

Divinity as Mother: The Indian Concept

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The concept of Divinity as Mother is unique to Hindu Metaphysics. Sri Aurobindo, in his seminal work 'The Mother'¹, explains this concept in a clear manner:

The one original transcendent Shakti, the Mother stands above all the worlds and bears in her eternal consciousness the Supreme Divine.²

She is Prakriti, the active principle of the Supreme or Purusha. If Purusha is water, Prakriti is its ripple; Purusha speech and Prakriti meaning thereof. Thus, there is no dichotomy between the two. "In Vedanta and the Tantra system, Brahman and Saakti, or Siva and Sakti, are used alternatively. Siva or Brahman is immobile, and the energy of movement is in the Sakti or the immanent aspect. This world of multiplicity, this world of manifestation, is thus in the realm of Sakti."³

The concept of the Divine as Mother is as old as the Rigveda where She asserts her supremacy in no uncertain terms:

I alone am the mistress of the entire Universe and grant wealth, etc., to devotees.⁴

The Divine Mother thus charges all creation with Her presence. This is how the **Devi Mahatmya**, the most detailed and moving account of God as Mother, describes her all-encompassing glory:

I salute that Devi who exists in all beings as mother.⁵

The glory of the Divine Mother has been extolled even by Shankaracharya, the great Indian monist and propounder of the great philosophy of non-duality in some of his moving hymns. His 'Saundarya Lahari' opens thus :

If Siva is united with Sakti, He becomes capable to project this universe; if not, He is not capable of even moving His limbs!⁶

In his popular 'Devyaparadha Kshamapana Stotram', verse 7, he sings ecstatically of the glory of the Divine Mother whom he places on a pedestal higher than even Siva's:

One who was smearing his body with ashes taken from the cremation ground, whose food was poison, whose clothes were the four quarters of space, whose hair was matted, who wore a snake as a garland on his neck and was the Lord of animals, who uses a skull as an eating bowl, and was the Lord of bhutas or ghouls—that Siva now holds the undisputed status of the Lord of the whole universe; O Bhavani, this is only because of His being married to you!⁷

This is really remarkable that this great monist who at first only knew Brahman or the Formless Immanent came over to the view of the glorious role of the Divine Mother in Creation. Really Shiva is just a corpse without His Shakti—the fact being forcefully asserted by the spectacle of Kali putting her foot on Shiva lying prone.

Every God in the Hindu pantheon has His Shakti: Vishnu has Lakshmi, Brahma Saraswati, Shiva Parvati, Rama Sita, Krishna Radha, etc. Significantly, Shakti is given precedence over God as in Lakshmi-Narayana, Vanividhata, Gaurishankar, Sitaram, Radhakrishna, etc. Thus, in Hinduism, the Mother-cult had its ultimate glorification. Sri Aurobindo, who takes otherwise a Vedantist view of life where all verily is Brahman, extols Her thus : "The Mother is the consciousness and force of the Supreme and far above all she creates."⁸ She is the fountainhead of all action in the world. "Nothing can be here or elsewhere but what she decides and the Supreme sanctions; nothing can take shape except what she moved by the Supreme perceives and forms after casting it into seed in her creating Ananda."⁹ So, according to Sri Aurobindo also, as in the ancient Indian lore, she is the executive Power of the Supreme. She does not only govern all but also descends into this lesser universe. "In her deep and great love for her children she has consented to put on herself the cloak of this obscurity, condescended to bear the attacks and torturing influences of the powers of the Darkness and the Falsehood, born to pass through the portals of the birth that is a death, taken upon herself the pangs and sorrows and sufferings of the creation, since it seemed that thus alone could it be lifted to the Light and Joy and Truth and eternal Life. This is the great sacrifice called sometimes the sacrifice of the Purusha, but much more deeply

the holocaust of Prakriti, the sacrifice of the Divine Mother.”¹⁰ So, Sri Aurobindo thinks the role of the Divine Mother more significant than that of Purusha so far as Creation goes. Naturally, it is through Her Grace that the process of ultimate ascension can take place for which one must identify oneself with Her. “The last stage of this perfection will come when you are completely identified with the Divine Mother and feel yourself to be no longer another and separate being, instrument, servant or worker but truly a child and eternal portion of her consciousness and force.”¹¹

Thus, the concept of Divinity as Mother has had a wide following in India. In fact, it has permeated all Indian life and thought and lent them a unique broadness. “Our great sages discovered the pulse of that Sakti, of that prakriti, of that Mother-heart, behind the universe. So, they spoke and sang of God as Mother, as para sakti—the Supreme Energy, para prakrti—the Supreme Nature, and Her unique manifestations as Durga, Kali, and Radha.”¹² Divinity as Mother was most probably the original concept in the rest of the world, too. But “all such cults were destroyed by Judaism and Christianity.”¹³ Hence, “In all semitic religions, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic, Father is the supreme world for God and Mother has no place there. But the concept of God as Mother was present in the various cults that existed in the Mediterranean region; ...”¹⁴

The concept of God as Mother has lent a marvellous warmth to the Hindu view of life. Who could be nearer to a person than his mother? When God is viewed as Mother, the very idea comes as a fountain of love. “The moment you visualize God as Mother, that mother-sentiment goes on percolating into various aspects of human life. It is that expansion of love that is capable of uniting human beings to human beings, and human beings to nature. This is the holistic concept and approach that is appealing to people all over the world more and more.”¹⁵ The concept thus is natural to all created beings. “If God is love as many scriptures say, here is a unique expression of that love. This value is found in the females of all species—the urge to care for and protect the offspring, even at the cost of one’s life.”¹⁶

A natural corollary to the concept of God as Mother is that of the country as Motherland. Really, only India is the Motherland while others are fatherlands. So, of all the countries of the world, only India is Mother—Bhârât Mâtâ. And how sweet it rings—Vande Mâtaram! Sri Aurobindo, one of the mightiest geniuses that India has profuced in recent times, speaks ecstatically of his madness to consider his country his loving Mother: “My third madness is that while others look upon their country as an inert piece of matter—a few meadows and fields, forests and hills and rivers—I look upon my country as the Mother; I adore Her, I worship Her as the Mother.”¹⁷

The concept of Divinity as Mother has also resulted in adoration of mother or woman in India. Indeed, in no other country of the world was womanhood held in such high esteem as in India. Indeed, womanhood has got even identified with the Divine Mother as we find in **Durga Saptashati** where the gods are thanking the Mother after she has killed the Asuras Shumbha and Nishumbha with their numerous retinue:

... All the women of the world are just yur images¹⁸

The famous law-giver Manu prescribes maximum honour to woman:

Where women are adored, there abide gods.¹⁹

That Indian women always had a privileged position in family and society is evident from what we gather from the ancient books. We find some of them as Vedic and Upanishadic Rishis. In the **Brihadaranyakopanishad** occurs the great philosophical debate at Mithila in which sage Yajnavalkya proves supreme, but not before he answers the tough questions of Gargi who, though vanquished, impresses us as a woman endowed with superb intellectual acumen. Indeed, Gargi is a Rishi in her own right. The same Upanishad also tells us of Yajnavalkya’s noble spouse Maitreyi who discards the lure of material possessions for spiritual light.

In the voluminous epic **Mahabharata**, there is a vibrant female world which runs parallel to the male domain. Great women here are galore—women who prove a match to males in every sphere of life. In the **Shanti Parva** of the epic occurs the story of Janaka, the philosopher-king of Mithila, who wanted to renounce his kingship to become a mendicant, but was dissuaded from it when he heard the wise words of his Queen: “Your resolve to live in solitude deserting your wife has made you sinful. Because of it, both this world and that would be bereft of happiness for you.”²⁰

The **Mahabharata** also declares mother to be the supreme entity: “Mother is more than ten fathers put together. She alone surpasses in glory the whole earth. So, none is higher than mother.”²¹ And mothers of the **Mahabharata** indeed act gloriously. Here is Kunti, the hapless mother of the Pandavas, who by her inspiring message sent through Krishna calls on her sons, long wronged by the Kauravas, to struggle for their rightful share of the kingdom: “This is for which women of the warrior caste beget sons. A high-souled man does not lose heart when he has to deal with his enemy.”²²

But for the depiction of the full glory of womanhood, we should turn to the episode of Savitri which occurs in the Vana Parva of the **Mahabharata**. When Savitri’s husband dies and is being taken away by the God of Death, she follows Him in that terrible back journey and finally reclaims the soul of her husband. It is notable that, in this legendary tale, it is not man who saves woman but vice versa which shows our Rishis’

strong conviction of the inner strength of the fair sex. Man has always dreaded death; but here is a woman who vanquished the mighty Death to bring back her dead husband to life. This story also illustrates the elevated Indian view of womankind.

Thus, since the very dawn of civilisation, Indian women have blazed a trail of glory. They have perhaps purposely remained in the background because of their consciousness of their innate strength and have always supported their male partners to the best of their capacity the like of which is difficult to find elsewhere. And our wise men—those venerable Vedic and Upanishadic sages—were not oblivious of the vital role played by her in evolving a viable world-order and also in the great quest of the Truth. As Dr. Iyengar sings in his other epic **Satisaptakam**:

Thus with their uncanny inner vision
our seer-poets and Rishis
saw Woman as embodiment of strength
and as Mother of the Race.²³

The hallmark of Indian Womanhood through the ages has been one ideal—purity. “On every page the Vedas preach personal purity. The laws in this respect were extremely strict.”²⁴ It is this high idea of personal purity that impelled Indian women to shine in their full glory in the darkest period of Indian history when the Mohammedan hordes burst upon the land and targeted, as the invaders have done everywhere, women. When Padmini, the most beautiful woman in the world, refused to be lured by the imperial temptations of Ala Uddin Khilzi, one of the most powerful of the Mohammedan monarchs, and offered herself to fire along with thousands of other women of Chittor, she was marching in the footsteps of Sita who tens of thousands of years ago had similarly spurned Ravana’s “golden” allurements and testified her purity by entering fire.

For a picture of women in medieval India, there could be no better document by a foreigner than Colonel Tod’s **Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan**. He was in India in the first quarter of the 19th century and made a profound study of the Rajput life and traditions. He especially comments on the status of Rajput women after making a very significant statement: “It is universally admitted that there is no better criterion of the refinement of a nation than the condition of the fair sex therein.”²⁵ He finds that, contrary to the general view, “... the women are nearly everything for the Rajpoot.”²⁶ He further remarks on their importance: “The influence of women on Rajpoot society is marked in every page of Hindu history, from the most remote periods.”²⁷ He has this to say on the glory of Motherhood: “The Rajput mother claims her full share in the glory of her son who imbibes at the maternal fount his first rudiments of chivalry; and the importance of this parental instruction cannot be better illustrated than in the ever-recurring simile, “make thy mother’s milk resplendent”.”²⁸ Tod accepts the unhappy prevalence of the purdah which nonetheless has failed to curtail the influence of women on exclusively male affairs: “... though immured and invisible, their influence on society is not less certain than if they moved in the glare of open day.”²⁹

To find Indian “female devotion” unparalleled: “Nor will the annals of any nation offer more numerous or more sublime instances of female devotion than those of the Rajpoots.”³⁰ One of its instances he gives is that of Samyogita, daughter of Jaichanda, who had garlanded the statue of Prithviraj against the wish of her father and was carried away by the former to Delhi, leading to the perpetual estrangement between the two cousins which paved the path of Mohammedan triumph in Hindustan. But she kicked away her romance when Prithviraj prepared to meet the fatal challenge of Gori. What Samyogita tells her husband when he takes leave of her on the eve of the fatal clash throws a flood of light on the inner strength of the Indian women: “... to hide their ignorance, they say, in woman there is no wisdom! Yet woman shares your joys and sorrows. Even when you depart from the mansion of the sun, we part not. Hunger and thirst we cheerfully partake with you; we are as the lakes of which you are swans; what are you when absent from our bosoms?”³¹ She assures her ill-fated husband that, if the worst happens, she would welcome him in the other world. “Her prediction was fulfilled; her lord was routed, made captive and slain; and, faithful to her vow, she mounted the funeral pyre.”³² So, this was a classic example, something unheard-of in the rest of the world, of how a young woman literally soaked in romance could transform herself overnight to exemplify ultimate heroism!

In our times also, Indian Womanhood has shown the same effulgence. Sarojini Naidu, whom Mahatma Gandhi called the Nightingale of India, was one of our foremost freedom-fighters. There were countless other female freedom-fighters who marched hand in hand with their male counterparts. In his **Autobiography**, Jawaharlal Nehru speaks warmly of the heroic support he received from his wife Kamala. Gandhiji is no less eloquent in his praise of Kasturba. Mani Behen Patel, daughter of Sardar Patel, became his life-long nurse and also decided to marry only after freedom came, and it came too late so that by that time she was too advanced in age to even think of marriage! Last but not least was Indira Gandhi, India’s third Prime Minister, who managed the nation well enough and finally fell to an assassin’s bullets to uphold national unity.

This is too short an account of the triumphal march of Indian Womanhood through the ages. Had an endeavour been made to include all the distinguished ones, it would have been an endless tale. Moreover their glory has not dimmed even in the present disjointed times when family has faced total disruption in the West but

remains intact in India mainly because of their sterling character. They still rule our home and hearth, though their contribution in such fields as administration and science has been no less significant. An Indian woman has “Devi” appended to her name, and she still remains a goddess—worthy of the tradition set by Savitri and Sita.

Thus, the concept of Divinity as Mother has done immense good to our national life, vitalizing it in more ways than one. It has provided elixir of love to us Indians making us the most durable nation of the world. The motherly touch has made us more humane than others, more conscious of the essential unity of the Universe. The concept has also cast its spell on many of the best minds from Europe. The great German poet Goethe concludes thus in his immortal work ‘Faust’:

The Woman-Soul leadeth us
Upward and on!³³

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- [4]. Ranganathananda, op.cit., p. 5.
- [5]. Ibid.
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- [19]. Ibid., Udyoga Parva, 137.10.
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- [31]. Ibid., p. xvi.
- [32]. Ibid., p. xvi.
- [33]. Ibid.