

Goddess as Consort and Śakti

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Abstract- This article moves out of the domain of regular question of subordination of women in a brahmanical patriarchal society and focuses on the image of woman as 'Goddess'. Interestingly the period chosen for this study (7th-13th centuries) is one of amalgamation of tribal religious beliefs (tantricism) in to the male dominated pantheons of brahmanical religion. While at the same time influence of Kālidāsa's style of depiction of women characters could also be felt in other literary traditions. The portrayal of women is like always of an obedient wife but when this depiction transpires in the realm of divine beings it is caught in dilemma. Fifth century onwards, where on the one hand Kālidāsa's dramas were carving out a sensuous image of woman; there on the other hand, a full section of Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna, Devī-Māhātmya Khanda eulogizes the mighty prowess of the mother-goddess for the first time. It is also the period which sees the construction of temples with idols of not only male but female deities for the first time in ancient India. The temple architecture is even beautified with erotic sculptures. The society appears to be fermented with different perceptions of women, hence providing ample scope for a discussion on the three prominent images of woman- the wife, the seductress and the all powerful mother-goddess.

Key Words: Image of women, Goddess, Sakti.

Introduction

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Traditionally the significance and status of women present a dichotomous situation in ancient India. The significance of her presence in the house as wife for the performance of daily household rituals and functions is quite evident in the literary tradition especially Purāṇas. It is her status and rights in comparison to her male counterpart which creates ambivalent situation. On the one hand, the texts associated with enumeration of codes of behavior in public and private sphere strictly lay down the condition for acquiring and treatment of a wife by a rightful person, emphasizing that it is the woman as wife which enables the man to fulfill his household duties properly. But on the other hand, it is the

question of her status which creates the problem for a patriarchal society. In a patrilineal society financial rights of women are very limited which affects her status adversely and make her acquiescent to the demands of patriarchy.

Idealization of woman's image as wife has its repercussions on the different stages of her life. The daughter and sister are seen as probable wife whose desires are to be monitored, as mother she is the wife who ensures that the interest of the patriarchal society are protected. Whereas widow presents an ambiguous situation (a negative condition for a wife), regulation of whose conduct and behavior is essential for the hegemony of patrilineage. The Purāṇic tradition plays a major role in defining and emphasizing the duties of a virtuous wife through myths woven around gods and goddesses. This deification phenomenon legitimizes the demands of the brahmanical patriarchal structure. Incorporating the otherwise all powerful goddess with strong matriarchal fervor as role model for women in patriarchal ideological framework presents its own

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challenges. Many regional traditions are mother goddess centric but their synchronization with the brahmanical tradition shows the attempt to tame the mother goddess through the institution of marriage. These ideologically counter cultures create numerous Purāṇic myths to incorporate both structures of beliefs. Moreover, they also reflect the dominating trends of the social norms. The role of myth in a culture is to instill certain desirable pattern; one can see in them the image of wife, which though quite pristine, can lack the glamour in comparison to a warrior goddess and at times the tale is twisted in such a manner so as to re-establish the status of ideal wife.

The Purāṇas are sacred books which were recited at sacred places or in the temples to promulgate norms of behavior and values which uphold the patriarchal social structure and are store-house of ancient cultural traditions. They were handed down for generations through oral tradition in the beginning, and were committed to writing later. Purāṇas belong to the Smṛti tradition of oral literature.¹ Unlike Vedas of the Śruti tradition, which were reserved only for the twice born (dvijas), the Purāṇas were accessible to all, even women and śudras. They were publicly sung or recited and in this process they underwent constant revision and elaboration. The fluid nature of these texts was by no means halted once it was committed to written form. It appears; originally there existed only one Purāṇa which later got divided into a number of Purāṇas, in all eighteen, referred to as 'Mahāpurāṇas' along with eighteen Upapurāṇas. They are all composed in Sanskrit of a mediocre quality, usually in śloka meter, occasionally in prose, in question-answer form and principally contain stories. The compilers or redactors of the Purāṇas always retained and interpreted the old by contextualizing them as per the new and changed social conditions.²

Skanda Purāṇa is the most voluminous of all the Purāṇas, with eighty-one thousand stanzas, contained in the seven khandas (Saptadhābhinnam), viz. Maheśvara, Viṅṅu, Brahma, Kāśī, Āvantya, Nāgara and Prabhāsa. These are further subdivided in to sub- Khandas

and Māhātmyas. The Skanda Purāṇa belongs to a period from 7th century A.D. to the 13th century A.D. Geographical knowledge of the authors of the Skanda Purāṇa seems to be quite extensive so much so that it is referred to as encyclopedia of ancient Indian geography. Hence, the area of its composition is quite vast with different sections and sub-sections composed in different regions. The Skanda Purāṇa gets its name from Skanda, the six-faced deity, son of Śiva and commander of celestial armies. The text thus contains myths woven around Śiva and Pārvati. The framework of the myths reflect the ideologies it want to promulgate through a medium accessible to all and which easily communicates the values inherent in patriarchal structure.

The period of Skanda Purāṇa's compilation becomes more interesting as it is also the period which saw rise in Tāntric literature and architectural representations. From the sixth century onwards the brāhmanical texts take note of this remarkable religious phenomenon called Tantricism. It affected not only Śaivism, Vaiṅṅavism, Jainism and Buddhism but also art and literature.³ The Skanda Purāṇa too frequently refers to Tantric philosophy. Another striking feature of the period is the predominance of eroticism in sculpture and literary works of the period. Sensuousness and sex emerged as a major thrust of the creative work done in this period. This particular period is marked for the rise and spread of this phenomenon.⁴ All over India the Hindu temples of this period are replete with sexual motifs. This depiction is not only limited to the renowned temples like Khajuraho, Konark and Bhubaneswar but is also evident in the temples of lesser known sites, whose walls also have portrayals of erotic figures.

The early medieval period also saw rise in literary activities on this subject. There were not only commentarial works on Vātsyāyana's work but many new books like Nāgarasarvasvam of Padmaśri, a Mahāyāna Buddhist, about magical prescription to stimulate different veins. In almost the same period Kokkoka wrote Ratirahasya same on the lines of Kāmasūtra. This erotic and sensual phenomenon was also

visible in the Skanda Purāṇa. Here along with carving out the image of ideal wife through the myths of goddesses we encounter the description of feminine beauty done in detail and sensuously. Not only the royal ladies' but ordinary women's and even the goddesses' physical attributes got the sensuous treatment.⁵ Beauvoir explains that for man woman is beyond just a productive force, she is a sexual partner, an erotic object.

The most striking description of female beauty is in the story of Lord Śṛīnivāsa and Padmāvati.⁶ In the story description of auspicious signs on the body of Padmāvati by the divine sage Nārada is the occasion to describe her physical beauty. Besides describing the auspicious marks on her body, befitting her to be the consort of Viṛṇu, he goes on to say that her thighs are equal and gradually thick, the buttocks are large and stout and the loins are thought provoking. The navel is circular and deep; both the sides are thick; the middle is fascinating due to the three folds of the skin shining with curly hair. The breasts are plump, thick-set and protruding with the nipples sunk within. Similarly in the Nādījaṅgha's story⁷, wife of sage Gālava is admired as a lady of excellent beauty with a slender body, dark-complexion, plump and protruding breasts. In her gait she resembled an elephant. She had ample buttocks but very slender waist.

Mahālakṣmī⁸ was also ascribed the same traits of beauty. She is told to be very fair, youthful and tender with the filaments of the lotus for her ornaments. A lady of slender shape, she had the fresh youthfulness as an adornment. She is described as very slender with fine waistline and splendid buttocks. Her hips were large. All these description follow Kālidāsa's poetic description of Yakṣa's wife in his Meghadūta⁹, which represents the ideal of female beauty. In describing the beauty of Pārvati in the form of Śabara huntress¹⁰, the Skanda Purāṇa writes that she was dark complexioned slender lady. Her teeth were like the buds of śikhara (a variety of jasmine). Her lips resembled the round biṅ ba fruit. She had to bend down slightly on account of the weight of her heavy breasts. She was very slender and thin in her waist and her buttocks

were large. Her thighs were like the golden plantain stem. Viṛṇu in Mohinī form too is described in same manner.¹¹ She walked rather slowly on account of the large buttocks. Her limbs are told to be agitated and excited due to inebriation, due to the tinkling of her golden anklets, she appeared to be cooing (like a cuckoo). And her breasts resembled pitchers. Matthew Ridley in his book,¹² gives psychoanalysis of men and explains that men are merely looking for someone who is strong and fertile. They are looking for youth. Description of large hips and big breasts is actually looking for someone who could bear and nourish a child for them. Whereas a flat belly means she is not already pregnant. Lerner¹³ observed that women were a resource acquired by men much as land was acquired by them, with emphasis on their chastity.

The image of the goddess, thus constructed, reveals aspirations and dilemma of the patriarchy. The all powerful mother goddess who is to be respected, as a consort idealizes the attributes of a perfect wife and whose physical beauty is par excellence to get the attention of Śiva, the yogi. But originally she is a warrior goddess killing demons independently, a force to reckon with. The goddesses in mythologies not only appear as divine beings but they also reflect the prescribed sexual roles of women. It is in this context the patriarchal society finds it difficult to ascribe them a place equal to male gods.

The goddesses in the Skanda Purāṇa though have strong maternal characteristics, belong to two distinct categories. One is of domesticated goddesses who are closely identified with male deities. The second category is of Śakti¹⁴, war goddesses who are independent, violent and ferocious. Goddesses like Pārvatī, Lakṣmī and Śacī are the very embodiment of the patriarchal behavioral patterns expected out of a female counterpart. War goddesses on the other hand are revered even by the male gods and are depicted not in association with them. In the form of Durgā, Kālikā and Cāmundā they are great warriors and at times depicted wild, eating human flesh and drinking liquor. They fight

battles in a mighty and ferocious way assisted by other mother goddesses, matrīkas.¹⁵ These two categories are not distinct but overlapping one. There are goddesses who are mentioned not only in relation to male gods but are independent deities in their own right also. Goddess Lakṣmī is though always represented in association with Lord Viṣṇu is also an independent deity of auspiciousness, Śrī. This somewhere indicates the existence of the regional cult of goddess Śrī accommodated in to the pantheon of Vaiṣṇavism. The tension between the two belief patterns is evident in placing the goddess, at times she is placed near the heart of Lord Viṣṇu, and at times depicted sitting near his feet.

In the myths of Śiva and Pārvati we find that while the male gods are divine beings engaged in supernatural and spiritual activities, the goddesses are infected with the weaknesses generally associated with women such as jealousy and irritation.¹⁶ In several divine hierogamies one tension runs parallel through all the myths of the goddesses, that of authority. Goddesses too are adorned with their individual powers but in patriarchy the problem arises on the question of their authority to use that power at will i.e., the right to perform the act. They have to seek the permission of male deities to exercise their power. In one myth goddess Pārvati regrets killing demon Mahiṅāsura, a devotee of Śiva and hence performs penance after the act. This clearly brings out the dilemma of relation of 'authority' with woman though a goddess. This paradox is visible in the representation of the goddesses as consorts and as independent dominating divinities. To understand the goddess in terms of the human experience, she signifies a close interaction between the images of woman and woman deity. This is particularly in the case of female consorts viewed in relation to the male deities.

The myths revolving around Śiva and Pārvati are constructed over close familial relation of women with men which reflect deeply held views on the relationship of sexes and sexual roles. The marriage between Śiva and Pārvati is like between dominant male and subservient

mortal woman. Mortal woman as she is subject to the indignities of birth and death. In her previous birth of Satī, Pārvati faced the consequences of not obeying her husband. According to a myth¹⁷ once Satī's father Dakṛa commenced a great sacrifice to which all sages and gods were invited except his own son-in-law, Śiva. Satī to know thoroughly about it was determined to go her father's house and sought the permission of Śiva for it, though he was not willing to send her without being invited to the occasion. Reaching there she stood at the entrance and enquired her father why the lord Śiva was not invited. Dakṛa then insulted Śiva. Listening to the censure of Mahādeva she pondered like a human female how she could go back after such insult of her husband and enters the sacrificial fire.¹⁷ In this myth her query is that of an ignorant mortal woman whereas Śiva appears as a supreme god endowed with divine power. He is the lord by whom this entire universe consisting of mobile and immobile beings has been sanctified. He is the lord by whose limb alone the universe has been filled up. Goddess Satī is portrayed more like a devotee, who enters the fire uttering the words, "O, Rudra! O, Śiva!" Though she is furious on seeing her father full of contempt for Śiva but instead of destroying the entire yajña with her divine powers she chooses to immolate herself.

After the death of Satī, Śiva got engaged in penance and she is reborn as Pārvatī. By taking birth she seems to have lost her status and hence has to perform severe penance to please the lord, to win him over and to wake him up from his spiritual meditation. Pārvatī's ambiguous mortal or immortal status is the pivot of the myth. She emerges as not more than a semi-divine deity and a loving wife. In this myth she is the daughter of Himālaya, wife of Śiva and later mother of Skanda. Incarnation of goddess as Pārvatī is essential for killing of demon Tāraka but she is not the one who slain Tāraka, the task is completed by her son Skanda; she appears just as a medium. Her role is marginalized in this episode and the credit is given to the excellent semen virile of Śiva.¹⁸

In one myth Pārvatī playfully closes the three eyes of lord Śiva. The Skanda Purāṇa writes, on doing so the goddess was as delighted as a young girl of youthful simplicity, who once thought her lover to be under her absolute control. But the eyes of lord were the moon, the sun and the fire, their closure brought about the destruction of the universe. For this Pārvatī, though called the mother of the universe is punished for her immaturity and has to perform penance.¹⁹ Pārvatī, the goddess, cannot escape her feminine nature. She is an ignorant, docile wife, who out of her immaturity does not understand the divine nature of her ever-meditating husband. There is mention of how once Pārvatī saw Śiva engaged in performing sandhyā-rite with his eyes closed. She thought he was meditating on some woman and that his love-making to her was a great fraud.²⁰ The treatment of mother goddess is not always lacking luster of power assertion. Her powerful matriarchal form can be witnessed in one myth where Śiva loses to Pārvatī in a game of dice. After defeating Śaṅkara she takes away his ornaments. At this Śiva became angry and stared at Pārvatī with his third eye but instead of showing any regard for her husband she replies, “Of what avail is your stare with your greatest eye? I am not Kāla nor Kāma nor the sacrifice of Dakṣa. I am neither Tripurā nor Andhaka. What will come out of your staring thus? In vain you have been a Virūpakṣa (of uneven three eyes) before me.” Śiva thus humiliated left Pārvatī and went to forest. Pārvatī then explains to her attendant Vijayā, “Formerly Śiva had been surrounded by great prosperity but he was defeated by me. ... Without me he will continue to be ugly and hideous. ... Maheśa who is without form and shape has been made one with form and shape by me. This entire universe consisting of the mobile and immobile beings along with the excellent devas has been created by me for the sake of his sport. O, Vijayā! See my sport along with causes of origin and existence.”²¹ In this myth the goddess is infused with power and authority. The myth clearly shows the amalgamation of female dominated and male dominated divine hierogamies, without compromising the Śakti status of the goddess, nor attempting to make her subservient to the

male god. Both are shown invincible, beyond all forms and responsible for every action in the world.

Conceptualization of the idea of virginity as the source of power is evident in Purāṇic theology. Virginity in women is seen as source of power benevolent as well as malevolent. The element of destruction is eliminated by subjecting her to the male authority. She is related to god not only as consort but also as his internal śakti, Māyā. Śakti's literal meaning is 'power' and 'might'. It also means 'illusion'.²² Through Māyā only the supreme god is able to create. It is Māyā who deludes and make one run for things and perform karma. It is the boundary line which separates human from the divine being. A negative attribute whose significance is well recognized. Vaiṣṇavakhaṇḍa's Puruṣottama-Kṛetra-Māhātmya is full of references of Viṣṇu's Māyā with which he deludes his devotees and even lord Brahmā and hides his real self.²³ In Skanda Purāṇa she is Māyā, Śakti which manifests itself in the form of Lakṣmī, Pārvatī and other goddesses as the consorts of the male gods.

The myth where Pārvatī had to go to Kāñcī for penance as a punishment for closing Śiva's eyes has two versions in the Skanda Purāṇa. In the first version Devas oppressed by the demon Mahiṇa sought refuge in her on this occasion. Mahiṇāsura had obtained boons from Śiva, hence, Devas requested her, the Mother of the Universe, to protect them. When Mahiṇa approached her she assumed the fiery blazing form of Durgā. Equipped with missiles and weapons provided by Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva and Suras, she went on to fight Mahiṇa and cut off his head in the battle and stood on it and danced.²⁴ In second version of the same story Pārvatī while performing penance is approached by Mahiṇa who is attracted towards her. Pārvatī does not want her penance to be obstructed hence, calls Durgā and assign her the task to fight with Mahiṇāsura. The Durgā with other mother-goddesses drank liquor and blood and danced madly in the battlefield after annihilating the daitya.²⁵ In both the myths Pārvatī herself is not

involved in the act of valour, rather it is her form as Durgā which is associated with the killings and drinking of liquor and blood. The character of goddess Pārvaṭī is carved in a manner more appropriate for the patriarchal social structure, whereas Durgā presents a challenge to this established structure. Her behavior pattern is strictly prohibited and condemned for a wife. But she is worshipped in her own right by the same society. This discussion brings us to a point where we see amalgamation of tribal and regional beliefs creates a situation where though goddess is all powerful but as a consort she has to be role model of behavior for the wives in patriarchal setup. The images of women therefore show the fusion of all the dominating thought processes; be it her sensual representation, a docile wife, as Śaktī of Tāntric cult or Māyā. This presents a very complex picture and to understand these images lot remains to be looked in to closely.

References and Notes

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