

TRACY Pintchman has done something which baffles the Hindu completely. She has mapped the manifestation of the Jagadamba textually, locating the genesis of the feminine principle in the sacred Samhitas and then describing its evolution till it crystallises to give birth to the notion of a Great Goddess in the Puranas. Exhibiting remarkable scholarship and a meticulous study of the Vedas: the Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Upanisads, the six systems of philosophical discourse: *nyaya*, *vaisesika*, *purva-mimansa*, *vedanta*, *samkhya* and *yoga*, particularly the *mimansa sutras* and the *samkhya karika*, together with the Puranas, Pintchman's encounter with the Goddess displays an academic systematism far surpassing that of David Kinsley, C. Mackenzie Brown or Madeline Biardeau. Amongst western scholarly works, only Thomas Coburn's celebrated work on the *Devi Mahatmya* can match her theological competence. Pintchman claims that she has attempted an "ontological" study of the Goddess, perusing strictly "textual evidence". Texts in India, as Coburn has noted earlier, are living traditions and Goddesses are born not only from the written traditions but also from a commingling of cultures spanning from the ascetic to the folk to the bawdy. In fact, one may say, the written tradition was considered to be a polluting one, and what existed was the oral, the aural and the mnemonic traditions. Pintchman, on the other hand, reads into these books the notion of a twentieth century text, looking at them through a post-modern hermeneutic lens. Incorrect tools tend to warp the vision. Despite her scholarly rigour, what baffles is the question of whether the Omnipresent One, who is at once *nirguna* — and *saguna* — can be ontologically structured and textually constructed.

# Goddesses : Textual and Spiritual

## The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition

Tracy Pintchman

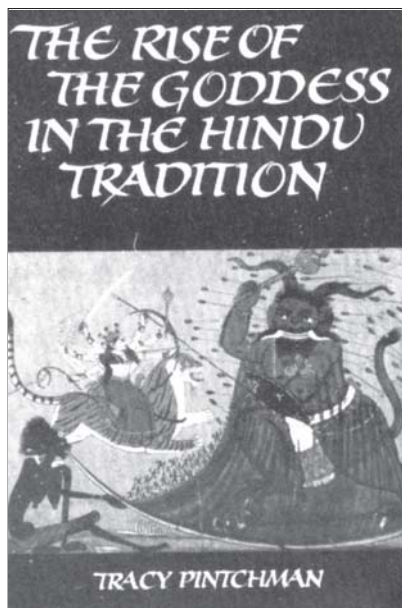
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Review: Sarbani Sarkar

Pintchman understands "text" to be both the oral and the written dimensions of Brahmanical scripture, with the Vedic and the post-Vedic Brahmanical traditions borrowing from each other from genre to genre and from period to period. This creates a culture of inter-textuality from whence each new text is created as a conscious or unconscious borrowed fragment of a textual continuum. The core tradition of the Vedas as the symbol of authority, with its cast of abstract, neutral monism, gives way to the influence of

non-Brahmanical traditions. By the time of the Puranas, the staticness of the Vedic texts is replaced by a fluid, ever-expanding body of mythological lore. Between these two polarities of the orthodox and the bardic, the static and the fluid, the genealogy of texts get played out discerned by common patterns and principles and a common grammar.

From within this textual universe, Pintchman constructs the Mahamaya, at first identifying her nebulous forms in an assortment of female, Vedic deities, which provides the framework and the principles upon which the Great Goddess is engrafted, principles which get further refined and developed in the early philosophical discourses. Finally, in the Puranas, these philosophical and mythological categories get conflated when there is a synthesis of divergent elements and narratives from which emerges a notion of a Great Goddess or a Devi. This Goddess is represented materially and cosmically, by and as *prakrti*, *sakti* and *maya* — grammatically and essentially feminine terms — and Pintchman methodically documents each instance of a cosmogonic account where the Divine Feminine most richly displays herself through these three



cosmological principles. The Goddess which emerges is thus identified by Pintchman as having the following three patterns:

The Goddess as the creative impulse inherent within Brahman which activates the process of creation and then sustains the universe; in this sense she is *sakti* (energy);

The Goddess as materiality and the material matrix in which the manifest world is grounded; in this form she is *prakrti* (matter/nature); and

The Goddess as the delusory power which creates and affects creation, as *maya* (illusion).

Pintchman adds that in the *Devi Bhagavat Purana*, the Goddess is also identified as the *Nirguna Brahman*, the eternal, unchanging Absolute, but that this depiction of the Goddess is “far less common”.

Vedic material to Pintchman is obscure, vague, and indefinite. She seems to have only a fuzzy notion of an all pervasive feminine principle. To her, even concepts of *prakrti* and *sakti* are not clearly distinguished or developed — therefore Vedic goddesses like Vac or Viraj tend to embody both principles. *Prakrti*, the ultimate principle of materiality, is most elaborately defined in the *Samkhyakarika*, the philosophical discourse of the post-Vedic period. *Sakti*, on the other hand, is a concept developed much later outside the Vedic-Brahmanical tradition, primarily in the Tantric scriptures. It was incorporated in the Puranas (the youngest group of ancient Hindu texts) which according to Pintchman, is where the Goddess finally comes into Her own. Pintchman further holds that the Devi is crystallised only in the Puranas because of certain kinds of equations in the Puranic myths of

creation as well as a political need to incorporate non-Brahmanical traits within the dominant theological discourse at this historical juncture.

It is this teleological construction that is both baffling and problematic. What Pintchman has overlooked is the fact that the Vedic notion of the Divine is what Max Mueller has called henotheistic. In other words, though it believes in one God, it finds that it does not affect its contemplation of many Gods. Different deities are identified with and as the one Divine (*ekam*) and in such identification the difference of number and gender are ignored. Unlike Pintchman’s “construction”, the Jagadiswari, as the

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*nirguna* and the Absolute, is genderless, the only One in the universe. She is at once the Great Void (as described in the *Nasadiyasuktam* of the *Rgveda*) as well as being materially manifest as *prakrti*: the five gross elements of ether, air, fire, water and earth; the triptychs of heat, water, food; red, white and black; the *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*; the sixteen *vikaras* including the *buddhindriyas* and *karmendriyas* and the twenty-four *tattvas*. She is the whiteness of milk, the radiance of the sun, the pith of the reed. She is touch, taste, smell and splendour. She is speech as *shabdbrahman*, the masculine as *purusa*, *virat*, *mahat*, *Aditya*, *Shiv* and *Vishnu*. She is *Aditi*, *Vac-Saraswati*, *Indrani* of the Vedas. She is *cit*, or consciousness, the all-pervading Omnipresence. As Energy, she is

creative as well as destructive. She is both the creator of *maya* and *maya* herself. She is the Benevolent One, the protector, the refuge and the shelter. She is the text; can it be that she is present in one part and not in the other? Can such Omnipresence be structurally mapped?

The Goddess, above all, is perceived devotionally. It depends upon the *bhakti* (devotion) of the devotee to realize the Brahman in the *shabd*, i.e. the word. The text therefore, is bound to the reader symbiotically, who already carries within him/her the imprint of the Goddess. For She is no myth nor is She text-bound but real and alive and born of a great living tradition of which the text is only a part. For the Hindu, reciting the text or hearing it being recited is another way of worshipping the Divine Mother. The text, however, does not enjoy the same status as *the text*, for example, as does the Bible or the Holy Koran. Pintchman’s exercise therefore, becomes considerably limited.

From the Vedic tradition, across the *samkhya tattvas* to the Puranas and the Tantrashastras, sets of “texts” emerged devoted to the glorification of particular aspects of the *paramatman*. If the Upanisads are abstractly metaphysical, then the Puranas concentrate on the mythographical details of the Brahman in its masculine and feminine forms. Hence, the *Kurma*, *Varaha*, *Garuda*, *Narada* and *Brahmavaivarta* Puranas are the celebration of Vishnu and his incarnation as Krsna, while the *Linga* and *Siva* Puranas elaborates the life of Maheswara. The scriptures entirely devoted to the extolling of the Goddess is the *Devi Bhagavata* and Chapters 81-93 of *Markandeya Purana*, better known as the *Devi Mahatmya*. This does not imply that such a synthesized

depiction of the Divine Mother is non-existent in other texts. The three Vedic goddesses, Vac-Saraswati, Ratri and Sri of the hymns *Devisuktam*, *Ratrisuktam* and *Srisuktam* of the *Rgveda*, vividly portray the three manifestations of *sakti* as Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati, the presiding deities of the *Devi Mahatmya*. The *Ratrisuktam*, usually read along with the *Devi Mahatmya*, is a complete, devotional prayer to the Bhuvanewari, invoking the Goddess' mercy to protect the world and to demolish the animalistic traits and desires in man which surfaces in him from time to time. This is in concord with the Puranic and Tantric forms of worshipping the Devi, where Her role as a protectress and the destroyer of animalism both within and without man is highlighted. In fact, the *Devisuktam*, also read along with the *Devi Mahatmya* is considered to be the most beautiful of all prayers invoked to the Goddess. The ritualistic worship of the Goddess as Durga, which takes place annually in Bengal, is incomplete without the recitation of the *Devisuktam*. Thus Pintchman's claim that the theology of the Goddess is crystallised in the *Devi Mahatmya*, while true, is no teleological evolution. It is crystallised equally in prayers and *mantras* scattered across the gamut of texts belonging to the Hindu tradition.

This myopia also comes to the fore in Pintchman's handling of the Vedic material. Pintchman identifies six Vedic goddesses representing either *prakrti* or *sakti*, having traits and attributes that are consistently "cross-identified" with each other. These six goddesses in their descending hierarchy as accorded to them by the author are: Ap (the waters), Prithvi (the earth), Aditi, Viraj, Vac-Saraswati and Saci/Indrani. Aditi is considered to be the primary deity of the *Rgveda* and Prithvi

that of the *Atharvaveda*, yet Pintchman attaches undue importance to "water" almost as the apex feminine principle. She devotes a lot of space to describing "water" as an "undifferentiated, primordial matrix... portrayed as womb-like, emphasizing the maternal, nurturing, motherly aspect," in which the material, manifest cosmos gestates. The Universal *garbha* which gives birth to manifest matter in the form of the earth. Perhaps this is because Pintchman perceives procreation to be the acme of



**Cosmic Woman,  
Rajasthan, c. 18th century**

femininity, whereas in the case of the Divine Feminine, it is the Divine which is emphasised and encompasses the Feminine. To select only cosmogonic accounts for a discussion on the female principle merely constricts one's perception of the Goddess. Procreation is only a part of the Mahamaya's functions as *prakrti*. On the other hand, Pintchman hardly attaches any importance to Aditi, who is the unbounded Infinite, the universal, abstract Goddess, who represents both

the physical creation and the endless expanse beyond the earth. She is the waters, the earth, the mother, the father, the sons, the gods, all that is born and will be born. A single verse on Aditi in the *Visvadevasuktam* of *Rgveda* crystallises the essence of the Goddess rather than numerous myths of creation involving water. In fact Pintchman dismisses Aditi as possessing only "some kind of abstract, universal significance... even though her precise nature is not clearly articulated." She even criticizes Max Mueller for "stretch(ing) the limits of textual evidence" in his assessment of Aditi's significance. Likewise, Pintchman's texts give ample evidence of the significance of Vac or Speech as a feminine, creative principle, closely associated with water. Pintchman is so taken up with this constant "cross-identification" amongst the Vedic goddesses and the roles they performed in creation — like water with Vac, Vac with Saraswati, Prithvi with Aditi, Vac with Aditi and so on — she is unable to perceive the fact that they are one and the same. To the believer, such oneness and pantheism is easily acceptable. For Hinduism allows the fluidity of traversing between the one and the many with an ease that is rooted deep over thousands of years.

The deific differentiation of the Goddess is depicted in the Puranas where She is represented in the forms of Shiva, Kali, Mangala, Chamunda and Uma. These images are largely borrowed from Tantric scriptures which deal exclusively with the worship of the Brahman as *sakti* in its masculine and feminine forms: Vishnu/Shiv and Kali. With the exception of John Woodroffe, Western scholars have tended to view the Tantras as falling outside the Vedic-Brahmanical tradition, while Indian scholars have by and large agreed that the

*rahasyamarg* (path of mysticism) of the Vedas which is revealed to the disciple only at the *acharya*'s (initiator/guru) discretion, may be identified with the *sadhanamarg* (path of diligence/practice) of the Tantras. In fact, the Tantrashastras are held to be distinctly Atharvavedic and also draw heavily from the *Taittiriya Aranyaka*. Tantric *yantras*, *mantras*, *chakras* and *mandals* are traceable in these two scriptures. Pragyanananda, in his *Tantratattvapraivesika* has meticulously demonstrated the similitude of rituals in the Tantras and the Vedas. In fact, Tantric rituals can be located even in the *Rgveda*. Bhaskaray, the author of *Lalitasahasranama*, is of the opinion that the Tantras are a part of the Upanisads. The Saptamatrikas-Brahmini, Maheswari, Vaisnavi, Indrani, Varahi, Narasinghi and Chamunda — Tantric goddesses who are incarnations of Chandi and Kali, are mentioned in the Vedas. Several other Puranic feminine deities are also mentioned in the Vedic tradition, e.g., Ambika in *Taittiriya Samhita*, Uma and Katyayani in *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, Uma-Haimavati in *Keno Upanisad*, Kali, Karali, Manojaba in *Mundakya Upanisad* as well as references to *sakti*, Shiv's consort, in the *Svetasvatara Upanisad*. Aditi, Prithvi and Vac-Saraswati have been equated by many Indian scholars to Ambika, Uma, Bhavani and Kalika. Unlike the Advaita Vedantists to whom Brahman is the only reality and the procreated material world an illusion, the Tantrists envision the Supreme Self equally in its abstract and gross incarnations. Philosophically this is the only "difference" between the Vedists and the Tantrists. In practice, Tantrashastra is devoid of any strictures and regulations and is accessible to anybody irrespective of caste, creed or sex. Hence, the Tantrashastra has

been more exposed to influences external to the Vedic-Brahmanical tradition and have been open enough to incorporate some of these elements. This does not make the Tantras, as popularly believed, specially by western scholars, spiritually non-Vedic and non-mainstream Hindu. It, along with its practice of Devi-worship, is very much endemic to the Vedic-Brahmanical tradition. Goddess Kali, for example, the presiding deity of the Tantrashastra, is popularly believed by many to be essentially non-Brahmanic, symbolizing power and destruction. The Tantras worship Kali as Brahmasvarupini, the manifest creativity of the unmanifest Mahakal

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Shiv or the Brahman. At a more profound level, the Tantras worship Kali as Vac, the emblem of *matrika* and *varna* i.e., the alphabet, the syllabary and the syllable, which is a quintessential form of worship in the Tantrashastra. In this *rahasyamurti*, Kali's garland of heads is nothing but a garland of syllabary, her extended tongue the symbol of the syllable and Kali herself is the manifest *varna*. Pintchman's understanding of the Goddess would have been enriched if she had incorporated a study of the Tantras, which would have provided her with insight into the spiritual and metaphysical premises of the Devi. It would have blended her notions of the philosophical and the ritual to generate a more wholistic understanding of the Goddess, removing in the process her webs of confusion.

In conclusion, Pintchman has added a sociological footnote to the book. "Despite the rich tradition of goddess reverence," the Indian woman, "has been and continues to be tremendously undervalued." Pintchman believes that the problem lies in the way the different images of the Great Goddess have been interpreted and emphasised to generate and support a continuing tradition which restricts choices that women have. The role of the Goddess in cosmogony represents the quintessential paradigm for a constructive, nurturant and beneficent expression of the feminine principle. The Goddess, by transforming pure power to material matrix creates the manifest world from which order arises. Similarly, the woman, by channelising her sexuality solely towards her husband in a martially confined universe, becomes a mother, giving birth to progeny. Unmarried and polygamous female sexuality represents chaos and matter out of place, threatening cultural institutions. Such unbridled *sakti* therefore must be channelised for the maintenance of social order. Pintchman holds that hitherto benevolent and "submissive" goddesses like Sita have been upheld as exemplars of appropriate female behaviour. It might be better to appropriate the images of more independent but "good" goddesses like Durga and Saraswati in "ways that are more empowering than the ways in which they have been appropriated in the past." Such equations are too simplistic and the claims problematic, but this requires a separate discussion on the sociology of the feminine.

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