

INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking characteristics of the ancient and multifaceted Hindu religious tradition is the importance of goddess worship. A considerable number of goddesses are known in the earliest Hindu scriptures, the Vedic hymns. In contemporary Hinduism the number and popularity of goddesses are remarkable. No other living religious tradition displays such an ancient, continuous, and diverse history of goddess worship. The Hindu tradition provides the richest source of mythology, theology, and worship available to students interested in goddesses.

Although there are several books on the history of goddesses in India,¹ there is still need for a survey of Hindu goddesses which not only describes their main appearances and roles but also interprets the significance of each goddess within Hinduism. Some studies have sought to apply this kind of approach to an individual goddess,² but to my knowledge there is no study that attempts to describe and interpret all of the central Hindu goddesses. My approach in this book is to provide portraits of the most important goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. I have tried to suggest some of the history of each goddess, to summarize her most important myths and roles, and to show how she illustrates important Hindu (or human) truths. Although common themes occur in the myths, iconography, and functions of several of the goddesses treated in this book, each portrait is intended to be complete and to be appreciated by itself. The book need not be read in its entirety by people interested in just one or two of the Hindu goddesses. My intention is to provide a sourcebook on Hindu goddesses for students of the Hindu tradition and for those interested in goddesses in general.

The book also seeks to be a sourcebook for the growing study of women and religion. In recent years, especially in North America, considerable interest has developed in this field. A whole new area of religious studies now focuses on the ways in which women are perceived in

traditional religions and on the status of women within those religions. The importance of goddesses in these traditions is of particular interest to people studying this field. While this book does not attempt to rethink female self-perception in the West in light of Hindu goddesses,³ I hope that it will make Hindu visions of the feminine accessible to those interested in such pursuits.

This book does not pretend to be exhaustive on the subject of goddesses in Hinduism. The number of goddesses in contemporary Hinduism alone is simply overwhelming. Nor does it pretend to be exhaustive of any of the particular goddesses who are included. Most of the ones I discuss have been known and widely worshiped for hundreds of years, some of them for thousands of years. Rather, this book seeks to represent the nature and diversity of goddess worship in Hinduism and to include all of the most important Hindu goddesses.

My primary sources have been literary and to some extent iconographical. I am aware that my views of the divine feminine in Hinduism may thus be slanted in the direction of the so-called great tradition, namely, the tradition that is high caste, educated, and predominantly male. In many cases, however, the only information that we have on some goddesses and on certain aspects of other goddesses, or the only information that we have from the past, is found in such sources. The chapter on village goddesses, which draws on the work of anthropologists and sociologists, suggests a quite different vision of the divine feminine from those visions underlying the great goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Nevertheless, this book is out of necessity weighted toward the literary stream of the Hindu tradition, which tends to ignore or look with suspicion on popular worship, in which goddesses are widely revered.

This book does not try to present the material on goddesses in a historical or chronological way. Although I begin the book by discussing the evidence for goddess worship in Vedic literature and close the study with a treatment of village goddesses which suggests a look at the modern situation, the order in which I treat the most important Hindu goddesses is not meant to suggest a historical sequence. Only in very general terms is there a discernible historical progression. The earliest evidence of goddess worship in Hinduism is discussed first. The main sources here are Vedic texts. In these sources no goddesses of great popularity or prominence appear. This situation persists in the Hindu literary tradition till after the epic period. Sometime around the fifth or sixth century A.D., however, several goddesses suddenly appear in iconographic and literary sources in situations of great importance, which indicates an acceptance (or resurgence) of goddess worship in the Hindu

tradition. All the individual goddesses that I discuss in the book (with the possible exception of Rādhā) are important from that period to the present: Śrī-Lakṣmī, Pārvatī, Sarasvatī, Sītā, Durgā, Kālī, the Mātṛkās, and such geographical goddesses as Gaṅgā. The central focus of the book is on these goddesses, and chapters treating them form the bulk of the work. The chapters on geographical goddesses, groups of goddesses, and village goddesses shift the focus of the book toward the present and rely more on the work of contemporary observers of Hinduism. Only in this limited way, then, might the book be seen to have a very general historical or developmental character.

My interest in Hindu goddesses dates to 1968, when I went to India to undertake doctoral research on the worship, mythology, and theology of Kṛṣṇa. During that year in India I was struck by the number of goddesses popular in Bengal, by my lack of knowledge about them, and also by the central role that Rādhā played in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. My first systematic attempt to study a Hindu goddess focused on Kālī.⁴ Despite her popularity in the Hindu tradition, very little scholarly research had been done on her. I have found a similar absence of research on other important and popular Hindu goddesses.

I doubt whether this state of affairs results from an inherent male chauvinism among scholars of Hinduism, because a similar gap has existed until recently with regard to most male deities of the Hindu pantheon as well. Perhaps the situation is simply a reflection of what scholars of Hinduism, both Western and Indian, have found interesting and worthy of study. Until recently what was called popular Hinduism did not seem worthy of scholarly attention. Vedic literature and the philosophic schools of the Hindu tradition, in particular, dominated the interests of students of the Hindu religious tradition. Perhaps it seemed to scholars that there was little connection between the philosophic systems of the Hindu tradition and the beliefs, myths, and rituals that occupy the lives of most Hindus. In some cases, I suppose, there is little in common. But it seems clear to me that in most cases popular Hinduism expresses central truths of the Hindu tradition.

The goddesses, who are usually associated with popular Hinduism, often illustrate important ideas of the Hindu tradition, ideas that underlie the great Hindu philosophic visions. Several goddesses, for example, are unambiguously identified with or called *prakṛti*, a central notion in most philosophic systems. *Prakṛti* denotes physical (as opposed to spiritual) reality. It is nature in all its complexity, orderliness, and intensity. The identification of a particular goddess with *prakṛti* is a commentary on her nature. At the same time, descriptions of her nature and behavior are a commentary on the Hindu understanding of physical reality.

Other goddesses express and explore the nature of devotion and the divine-human relationship. Rādā and Sītā, in particular, are important examples of devotional models in the Hindu tradition and suggest a significant feminine dimension to devotion as understood in Hinduism. Lakṣmī expresses Hindu thinking about kingship and the relationship of the ruler to the fertility of the world. The many goddesses associated with geographical features of the Indian subcontinent suggest Hindu thinking about the relationship between sacred space and spiritual liberation.

Most goddesses in their mythologies and natures also express Hindu thinking about sexual roles and relationships. Indeed, goddess mythology to a great extent is probably a means by which the Hindu tradition has thought about sexual roles and sexual identity. Many goddess myths seem to take particular delight in casting females in roles that appear contrary to the social roles of females as described in the *Dharma-sāstras*, the Hindu books on law and society. Several goddesses are cast in untraditional, “masculine” roles that express unconventional, perhaps even experimental, thinking about sexual roles.

Other goddesses, in their myths and personalities, express central tensions that characterize the Hindu tradition. The best example is the mythology of the goddess Pārvatī, in which the tension between dharma, the human tendency to uphold and refine the social and physical order, and *mokṣa*, the human longing to transcend all social and physical limitations, is explored in the relationship between Pārvatī and Śiva.

Although the truths underlying the goddesses may tend to be more world-affirming, more supportive of the emphasis in Hinduism on dharma, whereas the philosophic systems, especially Advaita Vedānta, tend to support the *mokṣa* thrust of the tradition, the great variety of goddesses allows one to find in their mythology and worship expressions of almost every important Hindu theme. In short, a study of Hindu goddesses is not so much a study of one aspect of the Hindu tradition as it is a study of the Hindu tradition itself.

Throughout this book I have tried to resist the theological assumption found in much scholarship on Hindu goddesses that all female deities in the Hindu tradition are different manifestations of an underlying feminine principle or an overarching great goddess. There are, indeed, certain Hindu texts, myths, and traditions that assert this position unambiguously. But to assume that every Hindu goddess in every situation is a manifestation of one great goddess prevents us from viewing such goddesses as Lakṣmī, Pārvatī, and Rādhā as deities containing individually coherent mythologies, theologies, and meanings of their own.

Hindu goddesses are very different from one another. Some have strong maternal natures, whereas others are completely devoid of maternal characteristics. Some have strong, independent natures and are great warriors; others are domestic in nature and closely identified with male deities. Some Hindu goddesses are associated with the wild, untamed fringes of civilization; others are the very embodiment of art and culture. Although the centrality of a great goddess is clear in some texts and although this goddess *does* tend to include within her many-faceted being most important Hindu goddesses,⁵ her presence is not indicated in the majority of texts that speak of Hindu goddesses.

The case of the male gods of the Hindu pantheon is similar. Although some texts, philosophic systems, and traditions insist that all gods are actually manifestations of one god, or one ultimate reality, most texts, myths, cults, and traditions understand such deities as Śiva, Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Skanda, Surya, and Gaṇeśa as individually significant gods whose coherent mythologies and theologies are quite unrelated to an overarching great god. Scholars have long recognized this and have written about the male deities as individual beings. Why should we not do the same thing for the many Hindu goddesses? I think that we should, and this is the approach that I have followed in this book.