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[Table of
Contents](#)

[Back Issues](#)

[Homepage](#)

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The enduring presence of the divine feminine in Hinduism

by Savitri L. Bess

Perhaps one of the reasons we in the West are drawn to Hinduism, once past the initial exoticism, is that we can see all aspects of it offering spiritual paths often unobscured by cultural and religious shadows. To see the perfection inherent in the core of another culture's belief system has the capability to free us from the preconceptions and misconceptions which come from having been born into the entanglements innate to our own culture. To expand our minds by transporting them into concepts foreign to our normal way of being can break old patterns. After sloughing off the surface trappings of our own heritage, we might be led down into the beauty and love inherent within them; we might discover that the Great Mother was always there.

That is the other gift a Hindu view gives us: The enduring presence of the divine feminine.

Even though at our American ashram on the East Coast we worshipped the Mother twice daily, adorned her image with flowers, offered her sweet rice, and chanted her names, it was not until my first journey to India that I began to get a tiny glimpse of the broad spectrum of her power and grace. In Hindu India, great rivers are named for goddesses; the ocean and the earth are considered the Mother, the trees her arms, the mountains her breasts, the plants her nourishment, the sky her lover.

Usas, Kali, Lakshmi, Kamala, Parvati, Aditi, Saraswati, Devi, Gayatri, Shakti - all names of Mother as God. There is a sun goddess, a goddess of dawn and another of starlit nights. There is a goddess of wealth and beauty, a goddess of wisdom and aging, a goddess of learning and of speech. There is a goddess of destruction, and a goddess of all-devouring time. They are all

the Mother.

In contrast I realized the extent to which we lack her influence in our Western society. In the West we have a powerful force in the Catholic tradition in the form of the Virgin Mary. Yet the message of Mary's position as only the mother of God, not worthy to be considered Mother as God, pervades most Western belief systems. By the year 200 C.E. "virtually all the feminine imagery for God had disappeared from orthodox Christian tradition."

Mary Magdalena adds another dimension complementary to that of Mother Mary. However, Magdalena's commanding influence during the formation of early Christianity was all but erased from scriptures. Instead she is commonly remembered as an unfortunate prostitute who simply underwent a conversion, not recognized as the great feminine force to which Jesus himself alludes.

My own unconscious response to the absence of Mother as God in our Western religions lead me to seek a more complete approach to my inner truth through the religion of Hinduism.

In Hindu India, the Mother, who has been obscured in the shadow of Western religions for thousands of years, is considered to be the sum total of the energy in the universe. While present-day India is primarily patriarchal, throughout contemporary, historical, and pre-historical times Hindus have never ceased worshipping Mother as well as Father. To have an example of living Mother worship in a major world religion can help us piece together vestiges of the power of the feminine force lost from Western spiritual traditions and illumine the path of the Mother.

Initially the Mother's multifaceted appearances, from fierce to benevolent, seductive to repulsive, might feel very strange. Some of us might welcome the wide range of feminine expression immediately. For all of us, the staggering unfamiliarity can help shake us out of the realm of heady logic into the realm of our hearts, into the soul of the Mother.

Sanatana Dharma, the real name of Hinduism, means "Way of Eternal Truth" and carries the belief that truth existed before human beings did. Sanatana Dharma assumes that it is the purpose of all human beings, on whatever path, to seek enlightenment. The unadulterated absolute which the religion of Hinduism brings to life says everything and everyone comes from, lives in, and goes to the same source: the river of love, the

supreme soul, the eternal truth, the Great Mother.

In fact, Hinduism is a name given by the British for the people who lived in the Indus Valley. For all the inhabitants of this great valley, religion was a way of life, an integral part of each day, from sunrise to sunset, in work, in prayer, in family life, in everything they did (it was Sanatana Dharma. When the British arrived they wanted to name the many forms of worship that were practiced there. So they named the Moslems, the Parsees, the Sikhs, the Jains. To the others, too numerous to designate, they gave the name of Hinduism and these people became known as Hindus. In those days everyone saw all of the many ways of life as equal in value, as paths to enlightenment.

All these different religious groups worshipped side by side and in harmony with one another. Even today, the true Hindu embraces all religions and all spiritual practices as well-founded. I have met many Hindu families who came to America to settle. Some wanted to give their children a spiritual education, so they sent their little ones to Catholic schools or Baptist schools, not understanding that the spiritual approach in these institutions was exclusive, not inclusive. These families became disillusioned when their children came home with tales of religious prejudice. One example was of a child in the third grade who had won an academic contest which promised him dinner at the teacher's home, but the award was withdrawn because he was Hindu.

Because Hinduism recognizes that the entire creation emanates from the Mother, it embraces all spiritual traditions, sees all ways as valid paths to the supreme. The volumes upon volumes of Hindu scriptures include monumental epics, philosophical treatises, endless laws of how people should conduct their lives, and rituals for every imaginable event and condition. Within the vast philosophical and devotional works, Hinduism acknowledges that there is only one absolute truth, which is eternal and beyond logic.

Even though there are thousands of gods and goddesses in Hinduism, the religion is not polytheistic at its core. These multitudes of divine beings serve the purpose of elucidating the fact that the one God or Mother is everything and that there are layers and various dimensions of existence beyond our normal perceptions. Paramatma, or supreme soul, is the name often given to that one genderless, formless, nameless being who pervades all and is all. Customs which include the feminine have not been removed from Hindu scriptures as they have

been from our Western Bible. Instead, Indian sacred writings which describe the Mother as the source of all are numerous.

Mother India's traditions have not forgotten out of whose bodies we are born. Many temples have engraved in stone such graphic feminine images as the yoni or vagina with the symbolic red blood of the menses smeared on it, or the spread legs of female figures with infants emerging out of the yonic passage. A few temples in India are encrusted with carved figures depicting sexual acts, representative of the divine union of masculine and feminine which causes the universe to remain balanced within its cosmic dance.

Hindu India is the only country in the world today where the Mother remains widely worshipped in an unbroken lineage that goes back in time thousands of years. In Central India there is a prehistoric megalith that is still used in rituals in much the same manner, one supposes, as it was during the time of the mother goddess cultures of 3,000 B.C.E. "All over the Indian subcontinent, monuments dating from as early as 8000 to 2000 B.C. symbolize the great active power in the universe, the feminine principle, Shakti." Many of these ancient Devi shrines are still held in reverence today.

The Sanskrit word for sanctuary means "womb-chamber." In prehistoric times domes were built and caves used as temples with their entrances resembling the Great Mother's yonic passage. Mother-Goddess figurines with exaggerated buttocks and breasts are prolific in many parts of India. Often the Mother statuettes show signs of having been touched on their yonic parts, evidenced by the wearing and discoloration that has occurred over centuries of repeated tactile acknowledgment. The genital area is regarded as the source of all life, the focus of the Mother's cosmic energy; her menses time is known as the flower; her breasts, belly, and yonic entrance were revered as sacred.

Hindu scriptures elaborate upon countless goddess legends and prescribe rituals and guidelines for living a life steeped in dedication to the Great Mother or Shakti. She is known to be the activity in all things, the great power that creates and destroys, the primordial essence, the womb from which all things proceed and into which all things return. Mother Shakti is associated with "independence or freedom because her existence does not depend on anything extraneous to herself. . . She is even regarded as substance, because all possible objects are latent and manifest in her womb. "At the time of dissolution

Meeting the Divine Mother

Another experience with Amma

Doing darshan

when she returns into the void, she is neither male nor female, nor neuter, nor does she have form or attributes of any kind; at this point she is the ultimate aspect of reality; she is both Shakti and Shiva.

Shiva is the masculine energy, the supreme lord, the great ascetic and meditator. In Hinduism, the male aspect represents pure consciousness, which is inactive; the female aspect symbolizes the primal force, which is active. The Shiva lingam, a stylized phallic symbol, stands for an eternal column of light, the purest form of Shiva. Interestingly, one of the largest laser beams in the world is named "Shiva." The lingam commonly sits in the yoni, a vaginal symbol. The two images as one represent the cosmic masculine and feminine, the great absolute. The lingam comes out of, not into the yoni, illustrating the nature of the universal male and female, suggesting the feminine principle which is the active force in both males and females - she is the primordial power. Whatever exists is dependent upon her. She is THAT which is energy in all forms and all beings. The masculine is inert without the feminine. There cannot be one without the other.

Today the relationship between Shiva and Shakti is honored amidst the most patriarchal traditionalism of Hindu India. An example lies within one of the most elite and highly respected of Indian philosophical systems. The Shankaracharya Jagadguru considered to be equal in stature to the Catholic Pope, inherits the position of serving his followers by representing Shakti, the Mother of the Universe, in the form of the goddess Sarada. Her divine presence in the temple of the South Indian village of Sringeri, in Karnataka province, has inspired and guided the actions of an uninterrupted heritage of Jagadgurus or universal spiritual figureheads since c. 800 C.E. "Through the person of the Jagadguru, she dispenses her grace."

The Indian Saint, Shankara, an incarnation of Lord Shiva, the first in the line of these Jagadguru religious authorities, settled in Sringeri after he saw an auspicious and unnatural occurrence: a cobra, with its open hood shaded a frog in labor pains from the scorching mid-day sun. Twelve hundred years later I could feel the love that must have existed between these two natural enemies as I walked barefoot over the four hundred acres of Holy land, met the smiling eyes of men and women Mothered by the presiding Goddess Sarada, crossed the Tunga river in a pole-driven boat, watched monkeys at play in the tropical forest, and passed by enclosed tombs of the 35 Shankara Jagadgurus where Shiva Lingams are worshipped

daily to acknowledge the passing of these great souls into the cosmic ocean of bliss, the ultimate union of Shiva and Shakti.

The average Indian is inundated daily with feminine religious symbology in the nearby temple, in the worship room in every home, in the scriptures, in the customs, and in religious celebrations. One such religious event is observed for ten days in October or November, according to the changes in the lunar calendar. In Sringeri, His Holiness, the Jagadguru, dons the jewels, the dress, and the crown of the supreme goddess or Devi. This Indian spiritual figurehead embodies the Great Mother of the Universe in a ritual attended by thousands of India's most humble and most elite.

"Except [from] our own mistaken habits of thought, there is really no justification for the popular conception of God as He. God may, with equal justice and propriety, be considered She"
--The Greatness of Sringeri

**Excerpted from The Path of the Mother by Savitri L. Bess .
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