

Aadhya Shakti: A Saga of Primordial Energy Continuum in Achieving an Inclusive World

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Abstract

Adhya Shakti, as the name suggests, refers to the primordial power. It is seen as the source behind all creation and forms the basis of all activity in life. Shakti is also the catalyst which influences the unmanifest form of the divine to manifest through the material world. Thus, it can be seen that Shakti or Prakruti is the connection between Brahman and Jeeva. The concept of "Shakti" can be understood in different ways, one of which is to study its progression from *Parameshti* (supreme self) to *Vyashhti* (individual self). Similarly, Shakti can also be viewed through the various aspects through which it manifests – *Iccha Shakti*, *Gnana Shakti* and *Kriya Shakti*. While scriptures have elaborately explained the concept of Shakti in myriad forms, it can also be seen that over a period of time, the understanding and significance of shakti changed or evolved as per देश, काल, परिस्थिति etc. which led to parallel schools of thought, trying to project the same truth in different ways. Thus, the concept of

Shakti as a philosophy has left an indelible mark on the Indian culture and society.

Through this study, the authors felt a need to understand and portray Shakti as a comprehensive driving power, as described in the Lalitha Sahasranama Stotra, "आब्रह्म कीट जननी वर्णश्रम विधायिनी". Seeking the intuitive force of Dheeshakti manifestation, the following points are presented: (a) To get an understanding of the concept of Shakti from the point of view of Shastras; (b) To study the impact of Adya Shakti on Indian society and (c) To study and understand the relevance of Shakti and its impact on Indian society in the modern times.

In the current work, the conceptual and fundamental interpretation of Shakti has been studied from sacred texts such as the *Lalitha Sahasranamam*, *Soundarya Lahari*, *Devi Mahatmyam*, *Tripura Rahasyam* etc. Also, the historic progression of Shakti in India and its influence on the Indian culture has been projected, especially in the light of the scriptural interpretation. This was compared and analysed to study as to in what ways has

the Shakti tradition evolved by itself and also influenced the Indian society. Thus, a conclusion is drawn from the study that if Shakti has to be defined and understood at a conceptual level, shastras are primarily a refuge. Secondly, the same Shakti can also be observed as a practice and philosophy, based on the traditions of the Indian culture and society over a period of time. However, if it had to be internalized as an experience, every individual must strive to pay a real tribute to that Shakti, by worshipping it in its true sense. Thus, Shakti needs to be understood in spirit and respected as part of daily life and living.

A conclusion is drawn that the true fulfilment of Shakti lies in utilising it for the greater good of the world.

Key Words: Tripura Rahasyam, Parameshti, Iccha Shakti, Bharatiya culture, Dakshinaachara.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction to Aadhy Shakti

The term **Shakti** translates to energy or power in simple terms. It represents the ability or the power which propels and forms the basis to undertake any activity. **Aadhy Shakti**, as the name suggests, refers to the primordial energy which is the source of all creation. It exists as the force that supports

consciousness, which is the substratum of the entire universe.

It forms the basis of all activity in life. At a cosmic level, *Shakti* can be seen as the catalyst which enables the unmanifest form of the divine to manifest and express itself through the material world (Dr. Rama Chandra, 2016). In other words, the *Brahman*, which is beyond names, forms and attributes, when associated with the *Shakti* or power, manifests as *Ishwara* and further takes forward his manifestation through the various aspects of the *Prakriti*. Thus, it can be observed that Shakti, at a cosmic level permeates the entire continuum from *Saguna Brahman* to *Nirguna Brahman*, even as it operates in various ways.

1.2 Different perspectives to Shakti

There are multiple perspectives through which *Shakti* can be understood:

1. Based on its functionalities, Shakti can be seen as इच्छा शक्ति (Power of will), ज्ञान शक्ति (Power of knowledge) and क्रिया शक्ति (Power of action). These in turn symbolize the deities Lakshmi, Saraswathi and Durga respectively.
2. Similarly, सृष्टि (creation), स्थिथि (Sustenance) and लय (Dissolution) are also expressions of the Shakti in

maintaining and operating the Universe.

3. As per Tripura Rahasya, the three states of *Jagrat*, *Swapna* and *Sushupti* are also powered by the presence of Shakti in varying intensity. For instance, *Jagrat avastha* is a wakeful state of existence where Shakti is more active, compared to *Swapna* or *Sushupti* states, where the manifestation of Shakti is dormant.

Here, it is interesting to note that Shakti by itself is generally understood as mere energy, but in its true sense, it is not mere energy but a ‘conscious’ energy which is aware of everything. Of late, even Science is progressing to the stage where energy is seen not as a mere dull entity, but as a conscious force which is full of awareness (Sarker, 2021). Thus, *Shakti* (*Prakruti*) or energy, as a principle operates based on *Shiva* (*Purusha*) or consciousness, thereby making the entire universe an interplay of the *Shiva Shakti* tatwa.

1.3 The progression of Shakti

A close observation at the process of evolution from the individual to the supreme self reveals the course of Shakti’s progression. For instance, the progression from व्यष्टि (Individual) to समिष्टि (Society) to सृष्टि (Creation) to परमेष्टि (Creator) is marked

by the presence of Shakti in various ways. What is individual energy at *Vyashti*, translates to collective energy of the society in *Samishti*. The same energy, when permeates the whole creation including animate and inanimate objects manifests as *Srushti* and at the ultimate level of cosmic consciousness, it is *Parameshti*.

1.4 Shakti’s evolution over period of time.

The understanding and significance of shakti changed or evolved over a period of time as per देश, काल, परिस्थिति etc. Thus, there emerged many parallel schools of thought and tradition which included several ritualistic as well as philosophical aspects of Shakti. In other words, the idea of philosophy and practice of the idea of Shakti translated into various traditions and got integrated into the cultural fabric of Bharatiya tradition. From the worship of nature and its elements during the ancient times to the emergence of Shakteya tradition and further emergence of the tantric practices such as *Vamachara* and *Dakshinachara*, the concept and practice of Shakti has evolved (Ankita Chand, Bimal Kinkar Chand and S. Biswas, 2023). Although there might be differences in the various schools of thought and the approaches towards Shakti, it can be clearly seen that Shakti as a philosophy has left an

indelible mark on the Indian culture and society by seamlessly integrating with its traditions.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

There is a need to get a comprehensive understanding of Shakti both as a philosophy and practice, and more importantly, the direction it provides for the present day's society to follow in the modern times. In this light, the current study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To get an understanding of the concept of Shakti from the point of view of Shastras
- 2) To study the impact of Adya Shakti on Indian society
- 3) To study and understand the relevance of Shakti and its impact on Indian society in the modern times.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to meet the objectives of the study, the methodology adopted is as follows. Firstly, the concept of Shakti is studied and its various aspects and dimensions are explored by drawing references to the ideas explained in various texts. The concepts as well as their interpretations are studied in tandem to get a broad understanding of Shakti. Also, some of the practices and traditions related to Shakti were studied in order to understand the evolution of Shakti

over a period of time along with its impact on the Indian culture. Finally, the relevance of Shakti to the present days is seen from a pragmatic or practical perspective and newer ways of expressing Shakti in the modern times are identified.

The methodology would enable to enhance the theoretical understanding of the concept of Shakti, study the ways in which Shakti tradition has been integrated into the fabric of Indian culture and throw light upon newer ways to unfold the manifestation of Shakti.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Understanding *Shakti* from the sacred texts:

The sacred texts of Sanatana Dharma such as the Vedas, Sastras, Puranas, Stotras etc. have elaborately described Shakti. Following are some such glimpses from various sources:

सर्वं चैतन्यं रूपां तां आद्याम् विद्यां च धीमहि । बुद्धिं या नः प्रचोदयात् ॥

The above sloka talks about Aadhya Shakti as the personification of all forms of energy and the power which illuminates the intellect. The Rig Veda describes the presence of Shakti in the entire creation through a series of verses such as या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्तिं रूपेण संस्थिता । नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमो नमः ॥ which signify the omnipresence of the Shakti. Similarly, the Devi Bhagavata purana

elaborately explains the manifestation of Shakti with various attributes and forms.

The Tripura Rahasya is another sacred text that glorifies the philosophical understanding of Aadhyaa Shakti. “त्रिषु पुरेषु स्थिता या सा त्रिपुरा” – The energy which permeates the three states of existence is Tripura, it says. And Tripura Rahasya also inspires the seekers to understand Shakti as a principle and a guiding force which inspires one to proceed towards achieving the true purpose of human life, which is self-realisation.

Soundarya Lahari, which is composed by none other than Jagadguru Sri Adi Sankaracharya Swami is one of the finest expressions of understanding Shakti in all dimensions (Mukta, 2023). For instance, Verse 21 of Soundaraya Lahari goes as “भवानी त्वं दासे मयि वितरा दृष्टिम साकारुणं इति स्तेतुम् वञ्चन कथयति भवानी त्वं इति यः” Here, the mother is described as the one who bestows her compassionate glance on her servant (*dasa*). The words भवानी त्वं are used to address the mother and at the same time, indicative of attaining the highest state of becoming one with or one as भवानी. Thus, contemplation on such sacred texts will help the seekers in understanding the Shakti *tatwa* more deeply.

4.2 Impact of Aadhyaa Shakti on Indian society

One of the verses of the Lalitha Sahasranamam says “आब्रह्म कीट जननी वर्णाश्रम विधायिनी” which means that Shakti is the mother of all, starting from the smallest beings in the creation such as the insects, all the way up to Brahma, the creator of the Universe! Also, she is the one who defines the order of *Varna* (categorisation of society) and the *Ashrama* (stage of one's life) in order to attain a perfect balance and harmony in the society (Jae-Eun, n.d.). This verse speaks about the influence of Aadhyaa Shakti on society.

Similarly, Bhagawan Sri Krishna says in Bhagavadgita, “चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः” which means that all the four classes of people were created by the Lord himself, based on the *gunas* (attributes) and *karma* (activities undertaken or inclined to). Thus, it can be observed that conventionally, the societal structure is based on the attributes which drive an individual to undertake certain activities. Again, it is the inherent Shakti which forms as basis to pursue or undertake any action. Thus, the intellectual class (Brahmins), the warrior class (Kshatriyas), the business class (Vaishyas) and the working class (Sudras) emerged based on the expression of their inherent power through their inclinations and activities. Even at a ritualistic level, it can be

seen that Shakti assumed the form which relates to that segment of society. For instance, Brahmins were initiated to the Gayathri mantra as part of their leaning and hence mother Gayatri is the deity associate. Similarly, Kshatriyas would worship mother Durga as they sought her grace to win over the evil forces. The Vaishyas would worship goddess Lakshmi in the form of Goddess Kanyaaka Parameshwari to bestow abundance. And the Sudras worshipped mother in the form of *Gramा Devatas* and other forces of nature. The idea is that it is the same Shakti which is worshipped in many forms and names.

Traditionally, there are three aspects to the Vedic lore as part of the Bharatiya culture – *Karma Kanda* (related to ritualistic practices), *Upasana Kanda* (related to worship) and *Gnana Kanda* (related to knowledge). The practice of Shakti tradition in the Ancient Bharatiya society has been influenced by all these three aspects in different forms.

For instance, when we talk of Shakti as a feminine aspect of energy and creation, it equates to mother. The ancient Indian culture, spoke of treating mother as God – **मातृ देवो भव।** Infact, mother is revered as the first God and Guru, from whom one would start learning. Personalities such as Madalasa

stand as shining examples of noble mothers who taught timeless truths such as **शुद्धोसि बुद्धोसि निरंजनोऽसि, संसारमाया परिवर्जितोऽसि, संसारस्वप्नं त्यज मोहनिद्रां** in the form of lullabies to their children at a very tender age. Infact, the worship of Shakti in the form of mother extended beyond one's physical mother and encompassed other forms such as mother earth, mother nature, mother land, mother tongue etc. These are all essentially seen as different manifestations of the feminine energy of Shakti in the form of mother. Thus, ancient Indian society had important role for women in shaping children at home.

Women or Stree Shakti was given lot of importance in the ancient times. Every person in the ancient Bharatiya society had to perform certain rituals and observe certain practices as laid down. Especially, the householders were involved in performing of *nitya agni hotra* and other such practices. Most of these practices could be performed only along with wife and considered complete only when they are done so. Wife brought glory to the lives of householders. This is an example of the importance given to women as embodiments of Shakti. Similarly, the *samskaras* to be performed included rituals such as the *upanayanam* where students would be initiated to the pursuit of knowledge. In fact, even a Brahmin by birth

had to be initiated to Gayatri, in order to be eligible to pursue and receive the knowledge. Goddess Saraswathi (the deity representing *gnana kanda*) and Gayatri (the deity representing *upasana kanda*) were prayed to for learning of *Apara* and *Para Vidya* respectively. It is important to note that *Gnana* and *upasana* drove people those days, and not *dhana*. These are certain examples of how the Shakti sampradaya was integrated into the *Karma kanda*.

With the advent of Jagadguru Sri Adi Sankaracharya, the extreme practice and obsession to *Karma kanda* was redirected to achieve a balance with the other two aspects of *Gnana* and *Upasana*. It is to the credit of Sri Sankaracharya that he integrated all the three aspects of *Karma*, *Upasana* and *Gnana* (Maitreyee, 2022). For instance, he initiated the practice of Sri Chakra Upasana, which had a tremendous impact on the society and its traditions. Many aspirants undertake Sri Chakra Upasana even to this date and worship Shakti (Mukta, 2023). Similarly, he authored several works such as Soundarya Lahari, Bhavani Ashtakam etc. in praise and worship of the mother. Similarly, some of the Shakti peethams were glorified by his presence and they continue to serve as centers of worship of Shakti. Thus, *Upasana* also attained glory through such means. Another

example of *upasana* or *Bhakti* in the modern times is Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. He explored various traditions and practices in tantra such as the *Vamachara*. He was a staunch *upasaka* of Devi and would be lost in the bliss of worshipping the divine in the form of the Aadhya Shakti (Ankita Chand, Bimal Kinkar Chand and S. Biswas, 2023). While he was a Vedantin, he also demonstrated signs of a true devotee through right *upasana* (Dr. Rama Chandra, 2016).

The *Gnana Kanda* aspect of Shakti and its influence on Bharatiya society can be understood by the philosophical interpretation of the Shakti principle. For instance, the various Peethams (including Shakti Peethams) not only served as centres of worship but also as centres of learning, where several aspirants and seekers would, by their constant contemplation on the divine aspects of Shakti, understand the real wisdom behind the Shakti principle (Rajesh Kumar & Sandhya, 2014). Texts such as the Tripura Rahasya teach the highest wisdom of self-realisation through the principle of Shakti. Similarly, the works such as Soundarya Lahari, while on one hand glorify the mother through *upasana*, when contemplated upon deeply, speak of the highest wisdom or *gnana*.

Thus, Shakti principle has influenced the ancient Indian society in all the three aspects of *Karma*, *Upasana* and *Gnana*.

4.3 The principle of Shiva Shakti

The counterpart to *Shakti* is *Shiva*. In other words, Shakti is the energy which rests on the basis of Shiva, the consciousness. The *Arthanareeshwara Stotram* beautifully encapsulates the interplay between Shiva and Shakti, where each verse glorifies their coexistence with the expression “नमः शिवायै च नमः शिवाय”. Shakti stands as exploratory knowledge tradition. While Shakti represents

the action per se (based on the knowledge of doing it), Shiva represents the wisdom from which the knowledge and the action emerge. Wisdom is Static and Knowledge is dynamic. In other words, wisdom represented by Shiva is rooted steady and unchanged in the consciousness whereas knowledge, represented by Shakti converts into action based on the situation. The Shiva Shakti principle is an example of striking the right balance between action coupled with knowledge and the wisdom behind the action.



Fig. 1 The confluence of Shiva and Shakti for sustenance of the world

Above is a pictorial representation of the concept of Shiva and Shakti represented by Wisdom and Knowledge respectively. Shiva and Shakti are two forces which run the entire

creation. Both, when seen as independent forces have distinct attributes and roles. However, it is the intersection or the union of

the two which is desirable towards sustaining the world.



Fig. 2 Expression of Shiva and Shakti as static and dynamic forces of energy

A new perspective to the Shiva Shakti tatwa is the expression of both as two forms of forces of energy. In the above picture, it can be seen that Shiva is represented as a static force and Shakti as a dynamic force. The analogy is similar to that of water contained in a dam versus water that flows as river. Both are essentially water; however, the expression is different. As far as Shakti is concerned, it has to flow with dynamic force like that of a river for the current day's needs of the society. In other words, the knowledge should be available to all and also dynamic to suit the changing requirements, while the wisdom stays constant and guides through

the seat of intuition by which knowledge can be put to its best use.

4.4 Relevance of Shakti and its impact on Indian society in the modern times.

Any idea or principle needs to be made relevant to the present day in order to effectively understand and benefit from the same and so is the idea of Shakti. Shakti has been existing as a concept and practice since time immemorial and has evolved over a period of time in multiple ways. While it is important to continue the legacy and worship of the Shakti as per the tradition, it is also equally important that Shakti is truly

worshipped in spirit and not confined to mere ritualistic practices, selfish worship or intellectual pursuits. या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्तिरूपेण संस्थिता। नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमो नमः say our scriptures. It is therefore important that one takes cognizance of the fact that the same energy which is in oneself is also present in all and hence, one should always respect each other and worship the divinity in one and all (Manzoor Ahmad et al., 2017). Shakti in action finds fulfilment when the action undertaken is for the greater good of others than oneself. For example, providing equal opportunities for women as men and helping them break the glass ceilings of discrimination is an act of worshipping the mother divine (Andrey, 2014). Shakti in worship is complete when it is done to purify oneself of all selfish thoughts and with the only feeling of expressing one's gratitude for bestowing with all the knowledge and abilities. Shakti as wisdom is at its best when the wisdom helps one not for mere intellectual accomplishments but to experientially realize the oneness of existence. Thus, Shakti would achieve its purpose in moving towards an inclusive world.

5. RESULTS

Following are the results of the study

corresponding to the objectives with which the research was undertaken:

- 1) The concept of Shakti has been defined interpreted in the Shastras in multiple ways. However, the analysis of all the examples from the various references can be summarised that one of the most common and widely used for expression to explain Shakti is that it is a “**conscious energy continuum**”. Shakti is not mere energy; it is a conscious energy and also flows as a continuum (ARUN KUMAR, 2018).
- 2) Shakti in general and Aadhyा Shakti in particular have influenced the ancient system of Indian culture across all the three aspects of *Karma*, *Bhakti* and *Upasana*. Although all three represent different paths to divinity, they complement each other in helping the spiritual aspirant in realising one's own divinity.
- 3) Shakti is a continuing saga or expression of the divine energy and the inherent divinity needs to be harnessed to its fullest potential by making it relevant to the present needs. Shakti needs to be understood, revered and realised in its true spirit.

6. KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

From the study, it can be seen that Shakti as a principle or philosophy, when observed from the point of view of the Shastras refers to the principle of energy or power, especially a 'conscious' energy which is aware of itself and everything. In other words, it is Shakti as energy which operates with its foundation from Shiva or consciousness. Shakti as a practice, can be understood based on its influence on the traditions of the Indian culture and society over a period of time, in the aspects of *Karma*, *Upasana* and *Gnana*. Shakti, in its true spirit and experiential understanding, is the same innate divinity present in one and all, which inspires to put all the energies for the greater good of the world and emancipate oneself. The true worship of Shakti is when it is understood in spirit and put to the best use in daily life and living, for the service of others and for the emancipation of oneself.

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