PROLOGUE
The Goddess in India

John Stratton Hawley

One of the critical developments in the recent history of Western religion has been the effort to make clearer contact with the feminine dimension in religious experience. This has taken a myriad of forms. Women are now ordained ministers and rabbis in a number of communities where a few years ago the idea would have been laughed away. Gender-neutral language is mandated in many hymnals, prayer books, and new translations of the Bible. Much attention has been focused on feminine images for God in the scriptures and elsewhere. Groups of women have labored to rescue the word witch from its infamous past by becoming witches themselves—and demonstrating whose infamy it actually was, when witches were burned at Salem and elsewhere. Finally, there has been a determined assault on the very history of Western religion in an effort to discover at its origins a Goddess who was widely worshiped before the champions of patriarchy suppressed her. Could she not be worshiped again? Indeed, she is.

The Abrahamic faiths nonetheless place many barriers in the way of seeing the divine as feminine. Those who assert that a coherent culture of the Goddess once prevailed across the Mediterranean world and Europe acknowledge that it has long since been defiled, broken, obscured. In the task of reconstruction—at the scholarly level as well as in the realm of practice—great creativity will be required before Westerners can discover the Goddess again.

Not so for India. All through the archaeological remains of the Indus Valley Civilization, which created a new standard of culture for South Asia in the third and second millennia B.C.E., one finds a distinctive set of female terracotta figurines—thousands of them. We cannot tell exactly what functions they served or what they meant to those who made and kept them, but
there seems no question about their ubiquity or importance. Moreover, the styles of modeling they display were carried forward into subsequent ages. Female sculptures from the Mauryan period (fourth to second centuries B.C.E.) and even later often look very much like their Indus prototypes. By that time one also has much clearer evidence of a religion that projected the divine in both masculine and feminine terms. True, the Aryan civilization that became increasingly dominant in North India at the level of high culture from 1000 B.C.E. onward allotted only minor roles to goddesses, but the material evidence shows that the indigenous culture never died out. In fact, one scholar recently suggested that “the history of the Hindu tradition can be seen as a reemergence of the feminine.” As the Sanskrit textual tradition developed up through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries C.E., the place of the Goddess in it became ever more firmly established.

Thus, in the religious life of Hindus today there is no need to resuscitate the Great Goddess. She is alive and well. She proliferates in ever new forms of herself (many would say, in fact, that she is fundamentally plural rather than singular), and she animates the religious lives of hundreds of millions of people. Her generic name in Sanskrit and the many Indian languages related to it is devi, a word that, like its Latin and Greek cognates dea and thea, means simply “goddess.” This is a book about Devi, singular and plural, the Goddess and goddesses of India.

It has a forerunner. A decade ago, Donna Wulff and I published a collection of essays (five of which reappear here, in altered form) under the title The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India. That volume focused on Rādhā, the consort of the well-known Hindu god Krishna, and had as a primary aim the task of making her better known and understood outside of India. Other goddesses were arrayed around Rādhā, with the particular desire of illuminating her place in the broader Hindu tradition. The book that emerged was the first collection of essays in English on Hindu goddesses, but because of the intimate relation between Rādhā and Krishna, it inevitably laid a certain emphasis on goddesses who are understood as wives or consorts.

This time we intend to shift the balance so that independent goddesses and goddesses who dominate their male partners can take center stage. In part, this reflects the redirection of Western scholarship in the intervening decade, which is in turn partially a response to the vigorous feminist influence in the field of religious studies. But this attempt to readjust the balance in the earlier book also has a logic of its own. However wide-ranging the essays that The Divine Consort comprised, the name of the book quite wrongly suggested that male gods (and perhaps male religion) are the fundamental point of reference in Hinduism. Indian society may be overwhelmingly patriarchal, as is often said, but in the realm of religion the picture is far more complex.
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 Santoṣi Mā. Most significantly, Lāl Sāgar kī Mātā was a carnivore, to whom goats and other animals were periodically sacrificed, whereas Santoṣi 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 Sántoṣi 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 Śrāṅvāli.)

As her film brought her to life, however, Sántoṣi 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 Sántoṣi 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, rākhī or rakṣabandhana, which the film identified as the moment of and reason for Sántoṣi Mā’s birth. Not unexpectedly, then, her image began to appear on the bright paper medallions that decorate the threads (rākhūs) sisters tie onto the wrists of their brothers and other male relatives and friends on that day. Everywhere, Sántoṣi 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 Sántoṣi 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 Sántoṣi 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-art depiction, ca. 1980, by J. B. Khanna and Company, Madras.
did their best to make life hard for Sāntoṣī 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 Sāntoṣī 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 Brahmāṇi, 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. 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 Purāṇa, provides a way of understanding why this should be so. For most Hindus, the gods, too, are ultimately understood as a unity: bha-gavān 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
collect under the common heading of Mariyamman: the Mariyamman of this locale or that, after the fashion of “Our Lady of ——.”

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.” This is true for gods, and even truer for goddesses. Not so many years ago India’s vast film industry produced a movie, entitled “Sarasvati, Laksmi, Parvati,” 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. Visnu’s characteristic disc can on occasion be found in the hand of Krishna, who is often conceptualized as his avatar, and Siva’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. 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 (sakti). That energy is abundant in the physical universe we inhabit. Hence, goddesses tend to be strongly associated with the forces of nature (prakriti) 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 Bhudevi. 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 (maya), 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 (pujā) 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. 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. But it is notable that where “real” sacrifice persists, a female divinity is apt to be involved.

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 “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 Devi and her closely related aspect, the locally grounded Vindhyavāsīni. 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 Laṃṣmī, 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 (prakṛtī), and power or energy (saktī). 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
with the Great Goddess in such a way as to avoid the conclusion that they have male counterparts, as they are assumed to have in other expressions of the Hindu tradition. For the Devi Māhātmya, māyā is not complementary or subordinate to Viṣṇu, as other texts would have it. Nor is prakṛti balanced—or superseded—by the principle of maleness, puruṣa, with which it is so often paired. Nor is śakti paired with, or subsumed in, the male god Śiva. In Devi, these qualities stand on their own, constituting reality in a manner that is independently female.

Toward the conclusion of his chapter, Coburn takes up the various ways in which this independent theology of the Great Goddess relates to elements of the Hindu tradition that are not so entirely focused on the feminine. As we have already hinted, these include communities devoted to the worship of Śiva (the Śaivas) or Viṣṇu (the Vaiṣṇavas) or gods such as Krishna who are frequently conceptualized as being avatars of Viṣṇu (Vaiṣṇavas again). Coburn also distinguishes between some of the perspectives of the Devī Māhātmya and those that developed later within communities devoted primarily to the Goddess and her many forms, communities broadly referred to as Śākta, a term deriving from the concept of śakti.

In the chapter that follows, by Cynthia Ann Humes, we have a chance to see what happens to the idea of the Great Goddess when it is taken up by one of these Śākta traditions, as practiced in a particular place. The place is a village called Vindhyachal. It marks the spot at which the Vindhyā mountain range, which stretches across the center of India, comes to an end at the banks of the Ganges. As we shall see, the Ganges itself is understood by Hindus to be a goddess—hence the place has unusual power—and the goddess who reigns there is known as Vindhyavāsinī, “The One Who Dwells in the Vindhyas.” The tradition of her worship is old. Humes shows, in fact, that it contributed to the general formulation of “goddessness” that is found in the Devī Māhātmya. Yet it is also given voice in a text specific to the Vindhya locale itself, the Vindhyā Māhātmya (“Glorification of the Vindhyas”). This work praises the Vindhya mountain range and the town that serves as its emblem, while at the same time extolling the goddess Vindhyavāsinī who enlivens them both and, in a deep sense, is them.

Humes offers a memorable account of what it is like to join the pilgrims who come to worship Vindhyavāsinī: milling crowds, the sound of temple gongs, blood sacrifices, and the following of ritual diagrams. Here we see—and hear, touch, and smell—what it is to encounter this transcendent goddess in real time and space. We come to sense how Hindus in one specific context taste the affirmation that the Great Goddess’s transcendence must be experienced through her simultaneous immanence in the world we inhabit.

Humes also shows that the meaning of this conflation of transcendent and immanent is undergoing a process of continuous renegotiation. She
highlights the manner in which the text describing this particular place, the _Vindhya Māhātmya_, is progressively being displaced by the _Devī Māhātmya_, even in local usage. As they increasingly seek to appeal to pilgrims drawn from far-flung places, the priests and pilgrimage guides of Vindhyavāsīnī tend to express her transcendence in a language that implicitly subordinates the here-and-now goddess Vindhyavāsīnī to the more generalized Devī of the _Devī Māhātmya_. For their more cosmopolitan clients in particular, they reorient the old passions of Vindhyavāsīnī in the direction of an emerging pan-Hindu orthodoxy that emphasizes Vedic roots, vegetarian habits, and a universalist theology.

Some of these same transitions can be seen in the worship of Kālī (“The Black One”). Recent field study by Rachel Fell McDermott, some of which she reports in her chapter at the end of this collection, shows that in modern-day Bengal, at least, the Black Goddess is predominantly conceived as a kind and beautiful maternal force. Yet, as her distinctly nonvegetarian patterns of worship and apparently horrific iconography reveal, there was a time not long ago when Kālī was experienced as a terrifying reality. Sarah Caldwell’s description of Kālī as she appears in a South Indian locale under the name Bhagavati (“The Blessed One”) conveys some sense of how this violent Kālī feels to present-day worshipers, and David Kinsley’s portrait of her as she appears in several key Sanskrit texts—the third chapter of our book—echoes many of the same themes.

Kinsley shows how Devī’s three great aspects—māyā, prakṛti, and śakti—take on a new form when expressed through Kālī. Kālī provides startling glimpses of what can happen when powers of illusion, natural forces, and energy exist in a pure form, beyond the control of any governing, restraining structure. For example, there is the paradigmatic moment when Kālī dances wild on the prone, ithyphallic corpse of her husband Śiva. It seems clear that such images of Kālī were shaped by men, and male roles are what give structural definition to most segments of Hindu society. Hence it is no surprise that, as Lawrence A. Babb some years ago observed, goddesses bear a seemly, auspicious demeanor when they are subjected to the will of their husbands or consorts—that is, when they serve within the structures that their spouses provide. But they appear dangerous and threatening when they do not.

Men know that women possess a power that exceeds the structures they would like to impose, structures that have collectively been called dharma: the way things should be, at least according to the dominant men. As Kinsley demonstrates, one influential account of Kālī’s origins gives shape to this knowledge: the gods need her to confront demons they cannot contain, but once they release her from their own beings and allow her to consolidate herself beyond the boundaries that their personalities provide, she becomes uncontrollable. Or, in a parallel tale, once she escapes the control
of her aroused mate, Śiva (śīva means literally “the auspicious one”), she expands her form and relaxes her behavior to the point where she dances a crazed dance on Śiva’s corpse (śāva, the most inauspicious of things). In these stories she is, as Kinsley says, “blood and death out of place.” In confronting her, we are not only horrified but potentially saved. A vision of Kālī takes us beyond the constraints through which and within which we live. Kālī releases.

In this paradoxical meeting of affliction and liberation, Kālī establishes a paradigm that fits many other goddesses, especially goddesses who express themselves as diseases. There is Śītalā, for example, the goddess of pestular diseases who is worshiped all across North India and has counterparts elsewhere, too. In her main incarnation as smallpox, she maims, disfigures, kills. Yet her name means “The Cool One,” as if she connoted something far more soothing than her diminutive demon-consort Jara (“Fever”), the burning, delusion-causing reality that every smallpox victim knows. Poems to Śītalā demonstrate the paradox that disease is not just curse but release—release from life in its humdrum channels, a journey into levels of sensitivity that seem now illusory, now realer than real. Even death can be a release of this sort—release from life itself—and because death and life are often seen by Hindus as contrasting moments along a single gradient of experience, a single goddess may govern them both. Śītalā does this, as both the disease and its cure. And, on a grander scale, so does Kālī: her name means not only “black” but “deathly.” Sarah Caldwell’s chapter later in the book describes how her affliction and deliverance are dramatized and experienced in one regional setting. Kathleen Erndl’s chapter provides comparative material for Devī; and in Vindhyavāsini, too, we encounter a goddess whose independence can sometimes lead to excess.

In chapters 4 and 5 we turn to a much less frightful, less paradoxical pair of divinities—Śrī and Rādhā. As Babb’s typology of malevolent and benevolent goddesses would predict, these are deities who relate to their mates in more characteristically amenable ways than Kālī or Śītalā. Both are consorts of Viṣṇu, but in different roles. As Vasudha Narayanan shows, Śrī (or Lakṣmī) is his wife, serving him predictably, eternally. True, she is sometimes shown independent of Viṣṇu, standing on the auspicious lotus, showering benefits on her human devotees, her children. But Śrī has another pose that more clearly represents what theologians regard as her ontological (as against soteriological) status and that serves as background for most devotees’ understanding of the goddess, even when she stands alone. In this second pose, Śrī appears as the “breast-jewel” of Viṣṇu, ever cradled in his arms, nurturing him with her warmth and sharing his essence. According to the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community of South India, who especially revere her, it is because of this intimate, submissive association with Viṣṇu, the lord of all reality, that she is able to dispense the benefits she does. Śrī is Viṣṇu’s smiling, maternal
side, the caring dimension that balances the authority symbolized by his maleness.

One can, however, take this emphasis too far. Narayanan is very interested in slippages between the reigning theology of the Śrī Vaishnava community, as represented in what we have just said, and the ways in which certain groups of worshipers celebrate Śrī as if she were a force fully coequal to Viṣṇu—on rare occasions, almost independent. Yet there is never any question about the importance of the bond of marriage that ties her to Viṣṇu. That bond, which mandates that a wife be subservient to husband, symbolizes the stability of the relation between the accessible (female) and the transcendent (male) sides of the divine. Śrī is Viṣṇu’s wife. She is not his only wife: Bhudevi, the Earth, in whom we participate directly, is also there. But Śrī, the pure principle of cosmic auspiciousness, goes beyond the mixed earthly realm in which we live, and thus shares fully in the divine. Nevertheless, she does so without challenging the hierarchical order that is intrinsic to it. However transcendent, she continues to serve her husband—far more than he serves her.

Rādhā’s relation to Krishna, who is often interpreted as an avatar of Viṣṇu but whom many of his devotees regard as the ultimate form of divinity, is different. Krishna takes to its logical conclusion the quality of free play (līlā) through which Viṣṇu manifests the world. In the paradigmatic form in which most of his devotees worship him, he is no king and no husband. Instead he is a youth. Although inherently powerful, he plays freely, letting his appetites carry him where they will, far beyond any constraints that might be implied by propriety, duty, or what many people conceive as religion. The word dharma means each of these things, and in his playfulness Krishna eternally transcends dharma.

Necessarily, then, Krishna’s relation to his primary consort, Rādhā, can hardly have the quality of a marriage. By far the majority of their devotees interpret Rādhā as Krishna’s lover and beloved, but not his wife. She is “another’s” (paraṇīyā), not “his own” (svakṣīyā). With the constraints of structure irrelevant or contravened, theirs can be a bond of pure love (prema). It is without progeny; it exists for itself. Unprotected by the expectations that accompanies marriage, and free from the confines of family, the relationship between Rādhā and Krishna is a sweet but stormy one. Its setting is pastoral: the Brāj countryside, where he and Rādhā dwell. As Krishna’s appetites take him to other women, she pines and angers, approaches and withdraws. Because of the force of their love, he, too, is often seen to be subject to these moods, and there are times when he abases himself at her feet; it is not just the other way around. When he does so, in fact, he is paying obeisance to erotic love itself (mādhurya), which Rādhā so fully symbolizes.

In her chapter on Rādhā, Donna Wulff explores such themes by examining the portraits of this goddess that emerge in the sixteenth-century San-
skrit plays of the major Vaiṣṇava theologian Rūpa Gosvāmi and in the modern Bengali performance tradition called *padāvalī kīrtan*. As Vasudha Narayanan found, despite what the texts say, Śrī is understood by many worshipers to be coequal with Viṣṇu. Similarly, Wulff discovers that both for Rūpa and for the Bengali *kīrtan* troupes, Rādhā is truly Krishna’s equal, no matter what Sanskrit classics like the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* would seem to imply. Indeed, in certain ways she transcends him. In a setting where embodied love is regarded as the supreme avenue to religious realization, Rādhā’s steadfast devotion to Krishna (even in anger) exalts her above her mate. Wulff shows that what is in many ways Rādhā’s most human feature—her intense longing for Krishna, displayed with particular force when they are apart and throbbing with the pique and anger that any neglected lover might feel—is the very measure of her divinity.

In an influential chapter of *The Divine Consort*, Frédérique Apffel Marglin discussed the meanings of different patterns of sexual union between gods and goddesses, as seen through the eyes of women she interviewed in Puri, Orissa. Three patterns emerge. In one, the male is dominant and is often portrayed as larger than the woman; in another, the two sexes are equal and are often equal in size; in the third, the female prevails and is often shown larger than the male, or above him (see figure 2). The first is typified by the relation between Viṣṇu and his consort Lakṣmī (or Śrī); the second is illustrated in the love of Rādhā and Krishna; and the third is archetypally present in the union between Śiva and Kālī.

At first glance, this method of sorting out the ways in which goddesses relate to the male side of the pantheon would seem to support the typology articulated by Lawrence Babb: “small” goddesses, controlled by males, are beneficent and auspicious; “big” goddesses threaten, and may bring death. Yet Marglin moves beyond Babb’s typology in two ways. First, she devotes particular attention to the intervening category, Rādhā’s, which floats between the other two and which her informants see as unique. Second, in an earlier essay, Marglin directly challenges Babb’s interpretation of “big” and “small” by proposing that what is dangerous in the “big” goddesses is not their female sexuality per se (as perceived by men) but their celibacy, their separation from erotic interaction. Female power (*śakti*), Marglin argues, is neither threatening nor benign. If not grounded in a sexual relation, it can oscillate freely between the two, sometimes nurturing and sometimes destroying. It is thus “the power of life and death.”

Be this as it may—and Babb’s own interpretation acknowledges this potential ambivalence—it is hard to consider Hindu visions of how the sexes may interact at the divine level without developing a powerful sense of men’s fear of women. Such fear is often expressed as the desire to control. Yet Marglin’s perspective in this disagreement with Babb alerts us to a different, equally important conclusion. Namely, it is insufficient merely to
categorize Hindu goddesses according to a schema that focuses entirely on their connections with male divinities. It is a simple fact that not all goddesses can be described in this way. Devi herself, as portrayed in the Devi Māhātmya, stands apart from even the “big” goddesses in that she has no consort at all, and the same can be said of many other goddesses who
are described in this volume. Śerāṇvālī, Gaṅgā, and Bhagavati belong to this set: their maternal functions make their bonds of consortship pale in importance, and in some cases no such bonds exist. Indeed, stories about Hindu goddesses, as well as conventions that govern their worship, make it clear that almost every goddess’s relationships extend far beyond sex and consortship. As we have just hinted, it is especially the maternal dimension
Figure 2c. Folk painting representing the goddess Kāli straddling the erect liṅga of Śiva's corpse. Gouache on cloth, Orissa, 19th century. From Philip Rawson, *The Art of Tantra*, copyright 1973 by Thames and Hudson, Ltd., London. Used by permission.
that often exceeds the matrimonial, and this dimension comes to the fore in the chapters that comprise the second part of this book.

GODDESSES WHO MOTHER AND POSSESS

Diana Eck inaugurates the second half of the book with a portrait of Gaṅgā, the river Ganges. Often referred to as Gaṅgā Mātā, “Mother Ganges” (as in the hymn with which Eck commences her essay), this goddess can be experienced in both living and conceptual form. She is a tangible river but simultaneously a personage whose full dimensions can be revealed only in icon, story, and song. She is characterized as the very embodiment of śakti, energy in its liquid form, and her power brings life to the wide plain she nourishes. Yet not only there. As Eck shows, Mother Ganges is understood to be everywhere that water is—in all the rivers (and therefore oceans) of the earth, and throughout the cycle of evaporation and condensation that ties earth to heaven. She is the female power that connects all things: the heavenly Ganges (ākāś gaṅgā) above, the river Ganges and all water beneath, and the descent (avataraṇa) that makes them part of a single system. The ability to encompass is what makes this goddess a mother in a special way: through her power to flow and to join, she creates and sustains life. Appropriately, therefore, her mythology associates her as a consort not only with Śiva, who is the dominant male in her life, but also with Viṣṇu; and in an important sense she is greater than them both.

The chapter that follows, by Wendy Doniger, presents a portrait of the goddess known sometimes as Saraṇyū and sometimes as Saṃjñā. Although she is, like the Ganges, in a certain capacity the nurturer of the human race—the stories concerning Saraṇyū make her our actual progenitor—she is a mother and goddess of connections in an entirely different manner from that of Gaṅgā. Doniger traces the story of Saraṇyū, wife of the sun, all the way from the Rīg Veda, India’s oldest text, to the “classic comic” series (Āmar Chitra Katha) of the modern day, and as she does so a wealth of interrelated variants unfolds.

Doniger shows how the myths of Saraṇyū/Saṃjñā return many times to a common set of themes. First and foremost, they explore the truth that humanity was born in a moment of alienation from the gods. Saraṇyū herself, our mother, rejected us and, in a series of ambiguous gestures, also rejected (and was sometimes rejected by) our celestial father, the sun. According to the oldest forms of the story, a delicate balance exists between these two. She is immortal; he is merely mortal, for he dies daily. Yet he is worshiped and she is not. Out of this ambiguous mix our species emerges, and language and representation, masquerade and illusion, are intimately involved. Saraṇyū’s own name comes to be closely associated with doubles (savarna) and images (saṃjñā). These are her resources as a bad mother. Us-
ing them, she rejects her own human progeny, abandoning her son(s), and sometimes causes injury and death, the marks of mortality. Here, then, is a mother goddess whose power to connect has its dark side, and in some myths she is explicitly aligned with the blackness of Kāli—even as she seeks to be Kāli’s bright counterpart, Gaurī, instead.

Perhaps precisely because she is conceived as so profoundly enmeshed in the ambiguities of human origins, Saranyi has never been a goddess whom Hindus actually worship. Her qualities as a mother may not be sufficiently distinct from our own natures to make her a promising focus for human appeals. In this regard Śrāṇvāli (“She of the Lion”), the great goddess Durgā whose independent power is so forcefully represented in the lion she rides, could not be more different. Yet Śrāṇvāli does not remain distant. In fact, as Kathleen Erndl shows in the chapter that follows, one of her most characteristic activities is to draw people to herself through the phenomenon we usually call possession. Here, too, in the experience of the Goddess the line between the human and the divine blurs.

Erndl offers us portraits of two “mothers” who illustrate this point vividly. They are human—women living in the northwest Indian state of Haryana who frequently travel to the Punjab and Himachal Pradesh—yet through a process of learning and experience they have come to be regarded by their devotees as in some sense divine as well, for the Goddess regularly “plays” in them. As is sometimes said in describing how possession works elsewhere in the world, she “rides” them—rides them as she rides her lion. These women have become the focus of organized cults, and possession regularly occurs in all-night vigils (called jagrātā) that feature their presence. Erndl explores the various techniques by which the women mediate between the Goddess and their clients: people sometimes need words of interpretation to understand what the Goddess means to say. That these women themselves—not just the Goddess—receive the title “mother” (Mātā) would seem to reflect not only respect and affection on the part of their devotees, and not only a close identification with the Goddess, but also a recognition that these are women who can, because of their special capabilities, both nurture and heal.

Erndl explains that in the world these “mothers” inhabit there is a healthy skepticism about possession. Not every trance is judged to be genuine. At the same time, however, the people of northwest India do expect possession by Devī to occur in women more often than in men, and these women benefit from that expectation. Erndl touches briefly on the point sometimes made by outside observers that possession affords a convenient language of protest and self-expression—and a vehicle of catharsis—for groups (women, the poor, outcasts) who are given only a small share in controlling the societies in which they participate. But as she also explains, from a point of view closer to that of indigenous exegesis, the nature of the God-
dress herself makes it likely that women will be possessed more frequently than men. According to Śākta theology, the Goddess, however ultimate, is by nature physically immanent in this world. Women partake of her female nature, and also her sākṭi, in a greater measure than men; hence, they are more apt to be possessed by her. Similarly, the Great Goddess is more likely to manifest herself through possession than are any of the Hindu “great gods.”

In the succeeding chapter, by Sarah Caldwell, we see the Great Goddess active in possession in quite a different corner of India—Kerala, the southwesternmost state. Caldwell describes and analyzes the dramatic rite of mudiyyettu, in which the goddess Kāli (or Bhadrakāli, “Gracious Kāli”; or Bhagavati, “The Blessed One”) does battle against the demon king Dārika (who is much like his counterparts elsewhere: Tāraka, Śumbha, Niśumbha, or Mahiśa, the buffalo-demon). The rite ends in a symbolic beheading of Dārika, complete with much symbolic blood.

Many features of mudiyyettu will seem familiar from the environment Erndl describes: the all-night ritual, the flame used to represent and worship Kāli, the bloody sword she carries as her principal weapon, the drums and ecstatic possession, and the “carrying” of the Goddess (who therefore “rides”). Yet there are differences. Here the entire community is assembled in a fully public ritual, the stage is a well-established shrine central to local worship, and Kāli’s vehicles are exclusively men, not women (although in other contexts, more peripheral to the life of modern Kerala, women yield to possession more than men). This nocturnal mudiyyettu event, interwoven so closely with the dominant social segment, is clearly understood as a way both to release the Goddess’s energies and to control them. Darkness is dared, forests are entered, ghosts are called up to serve in her army. Although liquor and the passions of desire and anger flow, the men who participate are protected by a long-standing and highly stylized language of ritual performance. The action follows a familiar goddess-versus-demon story line that surfaces many times in this book, from the first chapter onward.

Caldwell devotes much attention to the fact that in mudiyyettu, unlike in Erndl’s jagrātā vigils, the logic of the ritual and its benefits seem to serve primarily the needs of men. She shows how the goddess is both virgin and mother for both sexes, but in different ways, and stresses the somewhat divergent reactions of men and women to the taboo on menstruation in the goddess’s presence. Both sexes use the worship of the goddess as a means of cooling the dangerously repressed energies of anger and sexuality, but in the men’s case this is accomplished by publicly venting these passions. In contrast, women may express these overpowering emotions only in extreme circumstances—the tuḷḷal dance—and when they do, their actions are viewed as insanity, as a form of possession inspired by evil spirits. Kāli is given
the task of taming these demonic passions, not articulating them. When, in a very different mood, Kāli is ritually present in the possessed, cross-dressed men who perform mudiyettu, women guard their behavior even more carefully than usual.

Thus, in this Kerala context, at least, the power of the Goddess to possess has apparently been channeled so as to represent and benefit men, not women. Part of the ritual’s function seems to be to enable men to deal with their fears of women’s sexual and reproductive power. Perhaps this male cooptation helps explain why, for women especially, the dominant emotion in Kāli’s presence is fear, not love. Before Kāli, Kerala women seem to reject precisely the anger and defiance that are taken as a source of strength by goddess-worshiping women in the West.

Lindsey Harlan presents us with a third perspective on possession by the Goddess. Taking us to the western state of Rajasthan, she explores the character of one of a number of satīs, that is, “good women” or “truthful women,” who earn that title by being profoundly faithful to their husbands—even to the point of death. A genuine satī is believed to be overcome by a determination to place her own body on the funeral pyre of her recently deceased husband, thus keeping her sakti at his side not only in life but in death. For many Rajasthanis, a young bride, or even a virgin who is only betrothed and not yet married, is the ideal satī. As she moves forward to the act of self-sacrifice that demonstrates outwardly what she inwardly already is—a woman of pure virtue and truth—she is believed to radiate the nurturant benefits of motherhood upon her family, community, and those who come to worship her. This power is felt to persist after death, as well. Hence, like Bhagavati in Kerala, she wields that powerful combination of the virginal and the motherly. Her “children” are not her own biological offspring; rather, they are any persons who embrace her in childlike devotion.

A specific conviction about possession—and self-possession—is important here. Those who revere satīs believe that a woman’s resolve to commit suicide in this way, if it is genuine, can only be explained as resulting from the intense, protective energy of her own sat: her virtue, her truthfulness to the ideals of womanhood and marriage. Her sat possesses her, making her satī (a “truthful one,” in the feminine). In many contemporary Rajasthani accounts of incidences of satī, this possession of sat is depicted as having actual physical force. It ignites the pyre, shields the satī from pain, and repels any who would prevent her from realizing her intent. But in the story of Sati Godāvarī, which Harlan describes in its audiocassette version, the emphasis falls less on physical possession than on the total identification of the satī with her sat: she is a creature of immovable resolve. The brunt of the story is to show how Sati Godāvarī repulses any who would stand in her way, cursing them. In the effectiveness of her curses she demonstrates her sat and her
own divinity. Yet, if she curses her enemies, she also blesses her devotees and supporters with equal force.

In the simultaneous intensity of these two acts we hear echoes of the fierce maternity of many other goddesses who appear in this book. It is dark on the one hand, bright on the other. And in the consummately close association of human and divine that Sāti Godāvari exhibits, we encounter another general pattern: the suspicion or affirmation, at least by men, that the sakti of goddesses is also implicit in mortal women. But there is a special question here: why should this ultimate identification of humanity with the divine lead to death when it is a woman who experiences the connection? Taking up this gender issue, Harlan explains how it is inseparable from issues related to caste and class.

Despite the general resonances, Sāti Godāvari, like each “mother” we meet in the book, has a personality all her own. The same is certainly true for the mother who appears in the essay that follows: Bhārat Mātā, Mother India. Godāvari and other satīmātā (“sati mothers”) are worshiped in part because they serve as emblems of social entities, communities of caste and place. Bhārat Mātā does this on a grand scale, for India as a whole—or such, at least, is the hope of those who have promoted her cult.

As Lise McKeen shows in the chapter that concludes this second section of the book, in fashioning her as they do, the patrons of Bhārat Mātā have specific social and political objectives in mind. Like Santoṣī Mā, she is a relatively new goddess, although of a very different kind; and again like Santoṣī Mā, she earns her quick accessibility by building on connections her patrons seek to forge with other, older forms of the Goddess in India. This is evident in the massing of images of other goddesses and heroines (satīs) in the impressive Bhārat Mātā temple recently completed in Hardwar, a great pilgrimage center on the Ganges, north of Delhi. McKeen not only provides a vivid description of this building—half temple, half museum—but also offers a close analysis of the motives of those who have constructed it, especially as revealed in guidebooks distributed at the temple itself.

More than any other expression of the Goddess, except the great Devī with whom we began, Bhārat Mātā is fashioned so as to unite. Those who would spread her cult, particularly members of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) and its close political associate, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party), are making a conscious effort to use in a new way the unitive power of the Goddess as Mother. Although they do not always say so explicitly, they seem to hope that Bhārat Mātā, like the Devi of the Devī Māhātmya, will eventually be recognized as reigning supreme over the many other manifestations of female divinity in India. If they succeed in eliciting such recognition, they will have mobilized the immanent, pantheistic power of the Goddess in the cause of religious nationalism—a weighty, and potentially dangerous, achievement.
Many feminists, both in India and abroad, have hoped that other forms of empowerment would flow from the Hindu worship of goddesses. They have hoped—indeed, have sometimes believed or even assumed—that to participate in a religious tradition that addresses divinities as female is to impart strength to real, human women. On this point, alas, the Indian record is far from consistent. Kathleen Erndl shows how women possessed by “The Lion-Rider” are sought out as leaders and healers by others, and reports that people in this area of India typically detect the Goddess’s power in all women. Indeed, many observers have found the women of northwest India to be among the country’s strongest and most independent. Similar assessments have also been made of the women of Kerala, whose level of education, for example, exceeds that of any other regional group in India. Yet in her study of possession by the Goddess in Kerala, Sarah Caldwell cannot but conclude that the mudiyettu ritual does little to empower women. Instead, the great benefits go to the men.

Similar contradictions emerge as one compares the work of other contributors to this volume. Interviews with female performers of padavali kirtan in Bengal have led Donna Wulff to conclude that women not only delight in Radhā’s strenuous opposition to Krishna but derive strength from it. Likewise, Cynthia Humes’s interviews with male and female reciters of the Devī Māhātmya at Vindhyacal in north-central India revealed a widespread conviction that the Goddess shares with human women the power that goes under the name of sakti, as well as the “natural maternal instincts” that enable women, whether human or divine, to love and forgive children. Yet Humes also discovered an equally articulate conviction that there remains an unbridgeable chasm between goddesses and human women, since female bodies are irremediably permeated by evil and pollution. A few persons, however, did take exception to this widely shared view—and each, significantly, was a woman. Although Humes was able to unearth instances both in India and abroad where isolated women saw the Devī Māhātmya as a source of empowerment for their sex, she cautioned that all these women either had been educated in westernized Christian schools or had actually lived in the West. Moreover, each already occupied a privileged position in society.

The picture is surely very mixed, and sometimes almost viciously paradoxical. As regards the latter, satī offers the classic example, for the strength that leads to the popular acclamation of a satī’s inner and peculiarly feminine divinity, the power that culminates in the ritual of her apotheosis, is fully known only in the ceremony where she sacrifices her life. The price of becoming manifest as a goddess is thus to die as a woman. Happily, not every instance of a woman’s becoming or being possessed by the Goddess is a version of satī. Not every act of maternity—even the mothering of one’s husband, as in satī—requires such sacrifice.
In a far more typical pattern, women make adjustments (often significant ones) within the predominant patriarchal ethos of Hindu society that allow women space for internal autonomy and growth. Sometimes these involve open challenges to the “accepted” order; sometimes the challenge is more oblique. For instance, women who sing a collective meditation on the role of Sītā in the Rāmāyaṇa epic seize the chance to focus on a goddess and see how things look from her point of view. This leads to an empowerment and even a subversiveness that grow from within—or in tandem with—the social system itself.23 Under such circumstances, it is hard to tell whether challenges to the patriarchal status quo are gifts from Sītā to the women who revere her or acts whereby a goddess (here Sītā) is reclaimed or given new meaning and force by the women who sing her song.

Actually, this is a quandary we might expect from reading Kathleen Erndl’s analysis of the radically interactive nature of possession by Devi, where the Goddess and human women meet. In such circumstances, who possesses whom? Which “mother” mothers which? Must the empowerment flow in one direction only? If we keep such questions in mind as we move from India into an international arena, we may wonder whether perhaps we are seeing today the emergence of a natural and healthy symbiosis of Hindu goddesses, on the one hand, and Western or Western-influenced women, on the other. This symbiosis may serve to increase the śakti of both—and at the same time, one hopes, to imbue men with a kind of energy they have often lacked in the past.

TURNING WEST

We began this introduction by contrasting the search for female divinity in the modern West with the worship of the Goddess—and goddesses—in India, from the time of the Devī Māhātmya to the present. At the end of the book, these two worlds converge, as Rachel McDermott explains how the goddess Kālī has gained a prominent place in the American and European religious movement sometimes called women’s spirituality. By the time readers arrive at McDermott’s essay, they will have encountered Kālī many times, especially in the chapters by Humes, Kinsley, Erndl, and Caldwell. But here is a new Kālī, a Kālī whose profile, if not whose very existence, depends upon some of the scholarship that precedes her here. The work of David Kinsley has been particularly influential.

McDermott presents this new Kālī as a goddess of transformation: Western women have turned to her as a goddess who has the power to heal—in particular, through the reintegration of alienated rage. At the extreme, one finds novel rituals and ritual paraphernalia, in which Kālī’s taste for revenge and sexual pleasure are highlighted. The use of the worshiper’s own men-
structural blood is conspicuously prescribed. Seemingly less pointed are poems and litanies in which a verbal appeal for transformation is made, as in May Sarton’s “The Invocation to Kali”:

Kali, be with us.
Violence, destruction, receive our homage.
Help us bring darkness into the light,
To lift out the pain, the anger,
Where it can be seen for what it is—
The balance-wheel for our vulnerable, aching love.
Put the wild hunger where it belongs,
Within the act of creation,
Crude power that forges a balance
Between hate and love. 24

McDermott explains how, like Sarton, most Euro-American women who have called upon Kālī feel that her power derives from an embracing of opposites—maternal compassion and a distinctly female kind of rage. 25 It also derives from what some feminists perceive to have been Kālī’s own suppression at the hands of Indian patriarchy. McDermott examines these perceptions and finds both to be partly true, partly false; but the historical analysis, she thinks, is deeply flawed. In a view that is consonant with the many historical transformations of goddesses that we observe elsewhere in the book, as well as with the variety of forms that goddesses assume in the present day, McDermott vigorously affirms the right of Kālī (and, by implication, any Hindu goddess) to change as she moves from one culture to another. Such changes are the very stuff of India’s religious history, and they can be seen to represent the energy of the divine itself.

Yet in an age of transnational culture, when religions are moving into ever more complex interactions with one another, McDermott sounds a cautionary note. The worship of Kālī in the West rests in a special way on reports—reports of what it is like to live and pray on the other side of the world. Those reports, she insists, should be as accurate as possible, and they should be used with discrimination, after wide reading and much thought. McDermott laments that not enough real scholarship has buttressed the Western worship of Kālī. Sometimes, in fact, scholarship has almost purposely been pushed aside. McDermott reflects:

But in denying scholarly accounts of history a legitimate place in the discussion of goddess figures, it would seem that the potential for intimacy and depth is lost. Is it sufficient, in developing a love relationship with a divine being, just to “take a few minutes of research” to acquaint oneself with her characteristics? From the standpoint of devotionalism, a thorough investigation into the many backgrounds of the beloved in her land of origin would be a true sign of love and reverence.
It will take more than “a few minutes” to read this book. We hope that those who do spend the time will find genuine rewards in the panoply of goddesses—and fullness of the Goddess—that are presented here. The many particular goddesses and divine mothers, springing from soil, flowing in rivers, apotheosized from earthly women, possessing women and men, celebrated in texts and performances, remain irreducible in their diversity. She / they will not admit of any convenient oversimplification.

Devi, the Goddess in India, is one of the guiding forces of Indian civilization. In the whole world, a more complete rhapsody on the divine feminine would be hard to conceive—or one that resounds with so many happily discordant notes.

NOTES


2. See, for example, the female figurine from Sonkh, near Mathura, dating to about the second century B.C.E. and now in the Mathura Museum (acquisition number 66.2); see also the terracotta yakṣī from Tamluk (ancient Tamralipti) in Bengal, which dates to about the same time. The latter is now preserved in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (acquisition no. X.201), and has been published in J. C. Harle and Andrew Topsfield, Indian Art in the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1987), pp. 6–7 and color plate 2.


9. This is an observation made by Christopher Fuller (Camphor Flame, p. 41). The only exception I can think of is the lotus-headed goddess studied by Carol Radcliffe Bolon in Forms of the Goddess Lalja Gauri in Indian Art (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

10. For the Punjab, see Kathleen M. Erndl, Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol, (New York: Oxford Uni-

11. See David Pocock, Mind, Body, and Wealth (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), pp. 74–75. Pocock notes, however, that the existence of this broad trend does not mean that any particular form of worship need be exclusively vegetarian or non-vegetarian: the two interpenetrate (pp. 72–79). Fuller describes this interpenetration, in connection with the worship of a single deity, as typically taking the form of levels or layers (Camphor Flame, pp. 91–92).


16. Narayanan seems to highlight this somewhat feistier, more ambivalent, “earthly” element in retelling stories of goddesses associated with particular sacred places in South India. Their status as consorts of Viṣṇu occasionally seems to challenge that of Śri, but ultimately they and she are shown to be the same.


poor and lower-caste singers in Rajasthan and Gujarat. See *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).


25. For a review of psychological perspectives on this apparent coincidence of opposites, see David M. Wulff, “Prolegomenon to a Psychology of the Goddess,” in *The Divine Consort*, ed. Hawley and Wulff, pp. 283–97; for a sharply contrasting evaluation, see Kurtz, *All the Mothers Are One*, pp. 91–131.