8 The Goddess and Śākta traditions

The traditions of Śiva and Viṣṇu have dominated Hindu literature and have been the major focus of devotional attention. Yet there is nevertheless a vital Hindu Goddess tradition and many goddesses are worshipped daily throughout south Asia. The innumerable goddesses of local traditions are generally regarded by Hindus as manifestations or aspects of a single Great Goddess or Mahā Devi, whose worship may go back to pre-historic times if sixth- or fifth-millennia terracotta figurines are taken to be goddess images. Worship of the Hindu Goddess is also important beyond the bounds of Hinduism in contemporary western revivals of Goddess worship.1

The Goddess is a contradictory and ambivalent figure in Hinduism. On the one hand she is the source of life, the benevolent mother who is giving and overflowing, yet on the other she is a terrible malevolent force who demands offerings of blood, meat and alcohol to placate her wrath. Wendy O’Flaherty has referred to two distinct categories of Indian goddesses which reflect these two natures: on the one hand are ‘goddesses of tooth’ who are erotic, ferocious and dangerous, on the other are ‘goddesses of breast’ who are auspicious, bountiful and fertile.2 The goddesses of breast are generally role models of Hindu women who embody maternal qualities of generosity and graciousness, subservient to their divine husbands, while the goddesses of tooth are independent, low-ranking and dominate their consorts if they have any. The high-ranking goddesses of breast are sexually controlled within a brahmanical framework, the low-ranking goddesses of tooth are free, as Wendy O’Flaherty observes, to attack men.3 There are some exceptions to this distinction and some goddesses, such as Tripurasundari, are both beautiful and independent. Devi, the Great Goddess, embraces both of these images and her cults express this ambivalence.

Devotees of the Goddess are generally called Śāktas: the followers of Śakti, a name for the Goddess denoting the female ‘power’ or ‘energy’ of the universe. The Śākta tradition is, however, less clearly defined than Śaivism or Vaishnavism. Indeed it would be greatly misleading to assume that only Śāktas worship the Goddess. Almost all Hindus will revere her in some capacity, particularly at village level where her demands are very immediate as are her boons. Both Vaishnavism and Śaivism have incorporated the Goddess within them as the consorts or energies (śakti) of their male deities. Yet, as we have seen, at its tantric heart Śaivism is pervaded by feminized images of divinity and practice. With Śākta texts this feminized religion becomes overt in both puranic and tantric manifestations. The Goddess, on the edges of the brahmanical world, is incorporated into orthoprax, puranic worship and her tantric worship becomes brahmanized in the later medieval tradition of the Śrī Vidyā. Hindu orthopraxy contains the Goddess within a brahmanical structure. However, on the edges of brahmanical authority amongst the lower castes, the tribals, and in the tantric middle ground between the high and low castes, she maintains a wild independence as a symbol of the reversal of brahmanical values.

In this chapter I will first describe images of the Goddess in myth and iconography which developed during the first millennium CE, and which are still important in contemporary Hinduism. We will then go on to trace developments in the history of Goddess worship among the orthoprax Brahmins, among the tantric traditions, and at village level.

The myth of Devi

There are a number of narrative traditions about the Goddess and minor goddesses in the Purāṇas and Tantras. The most important manifestation of Devi is Durgā, the warrior goddess who slays the buffalo demon Mahiṣa. This myth is central to the cult of Devi and provides the inspiration for her main iconographic representation which shows her as Mahiṣa-sārjini, the slayer of the buffalo demon. The myth is told in a number of variants in the Purāṇas, especially the Deśabhāgavata Purāṇa and the Devimāhātmya, a part of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa. The latter text, the
earliest work glorifying the Goddess, dates from the fifth to seventh centuries CE. This version in the Devimāhātmya is the simplest and the following account is based on that earlier version.

The buffalo demon, Mahiṣa or simply Mahiṣa (‘buffalo’), had obtained a boon from Brahmā that he could not be killed by any male. With the confidence of his invincibility, he firstly conquers the world and then, wishing to conquer heaven as well, sends an ultimatum to Indra, the king of the gods. Indra scorns Mahiṣa and a terrible battle ensues in which Indra is defeated and flees to Brahmā for shelter, then to Śiva and finally to Viṣṇu. From the bodies and angered faces of the gods, great energy masses emerge which form into the shape of a beautiful woman, who is, of course, Devi. The gods manifest replicas of their weapons and give them to her, requesting her to defeat the demon Mahiṣa. Her lion mount she receives from the mountain god Himavat and her cup of wine from Kubera, the god of wealth in the north. She gives out a terrible laugh and the gods shout ‘victory’. Upon hearing the laughter and the shouting of the gods, Mahiṣa is angered and sends his troops to find out what is going on. They return, telling him of the beauty of the Goddess who is unmarried and who possesses all the qualities of love, heroism, laughter, terror and wonder. Through his envoys, Mahiṣa proposes marriage to Devi who refuses him, and he and his councillors are confused by her amorous demeanour yet her warlike talk. The envoys attack the Goddess when they are rebuked by her and are slain. Mahiṣa himself in a handsome human form goes to Devi and again proposes marriage, but she tells him that she has been born to protect the righteous and that he must flee to hell or fight. He attacks the Goddess, assuming the forms of different animals, but Devi drinks wine, pursues Mahiṣa on her lion, and defeats him, kicking him with her foot, piercing his chest with her trident and decapitating him with her discus as he emerges in human form from the buffalo’s body. The remaining demons flee to hell and Devi is praised by the gods whom she promises to help whenever necessary.

A number of themes and attitudes are expressed in this myth. The myth directly confronts brahmanical models of womanhood expressed in the Dharma Śāstras where the nature of woman (strīsvabhāva) is passive, unwarlike and where a woman’s role is defined in terms of male authority on which a woman should always be dependent as daughter, wife, or mother. Mahiṣa cannot be killed by any male, and a woman, so he thinks, could not possibly be strong enough to defeat him. Mahiṣa’s initial reac-

Images of the Goddess

The name Devi is interchangeable with Durgā, though Devi incorporates a wider conception of deity. A common term for the Goddess is simply ‘Mother’. Throughout South Asia the Goddess is referred to as ‘Mother’.

Mata, Mataji or Ma in the Hindi-speaking north, Amma in the Dravidian languages of the south. Like Śiva, the Goddess embodies paradox and ambiguity: she is erotic yet detached; gentle yet heroic; beautiful yet terrible. These aspects are expressed in a variety of different goddesses at local and pan-Indian levels. Indeed, there is a tendency for local goddesses to become identified with the Great Goddess through the process of Sanskritization, and sometimes for local goddesses to become universalized, as with the local goddess Santogi Ma who became a pan-Hindu deity due to a film telling her story. For her devotees, the Goddess is the ultimate reality, knowledge of whom liberates her from the circle of birth and death, yet she is also the ensnaring veil of the ‘great illusion’ (māhāmāya) binding all beings. As the power which both enslaves and liberates, she is Śakti, the energy or power of Śiva. The Goddess generates all forms and so is identified with Viṣṇu’s second wife, the Earth (Bhū), and with nature or matter (prakṛti). Yet she also destroys the cosmos and the human communities who inhabit it with terrible violence. She can be approached and worshipped in many forms, in natural phenomena, or in human forms as a mother, a wife, an old woman, or a young girl. Her main representations are:

- as Durgā, slayer of the buffalo-demon (Mahiṣāsura), seated on or attended by a lion or tiger (when she is called Ambikā). Durgā, the ‘difficult to access’, has ten arms and weapons, kicks and pierces Mahiṣa with her trident and beheads him, while yet maintaining a calm and detached demeanour.
- as Kāli and other terrible manifestations, such as Cāmunda. They are emaciated, blood-drinking and violent forms who haunt the
cremation grounds. Kāli is ‘black’ or ‘blue’, garlanded with severed heads, girdled with severed arms, with rolling, intoxicated eyes and a lolling tongue. She dances on the corpse of her husband Śiva.

- as consorts or energies (ākāti) of the gods, particularly Sarasvatī, Pārvatī and Lakṣmī, the consorts of Brahmā, Śiva and Viṣṇu, who are beautiful models of wisely and maternal devotion (though not devoid of righteous anger). In this category we can also include Rādhā, the consort of Kṛṣṇa, and Sitā, the wife of Rāma.

- as groups of generally ferocious female deities, notably the ‘seven mothers’ (Saptamātrikās) whose natures are ambiguous, preying on children yet also destroying demons. In esoteric tantric literature they are associated with letters of the Sanskrit alphabet and the Goddess Mātrikā is the deity of the complete alphabet.

- as local or regional icons in village or family shrines and temples. Local goddesses are often goddesses of smallpox and other pestilential diseases, such as Śitalā and Mārīyammaṇḍ in the south.

- as ‘aniconic’ forms such as stones, poles, weapons, magical diagrams (yanaṇṭra) and stylized female genitals (yoni).

- as natural phenomena, particularly rivers (such as the rivers Gangā, the sacred Ganges and the Kaveri), lakes, trees and groves.

- as male and female ‘mediums’ possessed by a goddess, particularly during festivals.

**Early worship of the Goddess**

Worship of goddesses may be extremely ancient in south Asia. Female figurines of baked clay have been found in the north-west at Mergarh and Sheri Khan Tarakai, dated to the sixth or fifth millennium, and terracotta figurines have been found at Mohenjo-Daro (c. 2500–2000 BCE), the major city of the Indus valley civilization. We do not know the purpose of these figures. It is possible that they served a ritual function, perhaps as offerings or talismans, or simply as gifts. Unfortunately the archaeological record is incomplete, though figurines from the north-west region have been dated to the third and fourth centuries BCE which may represent a continuity of tradition from ancient times, after the collapse of the Indus valley cities.

In early vedic religion, goddesses (deivi) are insignificant in that they play no role in the sacrifice at this early date, though several are mentioned in the Rg Veda, the earliest textual record we have. Most notable amongst them are Pṛthivī (the Earth), Aditi (the ‘unbound’), Uṣas (the dawn), Niṛṣa (destruction) and Vāc (speech). Pṛthivī is Mother Earth whose consort is Dyauṣ, Father Sky. Aditi is a goddess of some significance as the mother of the Adityas, a group of seven or eight deities including Daśa, Śiva’s later father-in-law.Ś She provides safety and wealth and is associated with the cow whose milk nourishes humanity. In the Brāhmaṇas she is identified with the Earth, Pṛthivī.Ś Ś Uṣas is a young girl who brings light to the world each morning by going before the Sun (Sūrya). She is bestower of prosperity and long life, yet conversely, because she announces the passing of the days, she also wears away people’s lives. Niṛṣa is a goddess of destruction; an early representation of destructive female power found in later Hinduism in local and pan-Hindu goddesses such as Kāli. The hymns of the Rg Veda implore her to go away and ask the gods for protection from her.Ś In the Brāhmaṇas she is described as dark and living in the south, the direction of death.Ś In contrast Vāc (speech) is a creative power who inspires the sages, reveals the meaning of language and is identified with truth. Speech plays an important part in later Hindu philosophy and in yogic and tantric traditions as the power behind words, particularly mantras. Other goddesses are mentioned in early vedic literature, such as the river Sarasvatī, Night, the Forest, and Diti, the mother of the demons, but their role is subordinated to that of the gods.

As the early texts are all the evidence we have regarding vedic religion, we can conclude from this evidence the following points:

- goddesses have a subordinate position in early vedic religion, male deities being predominant.
- there is no evidence of a ‘Great Goddess’ in the Vedas, an idea for which there is textual evidence only from the medieval period.
- some of the goddesses in the Veda, notably Pṛthivī and Sarasvatī, survived into later Hindu times. Sarasvatī becomes the Goddess of learning and music and wife of Brahmā; Pṛthivī or Bhū (the Earth) becomes the second wife of Viṣṇu.
- the evidence of goddess worship from the archaeological record and from references in the Veda, suggests that worship of goddesses has non-vedic, and probably non-Aryan, origins.

**The formation of Goddess worship**

Between the composition of the Vedas and the Purāṇas there is little literary evidence of Goddess worship, though there are Jain and Buddhist
sculptures depicting divine female beings, such as on the first-century BCE Buddhist monument (stūpa) at Sanchi. A general picture is suggested of low-caste, local goddesses becoming absorbed into, and resisted by, brahmanical tradition. Some of these goddesses were of Dravidian, rather than Aryan, origin. The Mahābhārata, composed by Brahmans, presents various images of female destructive power in the form of the seven or eight Mārkās, the ‘Mothers’ and a number of other demonesses. The Mārkās are described as dark, living on the periphery of society, and bringing misfortune, particularly upon children who must be protected from their unwanted attentions. The ferocious Kāli is mentioned in the Epic as being generated from the anger of Śiva’s consort, the Goddess Umā or Pārvatī, and Durgā is praised in two laudations by Arjuna in order to defeat his enemies. In South India there is evidence of early worship of goddesses. The Virgin Goddess Kanya Kumārī, whose temple is situated at the tip of India, existed in the early centuries of the common era, and the Tamil Caṅkam literature mentions Koṟavai, goddess of victory, to whom buffalos were sacrificed and for whom forest warriors, the Mārvars, were exhorted to ritual suicide. However, it is not until the Purāṇas that we find a more developed Śākta theology and mythology, and the idea of a single, all-embracing ‘Great Goddess’ (Mahādevī) who encompasses all other deities.

A picture emerges therefore of the gradual incorporation of the Goddess into the brahmanical sphere. This process of assimilation might be seen as the ‘upwards’ movement of local goddesses; the transformation of probably aniconic entities (that is, deities represented by stones, weapons, poles and natural phenomena) into iconic representations which are eventually assimilated into the brahmanical pantheon as the wives of the gods. The solitary Goddess is herself incorporated into Śaivism worship as one of the five deities of the paścāyatana pūjā and universalized in puranic mythology.

THE GODDESS IN THE PURĀNAS

The earliest work glorifying the Goddess in India is the Devimāhātmya (‘The Glory of the Goddess’), part of the Mārkandeya Purāṇa, an early Purāṇa which is dated to between the fifth and seventh centuries C.E. This text is extremely popular and is still recited in Durgā temples and throughout India during the Durgā Pūjā, the great autumn festival to the Goddess. The text presents a picture of the ultimate reality as the Goddess, who is also Mahāmāyā, the great illusion. The text demonstrates her salvific power by recounting three myths of how she defeated a number of demons, namely Madhu, and Kaitabha, Mahīṣāsura, and Śumbha and Niśumbha. In Vaiśṇava mythology, Madhu and Kaitabha were two demons who attacked Brahmā whilst Viṣṇu slept. Brahmā managed to wake Viṣṇu and he destroyed the demons. This story is retold in the Devimāhātmya, but here the Goddess is made superior to Viṣṇu by being identified with his yogic sleep (yogamādā). Viṣṇu’s sleep becomes a manifestation of the Goddess who thereby has him under her spell and is made superior to him. Brahmā implores her to release Viṣṇu from sleep and she does. He then defeats the demons as in the Vaiśṇava versions of the myth. The account of the defeat of Mahīṣāsura follows and the third myth relates how Kāli sprang from Durgā’s forehead, personifying her anger, and defeated the demons Śumbha and Niśumbha.

The later Devi Bhāgavata Purāṇa continues the vision of the Devimāhātmya in placing the Goddess as the absolute source of the cosmos. This text is related to the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, though, whereas in that text Kṛṣṇa is presented as the highest manifestation of the divine, here it is Devi, who, as it were, retrieves female power (śakti) from male authority and makes it her own. The Goddess is not subject to the authority of the gods and, indeed, is superior to them, controlling Viṣṇu through her power of sleep and not wishing to be married to any of them. The Goddess is her own ‘master’.
PAN-HINDU GODDESSES

Puranic, Smārta ideology dominated the early medieval period and became pan-Indian. With the Purāṇas the Goddess was assimilated by brahmanical religion and a theology of the Goddess was articulated in puranic narrative traditions. These traditions spread, and archaeological evidence attests to the worship of the Goddess throughout the subcontinent. At Māmālalapuram (also known as Mahabalipuram) on the southeast Tamilnadu coast, a seventh-century temple depicts Durgā slaying the buffalo demon and she is also depicted in the cave sculptures at Ellora (sixth-eighth century). The cult of Durgā was therefore very widespread by the early medieval period and the standard myth and icon of her slaying the buffalo demon was well established.

Not only worship of Durgā, but also of Kālī, the personified anger of Durgā, became widespread with the development of puranic Hinduism. Although always on the edges of the controlled, respectable brahmanical world, Kālī nevertheless enjoyed, and still enjoys, great popularity. She is treated with ambivalence by brahmanical orthopraxy, as she dwells on the social periphery, haunting polluting cremation grounds and appealing to untouchable castes and tribals. She has nevertheless attracted brahmanical attention and devotion, particularly in Bengal. Both Ramprasad Sen, a nineteenth-century Bengali poet who wrote devotional verses to her as the ‘Mother’, and the famous saint Rāmakrishna had visions of her. Kālī demands blood sacrifice and goats are sacrificed to her daily at the famous Kālīghāṭ temple in Calcutta.

Another popular ferocious Goddess is Cāmūndā who in the Mārkandeyapurāṇa sprang from the furrowed brow of Durgā. In one myth in the Devimāhātmya, the little Mothers (Mātrikās) manifest from the Goddess, upon which the demon Raktaśeṣa (‘Bloody-Seed’) appears to challenge them. They attack him, but each drop of blood which falls to the ground gives birth to a replica demon, whose fallen blood in turn gives rise to further demons. The day is saved by Cāmūndā who drinks up the blood of the demon before it touches the ground and so he is eventually defeated.

Other goddesses which have independent cults are less violent than Durgā, Kālī and Cāmūndā. Sarasvati, the ancient Goddess of the Sarasvati river in the Veda, is benign. She is identified with the goddess of speech (Vāc) and is, like the muse, the inspirer of poetry, music and learning.

Although she is married to Brahmā, he does not play an important role in her worship and she is iconographically depicted independently of him, seated upon a lotus and playing a musical instrument, the vinā. Many classrooms in Indian schools bear her image upon the wall. Śrī or Laksī, the spouse of Viṣṇu also has an independent cult which had developed by the time of the Purāṇas. She is the goddess of financial reward and good fortune, associated with royal power and iconographically depicted seated upon a lotus and being sprinkled with water by elephants—an act reminiscent of royal consecration. Along with Durgā she is strongly associated with royal power, as can be seen by the Vijayānagar king’s ritual identification with the Goddess. Apart from the pan-Hindu goddesses such as these, there are innumerable village or local goddesses, such as the northern and eastern snake goddess Manasā, some without iconographic representation.

Sacrifice and the Goddess

One of the most striking things about the independent Goddess is that she accepts, and demands, blood sacrifice. Sacrifice is part of her cult and central to her mythology in which the slaying of the buffalo demon can be read as the sacrifice of the buffalo. The Goddess drinks wine from a cup as she slays the buffalo demon, which reflects in mythology the idea of her drinking the blood of the sacrificed victim in ritual. Indeed drinking the blood of the victim has been a feature of Goddess worship, particularly in its medieval tantric manifestation. The drinking of blood is an important symbolic element in the mythology of the Goddess; present with the high Hindu deity Durgā, with tantric manifestations of the Goddess, and at local level among the village goddesses. While in the ‘purified’ brahmanical forms of Hinduism the idea of sacrifice is extracted out of ritual and confined to symbolism or the realms of mythology, in the popular religion of the villages, bloody sacrifice is an integral element in the worship of local goddesses. For example, the Nambudri Brahmins of Kerala would not practise bloody sacrifice as this would be too polluting, yet they make offerings of blood substitute to local or family Goddesses such as Rakteśvari, the ‘Goddess of Blood’ (see pp. 210–11).

Non-violence (ahimsā) is an important element in Hinduism, particularly among Brahmins and renouncers, yet this ideal contrasts starkly with the eruptive and bloody violence of the goddess. Because the Goddess is all-giving and fecund, she must also be renewed with blood,
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the power of life, if her bounty is to continue. This renewing blood can be related to the Goddess’ menstrual cycles, but is particularly the blood of sacrificial victims which can be seen as substituting for the devotee him or herself. Indeed, if non-violence is an essential element in the Brahman’s world in order to maintain ritual purity, then violence might be seen as an essential element in the world of the Kṣatriya. The connection between the Goddess and royal power can be related to sacrifice in so far as one of the ideals of kingship was to wage war upon neighbouring kingdoms. The battlefield thereby can be read as a sacrifice, the killing of the enemies, the killing of sacrificial victims. Indeed the human sacrifice, the sacrifice of the ‘great beast’ (mahiṣa), is regarded in the Veda as the highest sacrifice, even though human sacrifices may never have actually taken place. There is, then, a correspondence between the king who accepts the ‘sacrifice’ of both the enemy and his own army, and the Goddess who accepts the sacrifice of animals.

This idea of sacrifice becomes filtered through the layers of Hindu culture in a number of ways. At the level of village goddesses, generally associated with lower castes, the actual sacrifice of animals is commonplace. amongst Brahman communities the sacrifice of animals and offering of blood will not actually be practised, but will remain present as a symbolic element, while at the level of pan-Hindu mythology, the sacrificial victim becomes a demon. At this level, the ritual practice of sacrifice becomes ethicized: the destruction of the victim becoming the destruction of evil, the destruction of the buffalo becoming the destruction of the buffalo demon, the appeasing of a wrathful deity becoming the stabilizing or re-balancing of the cosmos. The idea of sacrifice to the Goddess is also given esoteric interpretation, as is the idea of vedic sacrifice in the Upaniṣads, by some Tantras in which the sacrifice becomes the sacrifice of the limited, particularized self into the all-pervading Kāli self: the Goddess as absolute, uncontaminated consciousness.

Tantric worship of the Goddess

While the Goddess tradition developing from the Purāṇas was of great importance, an allied tradition of Goddess worship developed from the Tantras. The tantric worship of the Goddess, or Śākta Tantrism, is found in a number of early Tantras of the southern Kaula transmission (see p. 166), composed before the eleventh century. These texts, traditionally counted as sixty-four, can be divided into those whose focus is the benevo-

lent and gentle Goddess, the Tantras of the Śrīkula, the ‘family of the Auspicious Goddess’, and those whose focus is the ferocious Goddess, the Tantras of the Kālikula, the ‘family of the Black Goddess’. The tradition which developed from the Śrīkula texts came to be known as the Śrī Vidyā, which worshipped the benevolent and beautiful Lalitā Tripurasundari. The Śrī Vidyā aligned itself with orthoprax brahmanical values, even though some adherents worshipped the Goddess using ‘impure substances’. The tradition in the south became aligned with orthodox Vedānta and with the Śāṅkaraśāstra of Śrīgeri and Kanchipuram. The Kāli traditions, in contrast, were less concerned with orthoprax, and more concerned with the power gained through impurity and going against social and religious norms.

A common feature of tantric ideology is that women represent or manifest the Goddess in a ritual context. As the male worshipper becomes the male deity, especially Śiva, for only a god can worship a god, so his female partner becomes the Goddess. Indeed the Goddess is manifested in all women in varying degrees. A prominent part of tantric practice is the ritual worship of woman or young girl by both male and female devotees. An important ceremony, practised mainly in Bengal and Nepal, is the worship of a young woman (the kumāri-pūjā) in which a virgin girl of about twelve is placed upon a ‘throne’. The Goddess is installed or brought down into her, as would occur with an icon, and she is worshipped. The ritual dedication of the young girl is an important annual festival in Nepal. Yet, while the Goddess is worshipped as a youthful girl, she can also be worshipped in a terrible form as the blood-drinking Kāli or the old and crooked Kubjikā.

THE CULTS OF KĀLI

Cults of Kāli or her manifestations are in evidence from among the earliest tantric texts we have, possibly dating to as early as the seventh or eighth centuries. The worship of Kāli is found at the heart of Kashmir Śaivism, traditions whose origins can be found in the cremation-ground cults.

While the Śrī Vidyā, according to its self-classification, develops from the southern transmission in the Kaula system, the cults of Kāli are within the northern and eastern transmissions. The Jayadrathayāmala, a text of the northern transmission, describes forms of Kāli, which the devotee would visualize, as transcending the male form of Śiva, Bhairava, on whose corpse she stands. Here Kāli is the absolute, identified with light at the
heart of pure consciousness from which the universe manifests and to which it returns. The devotee should meditate upon this process of the projection and withdrawal of consciousness, identified with twelve Kalis, and realize the final, liberating implosion of consciousness into itself, symbolized by the 'thirteenth' Kali, Kālasaṁkarṣṇi. These esoteric traditions, identifying Kali with states of consciousness, later became concretely expressed in external ritual from the tenth century, focused on the goddess Guhyakālī, visualized as having animal and human heads with eight arms bearing weapons. She is worshipped at an exoteric, popular level in Nepal as Guhyeśvarī and associated with the Goddess Kubjīkā (see below).

The texts of the Kālikula describe macabre rites in the cremation grounds to evoke a goddess and allow the practitioner to achieve salvation through confronting gruesome (ghora) experience. In a famous rite, the 'offering to the jackals', jackals are revered as manifestations of Kali and offerings are made to them at an inauspicious, though powerful, location such as a crossroads, a wood or a cremation ground.

Another tantric goddess who is the focus of a group of Tantras of the western Kaula transmission is Kubjīkā, the 'Crooked One'. This school originated in the western Himalayas, possibly in Kashmir, is known to have existed in Nepal by the twelfth century, and, according to its texts, spread throughout India. The principal text of the school is the 'Tantra of the Teachings of the Crooked Goddess', the Kubjikāmata Tantra, which explains the mythology, doctrines and ritual associated with her. Although the text and tradition takes its name from the Goddess worshipped in the form of an old, crooked woman, she is identified with the Supreme Goddess (Paśu Devī) and also worshipped in the forms of a girl and a young woman. The school had an esoteric dimension and shows its close links to Kashmir Śāivism by identifying the Goddess with pure consciousness. The Goddess is also associated with the 'coiled' goddess Kuṇḍalini, the power lying dormant at the base of the body until awakened by yoga to pierce the centres of subtle anatomy and unite with Śiva at the crown of the head. The Kubjīkā school is significant because it is in the Kubjikāmata Tantra that we first have mention of the classical six centres (cakra) of esoteric anatomy which have become pan-Hindu and have been popularized in the West. Earlier Tantras mention varying numbers at various locations. These six centres also became adopted by the Śrī Vidyā tradition.

**The Śrī Vidyā Tradition**

The Śrī Vidyā is the cult of Lālita Tripurasundari or simply Tripurasundari ('Beautiful Goddess of the Three Cities'), a tantric form of Śri/Lakṣmi, who is worshipped in the form of a sacred diagram or yantra of nine intersecting triangles, called the śrīcakra, and in the form of a fifteen-syllable mantra called the śrīvidyā, whence the tradition takes its name. The Tripurasundari cult can be classified, in its earliest phase, as the latest level of the Mantramārga, the 'Path of Mantra' (see p. 162). The earliest sources of the Śrī Vidyā within this category are two texts, the Nityāsodāsikārṇava ('The Ocean of the Tradition of the Sixteen Nityā Goddesses') which classifies itself in the Mantramārga, and the Yoginiḥridaya ('The Heart of the Yogini') which are said to form together the Vāmakaśvara Tantra. The Nityāsodāsikārṇava is concerned with external rituals and their magical effects, while the Yoginiḥridaya is more esoteric, interpreting the śrīcakra as the expansion and contraction of the cosmos. A later text, the Tantrarāja Tantra (the 'King of Tantras'), gives a more detailed exposition of these subjects. Apart from these early Tantras, a number of later texts praise the Goddess Tripurasundari, particularly the extremely popular Saundaryalahari ('The Ocean of Beauty'), the Lalitāsahāranāma ('The Thousand Names of Lalita'), and the Tripura Upaniṣad ('The Secret of Tripura'). The Saundaryalahari and Lalitāsahāranāma are traditionally said to have been composed by the Advaita Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara. Indeed, as Bharati has observed, no indigenous Śrī Vidyā scholar would doubt his authorship of these texts. While in principle it is not impossible that Śaṅkara would compose devotional hymns to the Goddess – this would not be incompatible with the composition of philosophical works in the Indian context! – these texts owe more to the non-dualism of Kashmir Śaivism than to Śaṅkara's Vedānta. This can be seen by the Trika ideology which pervades these texts and their terminologies derived from Kashmir Śaivism, such as the idea of the cosmos as the manifestation of sound. Indeed the Kashmiri Trika goddess, Parā, is regarded in some literature of this school to be the inner essence of Tripurasundari.

However, the Śrī Vidyā which developed in south India became distanced from its Kashmiri tantric roots and the cult of Tripurasundari was adopted by the southern Vedānta monastic order of the Daśānamis at Śringeri and Kanchipuram, traditionally founded by Śaṅkara. The Śrī
Vidyā tradition became popular in the south and the cult of Tri-
purasundari penetrated the Śaiva Śrīmāta community as well as the highly
orthodox monastic tradition of the Śaṅkaraśāivas.

In the theology of Śrī Vidyā the Goddess is supreme, transcending
the cosmos which is yet a manifestation of her. Although visualized and
praised in personal terms, the Goddess is also an impersonal force or
power. She unfolds the cosmos and contracts it once again in endless
cycles of emanation and re-absorption. This process is conceptualized as
the manifestation and contraction of the Word, the absolute as primal
sound (śabda, nāda), or the syllable om, identified with energy, light and
consciousness. Everyday speech is but a gross manifestation of this subtle,
all-pervading sound which manifests the cosmos through a series of
graded stages from the most subtle, non-material realms, to the gross
material world which humans inhabit. This subtle sound is expressed as a
‘point’ or ‘drop’ (bindu) of energy, prior to extension, which then pro-
cceeds to generate the manifold cosmos. The bindu, an extremely impor-
tant term in tantric theology, is associated with the fifteenth phoneme of
the Sanskrit alphabet, the nasalized ‘dot’ (anuvātra), which symbolizes
concentrated, potential energy, ready to burst forth as manifestation.
The details of cosmological schemes vary in different texts, but the principles
are identical in Śrī Vidyā texts to those in Kashmir Śaiva Tantras.21

This cosmology is symbolized by the cosmogram of the śrīcakra, the
central icon of the tradition, used as a focus of worship and installed in
temples. This diagram or ritual instrument (yantra) is both the deity and a
representation of the cosmos. The four upward-pointing triangles sym-
bolize the male principle in the universe, namely Śiva, the five down-
ward-pointing triangles represent the female principle, namely Śakti. All these
triangles emanate out from the central point or bindu. Their interpenetra-
tion represents the union of Śiva and the Goddess, which the aspirant or
sādhaka realizes within his own body through the ritual identification of
the śrīcakra with his own body.

Integral to the more esoteric practices of the Śrī Vidyā tradition, and
closely related to cosmological speculation, is the idea that the material
human body is a gross manifestation of a subtle body, which in turn is a
manifestation of a supreme or causal body. As a material world is the
most solidified coagulation of the subtle worlds, so the body is the most
cogulated form of the subtle body, which in turn is a manifestation of
a higher form. Salvation or liberation is release from the cycle of birth and
death, conceived as a journey which retraces the stages of manifestation
back to its source, which is the Goddess. This yogic journey through the
cosmos is also conceived as a journey through the body, and the levels of
cosmological manifestation are identified with levels along the vertical
axis of the body. The Śrī Vidyā yogin will attempt to awaken the dormant
power of the Goddess Kundaśīni, who rises up from the ‘root centre’, at
the base of the central channel which pervades the body, to unite with Śiva
at the crown of the head, piercing various centres or wheels of energy as
she rises (see pp. 98–9). The model used here by Śrī Vidyā is the stan-
dard Hatha yogic one which went beyond the boundaries of any particu-
lar tradition.

Ideas about the universe as a hierarchy of levels and the homology or
esoteric correspondences between the body and the cosmos are central to
the practice and theology of Śrī Vidyā, as they are to all other tantric
traditions. This is illustrated by the Tantrarāja Tantra which describes
three aspects or forms (ṛīpa) of Tripurarasundari, the supreme, subtle and
gross, which correspond to three ways of worshipping her, with the mind,
with speech and with the body. These refer to meditation upon her, or
visualization of her form, repeating mantras, and performing external
worship by offering flowers, incense and vegetarian offerings. Initiation
is, of course, a prerequisite for access to Śrī Vidyā daily and occasional rit-
uals, qualification for which must be determined by a guru, though it is not
based on caste as is vedic initiation.

LEFT-HAND TANTRA

Perhaps the most famous controversy which surrounds Tantrism gener-
ally, and which is of concern to the Śrī Vidyā in particular, is the ritual use
of ‘substances’ prohibited within Brahmanism. These ritual substances
are to be known as the ‘five Ms’ (paścamakāra) – the initial Sanskrit let-
ter of each being the letter ‘M’ – or ‘five realities’ (paścaatattva). These are
ritual use of wine (madya), fish (matṛa), meat (mamsa), parched grain
(brā) and sexual union (maihbuna). The consumption of alcohol, meat
and fish is expressly forbidden to Brahmans according to the Laws of
ms,22 so to ritually use these substances is, for a Brahman, to con-
sciously pollute himself. We have seen that in the Kaula rites of early
śivaism, ferocious female deities were appeased with offerings of blood,
 alcohol and sexual substances (p. 165). Abhinavagupta speaks about the
Ms’ of alcohol, meat and copulation, referring to their use as true

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holiness’ or ‘celibacy’ (brahmacharya). The five Ms later developed and their use became known as ‘left-handed practice’ (vamacara), that is, transgressive practices using impurity, as opposed to the ‘right-handed practice’ (daksinacara), based on purity. The use of parched grain (madrã) is sometimes said to be an aphrodisiac, yet may simply represent the kind of offerings to deities made amongst lower-caste groups.

There is a distinction within the Sri Vidyã between those who reject the use of the ‘five Ms’ and those who incorporate them, yet, generally, the Sri Vidyã tends to distance itself from extreme antinomian tantric groups. Left-handed Tantrism throws up challenging ethical questions for orthoprax Hinduism. The left-hand or Kaula division flouts brahmanical purity laws and conventions in order to gain magical power (siddhi), while the right-hand, the ‘Conventional’ or Samaya division, rejects the literal use of the ‘five Ms’, or uses symbolic substitutes (pratiniðhi) instead, such as milk for wine, sesamum for meat or fish, and offerings of flowers for sex. The use of the ‘five Ms’ in the Sri Vidyã has been controversial. Laksmiðhara (sixteenth century) was a theologian of the ‘conventional way’ (samayacara) who vehemently rejected the non-vedic and impure practice of the ‘five Ms’. Others, however, such as Bhãskararãya (1728–50), were happy to advocate the secret use of prohibited substances. Indeed, it is quite usual for the tantric Brahmã householder to maintain brahmanical social values alongside a tantric soteriology which involves the use of otherwise prohibited substances. There is an oft-quoted saying that the tantric Brahmã should be secretly a Kaula (i.e. a left-hand tantric practitioner), externally a Šiva, while remaining vedic in his social practice.

Sex in a ritual setting and the transformation of desire for a spiritual purpose is an ancient practice in Indian religion, stretching back at least to the time of the Buddha, and mystical union with the absolute has been compared, in the Brahadaranyaka Upanisad, to the joy of sexual union. Sexual union (maithuna) becomes important in Tantrism as both symbol and event. The earlier tantric literature seems to emphasize sexual rites as offerings to the deity, whereas later texts indicate that semen should be held back in order to facilitate a yogic transformation towards a higher state of awareness. Šaktã Tantras even classify people according to three natures or dispositions (bhãva) – of being an animal (pasã), a hero (võra) or divine (divyã) – though the classification is not found in Šiva texts. Only hero and ‘the divine’ should perform erotic worship, for those of animal nature are driven by desire which would lead to their destruction. Indeed, whether sexual congress is performed, as in left-handed ritual, or is substituted, as in right-handed ritual, erotic worship taps into a rich and powerful symbolism. The actual or represented union of the tantric practitioners symbolizes the union of Šiva and Šakti, of the male and female polarity in the cosmos, and their joy reflects the joy (ändã) of that ultimate condition. There are also strings of symbolic associations in the Tantras between Šiva, white semen, the moon, passivity and consciousness, on the one hand, and Šakti, red blood, the sun, activity and nature (prakrti), on the other.

Because women are filled with śakti in tantric ideology, they are considered to be more powerful than men, yet this power is generally not reflected in social realities where women have remained subordinate. Tantric texts were written by men – usually Brahmans – primarily, though not exclusively, for men. They reflect the concerns of the male practitioners rather than his female partner, regarded as his ‘messeger’ or door to the divine realm, though some texts make it clear that the ensuing liberation is for both partners. Yet women have a higher ideological status in Tantrism than in strictly orthoprax Brahmanism, even though this might not be reflected in social institutions. The women in these rites were generally from lower-caste groups such as washers, and while these women’s social realities were much more restricted than those of their male consorts, the tantric model of the strong, intelligent and beautiful woman contrasts with the brahmanical model of passivity and docile dependence. There were also female tantric renouncers who were greatly revered and who dwelled at sites sacred to the Goddess (pithã), where tantric yogis would hope to meet them and obtain magical powers through their acquaintance.

Apart from the transgressive Kaula wing of the Sri Vidyã, other tantric groups which adopted the five Ms arose during the later medieval period. Of particular note is the Vaiñava tradition of the Sahajiyas, which developed from the tantric Buddhist Sahajiyas, adopting a Vaiñava theology. them, man and woman are physical representations of Kåñã and Radhã, and, through erotic ritual, higher states of consciousness, or sãti, can be achieved. The Bauls of Bengal have inherited the Sahajiyas and erotic ritual continues to be used by them. Many of the elements of brahmanical tantric worship are derived from low-caste propitiation of ferocious deities with alcohol and blood
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offerings, and from the cremation-ground asceticism of the Kāpālikas. Yet these become transformed in the context of the Brahman householder, such as the Śrī Vidyā devotee, into a soteriology in which the tantric Brahman maintains his social status while following the tantric path. While maintaining social status, the tantric Brahman can pursue his soteriological quest for power and liberation, through transcending his social inhibition in a controlled ritual context. It is one thing to perform erotic worship with a low-caste woman in a ritual setting, but quite another to interact with her outside that context. The theological split within the Śrī Vidyā, between the Samayācāra/right-hand path and the Kaula/left-hand path, highlights a tension between the dominant ideology of Brahmanism and an ideology infiltrated by ideas and practices from cremation-ground asceticism and from lower castes, yet which, for the Śrī Vidyā, is controlled by or contained within brahmanical structures and ideology.

THE ŚĀKTA PĪTHAS

There are various important locations of Goddess worship in both north and south India, such as the temple to the Virgin Goddess, Kanya Kumāri, at Cape Comorin, the Minākṣi temple at Madurai, and the Kāli temple in Calcutta. The Goddess is not only located at specific sites but is also related to the Earth and the landscape, so in one sense the whole of ‘India’ is the Goddess, to the ‘four corners’ of which a pilgrim can journey and receive great blessing. Yet tantric literature refers specifically to ‘seats’ (pīṭha) of the Goddess which are distinct from these other pilgrimage centres. The locations of these ‘seats’ are given justification in the myth of Śiva’s first wife Sati.

I have already recounted the myth of Dakṣa’s sacrifice: how Śiva’s father-in-law Dakṣa had not invited him to the sacrifice, how his daughter Sati was so upset that she burned herself to death in the fire of her own yoga, and how Śiva destroyed the sacrifice in the ferocious form of Virabhadra (see pp. 149–50). Later versions of the myth, in the Deviḥāgavata Purāṇa and the Kālika Purāṇa, continue the story. Śiva is so upset at the death of his wife that he picks up her corpse in the cremation ground and dances with it on his shoulders in a distraught state. The other gods become worried, fearing the destruction of the universe due to this dance of death, so Viṣṇu hacks at the body of Sati, cutting it away piece by piece, until Śiva returns to a more composed state.34

While this is a myth behind the immolation of widows upon their hus-

bands’ funeral pyres (sati, ‘suttee’), it is also an explanation of the pīṭhas, which are located where the different parts of Sati’s body fell. In the Tantras and Purāṇas there are four principal sites listed, though other texts list more, and the Kubjikāmata Tantra says that all women’s homes should be worshipped as pīṭhas.35 The standard four ‘Great Seats’ (mahāpīṭha) are at Jalandhāra (possibly Jullundur in the Punjab), Oddiyana or Uddayana (the Swat valley in the far north-west), Purnagiri (of unknown location) and Kāmarupa in Assam. At these places the Goddess’ tongue, nipples and vulva (yoni) are said to have fallen. The most important of these ‘seats’ as a living place of pilgrimage is Kāmarupa or Kāmarūpa in Assam where Sati’s yoni fell. Here the Goddess is worshipped in the form of a vulva and her menstrual cycles celebrated by adorning the icon with red powder. This form of the yoni is not common, but its history as an icon is well attested.

Regional and local traditions

While esoteric forms of Tantrism are of central importance in the history of Hinduism and have had impact on all its manifestations, they are not directly relevant to the majority of Hindus. The majority of Hindus in India live in villages and most devotees of the Goddess at regional and local levels express their devotion through external worship (pujā) of local goddesses and in pilgrimage to places particularly sacred to the Goddess. While the brahmanical ideology of the Great Goddess spread throughout south Asia, there have been innumerable local goddesses, many without iconic representations, worshipped by local villagers usually belonging to lower castes.

VILLAGE GODDESSES

A distinction can be drawn between ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ deities. Hot deities are associated with passion, hot diseases such as smallpox which need to be cooled, pollution and lower social layers. Cool deities are associated with detachment, the cooling of passion, purity and higher social levels. The village goddesses, as well as ferocious goddesses such as Kāli, are classified as hot deities in contrast to the cool, mostly male, deities of the Hindu pantheon, such as Viṣṇu and Śiva. Village deities, the grāmadevatās, usually fall within the hot classification. They are almost always female, called ‘mothers’ (mata), associated with a particular village or locality and represented by a simple signifier such as a rock, a pile of stones, a stick, a couple
of bricks, a thorn bush with pieces of cloth tied to it as offerings, or in the form of a pot. These aniconic hot goddesses not only accept vegetarian offerings but also demand blood sacrifice (bali), of chickens, goats and sometimes buffalos, and need to be appeased with offerings of alcohol. In contrast the cool pan-Hindu deities, present in iconic representations, accept only vegetarian offerings. The Great Goddess shares both categories. She can be hot and ferocious, demanding blood and alcohol, and also cool and benevolent, accepting only vegetarian offerings, as with Tripurasundari and Lakṣmi.

A particular goddess might of course have two forms, an iconic cool form within a shrine or temple, and an aniconic hot form outside the shrine, perhaps manifested only during certain festivals. For example, the Tamil goddess Māriyamman might have an immovable icon within her temple, yet accept blood offerings only in a second form such as a pot of water, away from the central shrine. The goddess is thus split into high and low forms, as Fuller describes. These offerings reflect caste ranking to a degree, with lower-caste ‘priests’, perhaps possessed by the goddess, making offerings of meat to the lower form. While it is true that some deities are affiliated to particular castes – for example Lakṣmi, the goddess of wealth, is revered by trading castes – it would be an oversimplification to regard the ranking of deities as simply a reflection of caste society. While certain village goddesses might not be worshipped by Brahman or, even within the same caste, the goddess of a particular family (kula mātā) would not be worshipped by a different family, other deities have appeal across the social spectrum.

Although sometimes barely distinguishable, the ferocious village goddesses have a name and specific location. They tend to be associated with disease, particularly pusular diseases such as smallpox, and accidental death, and need to be appeased, usually with blood and meat. Although they are unpredictable, they are also protectors of a village or locality. These goddesses have no formal links with the pan-Hindu goddesses, though often villagers might identify the local goddess with the pan-Hindu Great Goddess, even though there may be no iconographic or mythological resemblance. Sometimes the village goddess will have a myth about how she came to be in that particular location.

For example, in Kerala the particularly terrible goddess Mūvālalumkulicāmunḍi is worshipped in a number of local shrines, the teyyam shrines, and along with other deities is celebrated in local, annual, dance-possession festivals. During these festivals the dancer becomes the goddess and relates her myth. A Brahman, who was performing sorcery upon one of these devotees, attempted to capture the goddess with mantras and confine her in a copper vessel with a lid which he then buried in a hole (kūli) to the depth of three men (mūtalam). She burst out of the ground in a terrible form and pursued the Brahman to a temple of Śiva where she agreed to settle down only if she could be installed there beside Śiva, which duly happened. The goddess is therefore worshipped as the consort of Śiva in the Trīkaṇyālapan temple as well as in the teyyam shrines. This myth indicates that, although a hot low-caste deity (her teyyam dance is performed by the low Malāyān caste of professional sorcerers), she is yet contained within the power of the high-caste pan-Hindu deity Śiva. Her power is contained and kept in place by the male deity, and absorbed into a brahmanical structure.

Among goddesses who have a regional rather than purely village appeal, yet who are not identified with pan-Hindu deities with large temples, are the smallpox goddesses Sītalā, in the north, and Māriyamman, in the south. Although now eradicated, smallpox has been particularly virulent in some parts of India during the hot season and has been regarded as a visitation or ‘possession’ by the smallpox goddess. Māriyamman has a couple of myths relating her origin. In one she was a Brahman girl who was deceived into marriage by an Untouchable disguised as a Brahman. Upon realizing what had happened she killed herself and was transformed into the goddess Māriyamman who then burned the Untouchable to ashes. The second myth tells of a pure but powerful wife of a holy man, who could perform miracles, but who one day saw two divine beings making love. She felt jealousy and as a consequence lost her powers, whereupon her husband suspected her fidelity and ordered their son to kill her. The son obediently cut off her head. Eventually she is restored to life as Māriyamman, but instead of upon her own body, her head was placed upon an Untouchable’s body, which expresses her ambivalent and angry nature as both Brahman and Untouchable.

Sītalā is a hot goddess who is dormant most of the year but who traditionally erupts with terrific violence during the hot season, spreading her ‘grace’ in the form of epidemics through villages and needing to be placated. Sometimes these diseases are seen to be the work of demons whom the goddess must defeat, at other times they are the work of the goddess herself. Smallpox victims were seen to be possessed by the goddess and
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were 'cooled' with water and milk, which are in effect offerings to appease her wrath, though the most effective offering to soften her anger is blood sacrifice.

These hot village goddesses and, indeed, the Great Goddess herself, are intimately associated with the cyclic pattern of the year, particularly the cycle of agricultural activity. The Goddess is associated with the earth, and the changing seasons might be regarded as changing modes of the Goddess. In northern and central India the seasons can be divided into three: the hot season (approximately from March to June), the wet season (approximately June to October) and the dry or winter season (the rest of the year particularly December to January). The ritual cycles of the villages are closely associated with the seasonal changes and worship of the Goddess, identified with the earth, is important during these times. In terms of ritual cycles, the hot season is important for village and regional goddesses, whose festivals occur at that time (the hot goddess worshipped during the hot season), as do many marriages, which allow expression to the 'heat' of passion. Apart from local festivals during the hot season, the most important festival for the Goddess as a pan-Hindu deity is the Durgā-pūjā in October, culminating in the day of dāserra, the tenth day following the commencement of the 'nine night' (navarātri) festival.

It is possible to view the village goddesses in terms of distinctions between popular/brāhmaṇic culture, low caste/high caste, regional/pan-Hindu, little tradition/great tradition, and even Dravidian/Aryan. While these distinctions might be useful in understanding the structural oppositions between village goddesses and pan-Hindu deities, the situation is more complex and many regional goddesses participate in both 'low' and 'high' cultural spheres. The goddess Draupādi, for example, as Alf Hiltebeitel's important study has shown, participates in both realms as pan-Hindu goddess – the wife of the Pāṇḍavas in the epic Mahābhārata – and as local or regional deity in Tamilnadu.

Summary

Hinduism cannot be understood without the Goddess, for the Goddess pervades it at all levels, from aniconic village deities to high-caste pan-Hindu goddesses, such as Durgā, or the wives of the male gods, such as Lakṣmī. This chapter has presented central ideas, mythology and iconographic representations of the Goddess in brahmanical Hinduism, in tantric Hinduism and in village Hinduism. We have seen that, while there are innumerable goddesses, each one being unique to a particular place, there are essentially two kinds of Goddess representations: a ferocious form such as Kāli, and a gentle benevolent form such as Tripurasundari or Lakṣmī. While some goddesses are independent – these tend to be the ferocious forms – others are perfect wives to their divine husbands whom they energize. Indeed, without the Goddess a god such as Śiva is a corpse.