Mahisasurmardini, late 18th centur red sasndstone

Experiencing the Goddess:

Notes on a Text, Gender, and Society

Thomas B. Coburn

TWENTY-THREE years ago I met the great Goddess, the Devi, of Hindu tradition. It was on an April Sunday morning in Boston. I had, in the course of my graduate studies, chanced upon a course on the art and architecture of India, taught by the great historian of Indian art, Benjamin Rowland. One of our assignments was to do some original research on one of the pieces in the South Asia wing of the Museum of Fine Arts. And so I, who had never before for-mally studied any art, innocently set off to inspect the India gallery.

As I rounded the corner, there She was. A near-life-size female, lovingly evoked from a slab of South Indian granite, she stood just to the right of a doorway. Her body was gently bent in the characteristic and provocative *tri-bhanga* pose, her face aloof with a matter-of-fact tranquillity. Her sensu-ousness was mysteriously enhanced by her many arms. In her hands she held weapons of war: bow, arrow, sword, discus, shield, and conch. Over her shoulders were visible two quivers and a trident, while under her feet lay the head of a freshly slain buffalo, its ears soft and fuzzy, its horns erect. Never before had I encountered such a striking juxtaposition of the sensual and the martial—of vitality and mor-tality, of sex and death. Whoever says that art is simply a matter of beauty and style is wrong, I now know, for there was a power in that image that reached out and laid hold of me un-awares. I did not then know what *darshan* was, but the Devi gave it to me and I took it from her without any need for the concept. In significant measure, what I have been doing in two decades of research since that Sunday morning is trying to under-stand the nature of the power mediated by that image.

My first inclination, reflecting my Western assumptions, was to seek out written accounts that would, as we say, "flesh out" the visual record. Having found them, my subsequent inclination was to try to understand them from an historical perspective, attending to the development of the Hindu Goddess tradition over time, from prehistory to the present. This approach has enabled me to write two books and a number of articles that have surely helped me, and I think others, understand some aspects of that tradition more aptly.[1] One of the purposes of this essay is to share something of this work, that is, of the verbal dimension of that Devi who

accosted me in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It is an extraordinarily powerful account of female deity. But beyond that I will share reflections that have gradually come into focus as I try to relate my own experience to that of others, both in India and in the contemporary West, both women and men. It is no accident, I now see, that it was a lithe young female deity who seized the attention of a young male student. Here, as in virtually all other areas of human life, it now appears, the difference between the sexes is crucial. This difference, moreover, seems to compound other kinds of variation that exist between cultures. Therefore, "what is the basic vision of Devi?" is the first issue to which I shall address myself here. But after that I shall try to draw out some of the larger issues involved in trying to relate this vision of Devi to a social context and to the experience of individual women and men.

●

At the beginning of my inquiry I was helped by a note written for the Museum *Bulletin* by Ananda Coomaraswamy, when he was cura-tor, on the occasion of the sculpture's acquisition in the 1920s. It was, I learned, an eighth century Pallava sculpture of Durga slaying the buffalo demon (Mahishasuramardini), the classical account of which was to be found in the *Devi-Mahatmya,* a por-tion *oftheMarkandeyaPurana.* I first sought out an old English translation of the text and subsequently read through the Sanskrit original. It is this text that I have subsequently put at the center of my study and have been trying to understand from an historical perspective.

My rationale for adopting such a tight focus was the widespread schol-arly agreement that the *Devi-Mahatmya*—known also as the *Chandi* (after the commonest name for Devi in the text)—is the earliest,

Durga, 9th century red sandstone

definitive written accountof the Hindu Goddess. There are brief, older hymns to particular goddesses, such as the *Sri Sukta* in an appendix to *the Rig Veda,* or the *Durga Stotra* that Krishna teaches Arjuna in some versions of the *Mahabharata* just prior to the *Bhagavad Gita,* or the hymn to the goddess of sleep in *theHarivamsa* and other early accounts of the infant Krishna's birth. But the fifth century *Devi-Mahatmya* is the first comprehensive textual account, in both myth and hymn, of deity as feminine, the singular Devi, "Goddess" with a capi-tal "G." By viewing the text first against the backdrop of older Vedic and epic material, and subsequently in light of its commentaries and ongoing function in devotional life, I hoped to provide a sense of how this text and its vision of Devi have lived over the course of time. In adopting this perspective, I deliberately sought to avoid the structural approach that has been so popular in epic and Puranic studies, and that seeks to understand any par-ticular topic by bringing together pas-sages from very different historical eras—an approach to the *Devi-Mahatmya* that Veena Das employed in the pages of this journal several years ago.[2] What I sought for myself, and others, was an increased aware-ness of the stages through which the worship of Devi has passed over the course of India's long history, using the *Devi-Mahatmya* as a kind of lens. To translate the text into a contemporary idiom would, I hoped, give others access to something like my own ex-perience in front of that vital sculpted image of Durga.

Although the central story of the *Devi-Mahatmya*—the account of Durga slaying the buffalo-demon—is well known, it may be useful to pro-vide an overview of the text's content. Much of the narrative is written in rather ordinary Sanskrit, but on occa-sion this gives way to elegant and powerful characterisations of the Goddess, particularly in the hymns. These moments may be understood as forming a kind of verbal counterpart to the experience of visually engaging an image of Devi. In order to give a sense of both the narrative and the hymnic dimensions of the text, let me provide a synopsis of its structure and stories, interspersed with three excerpts from the hymns.

The text begins and ends with a frame story that recounts the woes of a king and a merchant, who were be-trayed by counselors and family mem-bers and so retired to the woods in despair. After encountering each other, they came upon a sage, whom they questioned about the mysteries of human love and affection: how could they still feel favourably disposed to-ward those who had betrayed them? The sage replied: "O best of men, human beings have a

craving for off-spring,/ Out of greed expecting them to reciprocate; do you not see this? Just in this fashion do they fall into the pit of delusion, the maelstrom of ego-ism,/Giving (apparent) solidity to life in this world through the power of Mahamaya ['The Great Deluder"]... This blessed Goddess Mahamaya, having forcibly seized the minds/Even of men of knowledge, leads them to delusion."[3] Understandably, the two supplicants wish to know more, which prompts the sage to tell three stories of the Goddess's role in righting the cos-mic order. At the end of the third episode, the Goddess identifies future occasions on which she will appear to lend help and promises assistance to all who call on her in adversity. The king and merchant then worship her image and practice austerities. The Goddess appears to them and grants them boons: the king will regain his current kingdom and be reborn as a heavenly king or Manu, while the merchant is granted release from the cycle of rebirth, as he had requested.

In the first episode, the setting is *pralaya*, the time of cosmic dissolu-tion between cycles of creation. Lord Vishnu is sleeping on his serpent couch floating on the universal ocean. The god Brahma, who sits on a lotus grow-ing from Vishnu's navel, is tormented by two demons, Madhu and Kaitabha. Consequently, he invokes the God-dess in her capacity as yogic slumber *(yoganidra)*, asking her to withdraw from the sleeping Vishnu, so Vishnu can awake and slay the two demons. He begins with reference to Vedic *mantras*, then goes on to broader terms of praise.

"You are Svaha, you are Svadha, you are the exclamation *vasat*, having speech as your very soul.

You are the nectar of the gods, O imperishable, eternal one; you abide with the threefold syllabic moment *(matra)* as your very being.

(You are) the half-marra, stead-fast, eternal, which cannot be uttered distinctly.

You are she; you are Savitri (the Gayatri *mantra);* you are the Goddess, the supreme mother.

By you is everything supported, by you is the world created;

By you is it protected, O Goddess, and you always consume (it) at the end (of time)...

You are the primordial material *(prakrti)* of everything, manifesting the triad of constituent strands *(gwias)*,

The night of destruction, the great night, and .the terrible night of delu-sion.

You are Shri, you are the queen, you modesty, you intelligence, char-acterised by knowing;

Modesty, well-being, content-ment, too, tranquillity and forebearance are you.

Terrible with your sword and spear, likewise with cudgel and dis-cus,

With conch and bow, having ar-rows, sling, and iron mace as your weapons,

Gentle, more gentle than other gentle ones, exceedingly beautiful,

You are superior to the high and the low, the supreme queen.

Whatever and wherever anything exists, whether it be real or unreal, O you who have everything as your very soul,

Of. all that, you are the power *(shakti);* how then can you be ad-equately praised?"[4]

The Goddess then withdraws from Vishnu, allowing him to awake, and he dispatches the demons in short or-der.

The second episode of the *Devi-Mahatmya* recounts how the gods were displaced from their respective spheres by the depredations of the dread buf-

falo demon (Asura), Mahisha. Taking their tale to the great deities Shiva and Vishnu, those gods became irate, and from their faces came forth a great fiery splendor *(tejas)* that congealed into a single mass in the shape of a woman. This was the Goddess, whose various bodily parts, ornaments, and weapons were contributed by particu-lar male gods. In the sequel she then proved able to do what none of them individually, nor all together, could do by slaying Mahisha. It was scarcely an easy battle because of Mahisha's drunken brute strength and his ma-levolent capacity to change form. But the Goddess, often called Chandika, "the irrascible one," was herself flushed with passion and intoxication, and she caught Mahisa in the midst of a metamorphosis, decapitating him. At the end of the episode, the gods then sing her praises:

"How can we describe this un-thinkable form of yours? Or your abundant, surpassing valor which de-stroys Asuras?

Or such deeds as (you do) in battles among all the throngs of Asuras and gods, O Goddess?...

You who are the cause of release *(muktf)* and of inconceivable austeri-ties, your name is repeated by sages, who hold the essence of truth because they have restrained their senses,

Intent upon *moksha* with all faults shed: you are this blessed, supreme knowledge, O Goddess...

O Goddess, you are insight, knowing the essence of all scripture, you are Durga, a vessel upon the ocean of life (that is so) hard to cross, devoid of attachments.

(You are) Shri, whose sole abode is in the heart of Kaitabha's foe (Vishnu); you are Gauri, whose abode is made with the one who is crowned with the moon (Shiva).

Slightly smiling, spotless, like the orb of the full moon, as pleasing as the lustre of the finest gold (is your face).

Wondrous it is that when the Asura Mahisha saw (this) face, he suddenly struck it, his anger aroused.

But, O Goddess, the fact that Mahisha, having seen (your face) an-gry, terrible with knitted brows, in hue like the rising moon, did not immedi-ately

Give up his life is exceedingly wondrous—for who can live, having seen Death enraged?...

Since these (foes) are slain, the world attains happiness; although they have committed (enough) sin to remain in hell for a long time,

It is with the thought—'Having met death in battle, may they go to heaven'—that you assuredly slay (our) enemies, O Goddess.

Having, in fact, seen them, why do you not (immediately) reduce all the Asuras to ashes, since you hurl your weapon at enemies?

'Let even enemies, purified by (my weapons), attain (heavenly) worlds'—such is your most gracious intent even toward those who are hostile.

Although the eyes of the Asuras were not destroyed by the terrible flashings of the light-mass of your sword, or by the abundant lustre of your spearpoint,

While they looked at your face, which was like a portion of the radiant moon, that very thing happened (i.e., their eyes were destroyed)."[5]

The third episode begins when the cosmic order has once again been disrupted, this time by the demon brothers Shumbha and Nishumbha. They have gathered the finest jewels and treasures from throughout the various worlds, and having seen the beauty of the Goddess, they wish to add her, the jewel among women, to their possessions. The Goddess feigns remorse because of a prior vow to marry only someone who can best her in battle, to which she thus in-vites them, "he description here is longer and more detailed than in the earlier episodes, and it is filled with familiar characters and images from popular religious lore. The demon Raktabija proves a formidable match, for the drops of blood from his wounds pro-duce replicas of himself. But the grue-some goddess Kali, with her gaping mouth, lolling tongue, emaciated skin and garland of human skulls, springs forth from the Goddess's furrowed brow and laps up the torrents of his blood. At the peak of battle, the Goddess prolifer-ates her own forces by calling forth from each of the male deities his poweressence or *shakti,* a female form that has the same appearance as the god, but is uniquely effective in the fray. The final encounter in the battle has Shumbha accusing the Goddess of being falsely puffed up with pride, for she has relied on the power of others to win the battle. The Goddess retorts: "When I was estab-lished here in many forms, it was by means of my extraordinary power. That has now been withdrawn by me. I stand utterly alone. May you be resolute in combat!"[6] This encoun-ter reflects the basic concepts that inform the *Devi-Mahatmya's* under-standing of the Goddess: she is the universal fact of power *(shakti),* which can in her capacity as illusion

Durga from Chidambaram

(mayo) obscure the nature of the universe, and in her capacity as knowledge *(vidya)* reveal its true nature; she is the mate-rial substance of the universe *(prakrti);* her forms are both benign *(saumya)* and hor-rific *(ghora)*. She graciously re-sponds to those who call on her. At the very end of this episode, the gods once again sing her praises:

"O Goddess, who takes away the sufferings of those who take refuge in you, be gracious; be gracious, O mother of the entire world.

Be gracious, O queen of all; you are the queen, O Goddess, of all that does and does not move.

You have become the sole sup-port of the world, for you abide in the form of the earth.

By you who exist in the form of water, all this universe is filled up, O one of inviolable valour.

You are the power of Vishnu, of boundless valour; you are the seed of all, the supreme illusion.

Deluded, O Goddess, is this en-tire universe; you, when resorted to, are the cause of release right here on earth.

All the various knowledges, O Goddess, are portions of you, as is each and every woman in the various worlds.

By you alone as mother has this world been filled up; what praise can suffice for you who are beyond praise, the ultimate utterance?

When you, O Goddess who has become everything, granting heaven and ultimate freedom,

Are praised, what fine words could suffice for the eulogy?"[7] •

On the one hand, given the fact that the image of deity in Western religion is so overwhelmingly masculine—the image of Michaelangelo's

bearded patriarch on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel comes quickly to mind—it is not surprising that some-one with a western background, who was today looking for a fresh way of thinking about deity, would be drawn to the Devi described in the passages I havejustquoted. Surely it was partly the contrast with the familiar that so arrested me in front of the image of Durga. Many others, particularly western women, have also found im-portant new and empowering spiritual insights in Hindu understandings of the Goddess. Rita Gross,for example, in her often-cited article "Hindu Fe-male Deities as a Resource for the Contemporary Rediscovery of the Goddess,"[8] draws upon iconographic material to suggest six images as po-tentially fruitful for feminist theology or, to use Naomi Goldenberg's word, "thealogy":[9] the androgynous/bisexual nature of deity; the combination of strength and beauty; the coincidence of opposites; God as Mother; the God-dess as patron of culture; and explicit sexual symbolism as religious meta-phor.

On the other hand, given the complex and many-faced nature of the Goddess in the *Devi-Mahatmya,* it is not surprising that over the centuries it has served as a touchstone for the full rangeofHindu Goddess traditions. Its conception of the Devi as a singular and unique *sakti* makes it intelligible to the most monistic Tantric tradi-tions, while its correlation of particu-lar *shaktis* with particular male gods converges with the mainstream devotional view that every god has his own consort. Its recognition that the Devi is irrascible and her identity intimately wrapped up with her killing of a buffalo is continuous with the way she is often known in village life, particularly in Tamil Nadu, while its invocation of her as "Mother" fits precisely with the favorite name for her in Bengal. Itis,of course, the nature of great texts, both religious and secular, to invite engagement over many centuries from a wide range of perspectives. On this ground, in spite of the tedium of some of its battle scenes and the mediocrity of much of its Sanskrit, the *Devi-Mahatmya* must be judged the classic text of Hindu Goddess wor-ship, and one of the major religious documents produced in the subconti-nent.

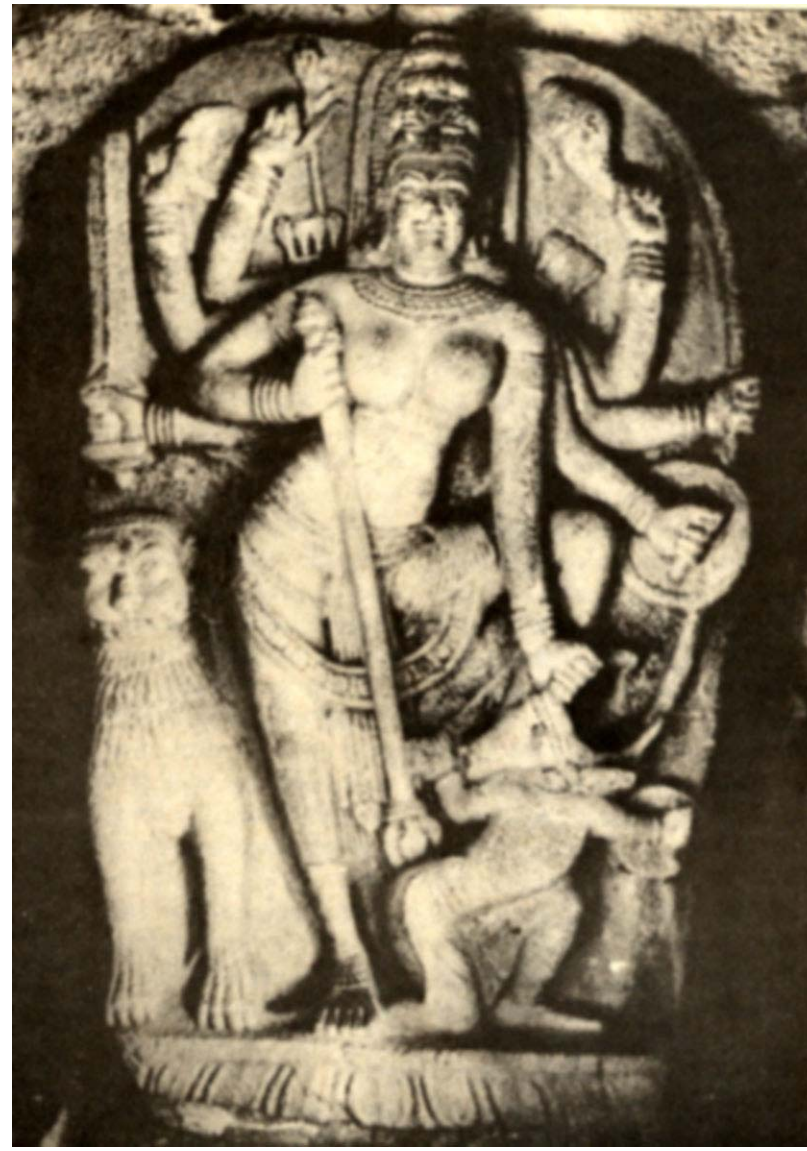
But in between these two poles lie a number of critical assumptions and issues that call for further exploration. The first wave of scholarship on religion and gender in the 1970s exploded the assumption that there would be a correlation between cultures in which goddesses are reverenced and those in which human women are highly re-garded. Broadly speaking, it now ap-pears that the oppression of women is independent of the dominant theology or thealogy of a^iven culture. India provides vivid evidence in support of this conclusion, for nowhere else on earth has there been as long and broad a tradition of Goddess worship and yet the struggles that Indian women face are legion, as readers of **Manushi** well know. But there are a number of other matters pertaining to the nature of texts and of religious life that bear further scrutiny. If we are to come to a bal-anced assessment of the Goddess as she appears in the words of the *Devi-Mahatmya,* and if we wish to bring those words to bear plausibly and intelligently on the quandaries of contemporary living in India and elsewhere, we must identify these issues and assumptions and begin to address their implications. Let me briefly explore four of them.

First, as is well-known to most Indians but often unknown outside the subcontinent, the *Devi-Mahatmya* is not primarily a text to be read and understood. It is a *mantra* to be recited. Its significance lies in thepower of its Sanskrit words, and its chief function for centuries has been to obtain quite mundane goals for a patron, who has secured the

services of a reciter. Although the text is viewed as part of the Puranic corpus and therefore as a more widely accessible form of esoteric Vedic truth, the fact re-mains that it was composed in Sanskrit, the language of the elite, the "refined" language. There are good grounds for seeing *the Devi-Mahatmya* as a vivid instance of how Vedic atti-tudes toward sacred sound continue in later Hinduism. But the immediate corollary is that, like Vedic recitation, the *Devi-Mahatmya* has never been widely *understood* by those who hear it. The Sanskrit text has, of course, been translated into Indian vernaculars, as the many popular editions available today suggest. Inthesecases the text's meaning does become more broadly intelligible, but even in ver-nacular forms, the *Devi-Mahatmya* functions primarily as potent-sound-to-be-recited, and there is widespread recognition that the power of the San-skrit sounds is diluted when the text is recited in a language other than San-skrit. *To call the Devi-Mahatmya one* of the great texts of India, therefore, does not mean the same thing as calling one of Kalidasa's plays a great text. Their functions in cultural life have been very different indeed. By extrapolation, in seeking to understand the content and role of the *Devi-Mahatmya,* we must not naively apply a western norm for what a "text" is. Such a norm might indeed apply to some Indian texts, but not all. To call something "a great text" does not mean the same thing in different contexts.[10] Second, we must ask: whose vision of the Goddess is it that is presented in the text of the *Devi-Mahatmya'?* In the strictest sense, of course, we will never know, for like all epic and Puranic material, questions of authorship are impossible to answer for individual texts. Also, in the strictest sense such a question is irrelevant in an oral culture, where it is *stories* and the ways in which they get told and retold that are central, not the authorship of a particular, written ver-sion of any individual story.

At a broader level, however, the question of "Whose vision is this?" is both relevant and answerable. The language in which the text is com-posed is Sanskrit, and based on what we know of traditional educational patterns, it is almost certain that it was a man, not a woman, who served as the author or redactor of the text. The world of Sanskrit learning was almost entirely a man's world. So, too, was the world of the *Devi-Mahatmya.*

Today, likewise, the world in which the *Devi-Mahatmya* lives re-mains significantly a world dominated by men. In her study of the text and temple of Devi at Vindhyachal, Cynthia Humes interviewed both pilgrims and reciters, and found that men were 40 percent more likely than women to be familiar with the text, and they were three times as likely as women to recite



Durga-Mahisasurmardini, late 9th century red stone

the text in either San-skrit or Hindi.[11] During Navaratra, when thousands come to recite the text, she saw very few women in the groups of reciters in and around the temple. At the autumn Navaratra of 1988 she counted just 15 women in a crowd of several hundred atop the temple early one morning, and 13 of the 15 were accompanied by their hus-bands.[12] The world of the *Devi-Mahatmya,* past and present, thus ap-pears to be little different from the broader patriarchal ethos of Indian life.

Third, although the *Devi-Mahatmya,* narrowly considered, has indeed become a *ritual text* that is significantly the property of men, the *stones* that it tells are pervasive of Indian life, unboundaried by gender or social categories. A goddess as killer-of-buffalo-demon, the bloodthirsty Kali, a demon who rejuvenates from blood-seed, a virginal goddess after whom lecherous demons lust—all these are well-known throughout the Puranas and folklore in regional lan-guages. There are, of course, variants in the way the stories get told, as one would expect in an oral culture. And there are regional preferences for par-ticular versions of the stories.[13] But the tales of the Goddess, their episodes and emphases, are woven into the very fabric of popular life.

How we shall interpret this fact is a difficult matter. The structural ap-proach to Indian myth that I men-tioned earlier is one way of coping with the complexity and richness of the material, but some of us feel that such an approach becomes abstract too quickly, leaving behind the par-ticularity of individual lives. Engag-ing the subject with the tools of psy-choanalysis, Sudhir Kakkar has ar-gued that "the 'hegemonic narrative' of Hindu culture as far as male devel-opment is concerned... is that of Devi, the great goddess, especially in her manifold expressions as mother in the inner world of the Hindu son."[14] But this line of thinking, like that subse-quently developed by Stanley Kurtz, is based on studies of how young males develop and so begs the question of *women's* lives in relation to Goddess mythology.[15] Conventional wisdom has it, of course, that a docile and acquiescent Sita and a devoted Savitri are the salient models for Hindu women. Butlam beginning to suspect that here, as elsewhere, conventional wisdom is at best a half-truth.

The basis for this suspicion is, in part, anecdotal, my simple observation of andconversan'ons with Indian women over the past dozen years—to whicfi I might add the portraits of individual women that appear so regularly in the pages of **Manushi.** This sample is scarcely scientific, but it is sufficient to give the lie to any facile stereotype. The ideal qualities that Indian women embody, both by choice and less delib-erately, are enormously diverse—as diverse as the qualities and forms of the Goddess. To privilege only one model is to manipulate the evidence.

The other source of my suspicion is the gradually accumulating infor-mation, often ethnographic, about women'slivesinparticularcontexts. I have in mind here such studies as William Sax's exploration of the Nanda Devi pilgrimage, where women place their own distinctive stamp on rituals and roles while leaving intact the dominant patriarchal ethos,[16] and Kathleen Erndl's documentation of possession as a predominantly female mode of engaging the Goddess in the Punjab.[17] Other detailed studies pro-vide comparable refinement of easy stereotypes about how India's ubiq-uitous engagement with goddesses relates to women's socio-cultural ex-perience.[18] Julia Leslie describes our emerging knowledge well when she says we ought "not to assume that women have aradically different world view than the one allocated to them by men or male-authored texts. It is the small deviations from the norm which may be crucial, perhaps the way the apparently negative is transformed into something positive and powerful."[19] Here, as elsewhere, there is no substi-tute for nuance and subtlety in under-standing the complex ways in which culture and my thology are intertwined. As the study of subalterns consistently reminds us, power does not always take obvious forms.

Finally, for all of the caution nec-essary when interpreting texts in crosscultural contexts, a remarkable power today inheres in the *Devi-Mahatmyavihob* it is construed in re-lationship to Goddess worship as a worldwide phenomenon and to the contemporary interest in Goddess spirituality. I sensed this was the case some 15 years ago, when young American college students, mostly women, with whom I shared portions of a draft translation of the *Devi-Mahatmya,* reported a vastly enriched dream life. Some years later, one of my friends and colleagues in India, himself a devotee of the Goddess, of-fered an interpretive framework for such experiences when he urged me to havepeoplekeep track of those dreams. They are, he affirmed, the medium through which Devi continues to speak to us. And just last fall, in teaching a new seminar entitled "Goddesses," which sought to juxtapose the *Devi-Mahatmya* and other Indian material with selective instances of Goddess worship elsewhere, I was astonished at the transformative experiences that students—both women and men—re-ported in their journals and in private conversation. They far exceeded the impact to which all teachers aspire in the classroom. Not

all students, of course, were affected to such an extent, and it is tempting to interpret such experiences as part of the spiritual malaise of the modem world, to which young people seem particularly susceptible. But that is not to dismiss those experiences. On the contrary, it is to argue for their importance. One of 'he aphorisms that runs through contemporary western Goddess spirituality puts the students' discovery beautifully: "The Goddess is alive, and magic is afoot."

Naturally there is lots of work to do, both academically and otherwise, in pursuing this intuition that the Goddess of classical India is—or can become—part of women'sand men's spirituality globally, and part of un-derstanding Goddesses as a genre of religious expression. The opportunities for constructive conversations are apparent at every turn, but so are the difficulties. For instance, can we use the Indian experience, which com-bines widespread devotion to the Goddess with a patriarchal social structure, to engage recent efforts to reconstruct the pre-Christian history of Goddess worship in Europe—ef-forts which expect that the social context for such worship was a nur-turing, egalitarian, peaceful, matrilineal society, quite unlike its successors?[20] S uch conversations then begin to converge with larger ques-tions: about women and society crossculturally; about the connection between feminist spirituality and ecological awareness; about the comparability of religious experience crossculturally;[21] about the traditionally Indian and increasingly modern preoccupation with the relation between the One and the many. The enormity of these issues, in both theory and practice, may appear daunting. But as one of my students reminded me on her final examination paper, it was only when the king and the merchant in the *Devi-Mahatmya* fell upon agonizingly hard times that they came to a deeper understanding of the mystery and wonder of the Goddess.

References

1 Thomas B. Cobum, *Devi-Mahatmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass and Columbia: South Asia Books, 1984, 1988) and *En-countering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and a Study of Its Inter-pretation* (Albany: Stale University of New York Press, 1991 and Delhi; Indian Books Centre, J992).

2 Veena Das, "The Goddess and the Demon— An Analysis of the DeviMahalmy3,"Wa/awA/ 30 (1985), pp 28-32.

3Encountering the Goddess, p. 35-

4 This translation is *ftommy Encountering the Goddess, pp. 36-37.*

5 Encountering the Goddess, pp. 48,49, 50.

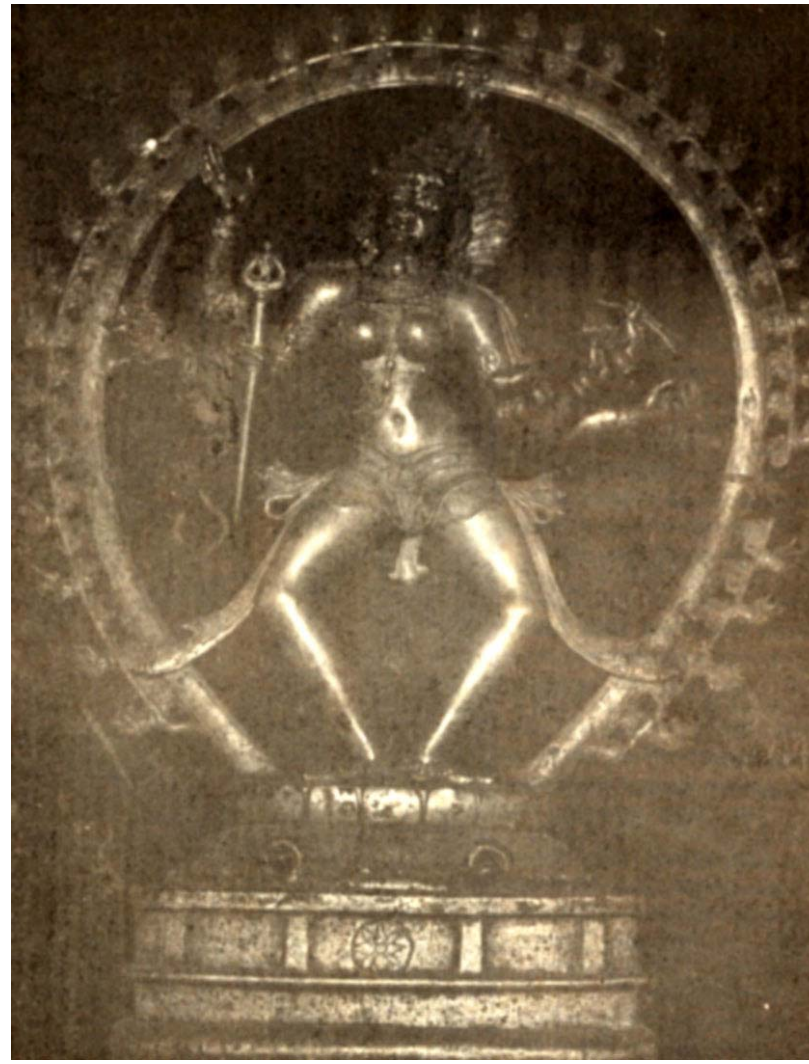
6 Encountering the Goddess, p. 71.

7 Encountering the Goddess, p. 74.

8 *Journal of the American Academy ofKeli-*£ion46(1978):269-91, reprinted in abbrevi-*Goddess* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 217-230.

9 From the Greek *thea,* "goddess," in prefer-ence to *theos,* "god."

10 I make this observation in the context of the ongoing debate in American higher educa-tion about "the canon" of Western civilisation and the merits of expanding the canon to include voices other than those of "dead white males." The relationship between writienness and orality, particularly with regard to religious "texts", has attracted considerable scholarly attention of late. Thetwo best works I know are William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and Miriam Levering *(ed.), Rethinking Scripture* (Albany: State University of



Kali, Early Chola period, Thiruvalangadu

New York Press, 1989).

11 Cynthia A. Humes, "The Text and Temple of the Great Goddess: The*Devi-Mahatmya* and the Vindhyacal Temple of Mirzapur," Uni-versity of Iowa Ph. D. dissertation, 1990, Appendix I.

12 Cynthia A. Humes, "Women's Experience in Ritual Recitation of the *Devi-Mahatmya"* forthcoming in Karen Torjesen and Karen King (eds.). *Women andGoddess Traditions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press).

13 For a wonderful sampling of the way this adaptation and accommodation take place with regard to the *Ramayana* story, see Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991).

14 Sudhir Kakkar, *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (Chi-cago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 131.

15 In spite of this limitation, Kurtz's work is highly engaging and ad-vances the field of cultural psychol-ogy dramatically: *All the Mothers Are One: Hindu India and the Cul-tural Reshaping of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

16 William S. Sax, *Mountain God-dess: Gender and Politics in a Hi-malayan Pilgrimage* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

17 Kathleen M. Emdl, *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

18 For example, Sara S. Milter, *Dfiarma 's Daughters: Contemporary Indian Women and Hindu Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univer-sity Press, 1991), and the articles based on Indian material in Nancy A. Falk and Rita M. Gross (eds.). *Un-spoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980) and in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (eds.), *Women, Religion, andSociatChange* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985). See also Humes, "Women's Experience in Ritual Recitation of the *Devi-Mahatmya."*

19 Julia Leslie (ed.), *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women,* (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1991), p. 3. It does not seem unreasonable to expect that these studies cumulatively will revolutionise our understanding as dramati-cally as the work of Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow has revolutionised our thinking about women's lives in a western context. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," in M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture and So-ciety* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 43-66.

20 These effortsarewidespreadin contemporary western Goddess spirituality. The archeological scholarshipon which they often depend is that of Marija Gimbutas, for example. *The Language of the Goddess* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

21 The work of Steven Katz, for instance, has generated lively debate about whether "mystical experience" is a generic or culturally specific phenomenon. A brief introduction to the debate is found in "Responses and Rejoinders" in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion 56* No 4 (1988):751-761 .❐