



The Essence of Devi Mahatmya

From the teachings of Swami Sivananda Saraswati

Often chanted during the Navaratri (nine days of worship in the months of April and October), the Devi Mahatmya or Durga Saptashati is a unique book in the world. It is the base and root of the Shakta tradition. Its reading is believed to give whatever one wants. A powerful reservoir of mantras from the beginning to the end, every verse of this text is a dynamic force.

The Devi Mahatmya describes how Devi assumes many aspects, according to the tasks to be performed by her, sometimes sweet and tender, and at others terrible and devouring. Devi is the deluding power which binds man to the relentlessly moving wheel of samsara; she deludes even the wisest of men. Yet she is the one who bestows liberation on the devotee who pleases her. For the sake of the continuance of her divine play, she as avidya-maya, has veiled the truth from us and bound us to samsara. When she is propitiated through the practice of sincere devotion and self-surrender, she as vidya-maya, removes the veil and enables us to perceive the truth. The Saptashati refers to her as Mahavidya, Mahamaya, Mahamedha, Mahasmriti, Mahamoha, Mahadevi and Maheshwari. She is Parabrahma-Mahishi, the queen and sovereign of all existence. Her compassion takes the form of aspiration in the aspirant, sadhana in the sadhaka, siddhi in the siddha. She is the truth behind thought, willing, feeling, understanding, action, name and form. It says (11:6):

Vidyassamastava Devi bhedah
 Striyassamastah sakala jagatsu
 Tvayaikaya puritamambayaitat
 Kaa te stutih stavyapara paroktih

Mother, all arts and sciences, all branches of knowledge, are your modifications, all women in the world are your manifestations. You alone pervade the entire creation.

The conception of the Infinite as Mother is not a meaningless one. The Riga Veda bears testimony to the fact that even in ancient times there existed the belief that the supreme ruler is the all-compassionate Mother. The conception of divinity as Devi, Durga or Sri, is not merely a theory but a practical way of life. The mother is the personality that appeals most to the human heart, whereas the father is perceived as a hard taskmaster. Even a subtle philosopher cannot dispense with the conception of Shakti, for he is essentially an embodiment of power, and has love for power. The highest intelligence and the most speculative metaphysics is only a manifestation of jnana shakti and is not outside the range of Shaktivism.

The first verse of the text implies that the whole book is an explanation of the root of the Devi mantra, Hreem. There are many commentaries on the text which explain it either in a mystical or a literal way. In whichever way one chooses to see it, the mantras of the Saptashati will have a positive effect on the one who chants it with devotion and faith.