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*Is Shakti Empowering for Women? Reflections on Feminism and the Hindu Goddess*

The study of the Hindu Goddess has been a consuming passion of mine for many years. It is, I hope, no longer unfashionable for historians of religion to admit an affective connection to their fields of study. I have long felt that scholars of religion (and perhaps scholars in general) fall into two camps: those who study what they like and those who study what they do not like. Or, to put it more elegantly, and to borrow the terminology of Paul Ricoeur (1970), there are those who engage in a 'hermeneutic of recovery' and those who engage in a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'. As far as the study of the Hindu Goddess is concerned, I would unabashedly place myself in the former category, though of course, like all scholars, I engage in both kinds of hermeneutic. Nevertheless, though I personally as a feminist find the idea of female power or *shakti* extremely attractive, I have in the past, especially in my published works (Erndl 1993), hesitated to posit any direct correlation between *shakti* and feminism in the Hindu or Indian context. I did not want to be accused of 'misrepresenting' Hinduism or imposing my own cultural biases on another culture. I now wonder, however, whether I had unwittingly accepted a deeply held assumption of Western scholarship, that in Hinduism women are universally subjugated and that feminism, however it might be defined, is an artifact of the West. I remember that at my PhD dissertation defense (in 1987), one of my committee members asked if there were Indian equivalents to the Western feminist spirituality movements which focus on Goddess imagery and worship. As I recall, I replied that I thought women's movements in India tended to be more concerned with economic issues, following a more socialist-feminist agenda and informed by a dialectical materialist ideology, borrowed from the West, which is extremely suspicious and critical of anything religious. From an Indian feminist point of view, I surmised, *shakti* and the Goddess, as part of the Hindu religious system, would be viewed as

contributing to the oppression of women. My committee members seemed satisfied by this answer, but I was not. First of all, what did I really know about what 'Indian feminists' thought or if there were anything which could be called the Indian feminist position? Secondly, what did I know about how *shakti* impacted on Hindu women's lives? Since then, I have tried to explore these questions more deeply. I have conducted fieldwork which focuses specifically on Hindu women's experience of the Goddess (Erndl 1997 and forthcoming). I have become more aware of the diversity and complexity of the rapidly changing women's movement in India (R. Kumar 1993; Liddle and Joshi 1986; Berry 1994; the magazine *Manushi: A Journal of Women and Society*). And I have become somewhat familiar with evolving critiques by Indian women thinkers of Western scholarship, feminism, and colonialist discourse (Mohanty 1991; Shiva 1989; Chakravarti 1989; N. Kumar 1994; Narayan 1989).

My current thinking is that there are definite connections between *shakti* and Hindu women's lives and between *shakti* and feminist movements in India. However, I must point out that *shakti* is a fluid and multivalent concept which is found in many different contexts and can be used, even manipulated, for many different purposes. I am not making any *a priori* claims. It is not inevitable that wherever *shakti* or the Goddess is found there will be positive implications for women; indeed, examples of the opposite can be found. The purpose of this essay is empirical rather than programmatic, that is, to suggest some ways in which *shakti* has been empowering for Hindu women and has been consciously embraced in contemporary Indian women's movements.

There are those who would claim that feminism is a Western ideology and that any feminist or women-oriented political movements in India must therefore be a result of 'Westernization', and are thus not 'authentically' Indian. To answer that claim, I quote two passages from Liddle and Joshi's study, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* (1986). The opening words of the book are as follows:

The women's movement has a long history in India. Much longer than the 'second wave' movement, or even the 'first wave' of earlier this century. The Shakti cults go back centuries, and the concept of Shakti—the female power principle—was recognized thousands of years ago. In this form the women's movement represents, not

merely an oppositional force fueled by anger, a rather negative approach to oppression, but the development of a distinctive female culture, a positive creative force inspiring men and women alike (Liddle and Joshi 1986: 5).

I find it interesting and significant that a study which uses an empirically oriented, social science methodology and focuses on the social construction of caste, class, and gender should begin by invoking such nebulous and empirically unverifiable concepts as *shakti* and 'women's power'. But *shakti* is so ubiquitous and appears in so many contexts that it cannot be ignored. Liddle and Joshi show that while the subordination of women is real enough, it varies according to caste, class, and other factors; it is not monolithic. In their conclusion, they argue that the British championed the cause of women in order to 'maintain colonialism and to demonstrate national superiority' (Liddle and Joshi 1986: 239). They further write:

A similar process occurs today whereby Indian women are portrayed in the West as abjectly submissive, without any reference to the contrary images and realities of female power. The notion that women's liberation is Western inspired is a further mystification of women's history in India, serving to emphasise the Indian form of male domination over the Western forms and perpetuating the myth of Western superiority in gender relations... Ideologically, cultural imperialism has introduced the notion of female inferiority which had no part in Indian culture, where female power and its containment was stressed (Liddle and Joshi 1986: 240).

It is not difficult to find examples in so-called 'traditional' Hindu religious life which attest to the positive impact of *shakti* and goddesses on women's religious lives. There is evidence to suggest that Shakta traditions tend to be more inclusive of women as practitioners and more accepting of women as leaders or gurus than do Vaishnava or Shaiva traditions. The work of Lisa Hallstrom (1999) suggests that the prominence of the woman saint Anandamayi Ma must be viewed against the backdrop of her Shakta-influenced Bengali milieu and, more specifically, the Shakta affiliation of her husband's family. Sanjukta Gupta (1991: 209) has observed that Shakta women saints have more religious freedom and higher status than Vaishnava women saints. June McDaniel, in her study of Bengali ecstasies, was able to find many Shakta holy women, but was less successful when it came to Vaishnava holy women (1989: 231, 315). In Tantric circles, women gurus are also fairly commonplace. A

famous example is the Tantric holy woman called the Bhairavi who was for a time Ramakrishna's guru (Kripal 1995: 117-30). The fact that holy women or women gurus can exist at all in male-dominated Hindu society is due to the divine model of femaleness which the Goddess provides. Several Indian scholars have argued that Shaktism, with its theology and ritual which place a high valuation on female embodiment, is in fact essentially feminist (Patel 1994; Khanna 1999). One of these, Tantric scholar Madhu Khanna, has established a Tantra Foundation in Delhi whose aim is not only to preserve Tantric traditions but to promote Tantra as relevant to the lives of contemporary women. Khanna has been heard to proclaim the motto, 'Tantra is a dharma for women!' (personal communication 1996, 1997).

Women gurus and holy women generally are called Mataji (respected Mother), which is also the most common name of the Goddess. The holy woman identifies herself with the Goddess and is so identified by others. I have written elsewhere of such Matajis, including a recent essay (Erndl 1997) describing the transformation of a Kangra village woman Tara Devi from a near invalid into a Goddess-possessed healer with a home temple and a large clientele. In that essay, I suggested that Tara Devi's identification with the Goddess was empowering for her and for other women in her village. I also suggested that because of the prominence of Goddess worship in Kangra and the cultural acceptance of women as her legitimate vehicle, Tara Devi had tapped into a traditional source of power for women. Tara Devi had to work within the constraints of her marriage to live her life dedicated to serving the Goddess, but other Matajis operate more independently, rejecting marriage, often at the behest of the Goddess herself. Such women are self-supporting through their healing and ritual activities and are often well respected and sought after in their communities (Erndl 1993: 113-34; forthcoming). Divine possession by the Goddess is one of the few culturally accepted forms of avoiding marriage in traditional Indian society, which allows few avenues of self-expression for women outside marriage. However, while Matajis are viewed in their communities as extraordinary women to whom the normal rules do not apply, they do exercise influence concerning women's roles. For example, Passu Mataji, a woman healer living in a village near Dharmasala in Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh, is very active in

the local Mahila Mandal (Women's Organization) and supports educational, social, and economic opportunities for women. More radically, while respecting the status of the householder and stressing interdependence and an ethic of caring among men, women, and children in the family, she believes that marriage is not necessarily a sacred duty for women. She told me that women should think long and hard before agreeing to marriage and that no one should be forced into marriage against her will (Erndl forthcoming). Such ideas she attributes to the influence of the Goddess in her life, for she is illiterate and has had virtually no exposure to Western ideas.

The concept of *shakti* is, of course, also widespread among Hindus generally, even those who are not specifically Shakta in their sectarian orientation, and is connected with life-giving female properties. Frédérique Marglin (1985a, 1985b) has argued that in Hindu culture female power is the power of life and death, a power which encompasses both auspicious and inauspicious aspects but is exclusively neither one nor the other. She further argues that the auspiciousness/inauspiciousness principle, that is, *shakti*, is profoundly nonhierarchical, presenting a different 'axis of value' (1985a: 40) than the hierarchical purity/impurity principle. While in general agreeing with Marglin, I would add that though *shakti* is a non-hierarchical value associated with women, and is openly acknowledged as such, even in Hindu hegemonic discourse, at the same time the Hindu patriarchal impulse to subordinate women is rooted in the acknowledgment that women are powerful. To support my claim, I quote two famous verses from Manu, which for me sum up Hindu hegemonic discourse on women:

In the home where women are worshiped, there the gods shower blessings. In the home where women are not worshiped, even virtuous deeds go unrewarded (*Laws of Manu*, III, 56).

By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent (*Laws of Manu*, V, 147-48).

The first verse glorifies women, celebrating their auspiciousness and life-giving powers, and instructs men to keep the women in the family happy. The second verse, on the other hand, prescribes women's dependence upon male protectors. These two verses, however, are

not at all contradictory. They recognize women's power and propose to control it for patriarchal purposes. These verses, however, do not necessarily portray what women are or were, but rather are representative of the highly influential and hegemonic ideology of the Brahmanical Sanskritic tradition, for which Manu is the most famous spokesperson.

One might say, then, that the task for Hindu feminists, on an ideological level, is to rescue *shakti* from its patriarchal prison. In using this metaphor I am reminded of a well-known book by Gail Omvedt on Indian women's movements entitled *We Will Smash This Prison!* (1980). The metaphor, however, should not be taken to imply that *shakti* is locked up so tightly that it cannot get out or has never before got out. The security of this prison is not as tight as its wardens would hope or like to believe. The *shakti* has seeped out underneath the doors and between the bars on numerous occasions. Furthermore, Hindu patriarchy is not monolithic or unchanging. The walls and bars, to continue the metaphor, are constantly being torn down and reconfigured. Some examples of that 'seepage' I have given above. Many others can be found in various folk, vernacular, and heterodox traditions; that is, those traditions which are at some remove from the Sanskritic Brahmanical traditions (Berreman 1993). Writing of the Indian women's movement in the 1980s, social historian Radha Kumar says:

If the interest in traditionalism led some to create images for feminists, others were more interested in defining ways in which ordinary, or unexceptional, women used the spaces which were traditionally accorded them to negotiate with their husbands, families, communities, and so on. Special attention was now paid, for example, to the way in which women simulated possession by the devi (goddess), particularly at times of pregnancy, in order to wrest concessions... Though this tactic was more commonly espoused by pregnant women to get special food during their pregnancy, accounts began to circulate of women who simulated possession in order to reform alcoholic husbands, or get money for household expenses, and this began to be recommended as a means of gaining some degree of power (R. Kumar 1993: 145-46).

There are those who would argue that *shakti*-related phenomena such as Goddess possession and women gurus are safety valves which ultimately function to preserve the patriarchal system. The

idea that women (and other disadvantaged people) engage in religious practices and experience spiritual empowerment as a kind of consolation prize for losing status in the 'real world' (a version of what has been called the 'deprivation theory') has been advanced by such scholars as I.M. Lewis (1971) and critiqued by Susan Starr Sered (1994) among others. I would respond that that depends on whose point of view one is speaking from and also on how much importance and legitimacy one gives to religious experience and spiritual phenomena as significant in their own right and not as merely indices of social, economic, and political status. But I postpone any detailed consideration of that question to a later time.

Instead, I will devote the remainder of this essay to some examples of contemporary Indian feminist activists, artists, and writers who have embraced *shakti* or the Goddess as both spiritually and socially liberating for women. I believe, however, that they are doing something different than contemporary Western feminists who are reviving Goddess imagery and worship (for example Christ 1979). Unlike the Western religious traditions in which female divine imagery has been obscured for centuries and has only recently been rediscovered by feminist theologians (or thealogians), Hinduism has had popular, pervasive, and longstanding Goddess traditions for many centuries. *Shakti* is part of the mainstream; it is not at all radical or shocking for a Hindu to say that God is a woman or to talk about women being powerful.

Some Indian feminists realize this, and are promoting *shakti* and Goddess images to generate a feminist consciousness among a broad base of women, especially more traditional women for whom powerful religious images carry more weight than do political rhetoric and dialectical materialist analyses. I do not mean to imply that these Indian feminists are cynically exploiting religious images and ideas for their own ends. Rather, I think that many Indian feminists are expanding their own visions of feminism to include a spiritual dimension and are finding powerful resources within their own traditions.

One example of such a feminist is Abha Bhaiya, director of the Delhi-based women's development resource center, Jagori. Raised in a conservative Rajasthani Hindu family, Bhaiya had for a time turned away from religion as her feminist consciousness developed. More recently, however, she has become interested in spirituality,

traveling throughout the countryside visiting Goddess temples and holy women in a quest for positive female images both for her personal spiritual fulfillment and to integrate into her activist work with women (personal communication 1997). Thus, her feminism is one which is not alienated from the spiritual pulse of the grass-roots level.

As a general observation, I have noticed that the Indian women's journal *Manushi* has in recent years included many more articles on goddesses, women *bhakti* saints, and other Indian cultural resources than in the first few years since its inception in 1979, when the journal tended to employ a more strictly socialist-feminist approach which ignored or denigrated religious and other traditional cultural forms. I think this is part of a general trend in Indian women's movements to shift away from reliance on purely Western analytical modes such as dialectical materialism, to embrace Indian cultural resources, and to include women who have a religious outlook. It is also significant that the most prolific press publishing books on Indian women is called Kali for Women, after the Hindu Goddess Kali. Hindu philosopher Lina Gupta has said, 'It is in the goddess Kali that I find the inherent power of women made explicit' (1991: 20). She has urged contemporary Hindu women to identify with Kali in her most liberating aspects, going beyond the 'patriarchal view of the goddess, and woman, as untamed and unsubjected and therefore in need of control' (1991: 37).

Bharata Natyam dancer, graphic artist and activist Chandralekha is known for her feminist appropriation of the Kali image, 'from whom all traces of manic bloodlust had been removed, though she continued to wield weapons of destruction, chosen by Chandralekha to represent the different religious communities of India' (R. Kumar 1993: 145). In an interview in 1983 with Manjulika Dube of *The Book Review*, Chandralekha said, 'We need to... understand Shakti... as an energy within ourselves which generates the power to act... We have to use our ears and eyes and see the creative energies in us... Personally, I believe this energy is directly related to the Shakti cults which are still very strong in our culture. I feel it in my own body and consciousness' (quoted in Liddle and Joshi 1986: 5).

Taking a somewhat different approach, ecofeminist Vandana Shiva (1989) has argued that gender subordination and patriarchy have

intensified in India through what she calls 'maldevelopment' and advocates a return to values and practices associated with Prakriti, the feminine principle. Lesbian-feminist poet Suniti Namjoshi has evoked stories and images of Hindu goddesses in her writings (1989). Writer Giti Thadani (1996) has gone so far as to locate evidence of a positive lesbian identity in ancient myths and images of goddesses and other female figures, which she argues was later obscured by Brahminical hegemony and the legacy of colonialism. Whether or not such assertions are historically valid is not at issue here. Rather, I wish to point out that it is significant that an Indian lesbian-feminist has chosen to embrace and recover elements of 'her' tradition, rather than reject it wholesale.

Another artist-activist who has incorporated Goddess images into her work is Sheba Chhachhi. Based in Delhi, Chhachhi is both a professional photographer and a creator of multi-media installations. Her photos documenting the women's movement have been widely credited (R. Kumar 1993) and exhibited internationally. But she sees her 'real work' as putting together a series of exhibits, most recently *Wild Mothers I and II*. The *Wild Mothers* series was inspired by a pilgrimage Chhachhi made to Kamakhya, the temple in Assam where the *yoni* or female organ of the Goddess is enshrined and where female and male ascetics perform Tantric practices in caves on the hillsides. These installations, bringing together historical and contemporary representations using poetry, song, narrative, photography, sculpture, and painting, are multi-media excursions into the lives of Khepisi, Matajis, and Yoginis, women 'who dare to define themselves in relation to the metaphysical rather than the social' (Chhachhi 1993: 150). Chhachhi sees such women as dangerous in that, while living in a patriarchal culture, they interrogate and subvert the assumptions underlying women's subordination (Chhachhi 1993: 151). She is, however, keenly aware of the potential for religious images, including those of female power and divinity, to be manipulated by fundamentalist ideologies and sees her work as countering such tendencies. Although much of her work is informed by Hindu Goddess images, she is interested in all spirituality which transcends the boundaries of institutional religions and thus includes in her exhibit images from Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism as well. When I asked her how her interest in the Goddess was viewed within the feminist community, she said

'In the beginning I was quite alone. Now, for the past five or six years, I have more company' (personal communication 1996).

One of the challenges which Indian feminists face is to generate among women a sense of identity and common cause with other women as women across caste, class, regional, linguistic, religious, and kinship lines. This identity is not a given; it must be constructed, and for Indian feminists, there are compelling political reasons to do so. *Shakti* is the female creative power which cuts across other identity boundaries and is thus effectively used to generate community among women. I was particularly interested to hear of the organizing strategies employed in Mahila Mandals, women's organizations, in Kangra villages not far from my own fieldwork site in Kangra. Anthropologist Kim Berry, who has been conducting a study of Mahila Mandals in Kangra, presented a paper (Berry 1994) in which she reported that Sutra, a development group, holds camps for women in Mahila Mandals. At these camps, women share stories of their common sorrows and joys (*dukh-sukh*), see slides of 'pre-Aryan goddesses', discuss the reclaiming of menstruation and reproductive powers, and shout slogans such as 'Jay Mahila Shakti' (Victory to Women's Power). Berry observed women at these camps dancing with their long hair flying loose and with their *cunnis* (long headscarves) discarded. The Mahila Mandals have mobilized for such actions as demanding the building of schools, the provision of water supplies for their villages, and the closure of alcohol shops. They believe they can accomplish these goals, because, as one woman was heard to say, 'Women's *shakti* is very great; it can shake not only the DC [District Commissioner] but the PM [Prime Minister]'.

In this essay, I have focused on the positive aspects of the question, 'Is *shakti* empowering for women?' I acknowledge and even caution that the answer to such a question can only be context specific. The context in which I speak is as a feminist and scholar of Hinduism in the post-colonial era who is sympathetic to both Indian feminist movements and to traditions of the divine feminine. Not surprisingly, I look for spaces in which the two come together and reinforce, even enrich, each other. While not excluding the possibility of other interpretations, I see ample scope for feminists to embrace the concept of *shakti*, should they choose to do so. Thus, from where I stand now, in answering the question, 'Is *shakti*

empowering for women?', I would prefer to reply with a qualified 'yes' than with a qualified 'no'.

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