

Muslims and Sakti (the Goddess)

There have been Muslims who, from within their awareness of the Divine Feminine Sakti within Islam, have found in their hearts a response to Her manifestations in India.

Centuries ago, a Bengali Muslim named Saiyad Jafar was one among several Muslims who composed odes to Kali. Here is an example:

*Why do you in such a plight call yourself merciful?
 (This is the Mother, the merciful, and in such a plight!)
 What wealth can you give me? You yourself have not even clothes.
 Would a woman choose nakedness if she had anything with which to clothe herself?
 Your husband is a beggar from his birth, your father is most cruel,
 There is not in the family of either
 any to be a benefactor.
 For Saiyad Jafar what wealth is there in your keeping?
 Hara's [Siva's] breast possesses your twin Feet.*

(quoted in *Kali, the Feminine Force* by Ajit Mookerjee, p. 104)

Ayeshah Haleem wrote a study of the *Lalitasahasranamam* (The Thousand Names of the Goddess Lalita), published in the anthology *In All Her Names: Explorations of the Feminine in Divinity*, edited by Joseph Campbell and Charles Musès (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 165-168. An excerpt from her study:

Srîmâtâ!—Glorious Mother!
Srîmahârâjnî!—Glorious Queen!
Srimatsimhâsanewarî!—Glorious ruler on the Lioness Throne!

Thus begins, with her first three names, the uplifted Sanskrit hymn *Lalitâsahasranâmam* (The Thousand Names of the Goddess) in praise of the Goddess of our Universe, with forms of address describing her prime triplicity as Container, Measurer, and Matter of the Universe (all implied by the word *Mâtâ*; Queen of the Universe thereby, and Regulator of Time, the Devouring Lioness—and therefore of all cycles that eventually return to their starting point, making a whole.

Although her triple quality is all-encompassing, she is Manifestation itself (*Mâyâ*)—the Veil of Existence—in all its variety and detail, and thus she may be found through countless avenues. It is something of this multiplicity that the *Thousand Names of Lalitâ* seeks to convey, though the "thousand," in turn, stand for the thousands upon thousands of epithets that actually exist. The text now available, although a compilation of recent date, is without doubt derived from prototypes reaching back several millennia before Christ and eventually to Paleolithic times.

(Ayeshah Haleem, p. 165-166.)

Shahrukh Husain (a woman scholar and author, not the Hindi film actor) wrote a book titled *The Goddess* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997) that was an exposition of the Divine Feminine in various traditions, and naturally included much attention to Indian manifestations of Sakti as well as women's spirituality.

The civilizations, such as ancient Sumeria, that have treated sex as a complex and pleasurable activity, which is also spiritually and physically beneficial (in much the same way as the Indian discipline of Yoga), have generally worshiped an active female godhead. In the rites of this deity, copulation is an act far more important than mere carnal gratification or the urge to preserve the species. This type of sexual ethos has inspired numerous erotic texts that were not intended merely to arouse, but formed part of a religious discourse which survives to the present day. These religious-erotic works include the Sumerian tableaux framed around Innana, Ugaritic ritual dramas, various Japanese texts including the *Nihongi* and *Kojiki*, and diverse Chinese medico-philosophical tracts. Perhaps the most famous of all the ancient erotic texts is Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra*, written in India some time between the 3rd and 5th centuries AD.

The notion of sex as a sin is entirely absent from this work, as it is from most early erotic writings. The *Kama Sutra* contains frank and detailed discussions of the beauty of the female form, from the eye-lashes to the toes and, crucially, the yoni, which is said to resemble "the opening lotus bud", and "be perfumed like the lily that has newly burst". Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* inspired the authors of many of the *Tantras*, or texts sacred to the Asian mystical philosophies collectively called Tantrism, which date back to at least the 6th century AD. Tantrism perceives the universe a set of energy vibrations, emanating from the love-play of the god Shiva (who is passive and unknowable), and his active female principle Shakti. One of the "Five Practices" of Tantrism is *kamakala dhyana*, or meditations on the art of love. Here the devotee contemplates desire with the yoni of the Goddess as his object of worship.

Physical intercourse takes place in a number of Tantric traditions, as an allegory for the mystical union between the Goddess and the acolyte. In addition to assuring peace in the afterlife, this union brings *jivanmukti*, or liberation, while still in the world – a condition which is deemed desirable only in those religions with a powerful goddess-figure. [This is a characteristic feature of Sufism too. —PK] Sexual intercourse is believed to nullify all social barriers, unblocking the flow of energies essential to the divine creative function, which must be emulated by devotees of the Goddess in their rituals.

The *Tantras* and *Kama Sutra* elevate women by casting them in the mould of the Goddess. ... The Prophet Muhammad never advocated celibacy, and the Koran contains little evidence of the hatred of sex. [As a matter of fact, the Qur'ân positively proclaims the spiritual value of sacred sex. —PK] Even the Bible includes the sensual and erotic Song of Solomon....

(Shahrukh Husain, p. 94-95.)

The yoni

The inverted triangle, representing the vulva of the Goddess, appears to have been worshipped since prehistory. Evidence exists of its use in the Paleolithic era, as a pendant, a fertility symbol or a charm to ward off danger. It was emphasized on Venus-figurines and stylized in diverse forms of art and in the cuneiform scripts that comprise the earliest writing.

The genital triangle of the Goddess, widely known today by its Sanskrit name of yoni, and symbolized as a lotus in bloom, is the entry and exit to the world-womb. ...

The feature of the devouring vulva is strikingly absent from the dominant Indian images of yoni worship. Here the Goddess, generally personified by Devi or Kali, is shown lying on her back, legs splayed, or stands, legs apart, releasing her vaginal fluid, *yoni-tattva* a divine elixir which her worshippers take into their mouths.

An event from a mystical text called the *Yoni-tantra* tells how the god Brahma chopped pieces of the goddess Sati's corpse to lighten the burden of her husband Shiva as he carried her around in a state of grief. The vulva fell to earth in Kamakhya, Assam, and a temple was erected in its honour. Inside the temple, the yoni is represented by a cleft rock, kept moist by a natural underground spring which runs red with iron oxide once a year, at the onset of the monsoon. This annual "menstruation" is interpreted by worshippers as Nature's way of confirming the veneration of the female vulva and the processes to which it is subject, and as proof that the Goddess is the earth.

Yoni-like rock formations, caves and dolmens are worshipped all over India, and pilgrims will often crawl through the aperture, if it is large enough, and crawl back out again in an imitation of divine rebirth – the entry and return from the celestial womb. Where such structures do not exist naturally, they are constructed in the form of triangular ponds outside temples. The altars of Hindu temples often have red-stained or painted triangles attached to them to symbolize the yoni. Sometimes the yoni has a black, erect phallus in the middle. In this case it is known as the yoni-lingam, and symbolizes the union of the lord Shiva with his female principle, Shakti. At other times, the symbolic yoni is itself upright, particularly when placed directly opposite an altar.

The yoni-fluid is frequently confused with menstrual blood in the mystical texts of Tantric Hinduism, when it is called "blood-food". It is highly venerated, and is said to contain special potency for healing and magic. The yoni-fluid is also designated *pushpa*, or flower, because "like the blossom of the tree" it announces its potential to produce fruit.

(p. 96-97.)

The female essence

In 7th-century India, mystical texts called *Tantras* began to promulgate the idea of Shakti: raw, female energy, the primordial power without which the gods (in particular Shiva) could not function. One *Tantra* states "women are divinity; women are vital breath". For almost the first time since the establishment of Indo-European, male-centred systems of worship, the supremacy of the Female Divinity was reasserted.

According to the Tantric vision, Shakti emanates from the central, universal force or Great Power, defined as Mahakali, the Great Kali. She is the container of the cosmos, including the gods. One painting shows Shiva sitting in her skull, Vishnu at her breasts and Brahma at her vulva. In addition to believing that the Goddess is the essential, universal energy who activates and protects the male divinities with her prodigious strength, many *Tantras* also define the Great Goddess as Mahavidya – Great Wisdom.

Women have increasingly turned to Shakti as a positive and powerful female force to emulate and possess. Perhaps the most famous images of Shakti, in which she is mainly personified by Kali, are those of sexual supremacy. She appears with her foot on the chest of Shiva, her husband, as she whirls in her dance of destruction, or else she rides his body in sexual ecstasy. The sacred text, *Kalika Purana*, is full of fantastic tales of Kali's sexual combats with her spouse. It indicates her enjoyment of erotic games and her determination to assert her own will in this area. Her vulva, or yoni, is worshipped by the Shaktas (devotees of Shakti) as the Great Womb. ...

Although in many images Kali is portrayed as bloodthirsty in character and appearance, her activities were never wantonly destructive. On the contrary, at her most fearsome, her aim was to wipe out demonic forces before they could endanger the cosmic order. As a symbol of empowerment for women she is, therefore, the perfect model of female balance: powerful, active and assertive, rather than pointlessly aggressive. She returns to women the three virtues that have historically been denied to them in most cultures – strength (moral and physical); intellect and knowledge; and sexual sovereignty.

(p. 156-157.)

(Incidentally, note the resemblance of the name **Kali Ma** and the Islamic declaration of faith, central to the religion of Islam: *kalima*. —PK)

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