

Lakshmi and Alakshmi

The Kojagari Lakshmi Vrat Katha of Bengal

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LAKSHMI, the goddess of wealth gets more attention in certain states of India and accordingly she has been assigned one special day in a week. She is worshipped in households by herself. Elaborate rituals accompany the worship and *vratkathas* are recited to invoke the presence of the goddess. For example, Bengal has six stories relating to Lakshmi which are recited on six different occasions. Similarly Lakshmi *vratkatha* in Orissa depicts Lakshmi who doesn't believe in untouchability. She is the sole manager of wealth. She finally teaches a lesson to her husband and brother-in-law for preventing her from going to the house of a *Chandalinee*.

In Orissa, Thursday is exclusively meant for Lakshmi *pūja*. People partake only vegetarian food that day. So much so that fish markets have a deserted look on that day.

In the South (Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh) Friday is the day earmarked for Lakshmi. Elaborate *vratkathas* are recited to invoke her. Similar is the case in some parts of western India.

By contrast, in North India the goddess Lakshmi has no special day devoted to her. She is never worshipped alone. She is clubbed either with Lord Ganesh, the *Vighnanesan* (remover of obstacles) or with Lord Satyanarayan.

All these variations raise various questions. Why do certain female goddesses get importance in certain parts of India? In other words we may ask as to why Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth particularly for the agricultural communities gets so much attention in Eastern and Southern India and why not in the North? What association does the status of women have with the importance given to the goddess Lakshmi and women's involvement in economic activities?

Unlike the Oriya Lakshmi *vratkatha* (which was published in **Manushi** No. 72), Bengal, the land of Shakti, has six *vratkathas* which are recited on six different occasions. Lakshmi *pūja* starts in the months of Bhadra and ends in Chaitra.

Again all these stories depict the life history of the members of high caste (either Brahmins or Kshatriyas) and how they get back their lost wealth or become rich after they worship the goddess Lakshmi.

The most important Lakshmi *pūja* comes on the full moon day of Ashwin or Sharad Purnima in Bengal. On that day the Bengali households recite the story of Kojagari Lakshmi. The rituals consist of driving out Alakshmi through the back door at night and welcoming Lakshmi through the front door. It is also interesting to note that Lakshmi who is the goddess of wealth for the agricultural community has been evoked in various forms such as Rajalakshmi, Kulakshmi, etc. though the main Lakshmi stays supreme in this story.

It is also important to mention here that this story has been influenced by the Brahmanical tradition which considers a wife to be inferior. So much so that the King leaves his wife on the bank of Ganga and comes back to his kingdom. At the end however, it is the Queen who saves him from his miseries and helps him regain all his wealth.



In the land of Banga there was a very virtuous King who was well-known for his observance of the dictates of *dharma*. He was also always respectful to the wise and the learned. A market used to be held in front of his palace and, in accordance with the dictates of his *dharma*, he used to buy up whatever was leftover at the market at the end of the day's ex-

change. He did it so that no seller ever had to sustain any loss.

One day goddess Lakshmi resolved to test the King's commitment to *dharma*. She asked god Dharma to disguise himself as a seller and take an iron statue of Alakshmi to the King's market to sell. The divine sculptor Vishwakarma made a statue of Alakshmi and Dharma took it to the

market. At the market the people asked him the name of the goddess whose statue he was trying to sell. At this Dharma addressed the public loudly so that everyone could hear and said: "This is the statue of Alakshmi and I am ready to sell it for a thousand rupees." On learning that it was a statue of Alakshmi the angry buyers turned away from him. Dharma then carried

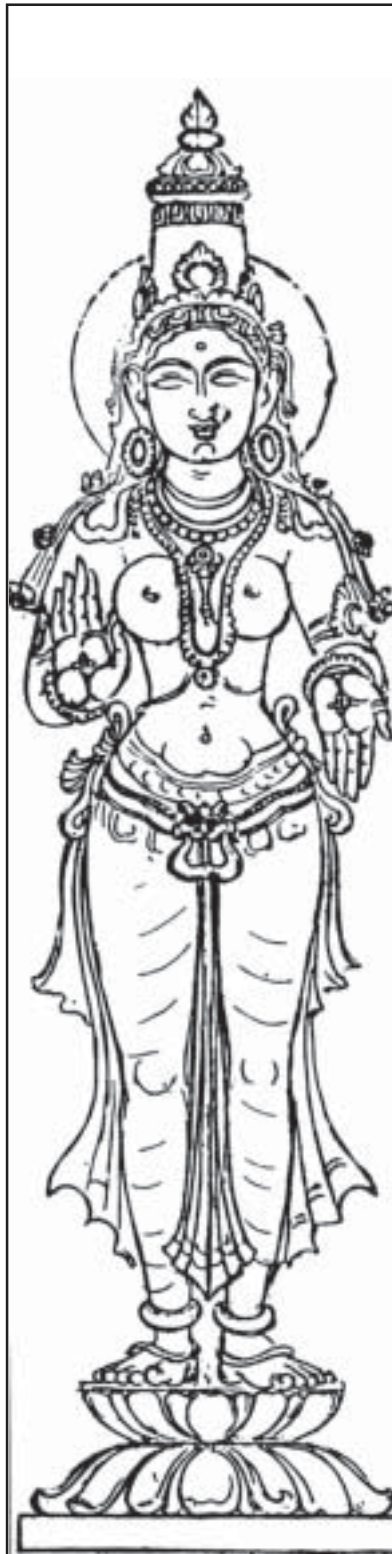
the statue to the streets and loudly announced his intention to sell it. On hearing this announcement, and keeping his *dharma*, the King bought the statue of Alakshmi to keep in his house since no one else was ready to buy it.

That night the King woke up from his sleep upon hearing a woman cry. When he went out to investigate, he saw an extremely beautiful woman crying as she walked out of the palace. When the King asked her who she was and where she was going in the dead of the night, the woman said that she was the Rajalakshmi (the Lakshmi of the kingdom). Since the King had given shelter to Alakshmi in his house, Rajalakshmi could no longer stay under the same roof with her. She could stay only if the King were to agree to throw Alakshmi out of his house. However, since she was very fond of the King she was ready to grant him a boon, which was that the King would from now onwards understand the languages of all animals and insects.

The King politely addressed the goddess: "O Mother! I do understand your anguish. But I have no option. I stand by my *dharma*, and according to its dictates, I must keep the statue of Alakshmi in my house. I am ready to withstand anything, even the loss of my life, to be true to my *dharma*."

Though the leaving of the Rajalakshmi worried the King a great deal, he still stood by his resolve. On the following night, he once again woke up on hearing a woman crying and this time found Bhagyalakshmi (the Lakshmi of good fortune) leaving the palace. Like Rajalakshmi, she too offered the King the alternative of throwing out Alakshmi to retain her, but as before, the King decided to stick to his *dharma* even at the cost of losing the Lakshmi of good fortune.

The King went back to his bed even more worried. Once again he



Lakshmi

heard a woman cry and went out to enquire. This time he found Jasholakshmi (the Lakshmi of fame and goodwill) leaving his house. He answered her in the same vein that, regardless of the consequences, he had to keep Alakshmi in his house to be true to his *dharma*.

Back in his bed, the worried King heard someone cry again. This time he found a man and a woman leaving the palace. The woman introduced herself as Kulalakshmi (the Lakshmi of the lineage). Once again, the King declared his firm resolve to be true to his *dharma* and she left. Now the King looked at the man and asked him who he was. The man said he was the god Dharma. Since all the Lakshmis had left the King, he did not think it appropriate for him to stay on with the King. But this time the King did not passively stand aside and let him leave. The King asked: "Why, sir, would you be leaving me? All my life I have acted according to *dharma*. All the Lakshmis may leave me, but you have no reason to leave me and you should not. I will always be true to you." God Dharma was pleased at this reply and agreed to stay back. However, he advised the King to perform the worship of Lakshmi on the full-moon of the Kojagari.

With all the Lakshmis of the palace gone, the King's situation went from bad to worse. Everyday when the King sat down to eat and the Queen served his food, some ants regularly gathered by the side of his plate for the leftovers. As the King's situation deteriorated, he became very depressed and started to lose his appetite. One day he told his queen that she should instruct the cook not to put any *ghee* in his food. Next time when the King sat down to eat, the ants who came for the leftovers did not taste any *ghee* in it. Then the leader among the ants told the others: "You see, the King has fallen upon such hard times since



buying that Alakshmi that he cannot even afford *ghee* in his food any longer." Since the King could now, with the grace of his Rajalakshmi, understand the language of the insects, he understood what the ants were saying among themselves and laughed. However, his queen, who knew nothing about it, was surprised to hear him laugh for no apparent reason and asked him the reason. At this the King answered that he could not tell her because if he did he was sure to die. The queen persisted. Finally the King gave in and agreed to tell her the reason sitting on the sides of the river Ganga.

When they went to the banks of the Ganga, the King heard a he-goat and a she-goat talking among themselves. The she-goat requested the he-goat to get her some grass that was floating down the river. At this the he-goat answered that the grass was floating on deep water and he would be sure to drown if he were to try to get it. He was not so stupid or crazy like the King that he would lay down his life at the words of a woman.

On hearing these words of the he-goat, the King came back to his senses. He left the queen behind in the forest and went back to his pal-

ace and applied his mind to the duties of running his kingdom. He never gave one more thought to the Queen or what kind of a situation she might be in.

The Queen, while wandering around in the forest, heard some auspicious conch-shell blowing accompanied by other music. Following the sound, she came to a place where she found the daughter of the sages in the forest worshipping an image of goddess Lakshmi made of some flour-dough. On being asked by the Queen who they were worshipping they told her that it was the day of the Kojagari full-moon and therefore an auspicious day for worshipping goddess Lakshmi. If one were to worship Lakshmi on this day, then that woman would get anything she desires on asking the goddess. Worshipping Lakshmi on this day also throws Alakshmi out of the house and one gains in prosperity. On hearing this, the Queen took some flour-dough from the sage women

and made an image of Lakshmi for herself and worshipped her with full devotion and appropriate rites. Then she ate the *prasada* with the sage women and stayed up the night with them.

From that day, all the Lakshmis who had left the King came back to the Queen and Alakshmi, thus defeated by Lakshmi, left the house of the King. Then the god Dharma gave the King the good news that Alakshmi had left his house since his Queen had worshipped goddess Lakshmi on the full-moon day of the *Kojagari*. On hearing this the King went to fetch his Queen back with great love and respect.

From that time, the King prospered from day to day by worshipping Goddess Lakshmi on the full-moon night of the *Kojagari*.

Here ends the *vrata* story for the month of the *Ashwin* (the sixth month of the lunar calendar) and let us all sing in chorus the name of *Hari*



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