



VEENADAS

The Goddess And The Demon

—An Analysis of the Devi Mahatmya

THE worship of the goddess in India is an early example of the incorporation of the pre Aryan, non Sanskritic goddess into the Sanskritic fold. The first extant text in Sanskrit which developed a comprehensive mythology of the goddess is the *Devi Mahatmya** which forms part of the *Markandeya Purana*. The *Puranas* are post *Vedic* texts dedicated to various themes, including incarnations of gods and goddesses, and chronologies of kings. Themes of creation, preservation and destruction of the world in endless cycles predominate. Many minor episodes from the epics are given fuller shape in the various *Puranas*. There are scores of *Puranas*, including some written as recently as the 17th century AD. *Pauranika* literature is a vast storehouse of myths and legends, which have been evolving through centuries and have been as influential as the *Vedas*, if not more so, in shaping Hindu belief and ritual, and is generally agreed to date from the fifth or sixth century AD.

Why is there a juxtaposition of three stories in this text and is there any logic to the sequence in which they are presented? My analysis addresses itself to this and related questions.

* *Devi Mahatmya*—literal meaning, the greatness of the goddess

The mythologies of a people, being a product of the collective unconscious, are a changing and developing reflection of that people's interaction with their natural, social, economic and political milieu. Therefore, a study of mythology can yield valuable historical insights.

This is a condensed and simplified version of a paper written in honour of Prof. M. N. Srinivas.

It analyses an ancient Hindu text and suggests that one aspect of the greatness of the goddess or the feminine principle was perceived as her ability to save the gods by overcoming demons or evil forces whom she absorbed into herself. This sheds light on the multifaceted image of the ideal woman that was evolved in Hindu culture.

The story of *Devi Mahatmya* is “framed” by a discussion between a king and a merchant, both of whom have retired to a forest due to adversity. The merchant is puzzled as to why his mind is still attracted to his wife and son even though they had deserted him. The king and the merchant encounter a sage who informs them that such contradictions are a result of the power of Mahamaya, she who is the great illusion or she who can take many forms. On the insistence of the two unhappy persons, the sage then narrates three stories about the great goddess. Devi or Mahadevi is the most powerful of the goddesses. As Parvati, consort of Siva, she is renowned for the austerities she practised to gain his favour. As Durga, she killed the demon Mahisasura, and is depicted in images and pictures, as a golden, ten armed goddess destroying evil in the form of the demon whom she tramples underfoot and slays. As Kali, she is usually depicted in a more terrible form,

with a chain of skulls around her neck, and her tongue hanging out, dripping blood.

The sage relates three separate episodes about Mahamaya who, in her various forms, confronts and defeats a number of demons. On the surface, it appears that the three episodes are unconnected narratives about the relations between gods, goddesses and demons. I hope to show, however, that the conclusion of each episode may be viewed as the commencing point of the next one. Thus the sequential order in which the stories are presented may be viewed as essential to an understanding of the meaning of the myth.

The First Episode

During one of the periods that fell between the dissolution and the creation of the universe, Vishnu* withdrew into sleep while resting on his great snake in the middle of the primeval waters. From the ear wax of Vishnu emerged two

demons, Madhu and Kaitabha, who proceeded to attack Brahma, the creator.

Brahma found that he was not powerful enough to defeat the demons. Fearful for his life, he prayed to the goddess Yoganidra, (the sleep of Yoga) to release Vishnu. The goddess was pleased by his devotional prayer and she released Vishnu. Awakened from his slumber, Vishnu proceeded to fight the two demons in order to save Brahma. A mighty battle raged between Vishnu and the demons but the strength of the latter showed no sign of waning. Exhausted by the battle, Vishnu prayed to Yoganidra to help him. With her power of delusion, the goddess cast a spell upon the demons and lured them into believing that they were more powerful than Vishnu. Thus deluded, the demons became impudent enough to offer a boon to Vishnu. Vishnu begged that by their grace it should be possible for him to kill them. The demons were trapped into granting the boon but they added the conditional clause that Vishnu would be able to kill them only on dry land. Since there was nothing but water all around, Vishnu finally took the demons on his thighs which were dry and killed them there.

The Second Episode

The demon king Mahisasura had become extremely powerful and had defeated Indra, the king of the gods. Expelled from their respective domains in heaven, the gods wandered around on the earth like ordinary mortals. In desperation, they prayed to the supreme gods, Vishnu and Brahma, who were enraged and from whose bodies emanated a great brilliance. The *tejas* (lustre, power) emanating from other gods united with this initial *tejas* of the two supreme deities and these various lustres then formed the various members of the body of the goddess, Durga. Since the goddess was constituted from the combined lustres of the gods, she was extremely powerful. Then each god generated a weapon from his own customary one, and all these weapons were bestowed upon her.

A mighty battle then took place between Durga and the demon warriors of

Mahisasura. She slowly annihilated them and was then confronted by the demon king. The battle raged for a long time because the demon could change his form as he pleased. Finally, the goddess bound him with her noose. Thus bound, he half emerged from his buffalo form and the goddess fought with the half revealed form. The lion on which she was riding stepped on the buffalo body of the demon and Durga decapitated him with her sword. The army of demons was thus demolished and the gods rejoiced over the victory of Durga.

The Third Episode

The demons Sumbha and Nisumbha took away the sacrificial portions offered to the gods. Deprived of their functions and expelled from heaven, the gods remembered the invincible goddess. They approached the mountain Himavat where the goddess resided and began to sing her praises. These hymns of praise all stress the dual nature of the goddess. She

is described as both knowledge and delusion, as hunger and thirst on the one hand and satiation on the other.

While the gods were praising the goddess, Parvati came and asked them whom they were praising. From the sheath of Parvati's body there sprang forth an auspicious goddess who replied that the hymns were being sung to her. This goddess who had sprung from the *kosha* or sheath of the body, was known as Kaushiki. Parvati then became the dark and terrifying Kalika who resides in the Himalayas.

The charming Kaushiki was seen by Chanda and Munda, two servants of Sumbha and Nisumbha. They persuaded their masters that this beautiful woman must be acquired by the demon kings who possessed all the beautiful things in the world. The demon kings sent a message to the goddess that she could select either of them as a husband. The goddess expressed her gratification at the offer but



Durga panel in the rock cut temple of Varakaswami in Mahabalipuram

replied that she had earlier taken a vow that she would only marry a man who could defeat her in battle.

The demon kings were enraged and sent a group of warriors under the leadership of a demon called Dhumralochana whose gaze could reduce anything to smoke, in order to drag the impudent goddess by her hair and bring her before them. When Dhumralochana tried to drag her, Kaushiki burnt him to ashes by uttering the single syllable *hum*. As for his army, it was destroyed by her lion.

The next group of demon warriors was sent under the leadership of Chanda and Munda, with the same purpose of dragging Kaushiki by the hair to the court of the demon kings. At the sight of them, Kaushiki was enraged. From her forehead, fierce with an angry frown, emanated a terrible goddess called Kali, with a sword and noose in her hands. Kali killed a host of demons. Then she killed Chanda and Munda and carried their heads to Kaushiki. Because she had carried their heads, Kali became known as Chamunda.

Sumbha and Nisumbha then called forth various families of demons. The *shaktis* or powerful emanations of the gods issued forth and defeated these demons. One demon called Raktabija could not be killed because every drop of his blood that fell to the ground gave rise to a new Raktabija.

Kaushiki suggested to Kali that the best way of killing Raktabija was to drink every drop of his blood before it fell to the ground. Kali stood with her mouth agape, drinking up every drop that fell from Raktabija's body while Kaushiki killed him.

Kaushiki then drew back all the emanations into herself and, fighting alone, she killed Sumbha and Nisumbha after a mighty battle.

History Of The Myths

In interpreting these myths, it is important to realise that those who participate in the creation or recitation of a myth understand its meaning within a received context.

The characters in one myth may also occur in other earlier myths. Their

significance in each myth is enhanced by their significance in the others. Therefore, to grasp this diffused understanding, we need to look at other myths earlier than or contemporary with the *Devi Mahatmya* in which the characters of this text occur.

Let us begin with the two demons, Madhu and Kaitabha, mentioned in the first episode of the *Devi Mahatmya*. The story of the destruction of these two demons by Shiva is narrated in the *Mahabharata* but was composed before the *Devi Mahatmya*. There is no mention of the goddess Yoganidra there. The demons, on their own initiative, offer a boon to Vishnu who makes use of the boon



**Mahakali, an incarnation Devi assumed to destroy demons.
Contemporary bronze**

to acquire the power to destroy them. Also, in the *Mahabharata* version, the demons do not spring from the ear wax of Vishnu but there is a suggestion that the demons will be reborn as the sons of Vishnu after being slain by him.

Mahisasura appears in the *Mahabharata* as a demon who was slain by Skandha. Therefore, in the *Mahabharata*, Mahisasura is not clearly connected with the goddess and, despite his name, his connection with the buffalo form is also not evident.

The great mythic elaboration of Durga as the killer of Mahisasura is a contribution of later Pauranika literature. Although archeological evidence suggests a female figure often identified with Durga from the

first century AD, the female figure was probably not linked with the theme of Durga slaying Mahisasura until the Gupta period.

It was a long process by which Mahisasura acquired the body of a buffalo and came to be represented as the victim of the goddess Durga. In the *Varaha Purana*, there is an account of the slaying of Mahisa by the goddess and his parentage is mentioned. He is supposed to be the son of the demon Rambha by a female buffalo. However, historians disagreed as to whether this text predates the *Devi Mahatmya* or not.

A later form of the story is found in the *Kalika Purana*. According to this version, the demon Rambha was a great devotee of Shiva. He pleased Shiva with his austerities and asked that Shiva be born to him as a son. Shiva then took the female buffalo form and Rambha copulated with it. From this union, was born Mahisasura with the body of a buffalo.

In this manner, the form and parentage of Mahisasura slowly evolved. In its final development, one might say that in killing Mahisasura, Durga killed the feminine aspects of Shiva.

It is also noteworthy that the iconic representations of Durga almost always include the representation of Mahisasura being killed by her. The *Kalika Purana* gives the reason for this. According to the story in *Kalika Purana*, before being killed, the demon prayed to Durga that he should not be completely deprived of all sacrificial offerings. Durga replied that since all the sacrificial offerings had already been allocated to the gods, nothing could be spared for Mahisasura. She, however, offered to share the worshipful offerings of her devotees with Mahisasura. Submitting to his fate, the demon agreed to be killed on condition that the goddess promise not to destroy his body.

Convention has it that because of this boon given by Durga to Mahisasura, it became a tradition for visual representations of Durga to include the representation of Mahisasura. By his presence along with her, the demon

secured a share in the worship offered to her.

It needs to be pointed out that the account of the birth of Durga in the *Devi Mahatmya* bears a close resemblance to the story of the origin of the king in *Manu Smriti*. In *Manu Smriti*, which is commonly acknowledged to have been composed before the *Devi Mahatmya*, the king is created to restore order in the world, and he is imbued with the powers of all the gods. In *Devi Mahatmya*, the goddess is created for the same purpose of restoring order in the universe, and she is endowed with the powers of all the gods. In *Devi Mahatmya*, the function of the king is thus performed by a female divinity.

The demons Sumbha and Nisumbha are mentioned as members of Ravana's demon army in the *Ramayana*. They were slain by Rama's army. Their ancestry and parentage are not described, either in the *Ramayana* or in *Devi Mahatmya*.

Progression In Definitions

The three narratives in the *Devi Mahatmya* may be seen as a chain in which the definition of the relations between gods, goddesses and demons are progressively transformed until the conclusion which, in a manner, reverses the beginning.

First, there is a change in the definition of demons and their origin. In the first story, Madhu and Kaitabha are born of the ear wax of Vishnu. Their birth is seen as a normal development of the fact that gods have bodies and these bodies secrete powerful impurities. The gods and demons have an intimate connection.

But the story of the birth of Mahisasura assumes a world in which gods and demons are separate, yet have intimate relations. Mahisasura is born as a result of the intimate relation between the demon Rambha and the god Shiva. Shiva is involved as a female animal. Thus Mahisasura has an ancestry which is demonic on the paternal side but divine on the maternal side.

In the third story, the connection between gods and demons is completely severed. Sumbha and Nisumbha are simply assumed to be there. In the case of



Kali, an incarnation of Delhi, destroyer of evil. A nineteenth century popular painting

Raktabija, all need of parentage is done away with, as his blood can generate him.

Corresponding to the transformation in the definition of demons is a transformation in the character of the goddess. In the first story, Yoganidra simply deludes the demons. It is Vishnu who kills them. In the second story, Durga is created from the energy of the gods and is herself the killer of Mahisasura. In the third story, the goddess in her two aspects as the terrible and the beautiful Kaushiki, kills the demons.

This duality in the definition of the goddess is an important theme of later *Pauranika* literature and accounts for the fact that the demonic aspects of the

goddess become difficult to contain in many later myths.

What is noteworthy is the reverse movement which has taken place in the relations between demons and gods on the one hand, and demons and goddesses on the other. The demons come to be slowly dissociated from the gods. In the first story, the demons are an aspect of a god's body but by the end of the third story, they are completely severed from any connection with the gods.

In contrast, Yoganidra was completely separate from the demons in the first story. In the beginning of the second myth, Durga, created by the energies of the gods, was unconnected with the demon. But by

the conclusion of the story, she agrees to be represented with the demon at her feet for all times to come. In the third and final myth, Kali imbibes the substance of the demons, thus establishing a close link of substance between the demon and the terrible aspect of the goddess. One may say that, expelled from Vishnu's ears as ear wax, the demon ends as the blood absorbed by Kali within herself.

The Feminine As Absorber Of Evil

In the *Devi Mahatmya*, the first episode is "framed" by a verse paying homage to Mahasarasvati, who is identified as the *tamsika*, dark aspects of the divine feminine principle, and whose expression is said to be the goddess Yoganidra. The quality of *tamas* is associated with inertia and sloth on the one hand, and riotous movement on the other. This aspect of the goddess is used in the myth to delude the demons and to bring about their destruction. However, Vishnu can kill the demons only with the help of a boon from them, which places them in a morally superior position. Thus, the conclusion of the myth may be seen as unsatisfactory, and this gives rise to the next cycle in the text.

The second episode is "framed" by a verse about Mahalakshmi, said to be the *rajsika* aspect of the feminine principle.

Although Durga kills the demon, she gives him the boon that he may share in the worship offered to her. Thus the solution is still unsatisfactory, although the demon is subordinated to Durga.

The last episode is "framed" with a verse praising Kaushiki as the *satvika* aspect of the great goddess Mahakali. The only solution to the threat posed to the sacrificial order of the world by demonic forces, it seems, is for the godly forces to achieve a complete separation from demonic forces, and for the feminine principle to absorb the demonic in herself.

Thus, it is not really surprising that Mahakali and not Mahasarasvati is identified as the *satvika* aspect of the feminine principle. Normally, *satva* is identified with purity and whiteness. However, here, the meaning of *satva* as it relates to the feminine principle is not the usual meaning—that which is devoid of *rajas* and *tamas*, the baser two *gunas*. Rather, it is that which is able to absorb the base *gunas* in itself.

The text says that after drinking the blood of the demon, the goddess appeared to bear a resemblance to a demoness.

It is important to remember that in this text, the goddess Kali poses no threat to creation as she could be absorbed by Kaushiki from whom she had emerged.

Thus, this particular text finds a solution to the problem of the evil represented by the demons. It separates them from the gods and completely expels them from the sacrificial order. However, a new cycle of myths arose in other texts, in which the nature of the goddess itself became a problem, especially in contexts in which the *satvika* goddess could not contain the *tamsika* aspects of the feminine principle in herself.

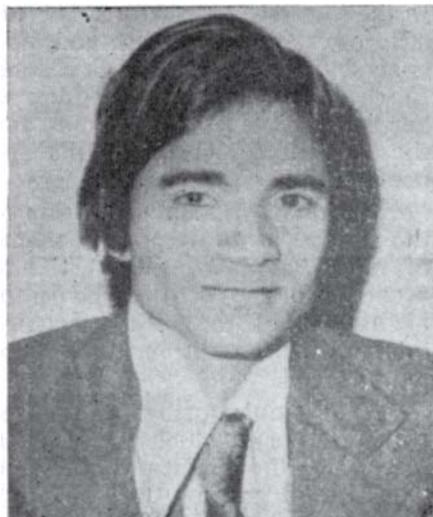
When we look at the three chains of the narrative in a single design, we see three different definitions of the feminine emerging with three different definitions of the masculine. The feminine in its dark aspect of *tamas* causes delusions, and misfortunes, and needs to be exorcised. In its *rajsika* aspect, it represents the creative energy which can be used by man to expel evil. In its highest, *satvika* form, it may absorb the evil in itself so that the masculine may be completely stainless.

Thus, a woman may be seen as the ensnaring *maya* of ignorance and delusion, the formidable *shakti* or power, and the auspicious *sati*, the devoted wife whose asceticism protects her husband. Movements between these three facets of the feminine provide the rich contextual variation which is the stuff of male-female relations in Indian society. □

Successful Struggle In Jaipur

On August 22, sessions judge Sunderlal Mehta of Jaipur, sentenced Chandrashekhar Sharma to life imprisonment for the murder of his wife, Gayatri.

Gayatri, aged 23, was killed on June 9, 1984, in her husband's house at Jaipur. Her parents live in the same city. She was educated up to class eight and was married in 1979. Within a few months, she began to be harassed for more dowry. She was insulted, starved, and beaten up. She was sent to her parents and stayed there for 13 months. On the intervention of neighbours, her in-laws took her back but began to torture her again. She was prevented from meeting her natal family.



Chandrashekhar



Gayatri

On June 9, 1984, her one year old daughter was snatched from her. At midnight, neighbours heard an uproar and, on investigating, found Gayatri lying dead, with rope marks on her neck, and wounds all over her body. The post mortem showed that she had died of asphyxiation due to strangulation and had suffered injury with a heavy weapon.

Chandrashekhar worked as a jeweller in the shop of Ramdhan Attar who is also alleged to have burnt his wife to death some years ago, and gotten away scot free. This man helped Chandrashekhar to get a number of false witnesses who testified that he was at the shop when Gayatri died.

Rajasthan Mahila Samiti and Jan Chetna Manch launched a campaign of protest. On June 24, 1984, a demonstration was held. Corner meetings were also held where it was resolved socially to boycott the Sharma family. This worked so well that not a single priest or barber could be found to conduct the rites at Gayatri's funeral even though her father-in-law scanned the whole of Jaipur and surrounding areas.

On July 8, a rally was held in front of the Sharma residence. The Sharmas registered a false case against the organisers of the rally and Gayatri's relatives who had taken part in it.

Gayatri Dowry Murder Case Struggle Committee was formed. It approached the authorities, with the demands that Chandrashekhar be denied bail and that his parents, sister and brother-in-law be also arrested. The first demand was complied with but not the second. The refusal of bail was instrumental in enabling the neighbours to testify fearlessly.

Many citizens, most of them women, took part in the campaign. The judgment came as a relief to all of them.

--Manimala
(translated from Hindi)

Muslim Women Launch Agitation



On June 6, 1985, Sharifabi, a young divorced woman, went on hunger strike at Bindu Chowk, Kolhapur, to protest against the Indian Muslim law which permits verbal divorce by a man of his wife. Sharifabi was married on January 1, 1985, to Harun Rashid, son of a hardware and cement merchant of Kolhapur. The

bride's father spent about Rs 30,000 on the wedding. Within a month of the wedding, Rashid asked her to bring a TV, a fan, an almirah and 25 saris from her natal home. When she did not fulfil this demand, Sharifabi was subjected to severe mental harassment by her in-laws.

On March 27, things came to a head when the in-laws finally dived her of her jewellery and certain other personal possessions, and threw her out of the house. She had to return to her father in Bombay. A few days later, Harun Rashid divorced her by sending her a *talaknama* or bill of divorce through the post.



Incensed by this, Sharifabi's father, Nabisahib Mullah, took the matter to the Sunnat Jamat, the local court of the Muslim community at Kolhapur. Rashid and his father, Ahmed Mohammed Khan, were summoned before the court and asked to explain the illtreatment meted out to Sharifabi. The two accused falsely alleged that Sharifabi was a leper. The suggestion of the members of the Jamat that this be substantiated by a medical examination of Sharifabi, was unacceptable to father and son, who next stated that they did not like the woman and were not prepared to keep her. When all efforts of the Jamat to bring about a reconciliation failed, they excommunicated the family of Harun Rashid.

Sharifabi next took her case to the Muslim Satyashodhak Samaj, a Muslim social reform body. With the help of this organisation, Sharifabi's father succeeded in obtaining Rs 10,000 in the form of cash and jewellery as *mehr* from Rashid's family.

But Sharifabi was forced to sign a statement saying that she would not press for maintenance. However, Sharifabi has now gone to court to claim maintenance, arguing that she signed the agreement under duress. The Samaj is supporting her in this legal action.

As long as Muslim men enjoy the right unilaterally to divorce their wives who have no such corresponding right, Muslim women will continue to live in insecurity and fear. In protest against this discriminatory law, Sharifabi went on a day's hunger strike. Nearly 800 women from nearby Muslim settlements came to express solidarity with her. That evening, the Muslim Satyashodhak Samaj took out a procession through the streets of Kolhapur, condemning the practice of verbal divorce and calling for the framing of a common civil code. They also presented a memorandum to the district level authorities, outlining their demands.

On April 23, the supreme court

delivered a historic judgment in the case of Shahbanu versus Mohammed Ahmed Khan, laying down that a husband must give maintenance to his divorced wife. This judgment has given Muslim women some confidence.

In order to give concrete shape to this new feeling, and to organise Muslim women around their own issue, the Samaj is organising, a Talak Mukti Morcha which will tour all the districts of Maharashtra. The activities will include public meetings, discussions with Muslims, street theatre, poster displays, slide shows and representations to every district magistrate.

The Morcha will begin from Kolhapur on November 3, 1985. It will be flagged off from Bindu Chowk, the place where an unprecedented number of Muslim women collected in support of Sharifabi's protest against the discriminatory law of verbal divorce by men.