

The Great Goddess: An Evolution from Cosmogony to Cosmology

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ABSTRACT

Hindu Religious thought has always been deeply concerned with the 'idea of femininity'. Hindu beliefs and practices have identified the feminine both in the material world and the divine world. The history of the development of goddesses from the early Vedic period to contemporary worship plays into certain debates and discussions about what it means to have a certain concept of divinity in a tradition. This paper aims to understand the historical and thematic development of The Great Goddess/Devī/Mahādevī as the source of ultimate cosmic powers. To reach my aim, I have divided this paper into two major sections: First, the analysis of the iconographies of twelve major Goddesses (starting from the early Vedic period to the Pūrāṇic and Epic Tradition), namely, Uṣas, Rātri, Pṛthivī, Aditi, Sarasvatī, Vāc, Nirṛti, Śrī-Lakṣmī, Pārvatī, Dūrgā, Kālī, and Mahādevī (the lengthiest section of the paper).¹ Second, I have traced (with the help of the analysis from the first section) the cosmogonies associated with these twelve individual goddesses to project a final single goddess who is the cause of this Cosmos. The Early Vedic Goddesses are depicted as 'givers, helpers, mothers, nurturer figures' but gradually in the Pūrāṇic and Epic Tradition they are partially involved in the process of creation, as the śakti of their male counterparts. Finally, the Devī-Māhātmya and Devī Bhagavata Pūrāṇa delineate the picture of an independent goddess, The Great Goddess/Devī/Mahādevī. This Great Goddess emerged as the embodiment of śakti, prakṛti, and māyā, therefore is the cause of this universe.

KEYWORDS: Vedic Goddesses, Pūrāṇic Goddesses, Mahādevī, śakti, prakṛti, and māyā

1. INTRODUCTION

The epitome of Hinduism is its plurality. It has no central doctrine, no single authority to lay down what Hindus should believe or how/whom they should worship. This present paper focuses upon the Goddess(s) devotion which forms a vital component of the Hindu religious life and enjoys more importance in Hinduism than they do in any other religion of the world. Prehistoric female figurines discovered at many places in India that are taken to be images of a Mother Goddess confirm the antiquity of goddess worship in the Indian subcontinent. Precisely what the earliest forms of worship were not known but their purpose was presumably that of propitiating the deities, suing for boons in this world, and seeking their protection in this world. In the beginning and for a long time, goddesses in Hindu thought were directly related to the worldly desires and fears of humankind. They were imagined governing and controlling fecundity, crop abundance, and natural phenomena such as the light of dawn, or as idealizations of human attributes

¹ For the analysis of this section, I have mostly referred to Kinsley, D. (1998). *Hindu goddesses: Visions of the divine feminine in the Hindu religious tradition*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ..

such as sound and speech, and upholders of the principles that hold existence together. As such they were directly implicated in human experience. They were nurturers, protectors, healers, and purifiers of existence, life-givers above all, although many of them are associated with displeasure and some with malevolence.² The Hindu tradition acknowledges and honors a diversity of individual goddesses, but they also tend to speak of “The Great Goddess/Devī/Mahādevī” as a single transcendent being. She is situated in the highest place and is the paradigm of the universal principle that creates, sustains, and permeates the whole universe.

S. No.	NAME OF THE GODDESS	CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES	Text of Origin	CONSORT (Association with male divinities)
1.	Uṣas	Goddess of Dawn, Nurturer, Protector of Ṛta	Ṛg Veda	Sūryā
2.	Rātri	Goddess of Night, Twin sisters of Uṣas, Brings with her rest, comfort, and calmness	Ṛg Veda	Kāma
3.	Pṛthivī	Nature Figure, Mother of all living organisms on Earth, Characterized by Ṛta	Ṛg Veda	Dyaus
4.	Aditi	Mother of all Gods, Ādityas, Kings, Protector of Ṛta	Ṛg Veda	Dakṣa, Kāśyapa
5.	Sarasvatī	Cosmic River, Epitome of purity, energy,	Ṛg Veda	Independent Goddess, Brahmā

² Introduction, Page 3, Bose, M. (Ed.). (2018). *The Oxford History of Hinduism: The Goddess*. Oxford University Press.

		knowledge, art, culture, and music, Connected with other Vedic goddesses, such as Īdā, Māhī, Bhāratī, and Hotrā		
6.	Vāc	Goddess of speech, Queen of the gods, Creator of the three Vedas	Ṛg Veda	Independent Goddess, Prajāpati, Indrā, Kāśyapa
7.	Nirṛti	Associated with disorder, chaos, and destruction, Prayed to be driven away	Ṛg Veda	Adharma
8.	Śrī-Lakṣmī	Associated with fertility, Brings fame and prosperity, Fickle in nature, Lord Viṣṇu's śakti	Ṛg Veda	Soma, Dharma, Indrā, Kubera, Viṣṇu
9.	Pārvatī	Incarnation of Satī, Model of an ideal wife, mother, Śiva's śakti	Pūrāṇa	Śiva
10.	Dūrgā	Warrior Goddess, Nurturer, Mother, Slayer of Demons	Pūrāṇa	Independent Goddess, Śiva

11.	Kālī	Warrior Goddess, Slayer of Demons	Pūrāṇa	Independent Goddess, Śiva
12.	Mahādevī	The Great Goddess, Unification of all the goddesses, Creator of the cosmos: Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, and other deities, Embodiment of prakṛti, śakti, and māyā	Pūrāṇa	Independent Goddess

2. ICONOGRAPHY

2.1 Uṣas

The goddess Uṣas is frequently compared to and identified with dawn in the Ṛg Veda. She manifests herself in the world's daily influx of light. As a young maiden drawn in a hundred chariot, she brings forth light and is chased by God Sūryā. She is praised and prayed to banish the oppressive darkness and evil demons. She is the divinity who wakes the world with her light and regulates time. She motivates humanity to wake up from their sleep and to render services and sacrifices to the Absolute. Uṣas is generally an auspicious goddess associated with light and wealth. She is often likened to a cow. In Ṛg Veda, she is called the mother of cows and, just like how a cow yields its udder for the benefit of people, Uṣas also bares her breasts to bring light for the benefit of humankind.³ Although Uṣas is usually described as a young and beautiful maiden, she is also known as the mother of the gods and the Aśvins; as a mother, she tends to all things like a good matron and goddess of the hearth. She is associated with or moves with Ṛta i.e., cosmic, social, and moral order. As a nurturer, she leads human understating to Ṛta. Uṣas observes everything that people do, especially since she is linked to the light that dispels all darkness, therefore, she is called the “God’s eyes”. As she is the ‘one who sees all’, she is mostly called upon to expel or punish one's enemies. Uṣas is referred to as the goddess, reality, or presence that ages people. She is often portrayed as a skillful huntress who squanders human lives. Since she serves as a constant reminder of people's finite time on earth, she is also prayed to for long life. She is the mistress or timekeeper.

2.2 Rātri

Rātri is the goddess of night, she is often described as the sister of Uṣas, dawn. Being covered in countless stars, she is referred to as glorious and immortal and praised for illuminating the night. She is frequently depicted as a benign being. She is sometimes linked to the things or dangers of the night and thus is prayed upon to protect people against them. Hence, Rātri is not only the protector of people during the hours of

³ Kinsley, D. (1998).

darkness when they are sleeping but also the protector of the night itself and all hostile and friendly creatures that dwell there. She brings with her rest, comfort, and calmness, and hence nurtures peacefulness in the world. These twin sisters, Uṣas and Rātri are called powerful mothers and strengtheners of vital power. They are the weavers of time and eternal law. These two are not present in polar opposition to each other but together they illustrate the coherence of the created order: the ordered alternations of vigor and rest, light and dark, and the regular flow of time.

2.3 Pṛthivī

The goddess Pṛthivī is always related to the earth, the planet where 'life' resides. Additionally, in the Ṛg Veda, she is frequently paired with Dyaus, the male deity related to the sky. These two divinities are so interdependent in the Ṛg Veda that Pṛthivī is seldom addressed separately but rather as a part of the dual compound dyavapṛthivī, sky-earth. They are the cosmic parents who gave birth to both the material world and the world of the divine. Dyaus is frequently referred to as the father and Pṛthivī as the mother. There is an implication that the two were once closely linked but were later separated by Varuna's decree. They reunite when Dyaus fertilizes Pṛthivī with rain, though in some cases it is said that they provide abundant rain together; it is unclear to what extent Pṛthivī should be exclusively associated with the earth and not also with the sky.⁴ Pṛthivī with Dyaus is praised for her maternal, productive traits as well as her supportive personality. She is often referred to as firm and is praised for upholding and sustaining everything; although sometimes she is said to move freely, immobily encompassing everything. Pṛthivī and Dyaus are frequently prayed to for riches, wealth, and power, and the waters they produce together are referred to as being full, fatty, nourishing, and fertile.

2.4 Aditi

Goddess Aditi is almost eighty times mentioned in the Ṛg Veda⁵ but not a very clear picture is portrayed, unlike Uṣas and Pṛthivī. She is not associated with any natural phenomena and there is a hymn that is necessarily related to her. Aditi is often associated with the qualities of motherhood. She is the mother of the Ādityas (a group of seven or eight gods which includes Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga, Varuna, Dakṣa, and Amsa), the mother of the great god Indrā, the mother of kings, and the mother of the gods. She is often equated with Pṛthivī but unlike Pṛthivī, she is not associated with any male consort in the Ṛg Veda. Her mother figure is sometimes identified as a cow; as a cow, she provides nourishment to humanity, and as the cosmic cow her milk is identified with the redemptive, invigorating drink soma. The name Aditi is derived from the root 'da' (to bind or fetter) and suggests another aspect of her character. Max Müller in his works has characterized Aditi as "the Beyond, the unbounded realm beyond earth, sky, and heaven." He has described Aditi as the visible Infinite, visible, as it were, to the naked eye, the endless expanse beyond the earth, beyond the clouds, beyond the sky i.e., 'that' what is free from bonds of any kind, whether of space or time, free from physical weakness, free from moral guilt.⁶ She is also the protector of Rta, the cosmic order.

2.5 Nirṛti

Nirṛti is the goddess associated with disorder, chaos, and destruction. She brings with her volatile, dark,

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Pintchman, T. (1994).

dangerous aspects of life and thus is prayed to be driven away. She is not mentioned very often in the R̥g Veda but in one of the hymns she is mentioned several times. This hymn sums up Nirṛti's nature very efficiently. After four verses in which renewed life, wealth, food, glorious deeds, youth, and continued long life are requested from the gods, the following refrain is invoked: "Let Nirṛti depart to distant places".⁷

2.6 Sarasvatī

Sarasvatī first appeared as a natural phenomenon, as a river. Sarasvatī is referred to as mighty and powerful. Her flood waters are said to roar, and her waves are said to topple mountains. She is reputed to be greater than all waters, perpetually active, and great among the great. Her source is said to be the celestial ocean, making her inexhaustible. She is obviously more than just a river; she is a divine stream that blesses the planet. In fact, it is claimed that she permeates the three creations of the earth, atmosphere, and celestial spheres. She is praised for bringing fertility to the earth. She is praised or beseeched for wealth, vigor, procreation, sustenance, and immortality; as a result, she is given the name subhāga (bountiful). In one of the hymns, she is called upon by unmarried men who yearn for sons. They ask to enjoy her breast which is swollen with streams and to receive from her food and progeny.⁸ In the Vedic times, she while worshipping is invoked with other Vedic goddesses like Īḍā, Māhī, Bhāratī, and Hotrā. In the Brāhmanas, Sarasvatī is homologized with Vāc in a way that the two become completely identified with one another. She is also associated with science, art, literature, and knowledge itself. She is the embodiment of everything that human intelligence can do. She is also the symbol of purity and transcendence.

2.7 Vāc

Vāc is the goddess of speech; speech here doesn't just mean mere speech but means knowledge, truth, science, and the power of the human mind in concepts and words to give order to reality. It is in her presence that the rishis are motivated to know the Brahman. She is the truth, and she inspires the truth by sustaining Soma. She is the enigmatic force that gives one the ability to perceive, understand, and then verbalize the reality of things. Vāc is referred to as a heavenly queen, the queen of the gods, she streams with sweetness and bestows vital powers to her subjects, perhaps reflecting her function as the giver of vision. She is described as a bright, an elegant, courtly woman who wears gold jewelry. Like most other Vedic goddesses, she is a benign, bounteous being. She is praised for providing light and strength in general as well as the unique riches of language, and one hymn claims that she is the only one who can feed people. She is therefore more than just a personified abstraction or artificial construct. She is a pervasive, nourishing deity who promotes organic growth and bestows the gifts of language and vision in addition to other blessings. She is often invoked as a heavenly cow that gives sustenance to the divinities as well as humanity. Hence, Vāc is considered a generous cow that offers the r̥sis lofty and astute vision, the priest's ritual formulas, and the people's common language. In the Brāhmanas, Vāc's character is extensively developed in several myths and representations that link her to ritual and creation. There is a famous myth that describes how the gods abducted or seduced Vāc from the demons after the world was created. After obtaining her, they established sacrificial rituals that sustain the creation and result in bounty, life, and immortality for the gods. This myth emphasizes Vāc's indispensable nature in ritual and cult especially the ones in which spoken or chanted mantras are essential, therefore, one can infer that she

⁷ Kinsley, D. (1998).

⁸ Ibid

was necessary for the divine rites to take place. As a creator, she is said to have created the three Vedas; these three Vedas when compared to the material world can be equated to the earth i.e., Rgveda, the air i.e., Yajur-veda, and the sky i.e., Sama-veda. In another myth, she is said to have entered the sap of plants and trees, thus pervading and enlivening all vegetation. In yet another myth, Prajāpati, the central deity in the Brahmanas, is described as initiating creation by impregnating himself by coming to his mind and his speech. It is stated elsewhere that after being created by Prajāpati's mind, Vāc desired to manifest herself, multiply herself, and extend herself; as a result, creation continued under the influence of Vāc's desire to create. Not only is Vāc frequently mentioned in Vedic literature, but it also has important theoretical implications. It is also said that Vāc and Prajāpati are collateral to each other. Her role in relation to Prajāpati hints at the Śabda-brāhman theory (the absolute in the form of sound) and the Sphota theory of creation (according to which the world is created through sound).⁹

2.8 Śrī-Lakṣmī

The iconography of Goddess Śrī-Lakṣmī can be analyzed by dividing her development into two time zones: (a.) Early Development, (b.) Later Development.

Early Development:

The earliest Vedic literature has no mention of the goddess Śrī-Lakṣmī. However, the term "Śrī" does appear quite frequently, and it is obvious that its meanings are connected to the nature of the later goddess Śrī-Lakṣmī. The hymn Srīsukta in R̥g Veda (a pre-Buddhist text) contains the most thorough depiction of Śrī-Lakṣmī in all Vedic literature. Unsurprisingly, and as per the early Vedic literature's definitions of the term "Śrī," Sri is invoked to bring fame and prosperity. She is said to be bountiful and to give abundance. She is said to give her worshiper food, cattle, and horses. She appears magnificent and ornate on the outside. She wears a gold and silver necklace and is as brilliant as gold and as illustrious as the moon. She is frequently compared to the Sun and described as having the lust of fire. She is also often asked to banish her twin sister Alakṣmī; a goddess who is feared and paid homage only to ensure her absence for she brings with her need, poverty, hunger, and thirst. In this hymn, the term "Śrī" refers to the goddess, who is also associated with fertility, a quality that was not particularly emphasized in earlier uses of the term in Vedic literature. The Śrī-sukta describes her as being abundant in harvest, odor, moisture, and dwelling in cow dung. Śrī's connection to agricultural fertility is still significant at the village level today, even though it does not play a major part in her later literary history in Hinduism. Villagers, particularly women, are reported to worship Sri in the form of cow dung on certain occasions, and this form of worship is enjoined in the Nilamata-Pūrāṇa.¹⁰ This hymn also mentions that lotus and elephants are always associated with Śrī-Lakṣmī. Their iconographic importance further links Śrī-Lakṣmī to prosperity and royalty.

Later Development:

In the course of her history Śrī-Lakṣmī. has been associated with various male deities, and each of these connections is significant in defining the characteristics of the goddess. Some texts link her to the god Soma. After performing a great royal sacrifice, Śrī-Lakṣmī., along with several other deities, attends Soma. As symbols of the sap of existence, they complement and reinforce one another. According to some texts, Lakṣmī. is Dharma's wife. Her father, Dakṣa, gave her and several other goddesses in marriage to Dharma (all of whom are personifications of various auspicious qualities). This association appears to be primarily

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

a thinly disguised "wedding" of Dharma (virtuous behavior) and Śrī-Lakṣmī (prosperity and well-being). The importance of this association is to teach humanity that by performing dharma one obtains prosperity. Śrī and the god Indrā have a more interesting and developed relationship. Several myths describe instances of Indrā's loss, acquisition, or restoration of wealth with the help of Śrī-Lakṣmī's boon. This tells us that any person under the presence of Śrī-Lakṣmī is royal and has both authority and power. In some traditions, Śrī-Lakṣmī is also associated with the god Kubera. Kubera is the Yākṣas' lord. Śrī's identification with the Yākṣas through Kubera also emphasizes her identification with the mysterious powers of growth and fertility. However, by the late epic period (around A.D. 400), Śrī-Lakṣmī became almost exclusively associated with Viṣṇu; as his wife, she is characterized by steadfastness. It's as if she finally found the god, she was looking for in Viṣṇu and has remained loyal to him ever since. Śrī-Lakṣmī's association with Viṣṇu is mythologically based on the churning of the milk ocean by gods and demons seeking the elixir of immortality (amṛta). However, by the late epic period (around A.D. 400), Śrī-Lakṣmī has become almost exclusively associated with Viṣṇu; as his wife, she is characterized by steadfastness. It's as if she finally found the god, she was looking for in Viṣṇu and has remained loyal to him ever since. Śrī-Lakṣmī's association with Viṣṇu is mythologically based on the churning of the milk ocean by gods and demons seeking the elixir of immortality (amṛta). In this myth, she represents the miraculous transformation of the formless waters into organic life. Some later variants of the myth indicate that Śrī-Lakṣmī is necessary to sustain the ongoing created order and thus may be identified or associated with the essence of creation. According to these versions, Śrī-Lakṣmī vanishes from the three worlds when Indrā insults her. As a result, all sacrifices are discontinued, all austerities are discontinued by the sages, all generosity is terminated, the sun and moon lose their radiance, the gods lose their strength, and fire loses its heat. The worlds become dull and lusterless in the absence of the goddess, and they begin to wither. When she returns, the worlds regain their vitality, and human society and the godly order regain their sense of purpose and duty. Lakṣmī loses her fickle nature as Viṣṇu's wife. She is portrayed as a model Hindu wife, loyal and submissive to her husband, as the great cosmic king's queen. One of her most well-known iconographic representations shows her kneeling before Viṣṇu, massaging his feet. Śrī-Lakṣmī was originally associated with growth and fecundity as manifested in vegetation. Her presence was animated by a teeming vitality, a power that gave birth inexhaustibly to life. Her character appears more restrained in her association with Viṣṇu. Although she retains her connection to fertility and growth, she appears to be more involved in or revealed by the order of dharma that her husband creates and oversees. When Viṣṇu takes on various avatars to uphold dharma, she incarnates as his helpmate, taking on an appropriate form as his spouse or consort. As a result, she assists and accompanies him in his world-sustaining role. She is usually depicted as much smaller than Viṣṇu and with only two arms rather than the four arms she usually has when shown alone.

2.9 Pārvatī

The Hindu goddess Pārvatī is just as well-known as Śrī-Lakṣmī. Pārvatī has very little independent history of her own, in contrast to Śrī-Lakṣmī (as discussed above). Nearly every mythological act she performs, including who she is, what she is like, and how she behaves, is defined or acted out in relation to her consort/husband, the powerful ascetic god Siva. Since the epics, when Pārvatī first manifested as a significant deity, it has been believed that she is the reincarnation of Goddess Satī, Siva's first wife, who committed suicide because of an insult to her husband. These two goddesses are frequently regarded as a single entity because of this close association. As the mythologies of both the goddesses are defined by

their courtship and union with Siva, Pārvatī's mythology is frequently referred to as Satī's ongoing narrative.

The Mythology of Satī:

Satī was the daughter of King Daksa. In most of her mythologies, Satī is frequently praised for her beauty; instead, Siva is drawn to her for her devotion and asceticism. She is occasionally put to the test by Siva or a representative of Siva, but she always perseveres, and in the end, Siva rewards her for her frugality with a boon. Finally, he accepts her proposal of marriage after learning that desire (kāma) exists in her. Siva is impatient, but she insists on a proper marriage complete with rituals and guests. Soon they get legally married, with Brahma as the divine priest. Siva and Satī retire to Siva's mountain home and linger there for many years. In the interim, Daksa organizes a great sacrifice and invites every significant deity. Daksha had a dislike towards Śiva because of his peculiar appearance and strange habits, therefore, he excluded Siva and Satī from the great sacrifice. This intentional slight has little effect on Siva. But Satī becomes indignant about the slight to her husband. She storms over to her father's house, where he ignores her. She kills herself in a rage over her father's treatment of Siva. When Siva learns of Satī's passing, he becomes furious and, in some mythologies, also summons Virabhadra and other ferocious creatures. The demons travel to Daksa's sacrifice arena, where they vanquish the assembled divine hosts and obliterate the offering. Typically, Daksa himself is said to have died during the conflict. Many stories go on to describe the restoration of the sacrifice and the resurrection of Daksa. Siva is also included in the sacrifice along with the other gods, and this sacrifice proceeds smoothly. In some myths, Siva finds Satī's body either before or after the sacrifice is performed again. He carries her around the universe in his arms sobbing. As a result, the cosmos is disturbed, and Viṣṇu is called to put an end to Siva's suffering. Following the distraught Siva around, Viṣṇu gradually removes Satī's body part by part until nothing is left. Wherever a piece of her body lands, a sacred area known as a pitha is established, where goddesses of all different names and types become the focus of worship. The Satī myth serves as a reminder of the archaic kind of divine couple, where a male deity is connected to the sky and a female deity is connected to the earth. Their union or marriage is essential to the creation and maintenance of life. This theme appears to be modified by Satī's identification with the earth and Siva's identification with the distant Himalayas, followed by their union as the yoni and linga. The main goal of Satī mythology is to unite these two gods in matrimony so that creation can live on and flourish. Satī's mythology's final chapter makes it abundantly clear that this has been done. She perpetually draws Siva (all individual men) in the form of the yoni (all unique women).

The Mythology of Pārvatī:

Pārvatī's name, which means "she who dwells in the mountains" or "she who is of the mountain," and her many epithets, such as Sailasuta (daughter of the mountain peaks), Giriputri (daughter of the mountains), Girirjāputri (daughter of the king of the mountains), Girisa (mistress of the mountains), identify her with mountainous regions.¹¹ She was the daughter of King Himavat and Queen Mena. Because of her complexion, she is frequently described as "the dark one" and in some renditions, she is also named Kālī. She is also praised for her stunning looks. According to some accounts, she immediately expresses a strong interest in Siva right away by repeating his name to herself and enjoying hearing about his appearance and

¹¹ Ibid

deeds. Pārvaṭī enters Siva's world by engaging in tapas, leaving the world of the householder behind. Most myths claim that she was the most austere of all the great sages. She engages in all the customary mortifications, including sitting amid four fires in the middle of the summer, staying outside in the winter and rainy season, subsisting solely on leaves or air, standing on one leg for years, etc. She eventually builds up enough heat to make the gods uneasy, at which point she approaches Siva and asks him to grant Pārvaṭī's wish so that she can stop her efforts. In some versions of the myth, Pārvaṭī is tempted by an agent of Siva or by Siva himself in disguise, who tells her that Siva's appearance is terrible, and his habits are uncivilized and inauspicious, and she is urged to abandon her desire to marry such a distasteful character. Pārvaṭī refuses, and Siva agrees to marry her. The marriage is duly arranged and elaborately undertaken. The iconography shows the family of the two deities, Śivaa, Pārvaṭī, Kartikeya, and Ganesha sitting together, happily in a harmonious association.

2.10 Dūrgā

The goddess Dūrgā is one of the Hindu pantheon's most impressive, powerful, and well-liked deities. Her main role in mythology is to battle demons that imperil the universe's stability. She is portrayed in this capacity as a formidable battle queen with numerous arms, each of which is armed. She is said to be unstoppable in battle and rides a ferocious lion. Dūrgā is also identified with Siva as his wife at a particular point in her history. In this capacity, Dūrgā takes on domestic traits and is frequently compared to the goddess Pārvaṭī. In her later history, she also assumes the role of mother. She is depicted flanked by four gods known as her children: Kārtikeya, Gaṇeṣa, Sarasvatī, and Lakṣmī, during her most significant festival, Dūrgā Puja. It also seems obvious that Dūrgā has, or at least had, a close relationship with the crops or the fertility of vegetation at some point in her history. Her festival, which takes place during harvest season, connects her to plants, and she also accepts blood sacrifices, which could allude to the renewal of her fertility powers. The name Dūrgā is mentioned in Vedic literature, but no goddess resembling the warrior goddess of later Hinduism is to be found in these early texts.¹² She is most well known for having vanquished Maḥiṣā, the buffalo demon. Her most well-known nickname is Maḥiṣā-Mardini, which means "the slayer of Maḥiṣā," and her most typical iconography depicts her slaying Maḥiṣā. Thus, the goddess Dūrgā was created because the male gods were powerless to defeat Maḥiṣāsura. She is made because the circumstance called for a woman, a strong warrior, a unique power that the goddess possesses to fool the demon. After performing heroic austerities, Maḥiṣā was granted the boon that he would be invincible to all opponents except a woman. Enraged by Maḥiṣā's victory and their apparent inability to stop it, the gods gathered and unleashed their fiery energies. This great mass of light and strength congealed into the form of a beautiful woman, the radiance of whose beauty spread throughout the universe. Her head appeared from the energy of Śiva, her arms from the energy of Viṣṇu, her waist from the energy of Indrā, her hair from the energy of Yama, her two feet from the energy of Brahma, her two breasts from the Moon's energy, her fingers from the energy of Vasus, her nose from Kubera's energy, her teeth from the energy of nine Prajāpati's, her two eyes from the energy of Agni, her brows from the energy of the two twilights, her ears from the energy of wind. Equipped by the god's energies and supplied by the god Himalaya with a lion as her vehicle, Dūrgā, the embodied strength of the gods, is said to have roared mightily, causing the earth to shake. Dūrgā is linked to all the other deities, she unites all of them yet exceeds them; she is greater than all the gods and demons. Dūrgā's preference

¹² Ibid

for inaccessible dwelling places, her worship by tribal peoples, her taste for intoxicating drink, meat, and blood, her ferocious behavior on the battlefield, and her preference for the flesh and blood of her devotees all paint a picture of a goddess who exists outside the orderly world, in the liminal space of the mountainous regions where she dwells. The *Devī- Māhātmya*, the most famous text extolling *Dūrgā*'s exploits, reveals the theology underlying her appearances and exploits. *Dūrgā* is said to lie beneath or pervade the cosmos, to create, maintain, and periodically destroy it following Hindu cosmology's rhythmic sequences, and to take on different forms from time to time when the cosmic balance is threatened by enemies of the lesser gods. "Though she is eternal, the goddess manifests herself over and over again to protect the world," says the *Devī- Māhātmya*.

2.11 Kālī

Almost universally, the goddess *Kālī* is depicted as having a horrible, terrifying appearance. She is typically naked, always black or dark, and has long, untidy hair. She wears a girdle made of severed arms, a necklace made of freshly cut heads, earrings made of child corpses, and bracelets made of serpents. She is frequently pictured with claw-like hands and long nails, long, sharp fangs, and blood smeared on her lips. Her terrifying nature is amplified in her favorite haunts. She is frequently depicted on the battlefield, where she is a ferocious combatant who imbibes her victims' hot blood, or in a cemetery where she sits on a corpse surrounded by jackals and goblins. *Kālī* is frequently treated as an independent deity who is not connected to any male deity in texts and contexts. However, she is almost always linked to *Siva*, in her case, she is not *Śivaa*'s consort but *Śivaa* is her consort. *Kālī* frequently plays the part of provoking him to act erratically as his consort, wife, or associate. Unlike *Pārvatī*, *Kālī*'s relationship with *Siva* appears to be designed to entice him to engage in risky, destructive behavior that jeopardizes the cosmos' stability. In many other mythologies, *Kālī* is linked to *Dūrgā* and *Pratvati* for her origination.

2.12 Mahādevī

As we have analyzed the iconographies of goddesses starting from *Uṣas* of *Rg Veda* to *Kālī*, we have seen that most of the divinities were dominated by a male figure, are associated with natural phenomena, are dominated by the feeling of motherhood, are nurturers (except *Dūrgā* and *Kālī*). All the qualities of these major goddesses of Hinduism are finally merged into a single figure named *Devī/Mahādevī/Great Goddess*. It took centuries for this female figure to grow in philosophical complexity as the cause of creation and the greatest of all divinities. *Devī* appeared as the embodiment of *prakṛti* (nature), *śakti* (energy), and *māyā* (illusion), and even as *Brahman*, the supreme creative will behind existence. She is the power that animates the gods. The *Devī- Māhātmya* section of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Pūrāṇa*, which was written between the fifth and seventh centuries CE, exalts *Devī* as a warrior goddess who protects the world from evil. The powers of *Devī* are invoked in greater detail in the *Devī- Māhātmya*. She is the mainspring of everything conceivable:

tvayaitad dhāryate viśvaṃ tvayaitat sṛjyate jagat |
tvayaitat pālyate Devī tvam atsyante ca sarvadā ||
viśṛṣṭau sṛṣṭi-rūpā tvaṃ sthiti-rūpā ca pālāne |
tathā samhatirūpānte jagato 'sya jaganmaye ||
mahā-vidyā mahā-māyā mahā-medhā mahā-smṛtiḥ |

mahā-mohā ca bhavati mahā-Devī mahāsurī || (Devī- Māhātmya, 1.75-77)¹³

By you this universe is borne, by you this world is created. By you it is protected, O Devī, and you always consume it at the end. O you who are [always] of the form of the whole world, at the time of creation you are of the form of the creative force, at the time of sustenance, you are of the form of the protective power, and at the time of the dissolution of the world, you are of the form of the destructive power. You are the supreme knowledge as well as the great nescience, the great intellect, and contemplation as also the great delusion, the great Devī as also the great asurī. (trans. Swami Jagadiswarananda, p. 17)¹⁴

This supreme deity is a figure of mystery that can be conceived of in many ways, including humanized forms. She is power personified (śakti-rūpiṇī), mother (mātr-rūpiṇī), wife (saha-dharminī), and even daughter (kanyā-rūpiṇī). Power is of course her primary identity and animates all creation: yā Devī sarva-bhūteṣu śakti-rūpeṇa samsthitā /

namas tasyai namas tasyai nama stasyai namo namaḥ //

(Devī- Māhātmya 5.32) To Devī who abides in all living beings as power, I bow to her, I bow to her; I bow to her. I salute!

A later text, the Devī Bhagavata Pūrāṇa, which dates to around the 11th century CE, goes so far as to refer to her as "the Mother of all the worlds who creates this universe" (Dev Bhgavata Pura, Book 1, chap. 2, verse 8), the creator of Brahm, Viṣṇu, and Śivaa, and the sole power who controls all gods and goddesses. A perception of unstoppable energy manifested through action in both the physical world and the unseen, imagined theatre of cosmic existence lies at the core of this challenging concept of the Goddess. Here Devī is identified specifically as Goddess Dūrgā who is the Supreme Deity, superior to Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. She is the origin and creator of all existence, the preserver and destroyer of everything, the source of all knowledge, and the only path to liberation. Hence, the abstract idea of Devī was given a definite form of Dūrgā; the warrior goddess, the slayer of the demons, and the strongest of all the deities. The resplendently beautiful Dūrgā kills Mahiṣā in a fierce battle and saves creation, though only for the time being because evil is never in short supply, nor are crises. Such threats are met and resolved again and again by the divine feminine. Reiterating that all feminine deities are one, it is important to note that Mahādevī, the Great Goddess, was given the title of this unified deity. To elevate the forms of the goddess they worship; devotees have also given Kālī and Lakṣmī the adjective "maha" (great). However, no specific cult of Mahādevī worship has developed, possibly because she is more of an idea than a specific figure. She has a distinctive presence as a warrior woman when she is thought of as Dūrgā, and she is supported by a branch of sacred lore that has such strong appeal that Dūrgā is frequently identified as the Great Goddess, Devī.

3. COSMOGONIC ANALYSIS

3.1 Early Vedic Goddesses

As we have seen through the iconographies of the Goddesses, these major goddesses of the early Vedic age are the personification of the virtues that Hindus wish to seek in women. Virtues like procreation, nurturing, giving, and purifying are all embodied by the ancient Vedic goddesses, like Uṣas, Pṛthivī, Aditi,

¹³ Notes from Women in the Hindu World course, Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

¹⁴ Ibid

Vāc, and Sarasvatī. Goddess Uṣas is the goddess of dawn; the Vedas describe her as auspicious and bright. She is the divinity that wakes up the world with her light and as a nurturer, she leads the human consciousness to Ṛta. Goddess Pṛthivī is the consort of Dyaus; she is represented supporting the material world as a mother, fulfilling all the needs of all human beings, birds, and animals. Goddess Aditi is the mother of all the gods and is the protector of Ṛta. Goddess Vāc is the controller of the world and sound, inspirer and creator of the original three Veda, and protector of sacrifices and rituals. Vāc is one of the independent goddesses that is represented without any male consort; later, she is merged with the image of Goddess Sarasvatī. One of the most important achievements for a woman was to be called Sarasvatī, a woman of learning, gifted in art or music. She first appeared as a nature spirit, a river, and thus a purifier who bestowed wealth, and renewed and nurtured lives. She is another independent goddess who from the Vedic times down to the present day has survived the subjugation of male dominance. We also encounter another pantheon of goddesses, which includes less-conventional goddesses like Nirṛti, and Rātri. These images of goddesses are not about blessing or order but about the disorder, suffering, danger, and death. This array of goddesses brings rest, calmness, and peacefulness to the world. In Hindu religious thought, these goddesses were worshipped to keep them far away. These are the idol figures of a nurturer, mother, giver, and healer; these are associated with the phenomena occurring in nature, and in this way, they also protect and maintain the Ṛta. These early goddesses were not involved in the creation of the cosmos, their role is limited to its protection and maintenance. These goddesses in the Vedic Literature at some point in time were associated with a male deity but this association is very secondary in nature, it didn't have any significance in the functioning of these goddesses.

3.2 Śrī-Lakṣmī

The most important of these wish-fulfilling models is Lakṣmī because she is the goddess of wealth and social stability, as well as the consort of Lord Viṣṇu, thus capable of protecting the orderly prosperity of the world. No praise for a woman is higher than that of being called Lakṣmī, whether she is a dutiful daughter, a newly married bride, or a housewife. As Gavin Flood points out, these goddesses clearly represented what worshippers wished to keep at a distance and were not models for women, although they, Alakṣmī, could be cited to explain women's misfortunes in the form of barrenness. Before her association with Viṣṇu in the epic tradition, Śrī-Lakṣmī was known for her fickle nature. She was associated with various deities as we have already seen in her iconography. She was linked to wealth, prosperity, power, and fertility but she didn't participate in the process of creation. When she is associated with Viṣṇu, as his śakti, she is involved in the process of creation of the cosmos. Hindu philosophy conceives divine femininity as a singularity—as indeed that philosophy conceives divinity per se—that may be expressed in a multiplicity of distinct forms. Though each such form is ascribed particularities of form, function, and purpose, their oneness is axiomatic: Devī can take any form or shape in answer to a particular situation, but the essence remains the same. This idea of the oneness of all goddesses at root led to the elevation of Śrī-Lakṣmī to a transcendent identity as one form of the Great Goddess. In chapter 4 of Devīmāhātmya, she is invoked as Śrī, the goddess of fortune, wellbeing, intelligence, goodness, respect, faith, and modesty:

yā śrīḥ svaya:m suk:rtinā:m bhavanesy alakṣm īḥ
pāpātmanām: kr:tadhiyām: hr:dayesū buddhiḥ/
śraddhā satā:m kulajanaprabhavasya lajjā
tā: m tvā:m natā sma paripālaya Devī viśvam//

[The goddess] Śrī who is the goddess of fortune in the homes of the virtuous and of misfortune for evilly disposed people, who is intellect in the hearts of the learned, faith and respect in good people, and who is modest in the well-born! We bow down before her! May you, Devī, protect the universe!

That Devīmāhātmya's vision of the rise of Devī from the core of divine energy comes to be the standard view is evident from Devī Bhāgavatapurā: na, a later text. Its account is very similar:

paśyatām tatra devānām tejaḥpuñjasamudbhavā/
babhuvātivārā nārī sundarī vismāyāpradā//

While the gods were looking steadfastly upon that Fire, an exquisitely beautiful woman was born out of it, causing excitement and wonder in all. It goes on to put a name to this female being and enumerates her attributes:

trig: nā sā mahālakṣmī sarvadevaśarīrajā/
aṣṭ ādaśabhujā ramyā trivar: nā viśvamohinī//

This woman was Mahālakṣmī, composed of the three qualities, generated from the bodies of all the gods, with eighteen arms and of the three colors, beautiful and fascinating to the universe.¹⁵

3.3 Pārvatī

Just like Sri Lakshmi, Pārvatī's character is defined in terms of her relationship with Śivaa, her consort. She is one of the most important goddesses in the Hindu pantheon of deities. She is considered the role model of an ideal wife, in accordance with the strī-dharma of the dharma-śāstras. The idea that the great male gods all possess an inherent power by which or through which they undertake creative activity is assumed in medieval Hindu mythology. When this power, or śakti, is personified it is always in the form of a goddess. Pārvatī, quite naturally, assumes the identity of Siva's śakti in many myths and in some philosophic systems. In the role of Siva's śakti, Pārvatī performs functions or assumes meanings, which imply an underlying harmony or interdependent relationship between herself and Siva. She is often identified with the force underlying and impelling creation. While Siva remains aloof in the creation of the world, Pārvatī as śakti is active, pervading the creation as its underlying strength and power. In this active, creative role she is sometimes identified with prakṛti (nature), whereas Siva is identified with puruṣa (pure spirit). As prakṛti, Pārvatī represents the inherent tendency of nature to express itself in concrete forms and individual beings. In this task, however, whether as śakti or prakṛti, it is understood that Pārvatī either must be set in motion by Siva or must act according to his will, wish, or design. She is not seen as antagonistic to him. Her role as his śakti is almost always interpreted as positive. Through Pārvatī, Siva (the Absolute) can express himself in the creation. Without her he would remain inert, aloof, inactive. Just as in the mythology Pārvatī is necessary for involving Siva in creation, so as his śakti, she is necessary for his self-expression in creation. It is only in association with her that Siva can realize or manifest his full potential. Without Pārvatī Siva's great power does not, or cannot, manifest itself in creation. Pārvatī as śakti not only complements Siva, but she also completes him.¹⁶

3.4 Kālī

Kālī allows (or perhaps forces) better perception by enabling one to see the complete picture. She enables

¹⁵ Page 87-89, Bose, M. (Ed.). (2018). *The Oxford History of Hinduism: The Goddess*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ Page 49-50, Kinsley, D. (1998).

one to see beyond the abundance of the other goddesses, who take on benevolent forms. The incredible fecundity and liberality of these beings are revealed by Kālī to be the result of an insatiable hunger. Like this, Kālī enables people to understand their overall roles in the cosmic drama. She encourages a broader, more responsible, and more realistic reflection on one's past and future. She enables the person to see themselves as just one being among an infinite number of permutations resulting from the perpetual cycles of life and death that make up the inner rhythms of the divine mother. The individual is allowed to view social roles and identities in perspective, to see them as frequently restricting and as obscuring a clear perception of how things really are and who he or she really is. This is done by viewing them as cycling and recycled energy, as both the creation and the food of the goddess. In the end, Kālī reveals that all living things are both her children and food, and that no social role or identity can free a person from this self-sacrificing exchange. Even though this reality might seem depressing, facing it may be the final push one needs to embark on the liberating quest for freedom from samsara.¹⁷

3.5 Dūrgā

The Devī- Māhātmya and other texts extolling Dūrgā state that she is identical with or associated with śakti, māyā, and prakṛti. This means that these ideas can be seen in Dūrgā's nature or that she somehow serves as a dramatic illustration of them. The divine's underlying power, or the aspect of the divine that encourages and permits creative activity, is almost universally understood as śakti. Furthermore, śakti is almost always perceived as a good force. śakti is frequently personified as a goddess when considered in a concrete sense. According to a widely held belief, a male deity is powerless, frail, and immobile without his śakti, without his female counterpart. Dramatically, the Maḥiṣā episode's creation of Dūrgā by the gathered male deities represents śakti as the goddess. Although the energy and heat that the deities contribute to her formation are called Tejas, not śakti. The male gods are contributing their strength and vigor to the goddess, who epitomizes power, action, and strength in the battle with the demon. As the personification of action and power, especially in her capacity as the battle queen, Dūrgā serves as an appropriate metaphor for the concept of śakti. When Dūrgā is referred to as māyā, or when it is equated with it or associated with it, both the connotations of creation and delusion are implied. Like Viṣṇu, Dūrgā uses her extraordinary power to create the world. Another theological point is made by Dūrgā's identification with prakṛti and with the earth itself. The physical world and the underlying rhythms that drive nature to gratify and produce itself in its numerous species are collectively referred to as prakṛti. prakṛti is both the primordial substance from which all things of the material world are derived and the living instincts and patterns that endow the physical universe with its propensities to sustain and recreate itself in every living thing. Therefore, as prakṛti, Dūrgā is inextricably linked to the material world—the world she creates, upholds, and safeguards in all her guises. There is no doubt about Dūrgā's identification with the world. The Devī- Māhātmya emphasizes several times that she is the world and all of this. She embodies the stability of the cosmos as the earth does. She serves as the building block and source of nourishment for all living things. She mothers all beings and provides support and protection as the earth's embodiment. She feeds the world as Śākambhari using food from her own body. In her aspect as the earth itself, Dūrgā effectively defends herself in her capacities as cosmic queen, warrior goddess, and demon slayer. She is the heavenly queen who periodically comes to Earth to preserve peace because she is transcendent. The connection or identification of Dūrgā with śakti, māyā, and prakṛti gives the powerful

¹⁷ Kinsley, D. (1998).

goddess known for slaying demons an immediate, concrete dimension. She is associated with creation itself because she is an expression of these ideas. Her presence is said to permeate and underline the world in which people live, and her strength and power are said to give all creatures the desire to flourish and procreate.¹⁸

3.6 Mahādevī

The Devī is represented as an overwhelming presence that overflows, spills forth into the creation, and infuses the world with life, energy, and power as śakti, prakṛti, and māyā. A positive point is made when the Devī is associated with these well-known philosophical concepts: the Devī creates the world, she is the world, and she imbues the world with creative energy. She is viewed as the very source and vitality of creatures rather than as the force that confines them to a limited existence as śakti, prakṛti, and māyā. Her incredible, vital power is revered because she is the source of the creatures and their mother. The assertion of Devī's supreme status in the Hindu pantheon is a common goal of texts devoted to her, and the concept of Brahman is helpful in this regard. Two key philosophical claims made by the concept of Brahman are compatible with the theology of the Mahādevī: first, that she is the ultimate reality in and of herself, and second, that she is the origin of all divine manifestations, both male and female (but especially female). As saguna brahman, the Devī is pictured as a vast cosmic queen seated in the highest heaven, with a plethora of gods serving as her servants as she rules the endless universes. However, some texts assert in a conventional manner that the Devī is beyond all qualities, beyond male and female, in her ultimate essence, i.e., as nirguna Brahman, despite their blatant preference for the Devī's feminine characteristics. The Mahādevī, as Dūrgā is like the great god Viṣṇu in many ways. Viṣṇu is frequently depicted as a cosmic king who oversees maintaining the world's stability. He appears in various forms to battle the threat of demons when the world is in danger. In accordance with cosmic dangers, the Mahādevī is also said to assume different forms. According to legend, Viṣṇu has ten avatars. He assumes ten different forms to battle ten different demons during each cycle of the universe. According to legend, the Mahādevī also has ten forms, known as the Dasamahavidyas (the ten great scenes or insights). Many well-known Hindu goddesses are represented in these ten forms, and like the Vaisnavite concept of avatars, the ten forms of the Devī effectively unite disparate strands under a unifying great deity. Hindu goddesses are various representations of Devī's work on behalf of the world, according to Devī theology and cosmology. A transcendent divine economy that the Devī runs in her own form (svabhava) or in her aspect as Brahman is understood to include goddesses such as Dūrgā, Lakṣmī, Pārvatī, and others. With a few notable exceptions, this economy is focused on preserving and defending the global order.

4. CONCLUSION

As we have noticed throughout the paper, the earlier individual goddesses are linked to the material world but not in a very systematic or normative manner; there are many narratives that mention this association but not in a very clear or direct manner. However, from the start of the post-Vedic period, there was an increase in the systematizing of belief and standardizing of the cosmic structures. In this period, a normative conception of the meaning of prakṛti emerged within the concept of Sāmkhya Philosophy. In Sāmkhya, puruṣa is a principle of pure, transcendent consciousness, beyond all materiality, whereas prakṛti, also called pradhāna, is the material principle from which the cosmos evolves. However, the

¹⁸ Ibid

Pūrāṇas tend to depict puruṣa and prakṛti as gendered, animate principles, respectively male and female, and several Pūrāṇas ascribe to them a role in cosmogenesis, portraying the universe as arising from the interaction between puruṣa and prakṛti. In such contexts, prakṛti is not just a material principle, as it is in Sāṃkhya, but is also a form of the Goddess. As the paper has shown, the understanding of śakti as a cosmic principle also emerged in this period. Coburn observes that in the Devīmāhātmya, śakti is a singular and universal phenomenon, something that Devī is as well as something that each individual deity has. As this universally abiding śakti, she is universally present in all things. The Goddess is also praised as Mahāmāyā (“great māyā”) and as such is extolled as creative, like śakti, as well as deluding like māyā. The term māyā generally designates creative yet potentially delusive divine power or the material form that results from the activity of such power. At the divine level, the Great Goddess who is the embodiment of these three principles is the unification of the individual goddesses who are the multifarious expressions of her. Therefore, it is perhaps right to conclude, that the nature of the Goddess that emerges in these cosmogonies' projects her as an essential cosmic principle central to Brahminical Hindu notions about the genesis and maintenance of the universe.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval: This article does not contain any study with animal or human participants performed by the author.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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