



The Divine Feminine In Hinduism: Goddesses & Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

The Divine Feminine in Hinduism has long been a source of profound spiritual inspiration, cultural identity, and empowerment for women. This study delves into the complex tapestry of goddess worship in Hinduism, highlighting the transformative role of these divine beings in empowering women. This study encompasses an investigation of the historical and cultural context of goddess worship, analyzing the diverse pantheon of Hindu goddesses and their empowering attributes. The study elucidates the metaphors and symbolism associated with these goddesses, exploring their relevance in the lives of women and society at large. This study sheds light on the profound connection between the Divine Feminine, Hinduism, and women's empowerment, offering a comprehensive exploration of this intricate relationship in the context of Devdutt Pattanaik's 7 Secrets of Goddess. Additionally, this research highlights the role of festivals and rituals dedicated to the Divine Feminine, representing how these practices continue to empower women and shape their identities in contemporary Hindu culture.

Keywords: Divine Feminine, Hinduism, Goddesses, Women's Empowerment, Devdutt Pattanaik, 7 Secrets of Goddess, Mythology, Symbolism, Rituals

Introduction

In Hinduism, Goddesses play a pivotal role in shaping religious, cultural, and social aspects of the faith. They embody various qualities and aspects of the divine, serving as symbols of creativity, nurturing, power, and protection. Goddesses like *Saraswati*, who symbolize knowledge and wisdom, and *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, are believed to contribute to the creation and sustenance of the universe. Whereas *Kali* is associated with the destructive and transformative aspects of the divine, signifying the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. *Durga* and *Parvati* are revered for their nurturing qualities protective and symbolizing the guidance and strength provided by the maternal figure. Many goddesses are seen as embodiments of empowerment, and their worship is believed to empower women and men alike in various aspects of life. Many rituals and festivals are dedicated to goddesses, creating a vibrant tapestry of religious celebrations that influence daily life, particularly for women. The roles of goddesses in Hinduism extend beyond the religious domain, significantly impacting cultural norms, gender roles, and women's empowerment. This study seeks to delve deeper into these aspects, examining the historical, philosophical, and cultural dimensions of goddess worship in Hinduism and the empowerment it offers to individuals and society.

The Divine Feminine

The Divine Feminine in Hinduism is a multifaceted and deeply ingrained concept that holds a central place in Hindu mythology, and cultural expressions. This notion encompasses the worship and veneration of various goddesses, each representing different aspects of the divine feminine energy. Hinduism is characterized by a diverse pantheon of deities, including female as well as male gods, and are often depicted as powerful, nurturing, and creative beings. Hinduism recognizes a multitude of goddesses, each with unique qualities and attributes. Some of the well-known goddesses include *Durga*, *Kali*, *Lakshmi*, *Saraswati*, *Parvati*, *Annapurna* and *Radha*. They represent various aspects of life, from fertility and wealth to knowledge and destruction. The

Divine Feminine complements the Divine Masculine in Hindu thought, emphasizing the harmony and balance between these energies. Hinduism is rich in rituals and festivals dedicated to goddess worship. *Saraswati Puja*, Navaratri, *Durga Puja*, and Diwali are just a some of examples of celebrations dedicated to goddesses. It is also celebrated and described in sacred Hindu texts. For instance, the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, the *Durga Saptasati*, the *Laxmi Purana* and the *Devi Mahatmya* are revered texts that extol the greatness of the goddess *Devi*. It has provided women with strong cultural and spiritual identities and has played a role in challenging gender stereotypes. Hindu goddesses are depicted with a strong iconography and symbolism, with each aspect of their appearance carrying deeper meanings.



कराग्रे वसते लक्ष्मीः, करमध्ये सरस्वती । करमूले स्थिता गौरी, प्रभाते कर दर्शनम्॥

On the tips of our fingers resides Maa *Lakshmi* bestowing prosperity. In the centre of our palm resides Maa *Saraswati* bestowing knowledge. At our wrist resides Maa *Gauri* bestowing power and divinity. *She* exists right within us, in our hands. In fact, *She* inspires us that we are the makers of our destiny. The Divine Feminine is not confined to ancient traditions but remains vibrant in contemporary Hindu culture. The goddesses continue to inspire music, art, literature, and daily life.

Historical and Cultural Context

In Hinduism, the origins of goddess worship can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization, which dates to around 3300–1300 BCE. Archaeological findings suggest the existence of female seals, and figurines possibly symbolizing a mother goddess or fertility goddess. In the Vedic texts, the earliest scriptures of Hinduism, there is an acknowledgment of various deities, both male and female. In the *Rigveda*, there are examples of early goddesses like *Aditi*, the mother of the *Aditya*, and *Ushas*, the goddess of dawn. However, their roles were not as prominent as later goddesses. The worship of goddesses gained prominence during the Puranic period, which began around 500 BCE. This era saw the emergence of many goddesses with specific attributes and roles. Goddesses like *Durga*, *Lakshmi*, *Saraswati*, and *Parvati* became central figures in Hindu devotion. Goddess worship has numerous local and regional variations. Different regions of India have their own methods of goddess worship, with local goddesses representing unique cultural and geographic attributes. For example, in Tamil Nadu, there is reverence for Goddess *Meenakshi* whereas in Bengal, there's a deep devotion to *Kali*. Hinduism is replete with festivals and rituals dedicated to goddess worship. The goddesses are often depicted in art and iconography with rich symbolism. Their weapons, attributes, and postures convey specific meanings, and the use of colours and symbolism adds depth to their representations. Goddess worship has played a significant role in the empowerment of women in Hindu culture. Hindus comprehend the goddesses are as strong, independent figures, serving as role models for women. This has contributed to women's participation in religious practices and rituals. Goddess worship remains relevant in contemporary Hinduism, influencing not only religious practices but also literature, art, cultural expressions, and social norms. The historical and cultural context of goddess worship in Hinduism reflects the deep reverence for the divine feminine in its many forms and its enduring impact on the lives of millions of Hindus.

In Hinduism, Goddess worship carries several empowering aspects that have had a profound impact on individuals and society. These empowering dimensions extend beyond gender roles, religious beliefs and rituals, influencing cultural norms, and women's empowerment. Many Hindu goddesses, such as *Kali* and *Durga*, are depicted as strong warriors. Their symbolism conveys qualities of strength, courage, and resilience. Devotees look up to these goddesses as sources of inspiration to overcome challenges and adversities in their own lives. In the same way the concept of *Shakti*, the divine feminine energy, emphasizes the idea of equality and balance between feminine and masculine energies. Some goddesses are seen as rejecting patriarchal norms

and traditions, for instance, *Parvati*, who balances her roles as a devoted wife, mother, and warrior, challenges the notion of women being confined to a single role. Motherhood and nurturing are associated with *Annapurna* and *Durga*. This balance is fundamental to the empowerment of both men and women, promoting harmonious cooperation and coexistence. The goddesses in Hinduism often serve as role models for women. Qualities like independence, compassion, intelligence, and fearlessness, challenging traditional gender stereotypes are personified through their stories and attributes. Women-centric rituals like Haldi-Kumkum and festivals like Navaratri and Karva-Chauth, where women come together to celebrate foster a sense of community and solidarity. Goddesses like *Saraswati* and *Lakshmi* are revered for their roles as protectors and bestowers of knowledge and wealth. Goddess worship serves as a source of empowerment, providing spiritual identity challenging gender norms, and offering diverse role models for both women and men.

Pattanaik's Perspective on the Divine Feminine

Devdutt Pattanaik, a prominent Indian mythologist and author, has made significant contributions to the understanding of the Divine Feminine in Hinduism. His perception on the study is characterized by a blend of symbolism, mythology, and cultural insights. He explores into the narratives surrounding goddesses which highlights their philosophical and symbolic meanings, making them more accessible to modern audiences. Through his narrations, he emphasizes the symbolic and metaphoric nature of Hindu mythology and goddess worship. He explains how these goddesses are not just objects of worship but also embody various roles, such as creators, nurturers, warriors, and destroyers. Pattanaik explores how goddess worship empowers individuals, particularly to womenfolk, by providing them with strong role models and a sense of identity. He suggests that the lessons and values embodied by goddesses can guide individuals in contemporary society, helping them navigate complex issues of identity, gender, and spirituality. He addresses historical contexts, gender-related issues, and the evolution of goddess worship in Hinduism. Pattanaik's insights have contributed significantly to the popularization and appreciation of the Divine Feminine within Hinduism. His approach has made complex philosophical and mythological concepts accessible to a wider audience, fostering a deeper understanding of the rich and multifaceted role of goddesses in Hindu culture and spirituality. Pattanaik's *7 Secrets of Goddess* delves into the hidden layers of meaning behind Hindu goddess worship, uncovering the secrets and symbols illustrating the wisdom and empowerment inherent in the Divine Feminine.

Lakshmi also called as Kamala, the goddess of wealth, prosperity, and good fortune is often depicted seated on a lotus. The lotus is symbolic of purity, detachment, and beauty. *Lakshmi's* association with the lotus teaches us that true wealth comes when one is pure at heart and remains untainted by material desires.

Just as the fragrance, colour and nectar of the lotus attracts bees, food attracts all living creatures. Food never goes to anyone; everyone comes to food. (p159)

Durga, the warrior goddess, battled the buffalo demon Mahishasura. When the demon took the form of a buffalo, *Durga* pierced him with her trident, and from the wound, a fierce, multi-limbed goddess emerged. This story represents the power of the Divine Feminine and the awakening of inner strength. In this book, Pattanaik presents *Mahisha*, the *asura* as the animal selves of human being and his defeat by *Durga* as *Uddhar*, or upliftment from self-indulgent view of the world (p129). In the same way, being human, it's not easy for us to confront our own *Aham*, these *Ahams* are *Asuras* with in us that overlooks the *Devas* that also exists within us. We need to realize that all the problems arise from our own fear. To eradicate this fear with in us and our surrounding and to get protected & empowered, we need to evoke *Durga*. (p155)

In the *Devi Mahatmya*, the goddess *Devi* reveals her cosmic form, from which all of creation originates. *She* is both the seed and the soil, representing the divine source of all life. *She is Mahadevi, the goddess of the gods just as Shiva is Mahadeva, god of gods* (p125)

Saraswati, an independent goddess, associated with speech, language and meaning, the goddess of Vedic Hymns and melodies. Her *Vahan* is *Hansa* that can separate milk from a mixture of milk and water. This signifies that it can separate truth (milk) from falsehood (water). White colour associated with *Saraswati*, is the symbol of purity (p213).

She is the first woman created by *Brahma*, who is like a mirror that reflects one's own personality. This symbolises a reflection of the divinity within each person, emphasizing the power of self-realization. (p205)

These examples illustrate the profound symbolism and philosophical wisdom associated with goddess worship. They reveal how the secrets of goddesses in Hindu culture inspire empowerment, introspection, and the recognition of the divine within oneself.

The Influence of Goddess Worship on Modern Women's Lives

Goddess worship in Hinduism continues to exert a significant influence on modern Hindu practices and women's lives. This influence extends beyond religious rituals and incorporates not only cultural and social but also psychological aspects. It provides a sense of empowerment and identity to women. This empowerment contributes to women's self-esteem and self-confidence in all spheres of life. It challenges traditional gender norms that has an impact on social expectations, encouraging women to avow themselves in personal choices education, and careers. Cultural celebrations and Goddess-centered rituals and gatherings like Diwali (dedicated to the goddess *Lakshmi*) and *Saraswati Puja* (dedicated to the goddess of knowledge) emphasize the importance of knowledge, wealth, and prosperity in the lives of women and promotes a sense of belonging

and solidarity. Goddesses like *Annapurna*, *Parvati*, *Sita* serves as role models for motherhood and familial devotion. Their stories motivate women to uphold family values while also nurturing their personal aspirations. The rise of feminist movements within Hinduism support for gender equality and women's rights, addressing issues such as domestic, dowry, violence, and women's education. In everyday life, women often turn to goddesses for guidance and strength when navigating challenges, making important decisions, or seeking emotional comfort. Goddess worship in Hinduism remains a dynamic and influential aspect of modern Hindu practices, significantly shaping the lives of women by promoting empowerment, spirituality, cultural continuity, and social engagement. It represents the continuing relevance of the Divine Feminine in the lives of millions of people.

Prominent Women Warriors: Symbolising Shakti

Throughout Indian history, there have been remarkable women warriors who displayed leadership, courage, and martial prowess. In the *Rigveda*, *Vishpala* is one of the warriors in an ancient Vedic text, who lost her leg in a battle but continued to fight with a metal prosthetic leg. Her story highlights the strength and resilience of women in the Vedic era. Similarly in the Medieval Period, the Queen of Ullal in coastal Karnataka, *Rani Abbakka* was known for her bravery in defending her kingdom against Portuguese colonial forces in the 16th century. She is celebrated as one of the earliest Indian queens to resist European colonial powers. A legendary queen of Mewar, the story of *Rani Padmini*, is a symbol of feminine strength and valour. She is known for her courage and commitment to her people. *Rani Durgavati*, the Queen of the Gondwana kingdom, displayed remarkable valour in leading her forces against the Mughal army. In the 16th century, her courageous defence of her kingdom is a testament to her warrior spirit. An example from Pre-Independence is of Empress of Jhansi, *Lakshmi Bai*, who became a fearless freedom fighter and feminist icon in India. She demonstrated remarkable military skills and leadership in her fight against British colonial rule.

Another example is *Lakshmi Sahgal*, a doctor and freedom fighter, was the commander of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, an all-female unit of the Indian National Army which was led by Subhas Chandra Bose during the struggle for Indian independence.

From Contemporary India, we can take the examples of *Kiran Bedi*, a retired Indian Police Service officer, who was the first woman to join the IPS. She is known for her bold and innovative approaches to law enforcement. Captain *Shikha Surabhi*, one of the first female combat officers in the Indian Army. She broke barriers by joining the Army's Corps of Engineers and is an inspiration for women seeking careers in the armed forces. Major *Mitali Madhumita*, an officer in the Indian Army, became the first woman to reward with the Army's prestigious 'Sword of Honour' in 2019. This award is given to the best cadet in a passing-out course. Captain *Tania Shergill* led the Indian Army's all-men contingent during the Republic Day parade in 2020. Her contribution was a significant moment in India's military history.

These women warriors from Indian society, spanning different historical periods, leadership, represent the indomitable spirit, and contributions of women in combat and military service. They have shattered gender stereotypes and demonstrated that women are equally promisable of excelling in traditionally male-dominated roles, including those in the armed forces.

Prominent Indian Women: Symbolizing Knowledge and Wealth:

In Indian society, there are several real-life women who have become symbols of education and wealth due to their remarkable attainments and contributions in various fields. These women have not only excelled academically but have also harnessed their knowledge and expertise to create wealth and make a positive impact. For instance, an ancient scholar and a prominent philosopher, *Gargi Vachaknavi* is known for her profound knowledge and fearless participation in intellectual discussions. She is renowned for her contributions to Vedic philosophy and her courage in challenging male scholars. A social reformer, educator, and poet in the 19th century, *Savitribai Phule* played a pivotal role in promoting education for women and oppressed castes. She established India's first school for girls. A prominent personality in the Indian independence movement, *Sarojini Naidu* was not only a poet but also the first woman to become the President of the Indian National Congress. She was a powerful orator and advocate for rights of women. An astronaut and the first woman of Indian origin in space, *Kalpana Chawla* inspired a generation and broke barriers in science and exploration.

Indra Nooyi, CEO of PepsiCo, her journey from India to the pinnacle of the corporate world is a testament to what education and determination can achieve. *Chanda Kochhar*, Managing Director and CEO of ICICI Bank, leadership in the banking sector has made her a symbol of women's success in banking and finance. As the founder and executive chairperson of Biocon, a leading biotechnology company, *Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw* has made significant contributions to the healthcare and biotechnology industries. *Rajshree Pathy*, an entrepreneur and philanthropist known for her contributions to the field of education and art, founded the Sona Group of institutions and the India Design Forum. She emphasized the importance of education and design in fostering creativity and innovation. *Roshni Nadar Malhotra*, Chairperson of HCL Technologies, leadership in the technology sector and her advocacy for education and art has made her a symbol of women's empowerment in the corporate world.

Personification of Goddess as *Maa*

कैसे आई भारत मां की धारणा? अन्य देशों की भी हैं राष्ट्रमाताएं



भाव रत या धारत माता की धारणा का उद्गम 19वीं सदी में भारत के स्वतंत्रता संग्राम के दौरान ब्रिटिश चट्टन वैद्यों के नाटक, बंकिम चंद्र चट्टनरायण के उपन्यास 'विश्वनाथ चट्टन' के लेखों और अबनिद्रनाथ टैगोर के चित्र से हुआ माना जाता है। अबनिद्रनाथ टैगोर के चित्र में 'भारत माता' की कैथरीन रत के कपड़े पहनी हुई और धारा साँव से अपने बसंतों के लिए जन्मदाता (भट्ठा का प्रतीक), चेत (ज्ञान का प्रतीक), धर्म का प्रतीक (अथ का प्रतीक) और कपड़ा (धर्म का प्रतीक) धारण कर दिखाया गया है। इस अवस्था में प्रेरित भारत माता के अन्य संस्करणों में बाद में उन्हें हाथ में शिराए पकड़े हुए, और पर सखा का शरीर द्वारा खींचे गए रथ पर सखा दिखाया गया।

भारत माता जैसे अन्य देशों की भी अपनी-अपनी 'माता' हैं। उत्तराखण्ड ब्रिटेन की ब्रिटिश, क्रिस की माता, न्यूजीलैंड की डोलीड, स्वीडन की मर स्वेड और अमेरिका की कोलंबिया। ये जन्मपुत्र से जुड़ी दीविया हैं, जिसका औपनिवेशिक काल में उद्गम हुआ। इस काल के अंत में राष्ट्र-राज्यों के उद्गम के साथ इन दीवियों ने देश की 'माता' के रूप में अपनी जगह बना ली। ब्रिटिश का उद्गम वर्ष हुआ, जब 18वीं सदी में स्कॉटलैंड और इंग्लैंड के राज्यों को मिलकर 'यूनाइटेड किंगडम' बनाया गया। ब्रिटिश को पकड़ने हुए के इंग्लैंड और डाल के साथ दिखाया गया, जो स्कॉटलैंड का प्रतीक और युद्धी प्रभाव का संकेतक था। ब्रिटिश का शाही सन्ध्याव दिखाने के लिए उन्हें शेर पर सखा दिखाया गया। हालाँकि आधुनिक काल में 'शहरी'



अबनिद्रनाथ टैगोर द्वारा बनाया गया चित्र 'भारत माता'। मूलमाता इसी चित्र से भारत माता की तस्वीर उपलब्ध सामने आई।

शब्द का निरुद्ध भले ही नकारात्मक संदर्भों से लिया जाता हो, पर उन दिनों ऐसा नहीं था।

उन दिनों ब्रिटेन ने अपने नौसेना की मदद से अपने साम्राज्य को विश्वभर तक फैलाकर उसे बरकरार रखा था। इससे वह लोकप्रिय धारणा उभर गई कि अंग्रेजी साम्राज्य का सूरज कभी नहीं डूबता है। इसीलिए ब्रिटिश को समुद्री देश 'नौसाम्राज्य' का विस्तृत पाकड़ा हुआ भी दिखाया जाने लगा। ब्रिटिश के माध्यम से अंग्रेजी ने अपने नौसेना के बल का प्रदर्शन किया। ब्रिटिश की प्रशंसा में लोगों को इंग्लैंड की दिग्गज मराठीनियों - पंडितबाबू प्रभु और क्वीन विक्टोरिया - को याद दिलाया। ब्रिटिश की नकल करते हुए न्यूजीलैंड ने अपने आप को 'डोलीड' के माध्यम से मूल रूप दिया। इसके

बाद स्वीडन ने मर स्वेड उभरी, जो स्वीडन के लोगों की देशप्रेम की मूल रूप थी। मर स्वेड की प्रथम बहिन लोगों की खानकरी कुमाराओं की प्रशंसा में उभरी थी।

आयरलैंड में 'कैथरीन' उभरी। वहाँ के राष्ट्रवादी ने अपने देशवासी। ये राष्ट्रवादी मानते थे कि कैथरीन ने इंग्लैंड एक बूढ़ी महिला है, जिसने अपने पर खो दिया है और जब वो युवाओं को उनके लिए लड़ने और यहां तक कि मरने के लिए प्रेरित करेगी, तब वह भी युवा बन जाएगी।

प्रसंग में गणराज्य की और तक के आदर्शों की प्रतिभान के माध्यम से मूल रूप दिया गया। युवा महिलाओं द्वारा प्रेरित राजतंत्र का विरोध करने के लिए एक महिला को चुना गया। महिलाओं को युवाओं, शासक के अवसर की ओर की ओर मुड़ी हुई अंग्रेजियन टोपी पहने हुए दिखाया गया। गणराज्य में स्वतंत्र लोग यह टोपी पहन कर रहे थे और महिलाएं अपने युवाओं को ये टोपी देकर गुलाबी में रंग कर रहे थे। इसलिए यह स्वतंत्रता का प्रतीक बन गई।

18वीं सदी में ब्रिटेन की संसद में होने वाली बहसों को प्रकाशित करना री-ब्रुनो था। इसलिए ब्रुनो में बहस के लिए राजनीतिक पत्रिकाओं ने लोगों और जगहों के लिए कार्यालय बनाया। इन कार्यालयों में अमेरिका के उपनिवेश कोलंबिया के जय से जाने जाने लगे। बाद में कोलंबिया जन्म महिला को अंग्रेजियन टोपी पहनाई गई और अमेरिकी ब्रह्म में लंगड़ा गया। इस रूप में ये गणराज्य का प्रतीक बन गई और अमेरिकी युवाओं को उनके बसंत लड़ने के लिए प्रेरित किया गया।

अन्धपुत्र को सलू टोपी का विचार सन्ध्याव रोम सन्ध्याव की मूल रूप 'रोम' की धारणा के साथ उभरा। रोम लोभ करने में कि रोम लोभ पकड़ी हुई माता थी, जबकि रोम सन्ध्याव मानता था कि वे संत थीं। -devdutt@gmail.com

The personification of the Goddess as *Maa* is a prominent and deeply ingrained cultural and religious concept in the Indian subcontinent. *Maa* is a term of endearment and respect that is often used to refer to the Divine Mother or the Goddess in various forms. The use of *Maa* creates a strong emotional connection between the devotees and the Goddess. It nurtures feeling of trust, love, and dependence, as one would have for their own mother. The term *Maa* is versatile and can be used to refer to various Goddesses in their different forms, such as *Durga*, *Kali*, *Lakshmi*, *Saraswati*, and others. This versatility allows for a comprehensive approach to the worship of the Divine Mother in her multifaceted aspects.

The national personification of Indian Subcontinent as Bharat Mata came into existence in the late 19th century after the historical Indian revolt of 1857 against the British. The poem *Vande Mataram* composed by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and published in Anand Math in 1882. It was painted as a four-armed goddess by Abanindranath Tagore in the 1905. On 24 January 1950, *Vande Mataram* has been accepted as the Republic National Song by the Constituent Assembly of India. Bharat Mata represents the nation as a nurturing and protective mother, symbolizing the love, devotion, and reverence that people have for their homeland. It embodies the belief that the nation, like a mother, cares for sustenance, protection, and a sense of belonging to its people. In the struggle for independence, this sentiment has been an essential element and continues to inspire pride and unity among citizens. It serves as a reminder of the need to care for and protect the nation, just as one would for a beloved mother.

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