



# Appreciating/Appropriating Wealth through Women: Devdutt Pattanaik's Mythmaking

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*Abstract:* 'Lakshmi' is much sought after in Hindu mythology. Devas, Asuras, Rakshash, Yakshas all need and vie for them. Rakshashas usurp wealth. Yakshas too forcefully seize and hoard wealth. Asuras who live in 'patal' believe that Lakshmi rightfully belongs to them and is therefore in perpetual war with the Devas who enjoy prosperity in 'Swarg'. The monastic order on the other hand shuns wealth and is therefore conspicuous by the absence of the role of women. Wisdom however is all about appreciating and not denying wealth. In the Puranas, it is said Vishnu always attracts wealth. That is why his abode, Vaikuntha, is the land of happiness. It's a playground or 'ranga-bhoomi'. Pattanaik contrasts this with Swarga, the paradise of Indra, king of the devas, who is constantly fighting Asuras. His abode is 'rana-bhoomi' or battleground as he chases Lakshmi and tries to prevent the Asuras from taking her away. Rich companies phenomenally successful are all under siege constantly battling workers, courts, regulators, struggling to get land from villagers and licenses from the government. They don't attract investments, the absence of Vaikuntha. But they are constantly fighting starvation despite bumper harvests; we are 'Swarga'. Menaka and Mohini are same in appearance. But while Menaka seeks to entrap the sage, Mohini seeks to enlighten the sage. In a society that wanted all men to have wives, women's freedom had to be curtailed. Laws had to be created so that she did not leave her husband for a better or more desirable man. Chastity of women served to allay male anxiety over their incompetence and inadequacy. This paper looks at the myth making of women that justifies the troubled relationship between the entrepreneur and the enterprise thus paving the way for social inequality in India.

Keywords: Alakshmi, appropriating, wealth, vaikuntha, Lakshmi, Ranga Bhoomi

As wealth poured into IPL and everyone raved about the meteoric rise of the brand, it was clear that Alakshmi was just round the corner. Alakshmi is the goddess of strife. She causes quarrels. She is called 'Jyestha' or the elder-one because she is the elder sister of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, one who is inseparable from Lakshmi. (Pattanaik, The Rise of Alakshmi)

As Devdutt Pattanaik says

Alakshmi is a secret goddess, invisible to all. The only way to see her is to have Saraswati, goddess of knowledge and good sense by side. But Lakshmi will never let Saraswati stay in the same house as her. She will go wherever there is Saraswati and kick her out, making room for Alakshmi. Why does she do that, one wonders. But then one is told that Lakshmi is a whimsical goddess, she does not like to stay in one place too long. By kicking Saraswati out and by getting Alakshmi in, she ensures there is a fight in the house and when there is a fight, wealth invariably moves out of a house. But if Saraswati is in the house, good sense prevails, fights do not take place and Lakshmi is unable to move out.

Lakshmi is whimsical probably because it only reflects the fluidity or suggestiveness of the Hindu philosophy which only shows and not necessarily dictates. It is for the human being to choose and bear the burden or bask in the glory of the choice.

But with Lakshmi resides an invisible Alakshmi. Hence, Ravana, despite being a great scholar, acts like a megalomaniac, risking the welfare of his city, even his family, just to satisfy his lust and his desire for revenge. He refuses to entertain any sound advice and that is the cause of his downfall. In the Mahabharata, Lakshmi resides with the Kauravas. They live in royal comfort all their life, yet, for Alakshmi, they are consumed by bitterness and jealousy and rage against their cousins, the Pandavas, who have nothing. That ill feeling causes Duryodhana to ignite a war which leads to the death of all his brothers.

Pattanaik says "As society increasingly values Lakshmi over Saraswati, a trend reflected in IPL, we are inviting Alakshmi into our lives, to our great peril."

Everyone needs, and wants Lakshmi in Hindu mythology: Devas, Asuras, Rakshasas, Yakshas. But each one's relationship with wealth is different. One who grabs wealth is called a rakshasa. One who steals wealth is a Rakshasa. Ravana is a Rakshasa because he grabbed the golden-city of Lanka which was built by his brother, Kubera. Ravana is considered a great scholar of Vedas; but still he is a Rakshasa, because he appropriated Lakshmi, instead of generating her. Yakshas, like Rakshasas, grab wealth from Nagas and hoard it. Asuras are slightly different from Rakshasas, in terms of the relationship to wealth. Asuras live in Patal, below the earth, which is a source of all wealth but all the wealth is enjoyed by Devas who live in paradise, above the sky. The Asuras feel that the Devas have what 'belongs' to them – so they want to reclaim what is theirs. Rakshasas are simply jealous of Yaksha wealth – so they want to grab what others have and they want. They steal. Asura action is motivated by a sense of justice. Rakshasa action is based on greed and lust.(Pattanaik, Lashmi helps us define who's God and who's not.)

Ravana grabs Lakshmi like a Rakshasa, and Duryodhana clings to Lakshmi like a yaksha, and Karna fights like an asura who feels tricked of what is rightfully is. Pandavas like Devas feel entitled. Only Ram and Krishna do not take Lakshmi for granted and work on dharma to make Lakshmi walk their way. That is why they are worshipped. It is this dynamics with the woman, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth that defines who is god and who is not.

Men and women who shun money are considered to be sages, holier than the rest, and closer to God. This is extremely peculiar, considering that Lakshmi is a goddess, the beloved of Vishnu, the preserver of the world. Vishnu is popularly worshipped as Shri-nath and Tiru-pati which means lord of affluence and abundance. Wisdom is all about appreciating wealth in its context, not denying wealth.

Pattanaik points out in "Beloved of Wealth" :

As Indians, we have lost the wisdom of appreciating wealth. In the Puranas, it is said Vishnu always attracts wealth. That is why his abode, Vaikuntha, is the land of happiness; it's a playground or Ranga-bhoomi. Contrast this with Swarga, the paradise of Indra, king of the devas, who is constantly fighting

asuras and His abode of Rana-bhoomi or battleground as he chases Lakshmi and tries to prevent the asuras from taking her away.

Happiness comes when Lakshmi walks our way not when we seek to grab her. The question, is India today Swarga or Vaikuntha? We will quickly say, certainly not Swarga. But that is not true. We have many rich people and rich companies in the land that are phenomenally successful. But they are all under siege constantly battling workers, courts, regulators, struggling to get land from villagers and licenses from the government. They are in the battlefield, like Indra. They don't attract investments, so they are not Vaikuntha. But are constantly fighting starvation despite bumper harvests; we are therefore Swarga. That is why Indra is not worshipped, Vishnu is. Investors seek Vaikuntha where they feel their wealth will be protected and their wealth will grow. They seek Vishnu.

Pattanaik sees it this way:



The fundamental difference between Indra and Vishnu is that Indra only thinks of himself and his shareholders. They all feel entitled, like shareholders. Vishnu thinks of everyone — employees, customers, shareholders, vendors, society at large, in other words stakeholders. A very large multinational firm recently informed me that they now think 'smart' because they want to think holistically; taking into consideration society at large in their strategic decisions, but it is tough as the shareholders want their profit. Here we see the great struggle of Indra trying to be Vishnu. We want Vaikuntha, but we can't let go of Swarga.

Apsaras were nymphs who slipped away from the grasp of man, like water from a clenched fist. They were sent by the Devas to beguile and seduce Tapasvins, ascetics who sought to churn spiritual fire (tapa). The point of the seduction was to entrap the ascetics in the material world. Menaka was one such Apsara who seduced Kaushika, a king who was determined to become a sage, liberated from all things material. Then there is Mohini, the enchanting female form of Vishnu. In appearance, she is just like an Apsara, beguiling and seductive. She enchants even Shiva, the greatest of Tapasvins. But her agenda is different: she seeks to draw attention to the essential role of material things in spiritual life. She facilitates the transformation of Shiva, the indifferent hermit,

to Shankara, the benevolent householder. Menaka and Mohini are the same in appearance. But while Menaka seeks to entrap the sage, Mohini seeks to enlighten the sage. Menaka is indifferent to the spiritual downfall of the Tapasvin, while Mohini balances material growth with spiritual growth. (Dance of Enchantress)

When an organization is focused on its sales numbers alone, and not the benefit to the customer, they function as Menakas — seductive nymphs serving the shareholders alone. When sales numbers are a consequence of serving or helping a customer, the organization functions as a Mohini.

Shvetaketu in ‘The Mahabharata’ discovers his mother in the arms of another man but the father, Uddalaka, is not upset. Shvetaketu wonders how he can be sure that he is his father’s son. So he institutes the law of marriage that requires the wife to be faithful to her husband. But he can ask her to go to another man if he is unable to make her pregnant himself. In a society that wanted all men to have wives, women’s freedom had to be curtailed. Laws had to be created so that she did not leave her husband for a better or more desirable man. Chastity of women served to allay male anxiety over their incompetence and inadequacy. With a wife at home obliged to be faithful to him, the man had nothing to fear. His fidelity was not a matter of law but a matter of choice. (Female as Alpha)

In the Adbhut Ramayana Sita is described as slaying a demon with hundred heads, suggesting she is capable of easily slaying Ravana who has only ten, but chooses to downplay her power to establish Rama as God. But modern storytellers — even on television — prefer versions that portray her as demure, weakly breaking down when Rama abandons her. They refuse to highlight the Sita who comfortably raises her children alone in the forest, just like Shakuntala, Hidimbi and Kunti. Men still want women to be victims, needing rescue, dependent creatures unlike the female in nature, who is very much capable of taking care of herself and her family.

In Hindu mythologies, when Ram is compared with Krishna, we are told Ram is more masculine and Krishna more feminine (Krishna even plaits his hair and sports a nose ring in many artworks). But both Ram and Krishna are forms of Vishnu who is clearly more feminine than the very masculine Shiva. (Masculine and Feminine Leaders). Therefore it is the feminine Vishnu who appreciates wealth and can form a sustainable

relationship with her. The masculine, the male on the other hand in lusting for her has to therefore present her as a meek creature in need of appropriation.

Yet in local legends near Mathura, Shiva takes the form of a milkmaid to dance with Krishna who is the complete man (purna-purush) and so becomes adored as Gopeshwar. In the local legends of Tamil Nadu, Shiva takes the form of a midwife to deliver the child of a female devotee. Like Vishnu who often turns into Mohini and does not take the help of nymphs, Shiva chooses not to take the help of his wife, Gauri.

Some feminist anthropologists are of the opinion that until the concept of property rights emerged, the world was matriarchal, based on a mother goddess, who is the earth. But property rights gave rise to inheritance rights and so fatherhood became important. With that the female divine lost her privileged position and was overshadowed by the father god.

Not so in Hindu mythology. Lakshmi may be visualised as massaging Vishnu's feet, but she will not be disrespected. She can leave Vaikuntha if she is insulted and Vishnu has to work hard to bring her back. Shakti stands on an equal footing to Shiva, conversing with him on matters of Veda and Tantra, a conversation overheard by sages, who transmit this wisdom to humanity. Radha dances with Krishna, but she is not his wife. Sita, who performs the Agni Pariksha, to prove her chastity, refuses to return to Ayodhya, after being cast out of the palace. Of course, a feminist reading of Hindu mythology will find codes that show the goddess, though present, is inferior to god and even denied agency. (Metaphors of the Goddess)

Perhaps the reason for this is that we take Hindu and especially Puranic mythology literally. We assume Lakshmi and Durga embody women, rather than ideas. In the mythological vocabulary, the male form is used to embody the mind and the female form to embody matter. The unenlightened dependent mind is Brahma, the enlightened independent mind is Shiva, and the enlightened dependable mind is Vishnu.

Brahma, for example, and his quarrelling children, including Devas and Asuras, Rakshasas and Yakshas, embody the unenlightened mind that creates Swarga where there is prosperity but no peace. Shiva embodies the enlightened mind, one who stays away from society, from family, atop Mount Kailas, until he is

encouraged by the goddess to descend from his mountainous icy abode, marry and share his knowledge with the world. Vishnu embodies the wise householder, sometimes king and sometimes cowherd, sometimes animal and sometimes damsel, who engages with humanity and tries to show them the big picture. (Who is a Hindu? Why do Intellectuals scorn Hindu Deities? )

Monastic movements of India sparked a countermovement. If Buddhism and Jainism rejected the overly materialistic tone of Vedic rituals, then later Agama traditions qualified the materialistic world with a spiritual undertone, where you lived a material life, fulfilled your worldly obligations, without getting attached to things. A true hermit did not leave the household; he lived as a householder but thought like a hermit. And so Shiva gets married, Ram rules a kingdom even at cost of personal happiness, and Krishna the prankster eventually witnesses the horror of civil war.

Amongst Goddesses, we are told the demure Gauri is more feminine than Durga, who marches into battle with weapons, but Kali, the wild one who drinks blood, remains a feminist icon. The silent Sita is seen as more feminine than the demanding vengeful Draupadi. In the Puranas, the male form is used to indicate the mind and the female form is used to indicate the world that the mind perceives. Thus gender-neutral ideas are represented through gendered forms. In Indian metaphysics, mind (inner world) and society (outer world) have an uneasy relationship, each one claiming to be superior to the other in different schools. Thus in Vedanta, society is Maya (delusion) and the mind is Shiva (pure, untainted by delusion) while in Tantra, society is Shakti (power) that animates the corpse-like mind (shava) into being Shiva. The reason the mind is seen as masculine and society feminine is that just as ideas of the mind can only be given a 'form' externally in the world, the reproductive power of a man can only be realised through the body of a woman.

This leads Pattanaik to the derivation that

The male form thus lends itself best to represent the mind and the female form for matter. So the male forms represent the entrepreneur (male or female) and the female forms represent the enterprise (neuter). As is the entrepreneur, so is the enterprise. If the entrepreneur is like Shiva, indifferent, the enterprise turns into Kali, wild and so demanding attention. When the entrepreneur is Shankara, paying attention,

the enterprise calms down as Gauri. If the entrepreneur is like Ram, the rule-follower, the enterprise can be like Sita, silent and obedient, or like Surpanakha, who will demand attention and whose will not be violently forced into submission. If the entrepreneur is Krishna, the enterprise will be dynamic, sometimes like Satyabhama, who demands love, and sometimes like Rukmini, who gives love, and sometimes like Radha and Draupadi, who though belonging to another, draw attention and care. As is God, so is Goddess. As is team leader, so is team. As is entrepreneur, so is enterprise. In the absence of God (the human mind), there is no enterprise. The Goddess then is nature (independent of human control).

A business that thrives taking into consideration such several possibilities and tensions can sustain.

Exclusive choices made can arouse the Alakshmi and prosperity will be anything but sustainable.

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