

The Suffering Mothers. The Hindu Goddesses as Empowering Role Models for Women

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Introduction

From the earliest manifestations of Hinduism, devotees have been familiar with divinity envisaged as both female and male.

The village or folk tradition, dominant in rural India, particularly in the southern Dravidian areas of Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh, involves the worship of predominantly female deities. Richard Brubaker maintains that there is increasing evidence of a continuity between the Indus Valley Civilization (c.2500-1500 BCE) and the south Indian Dravidian cultures (1983:149). Thus this is one of the most ancient forms of Indian religion (Whitehead 1921:11,17), and quite probably one of the oldest existing manifestations of human worship.

Although Hinduism is unique among the world religions in its rich tradition of Goddess worship, there is an obvious discrepancy between the respect paid to these divine females and the reality of the daily lives of Hindu women.

In KwaZulu-Natal, the veneration of these Dravidian folk Goddesses, can be traced back to its practice in south India, which the early Tamil settlers brought with them to South Africa from 1860 onwards.

Characteristics of the Amman Goddess Tradition

Dravidian is the name given to the aboriginal inhabitants of India, found mainly in the southern and eastern parts of the country. Lack of literature

results in a scarcity of information about their early existence. The religion displays many points of continuity as well as discontinuity with the Brahmanical tradition of Goddess worship.

Unlike the pan-Indian Brahmanical Goddesses, the indigenous folk deities are particularly identified with a specific village. There may be more than one in a village, but some are completely unknown outside their own village.

Their names often indicate their character and function (e.g. Kokkalamma, Goddess of coughs). *Amma* or *Amman* simply means 'mother' or 'respected woman' (cf. Amba, Ambika, Ma, Mata). Although both Kali and Durga are considered part of the Brahmanical tradition, they almost certainly have non-Vedic roots (Payne 1979:68; Elmore 1913:5).

Despite their great numbers and variety of functions, these folk deities share a considerable number of characteristics, many highlighting a tradition which places women's experience at centre stage.

Firstly, unlike the Brahmanical Goddesses, these Goddesses are often represented not by anthropomorphic images, but by natural features such as trees, unhewn stones, or anthills, an indication of their close associations with the natural world, typical of the great Earth Mother (Kinsley 1986:198).

Secondly, they are concerned mostly with local interests, particularly the wellbeing of the inhabitants of the village, as protector of the village. The Goddess is Mother (*Amman*) of the village; she gave birth to it as its Creator, and the villagers are sustained by her body, the earth. She is worshipped to ensure fertility, of earth, animals and humans, prosperity in the form of rain, good crops, and protection from famine, disease, snakebite, demons and premature death.

Thirdly, these *Amman* deities are frequently violent, punishing, Mothers, associated with disasters, diseases and death. They are not primarily associated with quiet peacefulness, but with the darker, fierce, untamable sides of human life and the natural world. Their characteristics are independence, arousal, anger, ferocity, destruction and a general lack of predictability. As Earth Mother, they are reminders of the inherent ambiguities of life; that those same forces of nature that uphold the stability of life and the social order, also ultimately threaten its existence.

Fourthly, a significant characteristic of these Goddesses is that they

usually do not have male consorts. Their independence from male control is often described as 'virgin', although this does not usually mean sexually inexperienced or inactive, but undominated, 'her own person'. This combination of the images of mother and virgin, but not of wife, is for Hindus powerful rather than contradictory, the appellation 'mother' not being interpreted to mean that birthing and nurturing the young is their (or women's) only or most important function, but simply to act in a life-giving, creative fashion. The sexual independence of these Goddesses also reflects their potentially dangerous nature, as not being answerable to any external authority. By contrast, Brahmanical Goddesses with male partners, such as Lakshmi, Sarasvati and Parvati, are usually gentle and mild, lacking the uncontrolled wildness often manifested by the sexually autonomous Goddesses.

Fifthly, their mythology further reflects their ambivalent sexuality, often involving stories of a faithful and virtuous woman, unjustly and violently treated by men, sometimes through sexual assault (Kinsley 1986:200-201). The woman expresses her outrage in anger and revenge, and, after her violent and premature death, is transformed into a Goddess (Fuller 1992:49; Blackburn 1985:260). This is reminiscent of the mythology of the virgin Goddess Durga, who rejects the sexual advances of all male suitors and their attempts to dominate her, and is victorious in battle over a male buffalo demon, Mahisasura, who threatens the stability of the universe. These myths are often recounted or acted as dramas at the festivals of the folk Goddesses (e.g. Terukkuttu for Draupadi).

Linked to this sense of outrage is the tradition that frequently they demand blood sacrifices of male animals. Blood sacrifice has a lengthy association with the Brahmanical Goddesses Kali and Durga, both of whom are depicted as thirsty for the blood of their male adversaries. Many folk Goddesses are also regarded as carnivorous, thirsting particularly for the blood of buffaloes, reminiscent of the Buffalo Demon, symbol of chaos and destruction, slain by Durga.

Sixthly, it is evident from the above characteristics that this tradition emphasises the immanence of the divine in the world and in human affairs. There is no real separation between the sacred and the secular; all life is sacred, the entire natural world is infused with spirit (anima), and the divine is encountered at every turn. This is particularly clear in the phenomenon of

possession, very frequent in *Amman* religion, where a deity is believed temporarily to inhabit the body of a devotee. The Goddess chooses human bodies in which to manifest herself to show her power, and her ability to communicate and to heal. The divine can, therefore, frequently be experienced in human form, particularly in female bodies

Also, the elevating of humans to divine status, particularly those who were renowned for their power or purity, or who died strange, untimely deaths, were murdered, or women who died in childbirth, is an indication of the interweaving of the divine and the human (Fuller 1992:50).

There are few written sacred texts recording origins, belief or practice of *Amman* religion. Most stories and legends were orally transmitted, probably for centuries, before being committed to manuscripts of palm leaf (Whitehead 1921:122; 126; Elmore 1913: ix). (The one clear exception is the Draupadi myth, central to her festival, but this has its origins in the Brahmanical *Mahabharata*, a later text than the majority of myths of the ancient folk Goddesses. See below.)¹

A further characteristic is that the religion shows practically no acknowledgement of the caste system which it appears to pre-date, but operates in a more egalitarian fashion (Kinsley 1986:199). There is no priestly caste; the *pujaris* who officiate can come from any class, and all who wish may participate in the worship, regardless of gender or caste background, outcastes included (Whitehead 1921:154), which makes it a religion with appeal to the poor and marginalized, especially women and Dalits.

Finally, female pollution and the accompanying need for ritual purification do not appear to be given the same emphasis as in the Brahmanical tradition. The Goddess herself is believed to give birth and to

¹ Elmore (1913:ix; xii) explains: 'The Dravidians are not a literary people, and their religion has no literature Their history is contained in the somewhat confused legends recited by wandering singers who attend the festivals and assist in the worship. These legends are always recited from memory; and as usually the singers cannot read, written stories would be of no value to them The written sources of information ... are limited. The most important are the government gazetteers, district manuals, and bulletins of the Madras Government Museum'.

menstruate, so these female functions are regarded as more naturally acceptable than in the mainstream tradition (Bhattacharyya 1977:8-9,19).

The Feminist Meaning of the Amman Goddesses

It is in the festivals of the *Amman* Goddesses that these diverse and complex characteristics come together to provide some overall meaning to the function of these seemingly paradoxical deities. In the past a festival would be called when some crisis, such as drought, flood, or disease, overwhelmed the village. The festival involved the people of the village, the children of the Goddess, springing into action to elicit her assistance in dealing with the calamity. The various rituals are designed to deal with and overcome the disorder and disaster, to revere and propitiate the Goddess, and so to restore a situation of order and wellbeing to the community.

The climax of the festival—its core ritual—is the blood sacrifice. This can be interpreted as an offering, a gift, made directly to the Goddess, to placate her so she will withdraw the effects of her anger; and as representing her defeating and slaughtering the invading and disruptive demons of disease and disorder (Kinsley 1986:205). Buffaloes were the original and most usual sacrifices offered to the Goddesses, and are directly associated with Mahisasura, the Buffalo Demon beheaded by Durga in the *Devi Mahatmyam*. Brubaker (1983:152) points out that the buffalo is a 'powerful and unpredictably dangerous beast with a well deserved reputation for brutishness ...'. Often it invades cultivated fields causing great destruction to crops, so it is appropriate that it becomes a symbol of power out of control, of chaos and disruption to the civilized order. Its beheading in the festival symbolises the Goddess's victory over the encroaching demonic forces.

It is significant that the sacrificial animals are always male, as this links with the mythological theme of the anger of the Goddess, aroused by some injustice done to her by males. The demons of chaos and destruction who invade the village, the territory of the Goddess, her body, are invariably depicted as male, so that the image of a rape is evoked.

The Mothers have to protect the civilized world from such disruptive and violating attacks, and the villagers, her children and devotees, must identify themselves with her struggle with these demons. Their world has been invaded by malignant male forces, and only by acknowledging the power of the Goddess can order, health and wellbeing be restored. The

activity and excitement of the festival reminds all participants of the presence in their midst of sacred power, a force above and beyond the experiences of everyday, material existence, and of the eternal conflict between good and evil, order and chaos.

The crucial question is, however: why are these deities female? What is it that specifically requires the presence of a divine female (a Mother) to restore the balance of society?

Most scholars, like Elmore, Whitehead and Babb, who have studied these fierce, independent Goddesses, express puzzlement and even discomfort that females, especially Mothers, should behave in such seemingly uncharacteristically wild and uncontrolled ways. Babb explains what he considers to be the fundamental key to the dichotomy between the two kinds of Hindu Goddesses: namely that 'married'. Goddesses are benevolent, givers of life, wealth, and children, and display devotion to their husbands, whereas the 'unmarried'. Goddesses are independent, malevolent, bloodthirsty, dangerous and terrible, 'surrounded with the paraphernalia of killing', all apparently attributable to 'feminine malice' (Babb 1975:222). He goes on to claim that the marriage of Shiva and Parvati shows the desirable transformation achieved by the pairing of God and Goddess, as husband and wife:

When the female dominates the male the pair is sinister; when male dominates female the pair is benign (Babb 1975:225f).

It is true that in any relationship with males, the Goddess does indeed dominate her male partners, and this reversal of the usually expected male and female roles appears to confuse and possibly offend some people. A patriarchally ordered society considers it 'natural' that women, especially mothers, should be primarily benevolent protectors of life, caring for the wellbeing of their husbands and children. The independent, untamed, angry behaviour of the Goddesses appear, then, to be an 'unnatural' reversal of the acceptable order, where women are expected to be pliable and subservient. However, this very patriarchal, and ultimately misogynist, view, expressed by Babb, simply reinforces socially accepted stereotypes and expectations, suggesting that the 'feminine malice' and frustration of unmarried Goddesses, and possibly of their human daughters, is responsible for the disruptive, harmful forces in society (Babb 1975:145). This view can only be

sustained by ignoring several crucial facts about the indigenous Goddesses: for example, the theme of sexual violence in their myths (Kinsley 1986:203); the concept of 'virgin' as applied to their sexual independence; and, closely connected to this, a male fear of female sexuality.

The analysis of Brubaker and Kinsley contradicts Babb's view, pointing to the fact that *Amman* Goddess myths frequently show that it is males who are most often violent and disruptive in society, so that the Goddess, the divine female, is then needed to protect and preserve the stability of life (Kinsley 1986:203). It is she who challenges the destabilizing male invasion, and brings about the restoration of order that is essential for society to continue to exist and to thrive. This is her role as fiercely protective Mother. So, her violence is almost entirely a reactive type of violence; a response of righteous anger to the violent situation created by invading and disruptive males.

Brubaker believes that understanding the 'untamed'. *Amman* Goddesses is connected to the male fear of the female, especially the power of her unfettered sexuality. As well as desiring them, men fear women and their powerful *shakti*: their sexual and spiritual power. One can develop this by acknowledging that women's powerful sexuality can be expressed in two different ways. Ideally, in a patriarchal society (reflected by Babb and others), they should be married, submissive to the supervision of their husbands, so that their powerful and potentially dangerous sexuality can be expressed in safely controlled ways. In a sense this serves to neutralize their *shakti*, to 'tame' and limit it to patriarchal demands and requirements. Unmarried women, widows, and to some extent childless women, are without properly defined patriarchal status, so they are regarded as inauspicious, and are feared for their unrestrained sexual power. This other alternative for women involves independence from men, possibly expressed in sexual abstinence, a self-imposed or chosen sexual restraint, which is not a negation or denial of sexuality, but to be 'virgin', like the Goddesses, in the sense of being independent of any male control or domination². It is this second option that truly allows women as autonomous beings to express

² The *Brahmacharini* and the *Sannyasinis*, the women who choose the status of celibate student or renunciate respectively, have achieved independence from any male control of their sexuality.

their sexuality as they wish, to explore and discover the fullness of their own female nature, and so to unleash their physical and spiritual powers (*shakti*).

This human situation is reflected in the two kinds of Goddesses: those who are married, the consorts of males to whom they are submissive and obedient; and those who are independent, 'virgin', uncontrolled by males, and therefore potentially threatening to the usually accepted stereotype of gender relations. *Shakti* is always powerfully challenging and threatening to patriarchal institutions. The Goddess's power is directly linked to her independence and sexual abstinence.

The truth encapsulated here is that sexual relationships in a patriarchal society are nearly always ambiguous and ambivalent, where males are expected to control women, and sex is too often confused with violence and domination, which has harmful results, particularly for the female.

So the phenomenon of the Dravidian *Amman* Goddesses, keeps alive awareness of the conflict between the sexes. Can the example and independence of the Goddess challenge and assist in overcoming the institutionalized and destabilizing aggression and violence of patriarchal structures?

The Worship of the Dravidian Amman Goddesses in KZN

Throughout their more than 140 years of residence in South Africa, religion has certainly been the most powerful stabilising force in the Hindu community (Kuper 1960:269; Pillay et al. 1989:145).

Because the Tamil community is the largest (approximately 45% of the total), their form of traditional religion and practice predominates, especially in KZN.

For most South African Tamil people, and many other traditional Hindus, the Mother Goddess, in one form or another, is the most visible and popular focus of their worship. The most venerated Goddesses in KZN are the *Amman* deities Mariamman, Draupadi, Ankalamman/Angalamman, and Gengaiamman; the fierce Goddesses Kali and Durga who also probably have non-Vedic origins (Elmore 1984:5); as well as Sarasvati, Lakshmi, and Parvati, the consorts of the great Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva respectively.

Although the rituals performed for these deities in South Africa appear to have been very carefully preserved, it appears to me that ritual has tended to become divorced from its controlling mythology, with most people only aware of some very rudimentary, and at times garbled, details of the various stories.

In the recent past in South Africa many have predicted the decline and abandoning of this type of indigenous Tamil ritual, because it is a crude remnant of popular religious expression with no further contemporary relevance (Kuper 1960:215, 269; Naidoo 1982). Contrary to this expectation, at present worship of the Dravidian deities appears to be flourishing, with larger and larger crowds attending the festivals each year (Diesel 1990:29-30; 1994:89-90).

My experience in observing the annual Draupadi firewalking festival in KwaZulu-Natal for the past 12 years, and in talking to many women participants, indicates that the image of Draupadi, Goddess patron of the festival, is to some extent acting in an empowering manner for certain women.

In Pietermaritzburg media attention since 1996 focused on the fact that the all-male temple committee forbade women to walk across the fire, although other temples in the province welcomed their full participation, as do most temples in India (Hiltebeitel 1988; 1991). The committee's reasons were blatantly sexist, claiming that women were more likely to be burned than men, and that certain women wished to dominate the proceedings. Because of this, a small group of Pietermaritzburg Hindu women, led by a lively and outspoken devotee of the 'Mother', led a campaign to overturn the temple committee's ban. After several years of pleadings, petitions, and newspaper articles presenting their protests, the women were finally allowed to cross the fire at the 1999 festival, accompanied by much jubilation on their part and by their supporters (Diesel 1998b).

I have pointed out elsewhere that in the South African Hindu community, which under the apartheid system was politically, socially and religiously marginalized and discriminated against, participation in the various rituals of these festivals can bring considerable empowerment (Diesel 1998a & b). Many of the descendants of the original south Indian indentured labourers have remained relatively economically depressed, which causes considerable stress, frustration and anxiety. This results in

much physical and psychological illness. People are increasingly unable to afford doctors' fees, while others despair of the ability of Western medicine to cure their ailments. In this context, the entire worshipping community can be seen to experience a strong sense of solidarity and identity from their participation in the symbolic religious rituals with their powerful mythology. To come through the fire unscathed, is itself empowering, and is claimed by many to bring healing. Loring Danforth who researched two very different firewalking communities, the Greek orthodox Anasternaria, and the American firewalking movement, confirms that many participants are empowered and gain an enhanced sense of self-confidence, even having their lives transformed, and that it is women whose lives are probably most radically transformed (Danforth 1989:5, 96). This certainly seems to apply to local Hindu firewalkers.

The traditional status of women in Hinduism accords them little independence or identity separate from their husbands, requiring them to maintain a fairly low profile at public events. However, at *Amman* Goddess festivals in KZN, women sometimes form the majority of devotees, many of whom move out of their subservient roles to perform relatively important and visible functions which bring them considerable recognition and status. The small group of Pietermaritzburg women challenged the patriarchally controlled temple committee and won, which, together with their jubilant and safe passage through the fire, brought them a strong sense of achievement.

The trance possession experienced by many women causes them to display the wild behaviour of one of the fierce Goddesses, behaviour not normally acceptable in a respectable Hindu woman. Possessed people (women and men) are revered as divine, their supernatural powers enabling them to bless others, to act as oracles, and, very often, to heal. Many of these women are regarded with great respect and reverence, some being regularly consulted as spiritual healers and counsellors (Diesel 1998a).

Some distinction needs to be made between *Amman* religion as practised on a large scale at official festivals, arranged by temple committees where male leadership dominates, although women devotees quite often outnumber men; and the small scale largely women led healing practices operating from smaller Goddess temples, or private homes. Many women come to seek healing and advice for dealing with abusive husbands and other

problems. This women dominated aspect of *Amman* religion is extremely popular, so much so that it sometimes appears to pose a threat to the male temple leadership, some women having been dismissed as simply running 'backyard temple cults' (Diesel 1998a & b).

The growing popularity of *Amman* Goddess festivals, indicates the power still accorded these ancient female deities and their ability to remind a community, far from its spiritual home, of its roots. Local Hindus will, one hopes, attempt to recover some knowledge and appreciation of the rich symbolism and mythology of Tamil religion, which forms part of their cultural and religious heritage. Recent emphasis on the revival of the vernacular evidenced in SA Hindu circles might encourage a re-reading of Tamil religious literature, including the mythology of the *Amman* Goddesses.

Some Myths of Amman Goddesses

The mythologies of many *Amman* Goddesses can be regarded as 'texts of terror', recounting the stories of hosts of women, usually faithful and virtuous, who were abandoned, deceived, betrayed, insulted, raped and killed by men (Kinsley 1986:200 - 204). These abused and righteously angry women drew strength from their virtue, gained victory over male intimidation and violence, bringing healing to their communities. Often human women were transformed into Goddesses, thus demonstrating the vindication of women's strength.

The Draupadi myth is a particularly characteristic and compelling example of a story detailing the experiences of a woman much exploited and misused by men.

The story of Draupadi is a dramatic epic of fortunes lost and won, of treachery and faithfulness, of defeat and final victory and vindication. Draupadi survived numerous attempts by men to seduce and humiliate her, her religious faith and purity bringing her safely through these ordeals. In the Tamil version of the *Mahabharata*, after her vindication, she demonstrated her faithfulness and purity by walking unscathed across a pit of burning coals.

The pivotal episode in the Draupadi narrative is the attempted disrobing by Duryodhana in the men's court. This is a turning point in the narrative. This insult to Draupadi reverberates throughout the rest of the epic, being regarded as justification for the awful carnage that follows (Falk 1977:96). In her anger, Draupadi vowed revenge, pledging not to retie her hair until she had washed it in her enemies' blood and is vindicated.

There are numerous other *Amman* Goddess myths which recount how women who suffered similar ill-treatment by men were then elevated to divine status, and could be regarded as role models for their contemporary sisters. This is a textual tradition which focuses on women's experience of injustice, suffering and vindication.

One of the numerous myths recounting the origins of the Goddess Mariamman involves a young Brahmin girl cruelly tricked into marrying an untouchable who had disguised himself as a Brahmin. On eventually discovering the injustice done to her, she despaired and set the house on fire, burning herself to death to expiate the evil she had involuntarily been forced to commit. When she was transformed into a Goddess, she declared to the villagers the great wrong done to her, demanded that they worship her, and wrecked revenge on her tormentor (Whitehead 1921:117f; Kinsley 1986:200).

Elmore (1913:69) recounts a story associated with the Goddess Podilamma of south India.

A young woman was sent to take their midday meal to some members of her family, low caste farmers who were working in a field some distance from their village. On the way, she met a man with whom she stopped to speak, which made her late in delivering the food. Her relatives, assuming she had allowed herself to be seduced, angrily threw her under the feet of the threshing oxen where she was trampled to death. Later, on removing the straw from the threshing floor, they discovered her body had disappeared, and only a stone was found to represent her (typical of the *Amman* tradition). A man at the site became possessed with the spirit of the girl, and she spoke through him, expressing her outrage at being unjustly killed, and demanding that she now be worshipped or calamitous retribution would befall the community. So the

remorseful villagers placed the stone at the centre of a shrine constructed in her memory.

Elmore also refers to the story of Mundla Mudamma (1913:70-71). A little girl of the Sudra caste herded cattle daily with other children. The children often played a game with stones and sticks, considered to be a boys' game. The little girl, however, won every game, despite the boys' best efforts. A traveller passing by one day was most impressed by the girl's skill particularly because of the assumption that it was not possible for a female to have superiority over males. While he watched the children playing the game, the cattle strayed into a neighbour's field. When the stranger drew the children's attention to this, the small girl uttered a shrill cry which brought all the cattle running back to them. After the traveller had told the villagers about the girl's skill, and control over the cattle, they watched her carefully. On another day when they witnessed the girl calling the cattle again in this way, they began to fear her, largely because of the traditional belief that females should never challenge the power of males. So, the villagers decided that the extraordinary girl should not be allowed to continue to flaunt gender roles, and plotted to kill her. Differing versions of the account record that either she heard of their plans and drowned herself in a well, or she disappeared, and all that was found of her was a stone. Her spirit then appeared in the village, condemning the injustice done to her, and demanding worship, whereupon the stone was shaped into her form, and placed in a temple built and dedicated to her.

Many versions exist of the commonly experienced theme involving a man with a beautiful daughter; against her wishes he arranged for her to be married to an elderly rich man whom the father regarded as a desirable husband. The girl wept and pleaded to be spared what she considered to be an undesirable and frightening fate, but the father was cruelly unconcerned about the daughter's happiness and wellbeing, and insisted on the marriage. So, after praying, the daughter went to the village tank where she threw herself in and drowned. Later, the girl appeared to one of the family members in a dream, announcing that she was now divine, a Goddess, who required their reverence and worship in order to ensure the continued health and wellbeing of the villagers (Whitehead 1921:126).

The *Devi Mahatmyam*, the great hymn of glory to the Divine

Mother, expresses very clearly many of the seminal characteristics of the Amman Goddess myths. Involving the Goddesses Durga and Kali, whose origins are almost certainly in non-Aryan indigenous religion (Payne 1979:68; Elmore 1913:5), this epic relates the necessity for a female to battle with, and overcome, a series of male demons who threatened the worlds with chaos, and whom the male deities were unable to defeat. The best known of these demons, and the prevailing sacrificial victim in Goddess festivals, is Mahisasura, the Buffalo Demon.

There are numerous accounts of women who became *sati*, by being burnt to death on their husband's funeral pyres, either 'voluntarily' or involuntarily, frequently with considerable encouragement from their family and community (Dubois:405 - 406). Many stories tell of women speaking from the flames demanding to be remembered, and worshipped as Goddesses (Elmore 1913:75; Dubois 1906:404 - 405; 408 - 415).

These various accounts indicate the persistence and power of the tradition of venerating women who have lived and died in extraordinary ways, suffering because of the demands of patriarchal traditions³. New folk Goddesses continue to be created.

This collection of ancient, and more recent, imaginative, and contemporarily potent, texts mirrors the experience of hundreds of thousands of women worldwide. They can be viewed as sacred texts because of their ability to penetrate beneath the surface and reveal some important truth about human experience, here the alienation of the sexes. They highlight the sexual abuse of women in society and within the home. Women are thus enabled to identify with the women protagonists and be freed to tell their own stories; to be assured that they are not alone. It is silence that disempowers. When women share their stories and support one another, they encourage each other to become survivors rather than victims of the structural violence engendered and fostered by androcentric culture.

The Amman Goddesses as Empowering for Women

Hinduism is familiar with the practice of using Goddesses as role models for women. But generally, it has been the milder consort Goddesses,

³ Cf. Elmore (1913:60): 'The tendency to deify widows who have become *sati* is always strong'.

particularly Sita, the wife of Rama, who has been presented as selfless and submissive paradigms for women in a culture obsessed with marriage (Kinsley 1986:70-78). A male dominated religious hierarchy has made use of these female images to encourage women to conform to patriarchal demands.

It is certainly a break with tradition to suggest that Draupadi, Mariamman, Durga, Kali, and other strong, autonomous Goddesses should consciously be appropriated as role models by women, as such independent, self assertive women have been regarded as threatening and potentially dangerous to the order of society. These Goddesses offer an image of womanhood freed from the demands and constraints of wife and mother, so allowing women to explore roles not defined and controlled by men.

I believe that the female figures and mythology of the *Amman* tradition offer a more powerful and liberating group of role models for contemporary women than the consort Goddesses, who continue to uphold patriarchal norms. It is exciting that these stories and rituals have retained their ancient power, and are capable of offering an explanation for, and even the alleviation of, much of the suffering endured by women, past and present.

That certain women, as well as those in KZN dealt with above, have experienced the figure of Draupadi as empowering, is borne out by the work of Purnima Mankekar in Delhi and Marie Gillespie in Southall, London (Mankekar 1993; Gillespie 2000).

Mankekar and Gillespie used the T.V. serialization of the *Mahabharata* ('an ancient tale told anew by Indian television') to question women's reaction to the episode of the attempted disrobing of Draupadi. In both Delhi and London women viewed this incident as a climactic point in the narrative, and were powerfully moved by the scene, seeing Draupadi as a symbol of female vulnerability, and finding it a frightening reflection of the contemporary oppression and abuse of women. Every woman interviewed, identified in some way with Draupadi's experience, comparing it with their own daily realities of sexual harassment and exploitation both at home and in the workplace.

These reactions illustrate the power of texts, however ancient, to challenge and empower women to gain insight into their lives, and to emulate Draupadi's rage at injustice by critiquing and working to change the conditions of injustice and humiliation they often endure.

Conclusion

In order for the healing and empowering potential of the *Amman* Goddesses to be realised, some knowledge of their mythology needs to be recovered at a popular level. These stories relate how female deities have suffered the same violations and terrors endured by their human daughters, but whose anger at injustice, and whose ultimate victory, can motivate all women to continue the battle against the demons of patriarchy. They are able to illustrate the strength of women's energy (*shakti*), which is there waiting to be appropriated by all who wish to triumph over the circumstances of their lives.

Here is a feminist theodicy: the question of the violence done to women by patriarchal attitudes and institutions is at the heart of *Amman* mythology. A woman orientated explanation is offered for the cause, and alleviation, of the evil and suffering that is specific to their experience. The *Amman* Goddess is a 'wounded healer' figure: she shares and understands the situation of women, exploited, manipulated and often broken by patriarchal constraints and demands, lacking autonomy and powerless to take control of their own destinies. Suffering women have a figure they can recognise and identify with, able to say, in effect, 'That's me; that's my life; I too can overcome this predicament, and experience healing'. Out of affliction and agony comes hope, followed by spiritual and psychological wholeness and triumph, a central theme in religion.

Probably the most profound message of these enigmatic deities is to preserve awareness of the necessity for women to become the initiators in the resolution of the sexual conflict and injustice of patriarchally controlled society, something that is impossible for most men (cf. *Devi Mahatmyam*). The Mother Goddess summons her daughters to join in her continued battle against male violence, to convert their anger into the healing and transformation of society.

Too often in the past, the *Amman* Goddesses have been dismissed as too focused on darkness, violence and destruction, but paradox and conflict are as much a part of the sacred as are light, reconciliation and deliverance. Thus the ancient and possibly pre-patriarchal power of the *Amman* folk religion may be able to contribute to a more human scale women's spirituality, and a post-patriarchal vision that promotes a social order with more egalitarian gender relationships, resulting in the overcoming of the

endemic sexual violence that appears to be overwhelming South Africa and other societies.

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