

# **Birth of a Goddess**

Reclaiming the 'Shakti' (Divine Feminine Power)

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A thesis presented to OCAD University in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of Master of Fine Arts

In Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

NaturLandia

The Dr. David Juan Ferriz Olivares House of Culture

2237 Dundas Street West April 8 - 11

Tkaronoto/Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2023

## Abstract

In my thesis project, I envision creating a space where one can experience the true 'Shakti' of the eternal Goddess i.e., the energy/force responsible for the entire creation, and rediscover this 'Shakti' within. I attempt to change the narrative around South Asian women through performance and storytelling. Creating a speculative story set in history I reimagine the present and future, as our past is not dead but lives through us constantly. This work challenges the patriarchal norms that still exist in South Asian communities across the globe and discusses the problematic approach to decolonizing by these communities.

## Acknowledgment

I respectfully acknowledge that I currently live and work from Maple Vaughan situated on Traditional Territories and Treaty Lands, in particular those of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, as well as the Anishinaabeg of the Williams Treaty First Nations, the Huron-Wendat, and the Métis Nation. I give credit for my work to my Indigenous friends and faculty at OCAD that played a huge role in shaping my thinking initially. It is watching them speak with great pride about their culture that encouraged me to dig deep into my own cultural roots.

My heart is full of gratitude for I would not have been able to accomplish this work without the love, support, and guidance of my mentors, friends, family, and ancestors. Firstly, I want to thank my mother who sowed the seeds of feminist thought in me since early childhood without even realizing it. As I grew up, she became my friend more than a mother, our long phone conversations on spirituality have been instrumental in building my thought. Her relentless encouragement to not give up has kept me going; today it is her dream of seeing me get my master's that is being fulfilled.

The biggest thank you goes to Professor Ayumi Goto whose encouragement and guidance in the initial phases of my work kept me from quitting. Even though she could not be my primary advisor she made sure I would find someone who understands my work well. Next, I extend my gratitude to my primary advisor Ashok Mathur who constantly motivated me and pushed me to go to the next level with this project. He had faith in this project when I doubted its worth and made sure to help me in every possible way until the last minute, from funding my sewing machine, securing plinths for the

exhibition to lending his brand-new projector. I can never forget his generosity and kindness. I thank my secondary advisor Johanna Householder for challenging my work in ways that I would have never thought of by myself. She helped structure my performance in a systematic order without which I wouldn't have felt grounded. My other professors who helped in the development of this work are Dr. Michael Prokopow and Marton Robinson.

I am grateful to my dearest friend Shiva Shoebi for the conversations, trips to galleries, and her constant support. Even in the eighth month of her pregnancy, she came to help with the installation of my exhibition and for documentation as well. I thank my friends at OCAD who gave me valuable feedback and priceless friendship, such as Asabe Mamza, Susan Clarahan, Veronica Waechter, and Sujeet Sennik. I extend my thanks to my dear friend Sejal who came for recording my performance even after being sick. I am grateful to my cousin Bhavya Soni in India who made the copper coins for me on very short notice and my friend Krutika Kokane who transferred my hand drawings of the coins into digital format for this.

I feel extremely lucky to have the best In-laws who not only came from India to help me with my pregnancy but also constantly supported my project. My mother-in-law dressed me and did my makeup for the performance and even gave me suggestions for my next performance to make it better and my father-in-law helped with the installation. Finally, I thank my baby who is in my womb giving me the inner strength for this important performance, and my husband Yash for being my pillar of strength, for holding me through my breakdowns, for running around with me getting things for the exhibition, for his ideas, and for his unconditional love, this work was not possible without him and my.

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## Introduction

अहं रुद्रेभिर्वसुभिश्चराम्यहमादित्यैरुतविश्वदेवैः ।  
 अहं मित्रावरुणोभा बिभर्म्यहमिन्द्राग्नीहमश्विनोभा ॥  
 अहं सोममाहनसं बिभर्म्यहं तवष्टारमुतपूषणं भगम ।  
 अहं दधामि दरविणं हविष्मतेसुप्राव्ये यजमानाय सुन्वते ॥  
 अहं राष्ट्री संगमनी वसूनां चिकितुषी परथमायज्ञियानाम ।  
 तां मा देवा वयदधुः पुरुत्राभूरिस्थात्रां भूर्यावेशयन्तीम ॥  
 मया सो अन्नमति यो विपश्यति यः पराणिति य ईश्रणोत्युक्तम ।  
 अमन्तवो मां त उप कषियन्ति शरुधिश्चुत शरदधिवं ते वदामि ॥  
 अहमेव सवयमिदं वदामि जुष्टं देवेभिरुतमानुषेभिः ।  
 यं कामये तं-तमुग्रं कर्णोमि तम्ब्रह्माणं तं रषिं तं सुमेधाम ॥  
 अहं रुद्राय धनुरा तनोमि बरहमद्विषे शरवे हन्तवाः ।  
 अहं जनाय समदं कर्णोम्यहं दयावाप्रिथिवी आविवेश ॥  
 अहं सुवे पितरमस्य मूर्धन मम योनिरप्स्वन्तः समुद्रे ।  
 ततो वि तिष्ठे भुवनानु विश्वोतामूं दयावर्ष्मणोप सप्रशामि ॥  
 अहमेव वात इव पर वाम्यारभमाणा भुवनानि विश्वा ।  
 परो दिवा पर एना पर्थिव्यैतावती महिना सं बभूव ॥<sup>1</sup>

“Birth of a Goddess” is an interactive performance-based work that invites the audience to participate in a ceremony invoking the ultimate Goddess's Shakti (divine energy) who is the creator of all existing worlds. The Vedic hymn I begin with, ‘Devi Sukta’, written in Sanskrit, is the earliest mention of the goddess being an autonomous creator found in the Rig Veda (believed to be the oldest Hindu text). Frequently chanted during the Durga puja festival (one of the biggest Goddess celebration festivals of India) even today its meaning has been lost and suppressed by the masculine narrative and the use of Sanskrit which is not a commonly understood language.

<sup>1</sup> This Devi Sukta hymn in Devnagri Sanskrit is taken from a website that has all the Rig Vedic hymns. <http://www.gatewayforindia.com/vedas/rigveda/rigveda10125.shtml> accessed 31 March 2023

Here is a simple translation of this hymn found in an article by Zakia Pathak and Saswati Sengupta.

I am Devi, I am Shakti.

I am the God of the world.

...I am the worshipped.

I provide the means to worship.

I have created the world. And Human Society. And its riches.

I am knowledge. I manifest knowledge.

I am worshipped by the Gods.

I feed the world and grant divination.

The sky who is called the father.

I am mother to him.

I am spread over the world, the sky, and the ocean.

I move through the world as wind. As freely.

I manifest myself as the world. It's my own glory (Pathak and Sengupta 566-67)

This chanting is preceded by the narration of the Mahishasura story during the festival (a popular story of Goddess Durga slaying the buffalo demon) which describes the birth of the Goddess originating from the combined energies of the male gods. The actual meaning of this hymn has been suppressed making the goddess a subordinate figure controlled by the male gods. "The Bengali narration does not deny female power. The goddess is addressed as Mahamaya Sanatani (permanence manifested in time), Niyati (fate), Mahashakti (energy), and Prakriti (nature). But such invocations are immediately followed by a reminder that she is also Narayani (wife/shakti of Narayan), Bramahani (wife/shakti of Bramaha), and Maheshwari (wife/shakti of Maheshwar) ...Thus defined, the female form is powerful as Shakti and procreative as Prakriti, but

she is not autonomous...Moreover, in this case, the wife is not even a complementary existence. The Bengali narration states that she is created by her husband” (Pathak and Sengupta 566). This is not just limited to Bengal; it is the most popularly known interpretation all over the subcontinent and thus bringing the real meaning of this hymn to light becomes crucial. This Hymn is an integral part of my Performance as it is played in the background while I speak some of the lines translated in English during the performance.

I will transcribe this powerful hymn in depth later in the written component of this thesis with the help of the Advaita scholar Sarvapriyananda Swami along with the explanation of this philosophy in the chapter Advaita Vedanta (the nondual philosophy) page 20. This is the 125<sup>th</sup> hymn (known as Devi sukta) in the 10<sup>th</sup> mandala of the Rig Veda written by Vakrishi Ambhrni, a female rishi (wise sage) daughter of a rishi named Ambhruna who has contributed several hymns in the Vedas which are ancient texts of India. Devi sukta forms an integral part of my performance. In this hymn, the goddess self-describes as being the creator of the Brahmas (creator of the world), Devas (demigods), Rishis, etc. Even though there is still an elaborate culture of goddess worship throughout the Indian subcontinent and in diasporic communities which is seen in the annual goddess festivals celebrated in India with different names such as Navratri, Durga puja, etc. does it translate into better treatment of women in society? This is questionable.

What if our past was totally different from how we know it today? How would that change the way in which we navigate through our present world in female bodies? And would that change our perception of women in our society today? What if it was just as

normal and regular to have powerful female leaders as it is to have men in ancient civilizations? And finally, the actual question that I ask through this research is how can I bring the power of the goddess back to the women? These are some of the questions that inform this work.

A supporting element of this thesis is my creation of a fictional story of a queen of ancient India who I suggest was revered as a goddess. In my construction, she existed towards the end of the Indus Valley period and before the beginning of the Vedic era and reigned over almost the entire subcontinent circa 1700-1500 BCE. I present this as a story that is as grand as the Ramayana and Mahabharata which are great Hindu epics. I claim that the manuscripts that contained this story are lost, buried, and burnt during multiple invasions over the last thousands of years. Only parts of it have been excavated in the form of seals, coins, and ancient tablets. This is a speculative story inspired by the stories of female scholars and queens of the past that have been silenced through generations. I am, as one of my graduate school professors, Marton Robinson, puts it, creating a story that will become a myth and eventually become history by repeating it many times. I want to create this story set in the past to change the present perspective of women and in turn shift the future.

Our past is not dead; it lives through us constantly, our bodies carrying trauma through generations. The generation that existed through and after the colonial era has been disconnected from ancient wisdom and has distorted versions of cultural traditions, which are blindly followed by some and outright rejected by modern-day feminists. Through this work, I wish to heal the trauma and empower my audience just

as I feel empowered embodying the goddess, using the indigenous wisdom found in ancient texts and iconography of ancient art.

Efforts of decolonization have been complicated and problematic for women in Indian society. I remember any attempts to critique biased rules of my culture were usually labeled as Western influence and dismissed. In her essay 'Contesting Cultures', Uma Narayan discusses this practice and the reasons behind such dismissal. "Terms such as 'Westernized' or 'Westernization' function as negative epithets in several Third-World contexts, used to castigate not only individuals or political movements but also various forms of social change. I believe that one cannot account for why these terms function as pejoratives without reference to the history of colonization of Third-World countries by Western powers" (Narayan 14). Holding on to traditional cultural customs was a part of the anti-colonial struggle for national independence by the colonized cultures which got so engrained in the psyche of the population that it continues even today. This brings us to the complication of identifying and naming colonial violence which is disguised as nationalism. Often these efforts of decolonization by the society are labeled as nationalism without investigating the roots of it in anti-colonial struggles. D. D'Costa and Alexandre E. Da Costa explain this complicated relationship between colonial violence and Indian nationalism: "In contexts conventionally understood as postcolonial like India where immunity for the casteist, fascist forces that regularly engage in Hindu majoritarian and heteropatriarchal capitalist violence is a normal part of governance. The recognition of coloniality as unexceptional is generative in such cases because it allows us to see, name, and challenge colonial violence wherever it is erased – erased, that is, either by normalization or because colonial violence is more readily

legible as something else, such as nationalism. And nationalism is especially illegible as colonial violence when it is grounded in histories of anti-colonial resistance” (349).

Although this text talks about the casteist and fascist forces too, for now, I am only focussing on the patriarchy and how these practices are an indirect effect of colonization.

What I suggest is that when analyzed in depth going further back in history, South Asian culture tells a different story, we are holding on to a narrative that is obscured and not the whole truth. Therefore, I attempt to challenge the use of ancient texts and philosophies and gods and goddesses by rightist politics to perpetuate nationalistic agendas, by proposing a different reading of the ancient texts and iconography that is more liberal and shows traces of a more egalitarian thought. And to undertake this gigantic task I begin with the Devi Sukta hymn and historical analysis of ancient sculptures for the limited scope of this Masters project.

## Context

### Personal Story

I was born in the year 1991 and brought up in a middle-class Hindu family, in Mumbai, India. My parents put me in a convent school to get the best kind of education. Here, I learned about how Indians before invasions were “primitive and illiterate,” and how women washed clothes on the banks of rivers (which I now know isn’t the entire truth about the highly intelligent civilization that India was). I learned about how Indian culture was oppressive, girls were not allowed to study, and there was child marriage and Sati. However, at home, I learned about the great epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, stories of many gods and goddesses that claimed a high standard of Indian culture.

At the same time, I also heard the story of how my mother and two of my older cousins were not allowed to continue their studies even though they were brilliant students and were married off in their 20s or even earlier. I also learned that at one point, my mother had to convince my father to let me go to college after finishing high school; although it wasn’t very difficult for her to do so it just shows that it was not a given. Even though my parents tried to keep things equal for my brother and me there were still some rules that were exclusive for me as a girl (that felt unfair to me). But there were also some favors that I received being a girl. I was regarded as a form of the goddess Laxmi (goddess of wealth) in the house, and after every ritual, the offering made to the gods and goddesses was first given to me, in every Diwali Puja (prayer ritual) I was made to write the spiritual incantations on the first page of my father’s accounting book for his business, etc.

There was also a constant expectation from relatives and society that a girl should behave in a certain way, be obedient, not argue with elders even if she is right, not laugh out too loud and become an ideal future daughter-in-law. A career doesn't matter as long as you know how to take care of the family and if you are fortunate enough then you would be allowed to work after marriage if you can manage household work along with the job. And this continues in many parts of India as well as diasporic South Asian communities even today. All these contradictory learnings confused my young mind and made me rebellious toward my own culture. As described well by Narayan "Both our mothers and our mother-cultures give us all sorts of contradictory messages, encouraging their daughters to be confident, impudent, and self-assertive even as they attempt to instill conformity, decorum, and silence, seemingly oblivious to these contradictions" (Narayan 8)

Neither the education system nor society exposed us to the vast and varied knowledge systems of ancient India with many different schools of thought and the powerful women that existed in the past. Even TV series and movies painted a grim picture of Indian women. Women would have to struggle against the harsh rules and barriers created by their own family and society to not only follow their dreams or passions but in some cases even to just lead a normal life of dignity. In epics, whether it was Sita of Ramayana or Draupadi of Mahabharata, women were portrayed as victims rather than having agency over their own lives and decisions.

Finding out that my then-boyfriend was going to leave the country and settle in Canada, I was very excited to escape the patriarchal ditch back home. Instead of feeling sad to leave a familiar place that I spent my whole life in and going to settle in an



entirely different place, I was relieved. But after moving to Canada, I still experienced the challenges of Indian expectations. This had created a deep-rooted shame, guilt, and disdain for my culture in my heart. Starting my master's at OCAD U, I witnessed the pride that my Indigenous classmates and professors have in their culture. This inspired me to investigate my own culture and find out the reasons behind my disdain. What came forth were the many contradictions within the cultural behavior and religious teachings. Therefore, I feel the need to address this issue in a way that focuses on the solution rather than the problem. There is a need to normalize the portrayal of feminine excellence without the struggle against unnecessary barriers created by the patriarchal mentality of society. There is a need to portray women in powerful roles without them having to possess or display masculine qualities.

## **The Problem with Applying Western Feminism.**

Feminism in the Indian context looks different than the western way of outright rejection of rituals without proper investigation and understanding. One such example is the issue of menstrual practices that incite deep shame in young girls. It is sad that the practices which were meant to give women comfort at one point got converted into a tool of oppression and shaming women because of the way they are enforced making women feel impure and dirty which was never the original intention. Dr. Sinu Joseph elaborates on the wisdom and truth behind certain rules around menstruation. Through experimenting with herself and the extensive research she found out the actual scientific facts behind such restrictions. Thus, instead of rejecting the practices it becomes important to spread awareness and change the way in which it is portrayed, that would be a South Asian approach to feminism.

There was a huge feminist revolt against the restriction of women of menstruating age from entering the Sabarimala temple in 2018. Before we get into the Vedic science behind this restriction it is worth noting that there exist certain Goddess temples where the entry of men is restricted during certain periods of the year too like the Kamakhya temple in Assam. Thus, it is not just the women that face this type of restriction. Coming to Vedic science, most of the old temples are built in sacred geometry and consecrated in a way that the energies within the human body are raised upwards. This is to enable activation of the kundalini shakti from the base chakra to the crown chakra. During menstruation, a woman's energies are naturally not supposed to travel upwards they should be focused downwards. And frequent visits to such places over a long period of time may cause severe health problems like endometriosis wherein the menstrual blood

containing endometrial cells flows back through fallopian tubes into the pelvic cavity during periods. This is a common problem experienced by female pilots and air hostesses that fly frequently even during their Periods. Dr. Joseph briefly explains these complications in her talk (Joseph 33:15-48:50) which are elaborated in her book *Rtu Vidya* ancient science behind menstrual practices. She shared instances where women shared that they have felt a sharp cramp while visiting a temple during their periods like something is being twisted inside the womb, I would usually have painful periods but later when I observed the cramps were especially stronger when visiting a temple during periods. Several such practices like not touching or watering plants, especially the Tulsi plant, not cooking during those five days, etc are all explained with scientific reasons by Dr. Joseph. I am aware that this can lead to questions about such analysis being used to justify exclusions, however, I am only suggesting the need to read deeper into the cultural practices that seem to be so elaborate that can't simply be dismissed as being orthodox and patriarchal. What I am interested in pointing out here is the lost wisdom, and loss of culture due to colonization that could have otherwise been systematically reformed instead of blatant rejection and demonizing a culture based on ancient wisdom.

## **Methodology**

There are two main aspects of my thesis work; performance and the speculative story of a powerful goddess-like Queen of the ancient past who ruled over most of the South Asian subcontinent. I start from a Hindu-based women-centric methodology working towards contextualizing Indian feminism that is not merely an import of western feminism. Under this umbrella, I use multiple methods that help me develop my thesis. These methods include autoethnography, speculation, 'Advaita Vedanta' philosophy (Indian non-dual school of thought), and story-making. Starting from deep dive into personal history I go on to experiment with performance. The performance then leads to more detailed research into Hindu culture looking at ancient sculptures and iconography. Through performance the process becomes cyclical and nonlinear, and this cycle of research-based creation and creation-based research is what has produced my thesis project 'Birth of a Goddess'.

## Goddess Adi Shakti

'Adi Shakti' literally means the energy that exists and existed before anything else ever existed. In Hindu thought this energy has been personified as a feminine entity. The creation of our universe and all the existing universes has been attributed to Goddess Adi Shakti. This includes the creation of the three main gods of the Hindu Pantheon: Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh. This is theoretically the creation story of the Shakta sect. I understand through personal experience that it is not just restricted to the people who follow Shaktism. Many families that follow Shaivism, Vaishnavism, or Brahmanism may also believe in the supremacy of the goddess Adi Shakti. For example, my family identifies as Vaishnava, but we also consider the goddess Hinglaj (an avatar of goddess Durga who is an incarnation of goddess Adi Shakti) to be equally powerful and she is our "Kul Devi" meaning the guiding goddess of our clan. In fact, my name is an abbreviation of the word "Hinglaj Maa". My in-laws identify as Kshatriya and pray to both Shiva and Vishnu, but I was introduced to the goddess Adi Shakti as the supreme goddess by them.

## **My Connection with The Goddess**

My most vivid memories of childhood include the beautiful festival of Navratri, which is a goddess celebration festival. Navratri literally means nine nights, and accordingly is celebrated over the course of nine days and nights. During this festival every night a different avatar of the goddess is worshipped. On the eighth day, nine little girls of pre-puberty age (including daughters of the domestic helpers in some cases) are invited to some neighborhood/relatives' homes where they are considered embodiments of the goddess and prayed to by touching their feet in respect and feeding them a full meal of freshly prepared delicious food items and at the end giving gifts. For several years I was also a part of this ritual. We were worshipped and fed like the goddess. However, this goddess is not autonomous as the one in Rig Veda as she is a controlled figure that is allowed to be free by the patriarchal society for just one day. As Nikky Singh and Guninder Kaur put it, "It is essential that there be an authentic goddess-girl identification that will allow girls to internalize the goddess as a part of themselves, and so generate an egalitarian society in which they will grow up utilizing her divine force" (Singh and Kaur ). Through my embodiment of the goddess, I reclaim this autonomy and call upon the divine feminine element existent in every being regardless of gender, sexuality, race, nationality, species, etc.

After growing up I was reintroduced to the goddess after marriage, this time directly to the ultimate creator of the universe, Adi-Shakti. Just after moving to Canada, I was commissioned by a spiritual guru that my in-laws believe in to paint the vision of goddess Adi Shakti that they saw in their dream state during intense meditation. It was very interesting to me that this guru is a male but embodies the goddess, and everyone

who worships him calls him 'Devi Maa' meaning mother goddess. One could either call it a coincidence or believe that it must be some kind of a connection that after a couple of years, as I was looking for some income during covid as I lost my job, I again received a commission order for a goddess Durga painting.

Just as in childhood, I was made into a goddess for the Navratri ritual; recently, when I visited my in-laws' village for a wedding, I was made into a goddess amongst 11 other women including the bride, as a part of a ritual that occurs after the wedding ceremony on the next day. This is a ritual to be officially initiated into the clan. Here, in witness of their 'Kul Devi', we are considered her avatars and prayed to, fed, and given gifts in terms of cash and sweets. In this way time and again I have felt this connection with the goddess, and it has led me to explore it deeper through my thesis. These experiences are directly evident in the performance I am creating, influencing every movement and gesture.

## Advaita Vedanta (the nondual philosophy)

Advaita, the nondual Vedanta philosophy, is a very sophisticated and elaborate theory that could take several years to fully understand and acquire expertise in. I am no expert in this field, but I experience and use the most basic tenet of Advaita which is the understanding that the creation and the created are not two separate entities. They are the same, but one is self-aware, and the other is not yet aware. In scientific terms, no atom or particle exists without energy, whether it be potential energy or kinetic energy. In other words, if we were to think about the big bang theory that initiated the universe as we know it today, in all aspects we can fundamentally find the existence of energy. This energy is called shakti and shakti in Hindu thought is given the feminine quality. It is the Goddess that personifies this creative force, Shakti.

In Indian politics, the Goddess has been used by right-wing nationalists and leftists alike to meet their own agendas deliberately forgetting the Advaitic aspect of her existence and thus causing deeper polarities. This is beautifully unpacked by Deepshikha Shahi in her paper 'The Flawed Dichotomy of Durga-Mahishasura: An Advaitic Postscript'. Shahi has specifically chosen the Durga Mahishasura episode from the Markandeya Purana for her analysis, but I propose the same is true for any goddess invoked in political discourse.

Shahi explains "the philosophy of Advaita, which is directed toward the goal of realizing one's inward self, presents a threefold classification of the 'self' that depends on three construals of consciousness: (i) Jiva, the individuated self, which has its own parameters of reflexive occurrence, given by the body and its apparatus; (ii) Atman, the



auto-reflexive self whose auto-reflexivity is occurrent; and (iii) Brahman, the all-encompassing self, which is typically reflexive and constitutes the nondual, irreducible, and universal consciousness. However, until one realizes the true nondual nature of the self, the multiplicity of the worldly existence is very much real as per the Advaitic teaching” (Shahi 6). Shahi warns, “However, the Advaitic philosophical presumption of melting down of diverse identities in oneness must not be evoked as a political license to forcefully homogenize India’s cultural diversity in the name of nationalism” (9).

## **Devi Suktam as explained by Swami Sarvapriyananda**

Swami Sarvapriyananda is an Advaitic scholar and is currently the head of the Vedantic Society of New York. In his lecture about the Devi ("A Hymn to the Devi - DevīSūkṭam | Swami Sarvapriyananda" 0:05:04), he explains in depth, the meaning of the Devi Suktam revealed by Vaak Ambhrini in the Rig Veda. Here I am transcribing Swami's words as heard from the video.

Devi Suktam, Swami says was the first ever hymn that propounded the Advaita philosophy and it was revealed by nonother than a female Rishi approximately 5000 years ago, before any Upanishads. Jessica Fraiser a professor at the Indian Philosophy oxford university, suggests through the most conservative scholarship this hymn dates around 1700 BCE.

Vakrishi Ambhrini in this hymn declares I am all the Vedic Gods, the 8 Vasus, 12 Adityas, 11 Rudras, 2 Ashvins

I am that you worship in the Adityas and the Varunas... she is hinting at 'one reality'

I am the mother of the universe, she announces,

Everything that you get comes from me. The great secret that I teach you. I am the divine mother. In this hymn, we see how through Dvaita we reach the Advaita. There is a sheer vigor and freshness of the human mind, with utmost confidence she pronounces her power and starts each line with the word 'Aham' meaning I am.

I am the mother of all nations, all civilizations... the source of all this translation Swami says are two; Saayana, a great Vedic commentator, and Dr.

Mahanamavrata Brahmachari, a Vaishnava teacher.

I reveal the knowledge to those who seek it. All the life is sustained in me and by me.

Awareness is what makes the experience of life possible, I am that awareness, I am that consciousness. She declares I speak by myself... swami explains that this is not Rishi Ambhrini speaking through her spiritual practice for which she has worked hard nor is she transmitting the knowledge that was revealed to her like the other Rishis that transmitted what was revealed to them, rather She is god herself speaking.

I am the source she says, I am that which is revealing to the gods and to humans.

I make Bharhmas, I make Rishis, etc.

My womb is the vast primordial ocean from which emerges the universe, in which the universes appear and disappear back again. At the beginning of the universe, when the worlds were created, I blew through it like a breeze. Having created the world, I entered into it; I sustain the universe by giving it existence. And I transcend it completely. She says I transcend it all and yet I am in and through all of it. concluding thought is that She is in each one of us. We all are a part of the same consciousness; the only difference is that Vaak Rishi has realized it and we have yet to still realize it.

Thus, as Swami Sarvapriyananda puts it this hymn is the first mighty example of the Advaita philosophy.

## My Process and Progress Journey

My journey within this subject matter began with the first assignment given by a critical theory graduate studies professor, Dr. Michael Prokopow on critical autobiography. For this, we had to dig down our own life journey that brought us to the current stage in our art practice. While looking back into my life so far, I realized that all the spiritual art that I made was a way of rebelling against my own Hindu culture/religion. My art was based on the spiritual concepts partly from Buddhism and partly from what I had learned in several meditations, sound healing, reiki healing workshops, etc.

Through the critical autobiography assignment when I investigated the reason for my rebellion against my own culture, I found the cause of it was the patriarchal rituals and rules that existed within the form of Hinduism my family followed as well as the societal expectations from women in general. However, moving to Canada gave me an opportunity to study different aspects of Hinduism from almost an outsider's perspective. Distance and dislocation made it possible to look at it with a new fresh perspective. I found that apart from the mainstream authoritative practice which has been popularized by Britishers in the form of making 'Manusmriti' the code of law for Hindus, Indian TV and Bollywood in the form of shows and movies based on patriarchy, there also exist many different stories traditions icons that hint at a more fluid and open-minded society of the past.



Fig 1 Ardhapurush



Fig 2 Ardhanari

In my first exploration, I use the iconography of the Ardhanareeshwara form of lord Shiva. “The Manusmriti says that Cosmic Principle divided itself into two, one half of it became male and the other half female and thus the creation started (1.32)” (Varadpande Ch.11). This form signifies the equal importance given to the masculine and the feminine. In Shakta tradition, it is believed that Shiva is inseparable from Shakti, that Shiva is shav meaning a dead being without the life-giving energy of Shakti. In Indian philosophy, it is believed that every living being consists of both masculine as well as feminine elements, and when through meditation one achieves a balance between these two elements one comes closer to Moksha (enlightenment/salvation). In my preliminary exploration, I decided to make a costume for myself as the Ardhapurushwara form (a woman who is a half man instead of the Ardhanareeshwara which translates to a man that is a half woman).



Fig 3 Performance objects (1)



Fig 4 Performance objects (2)

This was followed by a performance for which I created a plaster mask made using my own face. In my performance, 'Performing the Ritual' this half-male part of me takes the form of the white/colonizer or the haunting effect of colonization on the Indian women (This was an experiment, applying the theory 'Glossary of Haunting' by Eve Tuck). Through this performance I wanted to critique holding on to the rituals of the past without understanding the true meaning, it talks about the loss of culture and ancient wisdom.

Around this time two of my close friends who had just gotten married were facing a similar situation of being forced into following some traditions and some day-to-day restrictions that did not make any real sense but were used just to maintain some kind of authority over their bodies and movements. One such conversation I remember was about forcing them to wear bindi (a dot-like sticker women put on their foreheads) and

bangles. I remember as young girls we loved these things and all three of us would wear them with pride to college whenever we wore ethnic Indian clothes. However, being forced to do something even when you like it makes the same thing unbearable. Thus, this bindi and bangles became symbolic for my performance to demonstrate how patriarchal oppressive mechanism still works even in urban cities like Mumbai and Pune where my friends were married.

This performance took me into a dark place and made me realize that I wanted to focus on a solution rather than just the problem. Thinking about the solution brought me to the goddess. As I had a personal connection with the goddess ritual and having witnessed her power firsthand, I decided to embark upon the journey of unpacking this aspect of my past. I remember at a very young age I refused to accept that there was a separate entity called God who sat up there somewhere aloof from the material world and governed our world. For me, it was the universal energy or the force of nature or that natural intelligence that not only caused the world but also resided in every being. I thought I was an atheist but, it was a combination of Shakta and Advaita (non-dual) philosophy that I followed unknowingly.

Applying Advaita philosophy to feminism has the potential to be extremely powerful and go beyond merely seeking equality or emancipation from the oppression of a male dominant society. The nondual view allows us to identify ourselves with the divine Shakti (energy), the creative force manifested in all the different forms of being. It takes us to a higher realm of spiritual existence with a deeper sense of connectedness dissolving the polarities. I have been grappling with this idea of interconnectedness in my art practice throughout my art career and encountering the Conocimiento of



Anzaldua inspires me to explore my own inner knowing and develop my own personal spirituality by understanding and working from the state of Nepantla (Anzaldua 117).

For the next experimentation with performance, I attempted to embody the ultimate goddess who is regarded as the creator of the universes, a personification of the universal creative energy, goddess 'Adi shakti'. This was the solution-based work where I know that the biases exist in the Hindu culture but as an antidote, I propose this other end of the spectrum where I use the Advaita philosophy to claim that when the whole of creation and the creator are the same (we are just not realized yet), then how can there be any hierarchy between man and woman. For this performance, I wore a sari in navvari style which separates the legs and jewelry as per the iconography of the goddess. I used the chanting of the Devi suktam for audio along with a Damru an instrument of lord Shiva. One of the comments I received was pointing out the exotic element of my costume which would have the potential to disrupt my core message, although, I later realized through discussions with my advisor that this is problematic feedback. Accordingly, in my latest performance, I had now adjusted my costume with muted color and minimalistic use of jewelry. However, the costume and the jewelry I wore are in keeping with the culture I was attempting to depict thus adjusting the look would be catering to interests outside of my own subjectivity. The inability to disconnect from exoticizing the "other" culture is problematic on the viewer's part.

My costume here consists of a Kshatriya-style dhoti that women and men wore during the war. The color white indicates purity and gold divinity. I also created power shoulder extensions for the top. The crown and the stick were made with the natural elements found in the ravine behind my home. The crown was embellished with

pinecones and the power shoulders were also decorated with pine needles. The use of natural elements is done to signify the 'Prakriti' or the natural force that the Goddess represents. The wand in place of the Trishul seen in most God and Goddess iconography was made of a tree branch and decorated with the leaves of the bushes growing in my backyard.



Fig 5 Invocation of the goddess Adi Shakti 2022 (Performance still)



Fig 6 Performing the ceremony 2022 (Performance still)

## Women in Ancient India, Art, and Iconography.

(A material review of evidence toward women's power)

Starting from the Indus valley seals and sculptures to the sculptures found in temples all over India we can see some interesting iconography that tells us some informative stories about the women of ancient India.

### Indus valley seals and sculptures

Here, in this first seal (fig7), we can see a man with a bull bowing down to a woman standing in between a tree and there are 7 women standing in the lower part of the seal. One of the readings of this image given by Dr. Vineet Aggarwal on the TRS podcast was that it could be the depiction of the mother goddess and the seven Matrikas (feminine energies of the gods). Although it can't be said with absolute certainty that this



is the case, it could be Shiva and Shakti and the seven goddesses, as the man bowing down has a bull with him which is usually the animal associated with the lord Shiva.

Fig 7 Indus Valley Seal (1)



Fig 8 Indus Valley Seals (2 and 3)

Here are two other seals (fig 8), one with a figure that is half woman and half tiger. This depiction brings to mind, the later iconography of the goddess Durga who rides a tiger/lion. And the other one has a woman holding two tigers apart with her hands. This again looks like a divine figure and could be an early iteration of the goddess Durga.



Fig 9 Dancing Girl of Mohenjo-Daro



Fig 10 Woman riding bulls, dated 2000–1750 B.C., excavated in Kausambi, near Prayagaraj (Uttar Pradesh)

In fig 9 the dancing girl, we see her proudly standing there independently with her head slightly tilted upwards. She stands with authority in her own right. And in fig 10 we have a female riding on two bulls, but this does not look like a cart which would make it challenging to balance and yet a woman is capable of undertaking such a task.

## Yakshis and other female sculptures

This is a Mathura sculpture of a woman holding a sword in her hand found amongst several other yakshis, vrikshikas, shalbhanjikas of the Kushan period which was from about late 1st to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. As suggested by the author M.L. Varadpande she could be a female guard at the royal harem (Varadpande Ch. 4. Pl 20). There are some instances of warrior women found in the literature. In the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* of Kalidasa, King Dushyanta appears surrounded by Yavani female guards carrying bows and arrows. In *Ramayana*, we see that Queen Kaikeyi is an adept warrior who saves her husband, King Dashratha's life in a battle. Queen Satyabhama, fought alongside Krishna in the war against King Narakasura of Pragjyotisha.



Fig 11 Sculpture of a Yakshi holding Sword.



Fig 12 sculpture of an apsara writing a letter.

A lady writing a letter, 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Candela, Indian Museum, Calcutta (Varadpande Ch. 9. Pl 42). This clearly contradicts the popular belief that women were not allowed education historically. This sculpture has been deciphered by C. Sivaramamurti, as a girl immersed in writing a letter to her lover pointing out the deep nail marks made on the back shoulder. The other feature to notice is that there is a smaller size man on her left side touching her thigh.



Here on the right in fig 13, we can see a sculpture of a yakshi with a cage standing on a man, 1<sup>st</sup>- 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., from Bhutesar- Mathura (Varadpande Ch. 4. PI 17). Many of the Mathura women's sculptures can be seen in this posture with men lying at her feet. Also, many sculptures with men smaller in size than females are seen on these sites. In Kamasutra, Vatsyayana mentions that a lover shouldn't hesitate to fall at the feet of his angry partner to appease her. He calls it Padapatana.



Fig 13 A Yakshi holding a cage.



Fig 14 Goddess Kali, sandstone relief from Bheraghat, near Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh state, India, 10th century CE

In fig 14 We see goddess Kali, She is often portrayed standing or dancing on her husband, the god Shiva, who lies prostrate beneath her (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kali>). A popular story told by elders is that in the Battle against the demon Raktabeej, she goes rogue after killing him and only lord Shiva is able to calm her down by lying down under her foot.

## Madhanikas of Rani ki Vav

Rani ki vav is an ancient architectural structure believed to be a step well that looks like an inverted temple built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD by queen Udayamati of the Chaulukya dynasty to commemorate her husband Bhimdeva. There are exquisite sculptures of gods and goddesses, apsaras and madhanikas found here. I came across this interesting monument through a video of a popular youtuber Praveen Mohan ("7 Most Mysterious Carvings of Rani Ki Vav"

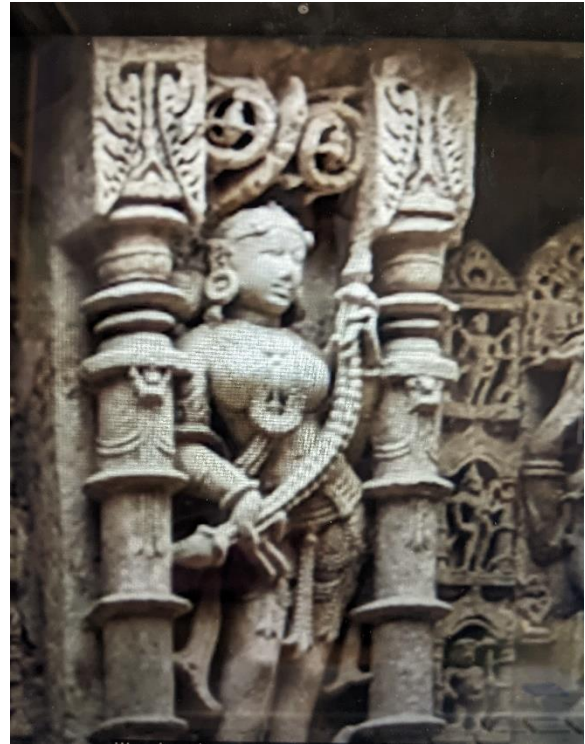
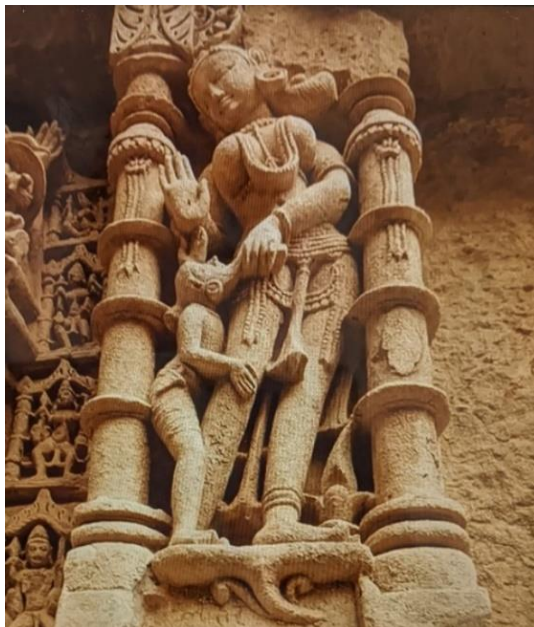


Fig 15 A woman holding a vertebral column.

0:06:49) who explores ancient temples of India and other countries as well. In fig 15 a



woman holding something like a vertebral column, could she be a doctor or a teacher of anatomy? We don't know for sure.

In fig 16 we see a woman holding the beard of a grown man and is just about to slap him. This is an interesting sculpture depicting a woman in a dominating posture ("The True Meaning of Rani Ki Vav- Can You Become a God?" 0:19:16).

Fig 16 A woman holding a man's beard.

## Ardhanareeshwara



Fig 17 Ardhanareeshwara, Kushana 1st century AD, discovered at Rajghat, now in the Mathura Museum, India



Fig 18 Ardhanareeshwara, 6th century; Government Museum, Jhalawar, Rajasthan, India. Pramod Chandra

This is the androgynous form of lord Shiva where half of his body is the feminine principle, 'Shakti', and half is the masculine principle, 'Shiva'. In this Iconography, we can see that both male and female forms are at an equal stage.

These are just some of the examples of women in ancient Indian iconography and sculptures that are different from the usual mother goddess depictions found in several other historical sculptures around the world. Here we can see women in various roles from independently existing to being depicted with male figures, sometimes in dominating positions over their male counterparts and sometimes in an equal position. Yet in popular belief women are seen as inferiors to men since ancient times.

## Rishis and Queens of the Past

I am Drawing upon the wisdom and energy of the great women that existed throughout Indian history including the power I inherit from the women of my own ancestry. As discussed earlier there were some dynamic women that made a difference in Indian society beginning with Vaakrishi Ambhrni who wrote the majestic Devi Sukta in the Rig Veda. She was a realized rishika (female word for rishi) of the Vedic era who is one of the known female voices in the largely male-dominated Rig Veda. Women who were writers of the Vedas were known as Brahmavadinis. We don't know much about her except the fact that she was the daughter of Rishi Ambrhna. Other prominent female scholars popularly known are Gargi and Maitreyi, whereas, Lopamudra, Vishwawara, Sikta, Nivavari, Ghosa, etc. were some names that I found during my research. There is also a non-exhaustive list of Rig Vedic Hymns and the female rishis who realized them given by one Quora member Raj Supe (Kinkar Vishwashreyananda).

Verse	Rishi
4.18	Aditi
10.72	Aditirdakshayani
8.91	Apala Atreyi
10.86	Indrani
10.85	Urvashi
10.134	Godha
10.39, 10.40	Gosha Kakshivati
10.109	Juhurbramhajaya
10.184	Tvashta Garbhakarta
10.107	Dakshina Prajapatya
10.154	Yami
10.10	Yami Vaivasvati
10.127	Ratrirbharadvaji

1.171	Lopamudra
10.28	Vasukrapatni
10.125	Vagambhrni
5.28	Vishvavara Atreyi
8.1	Sashvatyangirasi
10.151	Shradhda Kamayani
10.159	Shachi Paulomi
10.189	Sarparajni
9.86	Sikata Nivavari
10.85	Surya Savitri
1.126	Romasha
10.108	Sarama Devashuni
9.104	Shikhandinyava Psarasau Kashyapan
10.142	Jarita Sharngah
8.71	Suditirangirasah
10.153	Indra Mataro

Like the wise female rishis, there are also a number of brave queens that existed on the Indian subcontinent. Queen Mrgavati of the Vatsa Mahajanapada ruled as regent around the 6<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> BCE while her son Udayana was either a minor or held in captive by the rival king. In the 2nd century BCE, Queen Nayanika (or Naganika) was the ruler and military commander of the Satavahana Empire of the Deccan region (south-central India). Another early female ruler in South Asia was Queen Anula of Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka 1st century BCE). Rudrama Devi was a monarch of the Kakatiya dynasty in the Deccan Plateau with the capital at Warangal of present-day Telangana from 1263 until her death. She was one of the few women to rule as a monarch in the Indian subcontinent. She began her rule of the Kakatiya kingdom jointly with her

father, Ganapatideva, as his co-regent, from 1261 to 1262. She assumed full sovereignty in 1263. The more popularly known queens are Raani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi (1835-1858) and Ahilyabai Holkar of Ahmednagar who ascended the throne in 1767 after the death of her husband father-in-law and son all in a few decades' time. All of these examples however show women becoming a queen only because of either marrying a king or prince or jointly ruling with the father first and coming to power after the death of the male and not without resistance from the rest of the court or in later period rejection from the British. In my speculative story, the queen is independently elected due to her own valor and does not actually need to be the wife or the daughter of a king.

## Inspiration from artists

I owe my art practice and my thought to the innumerable artists that came before me and my contemporaries. There are a few of the artists that I would like to mention here that have shaped my thinking in recent years.

Sara Naqvi, who now goes by Rah is an Indian queer artist whose work engages in narratives themed around religious and societal polarization, feminism, etc. At first, I was drawn to Rah's works through the visual language they have developed, the masks, and other textile works like the puppets, etc. in the performance video 'How does one say Queen in Islam' created for the Bangkok art biennale 2021. The other works that made me follow them on Instagram were a stop motion video called the Gastronomical essay-recipe for Dissent and another performance called Faint Breath.



Fig 19 Artist Rah Naqvi in performance video of 'How does one say Queen in Islam'

It's only later very recently that I found many parallels between Rah's and my thinking behind some works. In an interview with Shraddha Nair, Rah shares about their

upcoming video installation at that time named, 'How does one say Queen in Islam'. In this work they are bringing forth the lost/erased narratives of Islamic female leaders, warriors, etc. they talk about how the history that is taught to us is biased, "We are not being taught history in a just manner and many stories have been erased, especially the femme-narratives that we do not see in our day to day lives. There is a very biased sort of representation of femme and queer narratives. To be raised without access to this is very unjust because it deprives a young child of confidence and aspirational characters and leaders to look up to in both religious and political history." I deeply resonate with this and attempt to do something similar through my exhibition.

Rajni Parera in her ongoing traveler series creates futuristic humanoid climate refugees traveling through time and space. This work deals with the ecological crisis our planet is currently facing and the migration of people trying to escape these places in search of a better life and their resilience is celebrated through her work. I take inspiration from the imaginative aesthetic she has developed to create her species set thousands of years in the future to imagine my character from thousands of years in the past. Even though her humanoids look futuristic there is still some essence of the Sri Lankan aesthetic that is evident from the use of colors and patterns which makes this work decolonial.

In some ways, we are both playing with the idea of time in hopes of bringing about a change in the present. One of the things I noticed throughout her works was the use of brown and black bodies. I came across an interesting interview of hers on CBC where she explains how she creates superhero women of color showing them not just as warriors but also in all their feminine glory (Grundy). This is one of the important



themes underlying my myth creation where I want to normalize women in leadership roles without having to prove themselves to be the same as their male counterparts possessing masculine attributes. Apart from this, there are several masks and futuristic eyewear by Parera that have also inspired me for creating my costume.

Rishabh is an Indian visual artist, creative director, and Tollywood actor I came across on Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/rishabhad/>). Fig 21 is his work on



Fig 20 Creative photography by artist Rishabh

'Durga Pot' which is the worship of Goddess Durga done through painting during the festival of Durga Puja, 'pot' in Bengali means painting. Inspired by the Pattachitra folk paintings. Durga puja is a Goddess celebration festival widely celebrated all over the Indian subcontinent with different names such as Navratri which has been mentioned

earlier in this thesis. The face painting done on these women's faces inspires me for my Goddess makeup. In a recent ritual at my in-law's village, I had my entire forehead covered in the red ceremonial powder called 'kumkum' in a similar way. And in this ritual, I was once again considered an avatar of the goddess along with some other women. Thus, using both my personal experience and these images I create my own look for the performance. I am planning to experiment further with designs on my face for future performances using motifs from my own native cultures in Kutchch, Gujarat.

Leena Manimekalai is a South Asian critically acclaimed filmmaker and poet who creates powerful politically charged films disrupting the systemic caste-based discrimination and patriarchy in India. She recently got in trouble with the Hindu right-wing groups in India receiving death threats, rape threats, and charges for her performance documentary 'Kaali' (Xing). I think the backlash she faced for portraying the Hindu Goddess smoking and holding the pride flag just proves the need for bringing the lost wisdom back now more than ever. It is normally accepted to depict lord Shiva with 'chillum' a desi version of cigarette but not okay to show the goddess smoking! Lord Shiva is depicted as half man and half woman in the Ardhanareeshwara form but if the Goddess holds the pride flag, that is a problem.

In this documentary, the artist embodies Goddess Kaali in her rebellious spirit and walks the streets of Toronto and rides the TTC, placing Kaali in the "land of Immigrants to understand settler colonialism." The depiction of Goddess Kaali smoking, drinking liquor, eating meat, etc. is in keeping with the Goddesses described in the tantric sect sacred texts. In an interview with Outlook editor Chinki Sinha, Manimekalai explains "I grew up seeing Kali descending upon my people in my village, allowing them to live an

anarchic existence briefly, eating blood soaked meat, intoxicating enough to urinate the land possessively and dance with their primal energy. I understand Kali as my denied existence”.

I am intrigued by the use of gaze in this performance documentary, Manimekalai sees through the world through the eyes of the Goddess, the indigenous feminine spirit while Torontonians gaze at her in this goddess avatar as she records them looking at her and their reactions with her camera. There is a double gaze at play here which is eventually seen by the public viewing this documentary. And she concludes,” What we get is the exoticization of dark skin and its illustrious presence by people of other shades of color and white” (Sinha). I try to use gaze in my performance too wherein I look through the mirror mask into the eyes of each person in front of me in the audience and the person sees not only my eyes but their own face in the mirror making it a double gaze effect as well. Although these artists have very different practices from mine, I am influenced by them and their works indirectly.

## Performance and Story element

### **Why performance**

Right from the first performance I did for the critical autobiography assignment in Prof. Prokopow's class, I felt extremely empowered while performing. I was able to experience the power, I could never have in my regular life. I have been a performer throughout my childhood dancing on stage in front of a crowd, but that made me uncomfortable at times. However, after several years when I created my own performance including the costume and a poem, it made me feel empowered and healed the trauma that I was going through at the time. The moment I put on the red bindi on my forehead I feel like the divine has entered my body and everything else falls into place.

My background is in drawing and painting but coming into the interdisciplinary program my agenda was to explore a new discipline that would be useful in expressing my subject efficiently. I could have simply painted the different forms of the goddess for my thesis but that to me would be an incomplete depiction. To me, it feels like a passive approach where I don't get to dynamically engage the audience in a meaningful way and my goal here was to create an immersive experience using audio, visuals, and interactivity.

Performance uses the whole body and existence and forces one to be completely in the present moment. The subtle movements carefully curated engage the consciousness, mind, and entire body. For me, this experience was one that connected me to the feminine energy that I had pushed away for several years of my life, it was a

reconnecting with 'Shakti'. Although it appeared as if I have taken on a different character because of the makeup and costume and other props like the staff and crown, etc. it was really just a revealing of what is already within. And what I want to convey through this performance is that each one of us has this divine 'Shakti' within us.

## About the final performance

For the final performance, I made another costume to create a visual spectacle, with more elaborate power shoulders, similar to the ones seen in the depiction of mythological characters of the Mahabharata. I have draped a Kshatriya-style dhoti sari. Anthony Howell explains how performance artists even if they are not acting in the traditional theatrical way are “still projecting a self or a persona through posture, through body language, and through their clothing... [I]n performance one attempts to see oneself seeing- to imagine what one looks like as one looks” (Howell 16-7). Clothing is an important aspect of my performance, unlike the muted look from the previous experiment I am going all in this time and embracing the exotic nature of my subject staying true to the cultural norm.

I acknowledge the fact that this creates an immediate othering effect, but it is in keeping with the way the Goddess navigates from dual to the nondual in Devi Sukta. Howell further mentions that in terms of performance, the artist prefers to wear only that kind of clothing that has a use and carries only the objects that are functional and support the concept of the work. Thus, in my case a ‘dhoti’ signifies freedom of movement-- the reason it was used in wars was to provide maximum flexibility of movement. I have the wand or the stick in place of a ‘Trishul’ (trident, weapon) to carry my bowl of rice that I give out at the end of my ceremony. A Trishul is a weapon to kill or cause harm and my intention here as a goddess is not to harm but to remind the existence of the divine within every being. The audio is chanting of the devi sukta found online in female voices. For the final performance, I create a mirror mask, which I use to walk around with, in front of the participants so they see themselves as the Goddess. In this way I

want to convey the Advaita nature of my work, “Tatvam Asi” that thou art. You are none other than the divine energy, just waiting to be realized.



Fig 21 Artist in performance with mirror mask.

## **Use of gaze and interactivity**

During my experimental performance, I maintained an intense gaze into the eyes of the audience participants as I walked around playing the Damru (Lord Shiva's Instrument). This was the most powerful moment in the performance. Gaze plays an important role in a performance. I remember how some of the audience members became uncomfortable and one of them actually did not look back into my eyes and completely avoided eye contact. I was trying to look into each of their eyes with a gentle smile on my face like that of the goddess sculptures and paintings that I have been seeing since my childhood. Discussing with advisor Johanna Householder I realized that this kind of intense gaze itself can be the interaction element with my audience, as I pondered about the interactive element of my performance which is giving out rice at the end of the performance/ceremony in order to be added to the mandala. This had a risk of becoming a kind of formality of interaction where the audience is reduced to automatons simply doing what is asked of them instead of actively interacting with the work. However, further discussing the importance of offering rice in Hindu rituals, it became clear that having this element in the performance is meaningful and must be conveyed accordingly, leaving the audience with free choice for what they would like to do with that handful of rice they receive. A link to the documentation of my performance and the exhibition can be found in the appendix.



## Creation of the fictional story

The beginning of my fictional story was a poem called 'Bhavishya ka Itihas' meaning a history of the future as a precursor to the story, created in the independent study course taught by Professor Marton Robinson. This was done as a part of the loophole collective's collaborative book "The Loop Hole, Voices From The Archive" which aims at centering alternative knowledge and ways of producing knowledge using decolonial strategies and aesthetics along with, language revitalization, and indigenous methodologies, etc.

### भविष्य का इतिहास

*(A future's history)*

यह कैसी ध्वनि इतनी सुरीली? कोई मुझे याद कर रहा है।

*Someone is calling out to me ....*

*Recalling me one letter one word at a time.*

*That sound!*

*I've heard it before but now it feels closer to me.*

*It is an invocation,*

*I am being awakened by a strong frequency, a mind*

*wave*

*It has been a while since I was last remembered.*

*My limbs have become stiff;*

*I've been asleep for several millennia.*

इतिहास ने तो मुझे भूला दिया

जला दिया

मिट्टी में दफना दिया

फिर आज इतने युगों बाद

कोई मुझे पुकार रहा है।  
*His/story tried erasing me in million ways,  
 but I can't be killed  
 I live in the soil,  
 the water,  
 and even the air of this land,  
 I live in the bones of those who lived on the land  
 and those who will be born.*  
 मे एक गाथा हूँ इतिहास की।  
*I am an epic of ancient India.  
 A story as grand as the Ramayana,  
 as elaborate as Mahabharata  
 but no one knows about me yet because I was burned amongst  
 thousands of manuscripts in the libraries of ancient Indian universities.  
 I am a story of a magnificent queen who ruled most of the South Asian subcontinent.  
 A story that will change your perspective toward women.  
 The time has come for me to re-emerge through the dust of all these ages.*

As this story developed further it became one of the two main elements of the exhibition. I place my story between 1700 BCE to 1500 BCE approximately between the end of the Indus Valley Civilization and the beginning of the Vedic era. This story is of a queen named Aadya who was found as a baby on the banks of the river Parusni by the female rishi Ambhrini and taken to her ashram. This story is inspired by the existing epics and real-life heroines of ancient India. It is an ode to my younger self that did not get to hear many stories of feminine excellence and opposed to that only came across stories of oppression or struggle against patriarchy by women and girls.

For the exhibition, I created fake archeological artifacts like tablets with broken pieces of the story of Queen Aadya, some seals, and two coins. As per my story, all these pieces of evidence are excavated at the Parushni excavation site as the first part of the excavations. This is just the beginning of the molding of this tale which will become an elaborate epic with subsequent archeological finds. The inscription on these objects is done in Brahmi script. I wrote it originally in Hindi and then translated it into the Brahmi script as it is one of the ancient scripts developed in the post-Indus Valley era and finally translated it into English.

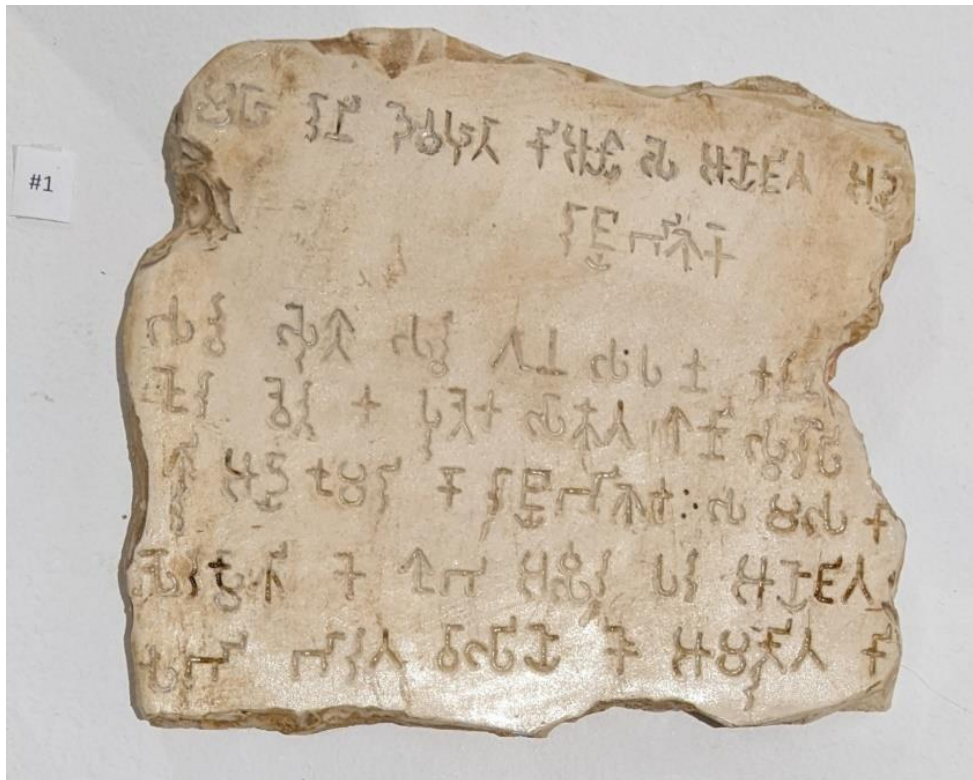


Fig22 Tablets 1 in Brahmi script

#### Tablet 1 in Hindi

महारानी देवहुति की आज्ञा से आयोजित सुकुमारी देवी आद्या  
का राज्याभिषेक। सर्व श्रेष्ठ सर्व गन सम्पन्न करुणा का प्रतीक  
साक्षात् शक्ति स्वरुपिनी श्री आद्या कुमारी का राज्याभिषेक  
इस मास की पूरणमासी के शुभ अवसर पर आयोजित  
किया गया है। सभी भारत वासी को आमंत्रित किया जाता है।

English translation- By the order of the great queen Devahuti a crowning ceremony has been organized for Devi Aadya. The greatest of all times the symbol of bravery and an embodiment of Shakti itself, Kumari Aadya is going to be crowned on the auspicious occasion of the full moon celebration of this month. All the citizens of Bharat are invited.

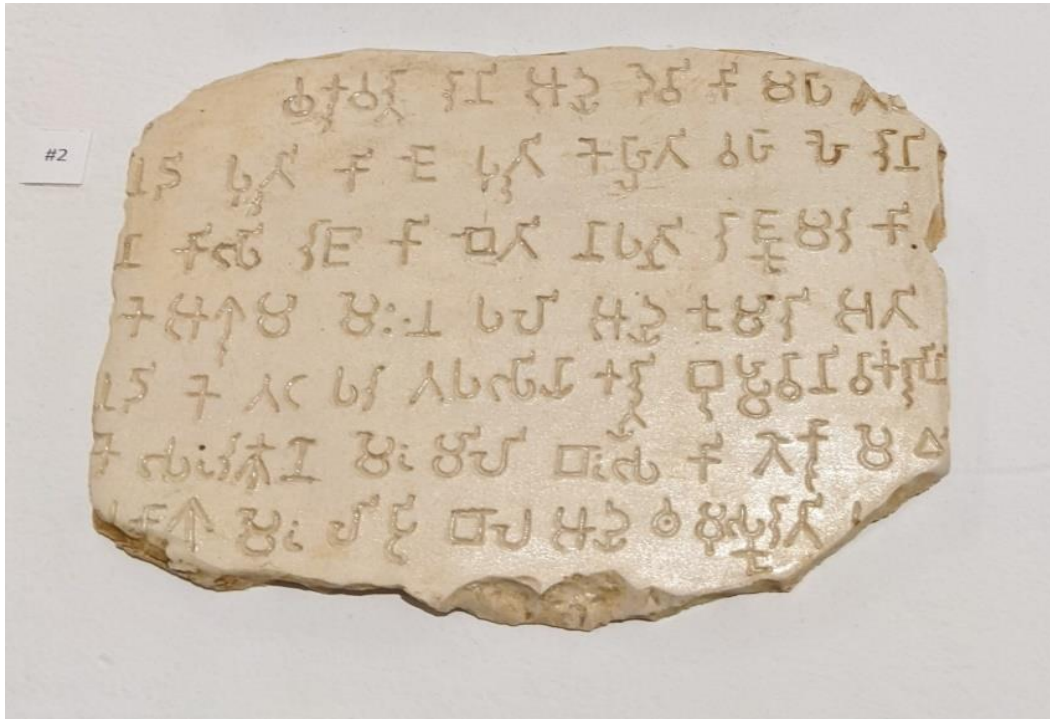


Fig 23 Tablet 2 Brahmi script

#### Tablet 2 in Hindi

महा गाथा चक्रवर्ती रानी आद्या देवी की  
 नदी परुष्णी की जो बेटी कहलाती वह है रानी आद्या देवी भारत की।  
 न किसी राजा की बेटी न पत्नी राजकुमार की। ऋषि अम्भृणी के  
 आश्रम में पली आद्या कुमारी अति बुद्धिशाली। नदी के तटपर  
 तपस्या करती ब्रह्मवादिनी... के संरक्षण में मिली बांस की टोकरी में...  
 लिपटी बाल आद्या थी... मुस्कुराती हुई।

English translation- Undefeatable Queen Aadya Devi's grand story. The one who was called the daughter of river Parusni. She is the queen of Bharat Aadya Devi. She was neither a King's daughter nor a Prince's wife. Wise Queen Aadya was raised in the ashram of Rishi Ambhrini\*. While meditating on the banks of river Parusni, brahmavadini ... protected by... found in a cane basket ... wrapped in... baby Aadya was found smiling...

## Conclusion

The question that led me to this research was 'Why do I feel shame and disdain toward my own culture?' inspired by the pride my Indigenous colleagues and professors take in their Indigenous culture. I understood the many factors that contribute to this feeling are the patriarchal rules and expectations from women within the society as well as in the family unit, the colonial education that highlighted only the misery of the Indian people, and subsequent defeats in battles against the invaders, and the TV and movies of my growing up years that depicted the women in miserable states.

Discussions with my primary advisor brought to my attention that almost all the ancient cultures around the globe had goddess worship and women may have enjoyed equal if not higher status and society may have been matriarchal. But in the later period, the globe was overtaken by patriarchy. The reason behind this could be that early men believed women to be solely responsible for birthing, hence preserving the species. Thus, even in some Hindu stories like the one where Goddess Parvati gives birth to Ganesha using the sandal paste that she uses for her bath, is solely done by her without the need of lord Shiva her husband.

While researching the patriarchy in Indian society I came across the many dichotomies clearly evident in personal stories, scriptures, philosophical schools of thought, and iconographies of ancient India which hinted at the possibility of a more egalitarian and open-minded society of the past. A history that is different from the one that is taught in the colonial education system. And how can a different past change our present and our future?

Through my experimentation, I found that critiquing the culture only took me to a dark place and made me even more negative, whereas bringing the South Asian feminine excellence of the past to the forefront made me feel empowered. Thus, instead of blindly criticizing the Indian patriarchal culture I decided to focus on ways in which I can reclaim the power of the divine feminine using ancient wisdom. This also serves a dual purpose of not only challenging the rightist patriarchy of the later period that claims its roots in the traditional system and holding on to oppressive rules in the name of preserving culture but also the leftist complete rejection of this intelligent culture based on ancient wisdom in the name of feminism.

I start from a Hindu-based women-centric methodology working towards contextualizing Indian feminism that is not merely an import of Western feminism. Through this work, I am exploring different ways to reconnect to the divine feminine energy that we have been disconnected from for far too long. Highlighting the suppressed narrative of the Goddess as being the ultimate creator, embodying the 'Shakti', and invoking this energy using sound and visuals I have attempted to heal and empower. Through iconography in art and real-life instances of brilliant femmes of ancient India, I tackle the stereotypical narrative of South Asian women being deprived of education and opportunity. And through the creation of a fictional story set in history, I am trying to build strong female characters that women can identify with. Ultimately, I hope that this work will be instrumental in making South Asian young girls feel empowered and less ashamed of their cultural background.

## Appendix

Video documentation of the exhibition- <https://youtu.be/RKLRVI4rW7I>

Video documentation of the performance- <https://youtu.be/AAtnKABBMuA>



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