



Feminine in the Trinity

Western tradition tends to view gender as something binary, either male or female. **Fran Borg's** research takes a closer look at how Sanskrit philosophy understands the inseparability of gender through language and mythology.

The act of creation incorporates the notion of destruction, and encapsulated within creation and destruction is the idea of maintenance. This is symbolised and understood in Hindu religion and philosophy within the Trimurti: Brahma as Creator, Vishnu as Preserver, and Shiva as Destroyer

While the masculine trinity is well-known in the West, the feminine aspect is often overlooked. In Sanskrit, the concepts of male and female are inseparable from one another. This is not only reflected in the mythology, but it is also embedded within the language of Sanskrit itself. One researcher, Fran Borg, grapples with the Sanskrit language and mythology and reveals a surprisingly modern interpretation of gender.

THE TRINITY: THE TRIMURTI AND THE TRIDEVI

The trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, are manifested from the Absolute, referred to as Brahman. It is through Brahman that the manifestation of the Universe takes place and that the cycle of creation, maintenance, and destruction can unfold. Rather than viewing Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva as three separate entities, it is important to note the relationship between them. Creation cannot occur without destruction, and destruction without preservation.

Borg argues that to fully appreciate this trinity one must also understand their feminine parallel. In fact, for Borg, this is the starting point to understanding how gender is conceptualised in Sanskrit.

The female counterpart, known as the Tridevi (the three goddesses), are the consorts of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. The Tridevi consists of Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Paravati, and each holds a union with the Trimurti.

SARASWATI AND BRAHMA

Brahma is seen as the creator, and his consort, Saraswati, aided in giving order to creation. She is the goddess of wisdom, the arts, and the 'stream of speech.' She is often depicted as sitting on a white lotus. In mythology, Brahma and Saraswati are acknowledged as having created the Sanskrit characters. This is one of the ways in which the Sanskrit language is understood as divine or transcendental. The Sanskrit script is named the 'Devanagari' script; *deva* is translated as 'god', and *nagari* is translated as 'town, or village'. Indeed, Sanskrit is considered as the language of the gods. It is claimed that Saraswati holds the divine word while Brahma manifests it into all that is identified as real — creating the Sanskrit symbols of language.

LAKSHMI AND VISHNU

Lakshmi in turn is Vishnu's consort. Just as Vishnu is seen as the 'Preserver', Lakshmi also maintains balance in creation through fortune and misfortune. She symbolises beauty, happiness, and surplus and has been compared with the Greek goddess Aphrodite. She is often depicted as holding lotus blossoms. In myth, Lakshmi and Vishnu are



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inseparable and are born together in their various forms; when Vishnu was born as Parashu-Rama, Lakshmi was Dharani. When he was incarnated as Raama, she was his consort, Sita.

PARVATI AND SHIVA

Shiva is seen as the god of destruction, granting limits to reality to give shape and form to the Universe. His consort, Parvati, brings limits to Shiva’s destruction, balancing his unbridled passions. She is also depicted as having a playful character as seen in one myth where she covers Shiva’s eyes. At that moment a third eye appeared on Shiva’s forehead so that the Universe would not be enveloped in darkness. *Parvati* is closely identified with *prakriti*, natural or primal matter. She is also the ‘world mother goddess’ or ‘the divine mother’ and in philosophy is identified as the notion of *shakti*. She embodies Law.

Shakti is understood as feminine energy and contrasted with masculine energy, is passive energy, or even

the limited energy of humankind. In the *Atharvaveda* (a revealed Vedic scripture of Hinduism), there are references of power or natural power being associated with pure female energy. Borg points out how shakti becomes associated with Shaivism wherein each goddess is considered to be pure power, force, indeed a shakti. Linked to shakti is the sacred symbol of *yonis*, depicted as the female genital organ, symbolised by a triangle with its apex pointing downwards. It is the source of all things and is understood as the origin of all life.

GENDER IN SANSKRIT: LINGA

The complementary nature of Tridevi and Trimurti is also reflected in the grammar of Sanskrit. Thus Borg’s research takes a closer look at Sanskrit translations and grammar to better understand the relationship between genders.

The term *linga* can be roughly translated to ‘gender’. *Linga*, however, is actually far more nuanced. In

Sanskrit, the terms used for male and female (*punlinga* and *strilinga* respectively) come from the same root, *ling*. This already highlights the inseparability between the two terms. However, this is taken a step further when we understand that the prefix *pun* carries the sense of ‘push’ or ‘force’ while the prefix *stri* has the sense of purity and that of a source. In this way, the masculine can be seen as ‘forcefulness’ and the feminine as its necessary ‘force’. As Borg succinctly puts it: ‘Force without forcefulness would not be made manifest, while forcefulness without force, on the other hand, would have no means to action, remaining motionless.’

To explain this, Borg points towards the relationship between the seed and the stem. ‘The seed contains the potential plant within it, representing the force of femininity (*strilinga*). As the stem pushes out of the seed during growth, this push can be seen as the forcefulness of masculinity

| Formed words | | Root of a word | | Prefixes | |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------|--|---------------|------------------------------------|
| Sanskrit Term | Denotation | Sanskrit Term | Attitudes | Sanskrit Term | Underlying senses |
| Napunsakalinga | First Gender | -ling- | 1) Carries the sense of going 2) Carries the sense of art | Na- | Signifies not, nor, or neither |
| Punlinga | Male/Masculine | | | Pun- | Has the sense of a push |
| Strilinga | Female/Feminine | | | Stri- | Has the sense of purity and source |

(*punlinga*). Through this forcefulness manifests the force of femininity.'

Much like the seed and the stem, the force and the forceful cannot be set apart from one another, nor should the one be understood in isolation from the other.

Borg is quick to point out that this does not imply that genders are the same, or that men and women do not take on different social or gender roles, but that the concepts of masculinity and femininity are inseparable from one another. When conceiving of the masculine or the feminine, we cannot talk about one without remembering the other. In mythology, this is reflected in the gods and goddesses. Indeed, when one is invoked the other is necessarily present.

TRANSCENDENCE OF GENDER

In some languages, there is also the 'neuter gender' (such as the term 'it' in English or 'das' in German). Similarly, in Sanskrit, *napunsaka* is

used to refer to inanimate objects. However, this gender also represents the transcendence of gender. The transcendence of gender includes both, in such a way as to contain both whilst being contained by neither.

This can be seen through the formation of the word *napunsakalinga*, 'neither-masculine-nor-feminine'.

This is reflected in the Absolute, which supersedes gender. The manifestation of the Universe and the existence of the deities can only exist and become reality through the Absolute.

In the West, we tend to take a binary view on gender, either male or female, though gender goes beyond the constructions of male and female. However, the structure of Sanskrit as well as the mythology behind it suggests a surprisingly modern view of gender. Rather than viewing male and female as two distinct forms, Sanskrit and the relationship between Trimurti and Tridevi frames them as inseparable and interdependent. Is

this non-dual approach to gender the key to dismantling our preconceptions of gender in our society? [T](#)

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