Scrutinizing goddesses, interrogating religious traditions: some methodological issues

R. Mahalakshmi

Abstract

The study of religion has primarily been undertaken from the disciplinary bounds of sociology, anthropology and psychoanalysis. It has only relatively recently become the subject of historical inquiry, and particularly in the Indian sub-continent, since the 1920s there have been serious attempts to locate the growth of religious traditions, institutions and ideologies in specific historical contexts. As a historian engaged in the study of religious processes and a feminist involved in issues of womens' empowerment, it may seem more than coincidental that I have chosen to focus on the study of goddess cults and traditions in early India over the past decade. It is this complex interweaving of subject positions that I seek to interrogate for myself and other scholars who seek to understand and provide meanings with regard to the evolution of goddess traditions, the significance attached to goddess cults, their inclusion in pantheons and hierophanies, and their place in the making of religious ideologies. I would wish to illustrate with reference to some cults and traditions, and also indicate the possible directions in which such research agendas may lead.

Introduction

In this essay, we intend to discuss issues central to the study of religion in India, with particular focus on the manner in which scholars have perceived goddesses within brahmanical religion. There are many works that include religion as an appendice to the main study, which are not of concern to us. However, after the pioneering work of R.G. Bhandarkar in the early 20th century, there have been some exceptional studies that have focused on the origin and growth of religious traditions, their philosophical moorings, the transformations in different regional contexts over time and their contribution to the evolution of syncretic cultures. Several important dimensions of the growth of religious institutions have been revealed relating to political legitimacy, material transformations and social stratification. Over the past few decades, an increasing interrogation of religious myths and cults has exposed the social roots of hegemonic ideas pertaining to caste and gender in particular. The feminist critique of patriarchal structures locates the sanctioning of dominant values attached to, and derived from, gender roles in religion, and sees these as reflected in the divine realm in the creation of pantheons and the elaboration of myths of chastity, divine marriage, etc. There has also been a plea for the 'recovery' of the goddess, and relocate goddess worship to suit contemporary feminist aspirations. We wish to discuss some of these works in terms of their methodological implications, and their usefulness in studying religion from a historical stand-point.

The case of the goddess Kâlî, in textual and other sources from the Tamil region, will be taken up for close perusal to explore the validity of the assumption that the gender relations in the temporal realm are mirrored in the myths related to gods and goddesses, and that the conceptualization of the goddess is the externalization of perceived attributes of women.

Some historians have postulated the importance of goddesses within brahmanism since the Vedic period and have only chronicled changes in terms of different epithets, myths and forms employed for them in literary and other sources, with little attempt at locating these in time and space contexts. V.S. Agrawala traces

goddess worship from the Vedic period, when the metaphysical principles were worshipped in the forms of Vâk and Ambhrnî. The Devî in the Puranic text *Devî Mâhâtmya* combines this earlier form with more earthly conceptualizations such as Saumyâ and Kâlikâ. The author does not speculate on the reasons for these newer associations of the Vedic goddess, but does refer to these as non-Vedic/ Aryan influences. J.N. Banerjea, best known for his work on iconography, was one of the earliest scholars to have argued that the post-Vedic religion differed from the Vedic primarily due to the influence of *bhakti*. As a result, Œiva and Durgâ-Pârvatî became the central figures for the appropriation of various local cults, which was instrumental in the evolution of a syncretic religion. Pushpendra Kumar, on the other hand, traces the notion of Sakti from the Vedic literature, but like Banerjea sees her as occupying a very important position within the Hindu pantheon as a member of the Trinity, once Brahmâ lost his preeminence in the *Purânas*. He believes that the cult of Durgâ originated from the pre-Vedic goddess, who was associated with hills and mountains. Sakti in the *Purânas* was defined through her association with Siva as her equal, but there were times when she was recognized as the absolute power. Kumar concludes that the Sakti cult, in its Puranic articulation combined Aryan and non-Aryan forms of worship.

In the works cited above, there is an awareness, explicit and implicit, that there exist non-Aryan and/ or pre-Vedic roots of the goddess traditions within brahmanical religion in the Indian sub-continent. There is also a recognition of the growth of the idea of the 'Great Goddess' in the *Purânas* for the first time, and the authors attribute this to the synthesis of brahmanical forms of worship with non-brahmanical ones. However, these works also exhibit some limitations as they are often not concerned with the material contexts in which new religious developments were occurring. Religion, in this perception, is an autonomous domain, far-removed from the socio-economic and political transformations, or at least secondary to these, and this has often resulted in simplistic correlations between incidental references to goddesses in Vedic texts and the later, systematic exposition of the idea of a powerful goddess. This type of scholarship is anchored on what I would refer to as the unilinear, descriptive or narrative method of analysis, where the tradition is interrogated from within the textual sources and seen as

progressing from the earlier descriptions to the later ones, corresponding to certain historical (read political) changes.

The growth of goddess cults

The first major effort towards historicizing the evolution and growth of goddess cults and traditions can be seen in the works of Marxist scholars. It has been interpreted that depending upon the particular material contexts, preeminence is given to either male or female deities. According to this view, in hunting and gathering societies, the female deity was the natural symbol of a terrible, unpredictable and dangerous power. With the growth of pastoral society and the concomitant 'control' over nature, the importance of the goddess was gradually overridden by that of a male god. As D.D. Kosambi, the foremost proponent of this view, says: "The food gatherer worshipped a goddess, while the god first appeared on the scene with pastoral life. The marriage of these mother goddesses is a phenomenon of the later conjoint society...." To begin with, the goddesses were unmarried mothers because no father seemed necessary to the society in which they originated. Kosambi also examines the conceptualization of the Mothers or the *Attakas* (*Astakas*), and suggests their origins in a pre-agrarian, hunting gathering society, with a consanguineous family structure. N.N. Bhattacharya, with the same understanding that forms of worship have to be rooted to their material culture, locates the emergence of the cult of the goddess as 'Mother' amongst agricultural tribes. He connects this to the understanding of women's reproductive capacity, due to the premium that was placed on fertility in this primitive agrarian context. Whereas the role of the father in procreation was not recognized here, the introduction of plough agriculture led to the rise in the economic importance of men. It is in such a context that Bhattacharya locates the development of the cults of male gods, and the concomitant subordination of cults of mother goddesses, by linking the latter as spouses of the former. We are largely in agreement with the views expressed by these two scholars, and Kosambi's insights particularly have shaped many of our ideas regarding appropriation and assimilation.

Chattopadhyaya has studied the 'reappearance' of the goddess in north India between the 4th and 10th centuries AD, through the prism of the "brahmanical

mode of cult appropriation". He brings in the question of interactions across space and time, encapsulated in the distinctions between *vana* and *ksêtra,* to study the transition from tribal kingdoms to early state formations in certain regions. He concludes that the "appearance of the cults of the goddesses in records from disparate geographical locations and at different points in time takes place mainly because of the linkage which is established between such cults and emerging monarchies through the mediation of the *brâhmanas* and their rituals". What is striking is that great mothers, the goddess of the forest (*aranyavâsinî*), goddess of the pot (*ghatavâsinî*), goddess of the tree (*vatayaksinî*), goddess of the post (*stambhêsvarî*), etc., were all visible in the written records at a point when those issuing these records were attempting to move beyond the political margins. By proclaiming their identities as patrons and worshippers of these apparently local goddesses, these politically ascendant groups were establishing a distinct claim for themselves. On the other hand, by issuing these charters/ records in Sanskrit, they were also proclaiming their acceptance of brahmanical mediation – linguistically, ritually and symbolically.

Chakrabarti's study of the *Upapurâna* in Bengal positions itself in such a manner as to interrogate the concepts of great and little traditions and Sanskritization in their definitional and applicative aspects. The context for the study is the early medieval period, and the religious transformation that occurred in Bengal due to the influence of Buddhism and Brahmanism, both 'great' tradition types. The discussion on the diverse local goddess cults, transformed through appropriations rather than incorporations or assimilations, that were woven together in a carefully constructed *Sâkta* theological tapestry, that at once provided identity and anonymity to these local goddesses in their unitary theistic form – *mûlaprakrti*, and the anchoring of this concept to that of *sakti,* allows us to understand the crystallization of the brahmanical religious tradition in Bengal.

In all of these works, the focus is on historical contexts in which religious beliefs, institutions, cults and ideologies have to be rooted. As can be seen, the endeavor is to look at a variety of sources that help in reconstruction of the trajectories, transformations and dis-/re-appearance of religious traditions. A limitation we have encountered in the application of this analytical method is that there are historical

conjunctures where symbols, motifs and identities of cultic deities cannot be simply understood on the basis of a one-to-one correlation with the material milieu. In other words, it is possible to see some symbols and motifs exerting a pervasive influence across contexts of time and space, and we need to account for these from the ideological point of view. Also, a stock argument with regard to the growth/ evolution of religious traditions is that it provides political legitimacy to its royal patrons. While this has been amply demonstrated in different contexts, there is need to look at more than this dimension. There have been attempts in the recent past to look at such movements, transformations and continuities in the historical record as concomitant with the growth and evolution of patriarchal ideational structures, which particularly seek to project through the conceptualization of divine pantheons and mythologies social values related to marriage, family, community and power. It has also been lamented lately that the historical materialist approach, while opening up fresh ways of looking at social formations has actually contributed in "blocking off gender with its sweeping and overarching arguments". As Uma Chakravarti argues, "men and women in India, whether or not they have formally learnt history, carry with them a sense of the past that they have internalized through the transmission of popular beliefs, mythology, tales of heroism and folklore". Given the patriarchal orientation of most such transmissions, the dominance of the "male-centred paradigm of knowledge in explaining reality" has continued to oppress and subordinate women socially. It is towards the breaking of such chains of oppression that Chakravarti calls for a different take on early Indian history, which seeks to pull out of the margins the histories of women, lower castes and other disadvantaged groups. Interrogating religious texts and traditions and scrutinizing the conceptualizations of goddesses is one such effort.

A number of scholars outside the discipline of history have studied goddess worship, and there have been differing analyses of the nature of the goddess and her significance in the context of the local society in which she is worshipped. Lawrence Babb, an anthropologist, has studied the diverse religious life of a village in Chhatisgarh and concluded that the protective and destructive aspects of the divine are a polarization of the same sacred power, seen in myth and ritual as a sex-linked opposition between the god and the goddess. The goddess can be both married and unmarried for the people who worship her, depending on the context.

Babb concludes that the divine marriage, and the domestication of the goddess this implies, ratifies a social order in which the male and female opposition is harmonized to further human society.

Susan Wadley, again in an anthropological study, in an edited volume focuses on the powers of Tamil women, and moves between economic functions, social values and religious sanctions in the reconstruction of religious life and its implications for women in Tamilnadu. She sees the marriage of Siva and Parvati in particular as an important social signifier, upholding the institution of the family and harmonizing gender relations in society. Lynn Gatwood makes a distinction between two goddess types – the married, spousified one who develops later and the prior, unmarried powerful Devî. It is due to attempts to control the latter's power and sexuality that the former emerges. Harald Tambs-Lyche looks at divine marriage as not just signifying the synthesis of male and female elements in cosmology but also the social attempts to privilege male control. Obviously, such studies are rooted in contemporary concerns and the interpretation of the past is from an unabashed location in the present. A major problem with such studies is the assumption of homogeneity and changelessness with regard to social structures and religious traditions.

Psychoanalytical studies offer another revealing dimension to the study of religion. Again, the emphasis is on fixed conceptualizations, assuming a trans historical character, with the focus primarily on religious myths. Edward Whitmont – a Jungian psychoanalyst – observes that early mythic corpuses abound with references to martial deities, "feminine not masculine", revered as the "oldest deities of warfare and destruction". "These archaic goddesses had dominion over both love and war. They were credited with both chastity and promiscuity, nurturing motherliness and bloodthirsty destructiveness. But they were not at all concerned with conquest and territorial expansion. These were male obsessions. Rather these goddesses monitored the life cycle throughout its phases: birth, growth, love, death and rebirth." Chakrabarti draws on such interpretations in his study of the Ganesa myth, and in the Jungian fashion roots the feminine – here, the goddess – with involvement and engagement, the archetypal mother, while the contrary masculine attempts to break free from commitment and confinement is played out in the

climactic resolution of the myth where the son of the goddess is killed and reborn at the hands of the male god, Siva.

Scholars of religion/ theology and literature, and phenomenologists provide an in-depth hermeneutic analysis of myths, symbols and ideas that appear, recur or disappear from the literary record. They seek to probe the hidden meanings and the inner worlds (and world-views) camouflaged in such textual readings.

David Kinsley, a scholar of religion, is of the opinion that Kâlî, the dark goddess, like the male deity Krsna was the 'other', and provided a telling counterpoint to the divine in the Hindu pantheon. She signified the transcendental realm of reality that is untamed. Both deities are classified as unVedic, and as "dark, lush beings associated not with dazzling light of heaven but with the blood and sap of the earth, and if they are associated with might and order it is a much more precarious and unpredictable power and order".

Beane identifies Durgâ-Kâlî as the proto-typical image of feminine power, and links the myths, cults and symbols related to this figure to argue for its crystallization in Sakta and Tantric visions of the divine feminine. Shulman uses the analogy of sowing, ploughing and reaping, which necessarily involves destruction to further the cycle of creation, to understand the ambivalent goddess. The goddess in her shrine, representing naked, unsheathed power, in this phenomenological view draws the devotee to her sexual and philosophical source, and in essence leads him to his death – the death of ignorance, with its concomitant rebirth – realization of true knowledge. Shulman, like Kinsley thus brings in the issue of motherhood, which has a high premium attached to it, where even unmarried goddesses who are shown as not having 'maternal', nurturing instincts are indeed mothers. These would fall in the category of the tooth goddesses according to Ramanujan, as different from the breast goddesses, or the benevolent mothers, and representing the non-Sanskritic traditions.

Various scholars have examined Sanskrit literature, particularly from the Vedas to the Puranas, and traced the evolution of goddesses by studying etymologies, conceptualizations and associations. Most of these studies, like the anthropological ones described above, essentialism attributes, symbols and practices even while

they are aware of transformations. In such studies, the religious realm is seen as having a life and logic of its own, often described as rooted in 'archetypes', and historical material transformations are seen as peripheral to these more abiding religious structures. We would not need to spell out further why such an approach is extremely problematic for the historian looking at social formations.

"Is the Goddess a feminist?" This question has tantalized many historians over the past few decades, and was the title of an essay by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in the early '90s and Rita Gross in 2000, and also of a collection of essays in which Gross' article finds a place. To this can we add another question - "is it valid to posit a direct equation between goddesses and women?" In many recent studies the goddess is seen as a social repository having implications for perceptions of women's status and importance in the past and also as a symbolic rallying point given current dilemmas and struggles within feminist movements. We look at some of the major contributions to this understanding, which can broadly be seen as looking at two questions – marriage and motherhood.

Rita Gross is among those historians of religion who would argue for the idea that female deities are a resource for contemporary rediscoveries of the goddess. Gross has an agenda – to retrieve goddesses from traditional religions who would then provide an anchor for feminists seeking to provide a positive women centred identity in contemporary life. Gross is aware that goddesses may not have been conceptualized as empowering in the feminist sense in the historical contexts in which they appear. She argues that they are, however, a resource for feminists because they imply the acknowledgement of the significance of the feminine even at the time of their conceptualization. In other words, the feminist project revolves around destabilizing the notion that the past is authoritative and determinative, and from its relics seeks to construct a formidable resource that draws on the "eternal mythic symbolism" that recognizes and valorizes the feminine. Hindu deities in particular are attractive starting points because of the fact that goddesses are part of a living religious tradition.

A collection of essays published recently, in its introduction reiterates this point about Hinduism's "elaborate living Goddess tradition". It is pointed out that the

question that they have fore-grounded has actually impelled the contributors to this volume over the years to research on South Asian goddesses. While there is no overt statement of purpose as in Gross, there is an acknowledgement of motivations beyond the academic portals of knowledge seeking. While the concerns seem to stem from real political/ personal locations, the problem that glares out at those of us located in South Asia is the very western anxieties and trajectories of the feminist movement(s) that are revealed in such excursions to the South Asian goddess's altar. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan sums up the discomfort with this position very well: "the recuperation of the Hindu goddess… as feminist is problematic … for its assumption of an undifferentiated 'woman-power' and for its promotion of a certain radicalized Hinduism". Tanika Sarkar demonstrates how goddesses become a rallying point for women in right-wing Hindu politics. So, what is apparent is that the goddess is actually a free floating symbol who can be randomly picked up by a political spectrum ranging from the liberal feminist to the extreme right. Given the latter's predilection for an uncritical acceptance of 'tradition' as a given, there is a tendency in such formations to reiterate and uphold patriarchal norms with terrible repercussions for contemporary women.

In our analysis, while contemporary feminist concerns must be addressed in our search for the past, we might in the process ourselves be guilty of mythicizing tradition and history in our bid to recover lost advantages and status. Secondly, and more importantly to my mind, what if history does not validate our claims – does it dilute our concerns for the present? I am thinking of questions such as the nature of pre-patriarchal society which have been raised ad nauseum by Marxist and feminist scholars. If we don't find the evidence for matriarchy or non-patriarchal society, do we cease to critique patriarchal oppressions? For many of us as practicing feminists and historians this is a non-issue. Thirdly, there are many of us, feminists and women, who see religion as oppressive and binding in its reach beyond the spiritual. While we need not move religion outside our academic vision, we definitely feel the limitations that it imposes in our activist lives. What we may at best do, as historians committed to unraveling historical process in as objective a manner as reasonably possible, is critically evaluate the sources that we take for granted while looking at the past. This is especially so when we are

faced with primarily myths and beliefs recorded in the textual traditions for any study of goddesses. In the words of R.S. Sharma, "myths were used to confirm and strengthen social practices, to make codes of conduct acceptable, and to legitimize the privileges or disabilities of various social strata." By recognizing and closely interrogating such sources, not only can we construct a history of goddess worship in early brahmanical religion, something that we have seen has been undertaken by a number of scholars, but we can also demonstrate that tradition itself is invented at various points of time reflecting changes in social and cultural contexts. The Goddess does not make herself, in a feminist avatar or in subjectivity. She is made out of the social fabric, as expressed by the dominant perceptions of the time and region.

It is within this broad framework of understanding that I have examined the making of the goddess tradition within Saivism in the Tamil region. The earliest female deity mentioned in Tamil sources is Kor̲ravai, the goddess of war and victory, who is propitiated so that the tribes worshipping her do not go hungry. However, there are a number of new associations and identities of this goddess in the literature of the 4th to 6th centuries AD, such as the Tamil epics *Cilappatikâram* and *Manimçkalai*. The 6th to 9th centuries saw the growth of the *bhakti* or devotional tradition, preserved in the compositions of the Saiva and Vaisnava saints called the *nâyanâr* and the *âlvâr*. Here, the earlier conceptualization of the goddess as Kor̲ravai is almost lost in the course of the Puranization of her persona. Secondly, the goddesses appear but in a secondary position – the object of devotion in this literature is the male god, Siva. (The Vaisnava tradition is outside the purview of this paper.) We will focus on one conceptualization of the goddess as Kâlî to demonstrate how a new mythology was being created in this literature, which thereafter finds representation in temple iconography and becomes the dominant perception with regard to an aggressive deity, Kâlî in this case. We will be discussing the myth of Úiva's dance contest with Kâlî and the projection of certain stereotypes in the resolution of this conflict. The historical context in which we will place these developments has been defined as the early medieval period on the basis of the transformation of the social structure with the expansion of agriculture and the growth of integrative political apparatus.

Dance of Siva

Appar, a saint who lived between the mid-6th and the mid 7th centuries AD, speaks of Úiva impressing Kâlî with his 'powerful' dance at Tiruvalangadu. At Tiruppasur, Úiva danced a *perunkkûttu* (awesome dance) in the presence of Kâlî. He made Câmundî sing the *Sâma Veda* while dancing. At Tirukkudamukku, Œiva danced the *kûttu* that caused Kâlî to sweat and slow down while trying to keep pace with him. At Tirukkadavur Mayanam, Kâlî's claim of being the dancer in the burning ghats is silenced by Úiva's victory over her. In Tiruvinnambaram, the extremely angry Kâlî was disgraced by what has been described as a small feat, which was Œiva's dance.

Sambandar, the boy saint who was a contemporary of Appar, sang of Úiva worshipping Kâlî after witnessing her powerful dance in Chidambaram. At Tiruvaiyaru, Kâlî's anger, which was spent after killing Dâruka, was further dissipated by Úiva's dance. Úiva apparently controlled the enraged goddess Kâlî's wild movements in another instance, perhaps in another reference to the Dâruka myth and the dance motif in its climactic resolution. The Brahmapuram temple is described as the abode of Úiva and Umâ and it is at this site that Úiva's anger against Kâlî for her dancing skills is recorded.

Sundarar, in the late 7th century CE, sang of the goddess in the forests and her demon hosts who watched Œiva's dance in the cemetery at Tiruvenpakkam. He gently admonished Œiva for his fiery dance at Kanattunallur, with his shoulders thrown back and his ear-rings dashing against one another, his loin cloth pressing against his beautiful body, and his thick hair splayed out. In Tirumullaivayil, Siva danced for the pleasure of Umâ, whose waist resembled a creeper. Doe-eyed Umâ was again the spectator at Pungur, and the cemetery was again the site of Úiva's dance. Here, one of the three *asurâs* vanquished by Úiva as Tripurântaka was mentioned as accompanying him on the drum. In a hymn from Kanchipuram, the goddess Mangai is mentioned as watching Úiva dance, once again in the cemetery. At Arisirkaraiputtur, Úiva's adoring spectators were his retinue of *pçy*, who were singing and playing on drums, keeping time to his beat. In Tiru

Valampuram, Úiva has been described as the fiery dancer, with Umâ having curly braids occupying half his body. This dance was performed in the forest infested with jackals. The dance of Siva is extolled in Tiru Kanapper as reducing the sky (empty space), water (liquid world), earth (solid world), fire (molten state) and air (gaseous stage) to nothing through his wild 'great' dance, and the site of the dance – the cemetery – was in fact the void that was created by the dance.

Manikkavasagar, who is said to have lived in the second half of the 9th century CE), refers to the goddesses Umâ and Kâlî who watched the dance of Úiva in Chidambaram. In yet another hymn from the same site, Siva is invoked for two benefactions – his dance, and his spouse. Manikkavasagar refers to the *ûrdhvatândava* dance of Siva as signifying the liberation of humanity (souls) from the rampage of illusion (*mâyâ*) in the form of Kâlî, who would have swallowed all that stood in her path.

In all of the instances cited above, there appears to be the underlining of the fact by the Saiva saints that Œiva and the goddess are engaged in a dance competition, where the goddess is either admired or vanquished by him. Unfortunately, the *bhakti* literature does not seek to illuminate us on the nature of the contest. However, if we read these references against a more voluminous medieval literary genre, the *sthalapurâna* or accounts exalting individual *sthalas* or temple sites, we are able to make sense of the mythic motifs that the *bhakti* saints were alluding to.

The *Cidambaramahâtmya*, and its fourteenth century Tamil version – the *Kôyil Purânam* of Umapati Sivacarya, frequently refer to the dance of Siva. However, it is primarily in the context of Siva's dance alone, as in the bhakti hymns. The motif of the dance of bliss, or the *ânandatândava*, in fact appears exclusively in a hymn of about three hundred and thirteen verses in praise of Natarâja's curved foot – the *Kuncitânghristava* – by Umapati Sivacarya, the author of the aforementioned *Koyilpurânam*. The *ûrdhvatândava* of Úiva is mentioned incidentally in this text, and it is in the context of Siva's encounter with Kâlî. Umapati sings:

Paṉupati in ancient days once danced with Kâlî.
In the assembly of gods and sages, raising up His foot
and performing the elevated dance.
He defeated Kâlî then
as prelude to her expulsion.
And all the gods and chief sages call Him Lord,
and the sinless ones worship Him every day,
Lord of the High Dance.

In another verse, Siva's vigorous *ûrdhvatândava* dance is said to have caused the four-headed Kâlî to hang her heads in shame. This myth is further explicated: Kâlî's drinking of the *hâlâhala* poison, her slaying of the demon Dâruka, her frightening rampage, Siva's quest to control her, his eventual victory over her, and finally his benediction to her in the form of his *ânandatândava*. What is interesting here is that, unlike in the first two instances which simply recount her defeat, Kâlî is instated as the protector of the worlds by Siva following the climactic defeat. As in some of the bhakti hymns, the poet appears to inadvertently tell us that Kâlî's dance pleased Siva enormously.

In the sixteenth century AD *Tiruvâlankâttupurânam*, Siva is described as the vanquisher of Kâlî in dance. The dance in question was the *pândarangam*, or the *ûrdhvatândava*, where one leg was pressed to the ground while the other was lifted up with the feet pointing upwards. The context of this defeat is the blood-lust of Kâlî in the *Vadâranyam* (literally, northern forest) after she had killed the demon Raktabîja. Siva's foray into the forest was essentially to control her and thereby restore order in the world. He engaged her in a dance contest and subdued her. His *ûrdhvatândava* was so earth shattering that the constellations were shaken out of place and Kâlî herself fell to the ground.

If we tried to piece these myths related to the dance of Siva and the goddess, we become aware of the continuities in terms of mythic motifs from the *bhakti* literature to the medieval *sthalapurânas*. The defeat of the goddess, referred to variously in the *bhakti* literature as Anangu, Kâlî and Câmundî, at the hands of Siva is common to these texts. The goddess we are told in the later literature is

vanquished by the upward thrust of Siva's leg in the dance known as the *ûrdhvatândava*. In our analysis, this would constitute the phallic conquest of the goddess by Œiva. The success of patriarchy is translated as the defeat of the goddess, and this is achieved through the metaphor of dance. The goddess who is otherwise confident, aggressive and self-reliant cannot raise her leg in dance out of bashfulness!

If we look at the iconographic canvas of the temples in the region, a feature that is quite common is the representation of dance *karanas* from the N*â*tya S*â*stra on temple walls. What is striking in many of these depictions is that it is women dancers who are shown in various postures, including the *ûrdhvatândava*. Marco Polo, the 14th century Italian trader and traveler, refers to women in the Pandyan court dancing in curious acrobatic postures such as lifting one leg to the top of the head. It appears then that what was unfeminine for goddesses was not construed as such for ordinary *dâsîs* in the temples and courts.

I conclude by reiterating that historical studies of goddess traditions cannot rest their case through mere description or glorification. We need to locate conceptualizations in the social milieu that produced them so as to understand how visions of the divine feminine evolve, transform and/ or disappear over time.

References

Agrawala, V.S.(1963), **The Glorification of the Great Goddess.** *Purâna,* Vol. 5,No. 1.

Banerjea, J.N. (1956), **Development of Hindu Iconography.** Calcutta, University of Calcutta.

Banerjea, J.N. (1966), **Pâuranic and Tântric Religion (Early Phase).** Calcutta, University of Calcutta, p. 110-25.

Bhandarkar, R.G. (1965), **Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems.** Varanasi, Indological Book House.

Chakrabarti, Kunal.(2001), **Religious Process: The Purânas and the Making of a Regional Tradition.** Delhi, OUP. p. 81-102.

Chakravarti, Uma. (2006), **History as Practice , in Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmanas of Ancient India. Tulika.**p. xxi-ii.

Chattopadhyaya, B.D. (2003), **Reappearance of the Goddess or the Brâhmanical Mode of Appropriation: Some Early Epigraphic Evidence Bearing on Goddess Cults, Studying Early India.** OUP, p. 172-190. p. 174-5.

Gatwood, E. Lynn. (1985), **Devi and the Spouse Goddess: Women, Sexuality and Marriage Within India. Manohar.** New Delhi.

Kumar, Pushpendra. **Sakti Cult in Ancient India.** Varanasi, Bhartiya Publishing House, p.974.

Kosambi, D.D. (1971), **Myth and Reality.** Popular Prakashan, chapter 3, NN Bhattacharya, Indian Mother Goddess, Indian Studies Past and Present.Calcutta.

Whitmont, C. Edward. (1987), (1983), **Return of the Goddess.** Arkana, London, p. viii.