

ETERNAL DRYAD OF THE INDIAN FOREST

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THIS PAPER IS AN EXPLORATIVE AND SPECULATIVE STUDY OF WOMAN through the eyes of the very early Indian people as they sought to express woman's inexpressible essence by myths and symbols in art and literature by the Hindu-religio-philosophical system, and suffused with that spirit—cosmogonic, mystical and deeply human. We are primarily concerned with what might be referred to as *pre-Vedic* and *post-Vedic* periods¹—time areas more specifically Dravidian in character and of a primordial ancientness. With the exclusion of other relevant and interesting topics such as fertility cults, the Tantras, polyandry, marriage customs, etc., our discussion will deal with woman as the universal Earth Goddess, woman of the matriarchate, woman as worshipped by the *Shaktas*, and woman's symbols, and woman at the time of male ascendancy and her eventual subjugation. We shall start with the latter.

THE VEDIC PERIOD

The Aryans invaded India through the years 2000 to 1500 B.C. The years immediately following the period of Vedic intrusion show what eventually became an age primarily Vedic in character. The Aryans were a warlike people who imposed upon the population of Dravidians obtaining their language and religio-social system. These herdsman-settlers as represented by the sacrificial hymns of the *RgVed*, were both intellectually and materially advanced. Their language, their religion and their social institutions were of the Indo-European type like those of the ancient Persians of the *Avesta* and the Greeks of the Homeric poems. They assimilated the more primitive and non-warlike people who in turn assimilated them into that blending that came to be referred to as the Indo-Aryan culture—in some expressions of which the indigenous Dravidian aspect irrepressibly permeated and overwhelmed the new culture.

The Aryans, roving warrior-herdsmen, it can be assumed brought few if any of their own women with them. They probably took wives from among the local population, a factor to be considered in determining what

¹ 'Post-Vedic' generally refers to the preeminent resurgence of the indigenous Dravidian character that often affirms what are considered to be pre-Vedic traits. The Buddhist period followed indeed, however much of the art serving Buddhist ideas remained in a sense untouched by both conservative Brahmanism and renunciative Buddhism. The Hinduic spirit prevailed reconciling all things.

woman's position came to be.² Zimmer notes that it was a practice to symbolically inseminate sacramentally the "womb" of the conquered city "by taking possession of its women—hence conquering the principle that embodies the Mother Earth."³

The *Vedic period*⁴ is basically characterized as a patriarchal society. Writings illustrate that woman's place was strictly confined to the domestic sphere. Sons were preferred over daughters. With male ascendancy was the stratification of society into castes. "Male imperialism" reduced woman eventually into two spheres of subjugation—the courtesan for desire and the dutiful wife and mother.

THE INDIAN HETAERA

The courtesan's primary purpose in life was to render pleasure to men. In the chapters dealing on the courtesan in the *Kama Sutra* of *Vatsyayana*, the writer articulates on the element of "honour" and the relevance of love associated with the profession and, "decides that desire for wealth, freedom from misfortune, and love are the only cause that affects the union of courtesans with men"⁵.

By having intercourse with men, courtesans obtain sexual pleasure, as well as their own maintenance. Now, when a courtesan takes up with a man from love, the action is natural; but when she resorts to him for the purpose of getting money, her action is artificial or forced. Even in this latter case, however, she should conduct herself as if her love were indeed natural, because — men repose their confidence on those women who apparently love them. In making known her love to the man, she should show an entire freedom from avarice, and for the sake of her future credit she should abstain from acquiring money from him by unlawful means . . .

The courtesan was master of several artistic talents referred to in the *Kama Sutra* as well as in other writings of an earlier date.

The cultured person and in particular the courtesan of Sanskrit literature . . . was expected to be educated in 64 *Kalas* (arts and sciences), a term often equated with *silpa* "art" or *vidya* "science". Though this number may vary in older Jain and Buddhist texts, a standard list of sixty-four is given by *Vatsyayana* in the *Kama Sutra* and a slightly different one in the *Policy of Shukra*. These arts include dancing, singing, acting, flower-arranging, legerdemain, distillation of spiritous liquors, sewing and embroidery work, first aid, metallurgy, cooking, chemistry, posture, duelling, gymnastics, horology, dyeing, architecture and engineering, minerology, calligraphy, swimming, leatherwork, archery, driv-

² Not so related, but interesting to take note of is Simone de Beauvoir's comment (*The Second Sex*): "The worse curse that was laid upon woman was that she should be excluded from the warlike forays. For it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that that kills."

³ Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, Pantheon Books, NY, 1946, pp. 177-178.

⁴ This period covers the years from 1500 to 500 B.C.

⁵ *Vatsyayana, Kama Sutra* (translation: Sir Richard F. Burton), EP Dulton & Co., Inc., NY, 1962, pp. 205-208.

ing horses and elephants, composition and solution of riddles and other puzzles, nursing and rearing of children, and the like⁶.

In the early city which was the real center of the second oldest profession (the oldest being that of medicine man), it is the function of the prostitute to care for strangers.

There is very little need for her under village conditions where the sexes are usually fairly well-balanced in number and adults usually marry. In the ancient city, on the other hand, there was a heavy surplus of males since man could leave their villages much more readily than woman. Everywhere in the Near East the temple prostitute was a regular part of the temple establishment. The city god, like any other male notable was provided with a large complement of women, but since he proved an inactive and unjealous spouse, these women found substitutes for him elsewhere and contributed their earnings to the temple upkeep. A society which was only emerging from village patterns also required sometime in developing adequate techniques for housing and feeding city transients, and this gave an opportunity for prostitution of a different type. The secular prostitute was frequently an innkeeper or had a small apartment in which she received successive travellers and provided them for a few days with a "home away from home".⁷

Linton's description of the ancient city could probably apply to the early cities of Harapa, Mohenjodaro . . . in ancient Mohenjodaro, for example, Kosambi suggests that the pre-Aryan great bath is a ceremonial *puskara*.⁸

This ancient building situated apart from the city on the citadel—Zikkurat mound, could not have been utilitarian seeing that so much labor had to be expended to fill the tank with water. There is no imagery or decoration of any sort, but the tank is surrounded by what may have been used by living representatives, companions or servants of the goddess, the *apsaras* of the day: The water need not have been so laboriously drawn, unless for water deities to whom it was essential.⁹

Apsaras were depicted in Sanskrit writing as heavenly courtesans. *Ap* denotes water and suggests that these dancing girls came from a watery origin.

The earthly and human counterpart of the *apsaras* was the prostitute. There were many types of prostitutes over a wide range of levels. Also opinions expressed in reference to her, the manners in which she is depicted show great disagreement and controversy. She was important, highly valued and respected as well as despised, considered as an object for use and abuse, a degraded outcast in that society where even dancing was deprecated.

⁶ Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Columbia University Press, NY, 1958, p. 259.

⁷ Ralph Linton, *The Tree of Culture*, Knopf, NY, 1955, pp. 124-125.

⁸ Meanings associated with the term *puskara* are lake, lotus, dancing. According to Kosambi ". . . the root *pus* from which it is derived, like the very close *puskala*, denoting fertility, nourishment, plenty."

⁹ D. D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality (studies in the formation of Indian culture)*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1962, p. 72.

The hetaera of high accomplishment who had great influence was called the *Ganika*.

As she had a seat in the general assembly, 'Gana', she was known as *Ganika*, and was the pride, beauty and prosperity of the city, i.e., 'Nagarasri', being well-versed in the sixty-four arts. Later on this office was also introduced in the monarchies, for Kautilya states that the superintendent of the prostitutes was to appoint a *Ganika* born or not born of a prostitute family but noted for her beauty and accomplishments. According to Vatsyayana and Bharata, she was to be the most accomplished of the prostitutes. Thus her office arose not from need of lascivious love but from the desire for the satisfaction of the artistic propensities of the people.¹⁰

In the writings on social conduct and customs of this period (e.g., *Dharmasastras*) there is little direct reference to the prostitute. It would seem by chance that she is referred to in passing as a self-evident phenomenon sometimes viewed with contradiction and mixed-feelings. On the other hand, much has been said about the devoted wife and mother—the extreme example of which we find in—

THE PATIVRATA

Woman's supreme justification for living was the procreation of sons and worshipful serving of her husband. Uncompounded, *pati* means husband, and its associated meanings are—master, owner, lord, ruler, sovereign, etc. The noun *Vrata* (not *vrata*) means loyalty, and fidelity; the word also means devotee. "According to the redactors of the Mahabharata as well as the idealist tone of the Rama, the husband was not only a friend but an ideal, principle, perceptor and the very God of the wife. She was to worship him with single-minded devotion. Her position was later on not that of a friend but that of a devotee". Also her affection for him was of the nature of a mother's affection for her child, unconditional and totally selfless.¹¹

Previously, in the earlier writing of the Epics woman is depicted more as a *Sadharmini*, i.e., wives who were friends and guides of their husbands; later, she degenerated into *pativrata*, without personality and character, and, upon whom inhumanly high moral standards were imposed.

In this patrilineal-patriarchal society with its strict set of morals, the reasons which led to woman's degeneration are not hard to find. Firstly, she lost her religious status as eventually the priest took over in offering the oblations and certain ceremonies which she was formerly in charge of. "This deterioration went so far as to result in woman being classed with dice and wine as one of the three chief evils (*Maitrayani Samhita* III. 6.3)".¹² Secondly, she was given to marriage early at the time of puberty or before,

¹⁰ Shakambari Jayal, *The Status of Women in the Epics*, Delhi, Motilal Bonarsidass, 1966, pp. 215-216.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹² R. C. Majumdar, ed., *The Vedic Age*, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1957, p. 454.

thereby eliminating the possibility of intellectual development as she was immovably anchored to child-bearing and domestic matters. Her education was abandoned and she was consequently maintained ignorant. Woman's degeneration was unconsciously assured her by the increasing over-dominance of the male. She was recognized weak and to be protected. "The father protects her in adolescence, the husband in youth, and the son in old age; a woman does not deserve absolute independence."¹³

The sacrifice of her own interests and even personality, for her husband and his family, was by no means an easy task. Therefore she was to be trained for it from the very childhood . . . in fact the composers of the Epics seize every opportunity to describe the duties of woman, perhaps thinking that as women were frail and fickle-minded, they must be reminded of their duties constantly.¹⁴

In the *Mahabharata*, *Uma* articulates on woman in response to Shivas query,

She should be beautiful and gentle, considering her husband as her god and serving him as such in fortune and misfortune, health and sickness, obedient even if commanded to unrighteous deeds or acts that may lead to her own destruction. She should rise early, serving the gods, always keeping her house clean, tending to the domestic sacred fire, eating only after the needs of gods and guests and servants have been satisfied, devoted to her father and mother and the father and mother of her husband. Devotion to her lord is woman's honour, it is her eternal heaven¹⁵

The husband was the object of her devotion and worship; her love for him must outweigh even that for child. Her 'goal' in life was marriage which was compulsory; her success as wife was based largely on her capacity to bear sons which was ultimately the aim of marriage.

The relative position of the two sexes is reflected in the keen desire for male progeny. This may be regarded as natural in a patriarchal society where relationship was recognized through the father. But this natural predilection exceeds all bounds of propriety or morality when we read in *Aitareya Brahmana* (VII.5) that a daughter is a source of misery and sons alone can be the savior of the family. The *Atharvaveda* (VI.II.3) also deploras the birth of daughter.¹⁶

The functional position of woman is outlined by *Manu*, and in the *Ramayana*, we find that Indian feminine example in *Sita*, symbol of undying fidelity, even after Rama has rejected her. Her endeavor is great in proving her fidelity over many hardships and trials in the jungle in meritorious practice of austerities and meditation.

The patriarchal situation at this time also ejected certain curious attitudes expressive of the ascendant male who in his vanity was nevertheless awed by the phenomenon of woman. Here is a humorous account from the *Mahabharata*—

¹³ *Op. cit.*, Kosambi, p. 444.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, Jayal, p. 103.

¹⁵ P. Thomas, *Kama alpa*, DB Taraporevata, Bombay, 1960, p. 101.

¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*, Majumdar, p. 455.

Originally there were no women in the world and men were reproduced by themselves alone. These sons of men were exceptionally pure and all went to heaven; they crowded heaven to such an extent that the gods found themselves hard-pressed for room. They then addressed their complaint to the Maker to find a way out, and Brahman then created women who very soon diverted the flow of souls from earth to a region far removed from heaven.¹⁷

The power of woman is considered to be of a worldly nature. Occult powers and intellectual strivings are not for her although there are some instances, scant in comparison indeed, that would prove otherwise. There is one method by which a woman can attain occult powers denied even to man. This is by her *Patrivrityam* i.e., absolute devotion to her husband.”¹⁸ *Patrivrityam*, as we have seen is a patriarchal concoction.

A few sources attest to woman's sexual potency over the male; she is considered to be uncontrollable in her passion. *Kalyamalla*, who wrote *Ananga Ranga* (The Hindu Art of Love), quantified woman's prowess when he said, “a woman eats twice as much as a man, she is four times as much clever, her determination is six times as strong, and her sexual desire eight times as strong as a man's.”

Pachasuda, a celestial dancer in the Mahabharata answered a question raised by the sage *Narada*—

Of truth, there is nothing worse than woman in the three worlds. Women are the root of all evils . . . they are ready to forsake their rich and worthy husband and bestow their favours on others as soon as they get an opportunity. We women know no moral bars and are ready to throw ourselves into the arms of evil men. Women are not swayed by considerations of beauty, youth or character. Any man is good enough for any woman when women do not get any man, they even fall on one another the fire has never too many faggots, the ocean never too many rivers, the all-devouring time never too many beings and beautiful women never too many men. Death, the storm, fire, poison, serpents, the sharpness of the sword, and hell itself—women are all these in one.¹⁹

Apart from these curious attitudes regarding the subjugated woman, we swing back to long before the Aryan intrusion and the early cities of the Indus Valley civilization. What unseen power was held by the indigenous people of India? From what origins emerged the devotees of the Shakti cults? What esoteric quality enabled the spirit of these very ancient people of Nature to influence profoundly the dominating Vedic imposition?

Primeval times are dark days of man's innocence, permeated with a sense of fear and mystery. Findings in archeology and anthropology shed a dim light, providing clues (as do myths and symbols that live in the culture of India) upon which to speculate.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, Thomas, p. 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁹ *Idem.*

THE MATRIARCHATE

There is a tremendous amount of evidence to affix as fact that a matriarchate obtained as the earliest Indian form of social organization. Matriarchy, which often though not always featured the rule of mothers, has been considered as a stage of primordial origin that preceded what eventually evolved into the patriarchal system. Throughout early Indian history, an extraordinary amount of material points to woman as playing a predominant role in society. The universality of the notion of Mother Goddess is encountered throughout the primitive world. A whole religious system sprung up from remote and early origins worshipping the goddess rather than the god (e.g., the *Shaktas*). There are several segments of Indian society, especially in the southern parts, greatly non-Aryan, wherein matriarchal forms obtain to the present. The *Toda* tribes, the *Kashi* of *Assam* and the *Nairs* from the south are living examples.

Briffault links this most primitive of social organizations with biological evidence in the animal kingdom and among the higher anthropoids. He says that "In no instance is the father, the provider and protector of the group. In the great majority of instances among mammals, if not indeed in all, the father is not an essential member of the group. As often as not he may be absent from it. The animal family-group consists of the mother and her offspring, and centers round the former."²⁰

The patriarchal social order as its own foremost institution marriage with the concomittant sacredness affixed to it. The "family" became the basic unit of society with the insured permanence of the union of husband and wife. This new order of human association upset and overtook that of primitive clan and tribe centering solely around the mother.

Its formation by the removal of woman from the group to which she belonged, to that of her husband is found to stand in direct conflict with the primal social rules of humanity in its simpler stages. The establishment of the patriarchal family marks everywhere the breaking up and decay of primitive clan and tribal organization. The social group which the sexual patriarchal group was everywhere antagonized and has eventually destroyed is the biological group formed by the mother and her offspring, a group economically self-contained through the cooperation of clan brothers and clan sisters, and one of which the sexual partner is not a member. The forces which make for the association of sexual mates are in uncultured humanity subordinate to those deeper biological ties.²¹

A classic example of the matriarch would be the *Khasi* woman of *Assam*. She was the nucleus from which was drawn the line of inheritance and descent—

²⁰ Robert Briffault, *The Mothers (matriarchal theory of social origins)*, MacMillan, NY, 1959, pp. 156-157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Briffault also here quotes an Arab saying — "Love of a clan is greater than love between husband and wife."

The father has no function in such a group beyond that of impregnating the female . . . that relation of paternity. It involves neither continued cohabitation, nor association, nor permanent duties toward mother and offspring . . . The group does not consist of a family formed around the authority or economic supremacy of the father, but consists of various generations of women associated with their brothers and uncles, and the kinship relations of the maternal clan are matrilinear. The economic privilege upon which the patriarchal family is founded does not exist. Economic production, fundable wealth and communal property are in the hands of the women and are transmitted through them.²²

Other sources describe the man-woman relations in the matriarchy as "promiscuous". We note that indeed *polyandry* was virtually a conventional and concomitant practice in matriarchates. There is reference to man's ignorance of paternity—

Our primitive ancestors were not aware that sex activities are responsible for pregnancy in women. Men and women mated solely for pleasure and had not the slightest idea that mating was responsible for the reproduction of the species.²³

The notions of "family", our notions of love enshrined in the patriarchal institution of marriage was virtually absent in the primitive society we are here speaking of. Briffault explains,

Maternal affection is an older, more primitive, and more fundamental form of sentiment than affection between the sexes.²⁴

And,

There is no connection in primitive social relations between marriage and propagation than between marriage and sexual relations. The children which a woman bears are not members of a social group to which the father belongs, but of that to which the mother belongs; they do not grow in a separate family, but constitute the increase of her clans. Marriage is no more grounded in that multiplication of the plan than in a patriarchal family which is not formed thereby . . . Neither is their sexual organization founded upon marriage, nor is their social organization founded on the family.²⁵

Unrestricted by notions of marriage and patriarchal morals, the matriarchate was also the system that best ensured the survival of the group. Progeny was a real need. "In primeval times old age scarcely existed. The average span of life in the Aurignarian—Perigardian and Magdalenian eras was about twenty years, as Mr. Vallois, of the Musée de L'Homme (Paris), has deduced from skeletons found in burial places."²⁶

Women and Nature were indistinguishable—they held the mystery of life essential to survival. Woman held in her very nature the promise of life as the trees that bore fruit. She was as Nature—life-producing, woman was the Earth.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 311-312.

²³ *Op. cit.*, P. Thomas, p. 1.

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, Briffault, p. 45-46.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

²⁶ Siegfried Giedion, *The Eternal Present (A Contribution of Constancy & Change)*, Bollingen Foundation, Pantheon Book, NY, 1962, p. 173.

THE EARTH GODDESS

Unearthed in abundant quantities by archeologists have been female terracotta figurines. Scholars are widely agreed that these are representations of the Great Mother Goddess used as object of cult.

The most common type of figurine is rather elaborately dressed. She sports a girdle wound around her, quantities of jewelry, big round earrings and an ornate headdress. Unlike the female figurines, the male ones that were found were entirely nude and in sitting position. Sometimes, statuettes that appear pregnant and with sex characteristics exaggerated have been found together with children and animal figurines.

Giedion notes that while figurines of the Earth Goddess are plentiful, the "phallus on the other hand, appears rarely, as do any male figurines".

Sculptures at *Amaravati*, *Sanchi* and others of ancient India bear similarities with the early statuettes. The sexual triangle is enlarged, as are the breasts and hips. Sometimes, (as in the case of the *yonis*) the female principle is emphasized, abstracted or isolated. The basic thinking behind this was that this one vital part represented the whole. The *yonis* then was the symbol of the essence of woman, symbol of the essence of life, and like "so many primeval symbols, it centers upon the desire for fertility, for the procreation and increase of the species: human and animal."²⁷

Radhakrishnan sums up the religion of the Indus people as having, "consisted in worshipping the Mother Goddess, the deification of trees and spirits, certain animal chimeras and therianthrope figures, the prototype of Siva, the aniconic phallic symbols, the swastika, etc."²⁸

The Mother Goddess figures unearthed in the early cities of India are not unfamiliar figures, for other versions of it have been found in other parts of the world concentrated in what are considered to be centers of cult. These figures are effect cult objects and idols of a rather universal ancestral mother.

In the form of this ancestral mother the hunter revered the primeval power of procreation and increase from which the tribe and family came into being; he revered the guardian of sexual life through which the tribe and family continued to exist; he experienced the protective spirit of the hearth; and last but not least the helpful powers which guided his hunting.²⁹

With the evolution and rise of Hinduism, we find increasingly sprouting throughout India, cults akin to the Shaktas and to the Saivites. This phase is indicative of the rise of that primeval spirit and profound belief in the regenerative forces of life; for which reason, the female principle became a symbol to be worshipped as—

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 453.

²⁸ Radhakrishnan, *The Cultural Heritage of India*, the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Calcutta, 1958, p. 124.

²⁹ *Loc. cit.*, Giedion, p. 173.

THE SAKTI

Sakti is conceived as energy. The Saktas consider Godhead to be essentially feminine. Woman is the life-force suffusing matter and beings to activity; so that even "the Sakti of a god is essentially the god himself and apart from her the god has no existence." Brahman and all the other gods are emanated from her. She is regarded as the "Supreme Mother who evolves the universe and destroys it, or rather dissolves it into herself—to create it again." Sakti as female energy is the mother of the world, the essence of reality and the secret of the cosmos.³⁰

Sakti, the cult of the yoni, is found in minority cults throughout India, but its strongholds are mainly in Assam and Bengal. The following legend is said to be found in the Tantrics; it tells of the origin of this cult.

The story goes that Shiva after killing Daksha took the charred body of Sati in his arms and started wailing over it. He fell into a paroxysm of grief and gone mad with emotion, started dancing with the body of Sati still in his hands. Such was the terrible rhythm of the dance that all fourteen worlds trembled and all the creatures in them were about to perish. In this predicament the terror-stricken gods supplicated Vishnu, the preserver, to devise some means to save the universe from impending doom. Vishnu finding no other method of stopping Shiva's dance took the flaming discus and cut the body of Sati into fifty-one pieces, which falling from Shiva's hands, the God regained his senses and stopped dancing. The fifty-one pieces of Sati's body are believed to have fallen in different parts of the country, and a shrine to have sprung up over each piece. The yoni is said to have fallen in Assam at the site where the Kamkhaya temple stands at present, and Saktiism is believed to have spread mainly from this place.³¹

In this cult, woman is depicted in the following aspects: as a tender and devoted wife, as World Mother, Great Earth Goddess stressing her maternal nature, as a symbol of sexual desire and joy; and Sakti in her terror aspect as Kali, Durga, Bhavani, blood, death and destruction. Many symbols in the form of objects are anthropomorphic representations that embody the feminine essence.

SYMBOLS RELATED TO WOMAN

Literally, *yni* means 'holder' and properly pertains to the 'vulva'. It means also nest, origin and womb; it is the matrix of generation and symbol of sex pleasure. Shell and ring-stones (*pindika*) have been found in the vicinity of the Indus Valley as common objects of the feminine principle. Often the yoni is found as a flat base, round or square, upon which the upright *lingam* stands—symbols of the regenerative forces of creation which union "gives a direct representation of the creation of the world. Uncompromising in their grandeur they symbolize Genesis itself."³²

³⁰ Raj Mulk Anand, *The Hindu View of Art*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1957, p. 49 ff.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, Thomas, p. 125.

³² Max Pol-Fouchet, *The Erotic Sculpture of India*, Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, p. 9.

This union of opposites symbolizes the "first bifurcation of the primal, cosmogonic, realty, now reunited in productive harmony. Under the form of Father Heaven and Mother Earth they were known to the Greeks as Zeus and Hera, Uranos and Gaia, to the Chinese as T'ien and Ti, Yang and Yin." ³³

As they are opposites they also are basically reconciled as *one*.

The God and Goddess are the first self-revelation of the absolute, the male being the personification of the passive aspect which we know as Eternity, the female of the activating energy (Sakti), the dynamism of Time. Though apparently opposites, they are in essence one . . . The Goddess is the yoni, mother womb of the ever cycling eons, of all the universe endlessly extending in space, of every atom in the living cell.³⁴

Mithuna (the sexual union) and the common representation of lovers are symbolic of the selfless union with the Absolute. Mithuna "can be represented by copulation without loss of its esoteric meaning. To some copulation signifies the union of substance (prakriti) and essence (purusha); for others it represents more directly the moment when the self (atman) becomes merged through release with the supreme impersonal Spirit."³⁵

We see the expression of these symbols also in the architecture of India. The inner-most sanctum of a Hindu temple is called the *garbha-ghriha* or womb-chamber. It is commonly dark with little or no light at all filtering into it. In the midst of this dome-like structure is the lingam-yoni as central force carved out of living rock.

Other symbols related to woman are the lotus, the moon, her symbolic aspects of Kati and Durga, the cow, the water, etc.

The lotus is widely to be found in all Indian iconography and is as basically related to the pre-Aryan cults as the sacred fire is to the Vedic Aryans. We know that the worship of the mother-goddess was a pre-Aryan practice. The lotus symbolized the Absolute as the generator and sustainer of life. It was "originally the exclusive sign and 'vehicle' of Padma—mother, or yoni, of the universe—it is symbolic of the procreative power (Sakti) of the immortal, adamantine, eternal substance."³⁶

The *nagas*—anthropomorphic representation of snakes as the keepers of life-energy stored in the bottom of springs and rivers. They are carved in stone tablets or slabs as votive offerings of women seeking extra fertility. These slabs are usually placed under water for a period of time "to become imbued with the watery element."³⁷

Water is a feminine symbol, as are dew and moisture. "According to Hindu conception, the waters are female; they are the maternal procreative

³³ *Op. cit.*, Zimmer, p. 127.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139-140.

³⁵ *Loc. cit.*, Pol-Fouchet.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, Zimmer, p. 128.

³⁷ *Idem.*

aspect of the Absolute, and the cosmic lotus is their generative organ.”³⁸ *Sarasvati* is the great river goddess who “originally represented the Indus (Sindhu), in the valley which developed the great civilization—along with its tributaries, was the secret of the riches and prosperity, which was responsible for the progress of that civilization. Hence, it is no wonder that the people benefited by it, raised it to a divine pedestal and worshipped it as the great goddess.”³⁹

Closely related to water is the moon which regulates its tide. The moon is the abode and source of life. The moon controls the waters (tides) that circulate through the universe. The moon maintains and restores, as lord of plants, the moisture to them which is taken from them by the sun. Hence also, the important role attributed to woman in the processes connected with rainfall.⁴⁰

Reference is made to the moon as the cup that contains the drink of immortality—*amrta* (nectar).

These symbols are taken from nature and are related to the generative aspects of *Kali* and *Durga*, the cow, the water, etc. in the figure of *Kali*—bloodshed, pestilence, terror and death. She is hideous and requires human sacrifices or propitiation with the blood of goats. *Kali* is death—for “the energy of life is finally no less destructive than creative—Life feeds on life. The aging and dying generation is to be replaced by the younger—what the goddess bestows benignantly upon the one, she has ruthlessly taken from the others—Time, the all producing, all-annihilating principle, in the outflow of which everything that comes into existence again vanishes after the expiration of the brief spell of its allotted life—the creative and the destructive principle are one and the same. Both are at unison in the divine cosmic energy that becomes manifest in the process of biography and history of the universe.”⁴¹

CONCLUDING COMMENT

We note that in the vastness of Indian culture—its intricacy and wealth—without solid overview, or more precisely an integrated conception, of its developments and foundations, one is bound to stagger blissfully about as we have done. In the absence of audacious speculation we have relied on some secondary sources here and there. Our attempt has been solely to obtain a glimpse of woman—in the eternal dryad of the Indian forest.

³⁸ *Idem.*

³⁹ Prakash, Buddha, *The RgVeda and the Indus Valley Civilization*, Vishveshvaranand Inst., Hosiarpur, 1966, pp. 47-48.

⁴⁰ J. Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, Mouton, London, 1965.

⁴¹ *Op. cit.*, Zimmer, p. 212.