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Women empowerment (Śaktism) as reflected in Vedic literature

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Abstract

Saktism, the worship of supreme deity as female form undoubtedly occupies an important place in the history of Indian religious practices. The word 'Śakti' means 'Power' but when it is personalized it is regarded as Devi Śakti. Śakti means the vibrant self-conscious energy through which this whole universe evolve. This idea is based on Vedic mantras propagated by Advaita Vedanta. Veda provide the valuable information and explanation of this Śakti worship. This female spiritual Power is the Great mother of the Universe. In the earlier stages of human history, the woman was the actual producer of life as well as the protector also. The idea of identification of earth with Śakti was prevailed since Vedic period. This idea gave birth of Śakti. Saktism gained more prominence in the epic period.

Keyword: Śakti, power, Veda, energy, Devi

Introduction

In this world everything has been happened by something else. Modern scientists also agree with it. But who is the creator of this world? How it is possible? These questions have been arising from the time when human civilization was growing up. Ancient Indian culture recognized the God as Śakti, who is the personification of primordial energy and source of all divine and cosmic evolution. The Sanskrit word 'Śakti' could be translated as meaning 'power' or 'energy'. It is drawn from the *parasmaipada* verb root 'shak', which means 'to be able', 'to do', 'to act'. The power is witnessed in all the different phenomena of life. It is the force responsible for the growth of everything. The planets have been revolving around the sun by Śakti. This Śakti makes the winds blow and the oceans churn, manifest as the very affective ability of all the forces of nature. In human beings, she has been seen as the power of intelligence (*buddhi*), compassion (*daya*) and divine love (*bhakti*).

Śakti is the supreme power as feminine, the female principle of creation according to Hindu scriptures. She is an important member of the Hindu pantheon. Śakti is synonymous with great Devi, quintessentially, the core form of every Hindu Goddess. It has been seen that Śakti, has outdone the male Gods of Hindu religion in respect of power. Women-Śakti is the controller of all the forces in the world and source of all. The theory of Śakti had been analyzed in different scriptures in regular succession. Additionally, the presence of Śakti is seen throughout the long literary tradition of India. In Rig Veda, at least forty Goddesses are mentioned. These include: *Sarasvati*, Goddess of wisdom; *Ushas*, the dawn; and *Aditi*, who is depicted as 'birthless'. One part of Rig Veda is known as "*Devi-Sukta*" (R.V. 10.125) and is certainly recognition of Śakti as a cosmic principle. Devi is the daughter of sage *Amvrin*, who takes the knowledge of ultimate reality i.e. *Brahma*. She is called as *Parā Śakti* i.e. supreme power. She is all in all. In the *Devi Sukta*, Śakti herself declared that in the form of *Sacīdānanda Ātmā*, she moves the *Rudras*, *Vasus*, *Ādityas* and *Viśvadevās* ^[1]. Devi holds virtues and non-virtues, gives wealth and wisdom. She took place as world (*prapancha*). She told about herself ^[2]—

"Aham raṣṭrī saṅgamani basūnam cīkītuṣi prathamā jāññīyanam.
tañ ma deva byadadhuḥ purutrā bhūristhatrañ bhūryābeṣayantīm"

This Devi is the power of vision, food, intelligence, work and so on. She is the creator of all gods and human beings ^[3]. She is transformed as world by illusion i.e. *Maya*.

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In Rig Veda the motherly form of Brahma has been called Aditi as supreme power. Aditi is in the heaven ^[4] and she is also present in the space between the heaven and the earth. She is the mother of all Gods and the creator of all living beings. She is also the father and savior of all ^[5]. The excellence of Aditi has been described in Yayur Veda and Atharva Veda also. She gives prosperity, enrichment and rescue to all ^[6].

Śakti is the symbol of generation who is conceived as the actual producer of life. So, she is identified with earth in Rig Veda and Atharva Veda also. Heaven and earth are described as universal parents in Rig Veda. Earth is the universal mother who gives protection to all human beings with her affection ^[7]. In Atharva Veda, earth is a totality of truth, wisdom, religious austerities, brahma and so on. Atharvan Rishi prayed for living beings. She has described ^[8]—

“Satyaṅ bṛhadṛtamagraṅ dikṣā tapo brahma yajñh pṛthivīṅ dhārayanti.

Sā no bhūtasya bhabyasya palyurūṅ lokaṅ pṛthivīṅ nḥ kṛnotu.”
In Vedic profession of India were worshipers of gods as father, but they could not neglect the pre-Vedic Earth mother. So the goddess Pṛthivī was allowed to remain the Vedic Pantheon. She is depicted as the mother of all and substance of all things. So Pṛthivī and Dyaus, the sky father are invoked together to grant blessings. The identification of Pṛthivī with women implies that the functions of the earth and those of women are similar. The spirit of earth is generally regarded as female because, the idea of fertility and reproduction is connected with woman. Not only in India but also in Greece people valued this idea. It has been proved by the poem of Aeschylus. In ‘Danaides’ had described—

“The pure sky years with love to wound the Earth,
The loving Earth yearns likewise to be wed,
And from the heavenly bridegroom showers descend
Upon the bride, who brings forth for mankind
With precious moisture ripping the fruits
To autumn fullness.”

Devi *Sarasvati*, the flowing one, is one of the most celebrated goddesses, is described in Rig Veda. She has been identified with the *Srasvati* River ^[9]. She is the goddess of speech and learning, and creator of Sanskrit, the language of Vedas. She gives knowledge of all things ^[10]—

“Maho arṇa sarasvatī praçetayati ketuna.
Dhiyo biśvā birājati.”

She is the consort of Brahma, the creator and member of the Hindu Trinity. In the Rig Veda Dawn (*Ūṣa*) is narrated as lover of The Sun. She is the symbol of well-beings and gives prosperity ^[11]. She removes the all darkness of illusion from human beings and gives the wisdom. Quelling has done by him ^[12]—

“Bahanti sīmaruṅāso ruṣaṅto gābh subhagābhūbiryā
prathānām.
Apejate śuro aṣṭa śaṭrunbādhathe tamo ajiro na bolhā.”

Her supernatural power is demonstrated in so many Suktas of Rig Veda (1.49, 3.61, 6.64, 5.80). The Night (*Ratrī*) is depicted as Devi, sister of *Ūṣa*, daughter of Sky. She defends mankind from malice and enmity. She catches all prosperity ^[13]. This is so much important to make a pollution free beautiful world. The Vedic ascetic feels it.

In the later Vedic literature, especially the minor Upanishads i.e. called *śakta-upanishads*; a philosophical interpretation of *Śakti-tattva* is depicted. The various names of Devi like *Tripurā*, *Trikūtā*, *Māyā*, *Mahāmāyā*, *Kundalini*, *Durgā*, *Mahalakṣmi*, *Sarasvatī*, *Vaiṣnavi*, *Sati*, *Sita* and so on are mentioned there. All these women have super natural power.

The main characteristic feature of Śakta- religion is Monism. Power (*Śakti*) cannot exist in a vacuum. If there is a power (*Śakti*), must be a power-holder (*Śaktimān*) also. *Śakti* implies a *Śaktimān*. There is no *Śaktimān* without *Śakti*, or *Śakti* without *Śaktimān*. *Śaktimān* is *Śiva*. Each is meaningless without the existence of other ^[14]. The two as they are in themselves are one—it is Monism. *Śiva* and *Śakti* are each Being, Consciousness and Bliss. According to the Śakta-religion, universe, itself, is different manifestation of Supreme God, the unity of *Śiva* and *Śakti* which are interrelated as mass and energy. Among the every God of the Hindu pantheon has a feminine companion as his power. For example, *Viṣṇu* has the goddess *Lakṣmī* as his eternal companion. *Śiva* is accompanied by *Pārvati*, *Brahma* by *Sarasvati*, *Krishna* by *Radha*. Here *Śakti* is symbolized as female because it is the productive principle. It is described that *Śaktimān* (God) is action less, though the two, *Śakti* and *Śaktimān* are inseparably associated even in creation. It has been said that there is a woman behind every successful man. So, respective attitude for all women is so much necessary in our society to make a pleasant world.

Everything has done by Power (*Śakti*). There is nothing in the universe that has no power. This power read as *Śakti*, Devi. Creation, existence and annihilation are done by him. According to John Woodroffe “*Śakti* who is in Herself pure blissful Consciousness (*Cidrūpiṅī*) is also the Mother of Nature and is Nature itself born of the creative play of Her thought ^[15].” Woman-*Śakti* is the controller of all the forces in the world and the source of all.

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