

cult, Goddess possession is seen in a positive light. Possession-like experiences are then perhaps more likely to be interpreted as the grace of the Goddess rather than stemming from other sources.

Finally, from the individual point of view it is the human vehicle herself who controls the possession. Although possession seems to strike randomly and spontaneously, there may well be elements in the psychological makeup of certain women that contribute to their receptivity.³⁹ The power and authority that Mātās wield as religious leaders is almost unheard of in this patriarchal society. For women who make a career of it, such as Gumtīvale Mātā and Ūṣā Bahn, divine possession is one of the few culturally accepted forms of avoiding marriage in a society that allows few avenues of self-expression for women outside marriage. In the cases we have outlined above, a common pattern emerges: the vehicle participates in the power of the deity, at first seemingly unwillingly. But gradually she is able to gain control over this power to a certain extent, to predict its coming, to prevent it from coming at times, and to bring it on at other times. Idiosyncracies in the Goddess's behavior during possession seem to emanate from the vehicle's personality. For example, Kālī, when present in Devtā, does not like the color black; it is the color of choice when she is in Ūṣā Bahn, who purposely wears black for the *cauki*. Just as the Goddess has a different localized identity in each of her temples, so does she have a different personality in each of her human vehicles. In some virtuosi, possession is used as a spiritual practice, or *sādhanā*, similar to yogic practices aimed at merging oneself with the divine.

Thus, the theological, cultural, and individual dimensions are mutually dependent and must be considered together. The Goddess, the audience, and the vehicle act and interact simultaneously in the "play" of possession.

The Goddess and Popular Culture Contemporary Perspectives

A theme that has cropped up again and again in this study is the simultaneously archaic and contemporary quality of religious expression in the Goddess cult. Modern technology, urbanization, and mass media have introduced numerous changes in religious practice. Modern means of transportation, especially rail and bus, have made Goddess temples more accessible to larger numbers of people and have changed the dynamics of the pilgrimage process. A journey that used to be undertaken on foot with many stops along the way can now be made in a fraction of the time, eliminating many of the traditional stopping places. Pilgrimage is becoming both more popular and more streamlined. The ritual paraphernalia of the *jagrātā* now includes microphones, loudspeakers, and electronic *mhritis*. Art of the mass-produced bazaar calendar print type has largely replaced folk art; even paintings commissioned for donation to temples are painted in this style. Mass-produced plastic statues of the Goddess grace the homes and dashboards of devotees. Even elegant marble statues in temples are, as a Western observer once quipped, "painted to look like plastic." The most popular devotional songs are now those sung to film tunes, and even "Devi Disco" has become the vogue. What do all these changes mean? Do they reflect a commercialization and decline of religious values, or are they simply a contemporary version of processes that have always taken place? Is the medium the message, or is this simply old wine in new wineskins?

In this chapter I explore these questions from several angles,

looking at some of the ways in which modern popular culture intersects with the sacred. Beginning with a few remarks on how popular culture relates to classical and folk culture, I move on to a discussion of the popular pamphlet as a transmitter of religious lore in the Goddess cult. I then dedicate the bulk of the chapter to a case study of the "new" goddess Santoși Mă, whose fame and popularity have spread through the media of print and film.

The Classical-Folk Continuum

One of the key areas of focus in the study of Indian civilization has been the problem of levels. The Great Tradition-Little Tradition model has been articulated in a variety of ways, and although scholars are aware of its limitations, most appear to assume it implicitly, if only to point out exceptions to it.¹ Another version of this model that does not rely on the urban-rural dichotomy is the distinction between classical and folk culture, which focuses more on the mode of transmission than on the content. The Indian terms *mārga* (highway) and *deśī* (country), denoting two strands of an artistic tradition, are roughly equivalent to classical and folk. Some examples of classical or high culture are texts and songs written in Sanskrit and canonical art. Their folk counterparts would be tales and legends told orally in a local dialect, folk songs, folk painting, and so on. These categories, of course, are not rigid; there is much overlap and interaction between the two. A third category is popular culture, which includes bazaar pamphlets, movies, and tapes in the standard regional language, film tunes, lithographs, and plastic images.

How does popular culture fit into the classical-folk typology? Is popular culture a product of modern times, or has it always existed? Joseph Elder points out that if mass culture (a term I take to be roughly equivalent to popular culture) consists of artistic products aimed at the general unrestricted public, then it is as old as society itself. Elder cites the historical continuity from the crude mass-produced icons of Harappa to the crude mass-produced icons of today.² Similarly, medieval *bhakti* poetry, spread largely by wandering bards orally, functioned much in the same way as modern mass media. The only difference is that the time it took to spread among the masses was much greater. Modern industrial technology is not a necessary condition for the existence of popular culture, but

it allows popular culture to spread more quickly and easily. Also, while a few examples of popular culture can be found in premodern India, now they abound. Until recently, scholars took little interest in popular culture in India as a form distinct from elite culture and folk culture. It has been commonly assumed that popular culture necessarily reflects a process of secularization. Milton Singer was a pioneer in the study of the effects of urbanization on both classical and folk culture. His comments remain thought-provoking:

The commercial mass media of film, radio, and print bring elements of a modern, secular culture with them into the cities and eventually into the towns and villages. Yet this trend has not displaced the traditional media or traditional culture. On the contrary, it is common to find such traditional institutions as temples adopting the tape recorder, the public address system, the radio, and the printing press for the popularization of prayers, devotional songs, and religious discourses. Traditional media are also employed to spread the "modern" messages of community development, sanitation, and industrialization.³

Singer further observes that urbanization and increased use of mass media do not result in secularization, but rather democratization of religious practice. This he attributes to the general shift toward *bhakti* that is less dependent on caste, ritual, and traditional *śāstrīya* relationships and lends itself to expression in the vernacular, popular media.⁴ We have seen a similar ideology in the stories and songs of the northwest Goddess cult, which emphasize that the "call" of the Mother is open to all, regardless of caste. By the same token, in religious practices such as pilgrimage, the *jaḡrātā*, and the worship of charismatic leaders such as Mātās, caste boundaries are routinely transcended. While I believe it would be going too far to say that the modern popular media have brought about this democratization, I think it is fair enough to claim that these media, because of their universal availability, lend themselves to the propagation of ideas and religious forms that are already found in the tradition.

Popular Pamphlets

The popular pamphlets available at pilgrimage places and in bazaars in the towns and cities are one of the most important means of propagation within the cult. As Stuart Blackburn and A. K. Ramanujan point out, "The printed pamphlet plays a pivotal role in

the folk-classical continuum as a medium into which both oral and written literature is adapted. Situated in the middle of the folk-classical divide, the pamphlet is something of an equalizer.⁵ Many of the pamphlets on the Goddess draw on both the elite Sanskrit tradition and the local or regional folk traditions, joining them together in a highly self-conscious way. The most common Sanskrit story retold in the pamphlets is that of the *Devī Māhātmya*, especially the killing of Mahiṣāsura and the creation of Kālī in the Śumbha-Nisumbha episode. Other stories connecting the cult to the Sanskrit tradition are also recounted in many pamphlets. Two that are also depicted in calendar art are Rāma worshipping Devī during the Navarātra in order to gain the power to defeat Rāvaṇa⁶ and Devī giving power to Arjuna to win the *Mahābhārata* war.

One pamphlet has arranged the various stories into a clever scheme, detailing Śerānvālī's *avatāras* in each of the four Yugas.⁷ According to this scheme, in the Satya Yuga, three *avatāras* of the Goddess appeared and the three episodes of the *Devī Māhātmya* (the killing of Madhu and Kaitabha, Mahiṣāsura, and Śumbha-Nisumbha) occurred. In the Tretā Yuga, the *avatāra* called Vaiṣṇo Devī appeared and the part of her story that deals with Rāma occurred. In the Dvāpara Yuga, during the time of Kṛṣṇa there was no *avatāra* of the Goddess,⁸ but she gave *śakti* to Arjun so that he and his brothers could win the war. Later they performed a horse sacrifice that figures in the Queen Tārā story. In the Kali Yuga, there were the stories of Vaiṣṇo Devī with Śṛidhar and Bhairō, Dhyanū Bhagat, Queen Tārā, and King Candradev.⁹

Another pamphlet focusing on Vaiṣṇo Devī¹⁰ has used a different scheme to incorporate various stories; it has divided them into categories: (1) the birth of the Goddess, Purāṇic story (the three *Devī Māhātmya* episodes), (2) a history (*itihāsa*) and guide to the Vaiṣṇo Devī pilgrimages, (3) folk stories (*darś kathā*) and other related histories (Dhyanū Bhagat, Tārānī, and King Candradev), (4) stories of the nine goddesses (three sets of nine are listed, the nine Durgas, the nine flames at Jvālā Mukhī, and the nine commonly worshipped today—Bhagavatī Saū (Pārvatī Devī), Durgā, Vaiṣṇo Devī, Jvālājī, Nainā Devī, Cintpūrṇī, Mansā Devī, Balā Sundarī, and Kāṅgrevalī Devī. Most of the pamphlets include devotional songs and *ārātī* to various forms of the Goddess and lists of the 51 or 108 *śakti pīthas*.

Thus, the popular vernacular pamphlet can be seen as a continuation of the Purāṇic tradition, synthesizing local, regional, and pan-

Indian stories and practices and bringing them together in an intelligible form. Some scholars have suggested that popular pamphlets have resulted in increased standardization of myth and cult.¹¹ This is true to some extent, for "standard" myths about the shrines can be found in most pamphlets, often reproduced word for word with little regard for copyright law. On the whole, though, the pamphlets, whether anonymous or with named authors, remain very close to the oral tradition. Certain motifs and plots from the oral tradition do get picked up and become standardized in the popular pamphlet tradition, but there is still considerable room for variation and even creativity. The Purāṇic style of elaboration and interweaving such that every story is connected to another story continues in the popular pamphlet tradition. For example, one pamphleteer connects the stories of Dhyanū Bhagat and Queen Tārā with the Sanskrit *Devī Māhātmya* myth in an ingenious way which I have not seen elsewhere but that is typical of the Purāṇic spirit. He begins his verse rendition of the story of Dhyanū Bhagat, not in the time of the emperor Akbar where most versions start but back in the time of the *Devī Māhātmya*, at the point in the story when the king Suratha and the merchant Samādhi, having heard the full story of the Goddess, worship her clay image on the riverbank. The pamphleteer then has the Goddess appear before them and say:

King Suratha, reap the rule of the Kṣatrī line.

Merchant, I give you my devotion today.

In the next life, King, be known as Haricand,

Through Queen Tārā's devotion gain my *darśan*.

Merchant, in the next life, become Dhyanū,

Sing my praises and spread my name.

I'll protect you both in every life,

In *jaḡratās*, I'll fill my devotees' treasury.

That devoted Merchant when he took birth

Was called Dhyanū Bhakt, as the world knows.¹²

This version also chronicles the life of Dhyanū Bhagat, detailing his birth, childhood, travels, miracles, preaching against animal sacrifice, and a different version of his encounter with Akbar. According to this version, he was born in Nadaun village, was carried by the Goddess to Jammu, went to Kangra on foot, then to Jvālā Mukhī, and finally settled at Cintpūrṇī, where he disappeared at the age of thirty-five. I have not encountered these details anywhere else; the

author is clearly drawing on a tradition, probably of the Amritsar area, different from that found in most pamphlets.

How do the pamphleteers choose their sources? I was able to speak with one pamphleteer, Mahant Omnāth Śarmā of Delhi,¹³ who is well known as a writer of devotional songs and "histories" of the Goddess and as a performer of *jaḡrātās*. Śarmā presides over a small Kālī temple in New Delhi but is also employed full-time as a stenographer at Cottage Industries on Janpath. The sources of his authority are diverse and eclectic. He says that his *isī devī* is Vaiṣṇo Devī, although he was married in a Kālī temple. His guru is a woman, Śrī 1008 Śubh Mūrti Mātājī, who lives at Hardwar and Vaiṣṇo Devī. She is a *sādhu* and *brahmacārīnī* who gets possessed by Devī during the Navarātras. His master (*ustād*) in music is Mahant Hirā Lāl Hirā, a classical singer who lives in Delhi. He is the *māhant* of his own *jaḡrātā māṅḍalī*, which belongs to the Kāśī Mātā *gharānā* style that originated in Lahore. Interestingly enough, although he is a Brahmin, several castes are represented in his *māṅḍalī*, even a sweeper who plays the *dhholak*. There are also three Muslims who wear the *tīlak* and believe in Devī. Remarking that the best god is the god who feeds you, he said that the Muslim god is not around; you cannot see him, but the Hindu gods and goddesses eat and wear saris, so they are more approachable. He has written hundreds of songs, some for Narendra Chanchal, and has also performed with Chanchal. He says that he prefers to sing songs in a light classical style but sometimes writes and sings in film style, to which he has no objection because it generates interest.

When I asked him how he gets his information for the stories he writes, he said that for "The Story of Queen Tārā," he read the well-known Caman Lāl Bharadvāj's version and heard versions from many other *māhants*, then composed his own, making corrections where he thought necessary. For him the main purpose of the story is to show that all are equal under Devī. When he writes about the Goddess temples, he goes to the places, meets the elders, gets all the stories from them, and then decides which stories are appropriate for the present time and society. He added that he uses these stories for the purpose of propagation (*pracār*) only, not for any personal profit. In a pamphlet on Nainā Devī he begins with an introduction on the importance of Devī *pūjā* and on the cultural significance of pilgrimage, saying that it was introduced by Śānkarācārya in the eighth century for the purpose of fostering cultural

unity in India. Many people, he says, worship Devī without knowing the significance of doing so. He sees himself as a teacher and transmitter of culture, as can be seen from his introduction to the section "Worship and Major Sites in the Kali Yug" in the same pamphlet:

Today in every area the greatness of the Mother is spreading, but before saying "Jay Devī" it is necessary for us to know who Mā is. Before finding this out, we have to look toward our religious books to find out where, when, and how the Mother arose. Come, dive into the Ganges of wisdom and ponder on the Mother *śakti* possessed of three *gūṇas*. It can be said with certainty that the entire universe is based on *śakti*. In order to know her, she can be called by so many different names; it is necessary to know this also. Come, first let us ponder Mā's arising.¹⁴

Santoṣī Mā

No study of contemporary Hindu Goddess worship would be complete without taking account of Santoṣī Mā. This goddess has taken all of northern India by storm, and the greater Panjab region is no exception. In fact, my most vivid memory of my first visit to Vaiṣṇo Devī in 1978, besides the ice-cold water in the cave shrine, is the melody of the song "Jay Santoṣī Mātā," which played constantly in the roadside shops all the way up the mountain. When I asked devotees about it at the time, they replied that Santoṣī Mā is of course the same as Vaiṣṇo Devī, that they are both *śakti*.

The Santoṣī Mā phenomenon illustrates the continuity of the Goddess tradition in a modern context. Santoṣī Mā (Mother of Satisfaction) is somewhat different from other goddesses described in this study, for she is neither associated with any particular geographical spot as are Jvālā Mukhī, Nainā Devī, and so on, nor is she a goddess of Purāṇic mythology such as Satī and Durgā. She sprang, seemingly from nowhere, into prominence sometime in the early 1960s. Temples to Santoṣī Mā in Jodhpur (Rajasthan), Ujjain and Indore (Uttar Pradesh), Delhi, and Bombay are said to have been founded in 1963. Her cult received a further boost in 1975 with the release of the Hindi film *Jay Santoṣī Mā*, an immediate box office hit that still draws crowds today. She has intrigued scholars of Hinduism, who have hailed her as the "new goddess."¹⁵ There is no known oral tradition of Santoṣī Mā. Rather, information about her

comes from popular pamphlets in Hindi published as far east as Calcutta and as far west as Jodhpur.¹⁶ According to these pamphlets, Santoṣī Mā is the daughter of Gaṇeśa and his wife, Riddhi-Siddhi.¹⁷ Technically, this makes her the granddaughter of Śiva and Pārvatī, but most worshippers identify her as an aspect of the Great Goddess, saying that there is a reference to the Goddess as Tuṣṭi (satisfaction, contentment) in the Purānas.¹⁸

The major ritual associated with Santoṣī Mā is a *vrāt* (fast, vow) performed on Fridays that has become her trademark. The *vrāt* is relatively uncomplicated, requiring only that one should set up a water-filled pot (*kalās*) with a dish of jaggery (*gur*) and chick-peas (*caṇā*) above it. The standard amount of the offering is 1¼ annas' worth, but this is not crucial, since as the pamphlets say, "The Mother hungers only for affection [*bhāvanā*]." Taking jaggery and chick-peas in one's hand, one should recite or listen to the story (*kathā*) of Santoṣī Mā and then feed the jaggery and chick-peas in the hand to a cow, distributing the rest as *prasād*. The water from the pot is then sprinkled throughout the house and over the *tūlśī* plant. This *vrāt* should be performed every Friday until the wish one desires is fulfilled. Then one must perform a final ceremony (*udyaṅgan*), consisting mainly of a special meal, including a fried bread (*khājā*), rice pudding (*khīr*), and chick-pea curry, fed to eight boys. One should also light a lamp with ghee and break open a coconut. The boys may receive any kind of gift except cash. The person keeping the *vrāt* should take *prasād* and eat only one meal that day. The one prohibition associated with the Santoṣī Mā *vrāt* is that the person keeping it should neither eat nor feed anyone any type of sour food, for that would anger Santoṣī Mā and dire consequences will ensue.

The story of Santoṣī Mā can be summarized as follows:

There was an old woman who had seven sons, the youngest of whom was an idle good-for-nothing who naively thought that his mother loved him dearly. In fact, she was feeding him the impure leftovers of his elder brothers. When he was able to confirm his wife's allegations to this effect, he decided to leave home to seek his fortune. He left his young wife behind, telling her to fulfill her duty. He found employment with a gem merchant in a far-off land and eventually became very rich himself, completely forgetting about his wife in the process. Meanwhile, his wife was being badly mistreated by her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law.

Not only was she forced to do all the menial housework, she even had to go out to collect firewood in the jungle. While engaged in this one day she came across a group of women performing the Santoṣī Mā *vrāt*. She then prayed to the goddess for the return of her husband and performed the *vrāt* according to the women's instructions.

Thus enlisted, Santoṣī Mā reminded the husband of his wife's plight in a dream. Following the goddess's advice, he sold his business very profitably and returned home with gifts of cloth and jewelry. The next Friday, the heroine performed the *udyaṅgan* ceremony to thank Santoṣī Mā, only to have it sabotaged by an evil sister-in-law who encouraged her sons to ask for something sour to eat. The heroine refused to give them sour food, but unthinkingly gave them some money which they spent on sour food. Santoṣī Mā immediately became enraged, and as a result the husband was arrested on a charge of tax evasion.

Once again the heroine performed the *vrāt* and pleaded with Santoṣī Mā for forgiveness. When she did the *udyaṅgan* again, the nephews tried the same trick again, so this time she fed the sons of Brahmins and gave them fruit instead of cash. Her husband was released from jail, and nine months later she gave birth to a handsome son. Later on Santoṣī Mā decided to pay her faithful devotee a visit and, in order to test her faith, took on a ferocious form. The rest of the family, especially the mother-in-law and the conniving nephews, were terrified, but the heroine quickly recognized Santoṣī Mā and opened the door to the house for her. After she had explained who the goddess was, the wicked in-laws fell at Santoṣī Mā's feet and apologized for their misbehavior. The story ends with the entire family receiving Santoṣī Mā's grace.¹⁹

Santoṣī Mā's iconography as shown on popular posters and pamphlet covers is fairly standard. She is seated on a throne in lotus posture wearing a red sari and a headdress. Her arms hold a sword, a trident, and a golden bowl of what appears to be *khīr*, with the fourth arm extended in the *abhaya mudrā*, or fear-not, gesture. Often she is shown in a mountain setting with temples in the background, accompanied by her devotees and by a peacock and bull. Images of Santoṣī Mā in temples and homes, however, show less fidelity to this set iconography, with informants calling images Santoṣī Mā that in fact appear to be Durgā or Vaiṣṇo Devī. This fluidity of names and images is not surprising, being in keeping with the general tendency in the Goddess cult to view all (or most) goddesses as one.

Some scholars²⁰ have attempted to attribute Santoṣī Mā's popularity to some unique characteristic of hers that more especially suits her to modern needs and problems, especially those of urbanizing lower-middle-class women who constitute the bulk of her devotees. However, there is little about Santoṣī Mā that is new except her name. Her nature and behavior fit the general pattern of goddesses identified with the Goddess. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that Santoṣī Mā is becoming more popular at the expense of more established manifestations of the Goddess. She is rather sharing in the bounty of the overall Goddess vogue. There is good reason for believing that Santoṣī Mā's rapid rise to fame has more to do with her widespread exposure through the media of print, film, and radio than with any special quality she possesses.²¹

Santoṣī Mā, while having her own "history" (as daughter of Gaṇeśa) and idiosyncracies (dislike of sour foods), shares many structural similarities with Śerānvālī that fit her for absorption into the Panjab Hills Goddess cult. The most important of these are her single, independent status, her benevolence with a flip side of fierce punitiveness, her accessibility to people of all castes, and her generalized concern with the mundane affairs and well-being of her devotees. Like Śerānvālī, she is both a virgin and a mother.

The most prevalent form of Santoṣī Mā worship in the greater Panjab region, as in most of north India, is the observance of the Friday *vrat*. *Vrats* in general are more commonly practiced by women than by men, and Santoṣī Mā's is no exception. In fact, it has become the most popular of women's *vrats*, practiced by housewives, students, and working women alike. Some of the reasons contributing to its current vogue include the fact that it is inexpensive and easy to keep, requiring only a small amount of jaggery and chick-peas, reading or listening to the story, and a single dietary restriction, the avoidance of sour foods. Also, like other weekday *vrats*, it is easier to remember than those falling on a lunar date (*tithi*). Keeping of the Santoṣī Mā *vrat* does not in any way conflict with the worship of Śerānvālī. On the contrary, images of the Goddess in her lion-riding form are often worshiped in conjunction with the Santoṣī Mā *vrat*, and those who keep it are also likely to be active in other aspects of the Goddess cult such as pilgrimage or *jagrātās*.

A recent phenomenon is the widespread Santoṣī Mā "chain letter," whose existence Stanley Kurtz reports in Nepal, Calcutta,

Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, and Bombay.²² I have heard numerous reports of these letters being circulated in the cities and larger towns of Panjab. I have one in my possession that a neighbor of mine in Chandigarh received. It is a carbon copy, handwritten in Devanāgarī script in a mixture of Hindi and Panjabi (such as is commonly spoken in Chandigarh and eastern Panjab generally). At the top is a crudely drawn figure, iconographically identical with Śerānvālī but with the caption "Jay Santoṣī Mātā" written on either side. Entitled "The Miracle of Santoṣī Mātā," it reads as follows:

A woman was worshipping in Santoṣī Mātā's temple. Santoṣī Mātā gave her *darśan* and said to that woman, "Taking on the form of a girl in the Kal Yug, I will destroy the Kal Yug and get rid of inhumanity. Then all the people will live in equality." That woman told this to many people. The people who considered this to be true and, to propagate it, had letters printed and distributed profited greatly. But one man received a letter and let twenty or twenty-five days pass in procrastination. Then his wife died, and he regretted it. In the east, a man kept putting it off for a month. As a result, his two water buffaloes died.

In the east, a farmer had a thousand letters printed and distributed them. He won a lawsuit, and Santoṣī Mātā granted him *darśan* in a dream and said, "There is a lot of money hidden in the western part of your house." Thereupon the farmer dug in his house and found a jar full of gold. He joyfully had a temple built to Santoṣī Mātā and distributed some wealth to the poor. Now he is living happily. A resident of Narayanpur near Aligarh, Man Singh, considered this letter to be false. Then great harm befell him. Whoever reads this letter and at that time has a thousand letters printed and distributed, within only twenty-five days Santoṣī Mātā will perform some miracle for that person. For this reason, all brothers and sisters are requested not to read this letter and throw it away, but to give it to others. Victory to the Mother. Victory to Santoṣī Mātā.

This letter, like the *vrat kathā*, definitely indicates that Santoṣī Mā, while benevolent when pleased, is fierce and destructive when displeased.

References to Santoṣī Mā, and stories about her and her temples have been incorporated into the traditional oral narratives told at *jagrātās*. In one such case the storyteller plays on the meaning of Santoṣī Mā's name to explain her connection with Śerānvālī. At the

end of "The Story of Queen Tārā," he incorporates the following comment:

When the king [Haricand] got Mā's *darsān* all his confusion disappeared. The king attained complete trust. The king attained complete satisfaction [*santoṣ*]. He got satisfaction, so he named the temple "Santoṣī Mātā Temple." We [the storyteller] have also seen this temple. This is the temple which Queen Tārā had the king build. When he got Mā's direct *darsān*, he named the temple "Santoṣī Mātā Temple."²³

There is in fact such a temple in the town of Hariipur, the former capital of Guler State near Kangra, reputed to have been the home of King Haricand in the story. According to B. N. Goswamy, an expert on the art and temples of the Panjab Hills, it is an old Tantric temple called Dandokṣī Mātā upon which the name Santoṣī Mātā has been recently superimposed.²⁴

Another example of the renaming of a temple is at Mani Majra near Chandigarh, about one mile from the larger and more famous Mansā Devī temple. Now called Santoṣī Mātā, the temple was formerly called Annapūrṇā.²⁵ It was founded at least 140 years ago; a mural on the back wall is dated Samvat 1899 (1842 C.E.). Several years ago the name was changed, a new image was installed, and a semiannual feast was instituted. Packets of jaggery and chick-peas, the standard offerings to Santoṣī Mā, are now sold on the steps to the temple, along with the traditional red scarves and coconuts offered to the original goddess. Loudspeakers blare out songs to Santoṣī Mā and to Śērānvālī, set mostly to film tunes. The temple is frequented by pilgrims on the way to nearby Mansā Devī and on Fridays by local people from Chandigarh, Mani Majra, and surrounding villages. When I asked the *pūjārī* about the name change, his reply was that Annapūrṇā and Santoṣī Mā are one and the same, because they both fulfill all desires. The name changes, but the deity remains the same. If the priest's approach is functional and experiential, it is also pragmatic. My guess is that the name was changed to attract more patrons to the temple and to give it a needed boost at a time when royal patronage has dried up.²⁶ This may also have been the case with the Dandokṣī Mātā temple at Hariipur. Larger, more established Goddess temples have appropriated Santoṣī Mā by building auxiliary shrines to her within their compounds. The Kāṅgrevālī Devī temple, for example, has recently installed a Santoṣī Mā statue. At Mansā Devī one can purchase framed

"photos" with Mansā Devī on one side and Santoṣī Mā on the other.

Another common indication of Santoṣī Mā's popularity is her inclusion in devotional songs and literature as one of the Seven Sisters. The composition of the Seven Sisters is fluid in any case, drawing from a pool of goddesses to complete the list. A song entitled "The Court of the Seven Sisters" sung by a group of women at the Cāmuṅḍā Devī temple includes Santoṣī Mātā, "who gives everyone satisfaction" (*santoṣ*), appropriately enough, as the seventh and youngest of the Sisters. The other six in this song are Vaiṣṇo Mātā, "who does everyone's work"; Jvālā Mātā, "who lights the sparkling flame"; Durgā Mātā, "who broke Akbar's pride"; Cintpūrṇī, "who eliminates everyone's worry"; Aśāpūrṇī, "who fulfills everyone's hopes [*āśā*]"; and Cāmuṅḍā Mātā, "who killed Caṇḍ and Muṅḍ."

With the increasing popularity of Santoṣī Mā, it is becoming common to hear her named as an *iṣṭ devī*, or personally chosen goddess. A devotee picks an *iṣṭ-devī* on the basis of an affinity with that particular goddess or because he or she has received a favor from that deity. Devotees often express the feeling that the deity has chosen them rather than the other way around. This is particularly true in the case of women who become possessed by Santoṣī Mā as a form of the Goddess Śērānvālī. Of the women I have encountered, two have expressly identified their possessing deity as Santoṣī Mā.²⁷ Both live in Chandigarh, are middleclass Baniyās, and have small followings. One is a young unmarried woman, the other a middle-aged married woman. I met both of them initially when they were performing *caukṛ* at the Santoṣī Mātā temple in Mani Majra (near Chandigarh) on the occasion of its biannual *bhāṇḍārā* (feast). On that day there were about one thousand devotees at the temple at any given time, standing in line to make offerings and receive *darsān*, eating their meal in an adjacent tent, or joining in one of the several *bhajan* groups that had congregated. Two of these groups featured "living Mātās" who called themselves Santoṣī Mā. The younger of the two was leading her group in devotional singing; the elder was holding her *caukṛ* while her devotees sang. I was able to meet both of these women later in their homes.

Viṇā Guptā (a pseudonym), who prefers to be called Santoṣī Mā or Mātājī, was about twenty-two years old and had been living in Chandigarh with her family for about seventeen years when I met

her in April 1983. Wearing a pink *salvār-kamīz*, she was seated on a divan in a room of her home; the room had been made into a shrine with a burning *jot* and pictures of Santoṣī Mā, other gods and goddesses, and her guru, whom she identified as Śrī Śrī 1008 Svāmī Bāl Jogījī Arjunpurī Mahārājī. There was a steady stream of visitors, all of whom washed their hands, took off their shoes before entering the room, and seated themselves beneath her on the floor.

Vīṇā's family is originally from District Gurdaspur, Panjab. Her possession experiences first started after they had moved to Chandigarh when she was about seven years old (1968). At that time she saw a direct vision (*sākṣāt darśan*) of the Goddess's face and played continuously for twenty-four hours. After that it would happen every Tuesday and Friday and during the Navarātras. When the *pavan* (wind) of the Goddess comes, it enters her hair and opens it up, even if her hair has been tied. At first the family thought it was sorcery (*jadū tonā*), but after a few years they realized it was Devī. When Vīṇā was eleven or twelve, they tried to lock her up in a room, because it was difficult to control her, but the doors broke down. Vīṇā's mother, listening to this description of events, added that she was afraid when the possession first started happening to her daughter but that now she accepts the fact that the Goddess has chosen to come to her home. Still, she expressed disappointment that her daughter would never marry and have a "normal" life.

Vīṇā has studied up to matric (tenth standard). She was in a government school up to the seventh standard, but the *pavan* would come while she was in class, so she had to drop out and complete her education privately. She speaks an educated style of Hindi well sprinkled with English words as well as her native Panjabi. In 1974 she met the Svāmī, first at Vaiṣṇo Devī and later in Chandigarh, whom she accepted as her guru. He tested her and was convinced of her powers before accepting her as his disciple. She is a strict vegetarian and does *piṇḍā* and recitation of the *Durgā Saptaśatī* (*Devī Māhātmya*) every day for several hours, saying that it has helped her control the *pavan*, which now comes usually only on *aṣṭamī*. She attends *jaḡrātās* when invited; then the *pavan* comes at midnight. The *pavan* also comes at unscheduled times when someone has committed a sin. She does not remember what happens during the *pavan*, what questions people ask, or what answers she gives. She does remember getting the *darśan* and is aware of something very heavy coming on top of her and entering her body.

Santoṣī Mā is Vīṇā's chosen goddess (*iṣṭ-devī*), because she is the first to have appeared in *pavan* form. In deference to her, Vīṇā abstains from sour foods on Thursdays and Fridays. But many other goddesses have appeared as well. She named Nainā Devī, Cintpūrṇī, Vaiṣṇo Devī, Jvālā Mukhī, Kāṅḡrevālī, Kālī, and Caṇḍī, saying that an informed observer can tell the difference by the expression on her face and by her voice. Vīṇā herself can tell, because she receives the *darśan* of the particular goddess just as the *pavan* starts. When Vīṇā told me this, I remarked that I would not be able to tell, since I had only seen some of these Devīs in *piṇḍī* form. She found this amusing and said that she hardly becomes a *piṇḍī* but actually sees the face of the particular Devī and her own face changes accordingly, just like a photograph.

Vīṇā states confidently that she has no intention of getting married; instead she plans to devote her life to the Goddess and to helping her devotees with their problems. She believes that she was chosen to do this because of her faith and a *saṃskāra* (mental predisposition or impression) from a previous life. Although she has heard about both Guṃṭivāle Mātā and Ūṣā Bahn, she cannot give a guarantee concerning anyone else's validity, she says, because many are fakes (*pākhaṇḍī*). No one should have faith just from seeing someone shake her head around; it might be due to *jadū tonā* or an impure soul. She said that it is *pākhaṇḍī* when girls get up during a *kīrtan* and start shaking and dancing, perhaps referring to an event I had witnessed among her own devotees at the Santoṣī Mā temple.

Her family supports her, albeit with some ambivalence, as evidenced by the fact that they have set aside a room as her shrine in their modest flat. At present her cult is very small, consisting mostly of neighbors and relatives in Chandigarh, but she has hopes for the future. She has had stationery printed in her name in Roman script with a drawing of Śerānvālī at the top and the words *jay mātā dī* at the bottom. She told me that "a lot of people come here and give me respect," using the English word "respect." She would like to travel, especially abroad, but said that people need her at home, too. Although she has not yet passed on her power to any disciple, she said that she might do so someday "after building several temples."

Kamlā Devī Aggarwāl (a pseudonym), the elder of the two women, was at the time of our meeting (May 1983) fifty-nine years old. A native of Ambala, Haryana, she had been living in Chan-

digarh for about twenty-two years. Her husband is a lawyer, and she has six children. She refers to her possessing goddess sometimes as Santoṣī Mā and sometimes as Bālā Sundarī. She also is possessed by Kālī, Vaiṣṇo Devī, and other goddesses, saying that ultimately they are all the same.

Her *caukī* first started on February 24, 1975, when she suddenly started playing. During this state she was able to tell the future, if something was stolen, or if someone had an illness. After the first *caukī* she fell unconscious. A few days later she saw an elderly woman in dirty clothing. The woman disappeared after Kamlā Devī gave her alms. For the next six months she kept seeing different forms of Devī. Her husband, believing she was possessed by Devī, took her to many temples to beg Devī to leave her. Devī did not leave, and gradually the husband was reconciled to the situation. At the end of that six-month period, Kamlā Devī started holding weekly *bhajan* sessions on Friday afternoons during which she becomes possessed and answers questions put forth by her devotees.

It is interesting to note that during the six-month transition period, the film *Jay Santoṣī Mā* was released and that by the end of the six-month period Kamlā Devī had definitely identified her possession deity as Santoṣī Mā and incorporated elements of her ritual into her religious practice. She says that Santoṣī Mā has been her *iṣṭ-devī* since 1975. Before that for many years her *iṣṭ-devī* and *kul-devī* (family goddess) had been the traditional goddess Bālā Sundarī, whose major shrine is in District Nahan, Himachal Pradesh. Bālā Sundarī is the favorite goddess of Haryanavis, particularly of those in the Ambala area. Her name means "beautiful girl," and it is in that form that she appears in legends connected with the shrine. She is often counted as one of the Seven Sisters, especially among Haryanavis.

I was interested to see if there were any differences that could be attributed to the association with the new goddess, Santoṣī Mā, so I attended one of the Friday afternoon sessions. About a dozen women were there, several of whom accompanied the singing with percussion instruments. Kamlā Devī "played" intermittently for about three hours. Women would approach with questions and make small cash offerings in front of the burning flame. The songs sung, mostly in Panjabi, were of the same type as those generally sung to Serānvālī in her various aspects. The only references to

Santoṣī Mā per se were occasional shouted slogans of victory (*jay-kārās*) to Santoṣī Mā and the singing of the *ārī* song from the film *Jay Santoṣī Mā*. The devotees identified Santoṣī Mā so completely with Serānvālī that before the possession, they sang a song with the words "Come, O Serānvālī, your daughters are crying out to you." Once the possession had started, they cried out, "Victory to Santoṣī Mā, victory to the true court, O true flame Mother, your eternal victory" (*jaykarā Santoṣī Māi dā, bol sāce dārbār kī jay, sacīyān jotān vālī mātā teri sadā hī jay*) and immediately went into a song that said, "Mounted on a golden lion / Look, Serānvālī has come / Proclaim her victory once again / Look, Serānvālī has come."

Kamlā Devī, unlike Viṇā and the Mārās discussed in chapter 5, has no ambitions to expand her cult. She explained that she calls the congregation for *bhajan* singing only on Fridays. If she did this every day, she would get the *caukī* every day, which would interfere with her family obligations. She has a small shrine for her private use where she performs *pūjā* and recites from the *Durgā Saptasatī* twice a day. Upstairs there is a larger shrine where she holds her Friday sessions. On Fridays she keeps a complete fast, sitting with the *jot* all day and not eating or drinking until evening. She does not go to anyone's house for *jagrās* but holds her own at home twice a year. One is always on February 23-24, the anniversary of her first *caukī*; the other can be at any time. Only women come to her *jagrās* and Friday sessions and perform all the rituals, singing, and storytelling. Kamlā Devī said that this is because women have more feeling (*bhāvanā*) than men. She goes on pilgrimages to Devī temples whenever she can, but her only public activity as a living Mātā outside her home is her attendance at the Santoṣī Mātā temple feast in Mani Majra twice a year.

Surely modern media and technology have hastened the spread of Santoṣī Mā's popularity, but these modern means have been used for traditional purposes. There is nothing amiss in the frankly materialistic nature of her worship. Goddesses have always been associated with mundane concerns, with the realities of life and death. One need only remember the description of the Goddess in the *Devī Māhātmya* as *bhuktimuktīpradāyini*, the grantor of material enjoyment as well as liberation. The desires for health, wealth, fertility, and stable family relationships have always been expressed in a religious idiom. Santoṣī Mā is not unique in her functions. Neither is her identification with older goddesses unique. The historical

process of absorption and identification of goddesses has gone on for centuries. Other goddesses have retained their specific histories and characteristics while becoming identified as aspects or manifestations of the Great Goddess. Santoṣī Mā is the most recent of such goddesses, her newness acknowledged by all. The case of Santoṣī Mā, who has arisen as it were before our very eyes, provides an excellent opportunity to study processes of deity formation and assimilation in popular Hinduism. These processes may differ in various parts of India. In the greater Panjab, where the worship of the virgin and mother Śerānvālī was already a well-established and dominant cult, Santoṣī Mā has become easily absorbed as one of her many aspects. The appearance of Santoṣī Mā on the contemporary scene is testimony to the continued flexibility and vigor of the Hindu tradition.

The Goddess as an Enduring Presence

7

In this study I have approached the cult of the Goddess in north-west India as a regional phenomenon with pan-Indian connections. Śerānvālī, identified with the pan-Indian Durgā or Mahādevī, is a goddess of many manifestations, nominal and geographical, such as the Seven Sisters, Nine Goddesses, and various śakti *pīṭhas*. The Goddess also takes on various "forms" (*rūp*) such as the *pinḍī* (stone), *mūrti* (carved iconic image), *kanyā* (maiden), *jot* (flame), and *pavan* (wind or possession), as well as her "direct form" (*sākṣāt rūp*) with which she sometimes graces her devotees in dreams and visions. In this final chapter I address once more the questions that have guided this study: Who is the Goddess? How do her various forms relate to each other? What is her significance in the lives of her devotees? I offer some comments on the continuing discussion concerning benevolence and malevolence among Hindu female deities, on *bhakti* as an overarching framework for interpreting the Goddess cult, and on the Goddess's multiple manifestations and ambiguity as a key to understanding her enduring popularity.

Benevolence, Malevolence, and the Single Goddess

Vaiṣṇo and Kālī are two different aspects of the Goddess that could roughly be described as gentle (*saumya*) and fierce (*raudra*). Superficially, this distinction resembles one put forth in modern scholarly literature on Hindu goddesses, that of benevolence and malevo-