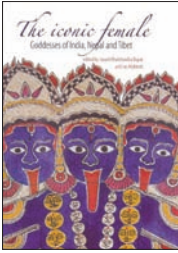


## India



Jayant Bhalchandra Babat and Ian Mabbett, eds., *The Iconic Female: Goddesses of India, Nepal and Tibet*

Clayton, Vic: Monash University Press, 2008. xiv + 230 pages. b/w photos, bibliography, index. Paperback, AUD\$44.95. ISBN 978-1-876924-66-9.

THIS IS THE first book on Indian religions to be published by Monash University Press, and is a collection of essays about the forms of the Goddess in India by Australian scholars who all have extensive fieldwork experience in South Asia. In the opening chapter the editors review work on the Goddess, rightly giving special place to Madeleine Biardeau, but moving on to stress the importance of research on regional and local cultures. Nevertheless both “top down” and “bottom up” processes must be considered.

After this somewhat woolly introduction to the topic which is itself highly diffuse and variable, the individual contributions begin, naturally enough, with the Indus Valley civilization and related archaeological evidence. Angelo Andrea Di Castro reviews the archaeological evidence from the Palaeolithic to Early Historic period and finds discontinuity and disunity in the “goddess cult in ancient India,” rather than a continuous tradition.

Greg Bailey looks at the role of Pārvatī as Gaṇeśa’s mother in the rather neglected *Gaṇeśa Purāṇa* (hereafter *GP*) (fourteenth–sixteenth century) from Maharashtra, analyzing several myths therein where the Goddess’s maternal instincts override her divine qualities. Rather strangely, since there are several strong parallels in the *GP* with the *Bhāvagata Purāṇa* stories of Kṛṣṇa’s childhood, Bailey only mentions Kṛṣṇa in the tenth book of the *Bhāvagata Purāṇa* in his final paragraph and then only as “a likely broad influence.” The problem that Bailey finds posed by Pārvatī, is whether she is “creator of *māyā* or victim of *māyā*” or simply the situation she is placed in by being made, by the creator(s) of *GP*, to parallel Krishna’s foster mother, Yaśodā?

Rashmi Desai argues that the Reṇukā story in the *Mahābhārata* is a mini epic with Paraśurāma as the hero. Paraśurāma is the greatest of the Bhṛgu heroes, and the inclusion of the story is clearly part of the process of the “bhṛguisation” of the epic.

In by far the longest chapter, Jayant Bhalchandra Bapat usefully reviews the Lajjāgaurī figure, and refers to ethnographic accounts of the image, not least from Marathi sources. However, in his summary of his own paper in the opening chapter, “Contextualising the Goddess,” he claims to have refuted claims that the image is “pornographic,” but does not as far as I can see do so explicitly; certainly he concedes that it may be viewed as “Tantric.” I well remember Leroy Davidson remarking to me years ago that he thought Kramrisch’s claim that the Lajjāgaurī figure is about to give birth to be unjustifiable, and Davidson took the view that the figure was rather “ready and waiting” for sexual intercourse. Surely this meaning should

be added to the range of meanings that Bapat accepts? There are instances of images on temples of women actually giving birth with the baby half out: no problem in representing birth if that is what is intended. In many cases Lajjāgaurī is represented as wearing a girdle, which is surely definitive proof that she is not giving birth.

John Dupuche makes a careful study of the Kula ritual as described in chapter 29 of Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka*, developing further the analysis given in his 2003 book on the same chapter, and showing how the Kula tradition was lived, and how it achieved its purpose. He shows how Abhinavagupta demythologizes the fearsome *yoginīs* and replaces them with the human sexual partner who destroys the limited sense of the self.

David Templeman examines the way the *dākinī*, that “sometimes nuisance-like” minor Indian deity, became a major figure in the Tibetan tantric tradition, bestowing gnosis. On the grounds that hagiography gives the fullest descriptions of the role of *dākinī* in imparting gnosis, he examines Kunga Drolchog's life of the eleventh century Indian *mahāsiddha* Kṛṣṇācārya, where indeed Templeman suggests that the role of *dākinī* may be found in its most expanded and detailed form. Alongside the account of the *mahāsiddha* physically entering the *Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala* in the sacred land of Ugyen, Templeman retells Tucci's fascinating story of meeting a Tibetan hermit in the 1930s who claimed never to feel lonely because he could always listen in to the *dākinī* chatter in his current meditation *maṇḍala*.

Max Harcourt looks at the way the bard caste (*cāraṇa*) in Rajasthan and northern and peninsular Gujarat exercised a moral regulatory function through the institution of self-harm (*trāga*), and argues that this capacity stemmed from the belief that Cāraṇa incarnations of Devī were the guardians of moral order. However, he himself concedes that it was paradoxical that the male bards inherited the Cāraṇī Devī's moral regulatory function, not the female members of the caste who were the actual vehicles of the goddess's incarnation.

Effy George studies the devotional songs that women of the Rabari pastoralist caste in a seaside village on the Saurashtran peninsular sing to their supreme deity, Mammai Mātājī. Their songs are the conduit for connecting to and summoning the goddess, but her name is rarely mentioned and no description of her is given. The Rabaris have a spiritual patriarch and matriarch, the Bhuwa Atta and Bhuwi Ma. The ritual of her worship is described in detail. We may note here that one hymn to the goddess is sung throughout the time that the patriarch is possessed by the goddess; and that during his state of possession, the Bhuwi, the matriarch, hosts his spirit, his *śakti*, which has been displaced by Mammai.

The final chapter is Marika Vicziany and Jayant Bhalchandra Bapat's account of the the Khāḍādevī temple behind the the Kolaba police station in Mumbai. On occasion hysterical women are taken to the temple by the police to determine whether or not they are genuinely possessed. The temple is perhaps the oldest and most important Koḷī temple in Mumbai. Although the Koḷī fisher people, the original inhabitants of the seven islands that were turned into Mumbai, are becoming more and more integrated into the popular culture of Mumbai, not least through the political campaigns of the Shiv Sena, nevertheless Khāḍādevī with her syncretic worship remains a vital presence, worshipped in Kolaba not only by the Koḷī but by

people of many different religions. She brings together, Bapat and Vicziany claim, the disparate communities that the Shiv Sen seeks to separate.

As the “Preface” claims, this is indeed an “exuberant collection” of essays about the forms of the Goddess in India. All the chapters are substantial contributions to the topic, and together make a well-balanced book which will be invaluable for university courses on Hinduism, as well as for everyone interested in Devī.

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