

Immanent Nature of the Divine Mother

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DURGA PUJA IS AN Indian festival celebrated in honour of the Divine Mother in the autumnal season. The Mother is known by various names in various parts of India and these names are mentioned in various lists such as *Lalitā Sahasranāma*, *Lalitā Aṣṭottara*, and so on. These names really do not represent different deities but only various aspects and attributes of one and the same deity. In fact, it is the same God, celebrated as a masculine Being under various names, who is worshipped as the Divine Mother also. The Divine Father and the Divine Mother, therefore, really represent the same entity.

Regarding worship of Devī, it is said: ‘*Pumrūpam vā smared-devīm strīrūpam vā’pi cintayet, athavā niṣkalām dhyāyet saccidānanda lakṣaṇam*; Devī may be worshipped as male or female or devoid of all gender associations or free from all names and forms as pure Existence-Consciousness-Bliss.’ In fact, some Tantras like *Muṇḍamālā Tantra* and purāṇas like *Kūrma Purāṇa* and *Kālikā Purāṇa* indicate identity between various forms of Krishna and Devī. All these show that it is the same God who is worshipped under male and female forms.

Brahman is Śakti and Śakti is Brahman

Sri Ramakrishna refers to this identity:

Is Śyāma male or female? A man once saw the image of the Divine Mother wearing a sacred thread. He said to the worshipper: ‘What? You have put the sacred thread on the Mother’s



Goddess Sri Śaradāmbā of Sringeri Peetham

neck!’ The worshipper said: ‘Brother! I see that you have truly known the Mother. But I have not yet been able to find out whether She is male or female; that is why I have put the sacred thread on Her image.’ That which is Śyāma is also Brahman. That which has form, again, is without form. That which has attributes, again, has no attributes. Brahman is Śakti and Śakti is Brahman. They are not two. These are only two aspects, male and female, of the same Reality—Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute.¹

Again on another occasion he says:

Thus Brahman and Śakti are identical. If you accept the one, you must accept the other. It is like fire and its power to burn. ... Thus one cannot think of Brahman without Śakti, or of Śakti without Brahman. ... Kālī is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily Kālī. It is one and the

same Reality. When we think of It as inactive, that is to say, not engaged in the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, then we call It Brahman. But when It engages in these activities, then we call It Kāli or Śakti. The Reality is one and the same; the difference is in name and form (134–5).

Sri Ramakrishna would often instruct that ‘Brahman is verily Śakti and Śakti is verily Brahman,’ which he even taught to Keshab Chandra Sen and his followers. He would point out the mistake of those who doubt this identity: ‘Hazra can never be persuaded to believe that Brahman and Śakti, that Śakti and the Being endowed with Śakti, are one and the same. When the Reality appears as Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer, we call It Śakti; when It is inactive, we call It Brahman. But really it is one and the same thing—indivisible’ (567).

Devī is Absolute Truth

This Śakti of Brahman is referred to in *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*: ‘May that Divine Being who though himself colourless gives rise to various colours in different ways with the help of his power for his inscrutable purpose and who dissolves the whole world in himself in the end, may he endow us with good thoughts.’² In *Kena Upaniṣad*, Uma Haimavati appears before the gods and points out to the gods that all their glories are dependent upon the glory of Brahman. Here Uma Haimavati represents *Vidyā* or pure knowledge through which the realisation of Brahman comes.³

The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* further says: ‘God is neither female nor male nor neuter.’⁴ This implies that the Ātman or God has no gender. The *Devī Upaniṣad* of Atharva Veda also makes this identification between Devī and Brahman. Devī herself says in the Upaniṣad: ‘I am of the form of Brahman. The whole universe including *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* has come from me.’⁵ The *Bahvrajopaniṣad* also mentions that only

Devī existed in the beginning before creation. It is only She who created the world. Similarly, the *Sarasvati Rahasyopaniṣad* describes Sarasvati as follows: ‘*Vedāntārtha tattvaika-svarūpā paramārthataḥ, nāmarūpātmanā avyaktā advaitinā brahmarūpa-svarūpā*; one whose only form is what is taught by Vedānta, who is manifested as *nāma* and *rūpa*, who is the *Śakti* or energy of Brahman that is one with Him.’

Although Devī is one and is identical with Deva or Brahman, many circumstances contributed to God being conceived of as a female. When the spirit of anthropomorphism necessitated the personification of the Absolute, it was quite natural for the devotees to associate the idea of gender also with God. When God is conceived of as a glorified human being, it is quite possible to conceive of a being as either male or female. In Sanskrit, the word *Śakti* itself as well as other words like *Prakṛti*, *Māyā*, *Vidyā*, and so on are in the feminine gender and therefore easily lend themselves to be conceived of as belonging to the female gender.

Ordinary people cannot conceive of the Absolute or the undifferentiated, attributeless unity of Brahman. So it was easy for them to conceive of the Creative Power as well as other powers and attributes, especially those which are denoted by words in the feminine gender, as in some way connected with Brahman as a separate entity. This relationship was variously conceived of by different devotees according to their temperaments. Poetic imagination and fancy lend colour to this relation between Brahman and its attributes. Thus the two aspects of Godhead, which are really one and indivisible, came to be separated in the imagination of devotees, poets, philosophers, and of the masses, and came to be treated as related to each other as husband and wife, parent and daughter, or brother and sister, for reasons poetical, devotional, philosophical,

and philological. The same Goddess is thus conceived in popular imagination as well as the sacred texts as wife, daughter, or sister of God.

Devī in Different Forms

Dyāvāprithivī • We find descriptions in the Vedas of the whole creation as proceeding from the sky and the earth as father and mother, and they are coupled together under the name of *Dyāvāprithivī*.

Uṣas • Since all living beings are produced on this earth, Devī was considered as the mother of all. Similarly, Uṣas, the dawn, was considered as a goddess.

Ambikā • *Ambikā* is described as the sister of Śiva in some portion of the Vedas, although She is known as the wife of Śiva in later literature.

Śraddhā • *Medhā*, intuition; *śraddhā*, faith; *vidyā*, knowledge—all these are considered as goddesses. In *Kāthaka Samhita* of Yajur Veda, *Śraddhā* is described as a goddess through whom all the gods derived their divinity and the whole world has been established in Her; She as the first born Absolute who protects all dharma.⁶ Similarly, there is also a prayer to *Śraddhā*: ‘I invoke *Śraddhā* in the morning, evening, and at noon. May the Goddess *Śraddhā* give me *śraddhā*, the faith.’⁷

Medhā • The *Taittirīya āraṇyaka* conceives of *Medhā* as another goddess and invokes Her to come and help the devotee as it is She that helps one to become a rishi. Similarly, in the Śukla Yajur Veda, we find a statement: ‘With that Goddess *Medhā* who is worshipped by devas and pitris, O Lord Agni, make us possessors of *medhā*, intuition.’

Sarasvati, Ile, and Bhārati • Sarasvati, a river on the banks of which so many spiritual practices have been performed, is eulogised as a Devī, who especially is helpful for spiritual practice and spiritual realisation. Prayers are addressed to

this Goddess in R̥g Veda: ‘*Bhārati, Ile, and Sarasvati*, all of whom I am now addressing, may they lead us to good fortune.’⁸ ‘*Sarasvati* who perfects our devotion or adoration, and the divine *Ile* and *Bhārati* that surpasses all—may these three goddesses come to the sacrificial chamber and guard this sacrifice against all obstruction for the sake of our oblations’ (2.3.8).

Aditi • The whole of nature itself under the name of *Aditi* which means *infinite* or *all-encompassing* is conceived as a female form of Brahman and praised as having become the whole universe in R̥g Veda: ‘*Aditi* is heaven in the intermediate region; She is father, mother, and child; all the gods and human beings are *Aditi*; She is what is already born and yet to be born’ (1.89.10).

Vāk • This goddess is the only form of Brahman who gives expression to her nature in an entire *sūkta* in R̥g Veda. The whole *sūkta* has Ātman for its devata and the rishi of the *sūkta* is Vāk, the daughter of Ambhṛṇa. Vāk gives expression to her own glories, which she experienced in spiritual realisation being identified with the Ātman thus:

It is I who move about in the form of Rudras, Vasus, Adityas, and Viśvedevas. It is I who uphold Mitra, Varuṇa, Agni, and the two Aśvins. It is I who uphold the Soma sacrifice, the gods Tvaṣṭa, Pūṣaṇa, and Bhaga. It is I who give wealth which is the fruit of sacrificial offering to the sacrificer making oblations of clarified butter and libations of Soma acceptable to the gods. I am the Ruler of the universe and the granter of the wealth of worship; I know Brahman as my own self; I am the foremost amongst those to whom offering should be made, the offerers of sacrifice conceive of me differently and place me in different places. I assume many forms and make all creatures re-enter the self (10.125).

Incidentally this mantra gives us a clue as to how, some of the goddesses who are worshipped

in later times might have been only human beings in the beginning. They realised their divinity by devotion to God and spiritual practices. They were considered goddesses later on as in the case of Vāk. As we have seen, Vāk, a daughter of Ambhr̥ṇa rishi and a rishi herself, was considered a goddess later on and the whole *sūkta*, quoted above, was considered as relating to Devī herself.

It might have been only on the same principle that one who realises God becomes God, that Pārvati, Sitā, and Rukmiṇi came to be worshipped as goddesses. Pārvati might have been in all probability a great woman devotee of Śiva, who did Tapas for union with Śiva and who finally succeeded in attaining fulfilment of her desire. Such might have been the origin of most of the stories given in the Purāṇas. Some of these goddesses might have been only the wives or daughters or mothers of realised persons who were considered as gods. Sometimes, as in the case of Śārada of Sringeri, a realised woman might have been considered as an embodiment of *vidyā* or spiritual knowledge and worshipped as goddess. Thus, many of the various goddesses worshipped in later times, might have been in all probability, only spiritual women who were themselves realised souls or related to such realised souls as in the case of Mīnāksī in Madurai, Padmāvati in Tirupati, Śrī Valli, Aṇḍāl, and so on.

Again in later times, we find spiritual practices like *Sandhyā* and various associates of spiritual practices like *Svāhā* and *Svadhā* being converted into goddesses and their names being considered as the names of the one primary goddess. In his prayer to Devī before the Mahābhārata war, Arjuna says: '*Tvam brahmavidyā vidyānām mahānidrā ca dehinām, sāvitrī vedamātā ca tathā vedānta ucyate*; you are the very personification of the knowledge of Brahman, among all kinds of knowledge; you are of the form of great sleep among those who bear bodies; you

are also *Sāvitrī*, the mother of all Vedas; you are also said to be the embodiment of the knowledge of Upaniṣads.'

Thus, we find that the various aspects of nature, external and internal, or subjective and objective, denoted by words in the feminine gender are elevated to the rank of divinity and worshipped as goddesses, especially when they are very helpful in spiritual practice and in spiritual regeneration or when they are conceived of as helping in the creation of the world.

Concept of Śakti in Different Schools of Philosophy

Mimāṃsa System • The Mimāṃsa system accepts the idea of Śakti independently of God. To them it is only an impelling agency of force in connection with *Apūrva*, which acts as an intermediary principle between sacrificial performances and their results and it is called *adyṣṭā* or the *unseen force* leading to a particular effect. In discussing the *Śūnya* doctrine of Buddhists, Kumarila Bhatta admits the existence of *Śakti* as a category which determines the cause and effect that should follow. He admits it only as a logical category and not as the higher metaphysical ground of the ultimate principle of creation, unlike other Indian philosophical systems accepting Vedas.

Sāṅkhya System • In Sāṅkhya, *Pradhāna* or *Prakṛti* is the active principle of Śakti that produces all subtle and gross matter, but She is never regarded as the active nature of the intelligent principle Puruṣa. Prakṛti is unintelligent and is active of her own accord in producing the world in the presence of the passive Puruṣa.

Advaita Vedānta • To Acharya Shankara, Śakti appears as *māyā* enveloping the *jīvas* or individual souls. It is also identified with creative ignorance, since the ignorance of the true nature of a rope gives rise to the idea of a serpent. Śakti is never a different principle associated with

God. When we realise Brahman, we recognise Śakti also as only Brahman. It is like conceiving the world in a dream where we see the act, the actor, and the powers of the actor which are but manifestations of the mind. Acharya Shankara calls this creative ignorance *ajñāna* or *avidyā*, which can never be described as real or unreal, *sadasadbhyām-anirvacanīya*. It is unreal as it is possible for us to get out of this *avidyā* and realise our true nature as Brahman through *ātma-vicāra* or self-enquiry leading to *Ātma-jñāna* or Self-knowledge. He considers this to be the opposite of *avidyā* and calls Śakti as *vidyā* also.

Both *vidyā* and *avidyā* exist only so long as we have not realised Brahman. As soon as we realise Brahman, we also realise that what was *vidyā* or *avidyā* to an unrealised person is nothing other than the non-dual Brahman. So this *māyā-śakti* exists for one only in a state of ignorance but in that state it has as much reality as the world and the *jīva*. Though it has no *pāramārthika-sattā* or absolute reality, it has *vyāvahārika-sattā* or empirical reality. Every one of the powers or forces of nature as well as the powers of a human being has this *vyāvahārika* or relative reality just as the powers we see in the dream have got as much reality in the dream state as the waking powers in the waking state.

Viśiṣṭādvaita • According to Acharya Ramanuja, Lakṣmi or Śrī and Nārāyaṇa are ever inseparably united. They go together and constitute the same supreme Reality, *Para-Brahman*, although they are two entities. They are the masters and saviours of the universe, and the origination, sustenance, and dissolution of the universe are done by the Divine couple. Devotion to the couple is the means of salvation and they both form the goal to be attained in the state of *mukti*. Though their persons are different, the tastes and opinions of both are identical and there is no possibility of difference of opinion between

them as in the case of loving parents' intention on doing good to their children.

Both Lakṣmi or Śrī and Nārāyaṇa are possessors of infinite auspicious qualities. Still, for the convenience of meditation, by their common consent, Nārāyaṇa manifests all the manly qualities and Śrī the womanly qualities. But this does not mean that, one does not possess the other's qualities. Out of their own will, one is the consort and the other is the Lord, and this agreement is only for the purpose of saving souls. The Lord is strict and severe, and the sinning souls cannot easily approach him for pardon. So the loving mother Śrī intercedes and both together save the suffering souls. The greatness of Śrī is however inherent and not dependent even upon her Lord. Here the duality does not show itself as their opinions are always identical.

Dvaita System • According to Acharya Madhva, Lakṣmi is the intermediate principle between the highest principle Hari (Lord Nārāyaṇa) and the highest soul Brahmā. She, being untouched by sorrow, is eternally free from *samsāra* or transmigratory existence. She is the presiding deity of all primordial matter. She is all-pervading and eternal, but her attributes are not infinite in the same sense as those of Hari. She is dependent on Hari, who is the only independent principle, and He is the only one on whom she is dependent. She is the Mother of the universe as the Prakṛti, of which the universe is the development and is presided over by her.

Lakṣmi is the acme of perfection. She is popularly represented as the goddess of fortune and plenty. She has innumerable forms like Śrī, Bhu, and Durgā. She is the controller of the three *guṇas*: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. Though Hari is all-powerful by himself and can do everything himself by his own wish, yet he condescends to be helped in his work by Lakṣmi, Brahmā, and others. What powers these possess are not their

own, but given to them by Hari. Lakṣmi is in all her forms and incarnations only the essence of intelligence and bliss. She is co-extensive in space and time but she transcends both. She is in closest and most intimate touch with Hari, who is therefore described as wearing her in his heart. Lakṣmi represents the material aspect of the universe and Hari the conscious aspect. Hari is full and self-dependent, and his majesty and bliss cannot be augmented by his association with Lakṣmi. Hari is the first independent cause and Lakṣmi the first dependent cause of the universe.

Bengal School of Vaiṣṇavism

According to the Bengal School of Vaiṣṇavism, Krishna has an infinite number of Śaktis. The three principal ones are *Svarūpa-Śakti*, *Māyā-Śakti*, and *Jīva-Śakti*.

Svarūpa-Śakti • The *līlās* or divine plays of Sri Krishna are possible through his *Svarūpa-Śakti*. The realm of *cit* or pure consciousness being its only sphere of action, it is also called *Cit-Śakti*. The aspect of *Cit-Śakti* that helps the performance of *līlās* is called *Līlā-Śakti*, and that aspect which makes Krishna and his associates forget their true nature during Vrindavan Līlā is *Yoga-Māyā*. This *Svarūpa-Śakti* has three other aspects, namely, *Sandhinī*, *Samvit*, and *Hlādinī*; each corresponding to *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda* aspects of the Reality. A combination of these three is technically called *Śuddha Sattva*.

Māyā-Śakti • *Māyā-Śakti* is that aspect of power which is *insentient* and cannot, therefore, move without Krishna's agency. This Śakti constituted of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *taṃas* has two aspects: *pradhāna* and *prakṛti*. As *pradhāna*, it is transformed through the creative energy of God, the inanimate and material substance of the created universe, and becomes its secondary material cause. As *prakṛti*, it makes the worldly-minded souls assume material bodies,

by suppressing their true nature and thus it becomes the secondary efficient cause of the universe. The principal cause is always God himself, since insentient *māyā* can never be the cause of the universe.

Jīva-Śakti • All the *jīvas* in essence are Sri Krishna's *Jīva-Śakti*. This is also called *Tatastha-Śakti* because it comes within the sphere of action of both *Māyā-Śakti* and *Svarūpa-Śakti*.

Sri Krishna is one without a second. There is no distinction between Śakti and its subject in as much as it is Sri Krishna who manifests himself as the eternal universe, himself remaining unaffected.

The Śākta Cult

In the Śākta cult, the power or active aspect of the immanent God is called Śakti, because in this aspect God produces, nourishes, and maintains all. In Her static transcendent aspect, Śakti is of the same nature as Śiva. Thus, Śiva is the unchanging Consciousness and Śakti is its changing power, appearing as mind and matter. *Śiva-Śakti* is the Consciousness and its power. This is the doctrine of one infinite Brahman having dual aspects: the transcendent aspect in which it does not change and the immanent aspect in which it changes. There is thus *changelessness in change*.

Śākta-dharma is thus only another form of monism. *Māyā* is only one of the powers of the Mother God. It is that power by which the infinite formless Consciousness veils *itself to itself*—negates and limits itself—so that it may experience itself as having form or forms. This *Māyā-Śakti* assumes the form of *prakṛti*, composed of three *guṇas*, whose function is to veil and limit the pure infinite formless Consciousness.

In the Śākta cult, God is regarded both as the power-holder or the male Śiva and as the primordial power or Śakti, the Divine Spouse and Mother. While Śiva represents the consciousness aspect of the Reality, Śakti is its aspect as mind,

life, and matter. Śiva is the liberation aspect of the Reality while Śakti is in the form of *samsāra*, transmigratory existence. Śākta teaching is thus non-dualist in the sense that both Śiva and Śakti are really one. It may be called *duo-mono-theistic*. It is monotheism because Śiva and Śakti are the two aspects of one and the same Reality; it is also dualistic because both are worshipped as different persons.


Śakti and the Modern Science

Thus far, we have seen how every system of Hindu thought, from the Vedic times to the present day, recognised Devī or Śakti in one form or another, either as one with the Absolute or independently of it or in some way related to it. According to the system of thought which seems convincing to oneself, Śakti may be conceived in different ways by different individuals, but everyone will have to admit one's own relation with Śakti in some form or another.

Even the modern scientist has been forced to the conclusion that the whole world of solid matter of varying degrees of subtlety and grossness is ultimately found to be—in the last analysis—only forms of manifestation of one and the same energy. The world of names and forms, of mind and matter are all dissolved by modern science into one fundamental Absolute Energy. Every aspect of power in the universe has its ultimate source in this fundamental root of the universe, whether it is spiritual power or moral or physical. But to the modern science, however, this ultimate source of all power is unintelligent and unconscious. To the Hindus, this ultimate source of all power is an intelligent and conscious energy like everything else in the universe.

Every human being holds a spark of this divine energy. Like the atom which is capable of manifesting the infinite energy involved in it by

intelligent scientific processes as shown by the atomic bomb, the intelligent manipulation of the human powers involved in the individuals can also be released and the finite human can be expanded into the infinite absolute Self. The only difference between these two processes is that the energy released from a material atom by modern scientific processes is only a blind unconscious energy. The release of the spiritual energy, which is involved in life and mind by *sādhanās* or spiritual practices is as much a scientific process as any other processes of modern science. This enables us to manifest our divinity. It is only when this infinite energy is manifested that one can realise its real nature.

People who have realised their divinity understand that it is this divinity that was at the beginning of creation and that it continues to exist in different forms at every stage of cosmic and individual evolution. It is on the basis of such a realisation, that the sages ask us to have faith in the truth that *everything is only the Divine Mother*. Any aspect of energy, mental or physical, may be taken as an aspect of that Divine Mother, as mentioned in our scriptures. This idea forms the basis of the Hindu practice of conceiving every aspect of nature as a *Devata* or divine deity, and trying to find the Divine Mother in Her completeness and absoluteness through any one of these aspects. It also explains why every *Devata* is identified with every other in the end. 

References

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4. *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, 5.10.
5. *Devī Upaniṣad*, 2.
6. Yajur Veda, 3.3.9.12.
7. Rg Veda, 10.151.15.
8. Rg Veda, 1.188.8.