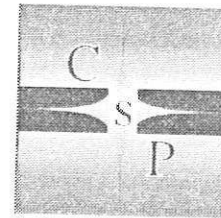


The Constant and Changing
Faces of the Goddess:
Goddess Traditions of Asia

Edited by

Deepak Shimkhada and Phyllis K. Herman



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE BODY OF THE GODDESS,
ECO-AWARENESS AND EMBODIMENT
IN HINDU MYTH AND ROMANCE

STHANESHWAR TIMALSINA

Introduction

This essay explores select Hindu myths of the goddess found reverberating in romantic literature in light of embodied cosmology and ecological vision. The archetypal myths to be analyzed herein characteristically weave together multiple images and concepts that apply a non-dual understanding of consciousness and the body.¹ The body of the goddess here is a multi-layered placeholder, representing self-sacrifice, the paradoxical character of presence-in-absence, an image of regeneration, mortification, union, food and milk, while simultaneously the suppressed, dark, scary, and wild.² The carnal bliss of the goddess in light of these

¹ The application of the concept of archetype borrows from Jungian psychology, which itself draws upon the Indian cosmology. Select readings utilized in developing this essay include Jung, Karl Gustav. *Man and His Symbols*, Doubleday and Co., 1964; Jung, Karl Gustav, and Kerenyi, C. *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myths of the Divine Child and the Divine Maiden*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull. Revised edition, Harper and Row, 1963; Neumann, Eric. *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine: A Commentary on the Tale by Apuleius*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Pantheon Books, 1956; Neumann, Eric. *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Pantheon Books, 1955.

² For 'body' as the 'other,' see de Certeau, Michel. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Vol. 17, *Theory and History of Literature*. Eds. Wald Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse. Minneapolis, 1986; Cooley, Paula M.

myths and romances is that of emptying oneself while also giving birth to cosmic and organic forces through shattering one's own body.³ The body of the goddess addressed here, therefore, is both the sacrificial object and also the source of immortality.

The approach here of reading myth and romance is not historical. The truth revealed through archetypal narratives woven through myths and romance cannot be confined to a linear time-frame. This, however, does not remove fiction from the realm of reality: the lack of historicity does not displace it from the realm of human experience. The deconstructive method applied here again does not seek the historical context to confine the meaning to India of the past, as these myths and narratives still resonate within the larger, contemporary culture. The mythical, along these lines, outlives the historical, and the 'fictional' that lives in the imaginative realm of human consciousness contributes to shaping collective consciousness with no less impact than the phenomenal. In this reading, the meanings attributed to the plot narratives may not be limited to the original intent. Myths live through civilization and gain their own voice. The reality of this romantic realm is immediately felt and not placed in a distant past: this is after all the tender side of the body of the goddess that is being touched.

Myth is a poetic spontaneity, and to unravel myth is to deconstruct poetry. In order to understand the mythical vision of India as an embodiment of the goddess, we will explore select examples from the enchanting romantic epics of Kālidāsa.⁴ By no means exhaustive but as an exemplary survey, this study will demonstrate the harmony existing between humans and nature in classical depictions, providing a ground for the argument of non-dual experience that binds the subjective and objective realms of consciousness.

Invoking myths and romance against this backdrop is of course a type of exorcism. The context deracinates myths' potential powers. Speaking

"Experience, Body, and Authority." *Harvard Theological Review*, 82/3 (July 1999): 325-342; Cooley, Paula M. *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis*. Oxford University Press, 1994. (what is this?)

³ For the concept of *jouissance* and French feminism, see Irigari, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Eds. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca, 1985.

⁴ Looking at Kālidāsa's writing from an ecological perspective, however, is not unique to this author, as scholars have spelled out similar reflections in their writings. For example, see T. S. Rukmini's "Literary Foundations for an Ecological Aesthetic: Dharma, Ayurveda, the Arts, and Abhijnanasakuntalam," in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersections of Earth, Sky, and Water*, eds. Christopher Key Chappel and Mary Evelyn Tucker, pp. 101-125.

through myth now in the wake of the language of commerce can already be found among the wild irrational savages: we are proud to wake up from mythical slumber to industrial reality and technological enhancement. Enchanted by the boons of industrialization, its power to create new circles of marginalized and untouchables by rendering them without dignity has been ignored. Mankind is always living in a dream, whether in the slumber of early civilization or in the blindness of modern awareness. This is what makes invoking an alternative vision of rationality relevant. The purpose of this regeneration of the body of Śakti or reading the myth in a new light is to reconstruct a rationality that does not endanger the very being of human civilization.

Myth 1: The Descent of Gangā

Bhagīratha conducts severe penance so that the Ganges may descend from the heavens and soak the dry land where the bodies of the sons of Sagara were incinerated by the fury of a sage. Śiva agrees to spread his matted hair and hold the Ganges as she descends to earth. Gangā not only liberates the sons of Sagara with her flow, she forever emancipates the people of India.

In Hindu cosmology, goddesses are present everywhere in nature. Gangā is the prototype of all Indian rivers; the 'daughter of the Mountain' manifests in caves, peaks, and slopes, while other goddesses unite with Śiva in the snowy peaks and confluences. She is present in herbs and plants, in rocks, soil, and sand. There is nothing that is devoid of the goddess. This Śākta vision of non-dual experience depicts an embodied cosmology, with consciousness being an integral part of the body. The myth of the presence of the goddess in nature is also the placeholder of her presence in the body. As self-sacrificing Saṁī, as Gangā, she sustains the life of millions of Indians while dying in the new fire-pit of capitalism, with modern industries poisoning her life fluids. As a repressed subaltern, she is the voiceless one. Her vital energy manifests in 'pouring out,' in being extinguished while giving birth, and in quenching the thirst of her children.⁵

⁵ For 'subaltern' and the 'female body,' see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern," in *Subaltern Studies (Vol. V): Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Ed. Ranjit Guha. Calcutta: Oxford University Press, pp. 91-134.

Myth 2: Saṭī's Body

Saṭī is in love with Śiva, a wild wanderer who smears ashes over his body, lives in the cremation ground, walks naked in public, and rides an old bull. What could be more humiliating to the prototypical Indian father Dakṣa who, at the pinnacle of caste and class hierarchy, agrees to wed his most beautiful daughter to this hermit, having successfully arranged the marriages of all other daughters with gods? Although Saṭī marries Śiva, she remains as a scar, a source of humiliation to the elite Dakṣa family. The betrothed couple does not receive invitations for the events at Dakṣa's house. Despite being ignored, Saṭī appears, as if revolting against the exclusion. Unable to bear the pain of humiliating words heaped upon her consort, she jumps into the sacrificial fire and immolates herself. Śiva pulls her body from the fire, but Saṭī is already dead. Śiva, in grief, carries her body as he wanders throughout the Indian sub-continent, with different parts of Saṭī's body falling at different sites. Each of these sites becomes a power-shrine for worshipping the goddess. Saṭī is the prototypical Indian daughter. Whether before or after birth, being Saṭī implies being dead. She is dead to save the dignity of her parents. In this way, she is also the placeholder for those repressed who cannot speak, not only because they are silenced, but also because they have not found their own voice.

The myth of Saṭī does not end with the immolation of her body. In Hinduism, consciousness precedes the body. Just as the seasons change and new leaves grow, so does the new body manifest on the foundation of consciousness. While Śiva is in deep meditation, Saṭī is reborn as the daughter of Parvata, mountain. She does not wish to marry anyone but Śiva. Kālidāsa recounts this story, found in several Purāṇas, in his epic *Kumārasambhava* (KS). The myth of Saṭī speaks of love, self-immolation, regeneration, and union.

As Saṭī, the goddess is the mother, as Śakti, she is the embodied force, and as Śrī or Pārvaṭī, she is the divine consort. The power-shrines distributed all over India are considered to have emanated from the dismembered body of Saṭī. Death, decomposition, and the absence of a single body are preconditions for her effulgent manifestation, as the goddess emerges from death to life. The goddess is also Śakti who is inseparable from Śiva. As Pārvaṭī, the goddess is rebirth, union, the end of suffering, and the placeholder of liberation. In this way, the goddess-myths are not only myths of power, they are also powerful myths of transformation.

Myth 3: Śakuntalā

Śakuntalā, an abandoned child raised by a hermit, succumbs to the blandishments of a wandering king. Her life changes forever after one small meeting that the king does not even remember. The latter part of this essay endeavors to deconstruct the narrative of Śakuntalā at greater length.

Bhārat Mātā: The Mother-Cow and the Mother-Spider

The most powerful of the nature myths are those that spring from the descent of Gaṅgā, and those that include the presence of Saṭī's body, which fell to all parts of the Indian sub-continent, the land then empowered by her physical presence. In both depictions, divinity is found in the form of the mother. This image culminates in a single image of Bhārat Mātā, Mother India. The processes of myth-making and demythologizing both play a role in modern-day India. In Indian myth and the cultural past, land is not a property to own, but a conscious, living, and caring mother of her children. Just to demonstrate how the myths mentioned above still speak to the people of the Indian sub-continent, hundreds of millions of people visit one or another of the goddess shrines every year. India is conceptualized as surrounded by the physical parts of the goddess through her shrines from Kāmākhyā to Kanyākumārī to Vaiṣṇodevī. Many more Hindus visit the sacred sites by the Ganges, and dip into her waters. The Kumbha Melā draws one of the largest populations for any religious gathering that occurs around the globe. These myths are woven into the fabric of Indian society and confirm the presence of the goddess in her earthly body, residing in her mountain-caves and sacred sites called *piṭhas*, and in her presence as the Ganges. As land, the goddess provides shelter and food, and as river, she offers nourishing fluid. In an enchanting Śākta vision, a believer is eternally seated in the lap of the mother goddess.

This myth is also enlivened by the independence-day invocation of India as the mother, or Bhārat Mātā. Through the writings of Bankim Chandra or Aurobindo, India again appears living, with her sons fighting for her independence against the colonial forces raping and dismembering her motherly body, the continent itself. In this vision, the milk and blood of India is squeezed out for the industrial benefit of the imperial powers. Any external invasion of India is seen as a rape. This colonial depiction of the subdued mother emerges again, but now with her own children exploiting the resources of the land and waters.

While India is conceptualized as the Mother in its myths and in the political sphere, a new consumerism reverses this myth. With a double-digit GDP and population of over a billion in this triangle-shaped country identified by Tantric vision as the vulva of the goddess, the body of the goddess becomes individual property for consumption and profit. The river Ganges, the earthly presence of the divine mother, turns to literal sewage, carrying tons of organic and chemical waste. The once-green mountains and plains are crowded by eternally hungry sons of "Mother India," with her mines and minerals consumed by giant companies that compete in the global market. As corporations penetrate deeply underground for hidden resources, no part of the body remains untouched. Each new consumer group is ready to literally devour everything the land and water of India can provide.

In mythical slumber, India is the mother. Her physical presence ensures liberation and the fulfillment of worldly desires. In the modern technologically aware and awakened India, the body of the 'mother' is sold and consumed. In colonized India, both Indians and India are the subalterns; neither has their voice. In decolonized India, Indians can speak, but India cannot. This conquered body of nature is now the victim of her own people, not satisfied by her nourishing milk, squeezing the very lifeblood by emptying the natural resources.

Hindu myths depict the earth in the form of a cow. Revered as a sacred animal, the cow as a mother provides milk for her children. This mythical depiction clearly represents that humankind and the earth are interdependent: humans care for the earth just like they do for their cattle, and the earth provides nourishing 'milk.' Humans consume the milk without risking the life of calves, and in the case of the earth, consume natural resources while protecting her innocent and subdued children, the wildlife. However, with the increase of greenhouse gases produced, the nourishing milk of earth is being poisoned and with the temperature increase, the life of the Ganges is at risk. This new way of consumption is not that of milking the cow, but of the spider babies devouring their mother before searching for food outside.

Geologically, India is one of the places on earth most vulnerable to global warming and climate change. Already warm, India will have to cope with rising heat and parts of India already suffering from drought will have to wait longer to see drops of rain. With the rise of temperature, snow peaks will melt, glaciers will flow, and the map of Himalaya will change. Even now, near the Brahmaputra and Koshi Rivers, the northeast of India is hard-hit, with millions displaced and thousands killed by floods. This will be nothing compared to the wrath of the Ganges with the

meltdown of snow that sustains the water system of India. If this is ignored, for years there will be floods, and then, a perpetual drought. Mountains once green will become naked and the land once fertile will turn to sand. Using the mother-spider as a metaphor for India, before her babies will be able to crawl out, the body of the mother spider will be drained of its juice.

This is not the picture of a welcoming future. However, it is not possible to avoid it by dwelling in perpetual slumber instead of facing this reality. Yet it has not been on the priority list of the leaders, intellectual masses, or the corporate elites. From the mythical slumber of a resplendent past to the technological slumber of not wanting to face reality, the gap between what is civilized and primitive is marginal. From an ancient rationality of deification to the modern rationality of consumption, the only change that has been made is that the early myth enlivened the earthly body as the mother, only to have it transformed into an object of consumption and profit. In this modern sacrifice of Satī, neo-cons of capitalism are the new Dakṣa. While the ancient myth ensures the presence of the goddess in different parts of India, the modern myth of consumerism elevates the role of pleasure in the process of rationalizing and de-spiritualizing India. The land once sacred is now capital, and the once-liberating Ganges is now merely water, and even a sewer.

Ecological concern, in relationship to these myths, is not merely a 'tree-hugging' vision, but rather, it is the vision of rationality transformed by the assumption that the analytical and emotional are not binary opposites.⁶ Following this vision, humans and nature are interdependent, and that awareness is both felt and experienced.⁷ The underlying assumption here is that nature and culture are not aspects of two opposites that exist by negating the other, but that it is one integral process of the same reality manifest in different forms. The constructions of the self and

⁶ For ecology and the divine feminine, see, Adams, Carol (ed.). 1994. *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*. New York: Continuum; Birch, Charles, William Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel. (eds.) 1990. *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*. New York: Orbis Books; Shiva, Vandana. 1997. *Bipolarity: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*. Toronto: Between the Lines; Warren, Karen. (ed.) 1997. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Eaton, Heather, and Lorentzen, Lois Ann. 2003. *Ecofeminism and Globalization: Exploring Culture, Context, and Religion*. New York: Rawman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

⁷ For eco-feminism, see Mellor, Mary. "Eco-feminism and Eco-socialism: Dilemmas of Essentialism and Materialism." *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Journal of Socialist Ecology* 3/2 (June 1992), 43-62.

the 'other,' in this perspective, are impositions on the same spontaneous experience shared by all sentient beings. This again is not the eco-vision where humankind is just one small fraction of the process, helpless and bound. Following the metaphor of a cow, the human here enjoys greater freedom and has the choice of co-existence or mutual extinction. The dualistic vision, wherein God gives humankind a soulless nature and authorizes the conquest and exploitation of nature, has not only separated man from the rest of the universe, it has allowed the self-justification of human superiority. The Indian masses, armed with modern Western education, have adopted the external shell of the above-mentioned myths while overlooking their substance, the message where nature and humankind constitute one single consciousness. In the absence of a cultural regeneration, the sleepwalking of India is mistakenly identified as awakening. Often translating domestic accoutrements as domestic happiness, those enraptured by rapid industrialization have ignored cultural and natural sensitivities, including tribal linguistic and cultural existence, ethnic and local governance, and the traditional sciences, including medicine.

The present scenario demands a serious consideration of co-existence and mutual dependence as a model for humankind interacting with nature, as it is the human being who stands atop the food-chain and exercises his mastery over nature. The negative consequences of this mastery have become visible in the ability of the ruling culture to abolish minority cultures, and of mankind to exploit resources and drive plant and animal species to extinction. The suggested model of interdependence confirms that nature, the body, the repressed, and the subaltern are integral to the rational, to culture, consciousness, and the elite. Within this paradigm is sensation, emotion, the irrational, and romantic, undivided by mind and rationality.

The Myth of Re-union

The myth of Śiva and Pārvaṭī can also confront the separation of the body and the self, the emotional and the intellectual, and nature and humankind. As a primitive awakens in his ignorance of science and technology, modern man awakens in his ignorance of a collective awareness and his interdependence with nature, and his blind arrogance of mastery over natural laws.

This rationalization begins with the demystification of nature and of the myths themselves. The focus on science and technology in academic institutions moves traditional education, religion, and culture to the

margin. As culture and religion have always remained a source of fascination to the masses, this old education becomes the source of income for 'self-enlightened' gurus and the subject of organization for political groups through which they can promote intolerance and social imbalance. Based primarily on 'mass' and on the power to influence through charisma that includes both political and economic forces, the modern religious marketplace is not much different from the governing ideology of modern-day socialism and capitalism, where both conceive of nature as inanimate and the site of perpetual human mastery and exploitation. With this ideological gulf, nature, once a source of awe and reverence that demonstrated power beyond human control, stands for mystery for early mankind, and demystified man stands alone, walking towards annihilation. Although the 'religious' still guides the everyday lives of the rural masses, the force it has is insignificant and often perverted by crooks. Reading myths against this background is then a process of invoking the marginalized.

The actualization of this harmony begins with the non-dual vision that binds humanity with the rest of existence. The dualism of body and mind, and of the world and God, has separated humankind from the rest of the nature. It has also split humankind into two genders with subsequent problems, threatening human civilization itself. On one hand, human civilization has reached its highest aspirations while on the other, human brutality over other races, over other species, and over nature and natural resources has reached new lows. Human aspects of sensation and emotion have been repeatedly denied and the religious focus has shifted from the body to intellect, making spiritual experience into merely philosophical discourse. Reading the myths of Pārvaṭī against this backdrop is not to claim that ecological issues are explicit in these narratives, neither is it to make a claim that ecological problems can only be solved by reading these myths, but as civilization is a composition of different streams, these myths can be the source for inspiration for social welfare through reunion of the self with nature.

Kālidāsa is aware that the mountain is the source of water, being both the origin of Ganges and several other holy rivers that irrigate India, as well as the physical mechanism keeping clouds within the Indian sub-continent. In the epic KS, when he narrates the birth of Parvata's daughter, he eloquently and at great length describes the mountains and their splendor. This glorification helps us to understand that he is not discussing some gods residing in the mountain, but rather, the mountain itself who is giving birth to Pārvaṭī, the goddess who wants only to be united with lord Śiva. Her penance to draw Śiva as her consort leaves her

parents in awe, whereupon they exclaim, 'Oh! No,' giving the goddess another name, Umā.⁸

The myth of the birth of Pārvaṭī confirms an embodied and immanent vision of divinity: the divine lives through nature and within creation, sustaining through it, not outside of it. This myth also speaks of birth and death as a natural cycle wherein the two are not negating opposites but rather completing the other. The divine consort is born here, and her presence is found on earth through her birth, death, and regeneration.

The reunion of Śiva and Pārvaṭī is a metaphor of an embodied cosmology. In this myth, Śiva does not remain isolated in his deep meditative slumber but is conscious of the outside world, of his own body and its needs, and of his surroundings. Nonetheless, it is not an easy union. In Śiva's deep meditation, he withdraws his senses from all worldly experiences, freeing himself from the sphere of emotion. Recognizing the difficulty of reunion with Śiva, Pārvaṭī also undergoes penance, withdrawing from her senses and emotions. However, her goal is different, to bring Śiva to the mundane world and awaken his emotions.

Śiva's separation from the world is troublesome, as the gods are unable to protect their paradise from being defeated by demons. It is only lord Śiva who could support them and be on their side to fight against the demons, but as long as he is in meditation, he himself is not listening to the prayers of the gods pleading for his assistance in the battlefield. In other words, the lord of gods, if dissociated from mundane experience, is not in communication with the world and will not grant protection or boons. The only way the supreme being can grant what is asked of him is when he has the will. The god without desire is no god at all.

Following the myth, Kāma, the god of desire, is appointed to break the vow of lord Śiva and draw him to the realm of passion and aversion. Kāma's effort bears the fruit of Śiva awakening, but Kāma himself is incinerated to ashes by Śiva's rage. This epitomizes the way the god of desire functions, dying in its body and living through another's awakened desire. Overcoming passion revives desire. In this myth of reunion, Pārvaṭī's vow to marry Śiva is the metaphor of bringing the self to the body and bodily emotions, whereby Śiva can feel love for Pārvaṭī, be compassionate to the gods, and fight against the demons. If seen only externally, the myth of Pārvaṭī is the myth of seduction. When the myth is explored again, this seduction brings divinity to protect the earth. Śiva is in absorption, free from his own bodily feelings and unaware of his surroundings; Śiva is worshipped by gods, but is careless about their

⁸ KS 1.26.

feelings and emotions. The myth of Pārvaṭī is a placeholder for salvation: it is through her self-sacrifice that Śiva can first feel pain and finally the bliss of reunion.

Embedded within this main narrative are other instances that allow us to connect the love of Pārvaṭī with the love for nature. Pārvaṭī, as a daughter of the mountain, is deeply connected to her parental home and her parents, the mountains, and to the offspring of mountains, the animals and plants. Kālidāsa does not miss the opportunity to elaborate upon Pārvaṭī's relation with nature, placing Pārvaṭī as the caring mother of innocent beings. In both KS and also in *Raghuvamśa*, Kālidāsa uses the metaphor of the breast as a pitcher, which Pārvaṭī uses to sprinkle the plants.⁹ In one episode, Pārvaṭī cannot bear the pain caused by an elephant rubbing his neck on a tree, whereupon she appoints the lion to protect her garden. A further implication of this action is that the land is protected from overgrazing. In this myth, king Dilipa ignorantly uses the land to graze the cattle and the lion appointed by Pārvaṭī threatens to kill the king.

In the narrative of KS, Pārvaṭī initiates her penance by planting trees that come into bloom before her penance ends and she is united with Śiva.¹⁰ Pārvaṭī's return to nature and her care for it in order to be united with Śiva identifies a spiritual path in which the divine is found and felt, not through separation of the mind and body, and nature and culture. Pārvaṭī's control of consumption as a course of purification demonstrates that the pristine and spiritual within the human are polluted by gluttony and over-accumulation. Pārvaṭī is eager to leave her childhood home in the mountains to be a divine bride, but that does not translate into ignoring the life and environment of her parental home.

At first glance, the love of Pārvaṭī appears directed towards humankind and the gods, as the waking of lord Śiva from deep meditation and his engagement to Pārvaṭī is a requirement for the salvation of gods and humanity. However, Pārvaṭī's loving care for nature and her intimate relationship with plants and animals both demonstrate that this love envelops all that exists, restoring the harmony and peace interrupted by divisive and destructive demons. At the heart of this emancipation myth is the struggle of Pārvaṭī, the goddess. The Lord often worshipped in his phallic form is isolated from the surroundings and is in deep absorption. The penance of the self-sacrificing goddess is now to awaken Śiva from the realm of isolated consciousness to physical reality.

Unable to dislodge Śiva from his absorption, Pārvaṭī undertakes severe

⁹ KS 5.14; *Raghuvamśa* 2.36.

¹⁰ KS 5.60.

penance, providing her with another name, *Aparṇā*, or 'leaf-less,' having restricted her consumption, denying herself even leaves as sustenance. For both Śiva and Pārvaī, their penance of controlling senses and restricting consumption is the same. This reverses the excessive and exploitive lifestyle of the devas, who have lost their glorious independence due to their greed, lust, and arrogance. And again, as are the devas, so are the asuras. The power of Śiva to bring harmony to the cosmos comes through his strength of asceticism and self-control. In modern consumerism, ten percent of the world's population consumes ninety percent of natural resources. In one part of the earth people are dying of starvation and in the other part, from obesity. This over-consumption, particularly of oil hidden deep into the earth, resonates of the gluttony of Tāraka, the demon that threatens the devas' world.

The myth of Pārvaī embodies the social implication of equality and respect for all forms and stages of life. She herself is the daughter of Himalaya, the source of natural resources and all riches. Sanskrit texts, including the epic of Kālidāsa, never tire of describing the wealth of the Himalayas. At the same time, Hindu myths depict lord Śiva as downtrodden and outcaste. In the myth of Pārvaī that completes the myth of Saī, social balance is maintained and the hierarchy dismantled. If examined in the Indian cultural context, this is a revolutionary myth, in which class, caste, and gender roles are reversed. This new balance is not found at the established center, but emerges from the periphery of the wild and outcaste.

The narrative of Pārvaī culminates with the birth of Kumāra, the fruition of divine engagement. This myth ties both Gangā and Pārvaī together, as Kumāra is a single son of both these mothers. As Gangā is also the daughter of the mountain, this is yet another manifestation of the goddess herself. The significance of the birth of Kumāra is the collective process of regeneration and rejuvenation. The myth that the son of lord Śiva able to fight against the demons is not born of single mother invokes the collective effort that gives rise to emancipation.

The Myth of Recognition: The Subaltern Śakuntalā

Kālidāsa, in the same way, narrates the profoundly rich story of the recognition of Śakuntalā in *Abhijñānaśakuntala* (AŚ). Ecological concern in this drama is explicit from the very first verse, the benediction to Śiva. In this, Kālidāsa invokes the eight bodies of God. Water, fire, and the sacrificer, the sun and the moon, and sky, earth, and air, in Kālidāsa's cosmology, constitute the body of the Lord. Explicitly, there are two

categories, the self as the sacrificer, and the physical world that sustains life, and both constitute the divine body. In the myth, the loss of identity for Śakuntalā and the loss of awareness that the king displays both need to be understood in light of this embodied cosmological vision that the poet weaves throughout the story. The union of Śakuntalā with the king is therefore not merely the identity of the repressed, the self-recognition of the forgetful one, the birth of a new nation, but it is also the recognition of the harmony of the nature and the self, as both collectively constitute the body of God.

A deconstructive gaze allows penetration into multiple layers of meaning found in the richly fertile narrative of Śakuntalā.¹¹ The protagonist in Kālidāsa's drama is an abandoned girl Śakuntalā, the illegitimate child born of the union of a nymph and a sage. As her name suggests, she was raised by birds, or brought up by wild creatures in the wilderness. She later finds shelter in the hermitage of Kaṇva, where she befriends deer and takes care of the garden. In the absence of her adopted parents, king Duśyanta, etymologically 'the spoiler,' seduces her with the dream of becoming a queen, takes advantage of her innocence, and impregnates her. Bharata, the person whose name gives the identity to the country Bhārata, is born of this union. In this class struggle, Śakuntalā is denied her identity and forced to care for the child alone. Like other romantic comedies of Kālidāsa, Śakuntalā regains her identity as the rightful spouse of Duśyanta and her son Bharata becomes the powerful king.

The opening of the drama gives a powerful message of the contrast between Duśyanta and Śakuntalā. Duśyanta hunts innocent wildlife whereas Śakuntalā protects, heals, and cares for them; Duśyanta crushes the wild plants with the wheels of his chariot and the hooves of the horses, whereas Śakuntalā tenderly sprinkles water on the plants and cares for the garden; Śakuntalā embodies the teachings of the sage Kaṇva and practices non-violence while Duśyanta, as a ruler always needing to define his power, finds his glory in his ability to shed the blood of innocents. The union of these two opposites suggests the possible co-existence of those who believe in war and those who do not.

In the narrative, Śakuntalā takes the role of daughter, wife, and mother. As a daughter she grows up like the abandoned children found in the streets; as wife she is forgotten and neglected by one imagined as her

¹¹ The narrative of Śakuntalā first appears in the *Mahābhārata*. This story is found also in the *Padma-purāṇa*. For detail, see M. R. Katre, *The Abhijñānaśakuntalam of Kālidāsa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969, pages cxi-cxxiii.

husband who saw her only as a passing fancy; and as mother, she reverses the legacy of her own absent mother, and through her child she revisits her past and achieves satisfaction through her motherly love for her child. The struggle of Śakuntalā is that of survival, existence, and a life of dignity. The *jouissance* of Śakuntalā lies not in the moment of passion with Duṣyanta but in giving birth to Bharata, whose glory gave the name to the country. Bharata embodies both the might of his father and untamed qualities of his mother: he befriends lions and fights with tigers.

Bharata, the founding father of India, is the result of the relationship between the elite and the subaltern. Without recognizing the power of Bharata, king Duṣyanta cannot rise to greater heights. The dramatic 'recognition of Śakuntalā' (*Abhijñāna-śākuntala*) is the recognition of the suppressed class by the elite; it is the story of interdependence and co-existence. This story still speaks for the future of India, that the real potentiality of the country lives in the streets among the illiterate masses suffering from malnutrition.

This story expresses the stark contrast between two Indian women, Urvaśī and Śakuntalā. Although there are other female characters in the drama, they lack agency; their subjective paradigm is confined. These two women are aware of and exercise their agency. Urvaśī lives to fulfill her lust; she is the temptress. Her daughter, on the contrary, has no place for lust; she is seduced and conceives. While Urvaśī abandons her child, Śakuntalā devotes her life to her son. The poet enlivens these two characters in two different ways. Utterly absent throughout the drama, Urvaśī speaks through silence. Śakuntalā, however, overpowers all the acts of the play; the other characters there simply remind the viewer of the presence of Śakuntalā. Through the presence and absence of these two characters, the poet indicates that the victimized body cannot reverse the lack of agency by simple clitoral emancipation. Śakuntalā lives for greater liberation, the recognition that grants Bharata the kingly throne. This achievement of Śakuntalā compensates for the *jouissance* of Urvaśī. In this, Śakuntalā embodies the entire Indian repressed and brings them to the throne, and unlike the pleasure Urvaśī gains in momentary seduction, Śakuntalā has the greater ability of self-control and of non-violent struggle against the repressor.

The Revival of the Myths

The range of literature addressed in this discussion is primarily mythical and poetic. In the light of a new rationality, these can be seen as subdued voices, with 'truth' reduced to objective facts, turned into data

that does not speak to, or of, human awareness the way a pulsating heart does. In this invocation of the peripheral, the myth of Saṭī carries a truth deeper than mere data, as it speaks in the language of integrity. The liberating myth of Ganges is another example of the suggestibility of myths. The body of Saṭī found in the form of India is enlivened by the veins and life-juice of the Ganges. These archetypal myths suffuse all other goddess myths with their cognitive and ecological implications. Sacred groves of the goddess are primarily sustained by the myth of Saṭī, as her limbs of Saṭī are present in every sacred grove, and in every hill.¹² Likewise, the Ganges is present in every drop of water that flows on Indian sub-continent.

The identification of the goddess with nature can be further demonstrated by another myth, that of Pārvaṭī. In many respects, this is the continuation of the myth of Saṭī. Saṭī is reborn as Pārvaṭī and marries lord Śiva after he emerges from his solitude in the Himalaya mountains. The marital bond of Gangā and Pārvaṭī with lord Śiva gives an integral vision of the self and the body and its vitality. Kālidāsa identifies the Himalayas as the soul of the gods (*devatāman*).¹³ In the absence of the Himalayas, there is neither the goddess of groves nor of the rivers. The possibility of life on the lower plains relies upon the balanced life of the snowy mountains.

The original message of these myths unites the divine and human, and nature and consciousness. This sacred gaze is not a process of constituting divine objects, as this completely usurps the original intent of the message. While the sacred groves remain and the Ganges is still a center of devotion, worship shifts from the recognition of the sacredness of life and nature to a confinement of the divine within conditioned space. Worshipping one tree and destroying the forest does not correspond to the message. Making *murtis* of Gangā and worshipping Ganges in the temple does not carry the message of the myth, but simply distorts it, turning the original intent into a misappropriated reduction. For an observing Hindu who invokes the Ganges while taking a bath in a pond or in water from a tap, the myth of Ganges remains alive, confirming all waters sustaining life to be divine. The myth of Saṭī or of Pārvaṭī is not to identify one tree or one rock as divine, but rather to ensure that the mountains and plains as the body of Saṭī remain sacred, and the snowy peaks as the origin of both goddesses may continue to sustain the people of the continent.

¹² See Frederique Apffel-Marglin and Pramod Parajuli in *Hinduism and Ecology*, pp. 291-316.

¹³ KS 1.1.

The myths of both Pārvaṭī and Ganges are primarily the myths of healing: Śiva unendingly laments the death of Saṭī in isolation, and the love of Pārvaṭī reassures; Sagara's sons are dead and the only consolation for Bhagīratha is the liberating touch of the Ganges. As Himalaya is often depicted as the source of medicine in Indian myths, this restoration does not end in healing surface wounds, but also includes healing burning (or broken) hearts. In the cosmic vision of Śiva and Saṭī, the first one witnesses death and birth and separates from sensation. In the case of Saṭī, life encompasses both birth and death, and it is the unchanging foundation of momentary events.

Redefining the 'Rational'

The myths of the goddess are not merely the glory of the feminine force that pulsates in the individual and society, in nature and humankind. They suggest integral consciousness that combines both body and mind. The collapse of integral thinking is linked with the way the rational has been defined as a fundamental duality, with the spirit opposing the body, and nature opposing culture. The process of division and subordination has great implications in our lives. Our family values have been shattered and our society splits into working and leisure classes. The greater freedom that individuals preserve now is the choice to be a slave in one or another corporation. The individual cry for social and ecological transformation is marginalized when truths are made, packaged, and sold for the benefit of the few.

In this paradigm, nature is at the bottom of systematized repression, because it cannot move, speak, get outraged, or strike back. Yes it can, in the long run, through cataclysmic change. And this change disproportionately affects the proletariat that has limited or no resources.

An alternative to this is to accept the non-dual argument wherein nature and humankind do not sit next to each other as two strangers or as master and slave, but with the human acknowledgement of the essential being of nature. In this non-dual argument, plants and humans play the game of life in the garden of nature together, acknowledging partnership free from the complex of domination. The myth of Saṭī speaks for all time, with the sacred felt and experienced in different sites as the limbs of Saṭī's body. The divinity, Pārvaṭī, manifests in and through nature, not outside of this world and controlling it.

This new rationale will redefine what is perceived as right action. Following this, one will not have the right over another's human labor. According to this rationale, a human being does not own the land or

control the property, but is a caretaker, a steward. A human being, in this vision, is not removed from the land but is part and parcel of the dust from which he comes and to which he returns. This is the myth of Saṭī, where the earth is the body of the goddess.