

# The Concept of Shakti: Hinduism as a Liberating Force for Women

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The intricate dynamics of power and gender has grown to become an increasingly important topic within the realm of present day academia - and justifiably so. Though representing half of the human race, women's voices, needs and inner psyches have, traditionally, been relegated to a place of unimportance in the history of the Western world. Throughout the history of European civilization, the nature of the feminine was misunderstood, neglected and, in some cases, practically demonized. Consequently, for millennia women have been deprived of the power - political, economic, spiritual, even sexual - which men so take for granted. Recognizing the imperative need to correct this historic imbalance, many modern Feminist leaders attempted to devise an ideological framework through which they felt that the roots of this imbalance could be properly understood. Additionally, there have been many attempts to wrest control over the primary mechanisms of power, specifically in the political and economic sectors. As a result, what were at one time conceived as the exclusive domains of the male gender have now begun to open up to women. In the modern West, power is no longer equated with the testosterone laden half of the human race. The question, however, is should this have ever been the view of Western civilization?

For while it may have been the tradition in the West to naturally equate power with the masculine, this is not at all a universally held outlook. One world-view which offers us a fresh and radically different approach to the issue of power and the feminine is found in the philosophy and culture of Hinduism - and specifically in the concept of Shakti. Within the metaphysical framework of Shakti, we discover the concept of the feminine as being the very manifestation of power itself. In the following essay, I will accomplish three tasks: 1) an examination of the concept of Shakti as found throughout the history and various schools of thought of Hinduism; 2) I will explore the historical implications that this concept has contributed in forming the traditional Hindu view of the nature of the feminine and the subsequent role of women; and finally 3) I will share some thoughts on the role that the concept of Shakti can potentially play in helping to bring about a reemergence of the much neglected and crucially needed feminine in our own Western culture.

The Sanskrit word Shakti can be translated as meaning "power" or "energy." It is derived from the parasmaipada verb root "shak," which means "to be able," "to do," "to act." This power is witnessed in all the various phenomena of life. It is the force responsible for the growth of vegetation, animals and human beings. It is what is responsible for the movement of all things. The planets revolve around the sun as a result of Shakti. It is Shakti that makes the winds blow and the oceans churn. Shakti is manifest as the very affective ability of all the forces of nature. She is the heat of fire, the brilliance of the sun, the very life force of all living beings. In human beings, she is seen as the power of intelligence (buddhi), compassion (daya) and divine love (bhakti), among her many other functions (Sharma, 1974; Goswami 1995). It is the power of Shakti that "...keeps the gods in their position, makes a man virile or makes a sage of a man" (Sharma, 1974). Without the presence of Shakti, all creation would be rendered impotent.



Most significantly, Shakti is an exclusively feminine principle. Shakti is synonymous with the great Devi, or the Great Goddess of Hinduism. As such, she is omnipresent in Hindu society via her many forms. She is propitiated by all segments of Hindu society, especially by women. According to Klaus Klostermaier, "...childless women implore her to conceive. In times of epidemics, it is the goddess who is implored to grant health and relief" (Klostermaier, 1990). Shakti has always been a living force throughout the long history of Hinduism.

The importance of goddesses is evident throughout the various sects and schools of thought of Hinduism (Gatwood, 1985). Additionally, the presence of goddesses is seen throughout the long literary tradition of India. In the Rig Veda, for example, at least 40 goddesses are mentioned. These include: Sarasvati, goddess of wisdom; Ushas, the dawn; and Aditi, who is depicted as "birthless" (R.V., 10.7.2.). The very word "Shakti" itself appears in the Rig Veda some 12 times. Two of the word's derivatives, "shaktivat" and "shakman," respectively appear twice and five times (Raj, 1983). Part of the Rig Veda is known as the "Devi Sukta" and is certainly a recognition of Shakti as a cosmic principle. Shakti is also seen in the later Itihasas, or Epics of India. She is found in the Ramayana, where "...she is called Devi, and is respected by all" (Sharma, 1974). In the Mahabharata there are two hymns dedicated to her. The various manifestations of the goddess are ubiquitous throughout the Puranas. Indeed, the Devi Bhagavata Purana is entirely dedicated to her. One would be hard pressed to find a work anywhere in the entirety of Hindu literature in which there is not at least some mention of a feminine power.

Hinduism's respect for Shakti is not limited to the religion's literary heritage. The various schools of Indian philosophy (shad-darshanas) also took this principle quite seriously. The Mimamsakas, for example, held that Shakti was no less than the inherent power of all things. The Naiyayika logicians attempted to explain Shakti in terms of being the function or property of any cause. For the Vedanta school, Shakti was "...conceived as the activity of a cause revealing itself in the shape of an effect" (Dev,

1987). Of all the various schools of Indian philosophy, however, the school most influential in helping to formulate a theory of Shakti was the Samkhya school.

Samkhya teaches the dualistic doctrine of Prakriti / Purusha. According to this theory there are two radically distinct principles at play during the creation of the cosmos: matter (Prakriti) and spirit (Purusha). Prakriti is the primordial matter which is present before the cosmos becomes manifest. It is as a direct result of the devolution of this original material substance that the universe, with all its diversity of names and forms comes into being. Prakriti is seen as being "...the power of nature, both animate and inanimate. As such, nature is seen as dynamic energy" (Rae, 1994). Prakriti is originally passive, immobile and pure potentiality by nature. It is only as a direct result of her contact with the kinetic Purusha that she unfolds into the variagatedness we see before us. Sudhir Gupta explains this process of devolution from the perspective of a Shakta, or a worshiper of Devi, the Great Goddess:

The universe with all its diversity and multiplicity remains equated in the divine volition as conception before manifestation. It is manifested in the course of basic evolution, started under the influence of the creative volition of the Divine Mother. The Universal Mother in Her Absolute Self admits of no mutability, change or division.  
(Gupta, 1977)

Thus, Shakti is seen as being antecedent to Prakriti, with Shakti being the instrumental cause, in the form of the Devi, or the Great Goddess, and Prakriti serving as the material cause.

The idea of Prakriti / Purusha is seen mirrored in another closely allied concept: that of the Divine Consort. According to Hindu teachings, Shakti, energy, cannot exist in a vacuum. If there is an energy, it must be someone's energy. Almost every god (deva) of the Hindu pantheon has a feminine companion, a consort, a goddess. This is an idea which is an indispensable element of every major sect of Hinduism. Vishnu, for example, has the goddess Shri (Lakshmi) as his eternal companion. Shiva is accompanied by Parvati, Brahma by Sarasvati, Krishna by Radha. These goddess-consorts are said to personify nothing less than the essential energy of the god. In the words of Ernest Payne:

The energy of Vishnu and Shiva was personified as a goddess and identified with Prakriti, the primary source of the universe. The connubial relations between Devi and her husband were held to typify the mystical union of the eternal principles, matter and spirit, which produces the world.  
(Payne, 1933)

So integral is the relationship between a particular god and his Shakti that one is thought incapable of existing without the other. It is said that in her manifestation as Shiva's consort and source of energy, Shakti is embodied in the "i" of his name. According to the grammatical rules of classical Sanskrit, if a consonant is not followed by a vowel, it is automatically assumed that this consonant is followed by the vowel "a." Consequently, without this "i" in his name, Shiva becomes shava, or a lifeless corpse. Thus it is the feminine principle which is the animating force of life itself.

Both the feminine and the masculine are necessarily present in the Divine. This is dramatically illustrated in South Asia in the image of Ardhanarishvara, the representation of God as being half man and half woman. Veneration of God necessarily entails veneration of the Goddess. They are two aspects of the same being and are, as such, mutually dependent upon one another.

The intimacy of god and goddess can be more clearly illustrated by examining one of the stories involving the creation of Devi which is found in the Devi Bhagavata Purana. Interestingly, although clearly a Shakta Purana, the Devi Bhagavata Purana describes Vishnu / Krishna as being the supreme God (IX. 2. 12 - 23) who "...is said to be the root and creator of all" (Dev, 1987) . According to this account, Krishna was at one time the only being in existence. Desiring to create the universe, He divided Himself into two parts, the left being female and the right male. That female was none other than Radha, the eternal consort and Shakti of Krishna, who is described as being the Mula Prakriti, or the root source of all existence. From the conjugal sport of Radha and Krishna a golden egg was born that was the repository of the material from which our universe was created. Creation, then, is depicted in the Devi Bhagavata Purana as proceeding from Krishna, through Radha. The feminine, Shakti, is shown to be crucial and indispensable in the process of creation. This fact very clearly demonstrates the mutual dependence in which god and goddess hold one another.

The relationship that is enjoyed between the gods and goddesses in Hinduism is one of the wielder of power (shaktiman, the masculine principle) and the power itself (Shakti, the feminine). Each is meaningless without the existence of the other. While the possessor of power is the guiding force as to the power's direction and purpose, it is the power itself which provides the ability to perform any task. To use a crude example, we might say that the deva is the computer while the devi is the electricity that makes the computer's functioning possible. Shaktiman is the principle that gives guidance and direction to power. Shakti is the vital, life-giving force of the god, as well as the personification of his particular power. As Shrivatsa Goswami explains this concept:

On the transcendental plane this functional duality implies the split of the Absolute into power or potency (shakti) , the subjective component, and the possessor of power (shaktiman), the objective one. On the phenomenal plane too there exists such a duality.  
(Goswami, 1985)

Together, the deva and devi, the god and goddess of Hinduism, are the able and the ability, respectively. Moreover, this concept is not relegated solely to the realm of the Divine.



### **Rama and Sita, an Incarnation of the Transcendent God/Goddess**

What is true on the macrocosmic level is also the rule on the microcosmic. Human beings too are said to also participate in the interplay of shakti and shaktiman. For in Hinduism, every woman is said to be a manifestation of the divine Shakti. The power of Shakti, the feminine principle, is believed to be directly present in creation in the form of our mothers, sisters, daughters and wives. As the contemporary feminist author Elinor Gadon explains, "the truth of the Goddess is the mystery of our being. She is the dynamic life force within. Her form is embedded in our collective psyche..." (Gadon, 1989). While she is primarily present as personified in woman, however, Shakti is also present in man.

There are several traditions of spiritual unfoldment in India that teach the notion that Shakti resides within each and every human being, and that liberation can be achieved by the proper utilization of the feminine principle within. One example of such a tradition is the path of Kundalini-yoga. According to Kundalini-yoga philosophy, Shakti resides at the base of the spine in the form of the kundalini energy. The goal of this path is to raise this energy through the various energy centers (chakras) of the subtle, or

astral, body. As each energy portal is open, the yogi achieves newer and higher levels of spiritual realization and power. Once this Shakti has reached the top chakra located at the crown of the head, full liberation and self-realization are achieved. This very process is described as the union of Shiva and Shakti (Dev, 1987).

In addition to Kundalini-yoga, there is an entire denomination of Hinduism dedicated to the realization of the Great Goddess, known as Shaktism. The tradition of Shaktism is most influential in West Bengal and Assam. Its influence, however, has been felt throughout the length and breadth of South Asia. While some references to Shaktism can certainly be found in the ancient Vedic literature (Sharma, 1974), it is the works known as the Tantras which are considered most authoritative by adherents. Philosophically, the teachings of Shaktism seem to occupy a middle position between the dualism of Samkhya and the extremely monistic interpretation of Vedanta posited by Shankara.

Unlike with Shankara, for the Shakta the world is not seen as being merely an illusion; it is in fact extremely real. In Shaktism, it is believed that Shakti (the goddess Prakriti) evolves her own being into 36 tattvas, or constituents of reality, in order to create the universe. The present diversified universe is nothing less than the creative manifestation of the uncreated goddess Prakriti, or Shakti. Prakriti, both in the form of this world and the human body is in fact the vehicle for salvation. In practice, Shaktism stresses the sacramental nature of the human body due to its being the locus of spiritual unfoldment (Kumar, 1986). For Shaktas, as for the majority of Hindus, women are greatly respected as being the personifications of Shakti in human, and therefore very spiritually accessible, form.

How has this view of the feminine affected the Hindu perspective on the nature and role of women in the Hindu community? Traditionally, Hinduism teaches that, while women and men naturally share much in common, their different psychological states and outlooks should not be overlooked. The belief is that, in general terms, while men are more aggressive, cerebral and self-promoting, women tend to be more nurturing, intuitive, mature and giving. Interestingly, it is precisely these feminine qualities which are aspired toward in Hindu spiritual life - by both men and women. Like every other religion and culture known to history, individual Hindus have sometimes had difficulty putting their high spiritual ideals into actual practice. Overall, however, the record of Hinduism vis-à-vis the treatment of women has been a very good one. As a result, according to Klaus Klostermaier:

Traditional Hinduism is still strongly supported by women; women form the largest portion of temple goers and festival attendants, and women keep traditional domestic rituals alive and pass on the familiar stories of the gods and goddesses to their children.

(Klostermaier, 1994)

As we will see, Hindu women have not only historically enjoyed the status of being the repository of Shakti, but have often actually had the opportunity to wield some actual power.

Unlike what is clearly observed in the majority of Western literature, Hindu literature is full of accounts of heroic, strong and brave women. There are many accounts of such women in the Mahabharata. For example, we find Draupadi, who is depicted as a brave and iron-willed woman. There is also Kunti, who

perseveres with her honor and her faith intact despite a life riddled with tragedies. In the Ramayana, we meet Sita, the wife - and Shakti - of Rama, an incarnation of God. Though arranged marriages are the norm in Hindu society, we find that Sita chooses her own husband in a svayamvara ceremony. Also of her own free will, she chooses to accompany Rama to the forest when he is sent into exile, thus exhibiting her strength and commitment to loyalty. While living in the forest, she continues to display her independent nature, as when she convinces Rama to chase the gold-spotted deer. Hindu literature is full of such examples of strong, heroic women. Images of powerful women in Hinduism are not limited to the realm of literature.

They are also witnessed throughout the living historical record of India as well. Hindu women have historically easily risen to heights of power within various monastic and religious hierarchical structures, parallels of which would have been unheard of in Western religion and society until only recently. In the earliest Vedic era, for example, women were awarded the sacred thread of priests (brahmanas) (Klostermaier, 1994). One text of the Rig Veda (V, 28) mentions that there was a female rishi, or revealer of sacred truth, known as Vishvara. There were also women philosophers such as Vachaknavi, who debated Yajnavalkya, of Upanishadic fame. The famous Sanskrit grammarian, Panini, observed the distinction in the Sanskrit language between "acaryani" (the wife of a teacher) and "acaryaa" (a lady teacher), indicating that women were accepted as spiritual teachers. Such women saints as Andal and Mirabai were leaders of the devotional Bhakti movement "...that initiated the religious liberation of women [and] was largely promoted and supported by women devotees" (Ibid., 1994). Women have continued this long tradition as leaders of various Hindu communities to this day. Such examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the forms of Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, Amritanandamayi, and Meera Ma, among many, many others (Johnsen, 1994). Considering that Indian culture has always been a culture in which religion has always been the most important social institution in society, it is no small accomplishment for women to have risen so high in the echelons of Hindu leadership.



**Sri Andal: One of Hinduism's Greatest Saints**

Such respect for the feminine has not been as readily visible in the history of the Western world, unfortunately. The Western religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have not had the same abundant degree of examples of women in leadership throughout their respective histories. To this day, for example, women are barred from the priesthood in the Roman Catholic church. It has only been in the latter third of the twentieth century that a reemergence of the feminine has begun to take place in European and American societies. Recognizing the terrible price that this gaping deficiency has wrought upon the world in the forms of war, the environmental crisis and the exploitation of women, many present day women thinkers are openly calling for a reclaiming of feminine values in many different sectors of life. In the words of Eleanor Rae: "while the feminine is not limited in its context, there are nevertheless certain key places where it is most appropriately rediscovered. These are in women, in the Earth, and in the Divinity" (Rae, 1994). By recognizing the sacred nature of women as personifications of the feminine aspect of divinity, and by seeing the Earth, not as a lifeless object, there solely for our exploitation, but rather as the living personality of our collective Mother, we can end much of the needless violence and suffering brought about by denying the feminine. Agreeing with this assessment, Vandana Shiva has written:

The violence to nature as symptomatized by the ecological crisis, and the



violence to women, as symptomitized by their subjugation and exploitation, arise from this subjugation of the feminine principle.  
(Shiva, 1989)

In an crystal-clear display of the ancient concept of Shakti coming full circle to occupy the center stage of current academic debate, it has finally been recognized that the feminine aspect of the very Divinity Him(Her)self has been too long neglected. In the works of such people as Matthew Fox and Vicki Noble, we are now witnessing a call for the reemergence of the concept of the sacred feminine power of God, of Shakti. In such interesting developments as these, I venture to say that we are not so much witnessing the "Hinduization" of Western thought, as we are the rediscovery of the feminine principle as an integral and inseparable part of our very being.

These more recent developments in the West, as well as the long and positive history of the concept of Shakti in India, have shown the idea of a sacred feminine power originating from Divinity and, therefore, necessarily inherent in all things, to be a very relevant subject for further exploration - both on an academic, as well as on a personal, spiritual level. While seemingly arising from the misty and esoteric depths of the philosophy and sacred stories of Hinduism, Shakti is actually a force which also has the ability to effect all human culture: politically, socially and at the deepest levels of our psyches - if we will only let Her.

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