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SAKTI: THE FEMININE ASPECT OF GOD IN INDIAN TRADITION

One of the happy signs of the modern age of *aggiornamento* and ecumenism is the gradual but profound change of *status quo* in various religions, thanks to the acceptance of plurality of cultures and, therefore, of the religious faiths too¹ by modern man, willy-nilly! Though the ultimate content of all the diverse faiths is the same thrilling *Mysterion* at the deep level, its realization at the surface level, however, is multifarious in form. Hence the dire need of the present day is not only to value the "other" cultures but also to find within them

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1. The acceptance of the plurality of faiths—the various attempts at encountering the same Spirit—on the one hand belies the absolutism of any single faith as well as its superiority over others and, on the other, proclaims the liberty of conscience as a right of each person. Both of these values were denied in pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic Christianity as it was proclaimed repeatedly by various Popes that no one could be saved outside the Apostolic and Roman Church. (Cf. Dz. 1646f, 1677f, 1685f, 1718, 1863 and 2199).

(H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*—first published in 1854, frequently revised and brought up-to-date by various editors, the latest being A. Schönmetzer, published by Herder, Freiburg/Barcelona, Rome, New York: the edition used in the present article is that of Barcelona 1951; referred to as Dz. followed by the paragraph number).

On the history of the axiom: "No salvation outside the Church" see H. Küng, *The Church* (New York/London: 1967), D II, 2; the same author on the Modern interpretation of the formula, *Truthfulness* (London/New York/Sidney: 1968 B VIII).

See also on Universal Salvation History: Karl Rahner, "History of the World and Salvation—History," Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions" in *Theological Investigations* Vol. V (London/Baltimore: 1966), pp. 97–134. The *ecclesio-centric* attitude which had its day, comparatively for a longer period in the Roman Church, has given way to the *theo-centric* consciousness at present thanks to the charisma of the good Pope John XXIII and Vatican II. Cf. Eugene Hillman, *The Wider Ecumenism* (London: Burns and Oates 1968), pp. 34–43; the Roman documents; Vatican II LG 16 and 17; NA 2; AGD 9 and 21; DV 3 and 14 and William Madtha, "Public Opinion in the Church", *Jeevadhara*, Vol. IX No. 52 (July–August 1979), pp. 301–11.

the existence of religious universals and build up tentatively a trans-cultural framework for a theology relevant to the times.

The corner-stone for this framework is the human conscious subject, since he is both the product as well as the producer of his culture; and theology, ultimately, is nothing but his own critical reflection on his faith for the sake of concrete praxis in the context of his day-to-day existence here and now.² When we observe human cultures phenomenologically in their spatio-temporal axis, we find that the deep-felt human biological experience is that he is a product of a male and a female. His religious tendency verticalizes this horizontal experience of sex-differentiation and reads it in God, his ultimate ground/meaning. While doing so, he often transcends the factual *duality* of this secular source-experience. Thus, basically, his God is androgynous to him with an emphasis either on the "masculine" or the "feminine" aspect according to his concrete cultural contexts.

Authentic mystics, eastern as well as western, who have successfully disentangled themselves from the webs of skin-encapsulated ego as well as time-bound and culture-conditioned parameters of thought, have depicted their Ground-of-being as androgynous.

God's meaningfulness is not contained in the possibility of our addressing him either as 's/he' or 'it'. As he is conceived to be the Ultimate, he cannot be described fully through 'either-or' category. He transcends, by definition any contingency and categorization. As man is conscious of himself and psychologically proved to be androgynous, his/her God can be addressed by him/her as 's/he' though conveniently 's/he' is better known as 'he' and lesser known as 'she' in our modern male-dominated cultures.

In India, however, the feminine aspect of God is still quite popular as *Sakti* and its various satellites. We find its echo among Hebrews, in Eastern Christian experience and probably in the Marian cult also

2. Refer to Aristotle's half-forgotten arguments in the *Eudemian Ethics*, e.g., 1216 b; 32 ff and 1217a, 18 ff, that we start from day-to-day judgements and by comparing, contrasting and sifting come to the formulation of general principles. This principle need not be restricted to Ethics; it can be conveniently extended, *mutatis mutandis*, to any theory.

to a certain extent.³ Why does the *theist*, particularly the Eastern, find such great pleasure in addressing his God as his Mother? Obviously, mother captures the emotions— anxiety, fear, love, etc. — of the child more forcibly than does father : a symbol of intellect and authority. She is dearer to the child particularly in a culture where

3. The female conception of God is found both in the East and in the West in the history of civilizations though in different degrees. In the East, the cradle of world-religions, the description of God as *Magna-Mater* is more common and personal than the analogy of father which is far stronger in the West. The cult of Queen of Heaven is traced in the folk religion of the Hebrews in spite of the dominating influence of pure Yahwism of the Pharisees, widely preached and supervised. Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Christian Trinity was known in early Syriac theology as our Mother. Their doxological formula was : The Father the Son and the Mother." Centuries later, the Moravians . . . spoke of the third Person of the Trinity as "the dear Mother," E. A. Payne, *The Religious Life of India : The Saktas : An Introductory and Comparative Study* (Calcutta : YMCA Publishing House, 1933), p. 130. Cf. *etiam* Bede Griffiths, "Mystical Theology in the Indian Tradition" *Jeevadhara* 53, 1979, p. 273. Cf. also *Mirror* Vol. XIX, No. 2 (Bombay : 1979), p. 20. According to some scholars Holy Spirit of the Christian Trinity is the Christian form of *Śakti*. David Smith writes that the "Operation of the Holy Spirit is the creative energy of God . . . ; What is this but the Divine Ideal of Motherhood? . . . The Spirit's yearning and striving and pleading and comforting, what are these but the outgoings of the Mother heart of God?" quoted in E. A. Payne, *Op. Cit.*, p. 130. Or again 'Spirit' as understood in the Bible means . . . "that invisible *force of God and power of God* which is effective creatively or destructively . . ." H. Küng, *On Being a Christian* (1978 2nd impr.), p. 469.

In the Old Testament Wisdom is a feminine figure of the Godhead Ws. 7 : 25 and 26. In Hebrew the word *ruah* for Spirit is feminine. In the Odes of Solomon the Holy Spirit is spoken of as our Mother. The *extreme* devotion to the Virgin Mary in the Church in India is a case, along with the above, for asserting the feminine aspect of God among the Easterners in general and the Indian Christians in particular.

Cf. Bede Griffiths *Op. Cit.* and also Godfrey Ashe, *The Virgin* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), wherein the author notes that the Jewish community in Elephantine in Egypt revered the Virgin Arath (a Canaanite goddess) as in "some sense attached to Yahweh" p. 31.

Cf. Andrew M. Greeley, *The Mary Myth* (New York : The Seabury Press, 1977) p. 79. According to this author some students of ancient Semetic religion opine that the "Shekenah" was once the female consort of Yahweh, the most fierce and chauvinistic of the male gods. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

In the myths of Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt and other countries bordering upon the Mediterranean we find the feminine aspect of God in bold lines :

There is a strong resemblance between the Indian Sakti conception of of *Śakti* . . . and the Semetic conception of Astarte, the Egyptian conception of Isis and the Phrygian conception of Cybele . . .

(R. P. Chandra, *Indo-Aryan Races*, Calcutta, 1969, pp. 148-49.)

wet-nurses are remote if not entirely unknown. She plays a central role not only in its pre-natal but even the post-natal period and also throughout its life in spite of marriage; in short, from womb to tomb.

The Symbol of Śakti

At this juncture it must be made clear that this is not an article directly on *Śakti*.⁴ It is rather about the feminine aspect of God as revealed through the symbol of *Śakti*. Man has experienced from the beginning the biological ground-of-power in the fertility of the womb. This feminine power, *Śakti*, has revealed to man the Supreme Power, *Mahā-Śakti*, his *alpha* and *omega*. The *Śakti* symbol, in India, is surely one of the most powerful symbols of the Eternal Power. There are thousands of sculptures in the shrines⁵ of *Śakti* from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari, not to mention Puranas, Mahatmes and other folklore. *Śakti* rightly counter-balances the over-masculinized Indian-Trimurti ('Trinity').

The thesis of this article, then, is that the symbol of *Śakti* reveals the tender, gentle, comforting, reassuring, 'feminine' dimension of God. This uni-dimensional study is arranged in a four-celled paradigm⁶—the mother, the spouse, the virgin, and the *pietà*—for the sake of convenience.

Woman is no stranger to any culture, particularly the agriculture-based pre-vedic culture of India. Known so well, she has been turned

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4. For the study of Śakti the following select bibliography is strongly recommended : (a) Woodroffe, John (Sir) *Śakti and Śakta. Essays and Addresses* (Madras : Ganesh and Co. Briv. Ltd. 1965; I ed. 1918); (b) Payne, Earnest A., *The Religious Life of India : The Śaktas (An Introductory and Comparative Study 1933)*; (c) Kumar Pushpendra, *Śakti Cult in Ancient India*, Varanasi : Bharatiya Publishing House 1974; (d) Bhattacharya N. N. : *Indian Mother Goddess*, Calcutta, 1971; (e) Bhattacharya N. N., *History of Śakta Religion*, New Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1974; (f) Mahadevappa, N. G. *The Virasaiva Concept of Śakti*, unpublished Doctoral thesis, University of Mysore, 1976; (g) Farquhar, J. N. *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*, Oxford, 1920; (h) Chakravarti C. : *Doctrine of Śakti in Indian Literature*, Calcutta, 1940; (i) Das, S. K. : *Śakti, and Divine Power*, Calcutta, 1934; (j) James, E. O. : *Cult of Mother Goddess*, London, 1959; (k) Agarwal, V. S., *The Glorification of the Great Goddess*, Varanasi, 1963; (l) Kakati, B. K., *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, Assam, 1961; (m) Widgrey, A. G., *Comparative Study of Religions*, Baroda, 1952.
 5. See the "Appendix" in P. G. Layle, *Studies in Devi Bhagavata*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1973.
 6. I am indebted to Andrew M. Greely (1977) for this model.

into a symbol to incarnate the community-experience of the Beyond, under various linguistic signs such as *Śakti* from pre-historic times :⁷

For, when we throw our minds back upon the history of this worship (*Śakti puja*) we see stretching away into the remote and fading past the figure of the Mighty Mother ... most ancient among the ancients; the Ādyā Śakti, the dusk Divinity ... whose veil is never lifted, Isis, "the one who is all that has been, is and will be," Kālī, Hathor, Cybele, the Cowmother Goddess Idā, Tripurasundarī the Ionic Mother, Tef the spouse of Śu by whom He effects the birth of all things, Aphrodite, Astarte, ... Babylonian Mylitta, Buddhist Tārā, the Mexican Ish, Hellenic Osia ... African Salambo, who like Pārvati roamed the mountains, Roman Juno, Egyptian Bast ... the Assyrian Mother Succoth Benoth, Northern Freia, Mūlaprakṛti, Semele, Māyā Ishtar, Saitic Neith, Mother of Gods, eternal deepest ground of all things, Kuṇḍalī, Guhyamahabhāravī and all the rest.⁸

In the Mohenjo-daro⁹ excavations some traces of religious culture of pre-Aryan civilization (c 3000-2000 B.C.) are observed, particularly in their icons, which include Mother Goddess. This speaks of the antiquity of the Indian *Magna Mater*. Whether this icon symbolizes *Śakti* in *sensu proprio* or not, certainly it signifies the feminine aspect of God and draws attention to the earliest reference of Indian worship of God as Mother.

Śakti myth¹⁰ is polyvalent as it discloses several dimensions of God simultaneously. They are well brought out in the *Kālī* idol in the temple of Dakshineswara of Calcutta.¹¹ *Śakti* is not the only Indian symbol of the primal Energy. It, however, is the privileged symbol among the Indian religions in general and Śāktas in particular. Hence

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7. As regards the place and time of the genesis of *Śakti* cult *Quot capita tot sententiae*. cf. Puspendra Kumar, *Op. Cit.* pp. 137-38.
 8. Sir John Woodroffe, *Op. Cit.* pp. 137-38.
 9. It means "Mounds of the dead." For details read E. Mackay, *The Indus Civilization*, London, 1935, pp. 66-68; Sir John Marshall, *Mohenjo Daro and Indus Civilization*, Vol. I, London, 1931, p. 49.
 10. By myth I mean here the symbol of the divine : For the details of this connotation read Ian Barbour's, *Myths, Models and Paradigms* as well as Andrew M. Greeley (1977) p. 12.
 11. For the word-portrait of the idol read Haridas Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Cultural Heritage of India* Vol. IV Calcutta, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1969 (Reprint), p. 661.

its content-value may differ from sect to sect and in modern times even from person to person. Our purpose here, specifically is to observe with ecumenical spirit the revealing power of *Śakti*—symbol only in its bold lines. God¹² not being a Hindu, a Moslem, or a Christian, and not even a *Śākta* for that matter, certainly encourages us to discuss and even critically accept an indigenous symbol like *Śakti* which, after all, reflects himself.¹³

Theologically speaking, it is agreed that God cannot be limited by attributes such as male and/or female. Culturally speaking, however, man has expressed the concept of the Divine in the biological terms of bi-sexuality.¹⁴ According to Eliade, there are innumerable cases of God being addressed as “Father and Mother.” The statues in Hindu temples showing males and females copulating most naturally though in an incredible variety of different erotic postures, clearly support the human idea of the androgyny of God. Nonetheless, for the sake of convenience he has been addressed either as *Deus* or as *Dea*.

The experience of God as a female is more appealing than as a male since the former brings in the element of fascination as well as awesomeness, thanks to woman's role in reproduction and continuation of the human species. This phenomenon of fertility, basically of a woman and analogically of the earth, becomes a limit-experience signalling the Unlimited Reality to man. *Śakti* has naturally become a powerful sacrament to God as she is related to the human experience of sexual differentiation on the one hand and the androgyny of God on the other. God is experienced through her both as a creator and a destroyer as she is regarded as *Durga*, the amiable as well as *Kālī*, the terrible.

12. According to Martin Buber God is the most loaded of all human words. In the context of the word 'God' Hans Küng rightly points out :

None has been so misused, defiled and mauled. Men have torn it apart into religious factions, have killed for it and died for it; there is no comparable term to designate the supreme reality and yet it is so often used to disguise the worst impieties. But because it means so much for man—even for atheists who reject God and not merely a nameless something—it cannot be given up. (Edward Quinn (Tr.), *On Being A Christian*, Collins : Jan. 1978 Sec. Imp. p. 77).

13. The idea, though it may *sound* horrible and even, God forbid, unacceptable to the traditional ears, might *look* quite sound and normal to those who care to be of the times and might be an eye-opener to those who are in the familiar grounds of incarnational theology, inculturation, indigenization etc.
14. See Mircea Eliade's *Pattern of Comparative Religion*, pp. 420-4.

The first three cells of the paradigm depict *Śakti* as benign and tender, and the last one as fierce and terrifying.

Śakti as Mother

One's first idea of woman is as mother. She conceives us, bears us, gives birth to us, and nurtures us, particularly in our childhood. Thus mother is intimately connected with our biological as well as psychological growth. Hence it is not surprising that the Bestower of life is symbolized quite universally through the Mother :

Tsis in Egypt, Demeter in Greece, Juno in Rome, Ishtar in Phoenicia, Artemis in Archaic Ionia, Artagatis in Syria, Rati in Indonesia, Kālī (in her more positive manifestations) in India, and ... Azetec ... in Mexico ... have cousins all over the world.¹⁵

Śakti is the Indian *Magna Mater*,¹⁶ for, she is *Dea* to the millions in India irrespective of their belief in male gods. Poets and saints have sung her praises as *Madonna* (*Śrī mātā*).¹⁷ Sankaracharya sings thus :

O Lady supreme, may all the functions of my mind be thy remembrance; may all my words be thy praise; may all my acts be an obeisance unto thee.¹⁸

Another extract where *Śakti* as Mother is addressed in a situation of helplessness may not be out of place here :

For what sins, O Mother Durgā, are thy sons thus dispirited, and their hearts crushed with injustice? ... Awake, O Mother ... Thy helpless sons, lean for want of food, worn out in the struggle ... , are struck with terror at the way in which they are being

15. Andrew, M. Greely, *Op. Cit.* p. 111.

16. *Tripurā Upanishad* 13; *Saubhāgya Lakshmi Upanishad* V. 4; *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* 4.10.

17. *Lalita Sahasranāmam*, 1. In Kannada, she is called *Yellamma* "The Mother of All." Under this title her shrine at Saundatti of Belgaum District (Karnataka, India) is very famous, attracting millions of devotees throughout the year. God as *Śakti*, i.e., as Great Mother can be traced in the addresses and writings of Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-84), Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902), Sister Nivedita (originally E. Noble), and *quondam* a Roman Catholic Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya (1861-1907), to mention only a few selected at random,

18. Haridas Bhattacharya, *Op. Cit.*, p. 247.

ruled. Famine and plague and disease are rife, and unrighteousness triumphs. Awake, O Goddess Durgā ! I see the lightning flashing from the point of thy bow, the world quaking at thy frowns, and creation trembling under thy tread. Let a river of blood flow, overwhelming the hearts of demons.¹⁹

The sculptors have carved Śakti with soft as well as generous breasts, and merry as well as tender eyes as Durgā.²⁰ The theologians have described her as the origin of all,²¹ Brahman's energy²² and the creation, her manifestation.²³ In fact she is the Mother of God (*Theotokos*) : *Brahma*, *Vishṇu* and *Siva*,²⁴ as she, unwilling to be alone, created this (triune) *Puruṣa*²⁵ out of herself and everything else through her association with him. This subordination of the female aspect to the male aspect of God is seen elsewhere in Asia Minor and the shores of the Mediterranean :

In Punic Africa she is Tanit with her son; in Egypt Isis with Horus; in Phoenicia Astaroth with Tammuz (Adonis); in Asia Minor Cybele with Attis . . . Everywhere she is *unwed*, but made the mother first of her companion by immaculate conception and then of the gods and of all life by the embrace of her own son.²⁶

The millions of devotees, for centuries, have invoked the World-Mother (*Jagadāmba*) to help and protect them in their anguish and the awareness of their own sinfulness, *i.e.*, selfishness :

19. Cf. Valentine Chirol, *Indian Unrest*, London, 1910, pp. 18-19.

20. For the photos of such sculptures, see Woodroffe, *Op. Cit.*

21. *Mahānirvāna Tantra*, 4·11, 34.

22. *Ibid.*, 4·30-34.

23. *Ibid.*, 5-195; *Devi Upanishad* 2; *Devi Bhāgavata* I·5·94-5; 7·27; IV, 15·35.

24. J. Woodroffe, *Hymn to Goddess*, Madras, p. 29.

25. Cf. A. Barth, *Religions of India*, London 1882, pp. 199-200. M. Monier-Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India*, London 1891, pp. 180 ff; H. H. Wilson, *Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus*, London 1861, pp. 240-44. The manifested Śakti is first *Puruṣa* as *Brahma*, *Viṣṇu* and *Śiva*.

26. Hogarth in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, I. 147 quoted in N. N. Bhattacharya (1971), p. 6.

The concept of Mother of God is found in Christianity too. Mary is called *Mater Dei*. I, however, think that she is so in a restricted sense, *i.e.*, as God bearer thanks to her son Jesus, the sacrament to the Father/Brahman. In fact in the Bible she is only Mother of Jesus; but defined later by the Church to be the Mother of God. Cf. Hans Küng *Op. Cit.* p. 460.

O goddess, who removest the sufferings of thy suppliants, be gracious !

Be gracious, O mother of the whole world !

Be gracious, O queen of the universe ! Safeguard the universe !

Thou, O goddess, art queen of all that is moveable and immoveable !

O goddess, be gracious ! Protect us wholly from fear of our foes.

Perpetually as thou hast at this very time saved us promptly by the slaughter of the Asuras !

And bring thou quickly to rest the sins of all the worlds.

And the great calamities which have sprung from the maturing of the portents !

To us who are prostrate be thou gracious,

O goddess, who takest away afflictions from the universe !

O thou worthy of praise from the dwellers in the three worlds,

Bestow thou boons on the worlds !²⁷

Thus, the one, infinite, uncreated, transcendent and omnipresent²⁸ God-the-Mother is kindness incarnate.²⁹ She is a merciful,³⁰ tender³¹ nourisher and protectress, particularly of her erring children³² who worship her.³³ The Divine Mother of the universe manifests — incarnates — herself on difficult occasions in order to help.³⁴ She abides in all beings³⁵ as a mother³⁶ who is both benign and fearful.³⁷ So, she is *coincidentia oppositorum* : all contradictions merge in her³⁸ that is, she transcends everything.

27. F. E. Pargiter, *The Markaṇḍeya Purāna*, Calcutta, 1904. Bankim Chatterji's (1838–1894) hymn : *Bande Mataram* from his novel *Ananda Math* is another illustration of man's adoration of the Mother God. Whether the poet addresses here Bengal or Kālī is not very clear. According to Sir Verney Lovett (*History of the Indian Nationalist Movement*, Murray 1921, p. 68) the appeal is rather to the land of Mother Kālī, than to his motherland. For the English translation of *Bande Mataram* see E. A. Payne, *Op. Cit.*, p. 102.

28. *Devi Upanishad* V. 26–28.

29. *Ibid.*, 25.

30. J. Woodroffe, *Hymn to Goddess*, p. 23.

31. *Ibid.*, 9–30.

32. *Saptaśati*, 4, 17–22; 36–37.

33. *Hymn to Goddess*, pp. 32 and 37.

34. *Saptaśati*, 1.66; 4.41–42.

35. *Ibid.*, 1.71; 5.14.

36. *Ibid.*, 1.78–82; 5.14–80.

37. *Ibid.*, 1.81; 5.10; 13. For the different names of *Śakti* expressing her benignity and ferociousness cf. Monier-Williams, *Brahminism and Hinduism*, 4th ed., 1891, p. 187.

38. Alian Danielou, *Hindu Polytheism*, London, 1964, p. 273.

The Divine Mother demands complete self-surrender from her *bhaktas*.³⁹ They are ever-loving to her.⁴⁰ Her passionate devotion brings about happiness (*bhukti*), a hundredfold here and life-everlasting (*mukti*) hereafter.⁴¹ This requires of a *bhakta* that he/she identify himself/herself totally with *Śakti*: *Aham Devī*: 'My Self is *Devī*'/'My Mother and I are one.'⁴²

Śakti as the Great Mother provides direction to the faithful in their critical times since she reflects for them the loving care of God through her tender hands. She invites those who are chauvinistic males to accept androgyny in themselves as well as in others and thus be sacraments to God like herself.

Śakti as Virgin

Śakti is often depicted as a virgin (*Kumāri*) like most of her cousin goddesses throughout the world from pre-historic times.⁴³ Virginity is an important stage of a female in her growth to womanhood, particularly in Indian culture. Woman related to man as a virgin, i.e., with non-genital sexuality, has power — *śakti* — to renew and enhance his personality :

A woman comes into a room where there are a group of men. The language changes, the conversation becomes more impressive, and the competitive behaviour among the males to make an impression noticeably increases . . .

. . . No man likes to lose a tennis match while women are watching . . . The presence of women, perhaps of a special woman, in the audience motivates him to try much harder to win . . .

This desire to impress a member of the opposite sex is quite unrelated to whether one is sleeping with him/her or not.⁴⁴

In India people saw *Śakti* as the source of spiritual transformation. She is described as the Saviouress (*Tārīṇī*) of the deserving

39. *Devī Bhāgavata*, II. 18-58.

40. *Ibid.*, VI, 22.56-57; 14.14-15.

41. *Devī Mahātmya*, 13.5.

42. *Kālikā Purāṇa*, 53.10; 59.104-105; 165 and *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* VII.27.

43. Cf. n. 26.

44. Andrew M. Greeley *Op. Cit.* pp. 135-36.

sādhakas. As she is capable of liberating us from *avidyā* (basic sin/ the fundamental ignorance about our Source or Ground), she is involved as Queen of Wisdom.⁴⁵ For our salvation she is constantly in dialogue with us. Hence she is described with *vyākhyā mudrā*.⁴⁶ Since she is the illuminating power, both intrinsic and extrinsic,⁴⁷ she is described as the Word (*Śabda Brahman*).⁴⁸

Śakti is not only life-giving *i.e.*, mother, but also life-transforming, *viz.*, the Virgin. Thus she is the *Virgo Mater* (Virgin-Mother). Indians, in their weariness, discouragement and frustration have approached her and found themselves renewed, reintegrated and transformed; and therefore, she has entered the woof and warp of Indian socio-religious fabric.

Kanyā

Śakti as *Kanyakumāri* has graced ecstatic experience even of "heat and delight" to her devotees and also attracted damsels as temple-virgins in quite large numbers whatever might be their actual life-style as regards sexuality in and outside *Śakti*—rituals. Her devotees of either sex, and particularly the young, have found life worth living and purposeful, thanks to her intimacy and tenderness. Life has become not just a vale of tears but a matter of joy and meaning to them. Thus *Śakti* has become to the teeming Indians, at various ages, a life-renewing Virgin.

Śakti as Spouse

Śakti, besides being considered the Source and renewal of life is also experienced as a tender person fit to be united with always. This aspect is signalled by the symbol of spouse. The eternal Fair One desires union not only with *Śiva*—the Beautiful One—but in and through him with all. In fact, she is the *hr̥daya* (heart) and the *sāra* (essence) of *Śiva*⁴⁹ or the *caitanya* (active) aspect/*cit* (pure consciousness) of *Śiva*. Without her union *Śiva* is *śava* (corpse). Thus *Śakti* is Active *Śiva*/Self-consciousness. Mythically, therefore, she is described as the Spouse of *Śiva*.

45. The different appellations of *Śakti* such as *Sarvajna*, *Śārada*, *Sarasvati* etc. amply illustrate this fact. Cf. *Lalita Sahasranāma* 196 and 704 as well as J. Woodroffe, *Hymn to Goddess*, p. 28.

46. J. Woodroffe, *Ibid.*, p. 23.

47. *Bahvr̥chōpanishad* V. 3, 4 ff.

48. *Saptaśati*, 4.10.

Creatures/finite-beings which manifest the Self are also united with *Śakti* :

Thou art wisdom, thou art virtue,
 Thou art in my heart, thou art my life,
 Thou art the very soul in my body.
 In (power of) arms art thou *Śakti*,
 In (tenderness of) heart thou *Bhakti*
 Thou art Durga ;
 Thou art Kamalā (Lakshmi) ;
 And Vāṇi (Saraswatī) the Wisdom giver.⁵⁰

Earnest A. Payne, says that :

....*Śakti*....is conceived as the active principle in the universe and is personified as a goddess.⁵¹

Śakti is united with *Śiva*⁵² in *unione identitatis*, viz., as conscious being and consciousness; milk and its whiteness or diamond and its lustre. According to Rāmkr̥ṣṇa, "The distinction between them does not mean a difference.... It is impossible to conceive of the one without the other."⁵³ Thus their distinction is only logical and by no means ontological.

The ritual intercourse frequently involved in *Śakti*-cult brings out the aspects of integration of the devotees into the life-giving and life-renewing Power without denying its accompanying secondary but undoubtedly intense physical pleasure resulting from the heat of sexual arousal in the intercourse experience. The early Indians must have been stupefied by the tremendous power of sexual union with the adult and consenting members of the opposite sex in the matter of

49. Cf. *Śivadīpti* III, 7 and *Iśvara-pratyabhijñā* I, 5.14.

50. Cf. E. A. Payne, *Op. Cit.*, p. 102, and also Note No. 27 above. In any case India—the *Bhārata Śakti*—is one of the specific forms of *Śakti* in Bengali literature of those times in general and of Chatterji in particular.

51. E. A. Payne, *Op. Cit.* p. 3.

52. *Śakti* is considered as the Power of *Śiva* in *Śaiva* purāṇas, viz., *Skanda*, *Śiva*, and *Linga Purāṇa*; but as that of *Viṣṇu* in *Vaiṣṇava* purāṇas like, *Bhāgavata*, *Viṣṇu*, *Vāmana* and other purāṇas. For the treatment of *Śakti* in various purāṇas and upa-purāṇas Cf. Pushpendra Kumar, *Op. Cit.*

53. H. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Op. Cit.*, p. 672. Also Pushpendra Kumar, *Op. Cit.* p. 151.

forgetting oneself or being absorbed in the other, particularly after a fairly long period of absence in their food-gathering/hunting expeditions. Surprisingly s/he has succeeded in turning this sex into a symbol of self-integration with the Self. Hence in cultic intercourse, the mating woman is conceived as goddess herself, at least *in theory*. Thus the oneness of two, sexually differentiated bodies in a liturgical service of *Śakti* trans-signifies the sexual unity as an a-sexual integration between the Unmanifested and the manifested.

Sexual arousal in the liturgy of *Śakti* of course does not (and cannot) adequately symbolize the power and force of the Divine Love :

A man pursuing the body of a woman who has utterly enthralled him ... so that nothing will stand in his way or stop him until he has merged his body with hers is a weak and meek thing *compared to the way the absolute feels for us*. A woman who uses every guile and wile and attractiveness, every inch of her flesh, every curve of her body to capture a man she passionately longs for wants to look modest *when compared with the wanton deity who has created the entire glorious universe to attract and seduce us*.⁵⁴

As the passionately loving God advancing towards us with his loving force of embrace is signalled through the western symbol, Hound of Heaven,⁵⁵ God as the alluring, charming, fascinating and arousing woman is pictured in the Indian heritage through the symbol of *Śakti*.

Our abandonment to *Śakti* brings about joy and authentic liberation for it is the goddess who takes possession of us. Thus *Śakti* as *Sponsa* reveals God's passionate lust for us. If marital intimacy and sexual orgasm can reflect God-the-temptress through the *Śakti*-myth, marriage cannot be down-graded or looked at as second rate in comparison with virginity consecrated or lay. Both the virginity as well as marriage reflect the two different dimensions, *viz.*, the eagerness to renew us and the hunger to be united with us, of the same eternally pursuing Love.

Śakti as Death (Pietà)

Death symbol is the most vivid in *Śakti* myth. It is the one which transforms her into *Kālī* : the "Terrible Female." As birth is asso-

54. A. M. Greely, *Op. Cit.*, p. 162. The emphasis is mine.

55. See *Hound of Heaven* by Francis Thompson.

ciated with woman so is death ! So *Madonna* is also *Pietà* as far as *Śakti* is concerned.

Woman as spouse renders a man dead for a brief period, thanks to the height of pleasure in her tight embrace between the crossed arms (and legs). Again, in the real death, it is she who holds the dead body of her child or man in her arms, particularly in an agriculture-based society. Thus the "Womb" is also a "tomb" for man. This signifies that Life-giving Power is also the life-taking Power.

Samhāra-Śakti (*Pietà*) as a final tomb terrifies us, for, after all she is goddess of death : *Kāli* ' the black one ' ! *Kāli* lives in the burial ground ! Neumann describes her horror-creating manifestations :

The most terrible of the three images of *Kāli* is not the one with the inhuman many arms, hideously squatting amid a halo of flames, devouring the entrails that form a deathly umbilical cord between the corpse's open belly and her own gullet. Nor is it the one that, clad in the nocturnal black of the earth goddesses and adorned with the hacked-off hands and heads of her victims, stands on the corpse of *Śiva* — a barbaric spectre whose exaggeration of horror makes her almost unreal. The third figure seems far more frightful because it is quieter and less barbarous. Here the hands strike us as human. One is extended, the other strokes the heads of the cobras almost as tenderly as *Isis* caressing the head of her child; and though the phallic animal breasts are repellent, they recall the similar breasts of the African mother-goddess. But with its hooded head, the cobra that is twined round her waist like a girdle suggests the womb — here in its deadly aspect. This is the snake that lies coiled in the lap of the Cretan snake goddess, forms the snake robe of the Mexican goddess *Coatlicue*, and girds the loins of the Greek *Gorgons*. And the hideous bloody tiger's tongue of the goddess is the same as hangs down flame-spewing between the tusks of the *Rangda* witch or darts from between the gnashing fangs of the *Gorgons*.⁵⁶

Thus *Śakti*, who is considered as life-giving force, is also thought of as life-taking one. If life comes from her where can it go unless back to her ? "As God is the beginning, so too he is the end," says H. Kūng. In Indian thinking life and death are just two phases of

56. Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother*, p. 149 quoted in A. M. Grœly, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 186-187.

the same reality. Every self that comes forth from the Self, in the last analysis, finds unity/integrity in that Reality. In this sense the Ultimate Womb is also *the* Tomb. It is truly *coincidentia oppositorum*. Śakti as *Madonna* as well as *Pietà* just reflects this unity of opposites.

The self that emerged and separated as an individual through birth is re-united with the Self through death. Man and all realities which are *entia ab alio* are thus relative and limited (*māyā*). S/He alone is the Absolute, Real and True, *i.e.*, *Ens a Se*. This is the message that the polyvalent *Śakti-Madonna, Virgo, Sponsa, and Pietà* gives to man of all centuries and cultures *in* and *through* India. *Śakti*, therefore, is not only the feminine aspect of God but a Dravidian and, therefore, Indian sacrament to God. It is undeniable that He has become more meaningful and quite intimate through *Śakti* to the teeming millions of Indians even from pre-Vedic times.

Śakti as *Kālī* reminds us that all things change except the Ultimate. Hence there is no point in becoming either over-anxious or too much worried in stamping out or tearing down others; we have to carry on our duties as effectively and lovingly as possible, with confidence and joy. This is the *prasāda* (grace) that *Kālī* gives to those who worship her through their actions. *Kālī* standing erect on the *śava* (corpse) of *Śiva* announces her good news : He who loses his self shall find it integrated with the Self.

In conclusion, we may say that the multi-layered, polyvalent *Śakti*-myth symbolizes the basic *weltanschauung* of Indians at large : Life here on earth is meaningful and purposive as its fulfilment is in the integral unity with the Simplicity (*kaivalya*) beyond the grave for all eternity. The eternal Power is neither male nor female; *it transcends* our mode of being.⁵⁷ But our conception of that Power as *Śakti* brings out the supreme tenderness of God towards us without sacrificing his male firmness. Though God is trans-human, trans-sexual, ultimate reality, the present-day need to look into the feminine-maternal element in him is great in the all-too-masculine theologies of our times.⁵⁸ Those who are accustomed to see him as Father should see him as Mother too and *vice versa*, as we are androgynous in nature.

57. The Absolute Spiritual Whole (*Pūrāṇa*), *i.e.*, God is *Śiva-Śakti*. He is neither male nor female. *Śiva* and *Śakti* are only two states always united in the identity of Being. They are not two but "Two-in-one," *i.e.*, *Abhēd a* as Essence. Cf. J. Woodroffe, *Śakti and Śakta*. p. 414, 428 and 467.

58. H. Küng, *On Being a Christian* (Collins, 1978, 2nd imp.), p. 310.