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Mother Goddess- Earth Goddess: Concept, Peculiarities and Changing Facets

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The history of the worship of female deities goes back to a very remote past. Female figurines unearthed from various archeological sites in the region of Western Asia, the South Russian Plain, the valley of the Don and Mesopotamia prove that this Mother Goddess cult had been prevalent among the pre historic societies in several parts of the world. These statuettes in bone, ivory stone and bas-relief, with maternal organs grossly exaggerated, are to be considered as the earliest representation of Mother Goddess.

Maternal Principle

The primitive society was a food gathering one and the clan centered on the woman who was conceived as not only the symbol of generation but also the actual producer of life. As the precise function of the male partner in relation to conception and birth was not clearly understood, he was regarded as a supplementary agent in the generative process. The organs and attributes of the mother were regarded to be endowed with generative power and they were considered as the life giving symbols. This life-producing mother was envisaged as the central figure of religion also. Thus the maternal principle, in due course, was personified as Mother Goddess. The female figurines found in the different parts of the world, as mentioned above, have evidenced this.

Goddess of Fertility

The transition of the society from the food gathering to food production mode of life naturally made changes in its religious beliefs and practices. When people began to settle down in agricultural communities, the Mother Goddess of the primitive food gathering society was envisaged as Earth Mother who is mainly conceived with vegetation and fertility. In different parts of the world, she became known under different names, though the spirit was the same. Several rituals and festivals also were performed in relation to the worship of this Mother Goddess. In Europe, she is called as Corn Mother while in Indonesia she is Rice Mother. N.N Bhattacharya refers to a special costumery ceremonies prevailed in the Germanic provinces of Europe in connection with the harvest festivals. In this ceremony, last sheaf of corn, often shaped and dressed as a woman, was carried with dance and song to the farmhouse.¹ Romans also have a number of ceremonies that should be observed at the time of the planting and harvesting of the rice.²

Sakambhari Goddess of Vegetation.

The worship of Goddess of Vegetation in Indian tradition goes back to the ages of Indus valley culture. It is observed that the seal unearthed at Harappa, with a nude female figurine, head downwards and legs stretched out upwards, with a plant sprouting out her womb can be taken a symbol of famous Puranic Goddess Sakambhari In *Devimahatmya* portion of *Markandeya Purana*, Devi introduces herself as Sakambhari (*M-p*, LXXXVIII, v. 44-45a). The Sloka denotes, the whole world shall subsist by the divine vegetable, which shall be produced from my body until the rain falls. I shall be known in the earth by the name of Sakambhari ,the preserver of vegetables.

In another seal found there, this Goddess is depicted as standing between the bifurcated

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branches of pipal tree in front of which appears a half-kneeling worshipper behind whom stands a goat with a human face, and in the lower section there are seven persons dressed in short kilt and wearing long pigtailed. This also seems to be a representation of the Mother Goddess.

Rituals and Ceremonies

Some scholars are of opinion that in Harappan society, human sacrifice was practiced to propitiate the Earth Goddess. John Marshall, who has carried out an in depth study in Mohanjodaro and Harappan culture points out a scene depicted on the other side of Sakambhari seal, mentioned above, as a proof for this. In this scene, a female figure with disheveled hair and arms raised up in alarm is depicted. In front of her, there stands a male figure in a threatening attitude with a shield like object in one hand and sickle-like object in the other. But this seems to be not convincingly acceptable as a scene that indicates human sacrifice. As commented by HariPriya Rangarajan, in a society where woman is considered as Mother Goddess such a sacrifice cannot be admitted.³

However, several types of rituals and ceremonies were prevalent in the agricultural societies of India for propitiating the Earth Goddess. Many of them are still continuing. As the productivity of Earth Mother is viewed in terms of the productivity of the human mother, the same preconditions which fertilize women are attributed to the fertilize Mother Earth also. Thus, several fertility rituals in connection with the so conceived menstruation of Earth Goddess became popular in the agricultural societies of Bengal, Panjab, Deccan.⁴ In Kerala also such practices are popular in relation to agricultural community till recent times. The ritual called 'Uccaral' which takes place at the end of the second harvest, representation in the menstruation and seclusion of the Goddess, is an example for this.⁵

The Macandri Puja in Hoshangabad is the celebration of completion of sowing. This worship of Mother Earth is intended to evoke fertility. The farmers of Eastern Punjab conduct a special ritual that is called 'Hariari Puja' or 'Worship of Greenery' at the time of transplanting rice. In several parts of India in the case of failure of rain, women perform particular nudity rites.⁶ The 'Nira' ceremony popular in Kerala also is related to the fertility worship. In this ceremony, on an auspicious day in the month of Cingam (Sravana month) a few stalks of rice are carried from the field to the house and installed there and worshiped in due order. In order to propitiate the vegetation deity 'Itu', the Bengali women perform a particular ritual on the Sundays of the month of Agradhanya.⁷

These, above-mentioned things are our past. People worshipped earth as their Mother Goddess. Now a day's man destroys everything in the Earth. Murder of the environment, which involves senseless poisoning of the earth, air and water, and destruction of forest wealth, are happening. Our rivers, including the Ganga and the Yamuna, are polluted. The consequences of such continuous and reckless use of trees and other natural resources would be disastrous. There are also the dangers from chemical pollution from radioactive wastes, and other wastes from homes, factories, hospitals and laboratories, and from other foreign matter that keeps entering the atmosphere. It is feared by experts that if the energy of the sun is hindered, if the natural processes of purification and elimination are reversed, and if the reckless destruction and pollution continue, mankind may return to the dreaded ice age. Therefore, preservation and restoration of Nature's balance is vital and efforts are being made for that purpose, at both

national and international levels.

References

1. Bhattacharya NN. The Indian Mother Goddess, Manohar Publishers, Delhi, 1970, 35.
2. *Ibid.*, 35.
3. HariPriya Rangarajan, Images of Varahi An Iconographic Study, Sharada Publishing House, Delhi, 2004, 8.
4. Bhattacharya NN. The Indian Mother Goddess Op. cit., 8.
5. Menstruating Women/Menstruating Goddesses: Sites of Sacred Power in Kerala, South India, Sangam Era (100-500 CE) to the Present by Dianne E. Jenett, Ph. D. A Journal of Menstruation and Culture. www.metaformia.org.
6. One nudity rites from Chunar (located in Mizapur District of Uttar Pradesh) is three women of a cultivator's family stripped off all their clothes; two were yoked to plough like oxen, and third held the handle. Then they began to imitate the operation of ploughing. The woman who had the plough in her hand shouted for to bring parched grain, water, and chaff. Then the landlord and village accountant approached them and laid down some grain, water and chaff in the field. The women then dressed and went home.
7. In an Earthen pot, rice, pulses, and barely is sown and tended for a month; several other plants are also allowed to sprout in the pot. Four small vessels filled with water, which represent the female womb, are placed on the pot. On the last Sunday of the month these 'Gardens' are carried to a river or tank by the women and thrown into the water.