

THE IMPACT OF GENDER ROLES IN THE REPRESENTATION OF THE DIVINE FEMININE IN HINDUISM WITH REFERENCE TO NAVADURGĀ AND DAŚA MAHĀVIDYĀ

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Abstract. This paper aims to analyse the contrasting representations of the Divine Feminine in Hinduism as Navadurgā (the nine forms of Durgā) and Daśa Mahāvidyā (the ten forms of Kālī) - the contrast being justified by the attribution of conventional gender roles. The former has been a more popular representation of the Goddess, whereas the latter has been shoved into the dark esoteric realm of Hinduism, which largely lies under tantric rituals. The popularity of Navadurgā has been widespread primarily for its representation of the Goddess in a conventional frame, where her appearance is that of a domestic deity, a symbol of fertility and piety, conforming to a certain tradition. Mahāvidyā, on the contrary, represent a version of the feminine cosmic powers which have an independent identity - one which transcends the boundaries of a male-centric mode of existence, as they are associated with sexual dominance and destruction, and remain independent of male intervention. Both Navadurgā and Mahāvidyā enfold the prospect of exhibiting immense power and possess the potential to create and destroy. However, it is only the former that has gained acceptance in the popular imagination while the latter still struggles to be discovered and comprehended.

Keywords: divine feminine, mythology, Hinduism, Navadurgā, Mahāvidyā, gender, gender roles

INTRODUCTION

The Divine Feminine in Hinduism, according to the Śāktā philosophy, is considered to be the controller of the cosmos. Mandakranta Bose mentions *Devī Sukta*, a hymn in the *Rig Veda*, which “declares her as the power that holds together ‘all existence’, whose reign stretches beyond earth and heaven” (Bose 2018, 2). The

major sects of Hinduism, alongside Śāktism, include Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism (centring on Śiva and Viṣṇu respectively). The form of the Goddess or Devī is paradoxical and has been viewed as both calm and fierce. Her forms and incarnations often depict her dual nature - some in adherence to the standard gender roles and some in complete contrast. While her existence as Gaurī, Lakshmī, Sarasvatī or Durgā focuses on her adherence to gender roles; (tantric) forms of Kālī like Dhumāvatī, Bhairavī and Chinnamastā are far from the standard notions of feminine disposition. The worship of the Goddess, therefore, often experiences a divide in its popular reception and engagement. The fierce forms of the Divine Feminine are often restricted to the forbidden Tantric rituals as they are perceived as highly uncontrolled and somewhat dangerous manifestations of the Devī. The Goddesses who are, on the other hand, related to fertility and adhere to domestic boundaries continue to enjoy an elevated status among practising Hindus. This paper aims to evaluate the dual nature of the Goddess, as her depiction oscillates between being a creator to a destroyer; a domesticated wife to a wild and sexually dominating figure. In order to create a distinction between these two roles, the paper seeks to classify the forms of the Goddess as those which are incarnations or forms of Durgā (the *Navadurgā*) and those of Kālī (the *Daśa Mahāvidyā*). The former is used as an example to represent those forms of the Goddess which are placed within conventional gender roles, while the latter represents those forms which contain uncurbed and malevolent energy, which is largely destructive and stands in opposition to these roles. The chief difference between the perception of these forms is based on one's adherence to patriarchal norms and the other's aversion to them.

A rather interesting take on this patriarchal bias can be uncovered upon analysing the creation process of Durgā and Kālī. On the one hand, Durgā is created by male deities to carry out the task of slaying the buffalo demon Mahiśāsura; but their efforts in doing so are rendered futile. However, despite being assigned this violent task, her appearance (both in texts as well as in her iconographic

representation in temples and paintings) has the strains of a married householder as she is adorned with conventional feminine clothes and accessories - a depiction which seems to preserve her identity of a married woman. Kālī, on the other hand, is created out of Durgā herself and is, therefore, a product of a consciousness that belongs solely to a woman's mind. *Devī Mahātmya* describes the birth of Kālī as emerging "from [Durgā's] forehead looking terrible with a frown came out Kālī with frightful face and with sword and noose in hand" (Devīmahātmayam 1998, 233). She is further described as holding "a wonderful skull-headed weapon *Khatwanga* in her hands" and "she had a gaping mouth and looked fearful with her wagging tongue. Her eyes were blood red and her terrible roars reached the skies" (234). Her appearance itself indicates independence from any traditional male bondage as she exists in nakedness, and defies all traditional notions of a mother, a wife or a householder. It must, however, be noted that both Durgā and Kālī are intertwined in a complementary existence; as Laura Amazzone remarks in her book *Goddess Durga and Sacred Female Power*, "Durgā is the calm centre of a torrential storm, while Kālī is the howling wind and pelting rains" (Amazzone 2010, 199).

As far as the origin of the two sets of forms of these two Goddesses is concerned, there are several overlapping myths and tales which have primarily been passed on as oral folklore. However, some of them have scriptural backing as well (for instance *Devī Mahātmya* and some of the Tantras), which date as far back as the 4th century C.E. On the one hand, *Navadurgā* - namely Śailaputrī, Brahmacariṇī, Candraghaṇṭā, Kushmāṇḍā, Skandamātā, Kātyāyanī, Kālṛātri, Mahāgaurī and Siddhidhātṛi - are said to be the representations of nine *yoni*s (female organs of generation), which depict the stages of Goddess' life. On the other, *Daśa Mahāvidyā* are said to have originated from the body of Satī when she was enraged at Śiva for not consenting her to attend the *yajna* (a ritual performed before a sacred fire) at her father Dakṣa's place. The ten fierce forms of the Goddess - namely Kālī, Tārā, Tripurā Sundarī or Sodaśī, Bhuvaneśvarī, Bhairavī, Chinnamastā, Dhumāvati, Bagalāmukhī,

Mātangi and Kamalā - had blocked Śiva's path from the ten directions until he gave in to Satī's demand. Satī, in fact, is said to have assumed a terrible form, like Kālī, when she was enraged. Anway Mukhopadhyay mentions in his book *The Goddess in Hindu Tantric Traditions: Devī as Corpse*, "Satī-as-Kālī is the wife of Śiva, but she also retains her independent status and is able to challenge the dictates of both Śiva and Dakṣa" (Mukhopadhyay 2018, 52). The *Devī Bhāgavatapurāṇa* presents another origin story stating that these ten fierce forms of the Goddess "came out of the body of the Devī" as "the principal Śaktis (incarnate forces)" while she was fighting a demon called Durgama (*Śrī Devī Bhāgavatam* 1921-22, 522).

Navadurgā are worshipped during the festival of *Navrātri* as a mode of celebrating the established ideals of womanhood and the power attributed to the female sex as a result of her capacity to procreate. On performing the *Navrātri puṇjā*, "those who are desirous of learning, riches, or sons will get them all" (*Śrī Devī Bhāgavatam* 1921-22, 182). However, the Mahāvidyā have no ritualistic *puṇjā* that is conducted on a large scale across the Hindu community; their worship mostly remains restricted only within the esoteric Tantric tradition, where most of the rituals associated with their worship are looked upon as malign or dark in the traditional sense (with some exceptions). Much of the reason for this bias may not be too difficult to decipher, as the origin myth itself suggests that *Mahāvidyā* are a product of a stubborn and dominating disposition whereas *Navadurgā* are the representation of Goddesses who might exhibit violent characteristics, but not outright rebellious ones.

This paper, therefore, argues that the association of Kālī and her Tantric forms with the idea of "forbidden" is largely a result of the fact that these Goddesses have established their identities beyond the assigned gender role of a wife or a mother. Sexual dominance, particularly, becomes the most active threat in the evaluation of any religious feminine figure. While some of Mahāvidyā, such as Sodaśī or Bhuvaneśwari, may exhibit the strains of conventional feminine beauty or appearance, they still do not have any explicit association with a male consort. This independent identity sets them apart from

the usual idea of observing the Goddess as Śiva's consort. Navadurgā, on the contrary, receive immense popularity in various parts of India and Nepal as they remain within the socially acceptable range of gender roles assigned to women.

ROLE AND DISPOSITION OF THE GODDESS

The worship of the Divine Feminine - or the Devī - in Hindu thought, is primarily a product of granting supremacy to the female sex by virtue of their ability to procreate. However, the Śākta sect has envisioned the Goddess as one who fulfils all three cosmic duties, as she holds the capacity to create, nurture and destroy life in the world. She becomes a figure like Viśnu - as David Kinsley writes in his article "The Portrait of the Goddess in the *Devī Mahatmya*" - "the cosmic policeman" (Kinsley 1998, 498). The Goddess in her guise of Durgā, or Kālī, fulfils the role of mother-turned-destroyer as she slays all that is unwanted in this world. However, in her nine variations or sub-forms of Durgā, she is often only related to fulfilling the role of a daughter or a mother such as in her manifestation as Śailputri and Skandamātā, whereas in her ten tantric forms of Kālī, she often only fulfils the role of a destroyer in her manifestation as Bhairavī or Chinnamastā. While the former indicates her benign nature as that of a creator and caregiver, the latter explores her destructive potential. Kinsley states that these tantric forms are a meaningful manifestation of the Goddess as "sudden and tragic death, natural catastrophe, sickness, and old age are part of *samsara*" (Kinsley 502). The other forms, in both cases, depict her intermediary nature as a protector. It is, however, the inclination towards destruction and the aversion to conventional gender roles in her Tantric forms which have led to its unpopular notion of being dangerously unfeminine. Her warrior-like spirit embodied in the forms of Durgā (even in the fiercest form such as Kālratrī) is, however, not perceived to be too dangerous as her

overall existence still remains under the control of her male counterpart and her destructive spirit is only temporary.

The epithets using, which the Goddess has been addressed in *Devī Mahātmya*, may be analysed to evaluate her disposition. The epithet Ambikā (representing the Goddess in her gentle, compassionate and maternal form) is used 25 times, whereas the epithet Caṇḍikā (representing the Goddess in her fierce form) is used 29 times (Coburn 1984, 94). It becomes quite evident, then, that the Devī, while fulfilling her role of the one who rids the world of evil, is consumed with fury. However, popular consciousness tends to worship the Goddess primarily in her maternal existence as Ambikā, with only occasional reference to her form as Caṇḍikā. It is noteworthy that the epithet Caṇḍikā has no history of its own as it has never been used in any text prior to *Devī Mahātmya* (Coburn 1984, 95). The lack of its occurrence in the past may hint towards the fact that the representation of the Divine Feminine was granted destructive powers only in the post-Vedic age.

However, despite this attempt, the Devī continues to retain a more sought-after status as Ambikā than as Caṇḍikā in common households. It may then be inferred that despite scriptural evidence for her volatile and fierce nature, the anthropological development of her identity becomes consciously selective and ends up choosing her lesser violent aspect.

A noteworthy fact that may be invoked during the exercise of determining the nature of Devī's contradictory disposition is her characteristic "masculine" roar as Durgā when she first steps onto the battlefield. According to *Devī Mahātmya*, the Goddess "roared again and again with a terrible voice" (*Devīmahātamayam* 1998, 109). It goes on to say that "the whole sky was filled with her terrible roaring sound" and "by her unending and great roar occurred a great echo. All the worlds shook, and all the oceans also trembled" (110). A roar of this kind goes on to assert the hint of masculinity that was embodied in the Goddess as she took the onus of ridding the world of evil. It could, perhaps, then be observed that the projection of

the Goddess within the usual boundaries of femininity is a deliberate attempt to cover up her physical strength as it may be seen as a threat to the patriarchal system. C. Mackenzie Brown, in his book *The Triumph of the Goddess: The Canonical Models and Theological Visions of the Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, points out that, in both *Devī Mahātmya* and *Devī Bhāgavata*, the Goddess is related to male deities “not as consort, but as Śakti” (Brown 1990, 125). However, this relationship is most often not viewed as a unique bond in itself, but is usually perceived to be as one created out of marriage, and therefore builds itself upon the pillars of conventional masculinity and femininity.

RITUALS ASSOCIATED WITH THE GODDESS

Menstruation becomes a rather significant issue while discussing the attribution of significance to the female sex. Goddess worship in Hindu thought has often considered the Devī, like other mortal females, to undergo a period of menorrhoea during which most temples or religious sites remain closed. Places such as the Kāmākhya Devī temple in Guwahati, as it is a predominant site for Tantric worshippers, celebrate the Goddess’ menstrual flow and witness the mass gathering of devotees who visit the temple and collect pieces of blood-stained cloth from the temple premises as a holy blessing generated from the Goddess herself. The *Devī Gītā* states about this place that “it is the best of hallowed places in this earthly realm” because it is here “where every month the Goddess herself resides during her menses” (*The Song of the Goddess* 2002, 105).

The stain on the cloth, however, comes from the water of the river Brahmaputra which turns red (due to a high content of iron-rich sediments) for about three days every year during the month of June (Lekshmi). Laura Amazzone remarks that the Kaula, Śakta and Tantric cultures see a menstruating woman as one who is “in her highest power” (Amazzone 2010, 213) and is equated with the Goddess herself. Mahāvīdyā, in their Tantric mode of worship, have assigned immense significance to menstrual blood as it is the very

sap of all existence. Mātangi, for instance, as David Kinsley writes in his book *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, is a Goddess who indeed “prefers pollution and who requires her devotees to be in a state of pollution when they offer her polluted substances, such as menstrual blood” (Kinsley 1998, 7). However, despite this assertion of significance, nearly all of the bhakti-influenced Hindu traditions associate menstrual blood with impurity. The Goddesses who are worshipped outside of the Tantric cult - such as Durgā and her forms, Lakṣmī, or Gaurī - do not have any elaborate rites or rituals pertaining to menstruation and, in fact, do not encourage menstruating women to remain a part of any customary ritual or *Pujā* (the act of worship). The aversion towards menstrual blood may also be seen as an impact of Western thoughts, which pervaded through the Indian consciousness several centuries ago, as it is rather odd “that a Goddess who demands bloody sacrifice for her propitiation will leave her vehicle at the first sign of blood” (Amazzone 2010, 97).

Another aspect which may be analysed in determining the position occupied by these two sets of Goddesses is the method of their worship. It has already been established that Mahāvidyā are worshipped using Tantric practices, mostly following *Vāmachara* (left-handed path). Navadurgā, on the other hand, are worshipped with adherence to rituals that have evolved out of centuries of following bhakti practices. They are worshipped during the time of *Navrātri*, which occurs four times a year - *Caitra Navrātri*, *Śarada Navrātri*, *Āśāḍha Navrātri* and the *Māgha Gupt Navrātri*. Each of the nine days of the *Navrātri* is assigned to a specific form of the Navadurgā. The rituals associated with it are primarily focused on emphasising the fertility of the female sex, which leads to procreation.

Hillary Peter Rodrigues mentions, in her book *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess: The Liturgy of the Durga Puja*, with interpretations that the sacred jar (*ghaṭa*) - which is worshipped during the *Navrātri* as the embodiment of the Devī - is one which “resembles a squatting

or pregnant woman clad in a saree” (Rodrigues 2003, 262). The *ghaṭa* is surrounded by grains which “sprout over the course of the puja, embodies the fertile capacity of the creation to generate life” (*Ibid.*). During the days of worship, it is only young girls who have not reached menarche, married women and post-menopausal women who enjoy a higher status. Rodrigues mentions that post-menopausal women enjoy an elevated status because they become incapable “of endangering life” as their “sexual energy no longer needs to be placed under any controlling influence” (Rodrigues 2003, 302). Unmarried women, menstruating women and widows are most often not accommodated within the ritual practices pertaining to Navadurgā. Those who are “born of widows, or of women unmarried are always to be avoided in this *pūjā*” (*Śrī Devī Bhāgavatam* 192-22, 182).

On the contrary, the Tantric modes of worship grant primacy to menstruating women and the female Tantric deities themselves often have little to no affiliation with a male counterpart. The significance assigned to blood and other bodily fluids including semen becomes one of the most prominent reasons for rejecting the worship of Mahāvidyā in popular practice, as it causes a sense of repulsion and disgust. Bhairavī, in the *Śakta-Pramoda* for instance, is called “She Who is Fond of Semen and Menstrual Blood” and “She Who is Worshipped by those Who Worship with Semen” (Kinsley 1998, 172). While it is quite evident that both forms of worship of the Divine Feminine emphasise the procreative potential of the Devī, it may be observed that it is only its symbolic representation in the form of a *ghaṭa*, or the sprouting grains, which fit the contemporary Hindu imagination comfortably.

TEMPERAMENT OF THE GODDESS

The temperament of various incarnations of the Goddess has often been divided into two broad categories - malevolent and benevolent. Tracy Pintchman writes in *Cosmological, Devotional, and Social*

Perspectives on the Hindu Goddess that the malevolent forms are those who are unmarried; whereas the benevolent forms are the ones who are tied in a marital bond. The grounds of this distinction, then, become self-explanatory as the Goddesses with an independent identity establish themselves to be in contrast to the designated social order. These independent Goddesses, such as Dhumāvati or Chinnamastā, are considered to possess “unreleased sexual energy and violence” (Pintchman 2018, 26). They tend to take “charge of their own sexual agency” (*Idem*, 24) and, are, therefore viewed as being endowed with danger. The benevolent forms of the Goddess, on the other hand, are “generally married and subservient to their husbands” (*Idem*, 25) and are hence perceived to be “high-ranking” (*Idem*, 25). The hot-tempered unmarried or widowed Goddesses are, on the contrary, perceived as “low-ranking” (*Idem*, 25). One might then argue that a figure like Brahmācariṇī (one of the forms of the Navadurgā) is not married in her iconographic description but yet remains within the category of benevolence. The reason for this could be attributed to the fact that, during her phase of adopting this guise, her primary motive was to persuade Śiva to marry her. Thus, here too, it is perhaps the intention of marriage which saves her from being ostracised for her unmarried status.

The figure of the Goddess as depicted in *Devī Mahātmya* is not explicitly mentioned to be placed within a marital contract with any male deity. She is simply perceived to be a manifestation of the divine cosmic energy, which has been invoked in order to rid the world of evil-doers. The Devī, in both *Devī Mahātmya* as well as in *Devī Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, is however not a malevolent representation of feminine energy despite the absence of the specification of her marital status. In the former, she is simply introduced by Brahmā as he says, “You alone sustain this universe, you alone create this universe, and you protect it. And at the end of this cycle you alone devour the same” (*Devī Mahātmyam* 1998, 82); the latter states “She is the Will-force of the Supreme Self. She is the First Creatrix of the world” (*Śrī Devī Bhāgavatam* 1921-22, 74). Both descriptions depict the independent existence of the Goddess. In modern and pre-

modern representations, however, there may be found traces of a growing misogynist imagination, as the Goddess even in her fierce demon-killing form tends to embody the guise of a woman married according to Hindu customs as she is always represented with vermillion, painted feet, bangles, and clad in a red attire (typically adorned by Hindu women during their wedding) among other elements of embellishment. The deliberate association of conventional femininity with the Goddess is most prominently traced in the contemporary worship of Kālī, or even Tārā. Kālī, as is mentioned in the *Devī Mahātmya*, emerges out of Durgā's own mind while she is fighting the demon Raktabīj. Primarily depicted as bloodthirsty and naked, uncontrolled and fierce, Kālī, however, is subjected to complete domesticity in her modern depiction as she is treated like any other benevolent female deity - a married householder. Adorned with vermillion, draped in a saree, her fierce tongue often reduced from a symbol of frenzied anger to a gesture of being ashamed - Kālī's iconography undergoes a massive shift. While her weapons and garland of skulls have remained intact in her modern depictions, her nakedness and ferocity are completely altered to a comfortable and acceptable display of feminine conduct. One of Kālī's Tantric forms, Tārā too is often subject to a similar treatment where her aggressive nature is negated (which could also impact her worship in the Tibetan Buddhist culture) and, instead, a more conventional representation of her prowess is projected. For instance, most of her bloodthirsty and violent nature is overshadowed by the depiction of "her large breasts and swollen belly as suggesting that she represents the first impulse toward creation and individuation" (Kinsley 1998, 105).

SEXUAL DEPENDENCE/INDEPENDENCE OF THE GODDESS

Mahavidyā and their significance stems primarily from Tantric literature, where they occupy a subjugating position. David Kinsley writes that several forms of Mahavidyā have Śiva as their spouse but

“he is subordinate to them” (Kinsley 1998, 62) as they dominate him sexually. This fact may be interpreted as yet another reason for the peripheral position of these Goddesses as they defy the basic norm of the submissive behaviour that is expected out of women in sexual terms. Further, one may analyse Kinsley’s argument of the subordinate spouse as being one of the most significant premises upon which the threat associated with these Goddesses is placed. While remaining may result in the containment of unreleased sexual energy, the idea of actively engaging in unmarried dominant sexual behaviour over the male counterpart becomes a difficult reality to sink into the minds of those practising patriarchally sanitised rites and rituals.

The iconographic representation of the Tantric Goddesses often depicts them sitting atop their male partner while remaining engaged in a sexual act - a position which evidently suggests dominance. For instance, Tripurā Sundarī is often “shown astride Śiva in sexual intercourse” (Kinsley 1998, 11). Chinnamastā stands “on the copulating bodies of Goddess Rati and her husband Kāma, the God of sexual lust” and sometimes she is also depicted “astride Śiva, copulating with him as he lies beneath her (*Idem*, 11). These kinds of depictions have retained themselves in temple paintings and illustrations but are not a part of popular depiction. Further, according to the origin myth of *Daśa Mahāvidyā*, Satī goes on to remind Śiva of their status as primordial *Prakṛti* and Primordial *Puruṣa* and “she appears to imply that it is her choice of Śiva as her beloved *puruṣa* which made him the *Param Puruṣa*” (Mukhopadhyay 2018, 138). This becomes a rather significant aspect in the establishment of Śiva as *śava* (corpse) in the absence of Śakti; and implies that it is indeed the Devī’s energy- both sexual and non-sexual - which fulfils the basic conditions of the existence of her male counterpart.

David Frawley writes, in his book *Tantric Yoga and the Wisdom Goddesses*, that the forms of Mahāvidyā “are often disturbing, and they are not meant to be merely pleasant. They are meant to shock the mind into awakening” (Frawley 1994, 60). Much of this shock is

simply a result of the independent and powerful depiction of these Goddesses as it challenges the conventions of female domesticity. The portrayal of Durgā too, according to commentators like Laura Amazzone, has a strain of independence as she argues that her weapons symbolise self-reliance, confidence, determination and passion. She is, as a matter of fact, indeed invoked by the helpless male deities who are rendered powerless at the hands of the growing evil in the world. However, one may argue that the various forms of Durgā fail to establish a completely independent identity as their existence is most often viewed as one which compliments the male Gods and not as something which allows itself to take complete responsibility for her actions. She is *assigned* a cosmic duty *by* the male creators of the cosmos in order to ease their efforts in its preservation. Unlike Kālī, Durgā's battles are focused on providing "a model of expressing anger toward injustice in a constructive rather than destructive manner" (Amazzone 2010, 25). However, the distinction between constructive and destructive anger is itself a manifestation of a bias, which is a product of gendered convention.

ADHERENCE TO CONVENTIONS AND TRADITIONS

The traditional life cycle of a woman is most often defined by her relation to her male superiors - first a daughter (guided by a paternal figure), then a wife (dominated by a husband) and finally a mother (dependent on a son). These roles, which are expected to be fulfilled by a woman through the course of her life, are manifested in the nine forms of Durga, or the Navadurgā - perhaps the most prominent factor resulting in their admiration and approval from the male supremacist version of contemporary Hinduism. Even while forms of the Navadurgā such as Kushmāṇḍā are credited with the divine duty of the creation of the universe with her lotus-like smile which "dispelled the darkness"; it must be noted that her role has been defined as one which *helps* Vishnu to dispel the darkness and not as a completely independent endeavour (Navratri 2020, 4th

Day). Thus, her role remains subordinate to male deities despite the immense potential of creation that she exhibits. Kālī's forms, on the other hand, are most often depicted as Divine Creators themselves. Bhuvaneśwari, for instance, is mentioned to have enlightened the *Tridevas* (Brahma, Viśnu and Śiva) or the Holy Trinity of Hinduism in figuring out the design of the universe. The *Devī Bhāgavatapurāṇa* states that it is “by her rays that the three worlds are pervaded” (*Śrī Devī Bhāgavatam* 1921-22, 556). It also states that she is “the Prime Force of Nature” and “the Creatrix of the whole world” (*Idem*, 212). Her “gracious glance enables Brahmā, Viśnu and Maheś to do their respective works creating, preserving and destroying the universe” (*Idem*, 559).

She, therefore, establishes herself as a figure who participates with an equal (or perhaps greater) sense of authority in the creation process of the world alongside male deities. As David Frawley has remarked, “the Daśa Mahavidyā reveal the inner workings of both universe and psyche” (Frawley 1994, 60). Therefore, the role of these Goddesses ends up superseding the functions of male deities, and their existence then goes on to potentially manifest as a rather odd idea to be accepted easily by a collective thought which is largely governed by a fixed notion of tradition.

As far as the projection of conventional femininity is concerned, another interesting aspect that may be looked at is the manner in which the display of the tongue in the iconography of the Goddesses operates. While Kālī is most commonly projected with a protruding tongue while placing her foot upon Śiva's chest, it is noteworthy that this episode finds no mention in the ancient Śāktā texts like *Devī Mahātmya* or *Devī Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. Kālī's tongue lolls simply due to her bloodthirsty and enraged disposition while she is in a demon-slaying frenzy. The manipulation of this phenomenon into believing that the tongue depicts her shame or embarrassment is completely absent in the *Purāṇas* or even the Tantras. It is to cater to the male-centric thought that the entire idea of being subjugated by the husband in order to be restored to normalcy has been

formulated. It is an attempt to build a conscious statement that a woman ought to be ashamed and must be subjected to ostracism as a consequence of stepping over her boundaries - much like Sita's doom in the *Rāmāyaṇa* after she crosses the *Lakṣmaṇa-Rekhā* (an invisible line drawn for her safety by Lakṣmaṇa). The fact that the tongue representing shame is indeed a later interpolation may further be concretised by taking into consideration Tārā's iconographic details. Her tongue, too, is protruded out and she too stands upon a corpse; however, this corpse though "often discernible as Śiva, but [is] sometimes said to be an anonymous corpse. Sometimes [the corpse] is being consumed in a cremation fire" (Kinsley 1998, 100). The tongue, then, becomes a rather complex symbol which seems to have very little to do with shame and a lot to do with ferocity and wrath. The tongue has also been viewed as a symbol of eroticism by Herman Tull in his article "Kali's Tongue: Shame, Disgust, and the Rejection of Blood and Violence in Vedic and Hindu Thought". The Goddess's eroticism is yet another taboo in the post-*purāṇic* Hindu discourse and, thus, the association of her tongue with an apologetic gesture is more pronounced and easily accepted than its obvious connection with disgust, seduction and fury. Further, one must also note the depiction of Kālaratri (one of the Navadurgā) - "her terrible black appearance, when beheld, increases the terror even of the Daityas (demons)" (*Śrī Devī Bhāgavatam* 1921-22, 343). Her iconography is a lot like Kālī, with dishevelled hair and dark complexion (in fact, her name is often used interchangeably with Kālī) - yet, her tongue never hangs out in any representation. In fact, Kālaratri's portrayal does not indicate any kind of nakedness unlike Kālī - yet another instance of depicting the violent form of the Goddess under the garb of socially approved sophistication. This difference between Kālaratri and the other fierce forms of Devī, such as Kālī or Tārā, then, might emerge out of the fact that Navadurgā serve as an ideal model of conduct for women and, even its fiercest form, must adhere to a basic feminine disposition.

CONSEQUENCES OF WORSHIPPING THE GODDESS

The nature of blessings that one seeks from these forms of the Goddesses is also a significant ground for drawing a comparison between their common perceptions. Upon reading *Devī Mahātmya*, the reader repeatedly comes across the prayer in which one prays to the Goddess to grant “a fine form, fame and victory and destroy [his or her] enemies” (*Devīmahātmyam* 1998, 2). The destruction of enemies here is never made to sound negative. However, in the worship of the *Mahāvidyā*, one comes across Bagalāmukhī who is known for paralysing and stunning one’s enemies; and her worship is almost always perceived to be a product of malign intentions. In her iconographic depiction, she is seen pulling out the tongue of a demon with her left hand, which becomes a symbolic representation of her ability to stun her enemies into silence. However, while the prayer for the destruction of enemies is projected as a constructive activity in the case of Durgā, it is considered to be a vengeful and destructive activity in the case of Bagalāmukhī.

The reason behind this disparity may once again be located within the method of worship of the Goddess: while Durgā is worshipped using conventional Vedic and Puranic rituals, Bagalāmukhī’s ritual worship includes sexual yogic practices as directed in the Tantras. Kinsley argues in his book that individuals who engage with *Mahāvidyā* get to “liberate their consciousness”, and this becomes possible by “subverting, mocking, or rejecting conventional social norms” (Kinsley 1998, 251). However, this understanding remains absent in the large-scale worship of the Goddess at well-known religious sites, as Tantric practices are generally rejected in mainstream bhakti rituals.

In order to derive the highest level of benefit for oneself as a devotee of the Divine Feminine, the Tantric culture predominantly suggests sacrifice. This sacrifice ranges from animals to humans, to one’s own body or self-sacrifice. It is suggested, especially in *Vāmacara*, that the results of the worship of the Devī set the soul free and enable one to fulfil the true role of a *sādhaka* (adept) by

uniting and becoming one with Divinity. As Kinsley points out, “at some Goddess temples, daily sacrifices are made, usually of goats and chickens” and the animal’s head is “cut off and offered to the image of the Goddess, often on a platter” (Kinsley 1998, 151). In the worship of the non-Tantric Goddesses, however, there has been a considerable change in terms of the concept of sacrifice. A few cultures cut open a vermillion-smeared gourd as a symbolic sacrifice, but nothing beyond that is either expected or propagated in the name of attaining salvation. Brian K. Smith and Wendy Doniger have remarked upon the substitution of animal sacrifice with non-animal elements in “Sacrifice and Substitution: Ritual Mystification and Mythical Demystification”. They suggest that contemporary Hinduism perceives “offerings of rice and barley (...) to be *better* than those of animals because they avoid the sin of killing” (Smith and Doniger 1989, 208). The sense of civilised comfort in the mode of worship of the latter becomes the primary reason for its wide acceptance. The former, on the contrary, projects itself as a rather hazardous and disturbing practice in the name of devotion and, hence, not as prevalent.

While almost all branches of the Śākta tradition have the concept of sacrifice associated with them, it is only the Tantric culture that has continued to propagate the idea of the sacrifice of animals as well as humans as a means of achieving complete union with the Divine Feminine. Therefore, despite the fact that the primary agenda in the worship of any Goddess is to seek spiritual contentment and overcome one’s vexation, the mode of generating the desired results is starkly different in the various strains of Śakti worship. The Tantric Goddesses rely heavily upon the willingness of the adept to participate not only with his mind but also his body, whereas other Goddess cults, such as those where people worship Durgā, rely less upon the physical aspects of engagement and more upon the conventions and traditions which are usually devoid of any association with sexual practices or self-sacrifice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to establish the impact of gender roles upon the popular perception of the Divine Feminine in Hinduism by categorising the forms of the Goddess into two broad groups- the Navadurgā - or the nine forms of Durgā - and *Daśa Mahāvidyā* - or the ten forms of Kālī. While the former usually depicts the Goddess in her violent demon-slaying form, the overarching attributes of the Devī remain within the boundaries of gender roles; the latter, on the contrary, depicts her in all forms - destructive and procreative - yet her perception seems to tilt towards being malevolent, which stems out of her dominating identity. Through this division, this paper has analysed the impact of her relationship with a male counterpart, usually in the form of a spouse, and her dependence on, or independence from such a bond. It is the level of her adherence to conventions of femininity that has played a major role in creating a social perception of her existence in various forms.

As pointed out, the reason for the dismissal of sexually dominant or independent Goddesses primarily stems from their uncontrolled and violent nature. They are considered to be “anti-role models for Hindu women in India” (Pintchman 2018, 34). While this paper has not remarked upon Goddesses who lie beyond the two aforementioned categories, such as Lakśmi and Saraswatī, it may in any case be suggested that their representation has been placed in the realm of acceptance, as their disposition lies within the boundaries of traditional feminine conduct. It is only the supremely destructive forms of the Goddess such as Kālī, Dhūmāvatī, Chinnamastā, Bhairavī and Bagalamukhī who remain outside the circle of a prescribed gender role.

This paper has also argued that there has been a constant effort by patriarchal thought to alter the ferocity of the Goddess in her wrathful depiction, such as Kālī or Tārā. The nakedness of Kālī has gradually been covered under cultural markers and her fierce tongue has been converted from a sign of wrath and disgust to a sign of

shame. Much of these alterations, quite evidently, emerge from a misogynist viewpoint which chooses not to perpetuate such unfeminine traits of the Devī into the popular consciousness lest it become a challenge to the existing male dominance. Her lack of domesticity and subordination in her Tantric manifestations has been the leading cause of the dismissal of these forms from the widely followed Hindu thought. However, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued, in *Moving Devi*, that Tantra too does not really allow “for women’s sexual agency” as “in the yantra-inspired activities, the actual women representing [the Devī] are the affectless receivers of foreplay” (Spivak 2001, 148).

There lies immense scope for further exploration of the possibilities of rejection that is faced by the Tantric Goddesses; and also in analysing the actual representation of Durgā and her forms, that is, in determining whether or not they are actually as placed within gendered boundaries or is it merely an illusion. It was suggested above that ancient Śākta texts like the *Devī Mahātmya* and *Devī Bhāgavatapurāṇa* have represented the Goddess not only as an independent entity but also as one who exhibits rather masculine traits as she proceeds to kill demons on the battlefield. Despite such explicit details, her later depiction has converted her entirely into a stereotypically feminine being who is, in fact, quite evidently engaged in a marital bond with Śiva. There is significant potential for excavating more information into the evolving perception of the Goddess in her dual nature. By examining the anthropological factors throughout the history of Śāktism, a deeper understanding and greater clarity can be achieved.

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