

Lakshmi: The Goddess who Defines India

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In Treasures of Lakshmi: The Goddess Who Gives

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1 The Approach

Of all the Hindu deities, Shiva may be the most complex but Lakshmi is certainly one of the most amorphous — when one attempts to capture her within a definitive framework. She is undoubtedly one of the oldest deities and one can claim, quite confidently, that she has survived for three full millennia, even as ‘superior’ Vedic gods and goddesses like Brihaspati, Brahmansthapati, Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Adityas, Agni, Ushas, Vayu, Savitur, Pushan, Ashwins and others just disappeared, some rather too early. Many of their traits have been subsumed in other deities, and some like Agni are invoked through ritual, in their material form, but they are not worshipped on a daily basis.

One has to appreciate that, in Indic religions, a deity is not just an image or an idol — some deities do not even possess a human or an anthropomorphic form. Deities represent some ‘power’ or an overwhelming characteristic, like the Surya stands for the sun and all that he represents or emanates — daylight, heat, life-giving energy, radiation, the seasons and so on. This god is invoked only or mainly for these qualities. A deity is, in fact, a metaphor for a life-force or a necessity. Lakshmi is a metaphor not only for wealth and economic prosperity but also of the fickleness, that invariably accompanies wealth. More than that, this deity stands for auspiciousness which explains why ‘Shri’, the oldest name for Lakshmi, that

stands for 'the decorous', is prefixed to names and events to convey both propriety and prosperity. In fact, Lakshmi's story really begins when she is merged with the late Vedic deity 'Shri'. Scholars feel that although Vedic civilisation mentions her for the first time around 1000 BC, her prototype may have continued to exist among the post-Harappan people, whose emphasis on material prosperity far exceeded that of the Vedic people. No image of any proto-Lakshmi has, however, been located but we are yet to understand fully the evidence collected so far. It is only natural to expect that since wealth must have been the highest priority in a trade-based material-rich civilisation like the Harappan, there may have been a deity dedicated to wealth. If validated, this would indicate that Lakshmi in whatever form enjoys one of the longest continuum among all deities.

Every Indic deity is not necessarily what she or he began as — they adjust, evolve, modify, reshape, accommodate, accustom and acclimatise. The failure to adapt is fraught with the danger of obsolescence, as Brahma has shown, by disappearing altogether except at Pushkar. Like 'corporations', deities change their appeal to reach out to larger target audiences. They go through mergers with earlier or local deities, acquire their strengths, immunities and characteristics. Shiva appears to have absorbed the Harappan god of animals — Pashupati, as some call it — who appeared to be in a yogic meditation pose. He then acquired the characteristics of the Vedic Rudra with his mighty roar — the frightening hurricane or tempest — via the *Shri Rudram* hymn of the Yajurveda. Bare-bodied in the icy Himalayas, clad only in a tiger-skin, covered often in ashes, with his *trishul* (trident) and the hourglass drum, the *damaru*, Shiva appears in his classic iconic form. But, at the same time, he is equally well known in his aniconic, phallic shape as the omnipotent *Lingam*. Vishnu, on the other hand, maintained his core self but appropriated a lot of floating legends about super-gods, through his ten (actually, nine, so far) incarnations — the *Dasha-avatara*. The point is that Lakshmi could also continue to thrive, with equal popularity, through different ages as she could absorb contradictory legends. A keen observer would be able to trace the pre-Vedic characteristics from later accretions. She had her own course of adaptations as Vishnu's wife, through his different incarnations, as Vamana, Parashurama,

Rama or Krishna. She was there on his side, as Padma or Kamala, Dhara, Sita and Rukmini. Then, there are eight Lakshmis to represent liberation, wealth, blessings, animals, children, valour, knowledge and victory.

We have deliberately used the term 'Indic' as Lakshmi may have been 'Hindu' to begin with, but was revered by the Buddhists and the Jains as well. In fact, her first proper representation was at the celebrated Buddhist stupas of Sanchi and Bharhut in the two centuries preceding Christ. There are holy Jain texts, that say that before an exalted soul like a Tirthankara was born his mother dreamt of several auspicious creatures, including the goddess Shri, which became a synonym of Lakshmi. We may recall that both Buddhism and Jainism loosened socio-economic strata and shackles, promoting, thereby, the entrepreneurial spirit. It is only natural, therefore, the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi, would be coveted and respected by both anti-Vedic religions that encouraged mercantilism.

Let us now approach the Lakshmi story along four different routes and then try to make sense of our findings at a later stage. We could begin with her origin-legends; then move to the textual mentions of her; take a look at her iconographic descriptions and finally, try to understand the civilizational traits conveyed through the symbols surrounding her. Obviously, it is difficult to keep the four approaches completely and clinically distinct as in Indic religions, the barriers between legend and text and the iconographic are much too fluid. Nevertheless, it may be useful to adopt this quadri-linear approach when grappling subjects that are so amorphous by nature.

2 Origin - Legends

The *Vishnu Purana* describes the arrival of Shri in *Samudra Manthan* or the legend of the churning of the oceans in search of the nectar of immortality thus:

“Then, seated on a lotus,

Beauty's bright goddess, peerless Shri arose
Out of the waves; and with her, robed in white,
Came forth Dhanwantari, the gods' physician"

This grand appearance of Lakshmi was greeted with great joy and wonder and the sea of milk presented her with a wreath of unfading flowers while the artist of the gods decorated her with lovely ornaments. There was, indeed, some amount of rivalry among the gods for her affections, but she chose Vishnu and positioned herself on his chest, seated on a lotus. A struggle ensued between the devas and the asuras for the possession of the nectar of immortality and when peace finally reigns and order is restored, Sakra eulogises Lakshmi, on behalf of the much-relieved gods:

"I offer my obeisances unto the Goddess who is the abode of lotuses, who holds the lotus, whose eyes resemble the petals of a lotus, whose face is a lotus, and who is dear to the Lord who has a lotus navel."

"You are Siddhi (superhuman power), Ambrosia, Svaha (auspicious) and Svadha (spontaneity), O purifier of the worlds. You are twilight, night, effulgence, opulence, intelligence, faith and Sarasvati."(Wilson, 79).

Shri or Lakshmi is thus assigned, as the spouse of Vishnu the 'great preserver of the universe', the additional task of ensuring economic growth and social stability. This version of the legend is repeated in many a text, Puranic or otherwise. Let us note how the Griffith's Ramayan (i. 204) reiterates the same tale:

"When many a year had fled,
Up floated, on her lotus bed,
A maiden fair, and tender-eyed,
In the young flush of beauty' pride.

Queen of the gods, she leapt to land,
A lotus in her perfect hand,
And fondly, of the lotus sprung,

To lotus-bearing Vishnu clung.
Her, gods above and men below
As beauty's Queen and Fortune know.”

The *Vishnu Purana* was composed over a fairly long period between the fifth century BC and the tenth century AD, over which the original kernel could grow and expand its coverage. It could, thus, absorb many of the known or acceptable legends and beliefs concerning Vishnu and his consort. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are believed to have been completed between 300 BC and 300 AD and these two epics and the Puranas represented the Brahmanical upsurge and retort to the sweeping popularity of Buddhism and Jainism. This was after the decline of the strong pro-Buddhist late Maurya age. *Puranas* appear to be the products of centuries of ideological craftsmanship that often grappled with obtuse and complex issues concerning deities and their existentialist problems. They could be viewed as Brahmanical schools and projects that usually completed their task of compiling all existing stories concerning specific deities and extolling their virtues, while linking the *Purana* and its deities to the wider universe of other well known *Puranas*. It may be noted that none of the early *Maha Puranas* are dedicated to any goddess and it is only the appendix of the *Markandeya Purana* that contains the earliest, comprehensive puranic validation of the mother goddess. Of course, even the older *Puranas*, like Vishnu's, extol the virtues of individual goddesses, but mainly in the context of a male deity.

While the *Samudra Manthan* origin is generally accepted as the primary legend concerning the arrival of Lakshmi on earth, the same *Vishnu Purana* contains another story that says that she was the daughter of the sage, Bhrigu, and Khyati and that it was only later that she re-appeared as the goddess who emerged gloriously out of ocean. John Dowson quotes yet another legend where she is addressed as the *Kshiraabdi Tanaya* — daughter of the sea of milk — and she is represented as floating on a lotus at the time of creation (Dowson 176). What we may need to note is that the overwhelming section believes that she arose from the ocean, which is fine, but that she is on a lotus. This is interesting as this flower and plant are

rooted to static pools of water, usually found in the 'interior' of India, not on the coast and certainly not in the middle of the ocean. We have, therefore, a disconnect between her origin from the sea and her firm habitat on placid water — that is churned in limited quantities by the two elephants. It appears that by this time, Vedic civilisation had come to terms with the habitat of the wet-rice cultivating peoples of India.

3 Textual Evidence

Many are surprised to learn that the core Rig Veda does not mention Lakshmi at all, though it does cite a 'Shri'. This text was composed between the thirteenth century BC and approximately the eleventh century BC. This represents the earliest phase of the Vedic people and their language, Sanskrit and the divide with those they demeaned as demons was quite obvious. All we can say from this evidence is that at that stage of social development, there did not appear to be any great need for the acquisition and concentration of wealth— that forms the core of Lakshmi's existence and blessings. From other sections of Vedic literature it is clear that what mattered the most was cattle and cattle wealth. It was basically a pastoral society, on the move all the time, perhaps to locate new fields to graze their animals on. There is a marked distaste for the dark-skinned settled peoples of India and a pronounced antipathy for both technology and accumulated riches. These are spelt out in as many words in scattered sections of the Rig Veda where the technological advancements of the non Vedic people are viewed as magic, mirage and trickery. Wealth other than cattle had little use in the Vedic world.

Zimmer feels, however, that though Vedic society represented "strictly patriarchal warrior herdsman and the installation of patriarchal gods", the mother goddess (of the Indus civilisation) "maintained her supremacy, nevertheless....in the hearts of the native population" (Zimmer 99). As we shall see, the evolution of Shri from the Vedic goddess of auspiciousness to Lakshmi, the deity of corn and bounty in post-Vedic settlements she filled a big gap. She emerged as the corn goddess like Core of

the Greeks, Demeter of the Romans, the Egyptians' Isis, the Sumerians' Inana, Ishtar of the Babylonians and Anahita of ancient Persians. Even the Vikings had their Freia.

Shri-Lakshmi is the Hindu form of the timeless mother-goddess who nurtures and nourishes all life, but it is only in the later Vedic and post-Vedic periods that we get the early signs of bridging the divide with the other ethnic groups of India. The first mention of Shri that we get is *Shri Suktam*, which is a *khilasukta*, i.e., a supplementary *sukta* (set of mantras) to the *Rig Veda*. It is the earliest hymn comprising multiple verses that invokes Lakshmi as the goddess of wealth and prosperity. It appears between the fifth and sixth cantos or mandalas of the *Bashkala shakha* or recession of the *Rig Veda*. The *Shri Suktam* has 15 mantras or *riks* and the very fact that it is also available in sources other than the *Rig Veda* prove that these are the primary texts related to the worship of goddess Lakshmi. Many of these have several additional verses, sometimes going up to 22, thus making a total of up to 37 verses. The most common additions made to the 15 mantras are a *phala shruti* (recompense for chanting the hymn) and the *Lakshmi Gayatri Mantra*. Even the additional verses that the *Shri Suktam* carries are actually supplementary to it, and as said, the *Suktam* itself is a supplementary to the *Rig Veda*. Isidor Scheftlewitz (37-50) takes pains to explain how separate strata are discernible on the basis of stylistic and linguistic differences in the *Shri Suktam*. Verses 1-2 and 13 to 17 are addressed to Lakshmi, while verses 3 to 12 are invocations to Shri — at a time when there are reasons to believe that they were distinct but analogous deities. In short, *Shri Suktam* coalesced the earlier Shri and the later Lakshmi. The various interpolations and layers represented the different attempts by different schools of thought. We discover, as we move along, that the *Atharva Veda* mentions her on multiple occasions and the *Shatapatha Brahmana* cites her in book XI at 4:3:1.

As we examine more texts, we see how some of the additional verses of the late Vedic period are so similar to those stated in the puranas and the Epics, even though these were composed well over a thousand years after the *Rig Veda*. This is the strength of Brahmanical Hinduism that

keeps relentlessly forging interrelationships between textual materials of different ages, to lend legitimacy to each other. This is the highly 'referenced continuum' which forms the solid scriptural foundation of the religion which overrides its internal self-contradictions by cross-linking and reiterating common tales separated by a millennium, if not more.

4. Iconography

Though the literature of the Vedas and the subsequent period displayed a remarkable flair for art, detail and splendour, we get no material form as sculpture or craft or paintings. In fact, the first attempts at representing human or divine images manifest themselves in the shape of *Yaksha* or its female counterpart, the *Yakshi* or *Yakshini*. They represented a class of generally benevolent but sometimes mischievous nature spirits who were said to be the custodians of hidden treasures. From their short height and often-unwholesome looks they appear to represent the indigenous people as viewed by those who composed Vedic and post Vedic literature, commonly classified as 'Aryans'. Even this development was in rather late and in the fourth and third centuries BC. This is well after the establishment and mass popularity of Buddhism and Jainism, as challengers of Vedic and post-Vedic Brahmanism. Jainism has a *Yakshi* for each of its twenty four *Tirthankars* and Indic religions often paid homage to *Yakshas* as tutelary deities of a city, district, lake, or well. They were worshipped by the masses, mainly indigenous, with *Nagas* (serpent deities), feminine fertility deities, and mother goddesses. It appears that *Yaksha* worship coexisted with the priest-conducted sacrifices of the Vedic period.

In art, it were the sculptures of *yakshas* that we see among the earliest of deities to be depicted for worship, veneration or propitiation. It was later, only in the second century BC, that we get the first major representations of a Hindu deity, Lakshmi, not in any Hindu temple (none have been discovered of that period), but on the highly decorative gates and railings of the Buddhist stupas at Bharhut and Sanchi in central India. It is more or less during the same period that we also come across the icon of Balarama

of Mathura and we get the first stirrings of idol worship in India — some 2200 years ago, not earlier. The sculpture of a *yakshi* found at the Buddhist site of Amaravati and the one standing on a lotus at Basrah in Bihar appear to be the forerunners of Lakshmi.

The imagery of Lakshmi in literature, as we have seen, is that of “an exceptionally beautiful woman, standing or sometimes sitting on a lotus with four hands — two of which hold lotus flowers and the lower left in the upright *mudra* or posture of benediction or blessing” (Knapp 138). She is also seen holding a *padma* (lotus), *shankha* (conch shell), *amrita-kalasha* (pot of nectar) and a *bilva* fruit. The *Lakshmi Sahasranama* and the *Devi Mahatmya* identify her with the great Devi and describe Lakshmi as having eighteen hands, holding a rosary, an axe, a mace, an arrow, a thunderbolt, lotus, a pitcher, a rod, a sakti, a sword, a shield, a conch, a bell, a wine-cup, a trident, a noose and the discus in her eighteen hands. The most common symbols of wealth and auspiciousness that are closely associated with Lakshmi are the pot, a pile of gems, a throne, a fly-whisk, a conch, a fish, a parasol, *nagas*, *yakshas*, a footstool, a horse, an elephant, a cow, and the wish-fulfilling tree. Her standard pose, Gajalakshmi, is that of Lakshmi with two elephants who constantly pour pitchers of water over her. She is occasionally accompanied by an owl, that can see through darkness while elephants symbolise work, activity, and strength. There are, of course, several variations, especially in the different regions.

There are several contestants for the oldest sculpture of Lakshmi. We get a Gaja Lakshmi from Sonkh in Mathura that is dated to the pre-Kushan era, while a terracotta plaque with images of Lakshmi dating to 2nd century BC was located in Atranjikhera in Burhanabad, Uttar Pradesh. Other archaeological sites with ancient Lakshmi terracotta figurines from the 1st millennium BCE include Vaisali, Sravasti, Kausambi, Campa, and Candraketugadh. A Lakshmi statuette has been found in Pompeii, Italy, that is dated to before the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE, which is very interesting indeed. In addition we come across Lakshmi quite frequently in ancient coins of various Hindu kingdoms from Afghanistan and northwestern India. Gaja Lakshmi has been found on coins of Scytho-Parthian kings

Azes II and Azilises; she also appears on Shunga Empire king Jyesthamitra era coins of the period between the second and first centuries BC. These surely prove that Lakshmi images were in circulation in the first century BC — much before most other deities. This itself is a remarkable fact worth pondering over

5. Making Sense of Symbols

This is the most interesting part and we shall avoid metaphysics altogether — like saying that her four hands indicate *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (wealth), *kama* (sensual pleasures) and *moksha* (final liberation). Instead, let us ponder over what we see and try to decipher their purport. The first fact that stares at us is her connection with the ocean from which she arose, as Jaladhija, daughter of the ocean. For a civilisation that has developed inland, rather than based on sea trade, this is rather unusual. True, the Malabar and Coromandel coasts have produced seafarers, as have other enclaves like Gujarat and Odisha, but oceanic trade can hardly be considered as central to existence as, for instance, of Britain and Portugal. In fact, crossing the oceans have been taboo for long periods. Yet, almost all the origin tales of many a civilisation, highly advanced or markedly less so, have been centred on the vast unconquered waters — to highlight both the unknown and the limits of man's existence. Much of the action of Hindu mythology, the great *Samudra Manthan*, has to take place on this centre-stage and we may view it as such.

The rest of Lakshmi's symbolism is rooted not only very far away from the oceans but around static water. The lotus and the water from which it springs is necessarily calm or has little motion, which is another way of saying it is stagnant and often marshy. But this landscape does represent stability, unlike say, Saraswati, which personified a flowing stream. The utter placidity of the lake from which arises the lotus is far removed from turbulent rivers or tumultuous oceans. In fact, this is the geography in which thrived the *Nagas*, snakes or snake-like amphibians that Vedic civilisation chastised a lot and was not only careful to stay away but deliberately

avoided. It was the territory of their foes who slinked away into the marshes and waters, confusing the dry-land loving Vedic people who cursed them. Thus, the most beautiful of its products, the lotus, was a crown jewel on which sits Lakshmi — symbolising a mastery over the watery landscape or the coming to terms with it. The appropriation of the very Indian symbol, the lotus, by Vishnu and his consort, Lakshmi, is almost an act of finality seen in the manner in which they dominate. Lakshmi uses it not only to sit or stand, but both hold lotuses in their hands as well. It is not that the Vedic Aryans were averse to the lotus — they were enraptured by its beauty and say so in their literature. But the habitat in which it prospered the most — across the Yamuna and Saraswati, in the marshy areas of the Ganga valley was terra incognita to them some two millennia before Christ. Later, Buddha and Bodhisattvas like Padmapani-Avalokiteshvara also coveted this lotus symbol, and Padma Sambhava or Guru Rinpoche, who introduced Buddhism to Tibet has strong associations with the lotus. Many an Indic deity like Saraswati may be seen seated on lotuses, but the association of the lotus with Vishnu-Lakshmi is complete.

Sukumari Bhattacharya says that “Lakshmi becomes the tutelary goddess of a primarily rice-growing agricultural population”. This explains why the waters are basically stationary and yet, they are shaken into controlled motion by the two elephants who keep pouring pitchers of water over Lakshmi. The importance of waters in agriculture was definitely realised by the later Vedic people as we come across invocations like these in the Yajur Veda: “The waters divine do thou pour full of sweetness to avert disease from men, from their place let arise plants with fair leaves” (YV, IV, 1,2). But the concept of settled agriculture and the importance of the abundance of water for rice cultivation dawns a little later. “Lakshmi is Karisini (the cow dung goddess, and cow dung is manure),” explains Bhattacharya, “her sons are Kardama (mud) and Ciklita (moisture) — things essentially linked up with agriculture.” P 161. Gupta art represents Lakshmi with the cornucopia and the lotus, as metaphors of plenty and beauty. Suniti Kumar Chatterji also connects Lakshmi quite definitively with the goddess of bounty in other parts of the ancient work. He says that Shri is

“derived from the same root from which the Latin Ceres, the corn-goddess is derived”. (Bhattacharya 162)

There is no doubt that the Indian nation was formed only after the Vedic Aryans crossed over to the *doab* of the Ganga and Yamuna and settled down, on whatever terms, with the indigenous folk of India — when the agricultures of the dry-land wheat cohabited with the rice of the wet lands. This is when water in abundance became a civilisational trait and the lake, the lotus and the serpent were not only accepted but deified. The lotus, thus, is not only an object of beauty, it represents the very treaty of Hindustan— for the flat lotus and inverted lotus were accepted and utilised to the fullest by subsequent rulers, from the Afghan, Turki and Mughal to the British, in their wondrous art of India.

6. Connections to the Yakshi

It is often said that Lakshmi has associations with the Yakshi cult that was the forerunner of formal image worship in India. Even after Indic gods and goddesses started appearing in iconic shapes, Yakshi sculptures of wood, stone, metal, terracotta and other material ran parallel to formal images of deities for almost two millennia, till about the sixteenth century. As the earliest of Indic deities to be found in image form, her sculpture is bound to have some carryovers from Yakshi imagery, as is evident in the stylistic forms of *Yakshis* at Amaravati and Basrah. The Yaksha cult was basically worship of pre-Aryan folk deities for boons or protection and appeared in different styles — from beautiful big-breasted women to short, fat, squatty doorkeepers. With such a strong appeal, some of them, like Kubera, the god of riches, found their way into the Hindu and Buddhist pantheons. Interestingly, adorning most Buddhist shrines are images of Kubera, the pot-bellied *yaksha* king and later, the treasurer of the gods, very closely associated with Lakshmi. Ganesh, too, has iconographic signs like a copious belly that reveal his connection with the outer fringe of Ganas and Yakshas. Ananda Coomaraswamy insists that “Ganesh is undoubtedly a Yaksha type, by his big belly and general character: but he is not cited by

name in any lists” (p 7). Interestingly, there is a frieze in the University Museology of Philadelphia, known as the ‘Trinity of Fortune’ that displays Ganesh, Kuber and Lakshmi. (Plate 8, page 92, Ananda K Coomaraswamy Yaksha Part 1). As said, two of them have definite and strong Yaksha origins, and the third may have had some such trait. Lakshmi would ultimately occupy Kuber’s space in the realm of prosperity, and relegate Ganesh’s position a lot, by reaching the status of “top of the mind recall” where wealth is concerned. We have mentioned that Jains have *Yakshis* as female attendants to each Tirthankara and they were housed in their temples.

Yet, it is difficult to pin the Yakshi label on Lakshmi. Coomaraswamy summed it up, saying “It is beyond doubt that Yakshinis were extensively worshipped, in part as beneficent, in part as malevolent beings.” P 9. He goes on to list the *Sapta-Matrika* (seven mothers), sixty-four *Yoginis*, the *Dakinis* of Kali, the Bengali *Sitala* and even Minakshi of Madurai as either *Yakshis* or having *Yakshi* lineage. But he does not list Lakshmi, proving that until further evidence can be gathered, she has no *Yaksha* origins, though she may have had associations with Kuber and Ganesh.

7. The Concept of Alakshmi

The *Shri Sukta* entreats Lakshmi to banish her sister Alakshmi or misfortune who is associated with need, hunger, thirst and poverty. Though Alakshmi is not mentioned by name in the Vedic, Upanishadic or early Puranic literature, she appears to embody all the characteristics of the Rig Vedic goddess Nirrti, the evil one. She is modelled on the mirror image of Lakshmi except that every benevolent characteristic is replaced by the opposite, malevolence. The cosmology *Vishnu* and the *Padma* include her and say that when the *Samudra Manthan* churned out various deities and objects, Alakshmi arrived before Lakshmi. She is, therefore, known as *Jyestha*, the elder one, but since the gods knew her evil designs, they sent Alakshmi to reside among malignant persons and spread grief and poverty among them. She is seen as the *asura* of inauspiciousness that emerges

whenever one is not careful. This is the moot point that the auspicious and the terrible are separated by a thin divide.

Since the Sanskritic way of life could not be ensured without a normative whip, Alakshmi was created to keep the women of the house in their place. Any transgression from the rules of strict purity and hygiene was considered Alakshmi and invited ruin. Even quarrels among brothers was said to be caused by Alakshmi, an attribute that was invariably bestowed upon one or more women, namely, daughters in law. She or they were accused of bringing in rivalries and jealousies into the household which thus ruined the male lineages or *kula*. Viewed from this angle, it was the epitome of patriarchy that ensured through an invisible surveillance that its values were enforced, using the threat of social ostracism.

We get glimpses of the Vedic way of life from the *Padma Purana* in its indictment of Alakshmi: "Always remain, causing misery, in the houses of those men who speak cruel and false words and who the mean men eat at dusk.....Your stay will be there where there are skulls, hair, ashes, bones, and chaff fire. Always remain, causing grief and poverty in the houses of those mean men who eat without washing their feet.... in the houses of those who clean their teeth with sand, salt, or charcoal. O, you eldest one, causing filth, your stay will be in the houses of those mean men who eat mushrooms and a left-over coconut, men of sinful thoughts, who eat sesamum-flour, bottle-gourd, garlic, shoots of young plants, a species of *kadamba*. Always stay in that house which is bereft of sacrifices to preceptors and gods, and bereft of gifts to guests, and where the sound of (the recital of) the Vedas is absent." Stay where brāhmaṇas, good men and old men are not honoured." (*Padma* 4.9.7b-22).

The *Linga Purana* suggests a divide along the lines of caste makes the caste by extolling Shri as the embodiment of patriarchal righteousness and relegating the lazy and rebellious Alakshmi to outside the pale of Vedic virtues.

Through Alakshmi, we get the don'ts of the Indic way of life and its obsession with hygiene and ritual purity. We also get glimpses of the cultural dislikes like garlic (to which Manu added onion) and certain other food items like mushrooms— which was finally forsaken in the nineteenth century provinces that were exposed to the European way of life and better reconciled to Muslim dishes and in the twentieth century in the rest of India. In the Buddhist *Jatakas*, too, there are tales of men and women who request the goddess Lakshmi to drive away the goddess of misfortune, Kalakanni.

Thus, every form of social commitment was injected into the household, mainly on women who are branded as Alakshmi for the slightest transgression. Though the term could also be applied to men, we never hear of men being Alakshmi — as the gender of this noun is decisively feminine. We reiterate that the Indic view of life and hygiene and the ritually pure and impure was enforced quite unforgivingly on women of the household through the mortal dread of being termed as Alakshmi. Though Mircea Eliade and Kunal Chakrabarti have observed that at the theological level brahmanism saw no conflict between good and evil, it seemed that in everyday existence women in the domestic sphere found it expedient to comply with the 'do's and don'ts' of so-called religious prescriptions.

8. Regional Variations

Before ending, it may only be proper to mention that while Lakshmi is universally regarded as a prime deity across the length and breadth of India, there is no uniformity in her worship or even image. In the North and West of India, Lakshmi is worshipped on a grand scale on the darkest moon night, *Amavasya*, as Diwali — lighting the whole world with lamps. For Gujarat, her worship marks the beginning of their new year. The South has, however, a tradition of worshiping Lakshmi during three of the nine nights of *Navaratri*, preceding Dusshera. The goddess is seated on a huge lotus in an *asana* posture and is flanked by Ganesh and Saraswati. In

Bengal and the East, comprising of Assam, Tripura and parts of Odisha, her worship is on *Kojagari Purnima*, the full moon day of the lunar month of Ashwin. This is a week after the autumn *Navaratri* and Durga Puja and here, Lakshmi is on the lotus as her seat or stool and her pot of wealth is very local — quite different from North and West India. It is placed firmly on her lap wrapped around by her right arm, with her owl near her feet. There is no image of her in standing position being bathed by two elephants on two sides — as in other parts of India. In Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, parts of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Orissa, *Varalakshmi Vratam* is observed on the second Friday of *Shukla Paksha* in the month of *Shravan*. People observe fast on this day and this day dedicated to Lakshmi has a great significance in these states.

This is just a glimpse of how diversity thrives amidst unity in India, for several millennia. Hinduism is basically the management of variations and contradictions.

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