasi and Bhairavi, and are more or less the tantrika innovations of the Divine Female.

Devi in Popular Tradition

The tradition of worshipping the Mother Goddess, in whatever name, thus, has very early beginning. It is believed Rama invoked Devi when he felt that without her blessings he would not be able to eliminate Ravana. Sikhs' tenth Guru Gobind Singh and the great Maratha warrior Shivaji invoked her to assist them in accomplishing their object.
During India’s struggle for freedom her sons resorted to Devi and perceived their land as Bharat-Mata. Reciting Vande Mataram, that is, salutation to Thee, Mother, they laid their lives for her freedom. She is now India's most widely worshipped deity and has associated with her more festivals and events than has any other Divinity.

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