Mother Goddesses, Mothers and Sustainability in India

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The most quoted definition of sustainability is the one given by the United Nation World Commission on Environment and Development: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Thus, it is evident that sustainability as a concept is focused on our children and their children, and the world we will leave for them to inhabit. Since the primary caregivers of children in most societies are their mothers, this paper attempts to shift the focus to a matricentric one, and to look at the roles and concerns of mothers and maternal figures (specifically, mother-goddesses) connected to the concept and goals of sustainability.

However, it is important to insert a disclaimer here. Although scholars have repeatedly emphasized that "[t]he apotheosis of the mother has reached a greater height in India than anywhere else," there are significant differences in the socio-cultural status of mother-goddesses and human mothers (Altekar 2014, 101). The various practices of mother-goddess worship that prevails in different regions of India certainly facilitates the institutionalized reverence for motherhood. The scriptures elevate the mother above teachers, gurus and fathers: "the father is equal to a hundred professors, the mother exceeds a thousand fathers in honour" (*Manusamhita* IX:145, qtd. in Bhattacharji 2010, 51). However, as Kamala Ganesh writes, "The point does not need labouring that

mother-goddess does not correlate with high secular status for women in India," and that many historians "argue for an inverse relationship," where the worship of the "mother-goddess may be a compensation for the subordinate status of women" (Ganesh 1990, 62). This is a crucial difference that needs to be noted as we investigate the entanglements of mother-goddesses and mothers with the concept and practices of sustainability.

Mother Goddesses and Sustainability Symbolism

The worship of mother goddesses in India goes back beyond the Vedic period. Seals excavated from Harappa and Mohenjodaro depict a female figure giving birth to a plant, or sometimes a horned female figure standing between branches of a tree. Both these images associate the Goddess with vegetation, an association that later developed into the Sakambhari avatar of the Devi. Expanding beyond these, other seals from various Indus Valley sites confirm that "Indus Valley people worshipped Mother Goddess in all her forms—Earth Mother, Human Mother or Mother of Gods, Forest Mother, Animal Mother, Corn Mother, Bird Mother….mother of everything—animate and inanimate within their knowledge" (Srivastava 2019, 30). From a sustainability perspective, worshipping the mother goddess ritualizes a commitment to protecting the inanimate and animate beings that belong to the goddesses' domains. Since the goddesses are the symbolic creators and protectors of the natural world, it becomes the responsibility of the worshippers to care for the natural world and the environment as an extension of their religious practices.

The extension of the protection arc from the goddess-devotee relationship to the devotee-world relationship is also evidenced in the religio-cultural practices emerging around local mother-goddesses, many of them being folk-goddesses of tribal origin. This is a phenomenon that has continued from pre-Vedic times to the present times, especially in non-urban locations where human lives are more intricately intertwined with natural and animal lives. For instance, in Bengal, worshippers of Manasa, the goddess of snakes, will also offer protection and care to snakes. Instead of killing them, they leave bowls of milk for the snakes to feed on, believing that the threat posed by snakes would be neutralized by the power

of the mother goddess, who would protect the devotees from the snakes whom she controlled.

Similar stories of protection and nurturance emerge around the sacred forests or groves that grow around local mother-goddesses or deities. Anthropologists researching the cultures of villagers and tribals located in the Himalayas have noted that "a natural system of conservancy was in vogue; almost every hill-top is dedicated to some local deity and the trees on or about the spot are regarded with great respect so that nobody dare touch them. There is also a general impression among the people that everyone cutting a tree should plant another in its place" (Pant 1922, 75).

In the Vedic period, though, the anthropomorphic associations of divine figures with natural phenomena became more male-centric, for instance, Indra with lightning or Surya with the sun. Although there are several female goddesses mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, like the Ushas and Aditi—regarded as the mother not only of the gods but of the entire universe—these goddesses are overshadowed by the male gods, and are presented more in abstract terms than with anthropomorphic attributes, a process which distances them from the embodiment of human motherhood. Although Prithvi (the Earth goddess) is a marginalized presence in the Vedas (with only a short hymn in the Rig Veda and a long hymn in the Atharva Veda being dedicated to her), she is a significant mother-goddess from the perspective of the human-nature connection.

> "She is called Mother and goddess. She is compared to mother and is prayed to give 'payas' (i.e., the sap of vitality of milk) to men as a Mother. The same idea of Motherhood continues always when she is prayed for anything, i.e, an object of desire or property, etc....The Earth-goddess holds the world in her womb (vishva-garbha) and she is the womb (yoni) of everything....Thus, the Earth Goddess was regarded as the source and sustainer of everything, the Creator and Preserver in one." (Srivastava 2019, 51).

Like the Earth-Goddess, the Vedic scriptures also worshipped the cow as goddess, and the "sacred cow is glorified and invoked as the preserver of Heaven, Earth and the Waters" (Srivastava 2019, 60). Nature itself is worshipped as the goddess

Prakriti: "Nature as Prakriti is inherently active, a powerful, productive force in the dialectic of the creation, renewal and sustenance of all life…Prakriti says: 'There is none but Myself who is the Mother to create'" (Shiva 1988, 37). In human societies, especially agrarian ones, it is natural for the relationship between humans, the earth, nature, animals and plants to be marked by reciprocity and reverence. Whether it be the earth, nature, the cow, rivers or anthropomorphic mother-goddesses, they are united through the common thread of the feminine principle: an essentializing maternal principle that connects these goddess symbols with creation, nurturance and protection.

Shiva analyses how the worship of the feminine principle constitutes a sustainable practice: "The living, nurturing relationship between man and nature here differs dramatically from the notion of man as separate from and dominating over nature…. Ontologically, there is no divide between man and nature, or between man and woman, because life in all its forms arises from the feminine principle" (Shiva 1988, 38). The cult of the mother-goddess, especially those goddesses aligned with the forces and symbols of nature in its multiple manifestations, encourages reciprocal, environment-conscious behaviour and life-choices from the worshippers, both male and female.

Mothers and Sustainability Concerns

In this section, the focus will shift to the environment-conscious behaviours and life-choices of human mothers. Defining maternal thinking and maternal practice, Sara Ruddick writes that it is constituted of three "demands" — "for preservation, growth, and social acceptance" — which are fulfilled through "works of preservative love, nurturance and training" (Ruddick 1995, 17). Of these three demands, preservation is the preeminent one, and, Ruddick continues, "Preserving the lives of children is the central constitutive, invariant aim of maternal practice; the commitment to achieving that aim is the constitutive maternal act" (19). There is an unstated but obvious connection between preserving the lives of one's children and ensuring that the environment is preserved in a way that the future generations are not adversely affected, which is the primary aim of sustainability.

Maternal thinking and practice is, thus, often focused on sustainability, whether as a conscious choice or as an instinctive or learned impetus.

Breastfeeding is one of the earliest and most intimate maternal practices that bond the mother with her child. Again, I will add a disclaimer that this analysis is in no way intended to invalidate the maternal practices of non-breastfeeding mothers, and that this author endorses breastfeeding as a choice. Nevertheless, breastfeeding is a sustainable action, and many mothers consciously choose to opt for breastfeeding their children—despite the physical/temporal inconveniences—not only because they consider it a healthier option for their children, but also perhaps because of an underlying awareness of its sustainability benefits. The UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake commented, "Breastfeeding is one of the most effective – and cost effective – investments nations can make in the health of their youngest members and the future health of their economies and societies" ("Breastfeeding" 2017). Lake's comment goes beyond considering breastfeeding as a private maternal choice to regarding it as a national agenda. While this may be pressurizing or stigmatizing to mothers who cannot or do not breastfeed, it also takes an important step of acknowledging the necessity of institutional support for maternal actions.

Any individual maternal practice of sustainability can only become effective at a larger scale if it is supported by the community (or, in Lake's word, "nations"). Breastfeeding is indeed a sustainable maternal practice that is a significant step in achieving 'Zero Hunger' (the second of the seventeen sustainable development goals framed by the UN). But, to be impactful on a national or global scale, this maternal practice needs to be buttressed through institutional supportive measures like paid family leave, breastfeeding access policies in workplaces and public spaces, maternal protection guidelines, and community networks of support and care. Without institutional support, maternal sustainability concerns have a limited range of effect, impacting only their children and, possibly, other members within the family. This does not, however, invalidate the significance of individual maternal practices of sustainability.

Hinduism venerates mothers as the first teachers of children when they are young. Although the veneration may be critiqued as a compensatory strategy

for manufacturing the consent of mothers to be the sole or primary caregivers of their children, the role of a teacher is something mothers willingly perform. Environmentally aware mothers often consciously inculcate eco-friendly habits and environmental lessons to their offspring, in order to ensure a sustainable future for them. Satoko Chatterjee, an Indian environmental activist mother, has written her book, *The Green Sprout Journey* (2009), to record and disseminate her attempts to teach such practices and habits to her children, through "home-based, ecological activities." Chatterjee's book narrates the story of a mother trying to stimulate environmental awareness in her two children through ecological activities initiated within the space of her home, and how her children responded positively to these practical lessons with their own ideas. Through a detailing of various activities—such as composting and organic gardening, clay jewellery and other eco-crafts, book-making, soap making, homemade solar cooker, and others — Chatterjee attempts to build a foundation for her children to become ecologically conscious citizens. Chatterjee's book — along with blogs written by some Indian mothers sharing their own environmental teaching-learning practices — is accessible to other mothers who may be propelled by a similar aim. By creating shareable resources like book or blogs, mother-writers like Chatterjee attempt to connect with a community of mothers with similar maternal thinking to amplify the impact of their sustainable maternal practices.

In India, mothers, even those who may not have the education or awareness to identify as environmental activists, often follow practices—and teach their children the same—that are beneficial in protecting the environment. These include a range of activities, from recycling household objects like milk packets and newspapers, or repurposing old clothes and leftover food, to encouraging the use of bucket baths and public transport, to saving electricity and water. Janardhan Pokala lists several of these practices that they have learnt from their mothers, and writes,

> "The used milk packets washed and stuck neatly on the tiles to dry, the MAHA plastic bag that stored all the other plastic bags, the half flush tank rule. Every Indian household was built along with at least one of these things as their fundamental practices. What we all grew to term 'sustainable' and cool, our moms have been doing since time immemorial." (Pokala 2019)

What Pokala's article makes evident is that these sustainable practices have been followed by mothers not as a response to any current trend, but because it is an expression of their concerns regarding the environment and is an outcome of their maternal thinking of preservative love and care. While their actions have limited impact outside the family, mothers ensure that their concerns are taught to their children, and that their sustainability practices develop a legacy that passes down vertically through generations. It is also significant how these maternal efforts are ridiculed or nullified by the aggressive consumerist thrusts of a capitalist society, that operates on a reckless 'use-and-throw' principle instead of the 'reuse and recycle' and 'spend wisely' principles that underlies all the maternal practices outlined by Pokala.

While mothers may or may not consciously identify as ecofeminists, pioneering scholar in this field, Vandana Shiva critiques the "reductionist paradigms" of commercial capitalism for marginalising or overriding maternal practices:

> Women in sustenance economies, producing and reproducing wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of a holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes. But these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to social benefits and sustenance needs, are not recognised by the reductionist paradigm, because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth. (Shiva 1988, 22-23)

As long as the reductionist paradigms of commercial capitalism continue to dominate the human-environment interactions, individual maternal practices of sustainability will continue to have a limited impact. However, this limited impact does not mean that maternal thinking at the family level is insignificant. Sustainability resides both in the large, institutional decisions and in the collaborative rebellions, as well as in the minor resistances and individual actions. Every change at every level—from the domestic to the institutional—is enabling and necessary for the realisation of sustainable development goals.

Mothers and Sustainability Activism

As has been mentioned in the above section, there is a large — often unbridgeable— gap between private actions of sustainability and public activism, but there have been several evidences of the involvement of mothers in sustainability-related activism in India and outside. One oft-recalled instance of ecofeminist activism is the Chipko Movement of October 1977 that was born from women's (including mothers') struggle for a safe environment. Gaura Devi led a group of women who were barring the path of the male contractors into the forest, singing "This forest is our mother's home/ We will protect it with all our might" (Kumar 1993, 183). It is significant that the widowed Gaura Devi was also a mother. Another woman actively involved in protecting the forest trees from being cut down said, 'On these days we leave our own work and protect the forest because our oak trees are like our children" (Shiva 1988, 87). Instead of looking at the forests through an exploitative lens, the women are looking at it through a symbiotic, relational lens.

Claiming the forest as their maternal legacy, and demanding that the forest be preserved for themselves and their progeny indicate that maternal activism also includes a deep awareness of the generational mother-child bond, and the ecological human-nature bond. In fact, the human-nature bond is metaphorized as a mother-child bond, sometimes with the humans being the children of the forest trees, sometimes with the trees being the children of the human mothers. Activist mothers often identify as daughters of mothers or as mothers of nature, situating themselves in a maternal-natural lineage and linkage. They fight to safeguard these maternal-natural linkages and legacies as they simultaneously strive to protect and perpetuate these legacies for their own children.

The Chipko movement became a blueprint for other feminist/ matri-centric environmental activism in other parts of India: "Beginning in the early 1970s in the Garhwal region of Uttar Pradesh, the methodology and philosophy of Chipko has now spread to Himachal Pradesh in the north, to Karnataka in the south, to Rajasthan in the west, to Orissa in the east, and to the Central Indian highlands" (Shiva 1988, 63). This indicates that maternal activism for the cause of sustainability is quite widespread in India, although the women leaders of

these movements or their identity as mothers are often forgotten in the media narrativization of these events.

Moving away from Shiva's focus on rural and forest areas, maternal environmental activism is also emerging in urban locations in India. Bhavreen Kandhari is the co-founder of Warrior Moms in India, a network of mothers campaigning for clean air and climate action and she emphasizes the maternal principle of preservative love that undergirds her activism: "There is nobody else in the world who loves you more than your mother – a mother is always protecting" (Carrington 2022). Warrior Moms in India is a part of a global community of activist mothers (and fathers), working together for cohesive action that will prioritize children's health, rights and futures in international climate summits and policy-making.

Conclusion

To sum up, this paper has demonstrated that there exist, apparently contradictorily, both powerful maternal symbols of sustainability in the cult of mother-goddesses in India, as well as the mostly domestic sustainability concerns and maternal practices of human mothers. This contrast in empowerment brings back the contention noted at the beginning of the article: that the high status accorded to mother-goddesses of India is accompanied by the subjugated position of human mothers in Indian society, although many subjugated mothers resist this subjugation in private ways. The public ritual world of mother-goddesses and the private actions of protection of children by human mothers intersect at sites of public maternal activism on sustainability issues. At these sites, the matricentric potential of individual mothers is elevated and empowered through collaboration with other activist mothers and non-mothers. The collective actions of human mothers lead to public maternal activism: and this reflects and replicates the power and might of the mother-goddesses who fiercely protect their devotees from all harm.

Vandana Shiva connects the divine feminine principle that is anthropomorphized in mother-goddesses with the liberatory agenda of maternal public activism:

> The revolutionary and liberational potential of the recovery of the feminine principle consists in its challenging the concepts, categories and processes which have created the threat to life, and in providing oppositional categories that create and enlarge the spaces for maintaining and enriching all life in nature and society. The radical shift induced by a focus on the feminine principle is the recognition of maldevelopment as a culture of destruction. The feminine principle becomes a category of challenge which locates nature and women as the source of life and wealth, and as such, active subjects, maintaining and creating life-processes. (Shiva 1988, 44)

The challenges of sustainability are multiple and formidable. However, mothers involved in public activism contest and sometimes conquer these challenges (replicating the mythical triumphs of mother-goddesses), while individual mothers determinedly following their sustainable maternal practices at home and are also often able to teach such practices to their children. The existing symbolism and cult of mother-goddess worship can be leveraged to legitimize and empower mothers and maternal activism at both the individual and, especially, the public level, by providing a metaphor for maternal empowerment and an alternative discourse of a caring, protecting and reciprocal relationship with nature. Through these three-pronged thrusts—private maternal practice, public maternal activism and the impactful deployment of mother-goddess symbolism—motherhood in India not just entangles with the sustainable, but is also able to bring affirmative action and positive changes to sustainability issues in India.

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