THE FACELESS GODDESS

Paths to the Feminine Source

Woodpaths

The flush of sunset flooded the old house on Fourth Avenue. Earth tones glowed. Luminescent yellow and lavender irises in a bouquet on the buffet seemed to float in mid-air. The Venetian vase radiated red light. Twilight! It was good to be home once more with everything so familiar. Yet there was something unfamiliar about the moment. When before had the golden light made iris and vase so surreal? Was this a consequence of coming home after a long absence or merely an experience of light and the good fortune of having eyes to see? Or was this due to the changed perception of a pilgrim returning home to find magic and mystery in her own household?

Woodpaths. That's what Heidegger called them[1]. We call them game trails. You encounter them in forests where they arise out of nowhere—and lead nowhere. When you find one, you follow it appreciatively for as long as it lasts for it provides a welcome relief from the arduous task of working through dense underbrush. As quickly as they appear, these paths end abruptly in impenetrable thickets that must be worked through if one is to get on with the journey. But on rare occasions they emerge in a clearing where you can stand for a moment in openness and in light.

Thoughtpaths. They have led me back to my desk where in the midst of the artifacts of the journey, journal, photos, notes on readings, sits a small bronze statue of a goddess. She is faceless. Her features have been worn smooth, her identity obliterated by time and fondling hands. Her anonymity beckons to me. Who is she? And why has this once powerful and distinctive goddess been reduced to a rounded, benign contour that only hints at the fullness of her former self?

I hold the little goddess in my hand, run my fingers over the smoothness of her face, her breasts, her hips. How long have others held her thus, imploring her to return, asking her assistance in the face of hardships, inviting her to partake in the unexpected blessings and joys of daily life?

I found her tucked away on a dusty shelf in a tiny shop on Commerce Street. She reinforced the questions that accompanied me in my travels. Long before searching through the temples of Greece where, with few exceptions, goddesses have been reduced to

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[1] Heidegger, Martin, *Early Greek Thinking* .trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A Capuzzi.(New York: Harper and Row. Publishers, 1975). 1-4

expressions of patriarchal rule, I looked for her to no avail in my lived-experience as a woman, an experience that eludes investigation even now in this twilight moment resonating between the present etched in beauty and the reconstructed, sentimentalized past. Who is she?

My desk in the upstairs study overlooks the valley. The Wasatch Mountains to the east are obliterated by the spruce trees that in my absence have begun producing cones and now attract nesting chickadees. Except for one small break, the rest of the valley lies hidden behind curtains of leaves that shade us from the summer sun. Through the opening I can see a street running straight on to Point of the Mountain, an archaic spit where once the waves of Pleistocene Lake Bonneville lapped.

My mind moves from journal entries, to my window, to the computer screen where I am trying to transpose my thoughts into something understandable to others. How to begin? My first tendency is to order and sequence journal reconstructions. Are these entries a list from which I must draw a straight line from beginning to end, like the street running across the valley? Not very likely. My mind weaves in and out of the present, will not let the past be. It alights briefly on the vase flaming in the evening light. The feeling of at-homeness returns and a moment later harkens back to India.

We had just returned that morning to our headquarters at the guesthouse at the Indian Institute of Science to regroup and rest. That morning Butia frondosa, the flame tree, would not let me be. Its searing orange blossoms were covered with a myriad of crows, sunbirds, parakeets and mynas chattering and foraging on nectar and on insects, feeding on other insects feeding on nectar. From overhead the Brahminy Kite cast its shadow. The funnel-shaped petioles in flickering flames of crimson and gold invited long-billed sunbirds to feast, their shiny black changing to brilliant reds, yellows and greens as they moved in and out of the sunlight. The constant chatter of the squirrels as they scolded intruders and scurried helter-skelter overrode the sound of the TV in the lounge where "house boys" watched a portrayal of the Ramayana. Odors of coriander, curry, cumin and ginger floated from the kitchen.

I translated the sensations of the moment into a series of scribbles in my journal that had no resemblance to the things that evoked the sensations that stimulated the thoughts. Undoubtedly, the Polish scientist sitting next to me reading the morning paper did not perceive the tree habitat as did I; in fact, he seemed not to notice it at all. Yet the tree and sunlight and birds and flowers were what they

were, pure and undefiled by his oblivion or by my particular viewpoint.[2]

Now as I write about the flame tree, my mind turns to the undulating flow of silk, the bins of multi-colored spices in the market, the ceaseless din of daily traffic—and the soft murmur of human voices in the night when the traffic diminishes. My thoughts go through one more permutation, frozen first on the computer screen and then on this page. Green light on the trees, flaming light of blossoms, stark white of patio. The present is embellished with the past, adorned with garlands and pigments and incense, reconciled with tensions and tenuous endings into a series of still-lives, where things come together and hold still for an instant there in the clearing. My experiences become a series of afterwards here in the present.

The sprout of a flame tree anticipates a multitude of meanings and possibilities in its stretch skyward: the splotchy trunk bifurcated at the base dividing endlessly into branches and limbs and twigs; red tongues of new blossoms emerging from dark little nubs of buds, fused perfectly for feeding sunbirds; long, pendulous pods, ripe with new life protruding from faded blossoms; old, leathery leaves left from last season set in motion by the slightest breeze and falling clattering to earth among the soft drift of blossoms; new, vibrant leaves unfurling at the tips of branches. An extraordinary menage, of cycles of renewal and death contained on one tree at one point in time!

I go over and over the flame tree's essence hoping somehow its meaning will emerge, but it eludes comprehension. It is like the new fruit I was given to taste. It looked like a kiwi. The skin was hard but I was instructed to eat it. The fruit contained huge, black seeds that looked like nuts which I was told I should not eat. It tasted somewhat like a pear, had the consistency of a peach. I tried hard to relate it to something I knew, to synthesize the characteristics of other fruits into a new definition. It was impossible for me to accept this fruit for what it was, something totally new.

Likewise it is difficult to comprehend the imagery and symbols and language of a foreign country. People's responses are unanticipated and incongruent; the landscape does not call up familiar metaphors. The sacred and profane, the significant and unimportant are all muddled. For a time, nothing makes sense. Ultimately with earnest effort to understand the other, we return to ourselves, to where we abide to reconcile the differences. In reconciliation there is

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[2] This section on the how we approach meaning through writing was inspired by a book written by Octavio Paz and read by me during the journey: Paz, Octavio, The Monkey Grammarian , trans. by Helen R. Lane (New York: Seaver Books, l981).

longing, longing to discover commonalities, longing stimulated by diversity. I move synchronistically, in and out, back and forth, from the flame tree to my spruce tree, from my world to the world out there, from journal to journey. All of this interplay, all of the woodpaths/thoughtpaths are for one purpose, to come to understanding with the others. I searched for the Great Goddess in India; I have come home to find her.

Silk, Sandalwood and Stone: Contemporary and Mythological Images of Indian Women

Earth

Women of India in their contemporary roles not only re-present mythological images of goddesses but go even deeper to reveal the primary source of the feminine. Although there is a long history of goddess worship, the Great Goddess has long been buried in the traditional Hindu pantheon that is high caste, ignoring the numerous, poor women of the land, and placing the goddesses and women in lesser positions of submission and service. The Great Goddess must be implied from the incredibly diverse views of the feminine in stone and sandalwood as well as in flesh and blood. To the Western, one-tracked mind, polytheism as manifested in the Hindu culture is both confusing and inspiring. As it applies to the goddess, it is even more puzzling. Rather than a hidden countenance what we find is a goddess with a thousand faces. (Figure 1.)

Elite women in their silks and jewels and men in their dotis, turbans and trim suits pass by like undulating rainbows on their way to the commerce of the day. But it is the poor women of the land, close to the earth who capture my attention and imagination. In the end, I see little else.

The Indian sub-continent as goddess, as earth, as motherland, as giver and withholder of gifts is a deep-seated belief. The mythology of Sati, a later Hindu Goddess, reveals this for she is the earth itself. [3] Sati was the beautiful daughter of Daksa who through her asceticism

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[3] My primary source on Indian Mythology was Kinsley, David, Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. 1987). Other sources included Driastava, M.C. P., Mother Goddess in Indian Art, Archeology and Literature, (Delhi: Agam. Kala Prakshan, 1979). Lons Veronica, Indian Mythology, (Rushden, Horhants, England: Newnes Books, 1983). Rao, T.A.Gopinatha, Elements of Hindu Iconography, (published under the patronage of the Gov't of His Highness the Maharaja of Travancore) Vol I, Part II, (Madras: THE LAW PRINTING HOUSE, 1914). Manushi, (C-1202 Laijpat Nagar, New Delhi 110024.

involved Siva, the wild god of the Himalayas, in sex and marriage and worldly life. She left her erotic life in the mountains with her husband and, although uninvited, traveled to her father's abode where he was entertaining divine hosts. Distraught by his deliberate snub of Siva, she killed herself. When Siva discovered her corpse, he picked it up and sobbing carried it about the universe. Visnu, concerned with the cosmic disruptions this great grief was causing, followed after Siva and sliced off pieces of Sati's body until nothing of her remained. Wherever each piece fell to earth, a pitha, a sacred place where goddesses are worshipped, was created. Siva came to earth in search of her parts and finding her yoni , her vagina, transformed himself into a lingam, a phallus, and plunged himself into her.

Sati reincarnated herself as Parvati, a female forester, dutiful wife and divine householder. She represents, soma, the sap of existence, and dharma, virtuous conduct. She won Siva to marriage through austerities, which exceeded anything he had seen. When united, their love-making rocked the world. When interrupted, Siva's spilled semen flowed red-hot through the land until the river goddess Ganges contained and incubated it. A boy child, Karttikeya, was born who later rescued the world by slaying a demon. Parvati created a child from the dirt and sweat of her body to guard the entrance of her house against intruders. When he refused to let Siva enter, Siva cut off his head. Enraged, Parvati insisted that Siva restore the child to life. He did so by replacing his head with that of an elephant. Thus was created Ganesa, the most beloved household deity.

In temples dedicated to Siva, priests will first escort you to the long rows of lingams, shiny black from ablutions of ghee, rendered butter, or streaked with bright red and yellow pigment. The lingam is venerated as the stored potency of asceticism and as male powers of fertility. It sits on a yoni, the sacred anatomy of the Goddess, the sacred geography and invigorating powers of the Sati, the earth. Through her body and transformative death she made Siva accessible to the world in order to maintain and nourish creation herself. Siva and Sati depicted together represent the creative tension and stored up energy between asceticism and eroticism and the maintenance and nourishment of creativity. But Sati is depicted of lesser importance. When present as Parvati she is diminutive and seated below or at Siva's feet. Siva depicted as Ardhanarisvara is half woman and implies a harmonious interdependence between woman and man. Yet the hermaphrodite is referred to as Siva, and Sakti is seen merely as the representation of his power.

Outside the temples, throughout the countryside women and the land are mirror images of each other. In the tropical regions where water is plentiful and crops abundant, women reflect the health of the land; with assurance and grace they stride along resplendent with their shiny black hair, almond-shaped eyes and shapely bodies. But in areas where the monsoon has failed, only the old and ailing remain; their skin and hair are desiccated, their withered bodies carry the parched appearance of the land. The able leave to find work as domestics or as construction workers on road or building projects in the city. Left behind are the older women, the widows who are useless to anyone, abandoned, disdained and often mistreated.

Typically a girl is initiated into the realm of womanhood at twelve or thirteen as soon as menses flows and she is able to bear children. Her marriage is arranged and with a dowry she goes to live with her husband and in-laws where she exists on the lowest rung of the social ladder, sometimes harassed and mistreated beyond endurance. Each day newspapers carry stories of deaths of these young women by suicide or murder. In the autumn during Durga Puja, she returns to her village there to gain strength to sustain her. She earns status in life slowly as she bears children, preferably boys, and becomes the head of the household. Thus she is socialized into the realm of the patriarchal woman who clings tenaciously to whatever resources exist and controls the household, first by dominating the husband and then, the son. In her own turn, she is often formidable and unforgiving of daughters-in-law. She runs the household with a iron hand wearing her dowry as jewelry, her final security.

Sons are valued; daughters, less so. The dowry, although outlawed, still prevails in this society where fixed marriages are a given. Infertility is cause for abandonment. A woman who becomes a successful entrepreneur or rejects childbearing threatens the very foundations of the societal norms and is subject to punishment by her husband without recourse to protection from physical and mental abuse. Widows are frequently abandoned.

They find themselves
shriveled and alone
walking down dusty roads
looking outward
clearly, caustically.
Older women
beyond expectations
stride on,
let their gray hair

hang down,
go bare-breasted
fling faded saaris half-heartedly
across lean shoulders,
walk on.

Independent of men, at the bottom of the social scale, there is, nonetheless, something invincible about their gait. Their hair disheveled, they are fierce in aspect. They represent the underbelly of womanness, the terrible goddesses, Durga and Kali.

Durga came into popularity with power, blood and battle about the Fourth Century probably as a reaction against the male-dominated Vedic pantheon. She lives among tribal and peasant cultures in inaccessible mountains outside of civilized order. She emerged from Parvati as a warrior goddess who slew the buffalo demon, which male deities were unable to subdue. Red-eyed and intoxicated, she drinks wine during battle and is a wild, ferocious and superior warrior who creates female helpers from herself. Her vehicle is a lion. She is the female counterpart of Visnu who is called upon to maintain cosmic order. She is responsible for *maya*, the power that deludes individuals into egocentric behavior and disturbs the underlying unity of reality. She represents *lila*, divine play, sport and dalliance for pleasure rather than for competitiveness or compulsion. She illustrates the power emerging from repression in women socialized into stereotypic, dependent and demeaning roles.

Kali is Durga's personified wrath, and the fierce aspect of benign Parvati, her alter ego. She has a terrible, frightening appearance: dark and usually naked, claw-like hands and long nails and long, disheveled hair. With bloodstained lips and a necklace of freshly cut heads, she eats those who defy her, using oozing from corpses as cosmetics and bathing in blood. She wears children's corpses as earrings, serpents as necklaces, and severed arms as a girdle. Her favorite haunts are cremation grounds where she dances madly on corpses and is surrounded by jackals and goblins and battlefields where she gets drunk on the blood of victims. She also is independent from any male deity but does take Siva as a consort inciting him to wild and destructive behavior. Although he defeats her in a dance contest, she remains in charge. She represents the opposite of the archetypal mother; she takes and feeds upon life rather than giving and supporting it. She represents the side of life we reject and acknowledges the untidiness that is ignored in a culture obsessed with purity that denies pollution that comes from the body.

Like Kali, village women look life straight in the eye. But the truth, though liberating, is not very sweet. To describe them as marginal or disenfranchised is to miss the point. They are beyond freedom and belonging. As young women they are important to others only as erotic objects and as mothers, who bring to life and nurture men's children. Issues that concern middle class Western women—how to get enough exercise and control weight, whether for the sake of ethics they should be vegetarians, whether or not they should work, what kind of day care they should seek for their children—are irrelevant issues to these village women. They eat when there is food. They work. In fact, the majority of women on this planet are village women working close to the earth from dawn to dusk, carrying their suckling infants along in shawls as they do most of the menial work. In India, their main concerns are food, water and dung.

Food

Whether in the city or the country, whether working for paddy or pay, women are responsible for the household and a good part of their day is devoted to procuring food, fuel and water. Many poor villagers migrate to the city to escape famine and drought. There they assume the same subsistence pattern of survival they learned in their native villages. In a large city like Delhi their plight is stark.

We arrived in Delhi at Christmas. A cold, thick smog hangs over the city in the morning. Captured as well as generated by exhaust from thousands of vehicles and smoke from tiny wood and dung fires that warm the people of the streets, it is caustic and burns the eyes and lungs. Along the busy thoroughfares amidst the maddening din of traffic, the life of poor, city people is laid out in public view. Women set up their households anywhere they can appropriate a few square feet of ground. They surround their space with whatever materials they scavenge from the streets: cardboard, pieces of wood, old tin roofing, cloth. Inside a few worldly possessions are stored where they and their families sleep on the ground or on planks. A shrine, ensconced in a corner, is attended to daily with incense and garlands. They sit on the ground outside the door to cook meals of rice in copper jars or nestled stainless steel pots over tiny propane burners or dung fires, serve meals on banana leaves or metal dishes and cleaned up quickly with water they have carried from a central spigot or well where they often wait in long lines. Their movements are graceful and efficient, their bodies lithe and willowy. Unlike the beggars or the whirling dirvishes along the roadside or on traffic islands, delightedly leaving the world behind in the flow of their billowing, crimson robes,

these women encounter the world full force without asking pity or assistance.

In the face of this very public householding, they retain their dignity and modesty. Efforts to build central toilet facilities have ended in polluted pits that women are forced to use. Men and children squat to relieve themselves wherever, but women by convention must conceal this private act. At the wells, they wash the family clothes daily, rubbing and beating them and then laying them on the ground to dry. They spend the day gleaning staples or working at various menial or domestic jobs. Their young children are by their side, playing bare-bottomed in the dirt as infants, working alongside their mothers as they grow older, rarely going to school. A few pennies a day buy the basics for their simple vegetarian meals. If they are lucky, they own a cow that gives them milk, a cow that, like themselves, spends its life scavenging the streets, eating paper and refuse.

At the guesthouse conversation around Indian meals served family style has an international flavor. Scientists from all over the world come to the Indian Institute of Science to exchange ideas and work in collaboration with Indian scientists. Geckos scale the walls looking for insects. Mynas sport in the flame tree. Chandra, the chief steward, takes care of our every need. All is peaceful and idyllic. But even here in this peaceful academic enclave, the poor are always in sight. On my walks to the Ecology Building each day, I pass a hovel where two women workers and their families live on a construction site.

With each observation in passing and some inquiry and reading, I put together the plight of women construction workers. They are usually migrants from rural areas who run out of employment when the monsoon and crops fail and are employed by one contractor. Where excavation is needed, they dig the soil with short-handled mattocks, their saaris hiked up as they heave dirt out between their legs like burrowing animals. They carry the excavated dirt in pans on their heads to a dump site. Their rhythmic pace continues all day from dawn to dusk. When building begins, they maneuver the scaffolds deftly with bricks, mortar and sand balanced on their heads. They receive 60-70 per cent of the wages of men co-workers and often must pay a portion of this back to the contractor for food and lodging. They usually work up to the day they give birth and most do not go to the hospital; there is a high mortality rate among the newborn. They hesitate to be sterilized because many of them suffer illness or death because of unsanitary operating conditions.

At the end of the day the women return to the housing provided on the site, thirty square feet, windowless rooms with tiny walled

areas outside the door where they sit to cook the meals for their children and husbands. Running water or bathroom facilities are not usually provided. After the evening meal, they continue with household tasks, washing and carrying water. When construction is completed on one site, they pack and move on to another. Passing through life in this indentured role they are probably thankful for a roof over their heads and food for themselves and their children. [4]

The transition from city to village is graphically before us along the thin strip of asphalt on a drive north from Madras to Srikalihasti to visit the pilgrim center where cobra, spider and elephant are venerated. Getting out of the city is a problem. It places us at the maddening center of commerce of the day, a tangle of four million people, expending and acquiring energy going to work and market. Children on their way to school draw my attention.

In the city, they are immaculate and resplendent in cobalt-blue uniforms as they walk in gender-segregated groups or piled twelve deep in rickshaws. The young women wear garlands of flowers encircling thick, shining braids. In the adjoining rural areas streams of children, uniformed but barefoot, walk along the roads to the country school. To the north in the hill country where the land is over-grazed and barren, school is not a possibility for most of the children. Youthful goatherds trail after long-legged, gangly goats, their female counterparts carrying on woman's work. Naked infants play in the dirt near thatched huts or sit patiently as their mothers pick lice from their matted hair.

In areas where the land is productive, rice is being harvested. The rice cut with huge knives is carried in bundles to the threshing area, which in most cases is the highway that provides a good hard surface and ready access for transport. We make our way around thrashing areas where stalks are scattered to dry and then beat to remove the kernels from the stems. The grain is swept into piles and portions placed in fan-shaped winnowing baskets that are held up to the wind or shaken to release the chaff that blows away. The winnowed rice is then sacked and hauled away in ox carts. Women work all day alongside the men and then carry their paddy, payment in rice, home in sacks on their heads.

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[4] Manushi, (C-1/202 Laipat Nagar, New Delhi 110024) a journal that deals with social and political issues concerning contemporary women of India was extremely helpful to me in coming to understand the role of women construction workers and other low caste and poor women.

Sita means furrow, the deep loam of the earth that is opened by the plow for planting seeds. But in the high country, Sita is gone. The land is barren and extremely over-grazed; all that remains is bedrock and tenacious thorn bush. Villagers labor in quarries breaking rock used in construction of highways and buildings. Scattered through the litter of rock debris, striking rocks with huge mallets, born into this way of life, a woman may know nothing else for her entire life.

Watching women along the roads, one senses that they carry the weight of the world on their heads. Rarely does a man carry anything. Instead they ride bicycles or drive ox carts or in the fields, drive the buffalo that plow and till the soil. Women seldom drive animals. Their work is manual. They stand in knee-deep water planting rice seedlings. They cultivate, harvest or work as domestics; they break rock or work on highway construction crews carrying dirt, gravel and hot asphalt in pans on their heads; or they sweep and clean the streets and public buildings.

Additionally, women assume the major task of maintaining and sustaining their households. Several times each day they fetch water in brass, ceramic or plastic jars carried from rivers or central wells. Often they must walk several miles to do so. On their way to and from their other tasks, they glean the countryside for dung or scarce firewood for household cooking and heating that may be only prickly remains of thornbush, unpalatable to the ubiquitous cows and goats, and carried in tangled masses on their heads or balanced on sticks. Amidst this endless round of labor, they remain an abiding source of energy.

Dung

Sri-Laksmi, one of the most popular goddesses of modern Hindus, represents prosperity, luster, power, beauty, and abundance. She is said to be fickle and for that reason is attracted to Visnu in his many forms. She is depicted sitting on a lotus blossom floating, pure and uncontaminated above primordial waters where the lotus plant is rooted in mud. She is often represented with elephants standing to her side showering her with fertilizing rains from their trunks. She is the symbol of fertility. (Fig. 2)

Her ancient association with fertility can be seen in villages where she takes on a less aseptic aspect. She can be detected through odors. She is present in and worshipped at the dung heap used for manuring the fields; the potency of the earth depends on her presence. She is, in fact, dung, the source of fertility of the land, the

energy for household fuel and cooking, the most important commercial commodity for women.

Cows, dung and women. They seem of equal importance; they sustain each other and together are the source of energy that revitalizes the culture. Perhaps cows are the most indispensable; certainly they are too precious to eat. Milk and yogurt are staples in the vegetarian diets. They also produce male calves with humps that make them fit as draft animals. And, of course, there is the dung.

Cows are magnificent scavengers in the cities where they wander freely on main thoroughfares and among the stalls of the markets sweeping the streets of garbage, lapping up refuge—cardboard, paper, banana leaves, coconut husks—with their long tongues. The cow is not venerated as a deity; she is merely treated like any other pesky person. Her ubiquity attests to her utilitarian importance in the culture rather than to religious symbolism. In some areas, such as near Mudumalai National Park, cows are kept primarily for their dung, gathered by women, stockpiled near their huts and sold to venders who in turn sell the dung to large land owners for manuring the fields.

Late one afternoon in a village near Mudumalai, I sat on a porch sharing tea with Sudha. A herd of cattle that had been taken to the forest in the morning to graze was trailing back across the parched field in front of the cottage toward the village down the road. The lean, highly adapted cows walked along lapping up leathery leaves and forest litter that comprise the major part of their diet. One laid down in the shade of a tree and with little warning gave birth to a calf. Sudha, who had never seen a live birth before was enthralled. She sent her servant, a teen-age girl, to fetch a bucket of water for the animal who drank thirstily. The calf struggled to a standing position about five times, precariously balanced on wobbly legs, only to be sent tumbling by hefty licking by its mother. Finally, after standing and fumbling in the wrong places, it found a teat and nursed voraciously. In the meantime, Sudha's three-year-old daughter had arisen from her nap. Fed a cup of hot milk by her mother, she kept up a constant chatter that Sudha translated to me as a story about the "baby, mother and father cow." Finished with their milk meal, the two infants went off to play, the calf actually steady enough to kick up its heals and frisk about. If cows and women are bonded in nurturance, so are their offspring in precocity.

Traveling north out of Madras, we encountered innumerable water buffaloes and herds of cows with brightly painted horns being driven along the highway. Mingled with the herd were women who quickly

scooped fresh dung off the highway with their hands and placed it into baskets carried on their heads before it was scattered by vehicles.

From the balcony of the hotel room in Madurai, I surveyed a full-fledged dung enterprise in the tangle of activity in the street below. A young woman worked on the sidewalk below amidst a melee of morning activity: disembarking pilgrims, come to visit the great temple; ox-drawn carts filled with bags and banana leaves; stalled cars pushed by crowds of boys; cycle rickshaws beeping incessantly; taxis and pedestrians vying for position; cows wandering through, eating scraps; and women construction workers filling sacks from a huge sand pile dumped in front of the hotel door and carrying them on their heads into the hotel to the floor above where we could hear pounding and plaster falling until late each night. She quickly scooped up steaming dung from a passing cow and placed it in a huge basket filled to the brim with more collected from the streets and deftly shaped handfuls into patties that she threw against the wall with enough force to flatten them. The final touch was her hand imprint, the trademark of her craft. The patties occupied the entire wall and sidewalk for one block. After they had dried in the sun, she stacked the patties in baskets that other women carried off for sale or delivery as fuel.

Water

Fertility of soil is replenished with precious dung but water makes it come to life. During the dry season, the earth is painted brown, yellow and tan as the parched land awaits the cleansing monsoonal rains. People work the soil or gather in crops with one eye on the dwindling supply of life-giving water. When they come, the monsoons wash the land with new vitality, replenish supplies of water and begin a new season of growth. When they fail, so do the land and the people.

Most of the people of India live in villages; some of them appear deceptively small although they may house thousands in tiny mud and thatched huts tucked away among trees or clustered together on barren clearings. To these people water is life itself. Each morning and evening skeins of graceful women weave their way along roads and paths across fields, carrying household water. If they are lucky, they will have access to a well or pump in or near the village; if they are not, they may walk for miles for water.

The large square tanks in temple grounds with steps leading down to them fill with water during the monsoon and are the center for life-sustaining activities connected with water. Although the water seems contaminated and green with algae, the belief is that a few drops sprinkled over the body cleanses and washes away the pollution

of life. Women on their way to market stop by the temple with their young children for their daily puja, prayer and blessing, and come to the pool for handfuls of water to sip or splash over their bodies. The slap, slap, slap of wet clothes being beaten on stone is a familiar sound in the busy scene. The clothes are laid flat on the stairs to dry in the hot sun, sometimes by male launderers. Young boys strip down and lather. Women, after finishing the daily wash, bathe deftly in partly unwound saaris, take down their hair and lather assiduously. With absolute modesty they wash and dry self and hair and change and wash saaris, which they set out to dry on the grass and re-braid their hair. Some use mud from the bottom of the tank to scour pots and pans. Meanwhile in the sanctum sanctorum where statues of the gods are paid homage, perfumed water is distributed to devotees.

Water cleanses the soul as well as the body. In Hindu tradition, running water removes all impurities of this life. Wherever there is water—whether in the tiny ponds or mudholes; in the trickles of dying streams or along great rivers; at wells where turns are taken at huge, hand pumps; in tanks in temples; or along the seashore—the ablutions are repeated in daily ritual bathing and washing. In the river, the pilgrim drowns the old self and is born anew. Crossings are especially sacred and fording a river represents rebirth and a state of transition.

Sarasvati in later Hinduism is the goddess of speech and represents the power that allows humans to rule over other creatures; she inspires the arts, sensual enjoyment, spiritual liberation and perfection. She shines as white as the moon and is seated on a lotus blossom or swan which keep her apart from the muck and mire of the material world. But originally Sarasvati was the river goddess, arising in heaven and descending to earth, purifying and fertilizing the earth. Siva's head and massive tangle of hair softened her fall from the divine realm and divided her into many streams, each flowing to a different part of the earth, sanctifying and nourishing it. She is Ganga Ma, milk and water, the ubiquitous life-giving liquids, flowing down carrying sediments, bringing fertility to the land and to women.

Reverence is paid to rivers especially to *tirthas*, places where one crosses over. Rivers are themselves sacred bridges, liquid *axis mundi*, the goddess herself who takes us to the realm from whence she came. The Ganges is especially sacred. Those who die in her waters achieve *moksa*, spiritual liberation. She is the intermediary between heaven and earth. At special times of year in the dark of the moon, before its light has begun to grow, Hindus by the hundreds of thousands gather at sacred sites along the Ganges. Cool springs flowing freely from earth are gifts of the Goddess and staircases to

immortality. Temples are built around them. Pilgrims flock to these sites, tucked away in the back country, dedicated to local deities. The roads leading to them are filled with devotees, with school children, with the sick and dying. In the temple, somewhere off to the side of the main shrine to the local saint, will be one dedicated to the source of the celestial spring. The goddess shrine can be identified by the fervor of women presenting offerings of flowers and food. At the spring, they pour the purifying waters over themselves and then dry their clothes in the sun. Spirituality overflows with the blessings that come from the purifying water.

Galta is such a place. It is situated in a deep, eroded canyon surrounded by hillsides wasted to bedrock. A kilometer or two before its entrance, a temple dedicated to the monkey deity Hanuman shines white in the sun. Across the road, lepers learn to spin and make sandals at a rehabilitation center started by the French. The road leads on to a cul de sac where a temple dedicated to a local saint is built in the high cliff face. The saint was a devotee to Ganges. When he grew old and was no longer able to make pilgrimages to her waters, she caused a spring to flow at this site to honor his great devotion.

It was noon. In the sandy, sunlit courtyard below the temple, women construction workers, building a new path and bridge to the temple, were eating lunch. Seated on piles of sand they ate rice served on banana leaves and flirted with the foremen. To the right was a huge, bricked well with steps leading down to a bone-dry interior. Caretakers fed bananas to a troop of monkeys. A palace stood off to the side where through the open veranda, we could see craftsmen mixing pigments used to restore murals on a wall. Goats wandered up the steps through scalloped arches into a sunlit courtyard strung with fuchsia and yellow streamers.

As we followed the path upward, we came to steps hewn into the sidewall. High above, water streamed out of the mouth of a sculptured cow's head and cascaded down the cliff into two pools, one over-flowing into the other. The steps were crowded with Rajastani villagers, turbaned men and bangled women, devotees of this local deity. Unable to contain my admiration, I stared at a beautiful village woman in her "Sunday best" who accepted my curiosity with good humor and with a flourish and smile, lifted her skirt to show me lavishly bangled ankles. At the top I stood to the side over the spouting cow head out of the way of the pilgrims lined up to receive blessings at the saint's shrine.

The cool clear water in the tanks below stood in contrast to the parched valley rolling away. Men occupied most of the far edge of the tank. Women were crowded in a corner next to the shrine of the

goddess Ganges. Uninhibited they bathed in their saaris, pouring the cool, clear water over themselves. They chose to ignore the sign above them that strictly prohibited bathing, washing or swimming when men were present.

Women stripped to the waist splashed like birds in a fountain, giving themselves completely to the moment, to the physical reality of the water, its coolness, its cleansing power, its liquid delight. Not just a spiritual ablution, this was also a refreshing interlude in their hard, dusty lives. Here was a perfect representation of feminine spirituality, body and soul united in the intensity of the sensual moment, the blending of physical and spiritual, of practical and aesthetic, of austerity and pleasure, of earth and cosmos. In contrast to the solemn-faced, self-possessed sadhus, the holy men of the temples, the women overflowed outward with energy, activity, and spontaneity.

Carolyn's words returned to me. It was a hot day in Dark Canyon in southern Utah. On our hike with graduate students along a trail, four of us women broke from the group to bathe in a sandstone basin filled with cool, spring water. The delightful moment was more than our bodies could contain; we over-flowed with childlike glee. Carolyn put it to words, "This moment is so wonderful! And do you know why? Because I know exactly how each of you feels." There below were women of a different land, yet I knew how each felt. The Epiphany of the goddess does not come in bright flashes of revelation, it comes when we participate in her presence, in this case in the redemptive power of life-giving, life-enhancing water, the liquid bridge that joins each to the other and to the earth, even across continents.

The Source

Back at my desk. The chickadees are scolding outside the window. In my mind's eye I see tomatoes ripening on the vine, the weeds growing out of control back in the garden. I look around for the little goddess to put me back on course. Buried under the debris of papers, journal and notes, she eludes me. She was there at Galta. She must be here somewhere.

I sense her presence here in the room, here inside me. Yet I am reluctant to claim the "goddess within" as a special privilege to me as a woman. Would this not be *mayasma*, the blind groping of an oppressed woman deluding herself into believing she occupies a privileged position? Although some may sense her presence more clearly than others, she is here in each of us, male and female. That acknowledgement in independent thought and action liberates us from the dichotomies of patriarchic rule obsessed with purity and pollution, aggression and submission and controlled violence. She is present in

men who are willing to relinquish their privileged position and in women who refuse to be pigeon-holed into archaic womanly roles.

Mary Hamer, a visiting scholar from Cambridge, is such a woman. She invited me to accompany her to the University of Bangalore where she was to speak. Her first lecture was a deconstruction of seventeenth century texts on Cleopatra [5] and revealed how she was depicted as an Oriental (and therefore a lesser being) and a sex object when in fact she was Greek by birth, a queen, a mother and an educated, powerful woman who spoke eight languages and was in control of her sex life. The audience at the University was segregated as is customary: professors up front, women students to one side, men students to the other. When Mary opened the discussion, it was almost totally dominated by male professors. But as we left the lecture hall for tea in the lounge, a wave of conversation bubbled up, increasing in crescendo as women students gathered around asking questions. Mary left the University with a little furrow between her eyebrows and determination in her eyes.

At the beginning of her second lecture the following day, she very politely invited the professors to "retire" at the conclusion of the formal presentation so that students would feel more comfortable to ask questions. Her lecture on the Irish Survey, [6] showed how it had been used to disenfranchise the Irish by changing ancestral land boundaries, by imposing a grid on the land that had nothing to do with place or people and by changing place names. It was a political act that used language as a way to gain power and control. The analogy to women and ethnic minorities, Cleopatra included, was clearly implied.

At the conclusion, she politely reminded the professors "to be so kind as to retire." Students immediately began asking questions. Does the feminist approach go counter to Christianity? Should Indian women give up the saari? Is it a symbol of confinement to a submissive role? What about dowries? What can be done about patriarchal women, mothers and mothers-in-law who cling tenaciously to their power but prevent the liberation of younger women? Are women in the U.K. and U.S. really free? Why does the popular media continue to depict woman as objects?

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[5] Hamer, Mary, “Cleopatra: Housewife,” Textual Practice, vol. 2, No. 2, Summer 1988.

[6] Hamer, Mary, “Putting Ireland on the Map,” Textual Practice,vol. 3, No. 2, Summer 1989.

After an animated discussion, Mary invited the professors back. Her assigned respondent was a male professor who had confronted her rather strongly the day before. He immediately set about involving her in a debate, but she refused to be placed in an adversarial position. Why did she not wish to engage in dialogue? he asked. She had no objection to dialogue, she replied, but she was not invited to debate; she was invited to present and she chose not to be involved in a confrontation. Mary clearly recognized his attempt to take control of the conversation and to redirect it, to make it his presentation, a forum for his ideas, a means of maintaining control of his students. The encounter revealed again the point she had made in her lectures: Controlling language is the best way to control people. By her refusal to submit, she illustrated in action the liberating power of the goddess that comes with knowledge, the power of women and men alike, young and old, to take a stand on what they know in their hearts is true and right, to refuse to be leveled in any situation, to withstand controlling forces as well as the urge to control and with a strong sense of independence and autonomy, to fight conformity with individual capacities, to fight tooth and nail for liberation of human potential in strong political and social action.

In our action and intellect, we must not ignore her presence within us, the soul of life, a compass that guides, a force I felt so strongly at a deserted temple in Narthamalai…The driver in the robin-egg blue cab waited at the bottom as we climbed the huge pegmatite dome in the early spring sun becoming more relentless each day. At the top, I rested in the shade of a huge tree, ancient cave shrines to Visnu and Siva at my back. A stone fence surrounded the courtyard. Nandi, the faithful bull with his rear to me, kept watch at Siva's temple at the center of things. Around it in various stages of disrepair were eight small shrines.

Paul had climbed to the top of the dome to photograph the valley so I was left alone in the silence. Not another person was present—no sadhu sitting in the shade of a column leveling me with a penetrating glance; no beggars clanging their cups on the stone; no lepers holding up their bleeding stumps; no spider-like cripples trailing after me; no beggar women with their feather-light touches and tugs at my elbow and whining supplications, "Madam, Madam , Ah, Mah. Ah, Mah;" no boys or Brahman priests insisting to be our guides; no rag-pickers and refuge collectors sitting in the shade of the wall sorting through the pollution of others; no swish, swish, swish of the ubiquitous sweepers, spreading dirt from one place to another; no hucksters waiting at the gate with their great bargains, no one, except

her, of course. She resonated in the sacrality of the moment. Suddenly, swiftly, silently, a spotted owl flew out of a little domed shrine and glided low over my head into the tree above me where she disappeared, camouflaged by the foliage.

The silence was broken by a striped lizard with russet tail and legs rattling the leaves in the debris under the rock. Paul returned and we began the long walk down over the rounded hip, the thigh and leg of stone where undoubtedly one of Sati's limbs had fallen to earth. As we worked our way down the steep incline, sounds rose from the valley below: the slap, slap, slap of clothes washers along the river; the talk and playful laughter of goatherds; the bleating of kids mixed with the cries of babies; the rattle of a pied woodpecker that flew out of a sea-green pool of water in the rock; the talk of the threshers on the rocks below and the reprimands of the woman keeping the buffalo away. Little pools of rice and chaff remained in the rock pockets. A turbaned man stood in the water fishing. Cultivated land lined the valley flanked on either side by weathered domes. Palms grew around a brick well with steps leading down into it.

I dreamed last night I was in a deep, dark well such as that. But I was on a ledge and there were no steps leading out. I was expected to "come up" with the right answers; then someone above would let down a rope and help me out. I had no hope of "seeing the light" and felt resigned and unafraid to remain in the dark, moist, earthy place.

The night before I dreamed a child was crying in a corner of the room. I was busy with my own activities and ignored it for a while. It was not my baby; I'm too old for such things. Finally, I went to it and picked it up. Its whole countenance changed as I held it and talked to it. I looked down at this small strange creature. Its face radiated a gleeful smile. It was laughing at me!

Woodpaths. Thoughtpaths. In a tangle, I am down there near the source being ridiculed by my own efforts at creativity. Despite my searching, I still cannot find the little goddess. I keep looking. I hesitate, hedge and delay making any assertion for I know in so-doing I will set her in the concreteness of this page and will thus limit her and my understanding of her. She is like the flame tree, filled with multiple meanings as well as possibilities for mis-conceptions. I approach her very cautiously, on tip toe, reserving the right for continued re-vision.

I began this journey by seeking to identify elements of the feminine principle, as some prefer to call it. I now reject the term "principle" in reference to The Great Goddess for she is no rule or law, judgment or standard, formula or policy that guides our behavior. With

great reservations about reducing her many-faced reality, I see her simply as the primary source of life, as earth, energy and woman/ genetrix.

She is the earth, life-giving and life-taking, creation herself. Like the rich, plowed earth and the good wife she is soft and receptive, gentle and kind, open and full and supportive. Like the wild places and the independent woman, she is beautiful and powerful, spontaneous and free, unconfined by god or man. When she blazes with destruction and ferocity, she is fierce and ugly. At times she devours her children or throws them to the elements; she can become a brave warrior. She is nourishment as well as pollution; birth and growth as well as death and decay; benign as well as malevolent. She is our protector as well as our destroyer. Life sustained through metabolism entails the killing and death of other creatures. In the cycle of nature, she herself must be fed if she is to bestow the gifts of creation. She carries a pot of food in one hand, a weapon in the other; her sisters, birth and death, walk beside her.

Not just a representation of "The Feminine," as the symbol of eroticism, fertility, and motherhood, she is the great genetrix, best depicted by the body and life cycle of woman herself. Through woman's body, she represents the life-sustaining aspects of birth, nurturance and death. Through her life as maiden, mother and crone she depicts the passages of life from youth to old age.

Contrary to the assertions of some, she is not androgynous; it is Siva and his fellows who become hermaphrodites when they accept her as a part of themselves and decide to become more than mere males. She makes this possible, of course, because she is there within them, in their blood streams, in their cells, in their very being as surely as she is in females, who if they respond to her presence can grow to their fullest potential.

The Great Goddess is the mother of us all. Because meaning of the mother has been distorted and over-sentimentalized by patriarchy, it takes us most of a lifetime to admit that we aren't self-made and that we did indeed come from and through her. On the one hand in such a world, mothers are worshipped as receptacles and conduits for bringing man's seed to fruition; on the other, they are despised for their reproductive capacities and feared when they refuse motherhood. In the scheme of mother worship, women are hated and feared, [7]especially non-reproductive women. As witches, as sources of evil, as representatives of the unexplained and uncontrolled side of life, they are mistrusted and maligned. That women can live happily and

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productively independently of men is unthinkable to most men and women.

Whether or not women choose to be mothers, they possess reproductive capacity, and tucked away in their wombs are ova with some rather remarkable features. Traditionally, explanations of reproduction have emphasized the fusing of nuclei from parent ova and sperm and the recombination of chromosomes and DNA in inheritance. But mothers pass on organelles called mitochondria in their ova whose DNA is uncombined with any part of the sperm. The mitochondria, the so-called "powerhouse" of the cells, are responsible for energy transformations in the cells. In them the oxygen we breathe becomes the breath of life when it is utilized in the conversion of sugars to energy. Mitochondrial DNA is passed from mother to both male and female children. In fact, all humans, as far as has been determined, possess the same Mitochondrial DNA, a matriarchal connection in each of us. Perhaps these organelles are our common connection to our original mother, the Great Goddess, whose energy sustains human life: the give-and-take, gift-giving/gift-receiving, sharing cycles where purity and pollution are two sides of the same coin; the life-enhancing fertility of water and milk and dung; the rhythm of the earth in gentle waves and grinding avalanches; the processes that unearth possibilities of renewal and restitution. Her energy dispersed throughout the world flows freely in a natural state and is released in oxidation in the mitochondria in benign little puffs that prevents damage to the cells. When concentrated in weapons and tools of destruction, the same energy when uncontrolled erupts from the heart of the atom.

The Great Goddess holds up the mirror of death to us lest we forget. A modern depiction of her is Chinnamasta, who stands on a copulating couple. She has a sword in one hand with which she has decapitated herself; in the other, she holds her head. Blood spurts from her neck into her own mouth and into the mouths of two attendants that hold her up. Chinnamasta illustrates the dramatic interdependence of life, death and sex. (Figure 3)

The Great Goddess is sensual, practical and austere. Her spirituality shines in moments of pure delight or ethical duty as she manages the affairs of the day. She is an erotic saint, the force of pleasure and wisdom, the strength in the spirituality of the body and its infinite ways of knowing. She is poetry that gets at the heart of things and liberation herself. She is the source of life that leads us to our humanness and to our unity with each other, the earth and its creatures. Her reality, like the flame tree or our own humanness, is multi-faceted and defies adequate description. We go to her as the re-

source, to re-discover the common thread that weaves us all together. In the end she takes us by the hand and leads us one by one, one way or another, to the river.

Suddenly the goddess is back at my desk, staring out with her blank face. After all of my searching, how could I have missed her there on the trivet next to my teacup? Was she hidden behind it all along? Or was I blind to her presence? In this magical moment of recognition, she speaks clearly. It is time to close the circle and begin again. Why not just turn off the computer and get on with harvesting the tomatoes?

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