ŚAKTI YĀTRĀ

Locating power, questioning desire:
a women’s pilgrimage to the temple of Kāmākhyā

by

Brenda Dobia

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© Brenda Dobia
for Uma

whose smile shames a million moons

with love
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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

_____________________________________
Brenda Dobia
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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

It is impossible to do justice to the concept of Šakti (pronounced Shakti) without employing the philosophical concepts and terminology of the Sanskrit texts through which it is elaborated. In integrating many related concepts throughout this thesis I have elected, out of respect for original sources, to use standard transliteration rather than attempt to anglicise the vocabulary used. Though this may appear daunting to readers unfamiliar with Sanskrit transliteration, it helps to convey the depth and distinction of the original material. The following notes on pronunciation are offered as a guide for the reader.

In Sanskrit short and long vowels are distinguished by a dash over the long sound, which is held for twice the length of the short sound.

Note that a is pronounced like the short u in English cup, whereas ā is pronounced like the broad a in English father.

In addition, r is a vowel in Sanskrit, pronounced re or ri, with no accent on the e or i that follows.

When reading consonants remember that c corresponds to the English ch.

h after a consonant is pronounced so as to aspirate the preceding letter.

ś and ś are both sh sounds.
ABSTRACT

The temple of the Goddess Kāmākhyā in Assam is the pre-eminent site of Hindu Goddess worship. It is revered as the *yoni pīṭha*, the place where the generative organ of the Goddess is worshipped. This thesis, centred on Kāmākhyā, explores the Hindu tradition of Goddess worship, Śāktism, and both the possibilities and contradictions it presents for women.

The research was undertaken from a feminist standpoint and employed a framework that was collaborative, cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary. Six women co-researchers from India, the U.S. and Australia took part in a pilgrimage that simultaneously explored the Kāmākhyā site, its history, symbols, myths and customs, alongside our own personal understandings of Śāktism and its role in women’s spiritual empowerment. Our aim, in the face of contradictory evidence about the impact of Goddess traditions on the status of Hindu women, was to try to bridge cultural differences of interpretation and develop feminist readings of what may be enabling for women.

The thesis establishes the basis of our collective fascination with Śakti, which denotes both the Goddess and the cosmic power she personifies. Through a combination of narrative, exposition of Indian sources and critical cultural analysis, I present our deliberations on the rich tapestry of themes we encountered.

From the outset the thesis problematises the cross-cultural encounter and continues this frame throughout. The voices of the principal co-researchers emerge as they co-constitute the research, its methods and its implementation. Their central role is confirmed as the inquiry proceeds. Following the path of my preliminary encounters with the Goddess and with the co-researchers, pilgrimage is established as a traditional means of encountering the Goddess and, in the form we constructed, as a key experiential dimension of the research.

In the encounter with Kāmākhyā, her dual persona as Mother Goddess and Goddess of Love is elaborated. The meanings and origins of both these aspects, their integration through the concept of *śrītī*, cosmic creation, and the implications for women of their associated practices of worship are explored at length. Finally, in light of the pilgrimage, I re-consider conjunctions between Śāktism, feminist perspectives on women’s empowerment and theological horizons.
Chapter 1

CULTURAL CROSSINGS, PERSONAL INTERSECTIONS

In Sanskrit the term *yātrā* means journey. The journey at the centre of this doctoral project was conceived in an attempt to bring together the sacred and academic dimensions of inquiry. Its central aim was to seek out a feminist and inter-cultural reappraisal of Hindu Goddess worship and consider its consequence for women. In keeping with the notion of pilgrimage, *tīrtha yātrā*, the research journey entailed outward travel to places of special significance as well as exploration of the personal and cultural implications of discoveries made along the way. Undertaken in successive stages, this project incorporated a process of inquiry that embraced the collaboration of seven women scholar co-researchers and numerous “informants”.

Lisa Hallstrom and Frédérique Marglin played pivotal roles in developing the research approach. Minati Kar, Madhu Khanna, Rita Ray, Kathleen Erndl and Elinor Gadon collaborated in the planning and in the pilgrimage that became our central method and focus. In reflection of their vital contributions to the project and to shaping my understandings, the voices of these seven co-researchers will be threaded throughout my account, including occasionally in this initial chapter. In the following chapter, which details the research story, a full introduction to each of my colleagues will be presented through their engagement in the research.

Uppermost in this collaborative journey was our collective fascination with Śakti, understood as the source of all cosmic energy in the Hindu tradition of Goddess worship (Śāktism) and ubiquitously symbolised in female form.

The Śāktas [worshippers of Śakti] conceive their Great Goddess as the personification of primordial energy and the source of all divine and cosmic evolution. She is identified with the Supreme Being, conceived as the source and spring as well as the controller of all the forces and potentialities of nature.

(Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, 1974, p. 1)

In this role she is not separate from the world she creates, sustains and dissolves, but exists simultaneously as a transcendent principle and an immanent force that innervates all life.
There is no word of wider content in any language than this Sanskrit term meaning 'Power'. For Śakti in the highest causal sense is God as Mother, and in another sense it is the universe which issues from Her Womb. And what is there which is neither the one nor the other? (Sir John Woodroffe, 1987, p. 17)

Although Śāktism is very clearly discernible as a branch of worship with the Hindu fold, the term should not be taken to indicate a singular, formalised tradition of Goddess worship. Even more than in other branches of Hinduism, Śāktism refers to a heterogeneous assembly of loosely related, overlapping traditions and practices which may also differ markedly. This is especially evident in the variety of place-specific local goddesses found in villages across India. In the eyes of local devotees whose experience is centrally polytheistic, these local goddesses are not simply manifestations of one Great Goddess. Nonetheless, their universal presence, their capacity to embody and wield śakti, and their reverential status as Mā, divine Mother, are overwhelmingly common threads (Hawley, 1996; Narayanan, 1999).¹

Before stumbling across the notion of God as Mother while on a visit to India in 1988, the idea that one might revere and worship a Goddess had never occurred to me, a Euro-Australian raised in the Jewish tradition. I considered that my interest in the Indian disciplines of ayurveda and yoga was thoroughly secular. In keeping with my determination not to dishonour my Jewish roots ("Thou shall have no other gods before Me"), during that trip I conscientiously avoided cultivating any interest in the plethora of Hindu images, icons and temples so prominent throughout the South Asian subcontinent.

It was consequently a complete surprise when, towards the end of my stay in Madras (now Chennai) on a shopping expedition in the busy commercial sector of Mount Road, I somehow found myself repeatedly transfixed by icons of the Goddess in the form of Pārvatī. Struck by the uninvited irrationality of my attraction, I determined to carefully avoid even looking in the direction of the icons, and I entered the next shop steeled by my decision. But suddenly I found myself in the throes of an insistent magnetic force that tugged at my shoulder and made me turn around: There she was again, staring me in the face.

¹ To convey this connotation I have elected, in the main, to capitalise the term Goddess. Where it is clear that the localised understanding only is intended, or where a generic meaning appears more appropriate, the term goddess appears in the lower case.
This initial experience of her ultimately demolished my sectarian resolve and initiated a path of inquiry that continues to profoundly shape my experiential reality. I did not at first bring a deliberately feminist consciousness to my sense of the Goddess, but I found nonetheless that she led me to reflect on questions of women’s experience, enriched my awareness with a direct appreciation of archetypal dimensions in gender relations, and focussed my inquiry into the nature of female power.

These explorations occurred in the context of successive trips to India, reflections and readings in between, and visits to a variety of Goddess temples. In the process I have been drawn deeper into the subject of Śakti, the Goddess, and Śāktism, the Indian tradition of Goddess worship. Gradually I began to piece together elements of Śākta iconography, mythology, philosophy and ritual practice - interwoven aspects of an ancient and continuing corpus of knowledge regarding the Goddess and her role in Hindu cosmology and culture.

Paralleling the period of my own investigations into Śāktism, the popularity of Hindu goddesses in Western contexts has also risen discernibly - a phenomenon that is undoubtedly the confluent result of a range of factors, including burgeoning uptake of yoga and associated forms of “Eastern spirituality”, digital globalisation of visual imagery that amplifies Western tastes for the exotic, and a less pervasive but nonetheless significant groundswell of (mainly Western) feminist fascination with female deities. Western feminists, myself included, are attracted especially to Kālī’s paradoxical symbolism. Incorporating within her own being both fierce and benevolent attributes, she is perceived as a dynamic antidote to restrictive stereotypes of purely benign and mild femininity.

My God wears not the face of placid benignity.
She is not content with veils and half-light,
With narrowed worlds devoid of Spirit's flame

Or embers left unstocked,
Suffocating under compost piles
Of ashen duty and social dictates…

(Dobia, 2001, p. 141)

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2 See Dobia (2000) for an account of some of these encounters.
3 See, for example, Rachel Fell McDermott, 1996, for a review of Kālī’s adoption by western feminists.
My own view of Kālī as a liberating force owes much to the influence of Sri Aurobindo’s (1928/1989) depiction of her “overwhelming intensity” and “tameless spirit,” which became the foundation upon which my subsequent encounters were superimposed. However, notwithstanding the appeal of such symbolic associations, to simply adopt modernist assumptions of psycho-spiritual universalism would be to mask, but not cancel out, the problematic nature of the cross-cultural undertaking.

**Cross-cultural dilemmas**

While a commonplace in times of escalating population mobility and the globalising effects of technological media, cultural crossing would appear paradoxically to have become increasingly knotty in scholarly contexts. Post-structural epistemologies which hold that power is discursively wielded by dominant individuals and cultures and that neutrality is non-existent, underscore the illegitimacy of speaking for others in ways that Western modernity has routinely assumed to do. Even when one attempts to be sensitive to issues of representation questions remain concerning whose ends are being met and who benefits from the research endeavour. Admittedly, these are questions that should apply to any consideration of research ethics, but they are magnified by the effects of the West’s colonial enterprise.

**Gauhati, 8th August, 1996**

*Kathleen:* One of the contradictions inherent in certain kinds of cross-cultural research, particularly in the postcolonial period when people from the previously colonising cultures come to learn, is the asymmetrical kinds of relationships that come out. … I have questions about it that are quite vexing.⁴

Since the publication of Edward Said’s influential *Orientalism* (1978) Western-originating scholarship on “the East” has been disrobed of its previous claims to “pure” knowledge. Under Said’s analysis, orientalist scholarship was seen to be fully implicated in the political agenda of Western imperialism, embedded in “a discourse that .. is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power” (p. 12), and consequently thoroughly interpolated with politically inscribed hegemonic assumptions regarding the intellectual, cultural and moral superiority of Western ideas and values.

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⁴ This quotation is drawn from the tape recorded transcript of discussions with the group of coresearchers, held, as noted in this instance in Gauhati, Assam, on 8th August 1996. The speaker here, Kathleen Erndl (to be introduced more fully in chapter 2), is a U.S.-based feminist scholar of Asian religions.
This perspective has been at the heart of postcolonial inquiry, providing an “ongoing critique of the West’s most confident, characteristic discourses” (Clifford, 1986, p. 10) through analysis of both the effects of Western dominance and its methodologies.

Colonialist assumptions within anthropology, in particular, have been scathingly criticised for systematically distorting its portrayals of non-Western peoples by imposing the value-laden lens of its own academic discourse on the cultures it assumes to study, while remaining blind to the biases of gender, culture and power its privilege masks.

What I resent most, however, is not his inheritance of a power he so often disclaims, disengaging himself from a system he carries with him, but his ear, eye, and pen, which record in his language while pretending to speak through mine, on my behalf.

(Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 1989, p. 48)

Reviewing the anthropological discourse on India, Veena Das (1995) observed that Western ways of knowing were held to yield the only true knowledge, so that the views of Western anthropologists were systematically privileged over those of their local-culture counterparts: “The knowledge categories of non-Western cultures are simply unanchored beliefs, while Western categories have the status of scientific and objective truths.” The result is that “Other cultures acquire legitimacy only as objects of thought, never as instruments of thought” (p. 33).

Admonitions to Western anthropologists against “going native”, while ostensibly ensuring sound scientific practice, corroborate the refusal to consider the worldviews of other cultural traditions as valid frameworks for scholarly inquiry. Yet we must question the extent to which this so-called “objective” practice serves to distort our capacity to appreciate others as subjects in their own right. During one of the planning discussions for this study Frédérique Marglin traced anthropology’s historical antagonism to “going native” to a modernist worldview that continues to uphold the superiority of Western discourses:

Milo, Maine, 21st August, 1994

Frédérique. Anthropology says that if you don’t grow up in that culture, you can’t go native: “This is fake, it’s inauthentic.” It’s that voice - that you can’t really transpose. And I’ve come to the point now of seeing that that voice is precisely the imperialist voice. It is precisely the voice that keeps the Western voice dominant. Because, lo and behold, we find it very troublesome to, as we phrase it, cross cultural boundaries and burrow and be eclectic, and all that vocabulary. Nobody ever finds it problematic when an Indian or a Tibetan or an Andean becomes westernised. Nobody bats an eyelid, because that’s a normal evolution,
because that's progressive, that's developing. Whereas, walking in a
different direction, that's going backwards.

**Going against the grain - Goddesses & women**

Focussing our research on the affinity between goddesses and women goes
against the grain (backwards) in a number of ways. Historically Indian goddesses and
women have been conspicuous sites and symbols of political contest. Colonialist
assessments of oriental backwardness invoked Hinduism’s orientation to both as means
of providing the central justifications for its “civilising” mission. Devotion to “the
grotesque form of Mother Kali” (Oman, cited in Urban, 2003, p. 169), whose rites
involved blood sacrifice and sexual licentiousness, was taken *prima facie* as evidence of
depravity and primitivism: “To know the Hindoo idolatry, AS IT IS, a person must
wade through the filth of the thirty-six pooranus…he must follow the brahmun through
In reply to the barrage of such insults the Indian nationalist movement’s counter-
discursive strategy explicitly invoked the $\text{\textsuperscript{\textregistered}ākti}$ of the Goddess as the rallying point for
its anti-imperial struggle (e.g., Ratté, 1985; Bagchi, 1990; McKean, 1996; Jha, 2004):

> Mother Durga! Giver of force and love and knowledge, terrible art thou
in thy own self of might, Mother beautiful and fierce. In the battle of
life, in India’s battle, we are warriors commissioned by thee…

(Sri Aurobindo, *Hymn to Durga*, n.d)

Whereas these contrasting positions evoke a neat, if mutually hostile,
polarisation of judgments for and against Śāktism and its practices, we will discover in
more nuanced ways how the key elements of Goddess symbolism they invoke – blood,
sex and violence – remain contentious as well as central to feminist efforts to
understand the nexus, both actual and potential, between women and Śākti.

Most Indian feminists are at best ambivalent about the effects of the colonial
period on Indian women’s social status. To the colonisers issues such as child marriage,
temple “prostitution” and *Sati* $^5$ figured as prominent proofs of the debasement of
Indian culture. While the interface with Western liberalism helped to catalyse the Indian
social reform movement of the 19$^{th}$ century which challenged a number of practices that

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$^5$ *Sati, or suttee* in its anglicised spelling, was adopted by the British to refer to the practice in some parts of
India of loyal wives joining their dead husbands on the funeral pyre.
were oppressive of women, the “civilising” mission of the British ultimately resulted in reconstituting a position of subordination for most women. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989) have contended that in changing the system so as to save “the Hindu woman” colonial authorities engaged “simultaneously and necessarily [in] a process of re-constituting patriarchies in every social strata” [sic] (p.6). The effects of this included the severe curtailment of women’s access to various forms of property rights and the legal legitimisation of patriarchal practices relating to the family. Gayatri Spivak (1993) further characterised the ruse: “Imperialism’s image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind” (p. 94), thus allowing her to be appropriated as theirs to “save against the ‘system’” (Spivak, 1993, p. 101). Such imprints continue to inform Western assumptions regarding the position of Indian women, even in postcolonial times – a point to which we shall shortly return for closer examination.

The relationship between woman and goddess was also discursively implicated in the development of pre-independence Indian nationalism and its resolution of the Women’s Question during the late 19th century. Partha Chatterjee (1989) pointed out that the nationalist response to the encroachment of Western customs was not simply regressive but rather more strategic and pragmatic (as well as essentialist) in contrasting India’s spiritual and moral superiority with the materialist know-how of the colonialists. Women were equated with the spiritual core of India’s cultural identity and strength, and (rhetorically at least) revered as goddesses for their feminine virtues of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion and modesty. Issues of women’s emancipation were consequently indissolubly linked with the emancipation of Mother India - a goal which women could further by being virtuous *satis*, demonstrating their devoted and pure service to the inner life of the nation through self-sacrifice and moral integrity as daughters, wives and mothers.

A detailed critique of the limitations and benefits of nationalist assumptions for bettering Indian women’s social conditions is beyond the purview of this study; however such contextualising of the relationship between Hindu goddesses and women in recent political history is instructive in demonstrating how a framework that assumes

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6 The Sanskrit term *Sati* simply means a “good” or “true” wife. The root *sat* (being) underscores that “goodness” or “truth” reflects spiritual virtue and shows that etymologically at least the term is distinct from any male expectations of the female role.
ultimate power to be female can nonetheless coexist with a patriarchal social structure that imposes significant restrictions on women’s social empowerment. There are echoes, clearly, of an all too familiar patriarchal ploy, in which male dominance is justified by a counterposed female need for protection. Yet, in contrast with the common pattern of assumptions informing gender roles in Western contexts, it remains significant that key binary dimensions underpinning gender roles for Hindu Indians, such as inner/outer, home/world, spiritual/social, assign a privileged and active position to the female-linked pole. Some exceptional women may also cross these binary distinctions to make major spiritual and political contributions on the worldly stage through actively displaying their own śakti—a phenomenon which seems to be more readily acceptable in Indian political contexts than in those of the West. As we shall see, this valuing is clearly consonant with a Sākta orientation.

More problematic is the question of how a sense of Sākta-inspired spiritual empowerment might be deployed in support of systemic social and political empowerment for women. In this regard Indian feminists have frequently lamented the paradox between goddesses’ cultural supremacy and women’s social subordination. Madhu Kishwar (1991) pointed to the detrimental intercession of hierarchies of class and caste as obstacles to universal respect and opportunity for many Indian women:

Brutal oppression and powerlessness of women coexist with a prevailing ethos of according social respect and honour to certain kinds of women--women mostly from elite families in the role of social service workers, teachers, reformers, talented artists, and mother figures. Power, learning, art, music, wealth, are all embodied in Hinduism as goddesses. Yet while even today Saraswati is worshipped as the goddess of learning, most families still consider education of women a wasteful affair (p. 27).

Clearly, given the extent of oppression still facing many Indian women this theoretical privilege is not always actualised—leading feminist scholars, including Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993), to point to the discrepancies between “real and imagined women”. Shakuntala Rao (1999) has provided a telling analysis of how Gandhi’s celebration of women’s superior spirituality in effect served to circumscribe their roles. At the same time ethnographers including Ann Gold (1994) and William Sax (1994) have provided accounts of how the cosmic power assigned to females aids women in assuming authority even in manifestly patriarchal circumstances. See also Nancy Falk (2005) for an account of how the notion of śakti has facilitated women’s entry into previously male-controlled domains.

Madhu Kishwar (1999) observed that “Indira Gandhi as the first woman prime minister of India was rarely attacked on account of her gender. If anything, she was able to use her gender to her advantage projecting herself as Mother India and Durga incarnate rolled into one. There was no fuss made over her assuming the highest political office in the land” (p. 138). See also Nancy Falk (2005) for a further account of the (Hindu) religious, social and political processes that support women’s leadership roles in India.
Kalindi Mazumdar (1998) was more scathing in her critique of the discrepancies between espoused religious values and women’s actual social status:

India probably is the only nation in the world which exclusively enshrines female deities in artistically built temples. … India has also been proud of women’s extraordinary ventures in the field of welfare, politics, art, literature and of late, sports. … The truth however, which stares us in the face, indicates clearly the pitiable condition of Indian womanhood trapped in the web of sociocultural factors such as superstitious and blind faith perpetuated by male dominance. The saga of the Indian woman is riddled with cruel, inhuman and pathetic attacks on her physical, emotional, social, political, and even spiritual growth. Her struggle for survival continues from the womb to the grave without respite (p. 28).

Citing the detrimental effects of religious culture, both in terms of sanctioning restrictions on women and inflaming religious intolerance, some Indian feminists have advocated the maintenance of a purely secular approach to feminist politics. The co-option of goddess symbolism to incite violence amongst right-wing Hindu nationalists, has led feminist activists including Sucheta Mazumdar (1994) and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1998) to argue that feminists should eschew religious motifs. By comparison, our intent to research the relationship between Śaktism and women’s agency can be seen once more to go against the grain. In the following discussion of the intersections between feminism and postcolonialism I elaborate a rationale for this position.

Postcolonialism & feminism – fissured alliances

In her critical introduction to postcolonial theory Leela Gandhi (1998) nominated three key controversies in the relationship between postcolonialism and feminism. Two of these - essentialising constructions of the “third-world woman” and the deployment of an agenda for female emancipation as justification for the “civilising” mission - have been briefly considered above in terms of their colonial origins. The third controversy, relating to “the problematic history of the ‘feminist-as-imperialist’” (p. 83), also has particular consequence for our cross-cultural inquiry.

Perhaps the most notorious example of feminist imperialism in action was Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India*. Published in 1927, it immediately met with a hail of protest (including being dubbed by Mohandas Gandhi “the drain inspector’s report”) for its narrowly judgmental and one-sided portrayal of the pitiable condition of Indian women at the hands of what she considered a debased culture. Her findings were cited as proof that India was not fit for self-rule (Liddle & Joshi, 1988). Given the ideological
The undergirding of British imperialism at that time it is perhaps not surprising that the Raj would have recruited a Western feminist to help justify its cause. What is less explicable is that more contemporary Western feminists should uncritically renew the imperialist myopia. Mary Daly (1978) based her critique of the practice of *Sati* on Katherine Mayo’s earlier work, taking it upon herself to defend Mayo’s feminist integrity and calling on “Feminist Seekers/Spinsters [to] search out and claim such sisters” (p. 129). In the process, as Uma Narayan (1997) has demonstrated, Daly conflated a range of differing practices, decontextualised and enlarged their historical and demographic reach, ignored Indian contestations as well as colonial provocations, and erased the voices not only of those to whom she ascribes patriarchal defensiveness but also of Indian women activists, thereby excluding them (however unintentionally) from the feminist sorority she invokes.

The practice of *Sati*, which even at its most prevalent was far less widespread than Mary Daly’s account suggests, had in fact become a very rare occurrence far ahead of *Gyn/Ecology*’s publication. This is not to say that it has become an uncontroversial issue for Indian feminists, human rights activists and Hindu religious leaders. *Manushi* (vols. 42-43, 1987), for example, carried extensive coverage and analysis of the furore aroused by the burning of Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan in 1987. The central theme that emerges from an impressive range of scholarly work aimed at deconstructing the social and political contexts implicated in recent instances of *Sati* as well as those involved in its colonial history (see Lata Mani, 1989; Romila Thapar, 1989; Gayatri Spivak, 1993; Veena Oldenburg, 1994; Ashis Nandy, 1995; and Veena Das, 1995; among others) is the extent to which *Sati* has been reconstructed as a modern project of right-wing political forces. What is dangerously off the radar in Western feminist appraisals such as Mary Daly’s or the account of the Roop Kanwar case included in the bestselling *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons* (Bumiller, 1990) is the influence of negative cultural essentialisations, continuous with the colonial project, that provide the backdrop against which a modern reclamation of invented Indian traditions constructs its prejudices.

9 The campaign against *Sati*, spearheaded by Rammohan Roy, culminated in British legislation to outlaw the practice in 1829 and resulted in a dramatic decrease in the incidence of widow immolation. Uma Narayan (1997) observed that “in the four decades between 1947, Indian independence, and 1987 … forty cases of *sati* have been recorded” (p. 69).
Mary Daly’s stance is of particular currency to a consideration of goddesses and women due to her position as a leading Spinster\textsuperscript{10}-prophet for the contemporary Western feminist spirituality movement.\textsuperscript{11} Daly intended her project in *Gyn/Ecology* to “exorcis[e] … the internalized Godfather” (Daly, 1978/1990, p. 1) and sought, as “an act of Biophilic Bonding with women of all races and classes” (1990, p. xxxi), to extend its reach to include critiques of institutionalised patriarchal atrocities in a range of non-Western and Western cultures. Notwithstanding these apparently laudable intentions, Daly’s discussion of *Sati* (amongst similarly problematic discussions of footbinding in China and female genital mutilation in Africa) may be seen to repeat the imperialist agenda of appropriating “the Hindu woman” for white Western feminists to save (Narayan, 1997; see also Veena T. Oldenburg, 1994b, and Kumari Jayawardena, 1995, for further considerations regarding Western feminists’ interventions in India). Such failure to engage with the intersections between patriarchy, race, class and colonisation has been critiqued for shoring up stereotypes of “‘third world women’ as a homogeneous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit victims of particular socioeconomic systems” (Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 1991, p. 57).

The persistence of this stereotype in the spectre of burning women spills into culturally-biased responses to dowry-related violence in India (“Hindus burn women, don’t they?”).\textsuperscript{12} Uma Narayan (1997) has detailed the asymmetry of understanding between domestic violence in the U.S. on the one hand, and dowry murders in India on the other. The local social issue of domestic violence in the U.S. is not seen as a widespread cultural phenomenon but as one that is bounded by specific contexts, whereas dowry murders in India are often viewed, in Narayan’s terms, as “death by culture”. In fact, she suggests, the incidence of the two phenomena seem likely to be proportionally roughly equivalent. Simultaneous exoticisation and demonisation of Hindu culture are here seen to reassure the West that it is modern and progressive by comparison with India’s backwardness.

Thus a position such as Daly’s, when seen from a postcolonial point of view,

\textsuperscript{10} “Spinster spin and weave, mending and creating unity of consciousness” (Mary Daly, 1978, p. 386).

\textsuperscript{11} Mary Daly’s *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (1973) is credited by Charlene Spretnak (1982) with having “pioneered postpatriarchal spirituality” (p. xxi).

\textsuperscript{12} See Elisabeth Bumiller, 1990, and Veena T. Oldenburg’s 1994 review in *Manushi*. 
appears self-serving in that it supports middle class white Western feminists’ perceptions of their own progressiveness relative to third world women’s unquestionably less advanced status. Despite being roundly critiqued at the time of its appearance Daly’s flawed account of *Sati* is still unproblematically cited in Western feminist texts as a prime example of feminist scholarship.\(^\text{13}\) Clearly, a feminist persuasion does not insulate the Western researcher from the assumption of cultural superiority, and the orientalist critique.

> In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him [sic] the relative upper hand.

*(Said, 1978, p. 6)*

In Said’s rendering imperialistic overtones seem inevitably to colour Western interest in the East – thus invoking the kinds of vexing questions referred to by Kathleen Erndl (above). Researchers cognisant of the problematic history of feminist imperialism (in which Mary Daly’s foray is only one prominent example) are consequently led to ask, like Daphne Patai (1991, p. 36), “Are there no choices other than exploitation or patronage?”

**Postcolonial imbrications**

The imperialist imprint that upholds Western cultural dominance is not easily sidestepped. Notwithstanding any recent changes wrought by India’s recently formed free-market credentials, postcolonial encounters are inevitably tinged by historical and continuing concatenations of race, privilege and progress. I discovered my own unwitting imbrication in the imperialist residue in an accidental encounter that occurred several years before I came across the benefits of yoga or of Goddess traditions.

This “accident” resulted from a weather-driven missed flight connection and consequent unscheduled stopover in Bombay in September 1975. Having been fog-bound for hours on departure from London, my parents, my younger sister and I had missed our connecting flight to Hong Kong, from where we were to pick up the last leg of the journey home to Australia after more than a year and a half spent in Israel and

\(^{13}\) An extract from *Gyn/ecology*, “Indian *Suttee: The Ultimate Consummation of Marriage,*” is included in Robyn Rosen’s (2004) anthology, *Women’s Studies in the Academy*, under the heading of anthropology. No reference is made to any critique of Daly’s work and no attempt is made to update the picture it paints of Indian women.
Europe. I remember feeling overwhelmed on arrival in Bombay by the steamy, oppressive atmosphere, the crowds and the general air of unfamiliar chaos, and confronted, both literally and emotionally, by the throng of beggars whose numbers swelled rather than diminished when the requested *bakshish* was handed over. My sense of shock crystallised on the bus trip to our hotel as we passed the destitute sleeping in streets, including one man whose swollen leg stump was putrid with gangrene.

Up to this point my personal memoir does not deviate significantly from prevailing cultural and political stereotypes of India’s third world status of the time – as reproduced in countless travel books and diaries aimed at the Western tourist. Ironically, however, the most intense shock for me came after reaching the sanctuary of our newish five-star hotel when the crisply liveried bellboy escorted my sister and me to our room, made sure we were comfortable, then bowed obsequiously before taking his leave - and continued bowing as he walked out, backwards. Unable to assimilate the extremes of privilege and its underside, I chose to remain barricaded in my room for the next 24 hours, refusing my parents’ invitation to go sightseeing because I could not bear the excruciating sense of undeserved entitlement.

Had a range of alternative frames been available to me then as a seventeen-year-old, the apparently binary choice of oppressed or oppressor that this situation conjured in my mind may have appeared more multi-faceted and thus more spacious. I may have recognised, for example, that the bellboy’s behaviour was not exclusively offered to white-skinned colonisers, or that bowing and offering reverence in this way was a widespread social grace in Indian contexts. However, in the absence of explanatory frameworks I found the racial overtones agonising. No doubt this sensitivity was influenced by having lived with the inherited trauma of my father’s Holocaust experience, starkly renewed only shortly before this journey through visiting the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz and at Buchenwald, where my father had been an inmate. This background has always tainted any notion of European cultural ascendancy for me. Hence in Bombay in 1975, at age seventeen, I was simply horrified at the sudden prospect of being identified with an other-cultural elite.

In retrospect this episode seems to have had the effect of priming me towards a psychological sense of identification with, rather than distancing from, the Indian “Other”. Additionally it highlights the extent to which ambivalences regarding Said’s positional superiority can at times be characteristic of close-up cross-cultural encounters across colonial lines, interrupting assumptions of Western political supremacy. Indeed,
where stereotypes of difference are eschewed or blurred, fissures in the discourses of colonialism and modernity may, following Homi Bhabha, open spaces for negotiating new forms of identity.

What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, ‘opening out’, remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race.

(Bhabha, 1994, p. 219)

Homi Bhabha (1994) has argued that this dynamic process of redefinition leads to increasing cultural hybridity, thus displacing neat conceptual boundaries such as East versus West. Such de-essentialisation seems to hold out the potential for liberation, yet the process of negotiation remains fraught due to prevailing discursive binaries that seek to maintain essentialist categories. The hybrid “subject” thus finds herself outside – or in-between – existing cultural categories.

My rendition … reveals the anxiety of enjoining the global and the local; the dilemma of projecting an international space on the trace of a decentred, fragmented subject. Cultural globality is figured in the *in-between* spaces of double-frames: its historical originality marked by a cognitive obscurity; its decentred ‘subject’ signified in the nervous temporality of the transitional, or the emergent provisionality of the ‘present’.

(Bhabha, 1994, p. 216)

Here Bhabha is writing primarily of the experience of migrant minorities. Yet elements of his description ring true to my own experience of temporary, though repeated, cultural crossings. If I was destabilised by my accidental encounter with India in 1975, my subsequent visits had the effect of decentring my experience. On re-entry to Australia after yoga study trips it would take some time for me to re-establish a sense of belonging. I found, for example, that the tenor of everyday discourse struck me as altogether too aggressive by comparison with the more sensitive and respectful tones I experienced in most of my dealings in India.

Extrapolating from Kalpana Ram’s (1991) work on “first” and “third world” feminisms, Penelope Magee (1994) argued that a “possibility not ever acknowledged … is that ‘India’ also ‘invades and redefines the interiority’ of Western minds” (p. 160). More than a mere possibility, this seems to me to be especially true for those who take up serious study and practice of yoga or Hindu philosophy and religion – disciplines that are fundamentally concerned with psycho-spiritual processes and hence with the
nature of the mind. Yet what can be said about the status of the cultural knowledge gained when “India” invades the Western mind? Can we assume, for example, that a Western “yoga therapist” is imparting something fundamentally Indian when the principles of yoga are adapted to suit a (post)modern Western context? Issues of representation and ownership remain.

**Exoticisation & appropriation**

Historically, Western exoticisation of the East has been a significant mediator of Orientalist perceptions. The fascination of early Indologists with “the sacred books of the East” and their contribution to ideas of a “golden age” of Hinduism were fuelled by European hopes and imaginings. Orientalist scholars like William Jones and Max Müller saw themselves as “reintroducing the Hindu elite to the ‘impenetrable mystery’ of its ancient lore,” opening up the Sanskritic tradition and making “its treasures … available to the people in its ‘pristine’ form” (Chakravarti, 1989, p. 31). Though the tone of imperialist paternalism is unmistakeable in such formulations, Jones and others also openly castigated the prejudice, ignorance and backwardness of negative assumptions held by Europeans towards the cultures of Asia (Gandhi, 1998, p. 79). Despite such remonstrations however, the romantic influence in Orientalism remained more limited in its effects on Western perceptions of India than utilitarian support for the civilising mission of imperial politics. Meanwhile in India the Orientalists’ positive reconstruction of Hinduism’s golden age was enthusiastically embraced by Indian intellectuals and became central to the subsequent fashioning of the nationalist agenda (Chakravarti, 1989).

What was at stake psychologically in Western romanticisation of the East was, according to Ashis Nandy (1983), the recovery of split-off poetic, mystical and feminine elements in European culture, previously disparaged by the rationality of the Enlightenment and now projected onto the Orient. This process continues, with the notion of the “mystical East” representing for some Westerners “the magic, the mystery and the sense of the spiritual that they perceive to be lacking in modern Western culture” (King, 1999, p. 97). Nineteenth century European women writers also reveal this kind of romantic Orientalist leaning.

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14 The term “yoga therapist” is itself a telling invention of Western origin.
Uma Chakravarti (1989, p. 43) quotes the “unabashedly romantic” Charlotte Speir, whose valorising account of Indian women in Vedic times was one of the first to single out the subsequently often cited Gārgi and Maitreyī as exemplars of the esteem which Hindu women commanded during its golden age. Along with Speir, Charlotte Bader saw in Sati evidence of Hindu women’s extraordinary piety and spiritual power. Western spiritualism, romantic Orientalism and feminism seemed to merge in the lives of several late nineteenth-early twentieth century women who played key roles in purveying Indian spirituality to the West yet, as Kumari Jayawardena (1995) has shown, contradictions in their views on the position of women illustrate the difficulty of reconciling spiritual romanticism with political reform.

The grand project of the Theosophical Society, initiated by Helena Blavatsky and Henry Olcott, was clearly anti-imperialist in its aims:

(1.) To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, colour or creed. (2.) To promote the study of Aryan and other Scriptures, of the World’s religion and sciences, and to vindicate the importance of old Asiatic literature, namely, of the Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Zoroastrian philosophies. (3.) To investigate the hidden mysteries of Nature under every aspect possible, and the psychic and spiritual powers latent in man especially.  

(Blavatsky, 1889, section III)

Promoting culture and gender equity as both spiritual and political agendas for theosophists, Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant (her successor, after Olcott, as president of the Theosophical Society) stood out as Western advocates for India and models of feminist emancipation. But their early public decrival of discriminatory practices against Indian women subsequently gave way to the more urgent need to support the Indian nationalist cause and avoid raising issues which could shore up the British case. Thus, while zealously advocating for home rule in India and for higher education for Western women, Annie Besant maintained that the best education for Indian girls remained one based on tradition, emphasising future roles as wives and mothers (Jayawardena, 1995).

Kumari Jayawardena’s account indicates that Annie Besant was influenced by local advice that suggested it was better to avoid alienating sections of the Hindu community. Nancy Falk (2002a) has recently described how political tensions between Indian traditionalists and reformists played out in their orientation to the “women’s question” in the late 19th century.
The radically anti-imperialist position advocated by theosophy was influential in re-valuing South Asian spiritualities and advancing inter-cultural tolerance. However, in joining the priorities of Indian luminaries through placing cultural and political revival ahead of women’s issues it became complicit in the nationalist recasting of Indian women. Exoticisation was evident in many theosophists’ romantic, idealising view of Asian cultures and of their women as already spiritually advanced – therefore, apparently, placing them beyond the need for social emancipation. Theosophy’s associations with occultism and the tendency amongst its adherents to cultivate loose interpretations of Asian philosophies in line with the theosophical notion of “Universal Truth” (clearly owing as much to Enlightenment philosophy as to its critique) contributed also to decontextualising and diluting the ways that Asian religious concepts were introduced to Western audiences. This legacy is still apparent in many “New Age” appropriations of Hindu and Buddhist philosophical terms and westernised reinterpretations of Eastern spiritual practices.

Spiritual vs cultural knowing: phenomenological insights from yoga

In Australia the Theosophical Society made its mark quite early, establishing a branch in Sydney in 1895. The flow of Indian swamis seems, however, to have been much slower to develop, with visits from key figures beginning only in the 1960s and 70s. My introduction to the techniques of Indian spirituality came some time later still, in 1984, when I received the “Knowledge” taught by Maharaji (also known as Prem Rawat). This proved to be a spiritual awakening for me, with the discovery of a potential for inner peace that was otherwise rarely accessible. I sought a system of physical exercise that would be consistent with my new-found meditation practice, and

Prominent examples include Charles Leadbeater’s *The Chakras* and Yogi Ramacharaka’s works. Maharaji achieved prominence as a child spiritual prodigy, inheriting his own father’s role as a spiritual leader at a young age in recognition of his apparent spiritual accomplishments. He subsequently attracted a huge international following amid extravagant claims of his divinity (Wikipedia contributors, 2006). Coming after this period, my introduction to Maharaji’s “knowledge” was far more secular. He presented himself at that time, attired in a business suit, and referring to himself as simply offering a straw (through “knowledge”) and encouraging those who listened to him to drink from their own inner source of peace. Though he has progressively secularised and simplified his approach, the four techniques he teaches, involving turning within to see inner light, hear inner sounds, taste nectar and follow the breath, draw prominently on classical Hindu perspectives and practices. For example, *Yogasūtra I.34-36* recommend concentrating on the breath, on the processes of sensory perception and on the inner light as means for achieving a state of yoga.
this led me very soon to yoga classes. The experiential dimensions that opened up through these two branches of yoga (i.e., meditation = dhyāna, and physical exercises = āsana) were both striking and illuminating. New to me, they were simultaneously at some level deeply familiar, bringing a profound sense of homecoming – suggestive, as I later found, of what Patañjali might have considered a discovery of Self, puruṣa (cf Yogasūtra III.35).

In turn my desire to also be engaged intellectually with these pursuits brought me to Sri Aurobindo’s *Synthesis of Yoga* (1976/1955). I was inspired by the depth and breadth of (his vision of) yoga as a means of spiritual evolution, and his sweeping prose awed me.

The human soul’s individual liberation and enjoyment of union with the Divine in spiritual being, consciousness and delight must always be the first object of the Yoga; its free enjoyment of the cosmic unity of the Divine becomes a second object; but out of that a third appears, the effectuation of the meaning of the divine unity with all beings by a sympathy and participation in the spiritual purpose of the Divine in humanity.

(Sri Aurobindo, 1976, p. 587)

To this end Sri Aurobindo’s integral yoga seeks, amongst other aims, to synthesise the classic paths of the *Bhagavad Gītā: karma* (“action” – in Sri Aurobindo’s terminology, “the yoga of divine works”), jñāna (“the yoga of integral knowledge”) and bhakti (“the yoga of divine love”). In particular, the offer of bhakti brought emotional depth into my spirituality. It signalled an approach that was foreign

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18. This experiential dimension was especially striking in contrast with the hyper-rationality of cognitive-behavioural theory which, as a student of Western clinical psychology, I was steeped in.

19. Sattvapuruṣayoratyantāsankirtanayoh pratīyāvāseṣobhogah
parārthatvātvātārthasanyamātpuruṣajñānam
The mind, which is subject to change, and the Perceiver (puruṣa), which is not, are in proximity but are of distinct and different characters. When the mind is directed externally and acts mechanically towards objects there is either pleasure or pain. However, when, at the appropriate time, an individual begins enquiry into the very nature of the link between the Perceiver and perception the mind is disconnected from external objects and there arises the understanding of the Perceiver itself.

(Desikachar, 1987, pp. 79-80)

20. Sri Aurobindo’s “integral yoga” was itself an interpretation and reformulation of Indian traditions, drawing from both Vedic and Tantric strands of philosophy. Aurobindo’s classics education in England, his political activism as a nationalist (though subsequently abjured), his universalist aims and his collaboration with The Mother also influenced his vision. While Aurobindo’s intent to herald new psychic capacities for humanity was future-oriented, Ashis Nandy (1983) also sees in Aurobindo’s synthesis of Indian and Western influences an attempt at psychological decolonisation. Nandy’s account is critical of The Mother’s “decisive [Western] intervention” in Aurobindo’s life, whereas others have admired her spiritual and feminist contributions to their joint work – not least Aurobindo himself who referred to her as his Śakti (Aurobindo, 1972; Iyengar, 1978; Satprem, 1980-1987; Jayawardena, 1995).
to Western psychological values of self-fulfilment, self-reliance, self-mastery, and so forth, being simultaneously alluring, intoxicating and spiritually empowering: “Bhakti in itself is as wide as the heart-yearning of the soul for the Divine and as simple and straight-forward as love and desire going straight towards their object” (Sri Aurobindo, 1976, p. 546).

A similar, if more understated, emphasis on bhakti impressed me in T.K.V. Desikachar’s (1987) translation of the 2000 year-old Yogasūtra which was given to me by a friend after he visited India in mid-1988. Here the idea of bhakti was encapsulated in the term īśvarapraṇidhāna, “surrender to ‘the Lord’”. It was the tone of Desikachar’s translation that struck me as much as the words, along with the conjoining of discipline and surrender as key requirements for pursuing yoga. This approach announces the section of the Yogasūtra that outlines practice:

\[ \text{tapahsvādhyāyeśvaraṇapraṇidhānāni kriyāyogaḥ} \]

The practice of Yoga must reduce both physical and mental impurities. It must develop our capacity for self examination and help us to understand that, in the final analysis, we are not the masters of everything we do.

(Yogasūtra II.1, with tactful non-denominational translation by Desikachar, 1987, p. 27)

Bhakti was the opening to a sense of spiritual possibility. Visiting India at the end of 1988 was consequently almost like entering a love affair; my growing appreciation of yoga as an Indian spiritual legacy of profound dimensions shaped my trip very differently from the earlier accidental visit. The glow of my spiritual interests percolated through to transform my experience of India at many levels. I seemed to find an internal reservoir of poise which radically dissipated my cross-cultural anxieties and enabled me to navigate my way via a kind of appreciative resonance with the people and experiences I encountered. Without doubt, however, what really magnified this new sense of confidence in my ability to negotiate the cross-cultural terrain was the opportunity to establish a relationship of student to teacher with Desikachar (see Dobia, 1999). Amongst the many teachings he offered, his ability – and generosity\(^\text{21}\) – in

\(^{21}\text{These qualities of teaching and learning are reflected in the hymn from the Taittiriya Upaniṣad which we would chant together at the beginning of classes with Desikachar: saha nāvavatu, saha nau bhunaktu, saha viryam karavāvahai, tejasviniévadhitamastu mā vidhiśāvahai, aum sāntih, sāntih, sāntih. Together may we be protected; together may we be nourished; together may we work with vigour; may our study be filled with illumination; may there be no dislike between us; Om peace, peace, peace.}\)
answering the multiple spiritual, personal and cultural issues I raised held out at once the richness of intercultural exchange and the evidence for spiritual permeability of cultural borders.

It seems evident from this that *bhakti* institutes romanticism as a central element in the spiritual search. A similar romanticism is apparent in the work of many orientalist scholars and in the images of Eastern spirituality proffered by theosophists and contemporary spiritual seekers. Thus, whether spiritual romanticism is inspired by Eastern *bhakti* or by an eclectic admixture of sources, and notwithstanding the limitations of either, romanticism seems to go with the territory of spirituality. This clearly runs counter to the critical analytic bent of rigorous academic inquiry. Should understanding gained through a *bhakti* orientation therefore be ruled out of the research endeavour as an unacceptable source of non-rational bias? Is distortion the inevitable result of spiritual romanticism? Most importantly with regard to postcolonial cautions, does romanticism necessarily engender exoticisation of the Other?

As Richard King (1999) has demonstrated, the dichotomy between romantic mysticism and rational religion, with rationality seen as far superior to intuition, is a Western Enlightenment construct. To the extent that Indian philosophies separate these two modes they tend to see them as complementary. Thus while a number of Indian spiritual traditions, including yoga, extol the virtues of *bhakti*, there is no accompanying requirement that one’s rational faculties be suspended. In the *Bhagavadgītā* Kṛṣṇa’s advocacy of *bhakti* takes place in the context of Arjuna’s constant questioning, as Desikachar pointed out in one of our interviews: “never has it been said you should be blind, you should be deaf, and you should be dumb” (Dobia, 1999, p. 31).

The advantage of romanticism, according to Richard Shweder (1991, p. 9), is that it views existence as an “infusion of consciousness and pure spirit into the material

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22. This became especially salient in my discussion of research methods with Minati Kar, as recounted in chapter 2.

23. A similar dynamic is apparent in the relationship between Ramakrishna as teacher and Vivekananda as disciple, both, as devotees of Kāli, exponents of Śāktism. Ramakrishna is widely regarded as Kāli’s greatest *bhakta*, his mystical prowess attested in a host of stories and earning him the title Paramahamsa, Great Swan. The swan is said to be able to extract milk from water – i.e. can see the Divine and leave the rest. More cultured and erudite than his humble master, Vivekananda’s capacity for intellectual discrimination (viveka) initially tested Ramakrishna but ultimately contributed to his spiritual prowess as a great sage and ambassador for Vedanta.
world, thereby narrowing the distance or blurring the boundaries between nature, humanity, and the gods”. Romanticism “inclines toward an interest in those inspirations … that take us beyond our sense to real places where even logic cannot go” (p. 11). I came to recognise that taking us to places where logic cannot go was the objective of yoga, where the intention is not simply to critically analyse existing material conditions but to point toward greater possibilities:

śrutānumānaprajñābhhyāmanyaviṣayā višeṣarthavāt

knowledge is no longer based on memory or inference. It is spontaneous, direct and at both a level and an intensity that is beyond the ordinary.


Shweder argues that romanticism is necessary to cultural anthropology as a tool for understanding the religious worldviews of others. In my experience an attitude of bhakti was indispensable to cultivating a relationship with the Goddess and hence to gaining an understanding of what she might represent. At the phenomenal level, whether undertaking the physical or meditative practices of yoga, participating in śākta ritual of one kind or another, or navigating the streets of Chennai (as in my example of poise above), a sense of experiential immediacy transcends differences. In such experiential domains the universalist claims of spiritual exponents are demonstrably true. For example, paying attention to the even distribution of prāna (life-force/breath) throughout the body will ease physical tension and produce a sense of calm; stilling the mind in meditation does bring a sense of spaciousness and peace, whatever one’s cultural affiliation.

Clearly not universal, however, are the meanings that might be made of such experiences and their origins in light of different cultural histories and social contexts. Consequently, the hybrid subjects who participate in a climate of spiritual multiculturalism, though existentially (and romantically) mobile, are not neutral players but are continually positioning themselves in relation to the cultural resources they imbibe. Taking a purely utilitarian position that seeks to isolate what is useful – or marketable – “back home” recapitulates what Kalpana Ram (1992, p. 609) has characterised as modernity’s programme of “bringing booty home from the colonies”. Romanticism does not automatically reverse such appropriative tendencies, especially insofar as it encourages, through reverse ethnocentrism (“the arrogance of the
benevolent neocolonialist conscience” - Gayatri Spivak, 1989, p. 281), a propensity to claim the Other for one's own purposes.

Taking into account these complex issues of inter-cultural exchange, this research represents my attempt to negotiate another position, one that places a premium on cross-cultural intersubjectivity as well as on attempts to engage sympathetically with the traditions of Śāktism under investigation. Endeavouring to navigate between the pitfalls of exoticisation and appropriation presupposes the possibility of what King (1999, p. 95), following Gadamer, has characterised as a “hermeneutically open-minded” dialogue. As we shall see in the following chapter, the dialogical dimension has been further privileged through a collaborative research design and the narrative orientation of the text.

**Feminism and Śakti**

A major strand in Western feminist spirituality over the last thirty years has focussed on goddesses and emerging thealogy. While much of this work has centred on the recovery/reimagining of ancient European traditions, cross-cultural borrowing has also been a feature of this project. Rita Gross (1983) advocated Hindu goddesses as “a resource for the contemporary rediscovery of the goddess” (p. 217). Her initiating contribution emphasised several features of Hindu goddesses that Western women might learn from. Amongst the features Gross flagged as noteworthy, the idea of a coincidence of opposites was prominent. Hindu goddesses in whom both creative and destructive aspects strikingly coincide provide more complete and liberative female models than have traditionally been available in Western theistic imagery.

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In the cremation ground of my heart
You are Queen.
A field once verdant with innocent promise
Now smoulders, and I,
Inflamed still with your beauty,
Fall swooning into ashen obscurity.

Ah, Mother!
What strange blessings you bring:
Relief in the sweet fruit of nihilism,
Joy in your gift of melancholy,
Naked truth beaten in and out of me
By the blows of your trampling feet.
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Mother.
Mother.
Cruel and wonderful Mother -
Who can understand this sublime torment?
This aching purity of Love,
The depth of You in me,
The tender restless heart that reels at the tide
Of human havoc and destruction,
And yet would drink it all in
Just to hasten the divine alchemy -

If only it could.
If only I could.

(Dobia, 2000, p. 203)

Hindu goddesses’ “obvious strength and capability” (Gross, 1983, p. 221) in their own right offer feminist sensibilities a powerful alternative to uni-dimensional constructs of femininity that emphasise passive receptivity and perpetual vulnerability. Worship of goddesses as mothers can help “to revalorize images of birthing, nurturing and mothering” (p. 224), and also, as signified in Hindu goddess worship, to extend our understanding of motherhood beyond biological literalism to appreciating and cultivating all kinds of creative and life-sustaining actions. Maternity does not, apparently, limit the roles or powers of Hindu goddesses, nor, if the preponderance of erotically-charged imagery is taken as a guide, does it disbar the celebration of their sexuality.

Of primary note for feminists seeking to re-imagine a goddess long ago expunged from the monotheistic Abrahamic religions is the “fundamental bisexuality of deity in Hinduism” (Gross, 1983, p. 218). Male and female aspects of the divine not only coexist, but their complementarity is recognised as crucial to both divine and worldly orders; hence deity is conceptualised as “indissolubly female and male” (Gross, 1996, p. 234).

To women raised under patriarchal monotheism such discoveries are indeed radical, leading some to enthusiastic adoption of Hindu goddess symbols as tools for feminist empowerment. However, the ways in which Hindu goddesses are interpreted and deployed in Western contexts, often with little regard for or engagement with the cultural contexts from which they have emerged, raise controversial issues and sensitivities. Exoticisation and commodification of Eastern symbols and images encourage materially rich but culturally impoverished Westerners (Mies & Shiva, 1993, p. 19) to re-make their own identities by introjecting an essentialised view of “the East” without requiring any dialogue or negotiation with those whose symbols are being
claimed for such purposes. The consequence of such appropriation, however unintended, may be “to create a displacement of the spiritual, cultural and intersubjective meanings of these religious icons … [in ways that] displace the individuals who experience their identities in and through this system of meaning” (Velayutham & Wise, 2001, p. 153).

“New and improved!” versions of Hindu goddesses originating in North America prompted Tanisha Ramachandran (2004) to critique their especially deleterious effects for South Asian women, who are subsequently viewed through a lens distorted by hyper-sexualised images of goddess symbols and interpretations. Ramachandran blames the misuse of Hindu goddess imagery on Rita Gross’s call for Western women to view Hindu goddesses as “resource[s] for the contemporary rediscovery of the goddess” (Gross, 1983, p. 218). While a fairer attribution for the most blatant misappropriations discussed would, in my opinion, recognise the impacts of the digitised global marketplace and its subscription to unbridled ‘free trade’ in cultural artifacts, Ramachandran’s critique nonetheless brings questions of desire and appropriation to a head. A distinction can and should be made between blatant cultural predation sanctioned by a ‘free market’ ethic and Gross’s far more respectful plea for Western feminist scholars to approach other religions and their symbols as being ‘good to think with’ (Gross, 1996, p. 104).

Yet, while the polysemic nature of religious symbols makes an array of interpretation possible, even well-intentioned cultural borrowing for the purpose of resourcing Western feminists can recapitulate the imperialist position if it is conducted as a unilateral transaction that seeks to appropriate an exoticised other for one’s own ends without requiring any dialogue or negotiation with those whose symbols are being claimed for such purposes. Kwok Pui-Lan (2002) has critiqued the genre of feminist “travel narrative” employed by Gross (1996) that on one hand purports to learn from the cultures visited and on the other infers that Western feminist appraisal and reinterpretation of Eastern traditions is a prerequisite to their rejuvenation. More thoughtful, interactive engagement is required to support postcolonial investigation as “a democratic colloquium” (Gandhi, 1998, p. x).

Cautionary voices

As noted above, most Indian-based feminists have been ambivalent about the relationship between goddesses’ sakti and women’s status. Though, as Liddle & Joshi
(1988) argue, enshrining “the concept of women’s power … into the common cultural assumptions” (p. 56) may lead (some) Indian women, and some men, to regard women as powerful and strong, under brāhmanic influence women’s power receives sanction only when it supports patriarchal authority. The basis for patriarchal control of women in the Indian context is thus the danger signalled by women’s power, rather than the stereotypes of women’s weakness usual in Western cultures.

Ambivalence towards women’s power is seen in repressive principles of strīdharma (women’s obligations) that comprehensively subordinate women to men. Nonetheless, even the notorious brāhmanic law-maker, Manu, celebrated women’s power - provided it was channelled towards supporting the happiness and welfare of husband and family. Thus, Hindu patriarchy effected control of women by sublimating their untamed womanpower into the ideal of devoted wifely service to the husband, pativratā. From a psychoanalytic perspective Sudhir Kakar (1978) argued that cultural ideals which valorise non-threatening images of women arise from male fears of being overwhelmed by the female power represented in Devi imagery and mythology. Liddle & Joshi’s analysis emphasises the particular danger of women’s sexuality to a complex brāhmanic hierarchy that seeks to exert social control by maintaining caste purity. As previously noted, the contradictions inherent in such religious traditions allow for simultaneous idealisation and oppression of women.

When proclaiming that men adore women as goddesses, it has become a habit to treat them as slaves. Double standard of morality reigns supreme in the customs, traditions and culture (Subbamma, 1985).

Nandita Gandhi & Nandita Shah (1992) comprehensively outlined the key issues focusing the post-independence activism of a multiplicity of Indian feminist groups, striking familiar, if depressing, themes: violence against women, women’s health and access to health care, women’s labour and earnings. In seeking to address such issues many feminists have sought to discard the retrogressive influence of religion. However, this strategy has not mobilised women in ways feminists would have preferred.

Madhu Kishwar (1991) observed that opposition by Indian feminists to cultural ideals that depict women's selflessness had not garnered widespread support for feminist agendas because the approach taken tended “to make people feel that they are backward and stupid to hold values that need to be rejected outright” (p. 48). Similarly, Kalpana Ram (2004) concluded that
The underlying assumption at some very fundamental level that was seldom made explicit until recently, is that the traditional social structure can only victimise women, requiring the intervention of modern forces such as feminist analysis and action, to introduce female agency into the picture (Ram, 2004, p. 22).

Such assumptions contribute to the perceived opposition between feminism and religion, a perception that Gandhi and Shah (1992) acknowledged was of recent origin. They elaborated also on the complex dilemmas that underlie the tensions between feminism and Indian religious movements and concluded that there was a need for feminists to engage more fully with issues pertaining to religion and women’s involvement in it.

The women of the earlier phases of the movement skilfully challenged and used religion and religious symbols and sentiments. They could, in the same breath and with conviction and persuasion, condemn sati and resurrect Sita, contest Hindu orthodoxy but function within its framework, in short follow Gandhi’s dictum, “It is good to swim in the waters of tradition but to sink in them is suicide.” This political philosophy which quickly appealed and eased contradictions won women popular support. The present women’s movement seems to have broken away from this tradition, and largely refrained from using religious symbols (even for quick communication), and at times even condemned the politicisation of religion, criticised it as an oppressive patriarchal force, perceived it as a purely personal matter, and so on. We have not been able to come to grips with the complex issues of religion, fundamentalism and communalism. We have not understood our own feelings towards religion, the deep need women and men have for the spiritual, the sense of identity which they derive from it and their acceptance of religion as a way of life and a world view. Perhaps we are handicapped by the rationalist/secular foundation prepared by the pre-Independence generation of nationalists, by an economistic application of Marxism, the criticisms made by the anti-Brahmin movements and our own reactions to communal frenzy into blanking out religion from our minds and our political agenda. But there is no way we can escape it in everyday politics, electoral wrangling and indeed in the lives of women (p. 325).

The most disturbing effects of Hindu nationalist deployment of goddesses for their agenda came to prominence just as Gandhi & Shah published their thoughtful review of the issues at stake in Indian feminism. Escalating communal tensions have further complicated any political resort to Śākta symbolism. In the aftermath of the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque at Ayodhya and consequential communal riots, feminists were confronted by the ease with which women were co-opted into Hindu nationalist agendas to play active parts in the violence, on a scale that manifoldly
outstripped painstaking attempts by secular women’s organisations to support cross-communal bonds between women (Gabriele Dietrich, 1994). Included amongst nationalist leaders who held aloft the glory of the “Hindu nation” were women who advocated aggressive actions against non-Hindus, frequently appealing to nationalist goddesses, Bhārat Mātā or Aṣṭabhūjā, to justify their cause (Basu, 1995; Sarkar, 1998; Bacchetta, 2002).

Longstanding goddess myths and motifs are now invoked to exhort Hindu women to join the battle for the nation. The Durga Vahini, a nationalist women’s organisation, tells women: “Today, Mother India is in danger again. And to save her, it is necessary that Durga’s power is revived” (cited in Kovacs, 2004, p. 377). The Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the most prominent nationalist women’s organisation, shows its adherence to the nationalist movement’s masculinised version of Hinduism by promoting conservative roles for women as heroic mothers and chaste wives (Bacchetta, 2002). In opposition with Mahatma Gandhi’s vision of feminised political activism, the militant Hindu nationalist movement encourages an active martial role for women as celibate female warriors. Human Dūrgas are engaged in the fight for Rāma’s honour and sovereignty rather than their own (Sarkar, 1995; Kovacs, 2004). However, despite the considerable power wielded by women who take up prominent positions in the cause of Hindu nationalism, this female power remains tightly circumscribed to fit a masculinised agenda rather than serving women’s needs for personal and economic security and sexual freedom (Kovacs, 2004; Banerjee, 2006).

Given the co-option of goddess symbolism for political purposes, as well as the concomitant alienating effect on non-Hindus of relying on Hindu religious symbols, calls for secularism in Indian politics are compelling. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1998) has argued that “the authority of majoritarian religious discourse and practice can only be countered .. by a clear-cut and visible secular alternative.” While I do not disagree with the aims of an ethically oriented secularism, I do, however, question the framing that suggests there are only two alternatives. Posing secularism as the sole means of countering fundamentalist views of religion risks playing into the dichotomising tendencies of Hindutva ideologues who are then easily positioned to discredit “Westernised” secularism. Uma Narayan (1997) has cautioned that

…it would be dangerous for feminists in a number of contexts to attempt to challenge prevailing views of ‘religion’ and ‘religious tradition’ purely by resort to ‘secularism.’ Many religious traditions are in fact more capacious than fundamentalist adherents allow. Insisting on humane and
inclusive interpretations of religious traditions might, in many contexts, be crucial components in countering the deployment of religious discourses to problematic nationalist ends.

(p. 35)

The growth of fundamentalist values and actions, and women’s participation in them, determine that feminist responses to questions of women’s communal identification cannot afford to demonise or ignore religion. At the same time, when considering the potentiality within Śākta symbolism for the promotion of women’s social empowerment, these issues clearly demand a critical and cautious approach. Insofar as my research project seeks to engage with the social dimensions and potentials of Śāktism, it represents an attempt to identify and articulate the elements of this tradition that may be more capacious for women.

Some of these elements have been highlighted in recent writings by feminist scholars of Indian origin. Lina Gupta (1991) has argued that the Goddess Kālī not only enables self-transformation but can empower the transformation of patriarchal injustice as well.

Kali represents … a way of facing and transcending any limitation, whether the limitation is self created or imposed by others, thus offering a way of liberating tradition itself from its patriarchal bias (p. 17).

Kālī’s capacity to create her own reality is at the centre of Gupta’s feminist-inspired vision. Vrinda Dalmiya (2000) highlights the devotional context in which Kālī becomes the support and model for “liberative fearlessness” (p. 145). A similar focus on personal spiritual transformation as a prelude to social transformation is also prominent in Neela Bhattacharya Saxena’s (2004) exploration of the power of Kālī-Kāmākhyā to “awaken women to their inherent divinity” (p. 45).

These possibilities for awakening divinity are consonant with a Śākta-Tantric approach, as we shall explore in subsequent chapters. They are also consistent with the emerging ideas of Western spiritual feminists, especially those of Luce Irigaray (1993, 1996,) and Grace Jantzen (1999), who propose becoming divine as both a goal of spiritual practice and a central means of personal and social transformation. Just how spiritual transformation can lead to social transformation is a significant question for feminists. Spiritual movements and solutions to feminist issues are frequently dismissed as being apolitical or naïve, and this can certainly occur. However, as Kalpana Ram (1998) has emphasised and as this contextual introduction to the field of my inquiry has
shown, a purely secular perspective cannot adequately address both the attractions and dilemmas associated with Goddess worship for women in India.

**Personal navigations**

Having emphasised the role of transformation in both feminism and Śāktism it seems important, as part of entering the field of inquiry, to elaborate for the reader the personal circumstances and triggers that propelled my focus on a specific Śākta temple, that of the Goddess Kāmākhya, and informed the experiential context for the pilgrimage undertaken as its centrepiece. In the following chapter, as part of more fully elucidating the methodological rationale and the process for developing its collaborative experiential approach, I will introduce my co-researchers. Here, to complete this introduction to the initiating contexts for my inquiry, I narrate the critical personal experiences that shaped its course.

Kāmākhya had fascinated me since I first read of its pre-eminence as the temple of the *yoni*. While sometimes translated simply as “vulva”, the Sanskrit term *yoni* has always seemed to me to be better, if more decorously, translated by the phrase many Indian scholars use: “the generative organ of the Goddess”. Apte (1988) provides the following translations (here I cite the first two of several related meanings):

1. Womb, uterus, vulva, the female organ of generation.
2. Any place of birth or origin, generating cause, spring, fountain. (p.789)

The Kāmākhya temple marks an ancient site in which the inner sanctum, deep within a natural cave, houses a sacred stone kept moist by a natural spring that flows up through the cave. For hundreds and probably thousands of years this rock has been worshipped as a symbol of the Goddess, and held to be especially sacred during the *ambuvāci* festival when the spring is reddened with mineral deposits flushed out by the monsoon rains, symbolizing the menstrual blood of the Goddess.

Though, as we shall see, the symbol of the *yoni* has helped to earn Kāmākhya’s place of prominence as a key centre of Tantric practice, my desire to visit Kāmākhya was prompted not by the mystique of Tantric sex24 but by the *yoni* as a symbol of female fertility. In 1994, at thirty-four and with no sexual partnership in sight, I was struggling with doubts and fears about my potential for motherhood. To simply

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24 Tantra is of course a much more complex and sophisticated practice than its much publicized association in the popular understanding with sex. See e.g., Gupta, Hoens & Goudriaan, 1979.
attribute this struggle to my awareness of “the biological clock” would be to derogate the profound personal, moral and ethical dilemma this situation posed. Between alternately feeling hopeful, stuck, or trying to ignore it, the idea of laying the whole dilemma before a greater source of wisdom occurred to me.

So, while in India for three months en route to San Francisco to take up doctoral studies, I planned a tour that would lead me through a number of regions to visit important Goddess temples. I began auspiciously in Kāñcīpuram with Kāmākṣī, then travelled to Madurai to the temple of Goddess Mīnākṣī. I visited the Cāmunḍeśwarī temple in Mysore and the temple of Cottanikara in Kerala. Finally I planned a big jump from the southwest of India to the northeast, and scheduled my arrival at the Kāmākhyā temple in Assam to coincide with the full moon. There I felt sure I would find an answer to my dilemma.

As an outsider to the Hindu world I had not quite put together in 1992 that my seeking in this regard could just as well be directed to any of her divine aspects or personalities. This is because Motherhood is so very fundamental to the Goddess’s identity: She is, after all, addressed as Mā. At Gauhati airport on my way to visit Kāmākhyā my plans fell apart.

Stop. Do not pass go.

Instead of providing the momentous spiritual experience I was hoping for, that full moon day on August 13th 1992 was spent in tears and remonstrations with immigration officers at Gauhati airport who eventually sent me back to Kolkata because I lacked the necessary restricted area permit. On this trip Kāmākhyā was beyond reach. Rather I discovered that one does not just “slip through” Kolkata, the city named for Kālī, as I had tried to do the night before, without paying due respects.

After days of grief at my failed plans, and a slowly germinating interest in the dark and fearsome Kālī, it was eventually to Mother Kālī that I made somewhat reluctant obeisance with a formal ritual at her Kālīghat temple. Taken in hand by one of Kālī’s enterprising temple attendants, who remained happily oblivious of my half-hearted intent while he whisked me around the temple site and through the obligatory prayers, I was delivered in the closing stages of the tour to a small, enclosed tree, gnarled and bare, which had hundreds of threads tied to its branches. For some reason the panda (priest) regarded this ritual as especially portentous for me and, handing me threads and bangles, he insisted that I take my turn, as so many Hindu women had
taken theirs, to tie them on the tree and wish for my heart’s desire. So, out of desperation or relief, and in solidarity with the millions of Hindu women whose faith in Mā is unquestioning, I finally found my moment of surrender.

It should be said that moments later I was still unsure what to make of her, as of the special worship I had offered. But I began, slowly, to warm to Kālī-Mā, and to the city that bears her name. Nevertheless, it seemed that she would not let me get away with my doubts. A couple of weeks later when I finally decided to get an icon of her she brought on in me a sudden and extreme menstrual flood that was as if to say, “Who do you think you are to doubt Me?” Three times I very narrowly escaped public embarrassment, saved only by the absorbency of my blood-drenched cotton petticoat and the rich purple of my sari. It occurred to me how fitting it was that she should have claimed her initiation rites in blood: after all, Kālī is reputed to be a bloodthirsty Goddess. Within moments of my realisation the flood stopped.

Though not apparent to me at the time, the week I spent in Kolkata in August 1992 sowed the seeds for the various elements that eventually came together in this doctoral project. At the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Kolkata I met Minati Kar, who enlightened me on the nature of Kālī and then became a friend and collaborator on the pilgrimage I finally managed to Kāmākhyā four years later. At the temple of Kālighat it was the influence of Mā Kālī that turned me into a devotee, persuaded me that my interest in Śakti, the Goddess, should become the focus of my Ph.D. research, and ultimately ensured the fulfilment of my prayers for motherhood.

During the latter months of 1994, while I was again visiting India and ostensibly focussing on the academic project I was hatching, Mā herself seemed imperceptibly to take a hand in overseeing the more personal and covert aspects of the pilgrimage. Barely a month after being transported spiritually at a Kolkata Kāli Pūjā, and very soon after an illuminating visitation by the World Mother, Jagadambā, I conceived in the highly auspicious milieu of Pondicherry-Auroville the little Goddess child I had barely dared to hope and pray for. The following extracts from my journal document the way these events unfolded.
Kolkata 2nd November, 1994

The eve of Kālī Pūjā

The pāndals are up, and Minati, China and I went to Kālighat this morning. First to the temple - crowds, pushing, etc., but we are “picked up” by one “turner” (i.e., he takes his turn as a pūjārī [worshipper, priest] once in a while) and escorted through. Pūjās, touching Kālī-Mā’s feet, garlands, goats with heads chopped off in one fell swoop, and intense beggars. Then shopping, with urchins following us seeking bakshish.

Pūjā evening

The trip to the Ramakrishna mission at Belgaria takes about an hour and a half. Along the way we pass by beautiful and elaborate pāndals, including a number with Jurassic Park themes and one with Kālī inside the dinosaur. She is stunning, appearing sometimes fair, sometimes blue, sometimes black.

At Belgaria she is a beautiful black Kālī, and I am immediately taken by her. Minati and I go through the large auditorium where the pūjā will be held. They are already chanting kirtanas [devotional songs] with musicians' accompaniment.

Women have pride of place in the front of the hall, the men are surrounding and at the back. We watch all the elaborate preparations and garlands galore arriving in readiness for the pūjā, which finally gets underway about 11:00pm. I am transported, especially when the music is going all the time.

Minati translates the lyrics. They are sublime: what it is to be a follower of a crazy girl. One is neither male nor female, since both exist together in the heart. These monks are so reverent and so meticulous in their pūjā. The crowd, too, is very devoted.

Having been exhausted before we came, all trace of tiredness is wiped away, and I feel I can stay all night. This crazy Mother is capable of taking me somewhere beyond anything that ordinary psychological or social awareness has to offer. I am completely drunk. She is all there is.

Soon after the conclusion of the pūjās I travelled south to Chennai where, in consultation with Desikachar, I continued to mull over the significance, both personal and scholarly, of my encounters.

Chennai, mid-November 1994

I woke up at about 2:30am itching uncontrollably. I had heard from my Dad when I embarked on this trip to watch out for the malaria epidemic. So at the height of this nighttime attack of pruritis I began to wonder

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25 Kālī Pūjā is celebrated in Bengal on the dark moon night following Navarātrī.

26 Temporary street auditoria built mostly of bamboo and canvas that house life-size models of the relevant Goddesses and Gods.
whether I was too blasé about such health threats. What was the responsible thing to do in this situation, I wondered, and I thought of asking my teacher for his opinion. But I knew that a potentially overprotective response would feed the anxiety, and that, I was sure, would only exacerbate any health risk.

So instead I summoned up a strong determination that on no account was I going to take on the fear of malaria or of illness, and as I focussed intently I experienced a powerful current of energy beginning to stir in me and circulate through my whole body. It built until I was entirely filled with light and vibration and there was no space anywhere for disease.

In that state I felt my consciousness expand and soar, and as this happened I saw three male figures appear off to the side, steadily diminishing in stature by comparison with the vastness of the energy that was filling and elevating me. I entered a profound state of bliss and clarity, experiencing my mental state as way beyond the reach of any male or indeed human authority.

Then a singular overarching sound vibration came from somewhere. “Jagadambā”, it announced and I suddenly realised that it was the World Mother Herself who was filling me with this light and guiding my path.

In the clarity of this state my sense of participation within her life energy was beyond doubt. It came to me as a kind of bodily revelation that the way in which I would learn to focus the Mother energy in me was through the physical experience of motherhood. No longer a choice, it seemed a spiritual imperative.

Post script: When morning eventually dawned and I returned to an ordinary state of mind, I discovered the source of my itching: a colony of fleas in my mattress!

Two weeks later, in Pondicherry, Uma was conceived.

Pondicherry, 5th December, 1994
Sri Aurobindo’s Mahasamadhi Day

Yesterday morning saw the dawning of a spiritual victory. After the storm and anguish all these months ….

Then yesterday afternoon, finally, Matrimandir. The whole structure, with its extraordinary inner chamber, is really a temple for the future, a place of incredible concentrated Mother force. Words escape me.

Having travelled the fourteen or so kilometres from Pondicherry to visit Auroville, the international township established by The Mother,²⁷ I was keen to visit Matrimandir, the shrine located at its heart. On stepping into the compound I suddenly felt a surge of

²⁷ The Mother referred to here and subsequently is Mirra Alfassa, the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, whom Sri Aurobindo referred to as his śakti. She was herself a great occultist and spiritual teacher. See, for example: Das & Sethna (1978), Iyengar (1978) and Satprem, (1980, 1982, 1987).
energy in my womb. It seemed a powerful visceral emblem of the connection between earth and spirit that the Aurovillian Shrine of the Mother evokes. I only fully came to appreciate some weeks later, after my pregnancy was confirmed, that this experience also marked the moment of Uma’s conception.

The Mother’s founding vision for Auroville, reiterated in a pamphlet displayed at the Pondicherry ashram, elaborates the significance of Matrimandir.

The Matrimandir wants to be the symbol of the Universal Mother according to Sri Aurobindo’s teaching.
Matrimandir is here to teach people that it is not by escaping from the world or ignoring it that they will realise the Divine in life.
Matrimandir must be the symbol of this Truth.
...A place to try to find one’s consciousness.

Unfortunately the sense of auspiciousness surrounding Uma’s conception - unmistakeable to me - was not shared, at least at that stage, by the key people and institutions whose support I sought. Rather than experiencing the cultural idealisation of (expectant) motherhood, I found throughout my pregnancy that I was all too often struggling in the face of numerous insults to uphold a nourishing contact with the sacred sensibility I wanted to surround it.

San Francisco, 11th June, 1995
This whole experience has been a descent and an initiation, made so intense by the hostile cultural context I keep bumping up against. I need a space to tell my story and have it honoured as symptomatic of a pathological culture rather than [being seen as] my personal pathology. I also want to reorient the sense of sacredness to my journey into the feminine and motherhood.

Eventually, after a full 42 weeks of cycling exhilaration and anguish, baby Uma was born - somewhat late, but finally with an intense rush into the world. She instantly became the Goddess-child in my house, whose smile “shamed a million moons” - as the Bengali poet Ramprasad had declared.28 As immensely grateful as I was for the fulfilment of my desire for a child I nonetheless subsequently had cause to regret that in my pre-conception appeal to Kāli-Mā I had somehow neglected to bring to her attention the need for a relationship that would provide ongoing support and nurture

28 “Giri sits up, lovingly/ Takes Gauri on His lap/ And smiling says: ‘Little mother, here/ Is the moon,’ handing Her a mirror./ Seeing Her face in the glass/ She’s happy,./ And so shames / A million moons./ Shri Ramprasad says: He’s a rich man/ In whose house the Mother lives,/ And, saying this, he lays Her down/ In Her small bed, fast asleep” (Nathan & Seely, 1982).
for both Uma and me. Throughout Uma’s first year I experienced a sense of overwhelming responsibility as I struggled to come to terms with the combined emotional, physical and practical demands of trying to be both mother and father in our new family unit. The particular challenge for me was to overcome the sense of shock and abandonment I felt at being left to undertake parenthood alone, and to then go on to create pathways for Uma and I to grow and flourish together.

Not surprisingly after all this, the search which first enticed me toward Kāmākhya had changed its emphasis by the time I finally arrived there in August 1996. And yet its theme of motherhood had become in many ways more complex and, for me at least, more prominent. Uma was by then almost one year old and accompanied our group as the seventh pilgrim on the collaborative journey that frames this doctoral research. She subsequently spent her first birthday in India and undoubtedly had her own hand in influencing the conversations and events to be reported here. For my part, I entered the final stage of the journey to the temple of the yoni ...

Post-यात्रा reflections: Melbourne, January 1997

… in the hope that it would provide Uma with a blessing that would serve to counteract the negative influences that I felt had surrounded us up till then, and with my own need to reassert the sacredness of motherhood and celebrate the bond between Uma and me. I needed to find a way for us to be alone together in the world with dignity and with the respect of those around us. At the same time I felt somehow forgotten or abandoned by the Goddess and I needed to regain the faith I had lost.

(In)forming the text

Intertwining strands within the thesis narrative will alternately weave its symbolic, practical, political, personal and academic dimensions. The following chapter will take up the research story, elaborating the detailed methodological approach that was developed in collaboration with the co-researchers, whose voices join the narrative as its central protagonists. Chapter 3 develops a basis in Śākta traditions and in my preparatory explorations for understanding the philosophical and experiential dimensions of pilgrimage, यात्रा. Chapter 4 brings us to Kāmākhya; it describes our encounters at the temple and pursues our exploration and feminist (re)interpretation of its history and longstanding practices. This is followed in chapter 5 by further investigation of the Tantric dimensions of Kāmākhya, of her role as Goddess of desire and possible implications for women. In the final chapter we return to consider the broader cross-cultural intersections, difficulties and possibilities arising from our
exploration of Śāktism and the repercussions for feminist framings of power and empowerment.

The kinds of questions that (in)form our experiential inquiry include:

- What kind of power is signalled by the notions of Śakti (as Goddess) and śakti (as power)? How is this power accessed?

- Are there capacious elements of the Śākta tradition that can support feminist-oriented readings and (re)appropriations?

- How can we account for disjunctures between spiritual understandings of Śāktism and social realities in terms of women’s status?

- How might an understanding of Śāktism intersect with feminist agendas for women’s empowerment?

- What are the ethical implications of Western feminists’ engagement with Hindu Goddesses?
Chapter 2

THE RESEARCH STORY

Interdisciplinary work, so much discussed these days, is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact, is willing to let itself go). … Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one.

(Barthes, 1984, as cited in Clifford, 1986)

Like the pilgrimage to Kāmākhyā that became the core of the research, the methods adopted to negotiate the complexities of the inter-cultural domain it sought to investigate were developed progressively through a process of collaboration. Together, with pivotal emphasis on our dialogic interpretations of Śākta perspectives, the co-researchers created a process of inquiry that drew inspiration from the syncretic symbolism of the Devī, who appears many-armed and in diverse forms. From its conception the project’s methodological positioning was necessarily established within an interpretive frame and underpinned by a feminist orientation.

This chapter will present the theoretical basis for the approach taken, tracing its unfoldment through narrating the stages of preparation, introducing the co-researchers, and demonstrating how I came to conceptualise the particular research framework we developed. While tracking these processes I will discuss in turn the key methodological perspectives from which we borrowed: feminist research, collaborative inquiry, heuristic inquiry and ethnography. I hope to show how my research activity all along entailed a heuristic and self-reflexive process in which I was both shaping and being shaped by the inquiry process.

Concurrent with my personal heuristic I was repeatedly challenged to consider different disciplinary viewpoints as I applied an academic lens to the material I was gathering. In this regard also I was helped immeasurably by my co-researchers and their range of academic and personal experience.

Kolkata, 19th October, 1994, from my fieldnotes
It's quite extraordinary, actually, the way it's turning out. … Frédérique is French and an anthropologist; Lisa is American and a scholar of religion; and I have a psychology background and Australian heritage … Madhu began her work on Tantra through its art. She is currently a research fellow at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, and did her Ph.D. in England at Oxford on Tantra, specifically on the Śrīvidyā tradition. Minati Kar is head of the department of Sanskrit at Visva
Bharati, Shantiniketan, the university established by Tagore. She is an advaitin, a non-dualist, but a devotee still of Kālī. ... Rita Ray, whom I'm yet to meet, is heading the department of sociology at Utkal University in Bhubaneswar. ... The dialogue should be quite remarkable.

Emerging from a hothouse of conversations, observations, readings and recursive reflections, this academic research text is intentionally a disciplinary hybrid. It draws from a multiplicity of perspectives to fashion its own particular trajectory, thus evoking Barthes' “interdisciplinary work ... that belongs to no one”. At the same time, as I attempt to (re)present not one voice but several voices in conversation, I hope that I will succeed - in some measure at least - in making this a work that belongs to no one but to all those who participated.

**Feminist orientation**

The imbrication of social power and knowledge construction are central concerns of feminist research. Feminist standpoint theory thus “claims that all knowledge attempts are socially situated and that some of these objective social locations are better than others for knowledge projects” (Harding, 1993, p. 56). In keeping with a feminist standpoint my research began from the assumption that women themselves would be best placed to consider how Śākta perspectives might be employed to their spiritual and social benefit.

Something akin to this position was suggested by Ajit Mookerjee (1988), who wrote that:

> The challenge of śakti (feminine force) with its vast Śākta literature has not been properly presented to the world from the feminine viewpoint to bring out its truth. Even casual observations on the Durga episode by a woman writer may give a glimpse of a perspective which has been ignored and distorted by an extreme phallic culture (p. 8).

To the extent that this may be taken to suggest the value of focusing our interpretive emphasis on “women’s experiences, told in women’s words” (Smith, 1997, p. 394) Mookerjee’s view does appear to hint at a feminist standpoint. His words were undoubtedly influential in motivating aspects of my initial feminist-oriented readings concerning Hindu goddesses. This coherence rests on taking into account that Mookerjee’s view of a feminine viewpoint is very much informed by a Śākta perspective that sees women participating fully in the “feminine force” of the Goddess.
However, Mookerjee’s modernist emphasis on “truth” in the singular and his tendency to essentialise “the feminine viewpoint” as common to all women is problematic to postcolonial (and indeed most contemporary) feminism. This kind of problem became evident very soon in my explorations when I discovered that not all my Hindu Indian women friends found it helpful to relate the concept of śākta to their own personal empowerment as women. While many Western-based goddess enthusiasts have argued for a more specifically feminist view of śākti (e.g. Sjoo & Mor, 1987) as fundamentally empowering for women, such positions are frequently insufficiently nuanced to escape the essentialist charge.

A fully articulated feminist standpoint must not only seek to bring forward an affirmative reading of Śākta texts but must grapple also with the effects on women of existing Śākta practices and with women’s involvement in them (as is evident from the issues of feminism and religion in India raised in the previous chapter). Taking a feminist standpoint requires “an epistemology and politics of engaged, accountable positioning” (Haraway, 1991, p. 196). It thus establishes an intention, followed by a commitment to work one’s way through “fraught, noninnocent, discursive, material, collective practices” (Haraway, 1997, p. 304) in order to achieve a situated, ethically sensitive understanding of women’s experiences and of the limitations and inspirations that their social and spiritual circumstances give rise to.

The feminist standpoint we adopted aimed to probe those aspects of Śākta tradition that might afford women with positive symbols and values, while at the same time problematising the social conditions and contradictions that impose limitations on the realisation of such potentials. Emphasising the possibilities for women in Śākta perspectives seemed to me to be consonant with a feminist orientation to social science for women, described by Marcia Westkott (1990) as “Opposed to .. social science about women... A social science for women does not exclude information about women, but informs the knowledge it seeks with an intention for the future rather than a resignation to the present” (pp. 63-64). Our collaborative work therefore involved a hermeneutic enterprise. Looking at tradition and myth through a feminist lens that highlighted women’s experience, we sought to reveal those aspects of the Goddess’s power we found to be empowering of us as women and that might provide feminist alternatives to patriarchal or communalist readings.
Involving women scholars in commenting on the Śākta tradition from a female perspective provided a counterpoint to the gender bias of traditional commentaries. But it was not simply a matter of exchanging male panditas for female panditas. Where necessary we chose to reappropriate the Devi’s wisdom, privileging woman-identified interpretations of tradition over those we felt were over-determined by the patriarchal gaze of male priests and sages. Our feminist standpoint was therefore constituted by altering the gender focus, and thus altering the values framework that informed the way we went about the research. I continued this orientation when incorporating my reading of texts and historical materials into the research narrative.

Having problematised Mookerjee’s notion of looking at Śaktism from a “feminine viewpoint” we might also, taking a postmodern perspective, question the legitimacy of adopting a feminist standpoint. Through the lens of postmodern theory feminist agendas concerning women’s liberation from patriarchal oppression are seen to replicate enlightenment values of modernity and its predilection for grand narratives—thus betraying what Lyotard viewed as a totalising and consequently indefensible obsession. Postmodern challenges to feminism have resulted in multiple reframings of feminist perspectives, at times undercutting feminist agendas but also offering “new freedoms” (Ramazanoğlu with Holland, 2002).

Deconstructing universalist knowledge claims has opened up spaces for feminists to grapple with the diversity of women’s experiences and positionings (e.g. Narayan & Harding, 2000). The discomfort that caused me, as a Western researcher, to reject from the outset the idea of conducting a solo investigation of the Hindu Goddess seems to parallel (in a more rudimentary way) the kinds of ethical considerations that inform such decentring discourses. I could not conceive of conducting a cross-cultural inquiry on this topic in the absence of direct, significant interchange with Indian women devotees. Collaborating from a feminist standpoint with Indian women in India entailed a (re)negotiation of female subjectivities in relation to Śākta perspectives as well as feminist deconstruction of the intersections and divergences between its spiritual discourses and patriarchal social structures. The result is not a grand narrative but a tapestry of little narratives, weaving plots, counter-plots and some threads of emerging possibility.

That Śaktism (in common with other Indian forms of spirituality) and feminism share a concern with liberation puts them at odds with postmodern suspicions
concerning liberation narratives and their appeal to universals. Yet, the postmodern distinction between different discursive fields and their “truths” provides a helpful frame for considering where the two forms of liberation – spiritual and social – converge and diverge. This question is plainly at the heart of this project.

Considerably more theoretical overlap between postmodern theory, Śaktism and feminism is discernible in the central interest of all three in the notion of power, its origins and its impacts. Foucault’s analysis of power, axiomatic in much postmodern thinking, controverts the view that power is located in institutionalised social structures, instead holding (famously) that “power is everywhere” (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). Rather than being construed as a force of oppression, Foucault sees power as constitutive: “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (1979, p. 194). In this Foucault’s continental philosophy substantively echoes Śaktism’s understanding of power as cosmically constitutive, as Hugh Urban (2001) has argued:

Like Foucault’s more nuanced model of power, the concept of Šakti in Hindu Tantra is something much more than a top-down force of oppression; it is, instead, a shifting network or chain of relations, emanating from all parts of the cosmos and the social organism; it is a productive and positive, not a negative and oppressive force… (p. 785)

The postmodern view that power is already everywhere presents opportunities as well as dilemmas for feminist analyses of power relations. Foucault’s emphasis on power as shifting rather than inhering in fixed social structures and institutions, and his highlighting of the corollary role of resistance, has inspired some feminists to take up postmodern tools in order to disrupt the status quo and thus expose and undermine patriarchal discourses. Judith Butler’s (1990) work, for example, seeks to trouble binary categories of gender so as to destabilise the constraints they exert over identities and behaviour. A similar project to destabilise may be seen, as Urban argues, in Tantra’s practices of transgression.

In this Šakti Yātrā project we were concerned not so much with the esoteric (and controversial) practices of Tantra as with decoding from its female-oriented symbolism and mythology potentials for feminist resistance to restrictive norms of femininity. At times the positions of our group of co-researchers coalesced; at others our divergent interpretations and convictions came to the fore. In keeping with postmodern feminist insights into the “multiple, partial, contingent & situated” nature
of knowledge(s) (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 76), I quote many of our dialogical encounters throughout this research text, endeavouring to bring the range of voices (and the tensions between them) to bear in my analyses of the issues discussed.

A still more pervasive concurrence between our orientation and perspectives elaborated in postmodern feminism is our employment of “redefinition” (Irene Gedalof, 1999), an approach exemplified most notably amongst Western feminists in the work of Luce Irigaray. Irigaray’s project of redefinition proceeds from the assumption that “woman” as a category has been appropriated by patriarchal discourse. She contends that woman must return to herself in order to find out “what or who could she be” (Irigaray, 2004, p. viii). This theme recurs throughout my personal narrative and is echoed in many elements of my co-researchers’ stories.

The same theme inheres specifically in our joint interest in re-appropriating Goddess symbolism for women’s self-empowerment and is fundamental to the process of spiritual inquiry, as well as pilgrimage (as we shall see). In this there are also conspicuous sympathies between Irigaray’s ideas and the assumptions we brought to our research.

This margin of freedom and potency (puissance) that gives us the authority yet to grow, to affirm and fulfil ourselves as individuals and members of a community, can be ours only if a God in the feminine gender can define it and keep it for us (Irigaray, 1993, p. 72).

Here the potency of cultivating a sense of female divinity emerges as a key premise in Irigaray’s project for women’s self-actualisation. However, while Irigaray’s more recent explorations into spirituality, relationship and Tantra may well provide tools for Western feminist projects of redefinition, she neglects to engage directly and substantively with the Indian context from which she draws her inspiration, or with the cautions and critiques of Indian feminists. This leaves Irigaray’s project, insofar as it seeks to engage unidirectionally with Indian traditions and goddesses, vulnerable to postcolonial criticism of the appropriative use of Hindu cultural symbols by Westerners for their own ends (Joy, 2003; Dobia, 2007).

Arguing for the benefits of theorising “in a postcolonial mode,” Irene Gedalof (1999) advocated that white Western feminists could “ask how listening to voices from elsewhere might complicate our view of ourselves” (p. 6). An emphasis on listening to and learning from Indian women was paramount from the outset in my formulation of the project. The complicating and enriching effects of engaging with the voices of all the
co-researchers became more strikingly apparent as the collaborative enterprise got underway.

**Collaborative inquiry**

*Amherst MA, 5th May 1995 by phone* *(to Brenda in San Francisco)*

*Lisa:* I think that really how you determine whether something's feminist is whether it recognizes the element of interdependency and the element of mutuality and the element of learning through relationship.

Choosing a collaborative research approach was a means of revoking the hierarchy of researcher and researched, and replacing it with a process of dialogic inquiry based on shared interest and mutuality. From the beginning I viewed the co-creation of the research agenda as essential to the collaborative framework; hence establishing the group of co-researchers was the necessary first undertaking.

In collaborative experiential research the subject's role expands to all phases of research. It begins with shared topic formulation - the participants acting as partners or consultants in shaping the research focus, selecting research procedures and their implementations; collaborating in data analysis and publication, or at least monitoring publications before their dissemination.

*(Shulamit Reinharz, 1983, p. 182)*

Given the domains of my interest in Śāktism I wondered how I could go about locating potential collaborators. What criteria could help me identify the kinds of women who would be interested and able to collaborate fully in helping to shape the research? Extrapolating from classical yoga principles of *karma* (action), *jñāna* (knowledge) and *bhakti* (devotion) I elaborated broad criteria: each co-researcher should be a woman with a background both of scholarship (*jñāna*) and personal devotion (*bhakti*) to the Hindu Goddess who was also sympathetic to feminist values (*karma*). This project-specific interpretation of *karma* simply assumed that co-researchers should have an interest in the application of Śākta principles to feminist-oriented empowerment.

While these criteria helped to inform deliberations over whom to invite, they were applied loosely to gauge interest and compatibility rather than to exclude. From the outset I decided to limit the number of co-researchers to six. I reasoned that depth of collaboration would only be possible with a small group that should be equally comprised of Indian and Western participants.
My first invitation was to Frédérique Marglin, whom I had heard speak about her anthropological work on women and Indian spirituality at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. I subsequently wrote to Frédérique about my idea of engaging a group of women scholars in some kind of collaborative research into the Hindu Goddess and the notion of female power. My initial proposal was rather staid and formal, however, and seemed to fall a little flat until Lisa Hallstrom joined discussion of the project in June 1994 when the three of us were attending a conference on “The Sacred Feminine”. It was Lisa who, over breakfast with Frédérique and me at San Francisco’s Cliff House, suggested the idea of an Indian pilgrimage. This was the creative spark that triggered our excitement and set in motion the travelling research trajectory that ensued. By the end of this meeting we had arrived at the project title, Šakti Yātrā, and resolved to meet again to further our plans.

The collaborative ethos was thus fundamental to the planning process from the beginning, with the project taking shape via a series of discussions beginning in San Francisco, then moving across the U.S. to Milo, Maine, for an inaugural ritual and a weekend of focussed conversation with Frédérique Marglin and Lisa Hallstrom. I subsequently made a fieldtrip to India and met first with Madhu Khanna in Delhi, then headed to Kolkata to meet with Minati Kar and to experience first hand a Bengali Durgā Pūjā, the most significant and ubiquitous Goddess festival in India. From there I travelled to Bhubaneswar to meet for the first time with Rita Ray.

Though in these conversations I’m sure I must have often seemed hesitant and vague about exactly what it was I wanted to do in this study that related the notion of śakti with the empowerment of women, I was gratified that each of the three Indian women I approached in 1994 were immediately interested in the topic and in the idea of collaboration. Subsequently the Goddess herself seemed to take a hand in shaping the project when, after attending Lakṣmi Pūjā 29 in Kolkata, I won an air ticket that would bring me back to India for another round of planning in March 1995, enabling us to sharpen the focus and logistics for our research and in the process strengthen its collaborative agenda.

The conversations that provided the basis of the research data thus emphasised an “intersubjectivity of meaning [that] takes the form of dialogue from which

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29 The Goddess Lakṣmi presides, among other things, over wealth and prosperity. She is worshipped in Bengal immediately following the more elaborate Durgā Pūjā on the full moon.
knowledge is an unpredictable emergent rather than a controlled outcome” (Marcia Westkott, 1990, p. 62). Still more than a quality of mutuality, I endeavoured – with limited success – to create a climate in which the collaborators would feel a sense of personal ownership of the project. Ultimately I think this sense of ownership did evolve, despite having had our collaborative ethos complicated by the withdrawal for personal reasons first of Frédérique and finally of Lisa. It is a testimony to the enthusiasm and commitment of Kathleen Ernsl and Elinor Gadon that they were prepared (in Elinor’s case on very short notice) to step in with such grace.

**Collaborators**

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

Devi Māhātmya, translation by Thomas Coburn, 1991

In deference to the Goddess and her pre-eminence in the endeavour we were planning, Lisa, Frédérique and I determined to begin our personal and scholarly collaboration in the Šakti yātrā project in a way that would help to confer auspiciousness. Though painfully aware of our lack of expertise (and authority) we also knew that, by way of offering respects, it behooves the seeker to begin any appeal to the deity with a ritual invocation. Hence we consulted an almanac, chose a date and gathered on a full moon in August 1994 for an inaugural ritual.

Two days of intense conversation followed, ranging over our personal attractions to India and goddess traditions, our struggles with creating a space in an academic context, and our reflections on how to proceed with this kind of project. In this inauguration of the collaborative process the overlapping threads of our individual stories became apparent, as well as some quite distinct and unexpected divergences that stretched my preconceptions. For instance, on hearing Lisa’s and Frédérique’s stories of their encounters with Šakti, I realised that my own fascination with the mythology of the Goddess was only one of many paths to establishing a relationship with her.

*Milo Maine, 21st August, 1994*

Frédérique: Here I am as an anthropologist and I’m really being an anthropologist, and then what happens over the twenty odd years I’ve been going to Orissa, is that slowly on the side - it has nothing to do with my work - I am falling almost so gradually that I don’t notice it into a relationship and a practice. I can’t talk about my personal practice with my intellectual friends in India. It's such a profound thing; that step is the last that would be taken. But, it's like I have a schizophrenic set of friends. I have my Delhi friends, Calcutta friends, Madras friends, you
know, city friends, all trained the Western way, all intellectuals, even though they're all critical of the West. And then my Oriya friends, my local friends who don't speak English, who are innocent of the Western tradition and who live it. So the irony is that they're the ones who have really transformed me.

**Milo Maine, 22nd August, 1994**

*Lisa:* If I tell the story of how I came to the Goddess, the Goddess isn't necessarily in the story. That sounds crazy, but I came here in reaction to some other things. I came here when I came to a dead-end and suddenly She was there. It didn't happen because I studied her or I read stories about her. That's not how it happened, ironically, even though I have studied her.

I've never found myths helpful. I relate to the Goddess really as the *śakti* that is awakened inside me.

*Frédérique:* Because that's your experience. …

*Lisa:* It came from my experience, because my first experience of the Goddess was through deep awakened *kundalini* meditation.

These examples disclose the first of various ways in which the process of collaboration served to challenge and enlarge my sense of what the Goddess could mean. They served also as a touchpoint for the quality of inquiry we hoped to engender through our collaboration with each other and with the Indian women we sought to invite to join the research endeavour.

**Milo, Maine, 21st August, 1994**

*Lisa:* We're going in it to learn.

*Brenda:* It's a gift.

*Frédérique:* It can only be a gift if it has been a gift to us first.

*Lisa:* And if we come in with an attitude of how much we have to learn from these Indian women. What we're saying is, “Share with us. If you can, try to articulate for us what it's been like to grow up with this consciousness.”

Noticeable in the transcripts of these initiatory conversations was the explicitly counter-colonial intent that, from the project’s inception, informed our desire to establish a fully collaborative process with Indian colleagues.

**Milo, Maine, 22nd August, 1994**

*Lisa:* It's open-ended because it is collaborative, and so we're waiting to meet our Indian counterparts before we know…

*Frédérique:* What will emerge.

*Lisa:* What we want it to be, which gives them a part in creating something as opposed to serving our needs.

*Frédérique:* Exactly.

*Brenda:* Yes. Now we need to hear from them and see how that goes. It really resonated with me a few times during our conversations how interesting it would be to discuss all these issues with the Indian
women. Also, I was thinking if we were with the Indian women, how would the nature of this conversation be different?

Frédérique: It would be very different.
Lisa: Very different. We'd be using different language, we'd be sharing different things.

Our priority from here was clearly to identify and engage the Indian women scholars who might join our collaborative enterprise. Together we came up with the names of three contacts we thought might be interested: Minati Kar, Madhu Khanna, and Rita Ray. I subsequently wrote to each of them to set up a meeting about the project during my upcoming visit to India.

In September 1994 I arrived in Delhi in order to meet first with Madhu. I had not met her previously, though I had heard of her reputation as an eminent scholar and knew of her collaboration with Ajit Mookerjee in co-authoring The Tantric Way. I also knew through an item in a feminist magazine that Madhu was interested in feminist interpretations of Hindu goddesses. Feeling my comparatively neophyte status, I made my way to Madhu's house in southern Delhi with some awe and a great deal of anticipation. She invited me in, arranged some tea, and we immediately began talking about the notion of śakti and how it might be approached. Mostly I listened intently as Madhu, with her characteristic incisive and articulate manner, expounded her broad knowledge of both Indian traditions and Western scholarship, peppering the discussion with her personal views and experiences as a follower of Tantra.

**Delhi, 25th September, 1994**

Madhu: My personal orientation to Śāktism is through the path of Tantra. That's a very different path. One of the ways in which it differs, at least the path that I'm following, from, say, Vedānta Śāktism is that the content of bhakti has a different flavour in Tantric worship because the idea of surrender as we know it in Vaiṣṇavism is rooted in emotion. Of course there's a great deal of emotional bhakti in Tantric worship as well, but the form of bhakti that Tantra teaches, at least the form of Tantra that I'm acquainted with in my life, is that the most important thing is to maintain awareness. In other words, if there is no jñāna about the notion of śakti, and the theology, and the various components of ritual, the ritual will be meaningless. So in this form of worship understanding and comprehensibility plays a very important part, so it is jñāna-oriented bhakti, not just emotional bhakti where you just dissolve into the sea of love as it is in Vaiṣṇavism.

In the tradition that I follow, which is the tradition of Śrīvidyā there jñāna is very important because you have to know so many things for things to work out for you. You've got to know the whole creed, the
whole philosophy, the krama of worship - and I don't think that just emotion is the right instrument to attain that sort of thing. It's also very much to do with the invocation of power. If one is meeting the Goddess in traditional religion through the path of bhakti then power in some sense is identified with ego, whereas in our tradition it is nothing to do with ego, it is just pure consciousness. That is the ideological difference. We are on the path of the viras. Vira is the heroic one, and we are very radical in our codes and we don't make those distinctions. No caste distinctions apply to us. Rules of purity and impurity are reduced considerably, and the aim is to become the Goddess. That is the sādhana. The aim is not to just surrender to the Goddess and dissolve into her personality. That's not the aim of Tantric sādhana. Tantric sādhana is that you become what you worship. It's a very important idea to become. Having become the Goddess you should worship the Goddess, and even the process of becoming is through feminine symbols, of sakti. There's a whole yoga involved. Even the initiation is to do with sakti - saktipāta. Unless you get your saktipāta you cannot really touch those subliminal levels of awareness. There's no way, because that dormant energy has to be aroused by the guru, has to be transmitted. So even the mode of initiation is sakti, the end is sakti, the starting point is sakti. It's a very distinctive tradition within Hinduism. That's the point I was trying to make.

Brenda: How did you get involved in this path of Tantra and in particular of Śrīvidyā?

Madhu: I was always attracted by Tantra from a very young age, and I was very fortunate. I wanted to study Tantric iconography, especially goddess images and abstract yantras, and that led me to write a book on yantras as you know. But then when I met Ajit Mookerjee, he opened another door in my life because he had a very big collection of art and I used to do a little bit of research work with him. So I started reading images first. Then I realised that Tantra is not just images, it's much more. By that stage I had written two popular books on Tantra, one with him and one on my own, and then I went into study of Sanskrit as a language. From there I moved on to a doctorate on Śrīvidyā: It just sort of overran itself. It was one of those things that just happen. It came together by itself, and then I realised that now there is no way I can move out of it. I just feel I'm surrounded by it. I'm part of a very complicated Tantric mandala.

Brenda: Once it grabs you that's it. (laughing)

Madhu: Yes. The thing is, I feel that one doesn't choose these things. You're chosen.

Brenda: There's no choice. It's choiceless action. You were meant to do this so you did it.

When I came back from England I was very excited about Santoṣī Mā and I started keeping her vrata [vow]. I used to keep her vrata and after one year of keeping her vrata I said, “Why the hell am I keeping her

30 Krama denotes a step, or, as here, a step-wise sequence of actions to be taken in the process of worship.
vratae I don't like to offer gram [split lentils] to the Goddess. My Goddess is Rājarājeśvarī, which is Tripurasundarī, and she loves wonderful food and best clothes. Why am I being so miserly and miserable offering bland grams to the Goddess?”

So I told Santosī Mā, please forgive me, I'd rather return to Tripurasundarī. I'm very happy with Tripurasundarī and her vratas because there is no denial.

So, you have to choose. Everything has to be in terms of your own inclinations.

Despite this latter test of faith Madhu spoke convincingly and emphatically, with the authority of an insider. While there were parallels between her path and the ways that Frédérique, Lisa and I had sought to pursue our interest in Śāktism via both personal and academic inquiry, Madhu expressed a sense of conviction that derived authenticity not only from personal experience but from a sense of clear identification with her own Hindu inheritance. On my subsequent trip I asked her:

Delhi, 24th March, 1995

Brenda: What attracts you to this project?

Madhu: It's basically the interactive quality, that's all. One can read books and one can decipher concepts, but it would be very interesting to know how women who know something about the Goddess within the range of their own discipline relate to it in terms of their own lives, given all the problems of contemporary living and contemporary struggles that we're all facing. It's a personalised approach and also the fact that here you're trying to bring together two cultures, East and West, and you're trying to build bridges.

The collaboration itself, with the possibility of rich contexts for dialogue about what the Goddess could mean in our own lives, was thus as central to Madhu’s attraction to the project as it was to my intentions for it.

Having been affirmed as well as challenged by Madhu’s immediate interest, I travelled to Kolkata where the annual Goddess pūjā season was just getting under way. I was reacquainted there with Minati Kar, whom I had met during my first unscheduled visit to the city two years earlier. Minati spent her time between Shantiniketan, where she was head of the department of Sanskrit at the Tagore University, and Kolkata where she worked in the research institute at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. During my many subsequent Kolkata stopovers Minati and her husband proved to be very kind and generous hosts. With the 1994 Durgā pūjā celebrations as a backdrop I began my conversations with Minati by asking what it meant for her to be a devotee of Kālī.
Kolkata, 11th October, 1994

Minati: We have grown up in one tradition. In our family tradition we have seen the pūjās, but I was also brought up in a boarding school where it was mainly Brahmo Samaj. Our school had that tradition. When we went to the pūjās in our ancestral home, so I knew what pūjā was, and we had also the sacrifices, these things. We also had Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā and also Śiva which are worshipped throughout the year. From my childhood I have seen this worship, and also I have seen the Kālī pūjā.

We were in certain very remote places in the coalfields where we have seen the Kālī pūjā in the traditional way, in the dark night and with the goat sacrifice, and it was really something which makes you shrink in your heart. That atmosphere should be there. You see, it should be dark. They call it the dark night amāvasyā. We had so much festival. So when it is the dark night and you have the lights, really you can feel the thrill, there is a thrill in your heart to see the pūjā. So we have seen that. But in our family tradition we have seen the Durgā pūjā and the chanting of the Čandra. I was in that tradition.

Then in my childhood I had a Sanskrit scholar who was also an ascetic, so he gave me the dikṣa, initiation into Kālī. At that time I did not know anything about the chanting of the mantras or their meaning, because in that boarding school I was in that Brahmo Samaj influence. I'm not so regularly sitting in one place and chanting or whatever, but it automatically goes on with me. Whenever I'm doing or going out - whatever, or sitting in a train - wherever, then it automatically comes to me. I think that mantra which was given to me has some power also. It gives me some inner strength.

I have seen in many times of difficulty that I could overcome that difficulty. When I'm staying and teaching in Shantiniketan I stay alone in the house. It's a very big compound and there is nobody there on the first floor where I'm staying, but I'm never frightened. There is no fear in me as such. In that room if I chant the mantra, or sometimes I chant the stotras [hymns] of Kālī, that gives me a real inner strength.

I am not a sādhika as such because I have not abandoned all my desires and all that, but I don't have so much desire also because all material things that we need, I possess. So there is no hankering for getting this and that. But still, suppose I want to build up a career. I'm in a position and I want a higher position, like that. Still there is no hankering. If it comes it comes. I'm not sad if it is not coming but I will be glad if it comes - that way.

I never talk about these things with people because there are so many people who don't know how to take these things. I think it has given me sufficient strength to overcome loneliness, to overcome fear, and to be in a blissful mood all the time. I laugh, I talk, but I'm never sorrowful at heart. I also feel pain to see somebody ill; I try to help people. This has given me some inner strength.

31 Brahmo Samaj is a Hindu movement which arose in 19th century Bengal emphasizing that the only real divinity is the absolute, formless aspect of Brahma. Followers of the Brahmo Samaj eschew worship of deities with form.
Like that I think I am doing a sādhana which is not to sit in one place or on a special auspicious day: every day is auspicious to me, every day dawns and it's good for me. Suppose there is something like I fell down and broke my leg. I think, “It could be worse.” Now this injury has happened to my ankle. I take everything in the optimistic way, not the pessimistic way. …

I think I have a very good grace of God on me because whenever I have wanted something I have never suffered. I have got it. After I was married I managed all my studies. Without the help of my in-laws or my husband I couldn't have achieved as much as I have. You know, to do the family duties and also to go on studying, writing books, giving talks and all these things, and specially to stay away from the house, it is a great thing to achieve I think. Everything has happened through some other force which has worked in me. Sometimes I'm very much aware, I always feel that something is enveloping me and guiding me or protecting me all the time. Still I won't call myself a sādhika, but I have a feeling all the time. So this is what it is.

Minati: You may worship Kālī once a month or at any time you like. All the time you utter the name, like Rāmprasād did. But you know I am an Advaitin and my special interest for study is Śaṅkara, Śaṅkara Vedānta. What I've pursued in my studies is the Vedānta philosophy of Śaṅkara, but I'm chanting the mantra of Kālī (laughs). I don't know how it came about. I was not quite doing any work on Kālī but sometimes I have written some things. Somehow many people have come to me asking about Kālī and Śakti and all that. So I think that Kālī is my guiding Goddess, and that is so powerful in me it means I can't do without it. Even if I want to go away I can't.

Brenda: She's got you.

Minati: Yes. She's got me.

As a Sanskritist and philosopher Minati had little experience of the kind of emergent methodology I was proposing. Steeped in the Kālī worship of her native Bengal, it was the opportunity to explore a shared interest in the Goddess, as well as her faith in the Kālī-inspired serendipity of our meeting, that spurred Minati's involvement in the project and sustained her willingness to participate - in spite of diffident feelings over a perceived lack of feminist credentials.

Kolkata, 18th March, 1995

Minati: The picture is not very clear still what we are going to do or what I am expected to do, but since I am interested in Śakti and in Kālī I thought I might get involved.

Brenda: So I should try to clarify the picture a little bit if I can.

Minati: Actually when you begin something then you don't know but you have to begin from somewhere. So I think once if all of us or even three or four of us could sit together and talk about it then we could get a better idea. This is more of an experiment than a book compilation. Since I don't deal with feminist studies very much - I have only read about it, and I have my own thinking - you may find that
others, like Rita who is in sociology, know better. What I have written or I have done, or what I think of Kālī or Śakti that is my personal thing - not that I have discussed it with many people.

Though, along the lines of Minati’s suggestion, I had hopes of being able to bring together the group of Indian women for at least one advance meeting, it did not eventuate. Instead, I continued to facilitate communication amongst the assembling co-researchers by distributing detailed meeting transcripts and project notes, and through reflecting back the views of others as my conversations with each of the co-researchers progressed. As indicated above, I chose to interpret the requirements for feminist orientation inclusively, leaving it to the invited participants to determine for themselves whether they resonated with the criteria I had specified and whether they felt drawn to the specific focus on what Śaktism could offer to women’s empowerment. Minati’s decision to participate in our “different” kind of research brought a crucial voice to our joint project, enriching our fieldwork with her intimate knowledge of Śākta philosophy. After its conclusion her verdict on the collaborative adventure as “a grand experience” affirmed its mutual benefit.

Between Durgāpūjā and Kālīpūjā in 1994 I travelled south from Kolkata to Bhubaneswar to meet up with Rita Ray, a sociologist colleague of Frédérique’s. I knew only at that stage that Rita had worked with Frédérique on evaluations of development projects and that Frédérique had stayed with her when in Orissa. I too was invited to stay. Since Rita preferred to talk informally at first, avoiding taping, my fieldnotes are the only record of my first Bhubaneswar visit.

**Bhubaneswar, 22nd October, 1994 – fieldnotes**

Rita met me at the station here. “Are you waiting for someone?” she said, “Who?” She is a strong, earthy woman, dressed in a Bengali sari, very much the hospitable mother/sister, self-possessed and welcoming without any element of overbearingness. She lives on the campus at Utkal, Vani Vihar with her two delightful children, Srirupa, who is 15 and in year 10, the last year of high school, and Srimoy, a ten-year-old only slightly mischievous boy.

Becoming part of the household for my five-day stay meant meeting and interacting with Rita’s children, servants, students, colleagues and her 82 year old mother who, I was stunned to hear, had given birth to eighteen children of whom thirteen had survived. There was a constant stream of telephone calls and visitors to Rita’s house. In the midst of this Rita coordinated a myriad of activities, including providing me with generous warmth and hospitality. As sustained conversation was
elusive, I talked with Rita in snatches. In between I took the opportunity to learn more about the sociological dimensions I was interested in. It was at Rita's that I first read Chandra Mohanty's (1991) work on third world feminism, and I learned about the complexities of dowry from Rita's graduate students - one of whom stepped in when she was unable to accompany me to a planned visit to the Caṇḍī temple in nearby Cuttack. From various bits of conversations I was able to gather something of Rita's orientation to Śāktism.

_Bhubaneswar, 25th October, 1994 – fieldnotes_

The myth of Draupadi is one of Rita's favourites. She [Draupadi] was such a śakti that no one husband could possibly satisfy her. Each one addressed only one aspect of her needs. ... Yesterday we were visited by the local Śākta priest, who is well known by Rita and has also met Frédérique. He came to Rita's at Durgā pūjā and made a special pūjā for the family and a few friends, chanting the Caṇḍī twice. It lasted 8 hours. Rita says she learns from him about Śakti, and he teaches her Sanskrit hymns, her favourites being those from the Caṇḍī, the Yā Devī hymn in particular.

Rita also told me a version of the Dakṣinākāli story. It was after she had destroyed Mahiśāsura. She became so furious with those who had worshipped Mahiśāsura that she planned to destroy them, gods included. Śiva was concerned at this prospect of destruction but could find no way to stop her. It was in response to this that he lay down on the battlefield before her feet and she stepped on him. Her response of surprise and embarrassment had to do with her stepping on his chest (of all things!).

From Rita's point of view it is very important that Śakti be understood as linked with Śiva. Even when he is not explicitly depicted he is there in spirit. The mythology and the inspiration is about masculine and feminine principles in balance, not about the domination of one over the other. This complementarity has been emphasised from the beginning by each of the Indian women.

Rita reflects that she can't say that she is a bhākta. It is up to the Goddess to decide that. There are surely many people who are far in advance of her, and that is an inspiration to make her try harder. She does what she can, that's all. Her particular academic interests also have not been in this field of women and religion, but in the field of development and women's issues.

I want to say that this project is for our learning, that this is why it is a pilgrimage … a work in progress. But the conversation is interrupted by the busy household, with guests, television, and children arriving home from school.

Rita's disavowal of her own devotion was a lesson in humility for me. While she retained this position throughout the project, it was notable by the time of our next meeting in March 1995, that the invitation to think about Śāktism in feminist terms had stimulated her to reflect on the role of religion in her own upbringing. Her enthusiasm
for the collaborative process had also been amplified. The following are edited transcripts from our taped 1995 meeting.

**Bhubaneswar, 20th March, 1995**

*Rita:* In my family, our deity is Kāli... My parents would say: “As a child you keep on doing whatever you have been taught to do so that good things are always put in your mind and soul, so your soul gets rinsed clean, and then you will understand later.” … We were told orally to perform certain things in order to get God. You had to rinse your heart. Once you rinse your heart you get the power if your soul is clean, and your soul will be clean if you perform these little things every day. Then you get to know things through experience.

There is a saying that if you argue too much against it then you are going away from religion: “Just don't argue so much, try to feel it.” I can now understand why it was used to be said, but then I thought it was illogical. It sounded to me like we shouldn't ask. But why shouldn't we ask also? Religion was used to get rid of all kinds of fears and dangers. And that is why I think Kāli was used more as a malevolent kind of goddess than a benevolent goddess. And Durgā is used as a benevolent goddess. She comes more during the time of prosperity and in the light, when the moon is brightest. Kāli comes when it is dark. They both destroy the demons but in a completely different way. That's what I'm saying that it's this kind of feeling. Not that we were not interested as children, but we were not asked to question too much. We were just waiting to experience. Maybe we didn't experience too much, some of us, so it didn't take us very far to visualising that kind of power inside. But it should be brought out. It's time that we start thinking about it. For whatever reasons we have started thinking, I think it's going to be a very good thing. It's going to bring positive results. ….

*Rita:* Let's do some academic work. I would like to see things from that perspective also. I myself have experienced certain things and I haven't done any work on that. And I'm interested and I believe in this, so why not get it complete by doing some academic work? I'm looking forward to seeing what is coming out of it, either way. Only I'm not expecting too much from the project to begin with because this is just the beginning of a whole project which will, I hope, continue at least for - I don't want to give a time limit, but for the sake of it - about ten more years to go.

*Brenda:* Yes, in some form or other that would be great. The interaction is important.

*Rita:* Yes, and the different perspectives. That's very important. That's also important that I get to know different perceptions of other scholars. In a way they have completely diverse backgrounds and I'm fascinated that most of them have almost the same view in it, coming to the same view in spite of different backgrounds. That keeps the project very lively I think. We didn't talk about it before but we get to know through their views on this that it comes out almost the same. That's also very interesting.
Rita: The outer limit is uncertain yet, Brenda, because it has to be seen. Let's see how it goes. That's how we'll be able to know. At least we'll be able to have that framework going and have the opinions together, at least sitting together and exchanging views on this, and getting our views on Devi itself is very important.

Though expressed in different ways by each of the co-researchers, the emphasis on collaboration seemed to be well appreciated by the Indian women I was inviting to join the project and helped to fuel their interest in the innovative method proposed. I, in turn, felt profoundly grateful to have been met in India with three clear yeses to my three invitations. Throughout the project Madhu, Minati and Rita, each in her own way, played a critical collaborative role in both (re)presenting certain Indian cultural traditions and demonstrating their elasticity. Their hospitality in sharing with us, both in conversation and through their own example, provided space for including my questions and reflections as well as those of our U.S.-based colleagues, enabling our participation to be the more genuine and appreciative as a result.

In July 1995, shortly after my return from the second preparatory trip to India, our co-researcher line-up sustained its first casualty when Frédérique advised us that she would have to withdraw from the project due to more urgent commitments. Setting aside my fears for what this could mean for the research, I began with Lisa to search for an appropriate replacement. Kathleen Erndl was a colleague of Lisa’s who was known to me as a scholar through her published work on goddess pilgrimage in northwest India (Erndl, 1993). When we made contact with Kathleen by phone and by mail her enthusiastic response confirmed our decision to invite her to join the pilgrimage. After I moved back to Australia in October 1995 we maintained regular email contact and formed a friendship in cyberspace long before we finally got to meet face-to-face in Gauhati.

_Tallahassee, 15th November, 1995, via email_

Brenda, I keep promising to answer the "three questions", and I'm sure there is much I could say on all three, especially if we were in conversation. But let me now give a brief response, just to have something to work with: ...

Initially what attracted me was the opportunity to go to Kāmākhya, which is the most important of all goddess sites, especially with a group of women whose interests intersect in some way with my own. I tried to get there in 1983 and was refused a permit; I have been looking for a way to get there ever since; I feel very drawn to the place.

I am intrigued by the integration of personal and academic agendas for this project. I don't think anyone would go through all the grief it takes to get a Ph.D. in something without some kind of deeply personal commitment, but there is always this “razor's edge" we have to walk
between our personal and professional lives. I see this project as providing an unusual and welcome space in which to “let my hair down” and pursue some questions in a way which is methodologically avant garde. My work on Hindu goddess worship has been largely ethnographic, though I have recently started exploring its implications for women in a more philosophical sense.

My own spiritual practice is Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism; my teacher is her Eminence Jetsun Kusho Chime Luding of the Sakya lineage. I do primarily Tārā practice, but hope to be initiated into Vajrayogini at some point. Now, my academic training and research is in Hinduism, so that makes me a bit of an odd duck. I haven’t brought the two together in any overt way, but I am sure that my Buddhist practice in some mysterious way informs my work on Hindu goddess traditions. Also, Tantric Hinduism and Tantric Buddhism share a common experiential basis, and my interest in both centers on the female as sacred.

I am also a feminist, a lesbian, and (since the last two years) non-biological mother of a son, so I may have some different perspectives on what the multiple meanings of "motherhood" may be.

I am very excited about participating in this project. I don’t have any clear expectations concerning the outcome and view the whole thing as an experiment in which I am open to a number of possibilities concerning my contributions and rewards.

That’s all for now. I hope to hear from you soon.

Jai Ma.

Kathleen.

Kathleen’s longstanding interest in Indian goddesses and feminism and her immediate recognition of what we were trying to do helped to ensure that the project went ahead. Through the vicissitudes of my attempts to secure funding for the project, and the grief associated with the loss of both my original collaborators, Kathleen’s signature *Jai Mā* (“Victory to the Mother”) provided reassurance and renewed my faith.

“[I]t is not merely the mechanical performance of the pilgrimage that produces results, but the attitude of the devotee. One must approach the pilgrimage with the proper *bhāvanā* (feeling or sentiment)” (Kathleen Erndl, 1993, p. 65). In Gauhati Kathleen further elaborated the basis for her interest in the project as follows.

*Gauhati, 10th August, 1996*

*Kathleen:* My own interest in this topic I think goes back to my childhood in which I was always very interested in anything having to do with India. That has been since childhood, actually, and there’s no evident reason for it in my family. I grew up in a very working class family, these were not sophisticated people who travelled or who had cosmopolitan interests or anything like that. In fact, I’m very much of an oddball in my family and they can’t understand why I’d ever want to go to a place like India.
For a long time I’ve been very interested in Hindu goddess imagery of all kinds, have had a very strong attraction towards śaktipithas etc. Also for a very long time I’ve been very interested in Buddhism. My interest in Tibetan culture is in the extent to which they’ve preserved the Indian Tantra. My connection really is with India. I think that’s why certain forms, like Tārā, I’m much more connected to - because they’re very Indian. And actually there’s a Sarasvatī.

Madhu: Tārā travelled from Buddhist circles into the circle of the Kashmiri vidyās.

Kathleen: There’s a very nice practice that I do occasionally. It’s a Sarasvatī practice which is a Buddhist practice, a very nice practice, and it’s so Indian. That’s one reason why I like it. It’s so Indian but of course it has all the Buddhist trappings and it’s within the context of Boddhisattva vow. But the iconography is very Indian and it’s all connected with wisdom.

The other thing that’s formed my life is the fact that I’ve become a mother, not a biological mother. I think we do this with a much higher degree of self-consciousness than heterosexual couples would, because as a lesbian couple Kelly and I are doing something that is only being done in this generation, and we want to do it right.

Kathleen was the only co-researcher whom I did not have the opportunity to meet face-to-face prior to our gathering in Gauhati. However, through our prior correspondence and with the added commonality of our both being mothers with young children, we quickly established a sense of connection.

In May 1996, shortly before we were scheduled to travel to India, the responsibilities of motherhood led to Lisa’s withdrawal from the project. Though we could have gone ahead with five collaborators, I felt that the texture of our discussions would have been diminished by having only two non-Indian collaborators. Lisa’s was not an easy place to fill. She had not only inspired the project’s framing, but had also provided me with generous and heartfelt support through my pregnancy and Uma’s birth. However, as Elinor Gadon had been instrumental in introducing me to both Frédérique and Lisa, she seemed an obvious replacement. Elinor’s interest and enthusiasm for the project was immediate. She had been drawn to researching the Goddess as a consequence of her experiences in India some years before and was keen to re-establish her Indian goddess connections.

Bolinas CA, 13th July, 1996 by mail

There are so many aspects of this project that are of interest to me. I will try to spell them out with some coherence.
I will be going to the temple of Kāmākhya which I have understood as different than other goddess temples in India, with a history that is very controversial at least in the English language sources I’ve found, in a
part of India where I have never been, and where I was not permitted to
go as an American citizen for security reasons.
Perhaps my primary interest is in the fuller understanding of the sacred
female, as a cosmic principle, as a creative force in human existence, as a
personal source of empowerment along with the corollary issues of
mystery of human life and the mystery of sacred sexuality.
I am someone whose primary source of knowing is through the
experience of the visual, my research interests have been in
iconographical analysis of image and symbols in their cultural context.
As I have expanded my knowing I have come to wonder about the
factors that have influenced the creation of sacred gender symbols for
the divine, the source of life, the yoni and lingam.
They seem so obvious and are found in so many cultures. Why have we
lost the power and understanding of their meaning as the source of all
life and the ground of being? How are we to reclaim them as we are so
rapidly advancing to the death of nature and possibly human existence
on this planet?
I am intrigued by the aniconic representation of the goddess at
Kāmākhya and the red waters that flow during her menses. I want to
learn all I can about the origins of this representation.
For my spiritual self, I see this pilgrimage as a possible awakening to an
active, daily, embodied spiritual practice that honors the sacred female.
Ever since I first lived in India in 1967-68 having seen all the images of
powerful, sexual, sensual women I had no doubt of the existence of the
goddess. This has been separate for me from spiritual practice which I
have never regularly followed. I have meditated upon the Buddha in
Vipassana and upon Kṛṣṇa whom I did my dissertation research on and
whose persona delights me, but I have never committed myself to
regular practice. I am now considering initiation into Tibetan Buddhism
as a vehicle to the development of compassion and letting go of ego. But
I am postponing this decision until my return from this visit to India and
what it evokes for me.
My Kāli-like rage has only gotten me into trouble in my culture even
though I consider it a powerful tool for empowerment. I seek to step
out of/go beyond the ugliness of the back-stabbing, competitive, jealous
women academics who are just as rampant in the leadership of women’s
spirituality as they are in the more establishment women’s studies
programs.

When we gathered in Gauhati Elinor enlarged on her personal resonance with
the idea of sacred sexuality and how this informed her appreciation of the Goddess.

Gauhati, 10th August, 1996
Elinor: I very much feel that I am in the body of a woman and
I’m conscious of that all the time. Even when I had no words and no
concepts to put it in I felt that my sexuality was sacred. I was married for
25 years to a man to whom I was very well sexually matched, we were
highly sexual, and although I wouldn’t have had the word then, that was
my pujā, that was my spiritual practice. This was part of every day. I’ve
lost many things in my life but maybe the loss of that has been the
paramount loss because I have never in the years since then found any lover with whom I had that kind of rapport. So I come to this then, with a very strong sense of sacred sexuality embedded in my worldview and again the fact that women and men are different, and the process, the bodily process of my body and how it informed my life is a real reality. This doesn’t in any way distract from my intellectual competence. The sad thing is that in the years when I was being trained one could not use one’s experience, you couldn’t ever speak of it, so that had to be something that was separate from the work.

It was clear, in spite of her not having an active ongoing devotional practice, that Elinor was deeply and personally interested in the Hindu Goddess and women’s empowerment. Ultimately, after I had made two trips to India, and had many conversations and much correspondence with collaborators in both India and the U.S., Elinor’s joining completed our circle of co-researchers. Though she became the elder amongst our collaborator team, Elinor almost single-handedly put the rest of us to shame with her vivacious exuberance.

**Heuristic Approach**

“One of the definitions of yoga is that it should take you somewhere you have not been before.”

T.K.V. Desikachar, oral communication July 1993

The foregoing description of our developing collaboration illustrates the importance of emergent principles and methods in the initial formulation of the project as well as in the process of engaging co-researchers. This highlights the heuristic approach we employed. Deriving from the Greek *heuriskein*, meaning “to find”, a heuristic process is one that “enabl[es] a person to discover or learn something for themselves” (Soanes & Hawker, 2005). Recent descriptions of heuristic methodology in the social sciences signal a particular emphasis on the investigation of human experiencing (Reinharz, 1983; Moustakas, 1990, Kleining & Witt, 2000). For Moustakas (1990) the critical driver for heuristic research is “a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated” (p. 14). Acknowledging this kind of direct, personal encounter was central to establishing the nature of our collaborative inquiry and its intended context of pilgrimage.

As an experiential vehicle for spiritual inquiry pilgrimage has its own traditions and methodologies. I will take up a detailed consideration of Hindu traditions of pilgrimage in the following chapter, interlacing a number of personal encounters so as to trace the path of my growing understanding of Śākta principles in the leadup to our
journey to Kāmākhyā. Here I consider the evolving contribution of heuristic processes to the academic research frame as it unfolded through my preliminary meetings with the co-researchers in 1994 and 1995.

Milo, Maine, 21st August, 1994

Lisa: Do you want to start by saying what you want?
Brenda: When I was in India last time I felt compelled to find out about this goddess, this Śakti. … Desikachar said this is going to be your dissertation, but I was already strongly pulled to go back to India and continue my pilgrimage. I don’t want to just sit in a library somewhere in America with books. Even at that stage I had a sense that what I really wanted to do was to go on pilgrimage, that that would be the research that I wanted to do. It’s about going and immersing yourself in it. But I thought there’s no way that other people will want to do this with me. It was just such a gift when we got together in San Francisco, and you said “let’s do it.”
Lisa: We said we don’t want to do any of this dry stuff like writing about this. We want to talk about it. We want to do it!

A heuristic approach to research requires full immersion in the topic under investigation in a way that is intended to reveal contexts of experiential meaning and significance. Method and procedures develop as the inquiry unfolds. Each step, guided by intuitive appreciation and focussed reflection, contributes to a growing understanding. The result of this kind of experiential analysis, according to Shulamit Reinharz (1983), “should represent growth and understanding in the arena of the problem investigated, the person(s) doing the investigation, and the method utilized.” (p. 174)

Heuristic research emphasises a regard for contexts of meaning that are not independent of the people involved in them: “The data thus are of people’s being, not in the world of phenomenologists, but in situations to which they give meaning and which shape their making of themselves and meaning” (p. 178). This project involved an investigation of existing Śākta doctrine and practice and included discussions with a variety of people about the meanings it held for them. Through employing a collaborative approach it also established a context in which to explore the way the women co-researchers applied an understanding of Śakti in their own lives and how they made meaning of it individually and collectively. The centrality of the experiential frame to our pilgrimage plans was summed up by Frédérique in our earliest meeting:

San Francisco, June 1994
Frédérique: Your research is not about the experience; the experience is the research.
Subsequently in Maine we elaborated an emphasis on processual inquiry that sought to have the key issues emerge from the conversation between us so that “the questions that we even ask or consider or discuss are not mine but come from all of us” (Brenda, in conversation Milo, Maine, 21st August, 1994). Our “cup-of-tea approach” to research further fore-grounded a flexible agenda that eschewed any pre-imposed focus on specific outcomes.

**Milo, Maine. Monday 22nd August, 1994**

*Brenda:* Is it just totally conversation?

*Lisa:* What we’ve done here is really a different model. We have been literally letting things arise. The pros of that, it’s a very organic process, and to me that’s very exciting. I know how to discuss when a topic is raised, you know, prepare, blah, blah, blah. This is something else.

*Frédérique:* That’s what’s like fieldwork.

*Lisa:* That’s right. You let it arise. A few minutes ago we finished a conversation that we started in the other parlour this morning.

…

*Frédérique:* But it’s much more like fieldwork where you just let people talk whatever they want to talk and catch conversations as they happen … the mode is not at all structured, and you kill it if you try to structure it.

*Lisa:* The mode is have a cup of tea, talk about -

*Frédérique:* Have a cup of tea, conversation.

*Brenda:* Oh, what happened to our cup of tea?

*Frédérique:* Speaking of cup of tea! It’s missing!

I carried this kind of open-ended frame to my subsequent meeting in Delhi with Madhu.

**Delhi, 25 September, 1994**

*Brenda:* In this idea [of research] there’s no way of coming up with a definitive statement. It’s more like let’s track this from the point of view of the experience of the women, where we are at this moment in time, and coming with our own particular threads or strands or what grabs us, and how does this come together. We share an experience around the Goddess, however we decide, if we decide to go to this temple or that temple, or however we decide it should take form between us, and see what comes out. This is what these women had in common and this is where they differed, and is there some thread here that can speak in these times to contemporary women. Is there something especially that’s beyond culture as well [i.e., that transcends cultural differences].

*Madhu:* Oh yes, absolutely. That goes without saying. … We’re all walking on different roads and coming and all obviously representing one culture, or different cultures, and what is the root of us there. I think that would be an interesting point to look at in this study.

*Brenda:* Yes. There are several dimensions that strike me. One is in the experience itself of what we do, … then there’s how we each
perceive that and the meaning for us individually, then the meaning for us collectively as well. What happens when we bring the stories together. And then reflecting back again and seeing are there differences because of our different cultures and what's that about, and how do we resolve them or not.

Madhu: Yes. Or not. I think that everybody needs a personal spirituality because you can’t have one design for everybody. In India we don’t believe in that. Truth is one and the outer forms and manifestations are countless, you know. And you have to allow for everybody’s inclinations, even within women’s groups. … That’s the beauty of this tradition. Sakti: She takes countless forms. She takes countless forms to suit the needs of the devotee. If there was just one image and one mantra then I think the tradition would have disappeared by now. It’s just that it’s so varied and it exists on so many different levels. You choose the level at which you interact best.

While Madhu was clearly excited by the collaborative process I described, she also stressed the importance of grappling with the breadth and depth of the Saktta tradition we were engaging with.

Delhi, 25th September, 1994

Madhu: There is a philosophical notion of sakti, and then there are two or three different threads which are running parallel in that philosophical notion: the aagamic notion, the vedantic notion, the notion emerging from samkhya. There are different philosophical schools, and these ideas of Saktism are not from one mainstream movement, but even within mainstream movements they have a different root. So there is a philosophical aspect of it, then there is ritualistic and a performative aspect of it, and then of course each of the traditions have their own texts. I personally feel that when you talk about Saktism and Hinduism it’s just too big, to me now, at this stage, because I feel it would be much safer to take a goddess and explore it fully, absolutely, and then move into more generalised statements about Saktism. Because you have the Devi cult, you have a very strong cult, and then when you talk of Saktism you also have a very strong vernacular cult. It’s not just the written tradition of mainstream Hinduism, it’s also the oral tradition, much of it. And there is so much data in archeology, archeological data on goddesses which is still undeciphered. And then every village in India has its own goddess tradition, gramedevas, devas to protect the fields, disease goddesses, Earth Mother, so many different variations to the theme. So when you talk about the concept of Saktism in Hinduism it doesn't mean very much unless one is very specific about what one is talking about, because there are too many levels.

As well as recommending a sharper, more ethnographic focus for researching Saktism, Madhu’s emphasis on the existing frameworks and ritual traditions we were stepping into highlighted for me the need to do justice to the philosophical traditions on which we were drawing. This suggested a more formal intellectual focus than I had so far
discussed with Frédérique and Lisa. During my subsequent stay in Kolkata I asked Minati for her opinion, as a Sanskritist and philosopher, as to how we might embrace intellectual inquiry while at the same time emphasising our direct experience through pilgrimage.

**Kolkata, 11th October, 1994**

**Minati:** I think that simultaneously if you have the intellectual and you also have the experience, if it goes together I think there is no opposition between the two forces. In our philosophical terms we say there are four qualifications. They call it śravana [listening], manana [pondering], nidadhyāsana [meditating], and then experience, anubhava. ... These are the causes for your perception, for the experience, and what are they? They are called śravana from śrutibhāṣyas, from the śruti or upaniṣads or other sources. Then you meditate on what you have heard. The meditation should be in accordance with what you have heard, and mananam means also rational thinking, putting it in a logical way. Once you have established it then you should meditate on it. That is called nidadhyāsana.

**Minati’s exegesis demonstrates, for me, one of the principal attractions of Hindu philosophy, namely, the incisive framework it affords for understanding the interrelationship between consciousness and experience. Conceptually at least this**

32 The upaniṣads are ancient teachings, originally transmitted orally but later written down, that provide philosophical explanation of the still more ancient revelations of the Vedas. The term upaniṣad refers to sitting down close and listening to one’s teacher. Similarly, śruti refers to the whole category of sacred teachings, now textual, but once passed on orally. Śrutibhāṣyas refer to learned commentaries on sacred scriptures.
seemed to offer a solution to my dilemma about reconciling disparate perspectives on the nature of the research. That the philosophy of the upaniṣads could support an inquiry which seeks to integrate academic and experiential dimensions seemed to affirm our broad orientation.

Although the addition of a research lens meant our approach to pilgrimage was not strictly traditional, we did, as will be shown in the following chapters, engage substantially with Hindu traditions, as well as with critique of particular interpretations and practices. My co-researchers and informants contributed richly to the elucidation of Śākta traditions. Subsequently, in keeping with processes of heuristic research, I further extended the textual elements of the inquiry as part of interpreting the field data and constructing this culminating text.

My role as sūtradhāri – gathering the threads

Madhu dubbed my role in this project as that of the sūtradhāri, the one who ties the threads. As the instigator of the logistically awkward research process entailed in such a geographically diverse collaboration, I took the key role in facilitating the developing design and the initial communications amongst the co-researchers. This positioning carried a degree of tension and ambiguity, something which was not always easy to resolve.

In the preparatory phase the central challenge was in finding a way to locate a sense of common purpose amongst a group of co-researchers who had not yet met together. As much as we would have liked it, and as helpful as it would have been, to advance the project by having advance meetings as a group, the opportunity did not eventuate. I was very conscious of the limitations, and the responsibility, of my role in trying to establish common ground by proxy. It became apparent quite soon during the 1994 meetings with my Indian co-researchers that the planning meetings would require a second round to enable each of the co-researchers to review the others’ transcribed comments and provide further input.

As noted earlier, within days of putting this need to the goddess Lakṣmī at a special neighbourhood pūjā in her honour, I managed serendipitously (apparently) to win a return air ticket. On my agenda for the second round was the need to come to an agreement on the timing and place of pilgrimage (still then under discussion), and to try to advance a sense of the shared nature of the inquiry so we could establish a foundation for our eventual coming together. In addition, my prior study of yoga
suggested the necessity of some form of preparation as a prerequisite to any form of spiritual practice. I therefore wondered how best to facilitate some sort of collective preparation for the intended pilgrimage. In order to clarify the project with - not for - everyone, I formulated a series of three key questions to address with each co-researcher:

What attracts you personally to this project? What would you like to get out of it?

Are there particular topics that you would like to see raised in the discussions?

What kind of preparation do you think is appropriate, whether individually or collectively?

The value of these preliminary rounds began to emerge in this anticipation of our coming together, in appreciation of what our colleagues had said in previous transcripts, in welcoming the interdisciplinary process and in noting the commonalities. I asked as follows for Rita’s ideas about preparation.

**Bhubaneswar, 20th March 1995**

*Brenda:* In terms of preparation, I was thinking from one point of view, how do we establish rapport? And I was thinking also in a *yātrā* there’s normally some kind of personal preparation that you would do - or is there? I wondered whether you had any thoughts, either personally or for the group, about what might be appropriate preparation.

*Rita:* Establishing rapport between ourselves, between the researchers? I think that we are getting to know each other through the conversation that we are doing now. There shouldn’t be anything necessary more than that. As long as we have been reading each other’s work then we know each other quite well. There shouldn’t be a problem.

Secondly, preparation for going on *yātrā*. I don’t think there is any preparation necessary. It’s just the mental preparation, the hankering for getting to Devi, that is the only preparation. I don’t think there is any preparation necessary. I’m keen to go and do the work and that in itself creates the preparation inside. I don’t think it needs any preparation outside of carrying your backpack. It just needs preparation from within mentally. And this preparation itself is a very Western way.

*Brenda:* That little bit of exchange of papers is helpful, in an external way?

*Rita:* Yes. We know how to manifest it externally once we have done the total. It’s not bit by bit that we feel, you see. It’s okay bit by bit, but this visit is very essential and then the external manifestation of it will show up there, eventually. I don’t see any reason why we need to be so “prepared” to do anything. I mean, let’s see what comes because that is important. That part of fieldwork is most important and that cannot be prepared. What must be prepared we prepare ourselves for it, just for the sake of preparing. This is certainly not an organised enterprise in the
Let me begin by saying that I can’t very much plan this. That itself is a very typical way of looking at a project. I don’t want to look at it from that point of view just to fulfil the requirements “we’ve seen that; we’ve felt that.” We’ll never get that -- if we really organise it to see something we’ll never see that. Anyway it’s not within our control to do it so we shouldn’t too much bother about it and at the same time don’t bother too much about external manifestations of it. The external manifestation itself is a kind of arrogance, in the sense that let’s first just go and do the work and fulfil the kind of space that we need to fulfil with her words and blessings and then we manifest it. We see what comes out of it. If we too much bother to look for the external manifestation and prepare ourselves I’m sure we’ll not come out with anything, and whatever will come out will come out artificially and I don’t want to be involved in that case. I think, let’s see, is it clear?

Brenda: Yes.

Rita’s own heuristic engagement emerged in these responses, which seemed to value the central relevance I wanted to give to experiential knowing. Her comments challenged my preconceptions regarding the place of formal traditions and pointed to the need to stay open to both intended and unintended developments as they occurred along the way. As the project developed I found myself repeatedly challenged to let go of preconceptions I had regarding the research design, the process and the eventual content which we came up with – all of which were subject to the increased mutability intrinsic to the collaborative endeavour.

Madhu, by contrast, shared well formulated ideas about what we should discuss and how to approach the project.

Delhi, 24th March, 1995
Brenda: Are there particular topics that you think we should raise?
Madhu: Yes. I think there are lots of questions. One of the questions I would like the group to discuss is the Indian notion of femaleness versus Indian notion of /śakti/, because there is a great deal of confusion about this in the modern interpreters of our tradition. You know what I mean? I have read articles by feminists and writers and Indologists and scholars on this and I beg to differ from all of them. So I think this is very important since we are dealing with femaleness and feminine experience on one point and a notion of /śakti/ on the other, and how the notion of /śakti/ which has an evolution of I would say 3,000 years in India gets percolated into human experience. I think these two questions I would like the group to reflect upon: the notion of /śakti/ and what it is, what constitutes this notion in the Indian perspective; and what constitutes feminine experience or femaleness in our day-to-day experience today. There are two separate questions. How /śāstra/ and tradition looks at it and how the modern woman would look at it. I think all the other questions that I wish to reflect upon and talk about would emerge from this question.
What constitutes Śāktism in India? What is Śāktism in the Indian context? I mean, we do have a very central notion both in terms of historicity and in terms of its evolution as a concept, and its manifestation in texts, in celebrations, in art, in iconography. I think it's important to know that. We just can't move into human experience of the goddess I don't think. And then what is femaleness in the Indian context? And I think the people who you have chosen are well equipped to give us answers, academic answers, on what is the Indian notion of womanhood or feminine quality in relation to the notion of Śakti. This is the central question I would like to see everybody discuss because I think I'm beginning to see an Indian point of view. Up till now we have approached the notion of Śakti from a Western perspective in writing on the concept of Śakti in academic discourse, and I'm beginning to see something else so I would like this thing to be discussed.

Brenda: That's fabulous.

Madhu: Number three?

Brenda: Number three is the question of preparation. Do you think we need some preparation, and what would be appropriate?

Madhu: I think everybody needs some conscious reflection on these two - their academic discipline, what they want to discuss and the personal reflections on it. The source of those personal reflections may be very different from academic disciplines, you see like a meeting with a yogini. I've had four gurus and three of them were women. They have shaped my spiritual perceptions whereas my academic perceptions have been shaped by a very different discipline. So I think some personal reflection on the sort of questions that are important to bring into this arena of discourse.

Brenda: Okay, that's great. It feels as though it's beginning to gel. I will transcribe these discussions, so that's second best to having a conversation with us all together.

Madhu: Yes. And you can pass it around.

In spite of the different orientations being expressed I felt the conversations were bearing fruit as an emerging sense of shared ownership of the project's experiential, interdisciplinary dimensions. While negotiating my way through immense appreciation and intermittent hesitancy about leading such an illustrious group, I tried to keep the threads of collaboration going in separate individual conversations by bringing up key ideas and reflections raised by the other participants and framing questions that arose for me as the discussion process unfolded. I frequently found myself trying to work out the balance between playing a facilitative role that sought the co-researchers' active determination of our orientation to the project and at the same time needing to establish the parameters for my Ph.D. research.

A consequence of my role as project instigator was my sense of responsibility for mediating what I perceived as differences in orientation. I was unsure how readily the free-
form personal conversation we had favoured in Maine, imbued with the kind of anti-
hierarchical stance espoused by Western feminists, could embrace the highly systematised
traditions, both philosophical and cultural, that support Indian Śāktism. The tension I felt
in this crystallised in my subsequent thinking as the disparity between structure and
spontaneity, and their nevertheless mutual importance to the project. As I felt my way
through the differences of orientation encountered in my meetings with co-researchers,
their enthusiastic responses helped to buoy my efforts at navigating the emerging
collaborative ground in its complexity.

Throughout the establishment phase I tried to maintain my own role as facilitator
rather than director, though this stance was sometimes frustrating to my colleagues who
would have liked me to more clearly define the research agenda. The paradox entailed in
this position was at once creative and frustrating. It was underscored in my simultaneous
roles as organiser and junior academic among a group of co-researchers who were
themselves well-established scholars. At times the desire expressed by several of them to
lend me a hand with my Ph.D. seemed to conflict with my wish that the project be
“owned” by us all. This was further complicated when Frédérique and then Lisa, whose
contributions had been critical in helping to define and orient the project, had to withdraw.
The timing of this meant that Kathleen and Elinor joined the project only after the main
planning phase had been completed.

Arguably, any approach to research involves heuristics, at least to the extent that it
initiates discovery or finding out. Once in the field in Assam our research emphasis was
most prominently attuned to discovering the cultural meanings associated with the
Kāmākhyā site itself and only secondarily to a self-reflexive concern with the personal and
interpersonal meanings of the pilgrimage we were undertaking. This was undoubtedly
largely due to the compelling attraction of the temple site and the limited time we ultimately
had to spend there.

Given staggered arrival and departure times and new acquaintances to establish, as
well as the inherent messiness of the heuristic process, the focus of our deliberations while
in Gauhati seemed at times diffuse. Though each day we jointly reviewed our program of
field visits and discussion, there were moments of divergence when it was difficult to locate
an agreed direction. There were moments when agendas I had supposed to be
complementary didn’t seem to mesh – most noticeably for me when the framework for our
inquiry was intermittently reconstrued as “helping Brenda with her Ph.D.” rather than a
joint inquiry in which we each claimed ownership of our own stake. There were many
moments then, as now, when I strove to balance the competing demands of motherhood and academic research, and experienced the constraints of one on the other. However, despite the tensions and ambiguities entailed in trying to implement an open-ended, flexible approach, the air of spontaneity and conviviality that we generated was recognised as one of the most engaging and rewarding elements of the research approach. It proved to be contagious.

_Gauhati, 15th August, 1996_

_Brenda:_ So to what extent do you feel that we’re fulfilling that model, and what more do we need to do?
_Rita:_ We are doing, that’s a part of the methodology, that’s the part through which we are going.
_Kathleen:_ Yeah, and even when we sit together having lunch or talk in the car, all the conversation that we’re having is a part of that inquiry. Everybody we meet becomes a part of our project and part of the inquiry. We get invited to lunch at somebody’s house, on goes the tape recorder, we’re interviewing, talking. You talked to the hotel manager, he’s going to come and talk to our group.
_Elinor:_ Rita just had a discussion with the room service man.
_Rita:_ Almost the whole hotel is now charged with Kāmākhya. When we’re coming up in the lift the people are saying, “Sister, are you working on Kāmākhya temple? What about Kāmākhya?” they’re asking.
_Kathleen:_ So it’s great, like there’s no separation between the field and everyday life. Everything becomes the field.

The heuristic threads interwoven through the chapters that follow include elements from our joint field discussions, reflections from follow-up interviews with the co-researchers in 1997-8, and insights that have emerged through my own further processes of investigation and sense-making.

**Ethnography**

_Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture._ (Fetterman, 1998)

_Ethnography is the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human experience._

(Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 5)

Our choice of pilgrimage as focal method determined the ethnographic nature of the research - in both Fetterman’s and Willis & Trondman’s terms. Such emblems of ethnographic inquiry as visiting fieldsites, exploring cultural meanings, and reflecting on processes of cultural exchange, were integral to our inquiry. Methodologically, as Barbara Tedlock (2000) has noted, ethnography “is located between the interiority of
From its historical origins in anthropology, ethnography has more recently undergone numerous disputations and re-framings. Key amongst the issues up for reconsideration have been questions regarding what might constitute an acceptable balance between participation and observation in fieldwork, and how these two dimensions should be represented in the ethnographic account. The collaborative approach we developed sought to stretch fieldwork practices still further. Given that our collaborative experiential emphasis represented a significant departure from previous canonical methods in anthropological fieldwork, Frédérique initially questioned whether what we were doing could be called fieldwork at all.

**Milo Maine, 21st August, 1994**

Frédérique: With my hat of anthropologist, to me what you’re doing is not fieldwork. Because in anthropology, except the very new feminist stuff, and even that I think is limited, I don’t know really of any anthropologist doing what you want to do. That’s why I wouldn’t call it fieldwork, because fieldwork precludes, fieldwork is the word that stamps it as anthropology. Ethnography, ethnology, precludes that you are a practitioner. . . Fieldwork is looking out at the other. You’re looking at you. This is so much more comprehensive.

Under the influence of objectivist traditions of anthropological inquiry ethnographic researchers have historically been constructed as impartial authorities on others’ customs who “attempted to be both engaged participants and coolly dispassionate observers of the lives of others” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 465). Even with Geertz’s (1973) intervention on behalf of interpretive theory the anthropological focus on the other was largely maintained without engaging in significant reflection on the position of the interpreting subject. The move to more self-reflexive methods of ethnography was just gathering momentum as we were framing our Šakti Yātrā project.

**from Tallahassee by email, 1st August, 1995**

Kathleen: I was interested that Frédérique remarked that what you are doing is not fieldwork. I see her point, but there is also a lot of experimental work going on now in ethnography, though I do think that much of what is being written by the big names (the Clifford and Marcus types, for example, who said in their intro to *Writing Culture* that there is no experimental feminist ethnography) only plays at being radical. What you express in your proposal is an intention to actually take them at their word and dissolve boundaries of subject/object, insider/outsider, etc. It seems that part of what you are doing is “auto-ethnography.” Also, the
methodology cannot be nailed down in a very definite way because of the unpredictability of the whole enterprise.

As Kathleen notes here, the timing of our project planning corresponded with a period of upsurge in postmodern, experimental ethnographies – Denzin & Lincoln’s (2000) “fifth moment” in the history of qualitative research. Our particular experimental ethnography was advanced by focussing its reflexive emphasis on the dialogical encounters with each other, as well as with our chosen pilgrimage site. However, though elements of what might be termed “auto-ethnography” are apparent in the approach we devised, I have elected for this research story to retain separate emphases on heuristic inquiry and ethnography.

Proponents Ellis & Bochner (2000) apply the label auto-ethnography to a wide range of self-reflexive approaches while simultaneously noting that the term was originally coined to describe native ethnography - i.e., cultural analysis undertaken within one’s own culture. In this original sense auto-ethnography would seem an apt descriptor for the roles taken up by my three Indian co-researchers. In addition, similarities between this study and recent approaches to auto-ethnography are evident in my use of first person voice and in the personal storylines threaded liberally through the text.

 Nonetheless, the dual emphasis on self and culture that the conjoined term auto-ethnography implies is unevenly deployed in my account. The investigative threads I have denoted as heuristics and ethnography come to the fore in different contexts and at different points in the story’s unfolding. We have already seen, for example, the centrality of heuristic processes in developing the collaborative agenda for the pilgrimage. When we came together in Gauhati the ethnographic agenda was uppermost.

As indicated in my discussion of heuristic inquiry the experiential emphasis is directed more toward the phenomenal field of personal experience than toward the self-culture conjunction considered central to (auto-)ethnographic analysis. This suggests different dimensions of experiencing and reflexivity – as Frédérique highlighted when considering the differences between anthropological fieldwork and our proposed research.

*Frédérique:* I’ve come to see that beyond the problem of anthropology is the problem of knowledge. What we understand as...
knowledge is problematic to begin with. Why is it problematic? For many reasons. One is it’s looking out. So you can better it by looking in – that’s the new anthropology, reflexive. So that gets better but that doesn’t take care totally of the problem because the other part is the transformative part. This is why I’m so excited about this. Because not only should you be reciprocal and mutual

Lisa: You should be changed.
Frédérique: You should be changed. You change. Now we’ve realised that we change whatever we look at in the new anthropology. But you are being transformed. And not transformed just in your mind – that’s accepted in the new anthropology - but transformed in your everyday life .. you have to live differently.

While privileging the personal, the experiential and, potentially, the transformative as part of a heuristic process, I was less comfortable for myself in this project with privileging the “auto” in ethnography. To me, the cultural dimensions of Šaktism, including its philosophy, history and practices, needed to have a larger presence and stronger voice than could be afforded simply on the basis of autobiography (the feature Ellis & Bochner, 2000, count as the hallmark of auto-ethnography). Although personal narrative is threaded through the text it frequently gives way to let these different emphases emerge. The field stories are drawn from multiple sources: from dialogue with the co-researchers, from conversations in the field, from texts and artefacts encountered while on the pilgrimage and subsequently. These voices contribute in significant ways to the epistemic frame that informs this account.

Engaging in the hybrid space we deliberately constructed for this project meant imagining ethnography not only self-reflexively but also in more fluid ways than would be permitted in a conventional anthropological study. Though the Kāmākhya temple was the key field site in the investigation, our focus on pilgrimage was not geared to producing an ethnographic account based on extended immersion at a single site, as required under Malinowskian lore (see Holmes & Marcus, 2005). Rather, it was slanted much closer to the meanings we could make of what we encountered on our joint pilgrimage and, on my part, through subsequent examination of key texts.

The field itself was also more diffuse than in conventional anthropological research. My investigation of the contexts and cultural meanings of Šaktism was initially established through successive trips that included multiple encounters with goddesses, temples and collaborators in several parts of India. Subsequently, as we have seen, the field was built through the rounds of meetings with co-researchers in Delhi, Kolkata, Bhubaneswar and the U.S. This research trajectory, in which the fieldtrip to Kāmākhya
was supported by and contrasted with observations from other sites and contexts, aligns with George Marcus’s (1995) formulation of multi-sited ethnography.

Recognising that cultures are rarely now bounded by discrete locations, multi-sited ethnography “moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (p. 96). As well as investigating existing Śākta sites in India, our deliberate focus on the exchange between us opened up an intercultural domain which invited the exploration of “meanings, objects, and identities” that could emerge from feminist interpretations of Śāktism. In this respect we were both embodying and investigating a process of cultural hybridisation. According to Ien Ang (2003) hybridisation “consists of exchanges, crossings, and mutual entanglements, it necessarily implies a softening of the boundaries between ‘people’: the encounters between them are as constitutive of who they are as the proceedings within” (p. 147). In this kind of investigation, as Frédérique had emphasised, you change.

Claiming a hybrid space for research necessitates amendments to Geertz’s (1973) designation of thick description as the central identifying characteristic of ethnography. This is particularly evident in cultural studies, where ethnography is employed in different ways to suit the nature of the inquiry (Ang, 2006). In multi-sited ethnography Marcus (2002) has pointed out that “ethnography is variably both thick and thin” (p. 196). This kind of variability is clearly evident in my research.

The thickest dimension of the research relates to our focus on Śāktism and pilgrimage. My own initial explorations and the growing dialogue between the co-researchers form the core of the material, supplemented by field observations and conversations with key local figures. Our emphasis on applying a feminist perspective to our inquiry and on examining the relevance of goddess worship with a cross-cultural lens is also richly described. Local mythologies figure prominently and in detail, particularly in relation to Kāmākhyā.

By contrast, restricted access to the Kāmākhyā site meant some aspects of our/my inquiry at the temple were much thinner. The time available for our 1996 visit spanned only ten days in total, due to limitations of finances and logistics as well as
Assam’s designation as a restricted area that required an elusive special permit. Though a short visit was consistent with the pilgrimage focus we had adopted, it left our engagement with the practices and conditions of the temple community superficial in several respects.

In particular, an extended period of immersion would have better allowed me to observe firsthand and in multiple situations the ways that gender, power and caste/class were negotiated. It would have provided the opportunity to participate in major festivals, and to investigate further the long-term significance of practices like *kanyā pūja* (worship of young girls) for girls growing up at Kāmākhyā. Instead, where available I have augmented my account of the observations and conversations we did manage with reference to the work of other researchers such as Julia Jean (in press), Nihar Ranjan Mishra (2004) and Kali Prasad Goswami (1998), who were able to undertake more extensive fieldwork at the temple. The eventual chance of a brief follow up visit in 2003 was also valuable for clarifying some details.

**Chronology**

The following chronology provides an overview of the fields and time frame in which the major elements of the project were carried out.

**December 1988 – January 1992**

My first exposure to the Hindu Goddess through an initial trip to India, subsequent readings, and three further trips for yoga studies.

**August 1992**

First solo Śakti pilgrimage.

**September 1992**

I arrive in San Francisco to begin three years of doctoral coursework at the California Institute of Integral Studies.

**December 1993**

Pilot of my first attempt at formulating a research project on the Hindu Goddess.

**June 1994**

Meeting in San Francisco with Frédérique Marglin and Lisa Hallstrom. Pilgrimage idea takes shape.

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33 My preliminary attempts to visit Kāmākhyā in 1992 and 1994 were unsuccessful due to the lack of a permit (only available to pre-arranged groups). The restricted area designation was lifted by the time of our 1996 visit, but by 1997 when I returned to India the area was again the site of political unrest and consequently the restrictions had been re-instigated.
August 1994, Milo Maine

Weekend retreat with Frédérique, Lisa and myself to inaugurate and discuss our intentions for the project. We begin with our own Devī pūjā on the banks of the Pleasant River on the evening of the full moon, August 20th.

September-December 1994, India

First meetings with Indian collaborators. I meet Madhu Khanna in Delhi on September 25th, Minati Kar in Kolkata during my visit there from September 30th to October 20th for the Durgā pūjā festival, and I stay with Rita Ray in Bhubaneswar from October 20th to 25th.

On 17th October Minati, Neelanjana and I visit Tarapitha, then return to Kolkata for Lākṣmi pūjā. After Bhubaneswar I go to Delhi and win an air ticket at a function at the Australian consulate. I return again to Kolkata for Kālī pūjā, 2nd November.

December 4th – Uma is conceived in Pondicherry.

March 1995, India

Return trip to visit collaborators individually and further develop the focus and logistics of the pilgrimage.

March 31- April 1 1995, Massachusetts, USA

I meet with Lisa and with Frédérique on my return to the U.S. for further discussions on my progress in India.

June 1995

My dissertation proposal is formally approved by my CIIS faculty dissertation committee consisting of Margaret Mackenzie, anthropologist, Karabi Sen, philosopher, and Tanya Wilkinson, psychologist.

July 1995

Frédérique withdraws from the project for personal reasons. Lisa and I discuss replacements and decide to approach Kathleen Erndl.

August 28th, 1995

Uma Rebecca is born at home in San Francisco. Being overtaken by the demands of new motherhood, my situation as a “non-resident alien” in the U.S. became untenable and I arranged to return “home” to Melbourne.

October 1995

I return with Uma to Melbourne, Australia.

May 1996

Lisa withdraws for family reasons.

I receive £2,000 towards the project from the Spalding Trust in England.

June 1996

Elinor Gadon joins the project.

34 “Goddess worship” - this was a ritual we constructed ourselves.
August 1996, Gauhati, India

6th August
  Brenda and Uma arrive in Gauhati.

7th August
  Kathleen arrives

8th August
  Elinor arrives. Discussion of project begins.

9th August
  AM  First visit to Kāmākhyā.
  PM  Madhu arrives.
       Formal beginning with ritual inauguration at Brahmaputra Ashok hotel.

10th August
  AM  Temple visit including pūjā for the success of the project
  PM  Conversations

11th August
  AM  Visit with Pandit Gauri Shankar Sharma at his home in the Kāmākhyā temple compound.
  PM  Minati arrives.
       Meeting with poet and cultural historian Nirmala Prabha.

12th August
  AM  Visit to Assam State Museum.
  PM  Rita arrives.
       Conversations.

13th August
  AM  Temple visit and kanyā pūjā.
  PM  Discussions with Nirmala Prabha.

14th August
  AM  Visit to the shrines of the Daśa Mahāvidyā on the hill surrounding Kāmākhyā.
  AM  Meeting with staff and students of Gauhati University, arranged by Dr Nandita Sarma and Dr Nilima Bhagabati of the Dept. of Education.
  PM  Conversations with Dr Bharati Barua of History Dept, Gauhati University, and Dr Chaudhuri, Director Assam State Museum.

15th August
  AM  Completion of Daśa Mahāvidyā tour.
  PM  Lunch and conversations at the home of Dr Bharati Barua.
       Madhu departs for Delhi.

16th August
  AM  Reflections.
  PM  Boat trip to Umānanda temple.

17th August
  AM  Brenda and Uma visit Kāmākhyā and observe Manasā pūjā.
  PM  Rita departs for Bhubaneswar.
       Elinor gives public lecture on Western goddess tradition at Gauhati State Museum, which later appears on TV news.

18th August
  AM  Elinor does press interview.
  PM  Remaining co-researchers depart: Kathleen, Minati, Elinor, Brenda and Uma.
May 1997

Follow up with Elinor in US.

October 1997-March 1998, India

In Pondicherry for three months working on transcriptions and initial drafts. Auroville for one month and Chennai (Madras) for a further month. Then visits to Bhubaneswar, Kolkata and Delhi for follow up with Rita, Minati and Madhu respectively.

March 2003, India

Participated in *Shaktika on the Ascent* seminar organised by Madhu, Rita and Elinor and held in Bhubaneswar. I was also able for the first time to briefly revisit Kāmākhyā under a relaxation of the area restrictions.

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Writing the text/weaving the threads - *sūtradhāri* #2

The role of *sūtradhāri* includes not just tying the threads but also communicating them. In Sanskrit *sūtra* (meaning thread) denotes precepts or aphorisms (as in Patañjali’s *yogasūtra*) that are carefully woven together thread by thread. While the production of a research text does not demand the kind of esoteric precision exemplified in the classic *yogasūtra* (for example), it does require the weaving together of research threads to produce a text that is readable, nuanced, informative and, I would argue, evocative. The way one approaches writing is thus also a question of method.

In ethnographic research the role of writing has always been central, though it is arguably only since “the narrative turn”, epitomised in *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) that it has become self-consciously so. For me, having formerly been steeped in the “voice-from-nowhere” style of research (through a background in positivist psychological methodologies), writing a qualitative text meant learning to position myself within it in ways that were simultaneously self-reflexive and reflective of the multiple voices I had undertaken to represent (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This proved far more complex than simply “writing up” our “findings”.

Barbara Tedlock (2000) observed that in recent years “the genre of narrative ethnography has emerged from the margins and moved to claim the center” (p. 471). Experimentation with forms of representation has been strongly embraced by feminist writers in particular, for whom the intersubjectivity of meaning-making is axiomatic (Kamala Visweswaran, 1994; Behar & Gordon, 1995; Tedlock, 2000). Kirin Narayan (1993) argued eloquently that ethnographic writing should enact hybridity by adopting a
narrative voice that renders the experiencing self of the researcher transparent. She asked whether “compelling narrative and rigorous analysis [need] remain impermeable?” (p. 681). This question reverberated continuously as I wrote, reinforcing my aim to synthesise narrative and analysis.

My account builds a recursive understanding of the people, places and contexts encountered, bringing different voices into dialogue and moving in and out of chronological time so as to represent both story and implications. It employs a multi-layered approach to accommodate the multiple narrative and analytic threads. For me as the narrator, the process of sifting, analysing and refracting entailed another journey, a (w)rite of passage that involved struggling with the task of representation itself (Chase 2005).

Whereas full collaboration was a highlight of the field research, authorship was ultimately my own undertaking. I maintained periodic contact with my co-researchers throughout the extended period of writing, sharing transcripts and drafts as they became available, but I was very conscious of the shift in responsibility entailed in producing this text. This move from a collaborative ethos to the solo task of writing provoked anxieties for me. I came face to face with inevitable limitations in my attempts to represent others and worried repeatedly through the process of analysis and interpretation about the extent to which my particular subjective approach to the collective data might be colouring my co-researchers’ viewpoints.

As I repeatedly confronted the impossible dilemmas entailed in representing outcomes from the research I found it necessary to concede the limitations of collaboration and accept greater personal creative authority in my writing and continuing inquiry. In the end, for practical as well as academic reasons, I came to accept the privilege and responsibility of my own coloured narration. My heuristic process required extending the inquiry into dimensions we had not directly discussed during our field collaboration, although they were undoubtedly spurred by the pilgrimage. Writing was thus a method of inquiry and analysis in itself (Richardson, 2000), enabling me to appraise what we had experienced and discussed during our collaborative pilgrimage in relation to the work of scholars of Tantra, history, feminism and postcolonialism.

The narrative plot in the chapters to come broadly follows the trajectory of my personal and scholarly pilgrimage. From tracing my developing understanding of Śākta
spiritual traditions and the ways they instantiate female cosmological power it gradually enlarges its gaze to incorporate increasing reflections on the interface between Śākta perspectives and women’s social empowerment. Chapter 3 initiates this plotline by establishing a foundation for understanding the place of pilgrimage in Hindu Śākta traditions and by navigating the philosophical and mythological terrain of Śaktism through my earlier encounters with goddesses, with texts and with co-researchers.
Chapter 3

YĀTRĀ

As a mode of research, pilgrimage seemed to offer an ideal vehicle for our collaborative experiential focus. Although our research agenda shaped the way we approached this pilgrimage, we were nonetheless drawing inspiration from longstanding spiritual traditions that were centrally relevant not only to our undertaking but to the temple culture itself. The intersection between Hindu concepts of pilgrimage and Śāktī traditions and practices provided fertile ground for locating our research intellectually as well as geographically.

In this chapter I seek to lay the groundwork for the joint pilgrimage to Kāmākhyā by establishing the philosophical and mythological contexts that inform both pilgrimage and Śāktism. As with the research collaboration, a recursive process that included intellectual as well as physical travel helped me to build frameworks for understanding Hindu goddess phenomena. This chapter aims to map this territory by explicating key philosophical underpinnings, situating them in relation to my earlier ventures into the field of Hindu goddess worship and to conversations with co-researchers along the way. It interweaves theory, experiences, dialogue and critical insights into Śāktism and the Hindu tradition of pilgrimage leading up to our 1996 journey to Kāmākhyā.

Pilgrimage in Indian tradition

_Tīrthas are said to be auspicious because of the extraordinary power of their earth, and the efficacy of their water, and because they were frequented by the sages._

(Mahābhārata 13.111.18)

The Indian tradition of pilgrimage, _tīrthayātṛā_, is well-worn. Since at least the period of the great epic Mahābhārata (circa 300 B.C.E.), Indian pilgrims have traversed the Indian subcontinent, seeking _darśan_ of countless deities in their quest for spiritual understanding and material boons. While Western philosophy and hence the Western academy have been dominated by logos-oriented epistemologies that prioritise the word, Indian ways of knowing emphasise _darśan_, seeing.
The six classical philosophical systems developed as tools for understanding and applying the wisdom of the Vedas, of which yoga is one, are known as *darśana*, ways of seeing. They are windows through which to look more deeply into the mysteries of the cosmos and of life. Yoga, as described in the *yogasūtra*, is a process of clearing away the false perceptions created by the mind so as to enable an ongoing harmonious link (*yoga*) with the *draṣṭṛ*, the “seer” or “perceiver” whose nature is pure awareness, distinct from anything that may be perceived.  

When it comes to apprehending the divine, the act of seeing - *darśan* – takes on a powerful significance. “Did you have a good *darśan*?” asked Nirmala Prabha when, on joining our group of co-researchers in Gauhati for lunch, she heard that we had been that morning to the Kāmākhyā temple. Diana Eck (1981) explains: “The central act of Hindu worship, from the point of view of the lay person, is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one’s own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity” (p. 3). The primacy of this mutual seeing in the relationship between human and divine is evoked in the following passage from the *Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad*:

> In the beginning this universe was just water. That water produced the true (or the real), *Brahman* is the true. …
> Now what is the true that is the yonder sun. The person who is there in that orb and the person who is here in the right eye, these two rest on each other. Through his rays that one rests in this one; through the vital breaths this one on that. …
> *Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad* V.5.1-2

*Darśan* is thus not concerned merely with seeing in the everyday sense, but with a desire for seeing through and beyond the mundane in order to glimpse a divinely inspired vision. It calls for an active presencing of the greater-than-human dimension and an appreciation of the possibilities for religious interchange between human and god (*cf* latin *religio* = to bind back to).

While various spiritual practices, particularly those of yoga and Tantra, emphasise the necessity for careful effort and austerities (*tapas*) on the part of the human seeker, the initiative in this relationship can come at times from the gods

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35 Saktism and tantra do not subscribe to the classical saṁkhya-yoga dualism of consciousness versus nature described by Patañjali in the *yogasūtra*. Nonetheless, the notion of seeing remains central in their ritual worship.
themselves - as it seemed to in my case through my introduction to the goddess Pārvatī. The following episode, situated in the unlikely “temple” of the shopping strip in Mount Road Madras (now Chennai), near the Commander-in-Chief Rd corner, illustrates the potency of the nexus between the human act of seeing and the active witnessing of the gods.

In spite of my insistent conscious resistance I suddenly and inescapably found myself mesmerized by an image of Devī - the Hindu Goddess. At the time I had no idea who She was. With no knowledge whatsoever of any Hindu mythology, and an express intention not to seek it, I found myself repeatedly attracted to a particular statue of Her. Every time I walked into a handicrafts shop in search of gifts a statue of this Goddess would irresistibly catch my eye. Finally I determined to avoid going anywhere near the icons, and I put on a mask of vigilance before entering the next shop. I headed directly for the silks, without so much as turning an eye - until I was stopped in my tracks by an insistent magnetic force that tugged at my shoulder and made me turn around. There She was again, staring me in the face (Dobia, 2000, p. 204).

At the time of this first meeting with Pārvatī I had no knowledge of who this goddess might be, nor of her religious or mythological significance; but I knew I had been seen. What was it she meant to show me?

The desire to come face-to-face with the divine may help to explain why for Indian seekers sacred pilgrimage is a frequent recourse, one whose popularity is growing with increased availability of transport to make journeys that once were much more arduous and time-consuming. In 1973 “the number of pilgrims each year visiting the well-known tirthas [was] reckoned in several millions,” according to Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj (1973, p. 6). In 1989 an estimated 15 million pilgrims were attracted to Prayāga (Allahabad) for the kumbhamela, when monks and lay people from all parts of India converged as Jupiter entered the sign of kumbha [Aquarius] (Coleman & Elsner, 1995, p. 139).

Tirthaś are sites of special significance where the interface between human and divine is felt to be more easily encountered. Fords and rivers are particularly auspicious sites according to the Hindu scriptures on pilgrimage, and so the confluence at Prayāga of two such holy rivers as the Gāṅgā and Yamunā contributes to making Prayāga “the king of tirthaś” (from the Kāśikhaṇḍa, cited in Richard Salomon, 1985, p. 204), renowned as the pre-eminent site for Indian pilgrimage.
Indeed the term *tirtha* itself connotes a river ford or crossing place. Apte (1965) lists twenty-four definitions, uppermost amongst them being:

1. A passage, road, way, ford;
2. A descent into a river, the stairs of a landing-place;
3. A place of water;
4. A holy place, place of pilgrimage, a shrine &c. dedicated to some holy object (especially on or near the bank of a sacred river &c.).

There is thus the sense of a *tirtha* as providing a conduit through which one can pass over, or into, holy waters. Over millennia the life-giving properties of the water itself must have provided vital sustenance for weary pilgrims. In addition Diana Eck (1981) points out that there is a particular symbolic significance to the association of a ford or crossing place: *Tirthas* are places where the *avatāras* (incarnations) of the gods are said to have “crossed over” in their descent to the world. Consequently one might assume that they are also places where humans may more easily make their own crossings in pursuit of the gods’ beneficence. E. Alan Morinis (1984) sums up: “All *tirthas* are sacralised intersections of some kind” (p. 50). In the compound *tirthayātrā*, journey to a *tirtha*, we may locate the Sanskrit term for pilgrimage. Agehananda Bharati (1963) translates *yātrā* simply as “travel” and provides the following account to indicate the antiquity of its assumed benefits:

The merit of traveling per se, not of the more specified traveling for pilgrimage, appears to be first mentioned in Vedic times. The God Indra says to King Harischandra, “There is no happiness for the person who does not travel; living amongst men, even the best man frequently becomes a sinner; for Indra is the traveller’s friend. Hence, travel!” (p. 136)

The quote here is from the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, VII, 15. Agehananda Bharati adds the further note that “Traveling and the protection of the wayfarer is one of Indra’s many portfolios.” As a somewhat habitual traveller I find much to recommend in Indra’s exhortation to travel, and in the mysterious something that has kept drawing me back to India.

19th September, 1994 - arrival in Chennai

I expect, and experience, the sloppy heat, the bedragglement of the crowd lining up at the immigration desk. Perhaps I’ve been preparing myself for disappointment, or accentuated grief, or out-of-placeness. But there I am in line and on the first whiff of India my heart jumps for joy. There’s no reason, except the mystery that keeps bringing me back here. I wonder if the radically different context is the source of my sense of light and freedom. It forces me to be real here, and doesn’t tie me down
to a social role. Here I can be gently out-of-place, and each small thing a moment of sacred exhilaration....

Heterogeneity within Indian culture and the abundance of pilgrimage sites ensure that Indian pilgrims, too, experience a sense of wonder at the unfamiliar when they go on pilgrimage. During preparations for our trip to Kāmākhya Minati Kar invitingly explained the custom of *tirthayātrā* as it is practised in contemporary India. She emphasised not only the spiritual significance of pilgrimage, but the importance of communality to the overall experience:

**Kolkata, 18th March, 1995**

*Minati*: Actually in pilgrimage, *tirthayātrā*, firstly you have the great inclination and you are together with some other people who have the same inclination and you go to that place. You'll see not only that you are out of your own place and arriving in the pilgrimage place, but along the way you'll see nature. You also become a part of the group with whom you are going and also you have their feeling. You become another family with those people, staying together or exchanging views. Maybe everybody's inclination is they want to see, but with what thought? Everybody's thought is different. My mind is orientated in some way; your mind is orientated in some other way. Everyday will not see the same thing. They'll see the same thing, but from different angles. You have the exchange of ideas and so forth. But if you read Kamalākānta he thought he would go to Vārānasī but then he says, “No, everything is lying at Her feet so I don't like to go anywhere.”

Actually, when your body is able you can go on pilgrimage and all that. In India we have a saying that after you reach a certain age then you should go on pilgrimage. But I think if you have to go on pilgrimage go when you are young because then your body is fit. Otherwise when you are old you are not able to go. You can reminisce on what you have seen. Here the notion was like that but now people are changing.

In her ethnographic research in north western India Kathleen (Erndl, 1993) also found that what Victor Turner termed “communitas” was an important element of the experience. However, more pervasive in Kathleen’s analysis, and as Minati also alluded to, was that “[p]ilgrimage is an intensely personal experience, so much so that individual pilgrims traveling together for convenience or companionship may have vastly different understandings of what it all means and may not even tell each other their private reasons for undertaking the pilgrimage” (Erndl, 1993, p. 82). In parallel with this observation, Minati’s reference to Kamalākānta’s view on *tirthayātrā* is emblematic of the paradox whereby many Hindu saints “have minimized the importance of pilgrimage

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36 Kamalākānta Bhaṭṭācārya, a famous Bengali poet devotee of Kālī from the late 18th century
[but] have constantly been on pilgrimage themselves.” Accordingly, Agehandanda Bharati (1963, p. 144) concludes that, “it has become customary for the pious Hindu to go on pilgrimages, to believe in their merit, and yet to state that pilgrimage is not important – just as their preceptors kept doing.” Whether young, old, pious or otherwise, Indian pilgrims regularly throng to particular sacred sites.

For many non-Indian visitors the whole of India exerts the allure of a *tīrtha*. In my own case this attraction was first expressed in 1988 when I felt compelled to locate the authentic source of the yoga tradition that had given me a sense of human potential that was far more than everyday:

\[
\text{paramāṇuparamamahattvānto ˈsyā vaśikāraḥ}
\]

When one reaches this state, nothing is beyond comprehension. The mind can follow and help understand the simple and the complex, the infinite and the infinitesimal, the perceptible and the imperceptible.

*Yoga Sūtra* 1.40 (translation T.K.V. Desikachar, 1987, p. 21)

In their inquiry into the pilgrimage traditions of the major world religions, Simon Coleman and John Elsner (1995) comment that “A pilgrimage may be a rite of passage involving transformations of one’s inner state and outer status; it may be a quest for a transcendent goal; it may entail the long-desired healing of a physical or spiritual ailment” (Coleman & Elsner, 1995, p. 6). All these played a part at some point in my travels, with trips to Chennai for yoga studies remaining important, but increasingly sharing a focus on my coming to understand and apply the female symbolism and cosmogony represented in *Śāktism*.

**Turnings and crossings**

*Parikrama* is a central feature of pilgrimage in the Hindu tradition. The term is a compound of *pari*, around, and *krama*, steps. According to Apte (1965, p. 591) the following meanings may be derived: “1 roaming about, moving about; 2 roaming, walking or passing over; 3 circumambulating; 4 walking for pleasure; 5 series, order; 6 succession; 7 penetrating.” *Parikrama* is applied to the tradition of circumambulating a particular religious symbol, temple or town, and may also be used to denote a pilgrimage circuit where the pilgrim successively visits several sites in a specific sequence. In his cultural geography of Indian pilgrimage Surinder Mohan Bhardwaj (1973) argues that the discussion of *tīrthas* in the epic *Mahābhārata*, which lists more than 270 places, “suggests a grand tour of the entire country.” (p. 43)
There are parallels between the notion of **parikrama** and the repeated rounds of my explorations in India. What began as an exploratory trip to discover the source of the yoga tradition I was engaged in evolved into a series of circuits, crossing over to India, imbibing what I could of both tradition and atmosphere, and then returning home where I continued to digest the fruits of my journeying. I had the sense throughout of repeatedly circling around and through a sacred sphere, with my (mostly) annual trips themselves denoting cycles in my deepening understanding.

... one travels to a sacred place when the instruments of religion closer at hand do not satisfy one's needs. The journey of pilgrimage takes place when some specific feature of the sacred place recommends itself to the pilgrim as especially suited to the type of interaction with the divine he seeks.

(Morinis, 1984, p. 281)

Noting that “...internal pilgrimage may precede physical pilgrimage, proceed from it, accompany it, or achieve the same ends without any physical movement” Colin Turnbull (1992, p. 261) draws an analogy between anthropological research and pilgrimage. He further states, “There are pilgrims who never return from their sacred journey or who return transformed into something other than they were. So with the anthropologist” (p. 274).

The correspondence between my Indian expeditions and traditional Hindu definitions of **yātrā** are not only revealed in the **parikrama** that I was undertaking via my repeated round trips and the inner expectancy which I brought to my travels. It can also be argued that physically crossing over waters (most commonly for me the waters of the Indian Ocean) in search of a spiritual goal manifestly reenacts the journey to the **tīrtha**. This analogy must, however, be conceded as paradoxical to **brāhmanic** codes of orthodoxy which suggest a world of difference between crossing a river ford and crossing an ocean.

Whereas the waters of a river, particularly a sacred river, are understood to be inherently purifying, the waters of the ocean are in some respects polluting, or potentially so. Indeed, Agehananda Bharati (1963) notes that one of the goals of **tīrthayātrā** may be the performance of resanctification rites, required as a consequence of overseas travel:

A special type of ceremony is that of atonement, or expiation, **prāyaścitā**, where ritualistic impurities due to all kinds of pollution (as **travel across the sea**, the conscious or unconscious eating of impure food,
etc.) are to be expiated. These often require pilgrimage to shrines ‘specializing’ in prāyaścitāna rites (p. 139, italics added).

Two issues appear salient to the question of crossing oceans to perform a yātrā. The first has to do with the nature of the ocean itself and its relationship to rivers. The Rg Veda, V.85.6, makes the point that “these shimmering torrents, pouring down, do not fill the one single ocean with their water” (O’Flaherty, 1981, p. 211). Wendy O’Flaherty explains, “That is, although there are many rivers and rains, the ocean, though alone, contains them” (p. 212). The ocean, in both its physical and cosmic forms, thus contains all that has been washed away by the rivers. At the same time it is revered as originary and equated with the cosmic womb:

\[
\begin{align*}
& aham suve pitaramasya mūrdhhamama yonirapsvāntah \text{ samudre} | \\
& tato viṭiśthe bhuvanānu viśvo tānum dyam varṣmanopasṛśāmi |
\end{align*}
\]

Devī Śūktam, Rg Veda, X.125.7

I gave birth to the father on the head of this world. My womb is in the waters, within the ocean. From there I spread out over all creatures and touch the very sky with the crown of my head.


The epics and purāṇas tell the story of the churning of the milk ocean, in which the devas (gods) and asūras (demons) take alternate ends of the great serpent, twine it around Mt Meru and pull it back and forth in order to agitate the cosmic ocean and churn up the sacred nectar, amṛta, from its depths. As they proceed, an abundance of magical objects are churned forth – along with a most toxic poison. While supernatural prowess of this kind is more clearly the preserve of the cosmic ocean, the worldly ocean is nevertheless linked37 to its cosmic counterpart and would certainly seem to share a common propensity for both auspiciousness and extreme danger. Accordingly, the Rg Vedic sage Vasiṣṭha sailed the cosmic ocean only with the aid of Varuṇa, god of the waters (Rg Veda VII.88). In the Devī Māhātmya the gods invoke Durgā as worldly protector with the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
& durgāsi durgabhavasāgaranaurasasangā \\
& \text{You are Durgā, the boat that takes men across the difficult ocean of worldly existence. (Devī Māhātmyam IV.11, trans. Jagadiswarananda, 1953, p. 57)}
\end{align*}
\]

37 cf Rg Veda, VII.49, which refers to the earthly ocean as the resting place for the waters that have the cosmic ocean as their source.
Besides the symbolic and physical dangers associated with crossing the ocean, Hindu custom warns of risks that are especially significant for brahmans. According to the Manusmṛti:

From the eastern sea to the western sea, the area in between the two mountains is what wise men call the Land of the Aryans. Where the black antelope ranges by nature, that should be known as the country fit for sacrifices; and beyond it is the country of the barbarians. The twice-born [brahman] should make every effort to settle in these countries; but a servant may live in any country at all if he is starved for a livelihood.


Consequently a Hindu brahman is required to expunge the polluting effects of overseas travel. According to T.K.V. Desikachar (1982) the restriction whereby “usually an Indian brahmin should not cross the ocean” (p.32) was a primary reason why the celebrated yogācārya T. Krishnamacharya, who travelled great distances on foot in India and Tibet to meet and study with his preceptors, and whose own internationally renowned students were drawn from all over the world, never travelled overseas. Yet Krishnamacharya actively encouraged his son, Desikachar, also a brahman, to travel overseas to teach foreign students (Desikachar, 1992). For many years Desikachar has travelled extensively to conduct yoga education but he remains steadfastly convinced of the importance of roots, those of his students and especially his own (personal communication). This reveals a deeply held conviction, reflected in Hindu custom, that the preservation of the tradition requires an ongoing commitment to maintaining the ancient source of the teachings and protecting them from dilution.

Bearing such values in mind, it would seem that, when done in the right way, for the right reasons, and with due attention to reaffirming and replenishing his religious source it may be permissible for even a brahman to cross the ocean. In such circumstances, where dangers are overcome and any contamination is purged, the journey may ultimately confer merit.

In my own case, though not being a brahman and crossing the ocean to India, I felt my pilgrimages to a number of specific Śākta temples conferred a sanctifying and deepening impact. However, in some more orthodox Hindu quarters I was doubtless viewed as unchaste, a foreign woman who lacked either the appreciation or the birthright to behold Hindu deities, and who was therefore debarred from entering a tīrtha.
The 1992 round: trails and trials

Foreign tourists are excluded from the inner sanctum of many Hindu temples, known as the *garbha grha* (literally “the womb of the house”), to protect the holiest places from the desecrating effects of alien miscreance. I confronted this barrier rather abruptly at the Kāmākṣī temple just as I was starting out on my hastily planned 1992 *śakti* tour, having excitedly seized the opportunity to further my *śakti* experience while Desikachar was undertaking a pilgrimage to Mt Kailāsa in Tibet.

Of the hundreds of temples in Kāñcipuram, an ancient temple town regarded as one of the five holiest cities in India, the Devī temple of Kāmākṣī, the “lovely eyed” one, had long ago been chosen as the focus of the Śaṅkara *matha*. The special auspiciousness and sanctity that the Śaṅkarācārya’s presence conferred on the abode of Kāmākṣī meant that non-Hindus - even those like me suitably attired in a *sārī*, wearing *kumkum* and demonstrably sincere in the spiritual search - were not allowed beyond the outer courtyard of the temple.

But I was not to be deterred by this confrontation with *brāhmanic* orthodoxy. Having once been denied access to the sanctum I decided that the next best option was to find out about Kāmākṣī from one of her priests. Accordingly, it was not in the temple of Kāmākṣī but in the home of one of her priests that I first came to hear something of the Great Triple Goddess Kāmākṣī/Lalitā:

> I bow down to Lalitā, the supporter of the universe, the ruler of creation, preservation, and destruction, the Śrīvidyā, the eternal, the great Tripurasundarī. She should be meditated upon as the great Tripurasundarī, bright as millions of rising suns, and armed with the noose, the elephant hook, the bow of sugar-cane, and the arrows of flowers.

* (Lalitā *Sahasranāma*, trans. Sastry, 1925/1988, p. 1)\(^{38}\)

Any number of great scholars and devotees have remarked on the triplicity of Tripurasundarī (literally “the beautiful woman of the three cities”) and her esoteric connotations, among them the original Ādi Śaṅkarācārya of the 8\(^{th}\) century C.E.,

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\(^{38}\) The tradition whereby a particular *avatāra* of the Great Goddess is known by many epithets reaches its zenith with Kāmākṣī, in whose honour the devotional *Lalitā-Sahasranāma*, Thousand names of Lalitā, is recited.
reputed author of the classic *Saundaryalahari*,” a devotional hymn to the Divine Mother, and the more recent and highly respected 18th century C.E. commentator Bhāskararāya whose works include an authoritative commentary on the *Lalitā-Sahasranāma* (see e.g., Sastry’s 1925/1988 translation). However, as a neophyte I was most impressed with the more esoteric discovery that her three eyes represented Sarasvatī (Kā = speech) and Lākṣmī (Mā = abundance) on the right and left respectively, with Durgā in the position of wisdom and command at the centre. Kāñcipuram, I was told, is where the heart of the goddess Śatī landed after her dismemberment (see following pages), thus emphasising the reason for her gentle and benevolent appearance. Yet, despite her beatific appearance, this auspicious goddess was no mere “spouse goddess” in Lyn Gatwood’s (1985) terms. Her “four arms ... [confirm] her status as a quasi-independent figure who can stand apart from Śiva as a *mahādevī*” (Brooks, 1992, p. 71). She was Beauty, Grace and Unconquerable Authority all at once.

Had my understanding of Śāktism and Tantra been further progressed at that stage, I might have noticed the coalescence of Lalitā Tripurasundarī at the Kāmākṣī temple in South India with Tripurasundarī in Assam. But it was not until the 1996 collaborative pilgrimage that I discovered Kāmākhyā herself is also revered as Tripurasundarī, an appellation which demonstrates the coequality of these two Great Goddesses within the tradition of Śrīvidyā Tantra. Appreciating as much may also have led me to regard my disbarring from the sanctum at the Kāmākṣī temple as a forewarning of the difficulties I would face on my arrival in Gauhati: the factors that blocked my attempt to reach Kāmākhyā in 1992 may have been as much to do with my own state of unreadiness for a formal meeting with the Great Triple Goddess (whether as Lalitā-Kāmākṣī or as Kāmākhyā) as they were with politics and bureaucracy.

Notwithstanding such challenges, there were, on balance, enough serendipitous rewards to keep me engaged in my quest. By chance rather than by design I had begun this Śakti pilgrimage in August 1992 on Ādivelli, a special Friday in the Tamil month of Ādi consecrated to the Goddess. As a result of this coincidence the unfortunate circumstance of my being excluded from entering the Kāmākṣī temple sanctum was effectively overturned when Lalitā-Kāmākṣī herself came out to greet me – along with

39 While some authors, (e.g., V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, 1991 & 1942, and V.K. Subramanian, 1977), agree with folklore in attributing the *Saundaryalahari* to Ādi Śaṅkara, historical analysis suggests the text was written later (Brown, 1958).
several hundreds of other excited worshippers who were there to fete the Goddess as she was escorted by priests in a pradakṣīṇa\(^{40}\) of the temple compound.

At subsequent destinations my earnestness was recognised. I was allowed, with some negotiation, to enter the temples and join with the worshippers for a glimpse in turn of Miṅākṣī at Madurai, Cāmuṇḍeśvarī at Mysore, and finally (reluctantly as this was not planned) Kālī at Kolkata. Simon Coleman and John Elsner (1995) point out that:

“The experience of pilgrimage, rather than being a static object or representation, involves not only movement through space but also an active process of response as the pilgrim encounters both the journey and the goal. It is the experience of travel and the constant possibility of encountering the new which makes pilgrimage distinct from other forms of ritual” (p. 206).

All the while I was revolving around aspects of the goddess, and at the same time making my acquaintance with new possibilities within myself (as pointed out in Dobia, 2000). The subtle trajectory of my development as a Śākta pilgrim and a woman went from a concern with relationships between male and female towards a growing appreciation of the (possibilities of) primary relationship between woman and female deity. The beginning point for this development can clearly be seen in my later account to Kathleen of how I became interested in the goddess:

**Gauhati, 10th August, 1996**

*Brenda:* For me yoga was a science of spirituality. It didn’t have to be tied to religion. I still feel that there’s the depth of it. I didn’t want anything to do with Hinduism because from the Jewish point of view that’s idolatry.

*Kathleen:* Idolatry, yes.

*Brenda:* But I was confronted several times by a statue of Pārvatī and it just kept happening. Some sense of something spiritual and archetypal told me there’s really something here. It turned out when I went to investigate that she was the consort of Śīva and they used to quarrel all the time. She would want to bless somebody that he would want to curse. And I said, oh, that’s exactly the relationship that I was having with this Hungarian man.

*Kathleen:* You wanted to bless and he wanted to curse?

*Brenda:* He was really macho and aggressive in the way that he approached things. It was that kind of dynamic. So I said, “Oh she’s come to show me something.” It really unfolded from there.

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\(^{40}\) Pradakṣīṇa is effectively another term for parikrama, circumambulation, with the added meaning of turning always to the right.
Revisiting this now it seems hardly surprising that I would have been so taken by Mīnākṣī, the fish-eyed goddess who all but conquers Śiva, then marries him, assumes dominance in his temple in Madurai (in the south-eastern state of Tamil Nadu) and presides gracefully over her kingdom (Harman, 1992). The equanimity she radiates seems to me to have been primarily achieved through complementarity and balance in gender relationships (see Dobia, 2000) – something I hoped for but that seemed to elude me in my own life.

While visiting the temple of Cāmuṇḍeśwārī in Mysore I was lucky to be invited to witness a local mātā in action. The mātā was a slight woman I estimate to have been in her fifties whose spiritual authority was substantiated through her frequent states of trance and possession, when the goddess would enter her consciousness and speak through her. I observed a simple ritual at her home centred on offerings of incense, flowers, fruits and fire. She recited the Cāṇḍī (Devi Māhātmya) by heart in the Kannada vernacular, then proceeded with shouting and clanging to assume the role of the Devī herself. When my turn came to request something of the goddess I found it hard to say anything. My eventual response conveyed both awe and ambivalence in my relationship with her. “I want to understand what she wants of me,” I said. What she wanted, according at least to her local representative in Mysore, was that I accept her power as available for me to draw on and get on with finishing the task I was procrastinating over.

Perhaps the Mysorean mātā’s reminder of the need to integrate the Goddess into the normal context of my life influenced my reactions when I went south from there to Kerala, where the practice at the temple of Cottanikara of offering the goddess fresh blood drawn by hitting one’s head on a nail seemed a little too extreme for my nonviolent sensibilities. I retreated to Cochin and spent some time exploring the old Jewish quarter and synagogue and demonstrating, to myself, my sense of solidarity with my family in Australia. Clearly though, it wasn’t simply the idea of blood per se that made me recoil, as I was still very keen to make the anticipated journey to Kāmākhyā in
Assam where the association of the yoni with menstrual blood, both metaphoric and real, gave me a sense of expectant miraculousness.

However, as recounted in my introductory chapter, the miracle I had anticipated did not occur – at least not in the way or in the place I had imagined. It was not Kāmākhyā with whom I came face to face on that trip but Kāli, the goddess whose presence is ubiquitous throughout the city of Kolkata (Calcutta). I returned there rather wretchedly after being denied access to Assam, and, after a week of coming to terms with the recognition that there would be no fast track to enlightenment for me this time, I finally, ambivalently, approached the fearsome and bloodthirsty Mā Kāli at her Kālighāt temple.

Bearing the strange skull-topped staff, decorated with a garland of skulls, clad in a tiger’s skin, very appalling owing to her emaciated flesh, with gaping mouth, fearful with her tongue lolling out, having deep-sunk reddish eyes and filling the regions of the sky with her roars, and falling upon impetuously and slaughtering the great asuras in that army, she devoured those hosts of the foes of the devas.

(Devī Māhātmyam VII.5-7, trans. Swami Jagadiswarananda, 1953, p. 95)

Paradoxically, while “her wrath is immediate and dire against treachery and falsehood and malignity…..she too is the Mother” (Sri Aurobindo, 1928/1989, pp. 41-42) - a realisation that took some time to understand and appreciate, and which I only began to accept after quite unexpectedly experiencing something of a blood initiation a week or two later in Chennai at the conclusion of my tour. Having, though unconsciously, invested a great deal in the prospect that Kāmākhyā would unleash the possibility of my own biological motherhood, I was stunned instead by the challenge that Kāli had thrown at me. There must be something here for me to learn and assimilate, I imagined, as I set out to solve the developmental task before me (an approach that seems all too predictable for a psychotherapist, I must admit). “But how does she get from being Sati to Kālī?” I asked Minati Kar on our first meeting in 1992, quite oblivious that in Bengal no distinction was made between the two.

In Hinduism, the merit of undertaking a pilgrimage to the holy tīrthas, [is] known as the tīrthaphala (merit of pilgrimage) … The merit of pilgrimage ranges from immediate relief from mundane troubles to the expiation of sins and gaining the ultimate reality, i.e., the mokṣa (salvation).

(Jha, 1985, p. 14)

41 For more on Cottanikara temple and its practices see Sarah Caldwell (1999).
According to the Hindu tradition of pilgrimage, when the deity at any given site is approached appropriately, tirthaphala, fruits of pilgrimage, accrue to the worshipper. There was no question that this first śakti yātrā had borne fruits – just not the ones I had looked for. The ultimate effect, for me, was a convincing glimpse of what engagement with the goddess could mean. In addition, even before I had begun my formal doctoral research a foundation for eventual collaboration in the journey to Kāmākhya had been established through my meeting with Minati Kar - another kernel of possibility waiting in turn for its fruition.

I came away from this first partikrama, having deliberately gone in search of Śakti, with a sense of having been affirmed and, after establishing with Desikachar a practice centring around Kālī, with rich spiritual and ritual resources to advance my understanding. In consequence of this respectful approach my interaction with the goddess in India resulted more, I believe, in my purification (tapas) than in defilement of Hindu places of worship. I had flown rather than sailed to India yet, though frequently challenging, my ocean crossings were ultimately auspicious. As David Frawley (1992, p.178) commented in relation to the Vasiṣṭha hymn of the Rg Veda “the ocean journey is a metaphor for the spiritual quest.”

**Tantric substrata in pilgrimage and Śāktism**

*The significance of the Mother worship .. lies in the sādhanā -- the practical endeavour for the realization of the truth. Because of the sole importance of this, Mother worship in India has been closely related to the Tantras.*

(Das Gupta, 1954, p. 80)

*Tantric literature contains elaborate instruction about circumambulation, pradakṣiṇā, (“walking clockwise”), and there is hardly a tantric text or manual lacking such instruction.*

(Bharati, 1993, p. 93)

The term Tantra evokes a range of meanings “as wide as it is varied” (Bhattacharyya, 1956, p.228). Its tenets and practices have often been misunderstood, being variously equated in the popular imagination in India with black magic and in the West with sexual eroticism. In fact, as Sanjukta Gupta, Dirk Jan Hoens and Teun Goudriaan (1979, p. 5) pointed out the word tantra means "extension" or "warp on a loom," noting that its Sanskrit roots had to do with stretching or expounding (tan) and saving (tra). Though in early sacred texts no particular religious or metaphysical
significance was ascribed to the term, “tantra came to mean the essentials of any religious system and, subsequently, special doctrines and rituals found only in certain forms of various religious systems” (Bhattacharyya, 1982, p. 2).

Tantra has been designated a parallel system to that of the Vedas, not so much because it presents a fundamentally different philosophical system, but because it emphasises the incorporation of worldly knowledge and experience into the otherwise transcendence-oriented Hindu brāhmanic approach to religion. Whereas the highest goal of Vedanta is mokṣa, spiritual liberation from worldly illusion, Tantra emphasises jīvanmukti, spiritual liberation of the embodied human being.

Tantra has healed the dichotomy that exists between the physical world and its inner reality, for the spiritual, to a tantrika, is not in conflict with the organic but rather its fulfillment. His aim is not the discovery of the known, for ‘What is here, is elsewhere. What is not here, is nowhere’ (Visvasāra Tantra).

(Mookerjee & Khanna, 1977, p. 9)

A number of influences, including its autochthonous substratum, its appeal to and early development by the non-privileged classes, and its reverence for sexuality and the female role in both cosmic creation and biological reproduction, have converged to endow Tantra with a manifestly anti-hierarchical value system that goes against the grain of brāhmanic restrictions on worship and religious merit. In turn, according to Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya (1982), this has resulted both in the endurance of Tantric traditions of worship and in their continual subjection to denouncement from the brāhmanic orthodoxy:

In spite of all sorts of Brahmanical interpolations, grafting and mishandling, Tantra clearly rejects the caste system and patriarchy and, in the field of religion, all external formalities in regard to spiritual quest. These viewpoints are in virtual opposition to those upheld in the Smārta-Purāṇic tradition, and that is why the followers of this system have been condemned and various attempts have been made to blacken Tantric ideals (p.5).

In Tantra the concept of sakti as both a creative and transformative force is at its most highly developed. As Madhu pointed out during our first meeting in Delhi in 1994 it is the awakening of sakti as a potent conscious power within one’s own
embodied being that denotes spiritual accomplishment. While the concept of dikṣa, initiation, is a crucial aspect of Tantric tradition, its focus on the accrual of spiritual merit via disciplines of lived experience that aim to awaken inherent śakti sets it apart from the emphasis on hierarchical entitlements based on birth that are prevalent in brāhmanic social and religious organisation. In my Indian travels in search of the goddess I was not denied access to any place of Tantric worship due to my foreign status.

**Delhi, 25th September, 1994**

Madhu: With the popular understanding of Tantra, most of it is not very flattering to Tantra because most people have a wrong idea of what Tantra is. They think it's just to do with siddhis and power-oriented worship, but that's not so. That's just a very superficial aspect. The element of power, of śakti, of energy is very important, and therefore for the Tantric yoginī or Tantric sādhikā or Tantric adept, especially female adept, it's very different. You have a very different personality from the traditional yoginīs who are just bhaktas of Kṛṣṇa or whatever.

Brenda: How would you say the personality is different?

Madhu: We are on the path of the vīras. Vīra is the heroic one, and we are very radical in our codes and we don't make those distinctions. No caste distinctions apply to us. Rules of purity and impurity are reduced considerably, and the aim is to become the goddess. That is the sādhanā. The aim is not to just surrender to the goddess and dissolve into her personality. That's not the aim of Tantric sādhanā. Tantric sādhanā is that you become what you worship. It's a very important idea to become. Having become the goddess you should worship the goddess, and even the process of becoming is through feminine symbols, of śakti. There's a whole yoga involved. Even the initiation is to do with śakti - śakti-pāta. Unless you get your śakti-pāta you cannot really touch those subliminal levels of awareness. There's no way, because that dormant energy has to be aroused by the guru, has to be transmitted. So even the mode of initiation is śakti, the end is śakti, the starting point is śakti. It's a very distinctive tradition within Hinduism.

Notwithstanding popular misinterpretations of Tantra and the bad reputation often imputed to Tantrics, Tantra has had a pervasive influence on many aspects of Indian spiritual traditions. Sir John Woodroffe (1986) described the teachings and traditions that form the visible (if often esoteric) corpus of Tantric doctrine as “the great Mantra and Sādhanā Śāstra (Scripture)” from which are derived “some of the most fundamental concepts still prevalent as regards worship, images, initiation, yoga,

\[42\] That is, ritual, practice. (as per note in original)
the supremacy of Guru, and so forth” (p. 1). Accordingly, many Tantric texts provide detailed instructions for the conduct of specific rituals of worship and provide accounts of the merits accrued from their diligent performance. Included amongst the range of practices discussed is pilgrimage.

In Tantric literature and practice, … pilgrimage and its corollaries – especially circumambulatory rites which are central to the pilgrims progress – have a much higher prestige, so much so that it might almost be called canonical, if that term could be properly applied to tantrism. (Bharati, 1993, p. 85)

**Satī’s dismemberment and the Śākta pīṭhas**

Agehananda Bharati (1993) identifies Tantric elements in many of the rituals surrounding pilgrimage, but argues that what distinguishes a pilgrimage centre as fundamentally Tantric is its association with the myth recounting the dismemberment of the goddess Satī. This story, known as *Dakṣa Yajñā* (Dakṣa’s sacrifice), achieves its climax when the Goddess, who has taken the form of Satī in order to marry Śiva, casts off her body by self-immolation after Dakṣa fails to invite Śiva to his sacrifice and subsequently dishonours her. On discovering what has happened Śiva clasps Satī’s charred body to him and begins dancing uncontrollably. His mad and earth-shaking dance can be stopped only by having the corpse cut from his arms piece by piece, whereupon the dismembered parts are strewn all over India, each giving rise to a particular holy site known as a Śākta pīṭha. In addition to explaining the origins of the pīṭhas, as Dines Chandra Sircar (1948) has pointed out, this myth provides an integrative narrative that seeks to relate the many manifestations of the goddess throughout India.

Though the *Dakṣa Yajñā* story incorporates elements from the *Ṛg Veda*, reference to Dakṣa’s sacrifice first appears in the *Mahābhārata* (Sircar, 1948). But it is in subsequent Śākta-oriented *purāṇas*, notably the *Devi Bhāgavatam* and the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, that its important mythic elaborations appear full-blown. In the account of the *Kālikā Purāṇa* Śiva’s tears of distress at Satī’s death are so hot and intense that even Mount Meru cannot contain them. The gods are consequently alarmed at the prospect of the world being burnt up. Consequently:

The gods after entering into that dead body cut it into pieces and caused the parts [to] fall at particular places on the earth.
First of all the pair of feet (of Sati) fell at Devikūta, thereafter the pair of thighs, for the welfare of the world, fell at Udīyānā and then the female pudenda fell on the mountain, named Kāmagiri in Kāmarūpa, the navel also fell there on the ground of that mountain, the pair of breasts, adorned with the golden chain, fell at Jālandhara, the arms along with the neck fell on the mountain, named Pūrṇagiri and then the head fell beyond the region of Kāmarūpa.

The regions in the east which Bharga [Śiva] with the dead body of Sati on His shoulder, covered became re-knowned [sic] as the land fit for the performance of sacrifice.

The other parts of the dead body cut into small particles by the gods and swept away by the wind fell in Gāṅgā of the heaven.

O twice borns! Wherever the pair of feet and the other parts of the dead body of Sati had fallen, Mahādeva [Śiva] being attracted and out of deep attachment to her stayed Himself, in all those places, assuming the shape of a linga (male organ).

Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śaṅkaśvara and all the other gods due to the devotion to Śiva started worshipping the feet and the other parts of the dead body (of Sati).


Various texts provide different accounts of the number and locations of pīthas formed in this way. Dines Chandra Sircar presented evidence from several early tantras, dating from around the seventh century C.E., of a tradition associated with enumerating four pīthas. Other later texts name more sites, with 51 and 108 being significant recurrent numbers. As there is variability in the number of pīthas thus enumerated, there is also diversity between the lists regarding the choice of locations to be included and the names attributed to them. However, there is a notable degree of consistency across the lists of four pīthas, which principally refer to Jālandhārā, Oḍḍīyānā, Pūrṇagiri and Kāmarūpa (Kāmākhyā), situated respectively in East Punjab, the Swat Valley, site unconfirmed, and Assam (Bharati, 1993). Of these only Kāmarūpa (Kāmākhyā) remains in use as a site of regular worship.

The term pītha as applied to such sites of worship designates their Tantric association: “In the Tantric tradition, a centre of pilgrimage is called a ‘pītha’, a ‘seat’ of the goddess; Tantric literature rarely uses the more general word ‘tīrtha’” (Bharati, 1993, p. 86). Apte (1965) gives the definition of pītha as follows:

43 Sircar follows the Kālikā Purāṇa in asserting that the tradition of the four pīthas corresponds geographically to the four directions, however, Bharati (1993) points out that the directional distribution of these sites does not provide adequate geographic coverage of India and suggests instead that their preeminent significance is related to their being the sites where “the magically most potent limbs of Sati descended: her pudenda, her nipples, and her tongue” (p. 90).
1 A seat (a stool, chair, bench, sofa &c.); 2 The seat of a religious student made of Kuśa grass; 3 The seat of a deity, an altar; 4 A pedestal in general, basis; 5 A particular posture in sitting; 6 (In geometry) The complement of a segment (p. 620).

This preferred appellation in turn flags a number of particular significances related to the nature of Śakti as goddess and to Tantric worship in both its practice and intent.

Assuming a seat has to do first of all with grounding, bringing us into a proximal relationship with the earth. In moving from standing to sitting we effectively submit to the earth’s ready capacity to support us, handing back a large measure of the responsibility for holding ourselves erect. In preparation for worship the sādhaka sits on a seat of soft kuśa grass and invokes Pṛthvī, Earth as goddess, both in homage and to supplicate her blessing for the ensuing ritual worship. According to the Mantra Mahodadhīḥ, a 16th century manual of Tantric worship, the sādhaka should be seated in a particular posture, either svastikāsana, padmāsana or vīrāsana. The pītha (pedestal or altar) itself is sanctified through a process known as pithanyāsa, which involves touching specified parts of the body while uttering prescribed mantra that link the sites in the body with cosmic elements and prescribed deities. The particular deity to be worshipped is then also invited to be seated, to stay as guest of honour and be feted.

*Asminvarāśane deva sukhaśino ḍsaratāmaka Pratiśhito bhavesatvam prasida paramēśvara*

O immutable and imperishable Being! Be seated comfortably on this excellent seat. Be stabilised, O great Lord, be pleased. *Mantra Mahodadhīḥ, XXII-47*  

In Tantric ritual the seat into which the deity is invited is not merely an external altar but is also, most tellingly, the body and being of the worshipper. This is achieved by various elements of ritual including mantra and nyāsa which are related to the actual or symbolic construction of the requisite yantra, a geometric symbol that reproduces the specific deity’s energetic form. The sacred geometry of the yantra locates the chief deity at its centre, with lesser deities, the pithadevatā, positioned at angles and pathways from the periphery to the core. “Yantras have been described as ‘symbolic extensions of the sacred pilgrim centres (pītha-sthāna)’ – the most holy temples of the Supreme Goddess which are scattered throughout India – and as ‘spatial digits’ of the divine” (Khanna, 1979, p. 21, quoting Beane, 1977). Tantric ritual thus designates a pītha as a site that is actively charged by the presence of the goddess.
Elaborate Tantric symbolism involving the pithas provides the conduit through which the goddess’s powers - sakti - are invoked in ritual enactment of the cosmologic correspondences between place and cosmos, between the microcosm of the human body and the macrocosm of the universe. Correspondingly, pilgrimage may occur in the context of an actual journey to a pithasthana or via ritual practice focused on the energy centres of the body.

While full blown Tantric ritual may appear esoteric, the association of the goddess with earthly existence and the many means of attracting her beneficence underscore her broad appeal, as Madhu explained:

**Delhi, 25th September, 1994**

Madhu: The goddess is popular in India because she gives both bhoga and moksha. That is a very very special thing about goddess worship, that she’s interested in worldly welfare as well as enlightenment. She’s not there only for enlightenment and no worldly joys. There are innumerable instances of sadhakas who believe that if you worship the goddess all your wishes are being granted, especially if you go to a pithasthana or if you go to a temple where Her power is manifest or has been energised, like if you go to Kâmâkhya.

**Women and Goddess worship**

Over the course of the pûjā season in Kolkata I pondered the juxtaposition of the Goddess festivities and the role of women as devotees and as saktis. For the fortnight of her pûjā Durgâ reigned supreme over this city as pûndals sprang up everywhere, all vying to show off the special beauty and glory of the larger than life mûrtis (=“forms”, in this case clay figures) of Goddess and attendants that they housed (figs 1 & 2).

**Kolkata, 9th October 1994**

Out in the streets Kolkata is being transformed for its annual major festive season. There are brightly lit pûndals springing up all over the place, temporary street auditoria built of bamboo and canvas, filled with life-size models of Durgâ in her mahiśāsuramardini depiction - with her ten arms filled with weapons, astride her lion, as she destroys the buffalo demon. She is surrounded by various other gods and goddesses, installed for the pûjā as supporting cast members. The place goes crazy over the next few days as people come to participate in elaborate rituals.

I had most certainly never witnessed a spectacle that was, in its symbolism at least, so affirming of female power. Surely the implications were unmistakable.

**Kolkata, 14th October 1994**

Durgâ pûjâ has been exciting and, ultimately, I think auspicious. There were over 1500 pûndals spread throughout Kolkata, each with its own pageant involving Durgâ as mahiśāsuramardini, astride her lion
finishing off Mahisāsura, and surrounded by her children – Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī, Kārttikeya and Gaṇeśa. The crowds were another thing! I had to leave the temple at Belur Math\textsuperscript{44} on mahāśāṭami because I couldn't stand the pushing and shoving. But I did get to see the kumārī pūjā. The little girl looked quite freaked out when the crowds surged towards her - and then I wonder what it says that there are so many grown women participating as if they were inferior beings in a spectacle that involves male priests worshipping a tiny girl.... Hmm...

In this very public and prestigious celebration of goddess and female power, it was apparent both actually and symbolically that access to that power was controlled by a male hierarchy. At the public events I witnessed this state of affairs was compliantly endured by the women participating. Remarking on this, I asked Minati during one of our several conversations her opinion on the relationship of Indian women to the goddess.

\textit{Kolkata, October 11\textsuperscript{th} 1994}

Minati: Here it is more of ritual than of inner realisation that these women are worshipping or going to the pūjās. It is the ritual. If you come here you will see that every year they're celebrating Kālī pūjā. In the dead of night they're sacrificing the goat, every year. That is their family pūjā. But, you know, it is the ritual they're doing, not that they want to realise. Just we have to go, we have to do pranām, we have to take prasāda and that's it. But the inner urge is not there. For them it is just the ritual, festival, all that. Even if you ask what is the importance or what is the significance of Kālī or why she is standing on Śiva, what is the significance of Śiva to Kālī, they will not be able to tell you, even intellectual women. It is only the festival, I think. These people who are talking about women's lib and feminism are not interested in Kālī. They also want to get cleared of all these pūjās.

\textsuperscript{44} Belur Math is the international headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission, which, though its history is comparatively recent, has established a prominent and highly respected public status. Belur Math itself boasts a very large and impressive temple and compound.
Figure 1: Durgā pūjā pāndeal display, Kolkata 1994.

Figure 2: Entrance to pāndeal, Kolkata 1994.
This suggested a possible explanation for the divergences I had observed between the prominent female symbolism of the festival and women’s manifest sense of empowerment. I wanted to know, however, what the gender implications might be for women who chose to approach worship more thoughtfully.

**Kolkata, October 11th 1994**

*Brenda:* I’m curious about the importance of Śakti being feminine. Is [worship of Śakti] different for women?

*Minati:* Listen, when you think of the origin of puja the gods have the power. Brahman, Viṣṇu, Śiva-Maheśvara - these are the triad and they also have the power to kill because Viṣṇu had killed the demons and all that. But why to kill Mahiṣāśura did they have to invoke Kālī or Durgā? They needed a feminine force to – tataḥ samasta devānāṁ tejo rāśī samudbhavāṁ. Then all the gods collected together and from their bodies and eyes that power emerged and they created a female. So all the power of the goddesses they accumulated in one and it was feminine, and it was Durgā. They had to invoke that Durgā to kill the demon. But why were they not able to kill the demon? They also had the power but they had to create one feminine goddess, they call it Mother, and then they started chanting that you are the primary being and you have created everything, and then they started the Čandī. She then killed Mahiṣāśura, then she killed Raktabija and all that. Why was that feminine force necessary?

*Brenda:* Yes.

*Minati:* That is a big question.

*Brenda:* What do you think about that?

*Minati:* I think the feminine force is very different from male energy. Female energy is very different. I think the main thing about women is they have the special power to create. This power is lacking in men, that creation. They call it ādyāšakti. So they need a feminine force for creation. And I think that even for the destruction of the evil force they need the feminine force. So both for creation and destruction this feminine force is necessary. See, Śiva without Pārvatī. Śiva is everything but he was in need of Pārvatī and Kālī. Kālī is another form, a different aspect, because Pārvatī is more domestic, Kālī is more energetic.

*Brenda:* Does she need Śiva, do you think?

*Minati:* Kālī?

*Brenda:* Yes.

*Minati:* Kālī also needs Śiva in some aspect, because if you look at Śiva, if you think of prakṛti - prakṛti without Śiva, then comes the concept of Śaṅkara. But for Kālī also Śiva is necessary because there should be a duality. When you are talking of Kālī, not the energy, but the Kālī, then there is duality. So She needs Śiva the sādhaka [devotee].

*Brenda:* To appreciate her.

*Minati:* To appreciate her, what she’s doing.

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45 Minati is quoting here from the *Devi Māhātmya*, II.19.
Clearly, the primacy of śakti, of female creative power, is ultimate in Minati’s reading of this myth, as was depicted in myriad styles all around us within the elaborate pageantry of thousands of pāṇdals that lined the streets of Kolkata for the annual pūjā season (fig. 3). Her reference to Śaṅkara, the legendary philosopher and chief exponent of the nondual philosophy of advaita vedānta, which upholds the supreme reality of a transcendent spiritual unity over the relativity of māyā, a principle associated with transformation of matter and attributed to the goddess, is telling. Although Minati is a prominent advaitin scholar, she draws her own inspiration and sense of empowerment from her devotion to Kālī (as we have seen in the previous chapter).

In the Śākta reality Kālī represents, female powers of creation are elevated from the subordinate principle of māyā to that of śakti, equally real and fundamental and possessing her own consciousness (as seen from the dualist perspective described here by Minati), or all-encompassing with consciousness and matter indivisible (as viewed in Śākta nondualism). While Minati herself acknowledges the contradiction between her philosophical work and her personal devotion to Kālī, her reference here to Śiva as Kālī’s admirer and hence to the egalitarian relationship between them, provides a pointer to the formula she has used to negotiate the flexible and independent role she occupies within her marriage.

Nita Kumar (1994) observed that “dichotomies … including those of male/female are less rigorously constructed in India than in the West. … neither masculinity nor femininity necessarily bear the same characteristics as they do in the West, nor do they have the same relationship to each other” (p. 11). Each of the Indian co-researchers insisted on the complementarity of Śiva and Śakti as a key concept in understanding the nature of the goddess. The matter-of-fact sense of certainty and conviction with which this was asserted came across as strikingly different from the choice between subordination and independence that seems to characterise much of women’s discourse in the western contexts with which I am most familiar. In the worldview described by my Indian colleagues the centrality of relatedness was a given.

**Direct encounters – the pūjās and their aftermath**

In contrast with contentions that the divergent fierce and benevolent forms in which Indian goddesses appear reflect psychological and cultural ambivalence (e.g., Babb, 1970; Kurtz, 1992) or patriarchal “spousification” (Gatwood, 1985) the public
Figure 3: Display featuring the Goddess being lauded by the gods after her defeat of the buffalo demon, Kolkata, 1994.

Figure 4: As mahiṣāsuramardini the Goddess defeats the buffalo demon, Kolkata, 1994.
celebration in and around Kolkata over the pūjā season of 1994 spilled out a rich intermingling of devotion and reinforced the emphasis I had heard from my colleagues on complementarity. In this case, however, the focus for complementarity was not principally the relationship between god and goddess - though this remained subtly apparent. What struck me most from the accumulation of celebrations and ceremonies I attended was the un-self-conscious integration through public imagery and ritual of the goddess’ complex and paradoxical powers.

**Durgā pūjā**

Appearing everywhere as mahiṣāsuramardini, the destroyer of mahiṣāsura the buffalo demon, she was nonetheless simultaneously mother and undeniable chief of an impressive entourage. The (apparent) paradox in this comes vividly to light when we contrast the linguistic imagery of the classic Devī Māhātmya with the imagery depicted in a sample of the many pāṇḍals I observed, themselves only a small subset of more than 1500 that had sprung up all around Kolkata.

... Caṇḍikā, the Mother of the worlds, quaffed a divine drink again and again, and laughed, her eyes becoming red. ... The Devī said: ‘Roar, roar, O fool, for a moment while I drink this wine. When you will be slain by me, the devas will soon roar in this very place.’

The Rṣi said: Having exclaimed thus, she jumped and landed herself on that great asura, pressed him on the neck with her foot and struck him with her spear.

And thereupon, caught up under her foot, Mahiṣāsura half issued forth (in his real form) from his own (buffalo) mouth, being completely overcome by the valour of the Devī. Fighting thus with his half-revealed form, the great asura was laid by the Devī who struck off his head with her great sword.


This depiction of the consummate warrior (fig. 4), borne out by iconography dating to the beginning of the common era (Bhattacharyya, 1971), concurs with references in the epic Mahābhārata and in later versions of the Rāmāyana which cast the demon-slaying Devī as patron goddess of kṣatriyas (ruler-warriors). The Devī Māhātmya provides only a brief but nonetheless telling reference to her worship at Nāyavratī (the “nine nights” festival) when Devī entreats her devotees to recite her Māhātmya “at the great annual worship that is performed during the autumn” *(Devī Māhātmya XII.11, trans. Coburn, 1991, p. 80)*. Subsequent key Śākta texts, including
both the Kālikā Purāṇa and Devibhāgavata Purāṇa, are explicit in linking the origins of worship at Navarātri/Durgā pūjā to Rāma’s defeat of Rāvaṇa, thus corroborating the battle theme. Historically the public spectacle of Durgā pūjā has been associated with kings’ and rulers’ invocation of Śakti to consecrate their rule and military prowess (Gupta & Gombrich, 1986). Adopting local deities, mostly goddesses, kings sought to gain political legitimacy and allegiance from the people they ruled. In elevating these local goddesses to the status of a devī the “Hinduisation” of goddesses that were originally tribal and aniconic was also accomplished (cf. Bhattacharyya, 1974; Heesterman, 1985; Schnepel, 1995).

In contemporary Durgā pūjā celebrations (at least in Kolkata) the ubiquitous central motif remains māhiṣāsuramardini, but with political change the spectacle of maharajas has undergone a process of social democratisation which now sees local neighbourhood committees commissioning their own pūjā pāndals (Bandyopadhyay, 1993). Those neighbourhood pāndals that I observed during 1994 portrayed māhiṣāsuramardini not as the raging torrent of wrath described in the Devī Māhātmya but more as evincing a wholly collected and assured control of the situation. This was apparent whether she was shown highly anthropomorphised and glamorous or in a more traditional ornate style. That she appears at the same moment flanked by her children, all impassive to the focal action, invokes at once both her motherhood and her supremacy. Kārrtikeya and Gaṇeśa, her two sons, are universally recognised and indispensable demonstrations of Durgā’s role as mother. Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī, elsewhere viewed as distinct and powerful devīs in their own rights, are here subsumed as daughters of this Devī, serving to exalt Durgā’s primacy as well as her fecundity (especially relevant to Durgā pūja’s seasonal positioning as a harvest festival), and affirming the pre-eminence of the sākta heritage in Bengal (fig. 5).

While the splendid larger than life mūrtis (images) remain on show in the street pāndals, the central navapattrikā pūjā, in which nine forms of Durgā are invoked via nine plants sacred to the goddess, encapsulates the festival’s ecological emphasis (Khanna, 2000). Both the natural harvest and motherhood have prominent places in worship of this Durgā, with special relevance for women. A ghaṭa (clay pot), filled with water and resting on a bed of grain sprouts, represents the “womb vessel” of creation from which the creative powers of the goddess bring forth the harvest and all life. This echoes the promise of Devī as Śākhambhārī to “support the world with life
Figure 5: Durgā flanked by her children as she defeats the buffalo demon, Kolkata 1994.

Figure 6: Bilvā tree with clay pots attached, Kālighāt 1994.
sustaining vegetables, produced from my own body, until the rains come” (*Devī Māhātmya XI.44*, trans. Coburn, 1991, p. 78), and suggests an older agricultural basis to the great autumn festival. Evidence of the enduring popularity of the *navapattrikā* ritual and its fertility symbolism is seen in a photograph of clay pots attached to a *bilvā* tree, taken in Kālighāṭ two weeks after the *Durgā pūjā* rituals of 1994 (fig. 6). Tied to the tree by women devotees, the clay pots further extend the fertility theme of the festival in that they commonly bear prayers for conception and for a safe pregnancy and birth. Consonant with my own earlier experience of tying a bangle to the tree within the Kālighāṭ temple compound (see chapter one), the use of the *ghaṭa* for fertility prayers is especially symbolically replete. The *bilvā* tree represents the living form of Durgā-Pārvatī, whose blessings safeguard the “womb-vessel” of the aspiring mother until, having successfully given birth, the woman returns to untie the *ghaṭa* and give thanks to the goddess.

In Bengal in particular, the theme of motherhood also encompasses the relationship between human mothers and the goddess with her worship as the dearly loved daughter, Umā, whose annual visit during *Durgā pūjā* is a welcome return from her Himalayan marital abode to her natal home. On *daśamī*, at the conclusion of the festival, women queue to spoil this daughter goddess one last time before her departure, feeding her with homemade sweets and entreating her to come again (fig. 7). The well-documented sociological parallels in all-human relationships between mothers and daughters are undoubted influences in the development of this custom (e.g., Kakar, 1978/2001). Here we also see the imprint of the *bhakti* tradition within Śāktism, highlighted through the songs of a host of Śākta poets who popularised what June McDaniel (2004) has characterised as emotional Śākta *bhakti*, in which an intimate and loving attachment to the goddess, alternately as mother or daughter, is cultivated (cf. McDermott, 2001). The following example from a *Vījāyā* song is attributed to Rajanikānta Sen. The voice is that of Menaka, human mother of the goddess and wife of the Himalayan king:

Prostrate, I held her feet. How I wept! yet she would not take me with her. How can I go back again to a home bereft of Umā? ……

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46 Minati Kar, personal communication, October 1994
47 *Vījāyā* refers to Durgā’s victory over the demon Mahīṣa, after which she departs on the last day of the festival.
Figure 7: Women queueing on *daśami* to feed and bless the Goddess before she departs, Kolkata 1994.

Figure 8: Durgā and her entourage being escorted to the Hugli river for feting and immersion, Kolkata 1994.
“Weep no more, Mother. I will come again. Then take this hope and tame your restless heart.” And, as she spoke, Umā wiped my eyes with the corner of her sārī.

(trans. Thompson & Spencer, 1986, p. 102)

With the goddess’s departure, I went with the Kars to a first floor terrace overlooking one of the many jammed streets in which the beautiful mūrtis, now lifeless, were being fanfared with trumpets, songs and car-horns as they were paraded to their immersion in Kolkata’s Hugli river (fig. 8). Perhaps it was the goddess who had triumphed over the threat of plague that year. Watching the vijayā parade, it was certain that she had conquered hearts.

O Janamejaya! No worship or vow or charitable gifts, extant in this world, can be compared, as regards their meritorious effects, with this Navarātra Pūjā.

(Devi Bhāgavatam, III.27.15, trans. Swami Vijnanananda, 1986, p. 231)

Tārāpīṭh

Three days later, Minati, a young colleague, Neelanjana, and I took an early train from Sealdah station to Rampurhat, approximately 460 kilometres northwest of Kolkata, and from there travelled by auto to Tārāpīṭh. A siddha pīṭha (a site known for devotees’ achievement of special powers) owing especially to the renown of its most famous devotee, Vāmākhepā, said to be the bhairava (male consort, incarnation of Śiva) of the deity Tārā (Morinis, 1984), Tārāpīṭh is set in lush rural countryside amid green stretches of rice paddy and fields of sugar cane, dotted with humble but picturesque mud huts crowned with cane thatched roofs. At its centre, rising above a modest assortment of stalls and shops, is the Tārā temple, of classic Bengali style and featuring fine terracotta engraving (fig. 9). It was this village setting, away from the Kolkata crowds, together with the fame of Tārāpīṭh as a siddha pīṭha as well as its śmaśāna (cremation ground – something which Minati knew fascinated me), that inspired the journey.

Though not counted in most classical texts among the Śākta pīṭhas, the local pāṇḍās regard Tārāpīṭh as the place where the third eye of Satī fell to earth after her self-immolation and dismemberment. This symbolism provides a clue to the association of Tārāpīṭh with the intense practices of Tantric sādhanā - in contrast with the more bhakti oriented popular worship we had witnessed over the past days. Indeed Tārāpīṭh is known for its vāmācāra, the left-handed path in Tantra, which advocates extreme practices such as śava sādhanā, meditation on a corpse.
The Hindu Tārā herself is described in fierce terms in texts including the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, where she is adorned with severed heads, has red eyes, licks a corpse, laughs shrilly and looks extremely dreadful. From such descriptions, together with her demand for blood sacrifice and her frequenting the cremation grounds it would seem appropriate to conclude, with David Kinsley (1997), that Tārā is a fearsome goddess. Still, “The goddess Ugratārā, in this shape, should be meditated upon by the devotees who seek their happiness” (*Kālikā Purāṇa, LXL.68*, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 897).

Being the day of the annual *Tārā pūjā*, the temple precinct was brimming with pilgrims. Some with young families picnicked in the adjacent grounds of the śmaśāna, generously park-like in its layout and boasting several small refreshment stalls for the visitors’ amenity. To my right the children playing happily were as unaware of my sense of amazement as they were unperturbed by the sight to my left where, clearly visible across the grounds, still-whole cadavers were being prodded or clubbed into the flames of open pyres; it takes some time, evidently, for a human corpse to be fully incinerated in this way. Mesmerised, I found myself being strangely calmed and grounded by this glimpse of reality, where, under the eye of Tārā, all dimensions of life were embraced with equanimity. For Tantric *sadhus* the fierceness of the goddess is a boon to conquer fear and stretch their powers of self-control, a primary aim for those *vāmācāris* who, like Vāmākhepā, frequent the śmaśāna at night and perform śava sādhanā (Robert Svoboda, 1986). Given my own unreadiness for such an experience I opted out of staying to join them.

Crossing back to the temple, the bustle made it difficult to get more than a moment’s *darshan* – and at that our view of the devī was partially obscured by the other visitors – but we were treated by a *pāndā* to a verbal narrative of the “true” Tārā, as revealed on the stone inside the sanctum and reproduced more vividly in coloured artworks for devotees.

*Fieldnotes, Tārāpīṭh 17th October, 1994*

When Śiva caught in his mouth the poison that was ejected during the churning of the milk ocean, Kāli sprang forward to catch him by the throat and stop him from swallowing it. But some of the poison got into his throat and so an antidote was needed to revive him. As his wife Kāli could not give him the breast that fed their children, so she turned herself into another form, that of Tārā, and nursed him with breast milk. A little of the poison is supposed to have gotten into the breast, and that, according to the story, is the reason for the dark ring around women’s nipples.
Figure 9: The temple at Tārāpiṭh.

Figure 10: Lakṣmi pūjā, Kolkata 1994.
This story locates Tārā within the Hindu Tantric tradition as an emanation and alter ego of Kālī, helping to cement her place as the second of the mahāvidyās, the ten “great wisdoms” of the tantras. In stressing her motherliness, and her likeness in everyday women, it also clearly signals the paradoxical nature of this fierce śmaśāna-dwelling deity. However, in spite of this astonishing contrast in Tārā’s depiction, V. Subramaniam’s (1993) observation that “in practice, Devi cultists see no paradox” (p. 11) would seem to apply. Within the temple sanctum the immediate and prominent metal mūrti of the deity is in the form of the bloodthirsty and terrifying Ugratārā. But behind this is the Tārā stone that reveals her motherly qualities as saviour of Nālakaṇṭha, the blue-throated Śiva (Morinis, 1984). This symbolism evokes the progress of Tantric sādhanā as followed by Vāmākhepā and followers of the vāmācāra. One must first conquer all one’s fears in order to behold the frightening vision of Tārā. Once pleased that unflinching courage has indeed been demonstrated, she reveals her motherly form, showing herself as protector and saviour of her devotees (Tārā derives from trā, meaning to protect, to save – Van Kooij, 1972).

**Lakṣmī pūjā**

Across India Lakṣmī is widely revered, her epithet, Śrī, indicating her auspiciousness and beauty. She is a serene and beneficent lotus-bearing deity, worshipped on the full moon in accordance with brāhmanic traditions and her relationship with Viṣṇu. Fullness is also associated with her abundant giving. Popularised images of Lakṣmī show gold coins streaming from her hand; more ecologically, her worship is associated with the rice harvest (Manna, 1993). In Bengal worship of Kojāgarī Lakṣmī completes Deviṃpakṣa, the fortnight beginning with the new moon of Āśvin (around October) and including Nāvaratrī, that is dedicated to the goddess. With the full moon occurring on October 18th that year, the day after our Tārāpīṭh excursion, Minati invited me to a family Lakṣmī Pūjā in suburban Kolkata. While the visitors greeted, mingled and sipped refreshments in an open air courtyard, the women of the household alternated between attending to their guests and assisting a priest and Lakṣmī prepare for the pūjā in an adjacent room.

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48 Another narrative, recounted in several tantras, links Tārā with the sage Vaśiṣṭha who was sent to seek out the Buddha in China after cursing her. This legend provides support for the view that Tārā worship was originally imported into India from Chinese Buddhism (see Bhattacharyya, 1982; Morinis, 1984).
“Kojāgarī” is derived from the term “Ko Jāgarī”, that is, “who is awaking at mid-night for my arrival?” It is generally believed that the goddess of fortune, vegetation, crop and corn comes to everybody’s home at mid-night and she would naturally testify the eagerness of the worshippers to earn the blessings from Her end. So, the worshipper should keep herself alert for the grand ovation of the deity.

(Manna, 1993, p. 56)

The ovation of this deity was certainly grand and auspicious. A full size mūrti had been commissioned and installed in a sizeable room, especially decked out for her. She herself was richly adorned, down to the silver owl at her feet representing Lakṣmī’s animal companion, and she was surrounded by flowers, ornaments and a huge variety of sweet and tempting food offerings (fig. 10). Having not previously experienced much affinity for Lakṣmī, I nonetheless found the devoted ardour of the priest, the welcome of the household and the intimacy of the setting very moving.

Late in the evening, once the goddess had been propitiated, the women attending were invited to be presented for her blessing. As the priest chanted mantras especially for me, I quietly wished for the success of my doctoral project – and for a way to make it possible for me to return for a second round of meetings with my co-researchers in order to further develop the collaborative process before undertaking the joint pilgrimage.

A week later I was quite serendipitously invited to a function at the Australian Embassy in Delhi where my entrance ticket won me a return international flight to any Lufthansa destination west of India. To some consternation from the Lufthansa officials I requested San Francisco-Delhi-San Francisco (via Frankfurt) - about as far west as anyone could go.

Oh Agni! Invite that Lakṣmī spoken of before to my residence. And also see to it that she having once stepped into my house will not forsake me so that I will be able to obtain through her gold, cow (includes land also), rich friends, well-wishers and faithful servants etc.


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49 I suspect this had to do with the opposition between Lakṣmī’s sweetness and my being a “spicy person” according to Desikachar. To me her association with wealth and beauty seemed to echo superficial desires and feminine stereotypes.
**Kāli puja and its fruits**

No visitor to Kolkata who ventures beyond the cocoon of a 5-star resort will fail to encounter Mā Kāli. Whatever the influence of her temple at Kālighāṭ in the British naming of Kolkata (a point of controversy), there is no question of her reign over the city. Her presence is all-pervasive on the dashboards of cars, taxis, buses and trucks, in household shrines as well as at the celebrated temples of Kālighāṭ and Dakṣiṇēśwar. On foot, one is continually passing street shrines that punctuate rows of shops or houses, all bedecked with garlands of red hibiscus, Kāli’s sacred flower. Notwithstanding this considerable pre-eminence, her permanent shrines are manifestly insufficient for Kāli Pūjā. I returned to Kolkata two weeks after the conclusion of Navaratri to find the pāṇḍals going up again, in order this time to house larger than life mūrtis of Bengal’s favourite Mother.

Kāli features throughout Kolkata in her Dakṣiṇakālī form, standing over the prostrate body of Śiva (fig. 11). Though known in the text of the Devī Māhātmya as a black goddess, Kālikā being the epithet that distinguishes her as “The Black One” (Coburn, 1984, p. 154), the mūrtis installed for Kāli Pūjā frequently portray her in blue or occasionally white (fig. 12). Her blue appearance would appear to reflect Bhāskararāya’s 17th century commentary on the Devī Māhātmya, which includes a dhyaṇa (meditation) on Mahākāli, included in many published editions of the Caṇḍī, that describes her as nīlāśmadyuti, “luminous like a blue jewel” (Swami Jagadiswarananda, 1953, p. 2). The white Kāli, according to June McDaniel (2004), is the auspicious Kāli whose worship can bring the devotee to heaven. Visually those mūrtis portraying the more traditional Kālighāṭ style appeared to me most consistent with the classic descriptions of Kāli insofar as they evoke her fierceness – mainly through her enlarged eyes and piercing stare.

**Kolkata, 18th March 1995**

Minati: In the Dūrgāsaptaśatī we meet Kāli as Cāmuṇḍā and hear how Kāli originated. ... Then she was Kauśikī Ambikā and from her forehead came out Kāli karālavadanā, with the sword in her hand. She was very dangerous-looking, with blood-red eyes. ... The śloka says that from a frown in the centre of the forehead, making a terrible face, Kāli came out with a sword in her hand, with a garland of skulls, wearing a tiger skin, very thin and her skin is very crinkled, with a large wide open mouth, tongue hanging out. Her voice was so great that it filled up the earth and the sky. This is the story of Caṇḍī.
Figure 11: Dakṣiṇākālli, with protruding tongue, stepping with her right foot on the prostrate body of Śiva, Kolkata 1994.

Figure 12: A white Dakṣiṇākālli, Kolkata 1994.
Figure 13: Dakṣiṇakāli, centre, flanked by Cāmuṇḍā, left, and Śivadūti, right, Kolkata 1994
Although not failing to share her ghoulish ornaments and divulging a protruding tongue, the smiling, beautiful and sārī-clad Kālī mūrtis on public display in community pāṇḍals otherwise seemed to bear little resemblance to the karālavadanā (terrible-faced) Kālī of the Caṇḍī. In this we may recognise the process of gentrification (sanitisation?) discussed by Rachel Fell McDermott (2001) as an impression of the bhakta poets of Bengal. At the same time, however, the capacity to metamorphose has always been Śakti’s prerogative. In the Śīva Purāṇa, for example, the name Kālī is given by Himavat to the beautiful goddess daughter born as a boon to Menā. The Kālikā Purāṇa also makes it clear that a number of both terrible and beautiful manifestations are aspects of Kālikā herself. As Teun Goudriaan (2000) pointed out, “it would be wrong to associate the name Kālī solely with the well-known fearsome apparition” (p. 186).

One of the larger pāṇḍals I observed in 1994 distinguished the resplendent dakṣīna form of Kālī from the indisputably terrifying Cāmuṇḍā, who “is of dark complexion, has long fangs, is tall and looks terrifying” (Kālikā Purāṇa, LXI.94), and Śivadūtī who “is with four arms, with a huge body, which shines like the vermillion, with red teeth ... splendid with her snake earrings and snake-necklace” (Kālikā Purāṇa, LXI.104-105). While Kālī towers over the scene from centre stage, at either side these two undertake battle with Śumbha and Niśumbha (fig. 13). Why should Kālī be the one to preside over all these emanations of Śakti? Quoting from the Karpūrādī Stotra Minati explained:

Kolkata, 18th March 1995
Minati: If we want to look at the derivation of the name Kālī, we can break it into four letters. Ka means Brahmā, A means ananta, without any end, La means viśātma, the ātmā of the whole world, and Š means sūkṣma or very subtle. Therefore Kālī is Brahma, the supreme reality, she is without any end, she is like the thread that permeates the whole universe, and she’s subtle.
Sat means here the real and asat the unreal. That is the power. By the desire of the creator she creates, she protects, and then all these beings dissolve in her. She is in every being as Viṣṇumāyā and like consciousness she pervades the whole world.

Iconographically Dakṣīnakālī is explained in the tantras in association with her cosmic significance. Minati elaborated:

In terms of meditation: Kālī has four arms. The upper right hand has the abhaya mudrā while the lower right hand grants the boon.
The left upper hand holds a sword and the lower left hand holds a severed head from which blood flows out. That sword is called the sword of knowledge, through which Kālī severs the ego, the mohana of her sādhakas. These sādhakas have given up all desire, so they are called niskāma. For knowledge the predominant guna is sattva. When the rajoguna has flown out and you can suppress the tamoguna then the sattva predominates, it shines. Then the divine knowledge can manifest itself. The black hair is the symbol of tamoguna. In her lower left hand Kālī is holding that hair which resembles tamoguna and the rajoguna is flowing away through the blood. So sattvaguna is formed.

Kālī is standing on the corpse of Śiva. Śiva is nirguna, without qualities, but when you create you must have qualities, so Kālī is saguna, with qualities, when she is creating. So, as the creator, the protector, and then the destroyer, she has the three gunas. Her right foot is on the body of Śiva. This posture is called pratyalidhapada, one foot on the corpse. So she has one foot in the past, the other in the future, and now she is in the present. …

She is black because she is called kṛṣṇavarna and mahāśakti. Of all the veils, the most subtle is māyā. Kālī is the totality called Brahman because she has overcome māyā. She is digāmbari, without any veil. Also digāmbari means one whose cloth is all the quarters. She has dishevelled hair, muktakeśī. Mukta means open and keśa means hair. The feminine is muktakeshī. Again ka means Brahmā, a means Viṣṇu, and śa is Śiva. So the word keśa means Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. One who frees the keśa, one who delivers even Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, she is muktakeshī.

There is one sloka in the Mahānirvāna tantra where it is said that the colours like white, yellow, and all, get dissolved in black. All these universal beings are dissolved in Kālī, therefore the yogis have described her as black. Also the eyes of mortal beings cannot see Kālī, but through meditation you can see. With the meditative eye you can see the light that is coming out from Kālī and she is illuminating everything. On the forehead of Devi there is a crescent moon from which nectar flows. With this nectar Devi gives immortality to her sādhakas. The munaḍmāla is the symbol of the 52 letters, maṭrakvaramam. Therefore Kālī is called ṣabdabrahmasvarūpīṇī. Then the arms she wears as a skirt around her waist are the symbols of karma. Through karma souls are born into the world and die. The arms symbolize the karma of the jīvas. If there is no destruction there is no meaning for creation. Kālī destroys what is evil. This is the image of Kālī in the Indian sādhanā.

The detailed cosmic symbolism of Minati’s elegant textually informed explanation of Dakṣiṇakālī’s form was complemented by the simpler narrative of a Kālighāṭ priest I spoke to, who, invoking the Dakṣa Yajña story, informed me that the goddess here was Dakṣiṇakālī because this was where the right foot of Satī had fallen to earth. The multivalence of the symbolism associated with Śakti thus allows for a
multiplicity of interpretations, whether complementary, as in the priest’s narrative, or contradictory. The paradoxical nature of Kālī in particular comes through in Rita’s reflections on the distinction between Durgā and Kālī, whom she sees as both a malevolent goddess and a respectful wife.

_Bhubaneswar, 20th March 1995_

_Rita:_ Religion was used more to get rid of all kinds of fears and dangers. And that is why I think Kālī was used more as a malevolent kind of goddess than a benevolent goddess, and Durgā is used as a benevolent goddess. She comes more during the time of prosperity and in the light, when the moon is brightest. Kālī comes when it is dark. They both destroy the demons but in a completely different way. …

The other day we were discussing the paper of some French scholar and he was asking why Kālī has a protruding tongue. I don't know whether I'm right but I said that giving men respect is part of her thinking also, part of her life, so the moment that she stepped on her husband's chest that was a kind of terrible sin that she has done. So that is the sign, a protruding tongue. I told him that I think it is her respect for the male counterpart, and that her male counterpart should be quite respected is not out of Kālī's power also. She doesn't rule out Śiva's worth in her life. I think that's important. Śiva is equally important for her life and her power.

_Brenda:_ That's part of her demonstration of power that she can actually give that respect?

_Rita:_ Yes, that's what I'm saying. Yes, and it is very clear that touching the feet on her husband's chest is a kind of sin, and that she recognizes publicly and openly. If she was arrogant or if she was that kind of a person that only believed in her own power without Śiva I think she would not have done it like that. She would have managed some other way. I think she wanted to project very well that this is sin. I see it from that point of view. Her protruded tongue is not to eat people. Whether the demons or not is another thing - that power is there in her hand, that she can kill. That power is shown very much in the way she's wearing the heads of the demons. But the protruded tongue is more towards her relationship with man and man's power. It's a joint power which I think is important. I'm not sure but that is how I feel it. I haven't read it as such. And I see Kālī from that point of view.

In Rita’s account we see elements of regional variation in goddess worship as well as the imprint of the popular *bhakti* movement (and the overlay of a patriarchal

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50 Whereas the influence of the bhakti movement in Bengal appears to have minimised the tendency to be fearful of Kālī’s fierceness this does not seem to be as evident in other parts of India, even in Orissa which has a strong Śākta profile (but nonetheless has the Vaiṣṇava Jagannāth as its most eminent deity). Sarah Caldwell (1999), for instance, has written of a much more ambivalent relationship between Kālī and her devotees in Kerala.
social system?) that transforms the projected tongue of the goddess, potentially threatening and defiant, into a sign of respect and humility. Tantric texts, by contrast, do not so much emphasise Kālī's deference to Śiva as her primacy as the devourer of time. In Minati’s view this is the symbolic significance of her protruding tongue.

**Kolkata, 18th March 1995**

Minati: In the Mahānirvāna tantra the one who devours all the living beings is Mahākāla, and the one who devours Mahākāla is Mahākālī. Mahākāla devours everything and that Mahākāla is lying at the feet of the Mother. The root kāla means many things. One meaning is that she is the intelligence who has the power to build this universe from Brahma. It also means that she is the primordial prakṛti, the mulaprakṛti, and she is also the substratum of the origination and dissolution of all the mahatattva, the evolutes of Śankar. She is the originator, she protects, and at the end she devours. She is Kālī.

In customary worship the goddess's devouring nature is not assumed to be merely symbolic. Consonant with Kālī's exaltation as blood-drinking vanquisher of the demon Raktabīja, Śaṅkta worship generally entails blood sacrifice. Visiting Kālighāṭ on the morning of Kālī pūjā in company with Minati and a guest, we were confronted not only by a crush of people vying for darśan of Kālī-Mā but by a cue of would-be sacrificers bringing goats and chickens to offer to the goddess. As a devout vegetarian I had never relished this aspect of Śaṅkta worship, but on this occasion, with a view to understanding more about her rites, I accepted our pūjāri escort’s offer to show us the sacrifice. The balipītha (place of sacrifice) was located behind the main temple and its adjoining open maṇḍapa (a roofed area used for devotional singing and prayers). Far enough away from the sanctum to be relatively discreet, the balipītha nonetheless remained amid the chaos of worship, with priests chanting mantras as they raised the khadga (curved sword) for the chop.

In Hindu lore the goat’s shortcoming evidently is its lust (kāma). Sir John Woodroffe (1981) quotes the allegory “as lustful as a goat (Chhāga)” (p. 329) to explain the symbolism of goat sacrifice. After its beheading the goat skull is presented to the goddess, while the body, the pūjāri told us, is cooked and distributed to the poor. I

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51 Another story of the origin of her Daksinakālī form has Śiva laying down before her on the battlefield so as to calm her wild and destructive dance (David Kinsley, 1988, in reference to Oriya and Bengali versions of the Rāmāyaṇa and to the Liṅga Purāṇa). The motif here is the devotee’s capacity to pacify Kālī’s violent tendencies, thus suggesting that, even when violent, her relationship to the devotee is one of protection rather than threat.
did not verify whether those who took their turn in offering the bali ritual to Kālī saw themselves as sacrificing their own lust, or simply as appeasing or thanking the goddess. Nor did I observe any signs of contrition or placid acquiescence on the part of the goats (all male). I did, however, reflect that their end was more seemly and auspicious than those of the poor animals seen packed tight in trucking containers or waiting forlornly in abattoir yards in Australia. Though still far from experiencing a carnivorous conversion I did appreciate the merit, for those who choose to consume meat, of first consecrating it to the goddess in appreciation of her life-giving powers.

In the midst of the mêlée, with people clamouring to touch the feet of Kālighāṭ’s powerful Kālī mūrti, I was somehow able to establish a brief state of communion with the goddess. In the moments I stole alone at the sacred tree I experienced a profound sense of surrender. No longer feeling invested in my personal desire for motherhood I left it to her to determine the outcome.52 Later, at Belgaria for the evening pūjā, my sense of psychological surrender – bhakti – was further heightened. Women had pride of place at the front of the audience, the pūjā was meticulous and reverential, the crowd decorous, the bhajans (devotional songs) sublime, and I was intoxicated with the spirit of Kālī-Mā (fig. 14).53

A Tantric goddess might be expected to make her impact on the psyche subliminally; so it was (again) for me. The circumstances of Uma’s conception almost five weeks later were such that only Kālī’s continuing influence on both consciousness and body could have enabled it - another rite of blood. Her blessing was confirmed when, in the sixteenth week of pregnancy feeling emotionally bruised and shaky, I returned to Kālighāṭ for inspiration. This time her darśan restored my sense of auspiciousness.

Kolkata 19th March, 1995
This morning’s programme was a visit to Kālighāṭ. I arrived by taxi and as I looked for a place to leave my chappals [sandals] I was picked up by a priest who then took me on the temple round. We took a garland of red hibiscus, four bangles, and sindūr in a basket and began at the main Kālī shrine, entering with a blessing of Oṁ śānti, and then moving to the front of the maṇḍapa across from Kālī where I was given sacred coconut water, a forehead mark, and whatever blessings. The noise and

52 Perhaps in this I was participating, unknowingly, in the goat sacrifice after all – i.e., through surrendering my own kāma.
53 See chapter 1 for a more detailed account.
Figure 14: Sublime Kāli mūrti at Belgaria, Kāli pūjā 1994.
the people milling in front of Kāli were in fine Kālighāṭ style (including
the mess of leaves, flowers, dirt and water underfoot). As I stood
opposite the shrine a special prayer was said and the crowd was shooed
away so I could get a clear view across to Her face. The fire of ārati was
flaming in front of Her. I offered a red hibiscus flower, throwing it
across the way and, without my taking any special aim, it landed
auspiciously squarely in the centre of a newly broken pure white
coconut. As we moved back the priest made another blessing, placing
the orange sandal paste on the wall. The next blessings were taken at the
Krṣṇa Rādhā shrine, then the Brahmā shrine, and finally a special
blessing at the Śiva liṅgam where I was to repeat a mantra to Śiva in
both my name and D’s. The hibiscus garland was draped around the
liṅgam and the sindūr was given back to me with instructions to place
it on my forehead every Saturday. Finally we went to the wish-granting
tree - it seems to be primarily focussed on blessing women who want to
have children. I was to tie a stone to the tree, silently asking Kāli for my
preference of a girl or a boy, the stone intended to signify a healthy
pregnancy and birth. The blessing was Oṁ namaste namaste. After
the tying of the stone, the bangles. I am supposed to come back with the
baby to give thanks. The priest felt sure that things would go well
because I have a clear mind. He promised to say prayers for the child,
and especially wanted me to come back with the baby so he and his two
children can make a special blessing.

In 1996 returning from Gauhati to Kolkata just prior to Uma’s first birthday I made
sure to take her to Kālighāṭ. This time I gratefully untied a stone from the tree.

**Jagadambā**

What remains to be explored in this cycle of encounters with Śakti is the
intervention in Chennai of Jagadambā, arriving not through a direct physical approach
on my part but in a spontaneous, if not entirely un-induced, epiphany (as described in
chapter 1). Her appearance, notwithstanding my surprise, in an effulgence of light and
sound seems reminiscent of Devī’s manifestation in the Mahiṣāsura myth of the
Caṇḍī. Her announcement to me as Jagadambā brings her closer to the vision of the
Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa, where, in addition to being revered for her supreme valour
and power, she is exalted for her maternal qualities of compassion (Brown, 1998). The
World Mother plays a causal role in creation, innervating the materia of nature that she
has produced:

O Mother of the world!
Can the Tattvas [principles], deprived of Cit [consciousness], create the
world?
They are lifeless things.
O Devil! Can the indriyas [senses] with their objects and functions, Bear fruit without Thee? 

(“Jagadambikā”, Woodroffe, 1982, p.147, translated from Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa V, XIX.28)

The theo(-a-?)logical innovation of the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa is that it “distances the Goddess in her supreme form as the benevolent World-Mother from the lesser forms that are prone to engage in the bloody rampages against the demons” (Brown, 1998, p. 8). While the transcendent form of the Goddess is thus emphasised (as in the quote above), her supremacy hinges on her capacity to wield the dual powers of transcendence and immanence (Brown, 1990). In effect this was how I experienced her arrival, as both immanent in my body and as a boundless power that surpassed and enveloped me, driving away doubt along with its embodied symptomatology.

The connotations of simultaneous transcendence and immanence implied in the epithet Jagadambā appear to have been instrumental in the assimilation of local and tribal goddesses within the brāhmanic māhātmya code (cf. Mallebrein, 1999). In my case, however, it seemed to signal supersession of patriarchal strictures, as evident from the personal symbolism that accompanied my moment of revelation. This Jagadambā, being an apparition of consciousness rather than of ritual participation, was largely unencumbered by my nagging sense of unentitlement as a non-Hindu to Hindu forms of worship. Moreover, her appearance to me at this time was attributable less to the purānic texts that entreat her protection than to Sri Aurobindo’s evocation of the divine Śakti, the enabler of yogic transformation (Sri Aurobindo, 1976), and her manifestation in the body as the World Mother.

The gnostic individual would be the consummation of the spiritual man (sic) … All life would have to him the sense of the Conscious Being, the Purusha within, finding its self-expression in Nature … He would feel the presence of the Divine in every centre of his consciousness, in every vibration of his life-force, in every cell of his body. In all the workings of his force of Nature he would be aware of the workings of the supreme World-Mother, the Supernature; he would see his natural being as the becoming and manifestation of the power of the World-Mother. 

(Sri Aurobindo, 1939/1970, pp. 971-2)

Whereas I argued in a conversation with a longtime Pondicherry ashramite for the centrality of Sri Aurobindo’s Śaktism, he was adamant that Sri Aurobindo’s consummate gift was his capacity as a great synthesiser. Both are true. As Nalini Devdas
(1993) put it, “In Sri Aurobindo’s system of ‘integral non-dualism’, or ‘realistic non-
dualism, as he designates it, East meets West and the Hindu tradition enters into
dialogue with the concerns of the modern age. The concept of the Mother goddess is
central to his treatment” (p. 199). This breadth was fundamental in legitimising my
Indian pursuits and inspiring the cross-cultural application of insights gleaned from my
emergent reflections. If, therefore, the goddess chose to announce herself to me as
Jagadambā just as I was poised to renounce my maternal desires, how extraordinarily
fitting it seemed that the moment of Uma’s conception announced itself as a jolt in my
womb just as I arrived in the grounds of Matri Mandir.

“The Matrimandir wants to be the symbol of the Universal Mother according to
Sri Aurobindo’s teaching” (The Mother, n.d.). A golden sphere bursts through the earth,
spreading open its twelve surrounding petals (fig. 15). At its core a white chamber, clear
and spacious, holds a central white marble dais imprinted with the Mother’s symbol.
Rising in turn from the dais a golden pedestal, formed of four of Sri Aurobindo’s
symbols, in turn supports an immense round crystal under the permanent illumination
of a single shaft of sunlight directed through the roof (fig. 16). Beneath the pedestal a
small round opening carries the sun’s ray into a ground pool to be absorbed into the
earth below. This “living symbol of Auroville’s aspiration for the Divine” (The Mother,
1977, p. 4) represents in combination spiritual aspiration and surrender, the coming
together of heaven and earth, and the cosmic principles of consciousness and creation.
Being conceived here (by miraculous serendipity), Uma’s special kinship with this place
was established. Some day, I am sure, she will return to Matri Mandir “to find [her]
consciousness” (The Mother, n.d.).

In August 1996, as Uma approached her first birthday, we gathered with
Kathleen, Elinor, Madhu, Minati and Rita in Gauhati, within close reach of Kāmākhyā.
It was both a culmination – representing the end of my struggles to get there – and a
new beginning, confirming and enabling our collaboration as researchers and
constituting Uma’s first visit to an Indian temple, where she was blessed (as we all were)
with red hibiscus flowers.

Finally this yātrā had come about. Poised to begin our fieldwork, we reflected
together on the meanings and intentions we brought to it.
Figure 15: Matri Mandir, Auroville, photo courtesy of Auroville website, March 2008. 
www.auroville.org/gallery/matrimandir/mm_26.htm

Figure 16: “A place to find one's consciousness”, the inner sanctum Matri Mandir, 1994.
Gauhati, 9th August, 1996

Brenda: Yātrā connects the sacred and the personal. It has to do with going somewhere you haven’t been before.

Elinor: In some traditions, e.g., Hindu and Christian, you recreate the life journey of the deity you’re following.

Madhu: Nature, epics, legend … there’s a whole philosophy in India re yātrā. And you can make the sādhana in your own body.

Kathleen: Every person who goes on a pilgrimage goes for a reason. In the case of Kāmākhya, I’ve been to many pithas, why not the yoni pitha?

Madhu: There are four main pithas for the Goddess. Jalandharā, Pūrṇagiri, Kāmākhya & Oḍḍiyāna - no-one knows where it is.

Brenda: I have a particular reason for coming, especially now with Uma, that has to do with both a thanksgiving for and an empowerment of my motherhood, and a sacralization of the relationship between Uma and me, a blessing for our onward journey together, the two of us alone together.

What we encountered at Kāmākhya and our reflections on it form the basis of the following chapters.

Figure 17: The co-researchers in Gauhati, from left to right: Madhu Khanna (inset), Elinor Gadon, Minati Kar, Kathleen Erndl, Rita Ray, Uma & Brenda Dobia.
Chapter 4

KĀMĀKHYĀ - tracing the matriline

Delhi, 25 September, 1994

Madhu: There are stories about Kāmākhyā.
Brenda: I'm hoping to get there.
Madhu: Yes. You must go there sometime. If you ask for anything there you will return; you are going to return there one day and thank her for it. It's a pīthasthāna, it's an energised sacred centre where the sakti of the Goddess is manifest, not just latent.

This chapter introduces us to Kāmākhyā - the Goddess, her temple and her history in the region of Assam known historically as Kāmarūpa. It opens with our inquiry into the origins of worship at the Kāmākhyā site, following the questions we raised, incorporating our discussions with local experts, and interrogating key archeomythological sources. This exploration of historical significances at Kāmākhyā informs the subsequent analysis of philosophy and practices related to the motherhood of the Goddess and the symbolism of the yoni. I conclude the chapter by looking at implications, applications and contradictions surrounding the ways these principles are put into practice.

The land of Kāmarūpa

... the worship of the Goddess Mahāmāyā in Kāmarūpa, the abode of the gods, is recommended to be the best of all. Kāmarūpa is the sacred land to the Goddess; there is no land equal to it. 

(Kālikā Purāṇa 58.40–41)

The sacred land of Kāmarūpa, or Prāg-jyotiṣa, the light of the east, as it was known in the time of the epics, is located in the far north-eastern corner of India, centring in the state now known as Assam. Under its current political boundaries the lush, largely rural environment of Assam is only thinly territorially linked with the main body of India to its west. Famous internationally for its tea and its wildlife reserves, Assam is known also for its rich natural resources of timbered hills and abundant waterways, the latter dominated by the prodigious Brahmaputra whose valley slices through the length of the state, from the river’s northeast origins in Tibet to its western destination in neighbouring Bangladesh. Amongst the hills of Assam one in particular
has been identified with the cultural landscape of this region. The blue hill, Nilācalā, crowned with the temple of Kāmākhyā, overlooks the red waters\(^54\) of the Brahmaputra. The joint influence of these two natural emanations in shaping the life and culture of Assam has led to its description “as the picturesque land of the ‘Red River’ and the ‘Blue Hill’” (Barua, 1991/1954).

My flight route in 1996 to this region led from Melbourne to Mumbai, then via Kolkata to Gauhati. Uma, then 11 months old, travelled with me.

**Fieldnotes, Mumbai, 5-6\(^{th}\) August 1996**

Arrival into Mumbai. Flight was good. Uma handled it well. Coming into airport felt quite matter-of-fact. Ground staff helped to get us to immigration counters and almost before I noticed it we were in the arrival hall. I felt quite at home and comfortable with the process in spite of its being hot and steamy. Uma too was happy. Perhaps all the anxiety of anticipation proved to be so unnecessary that the sense of relief and ease was greater by contrast. Overnight in Mumbai, Uma’s skin seems fine [she has been suffering from eczema for the last three months] and she makes friends with everyone.

Our group’s cumulative arrivals into Gauhati were staggered, giving me, the first, a brief opportunity to check accommodation arrangements for our group and settle a little with Uma before the others were scheduled to join us. It was a whole different order of things for me this time to be negotiating a trip to India with a baby and arriving in a region as yet unfamiliar. But my anxious anticipation began to drop away as things fell into place in our temporary “home” on the banks of the red river. Overall it seemed an auspicious landing.

**Fieldnotes, Gauhati, 6-7\(^{th}\) August 1996**

Gauhati has a new arrivals hall and also looks quite attractive. The man at the Immigration desk remembered me from four years ago. He was glad to let us through this time. As we went towards the exit I thought I could smell cow dung aromatically invoking the rural atmosphere. Once we got outside we soon picked it up on the wheels of Uma’s stroller - a tangible confirmation of my olfactory presentiment. The ride to the Brahmaputra Ashok hotel was for the most part through green and lush countryside. There were lots of cycles and cycle vehicles. It has a rustic, clean, fresh feel here. The hotel room is spacious and comfortable, exceeding expectations of its modest tariff. Stone floors, cane furniture, a magnificent view over a green stretch of garden and lawn to the Brahmaputra River and the hills beyond. There are

\(^{54}\) The redness of the Brahmaputra evidently derives from the effects of the river’s fast and often flooding flow through the red alluvial soil of the region (Hem Barua, 1991/1954; Envis Centre Sikkim on Ecotourism, 2005).
continual visitations of birdlife - including the four storks adorning the middle of the garden when we woke up at 6am today (fig. 18).

On the ride from the airport we passed the hill that Kāmākhyā inhabits. It was rich with vegetation and wild looking.

On our first morning in Gauhati I ventured out with Uma by auto rickshaw to the market. Finding that Kathleen had arrived while we were out, we took the time over the afternoon to get acquainted. The following evening, after suffering through frustrating airline holdups and two last-minute postponements of her flight, Elinor joined us. Anxious by now for our first glimpse of the temple, I booked an early morning car for the next morning to take the four of us the six or so kilometres to Nilācala. By car the climb itself was relatively modest. The entrance to the temple road (constructed for modern vehicles in 1958 according to Sarkar, 1999), is flanked by enormous stone statues of Gaṇeśa and Agnivetāla as prescribed in the Kālikā Purāṇa (79.92-104). We ascended in corkscrews and hairpins to a parking area located just below and to the east of the main temple compound (fig. 19). The Kāmākhyā shrine is situated up a long stairway at an elevation of 525 ft (Sharma, 1992) - though it is not clear whether this measurement indicates height from the base of the hill or if it refers to elevation above sea level.

Fieldnotes, Gauhati, 9th August 1996
Elinor, Kathleen, Uma and I leave for Kāmākhyā at 6.30 am. The drive up the hillside is leafy and winding, the road cutting through rock in places to assist the ascent. The earth is dark red and much of the vegetation a deep blue-green. We are greeted by a young pāṇḍā (priest) who guides us toward the temple up a long flight of marble steps, the centre of which is tinged red. On the way we stop to buy offerings and are passed by people leading goats – presumably destined for the slaughter. I am rather dismayed by the amount of goat excrement around – you can’t avoid walking on it and by now we’re barefoot. [Arriving so early in the morning we appear to have been ahead of the cleaners’ morning round.] The tank water is also a nasty looking shade on the green side of khaki. It’s hard for me to relax as a result, while I am carrying Uma. We get to the upper sanctum but we are too early to get a ticket for the main sanctum underneath. It begins to rain so we leave, anticipating returning there with Madhu.

The temple compound
Climbing from the carpark, the stairway is lined with rows of shops, displaying an array of temple art, bangles, pendants, tapes, booklets and refreshments in addition to all the pūṭā requisites (fig. 20). The ascent takes visitors to a gateway where, leaving their shoes, they can enter directly into the temple compound. Stretching up to the right
of the compound are the quarters of the temple community. This residential precinct is occluded from the temple courtyard by several small stalls that offer basic paraphernalia for worship (pujā). Before us as we entered the compound the main dome of the temple rose over sculptured panels depicting central deities of the Hindu pantheon. The tall beehive style dome-tower, the śikhara (fig. 21), marks the underground inner sanctum, the garbhagṛha whose cave houses the yoni stone. Behind this stretches a series of three further chambers or manṭapa, roofed alternately in a smoothed folk style or in the layered beehive characteristic of Assamese temples (Barua & Sreenivasa Murthy, 2005; fig. 22). The last long circular-ended hall is clearly of more recent origin than the anterior portions of the temple, though even the main structure shows signs of having been rebuilt above its stone foundations (fig. 23).

A range of sculpted figures adorn both the internal and external temple walls, as well as the outer stone walls of the compound. These included a number of females who captured our attention. The fierce Cāmuṇḍā was positioned as guard at the gate of one of the smaller shrines (fig. 24), while a still older (apparently) stone Cāmuṇḍā situated in an alcove to the right of the rear temple chamber was lovingly attended by a female pujārini (worshipper). A special favourite with Kathleen, this became our first stop in subsequent worship. In the outer western wall, facing towards the temple, an unusual image of a nursing mother with baby (fig. 25) symbolised public acknowledgement of sacredness in this early stage of motherhood (at the time also my own) and affirmed for me a sense of appropriateness about including Uma in the pilgrimage (fig. 26), despite attendant complexities and constraints. Remarkably, the sculptured image of a menstruating woman (fig. 28) seemed equally interesting to mainstream Hindu pilgrims as it was to our group of feminist scholars. This was one of a select few that received frequent copious red smearing, simultaneously marking her auspiciousness and leaving little room for doubting the menstrual symbolism of the image.

A wide paved pathway surrounds the temple, providing ample space for pradakṣinā, which is specifically encouraged in the Kālikā Purāṇa: “Any person who performs circumambulation of the goddess one hundred and eight times he gets all his desires fulfilled and at last attains liberation” (71,3, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 1080). As we walked from the eastern gate keeping the temple to our right, the southern perimeter provided views over a low wall across the forested hill to the road below and the fields and settlements beyond, before we were again enclosed by a higher wall reaching across
Figure 18: The Brahmaputra river viewed from the Brahmaputra Ashok hotel.

Figure 19: Setting out from base camp (the temple parking area) with local sadhu as guide.
Figure 20: One of the many temple stalls selling pujā requisites, Kāmākhyā temple compound.

Figure 21: The beehive style śikhara rising above the cave that houses the yoni stone, Kāmākhyā temple compound.
Figure 22: Exterior rear view of the main Kāmākhyā temple, showing the roofline of the four chambers.

Figure 23: Side view of main Kāmākhyā temple, showing ancient stone base in anterior section, superimposed with more recent construction and later addition of rearmost chamber, (photo: Kathleen Erndl, 1996).
Figure 24: Cāmunḍā, Kāmākhyā temple compound, (photo Kathleen Erndl 1996).

Figure 25: Nursing mother and baby, depiction on inner wall of temple compound, Kāmākhyā.
Figure 26: Mother-baby connections – Uma and I make friends in the temple compound, Kāmākhya 1996.

Figure 27: Pilgrims, priests and musicians gather on the covered platform near the northern temple entrance.
the western gateway and eventually meeting the canopied rear temple entrance. Here, on
our left, there was a further opening into a large sacrificial courtyard, the balighar,
which, though situated off to one side, had become a centre of controversy, as we later
discovered. On the north side the hill continues to rise. It has been furnished with a
steep row of elongated stone steps that provide amphitheatre-style seating during the
major festivals. About halfway along the temple complex the steps are interrupted by a
large covered platform. Over the period of our visit we variously witnessed groups of
pūjāris, musicians and stray visitors gathering there (fig. 27).

One of this assembly platform’s upper corners is flanked by the office where we
were later provided with viewing tickets; the other leads off via a further short walkway
to the temple tank. Symbolically pure, and therefore a necessary precursor to entering
any Hindu temple, the tank’s murky waters looked anything but sanitary. My maternal
anxieties were consequently aroused, fuelled by a protective awareness of the health risk
posed by contaminated water, the avoidance of which had been impressed on me by
advisors (both Indian and occidental) to the point that I ascribed my good health on
trips to India almost entirely to this habit.

\textit{heyaṃ duḥkamanāgatam}

Painful effects which are likely to occur should be anticipated and
avoided.

\textit{(Yoga Sūtra II.16, trans. Desikachar, 1987, p. 36)}

Not surprisingly therefore, I found the ceremonial bathing ritual a little tricky to
negotiate. Perhaps I would have been less reticent if I’d realised at the time that this was
the \textit{Saubhāgya Kuṇḍa}, Pond of Fortune, in which the Goddess is said to play
(Sharma, 1992, p. 30.) Several of my colleagues, on the other hand, unflinchingly braved
the water with apparent Tantric heroism – and maintained their health.

Śakti worship invariably involves propitiating Gaṇeṣa prior to approaching the
Devī. At Kāmākhya, a dancing Gaṇeṣa is depicted in a carved stone panel near the
northern entrance to the temple. From here it is possible to enter directly into the
temple’s central chamber which houses the metal bhogmūrti, “icons of enjoyment”, of
Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvari, referred to by Pandit Gauri Šankar Šarma in our meeting
as the \textit{sakalā}, “with form”, aspect of the deity. Beyond this chamber we came in
subsequent visits to the top of a steep staircase which leads into the inner sanctum, deep
inside a cave. At the bottom is the \textit{nīskalā}, “formless”, Goddess of the \textit{yonipītha}. In
the \textit{Kālikā Purāṇa}, Šiva refers to this rock as “the very lovely pudendum in the form
of stone, which is twelve *āṇgulas* in width and twenty *āṇgulas* in length, gradually narrowing and sloping … it is reddish in colour like vermilion” (62:88-89, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 918) - this either in keeping with or as a result of an eternal profusion of daubed *sindūr*, the vermilion paste sacrament essential to tactile propitiation of the Goddess. An unassuming spring beside it trickles water across the surface of the *yoni* stone, further embellishing the redness which peeks through a layered surround of floral garlands. Electric lighting helps to illuminate the darkness of the womb cave, while the Goddess’s modesty is assured by a canopy that shields her privacy except to those in the act of worship.

**Tracing history**

Like the conical beehive layering of the *śikhara* (tower) rising above the ancient cave shrine, many layers of history and tradition are represented in the temple architecture, its iconography and ritual practices, and in the stories that underpin them. Attempting to deconstruct patriarchal layers that obscure prior female-affirming value systems has been viewed by many feminist scholars as vital to the recovery of an authentic women’s spirituality (e.g. Gimbutas 1991; Gadon, 1989). Here at Kāmākhyā our interest in elaborating a woman-oriented perspective converged with the extraordinary sense of antiquity inspired by the cave shrines to press the question of the origins of the worship. We spoke with Dr R.D. Choudhury, director of the Assam State Museum at Guwahati about archaeological indications of the temple’s history.

**Gauhati, 14th August, 1996**

*Dr Choudhury:* Even right from Gupta period [circa 4th-6th century C.E.] you get the archaeological evidence at Kāmākhyā. There are some stone pillars, decorated pieces are here, seal is there according to the style of Gupta.

*Elinor:* There are Gupta pieces there and some looked Gupta, there is evidence of Gupta time. But I was going earlier than that, because the sense of this primal *pitha*, of the aniconic stone being there in this place, in a cave. We call it a *pitha* now but I don’t know what they would have called it then. Was that the beginning of the worship of local peoples? This is hypothesis.

*Dr Choudhury:* From a few stone sculptures under the walls of the western gate you can say that some tribal influence is there. You can see the mother and child is there; then a lady is pouring water; then one male and female are sitting there. Some four or five scenes are there. They have nothing to do with the Gupta style or eastern Indian school of sculpture.

*Elinor:* No, but they also don’t look that old, they don’t look like they’re pre-Gupta. They look very late.

*Dr Choudhury:* This cannot be pre-Gupta.
Assam’s geographic position as a frontier land abounding with natural assets and providing a critical route of access across Asia has seen it populated and repopulated in historically successive waves. The prehistory of the region suggests that several routes of migration must have played a role in contributing to a heterogeneous racial mix, amongst the earliest being Austro-Asiatics from the Pacific and southern regions and Mongolian peoples coming from the east, followed from the north by Tibeto-Burmans (Choudhury, 1966). As newer arrivals took over the river plains, the older tribes were evidently pushed into the hills (Barua 1991). Alongside the continuing pressure from the east which came in periodic surges, migrations from the west appear to have become significant quite early, with evidence of Aryan impacts found in archaeological, literary and anthropological records.

Whilst the effects of this are significant at Kāmākhyā, the tribal [adivasi] substratum remains a pronounced influence on the temple culture. The extent of this influence appears in keeping with Assam’s overall high population of scheduled tribes. Dr Bharati Barua of the History Department at Gauhati University helped us explore the Aryan and pre-Aryan roots of Goddess worship at Kāmākhyā.

_Gauhati, 14th August 1996_

_Elinor:_ I want to come back to the origin as much as you know of the worship at Kāmākhyā. This was long before the Āhoms. How ancient do you think that it is that there was Goddess worship in the cave there?

_Dr Bharati Barua:_ The temple was built by the Koch rulers, Naranārāyaṇa, and after that the Āhom rulers renovated the temple.⁵⁶

_Kathleen:_ Before that, how far back do you think it actually goes?

_Dr Bharati Barua:_ From 2nd century BC to 2nd century AD, because we have got reference from Kālikā Purāṇa, Yoginītantra.

_Elinor:_ You have reference in the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa also, no?

_Dr Bharati Barua:_ They haven’t referred regarding Kāmākhyā, but they have given the ruling power of Narakāśura and Bhagadatta.

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⁵⁵ Assam’s 23 scheduled tribes constitute thirteen per cent of the State’s population (Government of Assam, 2005).

⁵⁶ The Kochs, originally a hill tribe who were Hinduised at an early stage (Bhattacharyya, 1995), established a kingdom in western Assam around 1515-1530 C.E. (K. L. Barua, 1966). The Āhoms, a Shan tribe that had invaded Assam from the east in 1228 C.E., subsequently supplanted the Koch kingdom after centuries of conflict between the two (Hem Barua, 1991).
Naraka, legendary founder of the first temple at Kāmākhyā, is mentioned in the Rāmāyaṇa in connection with the search for Sītā and Rāvaṇa. There Naraka is described as a wicked demon who may have concealed the hostage in the caves of Prāgjyotiṣa, Naraka’s kingdom; elsewhere, however, the epic suggests that Naraka’s death at the hands of Viṣṇu occurred well prior to Sītā’s abduction. In the Mahābhārata Naraka is referred to as the son of Bhumī, the Earth. Via her he receives Viṣṇu’s weapon and then passes it on to his son Bhagadatta at his death. Both were kings of Prāgjyotiṣa, described as a country of mlecchas, non-Aryans, whose armies consisted of Kirātas, a reference to “all Mongoloid people (Tibeto-Burman, Sino-Tibetan and the like)” (Barua, 1991, p. 15), and Cinas, being a more specific reference to those of Chinese origin. In spite of the impossible chronology suggested by these references, the multiple records which depict these characters’ exploits point to a historical figure identified by the name Naraka, or most likely a ruling dynasty, who was responsible for Aryanising Goddess worship and building a temple at Kāmākhyā some time between the 1st century (Choudhury, 1966; Shastri, 1991) and 3rd centuries C.E. (Kakati, 1948).

Gauhati, 14th August 1996
Dr Bharati Barua: Narakāsura was a worshipper of Devī. He was given advice by his father, Janaka, who was in Mithilā. Janaka, as the king, wanted to Aryanise Prāgjyotiṣa. … But we have got three or four Narakas because their successors also wanted to take the name Naraka to influence the people as that we have come from that dynasty of Naraka. Janaka was the ruler of Mithilā and this Naraka was his adopted son. He found him from the earth when he was ploughing the field.

Kathleen: Like Sītā?
Dr Bharati Barua: Both, like Sītā.

Narakāsura’s role in Aryanising the Goddess

The Kālikā Purāṇa, composed at Kāmākhyā and dated to the ninth century C.E. (Shastri, 1991), elaborates the story of Naraka, drawing from the epic accounts as well as the Viṣṇu Purāṇa to paint a detailed narrative regarding this asura (demon/non-Aryan) king’s role “as the initiator of the Śāktī cult in ancient Assam” (Kakati, 1948, p. 28). The connection with Viṣṇu begins with his incarnation as Varāha, the boar, and his impregnation of Prthvī, the Earth.

O Lord! Who else is capable of carrying your Varāha body? Moreover, you raped the licentious [sic] Prthvī in the water in the past, and as she was in her menstruation period she conceived a terrible embryo.
Figure 28: Menstruating or perhaps birthing woman, carving on exterior temple wall.

Figure 29: Varāha image on exterior temple wall.
O Lord of the world! Since Pr̥thvī conceived while she was in her period of menstruation, the son that would be born from this conception shall bring disrepute. He would acquire the character of an asura (demon), shall be the enemy of the gods and the gandharvas [celestial beings]…


That menstrual conception should result in demonic offspring would seem to echo classic brāhmanic accounts of menstruation as polluting (e.g., Leslie, 1996). However, such a reading of mythology and practice surrounding Kāmākhyā is at odds with the pre-eminent position of the annual Ambuvāci melā, the menstruation festival, that attracts thousands of pilgrims, predominantly women (Mishra, 2004) and “is performed with great eclat” (Sharma, 1992, p. 34). Kali Prasad Goswami (1998) contends that the “Naraka episode is interwoven with this festival” (p. 71) and that “there is no doubt that the myth of Naraka is associated with mother cult, whether she is Nature of Earth [sic]” (p. 72). The importance of this aspect of the myth for the temple seems borne out by a re-examination of the menstruating figure on the temple walls (fig. 28) in light of her close juxtaposition with a sculpture of Varāha (fig. 29). She may well depict the goddess Pr̥thvī, whether intended to be shown menstruating, as the application of vermilion powder seems to suggest, or with a rounded belly due to pregnancy. Interestingly, in the terminology of North Indian traditional midwives (dais), narak, while connoting the demonic, “also signifies the fertility or fruitful potential of the earth and woman’s body” (Chawla, 2002, p. 173).

“Women are incomparably pure; at no time are they defiled; for menstruation sweeps away their sins month after month” (Leslie, 1996, p. 103). In this quote from the authoritative Strīdharmapaddhati the purifying rather than polluting aspects of menstruation are emphasised. As Frédérique Apffel-Marglin (1992, 1994) has argued, menstrual taboos in the Hindu context originate from an understanding that women should not be disturbed during this regenerative phase of their cycle. Thus the inauspicious aspect of the conception of Naraka consists in the disruption of Pr̥thvī’s menses. Not only is she raped by Varāha, but this occurs at a time when she is supposed to be left alone to be cleansed and replenished by the menstrual flow.

Pr̥thvī’s pregnancy is prolonged by Brahmā through the satya yuga until half way through the tretā yuga in the Kālikā Purāṇa account. The rationale given is to avoid having to deal simultaneously with two such mighty fiends as Rāvana and Naraka. This appears to be the author’s attempt at a narrative bridging of the
chronological gap between the Naraka references in the two epics. It also allows for Naraka’s birth story to be a recapitulation of Sītā’s.

In course of time after the demon Rāvaṇa was killed by Viṣṇu in his human incarnation, the goddess Pṛthvī proceeded to the sacrificial ground of the king Janaka and gave birth to a son, the would be hero, exactly at the same place where Sītā was born from the earth in the past. (Kālikā Purāṇa 37.32-33, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 467)

Naraka is discovered, having crawled away from the sacrificial ground of his birth, with his head resting on a dead man’s skull. This, indicates Bani Kanta Kakati (1948), occasions the baby’s naming as Naraka, meaning one who “placed his head on the skull (ka) of a man (nara)” (p. 17). Naraka’s Earth-born status together with his symbolic initiation from birth into Tantric rites of the cremation ground (through his association with the skull) suggest elements of tribal religion that precede his introduction to the Goddess Kāmākhyā. That he was adopted and that he is referred to as an asura imply that the human Naraka’s racial heritage was non-Aryan. Mythically Kātyāyānī, the nurse responsible for raising Naraka and eventually introducing him to his “real” father, Viṣṇu, is Pṛthvī in disguise; historically she is perhaps a non-Aryan consort of Janaka (Kakati, 1948; Shastri, 1991). “His illegitimate birth,” states Kakati “seems to point to matriarchal traditions” (1948, p. 17).

The Kālikā Purāṇa describes how Kātyāyānī lures Naraka away from Janaka’s court after overhearing intimations of resentment between Janaka’s legitimate wife and offspring and her own. She takes him on a pilgrimage to the Ganges where she reveals her goddess form and then summons Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu himself confers on Naraka the kingdom of Prāgjyotisa/Kāmarupa.

That country [was] inhabited by the strong, cruel and foolish Kirāta people kept concealed by Śambhu [Śiva], in the past, for using as his own province.

O Superior most ones of the twice-born ones! Viṣṇu beheld the Kirāta people, who looked like the golden columns, were bereft of knowledge, shaven-heads without purpose; they were addicted to wine and meat.


This provides a clear reference to the pre-Aryan predominance in this region of Mongoloid tribes who worshipped Śiva, represented by the lingam (phallus), and introduces the Aryan colonial agenda. Naraka, evidently Aryanised after his upbringing in Mithilā, succeeded in fulfilling Viṣṇu’s directive to drive out or subjugate the Kirātas.
and establish his own kingdom. It is finally, according to the myth, at Viṣṇu’s behest that Naraka takes up worship of the Goddess of Kāmarūpa.

O my son! You shall not worship any other god or goddess except the great goddess Kāmākhyā, the mother of the world, who is none else than Mahāmāyā, Ambikā.

(Kālikā Purāṇa, 38.149, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 495)

Here Viṣṇu may be seen to adopt the local goddess, taking her into the Sanskritic fold with the application of the epithets Mahāmāyā (equated in the Devī Māhātmya with the Yoganidrā of Viṣṇu who is called upon to remove her veil of sleep so that he can slay the demons Madhu and Kaitabha) and Ambikā, denoting motherhood and fertility, and shown in the Devī Māhātmya to possess extraordinary powers to metamorphose into an array of goddess forms.

Gauhati, 14th August 1996

Madhu: There was tribal influence, there was the Vaiṣṇava [of Viṣṇu] influence, then there was Sanskritisation, the dominant tradition, then the Kālikā Purāṇa was reconstructed which accommodates Vaiṣṇāvism, to modify it and to purify these traditions at the temple. Vaiṣṇāvism has always done that in religious history.

This Sanskritic influence evidently saw Naraka bringing in brāhman settlers to the region and establishing a temple, himself becoming versed in the Vedas and brāhmanic lore, prospering and enjoying a long rule. However, as outlined in the purānic tale, at some later point (and probably in a later generation) Naraka’s piety deteriorated and he began associating with Bāṇa, a neighbouring Śaiva king, under whose influence Naraka reverted to asura ways. Portentously, as a result of barring the Aryan sage Vasiṣṭha from worshipping at Kāmākhyā, Naraka was cursed with death at the hands of Kṛṣṇa and with desertion by the Goddess. Thus his eventual downfall, and the likely subsequent political return of the region to tribal hands, is explained.

In spite of his fall from grace Naraka’s stamp remains still at the temple, notably in the stone path he is said to have built along with the original temple, and the tank (Sarma, 1993). The popular story of the path’s construction highlights Naraka’s moral decline and adds to the tenor of his rift with Kāmākhyā the climactic elements of his desire and her deceit. Though evidently not of purānic origin, this story is recounted in

57 Sanskritisation refers to the process by which the Sanskritic ideas and customs of the higher Hindu castes are adopted by other groups, supplanting their previous values and beliefs.
the official publications prepared on behalf of the temple trust (Sharma, 1992; Sarma, 1993; Sarkar, 1999). Dr Bharati Barua recounted it during one of our conversations.

Gauhati, 14th August 1996

Dr Bharati Barua: When Naraka was the ruler of this region and he first arranged for the worship, the great pūthasthāna, he thought he’ll go and worship over there. One day when he was going there he saw a picture of the Devī in front of his eyes and he felt that he wanted something inside his heart and mind -that Devī. Immediately his mind switched over to some erotic thoughts.

Kathleen: So lust arose.

Dr Bharati Barua: Lust arose. So after that he wanted to marry that Devī. Devī was annoyed and said, “Why should I marry you? You do one thing: you make steps from the foot of the hill to the top of the hill.” So steps are there.

Kathleen: Oh, we walked on those steps today. We walked on those steps, because they told us that Narakāsura made those.

Dr Bharati Barua: So, “Within a few hours, within the night, then you have to complete this road.” And King Naraka was very happy. He said, “I am the king of this region, why should I not make this road? I will do it.” And the Goddess said, “You have to finish it before the waking up of the cock.”

Elinor: The crowing of the cock.

Kathleen: You have to finish by morning.

Dr Bharati Barua: So then Devī made the sound of the cock much earlier than the actual period when it had to be done.

Kathleen: Oh, she made the cock crow early!

Dr Bharati Barua: And he could not make the road [in time].

Ambivalence in the alliance of Kāmākhyā & Viṣṇu

In making the Goddess complicit in Naraka’s defeat, this story identifies his improper behaviour as justification for her abandoning him. At the same time it elevates her status and strengthens her association with Viṣṇu, who as Kṛṣṇa, finally puts an end to Narakā. Especially interesting in tracing the historical process of Hinduisation is that it is achieved not by supplanting the pre-existing “little” tradition but by co-opting it into the fold of the Sanskritic “great” tradition. As shown in the previous chapter, the principal device through which this occurs in Śāktism generally is the Dakṣa Yajña myth of the origin of the Śākta pūthas. At Kāmākhyā the overarching prominence of the Dakṣa Yajña myth is assured by its premier position amongst the Śākta pūthas.

58 “Hinduisation”, “Sanskritisation” and “Aryanisation” are commonly regarded as synonymous terms for the process whereby “high” Hindu culture overtakes local traditions. None of these terms is satisfactory. I have chosen “Hinduisation” here to indicate that the process at Kāmākhyā appears to have very much been one of mutual adaptation (cf Chitgopek, 2002).
Concurrently however, the integration of Viśnūvīśa is also clearly demonstrated, both
mythically, as we have seen, and in practice.

**Gauhati, 14th August, 1996**

*Dr Choudhury:* One interesting thing about Kāmākhyā, it is a centre of
Tantricism or Śaktism all right, but side by side Viśnūvīśa also
flourished. It continued in a degenerated form of Viśnūvīśa.

*Rita:* Degenerated?

*Dr Choudhury:* Degenerated or generated I don’t know, but there are
traces of Viśnūvīśa. I discovered one huge sculpture of
Veśugopāla.

*Elinor:* What date do you give it?

*Dr Choudhury:* It should be the pre-Āhom period. One Venugopala
image is there on the gate, small image, and there is another. And now
even on Holi day there these pāndās sing Holi also. Though they’re
Śaktas they believe in Kṛṣṇa and also they play Holi.59

*Minati:* (explaining) They’re chanting holi and going round the
temple.

*Dr Choudhury:* It is called Dolayātrā.

*Elinor:* It’s very interesting that they do that.

*Dr Choudhury:* And you see one inscription from 5th century A.D. It’s
found located in Nilācalā hill. It has Gupta characteristics and records
the construction of Viśnūva cave temples. That is the inscription of
Surendravarman.60

While evidence of Viśnūva influence is beyond doubt, Viṣṇu’s position in the
temple culture seems nevertheless limited. Goswami (1998) associates Dolayātrā at
Kāmākhyā with Durgādeul where, instead of placing Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in a swing as
is customary elsewhere, Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī are feted in this way. Nihar Ranjan
Mishra (2004) describes Durgādeul, held over six days in the month of Phālguna
(February-March), as a festival in which Kāmeśvarī is worshipped and celebrated with
the colours characteristic of Holi. In the following month of Caitrā (March-April) a
similar festival, Madandeul, fetes Kāma, the god of love and sexual desire. Between
these two events Kṛṣṇa as Gopāla receives Holi worship, but this is accorded less
prominence in the temple calendar. The official temple guide booklet simply equates
Dolayātrā with “the spring festival of Kāmeśvarī Goddess” (Sharma, 1992, p. 34).

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59 Holi is a pan-Indian spring festival associated in northern India with Viśnūvīśa and the burning of
the demoness Holika, though there are no specific religious rites to account for the building of bonfires
and dousing with colours that accompany its celebration. Interestingly, in South India the fires of Holi are
said to commemorate the burning of the god Kāma, god of love and sexual desire. This explanation also
coheres well with Śaiva-Śāktī myths of the origin and significance of Kāmākhyā at Kāmarūpa.

60 Surendravarman is equated with Mahendravarman, a king of Kāmarūpa from 450-485 C.E.
(Choudhury, 1966).
The *Kālikā Purāṇa*’s accommodation of Vaiṣṇāvism reveals that its accordance of this privilege is conditional on Viṣṇu knowing his place:

Once Viṣṇu while moving [through] the sky riding his mount Garuḍa saw Kāmākhyā seated on Nilācala (the blue mountain).

Keśava [=Viṣṇu], when he reached that superior mountain had shown disregard to the goddess, Kāmākhyā and goaded his mount Garuḍa ‘move on, move on’.

Kāmākhyā who is Mahāmāyā herself, the mother of the world, made Keśava (by her power) immobile with Garuḍa in [the] sky (in between earth and heaven).

Garuḍa being enchanted by the power of Mahāmāyā had neither been able to move forward nor backward, and remained there as if fastened (to the mountain).

Garuḍadhvaja (one who has Garuḍa bird as the emblem in his flag) having observed Garuḍa unable to move, got angry and made an attempt to throw the mountain away.

Keśava, the lord of the world, grabbed the mountain by his both hands but could not move it even a little.

Kāmākhyā having observed Keśava trying to remove the mountain grew angry and in her rage bounded both Keśava and Garuḍa with a purified thread.

After the goddess fastened Keśava she had thrown him without any effort in to the mount of grāha (mythical sea animal) in the salt sea. Keśava due to the impact [of being thrown] reached the bottom of the sea.

Then Mahāmāyā with her (divine) power restrained the movement of Keśava, who reached the bottom of the ocean, and thus pinned him down to the ocean rock.

Even with all his effort Hari [=Viṣṇu] was unable to come up to the surface of the water; he kept on making even still greater efforts to float himself.

The goddess Kāmākhyā stopped his inward and outward movements and dulled his senses also.

Hari having been restrained in his movement and deprived of consciousness began rotting at the rock of the ocean along with Garuḍa.


In the end it is Śiva who saves Viṣṇu, along with the other gods who have got themselves stuck in a rescue attempt, by teaching them the sacred *kavaca*61 of Kāmākhyā and ensuring that they propitiate the Goddess accordingly. On his release Viṣṇu leads the gods in paying respect:

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61 *Kavaca* literally means “armour”, an invocation in which aspects of the goddess are asked to protect specific parts of the body in ritual sequence.
Thou art the Primordial Force, the goddess, thou art the earth and water, thou art the matter of the world, thou art the embodiment of the world.

The entire world is created by you, thou art superior wisdom, who cause liberation. O great goddess! Thou art essence of both remote and proximate, thou art the soul of subtle and gross elements, be pleased to us.

O auspicious goddess; when thou art propitiated all gods become pleased. O auspicious one! Thou fulfilest the four-fold aims of life.


The mytho-historical subtext of the Kālikā Purāṇa, in which Prthvī, the Earth Goddess, is raped by Varāha (characterised here as a lower boar-like emanation of Viṣṇu) and subsequently gives birth to Naraka, suggests a possible referent for putting Viṣṇu so forcefully in his place. Varāha’s violation of Prthvī may be seen as a parallel for the process of Aryanisation in which prior earth-based tribal traditions were displaced by followers of Viṣṇu. A similar tyranny occurs in the insulting behaviour of Rāma towards Sītā, a daughter of the Earth, whose birthplace of Mithilā (where Naraka was also born of the Earth) lies not far from the land of Prāg-jyotiśa. It is noteworthy in Sītā’s case that the sense of offence remains prominent amongst the people of Mithilā, whose songs and worship share Sītā’s pain and maintain her honour over that of Rāma (Kishwar, 1997). Perhaps the authors of the Kālikā Purāṇa, cognisant of Viṣṇu’s poor track record in honouring goddesses, were keen to pre-empt any further such behaviour by ensuring that Viṣṇu is taught a lesson. It is significant that, in spite of the longevity of Sanskritic influence at Kāmarūpa and the widespread popularity of Vaiṣṇavism in Assam, the Goddess Kāmākhyā takes on Viṣṇu and emerges victorious.

Gauhati, 14th August 1996

Madhu: … the Kālikā Purāṇa was reconstructed which accommodates Vaiṣṇavism, to modify it and to purify these traditions at the temple. Vaiṣṇavism has always done that in religious history.

And then you have the Śaktas throwing them out and saying we are the greatest.

The Kālikā Purāṇa makes clear that the terms under which Vaiṣṇavism is accepted at Kāmākhyā require absolute and faithful reverence for the Goddess and her customs.

62 Here I use the term “Aryanisation” rather than “Sanskritisation” to indicate the role played by Rāma’s conquests in instating Viṣṇu worship over other traditions.
Tribal roots

*Gauhati, 14th August 1996*

Elinor: There was a tribal goddess here in this place, probably a Khasi tribal goddess. She wasn’t in the form of a *yoni*, they worshipped her aniconically in a monolithic stone. In order to Sanskritise this they began to mythologise. When the Ahoms, who weren’t Indian, came they brought in priests from Kanauj to legitimate their Indianness. The *brāhman* priests got a little bit conflated with what was already here, or maybe they were *brāhman* priests who were already Tantrics, so they were influenced by what was here.

The current local government district of Kamrup, which includes Kāmākhyā and Gauhati, stretches west of the state capital along the southern side of the river valley for about 90 kilometres. This plains country is bordered to its south by the Khasi Hills and further to the southwest by the Garo Hills, both now districts of the new state of Meghalaya. In searching for the tribal roots of worship at Kāmākhyā the proximity of the Khasi and Garo inhabitants of these hills - tribal (adivasi) communities with matrilineal social systems - was suggestive.

*Gauhati, 14th August 1996*

Dr Bharati Barua: Tribal culture might be found in Kāmākhyā also.

Kathleen: So you would say there’s a tribal influence at Kāmākhyā possibly, though we can’t know for sure.

Madhu: We have to assume that there’s a tribal influence at Kāmākhyā. D. D. Kosambi said you have to look at the archaeological evidence in relation to the traditions that survive. If you look at the living tradition you’ll understand archaeology better. So what is happening here is something similar because you have the Khasi tribe.

Our meeting with Nirmala Prabha, an eminent poet and cultural historian of Assam, had alerted us to the Khasi connection and to the pre-Sanskritic nuances in the naming of Kāmākhyā. These were highlighted in Nirmala Prabha’s popular volume, *Devi*, where she discussed the origins of goddess worship in Assam and at Kāmākhyā. Minati orally translated a section from the Assamese for our group.

*Gauhati, 12th August 1996*

Minati: The word *kama*, she says, is not an Aryan word. It is Austric, *kamoi*. This means *asura, kamine* means the cremation ground. So *Kāmadevi* may mean the Goddess of the cremation ground. She quotes here from the *Yoginītantra*: This represents the motherhood of the primitive race. Regarding the Khasi origin of Kāmākhyā: in this language it means the mother who holds the child in the womb, *garbhadhārini*. Ka-ma-i is the mother energy.
The Khasis are distinguished amongst India’s tribes as the only speakers of a Mon-Khmer language, indicating both their descent from some of the earlier waves of migration and their eastern heritage. The word Khasi itself alludes to their matrilineal configuration, with alternative explanations of its etymology linking the tribal Khasis to an ancestress known as Ka- (a prefix denoting the feminine gender) Si (a name), to Kha Si meaning (paternal) Aunt Si, or kha- (giving birth) Si meaning the descendants of Si (Shadap-Sen, 1981, p. 1). Kāmākhyā is referred to by the Khasis and other tribal peoples as Ka-mei-kha (wherein mei is the term for mother: Gurdon, 1914, p. 209), for which the range of interpretation includes “the paternal grandmother” (Shadap-Sen, 1981, p. 156), “Mother of the Tribe” (Bhattacharyya, 1995, p. 99), or “holy resort of the Old Mother” (Bhuyan, cited in Bhattacharyya, 1995, p. 99). Though she admits to doubting the historicity of the claim, Namita Catherine Shadap-Sen comments that “it is commonly believed by modern Khasis that the famous temple of the Mother Goddess at Kāmākhyā, near Gauhati, was founded by Khasis in the distant past when they controlled that area” (1981, p. 156).

Khasi religious culture, while evidently sharing Hindu proclivities for addressing a range of anthropomorphic deities, was devoid of iconolatry. Many Khasi rituals and gods were associated with specific earthly locations, especially with hills. Perhaps most prominent in Khasi religious practice was their construction of megalithic monuments dedicated to ancestor worship. The associated funerary rites were elaborate, with the dead first being cremated and their bones kept in household cairns by family members before being transferred at a later stage to a clan tomb with accompanying rites involving animal sacrifice. The final ceremony attended the erection of the stone megaliths, with flat stones representing female clan members and upright stones representing males (Gurdon, 1914; Shadap-Sen, 1981).

No megalithic monuments are apparent at Kāmākhyā, though given the regional history of earthquakes and temple decimations the possibility of its having hosted ancient Khasi ancestor worship is not precluded. Interestingly, there may be some basis for attributing Naraka’s stone path to Khasi craftsmanship (see Shadap-Sen, 1981, p. 35). The sacredness of the hill site at Nilācalā is clearly continuous with the Khasi conception. Indeed, in consonance with the upright megaliths of the old tribes, the hill itself, rising parenthetically out of the Brahmaputra plains, seems almost to have been placed there by some supernatural power. A Garo myth suggests that the hill resulted when an image of a goddess associated with birth was left there (Bhattacharya,
Another Hinduised mythic view emerges from the Yoginītantra, which declares the crematory origin of Nilācala. The story is summarised by Kakati (1948) as follows:

In primeval times Brahmā after having created the universe arrogated to himself the supreme creative force. The goddess noticed this arrogance of Brahmā and created out of her own body a demon named Keśī. As soon as born the demon rushed towards Brahmā to swallow him up. Brahmā fled in terror in the company of Viṣṇu. The demon then built a city called Keśipura and began to harass the three worlds. There was all around the echo of a sound — “Kill Brahmā”. Brahmā cast aside his vanity and in the company of Viṣṇu offered a hymn of propitiation to Kālī for the relief of the worlds from the tyranny of Keśī. The goddess was satisfied and confessed that the demon was her own creation for the punishment of Brahmā for his ignorant arrogance. She then uttered the syllable of destruction (huṁ) and burnt up the demon to ashes. Then she gave directions to Brahmā for his deliverance from the sin of ignorance and arrogance. Brahmā was to create a mountain out of the ashes of the burnt demon. The mountain should not be too high nor too low. It should be covered over with edible grasses for cattle. Brahmā’s sin would be diminished in proportion to the quantity of grasses consumed by cattle. She went on further to say that on the spot wherefrom they had offered her prayer for the destruction of the demon, there was springing up in their very presence a Yoni-circle out of her own creative energy and it should be regarded as the source and origin of all things. In future Brahmā should create after having contemplated the Yoni.

Despite the evident contribution of this 16th century text to the Sanskritisation of practices at Kāmākhyā it evokes her tribal genesis. Kālī is equated with Kāmākhyā and her taste for creating new life from cremated remains apparently derives from her prior relation with “spirits or ghosts worshipped in cremation ground … Kāmākhyā is the Kālī-śmaśāna” (Bhattacharyya, 1995, p. 89). It is interesting in this light to consider the Khasi tradition of ancestor worship as a possible precursor to the cremation ground associations of the Tantric Kālī and Tārā. The Yoginītantra further explicitly acknowledges Kāmākhyā’s tribal roots when, as Nirmala Prabha noted, it ascribes the powerful dharma of the yoginī pīṭha (here taken as referring to the overall role of the pīṭha as well as to its rites) to the mother goddess, māta, of the kirātas (mongoloid tribes).

Contemporary worship at Kāmākhyā by tribal people further corroborates this theme. Our pilgrimage coincided with the lead-up to Deodhāni nāc, a festival specific

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63 Kakati (1948) quotes the relevant sentence: Siddheśī yoginī pīṭhe dharmah kairātajah mataḥ.
to this region, referred to by Chandra Kanta Sarma (1993, p. 35) as the “Annual Shamanistic Dance at Kamakhya” and related to the deodhāni dances of the Bodo-Kacharis (Bhattacharyya, 1995; Mishra, 2004).

**Gauhati, 11th August 1996**

Madhu: We spoke about Devadhoni [=Deodhāni] ritual, very broadly, about this dance performance. He says there’s twenty-two people who perform this dance and they perform from 2 pm in the afternoon till 12 at night. This goes on for two days.

Kathleen: He said that the people who dance in this undergo a discipline. They have to eat vegetarian food for a month. These are mostly śūdras [servant caste]. The brāhmans don’t do it. It’s men that do it. He said there are twenty-two dancers and they represent different aspects of the Goddess and also Śaṅkara and Kubera, the god of wealth. They all wear red, except for the ones who dance in the aspect of Kubera, and they wear blue. He said there’s bali [blood sacrifice] that goes on during this also and that the dancers drink the blood of the goats. And during this month beforehand when they’re vegetarian they also have to be celibate. The dances that they do are spontaneous, they’re unrehearsed dances.

Madhu: This is the most fascinating part, you know. They’re not in any way choreographed.

Kathleen: No, it’s just ecstatic dancing.

Madhu: Spontaneous dancing, according to the beat of the various dhānis, the different resonances of the different instruments.

Kathleen: There are lots of musicians that come and play. People also come and ask them questions, they can give advice for healing and people’s problems and things like that when they’re in the trance.

Brenda: And it’s particular men who do this? Are they initiated into this?

Kathleen: No. They have a dream beforehand that says that they’re chosen for this.

Madhu: They have a dream of that particular Goddess. One aspect of the Goddess, so somebody will have on Kālī, another will have on Chinnamastā, somebody will have on Tārā, etc., and then they come to know that they’re the chosen one for that particular performance and they have to emulate the image of that particular deity. Or rather that particular deity will possess them when they’re performing. Then they go celibate for one month.

Kathleen: And then they’re expected to continue to do this every year. Once a year they do this.

Madhu: And while they dance worship of the Goddess Manasā⁶⁴ is performed just outside the inner chamber.

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⁶⁴ Manasā is a snake goddess who only came late into acceptance with the brāhmanic pantheon. A number of Assamese tribes are associated with snake worship, including the Nagas, Khasis and Rabhas (Barua & Sreenivasa Murthy, 2005).
Tribal participation at Kāmākhyā was also observed by Julia Jean during Ambuvācī, when adivasis (tribal people) intermingled freely with pilgrims from all over South Asia who had come to participate in the annual menstruation festival (Apffel-Marglin & Jean, in press). In addition, all the plains tribes, the Koch and Kachari and Boro, as well as the Ahom and Chutia were listed by Dr Bharati Barua as frequenting the temple during Durgā Pūjā (conversation of 14th August at Brahmaputra Ashok Hotel). Historically the tenth day of Durgā Pūjā has been celebrated with abandon in festivities known as Śāvarotsava, for which the Kālikā Purāṇa recommends lewd singing and dancing. This custom too has been linked with tribal tradition, whether seen as a remnant of older practices (Goswami, 1998) or as a concession aimed at furthering the incorporation of local tribes within the larger embrace of Hindu Śāktism (Mishra, 2004).

Gauhati, 14th August 1996

Madhu: Then it’s obvious that if you go by what Kosambi said, using his technique let us say, that these are not isolated traditions in any case.

Dr Bharati Barua: No.

Kathleen: Of course not.

Madhu: And if the Khasis still have a living tradition of blood sacrifice and they live nearby, and they themselves consider Kāmākhyā to be the mother, it’s obvious.

Kathleen: If you have people dancing and drinking blood to me that’s evidence that there’s some tribal origin to it.

Dr Bharati Barua: Yes.

Madhu: It’s definitely a fusion of the two.

In sum then, it seems “safe to speculate that Kamakhya … was a folk deity, situated in the country where matrilineal system still exists, associated with the tribes such as Garos, Hajongs and Khasis who interpret this word to mean ‘the hill belonging to our father’s mother’” (Singh (2003), p. xxvii).

Balidāna – sacrifice

As we have previously noted, balidāna, blood sacrifice, is a custom peculiar in Hinduism to the Śāktā stream. At a Gauhati University forum we attended the practice of balidāna emerged as highly contentious. There was a collective sense of distaste – including our own - for a practice that seems needlessly cruel (though, as I suggested earlier, it may be arguably less cruel than the treatment of many animals destined for human consumption).
Dr Nandita Sarma:
Yes, we all go to the Kāmākhyā temple and pray there, we believe that it is a śakti pīṭha, but another side of the traditions that go on at Kāmākhyā is the balidāna, sacrifice. In modern times, the new generation is very much against sacrifice, because now we think why should we sacrifice a goat or a buffalo or even a pigeon to please the Goddess? Last month in the cultural programme on TV, Surabhi, they showed how they drag the goats to the sacrificial spot. These things we don’t like. We want some very clear conceptions about what is śakti, how to get śakti, but not through these traditions of sacrifice and some other customary things.

Kathleen:
Actually this morning I had a conversation about balidāna with one of the paṇḍits at the temple. He said it’s written from thousands of years ago that this is what is supposed to be done at Goddess temples, however, he personally doesn’t like it. But it’s a very controversial issue, I think. Scriptures say that the Goddess wants this bali, that it’s appropriate to give bali to the Goddess, but many people particularly in the modern world, find this practice offensive, because it harms the animals and because it promotes violence.

Moral opposition to animal sacrifice and those who undertake it was also expressed by Indira Goswami at a seminar in Bhubaneswar in 2003:\(^{65}\): “They wouldn’t prick themselves to offer a drop of blood but don’t hesitate to kill innocent creatures to expiate their own sins.” A vivid account of how her abhorrence was triggered by a special pūjā and goat sacrifice at Kāmākhyā arranged for Indira by her mother, appears in Indira Goswami’s (2002) autobiography. She burst into tears at the thought of the goat’s plight and for some time after continued to scrub at the spot on her forehead that, as part of the ritual, had been anointed with the sacrificial blood. More recently, when the Nepalese king visited Kāmākhyā to seek the Goddess’s support for his reign, he was forced to change his approach due to public opposition to animal sacrifice.\(^{66}\)

Asian News International June 27, 2002
Nepal King Visits Kamakhya Temple
GAUHATI: Indian priests sacrificed several animals for Nepal king Gyanendra at an ancient temple in Assam on Thursday, but the king was not present for the ceremony, temple officials said. The king’s plan to sacrifice animals - for the well-being of the royal family in troubled Nepal - at the temple of the goddess of strength, Kamakhya, unleashed a storm of protest from animal rights activists. Temple authorities sacrificed a buffalo, a sheep, a goat and a duck offered by the king to the

\(^{65}\) The seminar, Shaktika on the Ascent: Reframing Gender in the Context of Culture of India, was jointly convened by Madhu Khanna, Rita Ray and Elinor Gadon.

\(^{66}\) The Nepalese king’s visit is noteworthy also as a measure of the cross-border esteem in which the temple and its Śaktī orientation are held throughout the region – despite the controversy surrounding the current King Gyanendra’s rule. For an account of the relationship between kingly power and sacrifice as suggested by the Kalikā Purāṇa see Hugh Urban (2001).
goddess just hours after he left the temple. Earlier, the king offered a basket of fruits draped in red fabric and marigold-and-jasmine garlands amid the chanting of hymns during an hour-long ceremony in the heavily guarded temple on a hill-top on the outskirts of Gauhati.

“King Gyanendra folded his hands in prayer here. He performed ‘puja’ also at the Shiva temple here. He then went inside to see Goddess Kamakhya,” said Himen Sharma, Secretary, Kamakhya Temple Management Trust. An official of the king’s office accompanying him clarified that Gyanendra decided not to violate the law of the land, instead leave it to the temple authorities to decide whether to hold the animal sacrifice.

The temple priest said the animals, which had been offered by the king’s priests on Tuesday, were beheaded and their blood offered to the goddess one-and-a-half hours after the king left the stone temple. Temple rites dictate that animals offered to the goddess at the 1,000-year-old temple have to be sacrificed and cannot be let loose.

Goddesses who demand blood sacrifice and are depicted as slayers of evil have long been associated with kingship and battles. Hugh Urban’s (2001) analysis of Tantric traditions at Kāmākhyā co-locates the emphasis on kingship and sacrifice with kingly desires for political power and brāhmanic desires for patronage. The rites referred to are outlined in detail in chapter 67 of the Kālikā Purāṇa which also provides a list of animals recommended for sacrifice. In ascending order of merit these are: birds, tortoises, alligators, fish, nine species of wild animals, buffaloes, big lizards, bulls, he-goats, ruru (a species of antelope), wild boars, rhinoceros, black antelopes, lizards, sarabha (an eight-footed mythical animal according to Shastri), lion and tiger. Only male animals should be sacrificed. “It is through offering sacrifices that devotee obtains liberation (from the bondage of the world), the heaven, and a prince gets victory by conquering his enemies” (Kālikā Purāṇa 67.5-6, trans. Sastri, 1991, pp. 1001-1002). The merits of sacrifice are said to be guaranteed if the correct procedure is undertaken. Our interlocutors at Gauhati University, however, questioned why a goddess who is supposedly so powerful should require the mediation of humans in order to satisfy her need for blood.

Gauhati University, 14th August 1996
Female participant: We go to Kāmākhyā to get something from the Goddess, to fulfill some of our wishes, then if we get what we want we say it is because of her. One fellow was in a lot of trouble and said he would offer two buffaloes to the Goddess if she helped him. She did, but he couldn’t get the buffaloes. After some time she came to him in a dream and asked him what about his promise. He said he didn’t have enough money for buffaloes, so she said, “Then you have to give something else. Give me a goat.” He said, “Okay I’ll give you a goat.”
But that also didn’t occur. The Goddess again came in the dream and said, “What are you going to do?” He said, “I’ll give you a pigeon.” But pigeon was not offered. Goddess Kāmākhyā was a bit lenient and said, “Okay you cannot give me anything else, so please give me a grasshopper. You must keep your promise.”
Then that person told the Goddess, “O Goddess Kāmākhyā, you are so powerful, can’t you catch a grasshopper and keep it for yourself? Why are you asking me?”

The ambivalence portrayed in this story is redolent of a broader loss of sympathy among contemporary Hindus with the original purpose and meaning of such ancient and bloody traditions. Blood sacrifice palpably recalls the kind of pre-Aryan primitivism over which civilisation asserts transcendence. Hence alongside worship of the Goddess in Assam there is also a strong tradition of Viṣṇu worship, popularised especially by the Assamese religious leader Śaṅkara Deva, who in the fifteenth century sought to replace sacrifice with surrender, propounding the doctrine of Ekaśaśaraṇa dharma, a religion of supreme surrender to the One as Nārāyaṇa (Kakati, 1948). Across India this was preceded in the eighth century by the revolutionary influence of Śaṅkara, who decreed that the breaking of coconuts should be substituted for animal sacrifice. Earlier still the Buddhist influence had advanced the precept of ahiṁsā, non-violence. Opposition to blood sacrifice clearly has a long tradition. What then might account for the longevity of the ritual in spite of such ongoing controversy?

Most scholars put it down to the continuation of tribal influence. Some attempt to reconstruct the symbolism and importance of blood in religion and cultural practice.

Gauhati, 12th August 1996
Madhu: The point Nirmala Prabha was trying to make yesterday when I asked her about blood sacrifice and the symbolism of blood was that these are primitive practices and these have continued.
Elinor: But I would not use the word primitive.
Kathleen: Primitive in the sense of primal.
Elinor: Oh yes. But with the grāmadevatās (village goddesses and gods) they have blood sacrifice. The little cup is there where she holds the blood sacrifice. This is also in the images of Šaṭṭhi. Eliade said that blood sacrifice has to do with the transformation of energy, the regenerative power.

Mircea Eliade (1957) argued that blood was capable of transferring the soul from one entity to another, for example when blood sacrifice is required to “animate” a temple structure. David Kinsley (1986) applied this theme to the reinvigoration of the Goddess herself, suggesting that her all-consuming role as Great Mother might deplete a goddess whose powers were not replenished by sacrifice. As a point of cross-cultural
comparison, the regenerative power of blood has figured strongly in the healing traditions of indigenous women at Warrabri in Central Australia, who drew their own blood for use as a potent medicine (Bell, 1983).

The dual theme of nourishment and sacrifice is most vividly depicted in the symbolism of Chinnamastā, who as one of the Daśā Mahāvidyās occupies a shrine on Nilācala close to the main Kāmākhyā temple. Chinnamastā, who decapitates herself in order to nourish both her devotees and herself with her own blood, is simultaneously the sacrificer, the sacrificed and the recipient of the sacrifice. She thus “embodies the complete sacrificial process which symbolizes the entire world through its process of creation, destruction, and re-creation” (Benard, 1994, p. 9). In a post-pilgrimage conversation in Delhi Madhu engaged a similar metaphor to explain the role of sacrifice as restoring the dynamic balance of creation and destruction.

**Delhi, 27th March 1998**

Madhu: I was asked this question about bāli. It’s such a violent kind of ritual, why is it accepted as a part of Goddess worship? I said that in Śaktism particularly, sacrifice is a very important part, and violence is accepted as part of reality. Violence is not outside reality, out there. It’s not that reality is all pure, beautiful, full of essences, supreme, untainted. Reality itself has the power to withdraw and to destroy as well as to create, and in order to maintain those balances sacrifice becomes very important.

When we read the lives of great saints like Ramakrishna Paramahamsa he was willing to decapitate his own head for Kāli in total self-surrender. Of course the sacrifice of a goat or a buffalo, as it stands in Devī worship, is to be interpreted symbolically. But it is an old survival of maybe very primal rituals that were linked with this cult. Today when we look at it from a distance, the philosophical meaning is that it is half the circle. Destruction and violence is half the circle, and sacrifice is that. If you look at it more philosophically it is really sacrifice of the ego, sacrifice of lust and greed, and it’s a kind of self-surrender through the animal symbol, getting rid of your beastly traits, so to speak.

Some form of symbolic sacrifice is a part of Hindu ritual whether it is more direct and overt as it is in Kāmākhyā or more indirect and symbolic as it is in other temples. One can see that this is to restore the balance. We don’t believe in a deity who is only peace-loving and remains on an even keel. There is change even within divinity and there is still dynamism. The notion of a divinity is an elastic notion, so you have the peaceful, benign aspect and then you also have the fierce and destructive aspect, and both amalgamated together. In that sense sacrifice becomes necessary.

The Kālikā Purāṇa makes it clear that the decapitated head of the sacrifice is to be presented to the Goddess. Symbolically this corresponds well with the notion that
sacrifice is intended as a surrender of consciousness. This symbolism, however, bears further examination in light of rites involving human sacrifice known to have occurred at Kāmākhyā as well as at other locations.

**BBC News: Gauhati, 3rd April 2002**

**Indian temple revives ‘human sacrifice’**

Followers of a Hindu cult in India’s north-eastern state of Assam have revived the ancient practice of human sacrifice. But in the absence of human volunteers, devotees at the Kamakhya Temple near the state capital Gauhati are using six-foot effigies made of flour for the rite. The cult followers had apparently wanted live humans to revive the gory tradition, but opted for an effigy instead fearing a backlash.

“A willing human being is difficult to find these days,” said Dr Pradeep Sharmah, director of the Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture (VKIC). He said priests had already been heavily criticised by animal rights groups for their use of animals in ritual sacrifices, hence their decision to use human effigies instead of the real thing.

“The ancient worshippers believed that the person to be sacrificed was sent by god, and as a rule a woman would never be put to the altar,” Dr Sharmah said.

The pandas say that only a chosen few are eligible to conduct a sacrifice. Research shows that human sacrifice at Kamakhy was first revived 75 years ago, but was discontinued a few years later.

A 1933 journal of the Assam Research Society says that living people were sacrificed until the reign of King Gaurinath Singha between 1780 and 1796.

A Koch manuscript, the Bansābali of the Darrang Rajas, describes the opening of the rebuilt Kāmākhyā temple in 1565 at which the king Nar Nārāyan undertook a great sacrifice (Gait, 1963/1905). He is said to have “consecrated it with numerous sacrifices, including 140 men, whose heads he offered to the goddess (Kamaksha) on copper plates” (Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873, cited in Gohain, 1977, p. 9). Of all the sacrifices enjoined as offerings to the Goddess, men are held to be the best.

If a human being is sacrificed following the rules laid down on that behalf the goddess remains pleased for full one thousand years, and when three men are sacrificed for one hundred thousand years.


Two kinds of human sacrifice are distinguished in the Kālikā Purāṇa. A “bright-looking” man of twenty-five years must undergo purification rites before being adorned with garlands and worshipped as a saviour and protector of the kingdom. Evidently it was Koch custom for the volunteers at such rituals, known as bhogī (*“enjoyers”*), to be afforded the prior freedom to do whatever they chose (Gohain, 1977). Under conditions of war or anarchy an alternative source of quarry was endorsed
in the sacrifice of captives. In both circumstances the sacrifice was at the king’s prerogative. Most investigators draw a correlation between these practices and the sacrificial traditions of surrounding tribal cultures such as the Kacharis, the Deori-Chutias, the Tipperas, the Manipuris, the Jaintias and the Khasis (e.g., Gait, 1963; Gohain, 1977). In the case of the Khasis, however, this correlation appears rather indirect, and Namita Shadap-Sen (1981) proposed that it may be the case that the direction of influence regarding human sacrifice flowed from Hindu culture to the Jaintias rather than the reverse.

That such “primitive” influences need not have come from outside of Aryan religion is manifest in the Rg Vedic Puruṣa Sūktam, which famously describes how the human world came into being as a result of the sacrifice of the first man - a theme which is further developed in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa. The man who becomes a horse in the aśvamedha sacrifice of the Vedic Aryans is utterly linked to a theme of fertility involving both sexual rite and earthly fruitfulness. Asko Parpola (1992) equates the sacrificed male in the ritual with the consort of the Goddess Vāc. He was killed after engaging in coition with the queen, Vāc’s representative. Originally, suggests Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya (1996), the priest would have engaged in the sex rite and hence have become the sacrifice.

Key to the link between sacrifice, fertility, and the central role of the Goddess in both, is the significance of blood - in particular its role in human fertility and, by association, in that of the earth. In this regard the role of menstrual blood as both a sign of fecundity and of sacrifice is central. The menstruum represents, both actually and symbolically, a regular sacrifice of female blood and of potential life. When blood is retained during pregnancy and allowed to nourish the embryo its result is new life. The primal belief that, in order for fructification to occur, the seed must be supplied with blood extrapolates the female cycle of reproduction.

One way to sustain the earth’s blood supply is to allow its menstruation to remain undisturbed, enabling also a time for cleansing, nourishment and rest to assure its fertility. This is crucial in the conceptual framework that underpins the Ambuvācī festival at Kāmākhyā and the Raja Parba festival held in coastal Orissa (see Apffel-

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*67 Namita Shadap-Sen (1981) points out that practices surrounding the Thlen (a demon serpent kept in secret by a few Khasi families who could only be placated by human blood) are more correctly regarded as ritual murder and were unpopular amongst ordinary Khasis – cf Gurdon (1914).*
Marglin & Jean, in press) in which ploughing of fields is prohibited while the monsoonal flow flushes the earthen yoni.

In sacrifice, ideas surrounding fertility and blood are taken further. Felix Padel (1995) describes the basis of human sacrifice amongst the Kond tribe of Orissa in terms of their affinity with the earth: “they worshipped the earth; they are a people of the earth, and ‘the earth needs blood’” (p. 119). This assertion was evidently regularly affirmed by shamanic priests, both male and female, under instruction from ancestor spirits who demanded sacrifice. The sacrificial victim, meriah, was duly feted and worshipped before being dismembered, whereupon the body parts were dispersed among clan members for immediate burial at various sacred locations and in their fields. Here the blood of the sacrifice is directly returned to the land in propitiation of its bounty and protection. Moreover, in receiving and interring the corporeal remains of a communal sacrifice in this way, the relationships amongst the clan members were strengthened and their blood ties to their tribal lands re-vivified.

Padel argues that, rather than being instances of mere savagery as they have mostly been portrayed, such rituals of sacrifice, however gory, enacted an understanding of life’s sacredness – an understanding that was lacking in the colonial British methods employed to curb the practice and bring its adherents under control. This dimension, like that of the Kond’s favoured dismemberment, is closely commensurate with both Vedic and Śākta sacrifice myths. In the Vedic version the man is sacrificed to cosmic creation and the brāhmans become head and mouth of a hierarchical social order. The Śākta myth, as we have noted, sees the Goddess eternally reborn at each place where a part of her body strikes the ground, simultaneously blessing the earth itself and demonstrating “the absolute ultimacy of the Cosmic Woman” (Beane, 1977, p.226).

In her manifestation as Kāmākhyā traces also of the Khasi Ancestress’ “absolute ultimacy” may be discerned. At the annual gathering of Ambuvācī, kaulas (“clan-members”) celebrate the menses of the Goddess by re-membering her scattered parts, brought from all over the sub-continent, and by ritually partaking of her blood (Apffel-Marglin & Jean, in press). Symbolically this re-enacts the matriline, where kinship ties originate from the womb blood of the mother. According to Julia Jean’s informants regeneration of the earth occurs at this time also, thanks to the śakti in the menstrual blood of the Goddess. Hence “Ambuvaci is for the world, for the earth, for the universe” (p. 3).
**Gauhati, 11th August 1996**

*Elinor:* What he said about the menses of the earth, the cosmic *yoni* and the menses, is also part of the festival that Frédérique describes in coastal Orissa, the festival of the menses of the Goddess.

*Brenda:* Raja.

*Madhu:* This is something which is celebrated even in U.P. and Bihar and also in Kerala, this particular festival.

*Kathleen:* I think it might be just about the same time of year also.

*Elinor:* It’s about the rain, because you see it’s right before the ploughing, the plough is the man putting the seed in the earth and then the rain is the menses coming down and fertilising the seed.

The major rites of Kāmākhyā converge in offering blood, and its role in creation, as their central motif. This is affirmed in the *Kalikā Purāṇa*’s description of the purpose of sacrifice.

> The gods are pleased by the performance of sacrifices, the sacrifice saves the people, the earth is upheld by sacrifice, and everything is rooted in the sacrifice.

> The creatures live on food, the food-crop grows by the rains, from sacrifice the rain comes into being, hence all entities are the embodiment of sacrifice.


Blood sacrifice at Kāmākhyā is thus fundamentally connected with the purpose of the temple itself. “The Tantric brāhmans at Kāmākhyā believe that the *yoni* should be covered in blood - otherwise the world will dry up” (Indira Goswami, oral communication 2003).

**Mother of creation**

Although Hindu Śāktism comes to fruition in medieval texts like the *Devī Māhātmya* and the *Kalikā Purāṇa*, and furthers its precepts in later *tantras*, the emphasis on blood and sacrifice shows that its doctrinal basis stems from an autochthonous worldview that upholds the Mother Principle as the universal creative force (*cf* Bhattacharyya, 1996, 1999). The denotation of earth as Mother reflects the manifest commonality between the miracle of human fertility, gestation and birth through the female and the biotic productiveness of nature. As Nirmala Prabha pointed out, “Mahāpракṛiti, Great Nature, symbolises the Mother Goddess. Whenever you want anything to take root it’s always there” (oral communication, Gauhati, 13th August 1996).

Against this profound reality the notion that the Goddess of the *Yoginītantra* should have to reassert her position as the ultimate power of creation is aberrant;
Brahmā in the creation story recounted earlier is merely a self-arrogating impostor. The *yoni* of Kāmākhyā is not simply an erotic enticement (though this symbolism is also implied, as we shall see); it is the ground of all life. Paṇḍit Gauri Śāṅkar Šarma, a senior scholar practitioner of the Kāmākhyā temple community elucidated this significance in an interview, conducted in Hindi, at his home in the temple complex. Later that afternoon Madhu and Kathleen translated for us from their notes.

_Gauhati, 11th August 1996_

**Madhu:** The *yoni* is a symbol of creation, of *śrṣṭi*. The _paṇḍit_ used the word *śrṣṭi* several times. Whenever we questioned him on this he said there cannot be any *śrṣṭi*, the creative process, without the *yoni*. Obviously when he was talking about the *yoni* he was not talking about the human *yoni* so much as the cosmic womb of creation.

**Kathleen:** Then he talked about the *ṛtu* of the Goddess, the *raja* [menstrual blood], and how from the union of the *raja* and the *śukra*, the semen, you have the creation of the *bijā* [“seed” – regarded as the source from which all possibilities emerge in Tantric philosophy]. He said it’s like the sun shining.

**Madhu:** What he meant was that just like in human birth *rajas* and *śukra* have to come together. Menstrual fluid is important and semen is important, otherwise there can be no human birth. Similarly at the cosmic scale you have Śiva and Śakti … Just as a seed is sown into the soil and the soil is supposed to represent the womb, the *yoni*, and seed is the *śukra*, which is fertilised by the heat of the sun, and rain (I’m just adding that [rain] myself), so *śrṣṭi* comes into being. Growth and generation or vegetation take place through this symbiosis, through Mother Earth. He says the whole earth is a *yoni* and she bears the seed which is like the *śukra*, the male seed, and then growth is facilitated by the other elements of the atmosphere including the moisturising rain and the solar heat. This is what he meant, explaining it and giving it a much larger frame of reference. We’re not talking just of the human *yoni* or *yoni* in abstraction, but we’re talking about earth as manifestation.

**Brenda:** Yes. Now that’s very significant. I hadn’t thought about it in those terms.

**Minati:** Actually, you make a mistake when talking about this *yoni*. It is not the human thing. Actually it represents the cosmic thing. But because we do not know we take it to be talking something vulgar.

To experience the cosmic at Kāmākhyā we were invited to make numerous descents. We had to descend into the inner sanctum (garbha grha or “womb house”) at the central temple as well as into several of the seven additional shrines of the _Daśa_
Mahāvidyā, the “Ten Great Wisdoms” of Tantra,\(^\text{68}\) that adorn the hillside and its peak. Visiting the Daśa Mahāvidyā shrines constitutes an important aspect of the parikrama of the Nilacāla site. Going down into the earth for darśan, at each place finding a yoni stone which we were encouraged to touch reverently, was both grounding and energising, as attested here by Madhu.

**Gauhati, 14th August 1996**

**Madhu:** Something I responded to very positively was going back into the womb of the earth, finding something very unusual and beautiful there, communicating with it, with that power or transcendental presence and then moving out of the darkness of the womb completely liberated and rejuvenated. I like that.

For Rita the effect was one of deepening and dignifying her experience.

**Gauhati, 16th August 1996**

**Rita:** First time I came and this time I came it was much different. There was a world of difference. First time whatever I was given to understand was something which has to be seen very secretly and get out as quickly as possible, not to see it very long. It’s like we treat human sex, or woman’s sex. The way I saw then nothing was discussed so much, except that this is just reproduction. Now this time I feel enlightened much more and getting into the whole thing, to the temple, I felt actually like the mother’s womb, and other feelings I had. Last time I couldn’t touch it also because it was all red and I had slight feeling of not touching it: that purity/pollution also was there. This time I did it very well and I even brought [away with me] water to take. It gives a very different spiritual feeling, there’s no doubt about it.

Minati, who like Rita had previously visited Kāmākhyā, also commented on the difference she experienced this time, where the combined focus of our pilgrimage intensified both our inquiry and its capacity to evoke a sense of power, śakti.

**Kolkata, 26th March 1998**

**Minati:** I didn’t see it that way before. The spirit was very different and actually talking with other participants I also came to know about their views, especially Elinor who tries to take everything out of you. She is so enthusiastic. It was a grand experience.

To go down and be there in the yoni pīṭha, is a very nice feeling that you don’t get in Kolkata or in Dakshineshwar. There was some power that was being aroused.

For me as well the emphasis on sthāti, creation, on śakti as the power of creation, and on the depth of symbolic relationship between the yoni and the earth

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\(^{68}\) Three of these Daśa Mahāvidyā are located within the main temple of Kāmākhyā, hence the number of additional shrines is only seven. The Bhuvanesvarī shrine is in fact above the main temple at the Nilacāla peak.
crystallised at Kāmākhyā, especially as I successively entered the cave-shrines of the Mahāvidyās. It surfaced as a visceral response: “As I go into her, she pierces my heart…” (Griffin, 1978, p. 219). This experience was informed by, but not reducible to, the philosophical exposition to which we had been treated. Elinor summed it up.

**Gauhati, 16th August 1996**

**Elinor:** I was very touched by some of the experiences we had at the temple, particularly going to the Mahāvidyās because it was back to the primal source. Going down deep into those shrines and feeling that I was touched by something that was very very ancient reified my belief that this is the most sacred symbol and that it’s both my body and it’s the cosmos. I absolutely believe that.

**Brāhmanic influence and position of women**

Our collective experience of sacralisation of the female body at the Kāmākhyā shrines was, as Minati pointed out, influenced by the spirit of our collaboration. In this our feminist agenda went beyond the explanations provided by brāhman pāṇḍās to highlight the relationship between women and the Goddess. In earlier Khasi society the ritual connection between the worshipped Ancestress and women was embodied in the person of the priestess. “The priestess was the agent for the performance of all religious ceremonies,” with the high priestess at least in some clans also functioning as head of state (Gurdon, 1914, p. 121). With the importation of brāhman priests to officiate at the Kāmākhyā temple religious responsibility, at least at the level of public ritual, has devolved almost exclusively to men.

**Gauhati, 12th August 1996**

**Brenda:** How has the indigenous source of Goddess worship met up with the brāhmanic tradition? What’s been the effect of that and how has it affected women one way or the other?

**Madhu:** How it affects women is very complex.

**Elinor:** What I see is that underlying in the Indian subcontinent the sense of the divine and the creative source of life is the female, and it was repressed in the Vedic and Aryan times. The compromise was by the sixth century where you have the Devī Māhātmya, but you have images going back a very long time.

**Brenda:** The question you’re getting at here is whether the so-called Sanskritisation of the Goddess is related to the social disempowerment of women.

**Elinor:** That is the question, but the bubbling up again of these non-brāhmanic powers is in the Tantric. Once more it’s been Sanskritised, but nonetheless it’s there.

**Kathleen:** It starts in the purāṇas and reaches its full fruition in Tantra.

**Madhu:** The point is these old traditions continued to live as a segment within the Sanskritised framework.
As we have seen, the infiltration of Aryan culture into Kāmarūpa and its influence on worship at the first Kāmākhyā temple goes back at least to Naraka. After the original temple was destroyed, most likely by an earthquake (Shastri, 1979), the Koch king Naranārāyaṇa rebuilt it in 1565, bringing in a fresh influx of brāhman officiants. The Ahoms, who took over the region soon after, also brought in brāhmans from Mithilā and Kanyakubja/Kanauj (Sarma, 1993). Paṇḍit Gauri Śankar Šarma traced his lineage to this period and to one of five brāhman families who still retain their charge of managing the temple. Two of his sons were temple pāṇḍās, continuing this tradition. They also maintained a joint patriarchal family structure; living all together were the paṇḍīt, his wife, six sons, two daughters and at least two daughters-in-law. We wondered how the radically female-affirming orientation to yoni worship he had previously described to us might impact on women’s status currently at Kāmākhyā and on gender dynamics in the patriarchally structured families of the temple community.

Gauhati, 11th August 1996

Kathleen: I said that in many countries, India not excepted, the common people tend to think that the yoni is something shameful that should be hidden. Madhu also said if you find these smārta brāhmans they wouldn’t even utter the name of yoni, they’d be embarrassed to talk about it. So I asked whether he saw that those who did sākta sādhanā had a different attitude about the yoni, and how did he see that difference. He said that the attitude towards the yoni is the same attitude as towards the mother: “We’re born out of the mother, we also marry the mother, when the wife feeds us she is also like the mother, and she’s like a counsellor who gives advice.” For example, if he has to go out somewhere his wife gives him directions and tells him what to do and where to go and so on. Then he said that a wife is looked upon as one’s mother, only at night she’s a wife.

He said even one’s daughter is viewed in the same way and that in fact all females are aspects of the mother. He said, “For example, I look upon you as mother also.”

While the paṇḍīt’s reverential attitude came across as very refreshing we were only able to make some limited observations of the degree to which the women of the household’s own estimation of their position might have concurred with his words. That the women were readily and collectively absorbed by the role of the human mother was plain from their excitement at Uma’s presence. I was summoned twice from our upstairs audience with the paṇḍīt by the commotion of Uma’s crying to find her in the middle of a small crowd of women delightedly vying for their turn to greet and hold her. Their un-self-conscious sense of prerogative conveyed an air of absolute authority in
this domain. I was a little taken aback, but then also amused and admiring at their audacity in first snatching Uma from the ayyah and then showing more reluctance than contrition in returning the baby to me. Was their assumption of a kind of communal “mother-right” (cf. Bhattacharyya, 1999, p. 270) emboldened by affiliation with the yoni Goddess? Was it perhaps more an expression of a generalised notion that “all the mothers are one” (Kurtz, 1992), which, to the extent that it applies, could be said to have inherited a vestigial adherence to matrilinearity? Unfortunately I missed my chance to ask them.

_Gauhati, 15th August 1996_

*Kathleen:* Brenda had some interaction with the women down there, so after we were finished interviewing the _panditji_ we wanted to interview some of the women of the family about their experiences. Not surprisingly we didn’t get very far. First of all they didn’t really understand Hindi very well. Madhu and I were asking them questions and we were trying to frame it in a way they might be able to respond to. But they’d never met us before, they didn’t know us, and they couldn’t relate to our questions. We asked something like, what does it mean for you as a woman being close to the Goddess. We tried wording it differently but it didn’t work.

The women’s reluctance to speak in this instance was no doubt severally attributable to a host of issues including familial, gender and social role expectations as well as the lack of familiarity noted by Kathleen. It was clearly also aggravated by language difficulties, which could have been relieved had Minati and/or Rita, who arrived only later, been present with their respective facility with Bengali and Assamese. But the same reticence was not evinced by one of the women’s husbands, who in his desire to assist our inquiry assumed the authority to answer for his wife. As the women’s attitude of reticence was a marked contrast with the bold behaviour I had earlier witnessed I was prepared to press the point, and did so a little cheekily by making reference to the sometimes stormy relationship between Śiva and Śakti. I asked, “So if you [meaning husband and wife] have an argument who wins?” Amidst the resulting laughter the space was also created for the husband to defer to his wife, breaking the ice in our conversation with her. Regrettably we had to truncate the visit at that point because of another commitment. The follow up, clearly necessary to a feminist framework aimed at eliciting women’s voices, awaits further research.

In his socio-cultural study of Kāmākhyā Nihar Ranjan Mishra (2004) considers familial relationships and confirms their patriarchal nature. He asserts that
The relationship between *giriêk* [husband] and *ghanieêk* [wife] is based on mutual love and respect. The *ghanieêk* never utters the name of her husband and is always anxious to make him happy. ... The husband, in turn, is always full of love and affection for his wife and consults her before taking any major decision.

In this idealising account of conjugal relations there seems to be little gender analysis. Elsewhere, however, the author refers to the unenviable position of women in the patriarchal family by quoting a women’s saying: “I shall not spell out the intricacies of talks here. Rather I would keep quiet and stay on. If I let out my feelings even my husband will rush in to charge me” (p. 155).\(^6^9\) Mishra’s study was based on much more extensive fieldwork than we were able to undertake at the temple itself, however its depiction of marital relationships at Kâmâkhyâ suggests a more conservative and hypergamic family structure than presented to us. While Mishra’s version is not necessarily inconsistent with the *pandit*’s views, our observations indicated that the hierarchy of family gender relations was in fact more relaxed here than in other parts of India.

**Gauhati, 15\(^{th}\) August 1996**

*Elinor:* There is something very important that came through to me. There was the most enormous difference between the daughter-in-law of the *pandit* and my experiences in Brindâvan. That woman stood there smiling, open, tall, joking with her husband.

*Kathleen:* Unembarrassed, yes.

*Elinor:* Unembarrassed. This is totally different. Even Kalpana,\(^7^0\) who’s been in America for a year and has her Ph.D., would cover her face and defer totally to the father-in-law and the men and not even say a word unless she looked first to see if she was entitled to say a word.

*Kathleen:* Or my experience in Uttar Pradesh with the daughter-in-law. When the father-in-law comes into the room she stands up and covers her head and faces the wall. There was none of that. She didn’t have her head covered. She was talking in an unembarrassed way in front of her father-in-law, joking with her husband.

*Brenda:* There was a definitely open relationship between the couple.

*Kathleen:* Very different. And that may be a function of eastern India as opposed to the northern part where there’s so much *purdah* and all that kind of thing.

*Rita:* Not eastern but north-eastern.

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\(^6^9\) It is not made clear whether this so-called “proverb” is specific to the temple community or is more generally heard in Assamese communities.

\(^7^0\) A pseudonym has been used for reasons of confidentiality.
A relatively tolerant approach to social relationships in Assam and the north-east has frequently been remarked upon in sociological research. Kumar Suresh Singh (2003) attributes this atmosphere to indigenisation of the *brāhmans*, resulting also in a more favourable attitude to women in which exogamous marriage was not enforced and bride price was exacted (rather than dowry paid) even when daughters were married into a higher caste.

**Gauhati, 11th August 1996**

*Madhow:* Kathleen asked him about marriage rules and regulations when you belong to a certain *gotra* [clan]. He said that if you’re a *bharaddo gotra* you can marry off your children to any other *gotra* except *bharaddo*. But if you’re *kāśyapa gotra* then you can marry any *gotra* including *kāśyapa*.

*Kathleen:* There was one more thing about the marriage regulations I thought was significant. They don’t have the custom of necessarily marrying girls outside the village – exogamy. I thought that was interesting because it meant that for the daughters of these families there was a possibility they could remain living near their parents in their natal home, near their natal families. This is what the anthropologists say is one of the things that greatly exacerbates women’s subordinate position, this practice of exogamy, because daughters are married out.

### Daughters as goddesses

Regard for daughters was noticeable at Kāmākhyā in the freedom afforded to young girls, *kanyās*, who roamed the compound exuding imperial self-assurance. A photograph I took of children at the temple in 2003 shows the girls clearly and proudly commanding centre stage, while the boys automatically assumed peripheral places. On this occasion I was able to observe the girls’ behaviour from the unaccompanied and unremarkable vantage point of being a solo pilgrim.

**Fieldnotes: Kāmākhyā, 25th March 2003**

I passed a group of four little *kanyās*. They were lively with their hellos as I walked past. Then, since I wasn’t sure of my direction, I decided to walk back and get them to escort me. As we headed off the first thing they did was stop at a stall and demand I buy them a whole pack of bangles each – at Rs40 a pop. I also saw a man stop to touch their feet. They pat him on the head as a blessing.

The *kumārīs* [literally virgins, as the *kanyās* are alternatively known] clearly rule the roost. When I was visiting a young *pandit* at his family

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71 Bhattacharyya (1995) notes that “Hindu caste laws are not the same everywhere. The emphasis given on *svadharma* (the typical socio-religious and cultural characteristics of a given people) and *lokācāra* (the existing popular custom) by the law-givers made the caste-system of the North-East liberal and flexible” (p. 46).
home the host’s three year old niece arrived back from an outing. We were required to touch her feet immediately and have her bless us before the conversation could continue.

As these examples illustrate, being blessed by the virgins of Kāmākhyā, who thus confer auspiciousness, is indispensable to accomplishing all manner of endeavours. Did this indicate a reversal of the pronounced preference for boys that predominates in much of India (cf. Krishna, 2002)?

Gauhati, 11th August 1996

Madhu: We asked paṇḍitji: Do Śaktas aspire for daughters rather than sons?
Kathleen: Roxanne Gupta says they want daughters because they need kanyās for pūjā. This paṇḍit said they like to have daughters because then they have the form of the Goddess in the house, but in fact they really want to have both daughters and sons.

Madhu: Daughters because they represent the Mother and sons for the continuation of the lineage.

Kumārī or kanyā worship at Kāmākhyā is highly ranked and frequently undertaken. During Navarātri kumārī pūjā is performed daily (rather than only on the eighth day as I had observed in Kolkata – see chapter 3), with the number of girls worshipped increasing each day to correspond with the serial progress of the festival throughout its nine days. In addition to such annual rites, specific kanyā pūjās may be performed within the temple at any time to help address the worshipper’s desires (Mishra, 2004). Chandra Kanta Sarma (1993) attributes the “interesting system of Kumari Puja at Kamarupa Kamakhya” (p. 29) to ancient times and to Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā’s unmarried status. What is “interesting” here is that the vāmācāra (left-handed, or woman-oriented – cf. Bhattacharyya, 1999, pp. 291-3) version of kumārī pūjā practised at Kāmākhyā recalls tribal matrilineal practices in which female heads of family remained unmarried and property was inherited by daughters. The origin of kumārī pūjā is also expounded in the Yoginītantra, as the following summary recounts:

Once a ferocious demon was born from Viṣṇu’s bosom. He tortured the gods. The gods being helpless prayed “Mahākāli”. Mahākāli approached the demon in disguise of a virgin and begged food from him. The demon gave her sweets but her hunger remained unsatisfied. She devoured horses, elephants, chariots, and at last devoured the demon. At the death of the demon the gods being overjoyed began to worship her. Since then the virgin worship began.

(Goswami, 1998, p. 92)
Figure 30: Girls, flanked by their family supporters, take their places for *kumari pūjā*.

Figure 31: Ritual offerings for the *kumari pūjā*.

Figure 32: Paṇḍit Gauri Sankar Sarma conducts a *kumari pūjā* with our group.
Figure 33: Kathleen paints the *kumari*’s feet

Figure 34: Tantric *kumari* worship at Kāmākhyā entailed placing flowers on our own heads first.
Whether this myth derives from a tribal story or represents a later development, perhaps intended to justify the importance of girls, there is no doubt that its ascription of devī-hood to young girls serves to elevate their status in the temple community.

At the invitation of Paṇḍit Gauri Śāntak Śarma we undertook our own kumārī pūjā, in which two little girls were propitiated, invoking the Goddess’s blessings for our project and our lives. The ritual, employing the prescribed sixteen-fold worship, was led by the paṇḍit inside the third (outer) chamber of the temple (figs. 30-34).

... a seat, water for washing the feet, arghya [an offering that combines rice grains, duvā grass and sanctified water], water for sipping, madhuparka (yoghurt mixed with milk, ghee, sugar and honey), ornaments, flowers, incense, a lamp, collyrium, eatables, water for cleansing the mouth, circumambulation, and adoration; these sixteen are considered as the prescribed items at the pītha.


In contrast with the spectacle I had witnessed at Belur Math in Kolkata, here we were fully engaged in the pūjā, washing and painting the girls’ feet, uttering the mantras, offering bangles and sārīs, flowers, vermilion paste and food. The custom of placing the red hibiscus flowers on our own heads and reciting the mantras before offering these flowers to the kanyā devīs revealed an extraordinary and clearly Tantric feature of the worship. This symbolically mutual blessing was authenticated by the girls’ engrossment in the proceedings, the quiet pride shown by their parents and the impressions left on us. From her later account Minati seemed most impressed.

Kolkata, 26th March 1998

Minati: The pūjā we did, the way we all participated, was something I had never experienced before, especially the kumārī pūjā, which I have seen from my childhood. In my ancestral village every Durgā pūjā day they have kumārī pūjā but we don’t participate. Only the priests do it. They bring a small girl to do the pūjā. Actually there [at Kāmākhya] we did it ourselves. The priests were uttering the mantras, actually it was kula kumārī. That was a very grand experience for me with everybody together, and especially with Uma also. And those little girls were also very lively as if they were participating. That means the pūjā was being taken.

To perform the kumārī pūjā with so many people was a great influence. Those little girls, still I remember them. If you look from the other way they are the embodiment of these śaktis. What we were trying to offer Kāli was taken, it was granted.
How does this ritual adulation of girls impact on their sense of identity and personal empowerment? As noted above, there certainly seemed from my observations to be a sense among the kanyās of the temple community that they were entitled to respect. From her own childhood experience Madhu recalled how affirming she had found it.

**Gauhati, 14th August 1996**

*Madhu:* I remember that this is a very powerful experience. My father used to do this to me when I was a child - not so elaborate. All the girls of the house used to be worshipped during *Navarātra* before I was twelve years old. This happens in every Punjabi home, all the young girls are worshipped by the men and by the parents. I’m the only daughter so obviously I was indulged. It meant a lot to me because you really feel empowered, that’s the only word I can say. I remember I used to bless my father without doing anything. That is very empowering, extremely empowering when you’re blessing the person. When I went through this experience I thought it was very aesthetic and great fun because we used to get toys and all that.

Despite her admission of being indulged, Madhu’s account conveys an air of wholesomeness in the familial ritual context and a convincing case for its empowering and lasting effect on her. In considering the advantages of such practices we need also to bear in mind that the potential for subversion of their female-affirming intent lies in the meanings with which they are imbued by the participants, themselves influenced by a range of social and religious constructions concerning women’s place. Issues of this nature are tragically portrayed in Satyajit Ray’s film *Devī*, which depicts the devastating effects on a young woman when her father-in-law projects his *Devī* idealisation onto her through his worship. The capacity for negotiating between the ideal and lived reality therefore seems crucial.

**Gauhati, 14th August 1996**

*Kathleen:* I’ve often thought with kanyā pūjā they get worshipped now while they’re young girls but then what’s in store for them in later life? In other words the idea is that they enjoy it now but in later years it’s going to be all the drudgery, hard work and then they don’t get worshipped.

Questions of meaning, values and aspirations arise when we note a tendency for some girls to skip school in order to be available for kanyā pūjā and the gifts it brings. This was raised as a critical concern when we spoke with members of the Education Department at Gauhati University. Here Kathleen elaborates the concerns.

**Gauhati, 14th August 1996**

*Kathleen:* In some ways this kanyā pūjā thing interferes with their education, at least in the temples that I’ve seen, because they hang
around the temple all day long. The *kanyā pūjā* that I’ve seen at Jvālāmukhi is not nearly as elaborate as what we did. The pilgrims come and give them a few things and they sit down and it takes five minutes. So they hang around all day because they know they’re going to be getting things all day. Really they should be in school. They’re skipping school. They’re not getting an education and there’s basically no future for them. Once they mature they’re not going to be worshipped any more.

*Madhubani:* I personally feel that in these networks where there is a large concentration of young girls some programme should be integral to the temple culture.

*Kathleen:* Today I talked to the father of this *kanyā*. I said, by the way, you should let your daughter study because it’s very important. I gave him a whole spiel about women’s education. But then one of the pandits that was with me said nowadays we let all the young girls study, we don’t marry them off. At least that was what he was presenting to me, that we do encourage the girls to study.

*Rita:* If they really encourage the girls to study, how is this that the average age of marriage is 13.5 years? It’s the average for the whole of India, contributing of course Bihar and Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh most. Assam is from women’s point of view slightly better.

In terms of marriageability Mishra (2004) observes that child marriage has been rejected at Kāmākhyā with marriage of adults now the norm. He also notes that while schooling made available locally for the temple community has attracted enrolments of both boys and girls, few girls take up higher education. Overall, the community’s emphasis on worship of girls, though not advocating liberation in a feminist sense (which might be served by higher education), nonetheless seems to have a liberalising effect on day-to-day attitudes and conduct.

**Śāktācāra**

The declaration that “All the various knowledges, O Goddess, are portions of you, as is each and every woman in the various worlds” (*Devi Māhātmya* 11.5, trans. Coburn, 1991, p. 74), underscores the respect for women that is institutionalised within Śākta texts. Following from this central principle Śāktācāra refers to a series of precepts drawn from texts and oral tradition that function as a code of conduct, providing behavioural guidelines for Śākta adherents (Khanna, 2000). In Paṇḍit Gaurī Śankar Śarma’s exposition of Śākta traditions he was keen not only to apply these precepts to Tantric practices but also to provide social commentary in their light.
Gauhati, 11th August 1996
Kathleen: He said Mahiśāsura and all the demons died because they had a wrong attitude about the Mother. (We know from some of those mythological stories that they were trying to seduce her.) Then he went into this whole thing about the cinema. He said how in today’s modern culture the cinema gives very wrong ideas about women and it’s responsible for a lot of the wrong ideas about women in society.
Elinor: Treats them as an object.
Kathleen: That’s what I said. He agreed with me when I said there’s a great difference between the common view and the view of one who has done Śakti sādhana.

To what extent, I wondered, did this imply congruence between Śākta teachings and feminist values?

Brenda: If we take these as the attitudes of a Śākta, does it suggest that Śāktism is inherently feminist?
Madhu: On the basis of a study that I recently made there is a lot of textual evidence on the liberal view that Śāktas take, but I don’t know whether I would use the term feminist. I would say they were liberal and they had all-embracing..
Kathleen: Somewhat egalitarian ideas.
Madhu: .. egalitarian ideas about looking upon women and power.
Kathleen: They were the opposite of misogynist, whatever the opposite of misogynist is - gynocentric maybe.
Madhu: Pro women in every respect, and Śāktācāra documents read more like documents in human rights.

Madhu summarised the pro-woman features of Śāktācāra, which hinge on what she describes as the Goddess=Woman equation.

Gauhati, 9th August 1996
Madhu: When you look at the Śākta position, the Tantric position, you see the Goddess=Woman equation comes very close.
Kathleen: Tantric vows that you’re never supposed to disparage women, you’re always supposed to worship women ..
Madhu: You’re supposed to worship women, and wife-beating is prohibited. That’s number one.
Kathleen: Right. Sati was terribly punished.
Madhu: Oh yes, absolutely. They were against widow-burning, against this kind of thing. In fact we have a goddess whom we worship who is a widow, Dhumāvatī. This aspect of womanhood is also divinised.

Indeed, since the pandit’s recent demise his wife has assumed ritual responsibility for the household, her authority extending beyond the usual women’s vratas (Julia Jean, personal communication 2003). She is also not restricted in her dress to the traditional white of widows, but wore a colourful red sārī when I saw her briefly during my 2003 temple visit.
Gauhati, 9th August 1996 (continued)

Madhu: Then they’re against caste. Prostitutes and veśyās (courtesans) and everybody’s given equal respect, and they’re saying it again and again. There are sāstras (religious texts) written on it. In chapters which discuss Śaktācāra you find very emphatic statements. Then when you come down to ritual, you see women are honoured physically. It’s not just lip allegiance, there’s a whole yoga linked with that. Women can become priestesses. There are fewer rules for women than there are for men, and then the woman can give dikṣā (initiation) to her sons or to anyone.

Brenda: Yes. That’s right.

Madhu: You know, they can initiate. They can hold positions of power. They’re the extreme traditions within Tantra, not the Vedāntist Tantra. They try to bridge the gap between idealisation and reality. At least there was a very definite attempt.

Besides explicit statements in many Tantric texts concerning the superiority of female gurus (gurvīś = female gurus) there are a number of references both in Hindu and Buddhist Tantric texts to female preceptors (Shaw, 1994). There are also numerous recent and living female Hindu spiritual leaders who invoke a Śākta framework in their teachings. Madhu told us of having herself had five female gurus. As Julia Jean observed, Ambuwācī brings numbers of gurus and gurvīś to Kāmākhyā to reunite with their spiritual families (Apffel-Marglin & Jean, 2004). The respected accomplishments of one of them, Siddhimātā, have been described by Agehananda Bharati (1961). Another originally Assamese and now international figure, Śrī Mā, who is venerated as a living incarnation of the Goddess, was recognised and blessed while still in the womb by a Tantric adept at Kāmākhyā (Johnsen, 1994). She subsequently developed her spiritual powers while wandering the forests around Nilācala. This power of place is referred to in the Kaulajñāna RirŚaya, which describes how Tantric knowledge “was ‘extracted upward’ (samuddhārtam) and is now found in every one of the Yoginīs’ lodges in Kāmākhyā” (White, 2003, p. 104). Kāmākhyā, it seems, both attracts and spawns female spiritual adepts and teachers.

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72 Sir John Woodroffe (1986) cites Rudrayāmala on this; Madhu Khanna (2000) cites Śaktānanda Tārānī and Kaulajñāna Nīrṇaya. Madhu also notes here that the yogini kaula tradition of oral transmission by women originated at Kāmarūpā.

73 Two of the most prominent are “Mother of Bliss” Ānandamayī Mā (see Lisa Lassell Hallstrom, 1999) and “Ammachi” Mātā Amrītānandamayī (see Swami Amritaswarupananda, 1994).

74 Madhu gives her account of one of her Tantric gurus in Madhu Khanna (2002).
Gauhati, 9th August 1996 (continued)

Madhu: Then the whole notion of consorthood. Of course you look upon woman as a mother but then you also have a whole tradition of yoginiṣ and consorts, which you read about in legends but then you also come across these in life. A woman could be worshipped in a family situation as a vehicle of the deity or as a reflection of the Great Mother. I know Śāktas who are like that. The whole power balance is reversed. The woman is central, she’s giving the dikṣā, and the husband comes and bows down to her in the morning.

Kathleen: I’ve actually seen a situation like that in Himachal. Even though it’s more of a popular style of Śāktism, not a very esoteric Tantra, the woman really is the one who’s the centre of the household and the husband is her servant.

Madhu: Exactly, he’s just there.

Kathleen: He’s facilitating things for her, basically.

Madhu: Or you have couples in history like Jayadeva (who wrote the [Tantric love story] Gitā Govinda) and Padmāvatī. They were a Tantric couple. He says at the feet of Rādhā I sit and I’m writing these things, and the model was his wife, Padmāvatī. So that’s another model, I would say, of liberated Śāktism, where it’s consortship, where it is not that the woman is supreme, but where there is partnership, where male and female are coeval.

In comparison with unrepentantly patriarchal religious doctrines which justify the subordination of women on the basis of their assumed spiritual inferiority these Śākta Tantric ethics are indeed radical. They are premised on a ritual point of view within Śāktism that presumes a spiritual advantage for women. It’s here that we see the clearest link between śakti as woman and cosmogonic power, as expressed most eloquently in the Śaktisaṅgama Tantra:

Woman is the creator of the universe,
the universe is her form;
Woman is the foundation of the world,
she is the true form of the body.
Whatever form she takes, whether the form of a man or a woman,
is the superior form.
In woman is the form of all things,
Of all that lives and moves in the world.
There is no jewel rarer than woman,
no condition superior to that of a woman.
There is not, nor has been, nor will be
any destiny to equal that of a woman;
There is no kingdom, no wealth,
to be compared with a woman;
There is not, nor has been, nor will be
any holy place like unto a woman.
There is no prayer to equal a woman.
There is not, nor has been, nor will be
any yoga to compare with a woman,
no mystical formula nor asceticism to match a woman.
There are not, nor have been, nor will be any riches more valuable than woman.
(cited in Mookerjee, 1988, p. 6)

Contradictions

The exalting lyric of this hymn makes it clear that Woman is to be cherished. Yet a feminist-oriented inquiry must delve further than the text to consider the impact of such tributes on women’s lives. The question that must be asked, paralleling those raised in Satyajit Ray’s Dev, is whether this exaltation of Woman is in fact beneficial to women themselves. Is the adoration expressed in such examples directed to real women or to the imagined ideals of males who may revere Mā but at the same time remain oblivious to the actual circumstances of the women they idolise? Sharada Sugirtharajah (2002) states: “Men have no spiritual qualms in worshiping these goddesses, but whether their appropriation of the feminine at the devotional level makes them devoted husbands to their wives is a different story” (p. 103).

Against Madhu’s and Kathleen’s accounts of husbands serving their wives, we heard quite a different charge from a number of the participants in a Gauhati University forum of academics and students with whom we discussed their concepts of śakti and how it influenced their perspectives on women’s issues. Our group and our agenda were introduced by Dr Nandita Sarma, head of Gauhati University’s Department of Education.

Gauhati University, 14th August 1996

Dr Nandita Sarma: I am not a person belonging to religion, but our efforts should be how to utilise that śakti within us. We should never utter that women belong to the weaker sex because we have some extra power to bear the child which the man doesn’t have - that potentiality, that śakti inside woman. She can raise a new generation. The Goddess, Mother Kāmākhyā, and other Goddesses whom we worship, these are things which we have not seen but we will have to realise. I think this kind of project can help us to find the truth.

Perhaps estrangement from religion comes as a by-product of academic rationality. Only a few people at the forum, an estimated twenty percent, indicated that they visited the temple of Kāmākhyā, and of these most were men. Interestingly, one implication of Dr Nandita Sarma’s conclusion above is that, rather than divinising women, ritual idealisation of the Goddess may have the effect of making Her seem more remote and difficult to access.
Amongst the women present at the forum there appeared to be little take-up (at least little that was verbalised at the time) of Dr Nandita Sarma’s exhortations regarding Śāktism’s promise for women – or indeed some of ours. The comments of several female participants suggested they saw Śākta philosophy as male rhetoric that did nothing to redress the social disadvantage of women.

**Gauhati University, 14th August 1996**

*Dr Nilima Bhagabati (Ed. Dept):* Mother Goddess Kāmākhya is there, but socially there are many problems. Considering Śakti on one side, and the physical torture and rape on the other, I feel that unless and until the attitude of men can be changed this question can never be solved. In Assam we’re lucky enough that we’re not facing so much oppression as in other parts of India.

*Member of Women’s Studies Research Centre:* There is a lot of difference between theory and practice, even amongst those who wrote the scriptures. They wrote on Śakti but used to beat their wives.

A similar charge regarding the hypocritical behaviour of male goddess worshippers had been raised by a feminist colleague of Kathleen’s in Delhi. Rita too told us of research carried out by one of her students in Orissa in which the discrepancy between scriptural injunction and actual behaviour towards wives was significant, and for the worse.

**Gauhati, 15th August 1996**

*Rita:* One of my students worked for his M.A. thesis on Śakti in the Caṇḍi temple in Cuttack. Paṇḍits in that temple, they very particularly said we associate our mothers with the Goddess sometimes or most of the time; it has nothing to do with our wives. There is absolutely no space for the wife to be in that position. They made it very clear. The women also said the same thing. “Our husbands are not in any way giving us that kind of status even if they chant Caṇḍi *mantra* every day five thousand times. We live in that thing, but they treat us as a woman.”

Clearly it is this sort of duplicity that galvanises (some) women’s feminist aspirations and turns them against religion.

**Gauhati University, 14th August 1996**

*Rita:* How much is religion important for your lives?

*Female participant:* No importance of religion in my life. I don’t feel any Śakti from this concept of Śakti. Because from childhood you have to live as a sister, bride, then a wife, then a mother. But in Śakti concept you’re considered only as a mother. If you’re considered as a mother only then the other behaviours that happen in our daily life should not happen. Today on our university bus one teacher was badly treated by some boys. If they considered that this is elder mother it would not happen. Because they see the woman that she can’t beat them, therefore
they consider themselves more powerful than that woman even though she is their teacher.

Another woman preferred a humanistic framework to either feminism or Śāktism.

**Gauhati University, 14th August 1996**

*Female participant:* Actually I don’t want to think myself as a woman, only a human being.

Given the concerns raised by the women participants and their largely ambivalent response to our enthusiasm for the temple and its Śākta outlook I asked for reactions from the men present. There was a striking contrast between the opinions of the male participants who responded and those of the women who had spoken earlier. Whereas the women tended to reject religion in the face of perceived anti-female discrimination, the men uncritically advocated a reliance on tradition as the solution to male harassment and abuse of women.

**Gauhati University, 14th August 1996**

*Brenda:* I would like to hear the response of some of the men to the statements that were made earlier about the need for men to change. We’ve been visiting the Kāmākhyā temple and we’ve had conversations with the pândās there who said that they look upon every woman as a mother. I wonder, is that something specific to the pândās at the temple, or is that something that’s part of the culture of you men who live here locally?

*Male participant:* Our view towards women is just like mother, not as woman. We respect our whole life there is woman because Indian culture, our traditions, respect a woman who is mother. Therefore our feeling towards woman is like mother.

*Brenda:* In that case what is your opinion of some of these things that were discussed - wife beatings or eve-teasing [sexual harassment of women]? What do you think about that?

*Rita:* If you consider every woman as mother, you don’t consider woman as woman, how do you react to these situations when you hear there is a lot of bride-burning or wife-beating, or lot of violence against women in society? It may not be so much in Assam fortunately.

*Male participant:* In this case my personal reaction is that a child is born from mother’s womb. When he reacts in such a way he should think he’s actually humiliating a mother.

The question of why “he” might react in such a way, given the existence of traditions of mother-reverence, was not something these men opted to discuss. Whether sexual harassment and violence against women is viewed as influenced by cinematic depictions of gender relations as the pandit had stated (broadly in keeping with so-called “cultural feminism”), by the more pervasive and insidious politics of patriarchy
critiqued by radical feminists, or by the impacts of economic “modernisation” (or globalisation) as Marxist or socialist feminism would suggest (cf Omvedt, 1990), or all these (and more) in combination, they clearly contravene the code of ethics outlined as Śāktācāra, as endorsed by the men we spoke to at the university as well as those at the temple.

The moral split entailed in this divergence between social behaviour and espoused values (a phenomenon which is certainly not specific to the Indian context) cannot be simply explained by appealing to varying allegiance to Śākta or non-Śākta codes amongst different Hindu constituencies - as the research of Rita’s student in Orissa suggested.75 Lina Gupta (1997) has pointed out that “contrary to the Western notion of ‘power’ as merely physical or socio-political power, the Hindu concept of power is to be primarily understood as an inner power essential to human evolution on a spiritual level” (pp. 85-86). This demarcation between spiritual and socio-political domains enables conceptual differentiation between Mā as Goddess and as mere mother and between Mother and woman. Under the weight of patriarchal social practices any sense of contradictoriness in this position can be readily minimised. “A woman certainly does not possess the goddess’s sovereign authority or her divine power” noted Samjukta Gupta (2000a, p. 87). Under this light brāhmanic elevation of the Goddess as ideal, and real women’s obvious deficiencies by comparison, can be used to buttress women’s social status of inferiority – whether by men or by women themselves (who are nonetheless expected to uphold pativrata and worship their husbands as gods, however imperfect).

Whatever the sway of such discourses among the various facets of Hindu society, it should be arguably less at Kāmākhya. In contrast with Rita’s account of the Cuttack temple, we have seen in the Kāmākhya paṇḍit’s words, as well as in texts and customs originating here, an explicit confirmation of women as representatives of the Goddess. Here, if anywhere, the spiritual ideal is said to inform the real. An example of the kind of reverence evoked by both the paṇḍit and the university men was witnessed by Julia Jean (Apffel-Marglin & Jean, 2004) at Ambuvācī. She observed a male

75 Both Orissa and Assam have pervasive and longstanding traditions of Śāktā worship. However, attempts to correlate this culture with positive treatment of women are confounded when we compare rates of violence against women. Whereas in Assam the rate is lower than most other Indian states, Orissa has one of the highest rates of violence against women. Clearly these statistics are a result of a complexity of factors.
renunciant asking to wash the feet of a woman and then drinking some of the water, thus reversing the practice where wives demonstrate their worshipful subservience by drinking water in which they have washed their husbands’ feet. In a less dramatic, and perhaps more “real” (to my sensibilities) instance, during my 2003 visit I experienced the respectful attentiveness shown towards me by male residents of the temple complex as impressively genuine, gentle and generous.

By comparison, however, the story told to us privately at the conclusion of our earlier forum at Gauhati University was disappointing, if not altogether startling. Several young women came forward to tell us that they don’t go to the temple any more because the pāṇḍās “misbehave” with them. To Kathleen, Elinor, Rita and Madhu this revelation was nothing new - though it was not something I had experienced or witnessed personally.

*After Gauhati University, 14th August 1996*

Brenda: Exactly how do they misbehave?
Kathleen: They just touch them
Rita: Touch them the way they do it in all temples.
Brenda: Really?
Rita: Of course.
Kathleen: Mostly with these young vulnerable girls who are too shy to say anything.
Rita: No, to everyone, even to grandmother, old ladies. You are a little bit scared of them, a little bit fearful, and their authority over that area is very strong, so nothing can be done against them. Even the police force, nobody can do anything even if it’s disclosed that they misbehave. It’s a very open truth everywhere at the temples that they do misbehave.
Madhu: I know many people who’ve complained. Especially if you go to a temple for the first time a pāṇḍā will say, “Come, come, I’ll get you a darsan. Then take them through a dark corridor and just tap them against a wall.
Rita: Around Jagannath temple also, at the most interior part, which is the most auspicious part, people have to go around that parikrama, and that is the place where the pāṇḍās will touch you properly.
Kathleen: Improperly. Properly improperly!
Minati: But why doesn’t the śakti there protect these girls from these external forces?

Why doesn’t the śakti protect these girls, and what is it with these men? Rita felt the phenomenon of “misbehaviour” with women went further than being a mere reflection of cinema culture; it had become an expected pattern in the culture of temple pāṇḍās. In addition to its patriarchal determination, the pāṇḍās’ authority over those
who visit the temple derives from their (arguably justifiable) sense of ownership of both
the physical area and its spiritual traditions. Regarding the latter, the young paṇḍit I met
with in 2003 made it clear that sādhanā (sustained individual spiritual practice) was
more highly regarded than pūjā (worship). Despite the manifest lack of caste barriers
within Tantra, there is nonetheless a spiritual hierarchy related to šakti realisation which
holds that an individual’s capacity to contain, embody and transmit šakti is a measure of
the quality of his/her sādhanā. I doubt that the temple pāṇḍās would have risked
their misbehaviour with women they recognised as female Tantric adepts, whose ability
to interact with the šakti of this place, and bring to bear their own, provides a
protection not available to the uninitiated.

While endowing certain freedoms and privileges for Tantric gurvīś and yoginīś,
hierarchies of power – even spiritual ones – can be subverted to license degradation of
those more vulnerable, as exemplified in the pāṇḍāś actions. By all accounts according
to Rita, the “misbehaviour” did not appear to have extended to the more severe sexual
abuse by clergy that has recently come to light in western contexts. However, this may
simply reflect the circumscribed function of Hindu pāṇḍās as ritual officiants who have
no pastoral role and thus fewer avenues for intimate contact with religious devotees.76
The irony for those stewards of the Goddess who engage in this (mis)behaviour is that
they fail to appreciate its effects in compromising the merits of their own sādhanā.

Gauhati, 11th August 1996
Kathleen: He said that Šakti sādhanā is not for everyone.
Madhu: Only a few have the authority to worship.
Kathleen: Only a few. Because, he said, if I have a bad attitude or
something it just ruins the whole thing. So he says it’s a test for a Šākta
to be in the company of women and not have bad desires.

For Rita, the behaviour of the pāṇḍās was an indication that they had failed the test.

Gauhati, 16th August 1996
Rita: I think it is not any more special than other temples
where the line is drawn on the status of women. Blame it on
brāhmanism, brāhman supremacy, patriarchy, process of
modernisation, all together. This has a clear separation between status of
women and the temple behaviour, or how they treat the Goddess as
Goddess and their counterpart at home. I don’t think it is anything more
special than any other temple where goddesses are worshipped.

76 On the other hand, among Tantric gurus many allegations of sexual abuse have come to light.
Each of us shared wholeheartedly in Rita’s consternation for such behaviour - though we were not all as totalising in our condemnation of *all* the *pāṇḍās*. As Kathleen pointed out, the aggravation caused by *pāṇḍā* behaviour could not undermine the sense of sacred femaleness suggested by the place itself. The core attraction for pilgrims at any *śakti pīṭha*, she maintained, is not the *pāṇḍās* but the power of the site. Our own experience at Kāmākhyā testified to this site’s particular power.

**Gauhati, 15th August 1996**

*Kathleen:* People go to sacred places and what they experience there is in spite of the presence of the *pāṇḍās*, not because of them. In interviewing hundreds of devotees on pilgrimage at Goddess places in the northwest, nobody said that they went there because they liked the *pāṇḍās*. Nobody said that. Everybody said that they didn’t particularly care for commercialism (of *pāṇḍās*) but that they went in spite of that. The important thing was that it’s a *śakti pīṭha*. The place was sacred even before the temple was built because according to the mythic consciousness these are places where the body parts of Śatī fell, so the place was sacred long before anybody ever discovered it or built a temple there. The place in and of itself is sacred. People also talked about the fact that there had been some saints and *sādhus* who had sanctified the place by their presence because they’ve meditated there.

*Madhu:* There is a difference between an ordinary *pīṭha* and a *siddha pīṭha*. *Siddha pīṭha* is a repository of power, of spiritual power, and this power is none other than the power of the people who have dedicated their lives there, doing proper *sādhanā* and energising the place over centuries.

Notwithstanding that the *śakti* of this place may not be erased by the unseemly behaviour of (some?) *pāṇḍās*, it does taint and inhibit women’s experience of the temple – and, if the Śākta scriptures are anything to go by, it must offend the Goddess. Though for individuals Śākta perspectives and practices may be empowering, they appear insufficient of themselves to confer immunity from the social practices of patriarchy. Our collaborative feminist interpretation did, however, suggest possibilities.
Chapter 5

KĀMĀKHYĀ - Goddess of Desire

Gauhati, 14th August 1996

Madhu: In Khasi ka-mai means mother. In Sanskrit kāma means love, desire, eros. Both these things are integrated here. She’s a mother and she’s also embodiment of human love.

Kathleen: That’s what Nirmala Prabha was saying. There’s the mother aspect and the Lalitā aspect, she was saying.

Having explored Kāmākhyā’s origins as a mother goddess in the previous chapter, our focus turns now to her unique association with love and desire. The yoni, as emblem of desire, highlights Kāmākhyā’s pre-eminence as a Tantric goddess. Many symbols of her Tantric affiliation were evident in the iconography and ritual practices we were introduced to. In this chapter I present the Tantric dimensions we were able to observe, together with the textual interpretations that support them. In our brief pilgrimage we could not expect to gain access to the kind of privileged knowledge restricted to those who have undergone initiation and instruction by a guru. We gleaned what we could from two key interviews, one with the paṇḍit and the other with a (male) scholar-initiate to whom we were introduced. Madhu’s specialist knowledge of Tantra was invaluable in helping to decipher encoded symbolic meanings, as will be evident in the pages to come.

These observations are embedded in an analysis of desire that emerged for the most part from the subsequent deliberations of my heuristic inquiry. It focuses on the many aspects of desire that Kāmākhyā appears to represent, on a feminist questioning of the implications for women of Tantric practices associated with desire, and on a consideration of the way our desires for the pilgrimage were met. The chapter concludes with reflections on the implications of Tantric framings of desire and eroticism for spiritualising sexual relationships.

The place of kāma

Kāma in Sanskrit refers to desire, whether applied in a general sense or as a more specific referent to eros. The range of meanings presented by Apte (1988) is indicative:
1 Wish, desire; … 2 Object of desire; 3 Affection, love; 4 Love or desire of sensual enjoyments, considered as one of the ends of life (puruṣārtha); … 5 Desire of carnal gratification, lust; 6 The god of love (p. 348)

All of these connotations are brought out in the temple iconography, mythology, texts and traditions relating to Kāmākhyā, inscribing multifocal confirmation of her Tantric status.

Enshrined amongst the puruṣārthas, kāma is considered one of the four fundamental aims of life according to Hindu traditions. The serial order among the puruṣārthas begins with dharma (moral or religious duty) and is followed by artha (material success), then kāma and mokṣa (spiritual liberation). But the importance granted by including kāma, here taken to indicate the broad pursuit of pleasure as well as love, is nonetheless circumscribed in most accounts. Of the four aims dharma takes precedence as a universally applicable moral standard, while mokṣa is extolled as the ultimate goal of spiritual life. The Mahābhārata advises that the pursuit of artha and kāma should be properly subordinated to dharma, which in turn serves a greater spiritual goal (cf Sharma, 1999). This understanding is conveyed even in Vatsyayana’s Kāmasūtra: “When these three aims – religion, power [here referring to artha], and pleasure – compete, each is more important than the one that follows” (I.2.14, trans. Doniger & Kakar, 2002, p. 8).

Within the ascetic model of religious pursuit propounded in the Upaniṣads, kāma figures most emphatically as a spiritual obstacle to be conquered.

… The wise men, who, free from desires [akāmās], worship the Person, pass beyond the seed (of rebirth).
He who entertains desires, thinking of them, is born (again) here and there on account of his desires. But of him who has his desire fully satisfied, who is a perfected soul, all his desires vanish even here (on earth).

Only with the transcendence of all mundane desire can the supreme pleasure of union with Brahman be achieved. In the Bhagavad Gītā this ascetic theme is accentuated by categorical denouncement: “Desire [kāma], wrath [krodha] and greed [lobha] – this is the triple gateway to Narakā, ruinous to the self. Therefore one should abandon these three” (16.21, trans. Svāmī Ādīdevānanda, n.d., p. 519). Significantly, it is the demonic domain of Narakā, elsewhere translated as “hell” (cf Radhakrishnan, 1992, p. 492).
In Tantra these considerations of the orthodox tradition are not simply swept aside; rather, in keeping with the principle of jīvanmukti (liberation in this life - cf chapter 3), the role of kāma is accorded liberatory potential. Madeleine Biardeau has been frequently quoted in this regard, describing Tantra as “an attempt to place kāma, desire, in every sense of the word, in the service of liberation … not to sacrifice this world for liberation’s sake, but to reinstate it, in varying ways, within the perspective of salvation” (cited in Padoux, 1986, p. 273).

Mythologically the reinstatement of kāma begins in the Kālikā Purāṇa from its opening narrative concerning the birth of the god of love (Kāma). The importance of Kāma’s role in securing the marriage of Śiva and Sati is amply described and he again plays a pivotal part in distracting the meditating Śiva from his austerities and luring him into an amorous liaison with the Goddess when she is reborn as Kāli.78 The mythic origin of the yoni pīṭha as a consequence of Sati’s self-immolation at Dakṣa’s sacrifice and her subsequent rebirth is further entwined with the story of Kāma: he is first burnt up in Śiva’s fiery glance as a consequence of disturbing his yoga, and is later resurrected here. Kāmarūpa is so named because it is the place where Kāma was returned to his own form (rūpa).

As Kāma after he was burnt by the fiery glance of the eyes of Śambhu [Śiva] regained his (former) shape by the grace of Śambhu himself there, hence, that region became known (by the name) Kāmarūpa.

(Kālikā Purāṇa 51.78, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 725)

Kāma remains an active presence in Kāmarūpa. Dharani Kanta Dev Sharma notes that “Kamdev regained the former beauty when he promised to built [sic] the temple” (1992, p.3), thus crediting Kāma with the original establishment of the worship

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77 Here, in contrast with the account of the Śiva Purāṇa in which Śiva cannot be distracted from his austerities, Kāma plays a significant and elaborate role in assisting Sati to gain the attention of the ascetic god.

78 The Kālikā Purāṇa uses the epithet Kāli prolifically. Occasionally in this narrative it refers to the Goddess as Umā or Sati and only rarely as Pārvatī.
here, prior to the advent of Naraka. The Kālikā Purāṇa account attributes the establishment of the yoni shrine to Kāma, the cave itself being known as the cave of Manobhava (an epithet of Kāma) with the yoni stone lying along the Bhasma-śaila, a hill made out of Kāma’s ashes (62.88-89). With this a recurrent motif of death and regeneration can be seen to wholly saturate the narrative that connects Kāma with Kāmākhyā, providing another frame for the link between fertility and sacrifice. Again, this underscores the Tantric emphasis on jīvanmukti in preference to the goal of mokṣa, which seeks liberation from rebirth.

Not only does the yoni emerge here as a powerful symbol of creation; the power of eros is also celebrated in, and by, this Goddess. Etymologically the Sanskrit name Kāmākhyā has been observed to mean “She whose eyes are filled with desire” (Kinsley, 1997, p. 283), or “the Place Called Love” (White, 2003, p. 102). The Kālikā Purāṇa provides its own etymology:

*The Lord (Śiva) said:*

As the Goddess has come to the great mountain Nilakūṭa to have the sexual enjoyment with me, she is called the (goddess) Kāmākhyā, who resides there in secret.

Since she gives love, is a loving female, is embodiment of love, the beloved, she restores the limbs of Kāma and also destroys the limbs of Kāma, she is called Kāmākhyā.


And since the mountain itself in this rendering of the Kālikā Purāṇa is equated with Sadāśiva (62.87) the opportunities for sexual enjoyment between god and goddess are boundless.

“Sexual enjoyment” similarly becomes a pathway for worship in the predominantly vāmācāra (left-handed) orientation of the Śākta tantras. The paṇḍamakāra ritual, in which the goddess is worshipped with wine, meat, fish, fried grain and sexual intercourse (maithuna), is enjoined in the Kāmākhyā tantra, where the ritual art of kāma is elaborated (Shastri, 1990). However, both the Yogini and Kāmākhyā tantras caution that eligibility for this form of worship is restricted to

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79 Bhattacharyya (1982) comments “Of the existing modes of tantric worship the Vāmācāra is so important that the term has become a synonym of Tantra itself. The concept of Daksīṇācāra as opposed to Vāmācāra seems to be a later development, and it is possible that the first word of the expression Vāmācāra is not vāma or left, but vāmā or woman” (p. 108).

80 The fourth element of this scheme, mudrā, has several meanings and may also refer to ritual designs and gestures or to women. The translation given by various authors seems to vary with “right-handed” or “left-handed” interpretation. Shastri (1990) provides the singular translation of “fried grain”.

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initiates displaying \textit{vīra} (“hero”) characteristics. The \textit{vīra} “should be fearless, of inspiring personality, and be resolute to achieve his purpose. He should be polite in language, attentive, yet bold, courageous, intelligent and active. He should know social manners and be considerate of the welfare of others” (Bhattacharyya, 1982, p. 317). Qualifications like these were also emphasised as essential by Paṇḍit Gauri Śāṅkar Šarma.

\textbf{Gauhati, 11th August 1996}

\textit{Kathleen:} He said that Śakti \textit{sādhanā} is not for everyone.

\textit{Madhu:} Only a few have the authority to worship.

\textit{Kathleen:} Only a few. Because he said if I have a bad attitude or something it just ruins the whole thing and so he says it’s a test for a Śākta to be in the company of women and not have bad desires. And the most difficult is the \textit{yoni sādhanā} he says.

What transforms sexual activity into \textit{sādhanā} is the stringent preparation of body and mind to enable the unencumbered and undistorted reflection of the cosmic creative act which the ritual intends to replicate. The physical act is homologised with the cosmic by means of \textit{mantra}, \textit{yantra} (geometric symbols), ritual gestures, offerings and meditations on the nature of god and goddess and their primordial union, referred to as \textit{kāmakalā}. In the \textit{Kāmakalāvilāsa} a text that outlines the symbolism of the Śrīyantra, Śiva and Śakti are described “in their secret mutual enjoyment, … now expanding and now contracting” (trans. Avalon, 1961, p. 15) The \textit{Śilpa Prakāśa} details how this symbolism was the basis for the architecture and erotic sculpture of medieval Orissan temples.

\textit{Kāma} is the root of the world’s existence. All that is born originates from \textit{kāma}. It is by \textit{Kāma} also that primordial matter and all beings eventually dissolve away.

Without (the passionate engagement of) Śiva and Śakti, creation would be nothing but a figment. Nothing from birth to death occurs without the activation of \textit{kāma} (\textit{kāma-kriyā}). Śiva is manifest as the great \textit{liṅga}, Śakti’s essential form is the \textit{yoni}. By their interaction, the entire world comes into being; this is called the activity of \textit{kāma}.


Based on this foundation the elaborate rituals of Śākta Tantra are intended to provide the means for transforming one’s consciousness by attuning with the subtle and powerful forces that perpetually create and re-create the world.
Virās and šaktis

If the yoni sādhanā presents a test for the male participant, even with the requisite status of vīra, what is the position of the female? This was an issue both of scholarly controversy (including amongst ourselves) and of propriety in our discussions with the male proponents of Tantra whom we interviewed. Sensitivity was called for, not least because our desire for information about esoteric practices might otherwise be vulnerable to the charge of academic voyeurism, as raised by one of our informants. Kathleen and Madhu did not go into great detail on this topic with the paṇḍit but what he did mention was nonetheless significant.

Gauhati, 11th August 1996

Kathleen: I asked him the question, is it more difficult for men to practise Śākta sādhanā or for women? He basically said it’s about the same because both men and women should be careful not to be overcome by any profane desires of any kind. But he did say that the woman has the authority to take all the impure substances.

Madhu: What he meant was there’s more leniency, there are no great rules for women to follow.

Minati: One thing is not clear to me about the sādhanā done by a woman and a man. What is the difference? I’ve heard in Tantric sādhanā, a bhairavī [female Tantric consort] who is the partner gets all the power without doing anything.

Kathleen: He didn’t go into detail about that. He said that both have to overcome desire.

Minati: What is true is that man should have more control, more self-control.

Madhu: When it comes to the maithuna [sexual] ritual.

Kathleen: We didn’t discuss the maithuna ritual. Personally I think there’s an over-degree of fascination with the maithuna when that is just one very small aspect of Tantric practice.

Madhu: I think he did discuss it briefly. He was saying that no-one can have authority for a maithuna ritual unless he has conquered kāma [desire], krodha [anger], māda [inebriation], lobha [greed].

Elinor: Yes. He said that part.

Madhu: And he said it again and again. He said if you have not conquered and you’re performing the ritual then it’s a farce.

The idea that the sexual ritual, maithuna, must be engaged in without kāma introduces a paradoxical element. It suggests that consciousness transformation, the

81 Like the little girls in the kumārī pūjā the bhairavī is worshipped. Performance of the ritual is incumbent on the male tāntrika.
goal of sādhanā, can be achieved only through cultivating a kind of desireless desire. A maithuna participant must therefore have the discipline required to maintain a singularly focussed psycho-physical state in order for the ritual to take effect.

Gauhati, 11th August 1996

Madhu: It’s linked with a series of transformations, and you cannot enter that world unless you’re totally transformed, and when you’re transformed the body is just an instrument. Your body identity is changed, your body chemicals are also changed once you take up [this] yoga. Of course there is physical union, but there are a lot of things linked with that form of physical union which we have to accept. One is that both have in a way transformed the chemicals of their body through yoga. Otherwise you can’t perform this yoga.

Lacking much of this discipline, prurient interest in the maithuna ritual is evident in much of the so-called “tantra” marketed in the new age West. From a feminist point of view, however, maithuna raises the question of how power dynamics are negotiated in a ritual that requires direct and intimate heterosexual interaction. Most Tantric texts are voiced from the perspective of the male practitioner. Those that outline the vāmacāra rituals also discuss the attributes of the śakti, bhairavī or dūtī, the female participant in the yonipūjā. Her status remains a controversial issue in the literature, as it was also in our discussions.

Gauhati, 11th August 1996

Elinor: I read that you had as your partner someone like a washerwoman or a lower caste woman and that in a sense she was being exploited because she was just being used for the man to realise himself.

Madhu: But Minati just said the opposite, that she gets the power without doing it. The mere fact that she’s put on a pedestal at that moment.

Minati: Lower caste because they’re easily available.

Madhu: Available, so there’s a social reason for it.

Kathleen: But there are also many instances in which there are husband and wife from about equal social status.

The position of the female partner in Tantric ritual is clearly of critical importance to feminist appraisal. However, it was not something that Madhu or Kathleen felt comfortable to broach while interviewing the pandit. Instead, contrasting perspectives on this issue are shown in the following accounts from Tantric texts and from the work of recent scholars.

The Yoginiśtantra carries an injunction that “a brāhmaṇ woman should never be the partner of a man of lower social status, and so on” (Goudriaan & Gupta, 1981, p. 85). The Yonitantra, a text which derives from Cooch Bihar (the region in West Bengal
adjacent to Assam’s western boundary) and is in parts derivative of the *Yoginītantra*, provides a list of *nava kanyāḥ*, nine young unmarried women, who are deemed suitable for the *yoniṃpūjā*. These are:

1) an actress (*nāṭī*), 2) a woman of the *Kapālika*-order (*kāpālikā*)
3) a prostitute (*veśyā*), 4) a washerwoman (*rajakī*), 5) the daughter of a barber (*nāpiṃgānā*), 6) a Brahmin woman (*brāhmaṇī*), 7) the daughter of a Śūdra (*śudrakanyā*), 8) the daughter of a cowherd (*gopālakanyākā*), and 9) the daughter of a garland-maker (*mālākarasya kanyā*).


In fact, observes Jan Schoterman (1980), this list seems to be derived from the Kashmiri *Rudrayāmalatantra* and is very shortly dispensed with when the *Yonitantra* suggests that any woman might serve as a *sakti* for the *yoniṃpūjā*, provided that she is not a mother. In the case of a *brāhman* woman, however, the *Yonitantra* applies a restriction. It allows for the collection of her *yonītattva* (the female sexual fluid that the ritualist aims to collect as an offering) but this must be used in worship of another woman’s *yoni* rather than hers. At work here apparently is a complex negotiation between social mores and Tantric transgressions. Teun Goudriaan (Gupta, Hoens & Goudriaan, 1979) suggests that the preference for low-caste women may indicate their greater suitability for Tantric ritual due to their experience of fewer social restrictions. For Mircea Eliade (1969) it suggests “the tantric doctrines of the identity of opposites, [where] the ‘noblest and most precious’ is hidden precisely in the ‘basest and most common’” (p. 261).

Apart from attempting to subvert the strictures of caste hierarchy, neither of these explanations provide women any voice for their experience, even though their “mouths” may be extolled for transmitting the Tantric essence. The “mouth of the *yoginī*”, as elucidated in detail by David Gordon White (2003), is a referent to the lower mouth, the *yoni*, depersonally prized for its production of female sexual fluid, the *yonītattva* that is the ambrosia of the *kaula* Tāntrikas. From this perspective the woman is instrumentalised.

… even if the experience itself remains in principle that of feminine power, this power remains in some way subjugated, controlled by the man.

(Padoux, 1999, p. 43, my translation)

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82 However, the *Yonitantra* states explicitly that they should not be virgins.
83 An extreme Śāiva sect famous for the use of human skulls in ritual and for Śakti worship
Based on both textual accounts and personal observation Bharati (1993) argued that women were not granted “anything like equal access or equal hedonic share” in esoteric rites. He concluded “Objects do not occupy the same rank as subjects, even when they are objects of worship” (p. 317).

If women’s subjectivity is occluded in male-oriented texts, there are nonetheless references to women’s engagement in and realisation from Tantric practices that suggest they may play an influential and rewarding role. Abhinavagupta’s Tantrāloka praises the capacity of woman, about whom

... the treatises state that her median way fully expands. And so to her alone should the guru impart the whole of the secret doctrine (kulārtha); and through her, by the practice of union ... it is imparted to men.


She is not described here simply as a means to male ends; she is rather a consummate initiate and esteemed dātī, bestower of esoteric knowledge. Miranda Shaw (1994) emphasises that the female energy sought by the male Tāntrika cannot be acquired by him through a simple act of will. Moreover, even a basic appreciation of female eroticism suggests that causing the śakti to feel debased or threatened would severely impede any attempt to procure the yonitattva. This consequently underscores the necessity for all base desire to be overcome in order for the recommended sexual rituals to yield benefits – a necessity that is achieved by cultivating an attitude of devotion to the śakti who represents the Goddess.

For her part the śakti also needs to show both interest and aptitude, as Madhu pointed out.

Madhu: We’re not talking about sexuality here, we’re talking about a yoga, so obviously the person must have certain attitudes and she must be a yogī herself to be able to share that experience, and she must be well composed in her attitudes and everything. You don’t have somebody who’s too scatterbrained.

This emphasis is also apparent in key texts, like Abhinavagupta’s Tantrāloka which derives from the Kashmiri Śaiva tradition.

The sole distinctive feature of the energy [śakti] – woman – is the faculty she has of identifying with the owner of the energy – man or sādhaka. Her selection, therefore, should be made irrespective of her beauty, caste, etc.

The importance of both male and female participants being actively engaged in Tantric sādhanā was highlighted by a male scholar-initiate who agreed to speak with us, in broad terms, about his views regarding the role of sexual ritual in Tantra.

Gauhati, 17th August 1996

Brenda: What about the kāma aspect of Kāmākhyā?
RK: Obviously you’ve heard about the so-called left-hand and right-hand, and there is a left-handed aspect which is not metaphorical.
Brenda: But also not public.
RK: It’s not public. …

So, there is a sexual aspect which is used as a stepping stone for something else because the aim is mystical. Chogyam Trungpa says, “What’s the big deal about sex?” In a way there isn’t and in a way there is. It’s fun, but the mystical pleasure is something else.

Kathleen: Is it men and women who are initiates?
RK: My wife is not an initiate and she’s not a Tantric. But in my own experimentation – it has been very limited in the sense that one needs partners who are interested in Tantric practice and not just anybody.

Kathleen: Somebody qualified. What are the qualifications?
RK: Someone who’s also interested in meditation, marrying meditation and sexuality and so on.¹⁰⁵

Kathleen: And someone who has also been initiated?
RK: Yes. But you could also do it yourself, like tell the person how to meditate, that kind of stuff.¹⁰⁶

Elinor: In the popular literature it’s always said that the partner was a washerwoman or someone like that.

Kathleen: Prostitutes and washerwomen. That’s the stereotype.
RK: Sometimes I think prostitutes are human beings too.

Kathleen: Why would an initiate want to do this particular practice when there are so many other practices to do? What’s the particular benefit?
RK: As I see it here sex is understood as pleasurable and a valid means for the samādhi experience or whatever you want to call it. So if a guru is satisfied that a person is serious about the meditative aspects and he feels that the sexual thing will help him, then I guess he will recommend it to him or her.

¹⁰⁴ The privileged and esoteric nature of Tantric teachings was emphasised in our informant’s opening remarks: “As an outsider [i.e., from outside the temple community] who has been initiated into this cult I don’t feel authorised to talk about these ritualistic and other aspects except indirectly. I also feel that there’s a certain amount of academic voyeurism and all that.”

¹⁰⁵ Sir John Woodroffe (1987) quotes the GuhyakālikhāŚ/c129aŠ of the Mahākāla Saˆhitā: “As is the competency of the Sādhaka so must be that of the Sādhika. In this way only is success attained and not otherwise even in ten million years” (p. 395).

¹⁰⁶ Initiation by the sādhaka of his wife or another woman is described in the Kulacudāmanītantra, a nigama tantra, i.e., one in which Devi provides instruction to Śiva.
For this male practitioner the equal status of the śakti as a woman who is, like him, seeking the mystical aspect of sex is crucial for the success of the practice; issues of caste appear immaterial - as, noted Minati, does marital fidelity. That sex is pleasurable and a valid religious pursuit comes through too, as we have seen, in the texts associated with Kāmākhyā.

**Kāmeśvarī**

Without direct testimony from women actively engaged in esoteric practices of sexual worship it is not possible to know the extent to which they might feel i) honoured and affirmed by the rituals, ii) oppressed by being eroticised under the male gaze, or iii) empowered by a sense of embodied identity with the Goddess. To the extent, however, that the “theology of identification” (Sherma, 2000) is applied, Kāmeśvarī (an epithet indicating her dominion as Goddess of Love) provides a role model of sexual freedom and autonomy.

When it is time for love-making she abandons her sword and willingly adorns herself with a garland, when she is no more in amorous mood (kāma) she holds a sword.

When it is time for love-making she stands on a red lotus placed on (the bosom of) Śiva, who is in the form of a corpse, and when free from the sex desire she stands on a white ghost.

(Kālikā Purāṇa, 58.57-58, trans. Shastri, p. 842)

Explicitly sexual iconography surrounds the temple’s main chamber that houses the icons of Kāmeśvarī and Kāmeśvara. It seems very likely that once this chamber hosted secret rituals performed each evening by devadāsis, the female temple dancers who served the deity by performing dance as a sensual offering. One of the popular stories of the Kāmākhyā temple (recounted in Kakati, 1948 & Mishra, 2004) is telling with regard to the status of the dance ritual. Having rebuilt the temple (in the 16th century), King Naranārāyaṇa decided he wanted to see the Goddess dancing, as she was said to do behind closed doors during the evening ritual. He prevailed on one

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87 The *Kālikā Purāṇa* 64.74 invokes Kāmeśvarī as goddess of kāma, possessor of kāma and beloved of Kāma.

88 The *devadāsi* tradition, now extinct at Kāmākhyā, remains only as a remnant in a few locations, though it was once prevalent throughout India. This tradition is richly portrayed in Frédérique Apffel Marglin’s (1985) account of the surviving *devadāsis* at Jagannātha temple in Orissa. She shows how the rituals of the unmarried *devadāsis* confer auspiciousness on the temple, the king and the region through both symbolic and active sexual rites.
particularly devoted priest, Kendu Kalāi, to allow him to peep through a hole at her. On catching them in the act, Kāmākhyā became irate and immediately turned Kendu Kalāi into stone. The king and all his descendants were thenceforth banned from coming near the Goddess or her temple.

What was the nature of the king’s desire? How far did he trespass? We can only conjecture. The devadāsīs, ritual specialists whose role in worship paralleled that of priestess, would have represented the Goddess herself during their rituals. Devadāsī accomplishment in the erotic arts was celebrated (like that of Kāmākhyā) but their sexual favour was not for the uninitiated (cf Apffel-Marglin, 1985). Nor, in contrast, it seems with traditions associated with the male Vaiṣṇava God Jagannātha, was it the king’s certain due. Naranārāyaṇa is the second king we hear of to meet his downfall as a result of an inappropriate erotic advance to the Goddess. Whatever the nature of his interchange with the devadāsīs of Kāmākhyā, this story of Naranārāyaṇa’s banishment from the temple he constructed makes it clear that the Goddess of Love is not bound to fulfill male sexual desires, but exercises her own choice. Kāmeśvarī presides over the erotic domain.

My reading of this story finds that themes of i) honouring of female sexuality and iii) women’s identification with the Goddess prevail over ii) commodification of female sexuality under the male gaze. In her Kāmeśvarī aspect, and in vivid contrast with the Vedic paradigm in which the sexuality of both goddesses and women is viewed as rapacious and dangerous (O’Flaherty, 1980), Kāmākhyā’s sexuality is revered as the key to the worshipper’s fulfillment. Hence she inspires continued devotion.

The fate of her human representatives has proven, however, rather more equivocal. Humans being more immediately susceptible to the effects of changing social conditions, the devadāsīs were vulnerable to the dual gaze of patriarchy and imperialism. Nineteenth century colonial values contributed to the view that temple dancing was a depraved practice rather than a sacramental one (Apffel-Marglin, 1985). Consequently a concerted campaign was mounted to eradicate temple dancing and protect women’s chastity. Ironically, this may ultimately have contributed to the harassment of the female students of Gauhati University who confided in us. The

89 cf Sir John Woodroffe’s defence of the “sensualities of Indian worship” in Šakti and Šākta (1987, p. 410).
removal of the \textit{devadāsīs}' female presence from the temple's ritual life effectively masculinised its practices and domain. Accounts we gathered would suggest that this has done little to preserve the chastity of male \textit{panḍās} (see also Bharati, 1993; White, 2003).

Our conversations showed up varying degrees of resonance with the theme of Tantric sexuality. It was most strongly articulated by Elinor, whose personal experience had led her to appreciate the significance of sacred sexuality, though the relational context within which it might manifest had proved elusive of late - as I too had found. Fortunately, in the absence of a suitable Kāmeśvara, Tantra’s considerable depth and breadth provides many other possibilities for spiritual advancement. Both Kathleen and Madhu emphasised that a creative assortment of tools and techniques for worship meant that sexual rites were neither necessary nor central to Tantric practice.

\textit{Gauhati, 11\textsuperscript{th} August 1996}

\textbf{Madhu:} There are various ways of dealing with \textit{maithuna}. One is that you perform the entire ritual alone. You internalize all the five \textit{tattvas} [elements] within the \textit{kuṇḍalinī}, where you don’t need a second person at all.

\textbf{Kathleen:} Because you have all those forces within your own body.

\textbf{Madhu:} Within your own subtle body. So one is that form. Number two is where you substitute all the five \textit{tattvas} into right-hand, so instead of wine you give milk, instead of meat you give ginger, like that. The third is where you make an offering of the four \textit{tattvas}, that’s the third form of \textit{pancatattva} [5 m’s] ritual, but when it comes to the final one you do an internal meditation where you raise the \textit{kuṇḍalinī} and let the \textit{maithuna} take place in the \textit{sahasrāra} [uppermost \textit{cakra} at the top of the head]. And the fifth part is where you actually unite physically. So there are all different forms. It’s not that every \textit{pancamakara} ritual has to end with a physical \textit{maithuna} with a \textit{yoginī}.

\textbf{Kāmarūpiṇī}

Inside the temple’s inner sanctum the \textit{nīskalā} (formless, without attributes) form of Kāmākhyā is, as we have noted, the “very lovely pudendum” of the \textit{yoni} stone. While this is considered her truest manifestation, Kāmākhyā is also described in the \textit{Kālikā Purāṇa} as appearing with form, \textit{sakalā}. Śiva, her principal devotee, discloses Kāmākhyā’s \textit{sakalā} appearance to his two monkey-faced sons, Vēṭāḷa and Bhairava. He advises them to worship her in order to regain their former status as semi-divine beings.

O best of men Vēṭāḷa and Bhairava! Listen to the five forms of the goddess, which are forever even secret to gods. These are: Kāmākhyā,
Tripurā, Kāmeśvari-Śivā, Śāradā and Mahālokā, who are endowed with the quality of assuming shape at will.


These five aspects of Kāmākhyā-Kāmarūpīṇī, the goddess who changes form according to her desires, are combined in a lithographic image of Kāmākhyā available at the temple stalls in several sizes (fig. 35). Its style of integrating the five-headed Goddess into a single figure is typical of other Hindu temple art; however we were intrigued by the superimposition of a sixth, supine head.

Gauhati, 11th August 1996

Madhu: Why is it that Kāmākhyā has six heads? He began to explain it through the story of the churning of the ocean. He said that during the churning of the ocean poison and nectar both came out, and when poison came out Śiva swallowed it up. Once he swallowed it up the poison went to his stomach and it was Devī who raised it up to the neck. Her sixth head represents that particular manifestation. ... Kathleen: Did he say that she originally had five faces but the sixth emerged at the time of this incident with the poison?

Elinor: Yes.

The Kālikā Purāṇa allocates the aspects of the Goddess represented in this six-headed image as follows:

Mahēśvarī has the white face, Kāmākhyā has the red face, Tripurā is with the face having yellow lustre, Śāradā’s face is green, Kāmeśvari is with the black face, while Caṇḍikā’s face is of variegated colour.

(Kālikā Purāṇa, 64.23-24, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 962)

Her seating arrangement too is rather unusual. Pañčīt Gaurī Śāṅkara Śārma explained it with reference to a story from the Kālikā Purāṇa that describes how the weight of Satī’s yoni when it fell dragged the mountain down into the “nether world.”

Gauhati, 11th August 1996

Madhu: Then he explained the icon by another metaphor. He said when the yoni went down into pāṭala [“nether world”, of Kālikā Purāṇa 62.58] Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva thought that the world will not re-create itself if the yoni lies there in the nether world, so they lifted it. ... They placed it on the lotus and therefore you have the lotus emerging from the navel of Śiva in the lotus - sāvar-Śiva [Śiva as a corpse] in this particular icon. The six-headed form of Tripurā-Kāmākhyā, or Kāmākhyā-Tipurā, is her outer form or exoteric form, sakalā, and the yoni is the niśkalā form.

90 cf the story I was told at Tārāpiṭha – see chapter 3.
91 A more esoteric interpretation suggests the heads might represent the Kaula tantra traditions, considered to number five in most places but six in the region of the Kathmandu Valley (White, 2003, citing Dyczkowski, 2000).
Figure 35: Kāmākhyā-devi devotional lithographic image, Kāmākhyā temple, 1996.
This symbolism is further explicated as a demonstration of her unassailable primacy.

The Goddess is one and everything together, the Primordial cause of the Universe and is also the embodiment of the world, she is always upheld by Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva.

Mahādeva [Siva] is the white ghost, Brahmā is the red lotus, and Hari himself is hari (the lion) – they are the mounts of the Goddess of the great powers.


What significance may be attributed to these various aspects of Kāmākhyā?

Like the multiple forms she takes, the discernible shades of meaning are several. Here Madhu decodes her iconographic style.

Gauhati, 14th August 1996

Madhu: On the lotus you find the six-headed, twelve-armed figure of Kāmākhyā seated. This six-headed is very significant because any five-headed image of the deity embodies the totality. You have the four quarters and you have the one above. So this is six-headed, so possibly it’s the nadir and zenith, to embody that she’s pūrṇa (complete) in every respect. Then you have two more stalks emerging from the base of the pedestal where the shrine is located. You have the holy trinity imagery also sort of emerging somewhere. So you have Brahmā on the right side of the Goddess and Viṣṇu on the left side. That means she’s acceptable both to Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava cults.

In addition to her appeal to major strands of Hindu religious culture, Kāmākhyā’s composite nature is reminiscent of the range of her affiliations throughout the region. The multiplication of her aspects mirrors the multiple modes of worship described in the Kālikā Purāṇa. With evidence from the Kāmākhyātantra suggesting that her domain extended across seven nominated tribal landscapes (Bhattacharyya, 1999), her breadth of countenance and character may have allowed for inclusive appeal to different cultural traditions of worship. Evidence from the Hevajratantra and from several carvings around the temple, including a relic casket, show that a Buddhist influence also flavours Kāmākhyā’s integrative makeup.

Being seated on the three gods encodes the importance of this Śakti as well as that of her pūtha (seat). Both Kāmākhyā’s primacy and the motif of regional coalescence are evoked in the Kālikā Purāṇa’s portrayal of Nilacāla as axis mundi (Van Kooij, 1972). Nilacāla (which embodies Śiva), with its supporting mountains of Brahmā and Varāha, is said to have extended skywards to a height of hundreds of yojanas. Under the weight of the yoni it has been anchored deep into the earth, with only its tip remaining visible. The mythic function of the Nilacāla site as axis mundi is
mirrored culturally in Kāmākhya’s magnetic attraction for pilgrims from other Śakti pithas during Ambuvāci. Its geo-spatial distinctiveness is mystically affirmed via Nilacāla’s triangular shape (Kālikā Purāṇa, 62.66-67), which creates a yoni yantra of the hill itself and establishes what Madhu termed a Devi-śetra, a Goddess field of both physical and energetic dimensions.

**Gauhati, 15th August 1996**

Madhu: The geomantics of the area, the way spaces are arranged, is absolutely outstanding. The location of the shrines, the way you go in, the spots that have been chosen for the Daśa Mahāvidyā sites, the whole concept: there is a hill, Nilacāla, the blue mountain, and then you have a shrine right on top and little shrines all around it.

Frédéric Apffel-Marglin and Julia Jean (in press) have remarked on the multiple homological levels mapped out in this demarcation of sacred space, these being the body (of the Tantric practitioner), the hill, the temple, the subcontinent and the cosmos.

The Kālikā Purāṇa’s description of the triangular hill is juxtaposed with that of the five-(or six)-fold deity Kāmākhya-Kāmarūpini whose worship is then elaborated with descriptions of specific mantras and other ritual practices based on Tantric invocation of the deity’s different forms. This, states the purāṇa, is the uncommon mode of worship. Her six-fold form is invoked as Kāmeśvarī for fulfillment of desires; her five-fold form as Śāradā, an epithet for the autumnal Goddess, Durgā, who yields “super normal power,” particularly that of multiplying herself (Shastri, 1991). In both cases ritual identification with her diverse aspects (those represented in the icon as well as numerous additional female attendants) is achieved through positioning them at specific locations within the maṇḍalas specified for each form of worship. This multiplication of the Goddess into different forms both exemplifies and magnifies her creative aspect.

**Daśa Mahāvidyās**

Paradoxically, Tantric doctrine expounds meditation on the sakalā form of the Goddess as a means of approaching her niśkalā origin, where her power is found ultimately to reside in her capacity to create and change form rather than in any singular manifestation. This is underscored in invocations to the Mahāvidyās which imply that “an adept who delves deeply enough into any one of the Mahāvidyās will find them all in her” (Kinsley, 1997, p. 6).
Sculpted Daśa Mahāvidyās encircling the worship hall in the Bhairavī shrine

Figure 36: Kāli

Figure 37: Tārā

Figure 38: Śoḍāśī
Figure 39: Bhuvalaśvarī

Figure 40: Bhairavī

Figure 41: Chinnamasta
Figure 42: Dhūmāvatī

Figure 43: Mātangi

Figure 44: Bagalāmukhī

Figure 45: Kamalā
**Gauhati, 16th August 1996**

*Rita:* What has influenced me more is those seven Mahāvidyās. Those places, [manifesting] different forms of Durgā and Kālī, enhanced my spiritual feeling [in each] place, and I could relate specific things to specific causes. That was my very special feeling, Durgā in different forms. It makes Durgā more fullsome. There I felt more spiritual in the main temple, but here I could relate myself to different forms of her in a much more precise way and I thought that those who know it must be getting specially attracted to these things. That feeling was very good in all these sthānas [places of worship].

In combination with the three Mahāvidyās located in the main Kāmākhyā shrine, these seven complete the group of ten that convene into a coherent, if esoteric, system of Tantric Śākta worship. The Daśa Mahāvidyās comprise Kālī, Tārā, Śoḍaśi, Bhuvanesvarī, Bhairavī, Chinnamasta, Dhūmavati, Bagalāmukhī, Mātaṅgi and Kamalā. They appear in their collectivity at temple sites only rarely (Kinsley, 1997). Here at Nilacāla all are represented in aniconic yoni forms within their respective shrines, with Mātaṅgi and Kamalā incorporated alongside Kāmākhyā (who represents Śoḍaśi) in the inner sanctum of the main temple. As a group they are also represented in the worship hall of the Bhairavī shrine where, above our heads on its interior walls, their brightly painted sculptured icons encircled the room (figs. 36-45).

**Gauhati, 14th August 1996**

*Madhū:* In the post-medieval period there was a sudden profusion of goddesses which were not known earlier, or they were suppressed and suddenly texts were written on them, new icons were created, new cults were formed. There was a sudden outburst and bubbling up of Śakti tradition in the post-medieval period. And in that context one of the major cults was the Daśa Mahāvidyā cult. The Daśa Mahāvidyās are the ten Great Wisdoms, but they really refer to ten great mantras because they encompass the whole universe in its totality. Ten is a complete number. Vidyā is a technical term in the Tantras which means mantras. Ten is the number of totality. Whatever has to be known in this universe you can come to know through these ten goddesses.

The *Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa* (cited in Kinsley, 1997) explicitly links the myth of the origins of the Daśa Mahāvidyās with Kāmākhyā. Acting as intermediary in this is Satī, who is said to have manifested these ten fierce forms at the time of Dakṣa’s sacrifice. Satī, on discovering that her father Dakṣa has excluded Śiva and herself from the great sacrifice he is preparing, intends to go there but is forbidden by Śiva. She becomes furious and transforms into the terrifying form of Kāli. Śiva, frightened, tries to run away but she manifests the remaining Mahāvidyās who block his escape by
Figure 46: Daśa Mahāvidyā lithograph, Kāmākhyā temple 1996
Figure 47: Nilacāla, showing Mahāvidyā shrines, lithograph Kāmākhyā 1996.
filling the directions. He subsequently acquiesces and allows his wife to go to the sacrifice. The drama of this narrative is depicted in the central panel of a lithograph available at Kāmākhyā, which shows a frightened Śiva trying to escape while Satī, reverting to her pleasant form, tries to reassure him. Surrounding them are images of the ten Mahāvidyās (fig. 46).

While the Kālikā Purāṇa, being an earlier text, does not refer directly to the Mahāvidyās, it does indicate that Satī, having become enraged at Dakṣa’s insult, “revealed herself in the fierce form (candamūrtti)” (61.6, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 887). This occurs only after she has abandoned her body, whereupon “tens of millions of Yoginis” take out her revenge on Dakṣa by joining Śiva in destroying the sacrifice. The text warns that these fierce aspects of the Goddess remain a threat if Durgā is not appropriately propitiated during her annual great festival.

In another lithograph available at the temple Nilacāla is illustrated in detail with roadways, shrines and the Brahmaṇḍu and Himalayas in the background. The upper left of the picture depicts Śiva’s mad dance of grief with the dead body of Satī and, in the corner, Viṣṇu appears brandishing the disc he uses to cut Satī’s corpse from Śiva’s arms. To the right and directly above the hill a reborn and lustrous Devi in benign form and with protruding tongue sits cradled in a lotus that emerges from a supine Śiva. Panels on either side of the central picture show enlargements of the Nilacāla shrines, including those of the Mahāvidyās. The link made here is three-way, with the story of the Dakṣa yajña giving rise not only to the yoni pīṭha and the rebirth of Satī-Kālī as Kāmākhyā, but also to the Daśa Mahāvidyās, whose locations are arranged with reference to Kāmākhyā (cf Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa, cited in Kinsley, 1997).

What does this circle of goddesses signify? Again Madhu explained.

**Gauhati, 14th August 1996**

Madhu: Each of them represents one aspect of the cosmos, one aspect of time. There is a complex iconography which is inbuilt on each of the goddesses and in their interrelationship. So they’re always worshipped during Durgā pūjā in all the major pīṭhasthānas of the Goddess as a circle. They are [also] absolute powers in their own right. You have Kālī who as Dakṣiṇākālī has a separate cult. Then you have Tārā, there’s separate cult of Tārā. Then you have Śoḍaśi which is Tripurasundari, separate cult. Bhuvaṇeśvari commands a separate cult. So they can be worshipped either individually or collectively.

Obviously this group was formed with a lot of thought and a lot of wisdom because they bring together three or four major sects of Śaṅktism. You have Kālī who comes from Bengal. Tārā comes from
Nepal and Tibet. She is originally a Buddhist goddess and there are legends that describe her Chinese form. She is originally Buddhist but totally Hinduised. Chinnamastā is also originally Buddhist. Then you have Tripurasundari, Soḍaśi, who comes from Kashmir. Then Mātaṅgī, the goddess with the sitar, comes from Maharashtra. She’s very very popular there; she may be worshipped elsewhere too.

Then you have Kamalā, Lakṣmi, whose prehistory can be traced to Śrīsūkta [hymn] of the RgVeda. So Lakṣmi is totally brāhmanical, Vaiṣṇava. Then you have Dhūmāvatī, extreme form of Śākta. Dhūmāvatī who’s a widow and then you have Bagalāmukhī - extreme form of Tantric goddesses, both of them. One who conquers enemies is Bagalāmukhī and everything about her is yellow. In her icon she’s shown pulling the tongue of the enemy. She has the power to paralyse and to conquer evil forces. Of course she also has healing powers. All these goddesses are linked with healing also, physical healing, at least when they’ve come into the Daśa Mahāvidyā circle. In their mantras you will find that. Then you have Dhūmāvatī, a widow being divinised. That’s extreme form of Tantrism. She represents the last moment of pralaya, of aeonic time when everything is reduced to ashes. There’s nothing left. The whole universe is reduced to ashes, she has such a destructive force in her, and she’s barren herself. She’s ekākini, alone.

So you have these two extreme forms of Tantric goddesses, then you have a beautiful Śrī of the dominant brāhmanical tradition who’s brought into the fold, then you have the two Buddhist deities, then you have the tradition from Kashmir as Soḍaśi, Tripurasundari, only she gets Vaiṣṇavised in the icon because she’s seated again on the lotus. Then you have Kālī who comes from Bengal originally, Daḵšinākālī is the image, then you have Mātaṅgī from Maharashtra. So it is syncretistic, I think this is the most extraordinary feature of this. This represents a very important aspect of Tantric Śāktism as a whole, the ability to fuse and merge and to create goddesses. Here you have the totality being expressed through the circle of ten goddesses who are from different parts, different streams coming together and fusing into one tradition.

Kāmākhyā’s nature as a multiform deity is underscored with the Daśa Mahāvidyās, and extended still more widely. As Madhu has pointed out, in the identification of Kāmākhyā-Kāmarūpiṇī with each of the goddesses in the circle diverse aspects of Śākta Tantrism are brought together. This declares the pan-Indian sweep of her cult.

**Tripurā**

Positioned to one side of the central firepit within the Bhairavī temple, where it formed a dais for ritual worship, was a large and impressive Śrīyantra, a ritual design of nine interlaced triangles (fig. 48). Considered the most auspicious (śrī) of yantras (sacred geometric symbols) it is widely known and revered, as well as being the central
object of worship within the specifically Tantric tradition of Śrīvidyā (“auspicious wisdom”). The form of the Goddess with whom Śrīvidyā is directly associated is Tripurasundarī (meaning “beauty of the three cities”), also known as Ṣoḍaśī, the third listed among the Mahāvidyās and represented at Niłacāla by Kāmākhyā herself. Ṣoḍaśī’s own particular symbolic form (Khanna, 1979), and thus her identity, was confirmed as Kāmākhyā’s by Paṇḍit Gaurī Śāṅkara Śārma when he proudly displayed her yantra to us (fig. 49).

The power of the Śrīyantra and the wisdom (vidyā) accrued through its inscription in ritual worship is again related to the Goddess’s expertise as creatrix. Madhu explained its symbolism.

_Gauhati, 13th August 1996_

_Nirmala Prabha:_ Can you say something on Śrīcakra [=Śrīyantra]?

_Madhu:_ How the Goddess is visualised? Firstly the Śrīcakra is not a symbol of the Mother: it is the Mother. Śrīcakra is a symbol of creation but it is not a symbol the way we use. It is Her in her totality, in her majesty, in her glory, and the Śrīcakra embodies all levels of creation. According to Śākta Tantra and the Śrīvidyā all levels of creation are real. There is only difference of degrees, not of kind.

The theory of creation as understood by this discipline is explained through the Śrīcakra. So the ultimate state of union of Śiva and Śakti is embodied by the bindu [“drop,” central point] which is right at the centre of the cakra, then at the time of creation there is total balance between the two and also this is a state of void. It’s like a luminous point. Suddenly within Śakti there is a spanda, a vibration, because Śakti embodies the energy of the cosmos and Śiva is identified with pure consciousness. Śiva as parāprakāśa or pure luminosity is consciousness and Śakti as vimarsa is the energetic principle of life, and Śakti has three more energies, the energy of will, icchā/akti, knowledge, jñānā/akti, and action, kriyā/akti. All these are in harmony and unity within her.

_Minati:_ This icchā, jñāna and kriya are accepted in all other philosophy. Iśvara, one who is the agent, must have these three.

_Madhu:_ These are seen as manifestation of cit, consciousness, and these three aspects of Śakti are embodied by the three points of the triangle, so first you have the bindu, the luminosity of the point embodying Śiva and Śakti in union, then the bindu expands and it transforms into a triangle with icchā, jñāna and kriya. Then the triangle again expands and projects itself, its luminosity, and the triangle transforms into a nāvayoni cakra [“wheel of nine yonis”], so you have a superimposition of triangles. Then again the nāvayoni cakra transforms into an octagon and then a decagon, two ten-angled figures, and then they again transform into a fourteen-angled figure, and then that transforms into [eight-petalled lotus] and then [sixteen-petalled lotus], and finally the lowest stage of creation which is represented by the square. So basically the Śrīcakra reflects the entire manifestation of the cosmos, starting from the bindu which is a state of unity to a state
Figure 48: Śriyantra in the Bhairavi shrine.

Figure 49: Yantra of Śoḍaṣi
of diversity which is represented by these triangles and the two rings of lotus petals. Basically this is a diagram of creation, sṛṣṭi.

Esoterically the triangular foundation of the yantra, which also symbolises the yoni (hence the appellation “nāvayoni cakra”), is fundamental to her creative power. From this base she creates everything through exponential multiplication of her forms.

Her interchangeability of names and locales – the quality of Kāmarūpiṇī - allows for Kāmākhyā to be connected not only, as Madhu had noted, to the Śrīvidyā tradition of Kashmir but also to the South Indian tradition centred on the Kāmākṣī temple in Kāñcipuram (Brooks, 1992), where I had somewhat naively begun my first Śakti round (parikrama) some years previously. In Kāñcipuram Kāmākṣī/Lalitā-Tripurasundari’s triadic nature had been explained to me in terms of her subsuming the features of the three goddesses Pārvatī-Durgā, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī. This triadic symbolism is paralleled at Kāmākhyā where, residing as Śoḍaśī in the main temple, she is also flanked by Kamalā (Lakṣmī) and Mātaṅgī (Sarasvatī). The Kālikā Purāṇa additionally provides an etymology for her appellation as Tripurā that indicates her comprehensive involvement with worldly affairs.

When the great goddess Durgā is meditated upon she presents these three (dharma, artha and kāma) before else (purāṇa), and on account of this Kāmākhyā-Kāmarūpiṇī is called Tripurā.

(Kālikā Purāṇa, 63.53, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 936)

However, the most significant triadic dimension of Tripurā seen to suffuse worship at Kāmākhyā is highlighted by the prominent placement of the Śrīyantra in the Bhairavī shrine rather than in that of Kāmākhyā-Śoḍaśī. The importance of Bhairavī as a manifestation of Tripurā is brought out in the Kālikā Purāṇa’s exposition on worship of the three aspects of Tripurā - Tripurabālā, Tripurasundari and Tripurabhairavī. They are respectively characterised as Ādyā, the original form of the Mother Goddess imaged as a young woman of sixteen years, as Madhyā/Kameśvari, the fulfiller of desires, and as Bhairavī, the protector.

South Indian traditions of Śrīvidyā worship, as intimated by my encounter at Kāmākṣī (see chapter 3), are strongly influenced by the Vedic orientation of its smārta

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92 The name Śoḍaśī means sixteen. Tripurabālā may also be related to Bhuveśvarī (Gupta, 2000b), whose Mahāvidyā shrine is significantly located at the peak of Nilacāla.
proponents. Though Kāñcipuram’s Tripurasundari is conceived as an all-encompassing deity with both gentle (saumya) and fierce (raudra) characteristics, her benevolent form takes precedence and she is conceptualised as a dutiful wife, in keeping with the value system of her orthodox patriarchal milieu (Brooks, 1992). Her worship, too, is exclusively that of the right handed path (dakṣiṇācāra). By contrast the fierce aspects of Tripurā-Kāmākhyā are retained and celebrated – as reinforced by the presence of the Mahāvidyās and by Tripurabhairavī’s fundamental engagement with the nāvayoni rituals specified for worship at Kāmākhyā. These rites follow both dakṣiṇācāra and vāmācāra modes.

Whoever worships the goddess Tripurabālā, Tripuramadhyā and Tripurabhairavī with devotion, he resembles Madana in his body.

The goddess Kāmeśvari, Kāmākhyā may be worshipped at will, following either orthodox or heterodox method …

The people of śūdra caste and others should offer the best quality of drink to the goddess Tripurabhairavī. An adept may worship Tripurabhairavī following the heterodox method, while the goddess Tripurabālā should be worshipped by both orthodox and heterodox methods.

Śmaśāna-bhairavī, Ugratārā, Ucchiṣṭa-bhairavī, Caṇḍi and Tripurabhairavī should be worshipped by heterodox method only, the orthodox method need not be followed.


Exhortations for worship involving drink and the cremation ground (Śmaśāna) are, not surprisingly, attributed to a left heterodox orientation, vāmabhāva in the Sanskrit. Tripurabhairavī’s associations are particularly suggestive of sexual themes, with her ritual attendants known by names such as Subhagā, Bhagā, Bhagarūpini,

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93 Smārta brāhmans are followers of “recollected scriptures,” these being those that confirm established Vedic exposition. Brooks (1990) discusses how smārta brāhman domination of the Śrīvidyā tradition in South India has led to modification of its antinomian practices and imposed restrictions on eligibility for initiation.

94 As evidenced, for example, in the range presented in the Lalitāsahasranāma, the “thousand names of Lalīta”, a very popular South Indian liturgy.

95 The intervention of the South Indian religious reformer Śaṅkarācārya in the 9th century is reputed to have tamed the previously bloodthirsty Goddess. Interestingly he is also said to have travelled to Kāmarupa for religious debate (Choudhury, 1966) – perhaps instigating or adding to the cross-fertilisation of Śrīvidyā traditions.

96 The god Kāma who “shines with his handsome body” (Kālikā Purāṇa, 74.136, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 1127)
Bhagamālā (Kālikā Purāṇa, 74.173-4, Shastri, 1991, p. 1133) - all variations on the theme of the bhaga, vagina. The further association of the Mahāvidyās with practices of magic adds to the radical and marginal status of such vāmācāra rites relative to mainstream religion. It is this marginality, argued David Kinsley (1997), that designates the Mahāvidyā goddesses as antimodels whose role is “to stretch one’s consciousness beyond the conventional, to break away from approved social norms, roles and expectations” (p. 251).

Tripurabhārāvī’s role in stretching the conception of the benign prosocial Great Goddess of Śrīvidyā to accommodate her fierce antinomian aspect is similarly consequential. Bhairavī confirms the fullness of the Goddess by burning the Tripurapurāṇa, the city of the three purāṇic gods, and establishing her ultimacy over the male trinity.

The amorous Bhairavī, the expert in the arts of kula, who burns the Tripurapurāṇa and hence known by that epithet, is the mother of all people.


What thereby differentiates the Kāmākhyā-Tripurā interpretation of Śrīvidyā from that centred on Lalitā-Kāmākṣī is the insistence at Kāmākhyā on the deity’s destructive and anarchic capacity as fundamental and crucial to her creative powers. This same emphasis is seen in the Yōginiṭantra’s assimilation of Kāmākhyā and Kālī, and, as we have seen, in their mutual association with blood.

The body of worship

In Śākta Tantra identification with the Goddess entails practices through which the Tāntrika comes to embody the worshipped deity. Ritual procedures of bodily purification precede the invocation of various aspects of the deity from their loci in the body of the Goddess into corresponding locations in the body of the worshipper.

97 The Yōginiṭantra, among others, includes an exposition of the ṣaṭkarmas, the six magical acts. These are appeasement (śānti), subjugation (vaśikaraṇa), causing enmity (videṣam), immobilisation (stambhana), driving away (ucaśanam), and causing death (māraṇa). See Magee (1995), Bhattacharyya (1982) and Bühnemann (2000).

98 The Kālikā Purāṇa explains the esoteric meaning: “This triangle (already mentioned) is regarded as the abode of three gods; in the north-east angle is Śiva, in the south-west angle is fourfaced Brahmā and in the north-west angle is Brahmā (Viṣṇu); these are stated in respect of six angles. The petals (of the lotus in the triangle) is one city [puraṇa] the filament is another city, the remaining third city is the triangle, thus the triangular maṇḍala is called Tripura” (63.65-7, trans. Shastri, 1991, pp. 967-8). By contrast R. A. Sastry’s (1988) translation of the Lalitā Sahasranāma contends that Tripurasundarī is so called because she is the wife of Tripura Śiva.
Various means, including breathing practices (prānāyāma), ritualised touching of specified parts of the worshipper’s own body (nyāsa), mantra, yantra, visualisation and meditation (cf Gupta, Hoens & Goudriaan, 1979), are prescribed for effecting this energetic transfer.

The Yoginiṣṭantra’s prescribed visualisation of Tripurabālā exemplifies how this creates a link between the physical form of the Goddess as young woman and her effulgent divinity.

… a vira [vīra=heroic Tāṇtrika] should meditate on the three bindus in the form of a 16 year old woman. The first is as bright as 10,000,000 dawn suns, extending from the head to the breasts. The second extends from the breasts to the hips and the third from the yoni to the feet.

(Magee, 1995)

In this worship the bālā (girl) who is its object should be naked (cf Kālikā Purāṇa 63.90; Kakati, 1948). Whether this visualisation is simply imagined or actually substantiated with a living bālā perhaps constitutes the difference between the orthodox and heterodox methods enjoined in the Kālikā Purāṇa. The yoginīs who reside in the maṇḍala as agents of Tripurabālā are again erotically charged, their names being associated with the vagina (e.g., Bhagā, Bhagajihvā, Bhagāsyā, etc.) or with love (e.g., Anaṅgakusumā, Anaṅgamekhalā) (Kālikā Purāṇa 63.102-106).

Bearing in mind textual injunctions, and that of the paṇḍit, against unconquered kāma, such imagery suggests why yoni sādhanā was pronounced the most difficult, to be undertaken only by true virās.99 Once more, without direct testimony from women involved in these kinds of esoteric practices it is difficult to subject them to ethical scrutiny.100 However, if we assume, with Madhu, “that there is [at least] some authenticity about this practice and there are some people, men and women, who get empowered by the right guru or by their own sādhanā” its radical intent can

99 “One who serves oneself for the sake of pleasure with wine and the rest is fallen. Having dispensed with one’s own lassitudes one should indulge only for the sake of pleasing the gods” (Kulārṣavatantra, 5.88, trans. Brooks, 2000, p. 355).

100 Our discussion of such issues came back to the question of the power balance between the participants. A more thorough and sensitive inquiry would be required to ascertain what kind of code exists within the temple community to govern the contracting and conduct of such rituals and how transgressions are dealt with. Textual codes such as that of the Kulārṣavatantra 5.91 only go so far: “Only when one knows the meaning of the Heart treatises directly from the auspicious guru should one take upon oneself the practice of the five imprinting ritual acts [that is the five M words], for otherwise one becomes fallen” (Brooks, 2000, p. 355). What is not clear is the mechanism for ensuring that such a code is adhered to, nor is there any consideration evident for the role and experience of the sakti.
be appreciated. Regardless of the path chosen, the symbolism is clear: the goal is to embody the Goddess in her female form as the matrix of all creation.

For male followers of vāmācāra the goal is even more explicit: they should strive in their worship to become women (Bhattacharyya, 1982, p. 109, citing the Acārabhedatantra).

**Gauhati, 17th August 1996**

*Brenda:* What does it mean for a man to worship the Goddess? Is it a different [bodily] experience than when worshiping Śiva?

*RK:* The God and the Goddess are one. They are a descent from what’s immeasurable. At the centre of the yantra it’s a dot so you could choose to concentrate on the yoni, but when you’re in the mood sometimes you could choose to concentrate on Śiva too. In Indian philosophical and popular understanding both are potentially experienceable within the human person, male or female.

*Brenda:* My sense of relationship with Kālī when it’s embodied is that she can come and be right in my body as her, with all of her. With Śiva I don’t have the sense of him being able to enter my body in the same way.

Our male informant takes the nondualist view, popular, as he says, in Indian philosophy. Śākta non-dualism proceeds from the understanding that in their dormant state, prior to creation, Śiva and Śakti are in union as Śarīravit, signified by the bindu, the dot at the centre of the Śrīyantra (Kaviraj, 1984). This seems to me a necessary assumption in order for a male Tāntrika to experience a sense of embodied identity with the Goddess.

For my part, as a woman, a much fuller sense of embodied identity seems possible when practices intended to embody the Goddess can resonate in flesh and blood correspondence with my female body in its dynamic state, transforming not only my consciousness but my conscious body-selfhood.

Shiva speaks of the Devi as the Brahmanda, the macrocosm. In this guise, she has an immense form, with millions upon millions of arms and heads. She is the sum of everything, containing puranas, vedas and smriti. As such she is of the brilliance of millions upon millions of suns and moons and fires, consisting of all knowledge, all paths, all dharma, all bliss, all shastra, all veda and all worlds, in short, everything. Then follows a meditation on Shakti as being present in the different parts of the body.

*(from Yoginītantra, ch. 9, trans. Magee, 1995)*

Miranda Shaw (1994) has described the significance of Tantric symbolism that matches the woman’s inner anatomy with that of the sacred maṇḍala. Julia Jean’s research (Apffel-Marglin & Jean, in press) provides evidence that such associations are
indeed central to female initiates’ practice and are experienced as empowering. When women’s ritual embodiment of the Goddess is uncomplicated by male needs or expectations, the “Goddess=Woman equation” (Khanna 2000) is potentiated, with the yoni at its core.

As the transfer of the Goddess’s yoni power to the woman is channelled through the yantra, so the cosmic power of the Goddess is mapped into the body of the earth through the great yonimandala of Kāmākhyā, homologising the body, the earth and the cosmos, and affirming the sṛṣṭi current of this place, with its powers of manifestation. The energetic convergence thus occurring at Kāmākhyā provides a conduit for the Goddess’s perpetual propagation of the world, upholding the centrality of her yoni as the most sacred seat (piṭha) of the Goddess and of Śaktism.

The resort of Tripurā Bhairavī is in Kāmākhyā-yonimandala, where the goddess Mahāmāyā dwells forever, the site being the jewel of all the holy places. No sacred place can excel this one in which the goddess is seen menstruating every month. … It will not be an exaggeration if it be said that though the wise persons have identified the entire world with the body of the goddess, the said Kāmākhyāmaṇḍala has no second in reflecting her real glory.

(Devi Bhāgavata, VII.38.15-18, cited in Bhattacharyya, 1999, pp. 297-298)

Kāmadā - granter of desires

As previously noted, the Goddess in the Hindu conception is fully engaged in both spiritual and worldly affairs. She is therefore known and supplicated as bhuktimukti pradayinī, the giver of both enjoyment and liberation. With Kāmākhyā’s supremacy as Goddess of desire her boon-giving capacity is heightened. She is extolled ultimately as Kāmadā, the granter of desires.

When a devotee meditates upon the three, i.e. the red lotus, the white ghost and the lion simultaneously in proper order, the Goddess being present in all these three becomes Kāmadā (who fulfills the wishes), therefore, the Goddess Śivā should be meditated upon in the form of Kāmadā as standing on each one of these three.

(Kālikā Purāṇa, 58.63-64, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 843)

The proper form of worship inevitably yields results.

Any body who performs the worship of Mahāmāyā on Kāmākhyā, he gets all his wishes fulfilled here on this earth and attains svarūpa of Śiva [Śiva’s own form] after death. There is none equal to him nor he has got any more thing to be done [sic].

Repeated devotion multiplies the blessings, and for generations to come. The adept who devoutly worships and meditates on Kāmākhyā in her five forms with her prescribed mantras and in the appropriate mantras… 

…this man shall stay in my abode for hundred of thousands of ten million world periods and then obtains liberation by the grace of the goddess.

In this world that holy man obtains all his desired objects, enjoys happiness, fame, conquers his enemies just like a lion the elephants. He lives a very happy life in the company of sons and grandsons, possesses innumerable wealth; and after death he like a god, amuses himself with young women, who hold him with affection. He forever becomes the leader of the yakṣas, rākṣasas, and piśācas [magical beings]; he obtains all his desires [and] lives shining like the moon.  


Though these descriptions may appear hyperbolic they are nonetheless in keeping with purānic formulations and with the worldviews of many Śāktī devotees. The young paṇḍit I spoke with at Kāmākhyā in 2003 had no doubt that he was blessed and honoured to be living in the most revered abode of the Goddess, unquestionably the best place on Earth, and that this was due to merit accrued in previous lifetimes - as too was the good fortune of those who visited Kāmākhyā. Key to this sense of auspiciousness is the understanding that in Kāmarūpa Devī resides in every house (cf Kālikā Purāṇa, 58.42). Kāmākhyā’s boon-granting is thus prolific, and she is active in eliciting the desires of the devotee.

The adept should with undivided mind meditate upon Mahāmāyā sitting on that lotus, who resembles the hue of the red lotus, whose dishevelled hairs hang down, adorned with a pair of bright earrings shaking like the mountain ebony … who looks brilliant because of her sitting firmly in a posture framing the tight pryaṅka posture, and keeps herself leaning on a pillar of gems with her body, keeps on asking “What do you want?”  

(Kālikā Purāṇa, 53.24-33, trans. Shastri, 1991, p. 759)

Clearly the Kālikā Purāṇa is addressing such erotically charged enticements to a male audience. So when Kāmākhyā-Kāmadā asks “What do you want?” I wonder whether women feel the question is addressed to them and, if so, what they might ask for. One of the women we spoke with at Gauhati University told us: “I don’t feel any śakti from this concept of Śakti. Because from childhood you have to live as a sister, bride, then a wife, then a mother. But in Śakti concept you’re considered only as a mother.” Socially, thus, women are more likely to be seen as desired objects than desiring subjects. The over-determined stereotype of women’s selfless giving remains a
formidable counter to women’s expressing their own desires. It is especially evident in the idealisation of Sītā as the height of Hindu women’s spiritual accomplishment (Kakar, 1988; Young, 1987; Rao, 1999). To what extent even in Tantra might this all-giving model of Kāmadā serve to constrain rather than enable women’s expression of their personal desires? The Purānic framing of the Goddess as granter of desires may well be construed as support for cultural expectations that women should only entertain their desires in light of fulfilling others’ needs.

_Tīrthaphala - fruits of pilgrimage_

One way of assessing the value of pilgrimage is through its “fruits”, or _tīrthaphala_. In spite of the obvious patriarchal bias in the _Kālikā Purāṇa’s_ representation of Kāmākhyā’s desire-fulfilling role, it seems pertinent to ask what we, as pilgrims and co-researchers, wanted and whether it was fulfilled.

What did we want? Articulating the broad intellectual question of what Śakti in general, and Kāmākhyā in particular, might have to contribute to women’s causes was accomplished easily enough. But beyond the dimensions usually considered in academic research, Kāmākhyā’s capacity to fulfil desires clearly operates on more levels than the merely intellectual. In a ritual inauguration at the temple on 10th August 1996 Madhu, Elinor, Kathleen, and I asked for the Goddess’s blessings for our collective project and for each of our group of seven, including Uma.

Our approach of merging academic inquiry with the experience of pilgrimage enabled our engagement with the Goddess to occur on multiple levels, thus enlarging the range of possible _tīrthaphala_. Amongst the boons we received, the quality of the three-way interaction between the Goddess, ourselves and each other, though not always seamless, proved to be especially satisfying.

_Bhubaneswar, 9th February 1998_

_Elinor:_ At Gauhati, although we never came to know each other well enough to really implement a different culture, the seeds of a new kind of relational inquiry were planted. We were not adversaries but of like values and commitment. The possibilities of a collective _śakti_, in the Western sense, a women’s way of doing things, of knowing, loom large in my imagination. I wish we could find some way for us all to be together again.

_Elinor_ was subsequently active, along with Madhu and Rita, in facilitating the opportunity to come together again as part of the _Shaktika on the Ascent_ seminar held in Bhubaneswar, March 2003.
The sense of creating a collective śakti, in the Western sense, was made possible by our central orientation to Śakti and an appreciation of her multiform character. In this Kāmākhyā provided the enabling matrix.

**Bhubaneswar, 16th February 1998**

Rita: What worked best is the variety of ways of looking at women’s power (Goddess’ power) from different perspectives. All had practised some form of Śakti pūjā but none was quite exactly the same. I think it worked particularly well for this very highly “charged” phenomenon. We could have some access to it only because so many women (quite powerful in their own conviction) were eager to enter into this phenomenon.

The collaboration thus enabled exceeded Minati’s expectations of what might emerge.

**Kolkata, 26th March 1998**

Minati: It was a grand experience. … The discussions we had were very lively. I liked that. … Really this has changed my outlook so much. I think I was doing a one-sided thing before. This collaboration definitely generates interest and arouses interest.

The atmosphere generated was one of mutual affirmation and spiritual inspiration. Amazingly this occurred within a very short time frame, despite cultural difference and the lack of prior acquaintance with one another.

**Delhi, 27th March 1998**

Madhu: And what we established in this project which I found to be its most outstanding feature was that we created an atmosphere of satsangha, which normally is created when you belong to the same sect and you’ve gone through initiation and then you believe in the same philosophy, but this was like a cross-cultural satsangha of women going on a journey.

Brenda: Without ever having met altogether before.

Madhu: Without anyone having mentioned the word or knowing what was going to happen. It happened naturally, it happened spontaneously, and everyone felt that they were in harmony with each other and in harmony with the place.

In follow up each of the co-researchers spoke about individual “fruits” in terms of renewed interest and changed perspectives that had sparked a range of creative projects. Elinor, in particular, articulated the transformative effect that had resulted for her.

**22nd September 1996**

Elinor: For me, our time together, the sacredness of the site, and the climate of openness and trust among us, my re-engagement with Indian culture has been a transformative experience. I feel that I have grown enormously both spiritually and intellectually. But for me these are not separate domains, the spiritual is the political.
Rita spoke about the boost to her understanding and confidence, a sense of knowing how to move forward in her work and her life without compromising either spirit or intellect.

**Bhubaneswar, 22nd February 1998**

**Rita:** The yātrā has certainly created a lot more interest because I was groping in the darkness and vastness of the whole thing. I know now clearly different perspectives – not that I have visualised everything, but I know how to see through things intellectually now, also without losing its spirituality.

This conviction has led me and Elinor to think that we can go ahead with this work; that we want to be with it and in it, both spiritually and intellectually. It’s a great source of confidence as an academic and as an individual.

A particular kind of liberatory potential was added to Rita’s experience of the Goddess. The collaboration enabled a renewed sense of personal authority and empowerment and profoundly influenced Rita’s spiritual life. She wrote:

**Bhubaneswar, 16th February 1998**

My patriarchal set must have influenced my previous belief which is totally changed. This has, therefore, changed my spiritual outlook and therefore my ritual performances in many subtle ways!

In addition to the numerous benefits that emerged through our collaboration, for my own part I was also quite specific about what I hoped to achieve personally from the pilgrimage. This centred on gaining a sense of blessing and support for Uma and me. Throughout my pregnancy and Uma’s first year I had been unable to shake a sense of grief as I struggled to integrate the loss of relationship with her father and the weight of responsibility and social stigma that had impacted on me as a new solo mother.

“One of [a mother’s] most powerful desires for herself is often to care for and relate to her baby” (de Marneffe, 2004, p. 70). I brought my pain, and my hope of somehow transcending it, to Kāmākhyā to expose before her while seeking her support and beneficence to enable us to move ahead.

**Melbourne, 28th February 1997**

I finally came to Kāmākhyā with the hope that it would provide Uma with a blessing that would serve to counteract the negative influences that had surrounded her up till then, and with my own need to reassert the sacredness of motherhood and the bond between Uma and me. I needed to find a way for us to be alone together in the world with dignity and with the respect of those around us. At the same time I felt somehow forgotten or abandoned by the Goddess through all this and I needed to regain the faith I had lost.
That Uma, and hence the two of us as a unit, managed the trip so well was in itself a blessing and a fulfillment of this desire. Beginning with Kāmākhyā we also visited other Indian sites of significance to her/our story.

**Melbourne, 28th February 1997**

I regard both the yātrā and the whole trip to India as a triumph for Uma and for the relationship between us. … It was important for me to bring Uma to Kāmākhyā and to Kālī [at Kālighāṭa]. It was important for me to take her to Pondicherry for her [first] birthday, to the samādhī of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, and to Matri Mandir at Auroville. All these have not only been blessings for her but also reaffirmations for me of being supported and resourced by the Great Mother in my own mothering. It's much easier to be relaxed and confident that things will work out for us when I feel her behind me.

The pilgrimage thus enabled me to reestablish a spiritual matriline, a female matrix within which the sacred meaning of Uma’s coming, and my becoming, could be honoured.

Uma also had her own part to play in granting boons for the group – in keeping with the character of her Goddess namesake.

**Gauhati, 17th August 1996**

*Brenda:* How has Uma’s presence affected things?

*Elinor:* Very positively. The sacredness of ourselves as women is so apparent or so manifest in the innocence of a little girl. Her charm and innocence and delight in life, her sweetness, so she was very much a female presence.

*Rita:* Oh yes.

*Minati:* And we enjoyed that she was here, that liveliness a little baby always brings.

*Elinor:* One accesses in the presence of an adorable baby like Uma the most tender feelings.

*Minati:* And everybody shared the same thing.

*Kathleen:* It also gave a much more homelike atmosphere as though we were meeting in somebody’s house rather than meeting in a strange place. That’s one of the artificial things about going to conferences – there aren’t any children there. It made me wish that I had my child with me too.

*Elinor:* As women’s research to have a child, an infant is [grounding].

*Rita:* I was always thinking the same way. … A lot of things could be done because of her presence. Very honestly when I’ve thought of working without the children I’ve never been able to work. But when I’m in the midst of children, maybe sometimes somebody having fever,
with all this midst of everything I have worked much better. Not that I want that situation, but I could never work with sending them away somewhere. Even if mentally I have no problem it just doesn’t work that way.

Minati: So in a way she was the cause of bringing us all together. We have a Sanskrit saying - you can bind all these different things in one thread. She was like that.

Kathleen: The thread.

Elinor: The golden thread.

Contained in this reaction to Uma’s presence were both a genuine response to her and a generous recognition of how important it was for me to have the pilgrimage include celebration of her. This is a testament to the real affection and rapport we had developed as a group and to the much appreciated care my colleagues showed towards me personally.

**Revisiting kāma**

I had no difficulty asking the Goddess of Desire for her blessing to affirm the matrilineal bond (Mother-mother-daughter), however her kāma (as eros) was, ironically, another matter. More than a year after our pilgrimage and once again, with Uma, in India I sought to come to terms with what the kāma of Kāmākhyā might mean for me.

**Pondicherry, 11th November 1997**

Your blue throne,
O Goddess of Desire,
Is studded with the vaults of your Eternity
From which you spill the waters
Of your carnal bliss,
Pouring nectar to your devotees:
Save me.

How strange that the One
Who would fulfil Desire
Has divested me of mine.
In its place a seed of wisdom grows.

To be with You
Is as well to be free of you.
The longing abates, leaving
Only this sense of vast spaciousness
And this taste –
Liberation?
The *Kālikā Purāṇa* describes how the gods, after failing to propitiate Kāmākhya, are instructed by her to purge their pride by bathing and sipping from her vaginal waters. They are astonished at the bliss that results and are transported to the abode of the goddess, on the way passing any number of Nīlakūṭas (blue hills), where they continue to sample the extraordinary bliss-fulfilling powers of the *yoni* waters. Though some advocates (e.g., Saran, 1994) see in Tantra’s orientation to *kāma* an affirmation of hedonism (as the above depiction from the *Kālikā Purāṇa* seems to suggest) my post-pilgrimage reflections developed along other lines. I wanted to know how to purify desire, an inquiry that led me to the contemplative asceticism also associated with Hindu spiritual practices.

An interest in asceticism seems to run counter to feminist moves to re-value women’s bodies, and their corporeal desires, as foundations of an immanent spirituality. Patriarchal asceticism is linked to the control of women’s sexuality. Its insistence on women’s chastity is seen as a way of enforcing patriarchal ownership of women and progeny; while the male ascetic worries about spilling his virility along with his seed. Rita spoke of Sītā’s chastity as “what patriarchy has played on and ... the only machine through which all oppression has entered”. Even Gandhi’s woman-affirming spirituality reinforces the patriarchal theme through his approbation of ascetic celibacy and associated denial of women’s sexual desires (Kakar, 1990; Rao, 1999).

According to Indian psychoanalyst, Sudhir Kakar (1990), “Indian spirituality is preeminently a theory of ‘sublimation’” (p. 118). Hindu asceticism, he notes, has long been concerned with the spiritualisation of sexuality in one form or another. Saints and gods acquire spiritual powers through their ascetic *tapas*, involving disciplined self-restraint. Yet, even while *tapas* is acknowledged as the basis of spiritual power, eroticism is at the same time understood to serve a critical cosmological function. The imperative for Kāma to ignite the passion of Śiva and Śakti, is a prominent reminder of the necessity of eros for sustaining and re-creating the world. *Tapas* purifies and potentiates the erotic, making of it a sacrament in service of the divine order. This is what Tantric spirituality strives for.

103 This is very likely a reference to the *yonitattva*, the female sexual fluids that are prized in the esoteric sexual rites.
104 Gauhati, 16th August 1996
For me, asceticism was as much an emotional necessity as a spiritual inquiry. I was looking for a way to shut down/shut out the sense of want that had remained in the wake of an intense pregnancy and relationship-ending, continuing to threaten my spiritual and psychological equilibrium. I sought to understand desire so as to free myself of its demands for an impossible intimacy.

Irigaray situates desire in, or as, the interval, rejecting the phallocentrism inherent in the psychoanalytic framing of desire as arising from lack. “Desire occupies or designates the place of the interval. … [It] demands a sense of attraction: a change in the interval, the displacement of the subject or of the object in their relations of nearness or distance” (1993b, p. 8). For a time I felt as if caught in the interval with no way forward. My corporeal reality while pregnant with Uma was one of inextricable cellular connectedness with her father. His responding desire, which I met with repeatedly, was for distance. I could not comprehend, or accept, that such a starkly different “reality” could co-exist with the spiritual consequence that had, for me, enfolded Uma’s conception.

In \textit{purāṅic} translations Śiva is said to retreat to the mountaintop to perform “penance”. Pārvatī performs “penance” in order to win him. However, the overtones of sin and punishment in the term penance distort the significantly more active and positive connotations of tapas. \textit{Tapas} is not a punishment exacted \textit{on} an individual, but a process enacted \textit{by} a spiritual aspirant. Though self-deprivation is frequently employed, the principal aim of \textit{tapas} is to enhance spiritual prowess. In this sense, as Minati argued, Sītā too is revered not simply for her chastity but for her moral strength, dignity and courage in defiance of Rāma’s tyranny.\footnote{See Madhu Kishwar’s (1997) reappraisal of Sītā’s influence in India. For an account of a Śākta-inspired \textit{Rāmāyaṇa} see Ruth Vanita, 2005.} \textit{Tapas} is also the first principle of yoga \textit{sādhanā} (\textit{Yogasūtra II.1}). It connotes the inner heat generated in spiritual practice, whose purpose is purification. Undertaking specific physical and meditational practices associated with yoga is termed \textit{tapasyā}, which “literally means ‘to tolerate heat’”. As well, \textit{tapasyā} may include “tolerance or endurance in the face of the impact of one’s own thoughts, feelings, and experiences; one’s passions and desires; one’s pain and sorrow; and one’s self-denial for the higher purpose of spiritual gain” (Gupta, 1997, pp. 89-90).
Rather than (simply) adopting an attitude of tolerance or endurance, I was interested in a more active process of purification. For Uma’s sake as well as mine I strove to preserve the sense of sacrality through which she had entered life and to cultivate a different kind of connection with her father. For me this meant reassessing and transforming my own erotic sensibilities. Gradually I came to clarify for myself those aspects of my desire that seemed to meet the criteria of “desireless desire” (as I interpreted it) from other elements that were clearly more self-serving.

Such a path may appear to recapitulate patriarchy’s denial of female desire. However, acknowledging the patriarchal determinations of my predicament, though affording critical awareness, did not yield any immediately practical solution. By contrast, I found developing a sense of voluntary containment to be empowering rather than repressive. Exercised as a choice (rather than a duty), this *tapas* yielded many useful insights and understandings about my own erotic needs and desires, and how they might best be met. It led, most astonishingly, to an unanticipated somatic consequence. I found that shutting down desire also shut down menstruation. Subsequently I was able to establish a level of voluntary control, menstruating only when I chose to allow myself the experience of erotic desire. This “womb statement” (from the inner sanctum of the female body) arrived as a mystery of blood (wise blood?) and *kāma* quite the opposite of my imagined deluge from years ago. Only recently, in a reference to Gandhi’s asceticism (Kakar, 1990), I discovered that menstrual cessation in such circumstances may be regarded as a victory of *tapas*.

A story about Tantra and desire that ends in ascetic denial would appear rather disappointing - particularly to those for whom, as for Elinor, sexual expressiveness and spiritual transcendence appear to be closely aligned. Happily, the story need not end here. As has already been amply demonstrated, *both* asceticism *and* eroticism are emphasised in Tantra. “[T]he ultimate solution is one of motion, not a static condition” (O’Flaherty, 1981, p. 293). The cosmological necessity, according to Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s reading of Śaiva mythology, is for a cycling between restraint and desire. She quotes the *Kauśārahasya*, a Śākta Tantric text:

Where there is worldly enjoyment there is no Release. Where there is Release there is no worldly enjoyment. But both enjoyment and Release are in the palm of the hand of those who are devoted to Devī….Sexual union is an auspicious yoga which, though involving enjoyment (of sexual pleasures), gives Release.

(cited in O’Flaherty, 1981, p. 258)
The idea that erotic desire can be spiritualised in auspicious sexual union is, as Kakar (1990) observed, compelling. But is this a possibility reserved only for realised initiates of the most esoteric aspects of Tantra? Might the perspectives and practices such a philosophy suggests also be availed by others who may, with similar sympathies, seek a similar goal? I put this question to our initiated scholar friend.

**Gauhati, 17th August 1996**

*Brenda:* Do you think there’s some potential in this kind of approach for sacralising sexuality in couples outside the framework of individual sādhanā?

*RK:* For me spirituality is not out there.

*Kathleen:* But outside of a ritual context.

*RK:* With my definition, yes, sex is potentially sacred, and probably intrinsically. It probably does spill over into male/female relationships. If both partners are into it, with that kind of thing it adds another dimension. …

I think in all aspects of male/female relationship, whether it’s sexual or just plain person-to-person.

**Elinor:** From my experience in teaching this kind of material to women the possibility of sacralising their sexuality is something that many women want but they find themselves at variance with men so it’s hard to find partners. So there is a fascination with the possibility of there being some sacred sexual ritual. My understanding of Tantra was that this wasn’t something that was done with someone you had an intimate sexual relationship with, but I don’t know.

*RK:* You’re talking about potentialities, right? Then let’s talk about my own feelings. When I interact with a woman intimately I see myself as divine and the woman is divine too. It doesn’t mean, hey presto, in the beginning was the word and all that crap. My partner is mother, daughter, sister, and God too. Male, female, it doesn’t have to be. I am heterosexual so it’s psychic androgyne I’m talking about: plus divinisation of oneself, plus divinisation of one’s partner.

The idea that psychic androgyny should be a desirable state to cultivate in sexual intimacy seems far removed from dominant stereotypes of hyper-masculinity. Our informant attributed his openness to such a position jointly to his own family history as a matrilineal Nair (from Kerala) and to the influence of his wife’s Assamese heritage. It was not clear, however, whose needs the divinisation he spoke about served, or whether it influenced other dimensions of his relationships. Was such “intimacy” an act of devotion or merely a means to fulfill his own desires?

The effects of cultural hybridisation also contributed to the discussion. Elinor revealed her own cross-cultural interpretation of Tantric practices through her teaching. RK showed his familiarity with contemporary discourses of feminist and “New Age” spirituality. We were discussing themes he had considered while a graduate student in
the U.S. – a further indication of the hybridisation of knowledge assumed/invited in such an exploration of “tantric” sexuality. Our conversation pursued these ideas further.

**Gauhati, 17th August 1996**

_Elinor:_ [From my point of view] there is transcendence in the sexual act.

*RK:* I was having a sexual relationship with a woman in Nepal. We were joined together and I said, hey you’re [me] and I’m whatever her name was. So transcendence, yes.

_Elinor:_ Eliade said that we now live in a profane world in the United States and we do so at our peril. This isn’t complex, just if you hold that life itself is sacred, then you view your children as sacred. I think that sexual union is a piece of that. I don’t think this is an aberration; I think maybe it can be acculturated, but I don’t know.

*RK:* It’s the most natural way to be. I think you can acculturate this by using elements from Tantra, shorn of all the theological and indological stuff, simplify the ritual, simplify the _kundalini_ practice or the _mantra_ practice, and I’m sure there are quite a few people interested in this kind of thing. That’s one way to do it.

What are the implications of a cross-cultural transfer that is “shorn of all the theological and indological stuff”? This kind of “simplified tantra” features regularly in new age publications and workshops. I wonder, however, what is being acculturated, what (mis)appropriated and what transformed. Can the exploration of “sacred sexuality” in a Western context, denuded of the complexities of the cosmological and esoteric traditions which it lays claim to and treated as a saleable commodity rather than a transformative discipline, legitimately be regarded as _Tantra_? It seems to me it may be “tantra-inspired” but little more. What might be lost and what gained in such a hybridising process? Issues both of culture and gender are of central relevance in the exchange.

Our conversation raised for me a crucial disparity between the vision of Tantric transcendence espoused by our informant and notions of transcendence and sexuality that arise within discourses of feminist spirituality. As articulated above by RK, the transcendence characteristic of traditional Tantra is spiritual and impersonal rather than relational; hence transcendence of gender is taken as a mark of its achievement and its benefits. By contrast, Irigaray (2001) emphasises the unbridgeability of difference: for her “irreducible alterity” is the basis of erotic desire. She places critical importance on women (and men) becoming more their own gender through a process of “vertical transcendence” which she views as fundamental to the full embodiment of spiritual actualisation.
We will return in my final chapter to a wider consideration of the implications of these differences for questions of women’s empowerment and inter-cultural borrowings. On the question of how my personal, admittedly hybrid, understanding of sexuality might have been influenced by Tantric ideas, I came to articulate my own synthesis of what it might offer as follows:

**Melbourne, March 2007 – my reflections**

It is, I think, about being open to the play of energies, to each other’s; about having some knowledge, and tools, for getting out of the way, surrendering - but consciously, with embodied awareness that brings presence to the moment and is not afraid to be expanded beyond itself. One of my “informants” simply referred to a shared interest in/capacity for meditation and openness to exploring sexuality as a vehicle for the samadhi experience. That’s not bad as a starting point.

And I have been thinking about the riddle of “desireless desire” that I got from my explorations - how it might manifest. To me it suggests the possibilities of sexual intimacy that is not about getting or having, but is about exploring dimensions of experiencing that deepen and empower and reveal more and more of the cosmic mapping that links the unique experiments in embodied beingness that we are to a much larger scale of creation.

How could anything less be worthwhile?
Chapter 6

CULTIVATING POWER, NEGOTIATING DESIRE

This margin of freedom and potency (puissance) that gives us the authority yet to grow, to affirm and fulfill ourselves as individuals and members of a community, can be ours only if a God in the feminine gender can define it and keep it for us.

(Irigaray, 1993b, p. 72)

Freedom, potential, and power were abundantly symbolised in the feminine imagery and mythology we encountered during our Śakti yātrā. We found our feminist reframing of Śākta iconography and traditions, and the mutuality of our collaboration, affirming and enabling of some of the options envisioned for feminist spirituality by Luce Irigaray (and others). Our explorations of Šākta Tantra and of Kāmākhyā’s extant traditions suggested also that when women are respected as emanations of the Goddess this may have broader benefits for their status. However, as much as we may have been personally, if differentially, inspired by our yātrā, it remains evident that even Tantric traditions of Šākti worship commonly uphold significant constraints on women’s social empowerment. This occurs through adherence to patriarchally circumscribed traditions of worship and complicity with larger societal trends that favour masculine values. Emblematically, the hypocritical behaviour of male Śāktas who fail to promote the respect for women that Šākta texts and traditions prescribe undermines Šāktism’s portent of social benefits for women.

What remains complicated, therefore, is the degree to which Šākta-inspired formulations might afford women the kind of authority and possibilities evoked in feminist imaginings for a “God in the feminine gender”. To what extent can this kind of empowering relationship be cultivated with an existing Goddess whose symbols, while amenable to feminist interpretation, have other significant associations with traditions and practices that do not necessarily advance feminist causes? Further, in the face of communalist invocations of Šākta symbolism to incite women’s participation in inter-communal strife and violence, troubling questions arise about the ends to which women’s power may be legitimately and ethically employed. This poses a considerable challenge to feminist ideals of empowerment. Consequently, the nexus between Goddess power and women’s empowerment, including possibilities and complications that arise in the Indian context and in cross-cultural translation, frames the discussion in
this closing chapter. To conclude our Śakti yātrā we therefore return here to the central questions that inspired it.

**Feminism, power and empowerment**

*Gauhati, 13th August, 1996*

*Kathleen:* When we talk about empowerment of women what do we mean?

Feminist theories of empowerment explicitly or implicitly proceed from the key distinction between power as domination, or “power-over”, and power as ability (cf Latin potere and French pouvoir = to be able to), or “power-to” (Yoder & Kahn, 1992; Allen, 1998). The concept of power-to contrasts with prevalent sociological and philosophical conceptions that define power purely in terms of control over others (Allen, 2005). Even Foucault’s perspective on power retains the equation of power with dominance. Despite contending that power is everywhere and is constitutive rather than merely repressive (thereby introducing a paradigmatic change in the way power relations are understood) Foucault (1983) maintained that “if we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others” (p. 217).

From a feminist standpoint the assumption that there is a necessary nexus between power and domination is regarded as symptomatic of patriarchal bias (Hartsock, 1983). This position is evident in feminist critiques of patriarchal religion, such as Mary Daly’s (1973) influential exposure of the false logic whereby the Judeo-Christian God “in ‘his’ heaven … ruling ‘his’ people” provided the ultimate justification for political domination of women by men. Daly’s account has been highly influential in catalysing the efforts of many feminists to refashion a more woman-affirming approach to religion and spirituality. Recent Western feminist Goddess theology has consequently drawn on the contrasting emphasis of power-to, or “power-from-within” (Starhawk, 1982), to go beyond the transcendent Father-God and recover an immanent sense of sacred “womanpower” (Raphael, 1996).

This approach to women’s empowerment complements a number of the themes that emerged from our Śakti yātrā explorations and discussions. It resonates also with Irigaray’s (1993b) “margin of freedom and potency” which is potentiated via the support of a female-identified divine referent. Such understandings of women’s sense of agency highlight the experiential dimension of empowerment. An emphasis on women’s agency requires that feminists “place the subject’s interpretation and mediation of her
experiences at the center of our inquiries into the how and why of power” (Deveaux, 1994, p. 243) rather than wholly deferring to Foucauldian formulations of power that do not account effectively for processes of personal and collective empowerment. As Monique Deveaux and others have argued, feeling empowered is critical to a feminist view of empowerment.

The importance of empowerment for catalysing change is also regarded as axiomatic in diverse fields of social inquiry and practice (Hur, 2006). Empowerment is thus understood in broad terms as a means of cultivating the power to take action for one’s own ends. However, the political implications of some practices associated with empowerment can also present dilemmas for feminists. Jasodhara Bagchi (1999), has described how recent social discourses of empowerment place Indian women under “a dual siege” (p. 368), on the one hand urged by development ideologies to demonstrate their empowerment through “choosing” to participate in the global “free” market economy, and on the other roused to action as saktis on behalf of militant Hindu nationalism. Thus under neo-liberal and neo-conservative agendas empowerment comes to be construed as a deliverable commodity or as a marker of identity status. In Bagchi’s view the terminology of empowerment has been so hollowed out that it can no longer be assumed to be in women’s interests. She emphasises questioning the source of empowerment – “by whom?” – in order to determine which constituencies are served.

Such conundrums illustrate the need to carefully consider the political contexts in which empowerment may occur. It is particularly important, as Aradhana Sharma (2006) has shown, to consider the extent to which neo-liberal development agendas may co-opt the empowerment work of feminist-oriented agencies. Significantly, in spite of such constraints, Sharma found that feminist processes of consciousness raising helped to empower subaltern women to challenge structural inequalities and demand justice from authorities. As Sharma observed, “such processes, once initiated, may not be easily reigned in” (p. 81). The term for empowerment employed by feminist agency workers, sasaktikaran, is evocative; literally “causing to have sakti,” it suggests an orientation to power as power-to. Sharma’s account also recalls Foucauldian insights into the propensity for institutional power to produce resistance (Foucault, 1980; 1983).

Taken together, these considerations suggest the necessity for feminist conceptualisations of empowerment to take account of how power is experienced, how it is enacted and how it enables women to challenge structural inequalities. All three of these dimensions are evident in Naila Kabeer’s (2005) definition of empowerment as the
capacity to exercise strategic choices where previously such capacity has been denied or constrained. Strategic choices are those that have consequence for people’s living situations. They are not incidental, and must derive from real options that are seen as active possibilities. In addition, the capacity for exercising choice should not violate that of others. Kabeer thus invokes the theoretical distinction between power-to and power-over, and embraces a notion of agency based on the former. Exercising strategic choice entails access to and deployment of political and cultural resources that provide for authority and enable agency. Sense of agency, the experiential dimension of empowerment, is viewed as a starting point for strategic action; achieving empowerment relates to the way in which agency is exercised and/or the results that flow from actions taken. For empowerment to be realised agency must be active (i.e., purposeful) rather than passive (i.e., lacking choice) and transformative – that is, it must challenge “the structures of patriarchal constraint in [women’s] lives” (p. 15).

This formulation firmly ties the agenda for feminist empowerment to bringing about social change. Power-to is indispensable here, but it must be directed toward an emancipatory purpose. Questioning for what (in addition to by whom) is therefore crucial for determining what a feminist perspective on women’s empowerment might mean and what it implies for women’s agency in different contexts and circumstances.

Śakti and women’s power

If concern about the ways that power is used is critical to social analysis, how it is sourced is much more the concern of Tantra and of Śākta practices. In contrast with Western notions of power that emphasise physical or political prowess, śakti more readily connotes “an inner power essential to human evolution on a spiritual level” (Gupta, 1997, p. 86). As we have seen, in Śāktism power is conceived as a direct endowment from the Goddess, available to all, but needing to be realised. Because it is ubiquitous throughout creation śakti may take many forms.

As potential, śakti, which derives from the Sanskrit root śak (= to be able), is clearly in consonance with an emphasis on power-to. Awakening and directing śakti requires a process of consciousness development that traditionally relies on cultivating spiritual self-awareness rather than social analysis, and on the accumulation of power through the performance of specific ritual practices. The religious emphasis on augmenting power advances a seemingly paradoxical link between śakti and bhakti, whereby “surrender and devotion lead to power” (Narayanan, 1999, p. 25). Deity
worship, when undertaken sincerely and rigorously, intends to heighten spiritual accomplishment and transform the devotee into a worthy vehicle for the powers the deity represents - as our examination of Kāmākhya’s Tantric traditions has demonstrated.

How might the Šakti of the Goddess bring about the kind of šakti that a feminist orientation would seek? As tracked throughout the encounters and conversations reported here, a response to this question depends very much on the particular spiritual and social contexts under examination. Negotiating a way through the different meanings and parameters given for women’s šakti may be helped by understanding the ways that patriarchal agendas seek to manipulate tradition for their own benefit, and by developing spiritual and political strategies that can help women to resist such influences and reframe an agenda for women’s empowerment. In presenting my concluding reflections on the challenges and possibilities offered to our feminist agenda I review in turn three key dimensions of šakti that emerged as central motifs in our yātrā deliberations. These three dimensions comprise strī šakti (womanpower), kriyātmika šakti, (power of action) and srṣṭi šakti (power of creation).

**Strī šakti – womanpower and its uses**

Given its instantiation in goddesses, the Hindu concept of womanpower (strī šakti) does not so readily provoke the quarrel with maleness that frequently entangles Western feminist advocacy of women’s power. Highlighting cultural differences, Suma Chitnis (1988) located distinctions of ethos and conviction in the Indian feminist movement with its history of male initiators and supporters, as well as the fusion of womanpower with the nationalist struggle. This background allowed prominent female leaders of the independence movement to promote roles for women in public life by claiming the positive strengths demonstrated by mythological figures like Sitā as indicative of the advantages to the nation afforded by women’s strī šakti (Ratté, 1985).

Minati’s advocacy of Sitā’s strength during our time in Gauhati was continuous with the related claim that Indian feminism would do well to highlight “the spiritedness, the intelligence and the resourcefulness of figures like Sita” (Chitnis 1988, p. 91). However, Sitā’s close association with the doctrine of pātivrata, and its interpretation in ways that appear to condone men’s mistreatment of women, also introduces constraints on women’s power, as Rita argued.
Guwahati, 16th August 1996, pm

Rita: It’s making the woman weak and vulnerable and she relates everything with Rāma and with the existence of Rāma. Without Rāma she doesn’t have anything. … it perpetuates the unfair system of the society.

In traditional Hindu contexts righteousness is viewed as a much more credible route to power than is the assertion of rights (Narayanan, 1999). By remaining loyal to her husband despite his maltreatment of her, Sītā is admired for her moral righteousness. Her example has been held up by many, including Mahatma Gandhi, as an indication of women’s naturally more spiritual inclinations. But appealing to women’s spiritual proclivities in this way co-opts “womanly” traits and establishes that women’s path to (spiritual) power is through emulating idealised characteristics rather than, as Nancy Falk (2005) has suggested, “cultivating the solidarity with other women that might help both to seek solutions for their mutual oppressions” (p. 325).

Mythological figures like Sītā and Savītṛ achieved śakti through their devotion (bhakti) and asceticism (tapas). Opting for spiritual empowerment, individual women may achieve the status of saints or even of incarnate goddesses through similarly undertaking intense bhakti and tapas (Narayanan, 1999; Hallstrom 1999). Under the nationalist agenda this kind of stri śakti continues to be claimed as evidence of the inherent spiritual superiority of Hindu culture. However, the power cultivated through wifely devotion and asceticism is not to be used by women for themselves, but in service to husbands or the nation (Bacchetta, 2002). Patriarchal constructions of righteousness thus allow women’s power to be commandeered in ways that work against women’s social empowerment and freedom.

Guwahati, 16th August 1996, pm

Kathleen: The only way that women can get any sympathy is if they’re absolutely pure. If you have the least little blemish then you deserve whatever you get.

A gendered double standard endures.

Śaktacāra diminishes the uni-directionality of pativrata through emphasising respect for women and worship of wives. A pattern of mutual conjugal regard is underscored by popular support for Śiva’s model of devotion to Parvati as opposed to Rāma’s treatment of Sītā (Kishwar, 1997). Mythologically Śaktism overturns restrictions on the action of its goddesses and looks to repudiate any implied slight. When Viṣṇu fails to pay Kāmākhyā due respect (as described in chapter 4) she has no
qualms about using her considerable powers to teach him a lesson. Even Sītā triumphs under the influence of Śāktism. In the Adbhūta Rāmāyaṇa, a 14th century Śākta reworking of the epic, she takes on a thousand-headed Rāvāṇa and proves herself to be a far greater warrior than Rāma (Vanita, 2005).

Goddesses are also associated with claims to exemption from the constraints of subordinating gender roles. Such exemptions are available to Hindu women who demonstrate advanced spiritual accomplishment as mystics or mediums. Mātās who (like the woman mystic I encountered in Mysore) become possessed by the Goddess, are familiar figures in the subaltern Indian landscape and acquire respectful status as a result of their spiritual powers (Ramaswamy, 1997; Erndl, 1997).

Some spiritually adept women have been bold in their critique of patriarchal practices, using their spiritual authority to flout social norms in a variety of ways (Ramaswamy, 1997). The margins for freedom provided in Śākta Tantra suggest further scope for women to develop spiritual power and social independence as gurvīs or yoginīs. For these women, argues Vijaya Ramaswamy, spirituality becomes a mode of empowerment. On this basis she concludes that “The spiritual path helped women to transcend all stereotypes, if they so desired” (1997, p. 19). Thus, though patriarchally circumscribed, Hindu spiritual frameworks appear to be elastic enough to provide significant freedom to those women who demonstrate recognised spiritual merit. While clearly not uniformly upheld, the availability and acceptance of goddess symbolism and the influence of Śāktism appear to be enabling of at least some women.

Against these possibilities for women, dominant brāhmanic norms are constructed in such a way as to limit spiritual advantages to individual saints and restrict their availability to other women. Elevating the accomplished woman’s spiritual status to that of a divinity “coopts [her] humanity and makes her a special figure who may behave in a manner that is not a viable alternative to a normal human being” (Narayanan, 1999, p. 42). The saint’s considerable śakti makes her an object of worship rather than a model for women to emulate (cf Hallstrom, 1999). Transformative power-to is consequently channelled into spiritual transformation of individuals in ways that downplay the need for socio-political conscientisation. Whether represented as goddesses or as their human representatives, female divinity appears to be readily commandeered for patriarchal ideals rather than for serving women’s own interests.
The meanings ascribed to the Hindu goddesses and to their powers may accordingly be spacious or limiting, liberating or detrimental for women. These differing possibilities are dependent on the positions ascribed to women, or to particular classes or categories of women, by those invoking the Goddess and especially by women themselves. Consequently, the extent to which the Hindu Goddess might support feminist possibilities depends on what the devotees make of the Goddess, on how the devotees interpret her myths and images. The Goddess herself ... does not exist as an independent autonomous entity, but only in relationship with those who know her, revere her, and follow her bidding – as they understand it.

(Gross 2000, p. 106)

Questioning how women relate to the śakti held by the Goddess and what they do with the sense of empowerment they derive is therefore manifestly critical to feminist analysis. In Śākta Tantra the scope afforded for determining the Goddess’s bidding covers a wide amplitude, particularly in those traditions we found were associated with Kāmākhyā. Reading against the grain of patriarchal co-option, as we attempted to do, brings to light munificent interpretations and formulations of women’s power based on the application of Śākta principles to feminist aspirations. When informed by feminist principles spiritual power accrued through tapas can help to provide clarity to recognise patriarchal injustices and strength to resist.

**Kriyātmika śakti – marshalling the power of the Goddess in action**

Devī’s authority is confirmed in her depiction as a consummate warrior. Iconographic and mythological portrayals of the multiply-armed Goddess displaying various brandishments represent her kriyātmika śakti, or power of action. The conjunction of beauty and unapologetic power in the armed Goddess is striking – particularly when contrasted with the absence of such powerful female symbols in the religious mainstream of other non-Hindu traditions. When related to through a theology of identification, this image of undisputed power and authority unequivocally supports women’s empowerment. However, the martial connotations of such images are controversial for their ethical and social implications. Many international Goddess feminists would argue, with Carol Christ (1997), that any feminist reclamation of Goddess religion should scrupulously exclude imagery associated with weaponry and warlikeness.
I wondered how the juxtaposition of beauty, power and weaponry might have affected the thousands of people who visited the *Goddess: Divine Energy* exhibition of South Asian Goddess art held recently in Sydney at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The issue was highlighted vividly in a documentary video of *Durgapuja*, filmed in Kolkata by two Australian students during the 2005 *puja* season (Prunster, 2006). The video makers’ accompanying commentary conveyed a sense of awe, astonishment and appreciation for their first direct encounter with the spectacle, its artistry and the sense of female strength and divinity portrayed. They dwelt especially on the grandest, most popular *pandal* and on their good fortune at being invited to get a closeup look. On viewing this footage my attention was drawn to the backdrop of three huge missile warheads standing directly behind the clay Goddess - a contribution to her weaponry that has apparently become popular of late. It did not appear to register with the video makers. I wondered how many of those visiting the exhibition would have taken in its significance.

A feminist appreciation of Śaktism and power cannot ignore this conjoining of traditional and new symbolism whose potential effects are more than symbolic. In some ways it may be considered an inevitable outcome of long term associations between political power and that of the Goddess. For example, Hugh Urban (2001) views the *Kālikapurāṇa*’s emphasis on kingship and sacrifice at Kāmākhyā as having arisen from the intersection of kingly desires for political power and *brahmanic* desires for patronage. Aparna Mahanta (1999) blames the ascendance of this relationship between the king and the *brahmanic* takeover of local goddesses in north-eastern India for progressively diluting matrilineal tribal structures and eroding women’s status and power.

In recent history Hindu nationalism has engaged not only kings but mass movements in violent action on behalf of Bhārat Mātā, the armed Mother Goddess charged with the mission of reinstating India as a Hindu homeland. As well as transforming the landscape of Indian politics, the way in which the Goddess came to be portrayed for the nationalist agenda reflected a profound transformation in her cosmic and worldly role (Sarkar, 2006). The devotees of this transformed Mother Goddess are called to restore her glory, to become the power of the Goddess through militarism rather than contemplation. For these devotees, the Goddess of the annual autumnal festival has been reshaped into a symbol of militancy, and ultimately a nuclear entity. In conjunction with this, Jasodhara Bagchi argues that the nationalist invention of Mother
India did little to support women’s empowerment in their own right, becoming instead “a signal to [Hindu] women to sacrifice everything for their menfolk” (Bagchi, 1990, p. WS-70).

More recently women themselves have taken to militancy as the goddess on behalf of the “Hindu nation” and its eternal king, Rāma. An examination of the ways in which Hindu women’s “consciousness” is promoted in nationalist women’s organisations shows them to be clearly at odds with the criteria for feminist empowerment advocated by Kabeer (2005). In the ardent pro-Hindu, anti-Muslim, often anti-Western agendas of nationalist groups, in their assumption of the authority to prescribe the model for Hindu womanhood, in the hierarchical structures that prevail in nationalist organisations, and in the deferent positioning of the women’s organisations relative to the Rāma-centred ideology and actions of the parent (paternal) organisation, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the model of power is clearly one of domination. While women involved in these organisations might achieve a kind of power - whether through dominance, devotion or both - the prevailing conservative and militant agendas deter women from making the kinds of strategic choices that would challenge patriarchal constraints. Indeed, the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti’s promotion of the ideals of chastity and selflessness for women (as outlined in Bacchetta, 2002), appears to align with the view that women’s own imperfections are to blame when they are mistreated.

What draws women toward wielding power as militant nationalists rather than empowerment as feminist activists? Sikata Banerjee (2006) suggests it has to do with the need to belong to family, culture, community - a need which is easily satisfied by agreeing with the swell of Hindu nationalist values. By contrast, the culturally marginal values of feminism are more difficult to enact and more likely to result in a sense of social alienation than social belonging.

The involvement of goddess warriorship in communal conflict is not inconsistent with the traditional role of goddesses in warding off enemies. Goddesses’ emphatic role in martial defence helps to define communities (Nancy Falk, 2002b) and engenders a sense of belonging. What is new in recent times is the reversal of the relationship between Goddess and nationalist devotees as a means of justifying the ideology of fundamentalist militancy. This raises uneasy questions. What kind of power, and how much, can be solicited from the symbol of the warrior goddess? Does her
deployment to incite aggression mean that the symbol itself is irredeemably flawed? Or are there other ways of reading kriyātmika sākti to support a feminist ethic?

Re-reading kriyātmika sākti – the Goddess as spiritual warrior

Gauhati, August 16th, 1996

Brenda: Coming from Western culture where aggression is *a priori* a masculine trait - there was the fascination. Here you have these goddesses who are so powerful and so strong, and violent. Is there such a thing as feminine aggression? And if it manifests in a feminine form, or through the female, does it have a particular quality or a particular way of being used?

Rita: The form doesn’t matter. It’s the cause that matters. Feminine aggression comes only for the destruction of bad and evil and ugly and that is all. I don’t think feminine force has femininity or masculinity but it can take any form – as far as I have understood mythology.

Rita’s position invokes the kind of nondualist view described by Thomas Coburn (1984) as one in which ultimate reality is really ultimate. My inquiry, however, owed more to a kind of “difference feminism” (e.g., Irigaray, 1993a). Claiming aggression as both an attribute and an impulse and attempting to locate and understand its female manifestation was for me central to a personal process of reclaiming those parts of myself that had been submerged or censored under the weight of cultural prescriptions of femininity. My phenomenological exploration of aggression had a corporeal base, beginning with an awakened experience of bodily energy flows inspired by hatha yoga practices. The dynamic sense of psychophysical power I tapped into was further shaped by inquiring into Śākta mythology, especially that of the Devi Māhātmya.

Gauhati, August 16th, 1996

Brenda: In the Devi Māhātmya you have very extreme descriptions, very bloody and violent, on the part of the Devi. But she never provokes it. She never starts it. She always gives them a chance. With Śumbha Niśumbha she’s sitting there on the mountain minding her own business, and they come to her and she says, “No. I’m sorry but I’ve taken this vow”, and it’s not until they come at her physically that she responds.

The point of these observations was not to somehow prove the ultimate superiority of an essentialised notion of women’s aggression, even as the text celebrates the ultimacy of the Goddess. It was rather to de-essentialise the culturally ingrained view (axiomatic in the Western culture into which I had been socialised) of aggression as a
purely male preserve, by definition out of context in a woman, and to similarly de-essentialise the notion of aggression as inevitably destructive and hence negative - especially in a woman.

In the *Devi Māhātmya* Devi’s power of action is shown to be consummately aggressive, but she is simultaneously, to the veneration of the gods, merciful and compassionate. Cynthia Humes’ (2000) feminist exegesis of the *Devi Māhātmya* elaborates how Devi’s power as a warrior “differs from that of simple male power … it is a compassionate, righteous, self-controlled power used in service for the good” (p. 137). The capacity for precise, unambiguous action to eradicate obstacles is further exemplified in Kālī’s role on the battlefield, as Kathleen described:

*Gauhati, August 16th, 1996*

Kathleen: Kālī was the killer of Raktabija and was able to accomplish what the Goddess riding on the tiger couldn’t accomplish because she was able to drink blood. She roamed about the battlefield slurping up the blood. She was able to get every last drop of blood, so she stopped Raktabija’s ability to reproduce himself in this way. … She’s getting down and slurping up every last drop of blood. She’s getting at the root of the problem. She’s not just attacking the demon, she’s completely devouring him and all of his little blood drops. To me it symbolises a way of confronting problems by getting at the root of them, destroying ignorance at the root, or whatever it is one is trying to destroy rather than attacking the symptoms.

As Kathleen suggests, a feminist interpretation of this myth can inspire action for social justice. Here Kālī is not so much causing blood to spill as mopping it up – a role for which her association with the symbolism of the *yoni* seems to equip her especially well. In this episode she “is proven the ultimate power over creation and fertility” (Humes, 2000, p. 134), prevailing despite the demon’s formidable boons. When approached with devotion Kālī becomes the support and model for “liberative fearlessness” (Dalmiya, 2000), for her tameless spirit as well as for her high and far-reaching vision and will (Aurobindo, 1928/1989).

If, as Lina Gupta (1991) has argued, Kālī has the authority to challenge patriarchy it is because her own is never in doubt. Viewing Śākta goddesses as models for women’s authority invokes women’s power to challenge limitations based on gender stereotypes. Identification with the independent power of Śakti enables women to “personally feel that power already belongs to women rather than being stolen or won or granted from men” (Dobia, 1991). When worship further emphasises the goddesses’
transgressive nature, as in Śākta Tantra, then sponsorship of social activism would seem a ready corollary. Read in this way, an emphasis on the kriyātmika sākti of the Goddess encourages action to focus resources, overcome fears and act resolutely - even forcefully when necessary. My yoga-inspired inquiry into the aggressive force of the Goddess functioned as a kind of tapas. It helped to remove internal obstacles and instilled courage to act independently and with clear intent.

In popular applications of purānic themes cinematic Indian goddesses frequently arrive on screen to restore justice for “the downtrodden and the voiceless – and most especially .. oppressed women” (Velayutham, Ram & Fogo 2006). Acting in all their ferocity, they mostly mete out their justice in blood. As well as encouraging action on the part of or on behalf of victims of various kinds of abuse, such cinema, as Selvaraj Velayutham, Kalpana Ram and Paul Fogo note, “helps to keep alive a certain instability within popular culture regarding the limits of male dominance.” Symbolic female violence thus serves not only to empower the oppressed but also acts as a warning to would-be oppressors. These scripts offer texts of resistance against violent domination. To the extent that their ends are justice and restoration of dharma their plots are continuous with those of the Devī Māhātmya. However, whether filmic devīs are read as restoring dharma or justifying violence will depend on the spiritual and political proclivities of their admirers.

There may be inherent dangers in linking justice with violence in a populist context, particularly when this same context is also the staging ground for Hindu nationalist militancy. Elinor reminded us of warnings against the risks associated with the Goddess’s bellicosity that surface, for somewhat different reasons, in Indian folklore.

**Gauhati, August 16th, 1996**

Elinor: In the iconography there’s a further aspect to the story. Kālī runs amok. In drinking the blood she becomes crazed. So there is concern that she might destroy the world.

This story, recounted in the Liṅga Purāṇa (a Śaiva rather than Śākta text) ends with Śiva’s intervention to tame his wife. Both psychoanalytic and feminist interpretations draw attention to its theme of patriarchal justification for controlling dangerous female energy (Babb, 1970; Gatwood, 1985). However, new dimensions to the dangers implied in stories of uncontrollable bloodlust emerge with the lop-sided use of violent goddess imagery to support militant Hindutva nationalism. Under a “holy war” scenario, when “War is also religious obligation, enjoined upon by the goddess, in
imitation of her own warlike aspect” (Sarkar, 2006, p. 3966), it is not evident who, or what, might tame a rampaging Bhārat Mātā.

As already noted, the capacity to incite violence for oppressive ends is categorically at odds with feminist principles of empowerment. However, the capacity to rouse self-defence in circumstances of real threat and abuse is fundamental. To increase this latter capacity the warrior goddess is not indispensable, but there is no doubt that goddess symbolism derived from Śāktism inspires many women, both in India and cross-culturally, to draw the courage needed to confront oppression (e.g., Pande, 1996; Kali Society, 2007). This association of the Goddess with the power of resistance has been suggested as a key reason for the enduring popularity of goddesses amongst groups of lower caste or class status (Bhattacharyya, 1974; Ram, 2006). Whether in the long run even the defensive deployment of martial imagery results in condoning and fuelling, rather than reducing, the wide scale resort to violence that seems to be increasing everywhere is an agonising issue. In this especially the question of who is utilising goddess imagery for the empowerment of women, and for what ends, remains critical.

For feminists to retreat from all engagement with Hindu goddesses in favour of secular models for promoting women’s interests would too easily serve the nationalist divide between “true” Hindus and their opponents. In order to open up spaces for understanding, and reconstructing, spiritual possibilities it is important to engage with the religious frameworks in which women situate their experiences (Ram, 2001). Maitrayee Chaudhuri (2004) has argued that

…we need to make distinctions between majoritarian, fundamentalist, racist, minority-hating movements from those seeking traditional cultural possibilities in a world hegemonised by contemporary notions of western market driven cultural norms as universal givens (p. xxvii).

Compared with the rich textures of the Śākta traditions we have encountered, the uni-dimensional enlistment of the warrior goddess to inspire militant support for hyper-masculinised Rāma ideologies appears shallow and restrictive as well as problematic and troubling. As opposed to enlisting goddess symbolism to support oppressive political moves for dominance over minority groups, a feminist interpretation of kriyātmika śakti invokes this power for fighting against injustice and oppression. Such reconstruction may even lead to disarming goddesses in the interests of fostering peace. A recent example suggests creative possibilities. Swachha Narayani,
the broom goddess, is a re-armed warrior goddess. Brandishing broom, video camera, pen, balance, earthen lamp, conch shell (among others) she undertakes to sweep away injustice and restore order (Kishwar, 2005, p. 4). This suggests a new kind of warriorship, in keeping with feminist ethics. To me it demonstrates a clever, creative use of traditional symbols in ways that seek to re-engage the syncretism historically fundamental to Hinduism, especially its Tantric dimensions.

Srṣṭi śakti - re-engaging the power of creation

Our encounter with Kāmākhya demonstrated the signal importance within Śākta Tantra of srṣṭi, creation, as an underpinning philosophical principle and ritual motif. Upholding this central significance of srṣṭi as the defining feature of the Goddess (her svarupa), and her dharma, seems crucial to enabling her deployment as a warrior for social and ecological justice. The concept of srṣṭi balances power. It locates śakti ecologically as a form of power-to rather than adhering to a paradigm based on dominance or power-over. Srṣṭi denotes a conscious and active power of creation that can potentiate in devotees the capacity for creative action. In the reciprocal gaze between deity and devotee She empowers the devotee to act on Her behalf, and her own.

As a symbol of creation the jōni reinforced the Goddess-woman association.

Gauhati, 13th August, 1996

Elinor: The connection is through the symbol of the jōni as creation, creation of the universe, but creation on all levels. Our symbolic identification with that, only those who are in women’s bodies have that. Śakti as srṣṭi.

Homologising the female body, the Goddess and cosmic creation in this way is a controversial move for feminists. It suggests an inherent ontological superiority for women and seems to tie creation and empowerment to biological capacities. As Rita identified:

Gauhati, 15th August 1996

Rita: If we deal only with that, we ourselves are getting into the trap of getting empowerment through the body alone … reproduction as the only way of empowerment.

The trap for women is that they are valued only as mothers. Motherhood becomes…

Gauhati, 15th August 1996

Kathleen: the way in which women are defined. Anything else that women may do is secondary or an aberration. The primary function of woman is mother. That’s problematic for feminists, it’s problematic for women who don’t have children.
Rita: Does everybody have to become a mother to be empowered?

Under the terms of patriarchy motherhood is empowering for women only insofar as it fulfills a socially acceptable role. Though it may be celebrated as an institution, motherhood also frequently serves to enforce women’s selflessness and dependency (Rich, 1976). If merely superimposed on such expectations, worship of the yoni may result in fetishising women’s bodies as venerable all-giving mothers (and/or as impersonal repositories of sexual bliss), in ways that dislocate these qualities from women’s needs and desires. Denying women’s own experience of motherhood contributes to its desacralisation and depotentiates the sense of personal empowerment that might otherwise accrue. Evident in my own experience, the effects of desacralising motherhood may also manifest socially, for example in high rates of medical intervention in childbirth, and personally, in post-natal depression and/or other emotional difficulties.

Identifying with the creative power of the Goddess as Mother can help to restore and re-empower motherhood’s sacred dimension for women themselves – as my own case has shown. This does not, however, make physical motherhood the only or the best means for women’s empowerment. The status of the Goddess as Mā is not defined by or limited to her physical motherhood. An emphasis on sṛṣṭi “conveys not so much the idea of physical motherhood but a worldview in which the creative power of femininity is central” (Ganesh, 1990, p. WS-58). In keeping with her Tantric challenge to cultural strictures, she symbolises a kind of power that cannot be contained within patriarchal definitions. Through her creative powers she authorises resistance: “by daring to exist, she begs to differ” (Ganesh, 1990, p. WS63).

Tantric traditions’ privileging of female deities and ritual practices of embodiment provide a spiritual context for women to explore embodied dimensions of their identity. This has also captured the imagination of some Western feminists. Irigaray (2002) invokes aspects of Tantric philosophy to inform her ideas on sexual difference and sexuate identity. Somewhat contentiously, Irigaray favours a corporeal knowing that derives from heterosexual interaction. While a heterosexual theme also

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106 This view parallels Hannah Arendt’s concept of natality which, though not originally developed with theological intentions, has been deployed recently to develop philosophical underpinnings for feminist reconstructions of religion (Jantzen, 1998; Kristeva, 2000).
underpins the notion of eros at Kāmākhya, the prominent emphasis given to symbols and rites associated with menstruation suggest its importance as a source of female-specific power. This runs counter to common cultural assumptions that regard menstruating women as impure or dangerous, consequently distorting the sacred dimensions of menstruation. In contrast with such negative cultural assumptions, the *yoni* as symbol of *ṣrṣṭi* offers a more affirming and enabling perspective.

**Gauhati, 14th August, 1996**

*Madhu:* One of the things which inspired me a great deal is the whole notion of the menses of the Goddess and how the Goddess’s body is sacred and pure. There’s a whole nomenclature of it in the Tantras, how it’s linked to the moon, how the body has certain moon identities, the whole notion of the sacred body and the subtle body.

In a number of regions in India first menstruation occasions a ritual celebration of the girl-turned-woman that involves feting her, providing her with new clothes and conferring new responsibilities.

**Gauhati, 14th August, 1996**

*Madhu:* It’s like an initiation. It’s nice, it sort of marks a certain phase in life.

*Elinor:* It’s very important because if you don’t have the ritual marking of your coming into your powers as a woman…

The ritual provides a public opportunity to acknowledge, in positive terms, the significance of this critical passage into womanhood. However, it may not always occasion the kind of results we would seek.

**Gauhati, 14th August, 1996**

*Rita:* It’s very rigid also, that kind of thing.

*Madhu:* Like being reborn into another …

*Brenda:* Does that message come through? Do girls experience it as empowering?

*Madhu:* It can be very traumatic also.

*Rita:* It’s traumatic I think, the way it is done now.

*Kathleen:* The way the girls in Sri Lanka told me, I think there’s a conflict with some of the modern values and they feel embarrassed by it much in the same way that Western girls feel embarrassed when they get their first period.

*Madhu:* But this whole institution can be revitalised.

It is not merely the fact of the ritual, but the matrix of personal, familial and cultural values all contributing a sense of relevance, congruence and meaning to the young woman’s experience, that make the celebration of menarche empowering for girls.
By honouring the body (particularly the female body) as the ground for spiritual understanding and development, the framework of Śākta Tantra provides opportunities for supporting the internalisation of a positive sense of embodied femaleness. As Madhu emphasised, in Tantra one becomes the deity (see also Khanna, 2000b and Sherma, 2000). Comprehending and experiencing the direct association between one’s own body and that of the Goddess is the critical epistemic structure through which empowerment percolates.

Ecological resonances

While this kind of experience is available to those who engage in the esoteric practices of Tantra, the question of how it might impact on a wider scale for social change was not clear. I asked Madhu about the prospects for making Tantric principles accessible to a wider range of people.

Gauhati, 14th August 1996

Brenda: What are the possibilities for people for whom there’s no way they’re going to follow the whole Tantric path with all the rituals?

Madhu: You may not follow a complete path, but you can always recognise the wisdom in the philosophy ... There are two concepts within Tantra that are universal I think. One of them is about the unity of male and female, the opposites coming together, that it’s for the balance of this universe to be maintained, opposites have to be simultaneous and united and integral to one another. The second is that the universe is within you ... Ultimately internalisation of what is exoteric is as important as externalisation because they’re made of the same stuff, the same substance. The third concept which fascinates me which I think transcends cultist aspects of Tantra is that everything is related. Because there’s no difference, nothing is impure: all life is holy ... And then the whole yoga which Tantra has developed, the understanding of kuṇḍalini, the prāṇāyāmas, the mudras, they’re not cultist in that sense ... The śricakra is a diagram of the self. You can substitute all the deities ... Basically it is a movement into your own purity and subtleness. It’s to do with phenomenology of consciousness; it’s not to do with deities in the end.

Tantric practices of embodiment are predicated on a phenomenological exploration of the homologies between nature and Nature. This can support the recovery of an ecological spirituality and worldview (Sherma, 1998). In her identification of the Goddess as Mahāprakṛti, Nirmala Prabha described how her sense of empowerment derived from an understanding of the interlinking of Nature, Cosmos and Goddess. In response, Madhu spoke of her similar experience of the interconnection between nature and Śaktism.
Gauhati, 13th August, 1996

Nirmala Prabha: That Mahāprakṛti, that Great Nature, Great Cosmos, I feel that as my mother, and Kāli, Dūrga, all are immaterial, those forms. I’m not concerning with forms. But I feel that power.

Madhu: Absolutely. Actually this whole feeling was intensified in me ever since I started discovering the nature personifications of the Goddess. Because sometimes we go through those very rare moments when a tree is not like a tree but like a flame and you see the energy of the Mother.

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993) argue that for many subaltern women devotees the Goddess is a living and intimate ground of daily being. The material link between śakti and nature is brought out strongly in these words of Itwari Devi, a woman from a northern Indian village: “Shakti comes to us from these forests and grasslands, we watch them grow, year in and year out through their internal shakti and we derive our strength from it” (Mies & Shiva, 1993, p. 250).

For those whose daily lives may, in contrast, be dislocated from nature, Tantric ritual can be restorative. Evidence for this possibility comes from the consistently enthusiastic responses of numerous social ecology students I have introduced to the principle of bhūtaśuddhi (purification of the elements). Drawing on Tantric cosmogony (though with a very simplified focus) I invite them to perform a ritualised sequence of breath and movement that promotes experiential recognition of the parallels between macrocosmic Śakti and microcosmic (personal) śakti. The focus is the five mahābhūtas, the gross elements through which Śakti brings the natural world into being, and on experiencing them as energetic dimensions within their own bodies as well as in nature. For these ecologically-minded students, many of them environmental activists, the experiential mapping of macrocosmic Nature onto their own microcosmic-natured bodies is exciting and empowering.

Thus, where emphasis is placed on srṣṭī, the power of creation, on an experiential sense of personally embodying the elements of nature, and on the nature of śakti as active, embodied consciousness, Śākta Tantra provides resources for spiritually engaging a rich sense of ecological identity. The Goddess demonstrates the creative power of the female principle that manifests in a myriad of diverse forms without losing integrity or coherence. She sustains biodiversity, and also the diversity of human expressions and beliefs. A sense of personal connection to the srṣṭī-śākṭi of the Goddess offers possibilities for affirming and inspiring women’s creative, embodied and ecological capacities.
In considering the kinds of šakti that may be available to women through the frameworks and practices of Šaktism I have sought to show that, despite the reductive readings of female divinity and women’s relationship to it that clearly do occur even in Śākta contexts, such constraints need not be inviolable. The examples touched on above suggest how cultivating a relationship with Śakti and undertaking practices associated with, or derived from, Śākta Tantra can enable a profound sense of experiential empowerment. This rests especially on an orientation to srṣṭi, Śakti’s creative power.

Reframing dharma, seeds of karma

For a Śākta orientation to lead to action that challenges structural inequalities for women it must be underpinned by a concern for social change. This emerged during our discussions in Gauhati, when we took the opportunity to articulate for ourselves the sense of empowerment we derived from relating to the Goddess as Śakti and described our visions for women’s social empowerment. Madhu intrigued us all with her ideas about a new dharma for women.

Gauhati, 13th August, 1996

Madhu: My personal concern revolves around creating a dharma for the Indian woman, looking at the sources, looking at the culture, looking at the vitality of its spirituality, its philosophical traditions, its art, its oral traditions, its myths, looking at these and reinterpreting it for the modern woman. That is what I am trying to do in a very modest way through my work. … I get very excited when I come across verses in Tantra that say the universe is within you.

A central premise in our investigation of Šaktism has been the conviction that, although it has been and remains subject to patriarchal fallibilities and misappropriations, it nonetheless may be gainfully (re-)interpreted to support a feminist agenda. The inherent challenge in articulating a dharma for Indian women is to (re-)construct an open, inclusive and diverse sense of dharma to counteract the narrowed one propounded under the influence of Hindutva, and to do so in ways that enhance engagement with different, non-Hindu communities. Feminist principles of inclusion and hence the need for models of power that can “keep a space open for the differences between women” (Gedalof, 1999, p. 191) caution against the wholesale deployment of cultural symbols associated with any single group in a movement that intends to embrace diversity. Madhu related her notion of a new dharma to an ethic of responsibility, interconnectedness and action.
**Gauhati, 9th August 1996**

Madhu: …We have the notion of *dharma*, that there has to be some righteousness and virtue, and secondly the notion of *karma*. . . .

that we humans are part of a continuous cycle where everything is interconnected.

Kathleen: And that we have to act.

Madhu: Yes. You can’t be static and silent and walk around with a seed in your hand and not put it in the soil and not activate it.

Kalpana Ram (2004) has remarked on the need to reconstruct understandings of agency in relation to religion and in doing so reconstruct understandings of religion itself. Finding ways to use religious metaphors to inform action that is creative and inclusive rather than defensive and hostile, seems an essential requirement for such reconstruction. The rich ecological metaphors available through Śāktism lend themselves to a reconstruction of both agency and religion, in keeping with an ecofeminist view (Sherma, 1998; Dobia, forthcoming). Madhu extended her metaphor for action to include an important role for women in bringing about ecological change. This entails a different kind of *strī śakti* than that circumscribed by patriarchal codes.

Connecting with Śakti at a deep level had also been a critical enabler of my own ecofeminist awareness.

**Gauhati, 13th August, 1996**

Brenda: Alongside that personal path, or subsuming it really, is my understanding of the Goddess as being inherently relational. She’s creating things, she’s sustaining things, she’s the *prakṛti*, she’s the Mahāprakṛti, so that’s totally about interconnectedness. … I see in the large scale of things the problems as we face as a [human] race are relational, to do with the relationship to the environment, and to do fundamentally with the way we live as a global culture. … It’s very clear from what my own nature is that unless I can stand in my power as a woman, and somehow “as a woman” is important, then I’m useless.

The emphasis here on ecology and interconnectedness presaged my subsequent route to social ecology. Retrospectively, it seems evident that the *yātrā*, with its multi-layered personal as well as academic threads, became a pivotal turning point for enlarging my personal sense of empowerment and envisaging a greater role in social as well as personal action. I was consequently especially interested to understand how the perceived distinction between spiritual and social empowerment could be bridged.

As well as calling for a “God in the feminine gender” Irigaray (1993b) has argued that women themselves need to become divine in order to claim their freedom and autonomy. This in some ways echoes the approach taken in Tantric worship,
though different purposes would suggest rather different prospects. Bearing in mind, however, that the context of Śākta Tantric worship most frequently emphasises devotion and surrender, I wondered the extent to which becoming divine was necessary to experiencing a sense of empowerment in relation to the Goddess. I asked my colleagues whether they felt worship of the Mother as divine might also be an obstacle to women’s empowerment. In response Kathleen offered the following account of her fieldwork with Indian women devotees.

Gauhati, 15th August 1996
Kathleen: I asked them the question: Kāmākhyā is the mother; you are also the mother, are there similarities or differences? What is the similarity there? They said, “Oh no, no, she’s the Great Mother and we’re just ordinary human beings.” … Even my informants, the women who become possessed by the Goddess, they won’t say I am the Goddess, I am identical to the Goddess. They’ll say the Goddess as śakti comes through me and whatever I do I do in accordance with her order. That’s the idiom it’s expressed in. But all you have to do is look at them and see that they are empowered by this experience. In their actions and in their speech they demonstrate it but they’re not going to be so conceited and proud as to say I’m the Goddess.

What makes the difference between feeling personally empowered by the Goddess and drawing on such power as a force for social change? What is the advantage to feminist activists of exploring such connections?

Gauhati, 16th August, 1996
Kathleen: If one goes into a practice that involves Goddess worship when one already has a feminist orientation, then it’s a very deepening experience in that way. … For people who are involved in activist work … I think that there needs to be some other source rather than doing it on one’s own … Some spiritual strength is necessary. So from that point of view I see tremendous promise in all kinds of Goddess worship, and not just Goddess worship but Tantric practices, meditational practices, a wide variety of spiritual practices.

Rita: And also reinterpreting the whole, the symbols.

Kathleen: Reinterpreting them, reinterpreting the symbols in a way that is consonant with social justice and with empowerment for women.

It is not the symbols alone that provide transformative potentials, but the kind of awareness and commitment one brings to their interpretation and use.

Gauhati, 16th August, 1996
Kathleen: I think one has to have a commitment to social justice and empowerment for women as a starting point. I think that one also has to have an interest in a spiritual path. … To the extent that we want
to influence other people it’s more through our own actions and who we are as people rather than proselytising or saying that they ought to be worshipping this or that.

I wondered how individual change could be related to social change. For Rita, the two were completely intertwined.

**Gauhati, 16th August, 1996**

*Rita:* The social activism itself is an outcome of the spiritualism. … I may never be totally full time engaged myself with spiritual activities alone. Whatever I will do my spiritualism will be there, the spirit through which I will do that work.

Elinor saw spirituality itself as inherently political echoing the dictum attributed to Gandhi, “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

**Gauhati, 16th August, 1996**

*Elinor:* I think that spirituality is political, and that doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to be out on the streets doing something. There can be spirituality which is totally inner-going and interested in transcendence, but if you believe in the interconnection of all of life, then what you do in your interactions with people and the world has to sustain that, and that is political.

Minati, whose previous considerations concerning Śaktism had centred on its philosophy and religious practices rather than its political potency, was inspired after the *yātrā* to a greater awareness of feminist concerns.

**Kolkata, March 26th, 1998**

*Minati:* I was very much influenced in your research by the feminist outlook. I didn’t concentrate so much on that before, but after your thing I have read women’s stories and womanpower and oppression. My outlook has a little bit changed and I have started thinking of so many things. … Really this has changed my outlook so much. I think I was doing a one-sided thing before. This collaboration definitely generates interest and arouses interest.

The exchange between us, framed as collaboration and incorporating opportunities for sharing stories of the Goddess and of our own lives in relation to Her, itself generated a vision for spiritually informed activism. Madhu’s ideas of a new *dharma* for Indian women joined Elinor’s hopes for a new mythology in the West, based on a re-inspired reverence for Śakti as a creative principle and for the female strengths the Goddess embodies.

**Gauhati, 13th August, 1996**

*Elinor:* I think we need to urgently create a new mythology in the West and this is where I see the potential for Śakti as being useful.
How to do this is something else again. ... Mythology isn’t something that can be created by one person, it has to be spun by lots of threads. This has to do with the changing consciousness.  

Madhu: I love your last sentence. I think that’s very relevant. One end of the thread has to be pulled by you; the other end has to be pulled by us, and that’s where the meeting ground comes because that way you create bridges. 

The growth of New Age and ecological spiritualities in Western contexts (especially but not exclusively) is perhaps indicative of interest in the kind of new mythology that Elinor advocates.¹⁰⁷

A similar though broader need for reinvigorating mythology in cultures of the “global South” has been advocated by Durré Ahmed (2002). Whereas she notes that religious symbolism and longstanding orthopraxies are more alive and available in “the South,” she sees the fundamentalist danger as bound up with the effects of the Western enlightenment project and its logos orientation. To counter this Ahmed envisages a three-way reclamation of religious mythos, drawing on imagination and narrative knowing as central tools for reframing religious understandings. She advises reinstating radical religious figures of the past, reinterpreting religions for contemporary contexts, particularly feminism(s), and “includ[ing] a comparative perspective which, even as it highlights diversity, must simultaneously focus on identifying the unifying aspects of women’s spirituality” (p. 25).

Perhaps the unifying aspect for women is claiming the power to define our own relation to religion and spirituality. This, as Ahmed notes, poses considerable danger to women in parts of “the South” who would seek to exert such powers for themselves by challenging fundamentalist agendas. International bridges spun from many threads need to be well grounded in complex political understandings to provide effective support for such a project. Under these circumstances Ahmed’s notion of cross-cultural and inter-religious spirituality appears as the most radical step.

Attempting to reweave bases of power and freedom for women from cultural resources that may in some contexts have been used to constrain them poses many challenges and contradictions. As Judith Butler (1993) observed, the process of resisting existing power structures in order to create alternatives is never “a ‘pure’ opposition, a

¹⁰⁷ Since the yātṛā, further threads have been spun and the bridges between us maintained through repeated traffic, including the opportunity for us all to participate in the symposium, Shaktika on the Ascent, established jointly by Madhu, Rita and Elinor and held in Bhubaneswar in 2003.
‘transcendence’ of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labour of forging a future from resources inevitably impure” (p. 241). This seems an apt parallel for Tantric practices that seek sources of power in objects and circumstances otherwise regarded as impure. It seems apt also to describing the syncretism of Śāktā Tantra - itself a fusion of multiple traditions and influences. That future opportunities might be, or indeed need to be, forged from impure resources seems an especially apt consideration when seeking to articulate the complex possibilities that may emerge from mutual engagement between Śāktā perspectives and feminist imaginings.

**Power and desire**

As expected from the outset, our key deliberations for this Śāktī yātrā revolved around power and the Goddess. Rather more incrementally, however, I discovered that desire too was implicated throughout. The central place of desire in Tantra, its spiritual, erotic and personal connotations, and their coalescence in the Goddess of Desire, were elaborated in chapter five. Here, with the yātrā now in hindsight, I (re)consider the significance of desiring the Goddess.

The precondition for desire, according to psychoanalytic thought, is lack. What women lack, according to both Freud and Lacan, is the power denoted by the phallus. I shall not rehearse here the many eloquent feminist rebuttals of this position as a psychological justification for the phallic social order (e.g., Irigaray, 1985; Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1994). As we have seen in multiple ways throughout the journey, the Goddess as Śāktī mythologically subverts any sense of phallic supremacy and presents the possibility of a power that need not be based on lack or on its bestowal by the patriarchal order. This, in the context of the feminist critique of patriarchal power, is her immediate and fundamental appeal: “by daring to exist she begs to differ” (Ganesh, 1990, p. WS63).

The Freudian perspective has been challenged also by Deleuze and Guattari (1983), in whose view desire, rather than signifying lack, is productive and mobile. The distinction is both significant and promising.

…while psychoanalysis relies on a notion of desire as a lack, an absence that strives to be filled through the attainment of an impossible object, desire can instead be seen as what produces, what connects … desire is an actualization, a series of practices… (Grosz, 1994, p. 165).
Insofar as it sees desire as a creative energy that is responsible for continuous becomings, the ontological emphasis in Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of desire shows some sympathy with Tantric philosophy. In their view desire operates within and between bodies as a fluid and productive force, constantly reigniting their (our) process of becoming. This perspective resonates with Irigaray’s conception of a corporeal feminism informed by spiritual practice.

The question of whether desire is propelled by a sense of lack or a sense of becoming also appears to have critical relevance to religious thinking. Many religious traditions, including orthodox forms of brāhmanic Hinduism, cast desire and spirituality in opposition. Seeing desire as an expression of lack aligns with transcendent forms of spirituality that encourage asceticism as a means of purifying insatiable desires. Such religious views are regarded with suspicion by most feminists since asceticism is seen to oppose women’s desires. Though, in contrast, Tantra is often assumed to embrace all desires, the Tantric reclamation of desire as inherently spiritual is subtle and complex, as we have seen. Tantra does not merely recommend embracing desire, but transforming it through spiritual practice.

Irigaray’s (2004) distinction between desire and instinct suggests a similar refinement:

Desire is a subtle subjective affect, demanding perhaps our subtlest cultural elaborations. But we have confused desire with instinct and, in the name of this confusion, repressed desire, a specifically human dimension, and source of our greatest cultural wealth.

(Irigaray, 2004, p. 78)

For Irigaray, spiritualised desire is enlivening. She argues, “Already, desire itself awakens us to a life generally asleep in us. To desire really represents an awakening” (Irigaray, 2002, p. 82). Irigaray’s sensibilities in this endeavour are strongly influenced by her exposure to yoga practices and to Western writings on Tantra (Irigaray, 2002; personal communication, June 2005). There are, however, a number of idiosyncrasies in Irigaray’s “Eastern explorations” that reveal the limits of her engagement in the field (Joy 2003). Irigaray’s view of spiritualised desire especially informs her deliberations towards a reformulation of male-female relationships, particularly in their carnal aspect. But her “inflexibly dimorphic” (Joy, 2006) insistence on sexuate difference as “the most basic and universal of all human differences” (Irigaray, 2004, p. viii) and on locating desire within a heterosexual context have been criticised for constricting the terms of her agenda for social change.
Hindu symbolism, including that of Śākta Tantra, shows a similarly heterosexist bias. This appears prominently in Kāmākhyā’s mythological depiction as Goddess of Desire. Nonetheless, the sheer range of forms available for worship and the corresponding array of practices, offer a diversity of possibilities for women’s becoming that includes but is not limited to being expressed in heterosexual relationships. Yet, as already noted, the deployment of this range of possibilities in ways that further feminist agendas for social justice depends very much on the orientation of the devotee.

Desiring and imagining are crucial here. The ways in which women imagine Śakti, and themselves in relation to her, are fundamental to enabling a sense of empowerment as well as to determining its parameters. In her call for a “God in the feminine gender” Irigaray (1993b) put forward the necessity of a divine horizon for women’s becoming. This position echoes, though in slightly different terms, the work of an array of Western thealogists (e.g., Christ, 1979; Raphael, 1996). However, amongst the reservations this approach has attracted is the concern that (re)instatement of an idealised “feminine” divine would result in placing normative constraints on women, thereby simply reconstituting the restrictions of patriarchy (Poxon, 2003). Evidence from the Indian context reinforces this possibility, as we have seen especially in the prominence given to the normative ideal of Sīta as a chaste wife.

Yet we have also found, through the interpretations and resonances brought out in our joint inquiry, that the more subtle and paradoxical Tantric conception of Śakti can provide inspiration to extend women’s horizons for becoming beyond the limitations of patriarchal ideals. Lina Gupta (1991) summed up the advantages of such open horizons:

A creative and interactive reading in the light of Tantric scriptural interpretation of the Great Goddess can allow Kali with her terrifying appearance to emerge as a powerful symbol of life and liberation to women in their passage to post-patriarchy. Beyond mother and wife, she encourages us to challenge our assumptions, ambiguities, negativities uncertainties and fears about “others”. Under her assurance we confront who we are in reality as opposed to what we perceive ourselves to be through the subjugated roles we play (p. 24).

This liberated “reality”, discovered through Tantric teachings and practice, defines the interval between normative ideal and possible horizon.

A similar gap, marked by women’s sense of who they should be and the possibilities suggested by their desires, emerged in Susan Dormer & Bronwyn Davies’
(2001) research into women’s desiring. In their analysis it was recognition of desire, of the possibility of something else, something beyond present constraints, that offered women a sense of freedom and agency. Tantra affirms the link between desire and freedom and seeks, through active spiritual practice, to cultivate it purposefully. In addition, Tantra’s specialised association with paradoxical symbols and transgressive ritual practices further challenges existing social conventions and hierarchies.

**Negotiating the interval**

Looking from outside to horizons imagined in another cultural context remains something of a risky undertaking. How is the cross-cultural interval of desire to be negotiated without re-engaging tendencies to exoticise or appropriate other cultural traditions? I doubt there can be any “pure” non-appropriative position in this negotiation. Śākta images of female power evoke possibilities that are unavailable in Western religious symbolism. Fascination with these cultural differences fuels both desire and newly imagined possibilities.

From our various reflections throughout the *yātrā* it is evident that I, along with my non-Indian colleagues, have found the culturally different symbols and ideas represented by the Hindu Goddess “good to think with” (Gross, 1996). In this respect our efforts to understand and reinterpret what Śāktism may avail women appears consistent with the project of enlisting Hindu goddesses to resource Western feminist theology. What is missing, however, from the orientation this language implies is the importance of paying crucial attention in the exchange to qualities of mutuality and reciprocity.

Overridingly, the most profound benefits of our engagement with the Goddess were not derived through garnering resources for a Western feminist agenda, but through establishing and deepening an open-ended relationship with the Goddess and with our Indian colleagues. Within this quality of mutuality, recognised separately by each of the co-researchers, there was space to hear different voices, acknowledge different perspectives and appreciate different spiritual temperaments.

*Gauhati, 14th August, 1996*

*Madhu:* Something which has happened is the idea of *satsangha* among women, sisterhood. It’s a kind of a sisterhood, harmonious, synergistic sort of relationship where ego is not important. There is no competition, you just share. I think this is one of the good things that’s happened in our group. To me you’re sharing your ideas, you’re not competing, and you’re walking hand in hand, you’re doing
things together, you’re sensitive. So it’s a form of spirituality in itself according to me, and I think this can be developed among women to help each other grow.

This was not incidental, but rather the result of our deliberate cultivation of an experiential rather than merely intellectual collaborative inquiry.

Milo Maine, 22nd August, 1994

Frédérique: ... not only should you be reciprocal and mutual ... you should be changed. You change.

Change seems inevitable also as an outcome of sustained cross-cultural encounters, whatever their form. In the hybrid space of inter-cultural exchange, the way meanings are negotiated is critical to a postcolonial ethic. I would rather emphasise imagining the possibilities and sense of purpose (Madhu’s new dharma?) our encounter with the Hindu Goddess might reveal to us, than seek the Goddess as a resource for our own separate Western feminist imaginings.

In establishing, for this research, a context where deep engagement could occur between the co-researchers, our purview of other domains was restricted. Our status as mature middle class academic researchers endowed a certain kind of (social) privilege. On many practical fronts this was undoubtedly enabling, but it proved a barrier to engaging in any depth, given the short time available, with the women residents we encountered at Kāmākhyā. The lack of extensive engagement with the women of Kāmākhyā limits our findings accordingly. Further longitudinal ethnographic research with the women of the Kāmākhyā temple community, and with its kanyās, would especially help to flesh out many of the local dimensions we only glimpsed.

While acknowledging the imaginative possibilities for a conjunction between Śākta Tantra and women’s pursuit of freedom and power, it is nevertheless clear that many difficulties remain. Despite the involvement of communities of practitioners, Tantra’s transformative impacts are oriented to individual rather than social goals. Tantric practices are embedded in spiritual codes intended for initiates and adepts; they are esoteric and demanding. Antinomianism makes for rather dubious ethics in some instances. For example, though subscribed to by a minority, some practices associated with left-handed Tantra controvert the basic ethical precept of ahiṃsā, non-violence (Sherma, 1998).

The sociocultural ramifications of the recent growth of interest in Tantric principles and symbolism, particularly in Western New Age contexts, are patently complex. It is far from clear whether interest in New Age “tantra” will result in
widespread sacralisation of women, including their sexuality, or merely further sexualisation of women. On this account, as also on account of the militarist appropriations of Śākta themes that contest the Indian context, the effects of posing alternative feminist-inspired readings of Śāktism’s possibilities for women remain to be seen. I can lay no claim to a “right” or definitive interpretation, only to an attempt to articulate possibilities.

If, as Elizabeth Grosz (2005) has recently contended, feminism needs to move “from policing to production” (p. 179) in order “to render more mobile, fluid, and transformable the means by which the female subject is produced and represented … [and] produce a future in which forces align in ways fundamentally different from the past and present” (p. 193), then it is important not only to challenge discourses but to re-imagine possible horizons and move towards them. Recognising the gap between patriarchal constructions of Śākti, and imagining different horizons she might offer women, helped to delineate the interval to be negotiated in this move.

Through undertaking this Śākti yātrā collaboratively and experientially, through engaging simultaneously in articulating “suggestions for the imagination” (Jantzen, 1999, p. 102) and through attempting to understand the complex and contradictory contexts in which Śāktism is evoked, our desires for the Goddess and her power were both enriched and grounded. We placed ourselves consciously between constraint and possibility, in the interval defined by our spiritual, feminist, postcolonial desires, in order to re-imagine, together, ways to close the gap.


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## GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advaita Vedânta</td>
<td>non-dualist doctrine that interprets evidence from the Vedas and Upâniṣads to uphold the supreme reality of a transcendent spiritual unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ambuvâci</td>
<td>festival associated with the annual menstruation of the Goddess Kâmâkhyâ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asûra</td>
<td>demon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avatâra</td>
<td>incarnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bâlā</td>
<td>girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bali</td>
<td>blood sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>balipîtha</td>
<td>place of sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bhakti</td>
<td>devotion, reciprocal love between deity and devotee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bhâkta</td>
<td>devotee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bhâvanâ</td>
<td>feeling or sentiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bhairava</td>
<td>male consort, incarnation of Śiva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bhairavî</td>
<td>female Tantric consort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bhoga</td>
<td>worldly enjoyment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bhûtaśuddhi</td>
<td>ritual purification of the elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bindu</td>
<td>drop, central point in a yantra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brâhmanic</td>
<td>upholding religious orthodoxy based on priestly authority of the brâhman caste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmaputra</td>
<td>known as the red river, the Brahmaputra flows from the Himalayas intersecting the state of Assam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmaṇâs</td>
<td>appendices to the Vedas covering rules of sacrifice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cāmuṇḍā  goddess known for her fierceness and emaciated look

Čandipāṭha(Čaṇḍī)  alternate name for the Devī Māhātmya

dīkṣa  initiation

daśamī  tenth day of Durgā pūjā when worshippers farewell the Goddess

Dakṣa Yajña  Dakṣa’s sacrifice

dakṣiṇācāra  right handed path of Tantra

Dakṣiṇakālī  depiction of the goddess Kālī standing over the prostrate body of Śiva

Dakṣinēśwar  Kolkata temple to Kālī associated with the saint Ramakrishna

darśan  seeing, especially seeing and being seen by a deity

darśana  “ways of seeing,” denotes the six classical Indian philosophical systems

devadāsīs  female temple dancers

devas  gods

Devī  Goddess, especially used when referring to the Goddess

Devī Māhātmya  the first and most important Śākta text, the Devī Māhātmya narrates the Goddess’s exploits and demonstrates her supreme status as Śakti

dhyāna  meditation

Dūrgāsaptāṣāti  alternate name for the Devī Māhātmya

dūtī  female participant in the yoni pūjā

Durgā  form of the Goddess known for her unassailability

Durgā pūjā  Indian Goddess festival

garbha grha  inner sanctum of a temple, literally “the womb of the house”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garo</td>
<td>matrilineal tribal <em>(adivasi)</em> community associated with the hill regions adjoining Kamakhya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grāmadevatā</td>
<td>village goddesses and gods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guna</td>
<td>quality, of which there are three essential ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gurvī</td>
<td>female guru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindutva</td>
<td>Literally “Hindu-ness”, political movement to establish Hindu values in India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iśvarapraṇidhāna</td>
<td>devotion to god</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jīvanmuktī</td>
<td>liberation in this life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jagadambā</td>
<td>Goddess as World Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jñāna</td>
<td>spiritual knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kīrtanas</td>
<td>devotional songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kāli</td>
<td>is more energetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kālighat</td>
<td>famous Kāli temple in Kolkata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kāmākṣī</td>
<td>the “lovely-eyed” Goddess who resides at Kāñcipuram in South India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kāma</td>
<td>desire, love, lust, one of the four fundamental aims of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kāmarūpa</td>
<td>region surrounding Kāmākhyā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kāmeśvarī</td>
<td>supreme Goddess of love (Śakti)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kāmeśvara</td>
<td>supreme God of love (Śakti)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kanyā</td>
<td>girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kanyā pūja</td>
<td>worship of young girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>karma</td>
<td>action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
kaula  belonging to Tantric clan

Khasi  matrilineal tribal (adivasi) community associated with the hill regions adjoining Kamakhya

Kirāta  term used in Sanskrit texts to denote mongoloid tribes

krama  step or step-wise sequence of actions in worship

kriyātmika śakti  power of action

kumāri pūjā  worship of young girls

kuṇḍalinī  Spiritual power (śakti) that lies coiled at the base of the spine and is awakened through spiritual practice

Lakṣmī pūjā  worship of Goddess Lakṣmī
dhita  form of the Goddess associated with beauty and enjoyment

liṅga  phallus

mahāśātamī  Eighth day of Durgā Pūjā associated with major worship

Mahāmāya  “Great illusion” - quality identified as a power of the Goddess

mahāvidyās  the ten “great wisdoms” of the tantras

Mahiṣāsura  name of buffalo demon

Mahiṣāsuramardini  the Goddess who destroys the buffalo demon

maithuna  sexual intercourse

mandala  circle, or circular diagram

Manasā  snake goddess of tribal origins

manusmṛti  code of legendary lawmaker Manu

manṭapa  a roofed area used for devotional singing and prayers

mātā  woman mystic who undergoes possession by the Goddess
māyā illusion
mokṣa spiritual liberation
mūrti iconic representation of Hindu deity
mudrā gesture used in ritual
Nilācalā “blue” hill that hosts the Kāmākhyā temple
nāvaratrī the “nine nights” festival associated, for Śāktas, with Durgā pūjā
Naraka legendary founder of the first temple at Kāmākhyā
nīskalā without form
nīskāma without desire
pañcamakāra “five m’s” ritual, in which the goddess is worshipped with wine, meat, fish, fried grain and sexual intercourse
pañcatattva another term for pañcamakāra
pāṇdal temporary street auditorium housing life-size goddesses and gods
parikrama circumambulation of a particular religious symbol
pāṇḍa priest
paṇḍit religious scholar/sage
Pārvatī Goddess born of the mountain
pativratā ideal of devoted wifely service to the husband
piṭha a seat, particularly the seat of a deity, site of Goddess temple
pradakṣinā circumambulation by turning always to the right
prakṛti material nature
pranām  respectful greeting
prasāda  ritual offering that has been blessed by the deity
Pṛthvī  Earth as goddess
pūjā  worship
pūjāri  worshipper, priest
pūjārinī  female worshipper
purāṇa  any of many medieval Sanskrit texts focusing on myth and ritual lore
puruṣārthas  the four fundamental aims of life
rajoguna  dynamic, passionate quality of energy
Raktabija  mythological demon whose blood when spilt creates more demons
rūpa  form
sādhaka, sadhu  spiritual aspirant (male)
sādhanā  ongoing spiritual practice
sādhika  spiritual aspirant (female)
Śaiva  pertaining to worship of Śiva, or denoting worshipper of Śiva
sakalā  with form
Śākta  pertaining to worship of Śakti, or denoting worshipper of Śakti
śāktācāra  a series of precepts drawn from texts and oral tradition that function as a code of conduct for Śākta adherents
Śakti  the source of all cosmic energy, personified as Goddess
śaktipīṭha  a site that is actively charged by the presence of the Goddess
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>śaktipāta</td>
<td>initiation characterised by awakening the śakti of the aspirant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Śāktism</td>
<td>Hindu tradition of Goddess worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>samādhi</td>
<td>state of spiritual merger characterised by bliss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saṃkhya</td>
<td>one of the six classical Indian systems of philosophy, Saṃkhya views the universe as consisting of two essential properties, puruṣa (consciousness) and prakṛti (matter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Śankar</td>
<td>the god Śiva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Śaṅkara</td>
<td>legendary Hindu sage of the 8th century who established the doctrine of Advaita Vedānta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanskritisation</td>
<td>the process by which the Sanskritic ideas and customs of the higher Hindu castes are adopted by other groups, supplanting their previous values and beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>śāstra</td>
<td>religious text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sattva</td>
<td>quality of wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>śava sādhanā</td>
<td>meditation on a corpse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>siddha pīṭha</td>
<td>a site known for devotees’ achievement of special powers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>siddhis</td>
<td>spiritual powers accomplished through tapas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>śikhara</td>
<td>dome-tower over temple site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sindūr</td>
<td>vermilion paste used in worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Śiva</td>
<td>one of the principal Hindu male gods, associated with Śakti as consort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>śloka</td>
<td>religious verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>smārta brāhman</td>
<td>follower of “recollected scriptures,” these being those that confirm established Vedic exposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>śmaśāna</td>
<td>cremation ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Śrīvidyā</td>
<td>Tantric tradition of “auspicious wisdom”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Śrīyantra</td>
<td>a ritual design of nine interlaced triangles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>srṣṭi</td>
<td>creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>śruti</td>
<td>written sacred teachings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sthāna</td>
<td>place of worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stotra</td>
<td>hymns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strīdharma</td>
<td>women’s obligations according to brāhmanic code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strī śakti</td>
<td>womanpower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sūtradhārī</td>
<td>one who ties threads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>śūdra</td>
<td>servant caste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Śumbha/Niśumbha</td>
<td>twin demon kings defeated by Devi in the Devī Māhātmya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tīrtha yātṛā</td>
<td>journey to sacred site, pilgrimage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tīrthaphala</td>
<td>fruits of pilgrimage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tamoguna</td>
<td>quality of darkness and lethargy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tantras</td>
<td>texts that describe Tantric traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tapas</td>
<td>inner heat generated in spiritual practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upaniṣads</td>
<td>ancient teachings that provide philosophical explanation of the Vedas, the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vīra</td>
<td>heroic Tāntrika</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vāmācāra</td>
<td>left-handed path in Tantra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaiṣṇava</td>
<td>pertaining to worship of Viṣṇu, or denoting worshipper of Viṣṇu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varāha</td>
<td>boar incarnation of Viṣṇu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vedānta</td>
<td>one of the six classical philosophical systems in India that bases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
its monistic vision of God and creation on the *upaniṣads*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>vidyā</strong></td>
<td>wisdom, especially esoteric wisdom embodied by Tantric goddesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>vijayā</strong></td>
<td>victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>viveka</strong></td>
<td>discernment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>vrata</strong></td>
<td>vow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>yātrā</strong></td>
<td>journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>yantra</strong></td>
<td>geometric symbol that reproduces the specific deity’s energetic form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>yogasūtra</strong></td>
<td>classic aphorisms on yoga attributed to the sage Patañjali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>yoginī pītha</strong></td>
<td>referent to Kāmākhyā temple site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>yoni</strong></td>
<td>womb, vulva – female sexual organ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>yonipūjā</strong></td>
<td>ritual sexual worship of the <em>yoni</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>yonitattva</strong></td>
<td>female sexual fluid that the ritualist aims to collect as an offering</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>