



## IS THE HINDU GODDESS A FEMINIST?\*

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan

### I.

There are many voices that join this debate, identifiable, broadly, as those of Indologists and south Asia area studies experts in the western academy from different fields (religion, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, language and culture, history), whose disinterested scholarship and academic discussion of the Hindu goddess is given a political edge by being addressed in this pointed fashion,<sup>1</sup> and those of Hindu worshippers. Hindu ‘nationalists’, feminists of varying hues, left secularists and others who are located within contemporary social movements and politics in India, for whom the goddess is, as we might expect, primarily a symbolic resource. Thus, the implications of the ‘is’ in the question: ‘Is the Hindu Goddess a feminist?’ would differ, from the universal present tense indicating a perpetual condition or an indication of abstract potentiality (as it were, can the Hindu goddess be feminist?) in the former instance, to a historical present tense, our contemporary context, local and global, within which the question would resonate with the deployment and role of a majority religion’s idiom in a post-colonial ‘secular democracy’, India, in the latter.

Despite the different locations of these voices, in response to the question they may be allied in and through their common perception of the goddess’s ‘feminism’. One section of respondents would be agreed that the goddess ‘is’, indeed, a feminist, that being a feminist is a good thing to be for a goddess, and that this position is enabling, that is, it is in the interests of women, India, Hinduism and Indian women. From the other side, for reasons that I shall be rehearsing shortly, the conclusion will be called into question. I shall focus on the disagreement centring on the last claim, but shall treat

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certain other definitions as starting-points and assume certain ideas to be consensual: one, that ‘feminist’ here will mean ‘pro-women’, ‘empowering women’; two, that the Hindu goddess is unique in that Hinduism is the only contemporary world religion that has a tradition and continuing practice of goddess-worship; three, that Hindu goddess-worship is radical insofar as the goddess is not inscribed in the mainstream of deities and her devotees are drawn largely from lower castes, women and even non-Hindus thus clearing certain spaces of alternative belief and practice in the monolith of brahminical Hinduism, and finally, that it is not only the existence and worship of the goddess, but also her representations in ‘feminist’ ways – as complementary ‘female principle’, as autonomous female agent, or as powerful cosmic force – that are under discussion here as aspects of her ‘feminist’ recuperation.

To talk of ‘the’ Hindu goddess as if she were a single or composite figure is, of course, already problematic.<sup>2</sup> The debate over the meaning of the goddess would have to take into account the range and diversity of her representations, the sheer number of goddesses, major and minor, mainstream and ‘local’, that are to be found in the pantheon. David Kinsley’s *Hindu Goddesses* provides a useful list, and also a chronological history of the evolution of various goddess-figures, and John Grimes’ essay on Hindu goddesses construct a taxonomy based on their different functions, provenance and attributes. One direction for the discussion to take would be to examine the distinctive attributes of different goddesses, or the anthropological aspects of their cults and worship, in order to decide upon their greater or smaller potential for feminist appropriation. It would be generally agreed that despite the great symbolic value and veneration bestowed on the consorts of the trinity the goddesses Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvati, it is the autonomous constructions of female divinity such as Kali, Durga and their numerous spin-offs who are representative of ‘stri-shakti’ (woman-power), and are therefore of relevance in this discussion. I shall sidestep the more nuanced and elaborate discrimination that this discussion would call for. As I clarified earlier, even if one does not dispute the claim that these goddesses belong to the ‘radical’ rather than mainstream – hence more patriarchal – tradition of

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<sup>2</sup> The figure of ‘Mahadevi’, or the Great Goddess is discussed by Kinsley (132-50). Grimes, however, stresses the diversity of goddesses.



Hindu social and religious practice, the implications of such radicalism are open to contestation.

In my view the recuperation of the/an Hindu goddess as feminist is problematic at the present historical juncture both for its assumption of an undifferentiated 'woman-power', as well as for its promotion of a certain radicalised Hinduism. Some Indian feminists, among whom I count myself, would be cautious of buying into the constituency of 'women' by extending the scope and politics of contemporary Hinduism. I shall however first rehearse, briefly, both sides of the debate over the question, though the arguments are likely to be familiar ones. I shall push them further by interrogating their politics: Who is saying this? Who is opposing it? What is at stake here? What investments can we discern in the investment in the goddess? What are the grounds of scepticism? These will lead to the elucidation of my argument in the concluding section of the paper.

## II

Those who assert that the Hindu goddess is feminist celebrate, first, the Hindu religion's richness and plurality of traditions. In contrast to the singular patriarchal god of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Vedic Hinduism had female deities and (arguably) a 'matriarchal worldview'. Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi are quoted frequently in this context:

The worship of the mother goddess does not constitute a matriarchy, but it does constitute a matriarchal *culture*, in the sense that it preserves the value of women as life-givers and sources of activating energy, and it represents the acknowledgment of women's power by women and men in the culture (p. 55).

When a community's object of worship and veneration is female, it is logical to expect that women in general benefit by sharing that elevated status. The widespread acceptance, even valorisation of positive constructions of femininity in goddess figures must serve as enabling models for women that would supplement, contest or displace the more prevalent models of female meekness, subordination and obedience (in the form and in the service of 'pativrata')



derived from the mythological Sita-Savitri-Anasuya paradigm. Their dissemination via popular cultural forms like folk theatre, mythology, song-and-dance performances, oral story-telling, and cinema has assisted the rise and dominance of women political leaders like Indira Gandhi, or folk heroines like Phoolan Devi; or, at least, such women have been accommodated and accepted within the cognitive frame provided by goddesses or the allied historical/mythological figures of the 'viranganas'.<sup>3</sup> In Hinduism gender stereotypes are broken down in the attribution of power, whether negative – unruly, destructive, sexually unbridled – or positive –maternal, protective, asexual, to female divinity. Finally, the phenomenon of 'possession' (by the spirit of the goddess) may be used by some women to effectively resist oppression or devaluation in the family by laying claim to spiritual prowess. And even where the goddess is not a resource she is a solace to women.

The connections suggestively drawn here, between goddesses and women in Indian society, have been questioned. The distinction is made between the feminisation of certain attributes – righteousness, justice, wealth, learning – or more accurately their embodiment in the female figure, and the elevation of strong or aberrant women with these attributes to divinity. The goddess is a product of the first process, not the second. The implication of this distinction lies in this: that the symbolic valuation of forms is not a reflection of the actual material and historical conditions in which they take shape. If we locate the indices of the status of women in the latter, that is, in female sex-ratios, life expectancy, literacy, income, subjection to violence, equality of opportunity, legal equality, then the evidence shows that societies that have, goddesses – and women leaders – score poorly on these counts.<sup>4</sup> That the ideological promotion of powerful female models does not contribute to ordinary women's well-being may be logically contrary to certain feminist expectations, but it appears to be an empirically valid finding. Tracy Pintchman resolves her puzzlement over this contradiction by describing women's status in India as 'ambiguous'.<sup>5</sup> But the divide

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<sup>3</sup> Hansen undertakes an extensive investigation of the virangana or heroic woman in "history, myth and popular culture".

<sup>4</sup> Grimes points out that "there is no stronghold of goddess-worship found in Kerala", which has the highest literacy rate, the highest ratio of women to men, and the second highest age of marriage for women in India (p. 136).

<sup>5</sup> The title of Pintchman's essay indicates this: "The Ambiguous Female."



between goddesses and women as social beings can be maintained by patriarchy without any sense of contradiction. Furthermore, though unconventional women may find sanction for their behaviour through reference to them, goddesses are rarely invoked as explicit role-models in the socialisation of girls (unlike Sita or Savitri).

Women's empowerment as 'goddesses' too meets with rational and 'modern' scepticism of the kind made memorable in Satyajit Ray's film, 'Devi'. Ray highlights as well the patriarchal investments in this transformative process and poignantly evokes the cost to the young girl – the sacrifice of 'normal' conjugal life, sanity and finally life itself – as a result of the pressures of the role she is obliged to play as the 'devi' of her father-in-law's fantasies. Beyond these arguments lies the more substantial issue of power – of certain kinds, individualistic, absolute, aggressive, or anarchic, and in certain contexts, those of authoritarian politics or fascistic social movements – in relation to women, specifically to women's putative agency, that I shall return to.

These arguments can be taken further, on both sides; but I want to move here into questions of identity, location and their politics: Who speaks? From where? To what ends or purposes?

### III.

The 'feminist' Hindu goddess, or more accurately the claim for the progressive potential of the goddess for women's liberation, is to be found chiefly in the following sites of discourse: South Asia studies scholarship in the western academy which is largely reflected in the forum alluded to Hindu 'nationalism'; radical Indian feminism of a certain kind and, allied with it, Gandhian secularism. These are widely-separated locations, and each operates with a distinctive voice and politics that cannot be collapsed into the other, nevertheless, the connections and overlaps among their arguments draw them into a single discursive field. I shall try to briefly identify the different sites in what follows.

I begin with the Hindu goddess-scholars from various fields engaged, as Alf Hiltebeitel put it, in 'scholarly reflexivity', the "attempt to think about one's relation to what one studies". This rela-



tionship he frankly admits to be one of ‘complicity’. Apart from the generalised complicity – the identification with the objects of one’s study that is an aspect of such studies – the scholars are also responsive to recent calls to ‘think difference’ relativistically in ethnographic fieldwork, to refuse to see solely through ethnocentric lenses. The main consequence of this is a displacement of the earlier view of women in Indian society as universally exploited and submissive – which is not regarded as an unacceptable inferiorisation of Hindu culture – through attempts to instead ‘recover’ the spaces of their autonomy and the resources of their positive self-images, and to identify their ‘agency’. The goddess and her worship are a means to establishing these. Some of this results in what Bernard Williams has called ‘vulgar relativism’, an uncritical, naïve, and patronising acceptance of other cultures’ view points that are unacceptable to one’s own. The obverse of this, the temptation to idealise non-western societies as a ‘resource’ to meet the inadequacies of western philosophies and lifestyles, is also visible in some of the interpretations: the goddess clearly meets one such lack, especially among feminist theologians.<sup>6</sup> But relativism is a complex position, and it is treated complexly for the most part in judging the question of the Hindu goddess’s ‘feminism’. There is the bold deployment of the deliberate anachronism of the term itself, and the attempt to achieve commensurability between the non-western ‘feminine principle’ that the goddess represents, and contemporary western ‘feminism’: both moves that push beyond the relativising exercise. Apart from the ethnographic evidence of studies of the worshippers themselves (in many cases women) in specific regions of India which supports a favourable interpretation of the impact of the goddess,<sup>7</sup> these scholars also, interestingly, draw support from Hindu nationalist rhetoric, from the work of Indian feminists, and from aspects of the Indian women’s movement in more visibly ideological ways.<sup>8</sup> This locates their interest in their ‘subject’ within the frames of feminist inquiry and contemporary subcontinental politics.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Gross.

<sup>7</sup> Ernlid’s *Victory to the Mother* is one such study.

<sup>8</sup> Hansen’s article, and some of the papers presented at the panel on the Hindu goddess (note it above) are examples.



Hindu Indian nationalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the subsequent decades of the Indian freedom movement had promoted the image of the militant goddess/heroic woman towards several ends: as propagandistic and reformist measure for elevating both Hindu women's and Hinduism's self-image and status, as in the Arya Samaj's programmes; to mobilise women to participate in the struggle; and above all to provide an inspirational symbolic focus – as in the evolution of the Bharatmata figure – for national and communal identity. By and large south Asianist scholars have been sympathetic to and have endorsed these ends. In contrast to their acceptance, Gayatri Spivak has alerted us to the possibility that, in their resistance to the imperialist effacement of “the image of the luminous fighting Mother Durga”, nationalist (male) elites were simultaneously perpetuating a “reverse ethnocentrism” (p. 129). Feminist historians in India have identified the development of the myth of the ‘advanced’ Aryan (upper caste) woman in nationalist historiography in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as belonging to the same ideological configuration.<sup>9</sup> Present-day Hindu ‘nationalist’ parties have produced aggressive women leaders and set up strong organisational structures for women volunteers for similar purposes and based on similar arguments, although in the quite different context of electoral politics and organised religious revivalism in the post-colonial nation-state. The actual modalities of the formation of women leaders in the organised hindutva movement, centred around the shakti/goddess ideology, has been investigated in detail by Paola Bacchetta. I shall be returning to hindutva feminism in the last section of this paper; before I do so, I shall attend to feminist ‘uses’ of the goddess in other fields.

The Indian women's movement of the mid-1970s, initiated by urban middle-class professional women (for the most part), invoked ‘traditional Indian’ (read: Hindu) symbols in some cases as a means of diluting, if not countering, the western bias of ‘feminism’.<sup>10</sup> The goddess-figure, or in a more diffusive way the concepts of *stri-shakti* and the ‘feminine principle’, were resorted to in order to mobilise women around women's issues: thus the logo and name of India's first feminist press, *Kali for Women*. Soon this was to be placed consciously on the agenda of some feminists. Madhu Kish-

<sup>9</sup> See Chakravarti.

<sup>10</sup> Flavia Agnes has advanced this explanation (p. 139).



war, for instance, editor of *Manushi*, (a journal of ‘women and society’), declared her non-allegiance to ‘feminism’ as a sign of her refusal of all ism ideologies, and began instead to explore “our cultural traditions” to “identify their points of strength and use them creatively to combat reactionary and anti-woman ‘ideas” [Kishwar and Vanita, p. 47]. As part of this trend *Manushi* has carried articles on women bhakthin poets, on Gandhi’s relevance for women, on women’s negotiations with religious worship and practices like austerity, goddess-cults, ‘bhakti’, spirit-possession, etc.

Gail Omvedt links this to a radical rethinking of theory and practice in the Indian women’s movement in the 1980s, which had earlier been tied mainly to a left tradition which rejected religion outright as ‘patriarchal’. The new perspective, she argues, had some ‘profound implications’:

On one hand, the idea of the ‘feminine principle’ challenged traditional Marxism by posing the nature-maintaining, subsistence-based rural peasant woman against the male industrial worker who embodied the ‘proletarian vanguard’; on the other, it questioned the feminist tendencies to locate violence in the family, in the relations of women against men, by stressing the ‘feminine principle’ as something that men and women both could unite around. The notion of *stri-shakti* similarly implied not so much a separate women’s movement as the leading role of women in various popular movements, helping these movements to transcend some of their own limitations. As with the slogan “the liberation of women and men through the awakening of women’s power”, it was a significant departure from the tendency of both urban feminists and party women to depict women as primarily victims (p. 226).

Omvedt expresses the confidence that within this redefined attitude to “religion/ethnicity/culture”, traditional gender resources could be drawn upon by women without subscribing to, indeed while actively opposing, Hindu communalism.

Omvedt draws mainly upon the examples of the struggles of rural women in the Shetkari Sanghatana in Maharashtra for property rights and political representation, and of hill women in the Chipko movement in Uttar Pradesh for forestry rights and preservation of natural resources. In the influential work of Vandana Shiva on the Chipko and similar struggles against the widespread depredations of the environment in the name of ‘development’ (which include anti-dam struggles), nature is celebrated as *Prakriti*,





the feminine principle, women as its representatives, and their power in collective struggle as *stri-shakti*.<sup>11</sup>

This position on women and religion is closely related to those working from within what we may call a Gandhian secular tradition, which recuperates or freely recasts the symbols and idiom of ‘Sanatan dharma’ in ‘progressive’, universal, i.e. non-communal ways, and exploits their affective potential for communal co-existence and harmony. Gandhi’s use of Sita as symbol for women in the nationalist movement has been discussed by Madhu Kishwar.<sup>12</sup> More recently Ramachandra Gandhi’s *Sita’s Kitchen*, a philosophical and historical treatise written in the thick of the Ayodhya dispute, expounds the overlooked Sita tradition in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist folklore and philosophy as an argument to counter the militant masculinity of the new hindutva movements and their streamlining of a canonical Hinduism. Here too women are associated with their tribal origins, with nature, nurture, and hence motherhood, preservation, and pacifism.

The question about the Hindu goddesses’ feminism is embedded, as we can see, within the larger question about the instrumentality of religion in the post-colonial nation – both for a ‘secular’ politics and for women’s struggles in mass movements – and thus moves far afield of a de-contextualised, if more focused, consideration of an answer. In the following section I shall problematise some of the connections between the Hindu goddess and feminism, between religion and women that have been made here, and the locations, theoretical and political, from where disagreement is articulated.

#### IV.

There are unresolved theoretical issues for feminism, among which the question of power – women’s access to it, especially in political life, their modes of exercising it, the ethics of domination versus democracy – is increasingly recognised as a major one. I have rehearsed in more detail elsewhere the feminist debates over the meaning of ‘power’ for women. Radical feminists repudiate ‘male’

<sup>11</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive*.

<sup>12</sup> Madhu Kishwar, *Gandhi and Women*.



values and spheres of power, and valorise in their place women's 'traditional' qualities of care, sacrifice, and sustenance in family and community; while other feminists argue that women's equality calls for struggle and requires participation in and control of the existing structures of political power.<sup>13</sup> The arguments in support of the feminism of the goddess deploy both arguments, the former in the celebration of Prakriti, nature as feminine principle, and the latter of shakti, the autonomous force of the destructive goddess principle. The problem with women's embrace of alterity is that it is based on an essentialised concept of femaleness, which is also an idealised one; with the argument for power is that it is often conceptualised as anarchic rather than as embedded in political process.<sup>14</sup>

Power is in both cases an instrument of 'agency'. Agency (autonomous action by the individual or collective subject) tends to be regarded as an inherently radical force or attribute of women and other subordinated groups, and therefore the recovery of their agency in the study of society, culture and history has been uncritically pursued as a politically correct objective. But women's 'agency' (like their 'empowerment') can neither be viewed as an abstraction, nor celebrated as an unqualified good. Agency is never to be found in some pure state of volition or action, but is complexly imbricated in the contradictory structures of patriarchy. In her extended reflections on the questions of women's "consent, agency and the rhetorics of incitement", formulated in the context of contemporary hindutva feminism, more specifically in light of the phenomenon of its aggressive women leaders and ideologues, Kumkum Sangari observes that patriarchal sanction for women's participation in political life in India is at present to be found most readily forthcoming in "conservative, indigenist or right wing formations" (p. 868). We must therefore be alert to the implications of "who or what is women's agency on behalf of" and ask whether "all modes of empowerment for women are equally desirable" (pp. 870-71). We need to also recognise that the celebration of a certain kind of 'feminism' as one that is always-already available in 'our tradition'

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<sup>13</sup> See my chapter on "Indira Gandhi", in *Real and Imagined Women*, pp. 103-28.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of popular Hindi cinema whose protagonists are avenging women, see my chapter "Name of the Husband", in *Real and Imagined Women*, pp. 83-102. Their prototype is the figure of Kali.



serves the function of preempting ‘western’ feminist demands, even as it simultaneously aggrandises the scope and politics of that tradition and coopts women’s agency for its own ends.<sup>15</sup>

Omvedt anticipates some of the objections to locating women’s struggles in India within the framework of stri-shakti from a left feminist secular orientation:

didn’t the concept of stri-shakti, with its reference to sometimes bloody mother goddess traditions, imply too much of an endorsement of power and violence? Wasn’t it too readily being picked up by conservatives who could twist it to see women’s ability to endure all kinds of oppression as a symbol of magnificent power? Didn’t Hindu nationalists have a tradition of appealing to mother goddesses? Wasn’t it a rajput defender of the sati-murder of Roop Kanwar who said ‘Sati is shakti, the power that upholds the universe’? And wasn’t the related theme of ‘virangana’, the historical tradition of heroic women queens who had taken arms against one or other invader or oppressor, simply an endorsement of feudalism as well as warfare? Could the question of empowerment be separated from that of violence? (p. 216).

If in Omvedt’s opinion, “by 1988-89, the need to do so was compelling” (*ibid.*)<sup>16</sup>, then in the following years the issue was once open to urgent reconsideration following the BJP-instigated destruction of the Babri masjid and the riots that followed.

The membership of women in large numbers in the Sangh parivar, the promotion of ‘feminist’ as well as ‘traditional’ roles for women by the RSS organisation, the xenophobic rhetoric of hindutva propagated by Sadhvi Rithambra and Uma Bharati, women sanyasin leaders in the VHP and BJP, respectively, and women’s active participation in the Bombay and Surat riots, are related phenomena that have been examined with care and detail in several essays in the recent volume, *Women and the Hindu Right* edited by Urvashi Butalia and Tanika Sarkar.<sup>17</sup> In another post-Ayodhya collection of feminist essays, *Against All Odds*, Gabriele Dietrich marks this as a transitional moment in feminist politics in India. The subjectivity and agency of a Hindu feminist (‘Kamalabehn’) as shaped

<sup>15</sup> For a more extended discussion, see my chapter “Real and Imagined Women”, in *Real and Imagined Women*, pp. 129-46.

<sup>16</sup> Omvedt gives the following reasons for the urgently-felt need to redefine women’s ‘empowerment’ at the decade’s end; political representation for women in legislatures and local boards was being talked about; women themselves were seeking entry into these areas; ‘conventional left politics’ was dead-ended, and revolutionary violence was being questioned (pp. 216-17).

<sup>17</sup> See, in particular, the essays by Basu, Sarkar, Banerjee and Setalvad.



within the ideological and organisational structures of the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, is undertaken by Paola Bacchetta in the same volume, and reveals in particular the instrumentality of the goddess in her self-fashioning. Kamalabehn rationalises her para-military training and activity as follows: “Did Kali fight the rakshasas with her hands? All our goddesses are armed. Why should I not be armed?” (p. 144). As a militant Hindu woman committed to ridding the ‘Hindu nation’ of the Muslim ‘enemy’, she finds her model in “Kali’s ridding of the world of evil in the form of demons in the *Devi Mahatmya*” (p. 153).

Goddess-inspired Hindu feminism is problematic not only for reasons having to do with recent majoritarian communalism in India. Flavia Agnes has pointed out that Hindu religious symbols and practices treated as an unquestioned secular ‘norm’ have a tendency to alienate women in the movement who belong to minority communities (p. 139). More recently, Kancha Ilaiah launching a ‘sudra critique’ of “Hindutva philosophy, culture and political economy” has called for a disassociation of the dalitbahujan caste and community from allegiance to Hinduism. The question of the feminism of the Hindu goddess is subject to a different orientation in light of this disavowal. Though Ilaiah’s argument may be (merely) polemical in this regard<sup>18</sup>, his representation of the non-Hindu dalit goddess is politically more in consonance with the goals of a secular and democratic feminism:

What is their [dalits’] notion of Pochamma? [a popular dalitbahujan goddess in Andhra Pradesh, typical of local village deities all over India]. She is the person who protects people from all kinds of diseases; she is a person who cures the diseases. Unlike Sita, her gender role is not specified. Nobody knows about Pochamma’s husband. Nobody considers her inferior or useless because she does not have a husband. The contrast [with] Lakshmi and Saraswathi ... is striking. Pochamma is independent. She does not pretend to serve any man. Her relationship to human beings is gender-neutral, caste-neutral and class-neutral. ... She herself relates to nature, production and procreation. ... The people can speak with her in their own tongues; ... (p. 92)

<sup>18</sup> In his review of Ilaiah’s book, D.R. Nagaraj questions the model of ‘binary opposition’ that Ilaiah creates between Hindu and dalitbahujan deities. On the contrary, he argues, sudra goddesses may be praised in Sanskrit slokas and brahmin deities appear in sudra temples, and refers to this ‘double phenomenon’. He reads this as a sign of ‘the radical energies of the dalits to transform the experience of intimate enmity’ (p. 7). Kinsley’s book does indeed carry a chapter on ‘village goddesses’ (pp. 197-211).



Ilaiah regards the influence of Hindu goddesses upon upper caste women in Indian society as pernicious, particularly as this emerged in their aggressive opposition to the Mandal reforms in 1990. This antagonism jeopardises the possibility of alliances between dalit and women's movements (p. 78).

These then, broadly, the left, left feminist and dalit movements, are the sites from where caution about the recuperation of the Hindu goddess, and of Hinduism in general, as a radical, progressive force for social change, is articulated. This essentially rational and sceptical attitude reflects a belief in what D.R. Nagaraj calls the "emancipatory potential of the project of modernity", a belief which is mainly a result of the "qualitative change in the lives of the dalits" (and, we may add, of women) brought about by the "Modern institutions of polity and social engineering" (p. 8). But the pristine days of that uncomplicated belief may now be over. Both religious 'tradition' and secular 'modernity' have become fraught, contradictory and complex realities, and their identities as separate and oppositional are difficult to maintain. Critiques of enlightenment reason and of projects based upon its premises, including secular modernity, reason, science, and post-colonial nation-statehood, are growing in influence. The struggle for meaning (of the goddess, in this instance) has been joined on religious terrain, as I have pointed out, and folk myths, bhakti, syncretic faiths, goddess worship and other 'little' traditions have even resurrected and recast for their rich possibilities of contesting and subverting the hegemonic hindutva ideology in the making. Strategically, radical and now left secular movements feel the need to wrest religion from the sole domination of the right, and to exploit the spaces within a plural and living tradition of Hinduism for progressive purposes.<sup>19</sup>

But the contemporary politics of hindutva is, as seems increasingly clear, expansionist and adaptable, and shows itself to be (selectively) incorporative of various 'progressive' elements in the political interests of enlarging its appeal to women, lower castes and, even, other minority communities. Feminist activists/intellectuals, as I have indicated, have been particularly alert to these moves. In a 'modernising' post-colonial nation, the authority of majoritarian re-

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<sup>19</sup> The activities of Sahmat have been particularly noticeable in this sphere.



ligious discourse and practice can only be countered, it seems to me, by a clear-cut and visible secular alternative. And to privilege religion as the sole available idiom of the social would be to surrender the hard-won gains of democratic and secular struggles in post-independence India. Finally, for ‘elite’ intellectuals to recommend the ‘use’ of religious symbols in social movements for change, in the absence of personal religious conviction – whether as a capitulation to its perceived appeal of the ‘masses’, or as a show of identification with them – is, literally, bad faith.

Speculation upon ‘Is the Hindu goddess a feminist?’ therefore leads us to the discovery of the many ramifications of that feminism in the intertwined contexts of religion, politics and social movements in India today.

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