

SHAKTI AND LAKSHMI PRINCIPLES. EMPOWERING WOMEN IN INDIAN TRADITION

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Abstract

The Indian traditions offer a very specific place in the society to women, and the religious practices give them certain responsibilities. Religion and common life are practically inseparable and the role models offered by the Hindu pantheon and sacred texts are to be reflected in the day to day activity. Shakti is the wife of Lord Sadashiva and the Mother of the Universe, while Lakshmi is the wife of Lord Vishnu, whose main characteristic is to bring prosperity. This article is approaching the role women play from the position of the Hindu tradition, overviewing Puranic and epic texts.

Keywords: feminism; Hinduism; Shaktism; tradition; sati; puranas.

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1. Introduction

Speaking about India as about a country that has a precise vision about one thing is naive. A place with about 22 official languages and more than 1000 spoken ones is also rich in traditions, and the Hindu pantheon is equally complex as logic, and it contains both unity and diversity. Media and the nowadays events throw an incomplete and maybe unjust image on the Indian women. They are seen mostly as subjects of domestic violence, of discrimination, as submissive creatures forced to stay at home, without access to the education they are capable of following, whose most important role is to give birth to children, boys only if possible. Women are subjects of discrimination and crimes, as the statistics prove², but the problem is multi-faceted, since gender is not the only criterion, but comes in combination with cast, economic category or region. On the other hand, the feminist movement is promoting the image of the western woman, who is financially independent, has an intense career, makes a point in politics, while family life is optional and divorce is as ordinary as buying a car. The institution of the housewife is seen in many parts of the world as outdated, since women want to play a more active role in society. However, the ideal life consists in the fulfilment of all desires, and this includes experimenting love, marriage and motherhood. In the Hindu tradition, the lady of the house is seen as having virtues of the goddesses and her power resides in these

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² In 2021, 428278 cases of women subject to physical and/or sexual violence were registered, a number 15% higher than the previous year. However, many cases are not reported (see <https://journalsofindia.com/ncrbs-report-on-crime-against-women/>).

qualities (Patel, 1994: 69) Shaktism is maybe the most feminist religious denomination, since in the centre is the Goddess Adi Shakti, the primordial power. The feminine aspect of divinity is the one that acts, while the masculine one is the witness. In this way a law a physics is described, the law of conservation of energy, with the two aspects: kinetic energy (the one that is, that acts) and the potential (the one that can be) (Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 1977). The Goddesses are seen as *shaktis* for the Gods (such as Parvati, Saraswati and Lakshmi), but, in certain situations, the Goddess acts alone, like Shri Durga.

My focus is to examine three main aspects of women, as reflected in Hindu mythology: the devoted wife, the mother and the independent person who can take the weapons in her arms when needed. Even if the subject of Hindu feminism was researched before and themes, such as vulnerability and feminine energy seen as strengths, expanded over the preoccupation of social psychology, my approach is to analyse and emphasize the relation between the qualities and powers of the two Goddesses and the structure of feminine personality and its role in the society. As methodology, I am using cultural studies, more specifically ethnography and textual analysis. Since I am not knowledgeable in Sanskrit or Hindi, I will limit my examination to the English translations of the Indian sacred texts. This article contributes to a better understanding of the intersection between religion, culture, and gender in the Hindu tradition.

2. Shakti and Lakshmi

The cult of Mother Goddess has been largely spread over Eurasia, and in the archeological Harappa sites there have been found hundreds of ornamented female statues, with nudity more or less accentuated. Many have a lotus head and the name given to them is Lajjagauri (Ganesh, 1990: 59). The Vedic texts mention Aditi, a female Deity, the Mother of all Gods, who has the power to protect and nurture, and the Vedic verses mention her as “the perfect Goddess” (*The Hymns of the Rigveda*, 2010, Hymn XLI: 181) or “The Housewife Goddess” (*The Hymns of the Rigveda*, 2010, Hymn XLI: 272), and the cult of Lajjagauri is associated with her (Kramrisch, 1975: 251) since she has no physical description, but she is maternity embodied (Kinsley, 1988: 9). According to Kamala Ganesh (1990: 59), the powers of Aditi are not related to the companionship role (as wife of a God), and David Kinsley (1988: 9) affirms that there is no male God associated with her in Rig-Veda. Aditi is self-created, being mother and daughter of Daksha in the same time (Jones and Ryan, 2007: 49), while her nature of mother-virgin can be related to rituals of fertility and of agriculture (Ganesh, 1990: 59). Other goddesses invoked are Saraswati, Ushas and the Mother Earth. Prithvi or Bhumi-Devi (Mother Earth) is a female deity who is associated with lord Vishnu. She has the power of sustaining life, to bear, to offer, to nourish (Wangu, 2003: 11). *Prithvi tattwa* (the principle of Earth element) is the

first to be established in the yoga practice and the women are most of the time compared to her, being required to bear and be patient like Mother Earth.

The Devi (Shakti) is described in the Hymn 125 of the 10th Mandala of Rig-Veda, called Devi Sukta (Vak Sukta in the translation of Ralph T.H. Griffith), as “the first of those who merit worship” (*The Hymns of the Rigveda*, 2010: 722), but the Shakti cult developed in the Puranic period and the texts dedicated to her are Devi Bhagavata Purana and Markandeya Purana, and she is mentioned as well in Matsya Purana, Vamana Purana, or Skanda Purana. She is described as “the source and the support of all things” (Devi Bhagavata Purana 1.9.5, *The Srimad Devi Bhagavatam*, 2022) “the embodiment of pure consciousness, the source of all knowledge and wisdom [...] the mother of the universe, the protectress of all beings, and the dispenser of all blessings”. (Devi Bhagavata Purana 1.9.24, *The Srimad Devi Bhagavatam*, 2022), the creative but also the destructive power of the Universe, wrathful, who annihilates all that is impure and sinful (Vāyavīya-saṃhitā 31.15, Shiva Purana, 2014: 2034). Shakti manifests through all the Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, such as Durga, Saraswati, Parvathi, Lakshmi, Kali, etc. Shiva and Shakti are seen as complementary and inseparable aspects of the ultimate reality, and their union represents the union of consciousness and energy (Vanamali, 2013: 22), and Shakti is the power of lord Shiva.

Shri Lakshmi is one of the aspects of Shakti, wife of Lord Vishnu, associated with luck, prosperity and royalty, but also with their loss in case she is not respected. She is invoked in *Shri Suktam* in an appendix to *Rig Veda* (Kinsley, 1988: 19), and in the puranic texts (*Vishnu* and *Padma Purana* especially). Although Lakshmi is a manifestation of the all-pervading power of God, she is limited to express qualities of grace, beauty, dignity and wealth, unveiling a sweet nature.

3. *Sati and the power of sacrifice*

“The deities delight in places where women are revered, but where women are not revered all rites are fruitless” (*The Laws of Manu*, 1991: 76)

North Indian women are often called Devi (Goddess). It is a paradox, that women are at the same time subject of worshiping and mistreated in some families, but as the country is complex, so is the society with all the influences and transformations. In the western society, the idea of virginity has been for some decades seen both as outdated, ridiculous, and any demands regarding it as attempts to control women’s lives. However, a return to some of the traditional Christian values has happened since the 1990s, as a reaction to the spreading of AIDS. One of the first legal texts in the Hindu tradition consider that chastity is a power, but the critics believe it is just a demand of a patriarchal society. *Manusmriti* or *Manava dharma shastra* is the central source of the later Brahmanical Hinduism and one of the first legal texts in the world history, which is considered to date since 1250 BCE. It was one of the first

texts to be translated into English in 1776, by British philologist Sir William Jones (*The Laws of Manu*, 1991: 76). According to *Manusmriti*, virgins are to be given into marriage for the “twice born men” (spiritually elevated) (*The Laws of Manu*, 1991: 74). *The Puranas* emphasize the idea of divine force of virginity, and the unmarried Goddesses (Kali, Kanyakumari, Durga) are those who have the power to kill demons (Kinsley, 1988: 202). But chastity has value both for men as for women, according to texts like *Bhagavadgītā*, and detaching from the senses is a path of gaining spiritual depth:

One who is able to withdraw his senses from sense objects, as the tortoise withdraws its limbs into the shell, is to be understood as truly situated in knowledge. (Bhagavadgītā 2.58, 1972: 172)

O, conquerer of the foe, all living entities are born into delusion, overcome by the dualities of desire and hate. (Bhagavadgītā 6.27, 1972: 439)

Nevertheless, more pressure is put on women, since it is believed they have the power to maintain the moral boundaries of the society and this created double standards and frustration. *Manusmriti* mentions chastity as a spiritual and moral attribute and as a cleansing task. The ancient text regulates the different types of marriage rites which are allowed and the protective role of the men (fathers, husbands and sons) in relation with women. The main quality of a woman is chastity and even today, virginity before marriage is important. The importance of the respect granted to women is emphasized in the quoted verses below, regardless of the role they play in their home (daughter or wife). At the same time, women are responsible with the wellbeing of the family, and they spread their happiness or unhappiness around themselves. The way the European mind interprets verse 3:60 might differ from the Indian one. While we assume that the code indicates care for the emotional state of the lady of the house on behalf of the other members, in Indian society this can be seen the other way around, that notwithstanding the way she is treated, a woman just has the duty to feel happy. Fidelity is the responsibility of both men and women.

3:55 Fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law who wish for great good fortune should revere these women and adorn them. 3:56 The deities delight in places where women are revered, but where women are not revered all rites are fruitless. 3:56 Where the women of the family are miserable, the family is soon destroyed, but it always thrives where the women are not miserable. (The Laws of Manu, 1991:76)

3.60. There is unwavering good fortune in a family where the husband is always satisfied by the wife, and the wife by the husband. 3.62. If the woman is radiant, the whole family is radiant, but if she is not radiant the whole family is not radiant. (The Laws of Manu, 1991: 77)

9.101. Let there be mutual absence of infidelity until death'; this should be known as the supreme duty of a man and a woman, in a nutshell. (The Laws of Manu, 1991: 175)

The history of India is full of stories of women who preferred to die rather than lose their chastity. The legend of queen Padmavati (Padmini) of Mewar (13-14 centuries) who used the *Jauhar* ritual (*Jauhar* is a custom of self-immolating women to avoid being captured and raped during war) was an inspiration for literature, the movie industry and even the opera world. The icon of chastity is offered by Anasuya, described in *Shiva Purana*, the one who became the mother of Adi Guru Dattatreya. The story tells that Anasuya (or Anusuya), the wife of sage Atri, had gained such powers through her spiritual practice and due to her chastity, that she could change the course of the Sun and of the rivers if needed and that she cured her husband (*The Brahmanda Purana*, 1958). She also could curse anyone. The Trimurtis (The Trinity or the supreme divinity in Hinduism), Brahma Vishnu and Shiva, advised by their wives, the Goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati, decided to test the chastity of Anasuya, for which she was granted so many other powers. The Trimurtis disguised themselves in sages and went to her door asking for alms, this being a great honor for everyone, the one hosting the sages getting many blessings in return. But they asked to be let inside the house and to be served by Anasuya naked, and she could not refuse. Thus, she did take her clothes off, but at the same time, with her power of innocence, she transformed the three sages into babies (Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 1979b). The three Gods became later the son of Anasuya, Shri Adi Guru Dattatreya, and the primordial Guru.

Anasuya was a *sati* (chaste woman), one of the five mentioned by the scriptures and worshiped: Sati, Sita, Anasuya, Savitri, Damayanti and Arundhati (Bhattacharya, 2000). Sati is the second manifestation of the Goddess, of Adi Shakti, the Primordial Mother, the first being Gauri, the daughter of Brahma. The story of Sati is described in several puranic texts, such as *Vayu Purana*, *Skanda Purana*, *Bhagavata Purana*, *Kurma Purana*, *Padma Purana*, *Linga Purana*, *Shiva Purana*, and *Matsya Purana*. She was the daughter of Daksha, and Daksha disrespected her husband, Lord Shiva himself. For this reason, she immolated herself in order to bestow the honor of Shiva, praying that in the next life she will have a father who will respect her. She reincarnated as Shri Parvati, the daughter of the king of Himalaya and became again the wife and *shakti* of Lord Shiva through devotion. Her sacred names and qualities include Shri Saraswati and Shri Kali, as she manifests powers of both deities. Sati is the Virgin (Shri Kumari) and her power resides in honor and sacrifice. Worshipping her or Parvati is the same thing. However, there is a certain characteristic of Sati, since she was the one who burnt herself. It is considered that the custom of burning the widows alive together with the corpse of the dead husband is an homage paid to Goddess Sati. But a *sati* woman is a different thing. Through her chastity and devotion to her husband up to worshipping him as her Lord, a *sati* woman is worshipped herself and she achieves Moksha (Redemption) and spiritual powers to

the extent that even Gods obey to her. A *sati* is more powerful than a Yati, who is a sage having knowledge and mastering of elements and who have reached through their ascetic practices the power to turn their enemies into ashes (Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 1981).

The powers of *satis* are described in *Mahabharata*, the ancient epic, as well, in the chapter *Vana Parva: the legend of Savitri and Satyavan*. Princess Savitri, whose name comes from Savitr, the Sun, was practicing asceticism and devotion, which were innate, since she was herself a boon from gods granted to her father. Married with Satyavan, she succeeds in convincing Yama, the god of death, to spare the life of her husband through her own boons.

Ramayana, the other major ancient Hindu epic, depicts Shri Sita, the wife of Shri Rama, the queen of Ayodiya and a divine personality herself (incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi), as extremely pure and dignified, that not even fire would touch her. After being abducted by the demon Ravana and saved by her husband through war, and killing the abductor, she needed, in order to restore the honor of her husband as he was the king, to prove her innocence by performing *Agni pariksha*, the trial by fire. Sita remained untouched by the fire and then she was accepted back by her husband. Although nowadays this episode is highly criticized and considered the most severe example of cruelty against women, the context is different than the one of a normal human society. Rama and Sita are a royal couple and also gods. They need to prove their divine qualities in front of their people in order to be followed and respected and bring the *dharma* in the society. Rama himself was obeying his father and he endured exile for 14 years, while the ambition of his stepmother was satisfied. Shri Sita, his wife, and his brother, Lakshmana, followed him in his exile. And Rama didn't ask his wife to jump into the fire out of cruelty or ambition, but out of obeisance towards his position of king and towards the people that he was about to rule. Also, for this reason he later had to send his wife away, since the people were again talking. When they finally met again and Rama asked her again to perform *Agni pariksha*, she preferred to join Mother Earth and so she disappeared. The image of Rama as an oppressor and Sita a victim is an emotional reaction and exaggeration generated by the high number of victims of domestic violence in society. Sita is a queen and has infinite dignity, while her husband is not remarrying after sending his wife away and uses a golden statue of her when he needs to perform certain rituals that request the presence of the wife, thus honoring her in her absence. Though abducted and being captive in the palace of Ravana, the demon is afraid to touch her. Also, Sita has her demands from Rama, who could have just saved her from Lanka and carry her away. Therefore, Sita requested that Ravana shall be killed in fight by her husband.

Although the Hindu tradition considers that the power of the *satis* comes from the husbands, *shaktism* offers another perspective, as the *shakti* is power itself. From the archaeological sites of Indus Valley to the cosmogonic theories of *Rig-Veda* and the

Puranas, the idea of *shakti* is the one of companion and power of the Primordial Father, while the Primordial Mother is the creator of the Universe. Madhu Bazaz Wangu considers that the cosmogonic explanation is an expansion of the human reality over the whole world (Wangu, 2003: 33). The modern interpretations of the Vedas and Puranas, such as *The Book of Adi Shakti* of H.H. Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi explain that, before the birth of the Universe, the matter and non-matter were dissolved in the Parabrahma energy, there was no movement, and the activity was absolute zero. Then, before the Creation started, the seed of creation (*Brahma Beeja*) and the germinating power separated and formed the two identities: Parameshwara, manifested as Purusha, and Maha-Shakti, manifested as Prakriti (Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 2013: 4). The duality Shiva-Shakti is compared to the Moon and the Moonlight and they are inseparable. There is no question of dominance, but of difference in manifestation, the active one being the feminine principle. The *shakti* is present not only in Shaktism, but also in other Hindu denominations, such as Shivaism, Gānapatism or Vaishnavism (Wangu, 2003: 33).

4. Mother and the power to sustain life

Innocence, though seen as a weakness in our society, is another major quality of Hindu goddesses. Mostly connected with the children, innocence is a power of a woman too, since a woman is the Mother and the preserver of innocence. In all the scriptures of the world, the innocent ones are to be protected and eventually gain victory in confrontations and war. The success-oriented present-day society promotes another type of personality, who obtains whatever he/she wants at any costs, stepping over dead bodies; this is the current image of power. However, the victories registered by such a personality are rather small, and fit the boundaries of one's ego, while the innocence is providing a long-term and maybe eternal victory, the greatest gain being the innocence itself.

The whole Creation begins with innocence, which precedes any material form. The material world begins with the appearance of the Carbon atom, with its four valences, just as the first chakra of the Creation, *Mooladhara*, the *support of the root*, has four petals (Barmola, 2022: 14-16). The ultimate icon of innocence in western culture is the Holy Virgin Mary with the divine child, Jesus Christ, the son of God and the Immaculate Conception is the seed of Christian belief. The Immaculate Conception in Hindu tradition is unveiled by the story of Shri Ganesh, the son of Goddess Parvati. He was made out of the clay that the Goddess used for covering her body. He is her son only and he finds himself in complete dedication towards his Mother, for this being capable to confront Shiva himself. The episode is described in the *Shiva Purana*, the *Devi Bhagavata Purana* and other scriptures. Parvati asked the newly created Ganesha to guard the door while she was taking a bath. Shri Shiva appeared in this time and was stopped by Shri Ganesha, who also declared he is the son of Parvati. Shiva becomes furious, not recognizing him and starts a fight, in which Ganesha is beheaded. Parvati finds out and she demands Shiva to bring

Ganesha back to life. Shiva asks for the head of the first living creature to be brought, so this is how Lord Ganesh receives the head of an elephant, which symbolises his egoless nature (*The Shiva Purana*, 2014).

One of the aspects of Shri Parvati is Annapurna, the one who gives food and the satisfaction of food, since Parvati is sustaining the material world. The episode related by Devi Bhagwat and Skanda Purana, where, following a disagreement between Shiva and Parvati, the Goddess retired and left the whole world and the gods to starve, emphasizes the importance of food and of the woman as giver of food. If the radical western feminists look with repulsion towards the traditional role played by women as the ones who cook in the house, in Indian tradition every woman is Annapurna and, in this way, she has the power of sustaining life (*The Shiva Purana*, 2014).

The tradition of feeding the husband first has a religious background: the wife is the *shakti* of the man, she offers food to him first, because she is the source of food and has the power to sustain his life and, in his way, he maintains his powers. Another episode of *Ramayana* describes the process. Mandodari, the wife of demon Ravana and a devotee of Lord Vishnu, was fasting so she could get the favours of God, declaring that she will not eat anything until her husband returns safely home. Gods obey to *satis*, so Ravana was undefeatable. But Yama, the God of death made a trick: he took the appearance of Ravana and came before Mandodari, thus making her eat. In this way, Ravana lost the protection created by the penance of his wife and was defeated (Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 1979a).

There are different versions of *Ramayana*, each giving other details as for why Ravana lost the protection offered through his wife. This episode is the basis of the custom of wives eating only after their husbands (and children). It is considered that, if the wife eats before the man, he loses his power. Moreover, cooking food is a woman's way to express her love to her husband and children, while love is just another power. Love gives a woman the strength to bear and to face the hardships of life, the strength to bear the pain of giving birth to children, it is through love that she is supporting her husband and becomes his companion, his best friend, his advisor and gives him the sense of stability.

Married women, though, are more related to the principle of Lakshmi, the *shakti* and the wife of Shri Vishnu, since she is the Goddess of prosperity and luck. When a bride enters her husband's house, it is expected that she brings good fortune and prosperity up to the extent that she is responsible for the luck and life of her husband. As Shri Vishnu is the conservation force of divinity, incarnating again and again and guiding the evolution of humankind, Lakshmi is all the time accompanying him, usually in the form of the wife (as Shri Sita for Shri Rama), but not only, as Shri Radha was not the wife of Krishna. Lakshmi is represented as a lady with round

shapes, dressed in pink, sitting on a Lotus, having four hands, on two of them holding lotus flowers, and in the other two a Kumba and golden coins.

Goddess Lakshmi appeared through the churning of the sea, so Venus is considered her equivalent, and she has eight powers. Together with her, the moon in waxing crescent appeared as well, so it is considered that the Moon is the brother of Lakshmi. One of her names is Neeraja (born out of the sea) (Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 1980). Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi explains in one of her conferences the meaning of Lakshmi's birth:

Lakshmi is symbolically expressing the awareness. The awareness first started growing in the sea. The life started in the sea, to begin with, and then it grew out. Without the life there is no awareness. First the life, because everything is jada (inanimate matter), everything is dead. And when it becomes life – it means it has awareness. This is the symbolic expression. (Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 1980)

The cult of Lakshmi is tied to the idea of auspiciousness, which in Indian culture is related to the married status (Ganesh, 1990: 58-64). Goddess Lakshmi is known as Shri, which means “dignity” and it is evoked in the appendix of *Rig Veda* in Shri Suktam with the description of her appearance on the red lotus, her ornaments and garlands and her motherly qualities (Kumar, 2010: 87). The prayer asks for the bestowing of wealth and auspiciousness (Lakshmi Tattwa) and removal of the Alakshmi tattwa (non-auspiciousness). Her motherly nature is expressed by the relation of Lakshmi to the harvest and fertility (Santaana Lakshmi is the giver of children), aspects of the Mother Earth (*Aitareya Brahmana*) (Wangu, 2003: 14). Lakshmi, the consort and *shakti* of Lord Vishnu and associated especially with the Nārāyana aspect of the God (Shri Narayani), who is resting on the snake Sheesha, as he is the refuge of humanity (*Sahaja Yoga Mantra Book*, 2020). Madhu Bazaz Wangu considers that the role of Shri Lakshmi is to stay between Lord Vishnu and the living beings, just as a mother stays between father and son, making the father compassionate and merciful, and the son dutiful and devoted (Wangu, 2003: 22). Thus, a woman who is a Lakshmi needs to manifest these qualities of compassion, generosity, and to have a benevolent temperament. The Goddess stands on a lotus floating on water and this symbolize two other qualities: the perfect balance and of a gentle and light nature. As Shri Lakshmi is offering protection with her upfront right hand, the lady of the house should be also protective (Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 1990).

Goddess Lakshmi is presented in 10 principal aspects, as the Nabhi chakra with which is associated, has 10 petals, or 10 sub-plexuses: *Ādyā Lakshmī* (The primordial Lakshmi power), *Vidyā Lakshmī* (The wealth of knowledge), *Saubhāgya Lakshmī* (Auspicious good fortune), *Amṛuta Lakshmī* (The ever-flowing divine nectar), *Gṛuha Lakshmī* (The ideal housewife), *Rāja Lakshmī* (The welfare and prosperity of a kingdom), *Satya Lakshmī* (Truth) *Bhogya Lakshmī* (The giver of enjoyment, food

and wealth), *Yoga Lakshmi* (The spiritual richness of yoga) and *Mahālakshmi* (The power of evolution and ascent) (*Sahaja Yoga Mantra Book*, 2020: 62).

The *Gruhalakshmi* principle, the Goddess of a house's fortune power, is required from any woman. The perfect wife brings joy to the house and is happy and peaceful in any situation. The aspect of *Gruhalakshmi* (the housewife) is worshipped on the first day of Diwali Festival (*Dantheras*). In our culture we do not have the possibility to imagine how human beings can be worshipped, since the western world has an image of an invisible and unreachable divinity. In Hindu tradition, the relation between divinity and human beings is not only of closeness, but of identity with God, this being the aim of Yoga and Samkhya practices. Thus, human beings are subject of worshipping in the same manner as the idols on different occasions. The *Gruhalakshmis* are the goddesses of the family. If in the European culture the housewife lost the respect and a woman without a career is seen as less worthy, then the house duties are seen as a burden. On the other hand, the western society also looks down to unmarried or divorced women, so the pressure is higher. A *Gruhalakshmi* not only enjoys feeding the family, but considers cooking for them as a privilege (Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 1982). However a housewife does not involve too much in cleaning, that being done by servants. But, if from a lady is expected that she manifests the qualities of Shri Lakshmi, the husband shall also be like Shri Vishnu.

The *Rajalakshmi* aspect is related not only to the queens or leaders, but to the dignity in every human being. However, the female leaders or the wives of male leaders bear the responsibility of being *Gruhalakshmi* for an entire country (Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, 1982).

From the 108 names of Shri Lakshmi (*Ashtottara Shatanamavali*), I recall a few which describe her qualities: *Sattvā* (The absolute essence), *Shāntā* (Peaceful), *Param'ānanda-rūpinī* (The one whose form is supreme joy), *Nitya shuddhā* (Ever pure), *Pāvanikarā* (The purifier), *Tushtā* (Contentment) and *Mahā-shakti* (The great power) (*Sahaja Yoga Mantra Book*, 2020: 63). Although she is worshiped for bestowing prosperity and material gain, the blessings of Shri Lakshmi are rather for the spiritual wealth.

The power of the mother is described also in the last chapter of *Ramayana*, when Sita, exiled by Rama while being pregnant with her twin sons, is expanding her *sati* powers to her sons and they are to use them in battles against their enemies (Chakravarty, 2019: 75).

5. *The saviour and the warrior*

The powers of a goddess now limit being the *shakti* of a God. The Goddess acts by herself. Shri Durga is an avatar of Devi, of Shri Adi Shakti and is portrayed as a

warrior sitting on a lion or a tiger having 10 arms, each carrying a weapon. She is richly ornamented with golden jewelries, such as bangles, crown and the nose ring. In the modern and kitschy representations of goddess Durga, sometimes only the frightening kajal painted eyes and the nose-ring are present. Her mission was to protect the Gods and human beings against the *asuras* (demons) who were trying to conquer the Creation. *Devi Mahatmyam*, or *Durga Saptashati* (700 verses in praise of Shri Durga) known also as *Chandipat Parvas* that constitutes chapters 81-93 from *Markandeya Purana* describes the advent of the three goddesses, Mahalakshmi, Mahakali and Mahasaraswati, elevated forms of Lakshmi, Kali and Saraswati, “maha” meaning “great”. The three goddesses together form goddess Durga. Each of them is extremely powerful and slays demon after demon. Before every battle, each goddess is worshipped by Gods and she is praised after each victory, because She is never defeated. The first goddess created out of Shri Vishnu’s navel is Shri Mahalakshmi, the most frightful is goddess Mahakali, the one who drinks the blood of demons and the most powerful is Shri Mahasaraswati. The 11th chapter is praise to Narayani, from which I am quoting the end, which is used by the devotees for their protection (*Devi Mahatmyam*, 2019, *Markandeya Purana*, chapter 91):

The world prostrates itself to thee; thou art followed by the world; thou art faithfully loved by the world. O Goddess! Protect and preserve the people from the fear of enemies, by destroying always the giants, as thou didst of late: extinguish the sins of the world, which proceed from accidental causes. O Goddess! Thou shouldst favour him, who humbly bows; O dispeller of universal alarm! The inhabitants of the three worlds shall prostrate themselves to thee; O bless the people! (The *Markandeya Purana*, 2019: 152)

In a translation of *Devi Mahatmyam* made by Lyndal Vercoe in 2010, in the 11th chapter the goddess is described as it follows: “All sciences are part of you. The feminine power of all women is from you.” (In the version of missing M.N. Dutt, we find “thou art the essence of all sciences, thou art the rich one, thou fillest all things, - who can praise thy holy eloquence.”) The domestic role of women in India doesn’t seem to fit the qualities expressed by Shri Durga. However, history gives a few names of heroic women, who even fought in battles, such as Rani Durgavati (16th century), the Rajput queen, who was defeated by the Mughal army in the end, but only after two successive victories; she killed herself in order not to be captured, and Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi (19th century) who fought against the British army at the Jhansi fort, where she escaped jumping with the horse from the high walls, and later she died defending Gwalior fort. Though she was defeated, general Hugh Rose, her adversary in those battles recalled her memory with great respect (Mahajan, 2014).

The 11th chapter of *Devi Mahatmyam* is recited during the Navaratri Festival (Nine nights of praising the Goddess Durga) in the 8th night, for worshipping the aspect of Mahagauri, the One Who made great penance. Devi Durga is a *Brahmacharini*, a celibate, though she is wearing the jewels of a bride or married woman. Goddess

Durga is evoked for granting protection to her devotees. Though she is a warrior by excellence, her Kumari (virgin) aspect is worshipped through rituals like Kumari puja and Kanya Pujan (Bhattacharya, 2019), offered to little girls. This custom is popular in certain parts of India and Nepal. The Indravrata festival (Nepal) is worshipping girls of 16 years old, while in India, for Navaratri (Matrika puja), are worshipped nine *kumaris* with ages between two to ten, with certain physical qualities, and coming from four casts. They represent nine aspects of Durga: Kumari, Trimurti, Kalyani, Rohini, Kalika, Sambhavi, Durga, Chandika and Subhadra (Pant, 1986: 178-86).

6. Conclusions

If the spiritual world worships these extraordinary goddesses, how can women in a society believing in *shaktis* be oppressed or be weak and vulnerable? If we think about women versus men, their place in society might be still poor. But if we think about families like a complete structure, where men and women depend on each other and create unity, then the situation looks completely different, since the woman is the source of life, sustenance, nourishment, morals, education for the new generation, prosperity, spirituality, while the man looks for the material wellbeing. The ideal situations are not to be found in all occasions, the society changes, and so do the values, especially after war or other social turmoil.

Empowering women in the way we see it in the European/American world has more aspects: economic, political, cultural, etc. If we really want to include the Indian historical way of seeing women in a specific category and use labels, we might consider that the Indian society per ensemble is more inclined to adopt maternal feminism, the feminist theology or a conservative one. The feminist writers have raised the issue of projecting of the religious principles upon the society to the extent that the hierarchy of sexes that we know from the patriarchal societies might have been missing in the places where the goddess was worshiped or that maybe all relations in the society were not based on hierarchy, but rather on functionality (Ganesh, 1990: 62).

If we consider the principle of Shakti, and the conception according to which the humans are reflectors of the divine models, women can be regarded as the force making society function. This power, which is intrinsic to the feminine gender, can be harnessed for the benefit of the individual as well as the society recognizing and harnessing the power of Shakti can have profound implications for women's empowerment and social transformation. The patience of Mother Earth, the gentleness of Lakshmi, the courage of Shri Durga when defending her children, the wisdom of Saraswati when educating them, the chastity of Anasuya, the purity of Sita are all to be found in the common women of India. These are considered not just normal qualities, but powers. The poor and oppressed women exist, not doubt. But

at the same time, India had a few female leaders, like Jhansi ki Rani, Sarojini Naidu, Pratibha Patil or Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi. The Indian society has many layers and a great complexity and is conservative from all points of view. However, even behind closed doors, women are powerful and empowered, since they are aware of their qualities and are creating the new generation and they are the source, the Shakti and the Lakshmi power of the house, of the society, of the country.

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