Newsletter Archives

Devi: A Journey Through Texts and Contexts
The Vedic seers, despite their strong monotheistic perception of the Divine and cosmic unity, deciphered on the very outset the two aspected character of existence and creative process, one being the male and other, the female. When the Rigveda acclaims that 'he who is described as male is as much the female and the penetrating eye would not fail to see it', it admits the factum of the outward duality of existence.

Under the Rigvedic perception the maleness and the femaleness are contained within a single frame but they are nonetheless two attributes of the 'contained'. The Vedic literature, the Vedas and Vedic commentaries - Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishadas, and post-Vedic scriptures have invented numerous metaphors to elucidate this Vedic mysticism and define outward duality of the universe in terms of its intrinsic unity. All these efforts only further affirm the factum of apparent duality, which characterises existence. Not such mystic duality alone, the Vedas have directly alluded to a number of operative attributes, male and female, having cosmic dimensions and role, deified them and sometimes even personalised. Thus Vedas themselves contained the 'seed' of personalised male and female divinities.
VEDIC POSITION IN REGARD TO FEMALE ASPECT OF COSMOS

Principal female attributes that the Vedas identified as operating upon the cosmos were Vak, Ushas, Sita, Ratri and others. The Upanishadas identified them as Prakriti, the Nature, and Maya, the illusion. The Upanishadas considered the materially manifest existence nothing more than Maya. Allusions to Sita, the furrow-line, which subsequently symbolised the patron-deity of agriculture, and Ratri, the night, are just casual. Vak and Ushas are alluded to more decisively. The Vedas perceived in Vak - a synonym of Vani, that is, speech, the divine instrument, wherein the unmanifest manifested, and in Ushas, the dawn, the instrument that brought to light what darkness enshrouded.

The Vedas have also alluded to human females, Aditi, the mother of gods with god-like divine status, and Diti, Ila and a few others. Though no hymns are attributed to, or rites ascribed, the Vedas allude to Mahimata, Mother earth, similar to the deity that Harappans worshipped as Mother goddess, with deity-like reverence.
In subsequent metaphysics, Prakriti and Maya were contemplated sometimes as the material aspect of Creation, and sometimes as the counterpart of Purusha, Self, that the Self enlivened.

Ushas lost its divine status, but long after during the Puranic era, Vak seems to have re-appeared as Vagdevi or Saraswati, the presiding deity of knowledge, arts and music.
Not easy to trace the evolution, the form of Lakshmi, at least in her initial iconographic representations, seems to have evolved, sometimes around the third-second-century B.C., conjointly out of the verbal connotation of the Vedic Mahimata, attributes of Sita, and the iconographic vision of Indus Mother goddess. Lakshmi represented fertility, riches, prosperity and benediction.

**PURANIC MAGNIFICATION OF THE VEDIC 'SEED'**

What the Vedas had in the 'seed' form, the Puranas not only magnified to its optimum but also personalised its each aspect in very specific terms and with a specific image. In the Vedas, what comprised the part of the creative process or was an attribute of the cosmos, emerged in the Puranas as an operative force with a goal before. Where the Vedas, or even Harappan dweller, sought mere benediction, the Puranas assigned, besides benediction, a specific role, more specifically the elimination of evil forces and effecting dissolution, something which the Vedas did not meditate on.
This Puranic attribution emerged in the course of time as the key role of the female energy, the Divine female, the Devi, operating in and pervading upon the cosmos. In almost no time this multi-aspected Divine Female had, in scriptures, arts and more so in folk mind, more massive presence than had the Great Trinity.

DEVI SHAPING IN DEVOTIONAL MIND

A mother, enshrining some kind of divinity, and a consort, who always stood by his side, formed man's earliest perception of woman and obviously it influenced his idea of the Divine female. In the Great Goddess, he perceived the protective mother and someone who he could assume as his strength, someone who belonged to him. This personalness characterised his ties with the Devine Female. He did not have such intimate feelings for a male god. In the earliest forms of Puranic invocations of the Goddess, performed reciting hymns of worship and homage, this passionate intimacy is often revealed. When invoking her in her entirety, describing her beauty, limb to limb, these hymns did not stop short of anything, not even in their appreciation of her feminine parts. In the Tantrika way, the process was further intensified. When the Tantrika made, through his 'sadhana', penance, the Devi's energies enter into his being, he also had the Devi merge into him. She kindled his entire being, all his energies, even sex. This led the Tantrika to experience a fervent passion, a maddening desire or even 'lust' for her, though differently, this passion or 'lust', being born of the worshipful attitude, could only be the purest in its kind intending no dishonour to the deity.
Whatever the Vedic vision or man's initial perception of woman, the Puranic transformation of the Divine female was altogether different, vigorous, operative and humane, and comprised the most complex aspect of the Divine image. The Puranas perceived the Divine female sometimes as Adi Shakti, primordial energy,

which like Sadasiva always prevailed, and at other times, as female power, which came into being out of gods' combined lustre, summarily, their creation. In both cases, she was not only possessed of powers superior to those of gods but was also the object of their worship.
The primitive Divine Female, Harappan or Vedic, appears to have been a mere iconically or verbally realised non-operative boon giver. Puranas transformed her into an operative force, humanised and wove around her abundant myths and innumerable personality aspects. She emerged in Puranas in myriad of forms and manifestations, eradicating evil and doing acts of benevolence. She was perceived as representing all forms of vitality, strength, might, power, force, proficiency, dynamism and all operative faculties. Vengeance and even violence, too, were her aspects. She was seen as operating in and on all manifest or unmanifest things, both, as their holder and their dynamic principle. Puranas saw her as manifest nature, as also the absolute consciousness, thinking mind, universal intellect and controller of senses. Thus, the image of the Divine female, as it had shaped in devotional mind, was a mix of metaphysics, myths and lingering pre-historic ritual practices and imagery.

ORIGIN: DEVI, THE ADI SHAKTI

Devi Bhagavata is the foremost of scriptures that consider Devi as the Adishakti, the divine power that preceded all things, all beings and all gods.
Devi Bhagavata records a number of episodes that reveal her priority over Trinity and her superior divine powers. Hayagriva, a demon with a horse-head, with an ambition to conquer death, made a thousand years long rigorous penance. Pleased by it Devi appeared and wished to accomplish what he desired. Hayagriva prayed her to grant him immortality. Devi persuaded him to ask for anything but immortality, for everything, live or dead, which was composed or entered a material form, was destined to decompose and decay. Hayagriva conceded and revised his prayer to have a death at the hands of none but Hayagriva, a horse-headed one, thinking that he would not kill himself. The prayer was granted. Practically, this rendered him invincible. His excesses and atrocities had now no limits. Gods and Brahmins were his chosen targets. Around then, gods had been performing a thousand years long 'yajna' with Vishnu as the presiding deity. Before the final offering, they went to Vishnu to invite him for accepting the 'havya', offering, but were shocked to find, instead of him, his headless torso lying on the ground. Helpless gods began wailing, but Brahma consoled them and invoked Veda-Shakti, the Devi, to reveal who had done this misdeed and to undo it. Brahma extolled her as the Creator of the universe who created all beings, including him, Vishnu, Shiva and all gods. He proclaimed that it was her will to create that transformed into the cosmos and Vishnu and Brahma were its mere operative agents. Hence, she alone could revive Vishnu. To the delight of gods, the all-knowing and all-accomplishing Devi appeared. She revealed how a trivial act of Vishnu incited Lakshmi to curse him and lose his head, though this too was not without an end. The Devi asked Brahma to find a horse-head and implant it on Vishnu's torso, which having been done, Vishnu revived.

Now with a horse-head, he too was Hayagriva who could kill Hayagriva, the demon, which, being commanded by the Devi, he did.

The Devi's similar status reveals in the event related to demons Madhu and Kaitabha. Vishnu was in a phase of sleep to prevail for a thousand years. In the meantime, out of the wax, releasing from his ears, were born two demons, Madhu and Kaitabha. Soon after, the demons attacked Brahma seated on the lotus emitting from Vishnu's navel. They chased Brahma from one place to other. Brahma recalled and invoked the omnipresent Devi, the Mother of them all, and prayed her to wake Vishnu. Devi appeared and woke Vishnu. Vishnu had a five thousand years long battle with Madhu and Kaitabha.
but was unable to kill them. At last, he invoked Devi and acting on her guidance was able to slay the two demons.

Far popular is the legend in which Devi enables Vishnu to know himself and his cosmic role. After the Great Deluge, Vishnu, as child, emerged upon the oceanic surface floating on a fig leaf.

Dismayed he questioned, ‘who am I, who created me and created what for’. Suddenly, horizons echoed with a voice - 'all that is, it is me; nothing but me alone is eternal and prevails beyond time'. When locating the source of the voice, in his vision appeared a heavenly female with four hands carrying in them a conch, disc, club and lotus. Divine costume and ornaments adorned her figure and twenty-one celestial powers stood in attendance. Vishnu instantly realised that she was none but the Adi-Shakti, Devi, and paid her homage.

**DEVI, CREATED OUT OF GODS’ DIVINE LUSTRE**

Devi Mahatmya in the Markandeya Purana and other texts relate her origin to the elimination of Mahishasura, a mighty demon who once ruled the earth. The ambitious demon desired to conquer the heaven, too. He sent words to Indra, heaven's ruler, to either accept his suzerainty or face him in battle. Indra preferred war but he and his gods could not face Mahishasura and fled. Under a boon from Brahma, Mahishasura was invincible against all males, men, demons or beasts. Gods,
led by Indra, rushed to Brahma. Finding himself helpless, Brahma took them first to Shiva and then to Vishnu. Hearing of Mahisha’s misdeeds, from Vishnu’s countenance burst a blazing divine lustre. He turned towards Shiva, and then Brahma, Agni, Surya, Indra and all other gods. A similar radiance began bursting from the faces of them all. This divine lustre amassed into a huge mount of radiance covering the entire sky. Out of it revealed gradually a female figure, first, her head, then breasts, waist, thighs and legs. From Shiva’s lustre was formed her head; from Yama’s, her hair; and from that of Vishnu, Moon, Indra, Brahma, Sun, Vasu, Kuber, Prajapati, Agni, Twilight, and Vayu, her arms, breasts, waist, feet, toe-nails, finger-nails, nose, teeth, eyes, brows, and ears. She had eighteen arms and a three-eyed face. The celestial creation had unique lustre not known or possessed by any god ever before. Filled with gratitude, all gods prostrated and worshipped the divine creation, Devi, the Great Goddess.

Out of his trident Shiva created another and presented it to the Devi. So did Vishnu, Varuna, Agni, Yama, Vayu, Surya, Indra, Kubera, Brahma, Kala, and Vishvakarma. They offered to her their disc, conch, dart, iron rod, bow, quiver full of arrows, thunderbolt, mace and drinking pot, rosary and water pot, sword and shield, battle-axe and a number of amulets respectively. Besides, Ocean brought for her glittering jewels, Shesha, a necklace inlaid with celestial gems, and Himavana, his lion for her vehicle. On behalf of gods, sage Narada narrated to the Devi all about gods’ miserable plight and Mahishasura’s atrocities and prayed her to kill him. In a fierce battle she killed the demon and earned for her the epithet 'Mahishasura-mardini', now almost her other name.

Though sage Markandeya has widely used the term 'Devi' to denote this Female Divinity, but his emphasis is largely on her demon slaying aspect, and epithets like Chandika, which he has used not less than twenty-seven times in the Devi-Mahatmya, reveal his mind and its image of the Devi.
DEVI: HER THREE MANIFESTATIONS

Whatever the mode of her origin, attributes or aspects, the Puranas, at least the earlier ones, saw Devi as the personified sole female energy of the cosmos, the comprehensive dynamic principle, and the universe as its manifestation. In its original application, the term 'Devi' was not a common noun as it became in later usages. As the Devi-Mahatmya has it:

'MahalakshmirMahakali saiva prokta Saraswati, Ishvari punyapapana sarvalokamaheshvari' (Part 3, Chapter Vaikrtika Rahasya, verse 25); that is, 'She herself is proclaimed as Mahalakshmi, Mahakali, and (Maha) Saraswati, the great ruler of all worlds, reigning over the virtuous and the wicked'. She is thus one but, as proclaims the Devi-Mahatmya, is also three, that is, she combines three in her, similar to the universe, which appears to be one but is three-aspected comprising 'tamas', 'rajas' and 'sattva', i.e., inertia, dynamism and luminosity. The equation of sage Markandeya is simple. Metaphysically, the Devi has been perceived as the one dynamic principle that the universe manifested in its oneness. In her forms as Mahakali,
manifested the cosmic diversity, i.e., the three elemental components of the phenomenal universe - 'tamas', 'rajas' and 'sattva', which not only work as instruments of creation but also underlie all subsequent activities of creation, sustenance and dissolution. Devi defines the totality of cosmic energy, while Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati define its 'vyastis', individual aspects of this cosmic energy, which are 'tamas', 'rajas' and 'sattva'. The Puranas, thus, saw her as both, one and many.

The abstract principle of Devi's unity, which texts like Devi-Mahatmya contemplated, seems to have confined, however, to rhetoric and metaphysical discourses alone. Her aniconic verbal concept little suited the devotional mind and least, a shrine, which had by now a well-evolved tradition of iconic deities. Not in the course of time but in the very beginning, Devi's three formal manifestations - Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati, were her more accepted forms. Even the Devi-Mahatmya, which advanced the principle of Devi's unity, treated each of her manifest forms independently. When personalising these forms, the Devi-Mahatmya conceived for each of Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati a different set of iconic imagery, anatomy, attributes, kind of role and personality type. The Devi-Mahatmya has for each of them an independent 'Dhyana', meditative hymn devoted to her. The text also classified into separate chapters the verses devoted to Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati and their exploits against evil forces. Not long before, the term 'Devi' reduced to a common noun, to mean goddess, defining either or all of Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati and other subsequently evolved deities in different pantheons.
The ten-armed and three-eyed Mahakali has been conceived with ten faces and ten feet. She has a complexion sparkling like a sapphire. She carries in her hands sword, discus, mace, spear, bow, iron club, sling, human head and conch. In her form as Mahakali, Devi was instrumental in eliminating the demons Madhu and Kaitabha.

The lotus-seated Mahalakshmi has been personalised with eighteen hands and the coral-like radiant complexion. She has been conceived as carrying in her hands prayer beads, ax, mace, arrow, thunderbolt, staff, lance, sword, shield, conch, bell, wine-cup, trident, noose and discus Sudarshana. It is in her form as Mahalakshmi that the Devi killed Mahishasura.

Effulgent like the moon shining at the edge of a cloud, the eight-armed Mahasaraswati has been acclaimed as the support of the three worlds. She has been conceived with lotus-like hands and as the one who came forth from the body of Gauri to destroy Sumbha and other demons. She holds in her hands bell, trident, plough, conch, mace, discus, bow, and arrows.

Thus, whatever her manifest form, the Devi was perceived initially as the destroyer of evil and the promoter of good.
In later Puranas, the roles of the three Devi-forms, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati widely changed. The aniconic Devi of the Devi-Mahatmya was now iconically realised Devi and demon-slaying attributes of her Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati forms, slaying Mahishasura or Sumbha, merged with this new Devi form. She was now the principal demon-slaying goddess assuming whatever form, four, eight, ten or eighteen armed, the prevailing situation required. This form was known by various names, Mahishasura-mardini and Durga being the most prominent among them. Lion was now invariably her vehicle.

Mahakali, better known as Kali, was contemplated as one of her aspects. For accomplishing an object Devi created Kali out of her own being.
She also created her 'shaktis', subordinate powers. In the course of time many of these subordinate powers entered the Brahmanical pantheon as minor but independent 'devis'.

With her own distinction Kali soon emerged in the devotional mind and tradition of faith as an independent divinity, and even if an aspect of Devi, it was as significant as her Mahishasura-Mardini, Durga and Parvati forms. In the entire pantheon, Devi came out with the widest role, most multifarious personality and the largest range of iconic and anthropomorphic formations. As Kali she was ferocious, as Durga, valorous, and as Parvati, Uma or Gauri, lovable and incomparably beautiful.

She represented in her being both light and darkness and destruction and sustenance. If black complexioned Kali represented darkness and destruction, the gold complexioned Parvati, Uma or Gauri, light and love, and Durga, sustenance, which she effected by annihilating evil that sought to destroy life and cosmic order.
The male dominated angle of later Puranas conceived Devi as Shiva’s consort and his feminine aspect. These Puranas perceived in Shiva the proto lover and in Uma or Parvati, Devi’s other aspect, his creative faculty and timeless love-companion and his half.

Mythically, Parvati was the daughter of Himalayas, and as such, represented humble sublime aspect of creation, which as Himalayas’ daughter was her inherent nature. As Durga, she slew demons and eradicated evil, but different from the ferocious looking Kali, she has been conceived with a benign look, feminine softness and an abhaya, fearlessness, granting gesture.
Kali, in all forms, Shamshan-Kali, Mahakali, Chandi and others, has been seen as the horror-striking destroyer of the universe.

Severed human heads comprised her garland, skull, her bowl, fresh human blood, her drink, and blood-smeared naked sword, her weapon. She roamed in cremation ground and exalted she danced over corpses.

Of Devi's all forms Kali has always been the most widely worshipped divinity of Indian masses enshrining altars even in remotest tribal hamlets.

Her role in assisting Devi, Durga of myths, in eliminating demon Rakta-bija is one of the best-known Kali-related legends. Under a boon from Rudra, there grew a new Rakta-bija demon wherever a drop of blood from the body of Rakta-bija fell. As the Puranas have it, before Rakta-bija became invincible, Durga separated her 'tamas', ferocious aspect and created Kali out of it. Kali devoured each drop of Rakta-
The demon-slaying aspect of Mahalakshmi was the first to disappear. Such aspect of Mahasaraswati continued for a longer time but not with the prior fervour. In her demon-slaying form, she was conceived with an iconography identical to Durga, though unlike Durga she wore white costume and had no regular vehicle. This form of Mahasaraswati was widely known as Sharda and was highly worshipped in northern and central India during medieval days. Mahakali continued in her demon-slaying role, though the over-all Puranic perception in regard to her had largely changed and sometimes widened. She still represented dissolution, destruction, death and decay but far more than that she now personified in her being horror, awe and loathsomeness. She still slew demons but mostly when summoned by Devi to accomplish an assigned target, and to such extent she was her subordinate. 

Whatever its status in concurrent linguistics, the term 'Maha', which formed first half of Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati, was reduced to a mere adjectival suffix and was widely dropped from their names reducing them to Kali, Lakshmi and Saraswati. Now the suffix 'Maha' was used with their names only rarely to connote a particular form or aspect, not a name in general.

THE SUSTAINER

Not merely that the adjectival suffix 'Maha' was dropped, the late concept of Lakshmi was altogether different from the Mahisha-slayer Mahalakshmi. Lakshmi, a blend of Indus Mother goddess and Vedic 'Sita' both in iconography and spirit, was conceived as the sustainer, who bestowed bliss, prosperity, wealth and material happiness, yielded good crop and abundant grain and represented magnificence and beauty in life. Lotus, elephant, pot and a four-armed anatomy emerged as the essential elements of her iconography.
Not an aspect of Devi, Lakshmi was one of the three major female divinities revered alike in Buddhism, Jainism and different Brahmanical sects.

She was linked with Vishnu as his consort and feminine aspect that helped him sustain the universe.
In the course of time there emerged her other forms, Padmavati, Gaja-Lakshmi and Mahalakshmi, and names, Shri, Kamala, Dharini, Vaishnavi, Narayani, Vishnu-priya, Rajalakshmi, Chanchala and so on.

THE CREATOR

Saraswati, representing creation, too, emerged as the Divinity independent of Devi and completely different from Mahasaraswati or Sharda. Lotus-seated and swan-riding Saraswati was conceived as the instrument using which Brahma rendered creation. She was hence dually perceived in Puranas, first as Brahma's creation, and hence, his daughter, and, secondly, as the feminine component of creation, and hence, his consort.
She has been addressed also as Brahmani, and as such carries most of Brahma's attributes. She represents supreme wisdom and all-knowing intellect and nourishes all creative faculties, arts, music, dance and literature. Elegantly bejeweled and gracefully costumed the four-armed Saraswati carries in her hands vina, book, rosary and pot. Lotus and swan, aspects of her iconography, symbolised purity and chastity, which she symbolised.

This article by Prof. P.C. Jain and Dr Daljeet.

References and Further Reading:

- Shrimad Devi Bhagavata, Chaukhambha Sanskrit Pratishthan, Delhi.
- Devimahatmyam, tr. By Devadatta Kali, Delhi.
- Menzies, Jackie : Goddess, Divine Energy, Art Gallery, NSW
- Kinsley, David : Hindu Goddesses, Delhi.
- Hawley, J. S. & Wulff, Monna Marie (ed) : Devi, Goddesses of India, Delhi.
- Rosen, Steven J. (ed): Vaishnavi, Delhi.
- Mookarjee, Ajit & Khanna, Madhu : The Tantrika Way, Boston.
- Kanwar Lal : Kanya and the Yogi, Delhi.
- Upadhyaya, Padma : Female Images in Museums of Uttar Pradesh and Their Social Background, Delhi.

We hope you have enjoyed reading the article. Any comments you may have will be greatly appreciated. Please send your feedback to feedback@exoticindia.com.