

# Everyday Aesthetics and the Indic Goddess Traditions: An Aurobindonian Approach

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Yuriko Saito, in *Everyday Aesthetics*, powerfully interrogates the age-old intellectual practice of equating aesthetics with the philosophy of art (1). She says that we do not pay close attention to the aesthetic value of the apparently mundane segments of our everyday life, and rather take them for granted (2). Saito criticizes the idea that aesthetics is all about detached contemplation, and focuses on the possibility of everyday aesthetics being grounded in actions as well (4-5). She proclaims that her project contains feminist elements, as, like a feminist philosopher, she too “takes up aspects of our lives that have traditionally been ignored in a serious academic discourse due to their ordinary and mundane nature, such as domestic chores and mothering activities, generally relegated to the female domain” (4). My exploration of the dynamics of everyday aesthetics within the Indic goddess traditions, in this essay, would, naturally, echo some of the feminist concerns of Saito. Saito opines that an exploration of Japanese aesthetics would reveal a significant amount of resources for everyday aesthetics (3). Here, she effectively comes out of the Eurocentric tradition of thinking about aesthetics and opens up new possibilities for spatio-temporally resituating and reformulating the idea of aesthetics itself (3). Spatially, she carries aesthetics away from Europe; temporally, she makes us move away from the *moment* of art to the ostensibly amorphous expanse of the everyday. Can we, from our Indic vantage point, attempt to lend a new critical and creative dimension to the discourse of everyday aesthetics? This is the issue I am going to explore in this essay, with particular emphasis on certain aspects of the Indic goddess traditions - through the lens of Sri Aurobindo’s figuration of the Mother Goddess in *The Mother* and *Savitri*. Saito tells us that “everyday aesthetics helps us fully appreciate the aesthetic concerns to influence,

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sometimes determine, the quality of life and the state of the world in the most literal sense” (5). I would focus on the way in which an Aurobindonian approach to the everyday aesthetics in Indic goddess cultures may influence “our quality of life” and “the state of the world”.

When we ponder over the artistic representations of the Great Goddess in the Indic traditions, we are immediately reminded of the wonderful sculptures of Durga Mahishamardini, augustly displaying her feminine charm and enormous strength. The Indic Goddess tradition, focusing on Goddess-as-Shakti, often gives the impression that the cultural dynamics of the warrior goddess is grounded in the mythic moments of slaying demons, monumentalized in the *puranas* as the great feats of Devi. The Goddess, in this tradition, appears to be far removed from the domain of everydayness, and grounded in mythic time. Indian myths, as we know, project a cyclical vision of time, and Devi is supposed to assume her divine avatars time and again to redeem the beleaguered gods and humans. In this vision of time as repetition, the repetition is mythic in scope and scale; it is different from the repetitive cycle of everydayness where the sun rises and sets at regular intervals, and which is punctuated by the rhythmic orchestration of temporal units that come back, again and again – everyday. And yet, running parallel to this tradition of the mythically momentous exploits of Devi - the tradition of Devi as located at the pinnacle of her mystic grandeur - we have the tradition of Devi-in-everydayness, a tradition that is prominent in the spiritual traditions of Shaktism. Within this tradition, Devi becomes the friend and guide of the *sadhaka*, inspires and listens to the devotional songs composed by the spiritual aspirant, makes her devotee a poet/singer, in effect synchronizing the song with the flow of everydayness rather than the “moment” of art. However, the most radical aspect of this mode of everydayness in Shakta spirituality becomes evident through the way it expands the domain of aesthetics far beyond that of “art” (songs, poems, paintings, sculptures) – the way it seeks to foreground the beauty of *being*, the *madhu* (to echo the Vedic expression) or “sweetness” (to borrow the Arnoldian term [Arnold 58-80]) of existence itself.

Here, it would be pertinent to cite an Indian approach to the aesthetics of everydayness that Ranajit Guha finds in Rabindranath Tagore’s writings. According to Guha, Tagore understands that the everyday may dwindle into an “averaging process”, a “dull uniformity”, “unless grasped in a creative manner” (93). However, which kind of creativity would it be, especially in the context of the everyday aesthetics fostered by the Indic goddess traditions? The Indic Magna Mater is seen as the Creatrix within Shaktism, she it is who is said to be the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe. However, is not this cosmogonic creativity incommensurable with the humdrumness of the quotidian creativity that Tagore aims to underscore? How can you say that the cosmic creativity is compatible with the quotidian creativity of cooking an ordinary dish in the kitchen?

As Ossi Naukkarinen argues in the essay, “What Is ‘Everyday’ in Everyday Aesthetics?”:

... we should aim at what is normal and non-spectacular to us, at something that does not stick out from the mat of normalcy but supports the routine. This, in any case, might feel good, safe and satisfying, not simply uninteresting and boring. . .”  
(“6. Aesthetics of the Everyday”).

The everyday aesthetics, then, would need to lovingly embrace the non-spectacular, the normal dish on your dining table, the routine creativity of the cook in the kitchen. In the Indic goddess traditions, curiously, the creatrix of the universe becomes the muse of cooking as well, blending the cosmic with the quotidian, the mythic with the everyday. In Varanasi, for instance, Goddess Annapurna is seen as the presiding goddess of every kitchen. In the restaurants selling humdrum food to the middle class devotees, her pictures are hung on the wall, and she is said to be the presiding deity of food and food-making. Food is probably the most palpable locus of the quintessential everydayness of our existence. We don't generally see it "aesthetically", *sensu stricto*, but we know that it supports and propels all possible modes of aesthesis. Naukkarinen says:

Everyday life is the unavoidable basis on which everything else is built. Life without everydayness is practically impossible, and it is difficult to even imagine a life that would be completely non-everyday-like. ("2. My Everyday Now")

Food is, conspicuously, the "unavoidable basis on which everything else is built". Elsewhere, I have insisted that food is the ultimate base of existence, in relation to which everything else seems to be superstructural (Mukhopadhyay, "Nature Is Not Trash" 21-33). Annapurna is the goddess grounded in this irreducible base of existence, of aesthesis, of aesthetics. But, more importantly, we need to notice that Annapurna is also the Great Goddess, the cosmic creatrix. For her, cosmic time and everydayness are part of the same temporal frame, and not mutually exclusive. She indirectly urges us to acknowledge the aesthetic value of food, of everydayness, of the routines through which the very process of living is sustained.

While discussing the everyday aesthetics of the quotidian religious rituals in Bengali Hindu homes, Sukanya Sarbadhikary says:

The home manifests with the world, not apart from it; dimensions of cosmic space and time are folded upon this everyday home, such that the home is definitely not outside the cosmic world, but it also has an embodied independence, not fully assimilable in abstract conceptions (1-2).

While Sarbadhikary's focus is mainly on Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess at the centre of the everydayness of the Bengali Hindu household (1), what she observes is evidently applicable to Annapurna as well. In the case of Goddess Annapurna, however, we have a direct co-configuration of the cosmic goddess (who might have terrible manifestations as well) and the domestic deity, which becomes conspicuous when we ponder over the figuration of Annapurna in Bharatchandra's Bengali work, *Annadamangal* (Acharya 6-7, 10, 34). Drawing on Dipesh Chakarabarty's observations, Sarbadhikary insists that Lakshmi worship in the domestic space of the Hindu Bengali household reveals the point where the sacred, the aesthetic and the everyday crisscross (18). In the case of Annapurna's association with a more secular, "routine" ritual like cooking, we, however, come upon a more concrete instance of everyday aesthetics than what is charted in the essay by Sarbadhikary.

For understanding the deeper implications of the link between everyday aesthetics and the Indic goddess traditions, however, I would focus on Sri Aurobindo, especially on his *Mother* and *Savitri*.

In *Savitri*, at the concluding moment of the yogic *sadhana* of Aswapati, the Divine Mother blesses him with the boon that Savitri, the transformer of human life, would be born to him. This episode occurs in the Canto Four of the Book Three, which is titled "The Book of the Divine Mother". The Mother speaks through an ethereal voice:

But there arose a wide consenting Voice;  
The spirit of beauty was revealed in sound:  
Light floated round the marvelous Vision's brow  
And on her lips the Immortal's joy took shape. (345-346)

The Divine Voice says:

A sweet and violent heart of ardent calms  
Moved by the passions of the gods shall come.  
All might and greatnesses shall join in her;  
Beauty shall walk celestial on the earth,  
Delight shall sleep in the cloud-net of her hair  
And in her body as on his homing tree  
Immortal Love shall beat his glorious wings.  
A music of griefless things shall weave her charm;  
The harps of the Perfect shall attune her voice,  
The streams of Heaven shall murmur in her laugh,  
Her lips shall be the honeycombs of God,  
Her limbs his golden jars of ecstasy,  
Her breasts the rapture-flowers of Paradise. (346)

It is very clear that, in this apparently mythic moment of theophany, the cosmic time and the everyday become fused in the yogic matrix. Yoga begins from the perspective of the everyday; one needs to initiate the *sadhana* in the here and the now, and not in some transcendental domain. However, what the Divine Mother's assurance makes clear is that Savitri's birth will herald the advent of celestial beauty in the mundane realm. Savitri will not just bring divine power and divine wisdom to the spiritually inert world; she will divinize the human life with an imperishable *beauty* that is the gift from the worlds above. And yet, Savitri will roam the paths of the mortal earth, the earthly domain of everydayness. Does the Divine Mother imply that Savitri would teach humankind the art of relishing the beauty of self-transformation, the beauty of being and becoming? After the birth of Savitri, we find her remaining firmly situated within the domain of everydayness, the terrain of the ordinary (Dhar and Sil 97-98). *Savitri* is an epic, but it is an epic of a very different kind – it is an epic of everydayness, or, rather, a celebration of the conjugation of the cosmic and the quotidian. It does not tell us a story of mythic wars and heroic lives, in the conventional sense of the term "heroic". Rather, it presents a narrative where cosmic problems and cosmic resolutions are presented in the domain of everydayness. Savitri does not flee from everydayness, and even when Death comes to claim Satyavan, she brings her husband back, from the world of darkness to the light of everydayness, the light embedded in the fleshly life of tangible things (Aurobindo, *Savitri* 664-668, 692-712).

Aurobindo's whole philosophical and spiritual project is to energize the everyday world with the beauty and power of yoga. In *The Mother*, he says that the Mother has come down

to the mundane realms, to the inert physical nature of things, to divinize all things and beings, no matter however ungodly they are in their present condition (16-17). He goes on to detail the functions of the most tangible and graspable manifestations of the Divine Mother, including Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati. He says:

Wisdom and Force are not the only manifestations of the supreme Mother; there is a subtler mystery of her nature and without it Wisdom and Force would be incomplete things and without it perfection would not be perfect. Above them is the miracle of eternal beauty, an unseizable secret of divine harmonies, the compelling magic of an irresistible universal charm and attraction that draws and holds things and forces and beings together and obliges them to meet and unite that a hidden Ananda may play from behind the veil and make of them its rhythms and its figures. (20)

This is, according to Aurobindo, the domain of Mahalakshmi. He goes on to say that the other manifestations of the Mother may appear to be too far from the ordinary human mind and life, but Mahalakshmi's magical power, working through the forces of love and beauty, transforms the ordinary human life into a magnificent piece of art (*Mother* 20). Can we say that it is here that the quarrel between aesthetics as philosophy of art and aesthetics as perceiving the beauty of everydayness gets dismissed altogether?

Aurobindo says:

Life is turned in her supreme creations into a rich work of celestial art and all existence into a poem of sacred delight; the world's riches are brought together and concerted for a supreme order and even the simplest and commonest things are made wonderful by her intuition of unity and the breath of her spirit. (*Mother* 21)

Art as process and art as product are fused in this vision of beautiful beingness: everydayness appears as the beautiful process of living an existence that becomes, in its totality, a piece of celestial art. In other words, Mahalakshmi, in Aurobindo's vision, is the goddess of the everyday aesthetics who can lend newer and greater values to "the simplest and commonest things". She is, precisely, the goddess who makes us find out the wonder in everyday life that is generally enmeshed in ostensible ordinariness but embodies the impetus to aesthetic bliss that we have always overlooked. She is also the goddess of harmony (Aurobindo, *Mother* 21), who, it appears, transforms our approach to the "routine". Under her shadow, we begin to celebrate the harmonious and harmonizing dimension of the everyday routine, rather than denigrating its monotonous dimension.

That Aurobindo's figuration of the Divine Mother is aligned with the aesthetics of everydayness becomes evident in his description of the function of Mahasaraswati as well. Mahasaraswati is, as he observes, "the nearest to physical Nature" (Aurobindo, *Mother* 22). She is that manifestation of the Mother which is the closest to the fallible human self - in other words, closest to the everyday dimension of human life. She it is who takes care of the details of the laborious task of transforming human nature, turning mundane life into life divine. She is, as Aurobindo observes, the goddess of perfection. However, this perfection does not negate the value of the imperfect details of everyday life but rather works through them (*Mother* 22-23). "Nothing is too small or apparently trivial for her attention", Aurobindo writes (22). She does not get angry with the human imperfections;

she always reminds her children of the "ever-present help", "chasing away with her radiant smile the clouds of gloom and fretfulness and depression" (23). Both Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati deal with the beauty of the immanent, and teach us to eschew an asceticism that abhors the domain of earthly everydayness.

It is interesting to note that, just like Aurobindo's Mahalakshmi, the Lakshmi worshipped in the domestic space, in the domain of everydayness - the Lakshmi Sarbadhikary dwells on - also teaches us to appreciate the value of everydayness. She belongs to a feminine space, the space that is often seen by men as monotonous and boring, the sphere of routine household chores. However, the other name for Lakshmi is Sri. *Sri* is a term that connotationally encompasses all the three central tenets of the Indic concepts of beauty and well-being - *satya* (truth/reality), *shiva* (goodness) and *sundara* (the beautiful). As in the Socratic discourse (Murdoch, *Fire and the Sun* 34-36), in the classical Indian conceptualization of beauty too, we find a deep connection between goodness and beauty. Everyday goodness may often seem banal, unadventurous - nothing special or eventful. However, the stability of any civilization depends on an everydayness that is sustained by goodness. The happiness of everyday life - whether individual or collective - is impossible without this stability. Aurobindo's integral yoga highlights the significance of the everyday dimension of our being, as it reminds us that the entire life is a yogic process (Anirban 5). In this context, the Mother Goddess, who operates as a *metaxu*, or a bridge between the divine and the mundane, the immanent and the transcendent, the spiritual and the material, comes to occupy a central position in integral yoga (Mukhopadhyay, *Literary and Cultural Readings* xvii, 33-39). The comprehensive, all-encompassing nature of this yoga requires not just an acceptance of everydayness, but a celebration of the beauty thereof. Savitri, the human avatar of the Divine Mother teaches us this, and so do the figures of Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati.

As Shashibhushan Dasgupta observes, the imagery of Sri in Hinduism is associated with the celebration of Mother Earth, in its palpably earthly aspect. In this context, he underlines the moment of the appearance of Sita, considered to be an avatar of Sri/Lakshmi, in the *Ramayana*. Sita emerges from the earth, covered with the dust of the ground that is auspicious and beautiful like lotus-pollen (21-23). Probably, this is the aptest metaphor for the aesthetics of everydayness, the greatest literary figuration of *Sri*, in all its possible connotations. Just as Annapurna foregrounds the central value of food, in spite of its non-spectacularity, Lakshmi or Sri too compels us to touch, smell and venerate the dust of our earthly everydayness without which the human civilization would lose its foundation. The lotus pollen that propels much of the rhetorical flourish in the Indic literary "arts" becomes, in Valmiki's imagination, connected with the dust of the earth that is probably the ultimate basis of everyday aesthetics. If we follow this logic, the distinction between "art" as aesthetic *event* and everydayness as aesthetic *flow* becomes irrelevant. In the *Lakshmi Tantra*, Lakshmi asserts that she has not only created the universe but is also immanent to it, in spite of her transcendent glories (8-11). We find similar ideas in Aurobindo's conception of the Divine Mother, and this is what brings the Indic Goddess close to the domain of everydayness.

When we muse over the celebration of the beauty of everydayness in the Indic goddess traditions, we find the classical and folk, scriptural and performative traditions of Hinduism getting interfused in a unique way. In the Jagannatha temple of Puri, a legend says that once, on hearing Balabhadra complaining about Lakshmi, Jagannatha, her husband, asked her to go away from the temple. After Lakshmi went away, the two male gods, Jagannatha and Balabhadra could not find anything to eat. No one fed them in the temple, and hence, they had to go out of the shrine to look for food. However, due to the tricks of Lakshmi, they could not get anything to eat. Finally, they joined a queue of poor people who were being fed by a woman. When their turn came, they found that the woman was none other than Lakshmi herself. The two gods understood their mistake and took Lakshmi back, honouring her properly (Pandey 71-72). The everyday life of the temple is grounded in the food that is provided by Lakshmi, and hence the everyday aesthetics of the temple life, involving the preparation of the *mahaprasad*, that is, the elaborate meal prepared daily for Jagannatha - is grounded in Sri/Lakshmi at a fundamental, and not superficial, level. In his unique Bengali commentary on the *Devi-Mahatmya*, Satyadeva insists that Lakshmi stands for the *pranashakti* (life-force) itself (144). Hence, if Lakshmi as Sri is both beauty and goodness, then this goodness and beauty are both grounded in the life-force itself. This philosophical message is conveyed by the lore of the Jagannatha temple as well. The shift insisted by this concept is one from making art to living aesthetically, something Aurobindo's Savitri teaches us too.

When Abanindranath Thakur focuses on the *vratas* associated with Lakshmi, he mainly underlines the connection between Lakshmi and the harvest of crops. In other words, his focus is mainly on the seasonal ceremonies surrounding Lakshmi. He focuses on the artistic aspects of this *vrata* - the *alpana* (auspicious drawings on the floor on the occasion of Hindu worship rituals), for instance (23-31). However, Lakshmi also receives special weekly worship in the Bengali Hindu households on each Thursday, and, as Sarbadhikary rightly points out, every evening the conch shells are blown in her honour (Sarbadhikary 2). Hence, Lakshmi is associated not only with the seasonal cycle but also with the diurnal one, these two cycles being inseparable in the flow of time. She is not just the deity of the *events* of harvest, but is rather implicated in the *flow* of everydayness that makes life beautiful. It is not that she arrives only when the crops have ripened; rather, they ripen *with* her, they turn from green to golden under her smile. Whether it is the Lakshmi of the Bengali household, the Lakshmi of the temple-lore of Jagannatha, or the Lakshmi associated with crops, her message is the same as that of Aurobindo's Mahalakshmi: one has to capture the beauty and goodness that ooze out of everyday life when its harmony is sustained. As Constantina Rhodes observes, the worship of Lakshmi in the domestic sphere opens "a window into the infinite that exists between the movements of coming and going, of past and present, of mundane and holy" (3). I would add that the everydayness encompassed by Lakshmi expands itself into the infinite, while simultaneously revealing the infinite in the domain of the everyday.

Speaking from the vantage point of cultural anthropology, Shashibhushan Dasgupta insists that, in the Indic goddess cultures, Uma/Gauri/Parvati and Durga/Kali/Chandi

constitute two different traditions (49-50). While the second tradition focuses on the Goddess as power, the first one focuses on the Goddess in her domestic context. According to Dasgupta, these two traditions have been artificially conjoined in later Hinduism (48-50). However, when we look at this issue from the perspective of folk belief systems or from that of performative Hinduism, we come to realize that these two traditions are intertwined *organically*, and this organic connection between the goddess as power and the goddess as peace gives rise to a unique goddess symbology – the goddess who creates and destroys the universe also cooks for and feeds her husband and offspring; the (feminine) transcendent reality of the cosmos also takes care of the nitty-gritty of the everyday life of her devotee, as the Shakta saints like Ramakrishna or Bama Khyapa would, time and again, aver.

Harsha Dehejia insists that Parvati incites a fundamental aesthetic process in Shiva's consciousness. She it is who makes Shiva aware of the world of *namarupa* and also of himself:

In loving Parvati, Shiva discovers the world of *namarupa*, the objective world of name and form, and having cognised this world eventually discovers himself. The *rasa* of *sringara* has now been transformed into the emotion of *adbbhuta*, amazement. (Dehejia 15)

In other words, it is Parvati who brings Shiva down from timelessness to cosmic time, and then finally to the domain of everydayness. She is, precisely, the initiator of aesthetics itself, or even of *aesthesis*, in Shiva. Her mirror holds up before Shiva's eye the *rasa* of *namarupa*, the beauty of the phenomenal world, the nectar of everyday existence (Dehejia 58). As far as the social dimension of the symbology of Parvati is concerned, she is embedded in the everydayness of many Indian women, as Dehejia asserts (Dehejia 15-16). On the one hand, she is preserved and celebrated in "art": literature, painting, sculpture (Dehejia 62); on the other hand, she is part of the everyday aesthetics of many women of rural India who find in her "a true and loving friend" (Dehejia 16).

However, as Naukkarinen rightly points out, one's everydayness is always different from that of another, even though, probably, all human modes of everydayness have common, shareable aspects ("2. My Everyday Now"), and each mode of everydayness is "borderlinked" (to appropriate Bracha Ettinger's term [Ettinger 158 – 160]) with the other forms of everydayness, including beings, things, attitudes – "life-worlds" (Schutz and Luckmann 1-21), in short. Hence, it is necessary to look at the diversity of the experiences of everyday aesthetics in the Indic goddess traditions. As we have seen, Aurobindo's Mahasaraswati mentors and guides the humans in their everyday work, whether spiritual or material. She is the living presence near us, the immanence that is tangible, and not merely notional (Aurobindo, *Mother* 23). While in the Sanskrit literary traditions and the Indic traditions of visual arts, the everyday life of the family of Shiva and Parvati is detailed (Dasgupta 90-128; Dehejia 68-69, 84-99), in the songs of a Shakta saint like Ramprasad, we find the co-existence of the images of everyday life in rural Bengal and those of the cosmic glory of Kali (Dasgupta 210-211, 228-235). However, Kali, in these songs, is grounded in both everydayness and cosmic time, encompassing the *samsara* that, as Sarbadhikary finely observes, encapsulates both the home and the universe

in the day-to-day Hindu belief system (1-2). Here, the Shakta saint-poet appears to live his everyday life with Kali, as would Ramakrishna. The songs of the Shakta poets of Bengal do not emerge *out of* their everyday life; they flow *along with* the waves of everydayness. The woman who worships Parvati or Lakshmi as a goddess and also as a friend-in-everydayness, the girl who draws the *alpana* on the floor on the occasion of Lakshmi's weekly or daily worship, the maker of the clay image of the goddess whose hands are implicated in a "co-poetic" (a la Ettinger [Ettinger 158-160]) relation with the clay body of the goddess-to-be, are all involved in different but interlinked modes of everyday aesthetics, knowingly or unknowingly. Kamal Kumar Majumdar focuses on the integral relation between "art" (*shilpa*) and everyday life in the popular Hindu belief systems in Bengal (cited in Chakrabarti 376-377). Sudhir Chakrabarti, while writing on the folk painters of the *chalachitras* of the large clay images of Durga in Bengal, underlines the enlivening, dialogic negotiation between the everyday lives of these people and the pan-Indian mythological texts and symbols. He argues that the folk art of Bengal is the product of the transformation of the textual traditions of the Hindu *puranas* by the play of the popular imagination in the domain of everydayness (375-391). Indeed, different groups and individuals, associated with or hyphenated to the goddess cultures of India, embody myriad modes of everyday aesthetics, and their experiences may or may not include "art" in the conventional sense of the term.

There is, however, another extremely important and unique mode of everydayness which can by no means be neglected in the Indic context. It is the everydayness of the saint who lives in an intimate relation with the Divine, everyday. The beauty of the Great Goddess that is extolled in Shankaracharya's *Saundaryalahari* and "Anandalahari" and in Ganapati Muni's *Umasahasram* is the beauty that a saint, immersed in devotion to the Divine Mother, lives with and lives by, in his/her everyday life. It is this beauty which sustains difficult spiritual exercises, integralizing (a la Aurobindo) yoga. As in the everyday life of the householder, in the everydayness of the Goddess-worshipping spiritual aspirant too, the Goddess becomes the source of beauty and goodness, or rather, beauty-as-goodness. Aurobindo insists that Mahalakshmi dislikes that mode of spiritual exercise which is founded on "ascetic bareness and harshness" (*Mother* 21). Even while we tend to believe that Shankaracharya was a champion of "ascetic bareness and harshness", his works like *Saundaryalahari* and *Anandalahari* give us a different impression. It appears that he did understand and appreciate the necessity for the beautiful touch of the Goddess in an ascetic's everyday life. Similarly, Ganapati Muni prays in the *Umasahasram*:

May Uma, the Mother of the entire world! Bless us who are afflicted with darkness (ignorance) and suffering, with the moon light of her smile, moist with the nectar of compassion. (1)

Here, the wisdom that is supposed to remove the darkness of ignorance is wisdom and beauty at once. And it is this beauty, the enlightening smile of Uma, which is invoked by the saint to activate his everyday aesthetics.

It may be asked: how can we bring in the gods and goddesses while discussing everyday aesthetics? Is it not a solely *human* affair? A "secular" enterprise? The point is that, in the

Indic traditions, the sacred and the secular are often intertwined in complex ways. As Lata Mani suggests, we need a "SacredSecular" paradigm to understand and critique our contemporary reality. She says that such a paradigm would "explore the inextricability of the sacred and secular realms of existence, . . . and the inseparability of spiritual philosophy from the practice of everyday life" (1). This is important in the Indic context, as here, to borrow the expression of Thales, "everything is full of gods" (Gregory 65-66). The Shakta saint lives his or her everyday life with the Goddess as much as with his/her co-humans.

As Ananda Coomaraswamy points out, the Indic view of beauty would imply that "beauty is a state" that is discovered when, "in aesthetic contemplation as in love and knowledge, we momentarily recover the unity of our being released from individuality" (68-69). This experience would, obviously, be SacredSecular rather than *either* sacred *or* secular. However, revisiting Coomaraswamy's formulation of beauty as a "state" from the perspective of Aurobindo's integral yoga, we come to understand that the SacredSecular nature of the everyday aesthetics which may be induced by the Aurobindonian figures of the Goddess would reveal the unity of being not momentarily but perpetually – that is, "everyday" – if, as Aurobindo insists, we could open ourselves up to the Divine Mother completely (*Mother* 12-13). As Coomaraswamy observes, the vision of beauty "is a state of grace that cannot be achieved by deliberate effort" (66). In other words, it comes down to us, like the avatar of the Goddess that Savitri was (Aurobindo, *Savitri* 345-346). The *Saundaryalahari* ultimately teaches us how to surrender ourselves completely to the Goddess (150, 160), and so does *Umasahasram* (557). Aurobindo says that, as the aspirant's self-surrender becomes more and more spontaneous, s/he becomes aware that the Mother herself is working through him/her and comes to understand that his/her "very breathing and moving come from her and are hers" (*Mother* 13). It is this self-opening or "unselfing" (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 82) that seems to be the secret of everyday aesthetics in the Indic goddess traditions, as understood through the Aurobindonian lens. When we cease to occupy the subject position in aesthetic enjoyment, we become receptive to the whispers of the Great Goddess. Aurobindo, like many other saints of Shaktism, implies that she is whispering to us always, at every moment. If we could be receptive to her voice, our everydayness would become beautiful, illumined by her smile. In this sense, everyday aesthetics is also the aesthetics of surrendering the ego and becoming one with the universe, in the flow of everydayness. It is here that – to borrow a reiterative image from Tagore songs – everyday aesthetics turns the individual into a *vina* (lute) in the hands of the Goddess whose body is the universe.

The Vedic *rishis* had sought to celebrate and sustain the beauty of *every* dawn, *every* morning, *every* night, through their hymns to the goddesses like Sri, Ratri (Night) and Usha (Dawn) (Rig Veda Book 6, Hymn 65 [to Dawn]; "Sri Sukta" 89-93; "Ratri Sukta" 97-98). It seems to me that these hymns can be seen today as the SacredSecular ways of worshipping everydayness itself, a simple worship that we probably need badly in our restless present. While we draw Lakshmi's footprints on our floors on religious occasions, Aurobindo's Mahalakshmi makes us understand that her feet are spread everywhere, in every facet of everydayness – that the states of grace that Coomaraswamy speaks of are

not so rare after all but available in the domain of everydayness. Everyday aesthetics inspires us to look around and find out the footprints of the goddess of beauty-as-goodness everywhere - the footprints that do not indicate that she has passed by or will arrive, but rather imply that she is, always, already there.

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