

THE SACRED FEMININE IN HINDUISM

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Introduction

If God is our Father, why cannot God be our Mother? If we are the children of our Heavenly Father, why cannot we be the children of our Heavenly Mother? This rhetorical question is the basis of this short essay.

Different religions provide different answers to the questions I pose. Judaism, Christianity and Islam worship God as a male figure. Recall the Christian prayer, "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven."

The Christian prayer is addressed to "Our Father." Hindus conceive of God both as father and mother. Lord Krishna declares in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

*Pitaham asya jagato,
Mata dhata pitamaha
Vedyam pavitram omkara,
Rik Sama Yajureva ca (9:17)*

I am the Father and the Mother of the universe,
I am the Creator of all. I am the highest to be known,
the Purifier, the Holy Om, and the three Vedas.

The doctrine of female divinity has established firm roots among the Hindus. The worship of the Divine as Mother evokes motherly traits of tenderness, generosity and love. An Indian saying goes: "Wife, children and friends may leave a man, but his mother, never." See Bansi Pandit, *The Hindu Mind*, 1998.

God is beyond number, count and gender. God is one and more than one. God is both male and female as well as beyond the male-female dichotomy. We may worship the Divine in any form we choose and God responds in kind. Lord Krishna says: "In whatever form people relate to Me, I respond in the same form." Several types of relationships with the Divine are described: the Divine as father, as mother, as friend, as husband or wife and as child. In India, the Divine is worshiped in all these forms. The worship of the Divine Mother is especially popular.

The male-female nature of the Divine Reality is narrated in a Creation Story found in the Upanishads. For comparative purposes, I shall first describe briefly the Biblical account of creation.

The Biblical Creation Story (Genesis 1-2 adapted)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and darkness was over the face of the deep. . . And God said “Let there be light” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night; one day.

And God said, “Let there be firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” And it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven, a second day.

And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas, a third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night. . . And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also, a fourth day.

And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens.” So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, a fifth day. . .

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created man in his own image, a sixth day.

And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day. . .

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” . . . So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

In the Biblical story, the woman was created as an afterthought and as man’s helpmate.

The Hindu Creation Story (*Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad* or the *Book of Forest Teaching*)

In the beginning was the Self in the form of *Purusha*, or the Great Being. He looked around and found none else but himself. And, the Great Being said *Aham* in Sanskrit, or “I AM”. That is how the Self came to be known as ‘I AM.’

He was afraid. But then he said to himself, "Of what am I afraid?" There is none other than myself. Once he realized this, the fear was gone.

But he had no delight, for one who is all alone does not rejoice. The Great Being desired a second. He caused himself to grow as big as a man and woman closely embracing. He then caused himself to fall into two parts, and from this a husband and wife were born. Sage Yagna-valkya says: "By oneself, one is like a half fragment, and this incompleteness is filled by a woman."

The Great Being united with her, and thus the human race was born.

But the woman reflected, "How can he unite with me after producing me from himself? For shame, I will conceal myself."

Thus followed the game of hide and seek between him and her. She hid herself becoming the cow. He became the bull and united with her; the bovine creation followed. She concealed herself as the mare; he became the stallion and the horse race ensued. She became a female-goat, and he a billy-goat, and from their union all goats were born. Thus followed several orders of creation, down even to the ants, says the scripture.

The Great Being then created the 5 elements: fire, wind, earth, water and space. He then created speech and names and forms to distinguish one from the other. God also created the fourfold order of society. Finally he created *Dharma*, the Law that holds together the whole Creation.

Once the creation was in place, He saw that He Himself was the creation for indeed He had released it from Himself. The creation is He Himself. And he who realizes this truth of creation becomes himself a Creator for he is identified with the creative process and the Creator. To know is to become.

Observation 1: In the Hindu creation story, the whole existence is One, for it originates from the One. It is the One Self that has entered into every object and into these bodies, down to the very tips of the fingernails. See my essay on "Oneness in Hinduism," on www.Sulekha.com or at: www.uwf.edu/lgoel. God therefore is not aloof from His/Her creation. The creation is a manifestation of the powers and potentialities that reside within the Divine. Creation is not an illusion, or *Maya*. If God is real, then this creation is real since it originates from God.

Observation 2: In the Hindu creation story, the Divine assumes a double form at the very moment of creation. The Great Being becomes two: male and female. God's dual form represents two sides of One Reality-- positive and negative, yin and yang, him and her.

Observation 3: The Divine couple plays a game of hide and seek. She becomes the cow and he the bull. The act of creation is joyful and fun-filled.

Shiva and Shakti

God's dual male-female form is given various names in Hindu mythology: Shiva and Shakti, Ishwara and Devi, Purusha and Prakriti. Shiva and Shakti are popular terms and are used here. The description of the Divine couple is rich in imagery.

Shiva imagines; Shakti procreates.

He is the legislator, she the executive.

Shiva is the origin and birth of things, Shakti is the nurturer and preserver of things.

He casts his seed into woman; the woman cherishes the seed and brings it forth into life.

Shiva is the father of things, Shakti their mother.

He is imaged as the Sun, the father of life. She is imaged as the Earth, the one who bears, nurtures and sustains.

Three Forms of the Divine Mother

Shakti, the Divine Mother, is known by various names: Devi, Uma, Parvati, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Chandi, Durga and many other names. Three forms of the Mother are popular in India. One is her power of all embracing grace and opulence and prosperity. A second is her profound capacity for knowledge and self expression. The third is her splendid strength, her warrior mood and her world-shaking force. These three powers are named Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Durga (also known as Kali).

Lakshmi

Lakshmi is the Goddess of wealth and prosperity, both material and spiritual. She is the queen of abundance. There is no meanness or smallness in her personality. She is wide, compassionate, and generous. Those who pray to her and seek her help receive in plenitude. She is the most beautiful of the goddesses. Lakshmi is depicted as bearing four arms, suggesting omnipotence in the four directions. She wears a green sari, symbolizing nature's abundance. She stands or is seated on a lotus flower, the symbol of spiritual knowledge. Gold coins drop from her hands.

Saraswati

Saraswati manifests the Mother's power of perfection and harmony. Youngest of the three, she is nearest to the aesthetic part of our nature. The science and the craft are her province. She bestows on humanity the artistic talents in art, music, dance, drama and literature. She is the patron saint of the artists and poets. Saraswati has four arms, wears a white sari, symbolizing purity. She is seated on a lotus flower, the symbol of spiritual knowledge. She holds a rosary and a book in her two rear hands. Her two front hands play the *Vina*, a stringed musical instrument. She rides a swan, the symbol of spiritual discrimination.

Durga

Durga is of another nature. Not wideness or wisdom, but force and strength are her peculiar faculties. She exhibits a strong temper, a mighty passion, and a divine force. Her strength destroys and conquers evil. Durga is the fierce one. She has eight arms rather than the usual four. She carries many different types of weapons. The color of her sari is red, suggesting vitality and passion. She rides the tiger, the symbol of strength.

Kali

Kali is a manifestation of Goddess Durga in her more destructive form. Sri Ramakrishna was a famous devotee of Mother Kali. Kali is terrible in form: her long tongue hangs out of her mouth; she wears a garland of human skulls; she holds a blood-stained sword in her hand. She is terrible and terrifying to look at. How can such a goddess command our reverence?

God is both benevolent Lakshmi and terrible Kali in Hindu theology. God is both Vishnu who nurtures and Rudra who destroys. Christianity on the other hand creates a partial God--a God of Love and Harmony. The Devil is set up to explain the existence of evil. All that is base, low and ugly belongs to the Devil.

The English philosopher David Hume is credited for making the following observation: God cannot be both all good and all powerful. If God is all good and we see that evil exists, then we must conclude that God is not all powerful. On the other hand if God is all powerful and evil exists, we must conclude that God is not all good.

The religious thought of India has never taken refuge in a partial theory of creation. It accepts God and Nature as they are, both good and bad. God is both a god of creation and of destruction. There is no creation without destruction. See Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*, chapter 5.

A Note on Hindu Iconography

The Hindu Goddesses wear different color Saris.

- Green is the color of prosperity, abundant life, the green earth. Lakshmi wears green.
- White suggests purity, serenity, calmness and wisdom. Goddess Saraswati wears white.
- Red suggests passion, vitality, the life force, the aggressive spirit. Durga wears red.

Hindu gods and goddesses usually are shown with four arms; they wear a crown with halo around it. They hold a lotus flower or are seated on a lotus flower. Four arms suggest strength and omnipotence in the four directions. The crown is the crown of majesty. Lotus flower is the symbol of creative power. The lotus flower grows in mud and floats on water. One should live a life of beauty but rise above its messy underside. Lotus flower comes in a variety of colors, suggesting rich diversity in God's creation.

A religious icon should not to be intellectually dissected or overly analyzed. An icon is to be imaged in the heart. An icon is not a photographic likeness; it is a symbol. In earlier times, the artist meditated before he sat down to draw or to cut into stone. The image appeared to him in meditation.

The Goddess in Ireland and Japan

I studied the Celtic religion of ancient Ireland during a recent teaching assignment there. Europe was Celtic before it was Christianized. The Celtic tradition is best preserved in Ireland, the country that lies farthest from Rome.

Pre-Christian Celtic traditions of Europe and Hinduism share many traits in common. The Celtic people worshiped the female form of the Divine. The Celtic goddess was associated with water and fertility. The Shannon River in Ireland is named after Goddess Sequanne. The river Boyne is named after Goddess Boanne. The Hindu goddess Lakshmi was born of the ocean. The Celtic gods resided on hill tops and therefore the hills were sacred. Hindu Gods also reside in the hills which are sacred. Shiva's abode is at Mount Kailash in the Himalayas. There are many similarities between the native Celtic religion of Europe and Hinduism.

The Celtic traditions were dubbed as paganism during the ascendancy of the Church. Celtic temples were destroyed and the priests burned. See Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 1997.

The Celtic religion is being revived in Ireland and in the rest of Europe. I attended their meetings. There is an annual gathering of the pagans at Stone Henge in Britain. Some people are of the view that Celtic pagans are a European branch of Hinduism.

The pagan tradition is also being revived in parts of the United States. At the University of West Florida where I teach, a pagan festival has been held annually for the past several years. I have lectured on the Hindu Goddess at the festival.

In Japan, Saraswati-like Benten (or Bensaitensama) is a popular goddess. Benten is usually shown as a beautiful woman dressed in (sari-like) silk robe, playing a biwa or lute and wearing a jeweled crown. Religious pictures often show her with multiple arms. She is the Goddess of music and arts, and also of rivers, lakes and waters.

A New Interest in the Sacred Feminine

A resurgence of interest in the Sacred Feminine is occurring strongly in the West. How many of the readers have heard of *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown? It was No. 1 on the New York Times bestseller list for months. *The Da Vinci Code* focuses on the Sacred Feminine in terms of Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene. Could they have been married? Was she really a prostitute, or is that a trumped-up charge? Dan Brown offers the following analysis:

- early Christianity entailed "the cult of the Great Mother"
Mary Magdalene represented the feminine cult and the Holy Grail of traditional lore
- she was also Jesus' wife and the mother of his children
- Magdalene's womb, carrying Jesus offspring, was the legendary Holy Grail (as seen in Da Vinci's encoded painting, *The Last Supper*)
- Jesus was not seen as divine (God) by His followers until Emperor Constantine declared him so for his own purposes

- The "truth" about Christ and Mary Magdalene has been kept alive by a secret society named the Priory of Sion that was lead by great minds like Leonardo Da Vinci and Isaac Newton.

“When Christianity came along, the old pagan religions did not die easily. Legends of chivalric quests for the Holy Grail were in fact stories of forbidden quests to find the lost sacred feminine. Knights who claimed to be “searching for the chalice” were speaking in code as a way to protect themselves from a Church that had subjugated women, banished the Goddess, burned non-believers, and forbidden the pagan reverence for the sacred feminine.”-- pages 238-39.

In four popular books, Margaret Starbird explodes the myth that Jesus Christ was a “celibate” god. She describes the suppressed story of Mary Magdalene, the “Lost Bride” of Jesus. Margaret Starbird perceives something troubling about a religion based on “a virgin mother and a celibate son.” The labeling of sex as sinful and the emphasis on celibacy among the clergy results in a distortion and denial of our basic nature. The consequences are played out in the recent clergy sex scandals. See her *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine*, 1998.

The Black Madonna in chapels and churches in Europe may actually represent Mary Magdalene. After Jesus was crucified, Mary Magdalene traveled for her safety to Marseilles in southern France. The gypsies gather annually for their celebration of the Black Madonna in late May in southern France. Interestingly, the gypsies call the black Madonna “Kali.” What does this suggest?

What happened to the Goddess in Christendom? During the Inquisition, the herbal and wise women of Europe were condemned as consorts of the Devil and were burned at the stake. The old witches of Halloween were actually the wise-women of their communities.

Concluding Thought

We can only be truly human through our connection to the Sacred Feminine. She is part of us and we are part of Her. If we deny our feminine aspect, we lead incomplete lives. She helps us to integrate our body, mind and soul. It is the integration of our masculine and feminine aspects which makes us whole and holy. We can be gentle and strong, intuitive and intellectual, inward and outward, reflective and active. We can love one another and care for each as brothers and sisters, as husbands and wives.

We need the Goddess in our lives to repair, to nurture and to heal.