

Introduction

Much of the world rarely questions the idea that God is male. The notion that God is female may even strike some readers as radical. But in India goddesses are everywhere. They are the bedrock of ancient religious traditions that extend back thousands of years. Goddesses are honored in, though not central to, the oldest scripture from India, the *R̥g Veda*. Some scholars even find continuities between certain early historical nature goddesses linked to fertility, such as *Yakṣiṇīs*, and artistic representations going back even further—to the dawn of human civilization as we know it—in artifacts from the third millennium BCE Indus Valley civilization.¹

Whatever their origins, India's goddess traditions proliferated and became central to religious and narrative literature there from late classical times (after ca. 600 CE). The stories in this book offer fascinating case studies of alternative imaginings of gender, devotion, and power. This is not to say that Hindu goddess traditions are necessarily examples of feminist spirituality; of the twelve goddess tales translated here, some envision female power and agency in thought-provoking and potentially inspirational ways, some are patriarchal in character, and many are ambiguous in how they portray female power. All offer studies in how the feminine divine has been construed and reckoned with in the religious imagination of Hindus.

FORGOTTEN GODDESSES

The book styles these twelve selected goddesses and their stories as “forgotten” in multiple senses. For some of them—the Seven Mothers, *Rāṣṭrasenā*,

Tvaritā, and Avyapadeśyā—their former glory, expressed in the translated sources, has waned to the point that a relatively small number of people still actively worship them or know of the ancient accounts translated here. Others, such as Bhadrakālī, Cāmuṇḍī, Svasthānī, Kailā Devī, Bahucarā Mātā, and Rangda, enjoy popular living traditions with millions of followers; in these cases “forgotten” certainly does not imply a lack of significance.

What unites all of these goddesses is that they are rarely mentioned in surveys of Hindu goddesses. In this sense, they have been forgotten by many of the authorities who speak for and about Hinduism to cosmopolitan audiences. Two other goddesses featured here have not yet been mentioned: Kauśikī and Kāmeśvarī. They are closely linked to Durgā and Tripurasundarī, respectively, and so each is honored as the Great Goddess by tens of millions of Hindus in vibrant living traditions. Durgā and Tripurasundarī are in no sense forgotten figures. However, our understanding of their early histories and transformations over time is rudimentary. The rare and largely forgotten sources translated here add depth and nuance to their better-known collections of traditional lore.

The types of sources selected for this book are also poorly represented in scholarship on Hindu goddesses. As described later in the introduction, the late-classical religious development of esoteric scriptures called “Tantras” is central to the rise of goddess traditions as we know them in southern Asia. Yet these prolific early sources have been largely ignored in American scholarship on goddesses. Several of our selections belong to the popular classic narrative genre called “Purāṇas” (ancient lore). While the Purāṇas have been relatively well studied, research on Hindu goddesses has tended to focus on a small number of popular Purāṇas readily available in printed editions. The well-studied *Devī Māhātmya* (Glorification of the goddess), for example, is an important piece of the puzzle mentioned frequently throughout this book.² But it is only one among many dozens of influential goddess scriptures from the first millennium, most of which have not even been published, let alone translated and studied in depth. Several contributors have done painstaking research to access and read unpublished manuscripts in order to uncover the fascinating stories of the goddesses Bhadrakālī, Kauśikī, the Seven Mothers, Svasthānī, Rāṣṭrasenā, Tvaritā, Kāmeśvarī, and early Tantric views of Kālī (here called Avyapadeśyā, “the Indefinable One”). Popular living traditions also possess fascinating but understudied archives of oral lore, songs, performances, and devotional booklets marketed to pilgrims. The chapters on

Cāmuṇḍi and her sister Uttanaḥḷi, Kailā Devī, Bahucarā Mātā, and Rangda draw on such undervalued sources to help show how these goddesses are significant to a broad range of Hindus today.

Given the intricate and multifaceted religious history of Indian civilization (and Indian-influenced civilizations farther afield), it is important to understand some of the major religious currents that have affected goddess traditions. Knowing the structures of religious history discussed in the following sections will help the reader come to a deeper understanding of the tales in this volume.

THE DEVELOPMENT AND SPREAD OF HINDU GODDESS TRADITIONS

Thomas Trautmann offers a useful framework of developments in Indian religious history, summarized here.³ The historical period in Indian religions begins with the Vedic religion, which flourished among the Indo-Aryan speaking tribes of northern India from around 1500 to 500 BCE. At this time, the primary religious mode—at least so far as can be discerned from textual records—consisted of worshiping a pantheon of sky-dwelling and earthly gods, and a handful of goddesses, through recitation of hymns and offerings of food in a sacred fire. These food offerings consisted of various grains and dairy products, as well as livestock. The central importance of food offerings for strengthening the relationship between humans and the gods led Trautmann to characterize it as a *religion of sacrifice*. The stamp of the Vedic sacrificial religion is evident in the present book; for example, the goddess Uttanaḥḷi of Mysuru is described as a seven-tongued goddess of fire, who, like the Vedic fire god Agni, is hungry for offerings (chapter 2). And it is also visible in the tale of Bahucarā, in which the goddess confronts demons who threaten the performance of Vedic sacrifices (chapter 7).

After around 500 BCE, religions such as Jainism and Buddhism rose to prominence and emphasized quite different values and ways of being religious. In contrast to prominent ideals in Vedic society of the time, they taught that violence, attachment to material things, and seeking pleasure in marriage and family life are obstacles to salvation. For these religions, at least in their early phases, the direct path to liberation lay in renouncing family and society, withdrawing into isolation or becoming part of an alternative community of nuns or monks, practicing meditation in order to tame one's desires, and

otherwise living an austere life. The immense growth of *religions of renunciation* under the Mauryan dynasty led to their ideas becoming commonplace in Hinduism and all subsequent religions founded in India. The earliest Upaniṣads of the Vedic tradition are some of the first texts to show similar concerns, though this class of Hindu texts did not develop a full-fledged focus on renunciation until centuries after the rise of Buddhism and Jainism. The imprint of values from the religions of renunciation is apparent throughout this book in several forms. The great Hindu god Śiva himself, frequently regarded as the consort of most of the goddesses in this book, is usually portrayed as an austere renouncer. When the Svasthānī tale extols the religious benefits of restricting food intake, sleeping on the ground, and conquering the senses (chapter 5), or when ascetics (sādhus) play such an important role in the Kailā Devī tale (chapter 6), the values of renunciation live on.

After the fall of the Mauryan empire, which is to say, starting from around 200 BCE, new religious values developed that emphasized personal *devotion* to a particular supreme God or Goddess, or to various sorts of enlightened beings in Buddhism and Jainism. In early devotional Hinduism, the high God was typically a form of Viṣṇu or Śiva; only later did goddess worship emerge in the written record, with similar massive movements of devotion, often to a singular almighty Goddess such as Durgā or Kālī. The names for these movements are derived from the names of the deities they identify as sovereign; followers of Viṣṇu became known as Vaiṣṇava, followers of Śiva are Śaiva, and followers of any of the numerous figures honored as the premier Goddess are called Śākta after the generic name for divine power, which is always gendered feminine: *śakti*. These terms are used frequently throughout this book.

A core idea of devotional religion is that finding favor with one's personal deity does not depend on rituals, as it did in the Vedic sacrificial religion, or upon renunciation of family and social life, as it did in the religions of renunciation. Rather, a feeling of pure devotion in one's heart toward the supreme deity is enough for salvation, as taught in early devotional classics such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The values of devotional religion are central to most of the goddesses in this book, as is plainly visible in the various narratives of savior goddesses who entered the world to fight demons and restore order, such as Bhadrakālī, Kauṣikī, and the Seven Mothers (chapters 1, 3, and 4).

Starting around 500 CE, Hindu Tantric religious cults developed within the Śaiva sects, and within a few centuries followers of Viṣṇu, followers of the goddesses, and Buddhists developed their own Tantric corpora, as did some

lesser-known religious traditions.⁴ The adjective “Tantric” has been applied to a wide variety of texts and practices. In Asia, some use it to refer to strange magical practices and transgressive rituals. In the United States, many think it refers exclusively to sacred sexuality. Neither is characteristic of the Tantric tradition as a whole, although both are present in some contexts. The Tantric tradition referred to here is an important initiation-based religious movement that purportedly was based on secret teachings of divine figures. It has had an indelible impact on the religions of Asia and left us thousands of scriptures (Tantras), most of which remain unpublished and unknown to scholarship. The Tantras are critically important to understanding the history of Hindu goddess traditions.

Central to early Tantras is the power of mantras and *vidyās* (gendered masculine and feminine respectively). Tantric practitioners repeat these sacred utterances both to accomplish spiritual salvation and to gain worldly powers such as rainmaking or the attainment of godlike longevity and power. In practice, such sacred sounds were regarded as ways of ritually evoking a deity’s presence or even causing divine possession. A Tantric *vidyā* is not only a sacred sound or spell but is considered to be the deity herself embodied as sound. It is thus perceived as a powerful living force, a link between the human and the divine.

All these religious developments—the Vedic sacrificial religion, renunciation religions, devotional movements, and the Tantric traditions—were composite affairs that intermingled in interesting and complex ways over the course of time. The Tantras encompassed elements of each of the prior three religious developments but also introduced unique deities, beliefs, and practices. Some might have worshiped a goddess like Kāmeśvarī (chapter 11) by following long-standing devotional practices, such as offering flowers and fruit to an external image of her. However, the Tantric devotee would normally show devotion through an intense sort of meditation in which one builds a detailed image of the goddess in the mind and proceeds to worship her mentally and by reciting her *vidyā*, usually silently. Far from being a form of daydreaming, Tantric visualization involves intricate and highly controlled techniques to enter altered states of consciousness wherein extraordinary visions of the goddesses may occur.

Goddesses began to rise to prominence in mainstream literature in the early medieval Tantric age. A goddess such as Kālī first came to be regarded as the supreme mother of the universe in esoteric Tantras such as the voluminous

Jayadrathayāmala (chapter 12), rather than in the Purāṇic narratives of popular Hindu devotion, where she is portrayed as a manifestation of Durgā's wrath. In this volume, the translated sources on Tvaritā, Kāmeśvarī, and Avyapadeśyā Kālī (chapters 10, 11, and 12) are all from unpublished early Tantric scriptures, while the chapters on Kauśikī, the Seven Mothers, Rāṣṭrasenā, and Rangda (chapters 3, 4, 8, and 9) show significant influence from Tantric traditions. Other goddesses, such as Bhadrakālī and Bahucarā Mātā, have important Tantric dimensions to their cults not reflected in the translated stories.

The early Tantras have been unfairly neglected in scholarship on Hindu goddesses. While a small number of orthodox Hindu texts have been the subject of an appreciable number of books and dissertations, the vast and largely unpublished archive of Tantric literature continues to languish, rarely even acknowledged. A concerted movement to change this situation began in the early 1980s, especially with the pioneering work of Alexis Sanderson, which is ongoing and has been expanded upon by many of his colleagues and pupils. Most notable in this respect is the scholarship of Diwakar Acharya, Mark Dyczkowski, Dominic Goodall, Harunaga Isaacson, Marion Rastelli, and Somadeva Vasudeva, among others. Several of the contributors to this volume—namely Anna Golovkova, Shaman Hatley, Olga Serbaeva, Michael Slouber, and Judit Törzsök—share the project of making the significance of the early Tantras better known to students and scholars of goddess traditions and Indian religions in general.

The final two relevant developments in Indian history are the immense growth of Islam in southern Asia over the past thousand years and the presence of European colonialism in the past several centuries. Islam was first brought to India by Arab merchants who came by sea as early as the seventh century CE, but it was not until large-scale empires under Muslim leaders arose in northern India that significant numbers of Indians began to convert. Tensions between Hindus and Muslims have marred the past century of South Asian history. However, religious identities tended to be more fluid and complex before colonial times, as demonstrated with historical evidence in the volume *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*.⁵ Muslims are among the devotees of the goddess Bahucarā in Gujarat, for example (chapter 7). When the Kailā Devī narrative (chapter 6) speaks of protecting icons of the goddess from Muslim iconoclasts, it does so with a particular figure in mind: the infamous eleventh-century warlord Mahmud of Ghazni, who was in no way typical of Muslims in India. The

Muslim-led empires of medieval north India were composite affairs, with bureaucracies and militaries composed of both Hindus and Muslims. Armies of the sultans, and later those of the Mughals, sought victory in battle for political and material gain, just as Hindu armies fighting each other had long done. With few exceptions, these were not battles between religions.

The story of colonial interactions with Hindu goddess traditions is particularly fascinating, and it is seldom flattering to Europeans. The behavior of Victorian-era Britons visiting or stationed in India was often driven by racism and reflected a sense of Christian superiority.⁶ European colonialism does not directly impact any of the stories told in this book; however, indirect impacts may be noted in shifting practices. The fact that animal sacrifice—the practice of butchering livestock as food offerings to the deity—was once acceptable nearly everywhere but in some areas is now uncommon and illegal (see the Bahucarā, Kailā Devī, and Rāṣṭrasenā chapters) may be partially due to strong disapproval of such rituals on the part of colonial Christian rulers, as Masakazu Tanaka argues in “Sacrifice Lost and Found.”⁷ On the other hand, other factors have contributed to shifting tastes. Animal sacrifice is primarily associated with particular Śaiva and Śakta deities, whereas Vaiṣṇavas usually view it as unacceptable. Animal rights campaigns and the orthodox high-caste orientation of contemporary Hindu nationalist culture have also contributed to the trend away from animal sacrifice.

GEOGRAPHY

The fixed boundaries of modern nation-states often skew our understanding of the spheres of influence of a given culture or religion. Hinduism is most closely associated with India, but it also spread to, and was in turn influenced by, a large number of other Asian countries. Map 1 shows the spread of the goddesses in this volume all over southern Asia. Starting around the third century BCE, mariners established trade networks between India and Southeast Asia. Sustained relations led most of Southeast Asia to incorporate features of Indian civilization into their own cultures. The story of Southeast Asian influence on India is less well understood and is the subject of ongoing research.⁸

Religion was one of the principal elements of Indian culture adopted in Southeast Asia. Tantric forms of Hinduism and Buddhism spread early on, as well as devotional forms of religion and the Indian epics. Indonesia, the location of the chapter on Rangda, is home to over seventeen thousand islands