

**FEMALE SEXUALITY : POLARITY AND PARADOX
IN THE INDIAN TRADITION**

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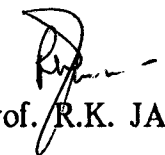
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This is to certify that the dissertation titled **FEMALE SEXUALITY: POLARITY AND PARADOX IN THE INDIAN TRADITION** by Miss **BENA JAIN** in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Philosophy has not been submitted earlier for any other degree to this or any other university.

It is recommended that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for their consideration for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy.


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FEMALE SEXUALITY : POLARITY AND PARADOX

IN THE INDIAN TRADITION

I N T R O D U C T I O N

One most striking feature of the female principle in the Hindu tradition has been the paramountcy given to chastity. Underlying the emphasis on chastity is the issue of female sexuality and an accompanying male control. Emerging from this central theme of my study is the characteristic ambivalence woven around the status of a woman.

The nature of femaleness as portrayed in the Hindu tradition presents an important duality which needs to be examined closely for a proper understanding of the Hindu woman's status in the past and upto the present. Be it the study of Hindu lawbooks, myths, or an examination of the lives of real women, all point to a distinct ambivalence surrounding the status of women. I say ambivalence, because on the one hand the woman is perceived as fertile and benevolent--the bestower, and on the other hand she is fearsome and malevolent--the destroyer. When examined carefully it will be seen that it is the expression of female sexuality which is the determining factor in casting women as benevolent or malevolent. And closely related to this feature is the relation between active female sexuality and male control.

Between the end of the vedic period and twelveth century A.D., the idea seemed to have gained ground that the husband should have exclusive and total control over his wife's sexuality. Pre-pubertal marriage was one way of ensuring this. It transferred the responsibility for safeguarding the girl's sexuality from her male kin in her natal family to her husband and his agnates. Once married, total faithfulness was expected of the wife, and this was sought to be assured by the

deification of the husband. Total control over her sexuality was not only for the duration of the marriage but it encompassed the pre and post-marital periods. Virginitly in brides was ensured by pre-pubertal marriages, while in the case of the widow, celibacy was required of her or she was faced with the choice of committing Sati (widow immolation). However, in both cases the ruling idea was the assertion of the dead husband's total control over his wife's sexuality. It is this uncontrolled sexuality which the woman represents when outside the purview of male control that is seen to be dangerous and feared and therefore sought to be controlled by the many sanctions imposed. The woman as the 'good wife', is the perfectly controlled woman, for she is subordinated, benign, nurturant and fertile having no negative evaluations attached to her sexuality. Her sexuality has been channelised in the desired direction under the legitimate male control.

The point to be taken note of in all the three stages of a woman's lifecycle described above, is the centrality of the issue of male control. The valued and simultaneously dangerous sexual and reproductive powers of women are rigorously controlled by men through such extreme institutions as child-marriage, purdah, sati etc. Thus while the uncontrolled woman is believed to be dangerous having a destructive yet potentially creative capability and thereby sought to be controlled through sanctions and taboos. The benevolent woman in the role as the good wife, is believed to be herself in danger and hence in need of protection. Thus both categories come under strict control. It is only when the wife becomes a mother and reaches the stage of post-menopausal infertility that she begins to enjoy a certain amount of freedom and her status is considerably enhanced.

Thus the underlying ideology conveys the idea that women are to be kept under the control of men at all stages of their lives. When not under male supervision, she is feared, for her status defined by uncontrolled sexuality, has certain connotations of

negative power. Therefore, the considered ideal women are those who do not strive to break the bonds of control.

Following this, I would like to put forth the contention that female sexuality and its expression, is the single most important determining factor in defining a woman's status through every stage of her life cycle. Closely entwined with the expression of female sexuality is the issue of male control, thus upholding and asserting the androcentric ideals.

I shall first examine aspects of Hindu ideology for drawing out norms and guidelines laid down for the lives of real women. This examination will bring to fore the ambivalence associated with a woman's status, which gets reflected in the differential treatment accorded to her during different stages of her life cycle. The determining factor in her negative or positive evaluations, as I shall bring forth is the notion of male control. After having established the duality endemic in the female principle on the plane of real women, I will seek to reaffirm this on the plane of Hindu goddesses. A comparison between these two planes of the religious and the secular proves to be useful for there exists a continuum between the two in the Indian tradition. The religious dimension gets well expressed in the Hindu social structure. Therefore, I propose to examine female goddess worship at three levels, paralleling the three important stages in a woman's lifecycle, virgin, wife and widow. I will bring out how the nature and characteristics attributed to each of these Goddesses are basically determined by their status defined by their controlled or uncontrolled sexuality. This categorises them into the benevolent or the malevolent Goddess. My area of study will be confined to the study of Hinduism in North India.

To establish my proposition I have not adopted an approach which confines my sources to a particular period in history and its related texts. Since there is no

single authoritative text which serves as a guideline to Hindu norms and ideology, I have not confined myself to a monographic study of any text. Neither do I resort to tracing the historicity of patriarchy in India through the ages starting from the vedic period. Instead, to capture the essence of Hindu ideology in general, and to focus on values and ideals which in some form or the other are an extant force even today, I have drawn from various texts, referring from the Vedas, to the Epics and the Puranas.

However, at the outset itself it must be said that an exploration of the images of Hindu women through an analysis of Sanskrit texts entails an inherent masculine and Brahmin bias. Hindu texts have focused almost exclusively on the Hindu woman's role as wife, while norms and role models for mothers, daughters, sisters etc. are largely ignored. The focus is on the woman's behaviours and roles in relation to men, for eg., wife to husband, mother to son, daughter to father and sister to brother. Role models for female behaviour vis-a-vis other female's are almost non-existent in any literature. These relations are of little concern to men, though they may be of importance to women in their daily lives. Myths and literature are replete with examples of the 'good wife', the ideal woman, while the woman as the mother, which is the most crucial of the other female roles is hardly paid as much attention. It must be borne in mind that a closer inspection of the relationship between texts and practices do reveal certain incongruities. From the point of view of the woman, it is as mother that she is accorded some respect and exercises some amount of freedom and authority of her own. The wife's role is one of subordination and dutifulness. In line with the patriarchal tradition, it is the latter which is glorified and cited as the 'ideal typical' for a Hindu woman. She who embodies the characteristics of chastity, obedience, loyalty and compliance--the 'valued' ideals from a male perspective. The characteristic stress of Hindu texts on the wifely role, and a clear lack of interest in the woman except as the wife quite clearly

suggests that all notions of the woman should be submerged in the ideal of wife.

Despite the limitation of such an approach, I am of the opinion that to understand Hindu women even today, one must gain access to the past primarily through available scriptural and literary sources. To understand a phenomenon in its specific context I have referred to its cultural-historical background. For instance to explain the rise of kumari worship, it was important to give the politico-historical background of the region.

While the use of ethnographic material does supplement the textual material thus providing for a more realistic understanding of Hindu women it must be noted that this source is not free from a male bias either. The ethnographers and the informants, whether men or women use the dominant modes of expression, the dominant ideology, which has an inbuilt bias. In Edwin Ardner's (in Moore:1988) theory of 'muted groups', it is proposed that the dominant groups in society generate and control the dominant modes of expression. Muted groups are silenced by the structures of dominance and if they wish to express themselves they are forced to do so through the dominant modes of expression. Women remain 'muted' because their model of reality, their view of the world cannot be expressed using the dominant male model. This of course points to a problem of a larger magnitude, that of confronting the conceptual and methodological inadequacies, and is not just resolved by studying women. However at this level it is best to point out this inherent limitation in using such material. Nevertheless, the use of ethnography, with such a relatively contemporary recovery of the past, being brought to bear on textual studies of Hindu ideals, will perhaps help enhancing our understanding of Hindu women. Thus for a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the religious role of Indian women, we need several approaches at once. First the religious texts relating to women must be closely analysed to reveal the implicit

structures. Secondly, historical and anthropological studies must be used to fill the gap between text and practices. However, to provide the missing dimension of the experiential reality we must focus attention on the women's perspective of themselves. The construction of sexuality by the female is quite essential if we are to achieve any genuine and truly representative understanding of women in the Indian tradition.

CHAPTER I

HINDU IDEOLOGY AND WOMEN

The images of women in patrilineal Hindu society are largely reflective of the Hindu ideology as laid down in scriptural and literary sources of the Hindu tradition. The social roles and behaviour of women which commonly parallel their symbolic roles in ritual and myth can be seen to be drawn from the Hindu ideological structure. Therefore, for a wholistic understanding of the "ideal Hindu woman", it is imperative to analyse Sanskrit scriptural and literary sources. It must be kept in mind that any attempt to understand portrayals of Hindu women based on an analyses of Sanskrit texts would be coloured by a Brahmin and masculine bias. However, one hopes that contemporary ethnographic studies, when brought to bear on textual studies of Hindu ideals will further a truer understanding of Hindu women.

The nature of femaleness as portrayed in Hindu tradition draws from references to the role models religious figures present and advocate for women. At the outset I shall deal with a discussion of Hindu norms and expectations of women's behaviour drawing on a wide spectrum of material to explicate the ideal typical model. Rules for proper conduct are laid down in Hindu law books (Dharmasastras), mythology, written and oral. These provide many examples of female behaviour and its consequences, thus setting up explicit role models for

the Hindu woman. Folklore provides yet more beliefs about female behaviour. Social organization and structure that reflect the dominant ideology serve to reinforce such beliefs about the proper conduct of women.

M.R. Allen (1990), has examined certain aspects of Hindu ideology that are important in the formation of significant views of Hindu women. In the course of analysing the four-fold structure of goals (*moksha* , *dharma* , *artha* and *kama*) and their associated ideological emphasis on renunciation , purity, worldly success and sensuous gratification we will see emerging a large number of well known Hindu female stereotypes.

Closely related to the goal of *moksha* or salvation is the notion of extreme asceticism and renunciation. Renunciation both as an ideology and as a way of life has occupied a prominent position in Hindu social and religious institutions. It is the last stage prescribed for the life of the twice born, who must follow the four stages from *Brahmacharya* , *Grihastha* (householder), *Vanaprastha* (hermit) and finally *Sanyasi* (ascetic).

The world renouncer seeks spiritual salvation by attempting to overcome all material and social bonds. This entails leading a life of an ascetic who perceives the woman as an obstacle in the pursuit of his goals. For most renouncers sex is regarded, as the principal obstacle that stands in the way of salvation. Thus the male renouncer sees the woman, with one foot planted in the physical world of reproduction and sexuality and the other in the social world of the family, as presenting the principal obstacle to the goal of spiritual salvation. According to the traditional view, sex was the enemy of the *yogi* and the woman representing sex became the symbol of this enmity. (Lal quoted in Allen and Mukherjee, 1990:3). In fact a common mythic theme has been the seduction of ascetics by beautiful *apsaras* or celestial nymphs. Thus the goal of *moksha* , prescribed

and believed to be attainable only by men, stands to view women as obstacles, thereby casting women in certain stereotypical categories viewed entirely from the male perspective, such as the voluptuous temptress, obedient wife etc.

Whereas the *Sadhu* seeks to achieve by means of ascetic renunciation, the ultimate goal of liberation (*moksha*), the goal of *dharma* and good rebirth are sought by the religious man in the world through means of purity maintenance. While the *Sadhu* represents the worldly ideal of the renouncer, the Brahman stands at the apex of a social hierarchy defined in terms of relative purity.

The development of a social hierarchy based on the principle of purity, has significantly influenced the position and status of Hindu women. On the one hand they are viewed as a source of pollution during menstruation and childbirth, and on the other, they are revered as pure beings reflecting on the honour and status of their menfolk. Though apparently contrary evaluations of women, an important point to be noted here is that these two beliefs share in common, the resultant male control.

Men seek to protect themselves from the dangers posed by women in a state of pollution, by requiring women to undergo strict seclusion during such periods. Allen is of the view that it is similar beliefs that have played a part in the development of social institutions such as child marriage for girls and the treatment meted out to widows, especially if pre-menopausal. Child marriage ensures that when the girl begins to menstruate she has a husband capable of transforming her 'destructive capability' into generative power. Widow burning dramatically removes the awesome danger of women who are still potentially creative but without legitimate male partners (Allen and Mukherjee, 1990:5).

On the other hand because of their great purity pre-pubertal girls are often the focus of veneration. In North India and Nepal orthodox Hindu families periodically

worship their unmarried and pre-pubertal girls as living forms of Kumari, the virgin goddess. This occurs during *Durga Puja* and irregularly when other Goddesses are invoked to enter the pure bodies of virgin girls. This phenomenon of Kumari worship has developed to a unique degree in Kathmandu where young girls were formally installed in office as living Goddesses and worshipped until some disqualifying sign appears, the most common being menarche.

While the impure woman is believed to be dangerous, having a destructive yet potentially creative capability, the pure woman is believed to be herself in danger and hence in need of protection and thereby sought to be brought under strict male control. Thus one might say that impurity has some connotations of power even if only in negative terms, whereas purity connotes the total absence of power.

The orthodox Hindu woman as wife comes under the control of her husband and the senior male and female members of the family. It is only when the wife becomes a mother especially of sons, and then reaches the stage of post-menopausal infertility that the restrictions are lifted and status enhanced.

Widowhood, particularly if it occurs before the woman has attained menopause is regarded as posing a grave threat to the status of men. What underlies this fear is the threat posed by uncontrolled sexuality to the status of her deceased husband's lineage. Harper's description of the fate of Havik Brahman widows in South India, is generally true for orthodox castes throughout the sub-continent. According to Harper (quoted in Allen & Mukherjee, 1990:8) the widow is seen as a symbol of inauspiciousness and cannot, like married women, directly participate in the numerous domestic ceremonies which form an important part of Havik culture. A widow must keep her head shaven, and wear no jewellery, usually a mark of femininity. The burning of a widow on her deceased husband's funeral pyre, or the practice of *Sati*, was the extreme measure meted

out to the fate of widows. *Sati*, viewed as a custom predicated on the purity ideal is discussed in a later section of this work.

If one accepts the centrality of the issue of male control, then one can say that the valued, though simultaneously dangerous sexual and reproductive powers of women were rigorously controlled by men through such extreme institutions as child-marriage, *purdah*, *Sati* etc.

The goal of *artha* or worldly success is associated with life affirming values as against life renunciation. Closely related to this is the high evaluation given to conjugal family life as against celibacy and monasticism, to the positive reproductive and ritual values of sexuality as against its temptations and impurities, and to the material advantages of fertility in all its forms.

For those Hindus whose lives are influenced by worldly consideration, women are valued primarily on three counts; as providers of labour useful for property acquisition, as producers of children, especially sons, and as sources of divine energy that can be utilized in the pursuit of worldly goals. (Allen and Mukerjee, 1990 : 9). The positive evaluation of the role of the mother has been a well established feature of Hindu beliefs. According to Allen the most elaborate forms of mother goddess worship are found among those castes in which worldly values are to the forefront - typically the *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and land owning *Sudra*. Among the *Kshatriyas* of ruling lineages the worship of Devi, who is seen as the divine source of political power, is commonly practised. In her destructive role she is believed to defeat the enemies of the State. In her creative role she is believed to bring wealth, health, progeny and territorial expansion. And in her sustaining role she is seen to protect the kingdom and other sacred institutions (ibid., 11). Devi worship is a feature of other caste's religious practices too, including Brahmins and *Sudras*. She is revered in order to seek

spiritual liberation as in the case of Saktas or Tantriks, besides the pursuit of worldly goals only.

There is a fourth Hindu attitude which expresses a more positive attitude towards sexuality in general. Though *Kama* (referring to sensuous gratification) has been recognised in the Smriti tradition as one of the three worldly goals (*trivarga*), it has however consistently been represented as contained within the context of and also in many ways as inferior to the goals of *artha* and *dharma*.

Tantricism represents a branch of Hinduism that has made the union of *yoga* and *kama*, of asceticism and eroticism, central to its goal of liberation. However, the male Tantric's attitude towards women is one where he views the woman essentially as a means towards an end. Instead of transforming sexual into spiritual power by the act of abstinence and the exclusion of women, the Tantric pursues the same goal by activating his sexuality with the necessary aid of a female partner.

The four-fold categorization put forth by Allen presents a static model of the image of Hindu women. In the context of social life one can in fact draw women into a more realistic and dynamic triadic scheme. Vivienne Kondos has argued that the conceptual scheme that views Hindu women in processual or dynamic terms is the *triguna*. She says, the primal energy (Shakti) itself represented as female, moves through the three phases of creativity, integration and disintegration (*rajoguna*, *Sattva Guna*, *Tamoguna* respectively). She sees these as underpinning the evaluative view of women contained in the triple worldly format - those of reproductivity, purity and materiality, especially in its sexual form.

The most important social context in which a processual view of women predominates is in the individual's progression through the life cycle. The first, pre-menstrual stage which culminates in the gift of the pure virgin, full of creative

potential to her husband ;the second reproductive stage, in which pregnancy is succeeded by maternal nurturance; and the third, post-menopausal stage, in which infertility culminates in disintegration and death. (Ibid: 16).

The four-fold scheme depicting women as negative distractions, pure symbols of male status, fertile producers of male offsprings and sources of material satisfaction stands as immutable depicting ideal types. This processual model represents related stages in the developmental sequence. It puts forth a triple representation as pure virgin, nurturant mother and destructive widow. This triple format is relevant at the metaphysical, the ritual and social levels, as will emerge in the course of this work.

In the course of describing a Hindu woman's life cycle in a developmental sequence, we will see how the question of chastity and male control over a woman underlie every stage of her life. Katherine Young (in Arvind Sharma (ed), 1987:65) points out that while lack of education and desire for children contributed to the early marriage of Hindu girls, the importance granted to chastity also contributed to this trend, besides other factors such as the increasing rigidity of the caste system and the desire to ensure purity of caste and stability of the social order. Chaste daughters were indeed accorded a high status in Hindu families and were even worshipped as the Virgin Goddess.

Upon marriage, the girl came under strict control of the husband and his family. Although she was auspicious by virtue of her marital status in one sense, anthropological studies reveal that she was often looked on as a dangerous figure, a temptress, until she bore her first child, preferably a son. Thus, while a woman enjoyed relatively high status among her own kin, she faced low feminine status upon her entry into her marital home. The greater concern with maintaining control over the sexuality of affinal women is clearly related to the fact that they

become members of their husband's lineage and the producers of the next generation. The newly married woman is the symbol of potential productivity and thus a symbol of sexuality at its most vulnerable and therefore guarded stage. Upon attaining the status of motherhood, she represents channelized sexuality, so to say.

By the time of menopause, when the woman is seen to have become, 'asexual', like the ascetic, both her purity and domestic power combine to give her high status. Thus because of her age and 'asexuality', "they enjoy the highest degree of domestic, social and ritual freedom than any adult Hindu woman ever knows." (James Freeman quoted in Arvind Sharma (ed), 1987:83)

The stage of widowhood in a Hindu woman's life cycle entailed many austerities and sanctions. In the case of the husband's death a woman was faced with the prospect of performing *Sati*, or undergoing the rite of passage to widowhood. A widow saw herself as having failed in her religious acts and goal of ensuring the husband's long life. The widow led an extremely austere life, she practised perfect chastity in speech, mind and deed. She had virtually no possessions, no desire, and developed endurance. A widow who emerged from her ordeals was viewed by the society with much admiration. Her own death was viewed positively heralding the moment of reunion between husband and wife.

A widow who was still capable of reproduction was seen as a threat to the purity of a family, by her unproductive menstrual blood, and the possibility of her misdemeanor. The enforcement of physical chastity and unattractive appearance, as in a shaved head, no ornaments etc, could be regarded as a measure to distance her as a sexual threat to the family. Underlying this threat one might suggest, is the issue of male control and the dangers of uncontrolled female sexuality.

Drawing from the above discussion of the portrayals of a Hindu woman

in her ideal typical and normative behaviour, one may suggest that the concept of female presents an important duality. On the one hand the woman is fertile and benevolent - the bestower. On the other hand she is aggressive and malevolent - the destroyer. According to Hindu cosmology, if a female controls her own sexuality she is both malevolent and benevolent. As Wadley puts it, she is changeable and presents both death and fertility. (Jacobson and Wadley, 1992). If, however, her sexuality is transferred to male control, she is portrayed as consistently benevolent.

To illustrate the potentially destructive and malevolent woman as depicted in Hindu cosmology, I cite the example of Kali, who has been described as "bearing the strange skull topped staff, 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..." (Jagdishvarananda quoted in Jacobson & Wadly, 1922:116)

Lakshmi, represents the contrasting example of the controlled, fertile and benevolent female. She is described as the Goddess of fortune; "She who springs forth from the body of all the Gods has a thousand, indeed countless arms, although her image is shown with but eighteen. Her face is white, made from the light streaming from the lord of sleep (Siva). Her arms made of the substance of Visnu are deep blue, her round breasts made of *Soma*, the sacrificial ambrosia, are white....She wears a gaily coloured lower garment, brilliant garlands, and a veil...he who worships the transcendent divinity of fortune becomes the lord of all the worlds." (Karapatri quoted in Jacobson & Wadley; 1992: 116).

This duality depicted on the divine plane, is revealed in a Hindu woman's life cycle during the different stages. Susan Wadley contends that this duality associated with the Hindu female must be taken into account for an understanding

of the rules and role models for Hindu woman. A central theme of the norms and guidelines for proper female behaviour, particularly in the male-dominated classical literature, has been that men must control women and their power.

The following passages quoted from the Laws of Manu, express in definite terms the need to control women because of the evils of the female character. In no uncertain words an excerpt points out: "By a young 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....though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife...She who controlling her thoughts, words and deeds never slights her lord, resides (after death) with her husband (in heaven), and is called virtuous wife". (Buhler quoted in Jacobson & Wadley, 1992:118).

Thus one might suggest that because of the evil inclinations and birth, women are to be kept under the control of men at all stages of their lives. When not under male control, her uncontrolled sexuality is believed to pose grave danger. She is feared for there are certain connotations of negative power attached to her status defined by uncontrolled sexuality. Therefore, the considered ideal women are those who do not strive to break these bonds of control. It is made out that the salvation and happiness of women revolve around their virtue and chastity as daughters, wives and widows.

In keeping with this belief, we may note that Hindu laws focus almost exclusively on the Hindu woman's role as wife, while norms and role models for mothers, daughters, sisters etc. are less prominent. Themes related to the woman's role as wife are reflected in later Sanskrit and vernacular writings as also in

oral traditions.

The popular epic, Ramayana, is well known for its portrayal of Sita who has been hailed and cited as the ideal model of a wife. Other wives in the Hindu tradition also provide popular role models. Women who have committed *Sati*, are acclaimed as goddesses and honoured with shrines and rituals. Numerous calendrical rites and festivals also incorporate the theme of the devoted wife. This can be illustrated by the example of the yearly worship of Savitri, throughout North India. Savitri is a Goddess renowned for her devotion to her husband, through which she saves him from the God of death. The story of Savitri is held up as a prime example of a good wife, who saves her husband from death, follows him anywhere, proves her virtue, remains under his control and gives him her power.

The emphasis is on women's behaviour in relation to men, i.e. wife to husband, mother to son, daughter to father and sister to brother. Role models for female behaviour concerning other females are almost non-existent in any literature. While these relationships are of importance to women in their everyday lives, they are of little concern to men, thus reflecting a distinctly male bias.

The woman as the mother is the most critical of the other female roles. The norms for mothers are less explicit than for wives. While there are numerous examples of the good wife in myths and law books, there are no prime examples of the good mother. However it is goddesses as mother goddesses who are worshipped regularly for their protection and aid and who are feared. The wifely role is one of subordination and dutifulness. It is the mother who gives, who must be obeyed, and exercises some sort of power, and who must be appeased. Though I must point out here that the Goddesses who have the prefix mother attached to their name are not always worshipped in their capacity as the mother of children, or known for such qualities as those associated with a mother. Thus

there is a certain ambivalence surrounding the status of Hindu woman which gets reflected on the textual plane as well as on the social lives of real women.

It has now become evident that the ambivalence surrounding the position of women, is closely associated to an expression of female sexuality. An explication of the ambivalence comes forth clearly in the differential treatment accorded to women in their affinal and consanguineal roles. The case of Brahmin and Chetri women in Nepal provide a good illustration of this point. Lynn Bennett (1983) in her study of Brahmin-Chetri kinship examines these two opposed but complimentary modes of kinship relation which she calls the patrifocal and filiafocal models. Each model posits a different view of women.

Through a study of certain key mythic and ritual complexes involving female sexuality, Bennett goes on to uncover some of the contradictory sentiments and religious ideas that surround women in Hindu culture. She shows how the status of women in both patrifocal and filiafocal models is related to their relative ritual purity, that is, their purity with respect to affinal and consanguineal men. This notion is reinforced by the Hindu view of sexuality which sees the process of childbirth and menstruation as polluting. The affinal woman's close association with her reproductive role, is linked with sexuality and pollution. Thus the strict rules governing her behaviour in her affinal home are sought to be justified as a means of controlling her sexuality. By contrast, women enjoy a better position in their filiafocal relationships. The greater concern with maintaining control over the sexuality of affinal women is clearly related to the fact that they become members of their husband's lineage and the producers of its next generation, while consanguineal women are transferred at marriage from their natal lineage and obviously have no part in its biological continuation.

In the course of interviews with the high caste women, Bennett saw how they

expressed their low status in terms of their sexuality and the vulnerability of their reputation. They cited affinal relatives as the people who were most suspicious of their behaviour. This brought to fore the patriline's concern with female sexuality as a threat to the legitimacy of the descent line. Closely related to this is the ideal of agnatic solidarity, to which also women are seen to pose a threat. To the groom's family, the bride is viewed as dangerous to the central patrifocal nature of agnatic solidarity. This suspicion about her is the greatest in the initial period of marriage, before she has children that give her common interest with the patriline. It is at this time that her behaviour is most critically watched and controlled by her in-laws. Any display of affection between husband and wife in public is not permitted because these emotions represent a shift of loyalties dangerous to the joint family and the patrilineal ideals it embodies. In contrast to the impurities of childbirth and menstruation, and the dangers of the sexuality of the affinal woman, is the sacredness of kinswomen. While the agnatic males give affinal women low status, these same males owe ritual deference to their own kinswomen. As a consanguineal woman, the sister has an absolute purity which even the faithful wife cannot match. This purity is the basis of her sacred filiafocal status and of her power to bless her brother with long life as in the ritual of *Bhai Tika*. This ritual gives expression to the special status of consanguineal women. It centres around the spiritual protection which the sister offers her brother and the worship and economic protection which he offers her by touching her feet and offering gifts of money and clothes. Further, the ritual superiority of the bride vis-a-vis her natal relatives, is demonstrated when they wash her feet during the wedding rituals. Besides these instances, the attitude towards a consanguineal women's sexuality and the associated taboos and sanctions in contrast to the affinal women's, help in illustrating the differential treatment

accorded to women in their differing roles.

The Brahman-Chetri attitudes towards women get crystalized in their attitude towards the female body. The body and the associated reproductive process is the vehicle through which negative and positive feelings about sexuality and about women themselves are expressed. The negative view of sexuality is most apparent in the Brahmin-Chetri attitude towards menstrual blood, which Bennett states, is the central physiological symbol of female sexuality. They view menstrual blood as a strong source of pollution particularly to initiated males. During this period, women are regarded as polluted and then segregation is strictly observed. At the end of this period they ritually purify themselves by bathing, washing their hair and drinking cow's urine. These acts are believed to cleanse their sexuality each month and direct it towards its legitimate end, that is, the production of offsprings to perpetuate the lineage.

Bennett describes two major rituals in Brahmin-Chetri culture directed at the purification of menstrual pollution and in a way at channelizing female sexuality. These are the *Tij-Rishi Pancami* complex and the menarche rites (*Gupha Basne*). These two rituals focus on the problem of female sexuality with respect to affinal and consanguineal women, respectively.

The *Tij-Rishi Pancami* complex expresses the dangerous and potentially divisive power of women and their sexuality. It is an attempt, through myth and ritual, to reintegrate the dangerous power of women into the structures of family and kinship which it threatens. *Tij* is meant to ensure the long life of one's husband, while *Rishi Pancami* is meant to purify women from the possible sin of having touched a man during the menstrual period. The Nepalese think of the two as a single event because the express purpose of the two are conceptually related. On the day of *Tij* women re-enact the famous fast of the Goddess Parvati, who performed



austerities to obtain Shiva as her husband. After a bath as part of their purification, women adorn themselves and dress in red wedding saris carrying offerings for Shiva. This is followed by much laughing, singing and dancing around the temple. This represents a complete reversal of the Hindu ideal of womanly behaviour. According to Bennett, this display of the erotic side of female nature is permissible because on *Tij* it is held in check by the strict purifying fast which the women have undertaken for the welfare of their husbands. The dangers of female sexuality are thus grappled with by the ascetic and patrilineal ideals.

In the main ceremony *Arundhati*, (the only one among the wives of the rishis who remained faithful to her husband in the face of Shiva's charms), who represents the controlled female nature, is worshipped. By dedicating to chaste *Arundhati*, the adornments they wore on *Tij*, these women purify their own sexuality. They channelize it in the only direction acceptable to Hindu patrilineal ideology, that is, towards their husbands.

The *Gupha Basne* or the "staying in cave" ceremony which occurs at menarche is the rite of passage that marks the transition of a girl from the pre-sexual to a sexual being. This ritual reiterates some of the negative ideas about the dangers of female sexuality. We will also discern in it the conceptual basis for the Hindu belief in the sacredness of consanguineal women.

The *Gupha Basne* ceremony is more strict for unmarried girls than for those having their first period after they have been married. The girl is literally secluded in a dark room away from her home, for she must not see the face of her father and brothers during menarche. At the end of the ritual the girl receives from her father and brothers, a red *dhoti* and blouse, the accessories of a married woman. These gifts may be seen to signify a transference of the daughter's nascent sexuality, away from her natal group to another patriline. The menarche rites are more

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severe for the unmarried girl - for it is her unattached sexuality which is seen to endanger her and her consanguines. In the case of a married girl, her emerging sexuality has been properly channelized and put under legitimate control. Thus daughters and sisters can be sacred to their consanguineal kin only because they are not structural members of their natal patriline.

The strong contrast between the Brahman-Chetri affinal and consanguineal women and the underlying patrilineal concerns well illustrate the duality associated with a woman's status in Hindu society. The sexual and procreative roles which are felt to endanger the purity of the patrilineal group are exclusively associated with affinal women. Hence, the bride, strongly identified with her procreative role, is protected by the strictest taboos. The daughter on the other hand is categorically shielded from any strong association with sexual roles. This is in fact the conceptual basis of filiafocal relationships and of the high ritual status of consanguineal women since they do not form part of the natal patriline.

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CHAPTER II

POLARITY AND PARADOX ON THE DIVINE PLANE

In the preceding section we examined how the concept of female presents an important duality in Hindu social life. Female divinities as popularly portrayed and understood today come to reveal a similar duality and ambiguity. A relation between feminine imagery on the divine plane and the position of women might prove to further the understanding of the female principle in Hinduism.

The two visions of polarity in the case of female divinities can be best elucidated through an examination of the nature and characteristics attributed to Shiva's consort Parvati, and her other forms as Durga and Kali. An understanding of these three categories of Goddesses, their synthesis and polarity will help in comprehending the polarity associated with Hindu Goddesses in general.

Based upon their relationship with their consorts, O'Flaherty (1980) categorises Indian Goddesses into two distinct groups. The first group are the dominated breast Goddess. They provide role models for the wife, they are fertile, bountiful and auspicious. The other category is that of the dominant tooth Goddesses. They are worshipped in times of crisis, such as epidemics, and are ambivalent, dangerous and erotic figures. Though they have consorts they dominate them and play non-feminine roles. An important expression of this contrast is also suggested in a distinction between high ranking goddesses who are sexually controlled and whose

power lies in their husbands, and low ranking goddesses who are sexually free. There is also an intermediate group of unmarried goddesses over whom there is some degree of control and who are not actively aggressive. Devi in her full form embodies both aspects, spanning both groups. Worshippers however tend to emphasise one aspect at the expense of the other.

Lynn Gatwood (1985) points to two distinct versions of the female principle in India. One of which is free from divine male control and the other which is defined by such control. She calls the control free non-Sanskritic version Devi, and the control defined Sanskritic one the Spouse Goddess. Gatwood rejects the sweeping dichotomization between benevolent Sanskritic Goddesses and malevolent non-Sanskritic Goddesses. She is of the opinion that this dichotomy reflects a misunderstanding of the Hindu female principle. The contrast she offers between Devi and the Spouse Goddess cuts across this division in several ways and throws light on an often overlooked aspect of femininity and the Hindu Goddesses.

To bring out the contrast between the two categories she refers to marital symbolism, in that the Devi need not enter into orthodox forms of marriage and functions independently. While it is crucial that the Spouse Goddess be sacramentally married according to orthodox standards. Orthodox marriage and proper wifely behaviour are essential to the benevolent functioning of the Spouse Goddess. Further, while both types have two sides to their natures, such a division does not necessarily carry a negative connotation. Devi presents a unified bipolarity and thus she operates both creatively and destructively, remaining one. Her polarity is not determined by marital control. By contrast the Spouse Goddess is seen as dualistic, in the sense that her positive and negative aspects divide the Goddess into two separate deities. When she ranges outside her proper wifely role, her latent malevolent nature emerges in myth and ritual as a separate Goddess. Gatwood

calls the latter, the Spouse Goddess-out-of-control. She is often mistaken for Devi and vice-versa, thereby neglecting Devi's positive side. Another point of distinction Gatwood draws is the relation of the Spouse Goddess and Devi with their respective partners. Devi's lover or consort is viewed as her co-equal, while the Spouse Goddesses' husband-God is viewed as her clear superior.

In both the classifications discussed above, the issue of male control emerges to be the most significant determining factor. While Gatwood on the basis of various criteria divides the female principle into two separate Goddesses, each having two aspects. Following O'Flaherty's contention, I will, in the following analysis of Parvati and her manifestations as Durga and Kali, show how in fact both aspects of the female constitute an inherent polarity endemic to Indian Goddesses. Indeed both aspects are embodied by Devi in her full form. However, when one aspect gets emphasised at the expense of the other she is commonly viewed as a separate entity.

The Hindu divine trinity, Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva, is each associated with a consort. In popular worship, the female expression of diety is personified as a separate Goddess endowed with specific virtues and powers. Saraswati, protectress of learning and the arts is the spouse of Brahma, Lakshmi, Goddess of beauty, luck and wealth, the spouse of Vishnu. But it is in considering Mahadevi, the Goddess consort of Shiva that we find the most powerful expression of the polarity and synthesis characteristic of the Hindu female principle. The great Goddess incarnates the female aspect of the cosmic substance - called 'Shakti'. The relations between Shiva and his 'Shakti' in her various manifestations as the Goddess Parvati, Durga and Kali, well exemplify all aspects of Hindu womanhood. In the analysis of her manifestations, we will see how Mahadevi, or Devi, has much grander dimensions than merely a consort of Shiva.

As Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas, she is the quintessence of feminine beauty and wifely devotion. She is the mother of Shiva's children, complacent and compliant. Parvati's identity is defined largely in relation to her husband and she is commonly depicted in a subordinate position vis-a-vis him. Though there are festivals like *Tij* and *Gangaur* associated with her, they only reaffirm her role as the ideal wife. She is a popular role model for perfect wifely behaviour. As Durga, she is a champion fighter, a warrior Goddess who intervenes, particularly to vanquish evil demons, which are among other things, symbols of basic human drives (Mitter, 1991:75). In her third manifestation, she is Kali, Goddess of destruction. Popularly depicted as dark skinned, hair unbound, with a necklace of skulls, a lolling red tongue, and thirsty for blood .

Devi, in her manifestation as Durga is one of the most popular deities of the Hindu pantheon. Several accounts of Durga's origin are found in Hindu mythology. She is sometimes said to arise from Vishnu as the power that makes him sleep or as his magical, creative power. In the Vishnu-purana, Vishnu enlists her aid to help delude a demon king who is threatening the infant Krishna. In the Devimahatmya, she comes to the aid of the god Brahma and ultimately of Vishnu himself when Brahma invokes her to leave the slumbering Vishnu so that he will awaken and fight the demons Madhu and Kaitabha. The Skandapurana says that once a demon named Durga threatened the world. Shiva requested Parvati to slay the demon. Parvati then assumed the form of a warrior Goddess and defeated the demon, who took the form of a buffalo. Thereafter Parvati was known by the name Durga. (Kinsley, 1989:4)

However, the best known account of Durga's origin is that associated with the defeat of the demon Mahisa. Mahisa had the boon that he would be invincible to all opponents except a woman. When the gods were unable to combat Mahisa,

they assembled and from their fiery energies arose Durga embodying the strengths of all the gods.

Durga represents a combination of world supportive qualities on the one hand and certain liminal characteristics that give her, her distinctive nature. In many ways she violates the model of a Hindu woman. As an independent warrior she reverses the normal role for females and therefore comes to have certain negative connotations associated with her. She is associated with characteristics which when manifested in women are condemned. Durga is clearly not subordinated to a male deity, she is not submissive, associated with any household duties. Moreover, she excels in the role of a warrior, essentially a male function.

Unlike ~~Shakti~~ other benign Goddesses, Durga does not lend her power ~~or~~ to a male consort. In fact quite the reverse takes place, she embodies the power of the male Gods in order to defeat the demon. Her role reversal is also portrayed in her independent status. Because she is unprotected by a male deity, Mahisa assumes that Durga is helpless. Women in Hindu law books are portrayed as incapable and socially insignificant, if independent of a male association. They are significant only in the role of sisters, daughters and mothers of males, and as wives. Durga is portrayed as independent of male support, yet extremely powerful. She is beautiful, but seductive, but not serving to win a consort, rather to entice victims. Further, her worship involves offerings of meat and blood, which are considered highly polluting in Hindu society. Thus Durga represents a vision of feminine that challenges the stereotypical view of Hindu women as portrayed in Hindu law books. In her role reversal, she exists outside the normal structures and perhaps suggests the power accruing from her independent nature, falling outside the bounds of male control. One might say that she suggests a version of reality which because it falls outside the purview of the dominating male structured society, is

feared, but all the same its existence cannot be denied.

Counterbalancing Durga's liminal, peripheral nature which at times seems to threaten the world's stability is her role as protectress of the cosmos. In acting on behalf of the male gods who created her, she acts to maintain or restore cosmic harmony and balance. The *Devimahatmya* relates myths underlying Durga's role as the upholder of cosmic order. The myths also make the point that Durga transcends the great male gods of the Hindu pantheon, who in other texts usually have the central role in these myths. Besides her role as a great battle queen, she is also a personal saviour and grants her devotees what they might desire. Thus Durga is not only a transcendent force concerned only with maintaining cosmic order, she also responds to the needs of her devotees.

Durga Puja, or the *Navratra* festival, is among the most popular festivals in North India. It is celebrated over a period of nine days in autumn during the month of Asvin. The central image of the festival is Durga slaying Mahisa, representative of the descriptions in the *Devimahatmya* and other scriptures. The *Devimahatmya* is recited several times during the festival. The festival in part is an assertion of Durga's central role as a battle queen and regulator of the cosmos. The festival has links at least in the past where Durga worship was undertaken by rulers for success in battle.

Another facet of Durga's nature that emerges in *Durga Puja* though not stressed in the texts, is her domestic role as the wife of Shiva and the mother of four divine children, Ganesa, Karthikeya, Sarasvati and Lakshmi. In this aspect she comes to being closely associated with Parvati. Durga is cast in the role of a returning daughter and many devotional songs are written to welcome her home or for her farewell. These songs make no mention of her role as battle queen or cosmic saviour. This theme parallels the social life of young girls in North

India particularly Bengal, where girls are married at an early age and their leaving their natal home is upsetting for both parents and daughter. In Bengal during the festival it is customary for the daughters to come home which is a cause for much rejoicing, while later at the end of the festival their departure parallels the situation depicted in the farewell songs at *Durga Puja*. Thus in this role Durga is identified with Parvati, the subordinated wife of Shiva. Though the image being worshipped during *Durga Puja* may show a mighty many-armed Goddess triumphing over a powerful demon, but many devotees cherish her as a tender daughter who has returned home on her annual visit for family succor, sympathy and the most elaborate hospitality (Kinsley, 1989:24). North India being primarily patrilocal and patriarchal, girls are customarily married at an early age. The dominant theme in the songs of welcome and farewell of the goddess, reflect the difficult life the goddess has in her husband's home in contrast to her natal home. This theme is closely identified with real women.

Having examined the different aspects of Durga which are worshipped during this single festival of *Durga Puja* some contrasting aspects have come to fore. One being the powerful fearsome, dominating and independent warrior in her mythical account of the defeat of Mahisa; the other being her portrayal of a benign and subordinated woman and her gentle treatment at her natal home, as opposed to her husband's home characteristic of a patriarchal society. One may now suggest that such polarity between the aggressive independent female and the benign, dominated wife and daughter only goes to prove the hypothesis that lack of male control determines a woman's nature and the characteristics attributed to her socially from a typically male perspective. Not having strict male control in the form of a spouse she is regarded as feared. The fear of uncontrolled sexuality and the associated uncontrolled power is what casts her as being feared, for she represents a

picture outside the bounds of normalcy, presenting characteristics opposed to that attributed to an ideal Hindu woman.

Another point that can be made here is that the duality associated with a Hindu woman cannot be seen on the divine plane as categorising Goddesses in two exclusive groups that of the wholly benevolent and wholly malevolent. In fact each goddess figure has aspects which represent both characteristics. The polarity may be said to be intrinsic, only one aspect may be highlighted more in any individual goddess figure. Thus it would be more appropriate to view goddesses as largely benevolent and not categorise them in a rigid dichotomy.

The most striking popular image of the other aspect of the female, the sexual, anarchic, destructive and bloody is that of Kali. In the mythology of Kali danger and disruption are a predominant association. Hindu texts generally describe her as terrible in appearance and offensive and destructive in habits. Her hair is dishevelled, reddened eyes, a lolling tongue with blood smeared, wearing a necklace of skulls and a girdle of severed arms. She is depicted with four arms, upper left holds a bloodied cleaver, the lower left a freshly cut human head; the upper right makes the sign "fear not", and the lower right hand, the sign of conferring boons (Kinsley in Hawley and Wulff (ed), 1982:145).

Her habits and associations only serve to reinforce her awful appearance. Her favourite dwelling places are said to be battlefields and cremation grounds. Her association with blood is well established. She is often said to drink blood both on and off the battlefield. Animal sacrifice at her temples is a regular feature.

Among the mythological accounts of Kali's origin, the most famous one is in the myth of the Goddess Durga's destruction of the demons Sumbha and Nisumbha. In the Devimahatymya version of this myth, Kali is born when two demon generals, Canda and Munda are sent to attack Durga. Durga loses her composure, grows

furious and from her darkened brow springs Kali. After decapitating Canda and Munda, Kali is summoned by Durga to kill the demon Raktabija. This demon has the magical ability to recreate himself everytime a drop of blood falls to the ground. After Durga wounds him the situation only becomes more desperate. Kali comes to Durga's rescue by sucking the blood from Raktabija until he falls dead. Thus as Kinsley has pointed out in these myths, Kali seems to be Durga's embodied fury, appearing when Durga loses control or is confronted with a formidable task.

Kali plays a similar role in her association with the Goddess Parvati. Parvati, generally is a benign goddess, but she manifests her destructive aspects too from time to time. In the Linga Purana, Parvati is requested by Shiva to slay the demon Daruka, who has been granted the boon that he can be killed only by a woman. For this task, Parvati emerges in the form of Kali. In her frenzy the universe itself is threatened by destruction and is only saved by Shiva's intervention. There is a similar depiction when Shiva sets out with his army to destroy the demons of the three cities with Kali accompanying him. She is said to whirl a trident, to be adorned with skulls and intoxicated from drinking the blood of demons. She is also however praised as the daughter of Himalaya, thus being clearly identified with Parvati. (ibid: 146). Thus her association with Parvati is quite well established. One might say that Kali embodies and manifests Parvati's wrath.

In her association with Shiva, Kali again presents a tendency to wildness and disorder. There are indeed very few images and myths depicting a becalmed, docile Kali. Generally images and references show Shiva and Kali in situations where either or both present disruptive behaviour, or Kali dominating Shiva. A common iconographic representation shows Kali dancing on the corpse of Shiva. When they are depicted in sexual intercourse, she is shown above him. Although Shiva is said to have tamed Kali in the myth of the dance contest, she is most popularly

represented as a being who is uncontrollable and in fact more prone to provoke Shiva to dangerous activity than to be controlled by him.

Thus Kali can be largely categorised as a goddess who threatens stability and order. Though as Kinsley has pointed out she may be said to serve order in her role as the slayer of demons, but in the course of the battle she is said to become so drunk and frenzied that she begins to destroy the world that she is supposed to protect. She tends to get out of control and thus she is dangerous in that sense. For she represents power out of control.

In her association with other goddesses as we saw she appears to represent their fury. When these goddesses become enraged or are called upon to battle their frightening and dangerous dimension is personified in Kali.

Being the goddess of thugs and criminals, her dangerous role vis-a-vis society only gets affirmed. To her devotees however she is the highest manifestation of the divine, and is approached as mother (Ibid: 148).

Kali can be said to be one way in which the Hindu tradition has sought to come to terms with certain inescapable facts. Within the Hindu tradition, blood and death, the two most polluting agents, are acknowledged though only within a highly ritualized and patterned structure, that handles them in "safe" ways, through purification rituals. Rituals allow the individual to pass in an orderly way through times when contact with blood and death is unavoidable. Kali, with her association with blood and death puts the order of *dharma* in place, by showing the other side - death and blood out of place. According to Kinsley, she puts the order of dharma in perspective, in its place perhaps, by reminding the Hindus that certain aspects of reality are untameable, unpurifiable, unpredictable and always threatening to society's feeble attempts to order what is essentially disorderly: life itself. (Ibid: 152).

In the above description we saw that Kali's association with Parvati and Durga is

quite clear, she representing their fearsome and dangerous side. While Kali has largely negative associations - her physical appearance, her association with blood and death, her dwelling place being cremation grounds; her frenzy and fury, dominating Shiva, she too has aspects which highlight the polarity inherent in goddesses. She manifests herself in order to combat demons and comes to the aid of gods and goddesses and therefore her association with maintaining order in a world threatened by destruction. Further the perception of her devotees who approach her as mother reflect the positive side of her character. An important symbolism to be noted is derived from her iconographic representation. While her upper and lower left hands have negative connotations in that she is holding a bloodied cleaver in one and a human head in the other; her right hands contrast this by the sign her upper right makes, connoting 'fear not' and the lower conferring boons.

Thus the simultaneous presence of benevolence and malevolence in a single deity gets further established in the case of Kali too who on the surface can get classed as wholly malevolent. These elements of polarity and synthesis that seem endemic in the portraits of these goddesses, are a characteristic of all Hindu goddesses and get reflected in the lives of real women too. It is a perception of a male dominated ideology which has attempted to grapple with a dimension of reality which they seek to channelise in "safe" ways through their ritual, mythic and social structure.

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CHAPTER III

VIRGIN WORSHIP

The history of Kumari worship in Nepal is shrouded in a great deal of legends and ambiguity. While no firm statement can be made regarding the origin of the custom of worshipping living Kumaris, there is however evidence that a Goddess of this name has been worshipped for a very long time, since at least the 6th century A.D.

The Kumari cult of Nepal, has been described as a unique phenomenon where girls, generally aged about two to four years, are worshipped as a living goddess. M.R. Allen, on the basis of research conducted during the period 1973-74, has provided a detailed account of this cult of goddess worship in his book, *The Cult of Kumari, Virgin Worship in Nepal* (1975).

The Newars, an orthodox Buddhist caste, who constitute about 50% of the valley population, are among those from whom the Kumari is selected. The Newars have for long been dominated by Hindu Kings and have developed a complex caste structure dominated by an ideology of purity and pollution. A striking feature of this cult, has been that while Kumari is a classic Hindu deity, the girls who represent her in living form are members of the Buddhist Newar community. However the worship of this Goddess is equally popular among Hindu and Buddhist communities.

Drawing from history, Allen notes that one of the Nepalese chronicles (Vamsavatis) records how Laksmikamadeva who reigned from about (1024-40 A.D) established and popularised *Kumari puja*. The primary consideration for his selection of a Sakya (Buddhist) girl was probably one of political expediency. He was a Hindu monarch ruling over a predominantly Buddhist peasant population. By establishing a cult devoted to the worship of a high-caste Buddhist girl as a living form of a prominent Hindu deity he might have promoted the spread of Hinduism, and increased the legitimacy of his rule over his Buddhist subjects.

There has been a close link between the Kumari, the King and the King's personal Goddess. Till the 5th century A.D., Maneswari was worshipped as the personal Goddess by the ruler of Nepal. Maneswari, a form of Durga was eventually replaced by Taleju during the 11th and 12th century. It is Taleju, yet another form of the powerful enemy destroying Durga, who is most commonly associated with the Kumari cult, and has been regarded as the chief protective deity of Nepalese Kings. A consistent feature of the tales associated with Taleju, is her representation as a beautiful goddess who once maintained an intimate relationship with her worshipping King. Then one day an event occurred which offended her after which she no longer appeared in physical form. Whatever the version, there is always the implication that the King developed a strong desire to sexually possess the Goddess. It is believed that the following night Taleju appeared to the King in a dream and said that though she could no longer meet him as before, she would give him the opportunity to worship her by taking the form of a young girl belonging to a family of a polluting occupation. Thus the close association between the Kumari and Taleju is established with this reference to history and legend.

The girls to be chosen as Kumaris are selected by reference to formal purity criteria. They must be in perfect health, have suffered no serious illness, especially

one that might leave some physical blemish, such as small pox, and most importantly have lost no blood either in the form of loss of teeth or through early menarche. The selection is made by a formal committee appointed by the King's priest, who then further purifies the girl in preparation for invoking the spirit of the goddess to reside in her body. The girl remains as a living Kumari until some impurity develops.

In Kumari worship the aim is not so much to worship either a virgin Goddess or a pure young virgin girl, but rather to utilize the purity of such girls to invoke the presence of powerful and mature goddesses such as Taleju Bhavani, and the Buddhist Goddess, Vajradevi. Though the deified girl is called Kumari, the actual goddess invoked at her installation ceremony and whom she is said to now become are by no means noted for their pre-menstrual purity. For Hindu worshipers she is Taleju Bhavani, a form of Durga, who must be assuaged with the blood of sacrificed animals. It is the capacity for destructive power that has led the Newar Kings and later the Gorkha King of Nepal, to install her as their personal deity within the palace compound.

Kumari's worshipers rarely seek her for other worldly or purity considerations, but rather for worldly ones. Foremost among Kumari worshipers are women with various problems, primarily menstrual, but also concerns with their children's health. Among men the most common motive is to gain, maintain and forestall loss of power.

Allen is of the view that it is the manner in which pre-menstrual virgin girls combine in their persons the seemingly irreconcilable values attributed by Hindus to women - those of purity, reproductivity and destructive capacity, that has led to their immense veneration throughout the Hindu world of India and Nepal. At the time of Allen's fieldwork, there were ten Newar girls being worshipped as living Kumaris. Allen noted major differences among them in terms of the girls' caste

membership, who worships her, the attributes most stressed and their relation to other goddesses. Of the ten living Kumaris, there were three in Kathmandu, three in Bhadgaon, two in Patan and one each in Deopatan and Bungamati.

The Kathmandu Royal Kumari

Those eligible to be chosen as Kumari are daughters of male Sakyas who have membership of a Kathmandu *Baha* (ex-Buddhist monastery). The selection of the girl is done by a committee comprising the *Bada Guruji* (royal priest), the Acahu (Buddhist caste) priest of Taleju temple, the *Panca Buddha* (are five Buddhist priests of *Vajracarya* (Gubhaju caste) and the Royal astrologer. The girls are examined supposedly using the list of 32 perfections to be found in Goddesses, however, their judgement is based on a much simpler and shorter list. Allen describes the features which are most frequently mentioned as the following: perfect health with no serious illness, especially small pox, having occurred, skin without blemish, black hair and eyes, no bad body smells, pre-menstrual and no loss of teeth. In addition to these physical signs, the selection committee takes into account matters as her personality, which must have signs of calmness and fearlessness, and the general reputation of her family, particularly in terms of piety. The practical irrelevance of the formal list of 32 perfections is quite evident in that many of them could be found only in a mature woman. Allen suggests that the list applies to Kumari in her true or inner form as a fully mature woman. After this initial selection procedure, the astrologer examines the successful girl's horoscope to check that it in no way clashes with that of the King, besides a general favourability. Following this the *Bada Guruji* brings her to the palace where the King offers her a coin. She now returns to her home where she stays until the final tests occur and the formal rites of installation are performed. It is believed that during this period the spirit of the Kumari slowly

enters the girl so that if she is in any way unsuitable her body would react negatively during the three or four week period.

The final test for the installation of the Kumari-elect occurs at the sight of the celebration of *Maha astami*, the "great eighth" day of *Dasain* which is the celebration of the slaying of the demon Mahisa by Durga. On *Kabratra*, the "black night", hundreds of buffaloes, goats, sheep, chickens and ducks are sacrificed at Taleju, Bhagvati, Durga and other mother Goddess temples throughout the country. At nightfall eight buffaloes representing the demon are tied to poles around the edge of a courtyard and killed by having their throats slit so that the blood jets high towards the Bhagvati shrine. A few hours later at about midnight a further one hundred and eight buffaloes together, with goats are killed. Lighted wicks are placed between the horns of the buffalo heads which are placed in rows across the courtyard. At this point the Kumari elect is brought to the entrance for her final test and installation. She is required to enter the courtyard all by herself and walk clockwise around the raised edge of the courtyard until she reaches the shrine of the Goddess. She must maintain a perfectly calm demeanour to accomplish the test successfully. Subsequently the installation ceremony is performed by the priests of Taleju temple.

Unable to obtain information of the ritual of installation, Allen gives a description drawing from that of the Patan Kumari's, believing them to have basic similarities. The ritual essentially consists of a removal of all past experience from the girl's body so as to make it pure for the spirit of the goddess to enter. This occurs slowly throughout the ritual and reaches its climax only when the girl is fully made-up as Kumari with the appropriate hair do, *tika* mark, third eye painted on the forehead, red clothes, red painted toes and elaborate jewellery, and when she fully takes her seat on the throne. With the ceremony over she walks on a white cloth across the public square to her official residence amidst a huge crowd.

While for the Hindu worshippers, the above described rituals complete the installation of Kumari, for the Newar Buddhists who in fact constitute the majority of her worshippers it is not yet complete. Though they do not disregard the belief that Kumari is a virginal form of Taleju, they identify her more with Vajradevi, the chief female divinity of Vajrayana Buddhism. After reaching the official residence Kumari is taken to the shrine on the second floor where two leading *Gubhaju* priests worship her as Vajradevi, the sexual partner of Cakrasamvara, (is a fearsome many armed deity, who also figures prominently in Tibetan Buddhism).

Thus the installation ceremony and its association with blood brings forth quite clearly the close association of the Kumari with mature goddesses, who are classed as erotic and blood thirsty and invoked to possess the girl. This rite stands in sharp contrast to the initial selection procedures in which the aim was to find a pure young virgin.

Allen points out that the young girl remains in office till she shows some sign of being human rather than divine, the most certain indication of which is considered to be loss of blood, which may be caused by loss of tooth, menstruation, a wound or internal haemorrhage. Though it seems that loss of tooth was often overlooked if there was little bleeding.

Upon the installation of a new Kumari, the old one is required to remain indoors in her parents home for four days during which people may come to worship her. On the fourth day a last puja is performed after which she removes all her Kumari clothing and jewellery. She is now relegated to the status of an ordinary member of the family and undergoes the usual life cycle rituals. Adjusting to this new role required of her poses difficulties both for her and for others who must now accept her as an ordinary human. Upon marriage the ex-Kumaris enter the most difficult phase, as one who is required to serve and even worship her husband. It is

commonly believed that marriage to an ex-royal Kumari could prove disastrous for any but the strongest men. There exists a strong belief that such girls retain something of their former power. In conformity with this belief all ex-Kumaris are addressed as *Dya Meiju* (*Newari*) or "deity female" for the rest of their lives. A consequence of such continuing power being ascribed to them has been that many ex-Kumaris have had to marry men of lower caste than themselves.

The Kumari is looked after by the Kumarima, who with her family live in the Kumari *che* residence (official) and assist the old lady in looking after and entertaining the goddess. The Kumarima is also responsible for all the arrangements that are required in connection with the goddess's formal commitments. As part of the daily routine, the Kumari is bathed and dressed, her hair has to be fixed in the top-knot style, her eyes are painted with black lines around them, the *tika* and the third-eye is also a must. The Kumari is worshipped by the *Achaju* priest of the Taleju temple, who performs a purificatory rite which consists of an offering of five things each of which is meant for the cleansing of the five sensory organs. After the Kumari has been fed her first food of the day (rice, egg and curd), she may be worshipped by Kumarima and other members of her family. The *Raj Gubhaju* also worships her and makes a simple lamp offering in the evening. However, his chief duty is to worship the image of Cakrasamvara and Vajradevi.

The Kumari's daily routine consists of two to three hours of sitting on the throne for visitors to worship her, playing with the children of Kumarima's family and standing at her window for the benefit of tourists. There are about 10-12 devotees who worship her each day. According to Allen's observations there are no formal requirements for the method of worship. The devotees represent a wide spectrum of Nepalese society ranging from peasants to prominent government members.

Foremost among her worshippers are those who suffer from bleeding

problems, women with menstrual difficulties, those suffering from chronic haemorrhage or who cough blood. Another category consists of those who are required to conclude a ceremony with *Kumari puja*. This is desired in the case of all ritual occasions for it is believed that without *Kumari puja* all that went before would be powerless or futile. However, most people simply perform the puja to some icon or image. Besides this category, public servants, even government ministers who fear either loss or demotion in their job are among the Kumari's worshippers. Yet another category consists of those who believe in the Kumari's power to foretell future events.

Allen contends that in the above mentioned cases she is worshipped specifically as Kumari with the emphasis on her role as pure young virgin, though even here not without some ambiguity. However, he also points out that in the case of those who invite a Living Kumari to attend Hindu or Buddhist privately organized Tantric rituals, the young girl is used as a suitable vessel for the spirit of some other Goddess, usually mature, passionate and beautiful. In such rites, Allen believes, it is the full power of Kumari's delayed sexual and creative potential that is venerated. She is believed to be "charged with the power of erotic womanhood." (Allen, M.R.1975:26).

The belief that Kumari is really Taleju and hence the chief protectress of the state has ensured worship by the King and other politicians. Allen's study noted that a new king would always pay homage to Kumari during his coronation. Allen also makes note of a number of important festivals during the year when the royal Kumari's presence is required. An important event is the worship of Kumari on the eighth day of *Dasain* (*Kalaratri*) at the sight of the sacrifice of hundreds of buffaloes and goats. The Kumari is brought to this scene of mass sacrifice and seated at the centre while worshipped by the *Achaju* priest. Here again the ambivalent nature of

the goddess becomes evident. While no blood sacrifice should be made to her in her overt role as Kumari, the virgin, in her role as a living form of the powerful mother-Goddess can only be satisfied with the warm blood of animals killed in her name. This holds true for both her identification with Hindu deities like Taleju, Durga, Kali or with the Buddhist Vajradevi.

Most of the other cases of Kumari worship described by Allen share the basic characteristics with the Kathmandu Kumari except for certain details. The Patan Kumari, was once the tutelary divinity of the Malla Kings of Patan, and was still of considerable importance in this town at the time of Allen's field work.

The Patan Kumari is chosen from the daughters of the Hawbaha men. The criteria of selection are the same as for the Kathmandu Kumari. The installation ceremony involves some variation in that the priest (the Mulpujari (the chief priest) of Taleju, a Deo-Brahman by caste) conducts an introductory purificatory ceremony with the girl seated before them naked, during which her body is sprinkled with water from a holy vessel. This is followed by the main puja in which her body is cleansed of all previous life experiences so as to make her a perfectly pure being for the spirit of the Goddess which is said to enter this girl. While this puja is taking place, the girl begins to get redder and redder as the spirit of Kumari enters her. While the girl is being dressed and made up in the appropriate Kumari manner, the priest prepares her throne, a simple low stool, by drawing the *Sri yantra mandal* on it. This is a triangle based *mandal* which has been regarded as the emblem of the Shakti or Devi of Tantricism. According to Allen's informants, the moment the girl sits on her throne she is said to have become Kumari.

Allen notes that the Patan Kumari, unlike her counterpart in Kathmandu, lives at home with her family. However unlike the other cases she is constantly treated as a Goddess and therefore leads a life of many restrictions. A family member, usually

the father acts as *Pujari*, and each morning conducts a *puja*. Her followers consist of similar categories of people as for the Kathmandu Kumari. Besides daily worship her presence is required at certain annual festivals and she may also be sought by certain individuals for private ceremonies provided she gives her assent.

In case of death in the Kumari's family, she must immediately leave and stay with some relative, and the family priest takes over her worship since her father would be in mourning. When the Kumari herself falls ill, a doctor is summoned only when she is serious, in which case she is first declared unfit and therefore no longer Kumari.

When the girl is declared unfit for office she immediately ceases to be regarded as a goddess. Allen's informants were of the view that while there is always a risk in marrying a girl who was once a goddess, there is also a certain degree of prestige.

In Bhadgaon, a Newar city, there were three individual Kumaris, as well as a group of eight girls regarded as Living Goddess. The three living Kumaris were known as Ekanta, Wala Lakhu, and Tebuk. The Ekanta is the most important and was Bhadgaon's equivalent of the royal Kumari of Kathmandu and Patan. All three Kumaris are closely linked in the sense that they are all selected by a single committee using identical criteria and are all recognised as forms of Taleju.

The Ekanta Kumari lives at home with her family, and more or less leads a life that differs little from other children. However, she must always wear her third eye and must avoid pollution. She may play in the neighbourhood like other children, and may also attend school unlike the Patan and Kathmandu Kumaris. Her family did not need to perform *puja* daily, as the caretaker of the official residence (*Kumari Che*) performs it in her name at her *Che*. While the chief signs of disqualification are the usual, i.e. small pox, loss of teeth and menses, but in Bhadgaon the tooth criteria is the most important unlike in Patan and Kathmandu

where the emphasis is on menses.

The Bhadgaon Kumari cult is believed to be closely linked with the royal worship of Taleju. Though the cult suffered because of lack of royal patronage for around 200 years, it was still an integral part of the worship of Taleju and the *Navdurga* during *Dasain* at the time of Allen's fieldwork.

Allen now goes on to describe the non-royal Kumaris. The Vajracarya community in Kathmandu, he noted had its own Kumaris, worshipped by priests using Buddhist texts and primarily identified with such Buddhist deities as Tara, Vajradevi or Vajravarahi. Allen points to the case of the Vajracarya Kumari in central Kathmandu who was a resident of Mubaha, one of the 18 main *bahas* of Kathmandu. The Mubaha Kumari was believed to be the first choice for any one wanting to perform a Vajrayana ceremony involving worship of a living Kumari, and therefore she had a special standing. In some sense she is even regarded as superior to the royal Kumari in that if the latter falls ill offerings are sent to her Mubaha counterpart. However, this cult of the Mubaha Kumari remained confined largely within the section of Kathmandu Newar Buddhists. Selection was primarily on the basis of the usual physical criteria. She was expected to live in the Kumari quarters of the baha. She was to strictly avoid contact with leather or other impure substances, and like the royal Kumaris she were not to take medicines while in office. The Kumari hair style, the painted third eye and red clothes, characteristic of the other Kumaris, were significant symbols in her case too.

There was no living Kumari at the time of Allen's study. He attributes the reluctance of Mubaha parents to offer their daughters as Kumari, partly to the restrictions that the position imposes on the whole family, and also because of meagre material rewards. Further, neither the King nor the State showed any interest in the girl. Among the other instances of non-royal kumari worship noted by Allen,

the prominent were a Vajracarya girl at Kwabaha of North Kathmandu; the Jyapu (a Buddhist caste) kumari worshipped by one of the two main groups of *Pradhans* in Kathmandu, the Jyapu Kumari of Patan worshipped by the Deo-Brahmans, the Bungamati (is a wholly Newar village, one miles south west of Patan) kumari and the Chabahi kumari (a largely Newar settlement, 3 miles north east of central Kathmandu). These kumaris were sought primarily to fulfil certain ritual needs, however, many of them unlike the royal kumaris, were also invited to attend ceremonial events such as a puberty rites or marriage ceremonies.

The contradiction imminent in the case of the living Kumari worship appears to be recurrent in other forms of Kumari worship too. In the case of the royal Kumaris, Allen pointed to the close association with the virgin goddess and Taleju Bhavani, a sexually mature and beautiful goddess. In many of her attributes the living Kumari is a young virgin, while in some other respects, she is a sexually mature mother goddess. Allen now goes on to discuss certain other forms of the virgin goddess and further explicates the mature / immature conjunction.

The existent Kumari worship in Nepal is commonly used to refer to one of the matrkas or the 'divine mothers'. The word Kaumari in the literal sense means 'pertaining to or concerning Kumari'. However the Matrkas are usually represented as the female energies or counterparts of the great Hindu Gods. In Nepal they are worshipped as a set of eight or nine, and are worshipped particularly during *Dasain* when they are regarded as fearsome destroyers of demons. It is believed that the great gods, in order to overcome the demons, take the form of *Bhairavas* and their Saktis become the *Bhairavis* or *Matrkas*.

Though very different as the young, beautiful and calm virgin and the matrka Kaumari on the other hand as the mature, fierce and sometimes ugly mother, Allen points to certain features which establish definite parallels between the two. Firstly,

both are associated with the colour red, their mount is the peacock and their flower is the hibiscus. Further, Agni, the consort of Kaumari is referred to as Kumara in the Brahmanas. Kumara is the chaste adolescent who is said to forever remain young and single and is as such the male counterpart of Kumari the perpetual maiden (Ibid: 66). Allen contends that the underlying sexuality and maternity of the virgin goddess is paralleled amongst the Newars by the role of kumar as the eternal bachelor who is also the ideal husband. This is brought out in the *ihi* or bel-fruit ceremony in which all girls of Vajracarya and Sakya castes are married at the age of six or seven to Kumar, who is Suvarna Kumar as the golden bachelor prince. Also both Kumari and Kumar have the peacock as their mount, who is believed to reproduce itself without sexual intercourse.

While in overt terms the living Kumari is foremost a pre-menstrual girl, yet the underlying sexuality and maturity as in some other contexts holds her as really post-menstrual. Her association with mature Goddesses, in that, her distinctive colour in clothes is red, the *tika* mark and flower is also red, supports such a view. The living Kumari also wears the *taya*, which is an essential item of jewellery worn by a girl at her marriage ceremony. Further, the occasional instance of a living Kumari of a clearly post-menstrual age, as with the Patan Kumari during Allen's fieldwork also indicates an underlying ambivalence surrounding the Goddess's true nature.

In addition to the living Kumari and the Matrka Kaumari, the virgin goddess is worshipped in the forms of Bala Kumari and Panca Kumari. The Bala Kumari of which there are four corresponding to the four cardinal directions, are images enshrined in pagoda-type temples at Thimi, Patan, Mayati and Mangalpura. Though bala literally means 'child', the image is of a beautiful and mature woman sitting on her peacock mount.

The temple of the Bala Kumari at Patan is notorious for a large following of sorcerers who come from all over the valley to acquire the power necessary to make their invocations or prayers powerful and effective. At Harasiddhi, a small Newar village close to Patan, the deity is propitiated with blood sacrifices. Every twelfth year it is said the Jalami (a number of men of Harasiddhi and close by villages, who keep long hair in a top-knot like woman and wear clothes like women are known as Jalami) bespell a victim, preferably a young pre-menstrual girl in order to prepare her for sacrifice at Harasiddhi.

The most famous is the Bala Kumari at Thimi, who has a *Acahju* priest. Her worshippers make a special offering of scarlet ceremonial powder. Goats and chickens are sacrificed to her in her temple. The meat of the goat is distributed as '*prasad*', which is not eaten but instead kept as a medicine to combat children's diseases.

The Panca Kumari, are usually represented in small and inconspicuous shrines, usually named after Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara and Mandodari. These are all spouses and beautiful mature women. Only Ahalya is represented in a chaste form. They are sets of five stones, which together are called Panca Kumari. Whenever a living Kumari is worshipped in a Tantric ritual, it is believed that extra merit is gained if the Panca Kumari are also represented by living girls at a pre-menstrual stage. Sometimes in marriage ceremonies, the five virgins appear as girl-friends of the bride. Also during *Dasain* some families do puja to the Panca Kumari in their living form. Allen notes that in recent years, the State has financed the appearance of five girls known as the Panca Kumari whenever the King or a foreign head of state arrives at Kathmandu airport. It is also said that if the King should worship them, perfect order will prevail throughout his kingdom.

Inferring from the statements of both Vajracarya and Deo-Brahman informants, Allen says that the goddess is worshipped in her virginal form because she is the

pure unruptured vessel who however contains within herself the full potential of creative motherhood. In addition to her purifying and creative capabilities, she also has destructive powers.

As seen earlier, according to her Hindu worshippers she is Taleju Bhavani, an immensely powerful goddess who protects the state by destroying its enemies. Likewise, for her Buddhist worshippers, she is Vajradevi, depicted as a weapon wielding, blood-drinking sexual consort of Cakrasamvara. Further, danger is associated with Hindu virgins in the context of initiatory intercourse with a girl. The followers of the Tantra seek to gain control of powers such as these in the performance of Kumari *puja*.

Allen points to the case of mock-marriages, such as the *tali*-tying ceremony of the Nayars of Kerala which he thinks are performed in order to neutralize the dangerous power within the virgin. He cites the example of the *ihī* rite, a similar mock-marriage ceremony of the Newars. He maintains that these two sets of marriage customs must be understood by reference to a parallel structural departure from the ideal model of a Hindu caste system and its associated ideology of purity maintenance.

In elaborately caste structured communities with a strict adherence to Brahminical ideals of purity maintenance there is an obsessive concern with female sexuality. The sexual and reproductive functions of women, though valued in terms of lineage continuity and size are also devalued as antithetical to male ascetic ideals and the maintenance of purity. A consequence of this apparent conflict of ideals has been a strict male control of female sexuality. Only under such control women's reproductive capability is accorded high value. Outside the realms of male control female sexuality is thought of as a dangerous force that is seen as a threat to the social system. Thus, an unmarried yet sexually mature girl is seen as an anomaly to

be avoided at all costs. Hence, Allen is of the view that the pre-pubertal marriage of girls must be understood as an institutionalized response to the dangers believed to be associated with reproductive sexuality outside the confines of marriage. This institution, in conjunction with the control of sexually active women by their husbands, and the prohibition against widow re-marriage, together ensure that men both gain access to and impose rigorous constraints on female sexuality and reproductivity (Ibid: 81).

The Newars and also the Nayars conform to this orthodox pattern to a certain extent. All girls are required to go through a form of pre-pubertal marriage and a period of seclusion which has some connection with menarche. The difference lies in that the girls are not married to their future conjugal partners and the period of seclusion is prior, to rather than at menarche. They also differ in that there is an absence of any prohibition against widow re-marriage, the comparative ease with which post-pubertal conjugal relationships may be dissolved, and the level of autonomy accorded to adult women.

When asked as to why *ihri* was performed, Allen's informants gave varied answers. Some stated it was to protect the girls from various dangers, like that posed by malicious spirits, others believed that it would protect the girl from the stigma of widowhood, as *ihri* links the girl in an eternal marriage with a god, thus the death of her spouse does not impinge on her married status. Some of the Buddhist and Hindu pandits maintained that *ihri* was not just an imitation of Hindu custom, but an innovation to avoid what they regard as certain undesirable features of Hindu marriage - like the prohibition against widow remarriage and restrictions placed on the girl as regards the choice of spouse.

Yalman, in discussing the Nayar *tali*-tying rites, contended that these and other such mock marriages must be understood as an institutionalized response to the Hindu

pre-occupation with caste purity, which focuses attention on the appearance of female sexuality. Allen questions this assertion and cites the examples of mock-marriages amongst middle-Indian tribes. He sees these instances as providing good ground for asserting that the mock-marriages are performed in order to provide an overt commitment to the orthodox Brahmanical purity ideal prior to an establishment of unorthodox sexual relationships. He is of the view that one would expect mock-marriages to occur more in the case of tribes encapsulated in a larger caste-structured polity rather than isolated tribes. Thus mock marriage may be said to constitute a formal show of commitment to orthodoxy in Brahman dominated communities, according to Allen's understanding.

While he agrees with Gough and Yalman in their belief of the Nayar *tali*-tying rite being an institutionalized response to a profoundly felt danger that focuses on female sexuality, he doubts that the danger lies in the fear of pollution generated by the pubescent girl's approaching sexual maturity as contended by Yalman. Neither does he agree with Gough's hypothesis that the danger arises through the identification of a virgin with incestuously desired and castrating mother. According to Allen the danger is simply that of uncontrolled sexuality in a caste-structured community dominated by a powerful minority. In Nepal, men of the twice-born conquering Gorkha castes, were often able to establish coercive and exploitative relations with Newar women. This might have been accentuated by a less stringent puritanical morality concerning female sexuality among Newars.

This felt danger of uncontrolled sexuality was dealt with by institutionalized customs of mock-marriage, and mock-menstruation ceremonies. The Kumari cults were a case of a similar concern with the potentially dangerous powers believed to be inherent in pre-pubescent female sexuality. In this case they sought to gain access to these same powers for political and other worldly purposes.

The Kumari as a goddess is not categorised as a malevolent goddess though she is used to embody the spirit of mature, destructive and powerful goddesses like Taleju who is a form of Kali. Kali, a largely malevolent goddess for she is dominating, associated with blood and death, and considered fearsome and powerful, is worshipped for fear of her unleashing her wrath on the devotees. She is shown to be representative of uncontrolled sexuality.

Thus it would appear that the virgin goddess is seen to embody the otherwise incompatible values of chastity, reproductivity and danger. Though the virgin is ostensibly the pure girl, the fact that they recognise her sexuality is apparent in her association with mature goddesses, her having powers to deal with menstrual problems, her association with the colour red etc. Thus one could say that the Kumari presents to the Hindu mind a solution to the otherwise ambivalent values associated with women.

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CHAPTER IV

THE SPOUSE GODDESS AND THE BENEVOLENT ONE

In the earlier sections, we have established the duality associated with the principle of the female, both on the plane of real women and on the plane of divinities in Hinduism. In the case of Hindu goddesses it was seen that one aspect often gets emphasised at the expense of the other. The goddess consort of Shiva in her various manifestations as Parvati, Durga, and Kali provided the most powerful expression of the polarity and synthesis characteristic of the Hindu female principle. I shall now focus exclusively on the goddess in her benevolent aspect. I will first take the case of the Spouse Goddess, representing the model of the "perfect" wife who best exemplifies this aspect.

The stereotypical image of the ideal Hindu woman is in fact best represented by the Spouse Goddess who presents an example of the controlled, fertile and benevolent female. Parvati, Sita and Lakshmi are amongst the most popular representations of this category of the goddess. They are portrayed as docile, obedient and gentle in their married state. The important concept of male control is well embodied in the portrayal of the Spouse Goddess as chaste, fertile and subordinated, with the dangers of uncontrolled sexuality far removed. With her sexuality transferred to male control, the Spouse Goddess is portrayed as consistently benevolent. However, when any characteristics which contradict this picture emerge, she takes the form of another

goddess altogether (e.g. Parvati manifests her anger by giving rise to Kali). In the course of our analysis we will see how the lives of Sita, Parvati and Lakshmi are dramas of power and containment in the sense that they reflect a recognition and a deep-seated fear of female power. This female power may be narrowed down to the power of female sexuality.

One of the most popular figures of Hindu mythology is Sita. Known primarily as the wife of Ram, Sita is revered as the model Hindu wife. Although the divinity of Ram and Sita is not stressed in Valmiki's Ramayan, they increasingly become identified as manifestations of the God Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi in the later vernacular renditions of the work (Kinsley, 1989:91).

Today, in North India, Ram and Sita are considered the supreme divine couple. Sita has been defined almost entirely in relation to her husband. It is the androcentric point of view which has cast her in Hindu mythology, legends and folklore as the ideal Hindu wife. Sita is the ideal *pativrata*, the devoted wife whose entire existence is dedicated to her husband. Manu describes the ideal wife as a woman who always remains faithful to her husband irrespective of his behaviour; "Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife."

As compared to other popular Spouse Goddesses like Parvati and Lakshmi, who are portrayed as ideal wives in most respects in Hindu mythology, Sita distinctly lacks an identity and power of her own. Lakshmi and Parvati, though subordinated to their respective spouses, have an identity of their own to the extent that they are worshipped in their own right too. Their worship is associated with certain Hindu calendrical festivals. Lakshmi is worshipped popularly in North India as the goddess of wealth and prosperity. She is particularly worshipped in all homes on Diwali. Parvati is associated with the festival of *Tij* in North India and Nepal. On the

other hand, Sita is not approached directly for divine blessing but as one who has access to Rama, who is actually the sought one.

I shall now cite some instances from the Ramayan that show Sita in the light of the ideal *pativrata*. Intertwined with these instances is the importance given to Sita's chastity and the dangers she is perceived to pose when outside the bounds of her husband's control.

Sita's complete devotion for her husband is exemplified when Ram prepares to leave for his fourteen years exile in the forest. Ram warns her of the hardships she would have to endure in the forest, but Sita insists on accompanying him, saying: "For the woman it is not her father; her son, nor her mother, friends, nor her own self; but the husband who in this world and the next is ever her sole means of salvation,..... In truth, wherever the shadow of the feet of her consort falls, it must be followed." (H.P. Shastri in Kakar, 1982:65).

Later, Sita is abducted by Ravana to Lanka and made to live in captivity. Throughout this period she patiently awaits to be rescued by her husband, remaining unflinching in her loyalty and faithfulness to him. An instance pointing to the importance given to chastity arises at this juncture in the epic story. Hanuman the loyal monkey ally of Rama reaches Lanka, and proposes to rescue her and return her to Ram carrying her on his back. However, Sita does not agree because to do so would mean touching another male other than her husband, which would be violative to her devotion to Ram (Kinsley; 1989:100).

However, despite her steadfast faithfulness and complete devotion to Ram, Sita's chastity is put to question. After the defeat of Ravana, when Ram encounters Sita, he expresses his hesitation at taking her back for she has been under the control of another man. Sita is shocked at this accusation and steps into a funeral pyre to prove her virtue. Because of her innocence and purity, *Agni* the god of fire, refuses to

harm her. Ram accepts this as proof of her fidelity to him, and convinced of her purity accepts her back.

That Ram's right and power to rule are dependent on Sita's virtue becomes clear when upon their return to Ayodhya, Ram decides to banish Sita to appease his subjects who raised their suspicion, casting doubts on her chastity. Sita once again proves her devotion and ideal wifely behaviour by blaming herself for her misfortune. She does not blame Ram, but believes it is she herself who might have been at fault.

However her ordeals do not stop here. After Sita has given birth to twin sons and spent several years in a forest hermitage, Ram summons her back to Ayodhya to undergo an ordeal that will absolve him of all shame and demonstrate her innocence once and for all. Although he himself is convinced of her innocence, he demands a public ordeal to convince his subjects. At this Sita asks to be taken back into the bosom of her mother, the goddess earth, on the basis of her purity and loyalty to Ram. From the androcentric point of view of most Hindu texts, Sita's steadfast loyalty to her husband, her self-effactive nature and her chastity make her the ideal Hindu wife, the *pativrata*.

Throughout, while Ram entertains doubts about her chastity when she was under Ravan's control, while he allows her to undergo an ordeal by fire, while he exiles her from his kingdom to pacify his subjects and to protect his own reputation and finally when he demands that Sita undergo a public ordeal to prove her purity, Sita continues to remain loyal and in fact blames herself for the turn of events. In her loyalty and chastity, furthermore, it is understood that she supports and nourishes Ram's strength and reputation (ibid:106).

A common Hindu belief is that a man is strengthened by his wife's chastity, and weakened and endangered by her faithlessness on the other hand. Thus Sita who is the dutiful and obedient wife of Ram, may also be viewed as motivating him to

perform feats of heroism and whose fidelity underlies the strength and enduring qualities of his reign as King (Hawley and Wulff (ed);1982:223). The Goddess Savitri's example also brings out this point quite clearly. Savitri is a commonly worshipped goddess throughout North India. She is renowned for her devotion to her husband through which she saves him from the god of death. The story of Savitri is held up as a prime example of a good wife, who saves her husband from death, follows him anywhere, proves her virtue, remains under his control and gives him her power.

The depiction of Sita in the epic Ramayana, may be said to present a typically male formulated view of femininity. And in true patriarchal tradition she has come to be glorified and the most often cited model of perfect wifely behaviour. Even her suffering is glorified and it has indeed raised her to divine status. Thus it is in her relation to Ram, her husband, that Sita has attained whatever identity she has, without Ram, Sita in herself is a non-entity with no independent existence or destiny. All the qualities associated with her and which have been elevated to being worthy of praise, are those which emerge in relation to Ram.

In Hindu tradition a woman is taught to understand herself primarily in relation to others. They are taught to cultivate an attitude that identifies their own welfare with the welfare of others, and particularly that of their husbands. It may be noted that all the periodical days of fasting that women observe are associated with being a good wife, good daughter-in-law, good daughter or mother. Thus the feminine role in Hindu tradition crystallises a woman's connections to others, particularly vis-a-vis males.

Coming back to the issue of Sita's sexuality and its determining role, it must be noted that Sita was the perfect picture of purity, chastity, benevolence and beninity as long as she remained under the legitimate control of her husband. It is not her own acts or aspects of her character which cloud her benevolent and positive nature. In fact it is circumstances over which she had no direct control which put her fidelity and

chastity to question. Thus I would contend that it is entirely the unguarded sexuality of Sita which is seen to pose danger to Ram's reputation. Therefore, this may be said to be the negative power of her sexuality for it is seen to pose a threat to Ram. Moreover, even to her such power cannot be utilized beneficially, in fact it only accrues misfortune and suffering. In fact her chastity is Ram's power - for his right and power to rule are dependent on Sita's virtue as we noted earlier. Sita contributes her powers to his realm as his devoted consort and wife. Thus we may say that female sexuality plays a determining role in defining her status. It is this single factor which make her into the highly praiseworthy Hindu wife and which when not under direct male control make her out as endangering her husband's reputation and power, and therefore degrading her status too.

Another popularly known goddess-wife worshipped in Hindu tradition in North India is Lakshmi. She is widely worshipped by all castes throughout India till this date. Since the late epic period, she has been particularly associated with the God Vishnu as his consort or wife. In this role she can be seen as a model Hindu wife.

Throughout her history Lakshmi has been associated with a number of male deities, each of whom suggests certain characteristics of the goddess. Though associated with Soma, Dharma, Indra, with the demons Bali and Prahlada, however, by the late epic period, Lakshmi becomes consistently and quite exclusively associated with Vishnu. In association with Vishnu as his wife, she is cast as steadfast and loyal. As Vishnu's wife she is depicted a model Hindu wife, loyal and submissive to her husband.

In one of the most popular iconographic depictions of her, she is shown kneeling before Vishnu to massage his feet. Although she does not lose her earlier associations with fertility and growth, as Vishnu's consort she seems more involved in the social and political order that her husband creates and oversees. Vishnu is described as

dwelling in a heavenly court, Vaikuntha, and he is depicted iconographically as a mighty king (Kinsley, 1989:62). And his primary role as a king is to institute and maintain cosmic and social order. When Vishnu assumes his various forms in order to uphold the world; Lakshmi incarnates herself as his helpmate, as his spouse or consort, assisting him in his role.

Her role as a model wife emphasises her more subdued nature. In iconographic representations of Vishnu and Lakshmi together, she is shown as subservient to Vishnu, in harmony with what is described in the Hindu scriptures. When depicted together with Vishnu, she is shown as considerably smaller than him, and as having only two arms instead of the four arms that she usually has when shown alone. In association with Vishnu, Lakshmi provides a picture of marital contentment, domestic order and co-operation.

Today, Lakshmi is one of the most popular and widely venerated deities of the Hindu pantheon. Her association with granting fertility, luck, wealth and well being, and her auspicious nature have gained her a large following. Throughout the year she is worshipped in a number of festivals. In all the festivals that she is worshipped her benevolent nature is stressed. Devotees undertake a number of religious vows or *vratas* requesting Lakshmi's blessings in return for undertaking some act of devotion or piety. The boons granted, generally have to do with marital fidelity, the longevity of one's spouse, fertility of crops and bestowal of material well being.

The festival of *Diwali* is the most important association with Lakshmi in both rural and urban India. The worship of Lakshmi in this festival is related to her association with wealth and prosperity, with fertility and abundant crops; and with good fortune in the coming year. In some areas, agricultural motifs are also seen in the way it is celebrated. On another occasion in Orissa, Lakshmi is associated with crops and food in the *Kaumundi - purnima* festival. Women invoke Lakshmi on a mound of new

grain, and recall a story in which Lakshmi's disappearance results in the disappearance of crops and food and her return brings the return of abundance (Behera in Kinsley; 1989:70). The banishment of Alakshmi, the female spirit associated with bad luck and misfortune is also associated with the festival of *Diwali* in Bengal. An image of Alakshmi is made and then ceremoniously disfigured by cutting off its nose and ears, after which an image of Lakshmi is installed to signify the presence of good luck in the future.

Thus the negative aspect of Lakshmi, when given any concrete expression, takes the form of another goddess altogether. The spouse goddess thus comes to be depicted as consistently benevolent, always under the control of her husband. There are no events in her history with Vishnu, when she has not been within the purview of his supervision and in a subordinated role. Therefore allowing for her consistently benevolent portrayal, making her the picture of perfect wifely behaviour in line with the perception of the patriarchal Hindu ideology.

Similarly goddess Parvati, the spouse of Shiva, is also cited as a model for good wifely behaviour. She is also commonly depicted as consistently benevolent. However, as discussed in a previous section, when the goddess gives expression to anger or to her malevolent aspect she takes the form of Kali or Durga, another goddess altogether.

It is the worshippers perception which emphasise one aspect at the expense of the other thus resulting in a complete categorisation as wholly benevolent or wholly malevolent. While in fact, the concept of Devi embodies both aspects in a single entity. The duality associated with the female principle is indeed endemic in the portraits of these goddesses. The Spouse Goddess as the consistently benevolent goddess then presents a portrayal that is a result of a deep rooted ideology which in dealing with female sexuality categories the nurturant and the dangerous as separate in their

attempt to deal with the dangers of female sexuality.

In the spouse goddess the potential sexuality of the female has been channelized in the right direct and through the control of the dominating male spouse. Therefore the dangers associated with the uncontrolled sexuality have been averted. However, when this goddess displays characteristics that disturb the male conceived image of the subordinated docile and nurturant goddess, she is seen as the malevolent other goddess, a separate entity who is considered destructive, fearsome and sexually threatening. It is made out that only the pursuit of *Stridharma* can keep this dangerous female nature under control. Therefore it is necessary for women to be under male control to express their sexuality in safe ways. The god or male is seen as channelizing her sexuality in the right direction. Alone goddesses and women are seen as powerful and thus dangerous. The stress on wifely duties and behaviour and a distinct lack of interest in the woman except as wife clearly imply that all notions of the woman should be submerged in the ideal of 'wife'.

However moving beyond the boundaries of this traditional categorisation is the case of the Goddess Santoshi Ma. A little known goddess in the past, Santoshi Ma has of late come to occupy a position in the urban Hindu family's regular pantheon. Overriding the traditional categorisation of the benevolent and malevolent goddesses, Santoshi Ma is depicted without a spouse and yet established as a benevolent deity. Traditionally, a goddess who is not encompassed within the male principle can only appear in a malevolent form. All other forms of the goddess are encompassed within higher male principles. The emergence of Santoshi Ma, seems to suggest that direct relations with benevolent goddesses, who are unaccompanied by male gods, has become possible.

The film 'Jai Santoshi Ma' is believed to have had a far reaching impact on the propagation of the cult of the goddess. It is said to have elevated this not so popular

goddess to become the centre of a new cult in many urban centres. Veena Das's analysis of the film has found that the film in fact provides a paradigm for the elements of this cult. I shall outline the features of the goddess and her worship in the recent times relying on the analysis of the film which is believed to have popularised the cult greatly.

In showing the evolution of the goddess through certain events depicted in the film, I propose to show how Santoshi Ma is established as a new category of the goddess. I hope to show how her nature, attributes and mode of worship develop and co-relate with the demands of contemporary society.

Das (in IIC Quarterly, Vol 8(1), March 1981) has shown how every significant event relating to the leading character of the film, Satyawati, points to a successive movement in the evolution of Santoshi Ma as a benevolent goddess. The first significant event is her promise to the goddess that she will visit all the shrines of the goddess if her wish of procuring Birju as her husband is fulfilled. The goddess grants her wish and in turn Satyawati fulfills her obligation by visiting the various shrines. Das significantly points out that had Satyawati failed to fulfil her obligation, she would have provoked the wrath of Santoshi Ma, and the rest of the story may have been one of expiation.

The success of Santoshi Ma is shown to arouse the jealousy of the wives of the three great Gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Unlike their traditional representations, here they are shown to defy their husband's and refuse to admit Santoshi Ma into the cosmic pantheon. A conflict is shown between what Das calls the principles of 'Shakti' represented by the three goddesses, and 'Sati', their polar opposite. In this clash it becomes established that Santoshi Ma does not desire worship in Shakti form. Rather she requires the suffering of a single devotee who can suffer on behalf of all her devotees.

The film shows Satyawati's sufferings to begin when she is separated from her

husband and her ill-treatment in her conjugal home. Her sacrifice in the form of trials is important, for it provides the test of her devotion to Santoshi Ma and averts the need for destruction of a victim. A failure of the ascetic mode would have symbolised the defeat of the principle of 'Sati' as against 'Shakti'. However, the success of this mode establishes Santoshi Ma as a protectress of those who suffer for her. The next significant event is when, Narad the sage, suggests she perform fasts for twelve consecutive Fridays in order to overcome her sufferings. This event establishes the regular propitiation of Santoshi Ma as a deity on a marked day. Later in the film, when Satyawati's sister-in-law violates a food taboo, this gets associated with the goddess's worship. This violation is shown to enrage the goddess and her wrath turns upon her devotees. This would categorise her as a ferocious, powerful goddess who is to be feared and propitiated primarily through the observance of negative injunctions. But in overcoming her anger and forgiving, Santoshi Ma is finally established as a gentle benevolent goddess who is intimately involved with her devotees. Significantly this is the first time the goddess appears in person among her devotees, thus establishing her fully.

We saw how the choice of every characteristic in the definition of Santoshi Ma is built by rejecting elements which stand in opposition. The succession of events in the film have a cumulative structure which culminates in the final form in which the goddess appears (ibid : 51). Das makes the suggestion that just like goddess Shitala (the cool one), the smallpox goddess, derives her name in opposition to heat generated by the fever of smallpox, by analogy Santoshi Ma may be said to derive her name in opposition to the feeling of *asantosh*, the absence of peace, characteristic of the modern times. There is no one demon, like smallpox which needs to be annihilated. The sufferings of Satyawati arise from a variety of problems which may be seen to be characteristic of contemporary times.

As the cult has grown in the recent times, there has been an emergence of new temples dedicated to Santoshi Ma, not only in metropolitan cities but also in pilgrim cities like Varanasi. Apparently a number of abandoned temples of goddesses like Shitala have been reconsecrated in the name of Santoshi Ma. Thus the cult of Santoshi Ma has evoked widespread worship because it appears to be well suited to our times.

Santoshi Ma represents the modern day category of the benevolent goddess who cuts across the traditional categorisation of the benevolent spouse goddess and malevolent independent goddess. Here is a goddess who is not depicted as subordinate to a male principle, but neither is she explicitly shown to be fiercely independent and dangerous. Can we then see this new category as representative of the modern day where the female principle is in a stage of transition?

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CHAPTER V

WIDOW AND SATI MATA

Among the Hindus the sexual and reproductive powers of women have been rigorously controlled by men through such extreme institutions as pre-pubertal marriages, *purdah*, prohibition against widow remarriage, and either social isolation through stigmatization or the burning of widows. The presence of a widow especially if she was still capable of sexual and reproductive activity was seen to pose a problem for her husband's surviving male kins. Total celibacy was required of her. The death of her husband was attributed to the sins she had committed in a previous incarnation. The widow who decided to commit *Sati* was, on the contrary the mirror image of the widow who had decided to live. She was regarded as auspicious, and was dressed as a bride for her last journey. Her martyrdom brought good reputation and good luck to her kinsfolk and to her village. Thus the fear of widows, generated by the magnitude of the problem that they posed for the maintenance of male control, took extreme form in the practice of their immolation on their deceased husband's funeral pyre. Though the widow and the *Sati* were treated so radically differently, the ruling idea in both the cases was the assertion of the dead husband's total control over the wife's sexuality.

The word *Sati* is derived from '*Sal*', meaning truth, and a *sati* was a woman who was true to her ideals. The Hindu tradition holds chastity, purity and loyalty to the

husband as the highest ideals for women. There appears to be a co-relation between the decision to give up one's life on the death of the husband as proof of chastity and the expression of a wife's fidelity. The original sati in Hindu mythology was not a widow and did not immolate herself on her husband's pyre. She was the daughter of Daksha, son of Brahma. Once when Daksha wished to perform a grand sacrificial ceremony, he invited everyone except his son-in-law whom he wanted to humiliate. Sati felt so outraged at this insult to her husband that she invoked a yogic fire and was reduced to ashes, with a prayer that she should be reborn as Parvati and become Shiva's consort again. The giving up of her body voluntarily in a fiery immolation was construed in time as a divine example of wifely devotion (Narasimhan, 1990: 58). In the modern interpretation this has been twisted round into a belief which holds that if a woman gives up her body by burning, like the original *Sati*, she deserves to be venerated and honoured. However there are several examples of women who did not immolate themselves but nonetheless came to be known as *Sati*. Women like Savitri, Arundhati and Anasuya in Indian mythology were all exalted as *pativratas*. None of them committed Sati in the sense the word is used now. Savitri for example, argued with Yama (god of death) when he came to carry off her husband Satyavan, and cleverly restored him to life. Stemming from such wifely strength is the phrase "*Sati Savitri*" used commonly as an epithet when referring to a devoted wife.

For a proper understanding of *Sati*, one must understand the Hindu widow. Though they represent apparently polar images in that, one was auspicious and the other inauspicious, they share a deep structure. When the husband died the Hindu woman had two options that of remaining a widow or of performing *Sati*. The Hindu woman believed that the acts of austerity performed for her husband provided good merit which would ensure her husband's longevity and prosperity. This orientation made her feel responsible for her husband's death before her. She came to blame herself believing

that she was lacking in her *dharmic* quality. The widow was considered to be unfortunate, even inauspicious. The *Sati*, by contrast was viewed as fortunate and auspicious. The redefinition of her status and role was in complete contrast to everything that the woman as wife stood for. Whereas the Hindus looked down on the widow, towards a *Sati* they expressed a dramatically opposite attitude. Performing *sati* was one of the most fortunate and auspicious events for the *Sati* herself and for those who witnessed this event.

Hejib and Young (in Arvind Sharma (ed), 1988: 76) describe the "ideal" event. The woman's decision was to be a formal vow (*Sankalpa*), without deliberation and immediate. She was to order the preliminaries of the *Sati* rite herself, maintaining a calm and composed demeanour. She was not to shed a tear, for she was to look upon this moment as the most auspicious of her life. This was to be the supreme opportunity for self-sacrifice that consummated her life of dedication to her husband. (Ibid: 76). The people looked upon her as a goddess incarnate, and reversing the usual norms of respect, they were to prostrate to her in return. She was to bless them benevolently with perfect tranquillity. She was to sit down on the pyre and take her deceased husband's head on her lap or recline beside him. As the pyre was lit, the crowd acclaimed her as a "good wife", a true *Sati*, one who had brought immense dignity and honour to herself, her family and her community. This Hejib and Young describe as the ideal *Sati*, the woman and her act.

It is quite apparent that *Sati* and widowhood did not constitute equal options. The *Sati* was considered auspicious from the moment of her decision, while the widow from the moment of her husband's death became inauspicious. Infact even the hardships she endured, and the austerities she practiced failed to generate public veneration for her, though her saint like behaviour did earn her respect. The *Sati's* resolve on the other hand countered any hint of accusations and degradation. The *Sati*

infact never had the title of a widow. The immediacy of her self-imposed death circumvented any rite of passage to another stage of life. Rather, dressed in her bridal finery, she reaffirmed symbolically her marital status, and auspiciousness. Everyone in the village gathered to witness the *Sati's* holiness, whereas everyone avoided the sight of the widow. While all gathered to hear the *Sati's* benedictions, they shut their ears to the widows utterance (Ibid: 81). The *Sati* was viewed as the perfect wife, the very embodiment of the goddess, for she expedited immediately her bad karma that caused the husband's death. The widow took time to rectify her faults, and join her husband. Thus the goal was the same for both, but the means were different.

Thus the *Sati* is the wife who has chosen not to become the widow. One the other hand it is the idea of becoming a deified wife that is asserted. Julia Leslie (1991) deriving from the 18th century orthodox pandit, Tryambakaya's treatise, arrives at certain conclusions. In sanskritic religious law the concept of 'woman' (the inherent nature of women) is almost invariably negative. In religious terms the only answer to being female is to become the perfect wife. In the orthodox view this is the only religious path open to a woman. The concept of widow denotes the woman, who has chosen to remain in this world without her husband and further, that she has chosen to follow the difficult ascetic path of the widow renunciate. She has chosen not to follow the path of *Sati*. Tryambakaya infact never calls the *sati* a widow. For he believes the *sati* is the wife who has infact chosen not to become a widow. The *sati* is seen as making a conscious choice, a choice that is grounded in the soteriological power of the good woman (Ibid: 141). *Satis* become worthy of worship for their act represents their upholdings the ideal of wifely devotion. It is a proof of chastity or the ultimate expression of a wife's fidelity (Narasimhan, 1990). My contention however, is that, the crux of the issue is not just chastity as a general concept but specifically, control of female sexuality by the male. And though the widow and *sati*

are opposed in several ways this idea is seen to underlie both the concepts in Hindu tradition. *Sati* as the personification of the perfect wife stands in opposition to everything the woman as widow comes to symbolise.

It is when the woman is faced with this stage in her life cycle, which entails the most rigid and serious taboos, sanctions and degradation that this opportunity for glorification is offered in contrast. Underlying the taboos and degradation associated with a widow's life is the notion of the danger posed by uncontrolled female sexuality and the idea of binding this female threat. The performance of the act of *sati* and thus the reaffirmation of the wifely ideals, is as closely related to the idea of control of female sexuality by the male. The loss of which at the death of the husband, is combated with either *sati*, (and in the process glorifying the controlled and therefore ideal woman) or the imposition of numerous taboos to keep within bounds uncontrolled female sexuality. Therefore it may be said that both the widow and the *sati* have the underlying ideal of the dead husband's control over her sexuality.

Through this comparison with the widow I have sought to establish my contention, that of the centrality of the issue of female sexuality and male control in determining a woman's status perceived by society.

This close relation of the phenomenon of *Sati* with the status and condition of widows in Hindu society may be regarded as one of the motivating factors in committing the act. However, the origin of the custom is not clearly established. It is said to be a symbol of aristocratic status associated with many early societies like those of the Greeks and the Scythians. However, there has been no other society where it was practised by variant social groups for varied reasons at different points in time. In India, it has undergone changes of meaning as well as degrees of acceptance. Though in spite of the varied reasons and conditions under which it was practised, the point of the subordination of women in a patriarchal society cannot be denied either. To my

mind this does remain the crux of the issue.

It must be noted that the practice of *sati* did not exist during the vedic period, when the position of women was not one of subordination at all, and infact widow remarriage was permitted. Precise historical evidence of widow burning comes from the various inscriptions. An inscription of A.D. 510, at Eran in central India, refers to the wife of Gopraja who immolated herself when her husband died in battle. Similar inscriptions found from Rajasthan and Nepal date back to the 7th and 8th centuries (Thapar,R. Seminar 342 -- February 88). From the peninsula too, inscriptions refer to widow burning when their husbands died in battles. Many inscriptions are located in Maharashtra and Karnataka even . The peak period of *sati* in these areas was pre-Islamic as Thapar has pointed out. Another historical evidence of widow burning is found in the existence of *Sati* memorial stones often found around the hero stones commemorating death in the course of a heroic act. The *sati* stones generally had some standard symbols: the sun and moon indicating eternity, an upright open right arm and hand showing bangles intact (an indication of her continuing marital status) and a lime held in the hand to ward off evil (Ibid:16). Thus far, historically, the notion of widow burning was tied to the heroic ideal of the *kshatriya* and for a long time Brahmin women were not supposed to follow this practice (Upreti and Upreti, 1991:12).

In the 17th century, the practice of immolating widows took a turn in a new direction. The overwhelming incidence was among the brahmans of Bengal. Ashish Nandy is of the opinion that the incidence of *sati* was high in those areas which had come under British domination and where the traditional life-style and political economy were being challenged by new forces (In Indian Express, 5.10.87). It is commonly believed that *sati* had become a means of solving property problems. Apparently in Bengal, in most of the reported cases of *sati*, coercion, direct or indirect

was used. For Nandy, this pathology emerged when the traditional way of life began to collapse due to the onslaught of outside forces -- thus attributing it to be a "pathology of colonialism, not of Hinduism" (Ibid), though conceding it has "something to do with tradition." He distinguishes between epidemics of *sati* and incidents. According to him epidemics have occurred thrice in history, when the Vijayangar kingdom was collapsing in the South, when the Rajput rulers were under attack in the medieval period, and when the British were establishing their dominion in the late 18th and early 19th century.

Thus Nandy puts the onus on the external agent, whether the Mughals or the British. This may be one of the factors to explain the spurt in the phenomenon. During the Mughal and British domination, the Indian male's experience of a loss of power in the political and economic sphere, may be said to have led to an assertion of a false sense of power. This led to the oppression and greater exploitation of women and rigidity of the caste system. However, underlying this also is the assertion of the long and well entrenched patriarchal tradition in Hindu India. Sangari (in Seminar 342-Feb,88) in criticising Nandy asks, "do we then sacrifice women in transitional moments of social change, or does the will of women to self-sacrifice rise automatically to mediate such transitions?" In any case, though this might offer an explanation for the occurrence of *sati* for a particular period in some regions, patriarchy's role here is fairly evident.

To understand *sati* properly it would be required to look at different regions at various points in time. Only when we examine the juxtaposition of property relations, rights of inheritance, the approach to sexuality, the ethic of the hero, attitudes to deities and adjustments to social change in the context of our history, will we begin to understand why and how women were encouraged or forced to become *Satis* (Thapar. R., Seminar 342 --Feb '88).

To understand *sati* in the context of the recent past I shall refer to the features of this cult in the Shekhawati region, Rajasthan. *Sati* in Rajasthan in the heroic aspect has been prevalent among the Rajputs in the medieval period. It was different from its counter-part in Bengal, in that the Rajput women performed *Jauhar*, a rite performed by women by burning themselves as a deed of heroism and to save their honour in the event of an attack. The notion of *sati* has moved a long way from the question of honour. The particular social groups supporting *sati* have also changed over time. The Shekhawati region, has in the post-independence period witnessed a deliberate and organised effort to revive the practice of widow immolation. The present revival has been led by the three upper casts of the areas -- the Rajputs, the Mahajans and Banias.

The history of this region suggests that widow immolation was not widely practised in the past. The Rajput chieftains of Shekhawat, part of the ruling kacchwaha clan of Amber (Jaipur) who gained some local power only in the 18th century, continued to be vassals of the Amber rulers. The Amber rulers, unlike the rulers of Marwar (Jodhpur) and Mewar (Udaipur) did not give much encouragement to widow immolation. Infact during the colonial period, Jaipur was the first state to abolish widow immolation and make it a penal offence (1846). The evidence gathered by recent researchers reveals ad hoc attempts beginning in the 1950's to piece together a set of beliefs and rituals which have now become part of a standardised 'plot' of widow immolation in the Shekhawati area.

The deification associated with the phenomenon of *sati* has been a relatively recent phenomenon. The Shekhawati region in Rajasthan is marked by a number of temples dedicated to the Sati Mata. The Rani Sati temple at Jhunjhunu is one of the biggest, most ostentatious and a prime example of the commercialisation associated with these temple cults.

Deification of *satis* because of their super-natural power is supposed to be a specific feature of the Sati cult in Rajasthan. The Sati cult and the miraculous and healing powers of Sati Mata is a significant theme of legends and folk traditions in this region. The woman possessed by *Sati* is believed to have special powers to bless and curse. Belief in *Sati* is used to elevate, what otherwise would be seen as suicide or ritualized murder, into a supremely holy act (Upreti and Upreti 1991: 66). Local folklores maintain that it is a rare woman who receives the power of the goddess Sati and proceeds to join her husband on his pyre. The event is great precisely because of its rarity. And it was legitimized through the supposed conversion of the potential *Sati's* consciousness under the influence of divinity, thus nobody but divine power was made responsible for a *Sati's* action.

A *sati* is the only person who acquires the deified status a goddess, immediately after her death, irrespective of her *karma* during her life. It is interesting to note that not all *satis* were glorified nor miracles associated with them. It was asserted that only blessed women could claim such divine transformation. Women who had '*parcha*' associated with them acquire the divine status of a *sati* i.e: when miracles get associated with such a woman, she comes to be worshiped. The worshipers belief in an immolated widow as a goddess is thus associated with her capacity to provide benefit such as protection from disease and illness. The process of her deification involves, the construction of a *chabutara-- sati sthal* where the act was performed; *arti*; fair and worship at a particular time, day and month; construction of temples; association of miracles. It is spread through publication of songs, miraculous stories, glorification in the folklore through songs and stories etc., and in the recent past through photos and posters.

Association with miracles is a prime factor for deification. In the *sati* case at Jhunjhunu in 1954, it is said that a few hours before her death, Tara Devi miraculously

bestowed a well on the village. She raised her hand, and a well sprang up in the court-yard (Ibid:108). Sati worship has been innovatively merged with Shakti. The *trishul* has been adopted as an appendage to the *murti* of the woman sitting on a pyre holding her husband's head in her lap. Sati worship in temples as such has been a recent phenomenon. Deification and glorification processes cut across castes and class lines. Infact women in all castes have been reported to commit *sati*. Interestingly *sati* has been committed not only on the funeral pyre of the husband but also the son, brother-in-law, and other relatives. A commonly held view is that the continuity of the institution of *sati* becomes possible largely through its deified glorification. The occasional incidents of *sati* revives the glory and reinforces the process of continuity.

In Sikar and Jhunjhunu districts the incidents of *sati* are highest. The spatial-locational syndrome of *sati* is largely due to the glorification of *sati* through the creation of temples, *sati-sthal*, and *sati chabutras*. The process of glorification itself is a single important motivational factor in committing *sati*. I will take up the case of the Thoi region in Sikar district. The influence of the adjoining Jhunjhunu district cannot perhaps be denied. In fact the entire Shekhawati area is full of stories of *sati* and Sati temples or *chabutras*. The deep faith in Naraini Sati at Jhunjhunu more popularly known as Rani Sati exists as a strong tradition in itself.

The specific constellation of social religious and cultural meanings which are presently being attached to widow immolation can be seen in the case of Om Kanwar who was immolated in Jharli village, Sikar district on August 30, 1980. (Vaid and Sangari, EPW April 27, 1991). Om Kanwar, a 16 year old Shekhawat Rajput girl was married to Ram Singh, aged 22, who had been suffering from tuberculosis. The couple did not have much of a conjugal life together, since Ram Singh worked as a truck driver in Bombay. From the accounts collected from research conducted by Singhi and Baj (1989), and by Vaid and Sangari in 1981, it appears that after Ram

Singh's death in a Jaipur hospital when the body was brought to the village and was being taken for the funeral, Om Kanwar suddenly ordered that the body be brought back. She had decided to become a *sati*. A local Brahmin priest, Jannalal Shastri, was sent to verify this decision. According to him, she showed no sign of any fear. The sensational news spread quickly and thousands collected from nearby villages. It is reported that many people tried to convince Om Kanwar to desist from taking this step, but she was resolute in her decision.

It is said that one person was even sent to inform the police about her decision, but apparently he forgot the way and returned without informing. This was believed to be uncanny, and explained as being related to the phenomenon of *sati* and the supernatural powers associated with a potential *sati*. In the meanwhile Om Kanwar was dressed in her bridal finery and following the funeral procession with incense in her hand, directed the villagers to the spot where the funeral pyre should be erected. It is said that she jumped on to a four feet high funeral pyre without any help, taking her husband's body in her arms. She then asked for cow milk and urine to purify herself. Following which she asked for the pyre to be lit. As per another version, it is said that after some time, Om Kanwar raised her hands towards the sun and the pyre lit itself miraculously. However, there are other versions according to which a young boy of the family lit the pyre, while yet another version goes on to suggest that, the *agarbatti* Om Kanwar was holding was used to light the pyre.

In her last words, she said, that on every *Panchami* worship should take place, that rice, and coconut be offered to the Sati Mata, and that whoever would come here and pray, his or her wishes would be fulfilled.

It must be noted that a number of versions were given during the interviews conducted about the circumstances that led to Om Kanwar's *sati*. Another account relates entirely to personal family matters which led to her *sati*. Apparently Dhapu

Kanwar the the paternal aunt who Ram Singh lived with was having an affair, but with Om Kanwar's arrival her freedom had been curtailed to some extent. Thus upon the death of Ram Singh, Om Kanwar was encouraged to become a *sati*. After the thirteenth day of Om Kanwar's committing *sati*, a trust was formed to collect money for constructing a Sati temple. A number of people were arrested on account of the *sati* incident, though released on bail later. There case was still pending at the time of this study in 1989. A temple, however was constructed. The temple *pujari* claimed that the soul of Om Kanwar enters his body and directs him to give relief to diseased people who visit. On account of this belief a number of people started visiting and worshipping at the Sati temple.

Many of the rites which could only have been performed with the assistance of the family and others were projected as miracles. The miracles are seen as evidence of the presence of *Sat*. Such instances are submerged in the broader public story in which the miracles are assembled into a seamless, virtually self-creating series of events: the water turns into *Mehndi*, trunks unlock themselves, her bridal attire rises to the top. *Om* leaps unassisted on to the tall pyre, the fire lights by itself (Ibid: WS-4). Such projection of events becomes a means of concealing and denying individual assistance and community responsibility. These 'miracles' and *Sat* are complicit and mutually reinforcing. And since the woman who is possessed by *Sat* is believed to have special powers to bless and curse, fear of her curse is used as an explanation for not crossing her will or preventing her immolation.

Through the concept of *Sat* the entire event of widow immolation is construed as a play of divine intervention projecting its victim as the embodiment of *Shakti* or divine feminine power. According to Vaid and Sangari, the power of *Sat* is created in inverse proportion to and reinforced by the low status of women as well as by patriarchal ideologies. Significantly, local accounts of *Sat* implicitly acknowledge its

relation to the social position of women and the patriarchal perception of widowhood. Local men placed *Sat* as an expression of female virtue which is innate or socially inculcated. The priest ascribed it to the good, correct "*samskarā*" of the woman. A Harijan woman said *Sat* possessed women alone, because men can remarry (Ibid. WS-5). Thus the belief in *Sat* serves to elevate what would otherwise be seen either as ritualized murder or 'suicide' into a supremely holy act of wifely devotion.

During a second visit in 1986, Vaid and Sangari found a large marble temple had been built, financed by the Rajputs and Marwari businessmen. A marble statue of Om Kanwar on the pyre with her husband's body in her lap had been ceremoniously installed in 1983, in the presence of Bhawani Singh, the ex-Maharaja of Jaipur. Devotees arrived from nearby towns and cities in large numbers. It was noted probably in reaction to this upper caste patriarchal model, the lower castes took over the old memorial of an Ahir-Gujjar Sati. It was freshly painted, and a boundary wall had been erected.

The plot or public account of the Deorala case follows a similar formula. It reveals a resemblance to the public accounts of Om Kanwar's case, as well as those of other widow immolations in the region: that of Sati Saraswati of Hatideh village, a fifty-five year old woman who committed *sati* on 12 January, 1978; and that of Tara Kanwar of Madho Ka Bas in 1955.

Roop kanwar, a matric educated girl had been married to Mal Singh, a science undergraduate, for seven months. In September 1987, Mal Singh took ill and was admitted at the Sikar government Hospital. However, his condition became serious and on 4th September, 1987, he expired. His body was taken to his village, Deorala where he and his wife lived with his parents.

There have been numerous and varied versions about the event in the press. However the account given by the people of Deorala at large and Roop Kanwar's

family, interviewed by many researchers point to the belief in the voluntariness of the act and in the supernatural powers of *sati*. It was reported how, after the arrival of the body at home, Roop Kanwar had made up her mind to commit *sati*. She put on her wedding dress, walked to the cremation site with the funeral procession, arranged herself on the pyre with her dead husband's head in her lap, and asked her brother-in-law to light the pyre. According to Pooran Singh, a first cousin. Roop Kanwar's, several relatives tried to dissuade her from her course but she simply told them that to oppose her would subject them to the risk of *Sati Shraap* (a feared curse upon those who oppose a *sati*) (Badhwar, I. in Mulk Raj Anand: 1989:153). However, there have been other versions which suggest that the act was not voluntary and that Roop Kanwar had been coerced.

Thousands of people had gathered to witness the event and for days after they continued to visit the *sati sthal*. Since the *sati*, commerce has boomed in the village. A number of shops came up selling sweetmeats, bangles and mementos commemorating the *sati*. The most popular memento has been the superimposed poster in which Roop Kanwar is shown seated amidst the flames of the funeral pyre, her husband's dead body across her lap, and she wearing her wedding finery. This iconography conveys that Roop Kanwar has made a conscious choice not to become a widow. That as a *sati*, she is a truly virtuous woman. For she has become endowed with stupendous powers, she will bring salvation to her husband and to the generations of their two families, regardless of their actual behaviour in the world, she will be worshiped in her own community forever (Leslie, 1991:150). According to the iconography Roop Kanwar has chosen to become a goddess, a deified eternal wife. As Leslie says, this is the empowerment of *Sati*; a strategy for dignity in a demeaning world. Veena Das (in Illustrated Weekly: Feb 1988) pointed out that the most important argument against *sati* is that any custom that defines a human life in a manner that it can be only be

glorified in death holds a seduction that must be resisted.

The pressure that caused Roop Kanwar to kill herself ~~was~~ may be indirect, impersonal, but nonetheless very powerful--the force of Hindu religions ideology concerning women.

From the above account of the instances of *sati* described, it emerges that *sati* is not confined to any single caste. Rani Sati of Jhunjhunu was an Agarwal, Sati Saraswati was a Bania, while Roop Kanwar, Tara Kanwar and Om Kanwar were Rajputs. Further, the age at which a woman commits *sati* is immaterial since women of all ages have committed *sati*. Also the act of burning a woman on the husband's pyre, whether voluntary or not, does not by itself accord her an elevated status. The association with miracles, and the appearance of *Sati* is very important. These factors are necessary for the glorification of *sati*, which is enhanced later by publicity and sale of *sati* literature, posters, legends, music and other momentos, deification and glorification become processes which cut across caste and class lines.

Sati as a diety is unique in that, her emergence as a diety is rooted in empirical, visible life experience of a group of people who have witnessed the event. Further the localized character of *Sati* as diety makes her look more real and accessible.

Belief in her power to curse is very strong and is often cited as the reason why people feared to intervene and prevent the occurrence of the event. On the other hand her association with curing diseases is very strong, and so is her association with granting boons for the welfare of her family as also her village at large. The characteristics associated with her cannot classify her as a benevolent spouse goddess. Since she has committed the act of *sati*, to reaffirm herself as the ideal wife, upon the death of her husband and has thus narrowly escaped widowhood, some fear is still attached to her status as *Sati*, and is thus not described as benevolent like other spouse goddesses. Neither can she be classified in the category of the dominating

malevolent Goddesses, for her association with the 'perfect wife' ideals is too strong.

To understand the origin, growth, and motivating factors behind the phenomenon of *sati*, we must take into account a wide range of factors such as, the approach to sexuality, property, relations, inheritance rights, social change and attitudes to deities. However, all factors do in one way or the other fuel a reassertion of the patriarchal norms for women.

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C O N C L U S I O N

In this concluding section I will briefly survey, by way of recapitulating, some of the main points that emerged as I progressed through this study. I am of the belief that a central theme runs through this analysis which is, the centrality of male control over a woman's sexuality and the determining role it plays in defining the status of the female - be it real women or goddesses. To establish my hypothesis I now focus attention on some conclusive evidences that I can draw out by way of adding substance to my contention.

The discussion of Hindu ideology dwelt on certain important aspects which were significant in the formation of views of Hindu women. The analysis of the four-fold structure of goals, that of *Moksha*, *Dharma*, *Artha* and *Kama* and their associated ideological stress revealed how certain Hindu female stereotypes emerged - defined entirely in relation to men.

To corroborate with the values embodied in the Hindu texts, I described the normative life cycle of the traditional Hindu woman in a developmental sequence. This brought to fore the centrality of the issue of chastity and male control. Chaste daughters enjoyed high status and were on occasions the focus of worship. The institution of child marriage was one extreme measure taken to ensure the total control of sexuality to allude any danger posed by the latent sexuality of the pre-pubertal girl. Upon marriage, the next significant stage in the woman's life cycle, she was brought under strict control of the husband. The newly married woman was the symbol of

sexuality as its most fertile and vulnerable and therefore guarded stage. Only upon attaining the status of motherhood, when her sexuality had been established to have been directed in acceptable ways was her status enhanced. The stage of widowhood entailed the maximum austerities, hardships and restrictions. Particularly, if the widow was still capable of reproduction she was viewed as a serious threat to the deceased husband's family. This threat was met with through the enforcement of physical chastity, restrictions on movement, non-participation in any social or religious function, prohibition on wearing ornaments, long hair and bright clothes - thus distancing the possibility of any misdemeanor. Thus the woman's life cycle reveals a certain ambivalence associated with her status. It pointed to the differential treatment accorded to the woman because of the expression of her sexuality, either focusing on the 'dangerous' or the 'valued' reproductivity.

To supplement the ideal typical model of the Hindu woman I referred to ethnography from Nepal where there was a clear distinction between the Hindu high-caste affinal and consanguineal women. The difference reveals the concern of the patriarchal Hindu society to maintain their lineage purity and continuity. This results in an overt concern with the control of their affinal women for they are structural members of their lineage. While consanguineal women are given relatively more freedom in their natal home since they do not form part of the patriline.

To reaffirm this distinctive duality of the Hindu female principle on the divine plane I examined popular Hindu female divinities and their associated cults. In classifying Hindu goddesses I have gone along with Wendy O'Flaherty's (1980) grouping based upon their relationship with their consorts. On the one hand is the dominated, sexually controlled goddess and on the other hand the independent, dominating, sexually free and dangerous goddess. I have referred to the two categories generally as the benevolent and the malevolent goddess respectively.

It emerges from the analysis of goddess Parvati that we cannot classify goddesses as wholly benevolent or malevolent. These two categories actually collapse in a single being, the Devi, who in her full form embodies both aspects. The duality is indeed endemic in the female principle. This polarity and synthesis is largely corroborated by the case of the real woman. The duality is the result of an androcentric evaluation of female sexuality which adds to it a negative and positive connotation.

It was significantly pointed out that the categorisation as the benevolent and malevolent goddess is the result of the worshiper's perception which emphasises one aspect at the expense of the other. Thus this results in their being viewed as two separate deities. I illustrated this best with the example of Parvati and her forms as Durga and Kali. As Parvati she is shown to be consistently benevolent. However when she needs to express her anger she is shown to give rise to a new goddess altogether, thus resulting in the categorisation of the latter as the malevolent one. This, I believe, is the Hindu minds attempt to grapple with the dangers of female sexuality which results in categorising the two aspects as separate entities.

To establish this polarity more convincingly, I have then examined Hindu goddesses in three categories to parallel the Hindu woman in three important stages of her life cycle : virgin, wife and widow.

The data on the Kumari cult of Nepal, where pre-pubertal girls, aged 2-4 years, are installed in temples and worshiped in living form brought out the contrasting aspects of female sexuality in a unique manner. The chastity and purity of the girl to be selected as the Kumari goddess was crucial in elevating her to the status of a goddess. In her various criteria of formal selection, we saw how this was an important point and how any explicit manifestation of her sexuality (such as menarche) was the point of disqualification. Though in her popular worship, her devotees did not worship her for her chastity, but the element is central to her status as a divinity.

Because of this quality she is considered worthy of being the embodiment of other goddesses. Virgin worship in Nepal, is an example of how the Hindu psyche has attempted to come to terms with the ambivalence inherent in the female principle. In her they find an easy acceptability of female sexuality, for she symbolises latent sexuality with the dangers of manifest sexuality well removed. Through her worship they seek to control and utilize this dangerous power. Thus it has been clearly brought out how her sexuality is a determining element in qualifying the Kumari as a divinity or disqualifying her from this status.

In the analysis of the benevolent goddess, it was shown how the nature, attributes and representations of spouse goddesses like Parvati, Sita, Lakshmi etc. were clearly related to their status as the controlled woman. The spouse goddess is the perfect example of the "good wife", whose sexuality is under the supervision of her male partner. Therefore benevolence is her defining characteristic. It was seen how the spouse goddess's identity is completely merged with her male partner's. Her nature and attributes only get defined in relation to him. I must point out here, that in looking for ethnographic material for goddess worship in this category, I could not come across any instance of the worship of a spouse goddess in her own right, depicted alone or having a cult or temple devoted to her alone. These goddesses are worshiped and depicted along with their spouses. While there might be a Shiva or Ram temple in its own right, it is rare to come across a temple devoted to their female spouses. This seemed to reaffirm the idea that independent of their male spouses they do not have an identity of their own.

Under the benevolent goddess classification, I also discussed Santoshi Ma, who was seen to emerge as a new category cutting across the traditional grouping of the benevolent goddess as the subordinated one under the supervision of a male spouse, and the malevolent goddess, the independent and fierce one depicted either

without a male god or in a dominating position vis-a-vis him. Santoshi Ma is not associated with any male partner, either in a subordinated or in a domineering position. Yet she has been clearly established as a benevolent goddess. This is an exception where I have not been able to conclusively establish male control as being a determining factor in describing a goddess as representing uncontrolled or controlled sexuality.

I have gone on to further my central contention through an analysis of the phenomenon of *sati* and the worship of Sati Mata as a goddess. I was able to establish my contention of the centrality of the issue of male control on one level, that of the comparison between the widow and the *Sati*. The widow and the woman who committed *sati*, portrayed contrasting pictures in that the widow was clearly defined as 'inauspicious', she was ill treated, degraded and accorded an inferior status. While the *Sati* was the 'auspicious' one, glorified and praised for upholding the values of loyalty and devotion to the husband. Through the act, she in fact established her status as the eternal wife. The widow, represented a threat to her deceased husband's lineage because of her uncontrolled sexuality. Numerous taboos and sanctions were imposed on her to suppress her sexuality and avert any danger which might accrue due to the loss of male control. Thus while the widow was almost treated like an outcast, the *sati* was glorified. However, both cases point to the commonality of the underlying male control. The *Sati* in reaffirming her status as the faithful devoted wife and thus being glorified, and the widow facing the numerous sanctions to bind her unguarded sexuality at the loss of her husband, and therefore degraded.

There has been a lot of discussion on aspects of the phenomenon which I have not been able to dwell upon in any detail within the narrow scope of this study. The question of the origins of the phenomenon, tracing the custom historically and analysing it within specific contexts of social change pointed to certain other

issues besides an obsessive concern with the control of women's sexuality. Therefore I cannot assert the claim of the centrality of the determining role of female sexuality. Yet by comparing the phenomenon of *sati* with the status of widows and the Hindu attitude towards women, I have in some measure laid the ground for showing the importance of male control.

One crucial omission in my discussion of the Hindu female divinities has been the omission of the category of the 'mother'. It is not just the constraints of available material, but in the course of this study I discovered that the worship of the 'mother goddess' was not related to the glorification of the deity in her role as the mother of children. There was no myth associated with her role in this capacity. Though there are numerous goddesses who have the prefix 'mother' attached to their names, but they are not necessarily associated with maternal qualities. For example, Shitala Mata, the small pox goddess or the Matrakas meaning literally "mothers". The latter are a group of goddesses occupying an important place in the villages. The earliest description of the Matrakas appears in the Mahabharata. However, throughout their history they are known for their violent behaviour, fearsome nature and are considered dangerous. In fact quite contrary to their name they are known to be dangerous to children. However, the worship of the Mother Goddess as the mother earth relates to her role as the giver of food and nourishment, her role in the fertility of the earth. Ganga Ma, to her devotees, is seen especially in her nourishing qualities, as nourishing the land through which it flows and as sustaining her people with her waters which are likened to milk or *amrita*, the drink of immortality.

Yet I am of the opinion that there is not a fair and comparable stress in Hindu texts and myths on the woman's role as the mother of children. While in real life a woman is accorded greatest status during this stage of her life cycle. It is as the mother that she is accorded some freedom and independence and begins to

command some authority. There clearly does not exist any popular worship as does in the case of other goddesses, neither are there any popular role models for the mother in myths or texts, as there are for the ideal wife. This omission of the mother's role in Hindu literature is again representative of the male perspective of the texts.

This presentation so far has been of a limited nature for the constraints of the narrow scope of this study confined me entirely to the use of secondary data. Therefore any attempt to make an assertion on the basis of this study would be in a preliminary stage. I propose to use these initial findings as a prelude to further exploration which would be based on field studies.

As pointed out at the outset itself, the use of Hindu literary and scriptural material produces a male biased understanding of the Hindu woman's position in society. Though the use of such material is almost imperative to gain an insight into the position of Hindu women even today. I had hoped to supplement this approach with the use of contemporary anthropological studies to provide for a truer understanding of the Hindu woman's status. However, the problem is not simply one of empirical study, but rather one of representation. Though a great deal of information on women exists, collected both by male and female researchers, it is frequently the result of questions asked of men about their wives, sisters, daughters, rather than from the women themselves. Further men's information is often presented as a group's reality, rather than as part of a cultural whole. Thus the focus should be on the woman as the object, the respondent, even though their modes of expression are within the frames of the dominant male ideology. Yet this would facilitate moving one step closer to understanding women's perspective of themselves.

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