

TRACY PINTCHMAN, EDITOR



Seeking Mahādevī

CONSTRUCTING
THE IDENTITIES
OF THE HINDU
GREAT GODDESS

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Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess



Edited by Tracy Pintchman

State University of New York Press

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*For my daughter, Molly Alice French
born April 14, 2000
the same month as this book
the Goddess does indeed have many forms*

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Portions of C. Mackenzie Brown's chapter are reproduced from his book *The Devī-Gītā; The Song of the Goddess: A Translation, Annotation, and Commentary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

All photographs in chapter 6 were taken by Sree Padma.

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A Note on Transliteration and Pronunciation

Words from various Indian languages are transliterated in this book according to accepted conventions. We have retained the Sanskrit forms of terms and names to a great extent for the sake of internal consistency, but we have allowed for variation to reflect regional languages, such as Tamil, Telegu, and Malayalam, and to accommodate contributors' preferences. We have not used diacritical marks for contemporary geographical names (e.g., Bhubaneshwar, Visakhapatnam, Delhi). Foreign terms that recur in the essays or are used without explanation are defined briefly in the Glossary.

The pronunciation of certain letters in Sanskrit and other Indian languages represented in this volume is quite distinctive. Those that we feel are most in need of explanation are below.

Letter	Pronounced as in the English
a	<i>cup</i>
ā	<i>tar</i>
ṛ	<i>rim</i>
ī	<i>meet</i>
ū	<i>tooth</i>
c	<i>cheek</i>
ś, ṣ	<i>ship</i>

In addition, the letter *h* after a consonant aspirates the consonant, meaning that it is pronounced as a puff of air following the consonant. So, for example, in the name "Bhairō," the *b* and the *h* are pronounced separately, resulting in an aspiration of the letter *b*. *Th*, similarly, is pronounced as an aspirated *t*, as in *hothouse* (*not* as in *path*).

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Introduction

Identity Construction and the Hindu Great Goddess

Tracy Pintchman

Goddess worship has been an important dimension of Hindu religious life for many centuries, and the Hindu goddess tradition is one of the richest, most compelling such traditions in existence today. In cities, towns, and villages all over India, temples and shrines dedicated to goddesses abound, and devotees flock to these to express their reverence, concerns, hopes, and fears. Goddesses also figure prominently in many home shrines and rituals, and both men and women participate widely in various forms of goddess devotion. Although Hindus recognize and revere a variety of different, discrete goddesses, they also tend to speak of “the Goddess” as a singular and unifying presence.

The notion of a singular, supreme Goddess is crystallized in a text of approximately the sixth century C.E. called the *Devī-Māhātmya*, “Glorification of the Goddess.” The central narrative concerning the Goddess in the *Devī-Māhātmya* has to do with her adventures as a great slayer of demons who leads the gods to triumph in their fight against demonic forces and vanquishes those who would subdue her. The vision of the Goddess that the *Devī-Māhātmya* achieves in narrating this story borrows and weaves together narrative and devotional threads already in existence at the time, but, in so doing, it produces a marvelous new picture of divinity. Thomas Coburn, who has written extensively on the *Devī-Māhātmya*, observes the synthetic nature of the text’s vision of the Goddess:

The synthesis that is accomplished in the Devī-Māhātmya is therefore extraordinarily and uniquely broad. It reaches deep into the Sanskritic heritage, identifying the Goddess with central motifs, names, and concepts in the Vedic tradition. It appropriates one familiar myth on behalf of the Goddess, and enfolds several less well-known tales into its vision. It locates the Goddess in relation to a full range of contemporary theistic and sectarian movements, familiar ones such as those of Śiva and Viṣṇu, and more recent ones such as those of Skanda and Krishna Gopāla. (1991, 27)

Coburn notes also the unique contribution of the text historically, observing that “the Devī-Māhātmya is not the earliest literary fragment attesting to the existence of devotion to a goddess figure, but it is surely the earliest in which the object of worship is conceptualized as Goddess, with a capital G” (1996, 16).

In the Devī-Māhātmya the Goddess is given numerous epithets, indicating that while she is unique, her forms are many. Contemporary devotees, too, often maintain that there is one supreme Goddess who has many forms or who is the unity underlying all discrete goddesses by way of accounting for the multiplicity of goddesses that persists alongside talk of “the Goddess.” David R. Kinsley notes that in general, there are two primary ways in which the unity of all goddesses is envisioned in the affirmation of a single, Great Goddess in the Hindu tradition. One way is to postulate the existence of one transcendent Goddess possessing the classical characteristics of ultimate reality and to portray all particular goddesses as her portions or manifestations. Another way is for a particular goddess like Pārvatī, Lakṣmī, and so forth to be affirmed as highest with all other goddesses viewed as her portions or manifestations (Kinsley 1986, 132).

As scholarly interest in Hindu goddesses and goddess traditions has flourished in the last two decades, scholars have continued to puzzle over the “goddess(es) versus Goddess” conundrum. John S. Hawley observes quite correctly that since Indic languages observe no distinction between capital letters and lowercase letters, and since they lack the definite article, the “g/G” issue and the problem of whether to use the article “the” when naming (the) Hindu Goddess is “clearly ours, not India’s.” He also remarks, however, that regardless of the lack of a “g/G” problem in Indic languages, “the quandary as to singular or plural is shared,” and that “sometimes the singular feels more accurate, sometimes the plural” (1996, 8). Kinsley uses the name Mahādevī or “Great Goddess” to refer to the supreme, singular Goddess underlying all goddesses. One could in fact see the use of the

prefix “Mahā-,” “great,” in Mahādevī’s name as largely analogous to the English capital G that Coburn points to in his description of the Devī-Māhātmya as “the earliest [literary fragment] in which the object of worship is conceptualized as Goddess, with a capital G.” Hence, one way to refer to the singularity or capital G-ness of Devī’s nature is to affix “Mahā-” to her name. In some contexts, Devī is explicitly called Mahādevī, whereas in other contexts her “Mahā-” nature is not stated but is implicit in the ways she is portrayed. In this book, we will refer to her as Devī, (the) Goddess, Mahādevī, and (the) Great Goddess, understanding all these names as indicating her supreme, singular form.

Mahādevī is both the unity underlying all female deities and a magnificent divine being. Kinsley offers a “composite sketch” of her that he compiles from a number of textual sources. He notes that generally she is homologized with the principles *prakṛti* (materiality), *māyā* (cosmic illusion), and *śakti* (power), which drive the process of cosmogenesis and sustain the created world. She is portrayed as both transcendent and immanent, rooted in the world and embodying it but stretching beyond it as well, and in some contexts she is identified with ultimate reality, Brahman, itself (1986, 133–139). She is both creator and queen of the cosmos and is often portrayed as independent of male control rather than married or subservient to a male consort (138; also Coburn 1982, 1996). Many contexts emphasize her nature as Divine Mother, too, a status that clearly reflects her gender, although she is sometimes said to transcend gender at the highest level (137).

Although many of these characteristics persist across different contexts, there is also a great deal of diversity with respect to portrayals of Mahādevī’s identity. The Devī-Māhātmya has been highly influential in shaping later text-based portrayals of the Goddess, but later traditions that appropriate various themes from the Devī-Māhātmya do so in diverse ways, achieving their own, unique visions of the Goddess. And, of course, other influences apart from the Devī-Māhātmya are at work, too. In his study of the Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa, for example, C. Mackenzie Brown skillfully demonstrates how themes derived not only from the Devī-Māhātmya, but also male Vaiṣṇava theologies, especially those articulated in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, are incorporated in this text’s portrayal of the Goddess, resulting in a fresh perspective on her nature and identity (1990). Kinsley notes that in certain texts of the Pāñcarātra school of thought and devotion, Lakṣmī is “elevated functionally to a position of supreme divinity” and is spoken of in terms that are quite consistent with other Hindu portrayals of the supreme, singular Goddess, although descriptions of her in the sections of text to which he refers—which have to do largely with

cosmogony—do not bear any clear narrative resemblance to the martial goddess of the Devī-Māhātmya (1986, 30–31). When it comes to practice, as Coburn notes, Devī's identity is always shaped by local custom, and where text-based ideas about Devī weave their way into popular practice, they do so in complex ways (1996, 43–44). The qualities of the Goddess that are emphasized, the name and nature of the goddess identified as Devī, and other such factors are all subject to local interpretation. Hence, while Kinsley's "composite sketch" is a helpful starting point for talking about Mahādevī's identity, it does not—nor does it purport to—encompass the myriad variations on and departures from the themes that Kinsley identifies.

The much-invoked notion that there is one, supreme Goddess with many forms encourages the understanding not only of all individual goddesses as Mahādevī's parts, but also of all distinct Mahādevī "portraits" as so many different perspectives on the singular Goddess. It functions as a hermeneutical lens that enables us to see unity within the multiplicity of views on Mahādevī's nature and character. While not disputing the legitimacy of such a perspective, these essays turn to focus on the multiplicity itself, the many ways in which the supreme Mahādevī and her unified diversity are portrayed, understood, and experienced.

The topic of this book is "constructing the identities of the Hindu Great Goddess." As noted above, we understand the Hindu Great Goddess, Mahādevī, to be the supreme female deity who is also considered to be the unity and source of all individual goddesses. Different essays in this book may highlight one or the other of these dimensions of her being, or both. We understand "identity" to refer to Mahādevī's nature, character, and attributes as these are portrayed in oral and written texts or understood and articulated by devotees. We use terminology of "construction" to signal what we understand to be the constitutive role of interpretation in shaping portrayals of Mahādevī's identity in diverse ways in different contexts. This understanding is informed by a more general tendency in many strands of contemporary scholarship to regard certain forms of knowledge as context-dependent and inherently conditioned by interpretive activity.

In his classic works *The Social Construction of Reality* and *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter L. Berger argues persuasively that social and cultural truths are constructed through human processes of "world building." Such world building also entails the construction of religion and religious categories.¹ But, like cultures, religions themselves are internally diverse and encompass multiple, sometimes competing discourses that are conditioned by context. The various texts, communities, and individuals explored in this volume envision the Goddess through

epistemological lenses that are shaped by a diversity of religious, social, textual, political, psychological, historical, and other, often local conditioning factors. Worshipers encounter the Goddess through experiential and ritual frames that are similarly conditioned. For purposes of the task at hand, therefore, we understand Mahādevī to have multiple identities that are constructed through interpretive activity occurring in particular textual and devotional contexts subject to particular conditions. This understanding is meant not as an ontological claim but as a hermeneutical framework that guides our exploration of Mahādevī's identity.

In addressing our topic, contributors tend to organize their essays around the issue of identity-construction primarily in two ways. First, some contributors focus on the "constructions" or constructed identities of Mahādevī themselves in the specific textual, devotional, and historical contexts in which they arise. Construction is a process, too, however, and some essays explore processes through which particular goddesses or women come to be identified with the singular Mahādevī in particular instances, or how and why such identification occurs. These two emphases are relatively interwoven, of course, and to separate them is somewhat misleading. However, several of the essays tend to focus relatively more on one issue or the other.

There are three primary goals of this volume. First, it aims to call attention to the great diversity of Mahādevī's identities to those who worship her. In so doing, it considers a wide variety of materials and explores a wide range of particularized contexts. We deem both textual and nontextual materials to be worthy of consideration, although most of the essays focus on Mahādevī's identity in lived devotional contexts. Second, it aims to elucidate the various ways that Mahādevī's diverse traits and attributes are interpreted, enlivened, and rendered meaningful in different ways in different contexts. And third, by ranging broadly, this collection of essays hopes to encourage further exploration of both continuities and discontinuities concerning perceptions of Mahādevī from context to context. While several studies of Hindu goddesses investigate localized portrayals of the Great Goddess (e.g., Sax 1991, Erndl 1993, Brown 1990), by juxtaposing numerous depictions of her, this book invites comparative reflection on her multiple identities and the ways these are constructed.

One important question raised by this collection is that of the characteristics or attributes that are most consistently central to Mahādevī's nature in the variety of textual and devotional environments we explore in these pages. This is a somewhat loaded question, for it suggests a desire to circumscribe a core identity that transcends specific context, an enterprise that this book ultimately resists. It is

also not a question that any of the contributing authors addresses directly. I would propose, however, that themes pertaining to Devī's immanence coupled with her transcendence, her nature as *śakti*/Śakti, and her status as Divine Mother seem to recur in these essays with the greatest frequency. It is Devī's transcendence-yet-immanence, in fact, that Hawley sees as particularly characteristic, remarking: "The unity of the Great Goddess incorporates the world as we know it, as well as transcending it. In some sense, the Goddess IS our world in a way that God is not" (1996, 6). The association of the Goddess with *śakti*, too, is so strong that traditions of devotion to the Goddess in any of her forms are called Śāktism, devotion to Śakti, and devotees of the Goddess are known as Śāktas. The epithet "Mā," "mother," is commonly used for goddesses all over India. The understanding of Mahādevī as Divine Mother, an understanding that is obviously related to her femaleness, is underscored in several chapters of this book.

As many of these essays make clear, however, the various qualities associated with Mahādevī, including her immanence, her nature as *śakti*/Śakti, and her status as Divine Mother, have multiple resonances and connotations, and different emphases may come to the fore in different contexts. In Purāṇic accounts of creation, for example, the Goddess's nature as *śakti* has a good deal to do with cosmogony; in her essay, however, Elaine Craddock argues that in the devotional context she has researched, devotees understand the Goddess's nature as *śakti* as having to do less with her cosmogonic power than with her ability to do things for her devotees. In some contexts, her immanence may be related to her nature as the cosmogonic principle *prakṛti*, the material basis of creation, underscoring the point that "Mahādevī is the world, she is all this creation" (Kinsley 1986, 136). But it may also have to do with her manifestation in language as the sound "Hrīm," a sound to be used in meditation that is associated with the Kuṇḍalinī energy inherent in human bodies, or with her embodiment as three rounded stones or *piṇḍis* in a Himālayan cave (see the chapters by Brown and Rohe in this volume). In some Purāṇic cosmogonies, Mahādevī as World Mother is the source of all creation; in the Devī Gītā, she is also the divine Mistress of the Jeweled Island who lies beyond all relationship and "manifests herself out of the subtle vibrations of pure consciousness" (Brown's chapter). Oriyan informants, however, associate her motherhood with receptivity to the needs of her children (see Menon's chapter). While persisting translocally, therefore, these qualities are richly complex and contextually nuanced.

In pointing to Mahādevī's immanence and her nature as *śakti*/Śakti and Divine Mother as qualities that seem to persist across the range of contexts discussed in this book, we do not intend to make universal claims. In fact, these qualities do not appear to be stressed

in all contexts. C. Mackenzie Brown's marvelous study of the Brahmapurāṇa (1974), for example, reminds us that Mahādevī's nature as *śakti* is not terribly central in that text, and Sarah Caldwell points out in her chapter in this volume that the Goddess's erotic, rather than motherly, appeal comes to the fore in the Śrī Vidyā cult. Even though it invites inquiry and reflection about unifying qualities that persist across a number of diverse contexts, this book does so in the process of also highlighting diversity, difference, and particularity regarding Mahādevī's depiction and worship. Ultimately, we do not purport to resolve the tension between unity and diversity when it comes to her identity; we mean to draw attention to it. We leave readers to make their own decisions about the relative merits of emphasizing one pole or the other.

We probably should think further, too, about what aspects of the Goddess's most consistently invoked traits might be particular to her and what might be shared, especially when it comes to lived devotional experience and worship. For example, in many contexts Devī's immanence means that she "IS our world," as Hawley notes. But Hindu scriptures boast a deep history of portraying the manifest cosmos as the body of the divine, beginning with the well-known Puruṣa Sūkta of the Ṛg-Veda and flowing into contemporary devotion to not only Devī, but her male counterparts as well. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, for example, portrays the world as the male Vairāja Puruṣa, "cosmic man," the material form of God; this emphasis is picked up in contemporary Braj Vaiṣṇavism, which holds that the entire world is Kṛṣṇa (Brown 1990, 188; Haberman 1994, 125–127, 215). Pilgrimage spots known as *śakti pīṭhas* purport to enshrine portions of Devī's body, emphasizing her embodied, immanent nature, but the pilgrimage spots in the Himalayas known as the five Kedars similarly enshrine Śiva's body, and Kṛṣṇa devotees write of and experience different regions of Braj as embodying different portions of Kṛṣṇa's body (Haberman 1994, 126–127). In what ways might the experience of Devī's immanence be unique? Is there a qualitative difference, or is it a matter of the consistency with which Devī's immanence is emphasized? With respect to *śakti*, Devī's nature as the cosmic, life-creating force that sustains the universe and everything in it comes to the fore in many contexts. But what about the nature of Mahādevī's *śakti* as her ability to act on behalf of her devotees that Craddock invokes in her essay—what dimensions of *śakti* as it is interpreted in such contexts might be unique to the Goddess? Joseph Alter and Philip Lutgendorf have argued that the male monkey-god Hanumān, too, is widely perceived to be the embodiment of *śakti* (Alter 1992, 199; Lutgendorf 1994, 240; 1997, 321–322). What might Hanumān and Devī share in this regard?

Another issue that we might raise here is to what extent Mahādevī's unmarried status seems central to her "Mahā-" nature in some contexts, since this is a quality to which a number of scholars have called attention in their research (e.g., Brown 1990; Coburn 1982; Erndl 1993). In his introduction to *Devī: Goddesses of India*, Hawley notes that Vasudha Narayanan's and Donna Wulff's essays in that volume push the limit on this issue regarding the status of Śrī/Lakṣmī and Rādhā, who, in certain devotional contexts, are coupled with a male deity but are perceived to be coequal with or even independent of their mates. Usha Menon's chapter in this volume also considers the issue with respect to Kālī as she is understood by devotees in Orissa. If a text depicts a goddess in Mahādevī-like ways, as supreme Śakti, Divine Mother, and so forth, and attributes independent agency to her, or if devotees understand and relate to her in such ways, how much does her marital status matter as a defining element of her identity?

In negotiating Mahādevī's diverse portrayals, it might be helpful to think about her "Great" or "Mahā-" nature more in terms of status than in terms of particular traits or attributes. Like the status of "Queen," the status of supreme Goddess is a position, one that is held by different goddesses in different contexts and in relationship to different individuals or communities. The various attributes frequently ascribed to Mahādevī—her nature as Brahman, *śakti*, *prakṛti*, or *māyā*, her embodiment as the world, and so forth—seem to function more as family resemblances, traits that tend to run in the Great Goddess "family" but have diverse forms and may be downplayed or even absent in some contexts or pronounced in others. And in some cases, features that are not generally recognized as particularly common familial traits might come to the fore. Ultimately, the identity of the Great Goddess may have more to do with how she functions in the lives of devotees than what, precisely, we are able to pin down as her particular traits and characteristics. Perhaps, therefore, it would be helpful to think of her "Greatness" as being grounded in the way a community of worshipers understands and relates to its goddess. Such a perspective on the Goddess, however, while potentially useful as a heuristic model, does not purport to reflect the perceptions or experiences of most Goddess devotees.

In arranging the chapters of this book, I have tried to take into account the emphasis of each with respect to the two main foci of this book, namely, Devī's constructed identities in various contexts and Goddess-construction as a process. The essays by C. Mackenzie Brown, Usha Menon, Mark Edwin Rohe, Tracy Pintchman, and Sarah Caldwell focus relatively more on the former issue, whereas the essays by Sree

Padma, Elaine Craddock, Jeffrey J. Kripal, and Kathleen M. Erndl focus more on the latter. The chapters are grouped accordingly.

In the opening chapter “The Tantric and Vedāntic Identity of the Great Goddess in the Devī Gītā of the Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa,” C. Mackenzie Brown focuses on the portrayal of the Goddess in a small section of this well-known *śākta* text, a section known as the Devī Gītā (Song of the Goddess). Brown begins by contrasting the account of Devī’s birth as it is narrated in the Devī-Māhātmya, with the version found in the Devī Gītā, noting that the Devī Gītā’s story, while borrowing elements from the Devī-Māhātmya’s account, radically redefines the Goddess and constructs her identity in a thoroughly different manner. While not denying her fierce, demon-destroying role, the Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa as a whole frequently emphasizes her softer, maternal side. This is also true in the Devī Gītā, where Devī plays the role of teacher rather than warrior.

Brown argues persuasively that the identity of the Goddess in the Devī Gītā as revealed in the account of her birth is both Advaitic and Tantric. Her Advaitic identity reveals itself in depictions of her as the supreme consciousness that is the non-dual Brahman of Advaita Vedānta philosophy. Her Tantric identity is revealed in her nature as the Tantric goddess Bhuvaneśvarī, “Ruler of the Universe,” the benign, auspicious mother of the world. These two aspects of her identity and their essential unity are exemplified not only in the birth narrative, but also in terms of sonic symbolism: Devī’s two dimensions, that of Brahman and Bhuvaneśvarī, are also embodied in two mantras, *Oṃ* and *Hṛīm*, that are identified with her. These two mantras represent her dual nature as both the ground of existence and its manifesting and ruling power.

Mahādevī’s identity as World-Mother, which Brown raises in his chapter, is highlighted in the next chapter, “Mahādevī as Mother: The Oriya Hindu Vision of Reality.” In this essay, Usha Menon explores the significance of the Goddess to Oriya Hindus living in Bhubaneswar, a city in Orissa. Menon focuses on three issues pertaining to Devī’s identity in Bhubaneswar: the belief that the Goddess is immanent in all forms of the created universe; the significance of her most common epithet, “Mā” or “Mother,” to devotees; and the importance that Oriya Hindus place on male/female complementarity and its relevance to their understanding of the Goddess’s identity.

Bhubaneswar is predominantly Śaiva, and the perspectives on Devī’s identity and nature that Menon articulates reflect this orientation. Devī is Śiva’s *śakti*, his creative power, which not only enables the creation of the universe, but is also immanent in its every aspect.

As in the Devī Gītā, however, she becomes accessible to devotees as “Mā,” the world-mother who generates and regenerates all life. Menon focuses particularly on Kālī, a form of the Goddess that is widely worshipped in Orissa and whose designation as “Mā” may at first appear problematic: Kālī is widely known to be a wrathful and indiscriminately destructive goddess with a tendency to spin out of control. Menon has found, however, that Oriya Hindus perceive Kālī as wild, but not altogether lacking in self-discipline.

In their interpretations of a popular image of Kālī standing on Śiva, devotees describe Kālī as pulling herself together and regaining self-mastery even in her most wanton moments when her attention is drawn to her responsibilities as Śiva’s wife and the mother of all living creatures. When devotees address Kālī as “Mā,” that simple utterance calls Kālī’s attention to the needs of her “children” and makes her receptive to the needs of her devotees. Furthermore, while honoring and affirming Mā’s autonomy, Oriya Hindus do not consider her to be superior to or independent of Śiva, but rather think of the two as complementary. The complementarity that exists between God and Goddess mirrors the complementary relationship between mortal men and women in the human realm. Hence, Menon argues, ordinary devotees make sense of Devī by domesticating her and defining her in terms of social roles that render her approachable.

In the first two chapters, Brown and Menon strive to clarify the core elements of Devī’s identity in the contexts they explore. In the next essay, “Ambiguous and Definitive: The Greatness of Goddess Vaiṣṇo Devī,” Mark Edwin Rohe emphasizes instead the ambiguity of her identity. Rohe takes us to the mountain cave shrine of Vaiṣṇo Devī in Jammu. Vaiṣṇo Devī is a relatively new goddess, but her home on Trikuta Mountain has become arguably the most important pilgrimage site to a goddess in North India. Aside from the pilgrimage itself, posters, photos, pamphlets, movies, songs, newspaper and magazine articles, and temple statues present her images and stories to the public throughout the subcontinent.

Rohe observes that while Vaiṣṇo Devī’s location is quite specific—only the cave shrine in Jammu is the true home of this goddess—her theology is quite fluid. Her nature as Mahādevī, the Great Goddess, is expressed by the three rounded stones or *piṇḍis* that represent her at the shrine and are said to embody the three goddesses Mahāsarasvatī, Mahālakṣmī, and Mahākālī. In both scripture and popular usage, these three deities are considered to be the three primary manifestations of Mahādevī (cf. Brown 1990, 132–154). But beyond this, ambiguity abounds. Which *piṇḍi*, if any, is truly Vaiṣṇo Devī? Or is she all three? Is she a form of Durgā, Lakṣmī, Śeraṇwālī,

Kālī, or Satī? A mother or a virgin goddess? Rohe argues that her theology is sufficiently vague that all pilgrims are able to create a meaningful experience for themselves no matter what their own devotional orientation. He also observes that her pilgrimage is simultaneously perceived to be extremely ancient and quintessentially modern in its facilities and administration, yoking traditional values to visions of material progress and hopes for an increasingly better future. Hence, Vaiṣṇo Devī's qualities make her an exemplary deity for Hindus pressed by the desires and demands of a future-looking, modern urban society but longing to connect with their traditional religious heritage.

My essay, "The Goddess as Fount of the Universe: Shared Visions and Negotiated Allegiances in Purāṇic Constructions of the Goddess," continues to address themes of unity and ambiguity in portrayals of the Great Goddess, but it does so with a focus on the Purāṇas and accounts of creation found in these texts. The Purāṇas are encyclopedic by nature and include a variety of mythological narratives, ritual prescriptions, devotional exhortations, and other types of religious materials. By definition, however, all of the Purāṇas contain accounts of creation, and several cosmogonic narratives are often found in a single Purāṇa. My essay argues that despite differences in devotional orientation, the Purāṇas tend to portray the Goddess in a similar manner: she is a creative agent embodied as the principles *śakti* (creative power), *prakṛti* (materiality), and *māyā* (illusion).

Although the formulation of Devī as these three principles is already evident in the Devī-Māhātmya, later Purāṇas rework this formulation in a new way. *Śakti*, *prakṛti*, and *māyā* are portrayed as explicitly cosmogonic principles that unfold during the early stages of creation and are identified as the Goddess no matter what may be the sectarian perspective of a given Purāṇa or Purāṇic section. Hence *who* the Goddess is—her name and personal identity—changes from text to text, but *what* she is—her nature as a tripartite cosmogonic agent—persists and transcends sectarian difference. Whichever goddess is *śakti*, *prakṛti*, and *māyā* is the Great Goddess. Such a portrayal of Mahādevī is indicative of her multiple singularity, for her nature as a cosmic creative power transcends particular form and allows for numerous interpretations of her identity. It also points to her generative capacity as Divine Mother, for it is she who gives birth to the universe.

In the fifth essay, we turn to Kerala and even greater ambiguity with Sarah Caldwell's essay, "Waves of Beauty, Rivers of Blood: Constructing the Goddess in Kerala." Caldwell's focus is the goddess Bhagavati, whom devotees worship as Mahādevī and whose mythology is connected to that of the pan-Indian goddesses Durgā and Kālī. In Kerala, the ritual construction of Bhagavati's physical form in ritual

possession performances, temple icons, narrative, *kaḷam* (portraits of the Goddess in colored powders), and so forth is a fundamental form of Hindu religious practice. Yet the way her body is formed and enlivened and the perceived nature of the Goddess thus constructed vary significantly from one social group to another and reflect differing religious, historical, and political contexts.

Caldwell focuses on the way that the Goddess's form and identity are constructed in four different social groups: Brahmins, Nayars/Kṣatriyas, low-caste and tribal groups, and women of both high and low castes. She finds that although there is a good deal of overlap, each group emphasizes different rituals, songs, and texts pertaining to the Goddess and paints a portrait of Bhagavati that tends to reflect values important to that particular social group. Hence, says Caldwell, each of these incarnations is Mahādevī herself, yet each reflects the social realities of the human community that constructs it.

Taken together, these five chapters explore some of the ways in which Mahādevī's identity is understood in a diversity of textual and devotional contexts, moving from approaches that place greater stress upon unity and clarity of definition in a given context to those that stress ambiguity, negotiation, and multiplicity. The next four chapters, however, focus more on the processes of Goddess "construction." In this section, we begin with essays that more clearly focus on elucidating particular cases and move toward those that are more centrally concerned with using particular cases as a springboard for reflecting on larger issues.

Sree Padma's chapter, "From Village to City: Transforming Goddesses in Urban Andhra Pradesh," takes a fresh look at Sanskritization by exploring its impact on village goddess cults, a process through which local village goddesses come to be cross-identified with the pan-Indian goddesses of Sanskritic Hinduism. She focuses on the city of Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh and the surrounding areas, which are undergoing rapid urbanization. In searching for the Hindu Great Goddess in Visakhapatnam, Padma argues for the primacy of village goddess cults over Sanskritic traditions, maintaining that despite increasing Sanskritization, the primary protective function of village goddesses is always sustained, while Sanskritic influence adds only superficial elements pertaining to liturgy, iconography, and ritual. Such elements are, says Padma, ritual and metaphysical "window-dressings" that do not affect the fundamental, village-based ethos of goddess veneration but, at least in Visakhapatnam, serve primarily to make local goddesses "user friendly" in an urban context, where devotees come from all over India and hence are not predisposed to revere local