

**THE CONCEPT OF PURUSA - PRAKRTI
AND THE FEMALE DEITY IN
RELIGION**

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Certified that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by Mrs. Dipali Chattopadhyay, that the contents of this thesis did not form a basis of the award of any previous degree to her, or, to the best of my knowledge, to anybody else, and that the thesis had not been submitted by her for any research degree in any other University.

In habit and character, Mrs. Dipali Chattopadhyay is a fit and proper person for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The Sāṃkhya system of thought has exercised tremendous influence on later religious thought in India. A lot has been written by researchers on Sāṃkhya philosophy, specially the interesting notion of the dualism between Purusa and Prakṛti. Let me specify at the outset that since my objective is to show the influence of Sāṃkhya dualism on the sectarian religious thought specially the female deity of various religions, I have not undertaken for serious study the entire metaphysics and history of Sāṃkhya thought. For the same reason, after discussing the Purusa-Prakṛti Dualism in Chapter II, I have devoted Chapters III, IV and V to the study of Saivism, Vaishnavism, Saktism and Aurobindo's Savitri.

The Sāṃkhya is basically dualistic. It recognises two fundamental and ultimate entities matter and spirit; prakṛti and purusa. Both these, eternal and absolute in their own spheres – operate in the universe. Prakṛti is thought to be the primordial stuff of the entire world-manifest and unmanifest. Purusa is the presupposition of individual consciousness. Purusa is not 'self' in the

sense of intelligence, ego or mind. It is simply pure consciousness which exists apart from Prakrti. According to Samkhya Karika, there is only one Prakrti but a plurality of purusas. The unconscious entity (Prakrti) implicitly contains the possibilities of all thought and substance. Again, by the mere presence of the pure consciousness the unconscious prakrti becomes intelligible. The proximity of unconscious entity and pure consciousness leads to the emergence of self-awareness.

In Chapter II, I try and show besides other things that matter or the unconscious entity (Prakrti) in Sāṃkhya does not mean solid, inert and perceptible substance, rather it is a pure potentiality for physical and psychological happenings composed of three strands of energy (guna) called sattva, rajas and tamas – which again, have physical and psychological connotation. In the primordial state of matter, these three strands of energy are in equilibrium. So long as this is disturbed, no actual manifestation occurs. The presence of purusa as a self luminous essence in the vicinity of Prakrti, disturbs this equilibrium and this leads prakrti to a process of evolution into twenty four categories of being.

It is said in the Sāṃkhya Karika that the purpose of the coming together of Prakrti and Purusa and the

resultant creation, is two fold. Firstly, the process of emergence is for the enjoyment or contemplation of Purusa. Secondly, it is for the liberation of Purusa. Purusa provides the consciousness which makes creation possible, and in turn Prakrti by means of its first evolute, buddhi (intelligence) provides the knowledge which enables the realisation possible that Purusa is absolutely different from Prakrti. This realisation of the distinction between Purusa and Prakrti is the precondition of isolation (Kaivalya) or release (Moksa). Purusa and Prakrti, though quite separate and unconnected, yet mutually interact to bring about the process of creation, self awareness and ultimately, enlightenment. The knowledge of discrimination frees man from the bondage and suffering and brings absolute freedom (Kaivalya).

Samkhya is not a religion in the traditional sense (to define religion in terms of belief in God). It does not have even a concept of God. This system is rather devoted to the achieving of absolute independence of man as a spirit from the phenomenality of Prakrti and its finitude and limitations.

But this philosophy has undoubtedly contributed to the emergence of different religious sects, like Saivism, Saktism and types of Vaisnavism. An understanding of Samkhya

specially the notion of Purusa-Prakrti and Kaivalya, I feel, will help one to uncover the philosophical insight in the central concept of the sectarian religions mentioned above. Hence Chapters III and IV discuss Saivism, Vaishnavism and Saktism in some detail.

In Saivism, for example, Siva representing the spirit is always passive and its Sakti represents various aspects of manifestation in the world and performs different functions under different names — Kali, Durga, etc. Rudra, the deity of the Vedas, have common qualities with Siva. Siva is thought to be the lord of the universe and everything emerges from his wish. Siva is the Yogi, rapt in meditation, and yet through the rhythm of his dance the universe is unfolded. There are, however, conflicting accounts of Siva in the Puranas. Siva himself, paradoxically holding together time and eternity, creation and destruction. In spite of doctrinal variations insistence lies on the supremacy of knowledge in the scheme of release.

Similarly, the workship of Sakti by the school of Tantra amounts to a turning point. The idea of mother goddess is taken to be the supreme Reality. However, the highest end which is called Moksa or liberation is release from bondage. Though there are several female deities in the Vedas (e.g. Vāk) and the Upanisads (e.g. Umā,

Haimavati, Durgā, etc.) some of them get later incorporated in the concept of Siva. The two words 'Siva-Sakti' in conjunction create vibration which is the source of all existing movements.

When we come to an understanding of Saktism, interestingly, we find the concept of Sakti enriched with qualities which traditionally belong to the male-purusa. Here the female principle is the highest reality. The supreme energy is not merely a passive substratum like the prakrti of the Samkhya philosophy. One can refer here to the worship of mother Kali/Durga in Bengal and of Goddess Kamakhya in Assam.

In the Vaisnavite Tantra (of Bengal), a similar picture of the highest spiritual reality as Sakti appears. Here too, the traditional prakrti controls the consciousness (Cit) of the male i.e., Krishna, though of course, the supremacy of the Krishna ideal is maintained by keeping Radha immersed in the love of Krishna. I have made a reference in the thesis to Caitanya Vaisnavism and Vaisnava Padavali. I must note at this juncture that even in Assam where the worship of Goddess Kamakhya was prevalent, in a full form it did not remain unopposed for long. Sankardeva, the propounder of Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam, rejected completely the cult of Radha — the unmarried consort of

Krsna and preferred, instead, the ideals of Sitā and Laksmi symbolising ideal housewives.

The dualistic view of the cosmic order-unconscious and kinetic, principle of action and passion, the concept of Purusa-Prakrti (Nature and Consciousness) have been working almost everywhere in Indian thought.

From time immemorial, even after the emergence of major world religions, we find the conception of God in terms of male-female qualities and powers.

Feminine qualities of Godhead always appealed and influenced the God seekers in all ages. In our country, even till today, the female deity though not viewed with equal honour as the male, has been ascribed super-human powers of creation, preservation as well as destruction. However, among these, her role vis-a-vis her devotees, is as powerful as the male deities but is always subordinate to that of the male gods in the general pantheon. Needless to say it is the quality of sacrificing motherhood that gets the most emphasis, in the conception of female deity.** The reason obviously being that the female

** Interestingly, the Sun or Ka Sngi is a female deity with the warmth of a mother in the Khasi pantheon. The Ahoms practice Prakrti Puja to bring peace. It is offered in honour of two powers. Langkuri (male and Nangthau (female). This puja is same as Siva-Sakti Puja.

as mother captures the emotions, anxiety, fear, love, etc. of the child more strongly than does the father. Here we can refer to the worship of Goddess like Kāmākhyā in the State of Assam, Shitalā and Manasā in Bengal, and others like Durgā and Santoshi Mā worshipped all over the country. Besides Hinduism, Hebrews and Eastern Christianity have this idea to a certain extent. One can very easily refer to the motherhood of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. Mary has often been referred to as 'the bride of the Holy Spirit', the bride of God the father etc.

The Rg Veda, for instance, gives detailed account of various Gods and Goddesses as the root cause of the creation of the world. There are references of several Goddesses of Great Power but noticeably they are treated as less important than the male gods who dominated the pantheon. So also Vedic religion appears dominated by the male, though later (may be due to the Buddhist influence) number of female deities started getting prominence. However, the tendency to see one's deity either in terms of the male or the female continued in the various religious sects of the country.

This feeling, I think was strengthened due to the model set by the Samkhya. Even the monism in India could not retain its ideal as it is based on a methodological

dualism i.e. the dichotomy between Vyāvahara and Paramārtha spheres.

The spirit behind my writing this thesis is the close resemblance between the idea of different Goddesses of religion and the concept of Prakṛti in Samkhya metaphysics. Prakṛti and Puruṣa of Samkhya always appear as female and male deities. In the Samkhya Karika, Isvarakṛṣṇa pictured Prakṛti as a female model which is directly related to the image of women in the contemporary society.

"Raṅgasya darsayitvā
 nivartate nartaki yathā nṛtyāt,
 Puṛusasya tathā-tmānam
 Prakasya vinivartate Prakṛtiḥ"¹

"As a dancer having exhibited herself on the stage ceases to dance, so does Nature (Prakṛti) cease (to produce) when she has made herself manifest to soul."²

The universal respect and worship shown to an ideal woman I feel, is only the spontaneous expression of the natural and hidden instinct of man to seek and worship a divine Mother. The female must be a loving mother or at most, an angry mother, that vision is acceptable popularly. However, the same agency gets to be classified

1. Wilson, H.J. Samkya Karika, p. 229.

2. Davies, John. Hindu Philosophy, p. 94.

as ferocious, aggressive, destructive and what not (Kāli), that the female principle operates in diseases etc. as smallpox (Mātā) and cholera is too well known.

The hymns of the Rg Veda though occasionally emphasizing the beautiful aspect of the female, unhesitatingly address themselves to the horrible aspects of the Goddesses be it Durga, Kali or Ratri. The description of Ratri in the Rg Veda is similar to Goddess Kali – the black and destructive Goddess. Rātri Devi and Nritti are demonness who are the personification of death, destruction and sorrow.

Among the various incarnations or manifestation of Sakti, I shall, for my thesis, deal with two main aspects, i.e., the benign and the terrible aspects. the benign aspect deals with the creative faculty and is seen in the form of Durgā, Mahālakṣmi, Mahāsarasvati, Bhubanesvari etc. And the terrible aspect denotes the power of destruction of the same. In this aspect Mahāsakti appears as Kāli, Bhairavi, Chinmamasta, Bagalāmukhi etc.

In the Khila Ratri Sukta of Rg Veda (x127) Sakti is called the mother, the resort of all human beings. There she is referred to as Goddess Durga – worshipped by the devotees for obtaining the fruits of their actions.

According to Sāyanachārya, (a great vedic commentator) Durgā is none other than the great Sakti.³

In Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna the goddess Durgā is pure consciousness, power of Siva, and the Māyā of Viṣṇu. She produces Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. She is Prakṛti, the primal root evolvment.⁴

In mythology there are several accounts of Durgā's origin. She is sometimes said to arise from Visnu, ~~who was in a state of~~ sleep (Yoga nidrā). In the Skanda Purāna it is accounted that once demon Durga threatened the world and Siva requested Pārvati (another popular name of the Goddess) to kill the demon who took the form of a buffalo. Pārvati assumed the form of warrior Goddess and killed him. Thereafter, Pārvati was known as Durgā. She is called Durgā also because she takes one across in difficulties.

Thus the creation of Goddess Durgā takes place in the context of a cosmic crisis. She is credited with the destruction of many asuras (demons) whom the Gods could not subdue. As Prakṛti she assumes the forms of three Goddesses and they are:

3. Kumar, Pushpendra, Sakti Cult in Ancient India, p. 15.

4. Ibid., p. 47.

As sattvik she is Maha Laksmi.

As rajasika she is Maha Sarasvati.

As tamasika she is Maha Kali.⁵

"... in many ways Durga is a female version of Visnu.... The idea of a deity's descending to the world from time to time in various forms to maintain the balance of cosmic order is a central Vaisnavite idea Durga, in the Devi Mahatmya, is heir to this avatara theology. She, like him, creates, sustains and destroys the world; intervenes on a cosmic scale whenever disorder threatens to disrupt the world in the form of certain demons; and is approached by the other Gods as their saviour in times of distress."⁶

In the Harivamsa she is called Nārāyana-Priyā (beloved of Narayana) and Vāsudeva bhagini (sister of Vasudeva Krishna). These names of Durgā clearly shows her early association with Visnu and Vaisnavite cult. In this connection, B.K. Kakati has quoted J. Muir from his original Sanskrit text as follows:

"The object of this passage seems to be to take Durgā and her worship under the protection and patronage of Visnu..."

"It appears as if some contest had one time existed between the votaris of Mahadeva and those of other deities in regard to adoration of the former."⁷

5. Ibid., pp. 49-53.

6. Kinsley, David. Hindu Goddesses, p. 102.

7. Kakati, B.K. The Mother Goddess Kamakhya, p. 17.

This will explain why the worship of Kamakhya was encouraged by Visnu. In the early stages of her evolution Durgā with her other manifestations had nothing to do with Siva.

There are some other incarnations of Durgā related to Visnu. Sometimes she incarnated herself to help him and again as a consort of his incarnations. All these forms are of benign Goddesses, working for the welfare of the world. As Vaisnavi, Sakti is capable to bestow all wealth and property. She also enchants the whole universe. Devi Bhāgavata describes her incarnation as ever - existence, intelligence and bliss and identifies her with Bhubanesvari. Rādhā also is identified with Parāsakti. She is of pure sattva quality. Mahālaksmi is the most widely worshipped aspect of Sakti. She is the wife of Visnu and hence called Sri.⁸ Her auspicious nature and reputation for granting fertility, good luck, wealth and well-being attract devotees in every Hindu household throughout the year. She has the attributes of both Rajas and Sattva.

In the Devi bhagavata, Durgā is called Mulā-Prakrti and she assumed the form of Mahā Laksmi and destroyed

8. Kumar, Puspendra, op.cit., p. 230.

Mahisasura. In Mahasarasvati Incarnation, Devi destroys ignorance. Sarasvati is also said to have had her origin from God Visnu. The predominant themes in Sarasvati appearance are purity and transcendence. In the Vedas her character and attributes are clearly associated with the river Sarasvati.⁹ She becomes associated with the creator God Brahmā as either his daughter or wife. In this role she is creative sound which is a peculiar and distinctive human dimension.¹⁰ Sarasvati is the sattivika form of Sakti.

The all pervading nature of Durgā is described in the Sapta Sati Chandi (consisting seven hundred slokas). She is eternal but assumes the form of time and produces modification of Prakrti.

The far reaching influence of Purusa-Prakrti conception of Samkhya, I find also in the great work of Aurobindo, namely 'Savitri'. In Chapter V, hence, I have taken a detailed analysis of Savitri-Satyavan episode (Mahabharata) with the purpose of showing that though Savitri in the legend exhibits great divinity and strength, it is as ideal wife and as ideal lover that she appeals to Aurobindo.

9. Ibid., op.cit., p. 244.

10. Kinsley, D. Op.cit., pp. 55-63.

She bowed and touched his feet with worshipping
hands
She made her life his world for him to tread
And made her body the room of his delight,
Her beating heart a remembrancer of Bliss.¹¹

Though she is "Divine Love and Grace incarnate", she as an incarnation comes to the world only to "link man's strength (namely her husband Satyavan) to a "transcendental force". Aurobindo himself says – She is the ever-ascending truth of creation, the self-transcending *elan* of human existence, and the "Flaming Sword" of Maha Sakti.¹² Yet it is as the Prakrti of the Samkhya that she appeals to him. She becomes a sort of link between man and the Supreme Power of the world. It is said that Savitri will bring immortality, truth, power, bliss and goodness to man. Like Prakrti she is there to make us see and experience the highest truth – the Kaivalya of the Samkhya or the Moksa of the Vedanta.

"The world was a conception and a birth
Of Spirit in Matter into living forms,
And Nature bore the Immortal in her womb,
That she might climb through him to eternal life."¹³

Aurobindo's handling of Savitri reminds one of the various interpretations of the Goddess Rādhā. Rādhā

11. Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, Vol. 29, p.410.

12. Reddy, V. Madhusudan, 7 Studies in Sri Aurobindo, p. 94.

13. Sri Aurobindo, Vol. 28, p. 43.

also has been understood as a symbol of a woman in love rather than a religious symbol for the soul seeking union with God. The fifteenth century poet Vidyapati sees her as a courtly lover while the same figure gets adopted by the Caitanya movement of Bengal as an inspiration towards Krsna-bhakti. These two conceptions, though distinct are interrelated. So also we can see the two conception in Aurobindo's Savitri. What I find common to both these views of Radha as well as Savitri is the inability of the poets to grant them the status of an omniscient and omnipotent deity.

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CHAPTER II

PRAKRTI AND PURUSA

PRAKRTI AND PURUSA

Existence is composed of Prakrti and Purusa, the one we call Soul and the other Nature. These double terms form the starting point of yoga. When we come to look in at ourselves instead of out at the world and begin to analyse our subjective experience, we find that there are two parts of our being entirely separated from each other – one a consciousness which is still, passive and supports and the other unconsciousness which is busy, creative and supported. The passive and fundamental consciousness is the soul. This is Purusa, witness or Sākṣi. The active and super-structural consciousness is nature – prakrti – creative energy of the sākṣi (purusa).

The Purusa is still and silent witness of whatever Prakrti chooses to create, not interfering with her works. Prakrti restlessly creating, acting, forming and effecting things for the delight of the Purusa.¹ Purusa is described in the Samkhya Karika as a pure witness, a kind of translucent bliss. The term is chosen by the Samkhya to denote self and the self (Purusa) is regarded as the subjective counterpart of Prakrti (Premodial matter) which is the

1. Birth Centenary Library, Sri Aurobindo, Vol. 17, p.51.

material basis of the world. Purusa plays the role of an efficient cause in the reproduction of the world. Classical Samkhya tries to understand the world from the standpoint of consciousness. But this consciousness is not man's will or mind or self-awareness etc. It is rather the pure translucent witness which is at once the source of man's freedom and his sufferings. This fact of consciousness makes man what he is. Classical Samkhya tried to comprehend this ultimate consciousness in order to overcome suffering and to find the condition of freedom.²

So, the original stand point of Samkhya is dualistic. The inter-relation of two original principles is the cause of the Universe. Purusa is conscious soul, self luminous but inactive, whereas, Prakrti is energy and is active. Purusa does nothing it only reflects the action of Prakrti. Prakrti is mechanical but being reflected in Purusa it assumes the appearance of consciousness and thus the phenomena of creation, conservation, dissolution of birth and life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge and ignorance, action and inaction, happiness and sufferings — are all created.³ Purusa, thus under the influence

2. Larsen, G. Classical Samkhya, (1979), pp. 206-07.

3. Sri Aurobindo Centenary, Vol. 13, p. 65.

of Prakrti attributes to itself all such actions. Creation in Prakrti continues so long as Purusa consents to reflect the disturbance of the gunas (essential modes of Prakrti). Purusa is the witness of nature by virtue of reflection and the giver of the sanction, saksi and anumantā of the Gita.⁴

Because of the reflection of Prakrti in Purusa, consciousness of the soul is attributed to the workings of the mechanical energy. Thus Purusa while observing nature as the witness, forgets himself. He is deluded with the ideas generated in her that it is he who thinks, feels, wills, acts, while all the time the operation of thinking, feeling, willing, acting is conducted by her three modes and not by himself at all. To get rid of this delusion is the first step towards the liberation of the soul from nature and her works.⁵

Prakrti in Samkhya denotes physical reality in all its complexity and treated to be the material cause of the Universe. It existed and functioned independently of the male principle and male could not replace it formally or functionally.

4. Ibid., p. 66.

5. Ibid., p. 68.

Purusa is the great principle or force whose presence is necessary to awake creative energy and send it out working into and shape the matter. This is the reason why Purusa is the name usually applied to conditioned Brahman in his manifestations.

Purusa himself does not execute; he maintains Prakrti in her action and allows her to express in energy and process and formed the result what he perceives in his knowledge. Purusa knows everything but is still and inactive. He contains the action of Prakrti with his consciousness and knowledge and enjoys it. He gives the sanction to Prakrti's work and she works out what is sanctioned by him for his pleasure.⁶

Purusa is not the surface ego, but a silent self, a source of power, an original and, receiver of knowledge behind the ego. Our mental 'I' is only a false reflection of this self. This Purusa or supporting consciousness is the cause, the recipient and support of all Nature's work but is not himself the doer. Karika 18 establishes the plurality or separate existence of souls. And Karika 19 concludes that the witnessing soul is isolated, neutral, perceptive and inactive by nature.⁷

6. Ibid., Vol. 20, p. 91.

7. Davies John, p. 50.

Purusa, according to Sri Aurobindo, is Isvara and Prakrti is his Sakti. 'Their play with each other is both the motive and the executive force of all existence in the universe.'⁸

Thus, the self (Purusa) in the Samkhya philosophy is an unqualified permanent entity distinguished from and yet related to a world of objects. So the metaphysical distinction between the subject and the object implicitly admits the fundamental unity between Purusa and Prakrti. In the Samkhya Karika the word samyoga (association) is used to mean contact between Purusa and Prakrti, like a contact of the mind with a matter and which is as eternal as the world itself.⁹

So the basic proposition of the Samkhya system is the existence of two principles – Prakrti and Purusa. From the interaction or interplay of these two principles all varieties of life and matter are produced. Every atom of matter is Prakrti ensouled by an individual Purusa manifesting activity and life. And in this way the entire phenomena of the Universe is accounted for.¹⁰

8. Aurobindo Centenary. Vol. 17, p. 52

9. Samkhya Karika, p. 99. Radhanath Phukon (1960).

10. Ramacharaka: The Philosophies and Religions of India, (1980), p. 62.

Kapilas's conception of Prakrti was not that of gross matter which is opposed to mind (as mind is also a product of Prakrti), rather his conception may be expressed by the word 'Nature' which is subtle, ethereal substance. Prakrti is the cosmic primordial energy or substance from which the universe is evolved and into which it again resolves itself.¹¹

In the early Samkhya both the principles – Purusa and Prakrti were viewed as equal. But later Samkhya, under the influence of Vedanta gave prominence to Purusa. There Purusa is equated with Atman and Prakrti with Maya. In the post-Samkhya-sectarian religions sometimes the male deities dominated over the female deities and vice versa.

Though the primary faith of Samkhya is dualistic yet it offers an implicit and fundamental unity between Purusa Prakrti. Some Samakhya thinkers established a relationship between Purusa and Prakrti by making Prakrti an integral part of Purusa. And Prakrti has sometimes been conceived as an energy of Purusa.¹²

Accordingly, in the Bhagavat Purana the Samkhya got a theistic colouring. God here occupies a prominent

11. Ibid., p. 63.

12. Latika Chattopadhyay, Self in Samkhya Philosophy, pp. 99-100.

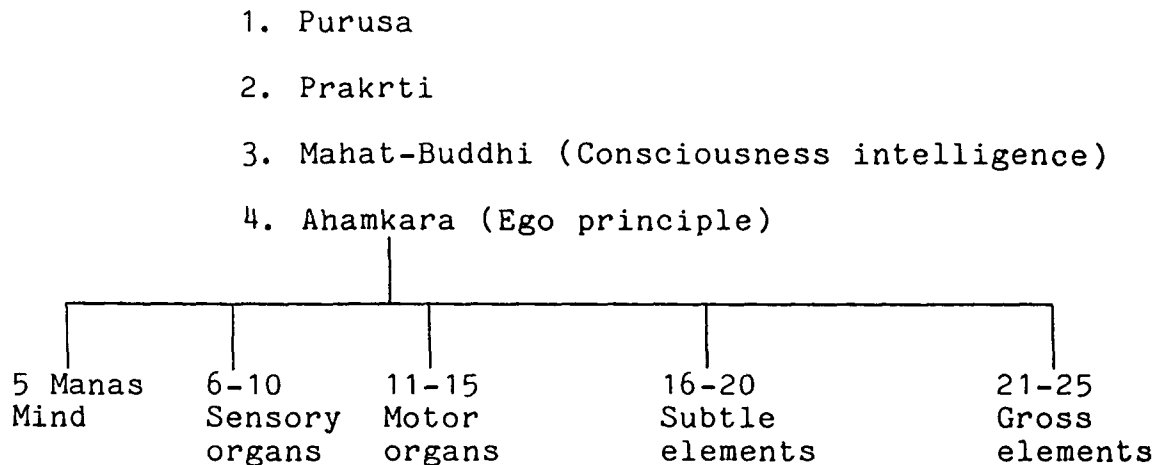
place and has been defined here as one who by his supernatural power exists in the heart of all creatures as Purusa. Before creation Purusa existed with everything latent in him.¹³

In the Prakrti Khanda of Brahmavaivārtha Purana, Prakrti is described as the premordial matter. According to this Purana, Prakrti is not inert as she is conceived to be in the Sāmkhya philosophy. Here she is intelligent and primary goddess of creation.¹⁴

✓ The Sāmkhya divides existence into twenty five categories. (Karika XXII) Twenty four of these are evolutes of Prakrti and are subject to modification and change. Purusa is the twenty-fifth principle who is indestructible and not subject to change. Unlike Rg Vedic Purusa (primal man who is one great soul), Sāmkhya Purusa is an infinity of individual souls each distinct from the rest. The twenty five categories are schematised as follows:

13. Ibid., p. 172.

14. Motilal Benarasidass News Letter, Vol. VII, No. 7, July 1985.



Unlike Vedanta, which recognises an intelligent creator responsible for the evolution, Samkhya holds that it is the soul and matter from which creation proceeds. Creation depends upon a principle whose nature is activity. This is Mulā Prakrti - the first productive nature and the material cause from which all effects are produced. The soul, on the other hand, is merely perceiving and witnessing.

According to the principle of causation all objects of the world are merely effects and they must have their potential existence in some world cause which itself is uncaused. To avoid the fallacy of infinite regress, Prakrti is thought to be the root cause of the world. Prakrti is constituted by the three Gunas sattva, Rajas and Tamas. Prakrti is the substratum of these Gunas held in a state of equilibrium. Gunas cannot be perceived but can be inferred through all objects of the world.

All objects of the world possess three traits according to three Gunas of producing pleasure, pain and indifference. In the Samkhya system, sattva is marked by pleasure and knowledge. It is light and bright (laghu and prakāsa). Rajas is marked by a tendency of activity. It is the principle of pain, movement and mobility. It also stimulates. Tamas is described as being possessed with indifference (viṣāda). It is heavy and enveloping and also responsible for confusion and bewilderment. The nature of all things of the world is determined by the dominance of Guna, since the Gunas are present in everything.¹⁵ The characteristics of the three Gunas are described in the fourteenth chapter of the Gita (XIV-11-13).

So, the well-balanced state of the three Gunas is Prakṛti in her pre-evolutionary state. When Purusa (Atman) comes into contact with Prakṛti and throws its reflection in it, the equilibrium of the three attributes is disturbed and each Guna begins to dominate over the other two. This disturbance starts the process of the evolution of the world. The Samkhya does not explain why and how the two come into contact neither can explain why the Purusa, after getting liberation will not come into contact again.¹⁶

15. R.N. Vyas, Significant Philosophies and Religions from India, (1979), pp. 42-43.

16. P.T. Raju, The Philosophical Traditions of India, (1971), p. 160.

Evolution or creation starts as soon as the equilibrium of the Gunas is disturbed. After the disturbance is created in the equilibrium of Prakrti, its sattva as pure and transparent, receives the reflection of the atman and becomes conscious. For this reason, Samkhya use the words buddhi and mahat to denote it. Therefore, reason is the first evolute of Prakrti, and out of this issues the ego (ahamkāra). In the ego sattva is not as dominant as reason. Rajas gets greater strength, because the nature of the ego is to act, to manipulate, and to appropriate. Out of this ego come the subjective and objective aspects of the world of experience. The ego also has three aspects – sattva, rajas and tamas. Out of the sattva aspect (vaikarika) arises all that belongs to the subject of experience. These are mind (manas), the five sense organs and five organs of action. Out of its tamas aspect (bhutādi) arises all that is objective – the five subtle elements (tanmātras) and from subtle elements five gross elements evolve. The subtle elements are the stuff of dream objects and the gross elements of the material world. The rajas aspect is responsible for the split into the subjective and objective poles of experience which creates the two poles out of the ego.

Reason (buddhi), ego (ahamkara) and mind (manas) are together called the internal organ (antah karana)

by the Samkhya. Five sense organs and five organs of action are called the external organ (bāhya karana).¹⁷

The three gunas or 'strands' of Prakṛti which permeate every corner of her being are more fundamental than the twenty-four categories. These are called sattva, rajas and tamas which can be literally translated as 'The quality of being, energy and darkness – usually known as goodness, energy and dullness. Sattva is the quality of purity and tranquility, rajas is the active principle which initiates karma, and tamas is obstructive and conducive to lethargic apathy. It is sattva that most nearly approaches to the nature of Purusa and it is the agency through which nature promotes Purusa's liberation. Whereas rajas promotes karma and thereby binds Purusa and tamas blinds and stupifies it.¹⁸

Thus the Samkhya system supplies a theory of construction of the phenomenal world out of twenty four tattvas or elements and three gunas. This is the important contribution of the Samkhya since the later philosophic and religious literature almost universally accepted this theory.¹⁹

17. Ibid., pp. 161-62.

18. R.C. Zaehner, Hinduism, (1972), p. 69.

19. Ibid., p. 70.

Scholars divide Samkhya into a philosophical and a mystical part. Philosophical Samkhya as formulated by Isvarakrsna supplies the theoretical basis for yoga and technique for achieving the highest goal (Kaivalya) – the total isolation of the individual (Purusa) from the domain of the nature (Prakrti). This is the Samkhya system proper which does not admit God. The philosophical Samkhya takes into consideration only the lower Prakrti which is merely a complex of the qualities of sattva, rajas and tamas, permanently intermingled, although one of them must necessarily predominate.

But Samkhya has a mystical path which is rooted in the Vedas and the Upanishads and which is also the source of Puranas, Tantras and other sacred scriptures. In a sense, 'the whole Tantric way of life is none other than the Samkhya.'²⁰

It is said in the Bhagavatam, that at the time when Samkhya arrived on the earth, a woman called Devahuti was the first to benefit by it. She represents Prakrti. Devahuti realised the knowledge of Samkhya to its ultimate limit to the point of identifying herself with the 'void'. Having rejected everything that was not pure and luminous

20. Lizelle Raymond, To Live Within, (1972), p. 99.

she is said to have wandered in nature, completely naked, radiating light. Instead of fading away into the void at the moment of death she transformed herself into a river in order to water the whole earth.²¹

In the Gita Prakrti is described as three fold the lower Prakrti (aparā), the higher Prakrti (parā),* the Prakrti that is our very own (paramā or swiyā). The higher Prakrti is mentioned in the Puranic and Tantic literature.

Prakrti contains everything that exists. It is the divine womb of all manifestations. In Prakrti one can observe the states of our being-soul-mind, intelligence, ego, and the animal matter of our body.

The Samkhya makes a departure from the tendency to view things in distinction rather than as a whole. The characteristics of Purusa and Prakrti is opposed to each other and can be specified as follows:

Purusa	Prakrti
1. Conscious	1. Non-conscious
2. Inactive	2. Active and ever forming the cycles of evolution.
3. Unalterably constant	3. Alterably constant and characterised by the gunas.
4. Subject	4. Object

21. Ibid., p. 95.

* Gita, Canto 7, Sloka V -

Apareyamitastanyam Prakṛtim Viddhi me parām
Jivabhutam mahavāho yayedam dharyate jagat.

The evolution of Prakṛti seems to have one aim; to produce a world of infinite forms which serves as bodies for the Puruṣa. The Sāṃkhya looks upon the world as a Kingdom of Warring Guṇas causing endless suffering. And wise man is one who identifies himself with Puruṣa and escapes suffering by neglecting his relationship with the body which is a product of Prakṛti.²¹

Because Prakṛti is one, all witness the same world, and since her principles are one and the same the internal and external experiences are the same for all.²²

A word about the relationship between spirit and matter. It is said in the Sāṃkhya, that Prakṛti requires the presence of Puruṣa in order to be appreciated while Puruṣa needs the existence of Prakṛti in order to understand and realise itself (Kaivalyārtham)*. Again the moment the two come together there is commotion in Prakṛti and equilibrium of the Guṇas are disturbed and creation takes place.

21. N. Jayashanmukham, Sri Aurobindo and the Indian Tradition, p. 108.

22. Sri Aurobindo, Essays on the Gita, p. 68.

* Puruṣasya darsanārtham

Kaivalyārtham tathā pradhanasya,

Pangvandhavād ubhayorapi

Sāmyogas-tatkṛtaḥ sargaḥ

(Karikā XXI)

In the philosophy of Samkhya, Purusa and Prakrti are treated as independent. But Prakrti, interestingly, dominates Purusa and clouds its freedom. She has the power of reducing it to a mere witness of her forms and actions. Purusa is able to return to its separate existence and become free only by the rejection of Prakrti's influence. This conception as I show later gets identified with the conceptions of the female goddess in later religious thought of our country.

The very first sutra of Samkhya Karika begins with three-fold affliction — Ādhyātmika (bodily or mental pain), Ādhibhautika (pain caused by acts of man and animal) and Ādhidaivika (affliction caused by God or by some supernatural causes).²³ Now, man as Purusa enquires about a means to end it. The Samkhya answer to this is that these pains cannot be removed finally, once for all.

"The union of the soul with nature is for its contemplation. The soul contemplates nature to become entirely separated from it. The union of both is made, as of the halt and the blind, and through that (union) the universe is formed." Further, as a separation takes place between the lame man and the blind man, when their mutual object is accomplished, so nature, having affected the liberation of soul ceases to act. (Quoted from Wilson, H.H. Samkhya Karika, pp. 103-04; and Davies, John, Hindu Philosophy, p. 51).

23. Dukha-traya-bhigātaj jijnasa tadabhighatake hetau
dr̥ste s̄a-parthā cennai-kantā-tyantato-bhāvāt

Purusa, is the conscious Being — the self, the originator, witness and enjoyer of the forms and works of Nature — Prakrti. But in spite of all intimate connection with Nature Purusa retains its transcendental character. Nature acts for the will and pleasure of Purusa. As Aurobindo observes:

"If the Purusa in us becomes aware of itself as the witness and stands back from Nature, that is the first step to the soul's freedom It becomes the master of Prakrti by refusing to be involved in matter."²⁴

So, Prakrti is the binding force for Purusa. It is said in the Samkhya Karika that "Prakrti binds by seven kinds of thoughts.* When a man gets rid of all these kinds of thoughts he parts with Prakrti for ever. The seven kinds of thoughts are like a screen over his head and as soon as they are removed, he sees the reality which is he himself."²⁵ But Purusa cannot remove the screen himself as he is entirely inactive.

24. Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, (1971), Vol. 18, pp. 348-49.

* These thoughts are virtue, vice, ignorance attachment, passion, power and weakness.

25. Samkhya Karika, No. LXIII.

The sole purpose of Kapila's philosophy is to relieve mankind from the suffering of pain. Life is not at all a blessing, rather it is a wearisome burden, which is finally cast off when the soul becomes free from all contact with matter. When the soul gets absolute independence, a self existence, it is not affected by any subsequent changes in the material world.²⁶

A word about Kaivalya, the state of liberation in the Samkhya philosophy.

In the realm of experience, Purusa and the Gunas of Prakrti form indistinguishable parts of the same idea and they are cognised as identical due to ignorance and non-discrimination. The moment Purusa identifies itself with the effects of Prakrti (like individuation, mind, sense organs etc), it is bound to the miseries and sufferings of the mind-body system (of which neither is Purusa). Buddhi, the reflector of phenomenal existence resembles Purusa to some extent (e.g. transparency etc.) and due to transcendental illusion in buddhi, the distinction between the two is not realised. This illusion is the bondage of Purusa according to Samkhya. "Bondage arises through the conjunction of Prakrti with Purusa, which

26. Davies John, Hindu Philosophy, p. 14.

is by nature eternal and pure, enlightened and unconfined" (Samkhya Pravacana Sutra, 1.19).²⁷

There is no reason whatsoever why Purusas should prompt themselves to have contact (Samyoga) with Prakrti and why they should create such a situation so that they must liberate themselves.

According to Samkhya, the realisation of the pure nature of the self and its distinction from Prakrti is the goal of Purusa. Now, the question is – when all souls are set free, Prakrti will cease to work, what will happen to the creation? Will it end there? According to Samkhya, there will always be souls struggling to escape the entanglement of Prakrti and it will never reach its end. Release from the recurring cycle of births follows from the knowledge of the Purusa's distinction from the matter. when the illusion is removed the Purusa becomes free. It gets back its real nature as pure consciousness, a state of eternal conscious, inactive individuality. This is the state of Kaivalya or liberation from the miseries of the world. According to Samkhya, freedom means the removal of obstacles of Prakrti which hinders full manifestation of the light of Purusa.

27. Reyna, Ruth. Introduction to Indian Philosophy, (1971), p. 150.

Unlike Vedanta, (according to which moksa is a state of ananda) Samkhya views that Kaivalya is a state in which there is complete separation from Prakṛti (nature) and thus a total destruction of the sufferings of existential life.²⁸

According to Kapila, the soul is the most real of all things. It is self-existent, never born and never dying.* By knowledge it becomes wholly separated from matter, and this separation is the soul's highest achievement.

"tena nivṛtta-prasavām
arthavasāt sapta-rūpa-vinivṛttam,
Prakṛtim pasyati puruṣaḥ,
prekṣakavad-avasthitaḥ svacchaḥ." 29

The soul having gained the supreme knowledge, beholds Nature as a spectator looks upon an actress. And after this there is no longer any occasion for virtue, or for any condition of ordinary life, because the soul has now become entirely independent of Nature. Soul and matter continue to exist, but each in an isolated, independent state.³⁰ This is a case of Jīvanmukta.

28. Ibid., p. 151.

* Bhagvad Gita, 2nd Canto, "No yayate mryate etc.

29. Samkhya Karika 65.

30. Davies John, op.cit., p. 98.

According to Samkhya Karika (XLII), human beings are more concerned with thoughts alone. It is thought that determines action, conduct and rebirth. Consequently thoughts are the ultimate cause of everything that concerns us. Therefore, one can get liberation only when one can get rid of all these thoughts.³¹ In Buddhism also one finds that thought or desire (Trisnā) is the root of suffering and to end suffering one should overcome one's own desire.

The Samkhya speaks of two types of liberation i.e., Jivan Mukti and Videha Mukti i.e., to be liberated while alive and the disembodied liberation. The common initial purpose of all yoga is the liberation of the soul of man from its present natural ignorance and limitation.

Contrary to the statement that Purusa to be liberated should be free from the clutches of Prakrti, it is said in the Samkhya Karika that Purusa is never under bondage, nor is he liberated nor does he migrate. It is only the Prakrti, who in her manifold forms suffers bondage, migrates and gets finally liberated (Karika LXII). The Purusa being all pervading consciousness cannot undergo any modification. He is static and omnipresent and remains the same in all successive births.

31. Phukon, R.N. Samkhya Karika, p. 131.

The Samkhya doctrine investigates the relation of the soul to the world in such a way that its imprisonment within the world and liberation from it will become comprehensible. Unlike Greco-oriental mysticism (which presumes that soul feels itself drawn to matter by an obscure impulse and to this it surrenders), the Samkhya opines that souls are destined to enter into connection with matter in order to be conscious of their absolute and complete independence.³² It is to be noted that matter has to emerge from rest so that the soul may enter into connection with it.³³

Samkhya treats Prakrti as the one to be enjoyed (bhogya) and Purusa as the one to be the enjoyer (bhokta). But it does not indicate the nature or the type of relation that prevails between the two. Admitting their separate existence the Samkhya does assert that the whole process of creation emanating from Prakrti which is very significantly called Pradhāna or foundation.³⁴

Though the scholars differ regarding the relation between Purusa and Prakrti, the authors of the Puranas have made an inseparable relation between Brahma and its

32. Albert Schweitzer, Indian Thought and Its Development, pp. 66-67.

33. Ibid., p. 69.

34. Ramakant Sinari, The Structure of Indian Thought, (1984), p. 40.

Mayā, Vishnu and Laksmi, Siva and Sakti and Purusa - Prakrti of Samkhya. Again this dual concept has regained the position in Radha-Krishna cult.³⁵

In Chapter I, I have undertaken a detailed study of these. What I find of interest in the concept of Prakrti is that the Prakrti of Samkhya is represented as a female principle. Basically it stands for mother earth, the fruit bearing soil. The relation between Purusa and Prakrti is explained in terms of the relation between a man and a woman. Prakrti charms Purusa just as a woman charms man.... Prakrti is sometime conceived as a blushing bride and sometimes as a beautiful dancing actress.

Besides the analogy of the dancer or actress (Ch. I) Prakrti also has got the other feminine virtues like "Generous Nature" (Karika 60), "Nothing is more modest than Nature" and "saying 'I have been seen', she does not expose herself again to the view of soul" (Karika 61). Kapila's Prakrti is endowed with all the qualities that belong to a thinking and self-conscious mind and not unconscious matter.

Nature is called generous as she acts for the benefit of the Soul (Purusa), which having no modes, cannot

35. Sasibhusan Das Gupta, Sri Radhar Krama Vikas, pp. 69-70.

act, and therefore can give nothing in return. When the soul gets liberation from matter it does not come into contact any more. And Nature having shown herself once, retires from the scene as a "modest matron who may be surprised in dishabille by a strange man, but takes good heed that another shall not behold her off her guard."³⁶

The concept of Purusa denotes the man. In the Rg Veda, Purusa is nothing but the male principle. In the later period, under the influence of Vedanta the Purusa was identified with soul. In the Tantra, Purusa means Siva. "As the birth of a child proceeds from the union of male and female, so the production and creation results from the union of Prakrti and Purusa."³⁷ The Upanisads symbolise Purusa in the Sun, the Father of life and Prakrti the earth, the bearer of life.

Vijnana Bhiksu, a great Samkhya master in the fifteenth century has given the metaphor of husband and wife to Purusa and Prakrti.³⁸

Debiprasad Chattopadhyay agrees that the notion of Prakrti is feminine and since it has a primary role to play, it probably reflects an ancient agricultural matriarchal social reality. He also supported the statement

36. Davies, John. Hindu Philosophy, pp. 94-95.

37. N.N. Bhattacharjee, Indian Mother Goddess, p. 93.

38. Lizeele Raymond, op.cit., p. 100.

that Samkhya is the origin for Tantric reflection. Sankakra's Vedanta Sutra Bhasya Samkhya is referred to as 'Tantra'.³⁹

In his book, "Indian Mother Goddess", N.N. Bhattacharjee has sought the origin of Samkhya in the non-vedic matriarchal tradition of India. The conception of a material Prakrti evolved from the conception of a material earth mother who is supposed to represent the forces that stimulate the generative power of nature. Through the ages this popular belief and custom in magical fertility rites survived, conserved and crystallized in the Tantras and the same conception of a mother earth later developed into the Samkhya metaphysical system.⁴⁰

There is confusion regarding the exact role of Purusa in creation. In the Samkhya as well as in Tantra the role of Purusa is subordinate, inactive and a passive spectator. Prakrti is the chief principle. But if creation is due to the union of purusa and prakrti, then why Purusa is given such a insignificant role? This contradiction can be removed only by the postulation of a matriarchal origin of the system, claims Bhattacharjee. In a matriarchal society the position of the husband is always insignificant.

39. D.P. Chattopadhyay, "Lokayata", A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism, (1973), p. 65.

40. N.N. Bhattacharjee, op.cit., p. 94.

The wife or the mother is the head and the only bond of union of the family. The children belong to their mother's clan and have no kinship with the father. Thus claims Bhattacharjee the role of husband in a matriarchal society finds its expression in the Samkhya philosophy. Just as the child has no real kinship with the father, so also the universe has no real relationship with purusa.⁴¹

In this connection, I would like to emphasise the dual aspect of a Supreme God in Khasi religion. Their conception of a Supreme Creator and master, omniscient and omnipresent ultimate cause is universal. Side by side, like popular Hinduism they believe in other minor deities and spirits ancestors and nature. The Supreme Being is very often conceived in the female aspect (Ka Blei) specially during birth, naming, disease and death. It should also be noted that like Hinduism, the Khasi honour the benign and dangerous aspects of the Goddess. As I have shown earlier, the mother aspect of God head is nearer to anybody's heart at the time of crisis and the Khasis are no exception to that. According to J.N. Choudhury -

"The Hindu conception of Ardhanarisvara (God as half man and half woman) comes very close to the conception of U Blei - Ka Blei."⁴²

41. Ibid., p. 4.

42. Choudhury, J.N. The Khasi Canvas, (1978), p. 222.

During marriage ceremony the Khasis address God in this dual aspect.

Though God in Khasi religion is above the rules of gender and all attributes yet, according to the relationship and creative process, God can assume gender and also attributes. The belief in the existence of spirits of deities (which may be termed as animism) also finds the expression in the Khasi religion. Now, the Khasis divide the realm of spirits into two in accordance with their intention towards mankind. The spirits with good intention (apparently) stand on the higher level.⁴³ Curiously, these gods with good intention are of masculine gender which are noted by Gurdon as follows:

U 'lei Muluk	- The God of the State.
U 'lei Umtong	- The God of Water (for drinking and cooking purpose).
U 'lei Longspah	- The God of Wealth.
U Ryngkew or u Basa Shnong	- The tutelary deity of the village.
U Phan u Kyrpad	- A similar Godling.

A few of the evil spirits which are mostly with feminine gender are as follows:

43. Ibid., p. 191.

- Ka Khlam - The devil of cholera.
 Ka Duba - The fever devil.
 Ka Taro - Also a fever devil in Jaintia Hills
 which causes delirium.⁴⁴

In Jaintia Hills, the most dreaded spirit is a she-devil called 'Ka Taro' which is supposed to cause delirium in cases of fever. Interestingly, J.N. Choudhury notes that,

"She usually finds lodgement in a person other than the sick person himself. She casts her evil spell over the sick man, as if from a distance Divination by breaking of eggs becomes necessary to determine in whose person the demon has found a temporary abode. The sick person may sometimes reveal this in delirium. The people let go the demon along with sick's wealth, house, lands, folks, etc."⁴⁵

No one dares touch these things, for fear he should become possessed by Ka Taro. It is observed that as in the case of u thlen, the demon is believed to follow the property.⁴⁶ The belief in Ka Taro, Gurdon equates with the Hindu Goddess "Sitalā Devi" (a particular manifestation of Divine Mother) and Mari-amman or mother of death in South India and the Āi-mā of the Assamese.⁴⁷

44. Gurdon, P.R.T. The Khasis, (1987) Reprint, p. 106.

45. Choudhury, J.N. Op.cit., p. 192.

46. Gurdon, op.cit., p. 107.

47. Ibid., p. 108.

The reason behind applying 'U' and 'Ka' before the names of good and evil spirits has an conceptual implication for J.N. Choudhury. He observes that -

"It is the female principle which is more active and dominant through all aspects of creation. The male influence is generally benign, but mostly indifferent We are reminded of the Hindu mother Goddess Kali in her role of destroyer who strikes terror in the heart of man."48

He also recalls the Biblical conception of -

"Satan symbolising the quintessence of everything evil. There are also the good angels of God who act as intermediaries between God and man."49

So also, Hindus have their conception of asuras and demons.

Generally, Khasi religious rituals are performed within the family or clan with its own ancestress, ancestor and ancestral uncle. Sacrifice to invoke the blessings of God to an expectant mother for her good health and safe delivery are performed to Goddess Ka Tap Kpoh. Similarly, name giving ceremony, ritual at the time of death are performed in the name of Goddess (Ka Ksan - Ka Rngiew or Ka Jer Khun, Ka Iap Briew or Ka Thep Mawbah, Ka Blei bad Ka Iawbei). So also during misfortune the Khasis pay

48. Choudhury, J.N. Op.cit., p. 193.

49. Ibid., p. 193.

their homage and pray to Dawing. And after the recovery from sickness and any kind of afflictions the submission and thanksgiving are as follows:

Do please hear O God, Oh Ancestress, since now I have found the cause and your reason to have felt offended and transgressed against; now oh Lord of thousand mercies, do take pity on me. Now as I have fallen into ignorance, I have turned my ways behind thee, I a poor human, do give me sound health for which I shall now hence stand awake...."50

Normally, the Khasis do not worship heavenly bodies. But it is interesting to note that like many other Asiatic societies they conceive the sun as female. One of the reasons given by J.N. Choudhury is that -

"because of the warmth which the living creatures including crops receive from the Sun that they survive and thrive The matrilineal Khasis regard the sun as female and associate the life-giving warmth with the sun."51

But the point to note is that the Khasis do not venerate the Sun. The Sun appears in a legend as the sister of the Moon, who falls in love with her. In her rage she is said to have cast hot ashes on his face (hence the marks!).

50. Ref. Marie, H.O. The Khasi Milieu, (1981), pp. 38-39.

51. Choudhury, J.N. Op.cit., p. 200.

Though the highest reality is gender-free at the conceptual level, popularly it gets identified with the male. The popular prefix to Blei is 'U' and not 'Ka'. My point gets substantiated with reference to the religion of the Christian Khasis.

In the Christian tradition the symbol of Trinity is of exclusively of masculine character. But in the Catholic tradition, Mary 'as the birth giver of God' is deified. As goddess 'Sri' as the consort of the Lord is commonly viewed in Hindu tradition, similarly Christian tradition adopted a bridal imagery. Virgin is portrayed as one who would reconcile God and humanity.⁵²

According to the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics,⁵³ the cult of Virgin Mary starts from the scriptural and orthodox position. Jesus Christ being the eternal son of God became man, being conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. In the first three centuries of Christian literature there are references of honour shown to Mary. But no mention of Mary's name, no reference to her occurs in the notices of Holy Communion in the New Testament.

52. "Theologies of Feminine Mediation: Hindu and Christian', Journal of Dharma, Vol. IV, No. 4, Oct-Dec., 1981.

53. Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. 8, p. 474.

The Gnostics who believed strongly 'the churches, ~~the~~ faith in the Virgin birth of the Redeemer, there were several constraints to admit the fact. For them, He issued from her womb but drew nothing from her substance.⁵⁴

During the period of four great councils (A.D. 325-451) the 'Fathers' were of opinion that 'the Mother of our Redeemer, through her faith in Him that she herself was saved. This period shows hardly a trace of any cult of the Virgin.⁵⁵

The beliefs of the ancient church underwent a change after it came under the influence of Hellenic philosophy which introduced the concept of a masculine Trinity — God — Son and the Holy Spirit.

But during the opening year of this century Irish Christian scholars to satisfy a 'popular sentiment' accepted the Holy Spirit as a Mother.

P.J. Jacob, in his article, has conclusively shown that 'the holy spirit is the Divine Mother in the Trinity'. For this exploration he has used the Bible and a few Fathers

54. Ibid., p. 475.

55. Ibid., p. 476.

of Syriac church as the primary source. He has also mentioned that in ancient Syriac writings the Holy Spirit is always feminine. And the oldest Syriac version of the Bible dating back to 200 A.D. explicitly calls the Holy Spirit 'She'. For Him the "Divine Trinity is God the Father (Male) God the Mother (Female) and God the Child (Generation), copied by the human trinity - human father (male) human mother (female) and human child (generation)."⁵⁶

It should be noticed that everywhere Mary - the blessed Virgin is referred to as Mother of Christ. The place accorded to her in Catholic and Orthodox theology and devotion issues from her position as Mother of the Redeemer. She is accounted pre-eminent among the saints.⁵⁷ But she is never accepted as Goddess in her own right. But whatever similarities and differences that may exist between the different Christian denominations in Meghalaya, Mother Mary appears no where to have been worshipped as female goddess.

56. Ibid., pp. 163-64.

57. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, (1974), 2nd Edn., p. 882.

CHAPTER III

SAIVISM AND VAISNAVISM

SAIVISM AND VAISNAVISM

According to Saivism, Rudra Siva is the first cause who creates, sustains and re-absorbs the universe. The early epic recognises him as an ascetic, 'rapt in contemplation of his own unfathomable being, who, though performing terrific austerities is also often willing to grant boons and to confer favours upon his worshippers. His phallic aspect, attesting to his ability for unlimited production'. According to archaeological findings, the Siva aspect of the Divinity existed even before 1st Century B.C. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have referred to his divine power and greatness. Siva is very often regarded as Lord, Master and Father of the universe.¹ In him the finite and the infinite meet, and in him all the opposites are reconciled. He is described both as the creator and destroyer, terrible and mild, evil and good, male and female, eternal rest and ceaseless activity. Again this great god transcends both the finite and the infinite, yet indwells the soul.²

Scholars regard the worship of Siva as pre-historic. 'The people of Mohenjo-Daro worshipped a male deity who

1. J. Gonda. Vaisnavism and Saivism, (1976), p. 13.

2. Zaehner, R.C. Hinduism, (1972), p. 85.

may be regarded as the prototype of Siva. He is represented as seated in the yoga posture and surrounded by animals. This explains the later conception of Siva as a yogin and paśupati. All other qualities are attributed to Siva in the later ages.³

The worship of Siva is popular throughout Indian subcontinent till today. There are different sub-sects of Saivism. In the process of evolution due to the influence of Samkhya, Siva came to be worshipped along with Sakti. The phallic worship in the Puranic age got a mystical and philosophical meaning and was recognised as an inseparable part of the Saiva religion.⁴

Most of the Saiva Puranas record a detailed account of the process for the realisation of the supreme knowledge (Siva-jnana). Linga Purana lays great emphasis on yoga and siva purana on bhakti and yoga. The Siva Purana further states that by the process of renunciation of worldly Karma one comes nearer to Siva. Through the knowledge of Siva one can discover the sorrow of the cycle of birth and rebirth. Accordingly a detachment from sense objects arises which again gives rise to emotion (bhava) and meditation (dhyana). Thus a devotee concentrates and meditates

3. Jash Pranabānanda, History of Saivism, (1974), p. 1.

4. Ibid., p. 10.

on the nature of Siva and attains the state of yoga by the grace of Siva. At the end, the individual gets liberation and becomes equal to Siva. When one's soul becomes lost in Siva one is said to be in the state of samadhi. It is like a lamp that burns in a steady flame.⁵ This analogy of flame in the heart according to some scholars, is the symbolic example of siva linga. Siva linga is like a lamp which is burning in the heart of every man and which is the controller and director of past and future.⁶ Originally linga is used as a symbol of Siva.⁷

Svetasvatara Upanisad gives stress on the supremacy of Siva. He is the God of all gods (Mahādeva) and the Great Master (Īsāna). He is attained by true tapas (austerity) and then comes the removal of all bondage. Both Agni and Rudra are combined in the concept of Siva.⁸

It is noticeable that, Sakti – the feminine aspect of god head did not get separate importance in Saivism. Umā, Ambikā, Pārvati, Haimavati, Kāli, etc. got only the the status of wife of Rudra-Siva. 'Siva and Sakti are not two separate realities, but two phases (conceptual)

5. Ibid., pp. 24, 25, 29.

6. Letters of Sri Anirvan.

7. Cultural Heritage of India, Vol. IV, p. 67.

8. Ibid., p. 83.

or aspects of the same Reality'. In Kashmir Saivism Sakti is described as the hrdaya (heart) and the Sāra (essence) of Siva.⁹

Thus, Siva who is always immersed in a yogic trance can be viewed as Absolute Brahman of the Upanisads and of course, the Purusa of Sāmkhya. Sāmkhya, though is not a direct descendent of the Upanisads, yet it could not but describe the concept of Purusa with an image of Siva. In Saivism Siva is the spirit (Purusa). Only Kashmir Saivism accepts the trinity consisting of Siva, Sakti and Nara which according to some scholars is due to the influence of Tantra.

According to Spanda, a branch (the other being pratyabhijna) of Kashmir Saivism, Siva is supposed to be the cause of all distinctions. Vasugupta, the Kashmir Saiva Acharya, describes,

"Spanda (vibration) is a psychic energy. It is a divine power in the form of serpent power (kundalini) which asleep or coiled at the basic centre, awakened by breath control and concentration on the Divine on it... it ascends to the highest centre above the cerebrum and unite with Siva."¹⁰

Siva the God, according to the followers of this school, is independent and creates merely by the force

9. Jash, Pranabananda. Op.cit., p. 130.

10. Ibid.

of his will all that comes into existence. The individual soul is identical with the supreme soul but fails to perceive this identity due to Maya and Karma.

The ultimate reality which is designated as Siva, Paramesvara, Purna, Atman, etc. is both transcendent and immanent. The transcendent aspect is described as Siva, and the immanent as Sakti. Considered as purely transcendent Siva is Sāva (dead). But as a matter of fact, there is a perfect equilibrium (samarasya) between Siva and Sakti. This state is known as Parama Siva.¹¹

This part can be compared again with Samakhya-Purusa. Avyakta (purusa) is the ultimate cause of the creation which itself is uncaused (Karika XV). Siva is considered as self-caused (sayambhu) and therefore, both Siva and Purusa of Samkhya are 'infinite, endless indivisible, inconceivable, inactive and immanent. At the earliest stage of creation, Purusa is in a state of trance. So is Siva, according to the Great Epic, 'the great ascetic, isolated and eternally at rest.'¹²

Kasmir Saivism, which is also known as Trika explains the knowledge of reality in three modes viz.,

11. Cultural Heritage of India, Vol. IV, p. 83.

12. Zaehner, op.cit., p. 82.

non-dual (abheda), non-dual-cum-dual (bheda bheda) and dual (bheda).¹³ Like Brahman, Siva is pre-consciousness, the benign one, the Highest good and bliss. Though He is one, yet He is in constant play with His own Sakti. Trika has given ample scope for bhakti. Another important feature of Kasmir Saivism is that it does not give an independent reality to Prakrti as the Samkhya does, for according to it, Prakrti represents a stage in the evolution of the universe out is Prama Siva. Moreover, like Advaita Vedanta, it does not reduce the universe to a mere illusion or maya.¹⁴ Siva is also considered to be the divine physician and also the 'Lord of dance'. His constant companion of a white bull and his consort is Parvati who is rather a part of himself.

There is another manifestation of Siva is a symbolic presentation of union between male and female principles. The totality of his nature is the totality of all existence and it is represented by the image of Ardhanārī-svara where the gods form the two halves of one body. To explain it philosophically it is a creative union of the active and passive principles. There is a description of this aspect of Siva in the Mahabharata. In the Rgvedic

13. Cultural Heritage of India, Vol. IV, p. 79.

14. Ibid., p. 97.

story of Yama and Yami we had a similar primeval bi-sexual character.

"The Yogisvara Siva together with his active (huntress) wife is a direct illustration of the inactive Purusa and the active Prakrti principles. Siva and Parvati thus satisfied the religious cravings at all levels of consciousness."¹⁵

The cult of Ardhanārisvara is as old as Saivism. Though it is not popular in the present day society. The idea of Ardhanarisvara is a symbolic expression of the two aspects of one ultimate Being. In the inactive or negative aspect all creative impulses remain dormant and the whole universe lies as a mere potency and possibility. 'This negative aspect is the state of nothingness'. In this aspect Sakti remains perfectly absorbed in the Lord, as if in a union of deep embrace.¹⁶ Thus, the union of Siva and Sakti is the basis of the concept of Ardhanārisvara. Each human body is the temple of Ardhanārisvara. This concept also represents the dual personality of human being. Thus, a man is a man because of the predominance of male aspect and vice versa.

In the united image of Radhakrishna the idea of Ardhanārisvara, once again could find expression. For

15. Bhattacharjee, Sukumari. Indian Theogony, (1970), pp. 175-77.

16. S.B. Das Gupta, Bharater Sakti Sadhana, p. 72.

instance, according to Vaisnava Sahajias every man has within himself the spiritual essence of Kṛṣṇa and Radha.

With the introduction of Tantricism the cult of Ardhanārīsvara was modified.

In Kalyān Sundara form of Siva a similar idea is presented by the marriage of Siva and Parvati.¹⁷

Thus, in the concept of Ardhanārīsvara, the male and female deity got an equal status. The root of this concept can be traced in the Upanisads, where Atman – the original Purusa was bisexual and then he divided himself into male and female parts and multiplied.¹⁸

Following the Tantric and Sahajia schools, S.B. Das Gupta finds an ontological reason behind the concept of Ardhanārīsvara. As he observes -

"The male and female represent in the visible world the division which is present in the nature of the Absolute as Siva and Sakti, and the perfect union of the Siva and Sakti is the highest reality."¹⁹

A similar idea he has found in the Sahajia Buddhism. "In Sahajia Buddhism Sunyata (void) and Karuna (compassion)

17. Jash Pranabananda, op.cit., p. 168.

18. Chattopadhyay, Sudnakar. Evolution of Hindu Sects, (1970), p. 139.

19. Das Gupta, S.B. Obscure Religious Cults, p. xxxvi (Introduction).

Vaisnava religion revolves round the worship of the Vedic deity Viṣṇu and Vāsudeva-Krishna who gets later identified with Viṣṇu Nārāyana. In the Rg Veda, Visnu appears to be a solar deity. In the early Samhitās, Nārāyan is described as a ṛṣi and devatā and the guardian of the cosmos.²¹ The Satapatha Brahmana identifies him as Purusa-Narayana, and Narayan again is identified with Prajāpati Brahmā – the creator God. When the popularity of Nārāyana reaches its peak, Brahma becomes a subordinate God of the cosmic divinity – Nārāyana.²²

The religion of the Bhagvad Gita represents the orthodox phase of Vāsudivaism in its fully developed form. Yet during the Great Epic (Mahabharata), the cult of Vasudiva Krishna had to face a stubborn opposition from the followers of Siva.²³ The Bhagvad Gita describes Vasudeva as Ksetrajna, nirgunatmaka and knowable. Thereafter the Lord is identified with the Purusa of Samkhya and the Creator of Maya.²⁴ Krishna (the active Purusa of Samkhya) possesses three powers or Sakti which are svarupa sakti, jiva sakti and Maya sakti. He also possesses three attri-

21. A.K. Mazumdar, Caitanya His Life and Doctrine, (1969), p. 11.

22. Sudhakar Chattopadhyay, Evolution of the Hindu Sects, (1970), p. 28.

23. S. Jaiswal, Origin, Development of Vaisnavism, (1967), p. 48.

24. Sudhakar Chattopadhyay, op.cit., p. 42.

butes viz., the attribute of existence (sat), the attribute of pure consciousness (cit) and the attribute of bliss (ānanda). It is, perhaps, due to the Tantrik influence that Vaisnavism accepted the three aspects of Srikr̥ṣṇa as his energies.

Since the Lord is described as Saccidānanda, his svarupa sakti also has three attributes corresponding to the three aspects. In the sat aspect it is sandhini sakti, in the cit aspect it is samvit sakti, and in the ananda aspect it is the hladini sakti. Among these saktis, hladini is the principal energy and is the most important.²⁵

Though the concept of Sri or Laksmi as fertility Goddess is found in the epics and Puranas, the concept of Rādhā in the context of Vaisnavism appears much later.

The central idea of Gaudiya Vaisnavism (Bengal Vaisnavism) is the bliss (hladini) aspect of Krsna. Rādhā is the embodiment of bliss and Krisna is the substratum. The consummation of the ideal is the identification of the dual conception of Rādhā and Krsna and this represents the idea of Sakti and Saktimat.²⁶

25. A.K. Mazumdar, op.cit., pp. 287-88.

26. Ibid., p. 290.

The worship of Sri-Laksmi by the side of Nārāyana represented the ideal of conjugal life set forth in the Puranas. It is interesting to note that the original image of Laksmi was four-handed. The two-handed image of her by the side of Nārāyana was later given to make her a subordinate goddess. One can compare this position with that of Prakrti of Samkhya where prakrti plays a very important yet subordinate role in the creation of the universe.

Though there are difference of opinions regarding the exact relation between Purusa and Prakrti of Samkhya, the authors of Purana did not find any difficulty to assimilate the concepts of Siva-Sakti or Visnu Laksmi with the Samkhya concept. And as a result, Visnu Laksmi in the Laksmi hymn of Purana, Brahman and Māyā of Vedānta, Purusa-Prakrti of Samkhya and Siva-Sakti of the Tantra all assimilated in the one dual image and of late the Radha-Krisna concept could easily surrender in the same dual image.²⁷

In Bengal Vaisnavism, Rādhā and Krsna are taken as one and the same. Before the creation of the universe,

27. S.B. Das Gupta, Sri Radhar Krama Vikas, (1940), p.70.

it is held that Visnu was all alone, he wanted to create and this creative became his energy or Primal Prakrti. Rādhā is considered as the 'transfiguration of the infinite potency of love contained in the very nature of Krsna'. Both are taken as one and the same principle. The reason for apparent separation of Rādhā from Krsna, it is held, is for the self-realisation of Krisna. Krisna has within himself two aspects of the enjoyer and the enjoyed. To realise his nature as the enjoyer he created Rādhā. Thus Radha represent the eternal enjoyed while Krsna is the eternal enjoyer. The secret of the eternal lila (sport) of Vr̄ndāvan is this mutual relation of love.²⁸

This mutual relation of enjoyer and the enjoyed is similar to that relation between Purusa and Prakrti. Prakrti is described in the Samkhya philosophy as enjoyed by Purusa. Prakrti requires the presence of Purusa in order to be appreciated and Purusa also needs the existence of Prakrti in order to realise itself (Kaivatyartham).* The Samkhya makes Prakrti an integral part of Purusa and sometimes she is conceived as the energy of Purusa. The Samkhya thinkers are of opinion that there is a sort of

28. S.B. Das Gupta, Obscure Religious Cult, (1976), pp. 123-24.

* Cf. Verse XXI: Purusasya darsanartham Kaivalyartham etc. Vide Samkhya Karia of Isvara Krsna by Radhanath Phukon, p. 40.

abstract tie which binds the two principles into a kind of fundamental union.²⁹ In Vaisnavism the relation between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is the relation of eternal love. It is a state of bliss.

Besides Rādhā, there are many young maids known as Gopis through whom Kṛṣṇa-līlā is manifested in Vrindāvana. In the Gopis the divine love is manifested in its fullest degree to the state technically known as Mahabhāva or supreme love.

The unique feature of Bengal Vaisnavism is that of Sri Caitanya. The Sat-Cit-Ananda power of Sri Kṛṣṇa personified in Caitanya. Caitanya is conceived by his followers as a dual incarnation of Radha and Kṛṣṇa. According to Sri Rūp Goswami, Rādhā being the hladini Sakti of Kṛṣṇa is inseparable from him. To know the nature and intensity of love of Radha, it is held, Kṛṣṇa incarnated in the body of Caitanya. In his outer appearance he was none but Kṛṣṇa but his dominating religious attitude was 'Rādhābhāva' or the love attitude of Rādhā towards Kṛṣṇa. He was of the ultimate nature of Kṛṣṇa with the supreme emotion of Radha (Rādhā bhava-dyuti-subalita kṛṣṇa rūp). this is the significance of dual incarnation of

29. Chattopadhyaya, Latika. Self in Samkhya Philo, (1982), p. 100.

Radha and Krsna in Sri Caitanya.³⁰

In their innumerable love-lyrics, the Vaisnava poets of Bengal expressed the attitude of 'Sakhibhāva' – the attitude of the female companion of Radha and Krisna, Joydeva, Vidyāpati, Candidās were absorbed in the sakhi bhava which is believed to be the best means for realising divine love. The theological explanation which is given by S.B. Das Gupta for the Sakhi-bhāva is as follows:

"the General Vaisnava view is that Jiva being the Tatastha Sakti of Krisna is, after all, a prakṛti, and its pride being the Purusa (Purusābhimāna) must be removed before it can be permitted to have its proper place in the eternal region of Svarupa Sakti."³¹

Vaisnava Sahajīā movement of Bengal and Buddhist Sahajīā cult both were totally influenced by religion of Bengal Vaisnavism. The Sahajīās received their Philosophy of Rādhā-Krsna from the Vaisnava poets. According to the Sahajias Rādhā and Krsna are not merely historical personality, rather every man has within himself the spiritual essence of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā.

Das Gupta observes that this view of holding men and women as the physical manifestation of Rādhā and Krsna

30. Das Gupta, S.B. Sri Radhar Krama Vikas, pp. 241-42.

31. Das Gupta, S.B. Obscure Religious Cult, p. 126.

by the Vaisnava Sahajias seems to have been inherited from the earlier Tāntric philosophy. According to the Hindu Tantras all men and women are nothing but the incarnation of Siva and Sakti which again, according to Buddhist Sahajia is the embodiment of Upāya and prajñā respectively.³²

Coming back to Caitanya Vaisnavism, I would like to point out that the birth place of Caitanya was Navadvipa which was associated mainly with Tantric worship, folk cults like Vāsuli Candi Manasā, etc. and Sri Caitanya could not overcome the influence of local popular goddesses. And this perhaps, later made him to accept Sri Rādhā as energy and an inseparable part of Krsna.

In the Bhagavatapurana, of course, Rukmini, Rukmini and not Rādhā is described as the eternal consort of Krisna. But Rādhā has a supreme position in Vrindāvan Lilā. She is regarded as the:

"Hlādini Sakti (the power of Krsna. The Hlādini sakti is an emanation from God's Svarupa sakti or sentient power. In God Svarupa sakti resides in the semblance of Rasa and makes him the transcendental Rasika. In the devotee this power is Bhakti. Radha is the personification of bhakti rasa, ... the embodiment of Love

32. Ibid., p. 128.

Divine and, therefore, superior to the other milkmaids and even the queens of Krsna. She is the greatest devotee of Krisna, who on his part, regards himself as her disciple."33

I have already mentioned Caitanya was the human combination of Krsna and Radha. Krisna wanted to relish his sports with Radha by becoming Radha.* Thus Rādhā and Krsna received almost as equal status in Caitanya Vaisnavism.

It is certain that material element of nature is symbolised by the term Krsna and its inherent energy by Radha. "As the energy is contained in the matter, so Krsna is said to be the Ādhāra or Āśraya (receptacle) which holds the energy, i.e. Rādhā."34

One can notice, again, the similarity between Radha-Krsna and Purusa-Prakṛti concept. In the post Caitanya Sahajia cult matter and its energy are considered to be the dual manifestation of the same cause. The Purusa-Prakṛti concept are represented by Krisna and Radha. "Purusa and Prakṛti are so closely united by the bond of love that the separation of one means the death of the other."

33. Ibid., pp. 112-13.

* Rādhā bhāva Kānti dui angīkār kari Sri Kṛṣṇa Caitānya rupe Kailā avatār - Caitanya Chritamṛta Canto - I, Chap - 4.

34. M.M. Bose, The Post Caitanya Sahajia Cult of Bengal, p. 233.

"Emati jāniha bhāi Prakṛti Puruṣa
Piriṅgi Primer lāgi dohe dohar bas
dohar vichhed dohe sahite nā pāre
tilek vichhed haile parāne se mare"³⁵

The scientific truth behind this concept is that without energy matter becomes dead and energy cannot express itself without matter. The Samkhya expressed the same idea, as it appears by Purusa Prakrti relationship. In the Samkhya system, Prakrti like that of a woman seated on the shoulder of a man making him subservient to her will.* While in Bengal Vaisnavism, Prakrti is united with Purusa in the close embrace of love. The Caitanya school have adopted the ideal of love as it exists between a lover and his beloved. 'Radha is notably the manifestation of the faculty of joy embodied in Krsna, but she represents his full potentiality."³⁶ Radha like energy, cannot stand alone, but must have a shelter in the bosom of the eternal matter — Kṛṣṇa which is her main stay. The longing or attraction manifested in a symbolical way is usually called love.³⁷

35. Ibid., p. 234.

* As a blind man and lame man can cooperate in order to get out of the forest, so the non-intelligent Prakrti and the inactive Purusa cooperate to serve their respective interests. - Samkhya Karika.

36. Ibid., p. 235.

37. Ibid., p. 236.

I would like to discuss in the context of Vaisnavism, how Bhagvad Gita has dealt with the Purusa-Prakrti concept. The Gita interprets the Samkhya view of cosmology in a more popular and synthetic way. The Purusattoma (Absolute) of the Gita is similar to Brahman of the Upanisads. In his qualified aspect he causes Prakrti to bear the whole universe.³⁸

Again, Purusa and Prakrti are called as Ksetrajna (knower of the field) and the Ksetra (the field). And everything is created through the union of these two. There are many interpretations of the story of Radha's love towards Krsna. There is no shortage of attempts to somehow explain away the femaleness of Radha. Actually it is said the story symbolises the relation of man and God. Ramanuja, the visistādvaita thinker and founder of Sri Sampradāya of Vaisnavism, unlike Sankara, admits the oneness of God with attributes - Cit the individual soul and acit - the matter, leaving no room for any female goddess. Sri Madhva, Nimbārka, and Vallabha all in spite of their being Vedantic thinkers admit Laksmi or Sri as the consort of Sri Krsna. "The worship of Sri with Krsna was introduced in accordance with the Sakta doctrine of

38. Mayadhyaksena Prakrtih suyate sacarācaram hetunānena
Kaunteya Jagad viparivartate. (Gita 9:10).

creation. Madhva who prescribed the worship of Siva, Surya, Devi and Ganapati insisted that all prayers and actions were to be finally dedicated to Visnu alone."³⁹

39. D.A. Pai, Religious Sects of the Hindus, (1983 Reprint), pp. 56-57.

CHAPTER IV

SAKTISM

SAKTISM

The fundamental belief in Hinduism about the all pervading and all transcending reality which is the source and support of everything has been visualised by the Sāktas in the form of Sakti.

"The Sāktas conceive the Great Goddess as the personification of primordial energy and the source of all divine and cosmic evolution. She is identified with the Supreme Being, ... as well as the controller of all the forces and potentialities of nature."¹

Saktism takes on a unique position in claiming the superiority of the Goddess over other Gods. According to it, the unmanifested Prakṛti alone existed before creation. Assuming the form of Great Mother she created Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva out of her own body. Later, the Mother Goddess, the Devi is transformed into the eternally existing all powerful Female Principle, the Prakṛti or Sakti. And having associated with the male principle the Puruṣa, she becomes Jagadambā or Jaganmātā, the mother of the Universe, the creator of the Gods. She is Mahādevi in her highest form and in spite of being the consort of Śiva she is his creator.²

1. Bhattacharjee, N.N. History of the Sakta Religion, (1974), p. 1.

2. Bhattacharjee, N.N. Indian Mother Goddess, (1971), p.6.

The Vedic Aryans were worshippers of father Gods, but they could not annihilate the Pre-Vedic Earth Mother and therefore Goddess Prithvi remained in the Vedic Pantheon. But she was allowed in a less glorious position in contrast to her male consort Dyaus, the sky Father.³ As wives of the Great Gods, Goddesses occupy a subordinate position in Vedic religion. With little independent power they play a very insignificant part.⁴

The worship of the divine feminine has been prevalent in India from a very early period among all the ethnic groups. Later different deities combined into one Great Goddess (Ādyā Sakti) to be identified with Prakṛti of Samkhya.⁵

The Mother-Goddess conception culminated in the idea of a cosmic principle as the source of all creation. Sakti is called the Mother – the resort of all beings. Sāyanachārya, the great Vedic commentator, in his commentary on Rg Veda says that Durga is none other than Great Sakti. "The three vedic deities - Vac (Saraswati), Rātri and Sri gives us a vivid picture of the three manifestations of Sakti as Mahakali, Maha Saraswati and Maha Laksmi."⁶

3. Ibid., p. 8.

4. Ibid., p. 103.

5. Chattopadhyaya, S. Evolution of Hindu Sects, (1970), p. 151.

6. Kumar Pushpendra, Sakti Cult in Ancient India, (1974), pp. 14-16.

There are Upanisads called Sakta Upanisads which contain the philosophical basis of Saktism where Sakti is regarded as Brahman or Isvara. They lay stress on the dynamic nature of the creative power of Brahman i.e., Sakti. Here Sakti and Brahman are inseparable from each other. This inseparableness is the key note of Saktism. Sakta upanisads regard Sakti as the creative power of Siva without which he cannot create the universe. She is the mother of the universe, the creator of Prakrti-Purusa and the world. Sometimes she is identified with Prakrti as well as with Māyā.⁷

Devi Bhagavata Purana conceives of God as the Divine Mother. She is described as Para Brahman, Atman, Pure consciousness and bliss. Para Brahman has a power called Māyā, which is neither existent nor non-existent, nor both but different from them. Māyā is a positive entity and always exists in Brahman and Atman as heat exists in fire. Brahman in conjunction with Sakti is the seed of the world. Māyā is called Pradhāna, Prakrti, Sakti or Avidya.

Prakrti, Avyakta or Māyā is the material cause of the world and the power of Brahman. Māyā is composed

7. Ibid., p. 20.

of three Gunas, viz. Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. Isvara is the reflection of Brahman in Maya and the individual self is the reflection of Brahman in Avidyā.

Sakti in this Purana is called the eternal and Supreme Goddess and the ultimate cause of all causes. Sakti is said to exist in all things. Though Sakti in its absolute aspect is formless, yet it has got to assume visible forms for the sake of showing grace to the devotee.⁸

The Brahma Vaivarta Purana mentions manifestation of Sakti as Saraswati, Durga, Laksmi and so on. The most important cult of this Purana is that of Rādhā. In this Purana Sakti is called Great mother and mulaprakṛti out of which the whole universe evolves. It is held to be the real essence and ultimate substratum of all that exists. This original Prakṛti first assumed five forms viz. Durgā, Sakti of Siva, Laksmi, Sakti of Visnu, Saraswati and Savitri of Brahma and Radha, the favourite of the youthful Kṛṣṇa.

Besides these manifestations of the Sakti or Prakṛti, the whole body of goddesses are said to have sprung

8. Ibid., pp. 66-68.

from the same source. In every creation of the universe Mulāprakṛti assumes the different gradations of Amsarupini, Kalarupini and Kalamsarupini or manifests herself in parts and further subdivisions.⁹ Sakti, not only is the creator, but she is also the preserver and destroyer of the universe. In the Mahabharata more specifically in Sapta-Matrika Kali is seen as a symbol of death and destruction. It is in the Devi Māhātmya that a full account of goddess Kali is given. In the first two episodes Devi, the great goddess defeats the demons (Madhu, Kaitabha and Mahisāsura). In the third episode, while confronting the demons (Sumbha and Nisumbha, Chanda and Munda) the goddess Kali appears on the scene. When Chanda and Munda approach Durgā, she becomes furious, her face becoming dark as ink. Suddenly there springs forth from her brow the terrible goddess Kāli, armed with a sword and noose. She is adorned with a garland of human heads, wears a tiger skin, and waves a staff with a skull handle. She is gaunt with sunken, reddish eyes, gaping mouth, lolling tongue and emaciated flesh. She fills the four quarters with her terrifying roar and leaps eagerly into the fray. She flings demons into her mouth and crushes in her jaws. Laughing and howling loudly, she approaches Chanda and Munda grasps them by

9. Ibid., p. 89.

the hair, and in one furious blow decapitates them both with her mighty sword. Returning to Durgā with the two heads, she laughs jokingly and presents them to the goddess as a gift.¹⁰

Once again, while fighting against the fearful demon Raktabija¹¹ Durga repeatedly strikes him and later calls upon Kāli to defeat the monster. Kāli swoops onto the field of battle and opens her gigantic mouth. She swallows the blood born creatures and drinks up the blood from the demon's wound and finally sucks the blood from the demon, who falls to the ground dead.¹²

Thus, it appears that Goddess Kāli is born from wrath, horrible in appearance, and is ferocious in battle. She takes delight in destruction and death and thus symbolises the wild and fearful aspects of the divine.¹³ Of course, in the Linga Purāna Kāli plays a positive and motherly role.¹⁴

In various contents it is seen that Kāli and Siva dance together. The dance is wild and world shaking. Kāli

10. Kinsley David, Hindu Goddesses, p. 118 and also 'Chandi' 7th Canto.

11. Note: Everytime Raktabija is wounded and begins to bleed, other demons in his image and might and ability are instantly born from his blood - Raktabija badha adhyaya. 'Chandi' 8th Canto.

12. Ibid., p. 118.

13. Ibid., p. 119.

14. Ibid., p. 104.

and Siva appear as mad partners in cosmic dance that is destined to destroy the worlds. There is a tradition in South India where a dance contest is held between the two. In every case Siva is victorious. It is arranged to settle the superiority of the sexes. Pārvati takes the form of Kāli but is still not able to defeat Siva. The defeat of Kāli in the dance tournament by Siva is the origin of Chidāmbaram temple (famous Saivite holy place in South India). The stories regarding the defeat of Kāli by Siva reflect the Saivite confrontation with and accommodation of Kāli. In South Indian mythological tradition Kāli is subdued by Siva and not accepted on equal terms.

The dance performance of Siva and Kāli has got other implications. It is also held that had Siva not defeated or calmed Kāli, the whole universe would become subject to her blind bubbling fury and destroy itself. 'Her fury is equated with Prakṛti - the realm of vibrating matter that proceeds according to its own laws. Siva by subduing Kāli represents Purusa, or the Yogin's heroic taming of matter, his defeat of Kali is sublimation and deification of matter.'¹⁵

15. Ibid., p. 120.

However, the Rāmāyana shows Kāli as dominating Siva. It is said that after the conquest of the ten headed Rāvana, Rāma boasted of his victory. Sita, however, was not impressed and wanted Rama to confront a thousand headed Rāvana. The giant Rāvana threw only three arrows which drove all Rāma's army back. Rāma became disheartened and began to weep alone on the battle field. Sitā then assumed the form of Kāli and killed the demon. She started tossing his heads and limbs, gulped his blood in her frenzy and began an earth-shattering dance. The Gods were alarmed and wanted Siva to intervene. Siva threw himself in the battle field under her dancing feet. Recognising Siva (who is called her husband) she was astonished and embarrassed and stopped her dance. (This is the usual representation of Kāli in Bengal). Of course, Sita resumed her appearance and accompanied her humiliated husband, Rāma.¹⁶

This dominant position of Kali can also be seen in certain forms of Tantrism. In many Tantric texts Kāli is declared as the supreme deity and is equivalent to Brahman. Compared to Kāli, the gods Brahma, Visnu and Siva are like the amount of water in a cow's hoof print compared to the water of the sea.

16. Ibid., p. 119.

In the Mahanirvana Tantra Kāli is described as the premordial Sakti; and Siva praises her as follows:

"Beacue Thou devourest Kāla, Thou art Kāli, because thou art the Origin of and devourest all things thou art called the Ādyā (primordial) Kāli. Resuming after Dissolution Thine own form, dark and formless. Thou alone remainst as one ineffable and inconceivable. Thou having a form, yet art Thou formless; though Thyself without beginning, multiform by the power of Māyā, Thou art the Beginning of all, Creatix, Protectress, and Destructress that Thou art."17

In Vāmācara Sādhanā, the Sādha (the practitioner) seeks to, gain moksa by realising the nature of the world which is thoroughly pervaded by the One Sakti. He realises the identity of Sakti with the whole creation.

As Siva represents "all devouring time", Kāli, by dancing on Siva, represents a mastery over time: the dark immeasurable void which is above time, space and causation. In this characteristic pose, it appears that by conquering the god of destruction, she affirms creation which is the ultimate expression of the feminine principle in the universe.

The creative, preservative and destructive forces are but the three aspects of Divine energy that exists

17. Ibid., p. 123.

in Brahman. And Mahā Sakti is the complete perception of Brahman with the three Gunas – sattva, rajas and tamas. From this it appears that the philosophical concept of Brahman is conceived as Mahā Sakti in the Tantras.¹⁸

According to Sākta Tantras, Sakti has a double aspect. In one she is identical with Siva and at this stage Siva alone shines. In another it is the tattvas from which the universe appears. Again Siva is the static absolute and Sakti is the conscious energy of Siva who creates the world.

Siva and Sakti as Brahman are inseparable and non-different from each other. Sakti is the supreme energy (Parā Prakṛti) of Siva, the Supreme Self. According to Mahā Nirvāna Tantra, Sakti creates, preserves and destroys the world at the mere will of Brahman. In other words, Siva creates, preserves and destroys the universe through his Sakti. Here Sakti is conscious, omniscient and the fountain head of all powers and knowledge. It is both subtle and gross, manifest and unmanifest, formless and multiform. Thus Saktism combines absolute monism with the Samkhya theory of evolution.¹⁹

18. Ibid., p. 152.

19. Ibid., pp. 168-69.

In Saktism there is an integration of both Vaisnavism and Saivism as Sakti is conceived as Vaisnavi Sakti and Saivi Sakti. The Sāktas have transformed the Impersonal Absolute into a personal divinity – the omnipresent and omniscient Sakti or the Divine Mother. Though popularly Saktism is identified almost wholly with the worship of the Sakti (female) yet there is no dearth of the efforts on the part of Scholars to somehow show Sakti as subservient to Siva (male). She is either highlighted as Sivas spouse, sometimes as his counterpart or is treated as a substitute for the Upanisadic Brahman, conceived in feminine terms and images. Rarely is the independent nature of Sakti emphasised.

The nineteenth century scholars sought to trace the worship of this female principle in the literal interpretation of some of the hymns of the Vedas and in the philosophical interpretation of the Samkhya system.²⁰

In Sahajia Buddhism (sunyata) void and compassion (Karuna) transformed as the prajna and the upaya, are held to be the primary attributes of the ultimate reality. In the Buddhist Tantra and in Sahajiā Buddhism these two aspects – Prajna and upaya are conceived just as Sakti

20. Ibid., p. 131.

and Siva of the Hindu Tantric school.²¹ Even now in Tibet, different Hindu Gods and Goddesses are being worshipped with full honour. Most of the Lāmās are the Tantric worshippers. According to Hindu Tantra, Tārā Devi is the manifestation of Sakti or Kāli. Regarding the origin of Goddess Tārā, there are different opinions. Some scholars are of the opinion that Tārā Devi is a Buddhist Goddess. There are twenty one forms of Tārā. Manjusri is the Goddess of learning in Buddhist religion. Though in Buddhist Tantra, Manjusri is taken as a male God but the form is similar to Saraswati of Hinduism.

The 'Bon' religion of Tibet is similar to Siva-Sakti concept of Hinduism. The Chief God of Bon religion is La-Chenpo-mig-dupa which means nine-eyed Mahādeva. He is the Lord of the Universe. The main Goddess is Gi-Brijidamthaysma meaning the two handed white Goddess.

Theologians as well as sociologists see in the Devi concept an integration of the elite culture with folk culture. Ghurye in his book Gods and Men, has described different names and forms of worship of Devi in South India.²²

21. Sasibhusan Das Gupta, Obscure Religious Cult, p. xxxvii (Introduction)

22. G.S. Ghurye, Gods & Man, (1962), p. 238.

In North East India more specifically the present State of Assam, we have the Ahoms who are believed to have practised Prakritik puja. This puja is offered in honour of two powers, Lang Kuri (male) and Nang thau (female). It is similar to Siva-Sakti puja and it is offered to bring peace for the country. The early religion of Assam may be called the religion of the plains tribal and it was said to be worship of a host of minor deities with the belief in a superior creator deity. The foundation for the evolution of various religious cults in Assam was laid by Alpine and Tibeto-Burman elements. The Supreme Creator deity was mostly inactive like the Purusa of the Samkhya. The religion of Saivism mixed with Tantricism prevailed in Assam from about 7th Century A.D. In different historical periods Saivism exercised a considerable influence on Assam's religion. In the second phase of Saivism in Assam, Goddess of Tantric Buddhism Aparājitā and Ugra Tārā got mixed up with Saivite rites.²³ According to Gait Buddhism was also wide spread in Assam at some previous period.²⁴

According to P.C. Choudhury, the Brahmanical religion of Siva and Sakti flourished in Assam when the influence of earlier surya worship and Buddhism had declined-

23. B.K. Kakati, The Mother Goddess Kamakhya, (1989), p.19.

24. Gait, History of Assam, p. 26.

"A land of planetary and Surya worship, having been assimilated into the cult of Visnu, and evident from the existing temple remains at Hajo and Kamakhya in particular, and as explained by the Kalika Purana itself, other Buddhist works and epigraphs, the Aryadharmā had its established root in the soil. Buddhism from the time of Mahāmāyā existed at different centres in Assam, followed by the cult of Siva and Sakti from which period might have started reaction of what may be called the Brahmanical Hinduism. With the rise of the sectarian faiths and the evolution of the cult of Sakti in its various aspects from about the 7th - 8th century A.D. of Siva, one of the Hindu trinity and of Devi with the incorporation of Tantricism and ritualistic details began to flourish round the Devipitha Kamakhya."²⁵

The most dominating name in the early history of Assam is the Goddess Kāmākhyā. She was the presiding deity of the State and the later religious history also centres round her. Even other goddesses were recognised as the varied manifestations of the Goddess Kāmākhyā. It was over her emergence, that the Saivites and the Vaisnavites went into silent conflict at a certain period. Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā was associated with and patronised by Visnu during the reign of Naraka. In the later periods she was pictured as the spouse of Siva.²⁶

Besides the identification of Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā and wife Goddess Parvati, she has also been

25. P.C. Choudhury, History of the Civilization of the People of Assam, (1966), p. 430.

26. B.K. Kakati, op.cit., pp. 33-34.

completely assimilated to a virgin Goddess of beauty and sex, Tripurā. The cult of virgin worship and sensual aspect of Devi worship seems to be derived from the cult of Tripurā.²⁷

Thus Tantric form of Hinduism in the worship of Kāmākhyā, the Mother Goddess has been flourishing in Assam for quite some time. Among the tribals, cult of Goddess worship was also in a dominant stage. It is interesting to note that within the Vaisnava pantheon, the worship of Devi was also included. Goddess Kāmākhyā found a place along with Guhya Kāli of Nepal and Nilā Saraswati of China.²⁸ Kāmākhyā was worshipped both according to right-hand and lefthand methods. Similar is the case of Tripurā-bālā who is identified with Kāmākhyā. The lefthand worship of Tripurābālā often required the worship of an actual living girl. Institution for virgin worship also was there.*

Kamarupa is described as:

"the favourite haunt of the Devi She dwells in every House, Every woman in Kamarupa is a miniature incarnation of the Goddess."²⁹

27. Ibid., p. 49 and p. 51.

28. Ibid., p. 43.

* Virgin worship is still in practice during Durga Puja.

29. Ibid., p. 45.

The female Goddess Mahādevi of the Tantra has been variously identified as Vishnu's Māyā. In one sense it is a positive connotation. 'As Prakṛti or Māyā, the Devi is identified with existence itself'. Here Māyā is not the binding aspect, rather she is the ground of all existent things.³⁰

According to the Saiva Siddhānta, Māyā is the Sakti of Brahman. It is the primordial stuff out of which the world is made. Māyā is non-intelligent and it evolves by the guidance of Siva.³¹ It is noticeable that in the Upanisads this aspect of Māyā did not get much importance. It was viewed only as a negative element (i.e. as ignorance).

Avidyā or Ajnana is the subjective expression of Maya. In the Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Māyā means 'illusion', unreality, deception. In the Samkhya, it is identified with Prakṛti or Pradhana, sometimes identified with Durgā and also regarded as the daughter of Anṛita and Nṛitti, etc.³²

30. Kinsley, David. Hindu Goddesses, p. 135.

31. Bhattacharjee, N.N. History of Sakta Religion, p. 116.

32. Monier Monier Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, (1986 Reprint), New Delhi, p. 811.

Similarly, in the Bhagvad Gitā, Māyā is synonymous with Prakṛti. It is the differentiated matter from which all delusions of duality are born and in which the ignorant take refuge.

Here one must note that the Brahman of Vedānta could create the universe only with the association with Māyā which is also equivalent with Prakṛti and Sakti. Here again, one can identify Brahman with Purusa and Māyā with Prakṛti. It should be admitted that in spite of becoming the creative power of Brahman, Māyā always got a derogatory position. Sankara uses the term Māyā to mean the indescribable (anirvacaniya) power of Brahman. Māyā also veils Brahman and creates delusion. Just as the Purusa must dissociate from Prakṛti in order to get liberation, the Sadhaka, must tear the veil of Māyā in order to know the true reality.

From the other point of view, of course, Māyā is seen as the extraordinary power of Gods. The precise relationship between Brahman and the world, in Advaita Vedanta is inexpressible and is sometimes referred to as Maya. I shall not discuss Vedantic Māyā in more detail. The term Māyā may be of common gender, but since it is very often equated with Prakṛti, and Prakṛti everywhere got a feminine connotation, so Māyā became in the popular

mind equated with the female. Let me refer here to N.N. Bhattacharjee's observation:

"Vedanta could not get rid of the expanding influence of Saktism. Even in its Advaita form, in which Brahman is one without the second, the conception of Māyā as a female principle gradually evolved. Thus Brahman could become the creator only when he was associated with Māyā, which was subsequently called the eternal energy (Nitya Sakti)."33

The dominating influence of Mother Goddess in Assam received a break through the Neo Vaisnavism of Sankar Deva. Radha is not acknowledged here nor any female complement.³⁴ A formula of four names - 'Rāmā--Krishna-Nārāyana-Hari' is given at the time of initiation. This Vaisnavism of Sankar Deva is similar to southern Vaisnavism in some points. In Sankar Deva's system Nārāyana is the "self conscious pure form of Hari" (Caitanya maya suddharupa Hari) and the primal cause of all incarnations (Sarva-Avatara-Kāraṇa Nārāyan).³⁵ In many systems of Northern Vaisnavism Rādhā, the unmarried consort of Krishna symbolises the Madhura relationships with God. "The Ekasaraniyā system of Sankar Deva may be looked upon as a protest against varied Rādhā cults that prevailed in different

33. Bhattacharjee, N.N. Op.cit., p. 90.

34. Kakati, B.K. The Mother Goddess Kamakhya, p. 71.

35. Ibid., p. 74.

parts of contemporary India."³⁶ In the Ekasarianiyā system there are the monks (Kevaliyā) but no nuns. "Women were never permitted to mix with men in devotion or abandon their usual household duties much less to assume the character of nuns."³⁷ It is said that Sankar Deva never gave any 'nama mantra' to women. He even drove out one of his follower (Vyāsa Kalāi) from his fold, because he secretly offered worship to the Goddess of small pox when his son was ill.³⁸ Sankar Deva encouraged dāsyā bhakti, i.e., puritan form of bhakti excluding the emotional side that which is free from tāntrik influence. In Sankar Vaisnavism Krsna maintains his manly independence without being overshadowed by the female aspect. Krishna is pictured as masculine hero, conqueror of Kama. However, Damodar Deva the successor of Sankara Vaisnavism, was much influenced by the Caitanya Vaisnavism of Bengal. Unlike Sankardeva, Domodar Deva prescribed the worship of Visnu. Thus creating a sect of Brāhmanical Vaisnavism along with worship of other deities. The influence of Tantras and Samhitās got entry once again in Damodoria Vaisnavism. Unlike Sankar Deva, Brahmanical Vaisnavism considered sakti or prakṛti

36. Ibid., p. 75.

37. Ibid., p. 76.

38. Ibid., p. 80.

as the root cause of creation and Purusa as the inactive aspect. Whereas Sankar Deva considered Brahman to be an active Purusa controller of both Purusa and Prakrti. Damodar Deva, like other followers of Caitanya considered him as the dual incarnation of Rādhā and Krsna.

The philosophy of Sankardeva is mainly influenced by the Bhāgavata and the Bhāgavad Gitā. The Bhakti-cult, propounded by him consists in the cultivation of an intimate relationship between the worshipper and the eternal omnipotent God, who is a person. In his 'Bhakti Ratnākara he admits the reality of Jiva and Jagat which are by no means different from Brahman. The apparent difference is only in nāma (name) and rupa (form). When Māyā is transcended, the existence does not disappear rather it gets a new meaning.

According to Sankar Deva,

"Purusottama, Paremesvara and Nārāyana is identical with Vāsudeva Krsna. He prescribes Kirtana as the method of worship. He teaches that it is only the action of Māyā that prevents us from the realisation that the whole universe, comprising the moving and the non-moving, the static and dynamic ... is pervaded by one God, in the form of Isvara...."³⁹

39. Nath, R.M. 'Sankar Deva and the Vaisnava Movement' in the Cultural Heritage of India, Vol. IV, p. 205.

For Sankardeva Paramesvara Nārāyan is the cause and upholder of Purusa and Prakṛti. His Kṛṣṇa is the supreme Brahman. The Bhagavata prescribes the method of worshipping this Supreme Lord in the Kaliyuga with Kirtana. By identifying Him with Sṛikṛṣṇa and Ramachandra and addressing Him as Maha Purusa, Sankardeva calls his religion as Mahapurusiā Dharma. It is also called the Nama Dharma as the main method of worship is Kirtana or singing the praise of the name of the Lord.⁴⁰ Idol worship does not occupy any position in the Ekasaraniya Nama Dharma of Sankardeva. The female element of the deity is acknowledged, but no separate worship is prescribed. The dual worship of Rama-Sita or Radha-Kṛṣṇa, which is a common feature of other Vaisnava sects, is remarkably absent in the Ekasarana Nāma Dharma.

Vaisnavism enjoins that the devotee should establish a relationship with the object of his worship. This relationship can be of five types, viz., sānta (of a serene devotee), dāsyā (of a servant), sakhya (of a friend), vātsalya (of a parent) and madhura (of a consort). Of all these, Sankardeva emphasised on the dāsyā-bhāva, teaching implicit sense of service to God, like a faithful servant, without hoping or asking for any reward in return. The Madhura bhāva with the Rādhā cult which gathered

40. Ibid., p. 206.

a great impetus in Caitanya Vaisnavism, had no attraction for Sankar Deva.⁴¹

In the Ekasarianiyā Dharma one has to take refuge in the Deva, Guru, Nama and Bhakat. Deva being inseparable from his Nama, Sarana (to take refuge) to the Nama is essential. The Guru (spiritual guide) is a human form of Deva and the Deva is subservient to his Bhakat (devotee). Therefore, Sarana is very significant part of a life of a devotee.

Though Sankar Deva lived a family life with wife and children, Mādhavdeva led a celibate life in spite of Sankardeva's protest. According to Mādhava deva, "A celibate devotee is like a soldier within a well-guarded fort, whereas a devotee leading a family life is like a soldier fighting in the open field."⁴² Damodaradeva was a widower and Vamsi Gopāla Deva remained a bachelor. It later became the custom in several of the Bamuniā satras and some of the Mahapurusiā satras, that the Chief Guru of the satra should be a celibate. The devotees living within the satra also lead a celibate life, and they are

41. Ibid., p. 207.

42. Cf. Sri Ramakrisna has often told that it is much easier for a celibate bhakta (devotee) to remember the name of God, but a householder devotee when he does that it is, as if he is doing the same by removing a huge stone.

called Udāsin Bhaktas or Kevaliās. The rejection of the female diety has also influenced the position of woman in the Vaisnavaita society. Sankardeva is said to have denied the privilege of formal initiation to women. They were to be benefitted only by hearing religious discourse and singing Kirtana-songs. The present position is that even the formal sarana is denied to a woman. She can neither become a Kevaliya or a Udāsina bhakta, nor become a Satrādhikara.⁴³

43. Ibid., pp. 209-10.

CHAPTER V

AUROBINDO AND GODDESS SAVITRI

AUROBINDO AND GODDESS SAVITRI

The Aranya Parva of the Mahabharata has the legend of Sāvitri-Satyavān which has inspired succeeding generations since time immemorial. Savitri has been adored as a virtuous wife devoted to her husband (Patibratā). In some parts of Bengal, Hindu wives still fast for three days and worship Sāvitri in the month of May-June praying for long lives for their husbands. During the fast they read the Sāvitri-Satyavān episode from the Mahabharata. The story goes as follows:

Asvapati, the king of Madra, was childless. In order to have a child he resorted to austerities and a life of celibacy, fasting every sixth day. Simultaneously he performed a hundred thousand sacrifices. After a period of these austerities lasting eighteen years, the goddess Sāvitri, was propitiated and appeared before him out of the sacrificial fire. She declared herself pleased and said that his desire for having an issue would be satisfied by Brahmā, the God of creation. From her own self, as her prasād, her special grace, she bestowed upon him a daughter. In consequence of the boon, a daughter was born to him and as she was a gift of the goddess Sāvitri,

Aswapati gave her the name 'Savitri'. She was beautiful like Laxmi, the Goddess of Beauty and of golden colour, more like a daughter of a god than of man. In course of time, she grew to age and the parents found it difficult to get her married because no prince came forward to ask for her hand as her personality was known to be too strong and brilliant. Aswapati was pained at this and he asked her to go round the country and choose her own partner. He sent her out to travel with an old minister as an escort. After travelling over the country for more than two years when she returned to her father's place, the great seer, Nārada, happened to be there. She disclosed her choice of Satyavān, son of King Dyumatsen who was living in a hermitage in the forest. Dyumatsen was living in exile because his enemies had taken advantage of his blindness and driven him out of his kingdom. The young prince Satyavān was brave, intelligent, generous, forgiving. The parents therefore approved of her choice. But Narada disapproved of the choice because he knew that Satyavān was fated to die after one year. In the face of this reading of the future Sāvitri persisted in and clung to her choice, saying that one makes the choice once only. The parents consented to her choice and she was accordingly married to Satyavān. Immediately after marriage she betook to the simple and hard life of the

hermitage where Satyavan live. Even though she was extremely happy to have married Satyavān, the man of her choice, she could not for a moment forget the dire prophecy of the great sage, Nārada. She was preparing herself for the great crisis and for the last three days of the year she resorted to complete fast, standing at one place all the time.

On the fateful morning, Satyavān wanted to go to the forest in order to bring fuel for the sacrificial fire. Sāvitri insisted on accompanying him to the forest, as she did not want to undertake the risk of letting him go alone to face his death. Satyavān's parents were obliged to consent to her going by her entreaties. The excuse she had given for accompanying Satyavān was that she wanted to see the forest. In fact, she was so occupied with the idea of Satyavān's fate that while going with him she hardly looked at the forest. They reached a certain place well known to Satyavān and stopped there to cut wood. After cutting some wood, Satyavān complained of a severe pain in the head and Savitri offered her lap for him to rest his head. After a short time, Satyavān fell asleep, and Sāvitri saw the God of Death standing before her. He declared that he had come to take the life of Satyavān and accordingly took it. Sāvitri followed the spirit of

Satyavān separated from his physical body and captured in the noose of the God of Death. She conversed with Yama, the God of Death, while following him, and her conversation so pleased him that he granted her several boons, the last of which was the restoration of the life of Satyavān. Thus Sāvitri triumphed over Death as well as fate and returned to her hermitage.

The episode of Sāvitri-Satyavān of the Mahabharata¹ was a great source of inspiration to Aurobindo. He had taken all the main characters of the said episode symbolically and explained their implication in his Philosophy. Scholars regard 'Savitri' as a master piece of Aurobindo's writings where Sāvitri is the symbolic presentation of the ideal woman.

In Sāvitri, we have an image of a woman devoted to her husband who confronts yama, the God of Death. This image of Sāvitri conquering death suggests 'the vision of the triumph of love over death'.²

Besides an incarnation Sāvitri is pictured by Aurobindo as a typical Hindu wife who worships her husband as Lord and surrenders herself to his will:

1. The Mahabharata - Aranyaparva, pp. 528-36.

2. Misra, D.S. Poetry and Philosophy in Sri Aurobindo's Savitri, (1989), p. 4.

"She bowed and touched his feet with
 worshipping hands;
 She made her life his world for him to tread
 And made her body the room of his delight,
 Her beating heart a remembrancer of Bliss."³

While for the Vedic seers, Sāvitri is the Solar Power that creates, sustains and guides the Universe, for Aurobindo, she is the incarnation of the Divine Grace and aims to liberate man from the clutches of death and fate. As a matter of fact Sāvitri is the love of Divine Mother that comes down to transmute Death to "hew the ways of immortality".⁴

Above the stretch and blaze of cosmic sight
 Above the silence of the worldless thought,
 Formless creator of the immortal forms,
 Nameless, investitured with the name divine,
 Transcending Time hours transcending Timelessness
 The Mighty Mother sits in lucent calm
 And holds the eternal child upon her knees,
 Attending the day when he shall speak to fate.⁵

On this level she represents Kāli. She is the earth principle in the lower being. In a general way she is the source of all cosmic forms – right from the physical.

Sāvitri becomes glorious in her encounter with death. She is destined to destroy death so that she can

3. Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary, Vol. 29, p. 729.

4. Misra, D.S. Op.cit., p. 15.

5. Sri Aurobindo, Vol. 29, p. 661.

bring immortality for man. She prefers earth to heaven so that she can work for the liberation of man. Love comes to Sāvitri overshadowed by death. Sāvitri loves and marries Satyavān knowing fully well that Satyavān will die within a year. She is advised by her father to change her mind and to choose some other prince. Here she faces an existential problem. She has a freedom to choose between life and death. She can escape the hard truth. But she prefers to confront the God of Death to assert her right to live and love. Because according to Aurobindo, love is the force of harmony. It is a gift of God which alone can lead man to God. It also can transform the force of division (death) into the "bliss of perfect union".⁶ So Aurobindo's Sāvitri, from a 'violent heart' says in a calm voice:

"Once my heart chose and chooses not again
 The word I have spoken can never be erased...
 Death's grip can break our bodies, not our souls;
 If death take him, I too know how to die,
 Let fate do with me what she will or can;
 I am stronger than death and greater than my fate;
 My love shall outlast the world, doom falls from me
 Helpless against my immortality.
 Fate's law may change, but not my spirit's will."⁷

So, Sāvitri recognises Satyavān as her eternal soul-male. Satyavān also reciprocates her love and hopes that this love will spiritualise his body.

6. Misra, D.S. Op.cit., p. 4.

7. Sri Aurobindo, op.cit., p. 432.

Sāvitri has a strong personality. Aurobindo calls her very often as "The Flame". She not only opposes death rather annihilates it. And death turns itself into immortality. In the legend we find Sāvitri defeats Yama by her wise debate and Yama grants her four boons of which the last is the life of dead Satyavān.

Aurobindo claims that Yama in his part also wants to see the embodiment of the Flaming Truth. Though he is an agent of Divine Mother he has not seen the Mother before. He addresses Sāvitri as the "claimant to immortality" and the "Mighty Mother". he wants to see her face to worship her. "Let deathless eyes look into the eyes of Death Transform earth's death into immortal life."⁸ And the Great Mother responds to Yama's request with supreme enlightenment - as if 'Eternity looked into the eyes of Death'.

Though Death is the black annihilation of life - utter nothingness - absorbs himself with glorious radiance of white embrace (Sāvitri). And Sāvitri infuses into Death the love-energy of her divinity. When Sāvitri assumes her original form of infinite splendour (like Prakṛti)

8. Reddy, V. Madhusudan. 7 Studies in Sri Aurobindo, (1989), pp. 95-96.

Death returns to its native Reality. After that a luminous transcendence emerges which transforms Satyavān and he goes above the law of limitation and absolute darkness.⁹

Aurobindo's Sāvitri is a Yogini. Like a dhyāna yogi she goes down inside her heart in search of her soul. There she perceives the various aspects of the spirit and the different levels of consciousness. Sāvitri knows that Satyavān is going to die within a year. Yet she marries him because she has faith in herself, that she will reshape her destiny. So she says,

My fate is what my spirits' strength can make.
My fate is what my spirits' strength can bear.¹⁰

The yoga of Sāvitri, is a means to know the real nature of herself. She goes deep in her heart through meditation and contemplation. There she witnesses the course of evolution from matter to mind. She also meets three universal energies. The Mother of Sorrows, the Mother of Might and the Mother of Light within her heart. Sāvitri moves from one inner reality to another in the search of her soul. These inner realities stand for the six chakras of the Tantra. At the end the psychic being of Sāvitri identifies her soul and she lives in infinity.¹¹

9. Ibid., p. 96.

10. Ibid. ”

11. Mishra, D.S. Op.cit., pp. 63-66.

She was no more herself but all the world.
 Out of the infinitudes all come to her,

 She was the single self of all those selves
 She was in them and they were all in her.¹²

The union of Savitri and Satyavan is seen by Aurobindo as really very much on the lines of the union between Purusa and Prakrti. Let me elaborate:

The Samkhya Purusa is divided into Asvapati (Sāvitri's father) and Satyavan (her husband). For Aurobindo, 'Sāvitri is the testament of the transcendent gifted to the individual to help the universal in its self-realisation Savitri is the portrait of humanity's gnostic future.'¹³ It is with Sāvitri that Aurobindo makes it possible for the earth to launch on the yoga of transformation.¹⁴ Sāvitri is Mahā Prakrti. Savitri, literally means the energy (sakti) of the Sun - the symbol of eternal vitality - the source of life. Satyavan is the symbol of soul which is in slumber (of ignorance) which is equivalent to death. Sāvitri - the conscious Prakrti - defeats yama (the king of death) in debate (i.e. by wisdom) and fearlessness) and thus brings Satyavan back to life. Satyavan represents Siva or Purusa (when Siva was a corpse).

12. Sri Aurobindo, pp. 556-57.

13. Reddy, V. Madhusudan, Seven Studies in Sri Aurobindo, (1989), p. 82.

14. Ibid., p. 79.

The word Satyavān literally means "one who possesses the Truth" and Asvapati signifies "the Lord of Life". (In the Veda, Asva means horse which is the symbol of life-energy or vital power). Aurobindo uses the symbol as the aspiring soul of man.¹⁵

The life of the childless King Asvapati performing tapasyā in order to have a child is interpreted by Aurobindo as a symbol of the human soul having descended on earth from divine heights and trying to acquire knowledge of the self and the world.¹⁶ Asvapati devotes himself to the Divine to divinise his physical being. Consequently, his soul is released from ignorance and a higher knowledge, power and bliss descend into his finite consciousness. According to the legend, Asvapati performs sacrifice to obtain a child. Now, in the Vedas, the word sacrifice stands for journey. Accordingly, Asvapati's journey is towards the occult worlds – for the welfare of all people. After a successful sadhana he meets the Divine Mother and prays for her descent into the world to help suffering humanity.¹⁷ The Supreme Mother in her infinite grace gives

15. Purani, A.B. Savitri - An Approach and a Study, (1952), pp. 2-3.

16. Ibid., p. 5.

17. Misra, D.S. Poetry and Philosophy in Sri Aurobindo's Savitri, (1989), p. 20.

Asvapati a boon that a human manifestation of her grāce would be born on earth "A new light shall break upon the earth, a new world shall be born, things that were promised shall be fulfilled".¹⁸

Aurobindo's Sāvitri resembles Prakrti as she creates the earthly creatures, supports and sustains them. Like Prakrti she assumes different forms while retaining the essential oneness. She also resembles Aditi - the mother of the Devas.

Like Aditi, Sāvitri is eternally present in all levels of consciousness. In pure consciousness she is transcendent. She stands above the world and links the creation to the Supreme. She is formless, nameless and cannot be perceived by the physical eyes.¹⁹

As an individual, she is the Prakrti. In the form of a seed, she is the essence of the cosmic and supra-cosmic Truth. And in this respect, Sāvitri acts as a bridge between man and his God.²⁰ Aurobindo writes:

"She is the Golden bridge, the wonderful fire
The luminous heart of the Unknown is she,
A power of silence in the depths of God;
She is the force, the inevitable word,
The magnet of our difficult ascent...."²¹

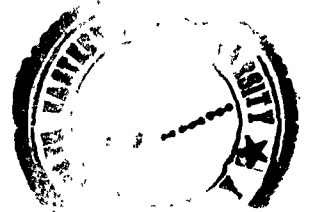
18. Purani, A.B. Op.cit., p. 6.

19. Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary, Vol. 29, p. 729.

20. Misra, D.S. Op.cit., p. 5.

21. Sri Aurobindo, Vol. 28, p. 314.

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The descent of Sāvitri can take place into the world if there is a genuine aspiration for it on the part of human consciousness. Asvapati's yoga is the yoga for self perfection. His yoga is an upward journey for the divine descent of Sāvitri. Satyavān's death points to the fact of the inevitability of death which is preceded by ignorance and suffering. The resurrection of Satyavān becomes necessary for a purified and transformed world.²²

Both Asvapati and Satyavān are representatives of human soul. Both want to taste immortality. Like Vedic sages Asvapati becomes immortal ("May I be immortal through my children"). Asvapati and Satyavān like Purusa of Samkhya enjoy the play of Prakrti and consent to do all those that Prakrti likes. Asvapati's yoga is for self-perfection. Every individual soul is the soul of Satyavān – not aware about the inevitable. In a sense, Sāvitri synthesises the two modes of Purusa. Satyavān enjoys the result of her yoga. The effort of Sāvitri as Prakrti, hence, is for others, symbolising the point I made earlier about Aurobindo's obsession with Sāvitri as a self-sacrificing wife and mother.

22. Maitra, S.K. The Meeting of the East and the West in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy, (1956), pp. 336 & 374.

The yoga of Asvapati (to become Siva) and of Satyavān (to become a corpse - Śiva or Śava) get fulfilment by the yoga of Savitri. Of course, for the sacrificing image he has no hesitation in calling her as Mahādevi who grants liberation, vision and ascent by her own descent and transformation. Thus life on earth is crowned by the life of the Divine.

Now, a word about the philosophy of Arubindo who has interpreted the universe from the standpoint of consciousness. Aurobindo, as we know, looks at the whole universe from the standpoint of the highest consciousness which he calls Sachchidānanda.

He claims that existence is really the substratum of becoming.

"The very conception of movement carried with it the potentiality of repose and betrays itself as an activity of some existence; the very idea of energy in action carried with it the idea of energy abstaining from action; and an absolute energy not in action is simply and purely absolute existence."²³

Unlike Sankara and Ramanuja, Aurobindo believes that existence is both indeterminate and determinate, Nirguna and Saguna simultaneously and like Upanisadic seers, he believes that force is inherent in existence.

23. Aurbindo: The Life Divine, Book I, p. 75.

"Shiva and Kali, Brahman and Sakti are one and not two who are separable. Force inherent in existence may be at rest or it may be in motion, but when it is at rest, it exists none the less and is not abolished, diminished or in any way essentially altered."²⁴

The Absolute possesses Force, but it is not subject to Force. It manifests itself as force in both its static and dynamic aspects and at the same time it transcends both the aspects. Aurobindo holds that matter itself is the form of consciousness. The Absolute creates the cosmos out of its Consciousness-Force.

"The Absolute, the Perfect the Alone
 Has called out of the Silence his mute Force
 Where she lay in the featureless and formless
 hush
 Guarding from Time by her immobile sleep
 The ineffable puissance of his solitude
 The Absolute, the Perfect, the Alone
 Has entered with his silence into space;
 He has fashioned these countless persons of
 oneself;
 He lives in all, who lived in his vast alone;
 Space is himself and Time is only he."²⁵

Thus Existence manifests itself in relation to the universe in three aspects: atman (self), purusa (spirit) and Isvara (God). Similarly, Consciousness-Force appears as Māyā, Prakṛti; and Sakti corresponding respectively

24. Ibid., pp. 82-83.

25. Sri Aurobindo, 'Savitri', p. 67.

to the three aspects of existence. Māyā is the force of the Absolute Consciousness, conceptually creative of all things. Prakṛti is Nature or Force as dynamically executive, working out of all things under the supervision of the Supreme Spirit. Sakti is the conscious Power of the Divine Being which is both conceptually creative and dynamically executive. And the fundamental determinates of Bliss are Love, Joy and Beauty.²⁶

Purusa is said to be the conscious Being of the Absolute; Prakṛti is its consciousness force. Purusa is intimately related to Prakṛti. In fact, Purusa supports Prakṛti and witnesses the acts of Prakṛti. He also enjoys the works of Prakṛti and becomes what she wants him to be.

"His soul, silent supports the world and her,
His acts are her commandment's registers.

.
A witness and student of her joy and dole,
A partner in her evil and her good,
He has consented to her passionate ways,
He is driven by her sweet and dreadful force

.
He rejoices in her every thought and act.
And gives consent to all that she can wish,
Whatever she desires he wills to be."²⁷

26. Reddy, V. Madhusudan. Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy in Sri Aurobindo - An Interpretation, adt, V.C. Joshi, p. 25.

27. Sri Aurobindo, Savitri, pp. 63 & 66.

Here the main points of my thesis get strengthened. Prakrti, the female power, at the disposal of male who humours and plays with her and till he is in the state of ignorance he is always led by her power. But when he realises his independent identity, he keeps himself back from the movements of Prakrti. So,

"At last he wakes to a memory of Self;
He sees within the face of deity,
Till then he is a play thing in her game."²⁸

There is a difference between Samkhya Conception of Purusa-Prakrti and that of Aurobindo's. According to Samkhya Philosophy, Purusa and Prakrti are two distinct entities. Purusa is conscious but inactive, while Prakrti is active but unconscious. But Aurobindo thinks that Purusa and Prakrti are essentially one. Prakrti conceals a secret of consciousness. Purusa seems to be led by Prakrti, but in reality, Purusa controls Prakrti. Even in the state of ignorance and passivity, Prakrti acts only when she has the consent of Purusa.

Isvara, is recognised as the Lord of Creation. He is the divine inhabitant of all the individual beings and the underlying reality of the universe. Sakti itself is the power of Isvara. Thus in the first aspect of Reality,

28. Ibid., p. 65.

Atman creates out of His Māyā. In the second aspect Purusa does what Prakrti wants him to do. In these two aspects Reality is not perceived in any definite form. In the third aspect, Reality can be seen as the Lord of his Sakti and of all things.²⁹

"He is the substance, he the self of things:
 She has forged from him her works of skill and
 might.
 He is the Maker and the world he made,
 He is the vision and he is the seer,
 He is himself and the actor and the act
 He is himself the knower and the known
 He is himself the dreamer and the dream
 There are Two who are One and play in many
 worlds."³⁰

Aurobindo describes the nature of Omniscient Reality as Sat (existence), Chit (consciousness force), Ānanda (Bliss) and Supermind (real idea). The world has originated from Sachchidānanda and its goal is to return to Him. According to Aurobindo, the world does not evolve of itself in a continuous process. It requires the intervention of Divine at every critical stage in the shape of a direct descent of the Divine consciousness. This radical change (Divine Descent) assures man the descent of the infinite Power of God.

This Philosophy of Aurobindo centres round the theory of evolution. Evolution is the movement which is

29. Mishra, D.S. Poetry and Philosophy in Sri Aurobindo's Savitri, pp. 52-53.

30. Sri Aurobindo, Savitri, p. 61.

the reverse of the movement of involution or creation. It is because of the descent of the Spirit into matter, life and mind, that these can ascend to the higher regions of the Spirit. Because the Spirit in creation has involved itself in matter, life and mind, therefore, matter, life and mind feel an impulse to rise to their source. Evolution thus, 'is a sort of home-sickness of the Spirit'.

The Spirit has descended into the lowest particle of matter; therefore, matter seeks to evolve into something higher than itself i.e., Mind. Similarly, there is a descent of the Spirit into mind, and consequently mind must ascend to something higher than itself, namely Super-mind. The highest principle so far evolved is mind. But mind is not the last word that evolution can stop. It must move further up and come to the next stage, namely Super mind. With the emergence of the Super mind, the process of evolution becomes a process of knowledge which previously was a process of ignorance.

In the Synthesis of Yoga, Aurobindo has given a practical guide to live and realise this philosophy. Yoga being "the union of that which has become separated in the play of the universe with its own true self, origin and universality," several methods have been formulated and perfected to achieve this union. This is not a mere

"escape from the world to God" but a "transformation of our integral being into the terms of God-existence". This requires a synthesis of all yogas. For Aurobindo, one can attain personal salvation by following a single yoga. Since all the yogas are interconnected in some way or other, a synthesis of all the yogas will lead to the salvation of the rest of humanity.

Besides the three classical paths (i.e., action, knowledge and devotion - karma, jnana-bhakti). Aurobindo prescribes the integral yoga of self-perfection which is a sunlit path, a life of Ānanda - consciousness, an existence in Beauty.³¹ In the Synthesis of Yoga, Aurobindo says:

"The God lover is the universal lover and he embraces the all blissful and All-beautiful. When universal love has seized on his heart, it is the decisive sign that the Divine has taken possession of him; and when he has the vision of the All-beautiful everywhere and can feel at all times the bliss of his embrace, that is the decisive sign that he has taken possession of the Divine.³²

Therefore, union with the Divine is the ideal of integral yoga of Aurobindo. The ascent to the supermind is the first aim, while descent of the same is the second

31. Nanda Kumar, Prema. Sri Aurobindo: A Critical Study, pp. 59-60.

32. Sri Aurobindo, The Synthesis of Yoga, (1955), p. 17.

aim of integral yoga. The ascent is achieved by a progressive hightening and expansion of the being of man. The descent of the supermind into the human transforms the mind, life and the body of man into sublime channels of Light, Love and Power and Luminous means of divine action. The ascent to the supermind and jits subsequent descent inevitably lead to the third aim of the Integral yoga – the full and perfect manifestation of the Divine.³³

Aurobindo says in 'Savitri' that when Truth dictates life and mind aspires for the divine light and supermind reveals. After the manifestation of Supramental consciousness, matter life and mind will be radically transformed. They will be the vehicle of truth and God. Matter shall reveal Spirit and Truth will dictate Life. When mind will aspire for the divine light, the body will carry out the force of the divine. Ultimately man will be able to conquer death.³⁴ The example here to man is of the grace incarnate namely Savitri laudable as her achievements and performances have been. She remains, besides being a link between man and God only prakrti, never the supreme goddess even in the imagination and creativity of Aurobindo.

33. Reddy, V. Madhusudan, Op.cit., pp. 34-35.

34. Mishra, D.S. Op.cit., pp. 54-59.

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

I started the discussion with the assertion that the vision of female deities in Indian religious tradition emanates from the Samkhya interpretation of Prakrti. Just as there is shift in emphasis in the individual status of the two ultimate principles (Purusa and Prakrti) in Samkhya philosophy, so also in the popular sectarian religions. For instance, while Siva is considered as the Supreme deity in Saivism, Sakti is worshipped as Supreme Power in Saktism. Also, in certain forms of Vaisnavism (Caitanya Vaisnavism), the male and the female aspect of God-head got equal status.

While conceding that Saktism is identified wholly with the worship of the female principle, I have tried to show that even there, there is no dearth of efforts on the part of scholars to somehow show Sakti as subservient to Siva (male). She is either highlighted as Siva's spouse, sometimes as his counterpart, or is treated as a substitute for the Upanisadic Brahman, conceived in feminine terms and images. Rarely is the independent nature of Sakti emphasised.

Historians generally point out that Saktism, in particular, Tantric philosophy raised the status of women in India. Earlier (Manusmriti) women were regarded as obstacles for any spiritual progress. In the Tantras they were allowed to initiate in matters of religious and spiritual practices. This high position of the woman in the Tantra goes against the Brahmanical notion that a woman is never fit for independence. So also, the Tantras have given special importance to virgin worship (Kumari-puja). The Vaisnava-Sahajia cult conceived the Kula-Kundalini-Sakti as Radha (female principle of Vaisnavism). R.G. Bhandarkar opines:

"The ambition of every pious follower of the system (Tantra) is to become identical with Tripura Sundari, and one of his religious exercise is to habituate himself to think that God is a woman."

The Sahajias also believe that at a certain stage of spiritual culture man should transform himself into a woman because without realising the nature of woman he cannot have the experience of true love. It is found in one legend (Devi Bhāgavata) that Brahma, Visnu and Siva were transformed into women before they were allowed to see Devi in her highest form.¹

1. Bhattacharjee, N.N. Indian Mother Goddess, p. 96.

In the Buddhist Tantra the disciple is initiated with Prajnā or Sakti. Buddhahood is possible only by accepting Vidyā or Sakti.²

There is also the historical fact of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa's veneration for womanhood. Sri Ramakrishna, whose family deity was 'Raghubir Rāmachandra', became a worshipper of Mother Kāli. For him the Mother was a living reality and in course of his Sādhanā he had numerous mystical visions of goddess Kāli. He was initiated into Tantric rites by a woman-guru Yogeswari whom he used to refer to as 'Bhairavi Brāhmani'. After undergoing the disciplines of sixty-four principal Tantra§, he looked at all women as embodiment of the divine mother. And his deep and instant respect for women got an unparalleled expression when he worshipped his virgin wife Sarada Devi as symbol of goddess Sodosi, one of the ten Mahavidyās and offered the fruit of all his spiritual disciplines at her feet.³

But all these remain in the larger Indian context as aberrations. The female principle never appears to gain the upper hand in comparison with the male.

2. Ibid., p. 97.

3. Moffit, John. Journey to Gorakhpur, pp. 184-85.

Chapter IV of my thesis tries to show the unique position of the Goddess in Saktism. As recognised in the Devi Māhātmya, a portion of the ancient Purana, (The Markandeya) it is said:

"She is the supreme eternal knowledge that becomes the cause of release from bondage to mundane life"

This surely could have given the female deity the highest status of being the ultimate truth that sets one free. This could not be so in practice because the same text which I have referred to earlier characterises Devi as Mahamaya (Ref. page 83, Visnumaya).

"This blessed Devi Mahāmāyā, having forcibly seized the minds Even of man of knowledge, leads them to delusion."⁴

Then again, the association of the female deity with Prakṛti and Māyā which means magical power, a power that is frequently regarded as belonging to the Asuras – the enemies of the Gods, confirms my stand-point. The philosophical efforts to reconcile the equation of the Devi, Mayā and Prakṛti are undoubtedly there. The three concepts have been adopted to both theistic as well as

4. Coburn, B. Thomas, Consort of None, Sakti of All: The Vision of the Devi Mahatmya, The Divine Consort, p. 155.

atheistic philosophical needs. In the Upanisads as well as in the school of Samkhya, for example, one can understand Prakrti not as the material possession of Purusa but as itself supremely divine, as Devi herself. Indeed, she has been conceived as such by Saktism and other religious cults as I have pointed out. But rarely has the tradition sustained & nourished the female deity as the ultimate principle. Let me refer here to another powerful deity namely the Goddess Prthivi (Rg Veda) signifying an awe for the earth itself. The idea of the earth as a personified Goddess persists in most Indian traditions. She too is identified with Maha Devi.

In the Lalitā-Sahasranāma she is called 'she whose form is all (sarvamayi), she whose body is matter (ksetrasvarupā), she who is the world (jadātmika), she whose womb contains the universe (Visvagarbhā), and she whose form is all existing things (Bhumarupā)'. She is also called Mahi and Dharā, two common names for the earth.⁵

The image of the earth as Great Goddess remains but then one does not hear of any religious sect appearing in her name. It captured the imagination of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Anada math) in the late nineteenth century,

5. Kinsley, David. Hindu Goddesses, p. 179.

when he advocated the modern cult of ~~the~~ Mother India. The concrete evidences of this reverence for the country as a feminine deity are there in modern India. (Tagore). In spite of these I do not think that this image has succeeded in demolishing the supremacy of the male principle.

The worship of the river Ganga and the reference to her as Gangā matā (Mother Gangā) in the Hindu tradition supports the point I have been trying to make in Chapter IV. Ganga is claimed as the consort of Siva and Visnu. Her waters are said to be the embodiment of Sakti, and her descent on earth is said to bring her power to the plains of India. Wherever she goes, pilgrimage places appear, Gorgotri in the Himalayas, Hardvar in North India and so on. One can see in her all the great virtues of the mother Goddess. While bathing in this one river it is said one bathes in all rivers.

A secular understanding of this sacred river which denies any religious significance to it is undoubtedly there. I do not at this juncture, wish to go into that. I wish to present here the river, Ganga as the Supreme Goddess for the land that is known as India. Now, right from the time of ancient mythology, we can see that the rishis or seers of truth see the universe as a vast ecosystem in which each part is inextricably related to the

life of the whole (Ref. to the image of the Golden embryo, Hiranyagarbha in the Rg Veda).

It is in this cosmos that the holy Ganga moves. She is everywhere – just as each village has its gram-devatā and its sacred forest, it also has its sacred river. This was a very strong imagery of the mother Goddess, her waters as divine and as Goddesses set free from their heavenly source by Indra. Unfortunately, in no religious cult she is the supreme deity though of course, the Hindus worship her till this day as one of them. She gets identified with Prakṛti with Radha, Saraswati, and Lakṣmi, hence is female and therefore, secondary to Puruṣa.

Another point that needs deliberation is the following:

The association of the Mother Goddess with Prakṛti seems to convey the insight that the Goddess's fundamental being is natural. Being Prakṛti/Nature, she e.g., Ganga can be destructive. But when subjected to Puruṣa's, in this case Siva's control she becomes a source of abundance. This attitude to nature finds expression also in the general attitude of ways in which all goddesses are viewed. Women, being natural creatures are full of power whose most striking function has to do with the propagation

of life itself. There lies their valuable contribution. But the fact remains that like the natural environment they are essential and attractive but potentially dangerous. That is the reason why in the Indian tradition Goddesses who are independent of male-control or who dominate over their husbands tend to be ferocious and malevolent. Only when properly domesticated and brought under male control they are benevolent, compassionate and accessible.

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