



EARTH MOTHER --- MYTHOLOGY

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Abstract

According to a UN report, 35% of the world's woman population is subjected to violence in some aspect of their lives or other. Neither can anyone deny the fact that in times of war, which in itself is violence against humanity, the risk of untold abuse against women becomes particularly high. Violence against women is and has always been a worldwide phenomenon. This is an issue that aggravates anger and bitterness in all self-respecting and educated women and (many, but not all) men. The vulnerability of women has perhaps been, so far, a perpetual feature in the history of mankind. In India, the situation can be seen to be even more particularly paradoxical since 80.5% of the population of almost 1.26 billion is Hindu who worship powerful Goddesses like Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, etc. Another name that all Indians are easily familiar with is Sita, traditionally known as the ideal of Indian womanhood. Sita's "pativrata" i.e. loyalty to her husband, was so strong that she was able to withstand the fire test unharmed. Ultimately, towards the end of the story, it is Earth Mother who comes to Sita's rescue. The epic raises many interesting questions and observations concerning female bonding between mother and daughter as well as grave issues of gender.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore the myth of the Earth Goddess in symbol as well as in metaphor. A comparison with other world cultures has also been made.

The objective of this paper is to study mythology with the intention of finding new and more meaningful interpretations that may have significant relevance in today's life. The reexamination of the role played by Pritivi or Bhoomi Devi in Indian mythology will probably provide a vital role model for today's Indian woman who struggles for a dignity and survival. A study and critique of the many interpretations of incidents and happenings related to these divinities and characters from mythology could, if brought into popular culture, probably change the mindset of both perpetrators of crimes against women as well as survivors of such crimes along with the many women who could fall victims to such crimes at any point of time.

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Violence has always been the creed of human beings. It surrounds us today in every sphere of life. Even though we are fortunate to live in times of relative peace and no major war, yet incidents of repulsive atrocities are reported daily in every newspaper around the world. About fifty percent of the world's population is female. But, astounding as it may sound; a U.N. report indicates that 35% of the world's woman populations have to put up with violence in some form or the other in their lives. More astounding, these women suffer at the hands of an intimate family member in most cases. (UN Women: 2013)

It is also common knowledge that whenever there has been war, women of the defeated side have always relentlessly been subjected to unspeakable abuse. Closer to present times, on July 2nd, 2014, as reported in India's leading dailies, a political leader from the leading party in West Bengal declared from a public platform that the women from the families of the opposition would be raped and killed by his men. Before that, on 10th April, 2014, another political leader opposed the new anti-rape law saying that men make mistakes and the rape accused should not be hanged. All this had come on the heels of the infamous Shakti Mills rape of a photo-journalist. The rape and molestation of minor girls in school by teachers, attendants, or the drivers and conductors of school vans is reported frequently if not daily. Very often girls are brutally killed if they put up any kind of resistance, as in the Nirbhaya case, on December 16th, 2012, when a twenty-three year old physiotherapy intern was gang-raped and killed in a private bus in Delhi. Although there have been strong mass protests against these and similar incidents and the government authorities have also been prodded to take punitive and legal action against the perpetrators of these crimes, the stronger and more relentless tradition of patriarchy prevalent in India dictates censures for women who are the victims rather than men who actually initiate and commit these crimes. The Vice-Chancellor of an Indian university had recently 'disallowed Women's College students' entry into AMU's Maulana Azad Library on grounds that women will attract "four times more boys". This discrimination was supported by the principal of Women's College within the same university who considered girls' presence in the library as a distraction and an invitation to indiscipline. (Singh: 2014)

In some places, women are banned by the local administration from wearing jeans and using mobile phones. Many times when teenage girls are subjected to eve-teasing, they have to undergo severe physical and verbal humiliation by their brothers or other male family members because their own families suspect that the girls are the instigators. The Times of

India of 2nd November, 2014, p.9, reports how, in Sonipat, two young sisters were harassed by a couple of men in a public bus and eventually thrown out while neither the bus conductor nor driver nor any of the other passengers did anything to either stop the culprits or protect the girls who had put up a resistance (Times of India Network, 2014: p. 9). The same newspaper of the same date on another page carries the news report from Germany about a twenty-three year old girl who was attacked with a bat so brutally that she succumbed to her injuries (Paterson, 2014: p. 18). She had rushed to help two women being harassed in a Macdonald's restaurant toilet in Offenbach on November 15, 2014. BBC news of 29th November 2014, narrates the domestic violence that women in Georgia face and the cultural restraints that prevent many women from speaking out (News Europe, BBC, 2014}. Female infanticide, widely prevalent in many parts of the world, including India, seems to be the ultimate violence against women who are not even allowed to be born.

While authorities may or may not take corrective measures, which may or may not have the desired results, I strongly feel that the mindsets and attitudes of the masses who are either perpetrators or mute onlookers of such crimes need to be changed. Awareness drives, street plays, and campaigns on this issue could and do happen to reach out to some parts of society. Another effective way to drive messages home is through popular culture. In a place like India, with low literacy levels and orthodox views, popular culture could go a long way towards bringing about much required changes. The most popular themes with masses in India seem to be ones which are mythological in nature. Films and television serials on such subjects are widely viewed and revered. Frequently, such presentations hammer in old and traditional concepts, which may do more harm than good in the present day scenario. For example, the portrayal of women in such media is a cause of serious concern. When the ideal woman is projected as the quiet, suffering type, whereas the man is projected as the active decision maker, then that is what the masses, including women, start following as their role model. Joseph Campbell says that:

Many of the difficulties that women face today follow from the fact that they are moving into a field of action in the world that was formerly reserved for the male and for which there are no female mythological models. The woman finds herself, consequently, in a competitive relationship with the male, and in this may lose the sense of her own nature. [...] They are moving into the field and jungle of individual quest, achievement, and self-realization, for which there are no female models.

He also says “Nor is there any model for the male in marriage to an individuated female. We are in this thing together and have to work it out together, not with passion (which is always archetypal) but with *compassion*, in patient fostering of each other’s growth” (Campbell, 2013: xiv).

Mythology reflects mankind’s earliest step towards socio-cultural claims. Culture, in turn, reflects the interpretation of the way of life in any particular community. Mythology, in itself, whether in the oral tradition or written form, may be interpreted in any number of ways. The great classics of the world have been able to withstand the ravages of time because of their timeless and boundless relevance and applicability to the social order. If gender discrimination were to be traced to its origin, we find its shameless footprints leading back to the first mythologies, stories and histories. Apart from being popularly followed by the masses, mythology has its own significant uses. The stories of all great mythologies can be easily connected to life around us. This is so because mythology is mostly to be understood as metaphor. Thus, when we talk about Earth Goddess, we actually mean to say that earth is like a goddess. If we refer to Earth Mother, we actually mean to say that it is as if earth is our mother. Stories from mythologies have a far-reaching effect in time and space on the psyche of human beings. There are heroes whom we admire and villains we hate. Those whom we admire often become our role models.

In India, Sita has long been the role model of the average Indian woman. She has always, right from the beginning, been projected as extremely passive and stoic. Thus the Indian woman is expected (even by her own self) to endure every injustice without resistance. But if she were to be portrayed as a strong woman then there would be a different result in the minds of those who look up to her. The strong patriarchal inheritance portrays prominent women characters as either helpless and defenseless or evil and scheming. Kaushalya, the senior queen in the *Ramayana* hardly seems to have any say in the epic, whereas Kaikayi is depicted as scheming, ambitious and selfish. But both these queens can, with the support of the text as well as socio-historical tools, be easily projected as strong, positive and responsible women commanding authority as well as respect and thus resist being sidelined. For, it is ironical how a petty, narrow-minded, gossiping washer man in the epic is shown as having the power to not only dethrone a beloved queen but also break up her marriage. On the other hand, efficient regal women, who have nurtured royal heirs and contributed to the well-being of the empire, have been pushed into the background and allowed to emerge only when required to shed tears or to be accused by male characters of being scheming, cruel and ambitious or, characterless, that is, being unfaithful to their husbands. Towards the end, when Sita has had enough of unjust and humiliating patriarchy,

it is the Earth Goddess who comes to her rescue, defying the power and glory of Rama, which was of such great proportion that not even the gods dared to either question him or stand up for Sita. It is only the mother who comes and carries her daughter away from the scene of public insult and humiliation. This Mother Earth or the Earth Goddess does not get into any kind of confrontation with the ruling deity and neither is she intimidated or deterred by his display of rage and threats. She is calm, confident, arrives at the right time when her daughter calls out to her, whisks her daughter away from the danger zone with such aplomb that all gods, demons and sages can only look on with admiration and shower floral tributes. She is the only character in the epic who dares to protect Sita from the king and husband who is god. She is able to do so with such simplicity and clean efficiency without leaving any room for error that even Valmiki, the author of the epic, is forced to acknowledge that she is the Earth Goddess. With her power and stature, she could very easily have wreaked havoc and revenge when her daughter is treated so shabbily. But, revenge is not in her agenda. She is Mother Earth, the nurturer of all life on this planet. She is the Mother of her children and as such, she steps in to prevent her daughter from being shamed by patriarchy. And though she is a mother, though nurture is her forte, no one in heaven, earth or the netherworld is able to prevent what she had decided to do --- rescue her daughter. It is said that when Sita called out to her, a glorious throne arose with the Goddess seated on it. She stretched out her hand and welcomed Sita, bidding her to be seated on the throne, while the world watched on, amazed, stupefied, and the heavens showered flowers.

This scene of grandeur, where both Sita and the Goddess Madhavi (Earth Goddess) reject the demands of patriarchy, is almost always presented as a tragically pathetic scene where the god husband demands that his wife prove her chastity in front of the general public as well as before her young sons. It leaves the reader or audience in tears and close to depression. The god husband is always justified, for he is the ideal man, the Purushpurushottam, and he can never be wrong. His reason for subjecting his wife to this ordeal is based on the expectations of his subjects, and we must remember that he is the ideal king. The code of social conduct for the woman, demanding that she should have no say in a man's world, has already been laid. And so, even though the whole universe knows that a gross injustice is being done, it is only the Mother Goddess who steps forward to extend a helping hand to the daughter of the Earth. For, the epic states that Sita, as a baby girl, was found by King Janak while he was ploughing his fields.

The question of Sita's lineage therefore raises interesting perspectives. According to Valmiki's *Ramayana*, when she is brought before Rama after Ravana has been killed, Sita is

told by Rama that he has won her back only to retrieve his lost honor and that she cannot be accepted back since suspicion has arisen regarding her character. For, being soul-ravishingly beautiful as she is, how could Ravana have endured being away from her for long? Though Sita is said to have been bitterly shocked to hear this, she tries to reason out with Rama and among other things, clarifies that she owes her name Janaki or Vaidehi to King Janak and not her birth, which took place from the sacrificial ground and yet, Rama did not consider her divine origin when he spoke about lineage.

Along with many other names, the Earth Goddess Madhavi is also known as Prithvi and Bhoomi. In the *Vishnupuran*, it is said that in the beginning, when nothing but the primordial oceans existed, the supreme spirit lord Narayan realized that deep within the waters lay the earth, and wanting to raise the earth to the surface, he took the form of a boar or Varaha Avtar and plunged into the waters. Prithvi prayed to him to elevate her to the surface. In her prayers she acknowledged that she is a part of the universe and thus a part of Narayan. Submitting herself to his refuge, she self designated herself as Madhavi, the bride of Madhav (another name for Vishnu or Narayan). Thereafter Vishnu, in his Varaha Avtar lifted up the Earth on his tusks and placed her on the surface.

Sometimes there is another addition to this legend. Vishnu has to fight a demon by the name of Hiranyaksha in order to save Bhoomi. Hiranyaksha is ultimately killed and Bhoomi rescued. Temple sculptures frequently depict Bhoomi as the lesser wife of Vishnu, the main wife being Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.

Adding to the myth of Bhoomi, the *Srimadbhagvatam* tells the story of Narakasur, who was born to Vishnu and Bhoomi. Narakasur grew up to become a powerful demon under the influence of Banasur. It was prophesized that Narakasur would be killed by Vishnu. His mother Bhoomi obtained a boon from her husband that her son would not die unless she wished it. Narakasur is said to have grown audacious and arrogant, knowing he would not die unless his mother wished so. His arrogance drove him to steal a pair of earrings belonging to the Goddess Aditi. He also kidnapped and imprisoned sixteen thousand women. Satyabhama, an incarnation of Bhoomi and wife of Krishna, who is recognized as Vishnu's incarnation, rode to battle with her husband and ultimately killed Narakasur, returned the stolen earrings while Krishna sets the imprisoned women free. Thus the prophecy that Narakasur would be killed only when his mother desired his death was fulfilled.

In this myth also, the woman is portrayed as a mother blinded with love for her child. The father is portrayed as the generous, loving husband and parent who grants the boon. But it is

prominent that the atrocities of Narakasur cannot be controlled because of the boon that the mother had extracted from Vishnu, the supreme lord. Even Satyabhama is portrayed as impulsive and cantankerous. The occasion when Krishna had fallen unconscious on the ground, and Satyabhama with unyielding valour had killed Narakasur, is depicted as a deliberate ploy on the part of Krishna, wherein Satyabhama is acting only as per Krishna's designs. Thus no credit or appreciation can be accorded to her. Narrations in this traditional patriarchal manner serve only to add more nails on the female's coffin.

But if presented from a more balanced point of view, the audience can very easily be made to recognize that the responsibilities of parenting should be shared by both mother and father. This recognition could go a long way in the bringing up of new generations with healthy and balanced mind-set. Secondly, acknowledging Satyabhama's contribution in the battle-field would also help to set the balance right instead of heaping all the accolades to the male counterpart.

Another interesting legend originating in the *RigVeda* tells us about a good king Vena who turned bad. The Earth Goddess Bhoomi Devi was offended and therefore turned herself into a cow and hid herself instead of providing crops. In the meantime, Vena was killed and all the evil was drained from his body by the sages. At this point, Prithu,

Vishnu's incarnation appeared from Vena's arm. In order to stop the famine, he threatened Bhoomi Devi. A pact was made wherein Prithu would become her protector and in return, she would yield agricultural and dairy products. It is said that she was called Prithvi hereafter since Prithu was now her protector.

Looking closely at this myth, we see Bhoomi as righteous and decisive, since she refuses to provide food for consumption to the king when he becomes evil. However, when the good king Prithu steps into the picture, she makes a deal with him. In return of the yields of the earth, Prithu has to become her guardian. Thus, for the general good of the planet and its inhabitants, man must look after the earth and not exploit it. But the presentation of this myth, even in the Wikipedia, shows a cow being chased by a man with a bow and arrow aimed at it. The text implies that the cow is frightened and therefore promises to give milk and allows itself to be milked. The sexual connotations are disastrous!

It is interesting to note that the *Prithvistotram*, speaks of Vishnu worshipping Prithvi. But, the *Srimadbhagvatam*, composed between 100 BCE --- 550 CE treats Prithvi as more inferior to the male counterpart. The *Ramayana*, composed between 550 BCE ---300 CE, also depicts

women as passive objects compared to the active decision taking men. It is easy to see that the social status of women has deteriorated along with the advent of time.

In order to visualize the way of life of our earliest ancestors, tools from the excavated from the Neolithic sites of the world need to be consulted. Tales told by these stone tools indicate a past inhabited by humans who depended on hunting and gathering for survival. The individual who was likely to be appreciated the most would have to be the one who brought in the best and the most food. Such a person would have led the hunt and protected the tribe from the foragings of other rival tribes. Physical stamina and muscle power was required to be optimum in the harsh and unyielding geographical terrains and fierce competition in the food chain during the Neolithic times. Due to their biological circumstances, women would often, probably have stayed back to defend the hearth and home. But when “the arts of plant and animal domestication were developed” Joseph Campbell thinks that there was “a shift of authority followed from the male to the female side of the biological equation. No longer hunting and slaughtering, but planting and fostering, became the high concerns; and since the Earth’s magic and women’s are the same --- giving both life and its nourishment --- not only did the role of the Goddess become the central interest of mythology, but the prestige of women in villages became enlarged as well” (Campbell, 2013: xvi).

Campbell talks of a widely prevalent myth, traces of which can be found in almost every culture. According to this myth, there was once “no distinction between female and male, or even between human beings and beasts. It flowed on, an undifferentiated, dreamlike epoch, until at a certain moment--- the end moment--- a murder was enacted. In some of the myths the whole group slew the victim. In others the act was of one individual against another. In all, the body is cut up, the pieces are buried, and out of those buried parts grow the food plants by which human life in this world is now supported. We are living, that is to say, on the substance of the body of the sacrificed god. Moreover, at the moment of the sacrifice, when death came into the world and with it the flow of time, there occurred also a separation of the sexes; so that with death, there came also the possibility of procreation and birth” (Campbell, 2013: xvii).

Apart from not being able to face the guilt of murder and therefore the attempt to convert the act into a (not so) beautiful story, the other prominent feature of this myth is that beginning of gender demarcation can be located here. But there is no indication of gender discrimination.

According to Hebrew mythology there is only one male God of Israel and no other. The female divinity of nearby Canaan was therefore named Abomination and had to be destroyed. Christian mythology blames the woman for the fall of man from the Garden of Eden. It also states that Eve was made from the rib of Adam, thereby privileging the status of the male. Ancient Mesopotamian myths talk about Tiamat, the primordial water Goddess who made the first creation. She was killed by her grandson Marduk, who used violence on her body with which he later created the sky, the earth, etc. The Wikipedia which is a popular source, has elaborately described Marduk:

[...] stood upon Tiamat's hinder parts,

And with his merciless club he smashed her skull.

He cut through the channels of her blood,

And he made the North wind bear it away into secret places.” (“Tiamat - Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia,” 2014)

According to Campbell, it was from the period (1750 B.C.) of Hammurabi’s reign that the politics of gender becomes evident. He speaks of this specifically when he says that it was at this time

“[...] that the Babylonian epic of the sun god Marduk dates, whose victory over Tiamat, the old goddess of the primeval sea, marks the moment of a decisive transfer of loyalty in that quarter of the world from the universal goddess of nature to an assortment of politically established tribal gods.” (Campbell, 2013: xxii-xxiii)

Not only is there prominent evidence in this myth of violence used against a female, but also the fact that the female deity was the initial creator and that she was running the universe before her grandson usurped her power as well as credit of being creator.

Campbell suggests a distinguishing between ‘creator’ and ‘builder’ while studying this myth. It is plainly obvious that the creator comes first and the builder can build only on soil which has to be created first.

Indian mythology offers diverse legends on the subject of creation. It is interesting to look for clues as to as to the roles played by the male and the female originators of the universe or the earth. The Vedic texts can be said to be the first to appear in the cultural context of India. We must keep in mind what Upinder Singh has to say about ancient texts being much older than their surviving manuscripts and that their period of composition could in some cases could range hundreds of years before they were compiled or given a more or less final shape. She also points out that many early texts were not the work of one, but many authors and that even though many of these authors must remain anonymous, it is important to identify their

background and the perspectives and biases they reflect, such as those of class, religion and gender (Singh, 2013: 15).

The Rig Vedic hymns at one place talk of the great egg from which Brahma was born and the earth and sky made. (Chandogya Upanishad 3:19:1-4) In another place there is free and frank admission of no information about the origin of the universe (Rig Veda 10:129)

Who really knows, and who can swear,

How creation came, when or where!

Even gods came after creation's day,

Who really knows, who can truly say

When and how did creation start? Did

He do it? Or did He not?

Only He, up there, knows, maybe;

Or perhaps, not even He. ("Hindu Views on Evolution - Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia," 2014)

Another myth (a hymn from the Rig Veda) tells how the universe was created from the cosmic being, Purusha, from whose mouth, arms, thighs, and feet the four classes of Hindu society originated. The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad talks about the initial divinity, creating another to combat fear and loneliness and from this initial pair, procreation started.

A myth from the *Devi Mahatmya* narrates a tableau in which Vishnu is engrossed in the worship of Yoganidra, on the coiled form of Sheshnaga, the divine serpent, in the primordial ocean. A lotus growing from the navel of Vishnu has Brahma seated on it.

Two Asuras named Madhu and Kaitabha, arise from the dirt wax of Vishnu's ear and proceed to attack Brahma, who calls out to Yoganidra to release Vishnu from his meditation so that he may do away with the two asuras who were creating disharmony. This is one of the many instances in Indian mythology when the most powerful among gods are depicted as worshipping the Goddess. Vishnu is successful in defeating the asuras only when the Goddess removes herself from his meditation. Brahma's prayer to Yoganidra needs to be particularly noted in the address which describes the Goddess as:

"You are she; you are Savitri (the Gayatri *mantra*); supreme mother.

By you is everything supported, by you is the world created;

By you is it protected. (Coburn, 1991:37)

This myth again favors the view of the creator of the universe as female. Such myths, when brought into popular culture, need to be presented in a manner so as to generate more respect

for women. For, if Brahma and Vishnu can accept the female as an object of reverence, why not the others?

But an attempt to understand the first footprint of Indian history and culture has to be done through archaeological sources first and later literary sources. The banks of the river Indus have cradled Indian civilization from about 3200 - 2600 B.C.E. Evidences of worship of a female goddess associated with fertility indicate the character of the religion which was in practice. Female figurines and women depicted on seals have been interpreted as a prototype of the Earth Mother, who is known by various names in Indian cosmology. But it must be noted that temple worship in this ancient civilization was absent and these figurines were mostly used in the family hearths or fire places.

In Europe, Marija Gimbutas has, based on extensive study of archaeological findings, strongly forwarded the case of the presence of female goddesses prior to the existence of powerful gods. She has traced the migration of a patrilineal, patrilocal, and pastoral and semi nomadic people, who worshipped male gods, were military and weapon loving in nature. These militant migrants overpowered the peace-loving indigenous populations and subjugated them. The culture of ancient Europe, before the entry of the migrants, was characterized by a dominance of woman in society where the male element represented spontaneous and life-stimulating but not life-generating powers. Gimbutas considers this *Old Europe* culture to be matrifocal and probably matrilinear, agricultural, sedentary, egalitarian and peaceful. But this culture was superimposed upon by the migrant proto-Indo-European culture which was patriarchal and war-oriented. The migrants originated from the Russian steppe in three waves between 4500 and 2500 B.C. (Gimbutas, 1996: p. 9)

These hunters easily evolved into warriors and their tools were developed into weapons.

Campbell explains that “the various scattered Indo-European races, battle-axe people and cattle herders, who in the fourth millennium B.C. acquired weapons of bronze, in the third mastered the horse and later invented the war chariot, in the second acquired iron, and by the end of the first millennium B.C. were dominant across Europe and western Asia, from the Irish Sea to Ceylon. These warrior tribes were not patient tillers of the soil, but nomadic raiders, and their chief patron gods were thunder hurlers, very like themselves: among the Semites, we find Marduk, Ashshur, and Yahweh, for example, and among the Indo-Europeans, Zeus, Thor, Jove, and Indra.” (Campbell, 2013: p.xxi-xxii)

At the beginning of the earliest civilizations in Europe and Egypt, around eight thousand to seven thousand years back in time, artists and sculptors of the day depicted the female deity

as a mother holding an infant in her arms. Various other figurines indicate how she was thought to represent nature and fertility along with protection from danger and evil. Such figurines have been found in the ancient Harappan and Indus Valley civilization sites also. Socio-scientists suggest that she represents the nature principle, while the male deities represent the social principal, thus explaining the militancy associated with monotheism where the god worshipped is male. This also is in sync with the social rules laid down in Indian scriptures where society is divided into sections, each of which have to follow the dictates regarding occupation, a way of life, etc.

The intention of writing this paper is in no way to demean either male gods or their devotees. For Vishnu and Brahma have been said to have great reverence for Yoganidra and Bhoomi. It is hoped that if suggestions in this paper are followed, many more will follow the wise gods and maybe, just maybe, the realm of Bhoomi will become a balanced, healthy place not only for mankind but the entire creation. And man and woman will take on the challenges of the future with equal responsibility and respect and compassion for all Bhoomi's children... .

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