

The entrance of many women scholars into the field of Hindu studies has also facilitated another important change that is reflected in this book. These women have often been able to pursue research into aspects of the living religion of India that their male predecessors could only approach indirectly. In a society where women and men often lead separate lives, women scholars can observe and enter into conversation with Hindu women far more easily than men. Of course, it would be wrong to think that Hindu goddesses are worshiped exclusively or even primarily by women, but female devotees certainly figure importantly in the communities that revere them. Several chapters in the book—those by Cynthia Humes, Donna Wulff, Lindsey Harlan, Kathleen Erndl, Sarah Caldwell, and Rachel McDermott—especially benefit from this new mode of access to the Goddess, and in general the focus on lived religion here is stronger than it was in *The Divine Consort*, which had a predominantly textual orientation. Because most Indian texts about goddesses, whether consort or “free,” have been composed by men, this increasing disengagement from the hegemony of the written word is doubly significant.

Critics may well observe that another hurdle is yet to be jumped: most of the authors represented here are not themselves Hindus. Only one has an Indian language as her mother tongue. With the rapid movement of South Asians into a Western diaspora, and with the gradual (if sometimes grudging) acknowledgment in India itself that religion is a respectable field of study, another decade will doubtless not only demand but make possible further changes of perspective in a collection such as this. More Hindu voices will be heard—and particularly, more voices of Hindu women.

ONE GODDESS AND MANY, NEW AND OLD

In 1975 the movie *Jai Santoshi Ma* emerged from the thriving network of studios that make Bombay one of the major capitals of the international film industry, and within months a new goddess was being worshiped throughout India. The name of the movie can be loosely translated as “Hail to the Mother of Satisfaction,” and it heralded a divinity—“The Mother of Satisfaction,” Santoshi Mā—who had hitherto remained entirely unknown to most Indians. In fact, although a temple to her existed in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, she had evidently not been known very long under that name or in that form even there. Before 1967 the temple now dedicated to her had belonged to a goddess called Lāl Sāgar kī Mātā, “The Mother of the Red Lake,” near whose banks it stands, and the characteristics of the earlier goddess diverged in important respects from those of Santoshi Mā. Most significantly, Lāl Sāgar kī Mātā was a carnivore, to whom goats and other animals were periodically sacrificed, whereas Santoshi Mā is a vegetarian, with chickpeas and unrefined sugar at the center of her diet.

Most who saw the movie knew nothing of this previous history, or indeed of Santoṣī Mā herself, before they walked into cinema halls throughout the subcontinent. Yet the goddess who appeared before them in celluloid form was in many ways familiar. The colors of her clothes and complexion were drawn from a palette standardized by the poster-art industry that dominates the iconographic imaginations of most modern-day Hindus (see figure 1). Her characteristic poses showed her standing or sitting on a lotus, as several other goddesses do. (See especially Vasudha Narayanan's description of Śrī in this collection.) And she shared her most prominent implements, the sword and trident, with the great goddess often named Durgā. (See the chapter by Thomas Coburn on Devī and Kathleen Erndl's essay on Śerānvālī.)

As her film brought her to life, however, Santoṣī Mā quickly became one of the most important and widely worshiped goddesses in India, taking her place in poster-art form in the altar rooms of millions of Hindu homes. People throughout India, especially women, kept (and still keep) a vow of fasting for sixteen consecutive Fridays. On those days they made special offerings to Santoṣī Mā, hoping to be blessed with a wish fulfilled. Then, and at other times too, they read her story and sang her songs. The annual calendar of Hindu festivals also responded to her advent. In late summer there is a celebration of brother-sister solidarity, *rākhi* or *rakṣabandhana*, which the film identified as the moment of and reason for Santoṣī Mā's birth. Not unexpectedly, then, her image began to appear on the bright paper medallions that decorate the threads (*rākhīs*) sisters tie onto the wrists of their brothers and other male relatives and friends on that day. Everywhere, Santoṣī Mā images and shrines were added to temples, and in some cases, as had already happened in Jodhpur, she took over the place of the presiding deity in temples that had previously been dedicated to other goddesses.

How was all this possible? Obviously the filmmakers had found the right story at the right time. Obviously, they were appealing to a religious culture in which visual access to the divine was understood to be both legitimate and crucial. Moreover, many said, it was devotion that had produced the film: the filmmaker's wife, after discovering Santoṣī Mā on a pilgrimage to Jodhpur, had been the one who persuaded her husband to spread the goddess's message by translating her into a new medium.

Yet it is hard to conceive that Santoṣī Mā could have granted such instant satisfaction to so many people had she not been part of a larger and already well-integrated culture of the Goddess. Her new devotees could immediately recognize many of her characteristic moods and attributes, and feel them deeply, because she shared them with other goddesses long since familiar to them. Some of these divine women were somewhat playfully depicted in the film as struggling spitefully against the growth of the cult of the new goddess—and understandably, for she had stolen their fire. In some sense, she really *was* Brahmāṇī and Pārvatī and Lakṣmī, the goddesses who



Figure 1. Santoṣī Mā. Polychrome poster by [Name] and Company, Madras.

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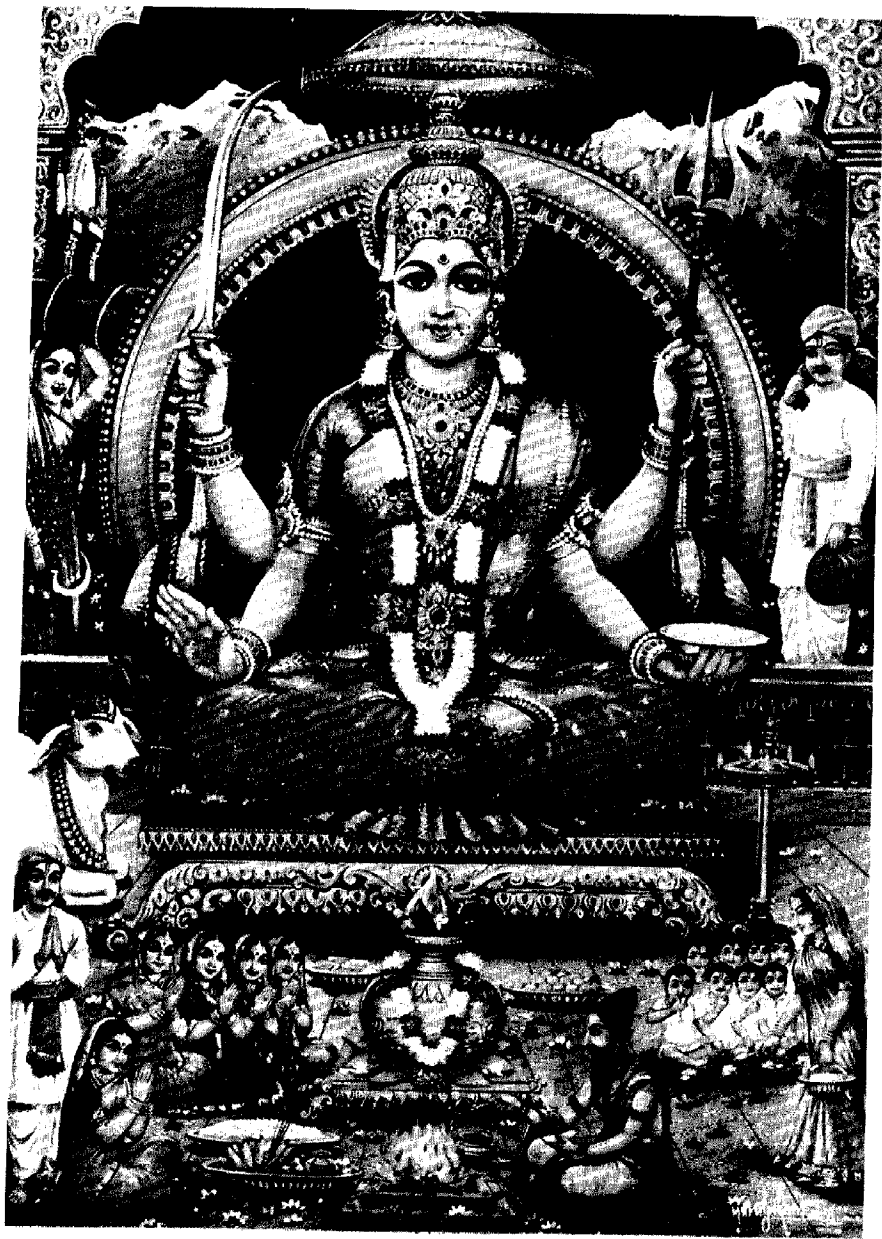


Figure 1. Santosi Mā. Polychrome poster-art depiction, ca. 1980, by J. B. Khanna and Company, Madras.

did their best to make life hard for Santoṣī Mā's paradigmatic devotee. In some sense, too, she prevailed because of her youth and vigor. In India, as elsewhere, there is something fascinating about the new, and the film's own plot suggested it was natural that Santoṣī Mā's youth should arouse the envy of older goddesses.

But there was another secret to her success: she was a unitive presence. At least in the context of this film, she was the Great Goddess in a way that Brahmāṇī, Pārvatī, and Lakṣmī, as wives to the classic triad of supreme Hindu gods (Brahmā, Śiva, and Viṣṇu), were not. Although she was depicted as emerging from a divine lineage, she stood on her own. Not only did she incorporate and thus summarize a certain spectrum of preexisting female divinities, but she unified them as well, amalgamating their power for her devotees.

There is much more to be said about the appeal of this new film goddess, as Stanley Kurtz has attempted to do in his recent book, *All the Mothers Are One*.⁶ Yet in all of it one can scarcely miss the point that, as his title suggests, Hindu goddesses tend to be seen as close relatives of one another—even possessing a common substance—in a way that is somehow less true of the male side of the Hindu pantheon. The "high theology" of the Goddess enunciated in two classic Sanskrit texts, the *Devī Māhātmya* and the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāna*, provides a way of understanding why this should be so. For most Hindus, the gods, too, are ultimately understood as a unity: *bhagavān ek hī hai* ("God is one"), as the common Hindi phrase has it. Yet this unity is typically conceived to exist at a level distant from everyday life—at the "nonqualified" (*nirguṇa*) level. With goddesses, it is different. As described in the texts just named (on one of which, the *Devī Māhātmya*, see the essays by Thomas Coburn and Cynthia Humes), the unity of the Great Goddess incorporates the world as we know it, as well as transcending it. In some sense, Goddess *is* our world, in a way that God is not. Hence the multiple forms she takes are connected in a way that strikes us as more intimate than those we typically project when we understand the divine as male.

This is not to deny the variousness of the Goddess. In one of her most prevalent expressions she spreads herself across the landscape of much of India—the southern part especially—such that she becomes specific to each place she touches. Each village has its tutelary divinity, its *grāmadevatā* ("village deity"), and the personality of each is distinct: no one place is the same as any other. Yet the fact that the divine *is* ubiquitous in this manner says something generic, and Hindus have overwhelmingly conceptualized that place-specific, divine reality as female. These village deities are almost always understood as goddesses, not gods. In most instances their commonality can be acknowledged by calling each of them "Mother," and in many places in South India one can be even more specific. There, village goddesses tend to

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collect under the common heading of Mariyamman: the Mariyamman of this locale or that, after the fashion of "Our Lady of —."7

It is important to understand that for Hindus, real differentiations, such as those that obtain among local deities, do not necessarily imply unbridgeable gaps between members of a given set of beings. As Diana Eck has commented about Indian ways of thinking, "If something is important, it is important enough to be repeated, duplicated, and seen from many angles."⁸ This is true for gods, and even truer for goddesses. Not so many years ago India's vast film industry produced a movie, entitled "Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Pārvatī," and on billboards the three goddesses were clumped together as a triad—three similar-looking heads emerging as if from a common frame. It is hard to imagine a film taking its title from the names of three gods who would be portrayed in the same fashion.

Of course, Hindu male deities do sometimes share emblems, attributes, and properties. Viṣṇu's characteristic disc can on occasion be found in the hand of Krishna, who is often conceptualized as his avatar, and Śiva's habit of wearing snakes as garlands is often replicated in his horrific manifestation as Bhairava ("The Fearsome One"). Yet this sharing of family traits is even more pronounced on the female side of the Hindu pantheon. To begin with, goddesses observe an important ground rule that does not apply to gods: when they appear in sculpted form, as images, they are almost invariably anthropomorphic.⁹ More than that, they share associations: with the auspicious, gentle lotus on the one hand, and with such powerful weapons as the sword and the trident on the other. Similar ties emerge at the level of theological analysis. For example, goddesses are characteristically described as bearing a close relation to power or energy per se (*śakti*). That energy is abundant in the physical universe we inhabit. Hence, goddesses tend to be strongly associated with the forces of nature (*prakṛti*) and the earth—sometimes in its nurturing, maternal aspect, sometimes in its natural periodicity, sometimes in its uncontrollable, destructive power. The earth itself is typically figured as a goddess: *bhū*, the earth, is Bhūdevī. Often, too, the power of a goddess (or *the Goddess*) is experienced as brilliantly hot—a quality called *tejas*. Finally, perhaps especially in the eyes of men, this goddess power is felt to be somehow miraculous, to produce illusion (*māyā*), to delude. And not surprisingly, all but one of the concepts we have just listed are grammatically feminine in Sanskrit and in other Indic languages that distinguish nouns by gender (*tejas*, the exception, is neuter).

To a certain degree, these family resemblances carry over into the ritual dimension as well. Both gods and goddesses are worshiped throughout India with a ritual vocabulary whose central elements remain more or less constant. To the accompaniment of music, offerings of praise (*pūjā*) are made to the divinity, who is typically present in the form of a clothed image

(*mūrti*), and certain of the offerings are standard: incense, flowers, lighted candles or flames of burning camphor, and various sorts of food. These, once touched or tasted by the divinity, are returned to the worshipers as ritual leftovers, called *prasād*. The word means literally "grace" and signifies that the original giver in this transaction is actually the deity, who is the real author of the materials being offered—and, indeed, of the offerers. A similar thing holds true for the act of visual attention (*darśan*, "seeing" or "sight") that accompanies these acts of worship. On the one hand, the worshiper sees the divinity, in an imagistic expression. Yet on the other, the worshiper is seen by the deity, the image, for the image has been ritually enlivened and thus has eyes. As with *prasād*, there is the conviction that in this visual transaction the deity's act of seeing actually precedes the devotee's. Ontologically, it has a prior status.

All this is standard for deities of either sex. It is noteworthy, however, that certain kinds of symbols and rituals are particularly associated with female divinities. For example, goddesses are often represented by pots; the pot overflowing with vegetation is an ancient Indian symbol of fructification. Further, goddesses tend to possess their devotees to the point of total identification, which is much rarer for gods. Possession is not entirely absent in the worship of male divinities, but it is especially characteristic of the worship of goddesses. In a similar way, it would seem likely, although the evidence is far from complete, that women are more frequently possessed by goddesses than are men.¹⁰ Certainly, women figure more prominently in possession performances associated with goddesses than they do as lead actors in the general run of public Hindu rites. Finally, and quite importantly, some goddesses (but emphatically not all) share a taste for blood sacrifice. Sacrificial violence is endemic to the worship of many goddesses, especially the village deities and local guardians mentioned above, so it was no small matter when the carnivorous Lāl Sāgar kī Mātā was converted into the vegetarian Santoṣī Mā. The elimination (or sublimation) of blood sacrifice in Hindu religion is a long-standing historical trend that applies to both gods and goddesses.¹¹ But it is notable that where "real" sacrifice persists, a female divinity is apt to be involved.¹²

Given this pattern of multiplicity and convergence, it is often hard to know how best to refer to Devī in English. Sometimes the singular feels more accurate, sometimes the plural. When we are speaking in the singular, it seems sexist and perhaps even imperialist to stick to English convention and withhold the capital "G" that we so readily award to a single male divinity. Hence, readers of this book will encounter not only "goddesses" and "goddess," but "Goddess"—both with and without the definite article. Since Indic languages observe no distinction between capital and lowercase letters, and since they lack the definite article, the g/G and "the" problems are clearly ours, not India's. But the quandary as to singular or plural is shared.

In similar fashion, there is no "ritual" of goddesses who will appear in the rest of chapters reflects only one possibility of several compromises. Readers will have to choose their own paths. Given the complicated web of relationships—both together and apart—between them, any arrangement can be definitive.

THE GODDESS AS SUPREMACY

In the first part of this book, we focus on the relationship between goddesses who are conceived of as all-encompassing and those whose characteristics are defined especially by the relations they bear to other deities. Two chapters are devoted to exploring the relationship between the goddess and the god. The first chapter links these two sets of two. At the end of the chapter, the goddess encounter the generic Devī and the goddess who is grounded Vindhyavāsini. These goddesses are goddesses of supremacy over all other forms of life. At the other end of the spectrum we have the goddess (called) and Rādhā, both of whom are goddesses of submission, although in markedly different ways. The goddess who fits into neither of these categories is the goddess who is both between the transcendent and the immanent. She unquestionably manifests herself as a goddess demanding submission or as an all-encompassing goddess. On the other hand, her supremacy is paradoxical. She exerts over her consort, the great goddess, a power that is both the same as and different from her own.

With this Great Goddess, then, we have a goddess who is both encompassing. In the book's opening chapter, we encounter the earliest known Hindu text in which the goddess is understood as "Goddess": the sixth-century BCE *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* ("Goddess"). Coburn points to the material in this text as composed of it combined and reshaped to serve the cause of a single, supreme goddess. The goddess's important martial encounters, in which she is the stability of the world, to illustrate the goddess's conclusion and redemption from it (*māyā*) and power or energy (*śakti*). As we have seen, the concept is feminine, and Coburn shows how the goddess's vision of both cosmic and earthly reality demonstrates how the *Devī Māhātmya*

In similar fashion, there is no "right" way to array the extraordinary range of goddesses who will appear in the pages that follow. The present ordering of chapters reflects only one possible alignment, and even it is the product of several compromises. Readers are invited to imagine other configurations. Given the complicated web of ties that binds these goddesses together—and, equally, the many features that keep them apart—no one arrangement can be definitive.

THE GODDESS AS SUPREME, THE GODDESS AS CONSORT

In the first part of this book, we follow one major gradient: the contrast between goddesses who are conceived as supreme, independent, and comprehensive, and those whose character is shaped by relationships—especially the relations they bear to the male gods who are their consorts. Two chapters are devoted to exploring each type, and a transitional chapter links these two sets of two. At the independent end of the spectrum we encounter the generic *Devī* and her closely related aspect, the locally grounded *Vindhyavāsini*. These goddesses are characterized by their supremacy over all other forms of life, whether animal, human, or divine. At the other end of the spectrum we have *Śrī* (or *Lakṣmī*, as she is sometimes called) and *Rādhā*, both of whom are defined by their relationships to their mates, although in markedly divergent ways. In between, we meet *Kālī*, a goddess who fits into neither of these sets and in a strange way mediates between the transcendent and the consort goddesses. On the one hand, *Kālī* unquestionably manifests herself as supreme—whether as a mother demanding submission or as uncanny, uncontrollable force—but, on the other hand, her supremacy is paradigmatically measured by the power she exerts over her consort, the great god *Śiva*. As her myths of origin reveal, she is both the same as and different from the Great Goddess.

With this Great Goddess, then, we begin: *Devī*, the transcendent and all-encompassing. In the book's opening chapter Thomas Coburn describes the earliest known Hindu text in which, as he puts it, "ultimate reality is understood as Goddess": the sixth-century *Devī Māhātmya* ("Glorification of the Goddess"). Coburn points to the many ways in which the theologian(s) who composed it combined and reshaped earlier formulations to make them serve the cause of a single, supreme Goddess. He retells three of *Devī*'s most important martial encounters, in which she defeats demons who threaten the stability of the world, to illustrate how she exemplifies the powers of illusion and redemption from it (*māyā*), earthiness and materiality (*prakṛti*), and power or energy (*śakti*). As we have seen, each of these Sanskrit concepts is feminine, and Coburn shows how they all serve a female-focused vision of both cosmic and earthly reality. At the same time, however, he demonstrates how the *Devī Māhātmya* associates these female properties