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Worship of Mother Goddesses in the Early Vedic India

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The worship of mother goddesses in early Vedi India was very significant. All the related classics give ample evidences about the importance of the mother goddesses in the observation period. Among the goddesses known from that time of literature may first be made of Usha, Ida, Sarswati, Aditi, Prithivi, Raka, Siniwali, Swaha, Bharati etc. In the Rigveda as many as twenty hymns are devoted to Usha. She has all the ingredient of becoming an all creating, all preserving and evil destroying deity. V. M. Apte gives very important light about the Usha. He renders the view of Rigvedic Rishis in the following stanza.[1]

I.Light us up with happiness, O Ushas, daughter of heaven, with great lustre, O radiant one, with wealth, O bountiful goddess.

9.OUsha, shine with shimmering radiance, O daughter of heaven, bringing us ample happiness, as you shew your light upon the daily sacrifices.

In the case of Ushas; the goddess of Dawn, the personification is slight, the poet never loosing sight of the beautiful physical phenomena behind the deity.[2] The word Ushas, derived from Shauchhante, means the dawn, is traced to uchha, to shine, the actual prototype is us- to shine, Avestan form of the Ushas is usaiti means shines.[3] On the basis of Rigvedic hymns it seems to that Usha clearly related with Sun and she is the goddess of dawn.[4]The beauty of heaven and awakening of the world.

Aditi is an other important goddess of early Vedic era. In the Rigveda she was called as the mother of the Gods.[5] In TattriyaSamhita it has been told that deviAditi is the abider and gifts the honour of the world,[6] 'VishwashyaBhartrirjagatahPratishtha'. The word Aditi is primarily a noun meaning 'non binding, boundlessness, derived from the root da 'to kind'. Hence as a goddess, Aditi is naturally invoked to release her worshiper from bondage.[7] The Adityas are described several times aditehputrah (Sons of Aditi), and this expression may have meant in the pre-Vedic age simply 'Sons of freedom' (like Sahashputrah = Sons of strength) and probably described a prominent quality of Varuna and other Adityas. According to Max Muller Aditi is in reality the earliest word to express the infinite; not the infinite as a long process of abstract reasoning but the visible infinite, visible by naked eye, the endless expense, beyond the clouds; beyond the sky.

The earth goddess Prithivi is generally invoked with Dyans, the sky-God'. One Sukta of Rigveda and one in Atharvavedais fully devoted to Prithivi. She is descried on the bearer of the weight of mountains, the bearer of the medicinal plants.[8]Prithivi was described as the mother's of every things, she gives birth, abide and lastly takes in her pleasure arms.[9] In the Atharvaveda she was called the mother of the sages who compiled the Shloka.[10]

Siniwali is also an important deity described in Rigveda. In a shloka of Rigveda she is mentioned with Raka, Gungu and Sarswati.[11] She has been called as the sister of devas and the wife of Vishnu.[12]Siniwali is famous as the goddess for giving the wealth and birth. Swaha is described as the terminating Omen, hail.[13]

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[1]Rigveda, I, 48, 1.
[2] The Vedic Age, page, 368.
[3]The etymology of Yaska, page, 58.
[4]Rigveda, I, 123, 1, "Poorvaviswasmadbhuwanadibodhi".
[5]Rigveda, 1, 89, 10.
[6]TattiriyaSamhita, 3.1.1.4
[7] The Vedic Age, Page 368.
[8]Rigveda, 5.84.1
[9]Rigveda 10.18.10.
[10]Atharvaveda, 12.1.12.
[11]Rigveda, 2.32.8.
[12]Ibid, 2. 32.6.
[13]Rigveda, X, 110, 11, Etymology of Yaska, Page 104.

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Bharti was a significant goddess of Rigvedic India. Her name was found in many of the hymn of Rigveda. Bharti is closely related with Bharat (the sun). Bharti was considered to be a daughter of Sun, called Bharati, because he supports (vibharti) the universe.[14]

About twenty-one rivers are mentioned in the Rigved. Of these Saraswati was the first to be singled out as a goddess and was associated with Indra, Pushan, the Maruts, the Asvins and a host of divinities. In the Brahmana literature she is identified with Vak (Speech) and in the post-Vedic mythology she became the goddess of eloquence and wisdom, a muse, and the wife of Brahma. Sarasvati is also associated with the sacrificial goddess Ila or Ida and Bharati with whom she forms a triad. Most probably it seems that the mother goddess Sarswati co-relate with Vak or speech, the evidences show that she was the most powerful goddess of Rigvedic era.

Among other Vedic goddesses mention may be made of the Apah who are praised in four hymns of the Rigved as well as in a few scattered passages as goddesses. As Mothers they give birth to Agni, one of whose forms is called 'Son of Waters'. Puramdhi, whose name occurs about nine times in the Rigved, is the goddess of plenty. Then there is Parendi, who is probably identical with the former, and Dhishana, mentioned nearly a dozen times. Ila or Ida, the personification of nourishment, generally appears in the aprisuktas in which she forms a triad with Sarasvati and Mahi or Bharati. Brihaddiva is mentioned four times in the hymns to the Visvadevas. Raka is mentioned only twice in the Rigved as a goddess of plenty. Sinivali, mentioned in two hymns, is a sister of the gods and is invoked to grant offspring. Gungu (Kuhu) is mentioned in name only. Then there are Pishni, the mother of the Maruts; Sita, the corn-monther; Saranyu, the daughter of Tvashti; Surya, the sun-maiden; Aranyani, the forest mother; Lakshmi and Sri; Sraddha, an abstract deity symbolizing respectfulness; Oshadhi, the herbal mother, Apya; Yosha; Sarama, the dog-mother; Gandharvi; Alakshmi, the antithesis of Lakshmi; Asuniti and Nishtigt, symbolizing abstract conception.

Although the idea of one supreme mother principle evolving the inner and outer world of thought and reality in conjunction with a make counterpart, either Siva or Vishnu, is scarcely postulated in the early Vedic literature, it is nevertheless possible to trace the first origin of this tendency in the Rigved itself. Firstly, out of the various cosmic functions of the Rigvedic gods slowly emerges the notion of Sakti or Divine power, not surely conceived as a single category but in a pluralistic sense. "Thus, for instance, Agni is specifically described in the Rigved as having three functions; first, as heat-energy manifested not only in culinary or sacrificial fire, but also in his terrestrial operation as the energy of gastric fire, and vegetative growth; second, in his operation in the atmosphere as the energy of lightening; and third, in his celestial operation as light and solar energy in the sun, the dawn and the different planetary bodies."[15] Secondly, in the notion of Sachi, a term which was commonly used in the Vedic literature for Sakti, we find, however erade and simple, the first faint glamour of the divine Sakti principle at the earliest stage of formation.[16] At one place, Sachi, the consort of Indra, is mentioned as the Goddess of Might. Later, Sachi is conceived as nothing but Indra's deeds of p;ower deified as his wife. The term Sakti itself is used nearly a dozone times in the Rigved and conveys the ideas of the powers of (i) generation and (ii) fertilization. "In the philosophical sense this idea of generation, meaning "to give birth to the world of names and forms' played an important part in the post-Vedic connotation of Sakti as the 'female creative principle' fashioning the world out of her womb (sarvaparpanchajanani)".[17] Thirdly, there are the Rigvedic allusions to the Jnas, meaning women, occurring about seventeen or eighteen times. In the opinion of G. Sastri whereas the RigvedicSachis represent divine powers as the deified nature of functions of the male gods forming an essential element in the constitution of the latter's personalities, the Jnas are distinctly separate principles of female energy acting in association with their male counterparts. In the Brahmanas "all the different forms of Jna divinities have been brought under the single head of Vac who is regarded as the most typical representative of the Jna type. The idea of Vac as the Mantra-Mother, giving birth to her three-fold progeny of Rk. Saman and Yajus is of great importance."

Some traces of the conception of Sakti can be found in the hymn addressed to Vak in the Devisukta, and in the Ratri hymn. The Devisukta of the Rigved (X.125.1-8) portrays in an inimitable manner the idea of divine energy underlying every action of gods and men.[18] It is to this Sukta that the beginnings of Saktism is traditionally traced. Here Vak, the daughter of the sage Ambhrini, describeds herself as presiding over speech like Logus in Greek mythology. She ascribes to herself the sole motivating power lying at the root of every effort in the world. "I hold aloft", she declares, "Varuna and Mitra, Indra and Agni and the pair of Asvins. I cherish and sustain high dwelling Soma and Tvashtr. I support Pushan and Bhaga. I bind the bow for Rudra so that his arrows may

[14]Rigveda, X, 110, 8, also seen the Etymology of Yaska, Page 70.
[15]Sastri, G., 'The Cult of Sakti', SCT, p. 11.
[16]Ibid, p. 12.
[17]Ibid.
[18]Chakravarty, A.K., 'The Devisukta of the Rigveda and its Speciality', PJ, IV Pat. II, p. 599f.

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strike and slay the hater of devotion. I have penetrated the earth and heaven… I hold together all existence".[19] In the Ratri, Sukta of the Rigved also the concept of the divine energy as inherent in everything, in gods, men and animals, foreshadows the similar concept detailed in the Devimahatmyaopf the MarkandeyaPurana.[20]Similarly, in a hymn of the AV 9Vi, 38. 1-4) the goddess is described as mother of Indra and as the one who dwells in lion, in tiger, in fire, in Brahman., in the sun, in elephant, in leopard, in gold, in waters, in chariot, in dice etc. The Devisukta and the Ratrisukta are read even today along with the Devimahatmya in the ceremonial recitations fo the latter.

The above mentioned evidences about the goddesses, I am going to conclude that the importance of mother goddesses was almost prevailed in early vedic era. They are basically related with creation and abiding of the universe. In the latter age the goddesses involved in security and they were looking as powerful warriors. Comparatively the Shakties like Durga, Kali, Karali, Raudri were become more powerful than her man form of Gods.

[19] See Agrawala, V.S., Devi Mahatmya, pp. 223-35.
[20] Ibid, pp. 236-38.

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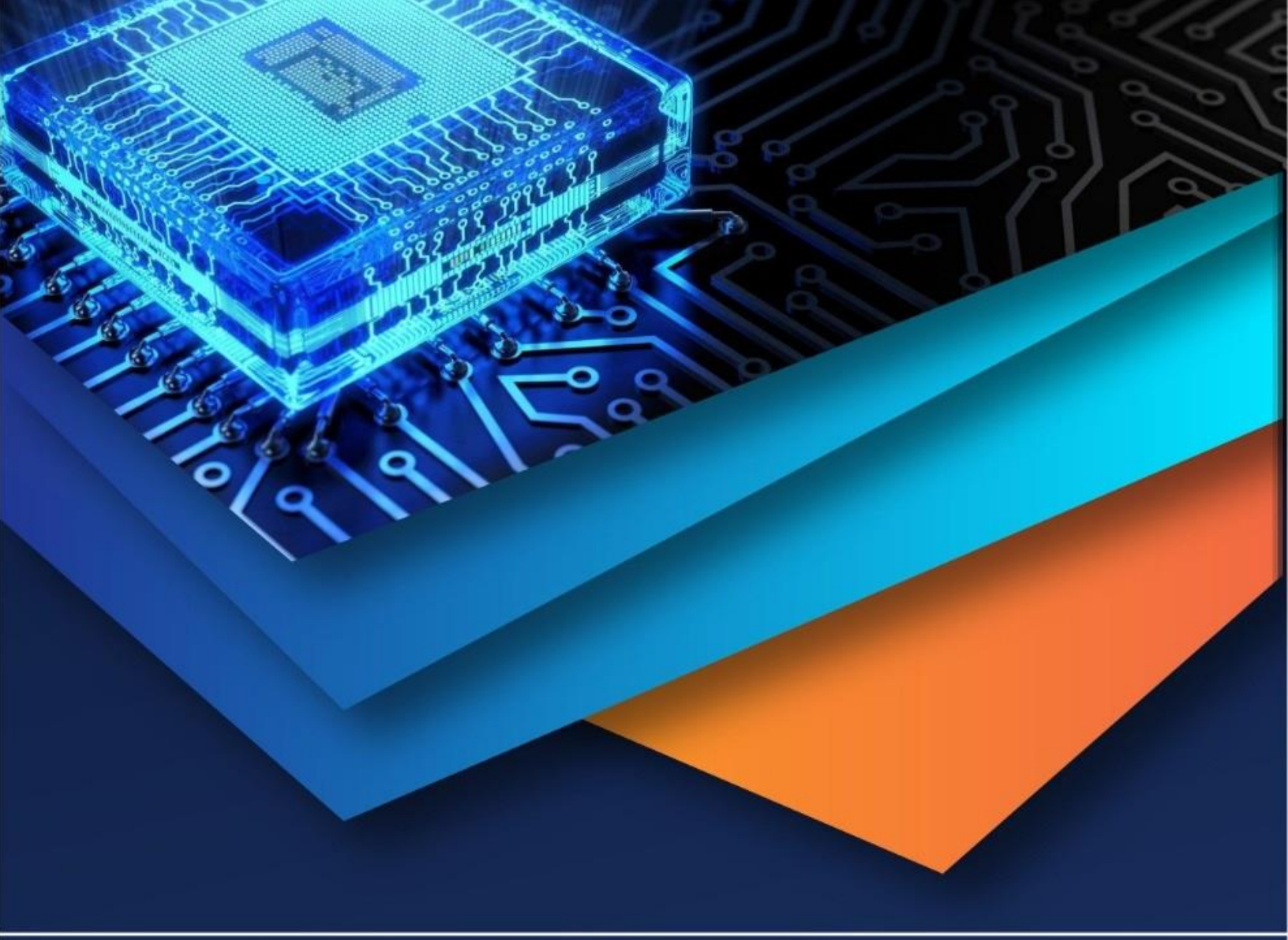

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