

RIDDLE NO. 12

WHY DID THE BRAHMINS DETHRONE THE GODS AND ENTHRONE THE GODDESSES ?

The worship of Gods is a thing common to all. But the worship of Goddesses is quite uncommon. The reason is that Gods are generally unmarried and have no wives who can be elevated to the position of Goddesses. How repugnant is the idea of a God being married is well illustrated by the difficulties which early Christians had in persuading the Jews to accept Jesus as the son of God. The Jews retorted saying God is not married and how can Jesus be the son of God.

With the Hindus the position is quite otherwise. They not only worship Gods they also worship Goddesses. This is so from the very beginning.

In the Rig-Veda several Goddesses are mentioned such as *Prithvi*, *Aditi*, *Diti*, *Nishtigri*, *Indrani*, *Prisni*, *Usha*, *Surya*, *Agnayi*, *Varunani*, *Rodasi*, *Raka*, *Sinivali*, *Sradha*, *Aramati*, *Apsaras* and *Sarasvati*.

Prithvi is a very ancient Aryan Goddess. She is represented either as wife of *Dyaus* heaven or of *Parjanya*. Prithvi is an important Goddess because she is said to be the mother of many Gods.

Aditi is chronologically one of the older Vedic Goddesses. She is described as the mighty mother of the Gods. The Gods, *Mitra*, *Aryaman* and *Varuna* are her sons. To whom Aditi was married does not appear from the Rig-Veda. We do not know much about *Diti* except that she is mentioned as a goddess along with and in contrast to *Aditi* and that the *Daityas* who were regarded in later Indian mythology as the enemies of the Devas were her sons.

The original title of the Chapter was 'Vedic and non-Vedic Goddesses'. From the subject dealt with in this chapter and from the concluding para, we have placed this at Riddle No. 12 in accordance with the subject mentioned in the Table of Contents. This is a 21-page typed copy having some modifications and also concluding para in the handwriting of the author.—Ed.

The goddess *Nishtigri* is the mother of Indra and the goddess *Indrani* is the wife of Indra. *Prisni* is the mother of Maruts. *Usha* is described as the daughter of the sky, the sister of *Bhaga* and the kinswoman of *Varuna* and the wife of *Surya*. The goddess *Surya* is the daughter of *Surya* and the wife of the Gods *Asvins* or *Soma*.

The goddesses *Agnayi*, *Varunani* and *Rodasi* are the wives of *Agni*, *Varuna* and *Rudra* respectively. Of the rest of the goddesses are mere personifications of rivers or are mentioned without any details.

From this survey two things are clear. One is that a Hindu God can enter a married state and neither the God nor his worshipper need feel any embarrassment on account of the God acting as though he was no better than a common man. The second is that the God's wife automatically becomes a goddess worthy of worship by the followers of the God.

Leaving the Vedic times and coming to the Pauranic times we come across the names of various Goddesses such as *Devi*, *Uma*, *Sati*, *Ambika*, *Parvati*, *Haimavati*, *Gauri*, *Kali*, *Nirriti*, *Chandi* and *Katyayini*, *Durga*, *Dassbhuj*, *Singhavahini*, *Mahishasuramardini*, *Jagaddhatri*, *Muktakesi*, *Tara*, *Chinnamustaka*, *Jagadgaury*, *Pratyangira*, *Annapurna*, *Ganeshjanani*, *Krishnakrora* and *Lakshmi*. It is very difficult to construct a who is who of these Goddesses. In the first place it is difficult to say whether each name stands for a distinct and separate Goddess or they are the names of one Goddess. It is equally difficult to be sure of their parentage. Nor can any one say with certainty as to who their husbands are.

According to one account *Uma*, *Devi*, *Sati*, *Parvati*, *Gauri* and *Ambika* are different names of the same Goddess. On the other hand *Devi* is said by some to be the daughter of *Daksha*, *Ambika* to be the sister of *Rudra*. Regarding *Parvati* the *Varaha Purana* in describing her origin says¹:

“Brahma when on a visit to Siva on Mount Kailasa is thus addressed by him : ‘Say, quickly, O, Brahma, what has induced you to come to me ?’ Brahma replies, ‘There is a mighty Asura named Andhaka (Darkness), by whom all the gods, having been distressed, came for protection, and I have hastened to inform you of their complaints’. Brahma then looked intently at Siva, who by thought summoned Vishnu into their presence. As the three deities looked at each other, ‘from their three refulgent glances sprang into being a virgin of celestial loveliness, of hue cerulean, like the petals of a blue lotus, and adorned with gems, who hashfully bowed before Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. On their asking her who she was, and why she was

¹ Quoted in Wilkins “Hindu Mythology” pp. 290-91.

distinguished by the three colours black, white and red, she said, ‘From your glances was I produced : do you not know your own omnipotent energies ?’ Brahma then praising her said, ‘Thou shalt be named the goddess of three times (past, present and future), the preserver of the universe, and under various appellations shalt thou be worshipped, as thou shalt be the cause of accomplishing the desires of thy votaries. But, O goddess, divide thyself into three forms, according to the colours by which thou art distinguished. She then, as Brahma had requested, divided herself into three parts ; one white, one red, and one black. The white was ‘Saraswati of a lovely, felicitous form, and the co-operator with Brahma in creation ; the red was Lakshmi, the beloved of Vishnu, who with him preserves the universe ; the black was Parvati endowed with many qualities and energy of Siva.’

Here is an attempt to suggest that *Saraswati*, *Lakshmi* and *Parvati* are different forms of one and the same divinity. When one remembers that *Sarasvati* is the wife of Brahma, Lakshmi is the wife of Vishnu and Parvati is the wife of Shiva, and also that Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva were at war, this explanation given by the Varah Puran seems very odd.

Who is Gauri ? The Purana says that Gauri is another name for Parvati. The reason how Parvati was called Gauri¹ is that when Shiva and Parvati lived on mount Kailasa, occasionally there were quarrels between them, and on one occasion Shiva reproached her for the blackness of her skin. This taunt so grieved her that she left him for a time, and, repairing to a deep forest, performed a most severe course of austerities, until Brahma granted her as a boon that her complexion should be golden and for this circumstance she is known as Gauri.

Taking the other Goddesses it is not quite certain whether they are different names for one and the same Goddess or whether they are different Goddesses. In the Mahabharata there is a hymn sung by Arjuna to Durga in which he says²:

“Reverence be to thee, Siddha-Senani (general-less of the Siddhas), the noble, the dweller on Mandara, Kumari (Princess), Kali, Kapali, Kapila, Krishna-pingala. Reverence to thee, Bhadrakali ; reverence to thee, Maha Kali, Chandi, Chanda, Tarini (deliveress), Varavarini (beautiful-coloured). O fortunate, Kalyani, O Karali, O Vijaya, O Jaya (victory), younger sister of the chief of cowherds (Krishna), delighting always in Mahisha’s blood’. O Uma, Sakambhari, thou white one, thou black one, O destroyer of

¹ Wilkins pp. 289-90.

² Quoted in Wilkins pp. 306-07.

Kaithabha ! Of science, thou art the science of Brahma (or of the Vedas), the great sleep of embodied beings. O mother of Skanda (Kartikeya), divine Durga, dweller in wildernesses'. Thou, great goddess, art praised with a pure heart. By thy favour let me ever be victorious in battle."

From this hymn it does appear that some of the Goddesses listed above are simply different names of Durga. Similarly, Dasabhuja, Singhavahini, Mahishamardini, Jagaddhatri, Chinnamustaka, Jagadgaury, Pratyangiri, Annapurna are the same as Durga or different forms of *Durga*.

There are thus two principal Goddesses. One is *Parvati* and the other is *Durga*. The rest are mere names. Parvati is the daughter of Daksha Prajapati and the wife of Shiva and Durga is the sister of Krishna and the wife of Shiva. The relationship of *Durga* and *Kali* is not quite clear. According to the hymn sung by Arjuna, Durga and Kali would appear to be one and the same. But the Linga Purana seems to suggest a different view. According to it¹, Kali is distinct from Durga.

A comparison between the Vedic Goddesses and the Puranic Goddesses cannot be avoided by a student whose business it is not merely to write history but to interpret history. On one point there is a striking contrast, between the two. The worship of the Vedic Goddesses was worship by *courtesy*. They were worshipped only because they were the wives of Gods. The worship of the Puranic Goddesses stand on a different footing. They claim worship in their own right and not because they are wives of Gods. This difference arises because the Vedic Goddesses never went to the battlefield and never performed any heroic deed. The Puranic Goddesses on the other hand went to the battlefield and performed great heroic deeds. Their worship was not by courtesy. It was based upon their heroic and thundering deeds.

There was a great battle, it is said, between Durga and the two *asuras* which brought renown to Durga. The story is told in the Markandeya Purana in full details. It says²:

At the close of the Treta Age, two giants, named Sumbha and Nishumbha performed religious austerities for 10,000 years, the merit of which brought Shiva from heaven, who discovered that by this extraordinary devotion, they sought to obtain the blessing of immortality. He reasoned long with them, and vainly endeavoured to persuade them to ask for any other gift. Being denied what they specially wanted, they entered upon still more severe

¹ Wilkins *Ibid.*, pp. 313.

² Wilkins *Ibid.*, pp. 302-306.

austerities for another thousand years, when Shiva again appeared, but still refused to grant what they asked. They now suspended themselves with their heads downwards over a slow fire, till the blood streamed from their necks ; they continued thus for 800 years. The Gods began to tremble, lest, by performing such rigid act of holiness, these demons should supplant them on their thrones. The king of the Gods thereupon called a council, and imparted to them his fears. They admitted that there was ground for anxiety, but asked what was the remedy.

Acting upon the advice of Indra, Kandarpa (the God of love), with Rambha and Tilotama, the most beautiful of the celestial nymphs, were sent to fill the minds of the giants with sensual desires. Kandarpa with his arrow wounded both ; upon which, awaking from their absorption, and seeing two beautiful women, they were taken in the snare, and abandoned their devotions. With these women they lived for 5000 years; after which they saw the folly of renouncing their hopes of immortality for the sake of sensual gratifications. They suspected this snare must have been a contrivance of Indra ; so, driving back the nymphs to heaven, they renewed their devotions, cutting the flesh off their bones, and making burnt offerings of it to Shiva. They continued in this way for 1000 years till at last they became mere skeletons ; Shiva again appeared and bestowed upon them his blessing—that in riches and strength they should excel the Gods.

Being exalted above the Gods, they began to make war upon them. After various successes on both sides, the giants became everywhere victorious ; when Indra and the Gods, reduced to a most deplorable state of wretchedness, solicited the interference of Brahma and Vishnu. They referred them to Shiva, who declared that he could do nothing for them. When, however, they reminded him that it was through his blessing they had been ruined, he advised them to perform religious austerities to Durga. They did so : and after some time the goddess appeared, and gave them her blessing ; then disguising herself as a common female carrying a pitcher of water, she passed through the assembly of the gods. She, then assumed her proper form, and said, 'They are celebrating my praise'.

'This new goddess now ascended Mount Himalaya where Chanda and Manda, two of Sumbha and Nisumbha's messengers resided. As these demons wandered over the mountain, they saw the goddess ; and being exceedingly struck with her charms, which they described to their masters, advised them to engage her affections, even if they

gave her all the glorious things which they had obtained in plundering the heavens of the gods.

Sumbha sent Sugriva as messenger to the goddess, to inform her that the riches of the three worlds were in his palace ; that all the offerings which used to be presented to the gods were now offered to him ; and that all these offerings, riches, etc., would be hers, if she would come to him. The goddess replied that the offer was very liberal, but that she had resolved that the person she married must first conquer her in war, and destroy her pride. Sugriva, unwilling, _ to return unsuccessful, pressed for a favourable answer, promising that he would conquer her in war, and subdue her pride ; and asked in an authoritative strain ; ‘Did she know his master, before whom none of the inhabitants of the worlds had been able to stand, whether gods, demons, or men ? How then could she, a female think of resisting his offers ? If his master had ordered him, he would have compelled her to go into his presence immediately. She agreed that this was very correct, but that she had taken her resolution, and exhorted him, therefore to persuade his master to come and try his strength with her.

The messenger went and related what he had heard. On hearing his account, Sumbha was filled with rage, and, without making any reply, called for Dhumlochana his commander-in-chief and gave him orders to go to Himalaya and seize the goddess and bring her to him, and, if any attempted a rescue, utterly to destroy them.

The commander went to Himalaya, and acquainted the goddess with his master’s orders. She, smiling, invited him to execute them. On the approach of this hero, she set up a dreadful roar, by which he was reduced to ashes. After which she destroyed the army of the giant, leaving only a few fugitives to communicate the tidings. Sumbha and Nisumbha, infuriated, sent Chanda and Manda, who on ascending the mountain, perceived a female sitting on an ass, laughing. On seeing them she became enraged, and drew to her ten, twenty or thirty of their army at a time, devouring them like fruit. She next seized Manda by the hair, cut off his head and holding it over her mouth, drank the blood. Chanda, on seeing the other commander slain in this manner, himself came to close quarters with the goddess. But she, mounted on a lion, sprang on him, and, despatching him as she had done Manda, devoured part of his army, and drank the blood of the slain.

The giants no sooner heard this alarming news than they resolved to go themselves, and collecting their forces, an infinite number of giants, marched to Himalaya. The gods looked down with

astonishment on this vast army, and the goddesses descended to help Mahamaya (Durga), who, however, soon destroyed her foes, Raktavija, the principal commander under Sumbha and Nishumbha, seeing all his men destroyed encountered the goddess in person. But though she covered him with wounds, from every drop of blood which fell to the ground a thousand giants, arose equal in strength to Raktavija himself. Hence innumerable enemies surrounded Durga, and the gods were filled with alarm at the amazing sight. At length Chandi, a goddess, who had assisted Kali (Durga) in the engagement, promised that if she would drink the giant's blood before it fell to the ground, she (Chandi) would engage him and destroy the whole of his strangely formed offspring. Kali consented, and the commander and his army were soon despatched.

Sumbha and Nishumbha, in a state of desperation, next engaged the goddess in single combat, Sumbha making the first onset. The battle was inconceivably dreadful on both sides, till at last both the giants were slain, and Kali sat down to feed on the carnage she had made. The gods and the goddesses chanted the praises of the celestial heroine, who in return bestowed a blessing on each."

The Markandeya Purana also gives a short account of the valorous deeds of Durga done in the various forms it took. It says :

"As Durga she received the message of the giants ; As Dasabhuja (the ten-armed) she slew part of their army ; As Singhavahini (seated on a lion) she fought with Raktavija ; As Mahishamardini (destroyer of a buffalo) she slew Sumbha in the form of a buffalo ; As Jagaddhatri (the mother of the world) she overcame the army of the giants ; As Kali (the black woman) she slew Raktavija ; As Muktakesi (with flowing hair) she overcame another of the armies of the giants ; As Tara (the saviour) she slew Sumbha in his own proper shape ; As Chinnamastaka (the headless) she killed Nisumbha ; As Jagadgaury (the golden-coloured lady renowned through the world) she received the praises and thanks of the gods."

A comparison between the Vedic and Puranic Goddesses raises some interesting questions. One of them is quite obvious. Vedic literature is full of references to wars against the Asuras. The literature known as Brahmanas replete with them. But all these wars against the Asuras are fought by the Vedic Gods. The Vedic Goddesses never took part in them. With the Puranic Goddesses the situation has undergone a complete change. In the Puranic times there are wars with the Asuras as there were in the Vedic times. The difference is that while in the Vedic times the wars with the Asuras are left to be fought by the Gods in the Puranic times they are left to be fought by the Goddess. Why is

that Puranic Goddesses had to do what the Gods in Vedic times did ? It cannot be that there were no Gods in Puranic times. There were Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva gods who ruled in the Puranic times. When they were there to fight the Asuras why were the Goddesses enrolled for this purpose. This is a riddle which requires explanation.

The second question is what is the source of this power which the Puranic Goddesses possessed and which the Vedic Goddesses never had ? The answer given by the Puranic writers is that this power was the power of the Gods which dwelt in the Goddesses. The general theory was that every God had energy or power which was technically called *Sakti* and that the *Sakti* of every God resided in his wife the Goddess. This had become such an accepted doctrine that every goddess is called a *Sakti* and those who worship the Goddess only are called *Saktas*.

With regard to this doctrine there are one or two questions that call for a reply.

First is this. We may now take it that notwithstanding the many names of the Goddesses as we find in the Puranas we have really five Puranic Goddesses before us—namely, *Sarasvati*, *Lakshmi*, *Parvati*, *Durga* and *Kali*. *Sarasvati* and *Lakshmi* are the wives of Brahma and Vishnu who along with Shiva are recognized as the Puranic Gods. *Parvati*, *Durga* and *Kali* are the wives of Shiva. Now *Sarasvati* and *Lakshmi* have killed no Asura and have in fact done no deed of valour. Question is why ? Brahma and Vishnu had *Sakti* which in conformity with the theory must have dwelt in their wives. Why then did *Sarasvati* and *Lakshmi* not take part in the battle with the Asuras ? This part is only reserved for the wives of Shiva. Even here *Parvati*'s role is quite different from that of *Durga*. *Parvati* is represented as a simple woman. She has no heroic deeds to her credit like the ones claimed for *Durga*. Like *Durga*, *Parvati* is also the *Sakti* of Shiva. Why was Shiva's *Sakti* dwelling in *Parvati* so dull, so dormant, and so inactive as to be non-existent ?

The second point is that though this doctrine may be a good justification for starting the worship of Goddesses independently of Gods, it is difficult to accept either the logical or historical basis of the doctrine. Looking at it purely from the point of view of logic if every God has *Sakti* then even the Vedic Gods must have had it. Why then was this doctrine not applied to the wives of the Vedic Gods ? Looking at it from the point of view of history, there is no justification for saying that the Puranic Gods had *Sakti* in them.

Further the Brahmins do not seem to have realized that by making *Durga* the heroine who alone was capable of destroying the Asuras,

they were making their own Gods a set of miserable cowards. It seems that the Gods could not defend themselves against the Asuras and had to beg of their wives to come to their rescue. One illustration from the Markandeya Purana is enough to prove how imbecile the Puranic Gods were shown by the Brahmins against the Asuras. Says the Markandeya Purana :

“Mahisha, king of the giants, at one time overcame the gods in war, and reduced them to such a state of want that they wandered through the earth as beggars. Indra first conducted them to Brahma, and then to Siva ; but as these gods could render no assistance, they turned to Vishnu, who was so grieved at the sight of their wretchedness, that streams of glory issued from his face, whence came a female figure named Mahamaya (another name of Durga). Streams of glory issued from the faces of the other gods also, which in like manner entered Mahamaya ; in consequence of which she became a body of glory, like a mountain of fire. The gods then handed their weapons to this dreadful being, who with a frightful scream ascended into the air, slew the giant, and gave redress to the gods.”

How can such cowardly Gods have any prowess ? If they had none, how can they give it to their wives. To say that Goddesses must be worshipped because they have *Sakti* is not merely a riddle but an absurdity. It requires explanation why this doctrine of Sakti was invented. Was it to put it a new commodity on the market that the Brahmins started the worship of the Goddesses and degraded the Gods ?

