



Newsletter Archives

Lakshmi and Saraswati - Tales in Mythology and Art

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While the great goddess as a cosmic force may be a deity of compelling dynamism and fearsome power, it is in the guise of the gentle and beneficent giver of the devotees' desires, that the female divinities of India first appeared. This role of the goddess as one who fulfills wishes has remained one of enduring strength and consequence. In the ancient collection of sacred hymns known as the Veda, this aspect of the goddess already becomes manifest. The two most shining examples in this context are The Great Goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati.

Lakshmi

Goddess Lakshmi, also known as Shri, is personified not only as the goddess of fortune and wealth but also as an embodiment of loveliness, grace and charm. She is worshipped as a goddess who grants both worldly prosperity as well as liberation from the cycle of life and death.

Lore has it that Lakshmi arose out of the sea of milk, the primordial cosmic ocean, bearing a red lotus in her hand. Each member of the divine triad- Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (creator, preserver and destroyer respectively)- wanted to have her for himself. Shiva's claim was refused for he had already claimed the Moon, Brahma had Saraswati, so Vishnu claimed her and she was born and reborn as his consort during all of his ten incarnations.

Though retained by Vishnu as his consort, Lakshmi remained an avid devotee of Lord Shiva. An interesting legend surrounds her devotion to this god:

Every day Lakshmi had a thousand flowers plucked by her handmaidens and she offered them to the idol of Shiva in the evening. One day, counting the flowers as she offered them, she found that there were two less than a thousand. It was too late to pluck any more for evening had come and the lotuses had closed their petals for the night.

Lakshmi thought it inauspicious to offer less than a thousand. Suddenly she remembered that Vishnu had once described her breasts as blooming lotuses. She decided to offer them as the two missing flowers.

Lakshmi cut off one breast and placed it with the flowers on the altar. Before she could cut off the other, Shiva, who was extremely moved by her devotion, appeared



before her and asked her to stop. He then turned her cut breast into round, sacred Bael fruit (Aegle marmelos) and sent it to Earth with his blessings, to flourish near his temples.



A few texts say that Lakshmi is the wife of Dharma. She and several other goddesses, all of whom are personifications of certain auspicious qualities, are said to have been given to Dharma in marriage. This association seems primarily to represent a thinly disguised “wedding” of Dharma (virtuous conduct) with Lakshmi (prosperity and well-being). The point of the association seems to be to teach that by performing Dharma one obtains prosperity.

Tradition also associates Lakshmi with Kubera, the ugly lord of the Yakshas. The Yakshas were a race of supernatural creatures who lived outside the pale of civilization. Their connection with Lakshmi perhaps springs from the fact that they were notable for a propensity for collecting, guarding and distributing wealth. Association with Kubera deepens the aura of mystery and underworld connections that attaches itself to Lakshmi. Yakshas are also symbolic of fertility. The Yakshinis (female Yakshas) depicted often in temple sculpture are full-breasted and big-hipped women with wide generous mouths, leaning seductively against trees. The

identification of Shri, the goddess who embodies the potent power of growth, with the Yakshas is natural. She, like them, involves, and reveals herself in the irrepressible fecundity of plant life, as exemplified in the legend of Shiva and the Bael fruit narrated above, and also in her association with the lotus, to be described later.

An interesting and fully developed association is between Lakshmi and the god Indra. Indra is traditionally known as the king of the gods, the foremost of the gods, and he is typically described as a heavenly king. It is therefore appropriate for Shri-Lakshmi to be associated with him as his wife or consort. In these myths she appears as the embodiment of royal authority, as a being whose presence is essential for the effective wielding of royal power and the creation of royal prosperity.

Several myths of this genre describe Shri-Lakshmi as leaving one ruler for another. She is said, for example, to dwell even with a demon named Bali. The concerned legend makes clear the union between Lakshmi and victorious kings. According to this legend Bali defeats Indra. Lakshmi is attracted to Bali's winning ways and bravery and joins him along with her attendant auspicious virtues. In association with the propitious goddess, Bali rules the three worlds (earth, heavens and the nether-worlds) with virtue, and under his rule there is prosperity all around. Only when the dethroned gods managed to trick Bali into surrendering does Shri-Lakshmi depart from Bali, leaving him lusterless and powerless. Along with Lakshmi, the following qualities depart from Bali: good conduct, virtuous behavior, truth, activity and strength.

Lakshmi's association with so many different male deities and with the notorious fleetingness of good fortune earned her a reputation for fickleness and inconstancy.

In one text she is said to be so unsteady that even in a picture she moves and that if she sticks with Vishnu it is only because she is attracted to his many different forms (avatars)! She is thus also known as 'Chanchala', or the restless one.

Her notorious fickleness has convinced her devotees that she may desert them at the slightest pretext. They have thus devised numerous ingenious strategies to retain Lakshmi, and thus prosperity in their establishments. One such sect is known to offer only the worst netlike fabric as vastra (clothing) to Lakshmi; for they say, 'It is much easier for Goddess Lakshmi to abandon our houses clad in ample folds of cloth rather than scantily dressed in the minimum fabric we offer to her as garment'!

In a mythological sense her fickleness and adventurous nature slowly begin to change once she is identified totally with Vishnu, and finally becomes still. She then becomes the steadfast, obedient and loyal wife who vows to reunite with her husband in all his next lives. As the cook at the Jagannatha temple in Puri, she prepares food for her lord and his devotees. In the famous paintings on the walls of the Badami caves in central India, she sits on the ground near where her lord reclines upon a throne, leaning on him; a model of social decorum and correctitude.

Physically Goddess Lakshmi is described as a fair lady, with four arms, seated on a lotus, dressed in fine garments and precious jewels. She has a benign countenance, is in her full youth and yet has a motherly appearance.



The most striking feature of the iconography of Lakshmi is her persistent association with the lotus. The meaning of the lotus in relation to Shri-Lakshmi refers to purity and spiritual power. Rooted in the mud but blossoming above the water, completely uncontaminated by the mud, the lotus represents spiritual perfection and authority. Furthermore, the lotus seat is a common motif in Hindu and Buddhist iconography. The gods and goddesses, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, typically sit or stand upon a lotus, which suggests their spiritual authority. To be seated upon or to be otherwise associated with the lotus suggests that the being in question: God, Buddha, or human being-has transcended the limitations of the finite world (the mud of existence, as it were) and floats freely in a sphere of purity and spirituality. Shri-Lakshmi thus

suggests more than the fertilizing powers of moist soil and the mysterious powers of growth. She suggests a perfection or state of refinement that transcends the material world. She is associated not only with the royal authority but with also spiritual authority, and she combines royal and priestly powers in her presence. The lotus, and the goddess Lakshmi by association, represents the fully developed blossoming of organic life.

No description of Goddess Lakshmi can be complete without a mention of her traditionally accepted vehicle, the owl. Now, the owl (Ulooka in Sanskrit), is a bird that sleeps through the day and prowls through the night. In a humorous vein it is said that owing to its lethargic and dull nature the Goddess takes it for a ride! She is the handmaiden of those who know how to control it; how to make best use of her resources, like the Lord Vishnu. But those who blindly worship her are verily the owls or 'Ulookas'. The choice is ours: whether we wish to be Lord Vishnu or the 'Ulooka' in our association with Lakshmi.



Saraswati

Saraswati is one of the few important goddesses in the Vedas who have retained their significance to the present day. Literary evidence suggests that right from the ancient times down to the modern, she is perceived in three major roles, as a river, as Vak (speech), and as a goddess.

In the Vedas her character and attributes are clearly associated with the mighty Saraswati River. She is the earliest example of a goddess who is associated with a river in the Indian tradition. In a symbolic sense she suggests the sacrality inherent in rivers or water in general. While the symbolism of water is rich and complex in the religions of the world, two typical associations are important in Vedic descriptions of Saraswati. First, she is said to bestow bounty, fertility and riches. Her waters enrich the land so that they can produce. Second, Saraswati represents purity, as does water, particularly running water. It is stated frequently in the Vedas that the banks of Saraswati were especially sacred for ritual purposes. This also suggests the purifying powers of the river.

Another particular association with rivers is the imagery of crossing from the world of ignorance or bondage to the far shore, which represents the world of enlightenment or freedom. The river in this metaphor represents the state of transition, the period of birth, in which the spiritual sojourner undergoes a crucial metamorphosis. The river represents a great purifying power in which the pilgrim drowns his old self and is born anew, free and enlightened.

In addition, a curious legend surrounds Saraswati, the river:

Once the celebrated Vedic sage Vasishtha was practising penance on the banks of the river Saraswati. Suddenly, the warrior turned saint Vishvamitra, a sworn enemy of Vasishtha, appeared on the scene and said to her, 'Flow on and bring Vasishtha floating on your waves.' Saraswati hesitated for a while, but seeing that Vishvamitra was determined, she broke through her banks where Vasishtha sat meditating. Vishvamitra was very pleased. But Saraswati did not stop at that. She flowed on towards the east, with Vasishtha on the crest of her waves. Vishvamitra realizing her intention was to protect Vasishtha rather than harm him, grew indignant and cursed Saraswati, turning her into a river of blood.

When the poor sages, who lived in hermitage on her banks, came for a bath, they were shocked to find a flowing stream of blood. Saraswati prayed to them, ' I was a river of pure water. But the sage Vishvamitra ordered me to bring his enemy, the good sage Vasishtha, floating to him. I sensed mischief but was afraid of Vishvamitra's ire. So I carried Vasishtha away from where he sat, but instead of delivering the innocent sage to his ill-tempered colleague, I took him to a safer place. Vishvamitra realized my intention and cursed me. I feel so unclean and humiliated. Can't you sages cleanse my water and restore my purity?'

'We surely can and are definitely going to do just that,' said the kind-hearted hermits, who were moved by her courage. So, through their magic powers Saraswati regained her purity and again became a river flowing with water. This is why she is also referred to as Shonapunya, a Sanskrit word meaning 'one purified of blood'.

Conception of Goddess Saraswati as a flowing blood river is open to interpretation as a symbol of the menstrual blood flow in women, particularly since Saraswati is conceived of as an ever-flowing stream which purifies and "fertilizes" the Earth.



Later ancillary Vedic literature consistently equates her with the goddess of speech, known as Vak. The importance of speech in Hinduism is both ancient and central. The entire creative process is said to be held in the sacred syllable OM, and the idea of creation proceeding from shabda – brahman (ultimate reality in the form of sound) is often mentioned in the ancient texts. A mantra too, which may consist of words or of sounds alone, is said to possess great power. Indeed, the mantra of a given deity is declared to be equivalent to the deity itself. To pronounce a mantra is to make the deity present. There resides in sound a potent quality, and this quality is embodied in Saraswati, the Goddess of speech.

As the embodiment of speech, then, Saraswati is present wherever speech exists. And so it is that she is pre-eminently associated with the best in human culture: poetry, literature, sacred rituals, and rational communication between individuals.

Till today, whenever a new baby arrives, grandmothers make a five pointed star-called Saraswati-sign on the newborn's tongue with honey. The tongue, the organ of speech, is thus expected to get hitched to Saraswati's star early enough.

As Saraswati, the goddess, her identity is not as nebulous as Vak (speech). There are clear descriptions of her form, dress, ornaments and mount, together with the articles she is associated with. She is always referred to as extremely beautiful, fair complexioned, with four arms, ever youthful and gracious looking. She is seated on a lotus-accompanied by her swan, and holds a lute (Veena) resting across her breast. In her hands she holds a rosary, a book and a water pot. The book associates her with the sciences and with learning in general. The lute associates her with the arts, particularly the musical arts, and the rosary and the water pot associate her with the spiritual sciences and with religious rites. She is dressed in white and blue garments, reminiscent of her form as a river. Like Lakshmi and unlike Durga and Kali, she does not carry any arms or weapons.



Her color is white, the color of peace. Her clothes, the lotus she sits upon, and also her familiar swan, are all white. Not for her Kali's dramatic and gory nakedness, or Lakshmi's dazzling red and gold. Her robe and appearance show serenity and a total lack of artifice.

Legends say that she sprung from the forehead of her father, Brahma, as did the Greek virgin goddess Athena who was born from her father, Zeus's head. As soon as Brahma looked at this beautiful woman, he desired her, even though she was his daughter. Saraswati disliked the amorous attentions of this old god and kept dodging him, but whichever way she moved, Brahma grew a head in that direction to see her the better. As a result he grew four faces on four sides of his neck, and even a head on top of these four, so that she could not escape by moving upwards. But Saraswati still eluded him.



Brahma was angry. He, being the Creator, was also all powerful. We do not know how, but legend has it that he did manage to marry the elusive girl, and produced through her mind the four great Vedas. Lore also has it that Brahma discovered that his girl-wife was too aloof and absent-minded for his liking. He had arranged for a major fire-sacrifice, at which his wife's appearance by his side was a must. He repeatedly warned Saraswati not to take too long over her toilet and miss the auspicious hour. She must, he had decreed, take her traditional seat to his left, well in time. But Saraswati behaved with her characteristic whimsical disregard for parental diktats. Her prolonged toilet saw to it that the holy hour passed without the couple's making the supreme joint offering to the fire God as man and wife. When Saraswati finally arrived, Brahma was livid. He threw her out, and replaced her with the daughter of a sage, called Gayatri.

Saraswati, thus, though married, never enjoyed domestic bliss like Durga or Lakshmi. According to most myths she had no children, possessed a fiery temper, was easily provoked and was somewhat quarrelsome. She, of all the goddesses, is described as possessing a very independent will and was not very obliging to the male gods.



As the disinherited daughter and estranged wife, Saraswati lived perpetually in self-imposed exile. She focuses her calm, dispassionate gaze upon the past as pure experience. The capacity to recall without anger or resentment, is Saraswati's greatest gift to her children: the writers, musicians and creators of various art forms. All of them have fought with tradition, but their fight has been cerebral, not emotional. For without cutting away the umbilical cord, no innovative new beginning may ever be made, whether one is creating or procreating. This is the message of Saraswati.

Saraswati's ironical eye, one may be sure, watches Kali's tussle for power against male demons and Lakshmi's subterfuges in the male world of power and plenitude. But she remains a witness, a dispassionate historian. She is the one who believes in the ultimate futility of all warfare and the trappings of wealth.

Understandably, such a Goddess could be venerated by the simple-minded and earthy householders, but not loved and fussed over by them, like her regal sister Lakshmi, or even feared and held in awe like Shakti. Saraswati remains the unblemished ascetic goddess, to whom no temples are built and who offers nothing except knowledge, no institution, no protection, no riches.

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This article by Nitin Goel.

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