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THE GODDESS

Mandakranta Bose

THE OXFORD HISTORY OF HINDUISM

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General Editor: Gavin Flood

The Oxford History of Hinduism

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Edited by
MANDAKRANTA BOSE

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To Lily, my granddaughter, with love

Preface

It has been a journey of pleasure to put this book together as I came to know closely my colleagues and their work, which has enriched my own understanding of the goddess tradition. My initial inspiration to explore the concept of goddesses in Hindu religious culture came from my students when I was teaching courses in religious studies at my university. Later, when I was invited to give a set of lectures as a Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies on women in the Hindu tradition, I contemplated the possibility of writing about Hindu goddesses but found it more urgent to publish a study of women's place in the Hindu tradition. Later still, when Professor Gavin Flood invited me to edit a volume on the goddess tradition, I happily agreed. Without his invitation and encouragement I probably would not have ventured to take this task, for which I owe him sincere thanks. I must also acknowledge other friends at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies: Shaunaka Rishi Das for his continued support for over ten years; Rembert Lutjeharms and Jessica Frazier, both of whom have been of great help. On my many research visits to Oxford, the unlimited use of the Centre's library has been of immense help. I am grateful to the entire family at the Centre.

To Professor Diwakar Acharya, Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics and Fellow of All Souls at Oxford, I owe special thanks for his valuable suggestions over the past two years on my visits to Oxford. I have been fortunate in finding a friend so ready to share his learning with me.

My thanks also go to Tom Perridge and Karen Raith of Oxford University Press for their support and for patiently answering my many queries, and to Kalpana Sagayanathan for managing production. A particular debt to be mentioned is to Nirmala Rowena Anketell for her precise editing. To my colleague Yves Tiberghien, former director of the Institute of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia, I owe a very deep debt of gratitude for his unstinted support with research grants.

My husband Tirthankar Bose's meticulous editorial help lightened my load through the years of this book's progress; without his support this volume could not have been completed.

Mandakranta Bose

*Vancouver, Canada
September 2017*

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List of Abbreviations

AP	<i>Agnipurāṇa</i>
AS	<i>Ahīrbudhnya Samhitā</i>
AV	<i>Atharvaveda</i>
BhaP	<i>Bhaviṣyaapurāṇa</i>
BhP	<i>Bhāgavatapurāṇa</i>
BrP	<i>Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa</i>
BVP	<i>Brahmavaivartapurāṇa</i>
DBP	<i>Devī Bhāgavatapurāṇa</i>
DM	<i>Devīmāhātmya</i>
GG	<i>Gītagovinda</i>
LU	<i>Lalitopākhyāna (Lalitā Upākhyāna)</i>
KKCM	<i>Kabikāṅkaṇa's Caṇḍīmaṅgala</i>
Mbh	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
NṢA	<i>Nityaṣoḍaśikārṇava Tantra</i>
RCM	<i>Rāmcaritmānas</i>
ṚV	<i>ṚgVeda</i>
SL	<i>Saundaryalaharī</i>
StrDhrP	<i>Strīdharmapaddhati</i>
TR	<i>Tripurā Rahasya</i>
URC	<i>Uttararāmacarita</i>
VS	<i>Vājasaneyī Samhitā</i>
VR	<i>Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa</i>

List of Contributors

Brenda Beck is a social anthropologist trained in Oxford who has spent a lifetime studying South Asia and Tamilnadu. She has published five books and contributed to and/or edited many more. She has also authored over fifty journal articles. Dr. Beck has a passion for Hindu mythology and has written a number of articles related to Indian goddesses, detailing their stories and describing their related festivals. One unique folk epic, *The Legend of Ponnivala*, has held her interest for over fifty years. She is Adjunct Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto and President of the Sophia Hilton Foundation of Canada, a charitable foundation that promotes the use of storytelling in education at all levels. Her earliest ethnographic work, *Peasant Society in Kongu*, is currently being translated into Tamil for a Madurai-based publishing house. In the past three years Dr. Beck has received eleven awards from Tamil community groups based in the US, Canada, Tamilnadu, and Malaysia, for her work in helping to deepen a worldwide appreciation of Tamil folk literature, especially by those living in the Diaspora.

Mandakranta Bose studied in Calcutta and Oxford and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. She is a Professor Emerita at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, where she taught in the Religious Studies Department, and till recently was Director of the Centre for India and South Asia Research. Her research comprises the textual tradition of performing arts of India, Sanskrit literature, the *Rāmāyana*, Hinduism, and gender studies, with many publications in all these areas. They include a critical edition of two Sanskrit musicological texts, *Nartananirṇaya* (Calcutta: General Printers, 1970) and *Saṅgītanārāyaṇa* (Delhi: IGNCA, 2009); *Women in the Hindu Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); *A Woman's Rāmāyaṇa: Candrāvati's Bengali Epic*, with Sarika P. Bose (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); and many articles on Hindu cultural and religious traditions and several on Tagore. Her most recent articles are "Hinduism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) and "The Rāmāyaṇa in the Hindu Tradition," for *Oxford Bibliographies in Hinduism*. Her most recent book is *The Rāmāyaṇa in Bengali Folk Paintings* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2017).

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Sanjukta Gupta taught Sanskrit at Visva-Bharati, Calcutta, and Jadavpur Universities from 1958 to 1966, subsequently joining Utrecht University in the Netherlands in 1967, where she held the post of Senior Lecturer in Sanskrit until 1986. She is a member of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Oxford University. Apart from Sanskrit literature, Dr. Gupta also specializes in Indian philosophy (Vedānta) and ancient Indian religions, with particular emphasis on Tantra, Vaiṣṇavism, and *bhakti* and gender studies. Her books include *Lakṣmī Tantra* (Leiden: Brill, 1972); *Advaita Vedānta and Vaiṣṇavism: The Philosophy of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); and *The Cosmic Play of Power: Goddess, Tantra and Women* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2012).

Madhu Khanna, Professor of Indic Religion, is at present a Tagore National Fellow at the National Museum, New Delhi. Until recently, she was the Director of the Centre for the Study of Comparative Religions and Civilizations at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, where she introduced a pioneer course on Religion & Gender in South Asia. She conceived and directed Narivada—The Gender and Culture Network of Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi. She was Bina and Haridas Choudhury distinguished Fellow (2013–14) in Asian and Comparative Studies at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco and has authored and edited seven books that include *The Śrīcakra: History, Ritual and Symbol of Goddess Tripurasundarī* (forthcoming).

Rachel Fell McDermott is Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures at Barnard College, Columbia University and specializes in South Asia, especially India and Bangladesh. She received her BA from the University of

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Bihani Sarkar has been a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Oriental Institute, Oxford University since 2014. Her book, *Heroic Shāktism: The Cult of Durgā in Ancient Indian Kingship* was published as a British Academy Monograph by Oxford University Press in 2017. She has written articles on aspects of the cult of Durgā, covering the Navarātra and its history, the rite of Durgā in medieval Bengal, and dualisms in Durgā’s conception in classical Sanskrit literature. She has also written about classical Sanskrit literature, including the ethics of poetic practice in thirteenth-century Gujarat and the interplay between poetic licence and minding narrative conventions in the classical period. She is currently working on her second book on the depiction and history of the tragic in classical Sanskrit literature, which is to be published by I.B. Tauris.

Saswati Sengupta is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Miranda House, University of Delhi. She has published on varied subjects ranging from *Kālidāsa’s Abhijñāna-śākuntalam* to a critique of Said’s *Orientalism*. Her work of fiction, *The Song Seekers* (2011), also translated into Italian (*La dea combattente*, 2013), was longlisted for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literatures. She has published, jointly with Zakia Pathak and Sharmila Purkayastha, an important article, “The Prisonhouse of Orientalism,” in the journal *Textual Practice* (1991), and has edited, jointly with Deepika Tandon, a collection of essays titled *Revisiting Abhijñānaśākuntalam: Love, Lineage and Language in Kālidāsa’s Nāṭaka* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011).

The Oxford History of Hinduism

Introduction to the Series

The series offers authoritative, comprehensive coverage of the History of Hinduism. Although the word *Hinduism* is problematic as the term's origin is only from the nineteenth century and *Hindu* is only attested as a people's self-description from the sixteenth century, it nevertheless denotes a range of traditions within India whose roots reach deep into the past. The volumes in the series provide a history of the religious traditions encompassed by the term *Hinduism* from the first millennium BCE to the present day. One of the problems about studying the history of Hinduism, especially in the earlier period, concerns dating. It has been notoriously difficult to establish the dates of early traditions, figures, and texts before the medieval period. We can fairly accurately date Sanskrit texts of Buddhism when translated into Chinese, but "Hindu" texts are more problematic, although there is general agreement about the sequence of major developments within this history.

Another issue is the category "religion." Some scholars have argued against using it in the Indian context on the grounds of its local origin in the history of the West, but arguably the term demarcates a set of ideas, practices, and hopes and the English word is no more problematic than "culture" or even "society." But we do need to acknowledge these difficulties and that our claims as scholars are always provisional, subject to correction, and our categories must sometimes be used without consensual definition.

Each volume considers the relationship between Hinduism and the wider society, for religion is always embedded within culture and sociopolitical structures. Hinduism needs to be understood as dynamically engaging with wider Indian society and with other religions, particularly Buddhism and Jainism, throughout its long history. This dynamism and interactive nature of the religion is reflected in each of the volumes, some of which are more focused on Sanskrit traditions, while other volumes will have more weight on vernacular literatures such as Tamil. After the Vedic age, the volumes are organized thematically and chronologically. Thus, we have volumes devoted to the three major traditions focused on Shiva, the Goddess, and Vishnu, volumes on philosophy and practice, Hinduism in the modern world, and vernacular traditions. Each volume addresses not only theological concerns but also material culture, such as temples and architecture, along with the history of practices such as making offerings to a deity (*pūjā*), observances or vows (*vrata*), and pilgrimage (*yatra*) which cut across specific traditions.

Professor Gavin Flood FBA
General Editor of *The Oxford History of Hinduism* series

Introduction

Mandakranta Bose

*sa tasminnevākāṣe striyam ājagāma bahuśobhamānām umām haimavatīm tām
hobāca kim etad yakṣam iti.*

God (Indra), [seeing] in the same sky an extremely beautiful woman, Umā, daughter of Himavat, approaching asked her who this transcendent being [yakṣa] was.

Kenopaniṣad 3.12

sā brahmeti hobāca...

She said he is Brahman...

Kenopaniṣad 4.1

These excerpts narrate the conclusion of the encounter of three major deities—Agni, Vāyu, and Indra—with Brahman, all failing to comprehend who was filling them with wonder even when they came close to him. It was the celestial spirit Umā who appeared and revealed to them that he was Brahman.

The narrative is intriguing on at least two counts: while it provides an answer to the question asked by the gods, the story does not even raise the question who Umā might be, and secondly, why it is she who has the answer. How does it fall to this female being to hold the key to a secret that the principal gods cannot penetrate? Does femininity have anything to do with the power of revelation? Historically, the role of Umā in this narrative is particularly challenging because she appears in Hindu thought well after the tradition had been set in the Vedas of constructing goddesses as representations of the creative and regulatory powers of nature and human faculties as well as upholders of cosmic laws. Venerated for their powers as they are, the Vedic goddesses are not endowed with a vision deeper even than what the principal gods possess, as Umā does. The role that *Kenopaniṣad* ascribes to Umā is particularly important in that context because it reinvigorates a profound assertion of the divine feminine that occurs only once but does so memorably in the *RgVeda*, the earliest source

of Hindu theological speculation. In its tenth *maṇḍala* of hymns we find the following declaration of supremacy:

ahameva vāta iva pra vāmyārbhamāṇā bhuvanāni viśvā |
paro diva para enā prthivyaitāvatī mahinā sambabhūva ||
 (Devī Sukta, in *ṚgVeda* 10.125.8)

I breathe a strong breath like the wind and tempest, the while I hold together all existence.

Beyond this wide earth and beyond the heavens I have become so mighty in my grandeur.

(*The Hymns of the Ṛgveda*, trans. Griffith, 1889)

Part of a long hymn known as the *Devī Sūkta* composed in praise of the supreme feminine power called Devī, the verse declares her as the power that holds together “all existence,” whose reign stretches beyond earth and heaven. Setting Devī on a higher plane than all other deities, this declaration signals the rise of the divine feminine from the earliest time in Hindu thought and indicates a philosophical continuity from the Vedas to the Upaniṣads. Placed against the hymn, the *Kenopaniṣad* reference to Umā persuasively suggests belief in an intimate link between divinity and femininity. As we move from the *Devī Sūkta* to the *Kenopaniṣad* we may thus see the conception of the divine feminine progressing from that of separate, individual female deities, each representing and governing particular conditions of existence, to that of an indivisible ultimate metaphysical reality.

Although Umā in the *Kenopaniṣad* passage is not on the same level as the Supreme Being of the *Devī Sukta*, she is decisively distinct from the Vedic goddesses. While they are approximations of the conditions of existence whereby they are directly related to the lives of human beings, Umā is far removed from such conditions and imagined as the ultimate seer, one who must be close to Brahman. In positioning Umā as she who bestows understanding upon the principal gods, *Kenopaniṣad* thus associates the conception of the goddess with the primordial creative force even though that is not the focus of the narrative. But incipient in that implied redefinition is the tradition of conceiving the divine feminine as the creative force at the center of the cosmic mystery, as the Great Goddess and the Creatrix, and as a unity manifesting herself in many forms. J. N. Tiwari reminds us that “Feminine divinities were indeed worshipped in some form practically all over the ancient world.”¹ Rooted no doubt in the conception of the Mother Goddess of prehistoric cultures, the Great Goddess of Hindu thought developed into an idea of increasing complexity in its metaphysical identity. At the same time, naming Umā as the daughter of Himavat places her within the bounds of the

¹ Tiwari 1985: xi.

family structure obtaining in social reality. Into this profile of the goddess the *Kenopaniṣad* fable imports the idea of a divinity with both finite and infinite attributes, at once material and mystical, bound within the conditions of social reality and creator of reality itself. The ground is prepared here for conceptualizing the goddess as the creative power behind existence, though it is not until the advent of the Sāṃkhya school that Hindu philosophy systematically postulates the identity of that power variously as *prakṛti*, *śakti*, and *māyā*.

Prehistoric female figurines discovered at many places in India that are taken to be images of a Mother Goddess (as are similar figures found elsewhere in the world) confirm the antiquity of goddess worship in the Indian subcontinent.² Precisely what the earliest forms of worship were are not known but their purpose was presumably that of propitiating the deities, suing for boons in this world, and seeking their protection in this world and the next, as one may surmise from parallels in prehistoric societies elsewhere in the world. In the beginning and for a long time, goddesses in Hindu thought were directly related to the worldly desires and fears of humankind. They were imagined to govern and control fecundity, crop abundance, and natural phenomena such as the light of dawn, or as idealizations of human attributes such as sound and speech, and upholders of the principles that hold existence together. As such they were directly implicated in human experience. They were nurturers, protectors, healers, and purifiers of existence, life-givers above all, although many of them could be roused to displeasure and some to malevolence. In being so conceived, the goddesses were not in principle distinct from the male gods such as Vāyu, the god of winds, or Varuṇa, the god of water, and like them the goddesses were drawn in the lineaments of humanity. But the conception of goddesses perhaps placed them closer than male gods to earthly life, for as anthropomorphic figures, early Hindu goddesses were idealizations of mortal women in social relationships that reflected life on earth, as in many other early religious cultures.³ As we will see in some of the chapters in this volume, this aspect of the goddess identity continues to determine the attributes and functions both of goddesses and human females. But long before that hardening of the gendered human–divine analogy, the Vedas, collections of orally transmitted hymns that are the earliest surviving sacred texts of India, celebrated the divine feminine in several forms. The goddess most often invoked is Uṣas, who is the animating light of dawn. Other figures of veneration are Pṛthivī, the earth as progenitor of earthly life; Aditi, the mother of all divine and earthly beings; Sarasvatī, a purifying spirit imagined as a stream and holder of knowledge; and Vāc, who commands speech.

² For a wide-ranging and illustrated account of Mother Goddess images, see Nagar 1989.

³ For parallels in Greek mythology, see Sissa and Detienne 2000. For the role of female divinities in early European societies, see Gimbutas 1982.

The *Kenopaniṣad* fable, however, tilts the conception of the goddess towards metaphysical speculation, even if not as overtly as the *Devī Sūkta*. Because Umā alone is able to recognize Brahman, she must herself be close to the mystery of existence if not part of it; she is also one who lifts the veil on Brahman not only for Agni, Vāyu, and Indra but also for the human narrator, making way for human explorations of divinity. The idea of Devī, the goddess persona found in the Vedas, is thus expanded by reaching beyond nature so that she not only connotes phenomena but is also recognized as the creative principle that animates existence and creation itself. Devī is one but can manifest herself as the numerous goddesses worshipped by Hindus, which is in line with the Hindu view that the One is also Many. The perception of this duality took deep roots in Hindu theology and came to inform expository and interpretive thoughts not only about the divine feminine but also about divinity itself.

Reflections upon divinity in any religious system are endless. The Hindu discursive tradition is particularly preoccupied with questions about the Great Goddess as part of a wider and never-ending questioning of the origin, composition, and process of creation initiated by the ancient musings of the *ṚgVeda*: “Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know” (*RV* 10.129.7). While such uncertainty is absent in later texts, the intensity of the need to know never abates. Of particular relevance to the present context, finding an answer by placing Devī at the fountainhead of creation never loses its appeal and explains what Vidya Dehejia has called the “phenomenal rise of female divinity.”⁴ The centrality of Devī becomes foundational in much of Hindu theological discourse, in Tantric belief and Sāṃkhya philosophy in particular, expanding its ramifications in theology and worship practices in the Purāṇic era (third–sixteenth century CE), and gives rise to the goddess tradition as a whole. Of great philosophical complexity, the supremacy of the Great Goddess impinges significantly also upon belief systems built around other dominant deities such as Śiva and Viṣṇu. The approaches to understand the concept of goddesses are immense and often at odds with one another. Sectarian religious arguments and practices have treated goddesses differently in terms of both their relationships with male gods and their individual roles, some conceiving them as consorts to gods, though possessing great power, and some as manifestations of a single supreme creative and sustaining power.

Necessarily, this volume begins with two chapters that probe what that singularity means as they consider the nature of Devī as an idea, launching the first of the four parts (“The Idea of Devī”) into which the fourteen chapters of

⁴ Dehejia 1999.

this volume are arranged. They are followed by studies in the formation of some of the major Hindu goddesses, their historical development, the brahminic as well as Tantric rituals relating to them, and their roles in the contemporary Hindu tradition. Part II (“The Development of the Goddess Tradition”) deals with the appearance of goddesses of regional origin and following in medieval times, who continue to influence the religious life of Hindus just as powerfully as the major pan-Indian goddesses discussed in the preceding chapters. Part III (“The Regional Heritage”) contains studies of the presumed flow of the divine spirit between goddesses and women on earth as we consider the extent of such linkages from the unveiling of the divine spirit in some women to their actual apotheosis. Turning to present times, Part IV (“Devī in the Modern World”) offers in the final two chapters two examples of contemporary worship practices, one in South Asia and the other in the United States. The unifying theme of these explorations is the general Hindu belief in the oneness of Devī, the Great Goddess who manifests herself in multiple forms.

The groundwork for understanding this fundamental tenet of goddess worship is laid by Tracy Pintchman in Chapter 1, where she considers what the Great Goddess means as an idea and as a presence in worldly life. Noting that while Hindus believe at once in many goddesses and a single Great Goddess, Pintchman explains that Devī is a single transcendental being, the source of the cosmos and the sum of three cosmic principles termed *śakti*, *prakṛti*, and *māyā*, or energy, materiality, and delusion (that is, her constant play of shifting form, substance, and purpose). Addressing the principles *śakti*, *prakṛti*, and *māyā*, Pintchman raises such essential questions as what transcendence signifies and whether or in what sense divinity may be immanent in creation. Pondering the relationship between divinity, embodiment, and the natural world, Pintchman considers the link between the divine and human realms and its implications for women. Her study thus aims at mapping the cosmological, devotional, and sociological understanding of the goddess tradition. Noting that although Hindus recognize and revere a variety of different, discrete goddesses, they also tend to speak of “The Goddess” as a singular and unifying deity, Pintchman looks at the Goddess (1) as a cosmogonic/cosmological creative force that creates, sustains, and permeates the universe, (2) as a being worthy of devotion who is also manifest as individual goddesses, and (3) as a potential role model for human women who in many contexts are viewed as special manifestations of the Goddess. The idea of the divine feminine thus has strong social implications for conceptualizing the nature and roles of women, for whom the goddess persona is made into a model, though only by abstracting her gentler attributes for emulation.

As much as the Goddess acts in the material world, it is as an abstraction and ultimately an impenetrable mystery that she preoccupies Hindu contemplation. In Chapter 2 of this volume Bihani Sarkar tracks the analytical

processes by which some thinkers attempt to unveil the mystery of *māyā*, which is one of the most intriguing aspects of Devī, especially when exalted as Mahāmāyā in the influential Śakta text *Devīmāhātmya*. As an idea Mahāmāyā is hard to pin down in that she is at once insentient yet consciously active, binding beings in the coils of existence and freeing them to reach for an ultimate, non-material reality. Who is she, where does she come from, what does she do, and above all, how may we have knowledge of her? The task of finding answers is complicated by the notion that she is the source of delusion, occluding human perception, especially as objective knowledge is limited in the face of the action of *māyā*. Sarkar seeks an answer in early Hindu discourses on cosmogony, particularly Sāṃkhya and Siddhānta views on the context of the formation and structure of reality. Her own search demonstrates how determinedly one has to weave one's way through the maze of speculation expressed as much in allegories and myths as in exercises in exegeses and argument. Not an anthropomorphized deity, Mahāmāyā is an ambivalent concept of being and non-being, an idea rather than an icon that propels the movement of beings within and between the delusional forms generated by *karma* and salvation by merging with the ultimate reality.

The infinite variety of forms that the active energy known as the Great Goddess may assume is indicated by Sanjukta Gupta in Chapter 3 on the cult of goddess Lalitā/Tripurasundarī, whose dual name hints at her intriguing identity. Gupta traces the development and transmission of the cult from Kashmir to South India through a close study mainly of two texts, *Lalitopākhyāna*, which is part of the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa*, and *Saundaryalaharī*, attributed to Śaṅkarācārya. Traced through an ascending hierarchy of the forms of Devī, goddess Tripurasundarī is venerated as the divine power of action (*kriyāśakti*) and the primordial source of the universe as the consort of the Supreme Reality. In the Kashmir version of the cults of Trika and Kaula she is the highest aspect of Devī. The name Lalitā, later appended to the goddess, indicates she is beautiful, charming, and desirable. Her cult arose in South India very early, absorbing that of a powerful local goddess called Kāmākṣī located at Kāñcīpuram, which was the capital of the Pallava kings. Gupta argues that the name Lalitā was added to the goddess Tripurā at a later date, when the doctrine of the cult attempted to attach to the word Lalitā the connotation of *kāma* (desire) understood as a means to achieve liberation. The meaning of the word *kāma* was thus taken beyond erotic sentiments to mean *kṛpā*, emphasizing the goddess's compassion for her devotees and her readiness to grant them her grace. At the same time Lalitā's other name Rājarājeśvarī connected her to the aspiration of kings who worshipped her to supplicate for sovereignty and unlimited power. The *Lalitopākhyāna* makes it clear that by the time this myth came to be recorded she had become for her devotees the all-powerful Śakti who was superior to all other deities, at once a

vanquisher of evildoers, especially false pretenders to power such as the legendary figure of Bhaṇḍa, and a loving protector of her supplicants. It is also an illustration of the expansion of the ideology and worship practices of the Great Goddess, and how she expresses herself as the Trika and Kaula goddess Tripurā who is also Lalitā. Implicit in this one form, then, is the manifold potentiality of Devī.

How the idea of the goddess takes a more concrete form in worldly life is traced in my essay (Chapter 4) on goddess Śrī/Lakṣmī. One of the earliest Hindu divinities, Śrī/Lakṣmī has commanded veneration from Vedic times till now as the source of all wellbeing, worldly bounty, sovereignty, and good fortune, although in later times she came increasingly to be worshipped for her gift of wealth. But even as Hindu thought focused on wealth and fortune as her particular province, it emphasized her identity as one form of the Great Goddess and as such proximate with the fundamental energy that creates, drives, and permeates all existence. Related to this view is that of Śrī/Lakṣmī as the consort of Viṣṇu, one of the three principal Hindu deities, and thus intimate with the inmost power of the cosmos. In medieval times her nearness to Viṣṇu elevated her divine action not just to intercession with Viṣṇu on behalf of humanity, as viewed in the Śrīvaiṣṇava school of Vaiṣṇava thought. More emphatically, the Pāñcarātra school accorded her the status of the actual initiator and controller of the creation, preservation, and dissolution, for even though Viṣṇu is the superior deity he remains inactive in cosmic action. For less philosophical worshippers, though, it is Śrī/Lakṣmī's worldly gifts and benevolent persona that primarily matter. As a feminine divinity she has been readily turned into a model for women, upon whom rests the achievement of orderly and prosperous domesticity. It is also a duty that calls for inexhaustible patience and self-denial. The figure of Śrī/Lakṣmī is thus the locus at once of human-divine interaction and of an ethic of women's self-abnegation. In the construction of Śrī/Lakṣmī as a model for women we may thus see the irony of female deification actually effecting the confinement of women within socially prescribed roles that deny them self-determination. As we find in Pintchman's discussion of the humanization of Devī in Chapter 1, this is a theme that has to be constantly kept in view as we consider the place of Hindu goddesses in philosophy and society.

The many ways of viewing Śrī/Lakṣmī indicate the complexity that dominates the conception of Hindu goddesses. This is what we observe in Chapter 5 by Elizabeth Rohlman on Sarasvatī, who has been venerated both as a goddess of learning and as a sacred river. Rohlman argues that Sarasvatī is the most ancient individualized goddess of Hinduism, and perhaps the first river to be worshipped as a goddess by Hindus. Generations of Indologists have carefully traced the evolution of Sarasvatī, from the river mentioned in the Vedas through her association with the Vedic goddess of speech, Vāc, to her emergence as a deity who is both a river goddess and the goddess of knowledge. Yet

cataloguing Sarasvatī's textual appearances does not tell the full story of her place in the Hindu pantheon. She is a figure who is both omnipresent—countless Indic texts from a variety of traditions begin with an invocation to Sarasvatī—and liminal: premodern images of Sarasvatī are exceedingly rare, posing the question of her place in extra-canonical aspects of Hindu life. Treating the river that bears her name as a metaphor, Rohlman examines the elusive and sometimes paradoxical position of Sarasvatī in the history of Hinduism. Even when taken literally (i.e. geographically) as a river, Sarasvatī cloaks herself in mystery: already described as “lost” in the Vedas, she is a river that is believed to appear and disappear from the surface of the earth at will. The very mysteriousness of this phenomenon is suggestive of a potency more profound than earthly powers in its hint of the elusiveness of purification. As a river, Sarasvatī defines the religious geographical tradition of the land, as we find in numerous regional Sarasvatī traditions across India, and indeed to sanctify the vast land of Bhārata, as asserted in the *Mahābhārata*. Rohlman maintains that Sarasvatī the goddess is no less elusive or powerful than the river, and that it is because of her compound role as river, speech, and goddess that Sarasvatī is such a perplexing figure.

In Chapter 6 on Rādhā, Tracy Coleman addresses a distinctive mark of Hindu religious culture; that is, the presumption of human–divine exchange. Not only are deities imagined in human form and attributed human motives, they are placed in close relationships with men, women, and children. Rādhā is a particularly challenging figure in Hindu devotional thought, undercutting as her legend does the idea of wifely faithfulness and exalting her *faithlessness* in her surrender to Kṛṣṇa. For that matter, how may one countenance the seduction of a married woman by a god? One way out of this ethical quandary is to argue that the intimacy between Kṛṣṇa, that most intriguing of Viṣṇu's human forms, and Rādhā his mortal lover is so close, virtually so organic, that the dividing line between god and mortal disappears, and with it the rules of worldly conduct. Coleman considers how this happens and what it means for understanding the divine–human relationship by examining the literary representation of the passionate love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa mediated by *bhakti*, the absolute surrender of the devotee to her deity. The issue is not only Rādhā's absorption in her love for Kṛṣṇa, it is also his own immersion in his desire for her. That desire, Coleman demonstrates by an extensive analysis of Jayadeva's *Gīta Govinda* (twelfth century CE), is one for physical, not metaphorical, union and of such intensity that it merges the human into the divine. The bond between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is so profound that theologians sometimes describe them as one being with two bodies, a concept represented in art by their gracefully intertwined limbs and their playfully erotic role reversals. Since narratives about Rādhā depict her as a simple *gopī*, a woman from the pastoral community of Vraja where Kṛṣṇa spends his childhood and youth, she stands as a model of devotion theoretically capable of emulation by all human beings,

irrespective of caste, class, and gender. Moreover, because Rādhā is a woman, theologians and scholars alike have often claimed that women enjoy a privileged position in Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* traditions, a uniquely feminine position that legitimizes erotic love as a way to salvation. But the question remains whether Rādhā is actually thought of in Vaiṣṇava texts as a mortal woman, and thus somehow a model for other women, or as a goddess come to earth who transcends gender and sexuality as constructed by society and embodied by human women. Coleman explores the socio-religious tensions represented by the figure of Rādhā and revealed in theological debates about the nature of her love in light of her marital status. That love relationship, Coleman argues, has to be viewed on more levels than the theological, for debates about *kāma* vs. *prema* and questions about Rādhā's status as Kṛṣṇa's wife (*svakīyā*) or adulterous lover (*parakīyā*) betray anxieties about female sexuality and women's capacity to experience divine grace and attain liberation from *saṃsāra*.

The impulse in Hinduism to attribute divinity to women—of socially valorized virtue, needless to say—developed early and has remained steady, as Heidi Pauwels demonstrates in her study of Sītā in Chapter 7. Reviewing the long history of the legend of Sītā from its earliest record in Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* to the modern era, which continues to attract its reiteration in many forms and in many types of media, Pauwels notes how consistently Sītā is revered as a wife unconditionally devoted to her husband to the point of enduring endless suffering and humiliation. Her absolute and unflinching devotion to Rāma, who is regarded as Viṣṇu in human form, has qualified her as an object of devotion herself for her numerous devotees who worship her jointly with Rāma. The Vaiṣṇava tradition exalts Sītā as the model for the soul's passive dependence upon God for its salvation; necessarily, then, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is seen to affirm the soul's need for mediation via the Goddess, manifest as Sītā, who is the embodiment of grace. Yet Sītā's representation is not entirely uniform, nor is her reception. While the majority of Rāma tales show her accepting her suffering without complaint—or at least stoically—such passivity is set aside in Śākta renditions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, such as the *Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa*, in which she is the real force behind Rāma in saving creation from the demons. As for the reception of Sītā as the epitome of suffering, the general response of sympathy has at times viewed her as a persecuted woman who does protest against the injustice she suffers and thus stands as the representative of women oppressed by the rules of a patriarchal ethos. Present especially in rural and working women's songs and stories, this alternative construction of Sītā has stimulated many modern *Rāmāyaṇa* scholars, especially feminist critics, to reconsider the purpose and process of confining Sītā within the matrix of devotion. While the general view of Sītā among Hindus perhaps remains constant in viewing her as a model wife and therefore deserving of worship, she is also revered precisely as an

icon of resistance, futile as it was yet potentially empowering and thus worthy of veneration.

Chapter 8 by Madhu Khanna considers the trajectory between divine and human femininity in the context of the myths of the Great Goddess imagined as a *kumārī*, a sacred virgin, which she argues can be a great resource for countering the subordination of the girl child in India. The election of a young, prepubescent girl as the vehicle of the Great Goddess underscores the ambivalence in Hindu attitudes to the feminine in that it causes veneration on the one hand and subjugation on the other. Brenda Beck's study of the royal *kumārī* of Kathmandu in Chapter 9 examines the process of electing a young girl into a goddess wielding miraculous powers; Khanna views that election with the potency of myths that reveal unbreakable bonds between a *kumārī* and Devī, which may indeed elevate the status of girls and women if only by association. The traditional neglect of the girl child in sacred books as in real life is a historical fact of Hindu society and part of the systemic reduction of women. Khanna notes that modern feminist scholarship has responded to this degradation by reductionist readings of myths, rituals, and beliefs, which essentialize gender relations into an exclusive male–female binary, and dismiss cultural traditions as regressive. While the systemic neglect of and oppressive indifference to girl children has to be acknowledged and resisted, Khanna argues that there are resources within Hindu religious belief and practice to support the empowerment of girl children. Drawing attention to rituals of Śākta Tantra, Khanna proposes a fresh approach to reconnect the archaic, under-researched past with modern programs to empower the girl child. Recounting several myths of all-conquering goddesses, Khanna argues that it is possible and necessary to explore the ways in which cultural resources such as the myths and legends of child goddesses can be reclaimed to create space for a dialogue with contemporary development programs to promote the autonomy of girl children and solidarity with their community.

The goddess–woman link receives a very different treatment from Beck when she studies women who “become” goddesses. Taking four instances, a mother–daughter duo from a Tamil bardic narrative and two from contemporary India, Beck details the processes by which these women and young girls achieve goddess status. While that status is founded on each woman's personal potentiality, its achievement varies from legend to real life. The mythic construction of the two women of *The Legend of Ponnivala* emphasizes the limitless penance and self-mortification that they go through to earn their life-giving, evil-conquering powers, which they achieve by their own effort, although there is a pre-existing potential for that achievement. By contrast, the two “living goddesses” are born with divinity organic to them. One of them, a woman revered as Amma or Mother, began to express her goddess-like traits, such as divination and power to protect and punish, from an early age and did so with increasing self-assurance as she assumed the insignia (of dress, chants,

rites) and forms of conduct traditionally associated with a *devī*. The other, a girl child called the royal *kumārī* of Nepal, was discovered by Nepal's priestly establishment and venerated as a vehicle containing the spirit of goddess Taleju, a form of the Great Goddess, until at puberty the goddess left her to invest another child with the same powers. Unlike the *kumārī* and Amma, the women in the legend Beck studies have to strive to acquire their powers, often through strenuous esoteric rites, but her account of every case underscores the action of the divine in the human as one of creation supported by conservation—by violent means if necessary—which affirms the conception of the feminine divine in Hindu thought and the place of women in the scheme of existence.

A goddess closely associated with women and the generation of life in nature is the subject of Prabhavati Reddy's description of the celebration of Bathukamma in Telangana in Chapter 10. Celebrated in that region of India, she has a festival dedicated to her, which has been going on for several centuries, reflecting, as Reddy tells us, a rich oral tradition of Telugu folk songs narrating the life of Bathukamma and her importance in the life of women, especially in agrarian society. Bathukamma means "mother of life" or "mother live on" and she is figured as a mound of flowers constituting a flower shrine, which represents life, death, and rebirth. Not one of the mainstream goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, she is thought by her devotees to be a form of Lakṣmī, Gaurī, and Durgā, and like those goddesses she is supplicated for the kind of gifts that enrich agrarian life, such as abundance of rainfall, good crops, and the conservation of nature. The annual festival in autumn takes place around these flower shrines which are made for that purpose and thought by devotees to be invested with the spirit of Lakṣmī or Gaurī. Needing no complex ritual, women worship her by singing and dancing around these shrines, and finally immerse them in local waters. Bathukamma is a goddess of transitory presence, for she has neither a temple of her own nor an iconic image, nor is she worshipped daily or through pilgrimage. She is nevertheless a sacred presence in the hearts of women, for whom she represents the fullness of life that autumn brings, signaling hope for the rejuvenation of nature and humanity.

The study of regional goddesses continues from Reddy's chapter to the next, on one of the most colorful of Hindu goddesses, albeit one with a regional rather than pan-Indian following. This is the serpent goddess Manasā, the subject of Chapter 11 by Krishna Datta. An important feature of Datta's work is that she not only covers the extent of the Manasā cult and her worship rites but also considers its impact on popular Bengali literature of the Middle Ages. Drawing upon legends in early Sanskrit texts as much as folklore, Datta traces the growth of the cult of Manasā, her legendary origin, her debated identity, and patterns of action. While serpent cults have existed in many parts of India, Manasā's most devoted adherents have been from Bengal (as the province of India was called before the Partition of India, now divided into West

Bengal and Bangladesh), especially the snake-infested part of eastern India. Datta describes the rites of Manasā worship in its varied forms, which include the recitation of her legend, forming a very substantial part of a body of verse narratives known as *maṅgalakāvya*s that dominated popular religious literature in Bengali through the Middle Ages. The hold of this genre on popular culture is examined by Saswati Sengupta in Chapter 12. At once celebratory and cautionary in praising a deity, promising every imaginable reward to devotees and threatening disbelievers with dire punishment, *maṅgalakāvya*s have left their mark on *pāñcālī* literature in Bengali, verse tales recited at the rituals of gods and goddesses commonly worshipped at home. *Maṅgalakāvya*s relating to Manasā, like those devoted to other deities, mirror their times both socially and politically as they correlate worldly events with the set ideas about gods and goddesses into which speculative religious thought had become fixed in the popular mind. Taken together, the legend of Manasā and the elements of her rites throw light on how a goddess identity may come to be formed and what ethical issues it involves—or ignores.

The regional location of some of the most widely worshipped Hindu goddesses gives rise to modes of belief and worship regimes distinct from those sanctioned by ancient brahminical authority, as Sengupta notes in her chapter on the forms of goddess Caṇḍī in Bengal. Commanding widespread devotion and lauded in *maṅgalakāvya*s dedicated to her deeds, the *Caṇḍīmaṅgalas* composed by numerous poets asserted the greatness of the goddess by telling or retelling a long, usually two-part, story of her munificence to her devotees and her wrath towards their adversaries. In this she acts as the protector Mother Goddess of ancient Hindu tradition even though here she is not as independent as, say, Durgā, but subject to a greater male god. There is also a hint running through the narratives, says Sengupta, that the goddess has a closer kinship with the chthonic goddesses of the lower social castes and as such is confined to a lower level of metaphysical authority. Sengupta argues that while the narratives do celebrate the goddess, they also fit her into the pattern of female dependency, just as the abilities, virtues, and consequent worthiness of the human actors are explained and validated by tracing them to higher social locations than they actually occupy. These narratives not only provide glimpses of social conditions and social relations of medieval eastern India, they also stratify religious belief on a scale of power and dependency.

In Chapter 13 Rachel McDermott points at an intriguing twist in the devotional culture of Kālī in modern India in its spread across religious boundaries, of which a particularly notable example is the poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam, a twentieth-century poet who has left a dual legacy in West Bengal and Bangladesh. The absorbing attachment to Kālī of this Muslim poet who had a Tantric guru manifested itself in some of the finest lyrics that comprise the *Śyāmā Saṅgita* genre. While they underscore the power that Kālī

can exert on both the spiritual drive and the poetic imagination of individuals, they also raise questions about religious identities inasmuch as they assail Muslim sensibilities, especially in Bangladesh, where this Hindu voice adopted by its National Poet troubles the Bangladeshi sense of what Bangladeshi Islam is or should be. This chapter thus addresses the complex issue of why and how a Hindu goddess could have exercised so strong a pull on a Muslim, especially a poet possessing so powerful an imagination and so clear a voice.

In Chapter 14, Tracy Pintchman describes a new vision of Devī and a new way to claim her as the focal point of Hindu religious identity. Indicating new directions in religious belief and regimens and extending into social organization, this vision informs Hindu religious life in the Indian diaspora with particular intensity in North America. Pintchman traces in her article the establishment of the Parashakthi Temple in Pontiac, Michigan, which is dedicated to the “Eternal Mother” who is the “Divine Pure Eternal Consciousness” as she is termed on the temple’s website, although at her original location in South India she is recognized as a regional deity named *Karumāriamman* (Black *Māriyamman*). Reviewing the history and ideological basis of the temple’s establishment at Pontiac, Pintchman notes the powerful appeal of its universalist claim which co-opts Native American spirituality in tapping into the shamanic energy of a sacred space as the temple site is declared to be. While the temple hosts icons of many other Hindu deities and holds orthodox Hindu rites of worship, all this coalesces around the Eternal Mother who is believed to have chosen her seat at this location as the locus of her protective energy for the protection of all. The development we see here is thus from a regional deity into a universal one who by implication may reach outside the Hindu community to participate, as Pintchman puts it, in a “transcultural, transnational, and transhistorical economy of divine power.” A new vision of Hindu religiosity is at work here, one that disrupts mundane boundaries of ethnicity, religion, and geography while still grounding the Goddess in a specific place, or, in this case, places (South India and Michigan). The Goddess becomes both local and universal, Tamil and American, Hindu and pan-religious.

This overview of the chapters in this volume should make it clear that they do not presume to offer the reader all that there is to know about Hindu goddesses. Nor do the contributors suggest that they have the final word on their particular subjects. If anything, they confirm rather the necessity for many different ways of thinking about goddesses in the Hindu climate of thought and of observing how they are worshipped, bearing in mind, above all, the emphatic—and exciting—acceptance of the simultaneous indivisibility and plurality of the Goddess. This book is not a general survey and does not cover all there is to know about the goddess phenomenon in Hinduism; rather it represents scholarly scrutiny of particular approaches to thinking about the Feminine Divine and modes of worship. The opportunities for exploration are

limitless; why else would so much new writing on the goddesses keep appearing? What the excursions in this volume show is that, like all abstractions, Hindu goddesses resist simple explanations and demand constant scrutiny. To the mystical, metaphysical, and ritual complexities one must add their place in the social reality of Hindu life to understand how they are conceived and the varieties of their conception, given that the presence of the goddess as the One and the Many is always felt in the everyday life of Hindus, informing their speculative philosophy as much as their social relations, personal and public conduct, and political positions. The chapters that comprise this volume are constantly aware of the earthly presence and action attributed to goddesses even as they navigate their way through complex—sometimes hairsplitting—arguments and interpretations. A common interest of these studies is in aligning themselves with the modern, lived experience of Hindu society, which should allow them to reach out to readers engaged in Social Studies, especially Gender Studies. This interest will be particularly useful in discussions on goddesses in modern Hindu life but should in addition encourage the reader, as the book draws to its conclusion, to look back through time to widen the view of goddesses in Hinduism beyond theology and ritual practice to situate them in the human world of their times.

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Part I

The Idea of Devī

Cosmological, Devotional, and Social Perspectives on the Hindu Goddess

Tracy Pintchman

Goddesses and goddess devotion form a vital component of Hindu religious life and enjoy more prominence in Hinduism than they do in many other religious traditions. Although Hindus acknowledge and honor a diversity of individual goddesses, they also tend to speak of “The Goddess” (Devī) or “The Great Goddess” (Mahādevī) as a single transcendent being. She is on the highest level the source of the universe and the Divine Mother who generates all that exists. John S. Hawley notes that many Hindus hold the Goddess to be both singular and multiple without any sense of contradiction; since the Goddess is beyond all limitation, she can assume an infinite number of forms.¹ She also embodies certain principles or forces that permeate the cosmos: these are *śakti*, *prakṛti*, and *māyā*.

In this chapter I focus on three broad dimensions of Devī in Hindu traditions: (1) the Goddess as the embodiment of universal principles that create, sustain, permeate, and are ultimately identical to the created world; (2) the Goddess as a divine being worthy of devotion who is also manifest as numerous individual goddesses; and finally (3) the Goddess as a potential role model for human women. I draw here on Hindu textual traditions and teachings as well as lived contemporary conceptions and practices pertaining to Hindu goddesses. I will also highlight a number of larger themes that emerge in relation to Hindu goddess traditions, including the nature of divine transcendence and immanence; the relationship between divinity, embodiment, and the natural world; and the relationship between the divine and human realms, such as the question of whether women may be empowered by goddesses.

¹ Hawley 1996: 8.

COSMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES: THE
GODDESS AS ŚAKTI (POWER), PRAKṚTI
(MATTER), AND MĀYĀ

A number of Hindu texts identify the Hindu Goddess on the highest level with the cosmic principles *śakti*, *prakṛti*, and *māyā*. As these three vital principles, the Goddess functions as a transcendent agent who produces, pervades, and sustains the world. She is also the created world itself.

Śakti, which means “power” or “energy,” is a universal, divine potency that both causes the created world to come into being and sustains that world through time. The term *prakṛti*, “matter” or “materiality,” refers to the manifest, embodied, material universe. The term *māyā* generally designates creative yet potentially delusive divine power or the material form that results from the activity of such power. In some contexts, most notably the philosophical school of Advaita Vedānta, *māyā* denotes a power of spiritual illusion inherent in Brahman, the eternal, unchanging godhead. According to Advaita Vedānta, Brahman alone is fully real; the manifest world of multiplicity conceals the true unity of Brahman and hence functions as a kind of illusion that Brahman generates through the power of *māyā*. Advaita Vedānta texts tend to portray *māyā* as a cause of spiritual ignorance (*avidyā*), the inability to perceive Brahman’s oneness and transcendence, which in turn keeps one bound to the cycle of birth and rebirth. Other Hindu texts, however, especially those that equate the Goddess with *māyā*, afford the term much more positive connotations, and *māyā* assumes the creative qualities of *śakti* and *prakṛti*.

The identification of the Goddess with *śakti*, *māyā*, and *prakṛti* was formed over many centuries and has roots in even the earliest Vedic texts.² Yet it is firmly established scripturally for the first time in the *Devīmāhātmya*, a text about which Thomas Coburn has written extensively.³ The *Devīmāhātmya* is the first extant brahminical Hindu Śākta text, meaning that it consistently portrays the Goddess as the ultimate, highest reality and the Supreme Creator who wills creation and sends forth the cosmos. It stands on its own merits as an autonomous devotional work, but it originates as a portion of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (fifth/sixth centuries CE), one of the early Sanskrit Purāṇas. The Purāṇas are compendia compiled over long stretches of time from approximately the third to the sixteenth centuries CE. They include a great deal of mythological material as well as ethical prescriptions and descriptions of ritual, pilgrimage, and other religious practices. The brahminical Hindu tradition delineates eighteen major (*mahā*-) and eighteen minor (*upa*-)

² Pintchman 1994.

³ e.g. Coburn 1982, 1984, 1991, and 1996.