

Some Goddess Rituals in Non-Narrative Folk Song of India

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This paper¹ is intended to present an outline of the non-narrative folk songs of Devi, 'goddess,' in north Indian Hindu society. This topic has not been investigated properly from the point of view of folklore, the main difficulty being the absence of proper data.

I collected 454 folk songs of Devi in my field work during 1961-63.² These songs give details of different rituals of Devi worship. They present the mild and fierce forms of Devi and deal with the psychological reasons for worship, e.g., fear, hope, love, longing, joy, sorrow, thankfulness, etc. Goddesses as well as humans are described as full of emotions. They laugh in happiness, howl in anger and sob in sorrow or pity. Religion deals with both negative and positive approaches to life and in folklore—one of the best sources for the study of human behavior in its natural form—we see this trait reflected. The two primary emotions of religious significance found in the folk songs are bliss and awe. These seem to be the main motivations for Devi worship. The feeling of having committed an error or sin is another reason for worship. Religious acts seem to have a therapeutic significance for a guilty person and presumably free the individual from the burden of guilt through the medium of different rituals. There is always a chance for anyone to improve his *karma*. Consider the following song which presents a very good description of the feelings of one pilgrim:

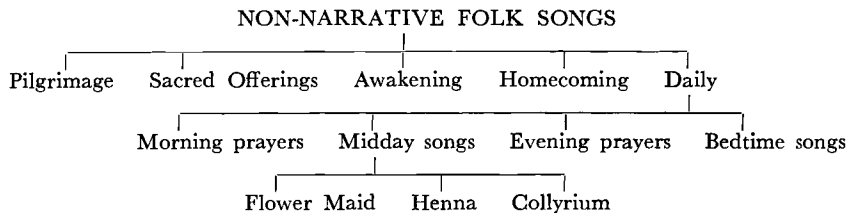
1. My thanks are due to Dr. Satyendra and to my husband Anoop for their guidance and suggestions on the subject matter of this paper. I am also thankful to Henry Sender and Linda Wentink for their editorial help.

2. The songs given here are from the author's Ph.D. dissertation "The Devi in the Folk Literature of the Hindi Area," 1969 (unpublished), K. M. Institute of Hindi Studies and Linguistics, Agra University, Agra.

On seeing the gram field,
 Don't set your heart on it, O Mother.
 If you do set your heart on it,
 Be sure to pay for it, O Mother.
 Seeing someone else's woman,
 Don't give your heart to her, O Mother.
 If you give your heart to her,
 Think of her as your sister, O Mother.

It is normal to have the desire to eat tender gram pods or to become attracted to a beautiful girl, but since the pilgrim is supposed to think and do only good, he finds an alternative in both these cases. The strength of his feelings determines the degree of his religiosity. His attitude toward the young, beautiful woman and the green gram pods becomes positive. He pays for the pods honestly and can only respect and protect the girl as he would his own sister. The repetition of the phrase "O Mother" comes at the end of every line and refers to the Mother Goddess. The devotee pledges the sincerity of his thoughts and actions in the name of the Mother Goddess. This song has within it the germ of the Hindu formula of four ends in human life, termed in Sanskrit *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksa*. The first three ends are achieved during one's lifetime whereas the fourth, *moksa*, is realized only after death. *Dharma* can be roughly translated as righteousness, morality or duty. *Artha* means wealth. *Kama* is worldly desires and pleasures; *moksa* is liberation. This formula is considered to give a balance to life since it takes care of the social, moral, physical and spiritual needs of the average person. This song voices the belief that the pursuit of pleasure and the acquisition of wealth should always be subject to moral laws. Only then can man achieve his ultimate end—liberation.

There are many goddesses and all of them are worshipped in almost the same way. There are folk songs for all kinds of rituals. The narrative folk songs are not very popular among worshippers as they are very long and therefore sung by professionals. Hiring professional folk singers is a costly affair and requires much time and planning. Here we will deal with only a few non-narrative popular folk songs. These can be classified as follows:



The pilgrimage songs

The songs known as *jat ke git*, 'songs of pilgrimage,' are sung everyday in the months of *Chait* and *Kwar*.³ In these months the devotees go on pilgrimages to various temples. A detailed work on this aspect had been done in Hindi by Satyendra (1960).

The pilgrimages are undertaken for various purposes: to carry out a special penance, to fulfill a vow, or to ask for a specific favor. A person who suffers from a disease, or one who wants to have male offspring, wealth, or a good harvest vows to go on a Devi pilgrimage. If his wish comes true he undertakes the journey as soon as possible. Sometimes the Devi appears in the dreams of a devotee and instructs him to go on a pilgrimage. The devotee then undertakes a pilgrimage known as *devi ka adesh* or 'the order of the goddess'. Psychologically these types of dreams are considered as "channels of communication with the supernatural" (Bourguignon, 1972) and a religiously inclined person takes them very seriously. If he avoids fulfilling his vows, or forgets them, or cannot carry out the desire of Devi, then it is believed that Devi might do great harm to him, his family, or his belongings. She will do this to make her desires known to humans so that they will subsequently please her. As soon as the devotee fulfills his vow, she is pacified.

The pilgrimage songs very often make mention of the four ends of human life (see song 1). Achieving these ends is popular not only among the Devi worshippers, but among all Hindus. Since the Hindus believe that good *karma* leads them closer to liberation and visiting holy places is considered good *karma*, pilgrimages are given a special significance.

The devotees usually consult a priest before going on a pilgrimage. The priest of a Devi temple is always male. He performs everyday services in the temple, a routine beginning early in the morning and ending with the evening prayers. During the days of Devi festivals the priests perform a more elaborate *puja*, 'worship'.

Pathwari, 'the goddess of the path,' is worshipped by the pilgrims and their families to insure success of the pilgrimage. There is a special place in the outskirts of every village which is known as *pathwari ka than*, 'the place of Pathwari'. There the devotees bow their heads in honor of Pathwari before leaving or entering a village.

The journey starts with songs which continue until the devotees reach the temple. These songs describe the beauty of the Devi temple,

3. The Indian month of Chait is from approximately March 15 to April 14 and Kwar from September 15 to October 14.

the difficulties of travel, the economic problems of poor pilgrims, and most of all the glory of the Great Mother. The knowledge that all pilgrims are equal for the Great Mother gives poor pilgrims great satisfaction.

In the months when pilgrimages are undertaken special buses and trains go to the different holy places. They are very crowded and sometimes it is impossible to get a ticket or a seat. Some folk songs describe these difficulties of travel (see song 2).

One can find people of all ages going on pilgrimage, but it is rather rare to take children on such a long journey. Women are more religious-minded than men; whenever a woman goes on a pilgrimage, the male members of her family accompany her. Sometimes the entire family goes together if they had vowed to do so. Song three describes how a couple solves all their domestic problems and goes on a pilgrimage.

Many rituals are performed when the decision to visit a Devi temple is made. The priest is consulted to decide the auspicious time for travel. Mother prepares special food to take along. Sister puts a *tilak*, 'red mark,' on the forehead of her brother to wish him good luck and safe return since there could be difficulties on the way. Sometimes part of the journey must be made on foot. Generally the pilgrims from one village travel together, in which case their departure becomes a matter of social celebration. The entire village participates in this type of ceremony from the beginning of the pilgrimage until the return of the pilgrims.

The songs of sacred offerings

The songs sung when making sacred offerings to a Devi are known as *bhet ke git*. If a devotee plans to visit a Devi temple or wants to perform *puja* 'worship' in his own home he has to make arrangements ahead of time. He rises early in the morning and, if possible, takes a bath in a holy river. If there is no river nearby he bathes in a lake, pond, or in his bathroom. While bathing he chants the *mantra*, 'prayer,' which invokes the holy rivers to be present in his water. Bathing before any religious ceremony is essential; without bathing no religious ceremony can be performed. The body must be cleansed of physical pollution before the soul can be purified by the chanting of holy *mantra*.

After his bath the devotee collects materials to be used in the Devi *puja*. Yoghurt, cow's milk, flowers, leaves, water, a coconut, cloves, sweets, betel leaves, incense, a five *paisa* coin, rice, vermilion, and yellow or red clothes are among the most popular things offered to Devi. Devi

is believed to be very fond of flowers; she especially likes flowers from *Nandanavana* and *Kesaravana*, two heavenly gardens. It is believed that Devi lives in them, but they exist only in the imagination of the worshippers.

In the folklore of the Himalayas two different kinds of heavenly flowers are mentioned. These are *masi* and *raimasi*. The two imaginary flowers are believed to be the favorite flowers of the goddess *Nanda*. A devotee tries hard to find these flowers, but does not succeed. Finally he asks an old woman:

Where could the *masi* flowers be
O, where could the *masi* flowers be?

The old woman tells him the secret of *masi* flowers and he determines to find them and offer them to the goddess *Nanda*:

High in the Himalayas bloom the *masi* flowers.
Which goddess should I offer the *masi* flowers to?
To the goddess *Nanda* I will offer the *masi* flowers.

The materials used for the *puja* should always be pure. In one song a devotee seems to be very much disillusioned because every worldly thing is polluted. He does not know what he can offer to the Mother Goddess:

O Mother, how can I offer you the milk of a cow?
The calf has polluted it; say 'Victory, Victory.'
O Mother, how can I offer you the water of the Ganges?
The fish have polluted it; say 'Victory, Victory.'

In some songs there is an account of the sacrifice of goats, ducks, chickens, or water buffaloes at the time of the Devi worship, but this type of song is rare. The fact that in my collection of 454 songs only five or six mention sacrifice is evidence of the scarcity of animal sacrifice in the Hindi speaking area. Hindus believe that the mental tranquillity necessary for worship is achieved with great difficulty by those who habitually eat meat, fish and eggs (Basak, 1953). Only some *Rajputs*, people of the warrior class, and people of the untouchable class sacrifice animals at the time of a *puja*. In the foothills of the Himalayas and in Bengal people are usually non-vegetarians and there we find the custom of animal sacrifice as well. In most temples animal sacrifice is strictly prohibited. In some places there is a symbolic sacrifice; there the worshippers make a goat out of flour dough to sacrifice instead of

a real goat.

The devotee collects materials necessary for the *puja* and goes to the Devi temple. He takes off his shoes at the temple gate, washes his hands and feet and then makes a circumambulation of the temple. This is called *pradaksina* or *parikrama* in Sanskrit and *phere* in Hindi, and is considered to be the ritual performed on any temple visit although the exact routine varies from temple to temple (Bharati, 1970). The Tantric literature is full of elaborate instructions regarding circumambulation. While walking around the temple, the worshipper continuously chants the holy name of the goddess. He throws a flower and a *paisa* coin and bows his head in respect to each of the idols that comes along his way.

After circumambulation the devotee performs the *puja*. He offers the sacred offerings to Devi and requests her to fulfill his desires. An unmarried girl prays for a good husband, the married one for male offspring and for the long life of her husband, the poor for money and the blind for eyes. The goddess is shown as granting everyone's wish (see song 5).

The ceremonial proceedings consist mainly of *puja* and an offering ritual. At the end of the ritual some of the devotees dance in honor of the goddess. Men and women both take part in these dances. The village temples are usually small so most of the ceremonies take place outside of them. The dance usually starts with the beating of drums and the singing of Devi songs. It starts slowly; gradually it picks up momentum and then becomes very fast. Some dances like *jhabuka* and *jhwara* are named for their quick tempo, swift stepping and jerky movements. In *cacari* the dancers form a circle and dance. While dancing some people become possessed by the goddess. We will discuss this phenomenon as it appears in the awakening songs.

The awakening songs

In certain religious and social ceremonies called *jagaran* people remain awake and sing songs throughout the night. It is during the days of *Devi puja* that the devotees observe the *jagaran*. They play drums, keep a lamp burning and continue singing all through the night. As it is considered inauspicious if the light is extinguished, the devotees keep refilling it with oil. Songs are sung both by the pilgrims and by family members who could not go on the pilgrimage. These songs are quite lengthy as they include the names of all family members and close friends. For example, if the father-in-law went on a pilgrimage the

singers would add the names of all his family members and friends to the list of pilgrims even though they did not actually go. The purpose of this is to help pass time. There are a limited number of songs memorized by a family and some of these songs can hardly be called religious. The singers will add *Devi, Mata, Mai*, all meaning 'Mother Goddess,' to any song and thus regard it as religious (see song 6).

During the time of the *jagaran* some people become possessed by a goddess. Psychologically this state of mind is called a hallucinatory or visionary state; in the ethnographical literature it is known as a trance and refers to an altered state of consciousness (Bourguignon, 1972). When a person is possessed by a goddess he is in a possession trance. In such cases the actions and words of the possessed person are believed to be those of the goddess who has possessed him. He starts behaving abnormally; his eyes become big and red and either start rolling or become fixated. His body starts trembling and he becomes insensitive to touch, pain, or taste. He possesses vigorous energy. He is honored with flowers, incense, rice and other sacred offerings used for *Devi puja* because he is believed to be a manifestation of the goddess who possesses him. The possessed person sometimes shouts or jerks his body and may speak if he wishes to. If the goddess in the possessed person speaks it is normally a demand for an elaborate *puja*.

The possessed persons are normally very religious minded and are considered psychologically weak and sensitive. Women become possessed more frequently than men. Sometimes a young girl six or seven years of age will be possessed by a goddess. The possessed girl is called a *deviji*, 'the goddess'. The devotees of the Mother Goddess then make many offerings to her since they consider her a manifestation of the Mother Goddess herself. People try to please *deviji* with the expectation that she may be kind to them and fulfill their desires. The period of this type of possession normally ends when the girl reaches puberty. On all religious occasions such possessed girls spend their time singing and praying to the Mother Goddess and may occasionally go into a trance.

The homecoming songs

The songs sung when the pilgrims come back from their pilgrimages are called *lauta ke git* which literally means 'the songs of coming back'. These songs are sung by the pilgrims on their way back and by their family members and friends who welcome them at the place of *pathwari*. The songs describe the feelings of the pilgrims toward their pilgrimage and the love and happiness of their family members at their safe return.

The devotees express sorrow at not being able to stay in a Devi temple forever, but at the same time they are happy to rejoin their families who had been waiting and wishing for their homecoming.

The subject matter of homecoming songs is the beauty of the Devi temple, the devotion of the pilgrims and songs of *pathwari* (see song 7). They also contain amazing stories about the greatness of the goddess. People sing songs and play drums on this occasion as it is considered a great time for rejoicing and feasts.

The daily songs

In an average Hindu family the daily worship is performed at home. People either have a *puja* room or select a corner of a room for this purpose where small images of different deities are placed. These images are normally smaller than those at the temple. They are made of silver, copper, brass, stone or clay. Rich people sometimes have gold images. Gold images can also be seen in big temples. The Devi worshippers place the image of their *istadevi*, 'tutelary goddess,' and other deities in the *puja* room. Personal care of the images is one of the greatest concerns of the worshippers. They perform the rituals of waking the image up with morning prayers, bathing it, decorating it, offering it meals and putting it to bed in the evening with the evening services and bedtime songs. Here we will deal with the daily *puja* of the goddess.

The morning prayers

In the household of a devout Hindu the daily religious practices start before dawn. The worshipper of Devi gets up early in the morning, chants the name of his chosen deity and takes a bath, preferably in cold water, to purify his body from pollution. He then recites the morning prayers. The morning worship can be performed at a river bank, in a temple, or in the *puja* room of the house. Home is the most important center for daily observances.

Like all Hindu religious rituals the *Devi puja* starts with the sprinkling of water, an act which symbolizes purifying the atmosphere. If the devotee wishes to perform the *puja* in a temple he usually carries a container filled with water with him. He may sprinkle a little water on the road in front of him in order to preserve his ritual purity. The *puja* in a temple is more elaborate and therefore longer. However, during the days of special festivals the religious services at home are also elaborate. Here we will discuss the *puja* ceremony in a temple as it is done by a bigger group on a larger scale.

The worshippers treat their chosen deities as living entities. The personal care of Devi's image and her temple is a very important duty for a worshipper and for the priest. The priest, like every other devotee, gets up in the morning, takes a bath and cleans the temple. Cleaning the temple is considered a very holy job. In some songs the gods are shown as servants of Devi who clean her temple, make her bed, and fetch water for the plants of Devi's garden (see song 8). These songs convey the supremacy of Devi over all the other gods.

After cleaning the temple the priest requests Devi to wake up. Many devotees gather at the temple doors to get the first glimpse of Devi. The priest removes the veil from the image of Devi and the devotees become very emotional. They sing the morning prayers while intermittently ringing bells and waving flames called *arati*. Most of the prayers are serious (see song 9). Others have a more humorous tone. In song ten, for example, the devotees make fun of a lazy priest who did not wake up in time to perform his morning prayers.

After the prayer is over Devi is served refreshments. Milk, yoghurt, sweets, fruits and nuts are first served to Devi and then distributed among the worshippers and visitors. This sacred or blessed food is called *prasad*. The devotee first puts a pinch of *prasad* on his head to honor it, then eats the rest of it. He may take it home to share with his family or friends if he wishes to do so. It is considered very inauspicious to refuse or throw away the *prasad*.

The midday songs: Collyrium, Henna and Flower Maid

The midday religious services are performed mostly by women and priests. Indian women like to go to a temple for *puja*. They observe fasts in honor of different gods and goddesses. On the days of Devi festivals they fast to please the goddess. Women have very little to do during the day so most of their religious activities take place then. They assemble in groups and celebrate *puja* in a house or go to a Devi temple together. On their way they may sing songs of Devi's greatness. On reaching the Devi temple they perform services to the Mother Goddess by bathing, decorating and honoring the image. They sing songs of Devi's beauty and decorate the image with beautiful dresses, ornaments and garlands of flowers.

Collyrium is applied to the eyes of the Devi image and the songs sung at this time are called *kajal ke git* which means 'the songs of collyrium'.

On all auspicious occasions Hindu women apply *henna* to their

palms, feet and nails. After bathing the image of Devi the women decorate it and apply *henna* to Devi's palms. They sing songs while stripping the leaves off the *henna* plant, grinding the leaves into a thick paste and applying it first to Devi's palms and then to each others' palms. When the paste dries it leaves beautiful red or yellow designs. The songs sung on this occasion are known as *mehadi ke git* which means 'the songs of henna'.

Flowers are considered very important for all Hindu ceremonies. Devi is believed to be very fond of flowers. *Malin*, 'gardener's wife or daughter,' is believed to be very dear to Devi. There are many songs about *Malin* and her skill in making beautiful garlands for Devi. *Malin* is believed to be a sorceress who performs a special expiatory service whenever children suffer from smallpox. The songs about flowers and *Malin* are known as *Malin ke git*, meaning 'the songs of the flower maid'.

The evening prayers

The evening prayers are very much like the morning prayers. The priest and the devotees take baths once again to purify themselves from physical pollution. If they cannot take a bath they wash their hands, feet and face and sprinkle water on their heads and bodies. This is called *panca snana*, 'bathing the five,' or in other words the face, two feet and two hands. They change their clothes and recite *mantras* for the purification of the body, soul and atmosphere. They sprinkle water around and then start their prayers. *Arati*, the lamp ceremony of waving flames in front of the goddess, once more takes place. Devi is offered different foods and *prasad* is again distributed among the worshippers and visitors.

The bedtime songs

At the end of the evening ceremony the goddess is dressed in beautiful sleeping clothes. Her bed is made and decorated with garlands of flowers. The goddess is put to sleep and her devotees sing bedtime songs (see song 13). The devotees feel very secure even when the goddess sleeps because they believe that even in her sleep the goddess is aware of everything and is concerned for them. Many songs describe this concern of Devi for her devotees. In one song she turned her lion into a statue because he started frightening her pilgrims when he thought she was sleeping. Except for the days when devotees observe an awakening ceremony the bedtime ceremony and songs of Devi are the last religious rituals of the day.

Song Texts

1. 'Victory, Victory' to the goddess Gaura, the Mother who rides the lion.
(You are) bestower of righteousness, wealth, enjoyments, and liberation.
'Victory, Victory' to the goddess Gaura, the Mother who rides the lion.
2. O Languriya,⁴ I'm going to Karauli and it's getting late.
Please don't argue about the ticket.
My father-in-law went for a Devi pilgrimage.
My mother-in-law is giving a holy feast.
Please don't argue about the ticket.
3. O darling, let us go and worship the goddess Jalapa, O Mother.
The duties of milking (the cow) and caring for the baby son cannot be neglected, O Mother.
Leave the responsibility of milk to the milk maid (and) hire a nurse for the son, O Mother.
4. Say 'Victory, Victory' to the great goddess.
O Mother, how can I offer you the milk of a cow?
The calf has polluted it, say 'Victory, Victory'.
O Mother, how can I offer you the water of the Ganges?
The fish have polluted it, say 'Victory, Victory'.
O Mother, I picked the flowers to make your bed.
The bees have polluted them, say 'Victory, Victory'.
5. The temple of Devi Durga is unfathomable.
Who is praying for food and wealth? Who is praying for a son?
Who is praying for health? Who is praying for beauty?
The poor are praying for food and wealth, the happy ones for beauty.
The leper is praying for his health and the barren for a son.
The temple of Devi Durga is unfathomable.
She gives food and wealth to the poor, beauty to the happy ones.
Mother gives health to the leper and a son to the barren.
The temple of Devi Durga is unfathomable.
6. It is best to live in the temple of the goddess.
It is best to dwell in the temple of the Mother.
O Mother, I have many brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law,
But without my father-in-law everything is meaningless.
O Mother, I have many brothers and sisters,
But without my father everything is meaningless.
7. O queen Rukmini, get up and worship Pathwari.
What good is the worship of Pathwari?
(You) get good food, (you) get riches, (you) get a family of sons.
(Your) husband (becomes) dominant.
O queen Rukmini, get up and worship Pathwari.
8. O Innocent Mother, who knows all that is in your inner heart!
Pawan⁵ swept (your floors), Indra⁶ sprinkled (your grounds).
Vishwakarma⁷ made your beds and all the gods have assembled (to serve

4. Languriya is believed to be one of the attendants of Devi.

5. Pawan is the Wind god.

6. Indra is the king of the gods.

7. Vishwakarma is a deity who is supposed to have invented all handicrafts and arts.

- you).
9. O Mother, thy temple is high on the mountain, the Ganges is flowing below.
 Mother of Vindhyaal mountain, O Mother of Vindhyaal mountain,
 You took birth in the house of Nanda, the milkman, and appeared in
 Mathura.
 When Kansa the (demon) king was about to hurl you down, (you) freed
 (yourself) and went to the sky.
 O arrogant king, why are you so proud?
 O king! Where did you get such a mean spirit?
 For your destruction, Kanhai,⁸ the Absolute Brahma, has manifested him-
 self.
 You became the lightning, you came to the mountain.
 You made your dwelling in the mountain, you are liked by the gods.
 I am praying with folded hands; you listen to me, O dark colored goddess!
 Having meditated on your feet, Dhanu⁹ is singing of your glory.
 We are your children and you are our Mother.
10. The Mother of the universe got up, Jalapa got up, the whole world got up.
 Get up, O priest, it is time for the lamp ceremony.
 All the temple doors are closed.
 The worshipper Dhadhu is waiting for the lamp ceremony.
 You get up, O priest, it is time for the lamp ceremony.
11. I went near the temple.
 I stripped off the long leaves.
 I turned over the grinding stone and muller.
 I ground the green leaves.
Henna is applied to (the palms of) my goddess.
12. The flower maid brought flowers from the Nandan forest.
 From the Nandan forest, from the Kesar forest.
 The flower maid brought flowers from the Nandan forest.
 The little, little flower maid has long, long hair.
 (She) is plucking the flowers from the land of the goddess.
13. My innocent Mother is sleeping on the bed, under a bed sheet.
 Her bedding is red, her pillow is red, and (she is sleeping) covered with
 a bed sheet.
 My innocent Mother is sleeping on the bed, under a bed sheet.

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8. Kanhai is an epithet of Krishna.

9. Dhanu is a devotee of Devi.