

Exploring the Veneration of the Divine Mother: Tracing the Cultural Significance of Ancient Indian Devotion

Vibha Rathod

Department of Humanities: The Bhopal School of Social Sciences, Bhopal, India

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Abstract: The ancient history of the divine mother holds a revered legacy in India, where the mother figure has been consistently venerated and is regarded as superior in various aspects. This paper explores the profound roots of Shaktism within Hinduism and its origins in the early worship of the mother goddess. It delves into the historical, religious, and cultural contexts surrounding the emergence of the mother goddess cult and its evolution over time. Additionally, the paper examines the significance of motherhood in Indian society, the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, and the prevalence of the 'Niyoga' custom. The study also delves into primitive religion and the archaeological evidence supporting the veneration of the Mother Goddess in prehistoric societies. Ultimately, this research sheds light on the enduring and multifaceted concept of the divine mother in human history. By examining the multifaceted aspects of this devotion, including historical, sociocultural, and religious dimensions, the study seeks to uncover the enduring influence of the Divine Mother in shaping Indian society in India.

1 INTRODUCTION

The veneration of the divine mother is a fundamental aspect of Indian culture, deeply rooted in the country's history and religious practices. This paper explores the rich legacy of the divine mother and the profound significance of motherhood within Indian society. It also delves into the emergence and evolution of Shaktism as a prominent sect within Hinduism, tracing its origins to the early worship of the mother goddess. In Indian society, womanhood, in its entirety, commands respect, but motherhood holds a special place of reverence. The maternal figure is elevated to the highest pinnacle of veneration by her offspring, reflecting a splendid legacy of motherly devotion. Shaktism, a significant sect within Hinduism, worships the Great Goddess as the embodiment of primordial energy, a concept rare in global religious history. (Smith, 1998).

The worship of the mother goddess is deeply intertwined with the historical practices of agricultural communities, which operated under the principles of mother-right. Early human societies may have practiced promiscuity, where paternity was not a concern, and groups were controlled by females.

Matriarchy likely preceded patriarchy, establishing the priority of mother-right in primitive society. According to Maine Paternity is a presumption and maternity a reality. (Maine, 1833)

In Vedic literature, the position of the mother is unique, and she is regarded as the highest guru. The epics, such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, also depict the exalted status of mothers. The Pandavas' devotion to their mother and Duryodhana's obedience to his mother are notable examples. Manusmriti and Yagyawalk Smriti elevate the mother above the guru. Puranic and Tantra literature describe the mother as 'Adyashakti,' Jagadamba, and Jagatjanini. This profound reverence for motherhood is also reflected in the works of poets like Kalidas and philosophers like Shankaracharya. The prevalence of the 'Niyoga' custom in ancient India challenges conventional notions of physical chastity. It allowed for the raising of children, particularly sons, through wives in specific circumstances. This practice highlights the importance of motherhood over physical chastity in ancient Indian society.

The myth of motherhood represents an ancient and foundational understanding of the power inherent in the maternal role. It symbolizes a force to be revered and feared, embodying both nurture and awe-inspiring qualities. Primitive societies began to

abstract this concept into a broader, cosmic notion, personifying it into various goddesses, each representing different facets of the mother archetype.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Several authors worked on Manifestation of Goddesses in sculpture. The most notable work on Manifestation of Goddesses in Art are as follows-

Heather El good's book 'Hinduism and the Religious Arts' focuses on the supreme importance of religious history of India is the worship of mother Goddesses. He has mentioned the 4th century Vidisha and nearby Udaygiri caves of Central India, which were developed under patronage of Kushan dynasty. The earliest intact body of Hindu Art in India is seen in Udaygiri, in 20 rock cut chambers. These caves contain carvings which are vital for the study of the creation of Hindu Iconography.

Stella Kramrisch's book 'The Hindu Temple,' Motilal Banarsidass provides information about the different types of temple architecture, the various stages of construction, the placement of deities in and around the temple as well as the position and proportions of the images of Gods from the foundation to its finial rooted in Vedic tradition. The author elaborates the chapters on the various part of the Hindu temple from versus of the Vedas enhancing its authenticity. This information has added to the raise the value of the material content of this thesis.

'Iconography of religions: an introduction' by Albert C. Moore intended as the introduction to the iconography of the religion. It seeks to provide a systematic approach to the types and the meaning of the images used in a representative range of the religious traditions of mankind. The illustrations in the book included the systematic discussion of iconographic features.

D. N. Shukla, in his book 'Vaastu-Shastra', gives detailed information about the development of architecture, iconography of Hindu temples. It further provides the description of various deities, their ayudhas, vahanas, Rupa, proportion according to the Samarangan sutradhara written by king Bhoja between 1018-1060 A.D.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Historical and archaeological methods were employed in this study. The general approach taken was interpretive, involving visual analysis to identify

and compare common patterns in the iconography of goddesses in India, with the assistance of literary sources.

Fieldwork involved visits to archaeological sites, monuments, and museums to collect relevant data. On-site analysis of artifacts and remnants was conducted to gather information about their form, function, and meaning. A comprehensive review of primary written sources, including Puranas, Brahatsamhita, Manasara, Samarangan Sutradhara, Agamas, Manjushrimulka, Sadhanmala, and more, was conducted.

The study of iconographic depictions of goddesses and the rituals associated with them helped gain an understanding of their symbolism and importance in contemporary religion and culture. This involved considering the context of the iconography, including the architectural setting, ritual use, materials used, and more. Overall, this research methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of the iconography of goddesses in India.

4 ORIGIN OF SHAKTI

Veneration by her offspring, reflecting a splendid legacy of motherly devotion. Consequently, Shaktism has emerged as a profoundly significant sect within the Hindu religion and maintains its prominence to this day. Adherents of this faith envision the Great Goddess as the embodiment of primordial energy and the wellspring from which all divine and cosmic manifestations originate. In the annals of religious history across the globe, a wholly female-centered system akin to the one found in India is a rarity.

Shaktism, firmly established as a potent religious sect, undoubtedly originated directly from the early worship of the mother goddess. This worship held a prominent place in the religious practices of agricultural communities, whose social structure was based upon the principles of mother-right. (Maine, 1833) While concrete evidence is lacking, the contextual factors surrounding the rise of the mother goddess cult strongly suggest this connection. Paternity is a presumption and maternity a reality'. Child after birth knows none except mother on whom it is totally dependent; father is only introduced at a later stage. Mother is, therefore, everything to a child. This privilege of mother is eternal. Many thinkers presume an age of promiscuity in the beginning of human civilization (Westermarck, 1891). In such an age the question of father right did not arise. Groups were controlled by females who produced child and

freely mated for the purpose, which later led to another development in sociological setup. Matriarchy became the order of the day. It is generally agreed that Matriarchy preceded Patriarchy. Therefore, there was priority of mother right primitive society. (James, 1959) the clan centered in the women on whose responsibility rested the essentially important function of rearing up the young ones and of imparting to them cultural traits including habits, norms of behaviours, inherited traditions etc., were formed by and transmitted through females. The woman was not only the symbol of generation, but the actual producer of life. Her organs and attributes were thought to be endowed with generative power, and so they had been the life-giving symbols. In the earliest phases of social evolution, it was this maternity that held the field, the life producing mother being the central figure of religion. (Bhattacharya, 1891)

In the Vedic period the position of mother is unique. She is the highest guru and the rites, performed by her and for her, lead to the same conclusion. She is to be respected by her children thousand times more than the father. Mother is very near to the child, and she is called 'Mata'. A Vedic devotee is seen not satisfied with the paternal conception of the God and considers him as his 'Mother' (Rigveda, VIII,98.11) In the Atharvaveda a son is warned to abide by the wishes of his mother. (Atharvaveda, III, 302)

The epics also appear to have held mother in high esteem. The Mahabharat contains ample references to prove the exalted status of mother. The Pandavas were greatly devoted to their mother and obeyed all her orders, the most unusual and difficult: sharing a common wife, Draupadi, is an example of this. Even the Duryodhana listens more to his mother than to his father. The Ramayana also yields similar examples. Rama was devoted to his stepmother Kaikeyi also, who was the root cause of his blighted fortune. (Kapadia, 1998).

4.1 Manifestation of Goddess in the Pre and Proto Historic Period

The concept of primitive religion is a complex and intriguing aspect of human history. To understand it better, we can explore the insights provided by James E.O. in his works on the history of religions. In his writings, James E.O. delves into the origins of religion by examining ancient artifacts and remnants left behind by our ancestors. He highlights the significance of various archaeological findings, such as graves of the dead, sanctuaries, temples, cult objects, and even artistic depictions found in

engravings and paintings. These remnants, despite enduring the passage of time, offer valuable clues about the early forms of religious expression. (James, 1959).

Primitive religion, according to James E.O., can be viewed as an innate and profound desire among primitive humans to establish a harmonious connection with a concealed transcendental order that governs both human destinies and natural phenomena. This desire for connection and understanding finds its expression through a structured system of rituals and beliefs. These rituals and beliefs serve as a means for primitive individuals to bridge the gap between the tangible, everyday world and the mysterious, transcendent realm that shapes their lives and the world around them. (James, 1959). In essence, primitive religion is not merely a haphazard collection of superstitions or rituals; it represents a coherent attempt by early humans to make sense of their existence and to establish a sense of order and purpose in the face of the unknown. It is through the study of the relics and remnants of ancient cultures that we can gain valuable insights into the evolution of religious thought and practice throughout human history. James E.O.'s work underscores the importance of these relics in piecing together the puzzle of our religious past and understanding the fundamental human quest for a connection with the divine.

4.2 Mother Goddess: Indus Valley Civilization

The Indus Valley has revealed a vast storehouse of invaluable evidence regarding the religious belief of a period of which little is known otherwise. Marshall and other scholars have claimed that the discovery of Harappan relics presents authentic material for the study of non-Aryan religions. (J. Marshall, Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization, London, 1931, volume One, page 48.) Though we cannot be certain about this supposition, yet it is a common inference of most of the scholars and for the long-time being should be accepted that the material remains of Harappan culture represent the pre-Aryan period and perhaps the non-Aryan.

The divine women or Ishtar type has been discovered from a number of Indus Valley sites with their upper body nude and arms kept in dispassionate manner whereas the divine mother or Isis type is represented by a child suckling the breast of a female figurine though this type is comparatively few. c

These clay figurines were kept in every house and streets of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, (James, 1959)

is a tutelary divinity much as the mother Goddess which is taken to be still the guardian of the house and village in India presiding over childbirth and daily needs. ((James, 1959). In the form of 'Gram Devta' she is worshipped throughout India. They may be manifestations of Mother Earth whose worship as a household goddess in many parts of India is prevent Today event (Crook, 1926.)

The terracotta seal, unearthed at Harappa, shows a nude female figure upside-down with legs wide apart, and 'with a plant issuing from her womb and her arms are shown like Proto-Shiva depiction on the Mohenjo-Daro seal. Marshall rightly compared this striking representation of the goddess, with a plant issuing from the womb, with the device on an early Gupta terracotta sealing showing a goddess with her legs in much the same position, but with a lotus emerging from her neck instead of from her womb. The idea of vegetation emerging from some part of the body of the goddess reminds us of the Devi-māhātmya concept of the Shākambhari aspect, in which she is said to have nourished her drought-afflicted people with vegetation produced from her body.

The association of vegetation with the Goddess is further proved by another seal, where a horned female figure stands between the two branches of a tree with her hair falling in coils. A devotee is kneeling beside the tree, and a goat (perhaps) is standing by the side or behind the devotee. Below them seven figures, human figures, holding something in hand and wearing one-horned dresses can be noticed. Both the hands of these figurines appear to be falling downwards, with some action at the end near the waist and tail, like here formed in a coil at the end. It falls in a straight line at 30-degree angle.

4.3 Goddess in Vedic Period

It is a commonplace in the study of other religion to observe that the goddess played only a subordinate role in the pantheon; the principal deities were exclusively male, and it was solely by virtue of their position as consorts of these male deities that the female divinities acquired their influence. (A.A. Macdonell, Vedic Mythology (Strasburg, 1897, p 125). No doubt in the Rig Vedic pantheon, male gods like Varun, Indra, Agni, Surya and others predominant. This fact has often been explained by the anthropologist answered that it was mainly due to patriarchal pattern of Vedic society, whether our mother goddess cults on the other hand. Owing its origin to the matriarchal system of societies is a problem with which we are hardly concerned here

while discussing the position of God is in the Rig Veda. (Briffault, 1927). We come across several goddesses in the vast extent of the Rig Vedic literature. Like Usha, Ratri, Raka, Shivali, Aditi, Prithvi, diti, svasti, Urvara, Indrani, Anumati, Apdevi Saraswati, Varuni etc. In the Hindu vedic texts, Goddess Aditi—the unbound one—is believed to have made the universe. In the Rig Veda, she is introduced as the formless 'Mighty Mother'. She is described as 'protectress of all men, her children. She is all that there is.' Aditi is the creator, the protector and the regenerator. She mediates between life and death. In the Hindu pantheon today, only a handful of deities can be regarded as descendants of the original mother goddess of the Vedas.

Durga is simultaneously a descendant of the Vedic mother-goddess and a creation of the gods. She contains multitudes; she is the goddess of harvest and battles, she is a tribal goddess and a Hindu deity, she is the goddess without a consort and as Gauri, she is the wife of Lord Shiva. Her origin stories and forms are many and vary across cultures. The best known of the myths of Durga are celebrated during the festival of Dussehra in the month of October-November. During this time, she is worshipped in her nine forms, each depicting a phase of her life. Some of these forms, enumerated below, are worshipped as goddesses.

4.4 The Antiquity of the Sakti Cult in India

The antiquity of the Sakti cult in India can be reasonably dated back to the third millennium B.C., based on the discovery of terracotta figurines from Harappa sites and the presence of symbolic representations of Sakti in ancient rock shelters. These symbols often take the form of triangular genital shapes or symbols denoting fecundity and fertility. In ancient Vedic times, Sakti was invoked and revered under various names such as Us, Aditi, Śrī, and Sarasvati. As time progressed, she acquired different epithets like Durga, Chandika, Saptamātrkā, Yoginis, and Camunda during the Epic and Mahabharata eras. In the Mārkaṇḍeya Purana, she is described as Mahākālī, Mahalakshmi, and Mahisarasvati. Even modern Indian spiritual leaders like Ramakrishna Param Hansa and Sri Aurobindo have invoked Sakti in the form of the Divine Mother. In Vedanta, she is regarded as Maya and Prakriti, representing the primordial energy responsible for creating, sustaining, and dissolving the universe. This explains why the worship of the Divine Mother has

been an integral part of humanity's spiritual and religious beliefs since the dawn of civilization.

Sakti, the cradle of the phenomenal existence of beings, plays a vital role not only in India but also in the whole world. She is the source of cosmic evolution and the controller of all forces and potentialities of nature. She is the immediate cause of the perceptible world, and all the beings are in her domain. As such, to know her in the entirety is to know her reality. To add more, Saktism is the worship of Sakti or the female principle, the primary factor in the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe.

4.5 Sakti, the Cradle of the Phenomenal Existence

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4.6 Depiction of Goddesses in India

Goddesses are often depicted in various forms of art, including sculptures, paintings, and icons. The iconography of goddesses is rich and diverse, with each goddess having her distinct attributes and symbols. For example, Durga is often depicted riding a lion and wielding weapons, symbolizing her power and ability to overcome evil forces.

The depiction of goddesses is often intertwined with mythological stories and narratives. These stories highlight the goddesses' roles, powers, and interactions with other deities and humans. They provide a deeper understanding of the goddesses' significance in Hindu mythology and their relevance to human life.

Goddesses in India involves elaborate devotional practices, rituals, and festivals. Temples dedicated to goddesses are prevalent throughout the country, and devotees offer prayers, perform rituals, and seek blessings from the goddesses. Festivals like Navaratri and Durga Puja are celebrated with great fervour, honouring the goddesses and their divine presence.

The depiction of goddesses in India goes beyond their physical form. They represent profound philosophical concepts and embody different aspects of existence. For example, goddess Kali symbolizes the destruction of ego and the ultimate reality beyond duality. The goddess Lakshmi represents abundance and prosperity. These symbolic representations provide deeper insights into the philosophical underpinnings of Hinduism.

By studying the depiction of goddesses in India, one can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural, religious, and artistic aspects of Hinduism. The goddesses serve as powerful symbols of divinity, inspiring devotion, and providing guidance to millions of devotees across the country.

The goddess Durga, summoned by the male deities and bestowed with their mighty weapons, vanquishes a buffalo demon who had been overpowering them. In this portrayal, Durga is accompanied by her lion companion and firmly grasps the struggling demon by its nose, enabling her to thrust her trident into its back. Durga's persona is multifaceted. Despite being a fierce and unstoppable warrior, her facial expression in this depiction conveys a sense of serenity and tranquillity. The triumph of Durga is commemorated every year during the six-day festival of Durga Puja.

The depictions of deities adhere to established rules and standards, particularly in terms of the proportions of their bodies and faces, as set by the Kalyana Mandapa centuries ago. It is widely believed that most deities possess unparalleled beauty, and the sculpted figures impeccably embody this aesthetic with their graceful physiques and finely chiselled facial features, regardless of whether they represent male or female beings. These images are not created with the intention of imitating or reproducing reality; rather, they serve as idealized forms infused with profound symbolism that signifies the boundless powers of the divine.

5 CONCLUSION

The veneration of the divine mother in India is a deeply ingrained cultural and religious phenomenon. From the ancient roots of mother-right and the

worship of mother goddesses to the evolution of Shaktism, motherhood has held an exalted position. The portrayal of goddesses in art can give us an understanding of the position of women in central Indian society and their role in religious and cultural practices.

This research paper has explored the multifaceted nature of the divine mother in Indian culture and its enduring legacy throughout history.

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