

Evolution of the Concept of God as Mother

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The Indian civilization is the most ancient, diverse, as well as the longest surviving civilization in human history. Its deeper appreciation requires us to go beyond the present appearances and realities. Then we shall understand its origin and the mindset of the ancients who founded this civilization. The civilization itself has passed through cycles or ages, and each of these ages had different mindsets. A deeper appreciation of a civilization which has passed through so many ages requires a special effort from us because the minds of the founders of our civilization were different.

First look at the Vedic age. The Vedic rishis had an intuitive mind, whereas the modern mind is rational. When the Vedic rishis saw Reality, they saw not with the help of our so-called rational mind but with their intuitive mind and they saw there the eternal oneness. When they saw the universe they saw it as an indivisible one. From the highest point of reality to its most material manifestation they saw a continuum. The rational mind of today is unable to do this. It sees only fragments which are clustered together. And this makes for a significant misunderstanding when we begin to explore the realities and the experiences of the Vedic rishis.

When the Vedic rishis, for example, spoke of various gods, they gave to each a name. Each one was for them an aspect of the One Divine, an aspect in which all the rest of the whole of the Divine was always

present. Therefore, in the Vedic chants you will find that one deity is being raised and praised as the greatest in whom all the other deities are present. And then the chants shift to another deity who is then praised as the most beneficent or the highest in whom all other deities are subsumed.

The European mind which was exploring the Vedic texts got confused. This happened because they approached the subject with their divisive rational mind and they had to give it some name which did not fit in their experience. So they called it henotheism. But to the Vedic rishis it was not so. It was always an underlying oneness, an indivisible whole in which there are no contraries. All are only special aspects of one single continuum. Therefore they saw the Divine Omnipresent not only presiding above, not only beyond, but all the way here.

This background is essential if we wish to appreciate the teachings of our Master Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, or Sri Aurobindo and others because they lived in this Vedic experience. It is with this backdrop that I wish to enter deeper into the theme of today—The Divine Mother and the evolution of the concept of the Divine Mother. Approaching the subject this way as *bhaktas* we may also make it a communion and a meditation on the Divine Mother.

One may ask why do we need to speak of the Divine Mother. Is it simply because as there is a Divine Father, so we need to have a Mother also? Is it a feminist reaction? No,

it is neither. To understand the source of the evolution of this concept we need to go deeper. It is from this depth that Sri Ramakrishna said: My Vedanta is not the same as yours. Many got confused and failed to understand what he meant by that statement. Sri Aurobindo similarly spoke of an ancient and larger Vedanta different from the modern Vedanta which is much smaller and limited in its scope. This we will understand as we go back to the origin of the concept of the Divine Mother.

In the Vedic conception, in the Vedic scheme of things, the reality beyond in its highest is transcendent and unknowable—unknowable to anything which is fragmented and partial, including our mind. This unknowable Reality is capable of knowing Itself by Its own power of cognition. When that unknowable chooses to know Itself that becomes He or *Tat*. How He knows Himself? By this power of consciousness. When He becomes conscious of Himself, He knows Himself. We ourselves in our consciousness are a part, a fragment of His indivisible consciousness. Therefore as part of His consciousness we too can know Him as He knows Himself.

This essential idea is at the core of all the rest that follows. There is a power of knowledge by which the Divine knows Himself entirely as one whole, and also as infinite potential—*anantaguna*. When He dwells on His infinite potential, when He concentrates on His infinite possibilities, that same power of knowledge begins as if to draw out each one of these possibilities, unfolding, unravelling, deploying each of these visions of Himself. So this power of consciousness begins to multiply infinitely because He is infinite potential. This unfolding process goes on unendingly because there is always more, always an infinity waiting

to emerge and to be deployed.

It is this power, not only of consciousness but of deployment of force of consciousness that can bring into manifestation infinite possibilities. It is this which we know as the Divine Mother—*Ādyāshakti*.

He, the Lord, the One Divine takes up a station in which He then participates and enjoys in this manifestation. We call him *Ishvara*. His power then presides next to Him as the power to manifest Him—*Ishvari*. Thus is born, as it were, the double status of the divine play. It is this double status that will see the unfolding in all the rest of creation, even within our hearts and in all our experiences. This unfolding is an extraordinary experience. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda describe this through a very simple, pithy image. They say, when the water is still, that is God. When the same water moves in waves, that is the Divine Mother. Very simply stated as an image! But in this simple image, in this simple statement, you will find the entire philosophy of unfoldment.

If you observe the nature of the waves—the waves are made of water. They are God. But when the waves move it is the Divine Mother. The movement, the power of creative expression is the Divine Mother.

When the waves move they do not move in one single pattern although each wave is still water. Out of each wave an infinite number of smaller waves can emerge and each one of those waves is still water. So we have waves after waves unfolding unendingly. The result is the extraordinary universe that we experience. Every piece, however varied, is as if a representation of the infinite whole.

When you gaze at the universe and look across all the planets, all the galaxies, you will never find two which are exactly the

same, just as the foams dancing on every wave of the ocean. Look at the millions of flowers thrown out by each tree. You will never find two flowers which are exactly identical. Why? Because the Divine is *anantaguna*, He does not repeat Himself. Infinite qualities are pouring out and out. . . . But wait. There may be something profound here.

When He pours Himself out, while the forms may not repeat themselves, there is always something new that emerges which was not before. When there is something new emerging we have an unfolding of an evolutionary universe—always something more beautiful, always a higher consciousness, always a greater possibility, a greater freedom, something inconceivable in each step. Who unfolds this process? The Divine Mother, the *citshakti* or *ādyāshakti*. This consciousness-force draws out from Her all these infinite possibilities, forming everything out of Herself, Her own consciousness, Her own force. Thus everything in the universe is made of Herself just to represent Him and to manifest Him. Such is the extraordinary vision that we have before us.

When we dwell upon this very simple statement of Swami Vivekananda that when the water is still that is God, and when the water moves in waves, that is the Divine Mother, we discover at the same time that when the waves become still the Divine Mother ceases to be. There is then only the Divine God. Thus we may say that without Him, She does not exist. But without Her, He is unmanifest. Existence and manifestation play together and the whole world is only a dance of He and She.

This play of He and She appears to us in many different vocabularies across the years. We have used the terms—*Ishvara* and *Ishvari*. We also use *Brahman* and *Māyā*.

Brahman is not just the Absolute. It is the Absolute embracing Its relativities. *Māyā* is also the creative power. But as a creative power, it is the power that emerges from the Absolute. *Mā* is the root of the word *Māyā*. It measures out from indivisible oneness all the finite appearances. Therefore *Māyā* is a creative power in the Vedic texts. As a creative power, what She creates is something unimaginable. Therefore, we may even say it is a power of magic. What She creates reveals the Absolute, but never the Absolute Itself. It only points to the Absolute. It is always insufficient and therefore it is an unending series of revelations. Therefore, what reveals also conceals its origin. So we may also say that *Māyā* is a power of concealment even though She reveals. A power of deception perhaps—illusory in the extreme. But still it is His creative power.

Other terms

Similarly, there are other terms that we use. We use the terms—*Purusha* and *Prakriti*, which denote the status of a supporting consciousness as well as the play of energy. In the presence of the support the play can continue. But if the support is withdrawn the play ceases to be. In the play is reflected the light of the support which makes the play possible and makes it appear real. We also come across a series of terms such as *sākshi*, *anumantā*, *Ishvara*; that is, the observer, the sanctioner, and the enjoyer. All these reveal the degrees of relationship between the two in their play. We find many such images in different traditions and all these are considered in Indian civilization as facets of the relationship of He and She. All these have one common feature regarding the purpose of the play. All the traditions agree that the origin of the play or the purpose of the play is the manifestation of

the One, the evidence of His power of consciousness which is delight or *Ānanda*. The purpose of the play is the outburst of the delight; it is not merely an intention of will. Therefore, in everything that is formed, it is His delight which fills and shines behind the appearances. At first the delight is concealed and, as time unfolds, it begins to be more and more revealed. This is how we describe the game or *lilā*. *Lilā* as a concept, I think, is much more complete, much more profound and rich than *Māyā*. *Lilā*, of course, includes the concept of *Māyā* but goes on to reveal some extraordinary unfolding in the future.

Here, Sri Aurobindo makes a very interesting comment. He says, we cannot understand the years or the decades or the billions of years of suffering of evolution if we only see it as an end in itself. We can understand it if we look beyond to something so extraordinary to come in the future; these prolonged sufferings are worth it for that which will be revealed later. It is this truth that is hidden in the whole concept of *lilā*. The *Tāntric* tradition in particular gives it a great force when it views the world and our participation in it as co-creators, as a deployment of *ānanda*, the delight of the *Sat*, *Cit* and *Ānanda*.

Our role in this play

This brings us to the key question: What is our potential and role in this play? First of all, when we observe ourselves we realize that we did not really choose to be here. We did not make a conscious effort to grow to become human beings. At least we are not conscious of making such an effort. As if all that was done for us. In fact, when we look at millions of years of evolution we realize that the one who led our journey of growth was that Energy, that *Shakti* working behind the scenes. It is She who has taken us through the stages of evolution and brought

us to this point where we are awake, we are conscious that this life has a purpose, it has a direction, and that there is something greater than the humdrum worldly things, which attract us, is to be realized. At that point we have the choice of participating consciously in the evolution and therefore speeding it up.

Swami Vivekananda defines *yoga* as the compression of a thousand of years of evolution into a few years. Left to Nature, this deploying, unfolding of the delight would take thousands of years. Then it would be a slow, gradual development. But when we become conscious, when we align ourselves to Her, when we participate consciously, we can speed up the evolutionary process. Here is the utility of *yoga*.

Now we come to a critical concept, a concept which is the secret of all *sādhana*. In the *Gītā* Sri Krishna uses a very interesting vocabulary. He speaks of *parāprakṛiti* and *aparāprakṛiti*—a higher divine nature, conscious of one's divinity, and a lower unconscious nature. The evolution which has brought us to where we are today was done by an unconscious *prakṛiti*. But *parāprakṛiti* is the repository of much greater power. As we become conscious and align ourselves to this higher Nature, the enormous creative power of the Divine, the Mother, then that greater power can lift us up and speed up our evolution. This is impossible to achieve by our own effort only, it requires Mother's grace. Here we begin to find the secret of all *sādhana*.

We have already discussed the idea of fractal appearance of the universe. Let us step back and look at it a little more deeply.

Everything, every object, be it a flower or something else, is formed by Her consciousness, expressing the same one Divine, the same indivisible Oneness. In the *Ishopanishad* the truth has been described

thus—‘*Ishāvāsyamidam sarvam yatkinca jagatyām jagat*’, that is everything in this universe is covered by the Lord. In other words, it is universe within universe. In this way each flower, as it were, is the entire universe putting forward one front of flower. Similarly, each branch of a tree is the entire universe putting forward the appearance of a branch. Again, each tree is an entire universe putting forward the appearance of the tree. How? Because the oneness is indivisible. So each form is, as if, a special expression of the same One.

We may also use the analogy of wave and the ocean. When you observe the wave that rises out of the ocean, you can say the wave moves; but which part of the ocean has actually moved? The very fact that that wave moves, a little further down some water has moved actually. A little further down, again some water has moved all the way to the deepest bottom of the ocean. It is as if the entire ocean leans to become another special wave. In the same way, the whole universe tends to become one flower, or one branch, or one tree. Yet the whole universe is present in each thing. The infinite potential of the origin is in each object, in each form.

If this is true of every object, it is equally true of us. There is within us the same divine presence. Our own form is the whole universe leaning forward to take a special front. So deep within our heart is that *anantaguna*—the infinite potential. It is this power of the divine *Shakti* which is being deployed bit by bit to bring us to where we are. So far it was in the lower working of *aparāprakṛiti*. Now that we are conscious self, we can align ourselves to the higher potential of *parāprakṛiti*. She can take us to our goal far more easily, far more rapidly than we can with our limited effort and capacity. After all, She is the one who gives birth to the universes, sustains them and

again extinguishes them at the command of the Lord. So, that which is impossible for us becomes for Her easy and She can do it in a trice. But there is a condition—we have to align ourselves consciously with Her, give ourselves to Her in an act of conscious self-giving. To the extent we are able to do that, She is able accordingly to sweep Her energy through us and form and recast us in a trice. The question is: Can we do that? Looking into ourselves we realize that we barely know the tip of the iceberg of our awareness. So yoga necessarily begins with that small part of our awareness. But bit by bit as that part is offered to Her in the spirit of self-surrender, She expands the scope of our awareness. Thus *sādhanā* is speeded up by the combined action of our personal effort and Her help.

Sri Ramakrishna describes this in a beautiful simple image of the baby monkey and the kitten. Both are dependent on their mothers. The baby monkey clings to its mother’s body and as long as it is able to hold onto her tightly, it is safe. The mother can then jump from branch to branch of a tree carrying it. But if at any point, its grip slips it falls and suffers injury. Conversely, the kitten has a very different *sādhanā*. It simply opens and offers itself—opens its most subtle, sensitive part and gives itself without resistance. It mews pitifully and the mother cat picks it up by the scruff of the neck and carries it to a safer place. There is no danger, no fear of falling because it is the strength of the mother that carries it. This is the nature of the *sādhanā* when we consciously offer ourselves to the Divine Mother.

In this very simple simile Sri Ramakrishna points out the secret. The secret is this—we still have to make an effort. We still have to be bent on giving ourselves. It means a withdrawal; it means a

dilution of our instinctive ego sense. When we are able to do this, She picks us up and carries us forward rapidly. And the *sādhanā* which would have taken possibly a thousand years, is done within a few years. So *self-surrender is the secret of success*.

Of course, we may ask here: Why should we surrender to the Divine Mother and not directly to the Lord? What is the difference? Here, we come to the understanding of the inscrutable relationship of the Divine Mother and the Lord. We must remember that it is the divine Lord who pours Himself out as the power of consciousness to form the universe. So there is a movement from Him that pours down and becomes the very substance of our minds, of our hearts, even of our bodies and that is She. Equally it is She who is working in us all, who shapes, changes these forms, transforms and transmutes them to help us grow in consciousness towards Him.

Thus there are two movements. There is a descending current in which She brings down all the possibilities. And in the second movement, She lifts all that She has formed to the Lord by awakening their consciousness and pushing forward the evolution.

When we surrender ourselves to Her power, we feel Her power within us. There is a very beautiful formulation of this which was given to India in the form of a *mantra* for India's freedom, and for her spiritual awakening. This *mantra* is what we know as *Vandemātaram*. It was given by Rishi Bankim Chandra. In this *mantra*, you will find a very beautiful statement where he says in Bengali,

. . . *bāhute tumi mā shakti*
hridaye tumi mā bhakti
tvam hi prāna sharire . . .

This points to the deep truth that the strength

in our arms is the strength of the Divine Mother. Our intelligence is Her intelligence. And the devotion in our hearts is Her devotion. We cannot claim these to be ours. To do that is to limit ourselves by our ego. But to realize that these are all Hers is to raise us to become greater than the narrow little bundle of ego that we are at present. This *mantra* shows us the secret of *sādhanā*.

But that is not all. The *mantra* carries a more profound insight. There Bankim says, '*tomāri protimā gadi mandire mandire*'. Commonly, we go on erecting temple after temple and install various images of God there. But the temples Bankim talks about here is not external. It is our whole being that is the temple. After all we must remember that it is Her power working in us which establishes His presence within us. Where is the temple? It is within us. Sri Aurobindo says, God remains in our hearts but He is not worshipped there. We are so busy chasing the forms of deities in temples, we forget the presence of God in our hearts. But that is the whole purpose of his evolutionary awakening. Isn't it? So Bankim reminds us to make our heart a fit temple for witnessing the divine presence there. What do we need to do that? We need to clean the temple and purify it. In this process, as we consciously open ourselves more and more to Her action, the process is accelerated because the *sādhanā* is actually done by the Divine Mother in us. This is the secret of *sādhanā* and this is the truth we will find when we explore certain practices included particularly in the *Tantric* traditions where they instruct us to repeat thousand names of the Divine Mother. Each of the names is like a key, like a lever. The purpose of repeating those names is to align ourselves to Her in that particular aspect and activate it. This process goes on bit by bit until all the thousand facets are activated and bloom out

like a flower when we are completely opened to Her without limit, without condition. This is the concept behind the repetition of the thousand names.

In the actual expression in the human consciousness, the divine *Shakti* has four major aspects. The first is *Maheshwari*. This aspect of the Divine Mother relates to Her vastness, in Her comprehensive wisdom. It is that knowledge which embraces the whole universe in all its multiplicity. Nothing is left out.

The second aspect is *Mahākālī*, which is the aspect of strength, force or power that translates this knowledge and the rich conception of the Divine into form. It is with this power that there is unfolding across time breaking all limitations.

The third aspect is *Mahālakshmi*, the power that harmonizes all the variations and holds precisely in tiniest details the right relation of each thing with everything else. Everything in nature is in harmony. It is most obvious in the flower, not so obvious in the stone. But it is still there. You break open a stone and inside you find a perfectly crystalline structure, perfectly symmetrical in geometry. What holds that perfect harmony is *Mahālakshmi*.

The fourth aspect of the Divine Mother, that is *Mahāsarasvatī* relates to Her working in fine details to make each detail perfect. Within us all the four powers work. And it is these four working together which makes for the completeness of the *sādhana* and the final perfection.

This brings us to the crucial idea that we have a choice. Sri Aurobindo points out that in the *Gītā* the exaggerated importance is given on the Lord, not on the Divine *Shakti*, not on the Divine Mother, because, the goal of the *Gītā* is acquiescence and transcendence. Again, in the *Tāntric* tradition, the focus is given to Divine *Shakti*

because the goal there is the participation in the manifestation. For an integral yoga such as Sri Ramakrishna practised, both are necessary. This is why you see in his life a spectrum of all the different paths and possibilities of realizing the Divine.

Sri Aurobindo says, for integral yoga you need both—Lord and His *Shakti*. There is a part within our consciousness that aligns itself to the Lord. There is also in us a part which aligns itself to Her to be perfect in the manifestation, in the transformation of our possibilities. Both are necessary for the integral yoga that seeks to participate in the *Līlā* as well as manifest the Divine.

Sri Ramakrishna's life is an example for us. In our own lives when we will call out to the Divine Mother we will know Her and the role She plays in our *sādhana* differently, and we will give ourselves to Her. As we give ourselves increasingly to Her, She pours Her peace, Her *ānanda*, Her intelligence, Her strength into us, and transforms us. There is a passage in Sri Aurobindo's mystic poem 'Sāvitrī' in which he describes Ashvapati's revelation of the Divine Mother in the following lines:

A burning love from white spiritual founts
Annulled the sorrow of the ignorant depths;
Suffering was lost in her immortal smile.
A life from beyond grew conqueror here of
death;
To err no more was natural to mind;
Wrong could not come where all was light
and love.
The Formless and the Formed were joined
in her:
Immensity was exceeded by a look,
A Face revealed the crowded Infinite.
Incarnating inexpressibly in her limbs
The boundless joy the blind world-forces
seek,
Her body of beauty mooned the seas of
bliss.
At the head she stands of birth and toil and
fate,

In their slow round the cycles turn to her call;
 Alone her hands can change Time's dragon base.
 Hers is the mystery the Night conceals;
 The spirit's alchemist energy is hers;
 She is the golden bridge, the wonderful fire.
 The luminous heart of the Unknown is she,
 A power of silence in the depths of God;
 She is the Force, the inevitable Word,
 The magnet of our difficult ascent,
 The Sun from which we kindle all our suns,
 The light that leans from the unrealised vasts,
 The joy that beckons from the impossible,
 The Might of all that never yet came down.
 All Nature dumbly calls to her alone
 To heal with her feet the aching throb of life
 And break the seals on the dim soul of man
 And kindle her fire in the closed heart of things.
 All here shall be one day her sweetness' home,
 All contraries prepare her harmony;
 Towards her our knowledge climbs, our passion gropes;
 In her miraculous rapture we shall dwell,
 Her clasp shall turn to ecstasy our pain.
 Our self shall be one self with all through her.
 In her confirmed because transformed in her,
 Our life shall find in its fulfilled response
 Above, the boundless hushed beatitudes,
 Below, the wonder of the embrace divine.
 This known as in a thunder-flash of God,
 The rapture of things eternal filled his limbs;
 Amazement fell upon his ravished sense;
 His spirit was caught in her intolerant flame.
 Once seen, his heart acknowledged only her.
 Only a hunger of infinite bliss was left.
 All aims in her were lost, then found in her;
 His base was gathered to one pointing spire.

(The Adoration of the Divine Mother,
 Book III, Canto II, pp. 314-15)

That is, as we merge more and more in Her consciousness, the sense of the narrow personal ego is gradually dissolved and we experience our oneness with all and life begins to become more and more revealed play of the *Lilā*. This is beautifully symbolized in the image of Sri Krishna playing with the Gopis.

When the Gopis, the human souls, are so distracted and lost in their activities of life they forget themselves, they forget the Lord, they forget the purpose of their lives on earth. Sri Krishna plays the flute and the call of the flute tugs their hearts and reminds them of something they have forgotten. But they have also forgotten what it is that they have forgotten. But they know that it is something that is so important. Then they forget the world and begin to chase after the source of this haunting music. Thus the Lord draws them away from the narrow houses into the wideness of the forests. As they come deeper and deeper, at same point they reach the intimacy with the Lord. There they bare themselves before Him without any boundaries of ego, narrowness and a sense of separation. They merge in Him and dance together under the full moon which is the symbol of bliss, *soma*, pouring down. It is this dance in which each one of us is in union with the Lord and yet all of us are uniquely in relation with the Lord and with ourselves. This is the nature of the *Lilā* to which the whole evolution is unfolding and leading us to the Divine Mother. Surrendering ourselves to the Divine Mother is the most rapid means by which we may grow into oneness with the Lord. ■

* This is the edited version of the text of the Foundation Day Oration delivered by Sri Sraddhalu Ranade at the Institute on 29 January 2018. Shri Ranade is a scholar, Sri Aurobindo Ashrama, Pondicherry.