

Lakshmi, Bounty and Cultural Deification: A Review of *Treasures of Lakshmi – The Goddess who Gives* by Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal

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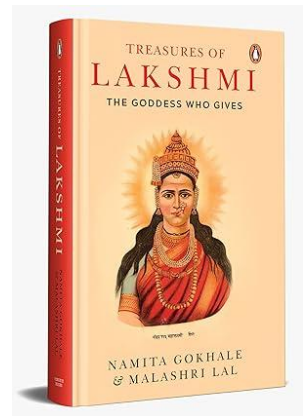
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Indian mythology and cultural constructiveness have always seen Lakshmi as the goddess who gives, Lakshmi as the goddess of bounty and fortune. If we scrutinize the cross-cultural segments of Greek, Roman, and Indian mythology, we find that in the treatment of Lakshmi and Aphrodite, the themes of beauty, fertility, and abundance, are highlighted. Whereas Lakshmi is said to have emerged from the churning of the cosmic ocean (the *Samudra Manthan*), Aphrodite was born from sea foam. Even Lakshmi, Tyche (Greek) and Fortuna (Roman) share the common themes of prosperity and material opulence. It is true how the interactions between Indian and Greco-Roman civilizations created the connections between Lakshmi and the Greek goddesses. Additionally, the Yavana (Greek) influence in the entire matrix of Indian art and iconography, particularly in the field of Gandhara art, has contributed to visual motifs while depicting the deities.

Treasures of Lakshmi – The Goddess Who Gives by Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal is the culmination of the Indian goddess trilogy, edited and curated by these two authors. The trilogy had its inception with *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*, continued with *Finding Radha: The Quest for Love*, and reaches its crescendo with the perfect harmonization of the sacred, the feminine, and the quintessential female whose footprints allow everyone to flourish. *Treasures of Lakshmi – The Goddess Who Gives* is divided into four distinct sections, with the main text being introduced with the hymns to Lakshmi and a riveting introduction by Malashri Lal, where she adroitly points out, “Within that vast framework, the first section unveils Lakshmi’s essence in the ‘divine interpretations’ proffered by historians, economists, storytellers, and mythologists.” (Lal xxxi) It is true how the basic essence of Lakshmi’s arrival, defining India and the Kubera Lakshmi effect in the cultural studies

of India, receives a detailed, insightful writing in the pages of the book. Right from Bibek Debroy's idea of Lakshmi's manifestation and omnipresence to Jawhar Sircar's idea of Lakshmi as a metaphor for prosperity and also for fickleness in terms of wealth, there are multiple interpretations of Lakshmi with which the first section commences. The book abounds in relating textual evidence, symbols, connections to the Yakshi cult, and the regional variations in different parts of India. For instance, there is a reference to the northern and western regions of India, where Lakshmi is worshipped on a lavish scale on the day of *Amavasya*, the night of the darkest moon, and also on the day of Diwali, when there is light all across the country. It is commendable how the book traverses across the multifaceted realms of the Indian territory and delves deeper into the region-specific, culture-specific originalities in ushering the goddess of wealth.

In *Legends of Devi*, by Sukumari Bhattacharji, the chapter on Lakshmi elaborates on the various domains, categories, and the euphemistic ideas about the goddess:

"In the battlefield, she is the goddess of victory, Jayalakshmi, who, as fickle as fortune, changes sides. A good wife is euphemistically called Grihalakshmi, the goddess of domestic prosperity. As Bhagyalakshmi, she grants fortune and preserves it. As Yasholakshmi, the goddess is associated with fame...she lives within the sacrifice which yields desired objects and is equated with Dakshina, the sacrificial fee." (Bhattacharji 13)

So, in the Indian context, there are multilayered references to Lakshmi, the Goddess who gives. In *Treasures of Lakshmi*, it is not just about the taut detailing of the origin of Lakshmi that gains prominence, but it is also about the iconography, cultural, spiritual, and ritualistic symbols and images that are widely discussed. Bulbul Sharma's chapter titled 'Enticing Lakshmi' creates an unbeatable aura around the Goddess and the female devotees who invite her to their homes during Lakshmi puja. Sharma's recollection of the *alpana*, or the folk-art style consisting of motifs and symbols on walls and floors, mango leaves, and ghot or the vessel, ushers in and embraces the essence of the quintessential Lakshmi puja in the Indian homes. Sharma writes, "Once the mango leaves have passed scrutiny, the women place five or seven perfect ones on the ghot. Then a few bananas, a gleaming green coconut and some other fresh fruits available in the house are arranged around the ghot in a circle along with some sweets. A special sweet made with coconut and jaggery called 'naroo' is always offered to the goddess." (Sharma 98)

In the other chapters of this section titled *Exploring Lakshmi's Mystique: Creative Interpretations*, the writers discuss the churning of the ocean and Lakshmi's *agaman*, the Nagarlakshmi, a translation of Tagore's work by Reba Som, another translation Lakshmi's *Agaman* written by Bonophul and translated by Arunava Sinha, are detailed studies to understand and reflect upon the various social and familial strands that Lakshmi as a concept unfurls. One special attribute of this section is *Give Us More, More, More* – poems by Sanjukta Dasgupta. Interspersed with strong images of Lakshmi on the earth, Dasgupta's poems also highlight the simultaneous reading of Lakshmi and Alakshmi who are 'immortal Siamese twins' existing on the same plane. She elaborates how Lakshmi sits in happy homes, sad homes, rich homes, poor homes everywhere, but one of the poems ends on a thoughtful paradigm – "Does Lakshmi regret that she is immortal?"

Treasures of Lakshmi also ventures into the interesting studies concerning the folk narratives and the cultural interpretations surrounding the goddess of wealth. Nilima Chitgopekar's *Tulsi: The Sylvan Form of Devi* or the reference to the *Manabasa Lakshmi Purana: The Redeemer of the Poor* written by Balaram Das and translated by Lipipuspa Nayak, the darker side of fortune, how Lakshmi tests Khiri, and how the goddess of

wealth is known by many names are some of the major areas on which the folk narrative segment rests. In fact, as Gokhale and Lal have compiled this voluminous work on Lakshmi, they have also not ignored the social implications of worshipping the goddess. Social hierarchy, discrimination, people at different social strata – nobody is bereft of the benedictions of Lakshmi. For instance, in the chapter titled *Manabasa Lakshmi Purana: The Redeemer of the Poor*, the translator Lipipuspa Nayak refers to the lane of the *chandaals*, where the Devi lived – “Shriya, a woman in that lane of chandaals, lived outside Puri, the premises of the kingdom of Lord Jagannath. And lo! Her greatness as a devotee was not known to the gods. She swept clean the streets of the kingdom of Lord Jagannath every day with rapturous devotion for the Lord.” (Nayak 241)

Words that resonate with the mundane and the spiritual world, sentences that bring back memories of Lakshmi puja to the present, and images that are a fine combination of the cryptic and the elaborate channelization of the obeisance to the Devi. The book has a very strong interlayered reader-response theoretical aspect, where the authors leave space for constructing meaning from the text. With suitable cues, symbols, ritualistic grandeur and imminent psychological nuances pervading the descriptive matrix, Lakshmi emerges and reaffirms herself every time, with each single, repeated reading. It is not just about the cultural construction of femininity that becomes obvious in a unidimensional reading, but the text has suitable intertexts, translations, poems, and critical insights that correspond to what Namita Gokhale writes in her Afterword – “The complex Hindu system of belief is not bound by any single book, text or decree. It nurtures a multiplicity of understanding and interpretation. Our anthology delves into the enigma of Lakshmi, her secrets, her treasures, her many blessings.” (Gokhale 310)

The elusive and *chanchala*, fleeting nature of the goddess is not unknown in the whole realm of spirituality. But the text makes a platform for creative and critical thinking to preserve Lakshmi among the readers. It is fascinating how the book acts as a polyphonic text and does not dissipate into unrealistic or incongruent realms of blind faith and worship. Rather, it renavigates the sense of usual closures that we might feel after reading a book on gods and goddesses. Therein lies the beauty of *Treasures of Lakshmi – The Goddess who Gives*.

Reference:

Bhattacharji, Sukumari, and Ramananda Bandyopadhyay. *Legends of Devi*. Orient Blackswan, 1995.