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ENVISIONING POWER AND VIRTUE

□ Aloka Patel

Can we call her “powerful”? What makes a person “powerful?” Is it her or his possession of more than one attribute or the ability to do more than one thing at a time, like the multitasking woman?

Think of a time when you felt “powerful.” Was it not a time when you discovered some inner strength to reach further than you ever had, a time when you found the courage to try something new? How often, and how many women do you think can afford this “inner strength” or “courage” to try something new or different, from what society prescribes, without raising eyebrows or risking social stigma?

The picture above is the image of an everyday woman we see in our families. Perhaps we remember our mothers, who we envision as hard-working and chaste.

Now let us take a look at this image of Goddess Durga, which perhaps inspired the image of the multitasking woman.

Isn't she fair, beautiful, good-looking, and at peace with herself? But, let us think also of Mahisasura. Does he look like a sinner, vanquished and repentant? I would rather say, he looks enchanted, which, in fact, he is! Durga's arms indicate her various powers, in this case the weapons and emblems that the gods gave her. Were our mothers this *Dasabhujja*?

One is not made powerful by making her sit on a high pedestal. A person is powerful when the real/ordinary world regards and reveres her for what she actually is (as a housewife perhaps) and accords the dignity that is due to her position and abilities or talents—Not by trying to make her achieve the impossible and/or being “god-like.” Mahisasura was invincible, only a beautiful woman could defeat him. But what fate awaits those who are “not so beautiful” or “ugly”? Don't they have a right to “powers,” or the same reverence that is enjoyed by Durgas? A woman in India, is always expected to be a “Devi”—chaste and virgin, or a sati. If not, she is a sinner. Not so very different for the poor “Man” either. He is the “minotaur,” the embodiment of all evil and animal instincts or should we say, just human! However, where the man shuttles between the human

and animal (evil)—which is so much a real life-like situation, it becomes so much more difficult for the woman who is denied human physical urges, and instead shuttles between the ideological expectations of society to be a chaste “Devi”/Sati or fall to be a sinner or *asati*.

This paper attempts to state that the claim we Indians make of a tradition that has ever been respectful of women by identifying her with Devi Durga, is not only oppressive to women, but is at the same time an expression of contradictions between the “powers” of the goddess and the “reality” of the stigma that such “power” apprehends if and when practiced by women. Although the goddess is worshipped by all, in reality a woman who tries to exploit her feminine sexuality, which the goddess embodies, is sure to be condemned by the society she inhabits. A contradiction also lies between the Vedic goddesses who were regarded as passive and inert and the Shaktas who worshipped the female god as personification of sexual power. This idea is discussed by Rita Banerji in her book *Sex and Power* (2009).

Goddesses of fertility rites like Cybele, Syria Dea and Isis also find references in Greco-Roman, Egyptian and other Asiatic mythologies. The Goddess slays a minotaur, and brings life and lost fertility back to earth. The male, symbolic of animal instincts, is sacrificed at the altar of the goddess, so that life and peace is restored. Whereas, other cultures do not any more practice the older religions, in India, where an agricultural populace is heavily dependant on fertility of the soil, people ritually worship a power that nurtures, protects and brings the seed to fruition. In the words of A. S. Altekar, “The apotheosis of the mother has reached a greater height in India than anywhere else.” (101) This cult of goddess worship iconically represented in “mother goddess figures” is vaunted as proof of woman's high status in our society. The goddess is considered to be the dynamic energy that is embodied in all women and is responsible for creation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe. But Indian society has not really paid much attention to the values and ideologies imposed on the mortal replicas of this feminine goddess, the everyday Indian woman. Do women in India enjoy the same



liberties as that of the goddess? Although theoretically, they are all images of Durga, do they enjoy the same reverence if and when they begin to behave like actual Durgas? Preaching and practice are poles apart. Whereas Durga exploited her sexuality to become the goddess that she is, women in traditional Indian society are taught to suppress and deny their sexuality, so much so that they become invisible as sexual beings. They are not supposed to be “seen”—in particular places, at particular times. And of course, the feminine body needs particularly to be covered and “concealed”. If women defy, it is at their risk of consequent violence and abuse! Such rules, however, do not apply to men. Why should a woman’s exposed body be more provocative to a man than that of the man’s to a woman? Yet ironically, “beauty,” read in terms of fairness of skin, is so much prized in our society that there is no dearth of “fairness creams” available in the market. Even media does not shy away from advertising such products. What pains and how many pots of fairness creams get invested to rub the darkness off the skins of women, and then they cover it with yards of silk—all to look as “attractive” as a Devi!

Feminists have earlier criticized identification of Indian women with the Mother goddess, which labels women either as saints or sinners, with little room in between. Some feminists, however, argue that the idea of shakti can be used to empower Indian women to resist patriarchy. Kamala Ganesh observes that the sacralisation of woman as mother is indicative of female creative power, “She conveys not so much the ideas of physical motherhood but a world-view in which the creative power of femininity is central,” (WS58) Sukumari Bhattacharji, on the other hand, reads the deification of motherhood as “compensatory, seeking to recompense society’s indifference to the mother.” Radha Kumar, similarly, in her study of women’s movement in India notes that the mother-ideology was deployed in the nationalist period by equating mother-goddess with mother-India: “of women’s power as mothers of the nation... the Gandhian lauding of the spirit of endurance and suffering embodied in the mother.” (2) Geetanjali Singh Chanda in her book, *Indian Women in the House of Fiction* (2008) rightly observes, “The sacralisation of motherhood is inherently problematic,” (18) and notes Mahasweta Devi’s short story, “Stanadayini” as a brilliant indictment of the glorification of the abstract idea of motherhood while ignoring the position of real mothers. She also claims that fictional writings by women, such

as Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Sashi Deshpande’s *The Binding Vine* indicate that for an older generation of women, often the only legitimate way out of imprisoning gender roles, whether of sacred motherhood or dutiful wives, was to follow the footsteps of Mira Bai, who renounced the world for her god.

We cannot deny that the politics of worship of mother goddesses is deeply sexual. We may start from the idol itself. The goddess is fair-skinned (and hence, beautiful) and embodies female strength as sexual superiority. She is shown as slaying a demonic half-man-half-animal creature who is placed at her feet. The demon Mahishasur is dark-skinned, has a naked upper body and lower animal body to which is attributed all “dark” (tamasik) characteristics. However, unwritten taboos on mentioning sex have silenced discourses on such archetypal images. Family and gender discourses generally centre around the dangerous consequences of breaking the status quo. As mother goddess, she becomes ironically, a contradictory image, of sexual purity on one hand, and on the other, someone of exceptional sexual charm who entices man, or the animal in man, to his doom.

According to tradition, the first lumps of clay for making Durga idols have to be collected, among others, from the doorstep of a prostitute. Ritual, presents this as a symbol of inclusiveness. And although we know reality to be so very different, once an idea is established, it becomes difficult to dislodge. Karl Marx had famously said that religion was the “opium of the masses” and he was perhaps right. It has certainly become the opium for Indian women who continue to dwell under the illusion that whatever the colour of their skin, caste or status, they are worshipped as goddesses. **In reality, people don’t think or believe that the real women in their lives are like the ones they are worshipping.** In September 2013, Indian advertising agency Taproot produced an ‘Abused Goddesses’ campaign, recreating Hindu goddesses with black eyes and bruised faces. Although its impact was not measured, the posters highlighted the contrast between deity worship and the treatment of girls and women in modern-day India, where a high female infanticide rate still exists. (Sarkar, Monica. “Feminism for Goddesses”)

The Devi Puranas state that Durga is the warrior manifestation of Goddess Adishakti. Durga means the Invincible One. But where lies the power of her “invincibility”? *Saptasati*, the hymn that is recited during Durga Puja in West Bengal and Odisha, illustrates that

this power of the goddess is inherent to her feminine sexual charm. Among the three forms that Durga takes to destroy evil, *Saptasati* talks first of Yogmaya. Brahma prays to Yogmaya who resides in the eyes of Vishnu to charm, in order to destroy the asuras. Madhu and Kaitava who threaten to kill him. Charmed by her beauty, or as it says, "tamasi shakti," the asura duo willingly surrender to be killed at the hands of Vishnu. The second invocation is that of the form that is generally worshipped in pandals—of Durga as Mahisasuramardini. After a long battle, finally, drunk with alcohol she sets her feet on Mahisasura's neck and attacks his "heart" with her trident. Severely injured (never is it said, "mortally injured") as the asura emerges from its animal body, he is stunned by the goddess' beauty and is rendered powerless and "dies" as she beheads him. The last form is that of Mahamaya, the virgin goddess who claims that she would marry only someone who would defeat her at war and crush her ego. Like the other two

goddesses, she too is a stunning beauty who receives proposals of marriage from asuras, Sumbha and Nisumbha. But she ultimately kills them along with Chanda and Munda and proves invincible.

What worshippers cherish in this goddess are her submission, beauty, and chastity—in that order, in the three forms that demolish demons. What is ironical, however, is the overtly sexual implication of struggle between the divine and the evil. In a country where goddesses also embody contradictory values/ virtues, is it not time that woman as a human being should be respected for what she *is*; NOT for what she is not or cannot be— a Durga—invincible in beauty (Laxmi), knowledge (Saraswati) or physical prowess (Kali). Let us put it like Amitabh Bacchan does in *Pink*: Whether she says "No" or "Yes"—in either case she is human, and deserves rights and respect. Otherwise, she will be the commercial mother of Mahasweta Devi's short story, "Stanadayini"—abused both at home and in the market.

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