

# ANGRY INDIAN GODDESSES - A STUDY OF THE TRADITION OF WORSHIPPING WOMEN IN THEORY

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## Abstract

*This paper aims at studying the age-old tradition of worshipping women in the Hindu religion in comparison to the status of women in the society. Hindu religion is one of the few religious traditions in the world that worships its women. The paper will study the portrayal of goddesses in the Hindu culture through folk tales and scriptures that mention and speak about the greatness of these women who have been celebrated since times immemorial, under the light of the text titled, "Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition -by David Kinsley". It will speak about how the goddesses helped the men achieve greatness in their lives and how in times of need these goddesses have saved the world from demons. It will focus on how traditionally, Indians celebrate and admire the female deities of Hindu religion, but at the same time fail to acknowledge the contributions of women towards family, life, society, and the world at large. How women are still deprived of basic necessities such as education, just because they belong to a certain gender, or a different sex. It will talk about the hypocrisy of Indian society, where it worships the goddess for days at length, but cannot treat its women well.*

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**Keywords:** Hindu religion, Hinduism, religious traditions, goddess, feminine, divinity.

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The Hindu religious traditions are considered to be extremely rich and diverse. The traditional beliefs state that the people following *Sanatan Dharma*<sup>1</sup> or modern day Hinduism, have believed in the forces of nature around the Earth and in the Universe at large. According to *Sanatan Dharma* it is believed that the Universe was created by *Brahma*, the creator, and each individual has a role to play in this world. Each soul starts its journey at birth, then enjoys life on earth and finally the deeds or *Karma* of the individual decides whether the soul (*Aatma*) will meet the *paramatma*<sup>2</sup> or will be reborn on earth. Is it said to be believed in Hindu tradition that there is a supreme god and the others are *avatars*<sup>3</sup> that the god takes form of to bring order into the society. One of the most striking features of the Hindu religious tradition is the importance of goddess worship. Since ancient times Hindus have worshipped the female deities in various forms such as *Prthivi, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, Kali, Parvati, Sita*, to name a few.

Hindu religion is considered to be the oldest religious tradition that has been followed since before 5000 BCE. It is rich in scriptures in the form of the vedas that have acted as a guiding light for its followers. It has been studied by many scholars who have stated that it is among the only few religious traditions of the world to worship female deities since its foundation. There have been hymns written in the Vedas in praise of these female deities. In the *Devisukta* written in the Rigveda (RV 10.125), the *Devi* or the goddess proclaims that she is the source of all the creation and that of the creative power. She is beyond the limitless universe. She is the guiding force for all the gods.

In a culture which is so rich and gives the position of the supreme god to women, it is expected that the women belonging to this culture also might be treated supremely. To the contrary we see women being treated as third grade citizens not only in their own homes, but also in the society at large. The title of the paper '**Angry Indian Goddess**', is a comment on the repressed social status of women in India. It focuses on how there has been modernisation, but women are still given the status of a second gender, where they should enjoy equal status. The paper deals with the hippocratic behaviour of the Hindu society, which keeps the idol of a woman in the temple, but does not allow women of the society to visit the same temple during menstruation. The Hindu culture is filled with rigid social stigmas which have been observed for generations without understanding the

cause behind these practices, and without realising whether the said religious norms are to be followed in today's society.

The paper will study the different roles performed by women in the society with regards to the goddesses worshipped in the Hindu religion. It will also refer to the text **Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition** written by David Kinsley to understand the origin of worship of the goddesses, their cultural and religious context, and their status in the current day Hindu society. During his time in India, Kinsley, claims to have found several books on the history of goddesses, but he still felt the need to have a text that would describe the significance of the goddesses in Hinduism.

David R. Kinsley, was a renowned professor of religion at McMaster University, Canada. He was a scholar of Hinduism, who dedicated his life and career to study the various aspects including symbolism, mythology, and rituals. He has significantly contributed towards the understanding of the Hindu traditions through his texts such as "The Sword and the Flute: Kali and Krsna, Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology," "Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition," and "Tantra: The Indian Cult of Ecstasy."

#### 1. Prthivi – the mother:

Goddess Prthivi is always associated with the earth as a provider for all the living creatures. In the Rigveda she is associated with Dyaus, the sky god. The two deities are so interdependent that through their union they are said to bring prosperity to the world. Goddess Prthivi is praised for being productive, maternal, supportive and firm. Goddess Prthivi along with Dyaus is prayed for wealth, riches, power, and nourishment. In the Atharva-Veda goddess Prthivi is shown to be an independent deity, the hymn said in praise of her emphasizes on her fertility. She is the source of all the living creatures on Earth.

In the Hindu tradition people respect our mother's as their first *Guru* (teacher), and give her a position next to the gods as she is the one who carries them in her womb, and starts caring for them even before they are brought into the world. This tradition is largely seen through the epics, stories and folktales. For generations we have observed the children respecting and obeying their mothers' in families where the elders respected these women.

This tradition does not seem to hold ground in the modern Hindu society. Studies show that mothers have been subjected to humiliation and violence at the hands of their own children. Multiple cases across decades have been observed and reported in the country, where the male children either abuse or leave their mothers at the hands of fate for multiple reasons. Most of these aged women then suffer violence at the hands of other relatives of anti-social elements around them, which worsens their mental and physical wellbeing.

#### 2. Lakshmi – the fulfiller:

Sri-Lakshmi is often associated with abundance. In the earlier Vedic hymns she is referred to as Sri, the one who provides the kings with elephants, horses, food and money. In the later part of Hindu religious traditions she is seen to be associated with many male gods like Soma, Dharma and Indra. It is notably said that she is generally persuaded to leave one ruler for another. But Sri-Lakshmi's association with Indra is fully developed and interesting as he is the King of Gods and is considered to be extremely powerful. Much later around 400 AD, an image of Sri-Lakshmi as the wife of Sri Vishnu appears as a constant and it is believed that she is attracted towards him due to his various *Avatars*. She is a dutiful wife who acts as a convener between Lord Vishnu and his followers. Those who pray to her always receive abundant wealth.

According to the Hindu traditions, it is considered that a woman who enters the family after marriage, is assumed to be the Lakshmi of the house. She is believed to bring in abundance of happiness, health and wealth in to the family. Some people have moulded this tradition to their benefits by starting a tradition for dowry. If a bride's parents are not able to give dowry to the groom's family, she is ill-treated in the husband's house, not given the dues respect she deserves as a person and some go to an extent of even harming the woman physically and mentally. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, dowry deaths and honour killings have been reported in many parts of the country.

In the traditional texts it is observed that though, Sri-Lakshmi is a dutiful wife, Lord Vishnu also treats her with the due respect that a partner deserves. They are a divine couple that have re-incarnated in various forms through different *Yugas*<sup>4</sup>. People in the Hindu society, want their wives to be like goddess Lakshmi, but they themselves fail to act like Sri Vishnu. They treat their wives inhumanly and fail to recognise the contribution that she offers to the family after entering a completely new setting post marriage.

3. Sati/ Parvati – the wife/ companion:

Goddess Sati or Parvati is seldom prayed to as a single entity. She is always associated and has her identity with regards to her consort Lord Shiva. First Sati's, and then Parvati's birth, has been termed as a conspiracy, where the Gods in Heaven gather fearing Lord Shiva's ascetic isolation would destroy the world. In order to lure Shiva in to the *Grihastashram*, Sati and Parvati were born. It is observed that the stories of Sati, the first wife of Lord Shiva and Parvati, his second wife, are very much alike as they focus largely on their marriage and life with Shiva, and the story of Parvati is always treated as an ongoing story of Sati. It is also asserted that the birth of Parvati takes place so that Shiva's child can be born to kill the demon Taraka. It is Sati and Parvati that make Lord Shiva accessible to his devotees on earth.

We see that both Sati and Parvati leave their comfortable maternal homes to reside with Shiva in the mountains of Kailash. Her sole purpose of life is to marry Shiva and involve him in to a family life. Shiva and Parvati have a perfect married life. They are the two halves of one body. Shiva respects Parvati and she functions on the commands of her lord. Shiva acknowledges her pleasures and desires and keeps up with her happiness.

In the Hindu society it is largely seen to be a one-way action, where the wives dutifully function on the commands of their husbands, but the husbands forget to treat her with the due respect she deserves. Wives spend more than half of their lives serving the husbands, yet the husbands fail to fulfil even the smallest and meekest desires and demands of their wives. The Hindu society expects its women to be the goddess and make their homes happy as heaven, but at the same time they treat the same women in a demonic manner by simply overlooking her happiness.

4. Sita – the *pativrata*<sup>5</sup>/ devotee:

Sita is largely associated with her consort Lord Rama, who is considered to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Her role in the life of Lord Rama is that of a devoted wife who follows her husband everywhere he goes to ensure his comfort in life. In Valmiki's Ramayana, she is shown to be victimised and to face atrocities at the hands of her husband, but she still remains steadfast and devoted to Lord Rama.

Her name means the line created on a field with a plough, and it has been associated largely with fertility. People invoke the Earth goddess, Sita, to bring fertility to their fields so that their necessities can be fulfilled. Her birth is a mystery as it is claimed that she was born when King Janaka, a childless king, was ploughing the field after years of drought in Mithila, and she appeared from underneath the earth, after which he adopted her. Sita is invoked by kings so that she can shower her blessings and provide for the people in the kingdom.

Throughout her life we find her to be devoted to Lord Rama. He questions her chastity not just once but twice and asks her to prove her purity by offering herself to the sacrificial fire. She loves her husband to an extent that she jumps in to the fire once and emerges unharmed from it after which he accepts her, but the second time she does not oblige to his commands and prays to mother earth to embrace her to death.

She is considered to be the ideal wife. It is expected from all the Hindu women to be the Sita to her husband and follow his commands, be faithful and devoted to him. She is the epitome of a perfect wife according to the Hindu tradition. But should Lord Rama be given the position of a God? He failed her as a husband. Like Lord Rama most husbands fail their wives, yet expect them to be the Sita of their lives. Men being unfaithful is considered to be normal, but a woman has to be devoted to her husband.

5. Radha – the lover:

Radha, more like Sita and Pravati, is prayed to in connection with her lover Krishna. Unlike other female deities, Radha never married Krishna. She was his lover in his adolescence when he stayed in Vrindavan. Krishna is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu and he is often prayed alongside Radha, as his lover.

Versions of the Hindu scriptures show that Radha was married to someone else, but like all the other women of the village, she was also charmed by the presence of Krishna and could not stay away from him. Krishna also loved her equally, but he had to bare the grief of separation from his lover to fulfil his duties as a son. The relationship of Radha and Krishna have been shown as that of the devotee and the Lord. Nothing comes in between them. She gives up everything to be with her lover. Her love for Krishna is so divine that the two are always worshipped together.

All women in India like Radha, desire to be loved by their other halves, but society binds them under the shackles of marriage fixed by the elders, depriving them of their choice of a lover or a future husband. Most women in the Hindu tradition continue to live in an unhappy and loveless marriage because of the societal pressure, giving up their desires to unite with their soulmate.

#### 6. Durga – the warrior:

Traditional myths state that Durga was created by all the Gods, when the demon Mahisa defeated all the Gods and only a woman could defeat him. All the gods combined their energies in to a ball of mass and so goddess Durga was born with a weapon offered by each of the gods as a symbol of strength. Some texts narrate the story of Shiva requesting Parvati to take the form of a warrior goddess in order to defeat the demons Shumbha and Nishumbha, hence Durga was a form taken by Goddess Parvati.

In a religion dominated by male deities who perform heroic acts of saving the people on Earth from demonic attacks, Goddess Durga, appears as the only female deity who comes to the rescue of the Gods themselves, when they are unable to control Mahisasura. In post Vedic texts it is observed that Goddess Durga takes centre stage as the warrior goddess who protects all those who need her. It is also seen that many Gods, kings and demons, try to convince her to marry them and in turn they would protect her, but she refuses outright stating she does not need protection from any man. She is complete in herself and does not feel the need of having a consort. She is the creator and destroyer of this universe. She is the only female deity who is worshipped alone. She has no consort alongside her.

It is believed in the Hindu tradition that when tough times fall upon a family or when the household is in trouble, every woman takes the form of Durga to protect her family from the demons of the world outside the safe walls of her home. Every woman is the Shakti till she is domesticated and taken care of, but the moment her chastity and authority are challenged she takes the form of the warrior Goddess Durga to protect her self-respect. Durga resides in each and every woman and her powers should be celebrated instead of being curtailed.

## CONCLUSION

In Hindu tradition at large one can observe that there are multiple female deities who have a significant position and are prayed to at par with the male deities. When people can pray to these female deities, then why can they not support, love, protect, and look after the women in their families, neighbourhood, or society at large? Why is there a need for special rules to be set, or a special task force to be formed to protect the rights and dignity of the women in the society at large?

Why do men forget that Prithvi (mother), gives birth them can also destroy them. Radha (lover), also has the ability to choose to love herself over loving the man in her life. Men should respect their better-halves just like Parvati got the respect of Shiva and Sita got the love of Rama, When they can pray to the Goddess Lakshmi for health and wealth, why can they not respect their *grihalakshmi*, who will make their life wealthy with love. Why do they forget, that Durga that protects them, also possesses the ability to protect herself from them.

It is time for the men belonging not just to the Hindu culture but also to other religious beliefs, to respect women as fellow human beings, give them the due that they deserve, and believe in the power of a woman. I have learnt from the Hindu Goddesses that each woman is a replica of these multiple versions of the divine form of Shakti, who is the driving force behind the creation of this universe. Without women there can be no procreation and no life on Earth.

## REFERENCE

- [1] Sanatan Dharma, an alternative word used for Hinduism.
- [2] Paramatma, is the God almighty, who the supreme soul or energy.
- [3] Avatar, an incarnation of a particular deity born in a different era.
- [4] Yugas, are the eras on earth in earth years. There are mainly four yugas according to the Hindu mythology, namely; Satyuga, Dvaparyuga, Tretayuga and Kaliyuga.
- [5] Prativrata, a tradition observed in Hindu culture where the woman is expected to be devoted and faithful to her husband.
- [6] Kinsley, David R. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. University of California Press, 1986.

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- [8] Mark, Joshua J. "Hinduism." *World History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.worldhistory.org#organization>, 4 June 2023, [www.worldhistory.org/hinduism/](http://www.worldhistory.org/hinduism/).