

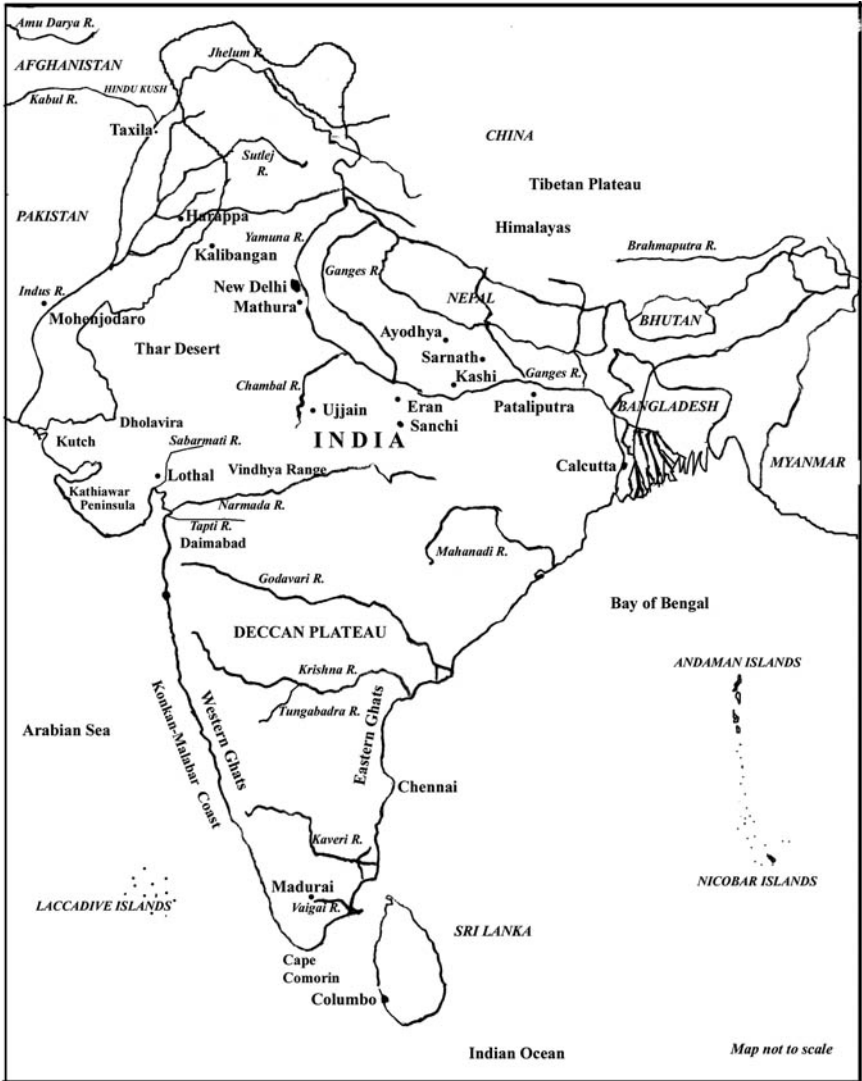
WOMEN *in* INDIA

A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY
VOLUME I

Sita Anantha Raman

Women in India

India Physical Map



Courtesy of Natraj A. Raman

Women in India

A Social and Cultural History

Volume 1

SITA ANANTHA RAMAN

PRAEGER

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YOKED OXEN

*Pipes played, drums rolled
the chant of mantras
cleansed the air
as showered with flowers
we took seven steps
together, you and I
two oxen, one yoke
Since that day
pebbles on my path
became
petals on a rug*

For dear Babu

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PREFACE

This history is really dedicated to the numerous women whose narratives I have tried to record as accurately as possible. On a personal plane, I thank the inspirational teachers, stimulating colleagues, and close family who watched over me as I wrote this book. I deeply regret that a lack of space precludes my acknowledging each by name. Two inspirational *gurus* at UCLA shared their vision of history as truth with me years ago. Mentor and friend Stanley Wolpert steered my research directly to the study of women and gender in India. Damodar SarDesai broadened my understanding of Asia and encouraged me in my early career. My fascination for women's history thrived in conversations with my good friend Brenda Ness of Santa Monica College. At Santa Clara University, I shared innumerable hours of enjoyable discussion on women and world history with Barbara Molony, Jo B. Margadant, Thomas Turley, and Timothy O'Keefe. My many students gave me insights into how to make this complex region and its multifaceted women comprehensible. I specially thank Mini Krishnan of Oxford University Press in Chennai for having promoted my work in India. Praeger editors Brian Foster and Hillary Claggett helped to breathe life into these two volumes. Christy Anitha, Haylee Schwenk, Diana Andrews, Valentina Tursini, and Anthony Chiffolo of ABC-CLIO gave them their final look and shape. I acknowledge the assistance of archivists at the Theosophical Society, Adyar, Tamil Nadu, the Government of Tamil Nadu Archives at Chennai, the National Archives of India at New Delhi, the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Museum and Library at New Delhi, the Madras Institute of Development Studies at Chennai, and the research librarians at Santa Clara University, UCLA, and University of California at Berkeley. I thank Shilpa Sankaran, Nandita (Sankaran) Geerdink, and Sonya Sankaran for allowing me to put their picture in Bharata Natyam dance pose on the cover of Volume 1. I especially thank my dear husband Natraj Raman for his two valuable maps, as well as for his patient humor and perceptive comments. I dedicate the book to him, and to my sons, daughters-in-law, granddaughters, sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, and friends.

INTRODUCTION

It is not surprising that women in India are often described as having two sharply contrasting aspects. In a region famous for goddesses with multiple visages, identities, and functions, the first façade is of the serene, primordial mother Great Goddess (Devi), Primal Energy (Shakti), and Nature (Prakriti), a gentle boon-giver who also slays demons. The other is the clouded face of the domestic handmaiden trailing behind men in life expectancy, nutrition, health, education, pay, and other rights on the subcontinent.¹ However, behind this colorful essentialization of Indian women lies the complex reality of myriads of feminine personas in a sea teeming with self-sacrificing heroines like Sita in the epic *Ramayana*, modern feminists in the guise of Shakti, and the victims of gender, religious, caste, and class inequalities.

This poses several dilemmas to the historian. What could an engendered history then include, which female narratives would one recount, and how does one retrieve the voices of the apparently voiceless? A work of this scope cannot cover all the narratives, since such a vast undertaking would lose its critical edge, and its diluted or descriptive litany may be unreadable. Due to the longevity of Indian history, this study of women is therefore divided into two broad chronological sections, i.e., the premodern era from antiquity to the early medieval Hindu kingdoms and the later era under Turko-Afghan and Mughal dynasties, colonial rule, and the independent state after 1947. The four interrelated themes focus on gender and female sexuality, viz., premodern social, religious, cultural, political paradigms of women in male-authored texts; their later resurrection by men and women for contemporary political and social purposes; women's narratives in their social contexts; and the contentious issues of female agency and objectification.

TEXT, CONTEXT, AND RE-CREATED TEXTS

No matter how unassailable texts and material artifacts appear to be, the historian views them as contested territory. This work attempts to be critical

in its assessment of the primary evidence from literature, art, and archaeology, as well as of secondary scholarship on women in Indian history. As it is almost impossible to read all the archaic texts entirely in their original languages, some scholarly translations have been used judiciously. However, it is clear that within ancient meanings lie embedded the unconscious biases of later translators steered by their own theoretical or cultural reasons to retell India's history. The values they attributed to ancient gender norms were often remodeled in later eras for contemporary purposes, and these crystallized into paradigms for modern women. Therefore, in order to trace the evolution of gender norms, it is imperative to reexamine India's complex historical tapestry and to re-create a new narrative concerning its women.

Ancient and classical texts reveal that in the preeminent interface between Aryan and local Dravidian-aboriginal cultures, the core value crystallized across the subcontinent. This was the high honor given to female chastity, a virtue whose luster almost exceeded that of women's natural intelligence in archaic texts, and there were numerous ambiguities, as the texts were composed by multiple male authors separated by centuries. Moreover, the genres of hymnal, epic poetry, and *shastra* (scripture, religious manual) facilitated several typologies of women as divine, heroic, maternal, saintly, victimized, lustful, or manipulative. The divine maternal appears early (ca. 3000 BCE) in pre-Aryan artifacts of the Indus Civilization, and it also appears in the Sanskrit scriptural *Vedas* (1600–300 BCE). In the early first millennium BCE, society also began to accord high respect to male and female celibate hermits (*sanyasins*). Thus, the utterances of the woman sage Gargi and the questions of Maitreyi to her sage husband Yajnavalkya were carefully recorded in the *Bṛihad Aranyaka Upanishad*.² Unlike the *Vedas*, the popular epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* contain socially pertinent messages on the honor given to faithful wives. Thus, while Indians celebrate the *Mahabharata* heroine Savitri for outwitting Death, the annual fast by Indian wives is a reminder that their chastity ensures the husband's longevity. Similarly, the *Ramayana* makes it clear that male strictures on female sexuality were paramount, so that even guiltless Sita had to be punished for residing as a hostage in Ravana's fortress.

This schizophrenia about women became more rigid in the classical era (250 BCE–500 CE) when India witnessed waves of immigrants and conquerors. The newcomers jostled for a high rung on the Sanskrit caste ladder and took local women whose husbands and male kin agonized over the lost "purity" of caste lineages. New texts by elite men reined in mortal women's sexuality, but exalted the feminine divine as the Devi. As local cults to divine female guardians were subsumed into the traditions of Devi worship, the Sanskrit hymn *Devi Mahatmya* celebrated the supreme goddess Durga's martial triumphs over demons. An echo of semidivine female fury also occurs in the Tamil epic *Silappadikaram* in which a chaste wife Kannaki sets Madurai city ablaze as a malediction for the unjust killing of her husband.

Meanwhile, ordinary women were kept in their domestic place by the misogynist authors of *Manu Smriti*, which may have been simply a normative manual but which some later Hindus regarded as their sacrosanct law code.

The long experience of gender inequality on the subcontinent prevents its dismissal as mere feminine fancy. Despite the persistence of local pockets of aboriginal and Dravidian matrilineal societies, and enclaves of Buddhist, Jaina, and Hindu nuns, the many layers of mainstream patriarchal society were cemented by adopting Sanskritic values (or “Sanskritization”) due to foreign invasion, immigrant settlement, and internecine feudal wars. These occurred centuries before Islam and European Christianity infused their own patriarchal features into Indian society. However, women did rebel quietly through nonconformism and loudly through religious literature. The most famous examples are the Kannada hymns of Akkamahadevi (twelfth century), a woman saint who rejected caste and gender inequality; the *padas* (songs) in three languages of Rajput saint Mira (sixteenth century) who cast aside prescribed norms of feminine and royal behavior; and the *yakshagana* folk songs of the Telugu widow Tarigonda Venkamba (nineteenth century) who was compelled by society to be a recluse. Other women worked from within the patriarchal order to negotiate with elite men through their writings. Betrayed in love, Chandrabati (sixteenth century) composed Bengali ballads against unjust social laws; the Mughal princess Gulbadan Begam (sixteenth century) wrote *Humayun Nama*, a biography of her brother in Persian; and courtesan Mahlaqa Bai Chanda (eighteenth century) composed Urdu *ghazal* poetry.

Exotic, Colonial Accounts of Sexual Mores

During tumultuous, colonial wars over hegemony in India (seventeenth to nineteenth century), women retreated further into private courtyards and *zenanas*, constrained further by earlier child marriage, bigamy, widow abuse, and a widow’s enforced immolation on her husband’s funeral pyre (*sati*). Colonial evangelical commentaries based on a bird’s eye view of misogynist customs fueled Victorian complacency over Western superiority. In 1829, Governor-General Bentinck passed a law outlawing *sati*, partly influenced by Utilitarian James Mill’s popular *The History of British India* (1826). Although Mill had not visited India, he described its civilization as “rude” and its women as “generally degraded.” He smugly concluded, “Nothing can exceed the contempt which Hindus entertain for their women.”³ These initial images of India left an indelible mark upon Europeans.

Colonial officials and a growing elite class of Indian reformers drew upon Orientalist translations of Indian texts, missionary accounts of Hinduism, colonial statistics, and the summations of Western anthropologists about

tribal and matrilineal societies in India. Indian reformers felt abashed by their partial truths, but they did not discard them easily. If scholarly Orientalists revealed the common origin of Aryan languages, pseudoscientific Social Darwinism cataloged linguistic groups as separate “races.” Racial theory validated European imperialism for having brought material advancements, and as being genetically the fittest to rule. A corollary deemed the high-caste “Aryan” Indian as a heathen “brown stepbrother” to Europeans; but it delegated darker Dravidian and aboriginals to the ranks of the least civilized on the subcontinent. Twentieth-century discoveries of sophisticated, pre-Aryan cities at Mohenjo Daro and Harappa on the Indus river compelled a reexamination of these colonial fantasies. While Victorian anthropologists assiduously cataloged India’s manifold tribal and Dravidian matrilinealities, and the worshipers of indigenous goddesses, many were dismissive of their religions and sexual norms favorable to women. A rare scholar was Verrier Elwin (1902–64) who lived among the matrilineal Gonds and sympathized with their “melancholy” when their forests were confiscated by the colonial state. Elwin married a Gond wife in a sensational public marriage, but callously discarded her once the novelty wore off.⁴ E. B. Thurston (1855–1935) documented his personal fascination for non-Aryan tribes and castes who performed “primitive” blood sacrifices to goddesses. W. H. Rivers (1864–1922) focused on exotic matrilineal and “promiscuous” customs among the Todas of south India.⁵ Higher-caste Hindus were a trifle higher on the scale of civilization, as their peculiar practices included female subjugation, caste, and the worship of strange deities. Victorian prudery was especially shocked by the uninhibited views on sexuality in precolonial India. A century of imbibing Raj attitudes in schools and offices resulted in greater sexual puritanism among elite-caste Indians who often lauded the chastity of high-caste women and decried lower-caste female promiscuity. Thurston’s assistant K. Rangachari argued that “primitive” tribalism must “evolve” into a more refined, *brahmanical* Hinduism. A. S. Altekar echoed this in his authoritative work, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (1938), and he exaggeratedly praised ancient Hindu women with these words:

Women were honored in ancient India, more perhaps than among any other nation on the face of the globe. They were considered the intellectual companions of their husband.⁶

Both India and Indian women were the objects of male political contestations during the Raj. While Indian aspirations for a national renaissance were more commendable than British imperial ambitions, Eastern and Western patriarchs selectively read classical texts to arrive at diametrically opposing views on Indian women. Evangelicals exaggerated women’s abject condition to justify their conversion; while Indian reformers used women’s

customary constraints to negotiate their own place in the Raj, making women fodder for the nationalist engine, while improving female literacy and legally restricting *sati* and child marriage. Nationalist Hindu “matriots” lauded Indian epic women as the paradigm for modern womanhood, maternal and chaste, educated companion and activist, the pure soul (*jivatma*) of goddess Mother India.⁷ These appear in Bankim Chandra Chatterji’s Bengali hymn *Bande Mataram* (1882), C. Subramania Bharati’s *Nattu Vanakkam* (1907) in Tamil, and Abanindranath Tagore’s painting of Mother India (1905) as an ascetic four-armed goddess with white lotuses at her feet. These sentiments were expanded by nationalist-feminists like Sarojini Naidu in *Ode to India* (1904).⁸

Hindu and Muslim nationalists tried to improve female literacy and social life, but they simultaneously reified patriarchy and religious identities. Thus to counter Western contempt for Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) idealized ancient Aryan mores of universal tolerance. Yet, neoconservatives later distorted his inclusive philosophy to advocate Hindu superiority and majority rule. B. G. Tilak hoisted the petard of militant Hindu patriarchy when he vehemently attacked feminist Pandita Ramabai for ostensibly preaching Christianity and when he opposed a moderate law to raise the female age for marital sex.⁹ Religious extremists in the Arya Samaj supported female education, but also anti-Muslim drives. Modern Muslim consciousness was similarly divisive when it came to women’s education and seclusion through the veil (*pardah*). Thus, Maulana Thanawi’s *Bihishti Zewar* (Jewelry of Paradise, 1906), a conservative guideline for modern Muslim women, defused feminism by supporting women’s education and also the veil.¹⁰ In the present era, defensive, resurgent Islamic movements often curtail women’s rights and social spaces.

To what extent then can we accept the narratives of colonial, nationalist, and postmodern Western scholars? Western educated scholars sometimes use the colonial-nationalist dialogue as a benchmark to gauge women’s status, often relying on Western models and theories without cultural specificity for India. For example, in their anxiety to declare war on religion and capitalism, some Marxists fault Hinduism, its caste system, and patriarchy for delaying the dialectical process in India. However, recent studies on the emergence of capital prior to colonial rule have undercut these theories.¹¹ Some liberal histories describe reformers as indebted to Western secular and Christian thought, without reference to their early education in humanist Indian scriptures.¹² Several downplay sectarian coexistence without serious conflagrations in early India. Yet, it is well known that Indian reformers would cite Hindu-Muslim-Buddhist-Jaina ideas on universalism to implant recent ideas from the West on social equality. For example, Tamil reformers Vedanayakam Pillai and A. Madhaviah frequently quoted the Jaina sage Tiruvalluvar (ca. 100 CE) on gender and caste equity, as well as the Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire on equality.¹³

Despite their championship of Indian feminism, Western feminists have sometimes interpreted Indian texts using Western models. Victorian-Edwardian women wrote rosy biographies of saint Mirabai and princess Gulbadan Begam (sixteenth century), but they infused their lives with contemporary European ideals on feminine virtue. Recent Western feminist translations of Indian texts are considerably more sophisticated, and they shed light on the multiplicity of female narratives. Yet, even these scholars either do not place the texts within the social context of India's living traditions or read early texts through the lens of modern Western feminist theory. This reminds us that historians must be cautious when applying Western models upon studies of Indian women, and second, avoid attributing modern value judgments to premodern societies.

SHAKTI, SAINT, OR SLAVE?

Were all Indian women saints and powerful agents, or hapless victims throughout history? This history attempts to avoid simplistic portrayals of victims and heroines of mythical courage, as these are socially dangerous. It notes that women are subordinate in India from the evidence of a declining sex ratio, lower literacy rates, poorer nutrition, and higher mortality rates than for men. However, it suggests that women have been both objects and agents, occasionally both on different fronts. It will show examples of their active resistance, avenues for self-expression, negotiations with patriarchy, and even their support of oppressive traditions.

It is also worth noting that before the emergence of feminism in Europe over two centuries ago, women asserted themselves in India and other cultures. Moreover, the idea of a universal sisterhood gained credence only in the last century, and today's feminists highlight sisterhood as a bond transcending parochial and national boundaries. Some scholars suggest that in view of its importance in determining women's social and domestic roles, gender is the sole marker of feminine identity, and that it bifurcates the horizontal stratifications of caste, class, and ethnicity, each with its regional, religious, or chronological variations. However, I suggest that women have multiple identities besides being female, and that they are often dissuaded from uniting in a generic sisterhood due to their strong loyalties to family, caste, class, nation, or religion. It must also be remembered that women's loyalties have been historically more local and communal, than national or international. Not all women are ardent feminists; some sit on the fence, some are even misogynist. Women have often quietly accepted domestic constraints either because they wish to protect the family even at cost to themselves, or because they are relatively powerless in specific situations, or because in the domestic pecking order, even lowly daughters-in-law can eventually become powerful mothers-in-law.

Despite their multiple identities, such a study is validated simply because, historically, women's experiences have been uniquely their own, whether in segregated female spaces or integrated public forums. Their agency or objectification is specific to each era, region, culture, economy, polity, and religion. Thus, this book examines the narratives by and about Indian women in the context of their regional history. To study India's women, we must come to terms with Indian patriarchies and the region's contradictions of power and pathos, beauty and ugliness, compassion and cruelty, serenity and chaos.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Volume 1 contains chapters 1 through 7. Chapter 1 introduces the subcontinent, its women, and its ethno-linguistic matrix of pre-Aryan aboriginal, Dravidian, and Sanskritic cultures; polyandrous, matrilineal, and matrilineal societies; local goddesses and their influence on mainstream societies; Indus Valley artifacts and influence upon later Hinduism. Chapter 2 discusses the coming of the Indo-Aryans, the Vedic era, and effects on women's education and roles; Vedic goddesses and women as authors of scriptures; the mergers between Aryan and local non-Aryan cultures; the connections between caste, gender hierarchies, and gender norms. Chapter 3 is on non-Vedic scriptures (*smritis*) like the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and their paradigms of motherhood, female sexuality, and education. Chapter 4 is on Buddhism and Jainism, nuns, lay devotees and donors. Chapter 5 examines women's representations in Hindu and Buddhist art, Sanskrit and Tamil literature during the classical era; the making of Indian society through streams of immigrants, their implications for gender and caste, elite responses in *The Laws of Manu*, and its resurrection by colonialists and nationalists. Chapter 6 is about Devi traditions in mainstream Hinduism, Tantric Hinduism, and Vajrayana Buddhism; images of Devi in Hindu, Buddhist, Jaina literature and art. Chapter 7 is on medieval devotional (*bhakti*) women saints and their hymns; feudal norms of *sati* and domesticity; philanthropic queens and courtesans in north and south India. Volume 2 begins with Chapter 1 on Islam, its textual references to women; arrival and history on the subcontinent; women's involvement in Shia and Sufi festivals; Turko-Afghan and Mughal princesses and courtesans till 1700. Chapter 2 is on colonial rule (sixteenth to nineteenth century), the impact of hegemonic wars, sexual intermingling between Europeans and Indian women; nineteenth-century missionary impact on education for girls and boys; Victorian influence on elite Indian men and women, and dual patriarchies; legal changes affecting women. Chapter 3 is on Indian male reformers and nationalists and their views on women; female victimization and agency; attempts to pass laws favorable to women on *sati*, marriage, and divorce; male reformers' work to educate Hindu, Christian, Muslim

women; working-class women. Chapter 4 is on Indian feminism, suffrage, Indian nationalism, women nationalists, feminists in international forums and as freedom fighters alongside Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Chapter 5 is on postindependence issues such as declining sex ratio, violence, globalization, and key political and legal controversies; women's education and employment; postmodern feminism; women in environmental and working-class struggles; women in politics and the arts; conclusion.

NOTES

1. The ratio of females to 1000 males declined from 945 (1991) to 927 (2001) in all states, except for Kerala and Pondicherry, despite the Prenatal Techniques Regulation and Prevention of Misuse Act (1994). The highest decline was in Punjab (874), Haryana (860), Chandigarh (773), Gujarat (921), Delhi (820), *vide*, Government of India, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, *Census of India 2001*, Series 1, India, vol. 4 (Primary Census Abstract, and Total Population Table A 5), vol. 9 (Report and Tables on Age C 14), New Delhi: Controller of Publications, 2003; Asha Krishnakumar, "Doomed in the Womb?" *The Hindu*, December 14, 2003, 14. Cities with a steep decline in the sex ratio are Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Amritsar, Patiala, Ambala, Gurgaon, Faridabad, Kurukshetra, Ahmedabad, Vaddara, Rajkot, Jaipur, Satara, Nagpur, Salem, Tiruchi, Cuddalore, and Vellore, *vide*, Shefali Vasudev, "Missing Girl Child," *India Today* 28, no. 45, November 10, 2003, 16–22; T. K. Rajalakshmi, "A Dangerous Trend," *Frontline* 20, no. 23, November 21, 2003, 95–96. Female literacy rates rose significantly, but women's education still lags behind men.

	1947	1991	2001
India	6%	39.19% (f) 64.13% (m)	54.28% (f) 75.96% (m)
Kerala (highest)		86% (f) 93.62% (m)	87.86% (f) 94.20% (m)
Rajasthan (lowest)		20.44% (f) 54.99% (m)	44.34% (f) 76.46% (m)

See Sita Anantha Raman, "Walking Two Paces Behind: Women's Education in India," in *Ananya: A Portrait of India*, ed. Sridhar Rao and Nirmal Mattoo (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), 375–96.

2. *The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2000), chap. 4, 6, and 8.

3. James Mill, *The History of British India* (1826), 2 vols. (New York: Chelsea House, 1968), 309–10.

4. Verrier Elwin, *Leaves in the Jungle* (1936; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1968); Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 57.

5. Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, assisted by K. Rangachari, vols. 1–7 (Madras: Madras Government Publications, 1909); W. H. Rivers, *The Todas* (repr., Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1986).

6. A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (1938; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999).
7. Personal communication with Vasantha Surya, author of *A Word Between Us* (Chennai: Sandhya Publications, 2004).
8. The watercolor painting on paper with the Rabindra Bharati Society, Calcutta is depicted in Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 410.
9. Meera Kosambi, *At the Intersection of Gender Reform and Religious Belief: Pandita Ramabai's Contribution and the Age of Consent Controversy* (Bombay: Research Centre for Women's Studies, 1993).
10. Barbara Daly Metcalf, "Islamic Reform and Islamic Women: Maulana Thanawi's *Jewelry of Paradise*," in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 184–95; Shaheeda Lateef, *Muslim Women in India: Political and Private Realities, 1890s–1980s* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990), 55–94; Gail Minault, "Women, Legal Reform and Muslim Identity in South Asia," in *Jura Gentium: Centre for Philosophy of International Law and Global Politics*, ed. Claudio Augustino, Anil Mishra, and Antonella Roninone (1998), <http://www.juragentium.unifi.it/en/surveys/rol/minault.htm>.
11. K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
12. Ainslie Embree, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition: From the Beginning to 1800*, vol. 1; Stephen Hay, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition: Modern India and Pakistan*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
13. Sita Anantha Raman and Vasantha Surya, *A. Madhaviah: A Biography and a Novel* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005); also Sita Anantha Raman, "Old Norms in New Bottles: Constructions of Gender and Ethnicity in the Early Tamil Novel," *Journal of Women's History* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 93–119.

ABBREVIATIONS

AIADMK	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
AIWC	All India Women's Conference
AS	Arya Samaj
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BS	Brahma Samaj
INC	Indian National Congress
ML	Muslim League
NA	National Archives, New Delhi
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
PS	Prarthna Samaj
SEWA	Self Employed Women's Association
TNA	Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai
TSA	Theosophical Society Archives
VS	Vedanta Society
WIA	Women's Indian Association

1

REGION, ENVIRONMENT, GENDER

In that very sky, he (Indra) encountered Uma, daughter of Himavat (Himalayas), a superbly beautiful woman with golden ornaments. He asked, “Who is this adorable being?”

*Kena Upanishad 3.12*¹

INDIA: ECOLOGY AND GENDER

Historically called India, the South Asian subcontinent today comprises the independent nations of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan.² The peninsula is geographically diverse with high mountain ranges like the Himalayas, tropical seacoasts, rivers fed by glacial snows and monsoons, arid deserts and plateaus, Asia’s second tallest waterfall, the world’s wettest zone, and luxuriant forests. The region is home to more than a billion people of disparate ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. Narratives of women and gender are thus closely interwoven into the larger historical tapestry of the subcontinent as an evolutionary crucible marked by extensive genetic and cultural fusions. These mergers are reflected in gender norms, which vary across sect and caste but may have regional similarities.

Urban civilization originated in the Indus Valley Civilization (7000–1650 BCE) some of whose pre-Aryan legacies, including views on sexuality and maternal potency, still prevail in the region. Society was initially forged by the genetic and cultural mergers of three broad groups. These are the aboriginals (Adivasis) of various ethnicities and languages who are sometimes matrilineal and matrilocal; speakers of Dravidian languages with a history of female power and goddess veneration; and patriarchal groups speaking Indo-Aryan languages descended from Sanskrit. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and other syncretisms evolved on the subcontinent; Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism arrived later in history. Over three hundred Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, and unspecified languages are spoken in South Asia. Gender and caste hierarchies were crystallized by subsequent infusions of Asian, Arab, European, and east African

settlers, who were often men who had relations with local women.³ Modern women's education, health, and legal status have been both assisted and molded by colonial rule, a national democratic state, industrialization, and globalization. In recent decades, women's public roles have notably expanded in India, but female sex ratios have simultaneously plummeted across caste, class, sectarian, and regional lines. Such anomalies cause grave concern, validating more studies of women.⁴

India is named for the snow-fed Indus river, which countless immigrants crossed before settling on the subcontinent. The most ancient Hindu scripture in the Sanskrit language is the *Rig Veda* (ca. 1650 BCE), which refers to the Indus and its tributaries as "*sapta-sindhu*" (seven rivers). The Persians called these "hepta hindu," which later Greek immigrants termed "indos," so that the local inhabitants became known as Hindus, regardless of religious belief. Geographical boundaries of mountains, rivers, and seas either promoted or inhibited invasions by male armies and internal trade settlement, which in turn shaped gender attitudes. The northwestern Indus-Oxus zone has been a social cauldron from which have spilled waves of armies and immigrants, while its land bridge fostered trade with ancient Asia and Europe. Sri Lanka's proximity to the southern peninsula has interwoven gene pools, cultures, and politics. The extensive coastline has washed ashore numerous sea farers, especially during the annual monsoon rains. Maritime excursions up to the Persian Gulf probably first took place in small boats hugging the coastline. Once the seasonal flow of the monsoon (*mausam*) was understood, Indians ventured on sturdier vessels across the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal to trade with Arabia, Persia, east Africa, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Land and river routes facilitated internal trade and migrations within the subcontinent, especially after 1000 BCE. These were used by peaceful monks and merchants, and also by marauding, largely male armies with camp followers, thus resulting in the cross-fertilization of gene pools and language, and of ideas on religion, gender, sexuality, and art.

Climate has also seminally shaped India's societies and religions through which ideas on sexuality and gender were expressed. Intense tropical heat and the monsoon promoted agriculture, while lush vegetation gave value to notions of female fecundity and male procreative power. Each year, scorched summer vegetation returns miraculously to life, seeded by rain clouds that drench the western coast and the northern river plains, and are then deflected south by the Himalayan peaks. This pendulum of ecological decay and renewal is recorded in popular songs and festivals, and shaped an early belief in *karma*, the doctrine of the soul's transmigration through a cycle of physical birth and death. Tropical greenery inspired an archaic veneration of fertility, and nature was identified with a female creative force. From such elemental beliefs there later developed more sophisticated theologies on maternal and male sexual potency. The mystical union of these dual sexual energies was deified and lauded in hymns, religious practices, art, and literature.

EARLY HISTORY

Prehistory: Migration, Sexuality, and Goddesses

Paleolithic stone tools have been found across the subcontinent from the Soan Valley in Pakistan to southern Tamil Nadu. Genetic studies also now show that all human populations can be traced to a single female mitochondria from Africa. South Asia's first human hunters and foragers arrived via the Arabian Sea, hugging the coastline on small rafts and crafts. They were probably the ancestors of the Onge and other tribes who speak Austro-Asiatic languages in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.⁵ Recent studies also indicate that another dispersal from Eurasia occurred ca. 30,000 years ago. Complex migration patterns at this time meant the exchange of gene pools when settlers cohabited with locals. Mesolithic cave sites dating from 30,000 to 10,000 years ago in northern Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh, and southern Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh, contain paintings of early women, men, and children in daily life and work.

The earliest evidence of goddess worship is from a Paleolithic Age shrine to fertility in Baghor, central India (ca. 9000 BCE). The site consists of a rubble platform with a triangular natural stone resembling the vulva/womb of the goddess, later called *yoni*. Across India today, there are similar platform altars with a triangular *yoni* as an aniconic representation of female energy as goddess Shakti. It clearly testifies to the persistence of a goddess tradition and to the worship of icons at sacred sites from the Stone Age.⁶ Other artifacts relating to fertility were uncovered in the Indus Civilization's rural sites in Kulli and Nal (ca. 3000 BCE) and across northern and central India. Stone symbols of the phallus (*lingam*) and the uterus/vagina (*yoni*) indicate the worship of fertility, an important aspect of Hinduism even today across India. Terra-cotta seals depict rites around trees whose spirit beings and priests were probably female.

Indus Civilization and Its Legacies

The rural and urban sites of the Indus Civilization (2800–1600 BCE) shed light on the ideas of sacred sexuality in early India, as the denizens believed in goddesses, zoomorphic totems, and arboreal worship. The transition from Neolithic village to town occurred at Mehrgarh (7000 BCE) near the Bolan river in Pakistan, and here copper tools were first used to manufacture beads and polished jewelry. Although most of the 1,400 sites were located on the banks of this river and its tributaries, this civilization extended over a thousand square miles to the Himalayan foothills, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. The semiautonomous cities included Harappa and Mohenjo Daro (Pakistan), Dholavira, Kalibangan, Rakhigarh, and the port of Lothal (India). A central agency planned the cities uniformly on a grid with intersecting streets, public buildings and two-story homes, drainage

systems, and warehouses for grains, as well as standard weights and measurements. They thrived on local and international trade with Mesopotamia, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Tibet. Foreign merchants arrived by camel and ox carts, river and coastal boats, sometimes staying for long periods within Indus city walls. Evidence from graves indicates an ethnically plural society. Small steatite seals probably used by local merchants employ a common script and religious emblems. The script has yet to be deciphered, but the language was probably proto-Dravidian that may have been akin to Elamite in Mesopotamia.

Rule was probably by a male oligarchy of merchants and priests, judging by the single powerful image of a male leader in Mohenjo Daro. The important personage has a robe with an impressive trefoil pattern over his shoulder, and eyes half-closed in apparent yogic contemplation. A large hall with a large adjacent pool, possibly used for ritual baths, has been unearthed, with adjacent rooms for bathers, monks, priests, or traders from other Indus cities, peripheral and foreign regions. Despite high citadels, there was probably social and sexual intermingling, with visitors staying within city walls or outside in camps.

Continuities with later eras are evident in houses and artifacts. Open courtyards in the homes in Harappa, Mohenjo Daro, and Dholavira indicate that families met in this central section and that family life was cherished. However, there were no separate quarters for women and men, as in later Indian society. There is an abundance of toys with movable parts, some humorously depicting animals with moving parts. This indicates a fondness for children that persists today. Similarly, there was a fondness for elegant and ornate bangles and necklaces for women, as well as jewelry for men in Indus culture. The civilization finally collapsed due to climatic changes, ecological catastrophes, and a decline in trade.⁷

Goddess Figurines

We know considerably more about notions of sexuality and religion in these sites, as their echoes linger today. Artifacts from early Baluchi village cultures at Mehrgarh, Kulli, Zhob, and Nal (ca. 3000 BCE) reveal that they worshipped icons of the goddess and also phallic symbols. These artifacts are immensely pertinent to the study of Indian religion and sexuality, as they echo the later iconic worship of goddesses and of the *lingam*, the phallic symbol of the later Hindu god Shiva. Mehrgarh reveals terra-cotta and bone female figurines with small waists, delicate hips, and full breasts. The Kulli figures predate those from Zhob, but both are of torsos above the waist, with small breasts, nose, and other features made by adding little clay lumps to the icon. They have flat bases, possibly for easy placement on a shelf or altar, an important suggestion that icon worship originated in prehistoric India. Some images show a nurturing mother and child, but they are crudely

contrived. Zhob figurines have bulging eyes and slits for mouths, and their fierce mien resembles that of Indian village goddesses today, like Mariamman who guards Tamil villages by devouring demons and plagues.

Thousands of terra-cotta goddess figurines have been found scattered in the rubble around homes in some Indus cities, suggesting that the icons were discarded after prayers. This is similar to current Hindu practice of fashioning new clay images for festivals, after which they are immersed into the river or sea. On each side of the head of goddess images from Harappa and Mohenjo Daro are elaborate coiffures with lamp-like protuberances with sooty remnants from lamps. This resembles the custom of lighting clay lamps in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina rites to icons (*puja*). One Mohenjo Daro goddess bears an uncanny resemblance to a terra-cotta goddess dated from the first millennium in Ahichchatra near Mathura and other later village sites.⁸ The domestic worship of icons, especially of goddesses, with lamps appears to be a legacy of the Indus Civilization.

Interestingly, after 2000 BCE, goddess figurines are absent in Kalibangan where large fire hearths have been discovered. Some scholars, therefore, surmise that the Indus cities were constructed by the Indo-Aryans, harbingers of Sanskritic civilization whose scripture, the *Rig Veda*, revolves around rituals (*yajna*) around fire altars. While the *Veda* makes a brief mention of potsherds along the Indus, the authors lived in wattle and daub huts, and they did not apparently know of large walled cities. They may have grafted their ideas of fire sacrifice onto the Indus religion, although they did not initially worship icons as did the Indus denizens. One scholar even questions if the Kalibangan hearths were ritual altars at all, since the earlier cities of Mehrgarh, Kot Diji, Harappa, and Mohenjo Daro do not contain hearths. Moreover, pre-Aryan folk worship of goddess icons lingered in the countryside after the cities declined, and similar statues dating a thousand years later have been unearthed on the Ganges plains.

The Indus cities do not have large temples, but a large city hall at Mohenjo Daro may have been used for public gatherings. Around Harappa and several other sites, archaeologists have also discovered many small images, including circular stones with a central hole like the vulva/womb (*yoni*); phallic images like the *lingam* of Shiva, the later Hindu god; and bull figures later associated with Shiva's virility. There are numerous etchings on seals of the pipala leaf whose tree is revered even today for promoting fertility. One seal shows a flowering bush with an emergent female figure similar to later tree nymphs (*yakshis*) in Buddhist, Jaina, and Hindu art. Another seal depicts a figure in a horned headdress, in a yogic, perhaps phallic posture. He is surrounded by animals like later depictions of Shiva as Lord of the Beasts, and his horned headdress resembles Shiva's trident.⁹ One seal depicts a horned being emerging from a tree and surrounded by seven, possibly female priests.

Other statues (ca. 3000 BCE) show astonishing continuities with later classical visions of the female and the male, yoga, love of dance, and aesthetics of sculpture. Three male torsos indicate that the people practiced yoga, while a bronze nude female figure suggests that dancing may have a religious, yogic significance. The finished bronze figure was sculpted through the “lost wax process” known to later Indian artists. It is of a pert young woman with Austro-Asiatic tribal features and bangled arms akimbo, as if in a dance pose. A statue of a male priest or leader with a trefoil design shawl has a dignified bearing, his eyes semi-closed as if in meditation. The figure resembles classical images taut with the inner breath (*prana*) as in yoga, as described in classical manuals of art. Also apparently filled with *prana* is another male torso of polished red stone with neck and shoulder sockets for the attachment of head and arms. Another small gray statue of a dancer also apparently had separately attached limbs, probably in dance gestures. The sculpture closely resembles later depictions of Shiva as the Hindu Lord of Dance (Nataraja).

Recent excavations near the Yamuna-Ganges, in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu near the river Kaveri have brought to light other cultures using copper tools. Excavations at Ahar, Rajasthan (3000 BCE) reveal bull figurines associated with Shiva. At Dangwada in Madhya Pradesh, hundreds of humped bull figurines, and fertility icons of *lingams* and *yonis* in conjunction with each other, seem to prove that the *yoni* and *lingam* were Dravidian-aboriginal emblems. The large town of Daimabad (2000 BCE) in Maharashtra contains a public hall with an agate *lingam* in a hearth, Indus seals, and another seal inscribed with a horse-drawn chariot, indicating contact with incoming Indo-Aryans.

SOCIAL MATRIX

The oldest pre-Aryans were Adivasis who speak diverse languages and the speakers of Dravidian languages whose ancestors may have been akin to West Asians. Adivasi tribes include speakers of Austric-Mons languages, Tibeto-Burman speakers who dispersed via the northeast (ca. 3000 BCE), speakers of minor Dravidian dialects, and some isolated Indo-Aryan speakers. While hunters and gatherers inhabited the forests, the Neolithic era witnessed village settlements with domesticated sheep, cattle, and goats, and small farming. Women sowed wild seeds, practicing a rudimentary form of horticulture, and artisans produced small pottery. Their artifacts have been unearthed in Kashmir; in Indus sites like Mehrgarh; and in Baluchistan, Haryana, Gujarat; at later Gangetic chalcolithic sites like Koldihwa and Mahagara; in the Deccan Plateau; and in the Godavari and Krishna river valleys. While Adivasis are often forced today to mainstream into Indian society and its globalized economy, a few tribes still practice shifting agriculture (*jhum*). Moreover, while some Adivasis smelt and forge copper and iron, a few tribes still prefer stone tools.

India's natural landscapes have long inspired legends about divine mountain abodes, tree groves, and fecund river goddesses, colorful notions that continue to hum in the popular imagination.¹⁰ The existence of a pre-Aryan matrilocal tradition is mentioned in the *Kena Upanishad* (see the quote at the beginning of this chapter), which states that the Himalayas are venerated as the natal home of goddess Parvati whose husband Shiva resided with her. The worship of female nature deities is notably common among Adivasis and some Dravidian cultures. These divinities include the earth goddess of the Austro-Asiatic Paraja tribe in Orissa;¹¹ river goddess Garhaera venerated by the Mundas of Bihar;¹² Sarna-Burhi, goddess of groves of Oraon tribes in the northeast;¹³ Jair-Era, forest goddess of the Santhals of Bengal;¹⁴ and Peyaacchi Amman of the *maruda* tree worshipped by some Tamils.¹⁵

Other worshippers of goddesses were the Indo-Aryans who settled near the Indus and the Saraswati (Ghaggar-Hakra), a tributary that later submerged.¹⁶ This is seen in the *Rig Veda's* prayers, which describe goddess Saraswati as the "mighty flood," a river who "illuminates, brightens every pious thought." The *Rig Veda* praises Prithvi or "the broad" Mother Earth or "the broad one" and later refers to nature as the female force Prakriti. Fed by Himalayan snows, the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra rivers were not only ancient highways, but as they ensured the fecundity of the northern plains, they became goddesses in the popular imagination. The Ganges is revered as a mother (*Ganga Mata*) who sustains the dense population of northern India. In the south, the monsoon-fed rivers Narmada, Tapti, Mahanadi, Godavari, Krishna, Tungabhadra, and Kaveri were arterial routes for migration and settlement, giving birth to mixed communities. Rivers were naturally revered as mothers who sustain life.

If the frigid Himalayan peaks deterred prehistoric central and east Asians from entering the subcontinent, a few hardy groups filtered in some 3,000 years ago through the hill passes near Burma, along paths near the Brahmaputra river. However, the most significant routes lay in the northwest Hindu Kush passes, the Khyber, Gomal, and Bolan. India's Adivasi hunters, gatherers, pastoralists, and farmers settled on the slopes of internal ranges like the Vindhya, Satpura, Aravalli, Western and Eastern Ghats, and on the Deccan and Chota Nagpur plateaus. These hilly regions inspired Adivasi legends, beliefs, and economies but fragmented local cultures. There is thus a wide array of gender norms, and also patrilineal, matrilineal, and bilateral lineages and inheritance patterns.

Unlike the Gangetic or Kaveri river plains, the harsh arid environments of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan, the Deccan Plateau, and the dry zones of southern Tamil Nadu are less populous and also inhibited political unification. Yet, early settlers attributed mythic elements even to such harsh habitats, which they saw as divine domains. Thus, Dravidian Tamil prosody of the classical Sangam era (ca. 200 BCE–400 CE) describes five ecological zones

(*tinais*) and their respective divinities. The most ancient were guarded by two pre-Aryan deities, i.e., a fierce goddess Korravai or Chuli with a spear who inhabited the sun scorched desert (*palai*) and her beguiling son Murukan whose sacred sites were the flowering hills (*kurinci*).¹⁷ Korravai gave life to Murukan and humans whom she defended from natural and demonic enemies. Stone and bone relics from the third millennium BCE across various Indian sites attest to the propitiation of such elemental goddesses.

Genetics and archaeology also confirm the settlement of Indo-Aryans from Central Asia, after an initial dispersal from the Caucasian steppes. The Indo-Aryans profoundly shaped Indian religious and social mores, including those of gender. Later waves of immigrants have added to India's ethnic and linguistic diversity. Geneticists point out that while some migratory groups were isolated due to geographical constraints, others were male dominated with fewer females, resulting in interactions with local women. This genetic imprint is evident in the subcontinent, and it seems to confirm the theory that there are few racially "pure" groups, since sexual and social intermingling were pervasive and routine through the millennia.

As an amalgam of thousands of distinct and syncretic ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities, the subcontinent is truly an anthropologist's paradise. However, this diversity masks a broad social matrix fused initially by the Adivasi, the Dravidian, and the Indo-Aryan Sanskritic components, each of which will be examined more closely in this chapter. Adivasis belong to several ethnic strains and speak languages from the Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Dravidian linguistic families, while a minority speak some unspecified languages.¹⁸ The presence of some tribes who speak minor Dravidian dialects indicates that a proto-Dravidian language was once spoken widely on the subcontinent. Dravidian Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, and Telugu are now largely spoken in south India, while languages derived from Sanskrit are spoken mainly in northern India. However, linguistic, ideological, and gender interactions have occurred for over two thousand years to form the core of the South Asian ethno-social matrix.

To add further complexity to this social tapestry, other immigrant streams forged together in the making of India, with the majority of new arrivals being men who had sexual contact with local women. In the classical era (300 BCE–600 CE), waves of immigrants from Asia, the Mediterranean, Arabia, and east Africa entered through the northwestern land passages or by sea. Under political or social duress, invaders and peaceful traders shared genes, ideas, and gender mores with local inhabitants. Similar transformations occurred after the seventh century CE when Islam arrived through Arab, Persian, Turkish, and west African Muslim rulers, soldiers, merchants, clerics, writers, artists, and artisans. In the last few centuries, western European adventurers, traders, missionaries, and colonists have also imprinted their gender norms and genes on South Asian society. In each

case, as few wives accompanied immigrant men in the premodern centuries, sexual contact with local women made India an ethnic “stew.” A. K. Ramanujan described the subtle and overt cross-fertilizations of ideas and ethnic strains as seepages across the “permeable membranes” of ethnicity, caste, class, gender, and religion. Such osmosis resulted in cultural and genetic similarities within South Asian populations, despite the region’s exterior social diversities.¹⁹

Adivasis

The earliest strata is that of the Adivasis who speak languages from different families and are also ethnically diverse, having different facial features, hair texture, height, bone structure, and skin pigmentation. There is also considerable cultural differences on gender norms, belief systems, and social organization. While some Adivasis are descendants of Paleolithic and Neolithic peoples, others later trickled in from Tibet and Burma to live as far north as Nepal and south in Sri Lanka. Adivasis constitute about 7 percent of India’s population, but they form up to 50 percent of the population in the northeast. Adivasis largely reside today in the wooded areas of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, the Himalayan foothills in Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh. They also live in the Chota Nagpur Plateau in Bihar, in Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa, Nagar Haveli, in the Nilgiri Hills of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, in Andhra Pradesh, in Kerala’s Western Ghats, and in the Andaman, Nicobar, and Lakshadweep islands.²⁰ Once found across the subcontinent, they were probably pushed into hilly enclaves by Dravidian and Indo-Aryan societies. The first cultural encounters occurred between some Adivasi and Dravidian communities, many of whom worship goddesses and some of whom have women priests and leaders due to the customs of matrilocality, matriliney, or polyandry. Some Adivasis who speak Dravidian languages are matrilineal; many Adivasis worship forest and earth goddesses; and some Tibeto-Burmese groups are matrilineal and polyandrous. The Bhils of Gujarat and Rajasthan are Adivasis who speak an Indo-Aryan language.

Folk Religion and Gender

Oral traditions on the mainland and Sri Lanka refer to some early inhabitants as *nagas*, or those who venerate zoomorphic totems like the snake (*naga*), or trees and plants.²¹ Similar myths and totems still prevail in Kashmir and among tribes like the Nagas in the northeast, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Sri Lanka. These mystical beliefs remain popular and resilient, and have seeped into Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The elite-caste male composers of sacred Hindu texts like the *Atharva Veda*, *Aranyakas*, *Upanishads*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata* lauded Indo-Aryan culture.

Yet, these works indicate extensive social and ideological mergers with non-Aryans ca. 1000–300 BCE. Folk beliefs probably penetrated high-caste religion through the mediation of wives and mothers. Thus, sage Aitareya who composed *Aitareya Upanishad* had a low-caste mother who worshiped the goddess; and the *Mahabharata* was composed by Vyasa, son of a *shudra* woman and a *kshatriya* prince.

Adivasi-Dravidian veneration for arboreal and zoomorphic totems seeped into Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism as practiced by all castes/classes. Even today, upper- and lower-caste women in Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu annually celebrate the festival of Naga Panchami by offering fruits and flowers (*puja*) to votive stone icons of snakes on platforms placed under banyan, pipala, and sal trees. Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina temples often have a space for a sacred tree (*sthala vriksha*).²² Female tree nymphs (*yakshis*) and male dryads (*yakshas*) are also sculpted on shrine walls. Hindu legends of zoomorphic deities associated with an anthropomorphic divinity appear in the *Purana* texts. They include elephant-headed Ganesa, son of Lord Shiva and the fount of knowledge; Hanuman, the monkey god and Lord Rama's greatest devotee; Adishesha (Original Serpent), Lord Vishnu's boon companion; and a guardian *naga* coiled around Shiva's neck.

Besides offering substantive *puja* rites to trees, stones, and animal totems, some Adivasis venerate a high spirit god, ancestors, and benign spirits to propitiate malignant spirits, and others have women priests. Folk religion was also influenced by Sanskritic ideologies controlled by high-caste men, who in turn selectively allowed for widely popular practices like iconic *puja* to penetrate their complex rituals. Not surprisingly, India's religious tapestry is so well meshed together that some ideas even seeped into Islamic practices on the subcontinent. The Parajas of Orissa have women priests but call them Gurumai, Sanskrit word for religious mother-teacher; and although they believe in a high spirit divinity (Sing-Bonga), they also worship a stone god (Pathar Buda/Munda). Paraja goddesses bear Sanskrit names—e.g., the agricultural goddess Jaker Debi (*devi*) and the earth mother Dharani Mata.²³ The Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh follow Tibetan Buddhism, but retain some Bon animist beliefs. The Lahaulas (Lalungs) of Himachal Pradesh are Buddhist-Hindu, but they also worship spirits through animal sacrifice. The Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir are Sunni Muslims, but retain unorthodox Hindu beliefs.

These mutual exchanges reveal that the Adivasis cannot be seen as prehistoric relics. Linguistic and religious interface with Indo-Aryan speakers of north India and the Dravidian speakers of south India expanded vocabularies and changed their views on women's roles, especially in the recent eras. While some Adivasis staunchly resisted mainstream norms, others interacted with other tribes and people from the plains, sometimes to their advantage.²⁴

Gender in Adivasi Societies

While it is important not to romanticize Adivasi societies as matriarchies in which women wield total power and men are the “second sex” by default, it is notable that many Adivasi groups have more egalitarian attitudes than do mainstream Indians. Economic patterns of foraging and farming shaped ideas of sexual rights, marriage, and divorce. Many groups traditionally allow women significant personal freedoms, and they also do not have a caste hierarchy. Although many groups have specific female roles in the household, others have women priests and community leaders. Many tribes abide by customs of female lineage and residence, while women have inheritance and sexual rights. These include descent and inheritance through either the eldest or the youngest daughter; women’s usufruct rights in a family; agricultural plots for each daughter; maternal avuncular jural rights over matrilineal property; matrilocality; uxorilocality in which husbands live with the wife’s maternal family; simple polyandry; levirate polyandry in which a woman is married to all the brothers; premarital sexual freedom; maternal over paternal rights; female divorce and remarry; and bilateral systems allowing both genders rights of residence, descent, or inheritance.

However, the adoption of Sanskritic patriarchal customs along with Western and modern norms has adversely affected Adivasi women and the environment.²⁵ The advent of the modern state has meant the loss of forest spaces, which has reduced hunting populations, while some others acquired farming techniques that increased food supply. In recent decades, the benefits of modern medicine have lowered death rates, but economic and cultural changes have meant the loss of some matrilineal inheritance rights. For example, women’s rights among the polyandrous Lahaulas of Himachal Pradesh and Todas of Tamil Nadu have eroded as they have adopted some patriarchal norms, but women retain primal rights of divorce and remarriage. While the Todas and some others give women certain sexual autonomy, there is a growing decline of these rights in the present era. Wet paddy cultivation brought prosperity to the Garos of Meghalaya, but conversion to Christianity has ended communal land ownership and matrilineal succession. Despite the diversity in gender norms, patriarchy and patrilocality have eroded egalitarian ideas in Adivasi societies which are under pressure by the modern state and economy. Patriarchal inheritance has led to a growing preference for sons, so that there is an imbalance in the ratio of females to males. In earlier centuries, the Oraons and Hos of eastern India had embryonic ideas of patriarchy, but during the colonial era when patriarchy was legally institutionalized, it became easier to adopt Sanskritic ideas of male land rights.²⁶

Adivasi economies today still range from hunting and foraging, pastoralism, subsistence farming, weaving, and metal craft. Subsistence agriculture practices could involve either working on settled plots or through rotational

horticulture (*jhum*) in which the field was left fallow for a few years. It is probable that in early nomadic society, women were the first foragers, while men hunted big game. This is evident among Adivasis like the Gharos and Khasis of Meghalaya whose women use the hoe in small *jhum* plots. The need to remain close to a base camp during pregnancy and motherhood may have led them first to experiment small farming with the hoe, in order to feed the family. However, with the later invention of the plow, men probably took over agriculture, and this new technology resulted in larger farms and food surpluses that were stored in urban centers.²⁷ Thus for millennia, Adivasis hunted, foraged, and practiced *jhum* horticulture in which communal and female rights are markedly greater than among Adivasis like the Santhals and Mundas who practice settled agriculture. The settlement of Dravidian and Indo-Aryan language groups near rivers probably confined Adivasis to the hills, but with seasonal migration to the plains to barter forest products like honey and medicinal herbs. After India's independence in 1947, such interactions between Adivasis and plains dwellers have increased. Moreover, as many Adivasis now practice settled, wet agriculture with cash crops, land ownership has become privatized. The property is often in male hands, while female property and usufruct rights have declined.

Gender divisions are socially imposed through usage, rituals, and taboos, and they are sometimes shaped by sexual differences. The most egalitarian are the tribes that do not own private property. There is a great variation in the patterns of lineage, marriage, residence, and gender division of labor, which is also partly true of some Dravidian mainstream communities of south India and Sri Lanka. The Birhor and Korwa Adivasis of Jharkhand in Bihar practice gender divisions in hunting. Birhor men hunt large game and refrain from sex during the hunting period, while women tackle smaller animals except during menstruation. They are peripatetic hunters who still resist the plow, and they do not own either private or communal property. Although patrilineal and patrilocal, their women sit on tribal councils. Gender division of labor is enforced through ritual taboos based on blood-letting and menstruation. The Korwa hunters have more recently taken to farming, but they allow women to sit on the village councils.

There are diverse practices on marriage and property ownership. For example, the Rabhas of Arunachal Pradesh are monogamous and patriarchal, but the Monpas practice both polygyny and polyandry. In Himachal Pradesh, the Kinners are polyandrous, but property is carried down the male line. The Lahaulas have no caste system, maternal rights supersede the paternal, women have premarital sexual freedom, and they can divorce and remarry. The Todas of Tamil Nadu trace lineage through matrilineal clans, but property is transferred through men. They practice polyandry, women can have multiple partners, and they have maternal rights over children. Some Adivasis frown upon marital infidelity, others are more tolerant, while

some practice levirate polyandry. Tribal sexual norms differ from tribe to tribe, as seen in the censure of extramarital relationships by the Parajas, but its acceptance by the Todas of Tamil Nadu.²⁸

The first Sanskrit textual reference to levirate polyandry (*niyoga*) in Indo-Aryan society occurs in the epic *Mahabharata* (800–300 BCE). The period marked rapid expansion of Sanskritic society to regions once occupied by Dravidian and Adivasi communities. The heroine Draupadi was married simultaneously to five Pandava brothers, indicating that this non-Aryan custom was cautiously introduced into Aryan society. While polyandry does sanction some sexual freedom for women, allowing women to remarry and thus to avoid the stigma of the inauspicious widow in mainstream society, it does not guarantee equality or social advantage to women. In colonial Punjab, heavy agricultural tax led many Jat men to emigrate permanently for work or to join the army. The wife/widow remained with her husband's brother who would marry her if the joint family needed her dowry or an heir. In this form of *niyoga*, widows were not ostracized, and her husband's line continued after his death. Yet, as the women had little choice and they were viewed as family property, abuse and rape were fairly common.

Women have far greater rights among Adivasi groups than in mainstream Indian society. For example, matrilineal, Austric-Mons language groups like the Khasis of Meghalaya allow women to be high priests, the youngest daughter inherits family land, and all daughters have usufruct rights over trees. Sons belong to the maternal clan, while husbands live in the wife's maternal home, but holding some village jural rights. Khasis accept premarital sexual freedom, but do not condone postmarital adultery for either sex. Originally *jhum* agriculturalists, their economy has now been transformed, and women's rights have eroded.²⁹

Tribal marriages and matrilineal inheritance patterns are being transformed, often irrevocably in the consumer economy. Some changes are beneficial, while others reduce the woman into an object. Among polygamous tribes, co-wives shared the burden of household and field work. Today, monogamy has meant greater gender parity, but more confinement to the household. There is a healthy resistance among the Parajas of Orissa to their former customs of bride capture and marriage between a girl and her maternal uncle. However, the earlier tradition in which a groom paid a bride-price in kind or as service to her parents has been reversed. Today, the parents of Paraja brides pay the groom a dowry, and also undertake all wedding expenses. Among the Bondas and Saoras of Orissa, the bride was traditionally *older* than her groom, in order to give her a stronger hand in the household; but increasingly, men are older than their wives, leaving her at a disadvantage.

Many Tibeto-Burman- and Dravidian-speaking Adivasi women have considerable freedom of movement and sexual rights. They work outside the

home as farmers and traders, and negotiate family settlements. Some Tibeto-Burmese in India include the matrilocal Boros of Assam; the uxoro-local Garos of Meghalaya; and the Kinners and Lahaulas of Himachal Pradesh, who practice levirate polyandry. Nepali groups like the Newar, Limbu, Gurung, and Tamang do not regard women as economic burdens, but allow them to initiate divorce, to return to the natal home, and to remarry with the clan's consent.³⁰

Dravidian Adivasis resemble mainstream Dravidian communities that value female power. Thus, the tribal Oraons of Bihar worship a mother goddess as do the people of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala. The tribal Gonds of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Orissa are polyandrous like the Nayars of Kerala, and Gond women practice *jhum* agriculture.

Tribal women's rights have been marginalized during the colonial and postindependence eras. Whereas women make decisions among hunters and gatherers, and in *jhum* agriculture, farming in settled plots often entails the reduction of female property rights. The trend to mainstream Adivasis today means the adoption of patriarchal customs that reduce female status, so that the girl child becomes unwelcome. Thus, the Santhals and Oraons of Jharkhand now practice the custom of female dowry and place taboos against widows. In many regions, the sex ratio of women to men has decreased in conformity with the rest of Indian society. However, the decrease in tribal sex ratios is not as severe as among affluent, often educated Indians in cities like Delhi where they have access to medical technology for female feticide. Such cities have a negligible tribal population. In 1930 Adivasis acquired the legal status of Scheduled Tribes of India (ST), and after independence in 1947, they were given special reservations in government schools and offices. Despite tribal matrilineal structures and women's right to sit on councils, their position has been hampered by the patriarchal biases of modernization and by India's economic liberalization. The nation's policies have fluctuated between total neglect and overzealous interference by mainstreaming Adivasis. Although Article 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees equal rights for all and Article 15 (3 and 4) tries to safeguard women and children, tribal women are the most marginalized persons who are ripe targets for sexual exploitation and violence.

Other problems stem from the diversity of Adivasi property rights. Thus, despite women's usufruct rights among Khasis, Garos, Rabha, and Jaintia, men largely control jural rights over property. Since only unmarried women and widows have managerial rights over property among the Santhals and Ho tribes, women increasingly remain single, and their birthrate has been lowered. Nagas have begun to view women as property, and their traditions of bride capture and bride-price have now deteriorated into blatant kidnapping. Other unhealthy social practices include polygyny among the wealthy, marriages between older men and underage girls, and the prostitution of

wives to offset a husband's debt. Few tribal women sit in legislative bodies in India, and when they do attend meetings, they are physically deterred by men.³¹ Since Santhal women had the freedom to choose their sexual partners, rape was not a social problem until recently, when dominant non-tribal groups have regarded them as sexually permissive, and thus prey. Dalit and tribal women have been similarly raped across the centuries by dominant-caste men. Santhals have also been cheated of their communal land by such dominant groups who entice the tribals to borrow beyond their means. The mass rapes accelerated in the 1970s immediately after Santhals protested the alienation of tribal land on the instigation of civil rights feminist groups like Stri Sangharsh.³² For decades, the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) has documented cases of rape of women from Adivasi or ST, and Scheduled Castes or Dalits (SC).

Dravidian Legacies

Dravidian language speakers constitute 23 percent of India's population. The majority are from the south, and they speak Tamil (in Tamil Nadu), Telugu (in Andhra Pradesh), Kannada (in Karnataka), and Malayalam (in Kerala). Tamil is the oldest Dravidian language, and the antiquity of Dravidian culture has been proved by burial urns at Adichanallur, Tamil Nadu (ca. 800 BCE).³³ During the Tamil Sangam classical era (200 BCE–400 CE), men and women poets gathered in Madurai at conferences hosted by the Pandya kings. The ancient Tamil literary corpus consists of the grammatical work *Tolkappiyam*, poetic anthologies, five epics, books of aphorism, and early Hindu devotional (*bhakti*) hymns by women and men.

Dravidian culture lauded female power based on chastity, and one of its prime and probably most archaic divinity was the mother goddess. That Dravidian speakers form an archaic strata is evident in the presence of Adivasis who speak Dravidian languages, e.g., the Konds, Oraons, and the Brahuis of Baluchistan, Pakistan. The Adivasi-Dravidian imprint on Hinduism has been profound, especially visible in the iconic worship of a mother goddess, and her personification as energy (*shakti*). These ideas were incorporated later into Sanskrit scriptures by *brahman* priests. Implicit in Dravidian folk culture are the veneration of animals, forests, hills, rivers, mountains, and stones, and the belief in spirit beings immanent in nature. These beliefs are now central to Hinduism and are especially visible in the folk practices of rural and forest dwellers.³⁴

Most Dravidian communities are patrilineal and patrilocal, but there are also high- or low-ranking caste matrilineal, matrilocal, or polyandrous groups, which can be Hindu, Buddhist, or even Christian. Dravidian culture in south India allows women greater freedom of movement than women in the north. Cross-cousin marriages are common, and great honor is given to the maternal uncle whose jural responsibilities are especially sacrosanct.

The most stunning examples of Dravidian matrilineal communities are in Kerala, where the former kings received the throne from the maternal line. Polyandry was common among the high-caste, landed community of Nayers, and the working-caste Ezhavas frowned on polyandry but follow matrilineal succession. Until the mid-twentieth century, Nayar men served as elite warriors for local rajahs, and Nayar women formed a polyandrous “connection” (*sambandham*) with *brahman* Nambudiris whose first wife was Nambudiri. In their joint matriliney (*marumakkatyam*), descendants of a matriarch and her brother (known as *karnavan*) lived under one roof (*taravadu*). Women shared property equally with men, but it was managed by the matriarch and *karnavan*. Nambudiri *brahman* men sometimes had a *sambandham* with women from the matrilineal Tiyya community, which allows women divorce. These customs eroded in the colonial era and have almost disappeared in modern India whose laws favor patriarchy.³⁵ However, matriliney has been recently reinforced among the Ezhavas due to short-term migration to the Persian Gulf where the community has reaped new wealth after centuries of poverty. Male workers diligently remit savings to India to the father-in-law who invests in matrilineal property.³⁶

The impressive range of gender norms indicates that it is unwise to “essentialize” Indian mores as “traditional” and static, or to equate matriliney simply with sexual freedom for women. Some groups like the Sri Lankan Tamils lay great value upon marital fidelity and premarital female chastity, but they follow matrilineal or bilateral descent or inheritance. The Chettis of Tamil Nadu are matrilineal with maternal avuncular rights, while the Muslim Mappilas of Kerala are matrilineal and matrilocal. However, they strongly venerate female chastity and see it as an empowering virtue, while strictly censuring its loss.³⁷ High-caste Tamils are patriarchal and religiously conservative, yet even here there are some exceptions. The Tamil *brahmans* of Kalladaikurichi village share liberal inheritance customs due to proximity to Kerala. While most Tamil *brahmans* inherit land through the father, and women are only given movable property in the form of jewelry or household goods, Kalladaikurichi *brahmans* give the daughter a household plot to grow rice (*pazhaidu kaani*), thus ensuring her economic independence even after marriage. The daughter resides with her parents and visits her husband every day at a specified time.³⁸

Lastly, the Brahuis of Baluchistan are a pocket of Dravidian speakers among Aryan language peoples. The Baluchi Hills contain some of the early rural sites of pre-Harappan culture that flowered into the great cities of the Indus Civilization. The cultures at Zhob, Nal, and Kulli (ca. 3000 BCE) worshipped images of the goddess, the bull as an emblem of male virility, and fertility as represented by the pipala fig tree. The presence of Brahui Dravidian speakers among an Aryan language populace today suggests that this region was the original home of proto-Dravidian speakers, until Indo-Aryan Sanskrit became dominant after 1800 BCE. In view of the millennium

of trade between Mesopotamia and the Indus cities, it has been suggested that proto-Dravidian was related to the language of Elamite in ancient Persia and Mesopotamia.³⁹ Fertility worship was common in all these civilizations, as were icons of goddesses. As trade involves exchanges of ideas, language, and gene pools, as well as of goods, these civilizations probably shared some common features.

Indo-Aryan or Sanskritic Legacies

The most significant mergers were between Dravidian cultures and that of patriarchal Indo-Aryan clans who spoke Sanskrit. The Indo-Aryans settled around the Indus and its tributaries ca. 1800 BCE. Over time, they spread to the east and south, merging along the way with local groups. Sanskrit is the ancestor of most north Indian languages spoken by 75 percent of India's population. It has also had a profound impact on Dravidian languages, society, and religion. India's ethnic and social fusions resulted in a dominant Sanskritic paradigm infused with pre-Aryan ideas. This is embodied in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The Indo-Aryans brought a pantheon of gods and goddesses, but the *Vedas* (Books of Knowledge), a compendium of Hindu hymns, liturgies, and philosophy, were almost exclusively by male priest bards (*brahmans*) for fire rituals (*yajna*). The Indo-Aryan influence on religion, gender, and caste will be examined in the next chapter.

NOTES

1. My translation of the Sanskrit verse, “*Sa tasmin evākāse striyamājagāma babusobhamānāmumām baimavatim; tānho vāca, kimetad yaksamiti,*” in Swami Sarvananda, ed., *Kenopanishad* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1970), 30–31.

2. For the period before 1947, the term “India” refers to the South Asian subcontinent; thereafter to the modern nation of India.

3. See M. N. Srinivas, “A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization,” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 15 (1956): 481–96; Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 6–45; Srinivas, “Varna and Caste,” in *Social Stratification*, ed. Dipankar Gupta (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 28–34.

4. Census of India 2001 reports the sex ratio as 933 (f) per 1000 (m), but 10 districts of Punjab and Haryana have lower rates, e.g., 766 in Fatehgarh Sahib. See also Kalpana Sharma, “No Girls Please, We’re Indian,” *The Hindu*, August 29, 2004, 1–3.

5. On caste and ethnicity see Iravati Karve, *Hindu Society: An Interpretation* (Poona: Deshmukh Prakashan, 1961). Recent genomic studies confirm waves of settlement and ethnic mingling in West Asia, South Asia, and Europe; see Mark Shwartz, “People from Distant Lands Have a Strikingly Similar Genetic Traits,” *Stanford Report*, January 8, 2003, <http://www.stanfordu.edu/dept/news/news/2003/january8/genetics18.html>; Partha Majumdar, “Indian Caste Origins: Genomic Insights and Future Outlook,” *Genome Research* 11 (2001): 931–32,

<http://genome.cshlp.org/content/11/6/931.full>; *Genetic Chaos*, http://vetinarilord.blogspot.com/2005/04/y_chromosome_lineages_trace_diffusion.html; V. N. Mishra, "Prehistoric Human Colonization of India," *Journal of Bioscience* 26, no. 4 (November 2001): 491–531, *vide*, 494–500; Kumarasamy Thangaraj and others, "Genetic Affinities of the Andaman Islanders, a Vanishing Human Population," *Current Biology* 13, no. 2 (January 21, 2003): 86–93, [http://www.cell.com/current_biology/abstract/S0960_9822\(02\)01336_2](http://www.cell.com/current_biology/abstract/S0960_9822(02)01336_2). Notable studies are by Marcus Feldman of Stanford University with U.S., French, and Russian scientists; Michael Bamshad of the Eccles Institute of Human Genetics, Utah with scientists at Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India and Anthropological Survey of India, Chennai; and Kumarasamy Thangaraj at the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad, India on Adivasis in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

6. Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *India, An Archaeological History: Paleolithic Beginnings to Early Historic Foundations* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 82–88; Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, J. D. Clark, J. N. Pal, and G. R. Sharma, "An Upper Paleolithic Shrine?" *Antiquity* 57 (1983): 88–94.

7. Gregory Possehl, *The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press [Rowman & Littlefield], 1990); Gregory Possehl, *The Indus Age: The Writing System* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Asko Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Script* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Richard Allchin and Bridget Allchin, *Origins of a Civilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); R. E. Mortimer Wheeler, *Civilization of the Indus Valley and Beyond* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966); Chakrabarti, *India, An Archaeological History*; B. B. Lal, "The Indus Civilization," in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. A. L. Basham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 11–19; S. R. Rao, "From the Indus Civilization to the Golden Age," in *Ananya: A Portrait of India*, ed. S. N. Rao and Nirmal Matto (New York: Association of Indians in America, 1996), 35–62; Shereen Ratnagar, *The End of the Great Harappan Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); M. Rafique Mughal, *Ancient Cholistan: Archaeology and Architecture* (Lahore: Ferozsons, 1997); George Dales and Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, *Excavations at Mohenjodaro, Pakistan: With an Account of the Pottery from the 1950 Excavations of Sir Mortimer Wheeler* (New York: Prehistory Press, 1991); Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (Karachi: American Institute of Pakistan Studies and Oxford University Press, 1998); B. V. Subarayappa, *Indus Script: Its Nature and Structure* (Madras: New Era Publishers, 1995).

8. Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (London: Phaidon, 2000); Roy Craven, *Indian Art: A Concise History*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997); Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1953); David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

9. Chakrabarti, *India, An Archaeological History*, 217–36.

10. Cynthia Humes, "Vindhyavasini: Local Goddess Yet Great Goddess," in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 49–76; Diana Eck, "Ganga: The Goddess Ganges in Hindu Sacred Geography," in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, Hawley and Wulff, 137–53; William S. Sax, *Mountain Goddess: Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

11. Jaganath Dash and Subodh Kumar Mohanty, "Religion and Crises of Life among the Paraja of Koraput District, Orissa," in *Tribal Transformation in India, Tribals of India*, ed. Buddhadeb Chaudhuri, vol. 5 (Delhi: Inter India Publications, 1992), 12.

12. Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 174.

13. *Ibid.*, 174-77.

14. Pupul Jayakar, *The Earth Mother: Legends, Ritual Arts, and Goddesses of India* (San Francisco and New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990), photographs 1-14 of prehistoric female signs and figurines.

15. Sita Anantha Raman, "Popular Pujas in Public Places: Lay Rituals in South Indian Temples," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 5, no. 2 (August 2001): 165-98.

16. Rajesh Kocchar, *The Vedic People: Their History and Geography* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004), 118-40.

17. The five Tamil regions (*tinai*s) and their deities were hills (*kurinci*) guarded by Murukan; deserts (*palai*) of goddess Korraivai; forest pastures (*mullai*) of Krishna, the northern god whom Tamils call Tirumal; coasts (*neytal*) of god Varuna; and the river agricultural tracts (*marutam*) of Valiyon/Balarama. George L. Hart III, *The Poems of the Ancient Tamil: Their Milieu and Their Sanskrit Counterparts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975); A. K. Ramanujan, *The Interior Land scape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967); Raman, "Popular Pujas in Public Places."

18. Indo Aryan languages include Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali, Rajasthani, Oriya, Kashmiri, Tulu and tribal dialects like Bhili (over 75%); Dravidian Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and tribal languages like Gondi, Oraon, Khond, Kurukh (22.5%); Austro Asiatic tribal languages like Santali, Ho, Khasi, Mundari, Korku, Savara, Kharia (1.1%); Tibeto Burman languages like Manipuri, Bod Buro, Tirpuri, Garo, Lughal, Karbi, Po, etc. (.96%); Arabic and other languages (rest).

19. A. K. Ramanujan, "The Indian Oedipus," in *Indian Literature: Proceedings of a Seminar*, ed. Arabinda Poddar (Simla: Institute of Advanced Study, 1972), 127-37; see also Wendy O'Flaherty, *Tales of Sex and Violence: Folklore, Sacrifice, and Danger in the Jaiminiya Brahmana* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 11.

20. Census of India 1981 states that the largest tribal groups are in Lakshadweep (93% tribal), Mizoram (93%), Nagaland (80%), Arunachal Pradesh (70%), Manipur (30%), Sikkim (25%), Madhya Pradesh (23%), and no tribals in Haryana, Punjab, Delhi, and Pondicherry. See also Buddhadeb Chaudhuri, *Tribal Transformation in India*, vol. 1, ix.

21. See Iravati Karve's lucid deconstruction of the *Mahabharata* entitled *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* (Delhi: Sangam Books, 1974), 94-106. Karve examines the story of the burning of the Khandava forest by Arjuna and Krishna as sanctioned by Vedic priests and the death of non Aryan Nagas in the forests, indicating the advance of Aryan culture on non Aryan terrain.

22. On rites near trees, see M. Amritalingam, *Sacred Trees of Tamilnadu* (Chennai: C. P. Ramaswami Environmental Education Center, 1998); Bansi Lal Malla, *Trees in Indian Art, Mythology, and Folklore* (New Delhi: Aryan, 2000);

Michael Meister, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture: South India, Lower Dravida Desa, 200 BCE CE 1824* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); K. R. Srinivasan, *Temples of South India* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 1973); Rama Sivaram, *Early Chola Art: Origin and Emergence of Style* (Delhi: Navrang, 1994); Raman, "Popular Pujas in Public Places."

23. Dash and Mohanty, "Religion and Crises of Life among the Paraja of Koraput District, Orissa," vol. 5, 12 13.

24. Buddhadeb Chaudhuri, ed., "Preface," in *Tribal Transformation in India*, viii x. Other articles on tribal gender, sexuality, and religion in this five volume collection: Malabika Dasgupta and Asis Banerjee, "Jhumias as the Way of Life of the Jhumias: An Analysis of Data from Tripura," vol. 1, chap. 3, 28 36; A. K. Adhikary, "System of Exchange among Tribals: A Case Study of the Santhal in a Village of Bhirbhum, West Bengal," vol. 1, chap. 7, 75 87; Geeta Menon, "Socio Economic Transition and the Tribal Women," vol. 1, chap. 8, 88 109; Dash and Mohanty, "Religion and Crises of Life among the Paraja of Koraput District, Orissa," vol. 5, chap. 1, 3 22; Stephen Fuchs, "The Religion of the Indian Tribals," vol. 5, chap. 2, 23 51; Jaganath Dash and Subodh Kumar Mohanty, "An Analytical Study of Witchcraft among the Mundas of Midnapur," vol. 5, chap. 12, 153 78; Biswantha Banerjee, "Religious Practices in a Santhal Village in West Bengal," vol. 5, chap. 6, 95 100. See also Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 82 151; Anthony R. Walker, *The Toda of South India: A New Look*, Studies in Society and Social Anthropology (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1986); Christoph von Furer Haimendorff, *Tribes of India: The Struggle for Survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

25. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parhley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952).

26. Shashank Shekhar Sinha, *Restless Mothers and Turbulent Daughters: Situating Tribes in Gender Studies* (Kolkata: Stree, 2005).

27. Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own*, 267, 307; Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan, *Gender and Tribe: Women, Land, and Forests in Jharkhand* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991).

28. Walker, *The Toda of South India*, chap. 3.

29. Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own*, 101 9.

30. *Ibid.*, 138 315, *vide*, 267, 307; and personal interview with Bina Agarwal, October 2000, Santa Clara University.

31. Tiplut Nongbri, "Gender Issues and Tribal Development," in *Tribal Self Management in North East India*, ed. Bhupinder Singh, vol. 2 of *Antiquity to Modernity in Tribal India*, Tribal Studies of India Series No. T183 (Delhi: Inter India Publications, 1998), 221 43.

32. Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800 1900*, "Appendix A: A Mass Rape in Santhal Parganas" (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997), 139 42.

33. T. S. Subramanian, "Urn Burial Site Found at Adichanallur," *The Hindu*, Sunday, March 14, 2004, 11. The author quotes Dr. T. Satyamurthy, Superintending Archaeologist and Director of the excavation, who describes the urn burial as similar to those described in the Sangam texts *Narrinai*, *Purananuru*, and *Patittrupattu*. See also Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 95.

34. Kamil V. Zvelebil, *Tamil Traditions on Subrahmanya Murugan* (Madras: Institute of Asian Studies, 1991); Thomas B. Coburn, *Devi Mahatmya: The Crystalization of the Goddess Tradition*, 3rd ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997); Raman, "Popular Pujas in Public Places"; Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha Bhakti: The Early History of Krsna Devotion in South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute Kali and Krsna: Dark Visions of the Terrible and Sublime in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975); Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*; David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); A. K. Ramanujan, trans., *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Vishnu by Nammalvar* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 95.

35. Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own*, 109–33, 171–76; G. Arunima, *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar c. 1850–1940* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004).

36. Prema A. Kurien, *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 105–32.

37. Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own*, 141.

38. Sita Anantha Raman, *Getting Girls to School: Social Reform in the Tamil Districts, 1870–1930* (Calcutta: Stree, 1996), 106.

39. Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973); Zvelebil, *Tamil Traditions on Subrahmanya Murugan*.

VEDIC GODDESSES AND WOMEN

Aditi is the heaven, Aditi is mid air,
 Aditi is the mother and the sire and son
 Aditi is all gods, Aditi five classed men,
 Aditi all that has been born and shall be born.
Rig Veda 10.129¹

INDO-ARYANS: LANGUAGE, ETHNICITY, AND GENDER

The pre-Aryan motifs of maternal power and sacred sexuality in Indian thought were expanded by the Indo-Aryans whose hierarchical norms of gender and caste became the social grid for India. These tribes had originally dispersed from the Caucasus with other Aryans (*arya* or noble) who shared mythic legends and spoke related languages like Avestan (ancient Iranian), Greek, and Latin. Most akin were the Sanskrit and Avestan speakers who first migrated into Central Asia (ca. 3000 BCE), after which the Avestans moved into Persia. The Indo-Aryans migrated to Afghanistan, and then trickled into the Punjab, settling beside the Indus as herders and small farmers (ca. 1800 BCE).² Sanskrit-Avestan affinities are evident after separation in their scriptures, the Hindu *Rig Veda* (ca. 1700–1000 BCE), and the Zoroastrian *Zend Avesta* (ca. 1000 BCE).³ The two groups venerated fire and initiated boys and girls in rites called *upanayana* (Skt.) and *navjot* (Av.) rites. However, around 500 BCE, Sanskrit patriarchs began to discontinue women's *upanayana*, which allowed them to learn the *Vedas* and conduct fire rituals. As knowledge is commensurate with power, women in India therefore suffered a serious setback.⁴

Horse bones and representations indicate the Indo-Aryan presence near the river Amu Darya (Oxus) and in Afghanistan.⁵ Their presence in India is first indicated at Daimabad (1700 BCE) where a cylindrical seal etched with an image of a horse chariot has been discovered, evidence of trade with some pre-Aryan towns in the post-Indus era. The *Rig Veda* makes a rare reference to potsherds, but the authors apparently did not know of the large,

sophisticated Indus cities or of their use of seals in commerce. The Indo-Aryans lived in pit dwellings in Afghanistan, and in wattle and daub huts in Punjab, relying chiefly on barter for trade.⁶

Although all Aryans share Eurasian genetic markers, the term “Aryan” is primarily a linguistic definition, rather than one of “race” as suggested by European colonialists, since the Aryans exchanged traditions and gene pools with local inhabitants at each step of their long journeys. This was evident in India where the expansion of a dominant Indo-Aryan society meant that non-Aryan communities often adopted Sanskrit cultural ideas, perhaps mediated by women with offspring of mixed ethnicity. Fearing dilution of caste purity and lineage, elite Indo-Aryans guarded their women’s chastity, although the men married or cohabited with local or lower-caste women. Despite these norms on sexual behavior, genetic evidence points to complex ethno-social interactions that began 4,000 years ago in India.

VEDAS: TEXT AND CONTEXT

Knowledge as Salvation and Power

The more notable Indo-Aryan contributions were Sanskrit and the sacrosanct *Vedas* (Books of Knowledge), which Hindus regard as revelation (*shruti*). The *Rig Veda* hymnal (*sambhita*) stems from the early era near the Indus (ca. 1700–1000 BCE). The *Sama*, *Yajur*, and *Atharva Vedas*, and the Vedic subsections of liturgy (*Brahmanas*), esoteric forest books (*Aranyakas*), and mystical philosophies (*Upanishads* or *Vedanta*) were composed on the Ganges plains in the later Vedic era (ca. 1000–300 BCE).

Except for a few hymns in the feminine voice, the *Rig Veda*’s authors were largely priest bards (*brahmins*), but it is conceivable that these men appropriated some women’s verses. The priests chanted the prayer verses (*mantras*) to nature divinities at fire sacrifices (*yajna/homa*) in the land of the “seven rivers” (*sapta-sindhu*), namely the Indus and its tributaries, one of which was the Saraswati or Ghaggar-Hakra, which submerged ca. 1700 BCE.⁷ We, therefore, deduce that the Indo-Aryans arrived prior to this catastrophe and composed the early *Rig Vedic* verses soon afterward.⁸ Women were initially taught the *Vedas*, but by the end of the later Vedic era, they were largely excluded from this body of knowledge.

Varna and Patriarchy

Indo-Aryan society was based on patriarchal lineage and residence, and the occupational division based on ritual color (*varna*). The three initial classes of *brahmins*, kings and soldiers (*ksbatriya/rajanya*), and common folk (*vaishya*) were distinguished by their *varna*, i.e., yellow, red, and brown, respectively. This initial *varna* system was nonhereditary, as seen in

this *Rig Vedic* hymn to Soma. The bard here describes his father as a healer and his mother as a farm worker:

Various indeed are our concerns,
 And men's vocations manifold:
 The carpenter and leech desire
 A break; the priest a Soma rite.
 The smith, with dry wood on his hearth,
 With wings of birds to fan the fire,
 With anvil and with glowing flames,
 Desires a patron rich in gold.
 A poet I: my father a leech,
 Mother the upper millstone turns
 With various aims we strive for wealth,
 As if we followed after kine.

RV 9.112⁹

The *varna* system was transformed after Indo-Aryans absorbed local non-Aryans as the menial *shudra* caste when their Sanskritic community spread to the Yamuna Basin, east on the Ganges plains, and south in the peninsula (1000–300 BCE). The origin of the *shudra* is first described in the Purusha Sukta, a later *Rig Vedic* hymn (RV 10.91) about creation, including the origins of the *varnas* through a primal sacrifice of Purusha (Primal Man Being). The explicit assumption is that the first human was male, and the highest *varna* was the *brahman* who emerged from Purusha's head, while the *kshatriya* emerged from his arms, the *vaishya* from his torso, the *shudra* from his feet. *Shudras* were allotted the lowest status, and their origin in Purusha's feet probably indicated their menial functions, while their ritual color of black possibly referred to darker skin pigmentation.

The *shudras* were needed for labor as Indo-Aryan society expanded, and women were necessary to reproduce the community. However, as elite society feared miscegenation, birth (*jati*) became central to the *varna* system, as were the behavioral norms for elite women and the *shudra*. However, while Sanskritic society frowned on relations between high-caste women and low-caste men, high-caste men were not bound by these rules. Moreover, while non-Aryans were inducted into society but *denigrated* as *shudras*, folk beliefs were absorbed and *elevated* through Sanskritic terms and values. Geographical expansion led to large kingdoms and towns marked by occupational complexity and ethnic pluralism. Endogamous, hereditary subgroups (*jatis*) proliferated. The *varna-jati* or caste system developed regional specificities when India was later flooded by diverse immigrants from Asia, Arabia, and Europe (200 BCE–500 CE).

While the *Vedas* represent a predominantly male vision of divine and mortal females, until about 500 BCE, some Vedic women etched their personalities and concerns upon the scriptures, which were orally transmitted and

written down at this time. Gifted women and *shudras* were initially invested with the sacred thread at their *upanayana*, which allowed them to study and chant the *Vedas*. After this period, however, *upanayana* became the exclusive prerogative of men from the three elite castes who became known as the “twice born” (*dvija*).

Elite-caste mundane ambitions for royal power and material advancement were glorified by *Brahmana* liturgies. Territorial contentions led to the exaltation of female chastity, and women retreated into the household. Meanwhile, dissident sages (*rishis*) proclaimed the irrelevance of caste and gender for mystical salvation in the *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* (700–300 BCE). While society revered their humanistic ideals, few women could shed domestic duties to become forest ascetics.¹⁰

Women who married across *varna* lines took on their husband’s caste. Despite Aryan dominance, pre-Aryan practices were transferred through social and sexual contact, so that they actively shaped hybrid Sanskrit-Hindu culture. For example, sage Aitareya, author of *Aitareya Brahmana*, *Aranyaka*, and *Upanishad*, had a *shudra* mother named Itara whose matrilineal pre-Aryan heritage helped to identify Aitareya (CU 3.16.7).¹¹ Neglected by his *brahman* father during a ritual, Aitareya called upon Goddess Earth, his mother’s tutelary deity, to inspire his composition of the *Aitareya Upanishad*.¹² It is also intriguing that although the Purusha Sukta states that the *shudra* emerged from Purusha’s feet, *Aitareya Upanishad* symbolically describes this male being as Cosmic Intelligence quickened by the Life Force (Brahman) entering through his *feet*.¹³ The *Chandogya Upanishad* also indicates that not all *shudras* became menials, and that *shudra* sages were respected as *brahmins*. Thus, sage Satyakama Jabala, the illegitimate son of a servant woman, was accepted by an upper-caste mentor as his worthy disciple (CU 4.4.1–5).¹⁴ Clearly, some Vedic texts by elite-caste men challenged the *varna* hierarchy, and history points to gifted *shudra* men respected as brave *kshatriya* rulers, wise men, or individuals with useful skills.

However, the equation of fair skin with the Aryan “race” and ritual purity condemned most *shudras* of pre-Aryan or mixed descent to become rural serfs who ensured the success of new Aryan colonies, or urban menials who served towns like Hastinapura and Varanasi. Ironically, over time, pre-Aryan ritual taboos against the spilling of blood and body fluids were used to restrict women from public rituals during menstruation and childbirth. Low-caste hunters, tanners, butchers, cremation workers, and scavengers were largely deemed unfit to hear or chant the *Vedas*.¹⁵

Intercaste marriages were more frequent when the three higher *varnas* shared traditions. With the arrival of fresh immigrants from Asia, Europe, and Arabia after 200 BCE, classical texts placed the onus of maintaining caste purity on women who were cautioned against foreign men. Yet, intercaste marriages remained common as late as the tenth century CE, according to

the Muslim visitor Alberuni.¹⁶ Recent genetic studies indicate that the Eurasian component is greater among the high castes, but that society was forged by Indo-Aryans, pre-Aryans, and later immigrants.¹⁷ With each merger, the rights of ordinary women were jeopardized, but female divinities were exalted.

RIG VEDIC RELIGION AND SOCIETY (1700–1000 BCE)

The *Rig Veda* consists almost entirely of a hymnal of 1,028 metrical verses or *mantras* arranged in ten books (*mandalas*). *Mandalas* 2–8 comprise the nucleus; *mandala* 9 is addressed to Soma, god of the hallucogenic juice of the ephedra plant;¹⁸ and *mandalas* 1 and 10 were composed last (ca. 1000 BCE). Among the 33 nature divinities were goddesses Aditi the primordial mother; Ushas (dawn); Prithvi (mother earth); Ratri (night); Aranyani (forest); Vak (speech); Saraswati (inspiration, the river); Virutri (guardian of cattle). The chief gods were Agni (fire); Indra (lightning and war); Soma; Dyaus-Pitr or Father Heaven; sun gods like Savitr, Surya, Aditya; Varuna (healer, dispenser of justice); and Vayu (wind).¹⁹

Male *brahmans* and some learned women (*brahmavadinis*) and female ritualists (*hotris*) superintended the sacrifices in which Agni served as the messenger from the supplicant to the gods.²⁰ Men often prayed for earthly boons like children, health, longevity, or prosperity, or mercy from transgressions like “wine, anger, dice, and carelessness” (RV 7.86.6). The giver of mercy was father Varuna who maintained Rta, the cosmic-moral order that was later equated with moral laws, religion, and justice (*dharma*). The *mantras* were carefully enunciated and rendered, as an improper ritual would result in moral/material disorder (*anrta/adharma*). Few female supplicants asked for mercy for sins, but prayed for children, as motherhood was highly valued in this small community. Women also jointly initiated sacrifices with their husbands, since their prayers as a “moral wedded couple” (*dharma pati-patni*) were highly esteemed.

Rig Vedic Goddesses

Although the deities are nebulous in their anthropomorphism, their sexuality and gender are explicitly expressed in the hymns. Goddesses are described as chaste matrons and wives who were often lauded as the cow, much cherished by Indo-Aryans for its dairy products, beef, leather, and use as currency. Goddess Ushas is described as “a dancing girl” who “puts on bright ornaments” and “uncovers her breast as a cow reveals her swollen udder” (RV 1.92.1–18). Mother Earth Prithvi is “the broad one” who bears life and sustains all things (5.84; 1.185). Male divine masculinity is also explicit. Rudra is the “brown and white bull,” “mighty,” “brown-hued,” “fair lipped” (2.19.5–9), wielding the lightning bolt, driving a steed,

fertilizing the earth. Indra the “thunderbolt wielder” who slew demon Vrta (1.32) is the virile impetuous hero, seducer of women, “the mighty bull” whose seven reins caused the seven Indus rivers to flow (2.12.12).

Vedic women expressed sexual desire candidly. Some conversational hymns between divine, semidivine, and ordinary women and men describe desire and rejection. Nymph Urvashi rejects her lover Pururavas for sex and taunts him for having forcibly “pierced” her with his “rod three times a day” (RV 10.95.1–18). Another dialogic hymn describes the transformation of spinster Apala into a desirable woman (RV 8.91.1–7). In a third hymn, Lopamudra desires sex and progeny from her husband the sage Agastya who wishes to be a hermit seeking enlightenment. The poet comments that “the foolish woman sucks dry the panting wise man,” but that Agastya is successful in “both ways,” namely as husband and ascetic (1.179).²¹

Western scholars have emphasized that the *Rig Vedic* hymns are largely to male deities and that “Goddesses play an insignificant part in the *Rigveda*.”²² A recent woman scholar describes it as “a book by men about male concerns in a world dominated by men.”²³ While the accusation is partly justified, since male bards appear to have loved gods Indra, Varuna, Agni, and Savitr, they also highly esteemed matronly goddesses like Ushas and Aditi. Moreover, surely the chief measure of a deity’s importance cannot be the *numbers* of hymns in his/her name.

Even among the gods, there was a struggle for power between father confessor Varuna (12 hymns), who was the arbiter of justice through Rta, and virile Indra the seducer of women who received 250 hymns, one fourth the total number. Indra’s heroic victory is evident in RV VII.83, but it was dramatically played out for the populace who probably preferred tales of his lightning defeat of demon Vrta over staid stories about father confessors. Other popular gods include Soma who represented a narcotic drink (an entire *mandala* of 120 verses); Agni, the great fire messenger (200); the exciting storm gods Maruts (33 hymns); the Aswins, twin horsemen of the sunrise (50 hymns) chiefly because of their equine nature. Yet, the sun-worshipping Indo-Aryans gave their chief solar deity Surya a mere 10 hymns; and Savitr whose name means “enlightenment” and whose sacred *Gayatri Mantra* (RV 3.62.10) is still chanted daily got just 11 hymns.²⁴

A society that venerated motherhood created maternal goddesses. While Aditi did not receive a single hymn entirely to herself, she was praised as mother of all the gods and humans through her womb, the unlimited Source, and Eternity. She is identified with Mother Earth Prithvi in 6 hymns (e.g., 1.185; 6.49.2), one of which praises her as “matchless, beneficent, illustrious, and honored.”²⁵ Aditi is also identified with Ushas or Dawn whose 20 hymns are the most received by a goddess (e.g., 1.113.19). Aditi has no male consort, as she is the primal mother (2.27) and cosmic cause (9.74.5).²⁶ A later hymn (RV 10.92) describes primal Aditi crouching (Aditi Uttanapad) to give birth to the sun Martanda and seven other

gods, and how she gave birth to Daksha, the first male being.²⁷ A poet mystically speaks of Aditi and of “Our kinship in the Mother’s womb” (RV 8.72.8).²⁸ Another hymn is ostensibly to Aditi’s sons, the 12 sun gods Adityas, but largely beseeches her thus (RV 8.18.4–7):

Aditi, guard our herd by day,
Aditi, free from guile guard by night
Aditi, ever strengthening, save us from grief!
And in the day our hymn is this:
May Aditi come nigh to help with loving kindness,
Bring us weal and chase our foes.²⁹

In Aditi one detects the seed of later monism in the *Upanishads* (700–300 BCE) as the apex of ancient Indian thought. One Indian scholar calls Aditi the unborn maternal principle (RV 10.119.4), “father, mother, child, begetting.”³⁰ Yet strangely, Westerners have ignored the possibility that Aditi was the first Vedic glimmer of a single feminine principle in the universe. The *Upanishads* later stated categorically that behind myriad deities lay a single, cosmic, neuter, eternal principle (Brahman) who was identical to the individual essence in all things (Atman). The seers cautioned that the veil of sensory perceptions prevented our understanding of this Unity as Reality. The seeker was asked to sacrifice the senses in the razor’s path of ascetic yogic meditation. The reward was enlightenment and freedom (*moksha*) from the cycle of birth and death (*karma-samsara*). It is strange that some scholars have failed to detect the incipient monism of a hymn (RV 10.129), which lauds Aditi as heaven and sky, mother, father, son, all deities, and human society in the past and future.³¹

If virile gods inspired hero-worship, goddesses were revered as embracing and honorable, chaste matrons and blessed daughters. While few goddesses received entire hymns except for Ushas, the hymns were reverential and potent. A single hymn is accorded to Mother Earth Prithvi (RV 5.84), although she is praised jointly with her spouse Dyaus (Father Heaven) in six hymns. Ushas’s sister Ratri (Night) has one glowing *mantra* (RV 10.127) about night’s power to ward off evil and bring rest, and it is still chanted at Hindu funerals. Forest Aranyani has a single, but evocative hymn about wooded mysteries (RV 10.146) that may have lured later ascetic seers. The hymns to goddesses are few, but their functions were so important that one cannot dismiss them as insignificant to the Indo-Aryans. Clearly, we need to read between the lines of these hymns, and not just count the lines.

For example, although men composed and chanted most of the hymns, inspiration and speech were goddesses. This intriguing fact points to the presence of women bards and ritual chanters. Although goddess Saraswati is as yet a nebulous divinity equated with the river and without a single *Rig Vedic* hymn addressed solely to her, in several hymns the bards ask her

to sit beside them as a witness to the fire sacrifice. One *mantra* vividly praises Saraswati, Ila (guardian of cattle), and Mahi (great goddess) equated with Vak (speech and learning) as “three Goddesses who bring delight,” and exhorts them to “be seated, peaceful on the grass” (*RV* 3.13.9) beside his altar.³² Ila protected their cattle from death and disease, a matter of importance to cattle herders. Similarly, Virutri vigorously guarded their flocks, suggesting that shyness and docility were not Vedic feminine ideals. Matrons were powerful, as seen in this verse ostensibly to wind god Vayu, but directly honoring a merged vision of Saraswati–Vak. The poet acknowledged their inspiration and asked them to accept a rite that would restore the moral order Rta:

Wealthy in spoil, enriched with hymns,
 May bright Saraswati desire with eager love, our sacrifice
 Inciter of pleasant songs, inspirer of all gracious thought,
 Saraswati accept our rite!
 Saraswati, the mighty flood she with her light illuminates
 She brightens every pious thought.

RV 1.3.10 12³³

This honor is especially due to Vak, the spirit behind sacred utterances who evolved into an aspect of Devi, the Hindu Great Goddess. Vak proclaims her grandeur in the *Rig Vedic* hymn, Vak Ambarni or Devi Sukta (*RV* 10.125), whose eight *mantras* are chanted by Hindus. The use of the first person singular has led some scholars to surmise that the author was a woman. The goddess proclaims that she supports the Vedic gods Varuna, Indra, Soma, and Mitra (verses 1–2), and draws mighty Rudra’s bow to kill the enemies of the sacred (6). She alone gives men wealth if they offer sacrifices (2); she makes both *brahman* and sage powerful (5). She calls herself “queen” of all, wise and worthy of reverence (3), and declares that he “who eats food: sees, breathes, hears the spoken word does so through me” (4). Her origin lay in the waters and ocean; she gives birth to the father on the summit of the world (7), perhaps in a reference to the Himalayas. Her breath is the wind (8), and the world originated through her sound/sacred speech. This last idea is remarkable, as it became a central Hindu doctrine that creation was accompanied by the primal sound, Om.³⁴ Vak Ambarni Sukta is revered as one of the most powerful chants.

Mortal Women in the *Rig Veda*

Education

A significant Vedic legacy was its emphasis on knowledge as salvation, an ideal that most Indians accept implicitly, regardless of religious affiliation. Since knowledge was empowerment, the *brahman* priest was venerated even

in poverty, and the literate male *kshatriya* ruler, *brahman* minister, *vaishya* banker enjoyed mundane authority. Women have struggled for equal access to these higher circles of power. At first, upper-caste women enjoyed social advantages. They were invested with the sacred thread in the *upanayana* rite, which gave them the authority (*adhikara*) to study the *Vedas* and to perform large public sacrifices (*srauta*).

Indian tradition attributes certain *Rig Vedic mantras* to two female seers, Apala (*RV* 8.91) and Ghosha (*RV* 10.40). Using the evidence of an early Sanskrit commentary, one Indian scholar also argued that the *Rig Veda* contains 20 feminine verses (e.g., *RV* 1.179; 5.28; 8.91; 9.81; 10.39–40), including two conversation hymns by Lopamudra (1.179) and Vishvavara (5.28).³⁵ Some Western feminists question this, arguing that as women could not directly invoke the gods, the *mantra* hymns attributed to Apala and Ghosha were likely to be male compositions.³⁶ A third school argues that there is ample evidence that gifted women and *shudras* were initiated in the *Vedas*, and therefore, they too could have authored some *mantras*.

The *Vedas* mention women priestly invokers (*hotris*) of the gods at sacrifices, although there were mostly male invokers (*hotr*), chanters (*udgatr*), and ritualists (*adhvaryu*). Ordinary women also joined their husbands in some public rituals, the woman being the female sacrificer (*yajamani*), the man being the principal sacrificer (*yajamana*). When the couple formally donated through a ritual, it was imperative for them to recite *mantras* together. When undertaking a sacrifice requesting children even today, married couples recite this important *Rig Vedic* fertility hymn together (*RV* 10.183). The wife begins the invocation with praise for her generous, virtuous husband; he then describes her virtue and desire for motherhood; finally, the priest likens the earth's fertility to her latent maternal capacity and prays for the couple.³⁷ While women's ritual roles were certainly secondary in this patriarchal society, women were crucial for rituals for family longevity and community survival.

For over a century, scholars have analyzed the *Rig Veda* to understand its norms on gender and caste, and there is a consensus that women's early religious and social rights had largely eroded by 200 BCE. Vedic women certainly initiated public rites, as well as domestic life cycle rites at birth, marriage, death; in the annual homage to patrilineal ancestors; and when making gifts.³⁸ The first grammarian Panini (fifth century BCE) noted the presence of various learned women whose *upanayana* marked them as "twice born" (*dvijas*) in their own right. The most eminent were ascetic female sages (*rishikas*), like male sages (*rishis*).³⁹ Others were women scholars (*brahmavadini*), teachers (*acharya*), and preceptors (*upadhyaya*), who studied the *Vedas* in depth and lit the sacrificial fires. They lived with their families, but sustained themselves through alms or fees from students. Less scholarly were the *sadhyovabas* who received the *upanayana*, but did not pursue further *Vedic* studies.

Still others were the learned wives of male teachers or preceptors (*acharyani* or *upadhyayani*).⁴⁰ The *Atharva Veda* (AV 11.5.18) advised parents to educate their virgin daughters before marriage.⁴¹

It is remarkable that some women conducted certain public sacrifices after 1000 BCE in an era marked by elite-caste men's mundane ambitions. *Kshatriya* kings fought over territory and dominated local non-Aryans; *brahmans* consecrated dynasties with ritual fanfare and rose to power as ministers; wealthy *vaishya* bankers lent money to kings. Clearly, Vedic society had initially valued learned women, but with the induction of potentially gifted non-Aryans, elite men faced competition from both women and the lower castes. By denying education to these subordinate groups, the pattern of control and marginalization was in place by 200 BCE.

Sexuality and Marriage

Hymns attributed to Apala (RV 8.91) and Ghosha (RV 10.40) concern female sexuality. Sickly Apala is transformed into a beautiful woman after intercourse with Indra; Ghosha is fulfilled through marriage. Other conversational hymns are candid in their dislike of unsolicited heterosexual advances by either men or women. In a conversation between the primal siblings Yama and Yami, Yama rejects his sister's sexual invitation to procreate the world, on the grounds that incest was immoral (RV 10.10.11–12).⁴² Another legend shows that Indo-Aryans decried marital rape. The beautiful nymph Urvashi angrily rejects unfaithful Pururavas by saying: "Indeed, you pierced me with your rod three times a day, and filled me even when I had no desire." In a third hymn, Lopamudra wants children, but her husband Agastya seeks spiritual fulfillment as a hermit. Here, the woman entices, and the man rejects sex.

Male Gaze, Female Bodies?

One scholar suggests that the male authors saw women like Lopamudra as lustful and earthy, whereas men's aspirations were spiritual. While this is true in some texts, not all *Rig Vedic* poems portray women as sirens and men as noble ascetics. Rather, both men and women pursue partners and are rejected. Descriptions of women do stem from the male gaze, as the *Vedic* poets were largely men. However, these scriptures do not generally demean women as objects created for male enjoyment, as in later misogynist Indian works.

It is also misleading to read archaic scriptures too literally or out of the Indian social context. Heroines and heroes in ancient Indian literature were commonly described as *subhaga* (having physical beauty). However, some scholars apply modern values of sexism to this archaic society by focusing on the Vedic descriptions of nymph Urvashi and others. Moreover, Indian cultures viewed a woman's outward beauty (*subhaga*) as a reflection

of her inner auspiciousness/good fortune (*subhagya*) based on sexual maturity and readiness for motherhood. Even today, elders bless young women with the boon of *subhagya*, but never with *subhaga*.⁴³

This early sexual candor may have stemmed from the small community's need to multiply. The Indo-Aryan legacy has been that life is arid without sexual fulfillment and offspring, especially sons. Marriage was a central goal, as seen in the many Vedic verses on its importance for the community. It was the parents' duty to find spouses for their daughters and sons. Monogamy was largely the rule, but polygamy was also practiced by the wealthy. Polyandry and incest were censured, but some verses indicate incest among siblings. In the *Rig Vedic* era, marriages were conducted for sexually mature couples, but virginity was highly prized. However, in later Indian history, the age of marriage for girls became lower and closer to her puberty. The Vedic literature describes young couples who pined from their sexual separation. Marriage rituals involved the father's "gift of the virgin" (*kanya daan*) to the bridegroom, indicating that the bride was mature enough to have intercourse and that she would live in her husband's home. A later Vedic text advises the couple to wait four days before consummation, in order for each to understand the other.⁴⁴

While there were single women, and unmarried women who grew old in their parental homes, later *Rig Vedic* verses indicate that society believed in marriage as essential for women, even those eager to pursue study and more public roles. One verse advises the father of an intelligent daughter to find her a husband equal in learning (*RV* 3.55.16). The "marriage hymn" (*RV* 10.85) urges an intelligent new bride to remain involved in public affairs and to address the village assembly boldly "as a commander" (10.85.26).⁴⁵ Marriage was a social sacrament whose duties were holy rites (10.85.24). The groom took a vow to be as steady as the North Star, and bride vowed to be as chaste as the star Arundhati, named for the virtuous wife of a sage. Women handled their parents' property in the absence of sons, even in this patrilineal system.

Deaths were common in the clashes among Indo-Aryans and non-Aryans, pastoralists and small farmers over cattle and grazing rights. Courageous *kshatriya* chiefs (rajās) and warriors were lauded, and widows were urged to remarry in hymns that reflect awe over women's reproductive power, which also ensured the community's survival. Thus, a funeral hymn (*RV* 10.18) asks a young widow who grieved on her husband's corpse to arise and resume a normal life, perhaps even remarry. This display of spousal grief probably became a symbolic act by widows at their husbands' funerals. However, *Rig Vedic* Aryans did not compel a widow to immolate herself on her husband's pyre as a true wife (*sati*), a custom that developed a millennium later in the fifth century CE. The later *Atharva Veda* (*AV* 10.5.27–28) indicates that around 500 BCE, Sanskrit society practiced levirate marriage (*niyoga*) in which a widow married her deceased husband's

brother who adopted her children.⁴⁶ However, the growing adulation of wives who remained forever chaste (*pativrata*) led to a later stigma on widows, who were prevented from remarrying in the classical era.

The *Rig Veda* describes women and men as farmers near the Indus and the Yamuna. In these early centuries when labor was in short supply, they sowed, reaped, and ground crops like corn and barley (*yava*). They plucked and pressed the soma plant for the ritual drink; spun, dyed, and embroidered cloth. Some women fashioned arrows, others served as domestic labor; some were singers and chanters. After 1000 BCE, large-scale conquests of pre-Aryans provided their society with agricultural workers. This reduced the pressure on Indo-Aryan women to labor on farms, but the focus shifted to domesticity and reproduction, especially among the high castes. Frequent textual references to procreation indicate anxiety over maintaining Indo-Aryan blood lines, which was also threatened when high-caste men pursued ascetic goals. Thus, Agastya finally succumbed to Lopamudra's pleas, before leaving for the forest. The filial duty to perform funeral rites for parents was also a cultural deterrent to men who wished to become hermits in the later Vedic centuries.

LATER VEDIC ERA: *BRAHMANAS* AND *UPANISHADS*

Sanskritization, *Varna*, and Women

In India's second major urbanization, *ksbatriya* leaders and warriors first expanded their base to Hastinapura (1000 BCE) on the Yamuna river near Delhi, and then colonized the Ganges plains, facilitated by the discovery of iron. Hastinapura and the Ganges towns of Kaushambi, Varanasi, and Shravasti (800 BCE) contain evidence of Painted Grey Ware (PGW) pottery associated with a chalcolithic culture.⁴⁷ A few centuries later, Black Polished Ware (BPW) fired during the smelting of iron at Ganges delta sites indicate that Aryan society had breached the frontier to the region rich in iron ore, which is also found south near the river Krishna. Trade with south India and Sri Lanka expanded, especially after the third century BCE.

While Sanskrit norms spread through Aryan hegemony, Dravidian and tribal cultural and religious ideas were woven seamlessly into an evolving Sanskrit civilization. Some pre-Aryan ideas included *yoga*, *karma*, and possibly *puja* (flower offerings to a deity), and local terms like the Munda word for plow (*langala*).⁴⁸ Although caste became increasingly fixed at birth, sexual mingling was common, as evident in the Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata* (*MHB*) and *Ramayana* (*RMY*). The *MHB* describes various high-ranking *shudras* as *sutas*, men of intercaste marriages and morganatic relationships such as the author Vyasa, the royal advisor Vidura whose brothers were kings, valiant Karna whose brothers were princes.⁴⁹ Prolonged relations among Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, and tribal cultures

resulted in similar physical features among Indians over time. This was in marked contrast to the *Rig Veda's* initial disparagement of pre-Aryan dark skin and blunt features, and the local worship of Shiva as *lingam*. The seers (*rishis*) and bards who completed the *Sama, Yajur, Atharva Vedas*, with *Brahmana* liturgies, *Aranyakas*, and the *Upanishads*, were often high caste, but gifted *shudras* were also inducted as *brahmanas*. This often meant that women with mixed ethnic offspring were cultural mediators over the millennia.

The *Brahmanas* contain coronation and other public rituals conducted by *brahman* priests for *kshatriya* kings after conquests. The sacrificial conflagrations depleted the forests and cleared the land for Indo-Aryan settlement. They also uprooted forest dwellers who became *shudra* serfs or fled to sparsely populated hills. As territorial expansion required more priests, *shudras*, like wheelwrights, and Adivasi hunters (*nishadas*) were invested with the sacred thread during *upanayana*, according to the *Mahabharata* (4.60.36) and two *sutra* texts (*AS* 1.19.9; *KS* 12.11.11). As the “twice-born” upper castes, they were now entitled to chant the *Vedas*.⁵⁰

However, some concessions to gifted non-Aryans probably strengthened conservative control over caste women, since elite castes feared miscegenation. This was most likely when an expanding economy brought communities together and new *jatis* emerged.⁵¹ This is also seen in Tamil regions where *brahmanas* ventured ahead in small Sanskritizing vanguards but, fearing sexual contact with locals, became strict in their patriarchal rules. Scholar Kamil Zvelebil thus wisely cautions against taking “a rigid dichotomic view” that equates language with race or culture, as these are interactive factors in history.⁵² Over time, Sanskritic culture became identified less with ideas of racial purity and more with religious and cultural excellence. Recent studies inform us of genetic variations within even apparently cohesive, regional groups, so that what appear as outward signifiers of “race” often mask the inner evidence of genetic mingling.⁵³

However, elite-caste women bore the brunt of censure for relations with non-Aryans. Hybrid society was marked by some beneficial cultural innovations that empowered women, while other syncretic norms constrained women. Thus, Sanskrit and Dravidian-Tamil praise for chaste women became a meeting point for ideas of the divine feminine and women’s latent energies. Pre-Aryan ideas on female chastity expanded Aryan paradigms of the chaste wife (*pativrata*) as semidivine. However, pre-Aryan taboos on menstruation and the spilling of blood seeped into *Brahmana* liturgies that restricted women’s public ritual spaces. Non-Aryans who adopted Sanskrit texts also accepted its strictures against widow remarriage. Non-Aryan kings validated their authority through *Brahmana* rites and incidentally shed older habits of matrilineal succession. Local mystics adopted the grand ideals of the *Upanishads* and also its ideas of ascetic restraint that frowned upon women as potential sexual threats. This may explain why the *Rig Veda*

frankly discussed female sexuality and the later epics *MHB* and *RMV* (1000–300 BCE) exalted chaste women as akin to goddesses. Patriarchs were awed by Dravidian notions of unleashed feminine power, especially when the woman was unjustly widowed.

Women in the *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads*

The *Brahmanas* represented patriarchal triumph, but this was counterbalanced by the social equity of *Upanishadic* seers. *Rig Vedic* sacrificial hymns came to be supported by complex liturgies like the *Aitareya* and *Satapatha Brahmanas*, which show the cementing of patriarchy under powerful kings and priests. Public fire rituals (*srauta*) included coronation (*rajasuya*), the horse sacrifice (*asvamedha*), and others to purify conquered territories. In this climate of military expansion, women were safeguarded from rape within the household, through paradigms of female honor and chastity. Upper-caste women now played a noticeably minor role in public rites. Meanwhile, their work on farms became redundant after the conquest of the Ganges region, since conquered non-Aryans were inducted into the caste system as menials.

Some *Brahmanas* highlight women's inferiority, as seen in these lines: "Woman, the *shudra*, the dog, and the crow are something wrong" (*SB* 14.1.1).⁵⁴ Such extreme misogyny was balanced by the conviction that nature and society operated through male and female forces. This led the authors to weave cosmic sexual imagery into mundane ritual acts, but their language subordinated women. This is seen in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, which compares the sizzling of the sacred fire through libations of melted butter (*ghee*) to thunderbolt strikes and the sexual taming of women:

And just in the same way, he beats and weakens now the women with thunderbolt, with the ghee; and thus beaten and weakened, they have no claim to their own body or to a heir.

SB 4.2.13⁵⁵

In a mellower verse, another author accepted that women were "one half" of men, but women alone gave men immortality through progeny:

When he was about to climb up, he addresses his wife with the following words: "Wife, we will climb up to the heaven." The reason for his addressing his wife thus is as follows—She, the wife, that is indeed his own half; therefore as long as he has no wife, he does not procreate himself.

SB 5.2.1.10⁵⁶

Other secondary texts like the *Grihya Sutras* (ca. 800–300 BCE) contain household liturgies that highlight women as central to family rituals during birth, confirmation, marriage, pregnancy, death. The *brahmins* had

succeeded in subordinating women's religious authority (*adhikara*), but women kept a hold over their vestigial rights over authority within the household. Domestic pressures upon upper-caste women must have been reduced by their active role in these rites.

The *Grihya Sutras* also describe four watershed life stages. These were of the ritually initiated celibate student (male *brahmacharin*/female *brahmacharini*) of the *Vedas*; the householder (*grihasthin/grihasthini*); the middle aged forest contemplative (*vanaprasthin/vanaprasthini*); and the yogic recluse (*sanyasin/sanyasini*). Women participated in all four stages. The last two promoted a powerful movement by sages who renounced the world affirming doctrines of the *Brahmanas*. Their discoveries are located in the *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* (700–300 BCE).

Upanishads: Spiritualism and Yogic Ideals

Maitreyi said, "If the wealth of this whole earth is mine, honorable sir, will it make me immortal?" "No," said Yajnavalkya, "Your life will be exactly that of those endowed with materials, but there is no hope of immortality through wealth." Maitreyi replied, "What will I do with that which does not make me immortal? Tell me, honorable sir, that which you know to be the only (way to immortality)."

Yajnavalkya said, "Ah, beloved, you have always been dear to me, and now you have said what is dear to me. Come, sit down, and I will explain it to you, but concentrate."

Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad 2.4.2–4 and 4.5.3–5⁵⁷

Tradition considers 12 *Upanishads* to be major, and one has liturgical importance in life rituals, but there are reputed to be 108 texts in all. The sages broke free of the *Vedic* gods and *brahmanical* rites as the lesser path, and instead advocated sacrifice of the senses and yogic meditation. Their central doctrine was that behind all manifest divinities lay a neuter, transcendental Cosmic Being (Brahman) whom they identified with the inner essence (Atman) in all beings. This single Truth is captured in the phrase *Tat tvam asi* (That thou art), as taught by a sage to his student (*CU* 6.8–6.16).⁵⁸ Despite the rejection of *Vedic* rituals, their insights led to the incorporation of the *Upanishads* into the *Vedas* as their final section (*Vedanta*). The texts state that social distinctions like gender and caste cloud knowledge of Brahman. The sages of many castes included men (*rishis*) and women (*rishikas*) like Maitreyi and Gargi. Their goal was spiritual enlightenment which brought freedom (*moksha*) from the cycle of births and deaths (*karma-samsara*).

Other heterodox dissenters rejected *Vedic* religion and caste. The most notable were the agnostics Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha (563–486 BCE) and the Jaina sage Vardhamana Mahavira (540–468 BCE) whose emphasis

on ethical conduct (*dharma*) attracted nuns and monks. Others were the atheist Ajivikas led by Gosala Maskariputra, the materialist Lokayatas led by Carvaka, and the nihilists by Ajita Kesakambalin.⁵⁹ Although male ascetics often felt that women were obstacles to their vow of abstinence, persistent women managed to cross this barrier.

In this climate of monastic experimentation, women carved out a female meditative space, and their challenges to patriarchal monopoly over spiritual matters are evident in the dialogues of Gargi and Maitreyi with Yajnavalkya in the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad*. Despite the spiritual insights of *Upanishadic* seers, male monasticism redefined stereotypes of women and their sexuality. First, the escape of ascetic men from family duties placed a great onus on women at home. This meant that the public activities of higher-caste women dwindled, while working women shouldered the burdens of labor both within and outside the home. Moreover, the renunciation of sexuality by aspirant yogis meant that women's desires became suspect, even when they merely wished for children in accordance with Indo-Aryan patriarchal custom. Wives were necessary for progeny, but they were also perceived as nagging females obstructing men's spiritual aspirations.

Non-Vedic texts in this period often depicted seductive nymphs who tried to distract meditating sages; although only someone as wise as the Buddha could resist the wiles of the vixen Mara. The *Mahabharata* has a minor tale about the beautiful princess Shanta who seduced sage Rsyasringa (*MHB* 3.110–113). Despite sage Vishvamitra's noble intentions in the *Ramayana*, his desire was kindled by the nymphs Menaka and Rambha (*RMY* 1.51–65). Sages frequently resided with their wives during the early phase of meditative life, until they were ready for the final spiritual journey. For example, in the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* (*BAU* 2.4.1–14; repeated in 4.5.1–15), Yajnavalkya lived in the forest with two wives, Maitreyi and Katyayani, before his final renunciation. In a subplot in the *Ramayana* on desire, male yogis, and divine mercy, sage Gautama's curse on his unfaithful wife Ahalya turned her into stone, until Rama's healing touch restored her to life. However, no such forgiveness was meted to her errant lover, devious Indra, who was punished with the appearance of numerous vaginas all over his body (*RMY* 1.48–49).⁶⁰

Interesting examples of female ascetic speculations appear in the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* through three conversations initiated by women who wish to obtain supreme knowledge of Brahman. The first conversation is by Maitreyi with her husband sage Yajnavalkya, and this is elaborated later in a lengthier chapter (*BAU* 2.4.1–14; 4.5.1–15). Maitreyi asked Yajnavalkya to answer her questions about Brahman before departing as a hermit on his final spiritual quest. Delighted at her curiosity, the sage taught her with great tenderness. In the next discussion, a learned woman student Gargi, daughter of Vacaknu, asks Yajnavalkya a barrage of questions in a single, long-winded stanza. The sage answered at first, but tired by her mode of

questioning, he retorted that if she persisted thus, her head would fall off (3.6.1). Some scholars have therefore quickly accused the sage of male chauvinism, but this is an erroneous and incomplete reading of the *Upanishad*. Yajnavalkya not only resumed his discussion with Gargi two chapters later (3.8.12), but he answered without condescension and in complete seriousness as she now probed more calmly and deeply into the mystery of Brahman. Yajnavalkya's final reply reiterates that Brahman was neuter, devoid of all sexual and other qualifying characteristics, and Gargi was silenced by this invincible wisdom. This is the verse:

Yajnavalkya: "Verily this Absolute, O Gargi, is never seen, but is the Seer; It is never heard, but is the Hearer; It is never thought, but is the Knower. There is no other seer than It, there is no other hearer than It, there is no other thinker than It, there is no other knower than It. This very Absolute, O Gargi, pervades the unmanifested ether."

Gargi: She said, "Venerable brahmanas, you should consider it enough if you can get off from him with a salutation. Certainly none of you can ever defeat him in expounding Brahman." Then the daughter of Vacaknu kept quiet.⁶¹

A life of austere yogic contemplation in the quiet forest surroundings now became the highest ideal of the ancient Indians. While hermit life was regarded as necessary for the middle aged, the new social trend of philosophical retreat and speculation among young people was a serious disruption of family life. Several reasons probably inhibited most women from taking the path of asceticism until menopause. Women's domestic *dharma* tied them firmly to the home as caretakers of the young and the aged, since virtuous acts as daughters, wives, mothers were considered essential for salvation.

Moreover, *Brahmana* texts stipulated that women were ritually polluted during menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth. These taboos probably also hindered women who showed an interest in an ascetic life of yogic meditation. Moreover, the belief that ascetics could not attain the worlds of the ancestors and gods and the social emphasis on male children to perform funeral rites for the parents indicate that women were expected to bear children regularly during their reproductive years. Few women could easily shelve social domestic duties (*dharma*) for personal fulfillment (*moksha*), and this made spiritual equality elusive at first. A woman's greatest chance to lead a contemplative life lay in marrying a man who also aspired to be an ascetic, as she could then retreat with him into the forest. Women's ascetic restrictions appear in the *Upanishads* (700–300 BCE), in secondary Sanskrit texts (*smritis*) like the epics, and in heterodox Buddhist and Jaina texts. Even the compassionate Buddha (563–483 BCE) initially objected to nuns in his order, though they were led by his wise mother Pajapati.

Not until 70 BCE did the monks who compiled the Buddhist canon include the nuns' hymns as the *Therigatha* into their scripture.⁶²

At the end of the Vedic era, the new trend toward a devotional Hinduism merged popular folk beliefs into a Sanskritic framework based on the *Vedas*. The practices were sanctioned by the *Bhagavad Gita* (ca. 300 BCE), and they are also evident in the *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad*. This later *Upaniṣad* is liturgically important to Hindus, as it contains *mantras* to *Rig Vedic* goddesses Aditi (MNU 28), Indra (1.52), and Varuna (1.55–57), and also to Hindu deities like goddess Durga (2.2) and gods Vishnu (13.4) and Shiva (24).⁶³ However, women's authority to initiate public sacrifices was eroded, so that only male *brahmins* chanted *Vedic* hymns at weddings, funerals, and auspicious ceremonies. In a culture that prized sacred knowledge, the denial of *Vedic* learning subordinated women whose identity was largely defined by marriage and motherhood. However, Hindu and Buddhist women carved new ritual spaces within their domestic altars through devotional worship (*bhakti-puja*). This was an avenue that empowered women in a gendered Sanskritic society.

NOTES

1. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, ed., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (1953; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 22–23.

2. J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 35–56; Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999).

3. T. Burrow, "The Early Aryans," in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. A. L. Basham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 20–28. Recent discoveries in Central Asia have disproved some of Burrow's theories.

4. A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day* (1956; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), 200–201.

5. Michael Witzel, "Early Indian History: Linguistic and Textual Parameters," in *The Indo Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language, Material Culture and Ethnicity*, ed. George Edrosy (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 98.

6. Rajesh Kocchhar, *The Vedic People: Their History and Geography* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000), 76–86, 118–36.

7. Thapar, *Early India*, 107–17.

8. G. L. Possehl and M. H. Raval, *Harappan Civilization and Rojdi* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989); Chakrabarti, *India, An Archaeological History*, 157–60; B. B. Lal, "Kalibangan and Indus Civilization," in *Essays on Indian Protohistory*, ed. D. P. Agrawal and D. K. Chakrabarti (Delhi: B. R. Publishing House, 1979), 65–97.

9. Anthony Arthur Macdonell, *Hymns from the Rigveda*, Heritage of India Series (1897; repr., New Delhi: Y.M.C.A. Publishing House, 1966), 90; Maurice Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, trans. (from German) V. Srinivasa Sarma, vol. 1, 5th ed. (1907; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003), 102. I have omitted the refrain, "Flow, Indus, flow for Indra's sake."

10. These are the *Aitareya*, *Brihad Aranyaka*, *Chandogya*, *Isa*, *Katha*, *Kena*, *Kausitaki*, *Mandukya*, *Mundaka*, *Prasna*, *Svestasvatara*, *Taittirya Upanishads*, and the later *Mahānarayana Upanishad* which is considered minor due to its liturgical emphasis.

11. Swami Swahananda, ed., *The Chandogya Upanishad* (Sanskrit with English translation; Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1980), 238.

12. Swami Sarvananda, ed., *Aitareyopanishad* (Sanskrit with English translation; Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2001).

13. *Ibid.*, 1 6.

14. Swahananda, *Chandogya Upanishad*, 276 81.

15. Hart, *The Poems of the Ancient Tamil*, 93 119.

16. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 72 79.

17. Partha Majumder, "Indian Caste Origins: Genomic Insights and Future Outlook," *Genome Research* 11 (June 1, 2001): 931 32, <http://genome.cshlp.org/content/11/6/931.full>.

18. Kocchhar, *The Vedic People*, 100 102.

19. Macdonell, *Hymns from the Rigveda*, 9; R. T. H. Griffith, trans., *The Hymns of the Rig Veda* (1892; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973); Swami Ashudoshananda, ed., *Vedic Mantras (Veda Mantrāṅgal)* in Tamil (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2003); T. V. Kapali Sastrikkal, ed., *Rig Veda: Hymns to Agni (Rig Vedam: Agni Sutramkal)* (Tamil and Sanskrit), 3rd ed. (Bangalore: Institute of Vedic Literature, 2001); Swami Amritananda, ed., *Rg Vedic Sukta: Gayatri and Others, A Contemplative Study* (Sanskrit with English translation; Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2003); Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, ed., *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* (New York: Penguin, 1981).

20. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India* (1954; repr., Delhi: Rupa, 2000), 137 88, 332 56; Rama Shankar Tripathi, *History of Ancient India* (1954; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), 49 51, 75 76; Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*; Thapar, *Early India*; Burrow, "The Early Aryans," 20 29.

21. O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 245 81.

22. Macdonell, *Hymns from the Rigveda*, 13.

23. O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 245.

24. The *Gayatri Mantra* states: "May we attain to the excellent glory of God Savitr that he may illuminate our thoughts ('*Om; tat savitr varainyam; bhargo deva sya dhimahi; diyoyonap prachodayat*')." Ashudoshananda, *Vedic Mantras*, 162 70; Amritananda, *Vedic Suktas*, 1 37; Macdonell, *Hymns from the Rigveda*, 33.

25. Macdonell, *Hymns from the Rigveda*, 67 69.

26. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 9; Kumkum Roy, "Vedic Cosmogonies: Conceiving/Controlling Creation," in *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology: Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar*, ed. R. Chamapakalakshmi and S. Gopal (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9 19.

27. O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 37 39.

28. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rig Veda*, 451.

29. *Ibid.*, 407 8.

30. Sarvananda, *Aitareyopanishad*, 17.

31. Radhakrishnan, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, 22 23.

32. Macdonell, *Hymns from the Rigveda*, 8.

33. *Ibid.*, 3.

34. Ashudoshananda, *Vedic Mantras*, 162-70; Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rig Veda*, 450; Coburn, *Devi Mahatmya*, 255-56 (English translation); Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 11-13.

35. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 10. Altekar attempted to validate precolonial gender traditions, but he idealized Vedic society, and blamed later invasions for India's "fall" into misogyny. This was a missionary influence on nationalist reformers. A Western feminist viewpoint is O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 256-67.

36. O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 245-46, 264, 266.

37. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rig Veda*.

38. Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45-47; Mary McGee, "Ritual Rights: Gender Implications of *Adhikara*," in *Jewels of Authority: Women and Textual Tradition in Hindu India*, ed. Laurie L. Patton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 32-50, *vide*, 41-45. Roy, "Vedic Cosmogonies," 9-19.

39. Shakuntala Rao Sastri, *Women in the Vedic Age* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1969), 23-29, 117-22, 191.

40. Katherine K. Young, "Om, the *Vedas*, and the Status of Women with Special Reference to Srivaisnavism," in *Jewels of Authority*, ed. Laurie L. Patton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 84-121, 88 (115 n. 35).

41. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 9-10. I have translated the Sanskrit verse: "*brahmacharyena kanyaana yuva vidante patim.*"

42. O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 248.

43. *Ibid.*, 247-81.

44. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 49-51.

45. Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 55-56.

46. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 150-51.

47. Thapar, *Early India*, 114-17; D. N. Jha, *Ancient India: In Historical Outline* (Delhi: Manohar, 1997), 52-55.

48. Thapar, *Early India*, 92-93, 116.

49. Karve, *Yuganta*, 1-6, 37-162.

50. *Apastamba Sroutasutra* (1.19.9) states that *kshatriyas*, *vaishyas*, and *shudras* lit the fire. *Katyayana Sroutasutra* (12.11.11) states that a *shudra* wheelwright and tribal hunter were ritually purified to perform sacrifices.

51. Young, "Om, the *Vedas*, and the Status of Women," 91 (*vide*, 84-121). Young connects women's status to that of the *shudras*, but there was probably a reverse effect.

52. Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan*; and Zvelebil, *Tamil Traditions on Subrahmanya Murugan*.

53. Chakrabarti, *India, An Archaeological History*, 29-40.

54. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, 190-91.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. Ramakrishna Math, ed., *The Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2000), 141-43, 384-86. The translation is mine of BAU 4.1: "*Saa hovaaca Maitreyi, 'Yunnu ma iyam, Bhagob, sarvaa prithvi vittena purnaa syaat katham tenaamrita syamiti?' 'Neti,' hovaca Yajnavalkya, 'Jivitam thathava jivitam syat; amritavasya tu nashasti vitteneeti.'*"

58. Swahananda, *Chandogya Upanishad*, 453-78.

59. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1 (1923; repr., New York: Macmillan Company, 1958), 274-85; Radhakrishnan, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, 227-49; Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 294, 297.

60. Swami Venkatesananda, trans., *The Concise Ramayana of Valmiki* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), 28-29.

61. Ramakrishna Math, *The Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad*, 241-53.

62. Susan Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the Therigatha* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), 13-29; Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in India, 600 BC to the Present*, vol. 1 (New York: Feminist Press, 1991), 65-69.

63. Swami Vimlananda, ed., *Mahānarāyaṇopaniṣad* (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1957), 71-93, 159, 179-80, 192-94.

MOTHERS AND WIVES IN THE *SMRITI* TEXTS

Sita immediately replied: “Surely, I shall abide by your advice, mother. A *vina* without a string is no *vina*, a cart without wheel is no cart, and a woman without husband even if she has a hundred children has no happiness here. For her father, brother and son give only a little happiness to a woman; but the husband gives her illimitable happiness. How then will she not worship him?”

Ramayana 2.39–40¹

***SMRITI* TEXTS (1000 BCE–600 CE)**

A common theme in the twentieth-century Indian nationalism was that of a pristine Golden Age of Hindu-Buddhist-Jaina civilization prior to Islam’s arrival in the seventh century CE. Its unique features included a Sanskritic religious framework, shared gender norms, aesthetic models of art and literature, patterns of kingship, and a premodern economy based on occupational castes. However, the theory of an unbroken indigenous tradition is problematic, since culture is rarely static in history, and as India has been a crucible for the complex mergers of immigrant and local groups. Many traditions had their genesis in pre-Aryan or Vedic culture, but India’s cultural and ethnic parameters largely crystallized in a “classical” era (200 BCE–600 CE) of benevolent rulers and extensive immigration. Gender norms were further modified through interactions with Muslims in later centuries and reinvented in the colonial era.

This study examines this millennium through the grid of two phases based on a profusion of secondary or “remembered” texts (*smritis*) whose elite male authors enunciated Indian paradigms of femininity. Although less sacrosanct than the *Vedas*, the *smritis* were profoundly influential as they were available to all castes. The first phase was commensurate with the later Vedic era (1000–300 BCE). The chief *smritis* of this period were the

Ramayana and *Mahabharata*; the *Bhagavad Gita* (Divine Song) interpolated into the *Mahabharata* (ca. 300 BCE); and liturgical *sutras* (ca. 800–300 BCE) such as *Srauta Sutras* for public rituals like coronations and *Grihya Sutras* for domestic life cycle rites (*samskaras*). They reveal that by 400 BCE, few women could study the *Vedas* or initiate public rites.

The second or classical phase was notable for Hindu *smritis*. Rules on female inheritance were stipulated in law codes (*dharma shastras*), such as the *Artha Shastra* or Science of Wealth/Polity (300 BCE–300 CE), and the *Manu Smriti* (100 BCE–200 CE). The *Puranas* (200 BCE–1000 CE) contain Hindu legends of the goddess Devi and the gods Vishnu and Shiva, and the *Agamas* contain prayers for their iconic worship. The aesthetics of feminine and masculine representation were delineated in the *Shilpa Shastras* on sculpture and *Natya Shastra* on dance, music, and drama (100 BCE–100 CE).²

Non-Hindu texts include the Buddhist and Jaina canons, also composed by men, with the single exception of the *Therigatha*, an anthology by Buddhist nuns (see next chapter). Despite theological differences, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina male authors shared Sanskritic assumptions about women's *dharma*, sexuality, and beauty. If there were women composers, their names are no longer known, partly as it was customary to give credit to the teacher (*guru*), but also as their names may have been erased.

Historical Context

By 500 BCE, Ganges settlements thrived due to flood waters, which ensured multiple harvests of wet rice and other staples. Agriculture expanded with canal irrigation, the iron plow, and the planting of mango and other fruit trees. The people raised cattle, sheep, goats, pigs. The use of non-Aryan serfs to clear forests and till virgin soil reduced dependency on caste women's labor, and the *smritis* increasingly exalted female domesticity, chastity, motherhood, and patrilineal descent.³ Kashi, Kaushambi, Vaishali, and Pataliputra developed from strategic river and overland trade routes that spread into the Deccan, the south, and Sri Lanka. Prosperous *vaishya* merchants sold rice, barley, millets, wheat, sugarcane; while *shudra* and *vaishya* artisans crafted goods of iron, copper, bronze, gold, silver, wood, ivory, and precious stones. Their trade enriched north India's 16 monarchies and oligarchies (*mahajanapadas*).⁴ Meanwhile, *brahmins* penetrated Dravidian-Tamil regions with Sanskritic norms, and local rulers adopted *kshatriya* titles. Polygamy promoted sexual mingling across ethnic and caste lines.⁵

After 500 BCE, India's porous borders invited peaceful settlers and invaders. Persians collected tribute from northwestern India (506 BCE), and in 326 BCE, Alexander led his Macedonian-Greeks into Punjab. India's Mauryan rulers (324–180 BCE) protected their vast empire, but its decline precipitated invasions by Persians and Graeco-Bactrians, followed by

Shakas and Kushanas from Central Asia (200 BCE–200 CE). Meanwhile, knowledge of the monsoons brought diverse seafarers who cohabited with local women. Although the *smritis* frowned on the women and such relationships, fresh gene pools seeded Indian society.

LATER VEDIC ERA *SMRITIS* (CA. 1000–300 BCE)

Epic, Women, and Caste

Disillusioned by transient royal ambitions and wealth, the sages of the *Upanishads* (700–300 BCE) retreated into the forests to reflect on a immutable reality. The era also witnessed the composition of secondary Vedic liturgies (*sutras*), the Sanskrit epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and the scriptural *Bhagavad Gita*.⁶ The *Ramayana* is attributed to the aboriginal hunter poet Valmiki, and its more cohesive narrative is set in the eastern Ganges region. The *Mahabharata* is the larger epic with 100,000 verses, and the main narrative is the dynastic struggle for Hastinapura near modern Delhi. The author is the mythical sage Vyasa, son of a fisherwoman and a *brahman* sage, but its multiple legends indicate it had many authors. The epics reveal the extensive mergers of Aryan and non-Aryan societies. The theme of the struggle between *dharma* and evil is enacted in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* with examples of both heroic and frail women. They contain some archaic *kshatriya* legends of brave and virtuous women, core narratives of resilient women, and later misogynist verses from the classical era.

As *smritis*, the epics were transmitted by both learned and ordinary folk, including women and *shudras* who were often denied access to the *Vedas*.⁷ Thus, elegant Sanskrit literature was enriched by a vibrant oral tradition in which women took an active part. The epics were regarded as Hindu scriptures ca. 300 BCE, when Rama and Krishna became venerated as incarnations of Vishnu. The later *Puranas* describe Vishnu's evolution from a minor *Rig Vedic* sun god (*RV* 1.54.1–6) into the Creator-Preserver who takes ten incarnations (*avatars*) to reestablish justice/law/morality (*dharma*). The epics have been sung as ballads, rewritten in vernacular languages, enacted in plays, sculpted, and painted.⁸

There are regional language versions of these epics by Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists in India and Southeast Asia, including the one narrated by Muslims in Indonesia.⁹ The versions by Indian women include the oral Sitayanas sung by Telugu *brahmin* and non-*brahman* women and the Telugu *Molla Ramayanam* by poet Atukuri Molla (sixteenth century CE).¹⁰ Regional accounts reveal local contemporary culture, as seen in two masterpieces by male poets. These were Kampan's Tamil *Iramavataram* (ninth century CE) and Tulsidas's *Ramcharitramanas* in Hindi (sixteenth century CE). Kampan's highly lyrical *Iramavataram* emphasizes Dravidian-Tamil belief that

women's chastity (*karppu*) empowered everyone. Thus, when accosted by the demon Ravana, Sita retorted that her *karppu* would triumph over his sinful lust.¹¹

Although upper-caste women were blamed for diluting Aryan purity, widespread sexual mergers across caste are evident in the *Mahabharata*, some of whose *kshatriya* princes had non-Aryan *shudra* (or *suta*) mothers.¹² King Santanu married Satyawati, a fisherman's daughter whose son from an earlier liaison with a *brahman* sage was Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa, the revered author of the epic. Vidura, uncle and wise advisor to the blind king Dhritirashtra, was the son of a *kshatriya* prince and a *shudra* maid. As the prescient *suta* Sanjaya could see distant events, he became the eyes through which Dhritirashtra visualized the war. Brilliant Karna's father was the sun god Surya, and his mother was queen Kunti, making him a *kshatriya* brother to the Pandava princes. Yet, he was taunted for being raised by a *shudra* charioteer. *Varna* attitudes changed as some *brahmans* became affluent royal advisors, kings took loans from *vaishya* bankers, and the state depended on revenues from *shudra* farmers and artisans.

Aims, Life Stages, and Gender Roles

The *smritis* enunciated broad principles that came to govern many Indians. Foremost was a belief in the four virtuous goals of man (*purushartha*), obviously with man as the normative index, but also applying to women. The goals were first morality/duty/justice (*dharma*), material wealth or happiness (*artha*), sexual love (*kama*), and spiritual emancipation (*moksha*). *Dharma* stems from the root to sustain (*dhri*), as morality is the foundation of religion and society, and it is superior to ritual acts. A person with *dharma* seeks spiritual knowledge/salvation (*moksha*) by speaking the truth and placing social and family duties above personal desire. These aims were interwoven into four watershed stages (*ashramas*) as described by the *Grihya Sutra*.

The first life stage was that of the celibate student or *brahmacharin* (m)/*brahmacharini* (f) after ritual initiation. The student was taught the *Vedas* in preparation for his/her spiritual salvation. In the second stage, the householder or *grihasthin* (m)/*grihasthini* (f) enjoyed the worldly pleasures of wealth (*artha*) and sex (*kama*) for progeny. The third and fourth *ashramas* prepared the individual for eventual spiritual enlightenment or freedom (*moksha*) from the cycle of birth and death (*karma-samsara*). The middle aged forest contemplative or *vanaprasthin* (m)/*vanaprasthini* (f) would venture periodically into forest retreats; and a few became complete yogic recluses or *sanyasin* (m)/*sanyasini* (f). Domestic responsibilities prevented ordinary women to attain the last stage, although there were women recluses in Indian history. Moreover, these Sanskrit principles in the Hindu *smritis* were shared by Buddhists and Jains.¹³

The integration of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, *moksha* into the four life stages was relevant, especially to literate caste women and men. The *Srauta Sutras* on public rituals (ca. 800 BCE) inform us that women and some *shudras* were initially allowed to study the *Vedas* and to take part in sacrifices. *Manava Srauta Sutra* describes women laying bricks for the altar, pounding rice for the ceremony, lighting the fire, and chanting *Vedic* hymns.¹⁴ *Apastamba Sutra* (1.19.9) states that *shudra* men lit the sacred fire in the rainy season; *Katyayana Sutra* (12.11.11) states that tribal hunters and *shudra* wheelwrights also performed sacrifices.¹⁵

However, with the spread of more stringent notions of female sexual honor, girls were often restricted from attending forest schools to study the *Vedas* alongside elite-caste boys. As this later prevented them from initiating public sacrifices, the classical text *Manu Smriti* described the *ashramas* as normative only for men. While the *smritis* glorified women's roles to reproduce and care for the patriarchal family, the *Grihya Sutra* offered them opportunities to initiate household ceremonies for birth, confirmation, marriage, pregnancy, and death. Ordinary women used these niches to expand their sphere of influence beyond nursery and kitchen, while powerful women either silently disregarded or openly breached harsh patriarchal constraints on their education and opportunities to attain *moksha*.¹⁶

Education and the Celibate Student

A young celibate student studied the *Vedas* and other skills with a teacher (*guru*) in a forest retreat. References to educated and courageous *brahman* and *kshatriya* women who performed fire sacrifices appear in the *Upanishads*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and the *sutras*. However, few are women sages with the exceptions of Maitreyi and Gargi of the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad*. Gargi's persistence and brilliance stumped even her veteran teacher Yajnavalkya (see Chapter 2). By and large, educated women were praised as chaste wives and mothers. An example was heroine Sita of the *Ramayana* (*RMY* 5.15.48) whose devotion to Rama has led modern feminists to describe as overdutiful. Yet, Sita's daily routine involved chanting the auspicious and powerful *Rig Vedic Gayatri Mantra*, which later became the sole preserve of caste men.

The *Mahabharata*'s educated *kshatriya* heroines include Savitri, Kunti, and Draupadi, but none remained celibate for long. In the Savitri-Satyavan legend (*MHB* 3.291–297), Savitri is depicted as a prescient, virtuous, and courageous princess. She searched the country for her ideal mate until she found Satyavan, an exiled prince now living as a lowly forest woodcutter. Even though she knew of the loss of his fortune and of his imminent death, Savitri simply garlanded him, and they were married. When Death claimed him, she trailed after this redoubtable foe and outwitted Death to reclaim Satyavan's life.

Learned Kunti acquired magical boons for her service to a sage, but she childishly used up one to call the sun god Surya, he appeared, and she had an illegitimate son Karna. Through her later marriage to the ailing king Pandu, she had five heroic sons, but she discovered that Karna had been raised by a *shudra* charioteer. Still later, the chaste widowed Kunti followed her sons into forest exile where she learned Vedic *mantras* from sage Atharvasiras.¹⁷

The *Grihya Sutras* prescribed household rituals to be conducted by upper-caste women and men who had some knowledge of the *Vedas*. The *Paraskara Grihya Sutra* (3.2) shows that women enacted household rites, but other *sutras* began to dismiss women and *shudras* as ignorant and incapable of studying the *Vedas*. Women's mastery may have lessened when household rituals became more complex, and their domestic duties became more onerous. This decline is seen in *Sankhyayana Grihya Sutra* (2.17.13), which states that Vedic rites once initiated by women in the husband's absence were now being performed by sons and brothers-in-law.¹⁸ Sage Jaimini's *Purva Mimamsa Bhashya* (400 BCE) and the *Bhagavad Gita* also indicate that women were excluded from initiating fire rituals due to lack of knowledge.¹⁹ The *upanayana* for girls was reduced at first to a symbolic rite without adequate Vedic verses, and then not performed at all.²⁰ Jaimini could therefore declare: "Men are unparalleled, and there is no comparison with women. The male sacrificer is learned; his wife is ignorant" (*PM* 6.1.24).²¹ A few centuries later, the *Manu Smriti* (*MS* 2.67) equated the marriage rite for women in lieu of their *upanayana*, which meant that they studied household arts, and men learned the *Vedas*.

Moreover, theologians now highlighted the importance of female chastity, premarital virginity, and marriages for girls soon after puberty, and there was greater gender separation in youth. This curtailed girls' education, as few girls attended forest schools with boys to study with a male *guru*. Some studious single women attended classes but resided at home, as the integrated forest schools were regarded as fraught with sexual dangers for women. Early marriage and hence more children meant that women had no time to master the *Vedas*, so that women lost this source of intellectual empowerment. Few women could therefore become forest recluses. The later authors who added to the *Manu Smriti* thus declared maliciously:

There is no ritual with Vedic verses for women; this is a firmly established point of law. For women, who have no virile strength and no Vedic verses, are falsehood; this is well established.

MS 9.18²²

Artha and Kama

When instruction ended, young men and women entered the stage of the married householder or *grihasthin/grihasthini*. The householder was

allowed to enjoy marital sex or *kama*, and reap wealth or *artha*, neither of which was considered unnatural to the human condition. As long as a husband or wife cared for parents and performed their life cycle rituals, they were expected to enjoy a sexually fulfilled life with children. As most women lived entirely as *grihasthinis*, this was described as their highest *dharma*, and women sought comfort largely from meditation at their domestic altars. Few middle aged women could embark on the third or fourth stage in the forest, but history informs us of some exceptional sages who were neglected wives, widows, or single women. An example was the powerful Tamil devotee of Shiva, Karaikkal Ammaiyar (fifth to sixth century CE) whose yogic powers frightened away her husband.

A virtuous woman's *dharma* was to remain a virgin (*kanya*) until marriage, to be loyal to her husband (*pativrata*) until her death, and to be a dedicated mother. Noble mothers were exalted in literature and loved universally. Rama's mother Kausalya first wept for her son's abstemious life in exile, before she cried poignantly for herself:

Without you, Rama, the fire of separation from you will soon burn me to death. Nay, take me with you, too, if you must go.

RMY 2.24²³

She finally ceased her tears when Rama reminded her of her duty to his father. In a moving benediction, she asked wayfarers, shrines, forest birds and animals to protect her son; the elements, oceans, and skies to be propitious to him; the sages, gods, and *Vedas* to guard him. She kissed his forehead and let him leave.

Noble Mothers in the Epics

Despite patriarchy, motherhood endowed women with one splendid source of authority. The mother has been revered even above the father, as evident in this Sanskrit verse (*mantra*): "I salute the Guru as god, mother as god, father as god, guest as god." Her love is considered superior to all others, the loss of a child is bemoaned as the greatest sorrow. Widowed Kunti accompanied her Pandava sons into a harsh forest exile in the *Mahabharata*. When forced to leave them before the end of the 13 years, she told Krishna that this grief was akin to death: "O Madhava, I do not suffer so much as a widow or in poverty, as I suffer from the loss of my sons" (*MHB* 5.90.69).²⁴ Mothers were forgiven for even dishonorable acts undertaken for their children. In the *Ramayana*, Rama's stepmother Kaikeyi manipulated her husband Dasaratha to grant the crown to her own son Bharata and to send Rama to the forest for 14 years. Others blamed her, but Rama declared that he would not judge his stepmother, as she was weak out of excessive maternal love.

The *Mahabharata* also contains the side tale of a man whose fury over his wife's infidelity leads him to order his son Chirakarin to kill her (*MHB* 12.265). The boy desisted from this ultimate sin, but he explained his reason for filial disobedience in these lines that describe a mother's love as superior to the father's affection, and a son's greater duty to the mother who gave birth to him:

As long as one has a mother, one is well-protected; if she is lost one has no protection. Even if one has lost all wealth, no worry oppresses, no age wearies him who can call out "Mother" when entering the home! If one has sons and grandsons, when beside his mother, even when he is a hundred years old, he behaves like a two year old child. A man is then old, becomes unhappy, finds the world empty when he has lost his mother. There is not cooling shade like the mother, no refuge like the mother, and no beloved like the mother.²⁵

Although girls were cherished in the main epic narratives, exemplary honor was bestowed on the mothers of sons, not of daughters, even when the women were personally reprehensible. The *Vedas*, including the *Atharva Veda* (3.23; 6.11), contain prayers asking for sons, not daughters, as the former gave women authority in a patriarchal family.²⁶ Wise queen Gandhari had one hundred evil sons from her blind, vacillating husband Dhritirashtra in the *Mahabharata*. This gave her the power to advise him when he illegally held on the throne of the Pandavas.

Polygamy, Polyandry, and Patriliney

The epics contain many tales of desire and lust in men and women, as sexuality was considered inherent to humans and animals. Polygamy was common among kings and the upper castes, but the *Ramayana* is a paean to monogamy. Polygamy meant jealous strife in royal households. However, it also created a gendered world and a strange sisterhood of women thrown together out of compulsion. Rama's mother Kausalya was the highly respected first queen, but she lived amicably with the second wife Sumitra whose sons she considered her own. They also lived in comparative peace with beautiful Kaikeyi, Dasaratha's third and favorite wife. However, jealous Kaikeyi demanded that Dasaratha exile Rama and declare her son Bharata as the crown prince. Although Rama honorably upheld his father's vow, the grief-stricken king died. Kausalya thus angrily asked at Kaikeyi: "How can a chaste woman survive her husband's death?" (*RMY* 2.65–66).²⁷ The words indicate that although widow immolation (*sati*) was not a common practice in the Vedic era, a woman's life was irrevocably bound to her husband's existence.

An unfortunate corollary was that this patrilineal society esteemed mothers of sons, above those with daughters. Only male progeny inherited landed

wealth and performed the last rites for parents. The classical text *Manu Smriti* declared women and *shudras* too incompetent to light the sacred fire, even for final obsequies for parents. Sons were valued as parents depended on them in old age. However, daughters were loved, but poignantly lost to their husbands' families. North Indian village exogamy rendered patriarchy even more harsh as a girl's marriage often meant a virtual break with her own family.

The *Mahabharata* contains one striking example of a polyandrous relationship, indicating that this non-Aryan custom of levirate marriage (*niyoga*) had filtered into Aryan society. The heroine Draupadi was married jointly to the five Pandava brothers, but she lived with each in turn in serial monogamy. A chaste and powerful wife, she was highly respected by all, including kinsman Krishna who was Vishnu incarnate. When their enemies Dushansana and Duryodhana disrobed Draupadi in public before the royal assembly, Krishna answered her prayer with a miraculous, continuous stream of unwoven cloth (*sari*).

In a subplot of the *Ramayana*, Lakshmana angrily cut off the nose and ears of Surpanaka, a female demon who tried to seduce Rama. Her punishment was for lust and for being a demon, not for being a woman. However, later retellings described Surpanaka as the epitome of female lust. The epic also relates the tale of Ahalya, virtuous wife of sage Gautama, who was inadvertently seduced by the philanderer Indra in the guise of her husband. When Gautama returned, he cast a spell transforming Ahalya into stone. However, as she was more sinned at than a sinner, Rama's touch redeemed her. As Indra's crime was beyond redemption, he became permanently impotent. Yet later classical retellings twisted the initial myths to portray women as temptresses of even great yogis. The first authors of the *Mahabharata* exalted women as superior to their husbands in many ways, and the Pandava Yudhishtira decried men who vilified women as fickle and wicked. Yet, later interpolated texts describe women as naturally sensual (*MHB* 1.4.39, 78)²⁸; sexually insatiable (*MHB* 5.30.6);²⁹ and eager to ensnare men (*MNB* 13.40.4).³⁰

Society lauded the fecund woman for continuing the blood line. However, this led to the perception of women as tied to the material world of *artha* and *kama*. Moreover, the merger with Dravidian and aboriginal societies led *brahmins* to adopt their taboos on blood to restrict menstruating and pregnant women or after childbirth, as well as *shudra* menials, from rituals and sacred discourses.³¹ In the first millennium BCE, the idea gained root that women were weakened by menstruation and childbirth, perhaps initially as a protective measure. However, the new belief also validated male religious restrictions on women. The *Aitareya Brahmana* instructed women not to talk to men during rituals; and the *Aitareya Upanishad* (*AU* 2.1) told pregnant women to retire from a philosophical discourse on gestation.³²

Moreover, people came to believe that spiritual insights were most common to celibate men (*brahmacharin*). In contrast, the perception grew that women's monthly discharges and childbirth were sensory anchors that inhibited spiritual growth. Thus, the *Manu Smriti* advised priests not to eat food prepared by a menstruating woman (MS 4.208). The text also terrified men with predictions of insanity if they had sex with a menstruating woman (4.41), and listed the following pollutants for a priest:

Neither a "fierce" Untouchable, nor a pig, a cock, a dog, a menstruating woman, or an impotent man should be watching the priests dine.
MS 3.239³³

Monogamy and Love Legends

Several women in the *Mahabharata* command our attention, beginning with Kunti, the widowed mother of the Pandava heroes, and their polyandrous wife Draupadi. However, this epic also contains archaic legends about three loving couples. In a sea of legends about polygamous kings, these few stories are paeans to monogamy. The Forest Book (*MHB*, *Vana Parva*, 3.4; 3.12; 3.147.11) contains the seed story of Sita-Rama, probably an ancient Indo-Aryan legend later given separate stature in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

Chaste Wife: Sita

The central theme in the epics is of the battle between justice as *dharma* and evil (*adharma*). This struggle envelops women and men, gods and demons. Every act has an irrevocable consequence, and so women protagonists are actors, not simply victims. Valmiki clearly identified Sita as earthly fecundity, as she was the daughter of Mother Earth, and her name means "furrow" in the ground. Sita was also later identified with Lakshmi, goddess of good fortune for Hindus, Jainas, and Buddhists, so that Lakshmi's image is carved on a railing of the Buddhist monument (*stupa*) at Bharhut (150 BCE). In a picturesque analogy, Rama was scion of the dynasty descended from the sun god, while his wife Sita brought agricultural productivity to his kingdom. Her abduction by demon Ravana left him shattered. All of nature mourned, the forests lost their leaves, animals and birds were distraught (*RMV* 3.49–50). The lovers pine for each other, he by visiting their familiar haunts, she remaining unkempt, fasting, weeping, resisting Ravana's lust. Despite the epic battle in which Ravana is killed, Rama receives her coldly, advising his brothers that he cannot take her back after her long sojourn in another man's home. Chilled by his suggestion of her impurity, Sita asks for a fire ordeal, in which she was rescued unscathed by god Agni. Rama declares he had to prove her innocence to the populace, and Valmiki's tale ends with their coronation in Ayodhya, where the trees thrive with undying roots (*Ramayana* 6.131).³⁴

However, in the classical era of social pluralism, the *Ramayana* was modified by adding a seventh chapter, the “Uttara Kanda” (Last Book). This chapter rakes up contemporary male anxieties about whether Sita could have remained impeccable during her abduction. To satisfy his subjects, Rama suppressed his faith in her integrity to his royal *dharma*. Pregnant Sita then retired into the forest under the care of sage Vishvamisra where she lived austere with sons Lava and Kusha. When grieving Rama, who had never remarried, saw his sons recite their epic, he asked for her return. However, Sita proudly refused and reentered Mother Earth.

As Hinduism evolved, Rama and Sita were deified as the two perfect halves, husband (*pati*) and wife (*patni*), manifestations of primal Purusha (RV 10.90), and elaborated later as Purusha-Viraj (BAU 1.4.3).³⁵ However, Sita’s travails open up the Pandora’s box on misogyny and patriarchy in ancient India. Was she a docile victim or a strong woman? Sita’s agency is apparent throughout the epic, as she chose her husband and went to exile willingly; resisted Ravana’s predations, although he saw her as an object. In the epic battle between *dharma* and *adharma*, Rama could destroy Ravana only because Sita remained chaste. Courageous till the end, she resisted evil men’s wish to demean her a second time by returning to the Earth in dignity.³⁶ Sita is the emblem of female suffering and its redemptive power. In the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi referred to Sita’s purified courage, when he called upon Indians to sacrifice for the nation’s freedom.

Savitri and Damayanti

The *Mahabharata*’s ancient legends of other loving pairs include those of Savitri-Satyavan, Damayanti-Nala (3.54), and Shakuntala-Dushyanta (1.62–69).³⁷ Like Sita, Savitri and Damayanti were learned *kshatriya* princesses who were brave and loyal. Sita and Damayanti were won by their heroes in a *svayamvara* contest of skill and bravery held by the brides’ fathers. Although the tests were won by the heroes, the women loved their grooms whom they garlanded in a monogamous marriage to last beyond death. In Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, Sita met Rama only after he had bent and broken Shiva’s mighty bow in the contest. However, in Kampan’s later Tamil epic, she gazed at Rama when he entered her city, and they fell in love upon first sight.³⁸ Damayanti’s lover Nala is a Nishada tribal prince whom she garlands in the *svayamvara* contest.

Each romantic legend depicts a woman admired for faithfulness to her husband. Later Hindus respect them as *pativratas* (wives who have taken a vow of fidelity), and this ideal has been one of the most resilient female paradigms in Indian history. In the story of Savitri, the god of death Yama arrived at his stipulated time to carry Satyavan away, but Savitri resolutely stalked them. Impressed by her persistence, Yama then granted her three

boons. Savitri cleverly outwitted Yama by restoring not only the family's lost fortunes but also Satyavan's life. The legend of Savitri the *pativrata* is told in elegant poetry charged with drama. Although technically a widow since her husband was dead, Savitri took special vows of celibacy and fasting (*vrata*), which custom later decreed could only be conducted by married women. The story's impact on women has been profound, as seen in the annual festival *savitri vrata*. Wives fast for the husband's long life and tie an auspicious red thread as proof of their virtue.³⁹

A whole array of female prototypes appear in the epics. They include the wise matrons Kunti and Gandhari (*MHB*), and Kausalya (*RMV*); the jealous mother and manipulative wife Kaikeyi (*RMV*); monogamous Sita and Savitri; the outspoken wife Draupadi (*MHB*); the demon Surpanaka mutilated for trying to seduce Rama;⁴⁰ the fallen wife Ahalya redeemed by Rama's divine grace; designing crone Manthara who caused Rama's exile; vengeful Amba reincarnated as an androgyne (*MHB*); low-caste devotee Sabari who received Rama's divine grace.

Polyandry, Premarital Sex, Widows, and *Sati*

Draupadi's polyandrous marriage caused consternation among other Aryan princes, indicating the elite men feared it would encourage female promiscuity. The *Mahabharata* shows that Draupadi had power over her husbands; and in Dravidian south India and Sri Lanka, she is invoked as a goddess.⁴¹

The *Mahabharata* also indicates that premarital sex was known in ancient India. Intelligent Kunti helped her father to play host to the short-tempered sage Durvasa. Impressed by her hospitality, the sage taught the virgin girl sacred verses to five gods to be recited only after marriage. Her hurried invocation to the sun god Surya shocked her as it made her into an unwed mother. She placed her son Karna into a casket and sent him downstream where he was rescued by a *shudra* charioteer. Kunti could not acknowledge him to her princely husband Pandu or to their five Pandava sons received through the sacred verses. When she finally spoke of her secret to Karna, the tragic consequences had already befallen. Kunti's legend also includes her sisterly affection for her husband's second wife Madri. As Madri was childless, Kunti shared her last prayer with Madri who had twin sons. On Pandu's death, Madri ascended the funeral pyre as a true wife (*sati*) in order to allow widowed Kunti to care for their sons. Despite this example of royal *sati* in the *Mahabharata*, Madri not only chose her own fate, but Kunti who lived as a widow was the epic's greater heroine. However, medieval society seized on this scriptural validation to compel innocent widows to die as *satis*.

Both Kunti and Draupadi deviated from the patriarchal norms requiring sexual restraint. Kunti experimented before marriage; Draupadi had five husbands in a society where female monogamy was lauded, but male

polygamy allowed. The inclusion of their stories in a largely male martial epic suggests that such women were not uncommon in ancient India. Those who listened to the tales regarded them as heroines who selectively broke some strict laws on female behavior. Were such women only victims of elite men's laws, or agents and occasional renegades? Obviously there were other women like Kunti and Draupadi, as the patriarchs felt the characters were real enough to include in this dramatic epic.

Bhagavad Gita, Dharma, and Women's Puja

Although the epics are *smritis*, they are cherished almost above the *Vedas* because their folk legends on *dharma* apply to all. Hindus venerate the *Bhagavad Gita* as the fifth *Veda* because of its elegant, inclusive message in poetry that everyone can understand. Although an addendum to the *Mahabharata's* main narrative, the *Gita* is theologically independent. Its 18 chapters contain a synthesis of ideas from the *Upanishads*, other later Vedic theologies, and substantive devotional rites to deified icons (*bhakti-puja*) borrowed from Dravidian-aboriginal cultures.

The epics reveal that women were defined by their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters, and that their *dharma* consisted of unselfish service to the patriarchal family. The *Gita* emphasizes the dispassionate performance of duty, depending on one's stage in life and occupation (*varnashrama dharma*; 3.35).⁴² While everyone's chief *dharma* is to seek *moksha*, it became increasingly difficult for women to escape alone to forest hermitages. They then took another path to *moksha* through the domestic altar and devotional worship (*bhakti-puja*), as decreed by the *Gita*.

The *Gita's* preceptor Krishna declares that he is Vishnu's incarnation (*avatar*) and a manifestation of Supreme Brahman, and that the soul or Atman is indestructible. Krishna also teaches that the *Upanishadic* goal of enlightened salvation (*moksha*) was available to everyone through unselfish action (*karma yoga*) and love for the Divine (*bhakti yoga*). Krishna declares his compassionate love for all, even the disfranchised like women and *shudras*. All that was required was devotion to God and flower offerings to icons (*bhakti-puja*). This marks the trend toward iconic rites in Hinduism. These rites echo domestic rituals to goddesses in pre-Aryan Indus cities (3000 BCE) where numerous images have been found. Their presence near homes indicate women were largely involved in these rites, as they are today in Hinduism. The Indus goddess images contain lamp-like objects on either side of the head, and their sooty residue suggests burnt oil wicks, also common in Hindu *puja* today.⁴³

Three verses from the *Gita* make pointed reference to *puja*. They indicate that dominant-caste men were swayed by the persistence and power of female and folk rites to absorb them into Hinduism. The first describes iconic *puja*, the second shows inclusion through *bhakti*, and the third speaks of women and *shudras* whom *brahmans* had excluded from Vedic rites.

Whoever offers a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water to me in devotion,
That devout offering I accept from the pure of heart.

BG 9.26

I am the same in all beings, none to me is more hateful or dear, but
Whoever worships me with devotion, I am in them and they are in me.

BG 9.29

O, Partha (Arjuna)! Whoever takes refuge in me goes to the highest
path, even those born in the womb of sin, or women, *vaishyas*, even
shudras.

BG 9.32⁴⁴

Forest Dweller and Hermit: *Moksha*

The third *ashrama* was available in middle age after the birth of grandchildren. Men and women then retreated into the forest as contemplatives. *Vanaprasthini* (f)/*vanaprasthin* (m) left worldly desire for *kama* and *artha*, and focused on attaining *moksha*, which released one from the cycle of *karma-samsara*. As it was often more difficult for women to shed male authority and family obligations for even temporary retreats, elderly women contemplated, prayed, or read scriptures in a quiet section of bustling households. There were probably fewer sages like Gargi of the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad*. The majority of women accompanied their husbands or even families into forest retreats, as seen in the epics, and most were honored as noble mothers and chaste wives.⁴⁵ In the *Ramayana*, Sita accompanied her husband into the forest. In the *Mahabharata*, widow Kunti lived with her sons in exile; and fiery Amba who resisted a forced marriage performed penance in the wood before wreaking revenge on Bhishma who had kidnapped her for his ineffectual brother.

The universal goal of *moksha* was difficult for most women and also men, but the last phase of the *sanyasin/sanyasini* was particularly harder on women. Most retreats catered to men, so that the few women aspirants were sexual prey or suspected of preying upon men. Women remain vulnerable even today in largely male hermitages.⁴⁶ There were powerful women sages like Auviayar (third century CE), but even the Kannada *bhakti* saint Akkamahadevi (twelfth century CE) had to prove her sincerity to Basavanna, leader of the Virashaiva sect.⁴⁷

Women and Property in the *Smritis*

The Vedic *Satapatha Brahmana* (5.3, 1, 13) bemoans those without male children, as funeral oblations were conducted by the sons.⁴⁸ The theme of reproduction as central to a marriage is found also in the epics that reiterate the need for women to have children to maintain the lines of patrilineal descent, since sons largely inherited their property. In the absence of a direct

son, girls sometimes inherited property, but the adoption of male heirs was not yet in vogue, although in the medieval era, adoption became more common. Daughters brought in a bride-price to augment their parents' wealth, and although the daughters of wealthy fathers, e.g., Sita and Draupadi, brought expensive gifts such as horses and jewels to their husbands' families, the dowry system was not popular in ancient India. In the absence of a son, the *Mahabharata* advocated an equal division between a daughter and the secondary claimant, and so did the law book, *Yajnavalkya Smriti* (ca. 400 BCE). However, by 200 BCE, most theologians had begun to oppose women's right to inherit property as daughters and wives.⁴⁹ The two epics briefly express such anxieties even among loving fathers (*MHB* 1.173.10; *RMY* 2.119, 35–36) as society valued premarital virginity. These anxieties, as well as codified laws that curtailed women's economic independence, reduced the status of daughters in classical India.

However, in the context of the regional and ethnic diversity of Indian traditions, these Sanskritic laws remained codified ideals that non-Aryan Adivasis and Dravidian language populations often ignored with impunity. Moreover, despite patriarchal traditions, the Sanskrit epics did not bemoan the birth of daughters, but actually praised them as cherished "gems." Thus, King Janaka took great pride in his daughter Sita. Kunti was loved by her father Raja Kuntibhoja for having saved him from the curses of the temperamental sage Durvasa. Raja Drupada cherished his daughter Draupadi, as did Savitri's father. Yet, some misogynist prejudices were later interpolated in the *Mahabharata*.

Within these domestic parameters, royal women were depicted as capable of influencing their husbands and sons, although the patriarchal order ensured that ultimate power lay in male hands. If in the *Rig Vedic* era, the bard urged a young bride to speak aloud before the citizen assembly, royal wives now voiced their opinions in the privacy of the inner palace rooms. While higher-caste women are praised for their modesty, they do not appear to have worn veils. In the epics, men of dignity were expected to observe the rules of modesty and etiquette by not gazing at married women. In the *Ramayana*, Lakshmana could only identify Sita's anklet, but not her other ornaments that she had discarded from the air while being abducted, since Lakshmana had never looked upon her face. The absence of a veil for women in ancient India is in marked contrast to references to veiled women in medieval India, especially in the north.

CLASSICAL ERA *SMRITI* (250 BCE–500 CE)

Women's Property Rights in the *Smritis*

In the story of Draupadi's humiliation in the *Mahabharata*, the author strongly condemned treating women as property or pawns in a dice game.

However, such attitudes became more popular after the classical text *Manu Smriti* (ca. 100 BCE–200 CE) became the preeminent Hindu law code. This work cataloged women with jewels and other possessions (MS 2.240), and described them as worthless without men (MS 4.213).⁵⁰ *Manu Smriti* (chap. 9) also declared women untrustworthy, and urged men to guard their wives “zealously, in order to keep his progeny clean” (MS 9.9). It recommended that as it was impossible to restrain a woman forcefully, she should be kept busy “attending to her duty, cooking food, and looking after the furniture” (MS 9.10–11). It advised:

Men must make their women dependent day and night, and keep under their own control those who are attached to sensory objects. Her father controls her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her sons guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence.
MS 9.2–3

Women, especially should be guarded against addiction, even trifling ones, for unguarded (women) would bring sorrow upon both families.
MS 9.5

The bed and the seat, jewelry, lust, anger, crookedness, a malicious nature, and bad conduct are what Manu assigned to women.
MS 9.18⁵¹

However, not all classical authors shared this view. Astronomer Varahamihira, author of *Brithat Sambhita* (sixth century CE), declared that both genders were subject to the same flaws.⁵² Examples of misogyny in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina texts were balanced by more humane voices that suggested that carnal desire was strongest in men, and that even monks were swayed by lust.

Some *shastra* law codes fueled male anxieties about women’s inheritance rights, so that some parents began to view daughters as an overwhelming encumbrance.⁵³ Despite this, however, India’s great regional and ethnic diversity has meant that Adivasi and Dravidian cultures often ignored or circumvented Sanskritic law codes. An early *Rig Vedic* bard had urged a young bride to speak before the citizen assembly, and in epic, heroines Sita, Kunti, and Draupadi were cherished by their fathers, and not afraid to express their opinions. In the later centuries, women’s public voices became muted, but they continued to speak up in private chambers. Kings often made the final decisions, but history reveals that royal women influenced their husbands and sons.

Social etiquette demanded modesty from both sexes, but women moved about freely and did not wear the veil in early India. Rather, men were cautioned against staring directly upon married women, even within families. The poet of the *Ramayana* states that as Lakshmana had never gazed

directly upon Sita's face, he could only identify her anklet, but not her other ornaments discarded from the air when she was abducted. The female veil came into wide use, especially in north India, during the tenth century.

Trade, Ethnic Mergers, and Women

After Alexander's brief invasion and retreat in 326 BCE, Chandragupta Maurya established an empire that soon stretched across the subcontinent. Asoka Maurya's Second Rock Edict refers to Tamil and Kerala kings, Sri Lanka, and Graeco-Bactrians.⁵⁴ The Graeco-Bactrian ambassador Megasthenes made the first reference to Dravidian matriliney when he described a "Pandaean [Pandya] nation governed by females" and their queen as a daughter of Hercules.⁵⁵ Classical Tamil texts from the Sangam era (200 BCE–500 CE) reveal a vibrant culture penetrated by *brahmins* and Sanskrit ideologies.⁵⁶ Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, and Tamil texts, sculpture, and painting reveal that feminine paradigms crystallized in the classical era. Other sources for this era include architecture, numismatics, epigraphy, and Greek, Latin, and Chinese accounts.

The Mauryan decline (ca. 180 BCE) precipitated invasions by armies of Persians, Graeco-Bactrians, Shakas, and Kushanas. Meanwhile, the peninsula received waves of seafarers due to general knowledge of the monsoon winds. Sailors, merchants, and other men docked at Bharukaccha on the Gulf of Cambay, Muziris on the Arabian Sea, Pimpur on the Kaveri, and Tamralipti on the Bay of Bengal. Romans, Egyptians, Arabs, Hebrews, Christians, Africans, Chinese, and Malays assimilated into Indian society by cohabiting with Indian women. Tamil and Sanskrit texts called them *yavanas* (Ionian), but the broad category included dark foreigners. Indian kings like the Guptas (319–500 CE) valued their trade.⁵⁷

There were clear expressions of initial xenophobia in Indian texts. The Tamil works describe *yavana* guards and artisans as speaking strange, harsh dialects.⁵⁸ The *Manu Smriti* disparaged them as outcastes (*mleccha*) who seduced wayward wives; and it urged Indian men to abide by endogamous caste rules and strictly control their women. However, such cultural anxieties probably reduced when immigrants took local wives and mistresses who disseminated Sanskritic ideas through their children of mixed ethnicity. Inscriptions in the Deccan indicate that Shaka *yavanas* became Hindu or Buddhist. The *brahman* composers of *Vishnu Purana* (third to fourth century CE) prided themselves as being the transmitters of Sanskrit refinement outside India, a land fringed by the Himalayas and three seas. In Southeast Asia, *vaishya* merchants and *brahmins* took local wives and spread Hinduism and Buddhism. Indian merchants also lived in Alexandria, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea according to potsherds and papyrus contracts.⁵⁹

Although misogynist texts laid the guidelines on gender roles, female sexuality, and racial purity, these were not always regarded by those who

assimilated into the Indian social mosaic. The *varna-jati* system was still porous, and the multiplicity of subcastes (*jatis*) indicates that cross-caste liaisons were often discretely ignored. Royal brides were exchanged by Shaka and Telugu Shatavahana rulers; and powerful Guptan queens were low caste; a floating population of hybrid Indians, Chinese, Persians, and Greeks lived in the Kushana empire. Mixed groups were categorized as *anuloma* (a high-caste father and a low-caste mother) and *pratiloma* (a low-caste father and a high-caste mother), but skilled, literate *shudra* artisans from powerful guilds commanded respect in this era.⁶⁰ However, gender and caste hierarchies became more inflexible when immigrants adopted Sanskrit ideas on female chastity, patriarchy, and racial purity.

Shastras: Women's Rights

The classical *smritis* were the Hindu *Shastras*, *Puranas*, and *Agamas*. Of the 18 *Maha Puranas* (200 BCE–1000 CE) on Hindu divine legends, the most relevant here are the Devi Mahatmya hymn in the *Markandeya Purana*, the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, and the later Hindu scriptures for the Great Goddess Devi (examined in a later chapter). The *Natya Shastra's* manual on music and dance defined women as dancers and musicians over the millennia. The *Shilpa Shastras* contain artistic rules on the depiction of women in sculpture.

The *shastras* that delineated norms of female behavior, right to inheritance, age of marriage, and other gender issues were the *Manu Smriti* and the *Artha Shastra*. The former was composed by multiple authors honored by the mythical name of Manu (ca. 100 BCE–200 CE). The *Artha Shastra* was begun by Kautilya (a.k.a. Chanakya), chief advisor to Chandragupta Maurya (321–297 BCE), but expanded later and completed ca. 250 CE.⁶¹ The two texts reflect upper-caste anxiety over miscegenation. By the end of the sixth century CE, elite Hindus saw a woman's chief function to be motherhood, and their daughters were married close to puberty to enable them to reproduce large families.

These *shastras* enshrined rules for the behavior of women and the castes. However, their repeated emphasis on types of intercaste marriages shows that these were common occurrences. The *Artha Shastra* (3.2) is the earlier, and it is fairer to those of mixed caste, namely the *anuloma* and *pratiloma*. The text states that “Offsprings of mixed castes shall have equal divisions of inheritance.”⁶²

Widowhood came to have a stigma in Indian society. An early *Rig Vedic* (RV 10.18) hymn had urged an earlier widow to “rise up, woman, into the world of the living,”⁶³ and the *Mahabharata* portrayed the widow Kunti as a guardian of her sons and progeny. In the classical era, male relatives came to view the widow as a threat, as she could either inherit her husband's property and reduce their share, or she could be entirely dependent upon them.

In sexual terms, young widows potentially attracted outside male advances or posed a threat to the family men. Despite some references to widow immolation, it does not seem to have been a common or sanctified act (*sati*) until the fifth century CE. Women often remarried, sometimes more than once. The *Artha Shastra* does not mention *sati*, and it indicates that widow remarriage was common. It describes living widows, their property rights, and their rights upon remarriage. Apart from her personal property from her father (*stridhana*), inheritance from a deceased husband was used for their children's upkeep. If she remarried, their sons received this property, and in the absence of sons, daughters were the heirs. The *Artha Shastra* states:

If a woman has many male children by many husbands, then she shall conserve her property in the same condition as she had received from her husbands. Even that property which has been given her with full powers of enjoyment and disposal, a remarried woman shall endow in the name of her sons.

A barren widow who is faithful to the bed of her dead husband may, under the protection of her teacher, enjoy her property as long as she lives: for it is to ward off calamities that women are endowed with property. On her death, her property shall pass into the hands of kinsmen (*Dayada*). If the husband is alive and the wife is dead, then her sons and daughters shall divide her property among themselves. If there are no sons, her daughters shall have it.

AS 3.2⁶⁴

In some communities levirate remarriage or *niyoga* allowed the family access to her property. Some classical texts describe widows negatively as preying upon men or susceptible to attractive foreigners. Non-Aryans and low castes eager to rise in the caste ladder often adopted elite-caste rules against widow remarriage.

The *Manu Smriti* also does not mention *sati*, but it praises the celibate widow who lives frugally (*MS* 5.156–169) declaring unequivocally: “nor is a second husband ever prescribed for virtuous women” (*MS* 5.162). This convinced many Hindus that the *shastras* prohibited widow remarriage.⁶⁵ *Sati* emerged as an ominous trend among royal women ca. fifth century CE. A pillar inscription at Eran, Madhya Pradesh commemorates the death of a brave king Bhanu Gupta whose wife, “loyal and loving, beloved and fair followed close behind him into the flames.”⁶⁶ However, it became more frequent only after the eighth-century arrival of the Rajputs whose ancestors were the Shakas of Central Asia. The Rajputs became the staunch supporters of a feudal, patriarchal, martial form of Hinduism.⁶⁷

The *Artha Shastra* (3.2, 7) and *Manu Smriti* (chap. 9) give specific attention to women's property rights, place in society, marriage, and to caste

rules. While the older text *Artha Shastra* has more lenient rules on cross-caste marriages and women's maintenance and property, its patriarchal biases are also evident. The *Artha Shastra* sanctions polygamy if the husband provided care for all his wives, but it does not recognize polyandry. Men's sexual rights over women were accepted as normative, as their sexuality was an independent force, unlike that of women which stemmed from the need to procreate. It thus states:

Having given the necessary amount of sulka [i.e., bride-price] and property even to those women who have not received such things on the occasion of their marriage with him, and also having given his wives the proportionate compensation and an adequate subsistence (*vrutti*), he may marry any number of women; for women are created for the sake of sons.

AS 3.2⁶⁸

The *Artha Shastra* stipulates that women were entitled to property, but that men were their guardians, men had judicial rights over that property. The *Artha Shastra* declares that "it was to ward off calamities that women were endowed with property" and that "whoever justly takes a woman under his protection shall equally protect her property."⁶⁹ It also stipulates that a bridegroom should pay a bride-price, and that if she became a "pious" widow, she should receive the remainder of the sums and her jewelry for her sustenance. If she married again outside the consent of her father-in-law, she would forfeit those rights. This might indicate that widow remarriage was possible through *niyoga* and that a woman's dowry remained in her deceased husband's family. The author describes various interpretations of women's right to their children, and he compares the woman to a plowed field:

My preceptor says that the seed sown in the field of another shall belong to the owner of that field. Others hold that the mother being only the receptacle for the seed (*mata bhastra*), the child must belong to him from whose seed it is born. Kautilya says it must belong to both the living parents.

AS 3.7⁷⁰

Both the *Artha Shastra* and the *Manu Smriti* were considered authoritative by the first or second century CE when Indian society was noticeably fearful of the immigrant deluge.

Puranas and Classical Hinduism

Theism became central to Hinduism due to the *Bhagavad Gita*, and fire sacrifices became secondary to iconic worship of goddesses and gods. Village

religion consisted of the worship of images of goddesses, but now icons of Vishnu/Krishna and Shiva were also worshipped in small shrines. The new rituals and their liturgies were compiled by *brahmins*, and these were known as the *Agamas*. The theologians also compiled compendiums of divine myths in the 18 *Maha Puranas* (Great Old Works) between 200 BCE and 1000 CE. Although the *Gita* had specifically included devout women and *shudras* as eligible for Hindu iconic rites, later texts like the *Manu Smriti* and *Puranas* excluded them from initiating rites to Hindu icons in shrines. *Manu Smriti* declared “there is no ritual with Vedic verses for women” (MS 9.18) and cautioned against ignorant priests, women, and impotent men (MS 4.205).⁷¹ Some *Puranas* also lumped high-caste women with *shudras* as “ignorant” (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.4.29) and “unfit” to hear the *Vedas* (*Devi Bhagavata Purana* 1.3.21), even when chanting to the Goddess Devi.⁷²

Yet, sacrifices were impossible without wealth, a fact which allowed royal women to perform rites. Thus, epigraphy shows that a queen named Nayanika in the Deccan performed rituals ca. 300 CE.⁷³ However, these injunctions in the *smritis* effectively stalled women’s education for centuries, especially among the lower classes, although women’s premodern writings indicate that misogynist strictures were sidestepped in order to teach daughters.

While the *Upanishads* were the foundation of esoteric Hindu thought, popular religion entailed the loving worship of icons of goddesses and gods with flowers and fruits and the burning of lamps. Such *bhakti-puja* is advocated in the *Bhagavad Gita* (BG 9.26).⁷⁴ Classical Hinduism was a merger of pre-Aryan and *Vedic* divinities, *Brahmana* liturgies, and *Upanishadic* doctrines. An impersonal neuter Brahman was made accessible through a gendered vision of Divinity in which female counterparts to male deities were the unifying elements of the Hindu Trinity. The chief functions were to create, preserve, and destroy the material universe.

Gods	Goddesses
Brahma (Creator)	Saraswati Devi (Knowledge)
Vishnu (Preserver/Creator)	Lakshmi/Sri Devi (Fortune)
Shiva (Destroyer/Creator)	Shakti Devi (Energy)

Devi the Mother Goddess

Hindus accept all things as inherently divine, as the myriad aspects of the universe are manifestations of a divine Brahman who is not limited by name or form. Brahman’s manifestation could be visualized and worshipped in any form that was pleasing. In classical Hinduism, Vishnu, Rudra-Shiva, and Devi became the most popular. Brahma’s functions were usurped by Vishnu and Shiva, but Saraswati as Knowledge remained a powerful concept to be

venerated, as were Lakshmi as Fortune and Shakti as Energy. The female deities took myriad local and Sanskrit names, and merged into a central idea of Devi the Great Goddess in the third century CE.

The *Atharva Veda* indicates in the merger of non-Aryan and Aryan religions, worship of the Goddess as Mother was gaining popularity in Sanskrit society. The poet praised Mother Earth (Prithvi) as the motherland, the queen of the four directions, the fecund mother who gave grain and medicinal plants, the nurse who fed cattle that produced milk, and the being from whose navel all things emerged.⁷⁵

Nebulous *Vedic* goddesses now began to coalesce with non-Aryan female deities into a great goddess Devi glorified in Sanskrit hymns like the Devi Mahatmya (ca. third century CE). Devi now represented Hindu Trinity as Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Shakti/Durga, knowledge, fortune, energy incarnate. Her origin lay in *Rig Vedic* Aditi (Limitless) as the abstract mother principle that probably shaped the ideal of Spirit Brahman in the *Upanishads*. This may explain Devi's theological importance in Hinduism and her popularity in public and domestic rituals. Among the most revered *Rig Vedic* hymns enacted in temple rites are the Purusha Sukta (*RV* 10.8.90) and three prayers to goddesses, i.e., Devi Sukta (*RV* 10.8.125),⁷⁶ Ratri Sukta (*RV* 10.127), and Sri Sukta (*RV* 5.871).⁷⁷ *Rig Vedic* Sri is goddess of fortune, her color is golden, she resides on a lotus, and she is garlanded with this auspicious flower. These descriptions are identical to those of Vishnu's wife in classical Hinduism. Although the *Rig Veda* has few hymns entirely for these goddesses, the existing hymns and the female deities became central to the Hindu pantheon and liturgy. This fact proves that Vedic goddesses had an auspicious power that made them popular throughout India's history. Clearly, modern scholars have misinterpreted this abstruse, archaic text when they concluded that goddesses were unimportant to this patriarchal society. The medieval importance of Devi in Tantric Hinduism will be discussed in a later chapter.

Tales of Vishnu's incarnations as Krishna in the *Mahabharata* and as Rama in the *Ramayana* were elaborated in the classical *Harivamsa* and *Vishnu Purana*. Vishnu's popular appeal increased when he was identified as the Creator or *Rig Vedic* Purusha, and described through his ten incarnations (*avatars*) to preserve *dharma*. Meanwhile, Vedic Rudra merged with pre-Aryan ideas of Shiva as male procreative power in the *lingam*. The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (*SU* 6.7) hailed Shiva as Great God (Mahesvara), a manifestation of Brahman.⁷⁸ The most magnificent myth later portrayed Shiva as the Cosmic Dancer (Nataraja) who supervised Time, destroyed illusion, and extended his mercy to devotees.

Courtesans and Prostitutes

Cities like Kaushambi, Varanasi, Vaishali, and Rajagriha now attracted skilled artisans, bankers, officials, and female courtesans (*vesyas*) whose

dance and music amused the rich. Some scholars surmise that the breakup of tribal clans during urbanization led to the “alienation” of some women.⁷⁹ Buddhist texts refer to courtesans in Vaishali who charged high rates, and that the king appointed the courtesan Ambapali to supervise. Interestingly, while the male authors of the Hindu *sutras* slight courtesans and advise *brahmans* not to accept food from them, the Buddha was won by Ambapali’s generosity to his monks. Ambapali was no sordid prostitute, but a gifted and respected woman, who became a Buddhist nun. Her wise poem is included in the *Therigatha* (TG 252–70).⁸⁰ As in later eras, courtesans danced or sang for clients irrespective of caste or ethnicity, as their livelihood depended on fees. This could have been a factor in social mergers. The classical guilds (*srenis*) for artisanal, merchant, and banking professions may also have had guild dancers and musicians, as in later eras. Women were weavers and artisans, but men dominated the thriving industrial *srenis* of goldsmiths, silver-smiths, engravers, chariot makers, bead and ivory workers, and masons and sculptors. Excavations at Lauriya Nandangarh reveal some of their artifacts, including the earliest images of goddesses in Sanskrit society. They include small gold images of Lakshmi Devi. Lakshmi also appears in carvings on the walls of Buddhist funeral mounds (*stupa*). The worship of a female deity in nature also appears in images of tree nymphs (*yakshis*) at *stupas* in Bharhut and Sanchi. These images helped to develop Indian notions of the divine feminine and of feminine representations in art.

Royal Marriage Treaties

Polygamy was common among kings and the wealthy. Political treaties were often sealed by marrying the daughter of a former foe, whatever her caste, sect, or ethnicity. *Kshatriya* princes sometimes married several tribal or foreign princesses, while lower-caste kings with ambitions assumed *kshatriya* status after marrying a *kshatriya* princess. As the monarchy evolved, women became pawns in the quest for political power among the kings of Kashi, Kosala, Magadha, and the Vrijji confederacy. However, as noble mothers or chaste wives the princesses were socially empowered, and opportunities for political influence rose. The status of even ordinary women rose through these feminine paradigms, so that they were nurtured by all women. India’s first king and Buddha’s key patron was Bimbisara of Magadha (fifth century BCE) who sealed alliances with neighboring states by marrying three princesses. They were Chellana from the powerful Lichchhavi confederacy, Khema from Madra, and the sister of Kosala’s king Pasenadi who claimed descent from Rama of the epic. Magadha became a preeminent state, and its benefits accrued to its virtuous queens.⁸¹

Women acted as cultural bridges in cross-ethnic marriages for political expediency. Some examples were the marriage of a Shatavahana princess and the powerful Shaka king Rudradaman (150 CE), and Chandra Gupta I’s

rise after marrying Kumaradevi, a tribal Lichchhavi princess. So important was Kumaradevi that Gupta coins depicted her face along with his.⁸² Marriages with local princesses enabled immigrant kings to assimilate and become Hindu or Buddhist. Royal dowries (*stridhana*) consisted of territory and money, which the women controlled themselves. The queens often donated to religious and artistic causes of one sect, while their husbands gave to another. Inscriptions at the Buddhist *stupa* at Nagarjunakonda in the Deccan indicate that Shatavahana queens Camti Sri, Adavi Catisri, and six others donated money for the monument.⁸³ Similar inscriptions from the Amaravati *stupa* and from Buddhist monastic caves in western India reveal that the donors were Shaka queens and wealthy women.⁸⁴ In south India, later Chola queens like Sembiyan Mahadevi built Hindu temples, and dowager mothers became regents for underage sons. Dowager Prabhavati Gupta, a daughter of the Guptas and widow of the Vakataka king in central India (390–410 CE), acted as regent for over a decade.⁸⁵ Early medieval records from the Deccan and south India show that aristocratic women were religious benefactors and trustees of property.

NOTES

1. Venkatesananda, *The Concise Ramayana of Valmiki*, 72.

2. Radhakrishnan, *A Sourcebook of Indian Philosophy*; Swami Nikhilananda, *The Upanishads: Aitareya and Brihadaranyaka*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ramakrishna and Vivekananda Center, 1997); Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, ed., *Hindu Myths*, 5th ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982); Sri Ramakrishna Math, *Pursha Suktam and Narayana Suktam* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1993); Sarvananda, *Aitareyopanishad*; Swami Sarvananda, ed., *Isavasya Upanishad* (Sanskrit text, English translation; Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1998); Swami Madhavananda, ed., *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2000); Swami Ashudoshananda, ed., *Veda Mantranga: Mantranga, Shanti Mantranga, Suktanga* (Sanskrit and Tamil commentary), containing commentaries on Purusha Sukta, Devi Sukta, Sri Sukta, Ratri Sukta (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2003), 83–111, 164–70, 177–206, 224–29.

3. D. D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline* (repr., Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1994).

4. Jha, *Ancient India*, 64, 78–91; and Thapar, *Early India*, 138. The states were the trans Indus kingdoms of Kambhoja and Gandhara (capital Takshila); Kuru near Delhi (Hastinapura); Panchala and Matsya in the Yamuna Basin; Shurasena (capital Mathura); Avanti (capital Ujjain); Chedi (capital Eran); Kosala (capital Ayodhya); Kashi (capital Varanasi); Vatsa on the Ganges; the oligarchic republics of Vrijiis and Mallas; Magadha (Pataliputra); Anga in Bengal; Asmaka in the Deccan.

5. Excavations at Adichanallur, Tamil Nadu reveal burial urns (ca. 800 BCE), 500 years before Asoka Maurya's edict (third century BCE) on the Pandya, Chera, and Chola kingdoms of the Tamils. Skeletons excavated by T. S. Satyamurthy predate the southern megalith era by several centuries. T. S. Subramanian, "Skeletons, Script Found at Ancient Burial Site in Tamil Nadu," *The Hindu*, Wednesday, May 26, 2004, 12.

6. Important *sutra* composers were Gautama, Baudhyayana, Vasishtha, Katyayana, and Apasthamba.

7. Venkatesananda, *The Concise Ramayana of Valmiki*; Robert P. Goldman, ed. and trans., *The Ramayana of Valmiki: Balakanda*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Sheldon I. Pollock, trans., *Ayodhyakanda*, vol. 2 (1986); Pollock, trans., *Aranyakanda* (1991). Also Swami Tapasyananda, ed., *Sundarakandam of Srimad Valmiki Ramayana* (Sanskrit with English translation; Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1983).

8. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*; A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. (Delhi: Rupa, 1967); Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics Draupadi amongst Rajputs, Muslims, Dalits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Vanamala Bhawalkar, *Woman in the Mahabharata* (Delhi: Saujanya Books, 1999).

9. Paula Richman, ed., *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), these essays: Richman, "Introduction," 3 21; A. K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," 22 49; Frank E. Reynolds, "Ramayana, Rama Jataka, and Ramakien: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Buddhist Traditions," 50 63. Velcheru Narayana Rao, "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telegu," 114 36.

10. Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 1:94 98.

11. V. V. S. Aiyar, *Kamba Ramayanam: A Study* (Delhi: Tamil Sangam Publication, 1950), 321; K. S. Srinivasan, *Ramayana as Told by Valmiki and Kamban* (Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1993), 184 95.

12. Karve, *Yuganta*, 1 6, 37 162.

13. *Asvalayana Griha Sutra* (1.5.1 3; 1.19.1 13; 6.1 8; 20.1 7; 21.5 7; 22.1 5), *Yajnavalkya Smriti* (1.97 105, 115 116), *Manu Smriti* (6.1 3, 8, 25, 33, 42, 87 89), *Gautama Dharma Sutra* (8.14 26) cited by Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:224 31.

14. Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife*, 36 37, 45 47, 55; McGee, "Ritual Rights," 42 43, 49 nn. 25, 28.

15. V. Varadachari, *Agamas and South Indian Vaisnavism* (Triplicane: Ranga chari Trust, 1988), 47.

16. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, *Manu Smriti* (3.55 57; 9.3 7, 11, 26); Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith, trans., *The Laws of Manu* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 34 82 (chap. 2 4), 117 27 (chap. 6), 197 225 (chap. 9).

17. Young, "Om, the Vedas, and the Status of Women," 84 121, 91. I thank Katherine Young for her reference to the *Mahabharata*'s Forest Book (3.305.20), 116 n. 62.

18. *Paraskara Grihya Sutra* (3.2) and *Sankhyayana Grihya Sutra* (2.17.13) cited by Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*, 202 3.

19. Jaimini states: "Atulya hi stri pumsa. Yajamanah puman vidyamscha; patni stri avidya cha," in his early *sutra*, *Jaiminiya Mimamsabhashya* (ca. third century BCE). See also S. Radhakrishnan and Charles Moore, eds., *A Source Book on Indian Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (1957; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 486; and McGee, "Ritual Rights," 32 50.

20. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 203 5.
21. I quote Jaimini's *Purva Mimamsa* from Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 205.
22. Doniger and Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, 918.
23. Venkatesananda, *The Concise Ramayana of Valmiki*, 62.
24. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 100 101. The Sanskrit verse reads: "na mam Madhava vaidhvyam narthanasho na vairita; tatha shokaya bhavati yatha putraivina bhavah."
25. Quoted by Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, 399.
26. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 3.
27. Venkatesananda, *The Concise Ramayana of Valmiki*, 88.
28. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 320 21.
29. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 1:182.
30. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 324.
31. Hart, *The Poems of the Ancient Tamil*, 132 35.
32. Sarvananda, *Aitareyopanishad*, 59.
33. Doniger and Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, 68, 78, 93.
34. Cornelia Dimmitt, "Sita: Fertility Goddess and Sakti," in *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (1984; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995), 210 23.
35. Madhavananda, *The Brihadaranyka Upanishad*, 46 49; O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths*, 34.
36. David Shulman, "Fire and Flood: The Testing of Sita in Kampan's *Iramava taram*," in *Many Ramayanas*, ed. Richman, 89 113.
37. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, 365 67, 382 84, 482; Chandra Rajan, trans., *Kalidasa: The Loom of Time, A Selection of His Plays and Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 80.
38. Srinivasan, *Ramayanam as Told by Valmiki and Kamban*, 20.
39. John B. Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 2nd ed. (1971; repr., Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1987), 58 76, with Edwin Arnold, trans., *Indian Idylls* (London: Trubner & Co., 1883).
40. Kathleen M. Erndl, "The Mutilation of Surpanakha," in *Many Ramayanas*, ed. Richmond, 67 88.
41. Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988 & 1991).
42. I have translated the *Bhagavad Gita* (3.35). Shakuntala Rao Sastri translated *dharma* as religion, in Shakuntala Rao Sastri, ed., *The Bhagavad Gita* (Sanskrit text and English translation), 3rd ed. (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan, 1982), 163, 173. Radhakrishnan, *A Sourcebook on Indian Philosophy*, 115, 117, more appropriately translated *dharma* as law, meaning that it was preferable to perform one's own law to another's, however well; and that God created the four castes on the basis of occupations. Compare this with Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:286. Embree sweepingly equates *dharma* with caste function (*varnashrama dharma*). To prove his theory, Embree juxtaposes two separate verses (*BG* 3.35 and 4.13) with several stanzas from elsewhere into a single long problematic verse. This is expanded in a footnote (p. 334) that inserted words not in the text, like *svadharma* (one's own *dharma*) and *lokasamgraha* (social solidarity). However, stanza 4.13 simply reads: "The four castes were created by me according to the separate strands of earthly

qualities (*gunas*) and works (*karma*); Though I am the Creator, know me to be the immutable non doer” (“*Caturvarnyam maya srishitam guna karma vibhagashah; tasya kartarampi mam vidhya kartaramavyayam*”).

43. Raman, “Popular Pujas in Public Places,” 165–98.

44. The three verses from the *Bhagavad Gita* read: “*Patram pushpam phalam toyam yo me bhaktya prayacchati; tadaham bhaktyu prahartamashnami prayatatmanah*” (BG 9.26); “*Samo’ham sarva bhutesu na me dveshyo’sti na priyah; Ye bhajanti tu mam bhaktya mayi te tesu chapyaham*” (BG 9.29); “*Mam hi Partha vyapasritya ye’pi syuh papyonayah; striyo vaishyastatha shudraste’pi yanti param gatim*” (BG 9.32).

45. O’Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*; Roy, “Vedic Cosmogonies,” 9–19; Frederick Smith, “India’s Curse: Varuna’s Noose, and the Suppression of Women in the Vedic Srauta Ritual,” in *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, ed. Julia Leslie (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992), 42–48.

46. Lynn Teskey Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York, 2004), 137–66.

47. A. K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 112. See also Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 1:77–81; Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:349–51.

48. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 100–101.

49. Altekar quotes *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, *Vasistha Dharma Sutra*, and *Gautama Dharma Sutra*, 237.

50. Doniger and Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, 42, 94, 198.

51. *Ibid.*, 197–98.

52. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 324–25.

53. *Ibid.*, 5.

54. Radhagovinda Basak, ed., *Asokan Inscriptions* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1959), 5–9. The Persian emperor Darius collected tribute from north India in 506 BCE. Curious about the source of the Indus, Darius “subdued the Indians and made regular use of the southern ocean,” according to Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (1954; repr., New York: Penguin, 1979), 284–85.

55. Excerpt from Megasthenes’s *Indika* in K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *Foreign Notices of South India: From Megasthenes to Ma Huan*, 3rd ed. (1939; repr., Madras: Madras University, 2001), 41; J. W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian* (Calcutta: 1877), 62–63.

56. Thapar, *Early India*, 156–60.

57. Sailors’ tales are repeated by Greek geographers Strabo and Ptolemy, and the Roman historian Pliny. However, the most valuable is an unknown ship’s log, the *Peripulus of the Erythraen Sea* (first century CE), listing Indian ports and goods. Hoards of Roman gold and silver coins show that they lived in Tamil emporia ports of Puhar and Arikamedu. Phoenicians, Arabs, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, east Africans landed in India, as did Jews, early Christians like St. Thomas the Apostle, and Chinese Buddhist monks like Fa Hsein who sailed from Java. See R. Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization: South India 300 BC to AD 1300* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 105–13; K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India: From Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar*, 4th ed. (1955; repr., Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975), 68–145.

58. Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization*, 109.

59. Thapar, *Early India*, 234 44.

60. Avvai Natarajan and Natana Kasinathan, *Art Panorama of Tamils* (Madras: State Department of Archaeology, 1992), 15 18; Raman, "Popular Pujas in Public Places," 165 98; R. Nagaswamy, *Studies in Ancient Tamil Law and Society* (Madras: Institute of Epigraphy and the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology, 1978), 84 88.

61. Thomas Trautmann, *Kautilya and the Arthashastra: A Statistical Investigation of the Authorship and Evolution of the Text* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971); and Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 55 59.

62. Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 313. Alphonso Karkala relies on R. Shama Sastry, trans., *Kautilya's Artha Sastra*, 8th ed. (1915; repr., Mysore: Mysore Printing and Publishing House, 1967), 174 77.

63. O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 52.

64. Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 310 11.

65. Doniger and Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, 115 16.

66. I quote Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 1:188. Basham cites *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 3 (London: 1888 1929), 92.

67. Paul Courtright, "The Iconographies of Sati," in *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 27 48; Vidya Dehejia, "Comment: A Broader Landscape," 49 53; Lindsay Harlan, "Perfection and Devotion: Sati Tradition in Rajasthan," 79 90.

68. Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 312.

69. *Ibid.*, 307 14.

70. *Ibid.*, 312.

71. Doniger and Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, 93, 198; Altekar, *The Position of Hindu Women in Indian Civilization*, 205. Altekar quotes the Sanskrit text to show the decline in women's education after 200 BCE; and Georg Buhler, *The Laws of Manu* (1886; repr., London: Dover, 1969), 330.

72. R. C. Hazra, *Puranic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs*, 3rd ed. (1940; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987).

73. McGee, "Ritual Rights," 34 35.

74. Sastri, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 272.

75. R. T. H. Griffith, trans., *The Hymns of the Atharva Veda* (1896; repr., Benares: E. J. Lazarus, 1957), 93 101.

76. Coburn, *Devi Mahatmya*, 256 58, 258 64.

77. Ashudoshananda, *Veda Mantranga*, Sanskrit texts and Tamil commentaries on Purusha Sukta, 83 111; Devi Sukta, 164 70; Sri Sukta, 177 206; Ratri Sukta, 224 29.

78. Swami Tyagisananda, ed., *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1987), 118.

79. Jha, *Ancient India*, 75.

80. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 1:184, 456.

81. Jha, *Ancient India*, 82.

82. Thapar, *Early India*, 227, 285, 328; Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, 5th ed. (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1998), 109 36.

83. Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1962), 128–31.

84. James Burgess, *The Buddhist Stupas of Amravati and Jaggayyapeta* (Varanasi: Indological Book House for the Archaeological Survey of India, 1970), 37–38, 48, 53, 55, 58, 63; Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (1997; repr., London: Phaidon, 2002), 75; Vidya Dehejia, “Collective and Popular Basis of Early Buddhist Patronage: Sacred Monuments 100 BC–250 AD,” in *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 35–45.

85. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 185–87; also Jha, *Ancient India*, 81–84, 119, 149; and Thapar, *Early India*, 148–50, 285.

4

BUDDHIST AND JAINA NUNS AND LAYWOMEN

Free, I am free.
I am free
by means of the three
crooked things,
mortar, pestle, and
my crooked husband.
I am free
from birth and death
and all that dragged me back.

Mutta, *Therigatha*, ca. sixth century BCE¹

DISSENT IN EARLY INDIA: BUDDHISM AND JAINISM

Indian civilization was transformed by widespread religious dissent between 800 and 300 BCE, when many intellectuals rejected prosperity for a celibate, homeless existence with rudimentary possessions. Seeking answers to ultimate, philosophical questions, the ascetics ranged from transcendental monists to heterodox atheists convinced of material causation. At the crux of their revolt was opposition to fire sacrifices that depleted forests and destroyed life, and to social distinctions of gender and class. The *Upanishadic* monists proposed that the highest sacrifice consisted not in the ritual, but in the burning of sensory desire through yogic meditation (*tapas*) to attain beatific understanding (*moksha*) of cosmic unity. However, as they believed that rituals and gods were the lesser path, the *Upanishads* were absorbed into the *Vedas* (see Chapter 2). In contrast, various atheists and agnostics rejected rituals, gods, and the *Vedas*. The most notable were the Jains who accepted women hermits, and the Theravada Buddhists who first rejected but later included nuns. More extreme radicals were the atheist Charvakas (ca. 700 BCE) and Ajivika fatalists (ca. 500 BCE) who accepted women hermits and were

lenient on celibacy.² The Theravada text *Vinaya Pitaka* states that there were 62 heterodox groups with women ascetics at this time.³

Despite theological differences, many ascetics shared certain Indian beliefs, namely that desire and social distinctions were illusory, actions (*karma*) determined future birth and death in the *samsara* cycle, and meditative yoga was redemptive.⁴ The monists regarded *moksha* as freedom from *samsara*, while Jainas and Buddhists described it as the “cooling” cessation (*nirvana*) of *samsara*. This elevation of spirit over flesh represented a high point in Indian thought, but some male ascetics equated women with the flesh and viewed them as a threat to salvation.

Powerful royal patrons included the Jaina emperor Chandragupta Maurya (321–297 BCE) and Asoka Maurya (268–232 BCE) whose Theravada missionaries included his daughter and son who introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Kushana emperor Kanishka (first century CE) promoted the spread of Mahayana Buddhism across Asia; and Shatavahana queens (ca. third century CE) supported Buddhist monasteries. Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism declined in India by the eleventh century CE when many female orders became defunct. However, in the modern era, lower-caste Tantric and Dalit Buddhist women and men have resuscitated their religion, and new monastic groups have emerged.⁵

Homelessness, Celibacy, and Gender

As ascetics were highly respected for forgoing worldly pleasures, religious mendicancy was incorporated into the third and fourth life stages (*ashramas*), namely, that of the part-time forest dweller and the complete hermit. Sanskrit titles for ascetics include *sanyasini* (f)/*sanyasin* (m), *yogini* (f)/*yogi* (m), *sadhvi* (f)/*sadhu* (m), and *bhikshuni* (f)/*bhikshu* (m). Buddhist texts in Pali refer to homeless poverty as “*pabbajatti*” and to nuns as *bhikkhuni* and monks as *bhikkhu* who begged for food, owning nothing but a begging bowl and the clothes on their backs.⁶ Some Buddhist and Jaina monastics also carried a razor to shave their heads, signifying rejection of gender roles in preparation for the asexual goal of *nirvana*.⁷

From the beginning, women had a space in Jainism and Buddhism, and their efforts actively helped to propagate these religions in India. Jainism evolved from the earlier sect of Sramanas/Nirgranthas (“bondless ascetics”) who vehemently opposed fire sacrifices. Founder Vardhamana Mahavira (538–463 BCE) was the last of 24 Jaina preceptors or *tirthankaras* (ford crossers), also called *Jinas* (spiritual victors). The 19th *tirthankara* was probably a woman named Malli. The 23rd *Jina* Parshvanatha belonged to the sect of the Shvetambara (“white clad”), and he inducted women ascetics and laywomen. Mahavira belonged to the Digambara (“sky clad”) sect, and he established the first order of Jaina nuns.

Mahavira's contemporary Siddhartha Gautama or the Buddha (566–483 BCE) initially objected to women celibates. His hesitation probably stemmed less from doubts over female spiritual weakness than from anxiety over the continued celibacy of his monks. However, his mother Pajapati persuaded him to sanction the first order of Theravada Buddhist nuns. Senior Buddhist and Jaina nuns provided leadership to younger nuns and instructed laywomen and laymen in the community of celibates and laypersons (Sanghas). Respecting the strict celibacy upheld by Buddha and Mahavira, nuns took advantage of these new religious spaces at a time when Hindu women's ritual authority had diminished significantly.⁸

The religions challenged the intellectual monopoly by *brahman* and *kshatriya* men. Due to strong convictions on nonviolence (*ahimsa*), Buddhists and Jainas rarely pursued farming as potentially harmful to minute soil creatures. Instead, many became traders, bankers, artisans, professions requiring literacy and accounting. The sects attracted women of all *varnas*, affluent *vaishya* bankers, non-Aryan *kshatriya* kings and aristocrats, and marginalized plebeian *shudras* and poor *brahmans*. Wealthy Buddhist and Jaina women have left records of their donations to their communities of monks, nuns, and women and men lay members.⁹ Some laywomen and laymen would temporarily adopt a renunciant's life, serve the community, and return to household life, chastened by the abstinent experience, thus helping to integrate the Sanghas.¹⁰

Although women and non-Aryans eagerly embraced these religions, monks dominated nuns, laywomen, and laymen in their communities. They flourished in northern republican states whose non-Aryan populations were more equitable on gender and in the south where Dravidian women sages were honored, according to Tamil literature.¹¹ Followers were attracted by the emphasis on morality (*dharma*) and nonviolence (*ahimsa*) over rites, Buddhism proving more popular due to less stringent rules. In contrast, Jaina ascetics undertook severe penances, some monks went nude, and practiced slow starvation to avoid killing microorganisms. In contrast, Buddhist monks and nuns ate frugally once a day, and homelessness merely involved separation from the family. When some monks questioned the Buddha about the value of incessant roaming and "trampling down the new grass, distressing the plants, and hurting so many little creatures," the sage decreed that during the annual rains, they would reside in sheltered groves (*vassa*) donated by philanthropists.¹² It is likely that seasonal settlement attracted some women to Buddhism.

While each sect practiced homelessness slightly differently, ascetics largely agreed that celibacy was integral for *nirvana*. Buddhist and Jaina texts expressed contempt for monks who succumbed to desire, by reiterating the maxim that the body was decaying matter, and that women and possessions were obstacles to *nirvana*. A general suspicion of women is evident even in

Mahavira's advice to his young disciple Gautama, although he actively supported nuns:

When your body grows old, and your hair turns white, all your powers decrease. Despondency, the king's evil, cholera, mortal diseases of many kinds befall you; your body wastes and decays. Gautama, be careful all the while!

Cast aside from you all attachments, as the (leaves of) a lotus let drop off the autumnal water, exempt from every attachment. Gautama, be careful all the while!

Give up your wealth and your wife; you have entered the state of the houseless; do not, as it were, return to your vomit. Gautama, be careful all the while!

Uttaradhyayana Sutra 10.26–29¹³

Scriptures and Women's Hymns

The religions were initially popular partly due to charismatic founders whose sermons and scriptures were in folk dialects, rather than in Sanskrit. Since women were often less educated, oral transmission was important in gaining their support. Buddha and Mahavira addressed followers in Ardha-Magadhi, a local dialect (Prakrit) derived from Sanskrit. The Jaina canon was orally transmitted in Ardha-Magadhi till inscribed ca. 450 CE.¹⁴ The Theravada canon or *Tripitaka* (Three Baskets/Books) with its subsections of *Vinaya* (Discipline), *Sutta* (Sermon), and *Abhidhamma* (Metaphysical) was verbally transmitted in Pali, and later transcribed ca. 70 BCE. However, after the first century CE, Mahayana Buddhist and Jaina texts were often composed in Sanskrit.

Interestingly, the *Tripitaka* contains the oldest corpus of female hymns in India, and possibly the world. This is the *Therigatha* (Hymns of the Elder Nuns), whose 522 hymns are found in the *Khuddha Nikaya* section of the *Sutta Pitaka*. Some hymns date from Buddha's life, but were later inscribed with the canon around 70 BCE.¹⁵ Moreover, other sections of the canon contain information on nuns or offer parables relevant to all. *Dhammapada* (Way of Righteousness) in the *Sutta Pitaka* contains the famous parable of the mustard seed. In this text, Buddha taught Kisa Gotami who grieved unceasingly for her dead child that sorrow is universal and how to rise above it.¹⁶ Patriarchal attitudes are revealed in *Vinaya Pitaka's Culla Vagga* (10.1–6) on how the first nuns' order was formed and *Bhikkhuni Vibhanga* (Nuns' Section) which states that nuns had to abide by 311 rules, unlike monks with just 227 rules, as stipulated in *Bhikkhu Vibhanga* (Monks' Section).¹⁷ This will be discussed later in this chapter.

Gender and Salvation

Despite women's space in these religions, Indian patriarchal norms prevailed here as well. The founders were male sages, hence monks became the paradigm, and nuns the "Other." Moreover, as most theologies were male constructions, women's subordination became scripturally ordained. Senior Theravada monks (*theras*, *bhikkus*) could instruct nuns (*theris*, *bhikkunis*) and laywomen, but nuns rarely taught monks. Learned women (*acharyis*) instructed other nuns, but even male novices rarely accepted women teachers. Sangha hierarchies clearly mirrored lay patriarchal norms. The nuns' quarters were subject to paternalistic supervision, although some rules were benign and intended to address issues like menstruation. One scholar conjectures that female subordination led to the decline of Buddhist nuns' orders in India.¹⁸

The canon contains words attributed to Buddha who apparently ordered nuns to keep their place. However, these words may have been later interpolations by zealous monks eager to reiterate their own strictures on monastic celibacy. Buddha was the "Compassionate One" who respected women as mothers, and it is unlikely he was a petty patriarch. His advice to monks to cultivate the unselfish kindness of mothers is evident in his verse still chanted by Theravada Buddhists:

Just as the mother at the risk of life,
loves and protects her son, her only son,
So let him [the monk] cultivate this boundless love
To all that live in the whole universe . . .
When he lives with perfect insight won,
He surely comes no more to any womb.

Sutta Nipata 148¹⁹

Despite entrenched patriarchy, early Hindus and Buddhists did not question women's right to salvation. The Hindu belief in virtue and *dharma*, powerful goddesses, and a neuter Brahman show that gender is a trivial distinction on the path to *moksha*. Buddhists believe that *nirvana* is available to all virtuous individuals, irrespective of social condition, as seen in the *Culla Vagga*:

Then the venerable Ananda spoke to The Blessed One as follows:

"Are women competent, Reverend Sir, if they retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Thathagata, to attain to the fruit of conversion, to attain to the fruit of once returning, to attain to the fruit of never returning [to *samsara*], to attain saint-ship?"

"Women are competent, Ananda, if they retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by the Thathagata, to attain to the fruit of conversion, to attain to the

fruit of once returning, to attain to the fruit of never returning, to attain saint-ship.”

Culla Vagga, in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, 10.3²⁰

As in other ancient civilizations, women's roles as mothers and wives were seen as a natural result of their anatomy, and many did derive pleasure from these functions. Yet, single women rarely bypassed domesticity for the ascetic path, although society honored exemplary widow hermits and female saints.²¹ However, Tantric Hindu and Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhist traditions differ, as they acknowledge women's spiritual and sexual potential and do not require celibacy or homelessness for *nirvana*. Instead of becoming forest recluses, meditative *yoginis* (f)/*yogis* (m) reside at home.²²

Fortunately in South Asia, parallel practices evolved outside the male textual doctrines. Hindu, Jaina, and Buddhist women often carved out their own ritual or meditative spaces not dictated in the texts, and they thus commanded spiritual authority. Therefore, despite a lengthy debate among Jaina monks on women's *nirvana*, women expanded their religious spaces by celebrating devotional festivals almost in contradiction to theological guidelines. Many Jaina, Hindu, and other women today perform public rituals despite male textual strictures against women priests.²³ Indian women's authority is also derived from the cultural veneration of the mother, which extended to the worship of creator mother goddesses. This is seen in Hinduism, in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, and in atheistic Jainism.

JAINISM AND WOMEN

Vardhamana or Mahavira (Great Courageous Sage), the last *tirthankara* or *Jina*, was born a *kshatriya* prince of the Jnatraka clan in Bihar. Vardhamana left his mother Trishala, a princess of the powerful Lichchhavi oligarchy, and his wife and child to become a religious mendicant. He is described in Theravada Buddhist texts as a Digambara or “naked ascetic” of the Nirgranthas.²⁴ Jainism is based on three principles (Three Jewels), viz., Right Views, Actions, Faith, and five cardinal rules, viz., nonviolence (*ahimsa*), truth (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), celibacy (*brahmacharya*), and non-attachment to possessions (*aparigraha*). While lay members practice sensory restraint, monks and nuns observe strict celibacy, poverty, and nonviolence. Jainas uphold reason and material causation, but two principles stem from mystical intuition rather than logic. The first dogma that all living and nonliving things have a soul (*jiva*) allows Jainas to embrace nature with empathy. *Jivas* range from the most complex with multiple senses like humans, in varying grades to include those with no sense organs, e.g., microorganisms and plants, and even nonliving organic matter like metal and stone. Since the earth pulsates with innumerable souls, the highest morality and quintessential ideal is nonviolence. Moreover, as Jainas implicitly accept

the principle of *karma-samsara*, violent acts result in the *jiva*'s rebirth in a reduced life form. Buddhists and many Hindus also embrace the central dogma on *ahimsa*, and like Jainas, they hold that logic is needed for mundane knowledge, but enlightenment is an intuitive transformation attained by few ascetics. Jainas believe that enlightened sages (*kevalin*) have an extra-sensory consciousness of *jiva*.²⁵ The *Sutrakritanga* text describes some beliefs:

Earth and water, fire and wind,
 Grass, trees, and plants, and all creatures that move,
 Born of the egg, born of the womb,
 Born of dung, born of liquids
 These are the classes of living beings (*jiva*).
 Know that they all seek happiness.
 In hurting them men hurt themselves,
 And will be born again among them
Sutrakritanga 1.1 9²⁶

Jaina sub-sects of the Shvetambaras and Digambaras took root in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. Most nuns were Shvetambaras, as clothing protected them from unwanted sexual attention. Digambara nudist monks traditionally rejected nuns in their midst. However, in the present era, nuns and laywomen have increased in Jainism, even among the Digambaras. Jainism has a new appeal today due to its emphasis on reason, human rights, and safeguards for the environment.²⁷

Female Preceptors, Doctrines, and Salvation

There are historical references to *tirthankara* Parshvanatha who possibly lived a century before Mahavira, but the lives of earlier preceptors are cloaked in legend. What is clear is that Nirgrantha-Jaina teachings stemmed from non-Aryan perspectives and that legends about several *tirthankaras* honor women. The Shvetambaras believe that the 19th *tirthankara* Malli was a woman, although Digambara monks argue that this was a monk named Mallinatha. A Shvetambara myth also offers a female origin for the cosmos through a single sensed soul (*nitya-nigoda*), from whom sprang goddess Marudevi, mother of Rshabha, the elusive first *tirthankara* (ca. 750 BCE). Marudevi has also been called the first Jaina woman ascetic and Mahavira's great-grandmother, as well as "the First Lady of the First Family of our times." Medieval statues show Marudevi with Rshabha on her lap.²⁸ Rshabha was a Nirgrantha who resisted *brahman* fire sacrifices that celebrated *kshatriya* conquests. In the ensuing forest conflagrations, aboriginals and animals were decimated, as seen in the *Mahabharata* tale of the burning of the Khandava forest.²⁹

Jainas probably imbibed respect for women shamans from aboriginal groups. A legend states that Rshabha's daughters Brahmi and Sundari bypassed married life to become ascetics, although this myth incidentally emphasized prior virginity for nuns. Rshabha is believed to have fathered children, but his successor Nemi and his fiance Rijimati were celibate.³⁰ *Tirthankara* Parshvanatha was dark skinned, perhaps indicating non-Aryan ancestry. He was a Shvetambara monk who believed in *nirvana* for women hermits (*sadhvis*) whom he appointed as administrators. Parshvanatha's encouragement to women probably led to the Jaina adage, "Women too can attain perfect liberation (*nirvana*)," according to an eminent scholar.³¹

His successor *tirthankara* Mahavira was a Digambara, but he began the first order of nuns in Jainism. Such egalitarian ideas proved popular among the pre-Aryan republican clans of the Jnatrikas in Bihar and the Lichchavis in Vaishali.³² Perhaps the idea of a world teeming with unseen *jivas* attracted women to Jainism, as they could relate to the miraculous growth of the fetus within the womb. It is also possible that aboriginals were drawn by the theology of multiple *jivas* in the world, which resembled the innumerable life forms existing in the forest.

Nuns were clearly rejected by many Digambaras, especially after the deepening sectarian schism with the Shvetambaras ca. 300 BCE. Some abstemious Digambara monks then voiced their opinion that women could not attain *nirvana* due to their flawed anatomy, which harbored microscopic mites and lice in their bodies. As women unintentionally killed these creatures, they broke the cardinal rule on nonviolence (*ahimsa*).³³ This led to a long-standing debate on women's *nirvana* in the classical era. The extreme practice of *ahimsa* also meant that some Digambara monks avoided traveling in the monsoons as it meant trampling upon insects and plants. The text below emphasized nudism and *ahimsa* for *nirvana*, but it was a reminder to the monks that women were outside its *purview*:

If on his daily begging round he receives no alms, he should not be grieved, But think, "I have nothing today, but I might get something tomorrow!" When a restrained ascetic, though inured to hardship, lies naked on the rough grass, his body will be irritated, and in full sunlight the pain will be immeasurable. But still, though hurt by the grass, he should not wear clothes.

When his limbs are running with sweat, and grimed with dust and dirt, in the heat of summer, the wise monk will not lament his lost comfort. He must bear it all to wear out his karma, and follow the noble, supreme Law. Until his body breaks up, he should bear the filth upon it.

Uttaradhyayana Sutra 2.24–37³⁴

Fearing the presence of nude nuns, some Digambara monks declared women incapable of attaining *nirvana* on moral and anatomical grounds. This debate escalated ca. 150 CE when some misogynists argued that as female bodies harbored invisible mites, they could not renounce the sensory world to attain *nirvana*.³⁵ Digambara thus also rejected those who wore garments as this negated the fifth Jaina principle of non-ownership (*aparigraha*). It was also argued that clothes reflected false modesty and the inability to control sexual desire.³⁶ In the medieval era, the Yapaniya sub-sect (ninth to fifteenth century CE) combined some Digambara and Shvetambara ideals to declare females as spiritually and anatomically “inferior,” but eligible for *nirvana*.³⁷

Despite such examples of male antipathy, not all Digambaras can be faulted with cruelty to women. Mahavira was a Digambara, but his compassion to women was proverbial. He encouraged women to debate publicly on spiritual issues and inducted the first Shvetambara order of nuns. The Shvetambaras believe that simple clothing and strict morality lead women to *nirvana*. Without prohibiting nudity for either sex, this sect holds that nudity simply distracts the ascetic from his/her own meditational focus.³⁸ The emphasis on celibacy led to sermons on the body as a lump of decaying matter, and women as a distraction from a spiritual focus. While such monastic didacticism indicates a deep fear of female sexuality, it is important to state that the highest Jaina legacy were the ideals of *ahimsa* and compassion for all visible and microscopic beings, irrespective of gender. In this medieval era, Shvetambara laywomen expanded their religious spaces by celebrating devotional (*bhakti*) festivals in which they still sing hymns, offer flowers in *puja* rites to images of *tirthankaras*, and refer to Mahavira as “*bhagwan*” or divine being. This is a startling title for the founder of a theology that rejects a Creator. It shows that women and laypersons have shaped religious practices in India, and these often deviate from textual dictates.³⁹

Jina Malli and Female Salvation

Despite the negative comments on *tirthankara* or *Jina Malli* and her gender in the above debates, Jaina nuns’ orders continue today in India. The Shvetambara text, *Nayadhammakahao* (An Account of the Jnatrikas), has a section entitled *Malli Jnata* (I.8), describing *Jina Malli* as a woman. This work also notes that the birth of a female *Jina* was one of the world’s rarest events.⁴⁰ The legend states that in her previous life, Malli was a devious king Mahabala who performed great penances to win spiritual merit. For his evil motive for virtuous ends, he was reborn as a beautiful girl, flawless as a jasmine flower (*Malli*).⁴¹ Malli perceived the moral flaws in her suitors and became a virtuous ascetic who reached enlightenment as a *kevalin* who became a *Jina*, but Digambaras claim that this was the male *Jina* Mallinatha.⁴² Around 150 CE,

Padmanandi Kundakunda, a prominent Telugu Digambara monk, argued that women could never attain *nirvana* in his Prakrit text, *Suttapahuda* (Gifted Treatise). This classical work contains the misogynist attitudes in the Hindu *Manu Smriti*. Kundakunda's words on women's salvation are provocative:

1. The supreme Lords of the Jinas [i.e., the highest authorities] have taught that there is only a single path of *moksha* (salvation) characterized by total nudity and hands alone used as a bowl for receiving alms. All other modes of mendicancy are not true paths.
5. The third emblem is that of women. She is called *arya* [Noble Lady, i.e., a nun] and eats only one meal a day and wears a single piece of cloth. But the female novice (*ksullika*), who keeps two pieces of clothing wears only one while eating.
6. According to the Teaching of the Jina, a person wearing clothes cannot attain *moksha* even if he be a Tirthankara. The path of *moksha* consists of nudity; all other paths are wrong paths.
7. In the genital organs of women, in between their breasts, in their navels, and in the armpits, it is said [in the scriptures that] there are very subtle living beings. How can there be mendicant ordination for them, since they must violate the vow of *ahimsa*?
8. Women have no purity of mind; they are by nature fickle-minded. They have menstrual flows. Therefore, there is no meditation for them free from anxiety.

*Suttapahuda*⁴³

Shvetambara patriarchs wrote an apologetic defense more insulting to women. They argued that Malli's femaleness was irrelevant, as she became a nun before puberty. Lingering feminine traces were erased on attaining *nirvana* and her rise to the status of a *Jina*. Some teachers defended Malli's femaleness and women's *nirvana*. Yet by constructing the legend of her previous birth as a man, they obviously felt women were inferior. A new twist was initiated by the Yapaniya sub-sect, which adopted notions on clothing and *nirvana* from both Digambaras and Shvetambaras. In the Sanskrit text, *Stri Nirvana Prakarana* (Exegesis on Women's Salvation), the author Sakatayana argued that *nirvana* was possible for those wearing clothes if they had no sense of ownership or vanity.⁴⁴ Yet, this monk listed three genders, i.e., male, homosexual, and female, with women ranking lowest. Homosexuality was considered natural; men with female desires were considered both spiritually and anatomically higher than women who had female bodies and desires.⁴⁵ The Shvetambaras dispute this argument.

A single black stone sculpture of a full breasted nude female *tirthankara* in meditation at Unnav, Uttar Pradesh is believed to represent *Jina* Malli.⁴⁶ Others dispute this, as she has long, braided hair, where a nun's hair would

have been completely shorn.⁴⁷ However, one can argue that if a female *Jina* was a radical departure from the all-male *tirthankara* pantheon, could she not also have departed from the rule on shorn hair for celibates? Although not a goddess like Hindu Devi or the Vajrayana Buddhist goddess Tara, *Jina* Malli is the closest to the divine feminine in Jainism. Since Jainas followed Indian aesthetic norms, their artistic representation may have fallen in line with full-breasted, long-haired Hindu-Buddhist goddesses.

The history of Jainism is a poignant narrative of women who continuously strove to break the ceiling on spiritual authority. It also reveals that liberal men resisted numerous didactic opponents, and artisans carved free-flowing visions in sculpture. Finally, it is clear that Jaina women reshaped textual doctrines through orthopraxy. Female agency in religion has never really been in doubt, despite the dull weight of patriarchal censure.

Jaina Nuns and Laywomen

Tirthankara Nemi, Parshvanatha, and Mahavira were more favorable to women than the Buddha was to the first Theravada nuns.⁴⁸ Legend states that Rijimati was engaged to Nemi, the 22nd *tirthankara*, but became a nun with his approval. Parshvanatha's support of women is now well known. Mahavira founded the first Shvetambara nuns' order after his discourse with his female disciple, Ajja Candana. The texts state that Candana was the leader of thirty-six thousand nuns whose numbers were three times higher than those of monks and that there were twice as many laywomen (314,000) as laymen (159,000).⁴⁹ Even if these numbers were idealizations, the male authors clearly sought to prove that women favored Jainism. Sakatayana's ninth-century discourse on women's salvation describes some important nuns:

28. How can that be? For [the women] who have reached the shore of the ocean of good conduct have plenty of steadfastness.

29. The chief nuns—namely, Brahmi, Sundari, Rijimati, and Candana—were worshipped even by gods and demons and are famous on account of their good conduct and sattva.

*Stri Nirvana Prakarana*⁵⁰

The Jaina canon also refers to the historical Queen Jayanti of Kosambi, who became a Jaina nun after speaking with Mahavira. Her philanthropy clearly gave a boost to early Jainism. Despite constraints on female property rights in classical India, royal and middle-class women owned property and were benefactors to Jaina, Buddhist, and Hindu organizations.

Jaina *Puja* and Goddesses

By the last centuries BCE, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina practices changed dramatically from asceticism to personal substantive rites of devotional worship

(*bhakti-puja*) to sacred images housed in domestic altars and public shrines. In atheistic Jainism and Buddhism, new divinities were constructed from the folk veneration of exemplary humans. Hindu veneration of Devi or Mother Goddess drew upon folk legends of local female divinities (ca. first century CE). This was echoed in Jainism and Buddhism, as seen in the statue of *Jina* Malli. Jainas also venerated Marudevi as the Divine Mother and the first woman Jaina nun/saint or *sadhvi*.⁵¹ Among the honored Jaina mother figures are Vama and Trishala, the *Jina* Matas or mothers of Parshvanatha and Vardhamana, and other “perfected mothers” or Mahasati Matas who represent role models on womanly virtue.⁵² Jaina women also began to pay homage to the “eight mothers of teaching” (Vidyadevis) like the Hindu goddesses Saraswati and Lakshmi. Jainas invoke these revered divinities represented in images in household altars and shrines. Once valued for their benign magical powers, Matas and Vidyadevis are now meditative emblems.

Such early feminine deities appear as tree nymphs (*yakshis*) and male dryads (*yakshas*) on Buddhist funerary monuments at Sanchi (third century BCE), Bharhut (second century BCE), and Amaravati (first to second century CE). A popular Jaina *yakshi* is Ambika, a benevolent mother goddess with a fierce form in south India. Regional influences are seen in the Jaina goddess Jvalamalini popular with Digambaras in south India, and Sachiyamata in Rajasthan. Jainas also worship local clan goddesses along with Hindus in western Indian villages. Such devotional practices, partially shaped by women’s rights, and visions of the feminine divine integrated Jainas, Buddhists, and Hindus in India.⁵³

BUDDHISM AND WOMEN

Buddha and Theravada

Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince of the *kshatriya* Shakya clan to King Suddhodhana and Queen Maya of Kapilavastu, Nepal. Buddha was initially respected as an enlightened monk, and not as a divinity. However, myths soon circulated around the miraculous conception and birth of this extraordinary individual. The myths related that a sacred elephant impregnated his sleeping mother from her side and that she gave birth to Siddhartha not vaginally, but also from her side under an asoka tree in Lumbini Gardens. This episode is sculpted on the railing of the Buddhist reliquary (*stupa*) at Bharhut (second century BCE), which predates the 70 BCE *Jataka* (Birth stories) in *Sutta Pitaka* (Sermon Basket). The *Jataka* also states that Queen Maya died after his birth and that his aunt and stepmother Maha-Pajapati raised him with her own son and daughter. The legend is also sculpted on a later Mahayana Buddhist panel from Gandhara (first to second century CE).

Disturbed by Siddhartha’s melancholy in the midst of luxury, his father confined him to the palace, but on a rare visit to the city, the thirty-year-old

prince witnessed old age, sickness, death, and an ascetic. The contrast between sorrow and sensual palace existence deeply disturbed Siddhartha who now left his wife Yashodhara and son Rahula to become an ascetic. Six centuries later, the monk Ashvaghosa wrote a hagiography, *Buddhacharita* (Life of the Buddha), in which he described Siddhartha's farewell. While some believe that this account proves Buddha's dislike of women, it may be a false interpretation. Composed centuries after Buddha's death, the hagiography mixes legend with real events, as its purpose was theological, rather than factual. Ashvaghosa portrays the virile prince consciously conjuring up repulsive images of sleeping harem women to reaffirm the transitory nature of pleasure. Whether or not Ashvaghosa intended to degrade women, he showed that Siddhartha viewed them as objects of desire and disgust, a message not lost on monks and laymen. Ashvaghosa wrote:

The loveliest of women waited on him . . . but even music played on instruments like those of celestial beings failed to delight him. The ardent desire of that noble prince was to leave the palace in search of the bliss of the highest good. Whereupon the Akanistha Gods, who excelled in austerities, noting the resolution of the prince, suddenly cast the spell of sleep on the young women, leaving them in distorted postures and shocking poses . . . Another with well-developed legs lay as if sprawling in intoxication, exposing what should have been hidden, her mouth gaping wide and slobbering, her gracefulness gone and her body contorted . . . Seeing this, the prince was disgusted, "Such is the real nature of women in the world of the living—impure and loathsome, but deceived by dress and ornaments, man is stirred to passion for them."

Ashvaghosa's *Buddhacharita*⁵⁴

The *Jataka* (1.68–76) has an earlier account of Siddhartha's meditation under a bodhi tree near Varanasi and how Mara, the male dryad (*yaksha*) of temptation and death, tried to seduce Siddhartha with wealth and power. The Buddha repulsed him by invoking Mother Earth, a scene often depicted in sculpture.⁵⁵ The text states, "The mighty earth thundered, 'I bear you witness!' with a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand roars, as if to overwhelm the army of Mara."⁵⁶ Mara then asked his daughters Desire, Pleasure, and Passion to seduce Siddhartha who rejected them and attained enlightenment.⁵⁷

Scholars argue that the Sangha's misogynist monks described women as temptresses in texts like *Anguttara Nikaya* (II.80, III.67–68) in *Sutta Pitaka*.⁵⁸ However, the primary purpose of such parables was not patriarchal but was theological in order to describe monk Siddhartha's grand conquest of desire. As the order initially comprised only monks, pleasure and passion were conceived as seductresses. For contemplative nuns, the tale

would involve male seducers, as when Mara appeared himself to disturb the meditations of the *bhikkhuni* Soma. Mara derided Soma's femaleness with "a two-finger wit" used to obstruct women from attaining *nirvana*. However, wise Soma saw through his guile and remained steadfast, thus proving she was unshaken by worldly gender distinctions. Mara fled on hearing her retort:

Am I a woman, or
Am I a man, or what not am I then?
To such a one is Mara fit to talk?
*Samyutta Nikaya*⁵⁹

In his first sermon at the Deer Park, Buddha taught the Middle Way between rigid penance and indulgence, and compassionately offered salvation to all. He delineated Four Noble Truths as causes and effects the first being universal sorrow (*dukkha*). The second is that sorrow emanates from desire out of ignorance that the world is transient (*anicca*) and the soul nonexistent (*anatta*). The third explains that each disease has a cure; and the fourth describes the cure as the Eight Fold Path. The sermon is related in the *Samyutta Nikaya* in the *Sutta Pitaka*:

Thus have I heard. Once the Lord was at Varanasi, at the deer park called Isipatana. There he addressed the five monks: There are two ends not to be served by the wanderer. What are these two? The pursuit of desires and the pleasure which springs from desire, which is base, common, leading to rebirth, ignoble, and unprofitable; and the pursuit of pain and hardship, which is grievous, ignoble, and unprofitable. The Middle Way of the Tathagata avoids both these ends. It is enlightened, it brings clear vision, it makes for wisdom and leads to peace, insight, enlightenment, and Nirvana. What is the Middle Way? . . .

It is the Noble Eight Fold Path—Right Views, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. This is the Middle Way.

Samyutta Nikaya 5.421⁶⁰

Maha-Pajapati's Quest

The canon records that the Buddha equated unselfish motherly love to the compassion of an enlightened sage (*arhant*). Yet, Maha-Pajapati's struggle for an order of nuns was arduous, and once established, *bhikkhunis* faced institutional restrictions. This is poignantly recorded by a Theravada monk in the *Culla Vagga* of the *Vinaya Pitaka* (Discipline Basket). Buddha's foster mother Pajapati's three appeals to him were rejected. She finally made a last attempt, journeying across many miles, and arrived with painful feet with

five hundred women dressed in saffron and with shaven heads like ascetics. They included widows, those whose male relatives had died in battle, the devout, and those who simply followed Pajapati.⁶¹ Buddha sanctioned the *bhikkhuni* order after being persuaded by his gentle cousin Ananda who sympathized with the women. He pointedly asked the Buddha if women could become *arhants* who reached *nirvana*. The Buddha agreed that women were eligible for this highest state, whereupon Ananda pressed his case. After two refusals the Buddha agreed in view of her maternal love and service for him in childhood. Yet, Buddha's anxiety over his monks' continued celibacy led him to stipulate eight "weighty laws" for nuns. The text states:

And standing respectfully at one side, Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid spoke to The Blessed One as follows: "Pray, Reverend Sir, let women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine [Dharma] and Discipline announced by The Tathagata [One who has gone forward, i.e., the Buddha]."

"Enough, Gotami. Do not ask that women retire from the household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata." [A second and a third time Pajapati made the same request in the same words and received the same reply.]

Then thought Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid, "The Blessed One permiteth not that women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata;" and she was sorrowful, sad, and tearful, and wept. And saluting The Blessed One, and keeping her right side toward him she departed.

Then The Blessed One, after dwelling at Kapilavatthu as long as he wished, departed on his wanderings toward Vesali, and wandering from place to place, he came to where Vesali was. And there The Blessed One dwelt in Vesali, in Great Wood, in Pagoda Hall.

Then Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid had her hair cut off, put on yellow garments, and with a number of Sakka women departed towards Vesali; . . . And Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid with swollen feet and covered with dust, sorrowful, sad, and tearful, stood weeping outside in the entrance porch . . .

[Ananda:] "... consider, Reverend Sir, how great a benefactress Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid has been. She is the sister of the mother of The Blessed One, and as foster-mother, nurse, and giver of milk, she suckled The Blessed One on the death of his mother. Pray, Reverend Sir, let women retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by The Tathagata."

[Buddha:] "If, Ananda, Maha-Pajapati the Gotamid will accept eight weighty regulations, let it be reckoned to her as her ordination."

Culla Vagga 10.1⁶²

The *Bhikkuni Vibhanga* describes the nun's stages from novice to senior *bhikkhuni* and the rules governing her life. Compassion decreed that the monks take note of women's specific menstrual needs. However, as a patriarchal institution, the "Eight Special Rules" ranked senior *bhikkhunis* below the youngest male novices, and nuns were subject to monks' criticisms, but not vice versa. Care was taken to weed out novice nuns whose health was unsatisfactory, whose morals were suspect in any way, or if they used "magical" techniques and potions in abortion or childbirth.⁶³ Although nuns and monks received similar teachings, novice nuns had to be at least 20 years old and to have parental permission. Novice nuns needed the approval of monks, but male novices did not require support from *bhikkhunis*. Nuns confessed their wrongs before an assembly of monks and nuns; monks confessed solely to other monks. Even senior nuns had to bow low to male novices, a demeaning rule that led Pajapati to appeal through Ananda for its reversal.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the Buddha is reputed to have dismissed it as "impossible."⁶⁵

Some texts like *Angutarra Nikaya* point to Buddha's suspicion of women in the Sangha, but some verses may have been interpolations into the Pali canon when it was compiled ca. 70 BCE. A verse in tune with Buddha's personality shows Ananda asking the sage how to treat newly ordained nuns. The Buddha advised him not to look directly and to control his senses.⁶⁶ However, another verse is so much at variance with the image of the benign but firm patriarch that it may not have emanated from the Compassionate One. A monk asked why so few women addressed assemblies, indicating that women's public roles had shrunk by 70 BCE. Buddha's uncharitable reply is surprisingly at odds with his saintly reputation. Such apocrypha show how later monks used his voice to authoritatively supervise monastic celibacy. The verse states:

Women, Ananda, are uncontrollable . . . envious . . . jealous . . . weak in wisdom.

Angutarra Nikaya II.80⁶⁷

The canon also exhorts monks to be kind, even under the stress of sexual abstinence, for example, in the *Dhammapada* verse: "As the Vassika plant sheds its withered flowers, men should shed passion and hatred."⁶⁸ Although some misogyny marred the benign face of early Buddhism, other charitable monks helped women to reap the advantages of this religion.

Therigatha and *Bhikkhunis*

The *Therigatha* (Hymns of the Elder Nuns) was composed by the first *bhikkhunis* or *theris* in the sixth century BCE and inscribed around 70 BCE with the rest of the canon. The 522 hymns were composed by 72 wandering

nuns who sang the hymns while preaching Buddha's doctrines. The hymns were orally reshaped over centuries before being written down.⁶⁹

Susan Murcott has uncovered the lives of the nuns who followed Pajapati and the meanings behind their poignant, yet exultant hymns. Women joined the order for social, psychological, and spiritual reasons. Some escaped from domestic hardships and thwarted ambitions; others sought answers to traumatic grief; and still others found comfort in the company of similar women, but all were assuaged by Buddha's teachings. A devastating war had left women without male family support, and Pajapati took them under her wing. Female relations, servants, and aged hangers-on in the Buddha's dispersed harem joined Pajapati when she became a nun. Mothers and sisters without support and abstinent widows easily adjusted to the nuns' frugal existence. Society frowned on widow remarriage, and it is possible that widow-nuns with shorn heads shaped an emergent tradition requiring all widows to shave their heads, live and eat frugally, wear drab mourning attire, and eschew ornamentation. *Dhammapadana Katha* by Buddhaghosha (second century BCE) describes how the widow Bahupittika became a nun after her cruel sons cheated her of her property.⁷⁰ Another aged widow, Citta, described her spiritual release in this stark poem:

Though I am thin, sick
and lean on a stick,
I have climbed up Vulture Peak.
Robe thrown down,
bowl turned over,
leaned on a rock
then great darkness opened.

Citta, *Therigatha*⁷¹

Emotional stress was common among co-wives in a polygamous society, and some described their suffering as "hell." A few were ready to eat poison till they became nuns, while other nuns had been abandoned by ascetic husbands. Sumangalmata and Mutta left abusive husbands, as seen in Mutta's poem early in this chapter. Isadasi was a beautiful, selfless wife neglected by a callous husband, but she conquered desire and found peace in Buddhist ideals and the female sangha.⁷² Buddha's words to another woman novice became her own poem:

Sleep sweetly, dear sister
in the robe you made
your desire is still
like dried up vegetables
in a pot.

Anonymous, *Therigatha*⁷³

Of the original 18 married women who became nuns, at least three grieved for dead children. Kisa Gotami's cousin was the Buddha who directed her to bring a mustard seed from any house free of sorrow. She returned empty handed and was cognizant that sorrow was universal. Buddha assuaged her tears with these kind words, "Miserable woman, this pain cannot be measured. Your tears have fallen for thousands of years." The mother Vassethi's loss made her "totally mad, out of my senses" until she became a nun. Ubbiri wept for her daughter Jiva:

I had an arrow in my heart
And he took it out That grief for my daughter.
Ubbiri, *Therigatha*⁷⁴

Courtesans in bustling cities also found a space as laywomen and nuns in early Buddhism. Tensions occasionally erupted between women escaping from arid sensuality and celibates priding themselves on their virtue. The latter were shamed by the beautiful, wealthy courtesan Ambapali, mistress of King Bimbisara of Magadha to whom she had borne a child. After hearing Buddha's sermon, she joined as a lay disciple. Her munificent gift of a grove and hermitage sheltered Buddha on his death. Prostitute Vimala's overtures were refused by monk Moggallana who told her to regard her body as "a bag of dung" until she grew independent of its cravings. She describes how she once scorned women and preyed on men:

Dressed to kill
at the whorehouse door,
I was a hunter
and spread my snare for fools.
And when I stripped for them
I was the woman of their dreams;
I laughed as I teased them.
Today,
head shaved,
robed,
alms wanderer,
I, my own self,
sit at the tree's foot;
no thought.
All ties
untied,
I have cut men and gods
out of my life,
I have quenched the fires.

Vimala, *Therigatha*⁷⁵

Some found spiritual opportunities, others became prescient teachers whose intellects enhanced the reputation of the first female sangha. After Maha-Pajapati, wise Patacara became the leader of the five hundred nuns. She had become a nun after the death of her child, but Patacara cultivated philosophy, empathized with, and assisted other grieving women. Dhammadina's intelligence led Buddha to declare that her words were equal to his own as "*buddhavacana*" (*Majjhima Nikaya* I.299–305).⁷⁶ Brilliant Khema was praised for her efficient administration of the order. Her lectures convinced King Pasenadi of Kosala to become a lay patron (*Samyutta Nikaya* IV.374–380).⁷⁷

Inscriptions also reveal that women could bypass the eight "weighty laws" to find opportunities in Buddhism. The nuns who sang the *Therigatha* were Theravada missionaries freed from domestic constraints. Asoka Maurya sent his daughter Sanghamitta and son Mahindra, children of his Buddhist mistress Devi, to Sri Lanka where Sanghamitta instructed the queens about Theravada and Mahindra introduced Buddhism. Devi was a merchant's daughter from the Buddhist stronghold of Vidisa, and Asoka's first queen Asandhimitta was also an ardent Buddhist.⁷⁸ However, his second wife Tissarakkha was apparently jealous of this religious preoccupation and is reputed to have damaged Buddha's bodhi tree. Asoka's last two queens, Karuvaki and Padmavati whose son was the heir, were all Buddhists. The tenuous position of co-wives in royal harems is indicated in the short Queen's Allahabad Pillar Edict. It records Queen Karuvaki's philanthropy, but ensures that this queen was given due credit:

On the order of the Beloved of the Gods, the officers everywhere are to be instructed that whatever may be the gift of the second queen, whether a mango-grove, a monastery, an institution for dispensing charity or any other donation, it is to be counted to the credit of that queen . . . the second queen, the mother of Tivala, Karuvaki.⁷⁹

Mahayana

After 150 BCE, the popular sect of Mahayana Buddhism (Great Vehicle) was dominated by monks, but its fluid doctrines and engendered savior divinities (*bodhisattvas*) opened lay ritual spaces for women and men, and facilitated its spread across Asia. At the great monastic center of Nagarjunakonda, Andhra Pradesh (100–450 CE), theologians reexamined Buddha's teachings in fresh Sanskrit scriptures. *Saddharma Pundarika* (Lotus of the True Law) is especially interesting for gender studies, and the later *Prajnaparamita sutras* (Discourses on Transcendental Wisdom) described *bodhisattvas*. Texts favorable to female *bodhisattvas* were often composed by 300 CE.⁸⁰

Other new Buddhist theologies reshaped attitudes to women and their roles in this religion. Mahayana monks honored Buddha as a historical personage, but he became a cosmic ideal and force behind a stream of semidivine past and future *buddhas*, *arhants* who attained *nirvana*, and selfless *bodhisattva* teachers. The Buddha was unique because of his three bodies (*trikaya*), concepts that brought Mahayana closer to Hindu Brahman as manifest in various deities. Buddha's earthly body was a "Magical Transformation" of his sublime Body of Bliss, which emanated from his Body of Essence in the universe. While Buddha remained on earth after *nirvana*, upon death he merged into cosmic *parinirvana*. From this theistic vision, there sprang a pantheon of *bodhisattvas*, heavens, hells, and a Pure Land (Sukhavati). Nontheistic sects proclaimed the doctrine of "emptiness" (*sunya*) echoing Buddha's atheism, and the meditative Dhyana school flourished in China as Chan, and in Japan as Zen Buddhism. Other Mahayana Buddhists believed in male and female deities and magical mysticism.⁸¹ Vajrayana Buddhism (post-sixth century CE) incorporated goddesses from local traditions in India, Nepal, and Tibet, and it encouraged women preceptors. The sect will be discussed in the next chapter.

Bodhisattvas: Male and Female

The ideal of compassion was elaborated in Mahayana through the doctrine of the selfless *bodhisattva*. The theology is significant because it derives from Buddha's injunction to a monk to cultivate maternal kindness as superior to all other forms of compassion. The *bodhisattva* thus postpones his own *nirvana*, takes on the suffering of his followers, and rescues them. This is apparent in this text:

"All creatures are in pain," he resolves, "all suffer from bad and hindering karma . . . so that they cannot see the Buddhas or hear the Law of Righteousness or know the Order . . . All that mass of pain and evil karma I take in my own body, . . . I take upon myself the burden of sorrow; I resolve to do so; I endure it all . . . I am not afraid . . . nor do I despair. Assuredly I must bear the burden of all beings . . . for I have resolved to save them all, I must set them free."

*Sikhsasamuccaya*⁸²

A *Prajnaparamita* text describes a conversation between Buddha, or the Lord, and his disciple Sariputra. Buddha compares the kind *bodhisattva* to those who strive only for themselves:

"But," said the Lord, "the bodhisattva (has this resolve) . . . a firefly . . . doesn't imagine that its glow will light up all India or shine all over it, and so the disciples and Private Buddhas don't think that they should

lead all beings to Nirvana . . . after they have gained full enlightenment. But the disc of the sun, when it has risen, lights up all India, and shines all over it. Similarly, the bodhisattva . . . when he has gained full enlightenment, brings countless beings to Nirvana.”

*Prajnaparamita*⁸³

The most important *bodhisattvas* were males like Amitabha (Heavens), Avalokitesvara (Compassion), Maitreya (Future), and Manjusri (Wisdom). In India, Mahayana monks felt that Avalokitesvara's kindness was compatible with masculinity, and at least one classical fresco at Ajanta Caves (fifth century CE) shows him as virile and handsome, eyes limpid with empathy for the pain of others.⁸⁴ However, as the myth journeyed to East Asia, it encountered existing gender tropes, and gentle male Avalokitesvara was identified with goddess Guan-Yin/Kuan-Yin.⁸⁵

The first Mahayana scriptures declared that women could reach *nirvana* and become *bodhisattvas*. *The Lotus of the True Law* (XII) states that nuns Maha-Pajapati and Yashodhara, Buddha's wife, achieved *nirvana* with six hundred nuns in their train.⁸⁶ When the *bodhisattva* Manjusri was questioned about his most perfect pupil, he named a virgin tribal girl, daughter of the serpent king of the sea:

Manjusri answered: In the bosom of the sea I have expounded the Lotus of the True Law and no other Sutra. Prajnakula said: That Sutra is profound, subtle, difficult to seize . . . is there any creature also able to understand this jewel of a Sutra, or to arrive at supreme, perfect enlightenment? Manjusri replied: There is, young man of good family, the daughter of Sagara, the Naga-king, eight years old, very intelligent, of keen faculties, endowed with prudence in acts of body, speech, and mind who has caught and kept all of the teachings . . . who has acquired in a moment a thousand meditations and proofs of the existence of all laws. She does not swerve from the idea of enlightenment . . . With a bland smile on the face and in the bloom of an extremely handsome appearance she speaks words of kindness and compassion. She is fit to arrive at supreme, perfect enlightenment.

Saddharma Pundarika XI, 48⁸⁷

Yet, some Mahayana monks quibbled over whether women could be *bodhisattvas*, since such a perfect being could only be born in a male body.⁸⁸ As the Buddha had already accepted the girl's present of a gem and declared her as a *bodhisattva*, the monks could only resolve this by a miraculous sex change:

At the same instant, before the sight of the whole world and of the senior priest Sariputra, the female sex of the daughter of Sagara, the

Naga-king, disappeared; the male sex appeared and she manifested herself as a Bodhisattva.

Saddharma Pundarika XI, 51⁸⁹

Another interesting Mahayana work is *Srimala Sutra*, attributed to the woman saint Srimala (Holy Garland) in the third century CE. Srimala calls herself “a lay *bodhisattva* of a good family,” with a constructed genealogy linking her to an ancestral garland maker for the Buddha. Srimala may have been an Ikshvaku princess from the dynasty that maintained monasteries at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. Although only fragments remain of this brief but intriguing work by a woman, her theology is echoed in later Mahayana texts (ca. 400 CE), which refer to Srimala’s Divine Garland (*Srimala devim Adhkrtya*) as the Lion’s Roar of Srimala (*Srimala Simhanada*). It was also known to Chinese Buddhist translators.

The text was theologically innovative and subtle, and the author was not a nun but a lay woman saint praised as a *bodhisattva*. The legend states that Srimala was a woman of “a good family” and supported the Mahayana through gifts, indicating that she had accrued meritorious *karma*. Since it ties the author Srimala to Mahayana monasteries where Telugu royalty made donations, she was probably a devout, aristocratic woman. The narrative also emphasizes her compassion and intelligence before she asked the Buddha to make her eloquent enough to teach his Doctrine during tumultuous times. The Buddha prophesied she would be a *bodhisattva*. Srimala took 10 vows, including a declaration to take on the pain of others. She declared:

When I observe sentient beings who are trapped and friendless, bound, diseased, poor, miserable, I shall not forsake them for a single moment.
*Srimala Sutra*⁹⁰

After making her tenth vow, the text states that she merged completely into the Illustrious Doctrine (Mahayana). She had now become a *bodhisattva*, capable of preaching the Doctrine. She then uttered the Lion’s Roar to signify spiritual victory:

My births are finished; the pure life fully resorted to; duty is done; there is nothing to be known beyond this.

*Srimala Sutra*⁹¹

CONCLUSION

Women’s orders in Jainism continue to this day; but those of the Buddhists in India have declined due to various reasons. Hindu rulers supported Buddhist monasteries like Nalanda in the fifth century, but after the

sixth century, they supported devotional, *bhakti* Hinduism. Theravada remained in Sri Lanka, and Vajrayana took root in Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal, and Tibet (640 CE) and Mahayana continued in Bengal under the Palas (800–1100). The conversion of rulers to Hinduism was followed by bankers and merchants, and this dried up the financial base of Buddhist monasteries.⁹² Invasions by Huns (fifth to sixth century) and by Muslims (1197) destroyed Buddhist centers of learning and ebbed the orders of monks and nuns. Neither misogyny nor Muslim rule caused the Buddhist nuns' orders to "disappear," as nuns still survive in small monastery compounds. For example, one group in eastern India is still maintained by a ninth-century grant.⁹³ Finally, a medieval feudal culture reinforced male martial chivalry and female honor as wives and mothers, so that few women chose to become Buddhist nuns. However, Hindu women mystics adopted the ideal of *bhakti* saintly celibacy.

NOTES

1. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*. See also translations by Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy, in Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 1:68.
2. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 294–96; Nalini Balbir, "Women and Jainism in India," in *Women in Indian Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 85. Balbir cites Arthur L. Basham, *History and Doctrine of the Ajivikas: A Vanished Indian Religion* (London: Luzac & Co., 1951), 106.
3. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 41 n. 4, citing Meena Talim, *Women in Early Buddhist Literature* (Bombay: Bombay University, 1972), 1.
4. Padmanabh S. Jaini, *Collected Papers on Jaina Studies* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), 3–11.
5. Nancy Auer Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism," in *Unspoken Words: Women's Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989), 155–65; Reginald Ray, "Accomplished Women in Tantric Buddhism of Medieval India and Tibet," in *Unspoken Words*, ed. Falk and Gross, 191–200; Nancy J. Barnes, "Women and Buddhism in India," in *Women in Indian Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51–61; M. Whitney Kelting, *Singing to the Jina: Jain Laywomen, Mandal Singing, and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 193–203.
6. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 15, 204.
7. Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (Oxford: Bruno Cassiter, 1951; repr., New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975), 54–55.
8. Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*.
9. Jaini, *Collected Papers on Jaina Studies*, 3–11.
10. Stein, *A History of India*, 69–70.
11. A Dravidian Tamil woman sage was Auvaiyar (Old Woman Sage). There are strong references to Buddhist and Jaina nuns in the Tamil literature. The Jaina monk Tiruvalluvar authored *Tirukkural* and *Naladiyar*, the second work being expanded

later by other Jaina monks; a central character in *Shilappadikaram* is the Jaina nun Kavundi; *Manimekhalai* is the story of a Buddhist nun; *Jivakachintamani* is about a Jaina king Jivaka. In the fifth to early sixth century, the first Hindu woman *bhakti yogini* was Karaikkal Ammaiyar. See Mu. Varadarajan, *A History of Tamil Literature*, trans. E. Sa. Visswanathan (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988), 80–96, 100–101, 151–53, 174–76; P. S. Sundaram, trans., *Thiruvalluvar: The Kural* (Chennai: P. S. Sundaram, 1987); Alain Danielou, trans., *Shilappadikaram: The Ankle Bracelet by Prince Ilango Adigal* (New York: Penguin, 1965).

12. Karen Armstrong quotes *MahaVagga*, in the *Vinaya Pitaka* (3.1), in Armstrong, *Buddha* (New York: Lipper Viking, 2001), 139.

13. Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 176, based on Hermann Jacobi, trans., *Jaina Sutras*, Part II, in *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. Friedrich Max Muller, vol. 45 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1895), 41–46.

14. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 288–89.

15. Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 1:65–70; and Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*; Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism: In Translations* (Harvard University Press, 1896; repr., New York: Atheneum, 1982), xvii.

16. Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 240–42. Alphonso Karkala cites E. W. Burlingame, trans., *Buddhist Parables* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 20–28.

17. Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, 441–47; Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, Appendix, 196–99. Murcott uses adaptations from I. B. Horner, trans., *The Book of the Discipline (Culla Vagga of Vinaya Pitaka)*, vol. 5 (London: Luzac & Co., 1952), 356; and F. L. Woodward, trans., *The Book of Gradual Sayings (Anguttara Nikaya)*, vol. 4 (London: Pali Text Society, Oxford University Press, 1935), 184–85.

18. Falk, “The Case of the Vanishing Nuns,” 155–265.

19. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 77, 90 n. 8.

20. Warren, *Buddhism: In Translations*, 443–44.

21. Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 23–40.

22. Ray, “Accomplished Women in Tantric Buddhism of Medieval India and Tibet,” 191–211; and Falk, “The Case of the Vanishing Nuns,” 155–265.

23. Personal research; also Raman, “Popular Pujas in Public Places,” 165–98. Also Katherine K. Young, “Women and Hinduism,” in *Women in Indian Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 31.

24. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:49–50.

25. Radhakrishnan, *A Sourcebook on Indian Philosophy*, 250; also Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 166–211; John Fenton, Norvin Hein, Frank E. Reynolds, Alan L. Miller, and Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., *Religions of Asia*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 280–86.

26. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:63.

27. Balbir, “Women and Jainism in India,” 88–89.

28. Padmanabh S. Jaini, “From Nigoda to Moksha: The Story of Marudevi,” in *Jainism and Early Buddhism: Essays in Honor of Padmanabh S. Jaini*, Part I, ed. Olle Qvarnstrom (Fremont, California: Asian Humanities Press, 2003), 1–2, 11–27.

29. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Delhi and Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), 71–110.

30. Padmanabh S. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 105.

31. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 60.

32. Fenton, Hein, Reynolds, Miller, and Nielsen, *Religions of Asia*, 281, citing Heinrich Zimmer who stated this fact about Parshvanatha in his *Philosophies of India*, Bollingen Series 26, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton University Press, 1951; repr., Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969), 60, 196.

33. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, xvi xvii; Balbir, "Women and Jainism in India," 72 73.

34. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:67 68, quoting J. Charpentier, ed., *Uttaradhyayana Sutra* (Uttarajjhayana; Upsala: Appelbergs Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1922).

35. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, 1 29, *vide*, 2 4; and Robert P. Goldman, "Foreword," in this volume, vii xxiv.

36. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, xix xx.

37. *Ibid.*, 2 4.

38. Balbir, "Women and Jainism in India," 70 72; also Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, xvi xxi.

39. Kelting, *Singing to the Jina*, 8 10, 53, 134 77.

40. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, 14 15, 217.

41. Balbir, "Women and Jainism in India," 78 80, 104 n. 19.

42. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, 15, 27 28 nn. 19, 21, 105 6 n. 54.

43. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, 34 35, without the author's numerical references and citations.

44. *Ibid.*, 58 59.

45. *Ibid.*, 82 92, 181.

46. Balbir, "Women and Jainism in India," 104 5 n. 20.

47. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, 14 15, 191 n. 38; Balbir, "Women and Jainism in India," 78 80.

48. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 42, 59 61.

49. *Ibid.*, 60 61.

50. Jaini, *Gender and Salvation*, 72 73, 105 6 n. 54.

51. Jaini, "From Nigoda to Moksa: The Story of Marudevi," 1 27.

52. Kelting, *Singing to the Jina*, 42 44.

53. Balbir, "Women and Jainism in India," 80 81.

54. William M. Theodore de Bary, ed., *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 56, 66 67, 399.

55. Warren, *Buddhism: In Translations*, 71 83. Warren gives a translation of the *Jataka* (Birth Tales; 1.68 76) on Buddha's challenges before enlightenment. For a feminist critique, see Uma Chakravarti, *Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

56. Warren, *Buddhism: In Translations*, 81.

57. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 359.

58. Barnes, "Women and Buddhism in India," 38 69. Barnes lists *Angutarra Nikaya* and *Kunalajataka* as the most derogatory about women, but composed after the Buddha, 63.

59. Barnes, "Women and Buddhism in India," 45, 64 n. 19. Barnes quotes *Samyutta Nikaya* V, *Bhikkhuni Samyutta* 2 (vol. 1, 128 29).
60. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:100 101.
61. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 15, 19 29.
62. Warren, *Buddhism: In Translations*, 441 47.
63. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 40 44.
64. Barnes, "Women and Buddhism in India," 43; also Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns," 159 60.
65. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 16 17. Murcott quotes the *Culla Vagga* (10.3.1) from T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, trans., *Vinaya Texts*, in *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. Friedrich Max Muller, vol. 20, Part III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 327 28.
66. Quoted by Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, 58.
67. Barnes, "Women and Buddhism in India," 63 n. 12.
68. Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 236 37. Alphonso Karkala gives the entire verse on *bhikshus* from Friedrich Max Muller, trans., *The Dhammapada, a Translation of Verse, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 10 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881).
69. Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 1:65.
70. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 115 16 nn. 1 2.
71. *Ibid.*, 116 17.
72. *Ibid.*, 93 95.
73. *Ibid.*, 105.
74. *Ibid.*, 79 81.
75. *Ibid.*, 123 27.
76. Barnes, "Women and Buddhism in India," 45, 64 n. 18.
77. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 62 66, 81 83.
78. Sastri, *Foreign Notices of South India*, 70; Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 22 25; Barnes, "Women and Buddhism in India," 47 48, 65 n. 28.
79. Basak, *Asokan Inscriptions*, 151 52; Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, 30, 260 (Appendix V, inscription).
80. For Mahayana theology, see Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Alex Wayman and Hideko Wayman, trans., *Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*; H. Kern, trans., *Saddharma Pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963); reprint, F. Max Muller, ed., *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 21 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884); Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 1; de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*.
81. Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, 201 7.
82. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:162, quoting Cecil Bendall, ed., *Shantideva: Siksasamuccaya* (St. Petersburg: Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1902; Bibliotheca Buddhica), 278 83.
83. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:160 61, quoting N. Dutt, ed., *Panca vimsatisahasrika Prajnaparamita* (Calcutta: Oriental Series No. 28, 1934; repr., 2000), 40 41.

84. Maurizio Taddei, *Monuments of Civilization: India* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), plate 65, 114–15.

85. Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, 146–47, 205; and Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:156.

86. Kern, *Saddharma Pundarika*, 256–57.

87. *Ibid.*, 250–51.

88. Barnes, “Women and Buddhism in India,” 49–50.

89. Kern, *Saddharma Pundarika*, 253.

90. Wayman and Wayman, *Lion’s Roar of Queen Srimala*, 65–72.

91. *Ibid.*, 77–90.

92. Noted Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang stated that Harsha of Kanauj (seventh century) supported Hindus, Buddhists, and Jainas, that there were one hundred Mahayana monasteries and few Theravadins. Buddhism was rekindled by the Palas of Bengal (eighth century CE). Jainas flourished under Rajput Hindu rulers, and Muslim kings of Gujarat. Thapar, *Early India*, 274, 461, 486–87; Tripathi, *History of Ancient India*, 305–9; Jha, *Ancient India*, 158–63. The eleventh century Persian Muslim visitor Al Biruni confirmed that Hinduism was the chief religion, but mistakenly thought that “the Buddhists were banished” to the northwest. Ainslie Embree, ed. of Edward C. Sachau, trans. (1872), *Alberuni’s India* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 21, 27–32.

93. Falk, “The Case of the Vanishing Nuns,” 159, 163–64.

WOMEN IN CLASSICAL ART AND LITERATURE

Mother

There in the very middle
of battle camps
that heaved like the seas,
he had fallen
in that space
between armies,
his body hacked to pieces;
when she saw him there
in all his greatness,
mother's milk flowed again
In the withered breasts
of this mother
for her warrior son
who had no thought of retreat.

Auvaiyar, *Purananuru* 295¹

MAKING OF INDIA: 300 BCE–600 CE

Extensive immigration and settlement resulted in the expansion of Sanskritic culture across ethnic and caste lines, despite elite textual controls over women's sexuality. At first Buddhism and Jainism held sway, although followers of Hindu Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi gained popularity. Indo-Bactrian, Shaka, and Kushana rulers in the north and west adopted Mahayana Buddhism or Hinduism, which spread to Nepal and Tibet. Theravada became embedded in the culture of Sri Lanka, and Jainas thrived in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. After 300 CE, royal patronage shifted to Hinduism, and *brahmins* sanctified folk myths and *bhakti-puja* in the *Puranas* and *Agamas*.² Dravidian and aboriginal mother goddesses associated with forests, rivers, mountains, and deserts were absorbed into an overarching Great Goddess of Energy, Mahadevi/Shakti.³ Women embraced

these goddess traditions, which also surfaced in atheistic Buddhism and Jainism.

These currents are visible in art, scriptures, and secular literature. Maurya, Shunga, Shatavahana, Shaka, and Ikshvaku kings and queens authorized Buddhist reliquaries (*stupas*), monastic prayer halls (*chaityas*), and temples (*viharas*). Nuns, monks, and wealthy merchants and wives donated generously to their upkeep. Masons designed and executed *chaityas* in caves in the Western Ghats (200 BCE–350 CE). Under tolerant Gupta and Vakataka rulers (fourth to fifth century), painting reached its apogee in Mahayana *chaityas* at Ajanta; architects laid the framework for brick and stone Hindu temples; and Sanskrit was the courtly language of playwrights. Artistic representations of women defined Indian standards of feminine beauty.⁴

Indian artistic motifs often derived from tribal and village drawings of sacred diagrams (*kolam*, *rangoli*) for community rituals and women's paintings on household floors, walls, and altars during domestic rites. These developed into sophisticated art forms under male craftsmen in caste guilds (*shrenis*).⁵ Male-authored art manuals describe artisans (*shilpins*) as men of *shudra*, *vaishya*, and mixed castes. Occupation was not based on choice, but family and caste traditions whose skills were first learned in childhood. It is thus likely that women assisted male artisans at home, although studies largely focus on men in guild workshops.

Classical society's nuanced but candid expressions of sexuality are evident in Sanskrit poetic dramas (*kavyas*), manuals of laws and rules (*shastras*), and in Tamil Sangam literature (200 BCE–400 CE). The *Shilpa Shastras* delineated feminine and masculine paradigms in sculpture and painting. Bharata's *Natya Shastra* laid the foundation for theater and laid down the artistic formulae for expressing emotions (*rasas*). This first-century-CE work profoundly influenced women dancers (*nityasumangalis/devadasis*) in temples. Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* dispassionately examined female and male desire from a man's perspective. The most famous Sanskrit dramatist was Kalidasa (fourth to fifth century) whose *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* reveals a sensitive understanding of women and nature. In southern Madurai, Tamil Pandya rulers hosted conferences (*sangams*) for poets who exalted powerful women, and female sages like Auvaiyar. There were some significant women authors; while male authors Ilango Adigal and Sattanar chose women as their chief protagonists in *Shilappadikaram* and *Manimekhalai*. Women appear in texts as *devis*, *shaktis*, sages; mothers, wives, sisterly companions; nymphs (*yakshis/lapsaras*), courtesans, poets, dancers, musicians, shepherds, hunters, and manipulative shrews.

FEMALE IMAGES IN BUDDHISM

Yakshis

Although Buddhist funerary *stupas* stemmed from a male monastic tradition, they became pilgrimage sites for laywomen and laymen. Under the

direction of monks who wished to inculcate *dharma*, classical artisans carved narratives from Buddha's life around the *stupas* of deceased monks. The artisans were lower-caste men who drew upon earlier rural traditions to carve fertility nymphs (*yakshis*) and male nature spirits (*yakshas*) around the *stupas*. In turn, the *yakshi* became the prototype for later Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina icons of *devis*. Fertility goddesses and auspicious geometric designs (*kolam/rangoli*) appear in the Indus Civilization (ca. 3000 BCE). Women still paint such emblems around homes, while belief in a female force as Energy (Shakti) and the sap of life is widely prevalent.

Colonial European encounters with full-bosomed *yakshis* and *devis* in diaphanous, tropical garments led to their mistaken conclusion that Indian art was crafted by men for their erotic pleasure.⁶ Victorian Christians, accustomed to restrictive clothing and repressed desire, felt alarmed by the "heathenish" sexual exuberance of *yakshis/devis*.⁷ Thus, Western literature engendered Indian art and Hinduism as "feminine" and "decadent," and propagated the myth of a superior, masculine, moral Christian West.⁸ In response, Indian nationalists created the trope of a powerful motherland, a goddess resembling *devi* icons.⁹ In a scholarly pendulum swing, early twentieth-century liberals romanticized Indian art as spiritually superior. However, the complex truth is that the sublime and erotic in India have been closely intertwined. Cosmic creation is regarded as a union of the divine male and female, which Hindus identify as Shiva-Shakti.

It is now well established that the primary purpose of early art was to inculcate *dharma* to pilgrims and that artisans used known symbols to relate sacred myths. Despite the candid portrayal of female sexuality, the intent was not sexual stimulation, as *yakshis* were venerated as emblems of fertility. It is extremely unlikely that dignified monks and nuns whose inscriptions declared that they had "abandoned all attachment" on the road to *nirvana* would have wished to be aroused by *yakshis*, *devis* like Lakshmi, or fleshy female donors.¹⁰ It is more reasonable to suppose that the *yakshi's* female features symbolized nature's fecundity, and the artists simply sculpted "pictures" of prosperous lay donors. This purpose differs from modern commercial posters of voluptuous women meant to catch the male gaze. It reminds us not to inscribe contemporary values on premodern artifacts, as these should be viewed through their own cultural lens as far as possible.¹¹

Buddhist tree *yakshis*, also called *shalabhanjikas*, appear at Sanchi and Bharhut *stupas* authorized by Maurya and Shunga rulers. These images show that pre-Aryan arboreal fertility cults were absorbed into a more sedate, monastic Buddhism. Hindus venerated trees as emblems of natural growth, and early shrines were at the base of tree trunks, according to Sanskrit and Tamil Sangam poetry.¹² Trees stimulated enlightenment, as seen in the narratives of Buddha's birth under an asoka tree (*Saraca asoca*), his *nirvana* under a bodhi or pipala tree (*Ficus religiosa*), and his death under twin sal trees (*Shorea robusta*).¹³ Most *yakshis* were draped around a

blossoming sal, fig, asoka, or mango tree, as their touch stimulated leaves and fruits. At Sanchi gateways, full-bosomed *yakshis* cling to mango trees. At Bharhut, *yakshi* Chandra stands on a mythical fish-crocodile, one hand holding a tree branch, the other suggestively pointing to her womb. Belief in a female energy force or sap of life percolated cults of the mother goddess as Nature (Prakriti).

Yakshis were also associated with the aboriginal totem worship of snakes (*nagas*), as seen in a gray terra-cotta statue of a *yakshi* entangled by a snake in eastern India (first century CE).¹⁴ The folk myth of a cobra king of the waters surrounded by serpent-nymphs (*naga kanyas*) was later absorbed into the Hindu legend of Krishna whose triumph over the lake serpent Kaliya became a metaphor for sensory conquest through divine aid.

Yakshi aesthetic modalities also appear in secular feminine representations. An exquisitely polished figure from Didarganj (third to second century BCE) resembles a *yakshi* with slim waist, but ample bosom and hips. However, the fly whisk (*chauri*) in her hand, the rich folds of her garment, heavy anklets, necklaces, and bangles all indicate a wealthy court attendant.¹⁵ Such images of court attendants and donors later inspired medieval ideals of feminine beauty.

Devis and Bhakti-Puja

Goddess images are found in north India dating a thousand years after their appearance in the Indus Civilization, showing that folk traditions of *bhakti-puja* to nature goddesses were grafted onto Sanskritic Hinduism.¹⁶ The fecund forest *yakshi* now resembled *Vedic* Mother Earth (Prithvi) embodied in Sri-Lakshmi, harbinger of bounty in the later *Vedic* hymn, Sri Sukta. Thirty verses describe Lakshmi as stirring the muddy earth into life (RV Khila, 2.6.11) and stimulating rain clouds, which caused seeds to sprout (24).¹⁷ As the golden, slender lotus dweller Padma (1), with lotus eyes and hands (25–26), she also has wide hips that promise progeny (26). As Gaja-Lakshmi, she is accompanied by elephants and horses, the emblems of royal power. These textual images resonate in art.¹⁸

Buddhist and Jaina merchants and bankers thus naturally revered Lakshmi, although their religions denied a creator god.¹⁹ Lakshmi's images appear at early Buddhist *stupas*, e.g., on the northern gateway at Sanchi (third century BCE),²⁰ and on a Bharhut railing a century later. The *yakshi* influenced images of Hindu and Mahayana Buddhist *devis* and of Malli, the sole female Jaina preceptor (*tirthankara/Jina*). The Shvetambara sub-sect of Mukti-Pujaks do *puja* to images of *tirthankaras*.²¹

Women Devotees, Trees, and Stupas

Arboreal rites are seen in Buddhist reliquary *stupas* whose friezes reveal that women and men worshipped the bodhi tree in rites similar to Hindu

bhakti-puja. Arboreal rites are also mentioned in Tamil poems (*Ainkurunuru* 245, 247; *Akananuru* 149.12).²² In the Mauryan era, devotees visited *stupas* to venerate icons symbolizing Buddha's life events. Railings and pillars at Sanchi, Bharhut, and Amaravati (150 CE) show them with hands folded in prayer (*namaskara*), offering flowers to the sacred symbol, prostrating themselves, circumambulating the *stupa* shrine, and occasionally playing music on drums, lyres, and flutes. Sanchi's northern gateway shows two women kneeling in prayer to a *stupa* representing his death (*parinirvana*); the western pillar tells a *Jataka* tale with two women and a child kneeling to the bodhi tree indicative of his *nirvana*.²³ At Bharhut, women and men kneel with hands folded at the base of a bodhi tree;²⁴ and two women kneel while king and courtier stand near a wheel embodying his teachings (*dharmachakra*).²⁵ At Amaravati, four women prostrate themselves to his footprints, iconic of his death and *parinirvana*.²⁶ Another delicate frieze shows women watering a bodhi tree, offering substances in *puja*, and prostrating themselves.²⁷ The friezes clearly show female agency in the spread of *bhakti-puja*, even for agnostic Buddha who became an icon after his decease.

While the earliest *stupas* contained Buddha's relics, later monuments had relics of enlightened sages (*arhants*). It is often presumed that the remains are of monks who dominated the monasteries, although their names are not inscribed. Nuns and monks contributed to the building and upkeep of these pilgrimage sites. Secondary texts state that nuns worshipped Mahapajapati's relics and images on festival days until the first century BCE, and there were perhaps venerated *bhikkunis* after Buddha. As *arhants* transcended their sexual identity, some of the 84,000 *stupas* attributed to Asoka Maurya may have held relics of *arhants* born as females.²⁸

Buddhist Women Donors

Inscriptions

As Indians commonly believed that philanthropy (*dana*) transfers merit in the *karma-samsara* cycle, Buddhist donors included women and men as rulers, celibates, and lay devotees. Inscriptions and images prove that Indian women owned, managed, and donated property, despite the *Manu Smriti*'s attempts to keep them illiterate and financially subordinate.

Inscriptions praise erudite nuns, and their names and gifts are inscribed on the pillars and walls of *stupas*, *chaityas*, and temples (*viharas*), between 200 BCE and 400 CE. Some donor inscriptions are Theravada and predate Mahayana scriptures. The Sanchi *stupa* inscription describes a woman donor as "learned in the scriptures" (*sutatika*). Central Indian *stupas* reveal that donor monks and nuns were often versed in the three scriptures (*tripitakas*). Three inscriptions (ca. first century CE) refer to the nun Buddhmitra who was "knowledgeable in three scriptures."²⁹ An inscription from

Bharhut states that 40 percent of the donations were from 12 nuns and 24 monks. Inscriptions from early cave temples at Kondivte, Bhaja, Pitalkhora, and Karle (150 BCE) in the Western Ghats also indicate that 66 percent of the donors were monks and nuns.³⁰

The prosperous classical era was notable for munificent donations by queens and kings, as well as by wealthy merchant and artisan families to monasteries and shrines. Their names are inscribed on the walls of cave temples in the Western Ghats, along with some massive sculptures of anonymous donor couples at the entrance. These monasteries and *chaitya* halls often housed a reliquary *stupa*. The famous Shaka king Gautamiputra Satakarni (100–110 CE) authorized the excavation of a cave with a *chaitya* and *stupa* near Nasik. His mother Balasri enlarged this shrine and inscribed a eulogy to him on the wall of Queen's Cave. Balasri also donated a village to the monks of the Bhadaniya sub-sect.³¹ A century later, the Shaka queen Dakshamitra modestly donated a monks' cave cell at Nasik, while her husband Rshabhadata made a magnificent donation with fanfare.³²

Other dynasties whose kingdoms prospered due to artisans and merchants made donations to Buddhist institutions. In the Deccan, the Shatavahana royal navy patrolled both peninsular coasts to command trade. They supported great monastic centers at Amaravati with its marble *stupa*, Jaggayyapeta, and Nagarjunakonda whose ruined fragments contain inscriptions of donors. Amaravati inscriptions list donations by nuns and laywomen who described themselves as sisters, mothers, wives, and not by occupation. Donor monks and laymen are listed as sons and husbands, and by occupation as goldsmiths, merchants, or leather workers. Although society identified women primarily by domestic functions, it is likely that they were home-based artisans whose products contributed to the region's prosperity. As in later eras, home craft enabled women to tend simultaneously to family duties and to elude the public eye. Thus, female work has often remained invisible in public records.

Out of the 54 or so fragmented inscriptions at Amaravati, 22 gifts were solely by nuns (12) and women householders (10); and others described as the mothers, sisters, and wives of male donors.³³ One pillar inscription states that the gift was made jointly by Sangha, Sanghadasi, and Kamala who added their husbands' names almost as an afterthought. Learned women wished to be associated with their female teachers; household women with other female and male family members. This is evident in an inscription, which states that "Mala, the female disciple of . . . Samudiya, the female disciple of Aya-Punnavassu" had gifted a "padakka," or stone slab image of Buddha's feet.³⁴ Another describes a "*bhikkhuni* Budharakhita with her daughters" and her gift of a coping stone.³⁵ Obviously, being a "mendicant" did not mean giving up wealth, and women boldly described their achievements, as seen in this railing:

The gift of the nun Roha who has passed beyond the eight worldly conditions, the daughter of the venerable Sujata of great self-control.³⁶

At Nagarjunakonda, the Ikshvaku dynasty (third century CE) promoted sectarian coexistence through evenhanded generosity. Queens donated to Buddhist sites, the kings patronized Hindu shrines. Several royal women related to founder king Camta-Mula are described as donors to monasteries, which may have included nuns. Camta-Mula's sister Camti Sri provided pavilions and halls for the monks. Other donors included his daughter Adavi Catisri; his nieces Bapi-Srinika and Mahadevi-Camtisri; Mahadevi Rudradhara-Bhatarika, a princess of Ujjain; a royal relative Cula-Catisrinika; Bhati-Deva, mother of his successor; and Kodaballi Sri, a neighboring princess. The noblewoman Bodhi Sri donated pillars, trees, and a monk's cell.³⁷

The institutional power of Mahayana monks is apparent in donations to monasteries in India. In contrast, the paucity of inscriptions on nuns' donations after the fourth century CE reflects the decline of philanthropy for nuns and their impoverishment. Chinese monk pilgrim Fa Hsein (fifth century CE) thus described Indian Buddhist nuns as humble and poor, and not erudite as few women attended the universities at Nalanda and Kanchi.³⁸ Monastic patriarchy was not the sole cause for the disappearance of nuns' orders, but it reflected the reduced social importance of women in the later classical era.³⁹

Images

In the early *chaityas* at Bhaja (150 BCE), Karle (50 CE), Kanheri (100 CE), and Nasik, prosperous looking women are portrayed with their husbands as joint donors. Although once described as a sexual pair (*mithuna*), the loving couples simply exude contentment with the mundane world, in sharp contrast to monks and nuns focused on *nirvana*.⁴⁰ Their affluence is evident in generous body lines, elaborate headdresses, necklaces, earrings, and rings, but bangles and anklets adorn only women.⁴¹ Round bosoms and wide hips mark femininity and wealth. Diaphanous garments reveal the breasts, suggesting that the appearance of upper body nudity may have been due to the fine quality of textiles. Men's corpulent bodies are clad in loose nether garments (*dhotis*). These aesthetic norms became central to Buddhist, Hindu, and Jaina art.

The large sensual images of women in unrestrictive clothing in monastic spaces also inform us that women were not confined to the home, although they were defined by domestic roles. This is confirmed in the Tamil epic *Shilappadikaram*, which describes public streets and markets frequented by women poets, musicians, dancers; actresses; nuns; wives; garland makers; fisherwomen; shepherdesses; cowgirls; tribal huntresses with bows.

Ajanta: Feminine and Masculine Ideals

In a shifting emphasis from Theravada's celibate ideals, Mahayana's lay devotees clearly felt that prosperity was compatible with Buddha's Middle Way under the Vakataka dynasty (fifth century). At Ajanta in western India, royal and mercantile munificence enabled the construction of many cave monasteries with colonnaded *chaitya* halls, *stupas*, and magnificent frescoes. Frescoes at Sigiriya, Sri Lanka, also belong to this prosperous era. While Ajanta frescoes relate Buddhist narratives for a moral purpose, the representations of women and men are secular in detail. They often relate a miraculous event, but the witnesses are painted in an elegant, opulent, worldly style. At Ajanta, the wall canvas is crowded with women and men in vibrant postures, their bodies being of diverse skin colors. They are clad in rich silks and jewelry or in simple cotton garments, according to their station in life. Women have a slim waist and drooping breasts often separated by pearl necklaces, which hint that an upper garment was optional for wealthy women in this era. They appear languorous, their limbs droop, and their soft eyes resemble the lotuses they hold in elongated fingers. The arms are heavy with bangles, lobes have pendulous, gold earrings, the hair is elaborate with jewels.⁴² Men are also portrayed with elegance. Two women appear awed by the generosity of Prince Vessantara, an earlier incarnation of the Buddha. In another scene, men and women listen raptly to Buddha's sermon (cave 17).⁴³ The *bodhisattvas* Padmapani and Avalokitesvara are virile, but gentle, their elongated, limpid eyes are half-closed with unshed tears of compassion (cave 1).⁴⁴ These ideals of masculine and feminine beauty resonate in Sanskrit literature, and they became the most elegant standards in Indian art. Human qualities of gentleness, cruelty, bravery, selfishness were not exclusive to either gender, although women's virtue was expressed by mothers and wives.

A Case for the Woman Artisan

The artisans (*shilpins*) in workshops or at open work sites were probably men of the *shudra*, *vaishya*, or mixed castes of *anuloma* and *pratiloma*.⁴⁵ The *Brahmavaivarta Purana* gives a mythical origin for craftsmen who breathed life into stone and metal to create human and divine figures. The god Vishvakarma was cursed by a celestial nymph (*apsara*) to be born on earth to a *brahman* mother and to become an architect. His relationship with a *shudra* woman resulted in nine illegitimate sons who pursued the crafts of garland maker, blacksmith, potter, metalworker, conch shell carver, weaver, architect, painter, and goldsmith. The legend shows that artists were low caste and that intercaste sexual relations were common. However, since this male author did not specify craftswomen, it is likely that women from artisan castes conducted their domestic chores along with craft work. Artisan traditions are based on caste and family, not personal choice.

Children learned to carve, weave, or etch from childhood at home before heading for the guild (*shreni*) workshop, and there are no textual restrictions on girls working beside male siblings.⁴⁶

The *Shilpa Shastras* describe the guild artisan as literate with knowledge of legends and texts. These texts refer to women courtesans, musicians, dancers, agricultural and urban laborers, but do not specifically mention women artisans. This suggests that respectable craftswomen did not work in public.⁴⁷ While this suggests that respectable craftswomen did not work in public space, it does not negate the possibility that they assisted family men at home. It is unlikely that all Indian cloth or jewelry valued by foreign merchants were entirely produced by men.⁴⁸ No doubt, sculptors at precipitous cave sites and masons in *shreni* workshops were men. However, women artisans may have carved smaller pieces at home while attending to family chores. Artisan traditions were based on caste and family, and some crafts like pottery and sculpture could be conducted at home. Children learned skills from an early age at home, making it probable that women assisted them, as well as their men folk, in their tasks. As in later Indian history, women artisans may have painted designs, carved and molded small sculptures, spun and wove cotton cloth, laced baskets, and etched jewelry, especially when the delicate precision of smaller hands was required. The intricate carvings at Bharhut suggest that some early stone masons had initially trained as carvers of ivory and gold jewelry, tasks suited to women's hands.

Indian living tribal and village traditions point to this truth. Women paint figures and legends on the mud walls of homes, create geometric designs for community rituals, work on pottery wheels, and spin cloth at home. The tribal Warlis originally prohibited men from painting, as this was relegated to women.⁴⁹ Bhil, Gond, and Savara tribal women in north and central India also paint designs on their homes for rituals. Across India from Mithila, Bihar, to Rajasthan in the west, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu in the south, village women paint the mud walls and floors of homes with geometric designs and erotic themes connected to goddess worship. The women painters use rice flour for white and vegetable dyes of vivid green, red, and yellow for rituals connected to the earth's fertility (*bhumi puja*).⁵⁰

TAMIL-DRAVIDIAN TRADITIONS

Sangam Era Women

Inscriptions and Tamil literature reveal that during the Sangam era, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism became the ideological catalysts for a fusion of Dravidian and Sanskrit cultures.⁵¹ The identity of Tamil goddess Korravai, fierce guardian of the desert (*palai*), merged with Hindu Durga or Shakti, thus strengthening traditions of the Mother Goddess (Amman/Devi) in south India. Korravai's handsome son Murukan of the hills absorbed

Hindu Skanda, and Korraivan, a flat male god of Death, dissolved into complex Shiva.⁵² The first Tamil *bhakti* text, *Paripatal* (300 CE), juxtaposed passionate lyrics to “red” Murukan with poems to “dark” northern Krishna or Perumal. In the next centuries, a fervent theistic movement originated among Tamils whose women *bhakti* poets set the pace for later saints across India (Chapter 7). The first Tamil *bhakti* saint was the wraithlike female yogi Karaikkal Ammaiyar (fifth to sixth century). In contrast, enraptured Andal (ninth century) composed lyrical, sensual hymns to her lover Krishna.⁵³

Dravidian views on chaste female empowerment profoundly influenced Indian feminine paradigms. Irrespective of sect, Tamils believed in women’s intrinsic auspiciousness (*ananku*) that kept evil spirits at bay. *Ananku* was believed to repose in the breasts of chaste wives and mothers, royal martyrs, and celibate yogis and monks. Such empowered persons could resist dangerous blood flows in menstruation, childbirth, disease, or violent death. An ambivalent respect for female sexuality thus led Tamils to regard chaste women with awe, as even the docile could be transformed into formidable enemies. However, the virtuous widow was forced to remain abstinent, as her inauspicious sexuality required ritual propitiation.⁵⁴ Some Sangam male poets thus praised the benign *ananku* of a woman’s breasts (*Akananuru* 161; *Kuruntokai* 337).⁵⁵ Another poet feared that in the pubescent girl, it could wreak havoc:

Her brothers,
strong in the hatred of murderous battle,
will not be content without a fight.
For spots have spread
on the breasts
of the young girl
whose red, blackened eyes
are like the sharp blades of brandished spears
and whose bangled arms sway.

Purananuru 350⁵⁶

Yet, Tamils respected women’s creativity and scholarship, as evident in the signatures of at least 16 women poets in the Sangam corpus. Scholars suggest that as many as 155 of the 473 Tamil poets were women, since female compositions were often signed as anonymous in world history.⁵⁷ However, this may be a partial truth in early India where these have been preserved in the *Therigatha*, the Sangam corpus, and as medieval hymns. As Sangam poems were sung before being inscribed, they probably originated in a plebeian performance culture. They describe lower class entertainers as singers (*panans*, *patini*), dancers (*virali*), and those who played lutes, drums, and reed instruments on festival days, at shrines, or when heralding the king. A class of learned men and women (*pulavars*) advised the king on morality.

There were two women poets named Auvaiyar (Old Woman Sage). The first was a preeminent composer whose 59 stark and powerful poems are found in Sangam anthologies. This first Auvaiyar wrote in both thematic categories of poetry, namely those pertaining to the inner emotions (*aham*) and to outer, worldly affairs (*puram*). She may have been a *pulavar* who advised rulers, as her *puram* verses reveal that she placed even maternal love below loyalty to a battle-scarred king. Other signed female poets were Allur Nanmullai, Atimantiyar, Kacchippettu Nannakaiyar, Kakkai Patiniyar, Kallatanarm Naccellaiyar, Kavarpentu, Kuramakal Ilaveyini, Marippittiyar, Nakkanaiyar, Okkur Macattiyar, Puncanuttiraiya, Velli Vitiyar, Venmaniputi, Veripatiya Kamakkaniyar, and a set of sister poets called Pari's Daughters.⁵⁸

The first Auvaiyar mourned her son, but proudly praised his valor in the poem (see beginning of this chapter). On a different theme is Okkur Macattiyar's mourning for her lost lover and wasted youth:

The rains, already old,
 have brought new leaf upon the fields.
 The grass spears are trimmed and blunted
 by the deer.
 The jasmine creeper is showing its buds
 through their delicate calyx
 like the laugh of a wildcat.
 In jasmine country, it is evening
 for the hovering bees,
 but look, he hasn't come back.
 He left me and went in search
 of wealth.

Okkur Macattiyar, *Kuruntokai* 220⁵⁹

The second Auvaiyar (ca. third to fourth century) was a later *pulavar*, whose didactic proverbs in *Atticutti* have been taught in Tamil schools for over a millennium. The popular expression "as wise as Auvaiyar" is a tribute to her couplets.⁶⁰ One legend states that Auvaiyar's high-caste father urged his low-caste wife to abandon their child. However, her mother left him and raised her daughter with help from charitable villagers. Auvaiyar enjoys universal respect among Tamils as her vision transcended gender, sect, and caste, although Hindus sometimes refer to her as Saraswati, goddess of wisdom.⁶¹ Her nonsectarian vision most closely resembles that of the male Jaina sage Tiruvalluvar (ca. 100 CE) whose didactic works, *Tirukkural* and *Naladiyar*, are sometimes called the Tamil *Vedas*. The two sages established an ethical system for all Tamils, as seen in Auvaiyar's verse:

All religions say this,
 Do good, refrain from evil.

The good you did in your past lives
 Is the wealth you inherit on this earth
 Therefore, sin not, do good.⁶²

Tamil Epics: Woman Empowered, yet Contained

The Dravidian-Tamil epics *Shilappadikaram* and *Manimekhalai* (ca. 350–400 CE) exalt chaste women with *ananku* as demigoddesses. This message simultaneously contained the sexuality of ordinary women.⁶³ *Shilappadikaram*'s female characters include chaste Kannaki; Kavundi the Jaina nun, a fictional prototype of Auvaiyar; Madhavi the musician-dancer; Shalini, the tribal goddess; a plebeian shepherdess; and a virtuous queen.

Daughter of a wealthy ship owner, Kannaki is compared to goddess Lakshmi and to chaste Arundhati, wife of sage Vasishtha (canto 1), but her happiness is shattered by her husband Kovalan's affair with Madhavi. When he repentantly returns, Kannaki forgives him. However, Madhavi is not shown as a temptress, but as a dignified courtesan whose talents are inherited from her mother, Vedic nymph Urvashi, and her father, god Indra (cantos 3 and 7). A forlorn, rejected Madhavi bears Kovalan's daughter Manimekhalai and becomes a Buddhist nun, as does her daughter upon maturity. Ilango Adigal dignified Madhavi's profession by describing her compositions, instruments, and dance skills, based on a Dravidian tradition of women dancers and singers.⁶⁴ He probably knew of Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, the Sanskrit guideline on dance drama (*natya*), poses, hand gestures (*nritha*), and mood-based *ragas* (five-note scales) that still defines Indian performances.⁶⁵

Kavundi guides Kannaki and Kovalan to Madurai. On the way, they meet the Eiyandar hunters' goddess Shalini, a fusion of local deity Korravai/Culi and Sanskrit Durga Devi who both carry spears. These goddesses are all seen as aspects of Madurai's Meenakshi Amman who is Shiva's wife and Vishnu's sister.⁶⁶ When the Pandya king unjustly executes Kovalan for the theft of his queen's anklet, Kannaki exacts a furious retribution. The heat of her chaste *ananku* makes her pull out her left breast, and god Agni burns the sinful city. Meenakshi Amman quenches Kannaki's inner fire, and the chaste wife becomes a demigoddess reunited with Kovalan.⁶⁷ Male characters are depicted as morally culpable and weak. The dishonored king commits suicide, but his wife dies as an honored *sati*. Kannaki's curse is presented below:

“Men and women of Maturai [Madurai], city of four temples!
 Gods of the skies, and men of austerities,
 hear me.
 I am enraged at this city
 whose king wrought injustice upon him I love,
 and I am without fault.”
 With her hand she twisted off her left breast,

encircled Maturai three times keeping it to the right,
 uttered a curse, and shining with her ornaments
 she threw her lovely breast on the pollen covered street.
 His color black,
 his long, matted, twisted hair crimson,
 his teeth as white as milk,
 the god of fire
 who consumes in concentric order
 appeared at her curse in a Brahmin's form.
 "Woman of great chastity,
 long ago I was commanded to leap forth and consume this city
 on the day you would be so cruelly wronged."

Shilappadikaram 21.40 57⁶⁸

This Dravidian myth enshrined women's chastity in a region already penetrated by *Ramayana* legends, explaining the similarities between Sita's ordeal by fire and Kannaki's agony and curse.⁶⁹ In both cases, fire god Agni appears as their avengers; neither dies on her husband's pyre, but each is regarded as a faithful *sati*. Indians noted the message that virtuous wives must be honored, and their anger must be quelled as it could consume the world. Medieval widows were later forced to immolate themselves on their husbands' pyres as *satis*. Kannaki is venerated in south India and Sri Lanka; and Sita's name is a synonym for womanly virtue.⁷⁰ The sequel *Manimekhalai* about the Buddhist nun who was the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi contains the message of permanent celibacy and retribution.

Jainism and Gender in South India

The Sangam texts show that Jainism thrived in south India where its ethical emphasis appealed to all sects. The epic *Jivakachintamani* revolves around a virtuous Jaina king; Tiruvalluvar's *Tirukkural* transcends social ranks and gender. Tiruvalluvar's work contains three sections on the first three life goals of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*. While everyone was advised to be faithful, kind, and honest, the genders differed in their duties of *dharma*. Men were advised that a faithful husband was "a greater saint than hermits who fast and pray" (*Tirukkural* 1.48). Wives were directed to be chaste, serve the husband, and live within his means (51). Other verses ask rhetorically, "With a good wife, what is lacking? And when *she* is lacking, what is good?" (53; emphasis added); "What can excel a woman who is rooted in chastity?" (54). Still another couplet advises: "She whose husband is her only God says 'Rain,' and it rains!" (55).⁷¹

Jaina yogic influence is seen in the fictional representation of the wise old nun Kavundi in *Shilappadikaram*. It also appears in the personages of Hindu Auvaiyar and Tiruvalluvar, a Jaina monk. Ideas of austerity meshed strangely with fervent Dravidian theism in the coming centuries. This is

apparent in the first Hindu *bhakti* saint, the woman yogi Karaikkal Ammaiyar who yearned for union with Shiva the Great Yogi. It is also visible in Akkamahadevi (twelfth century) whose hymns describe her passionate longing for her austere lover Shiva. Influenced by the Digambaras in Karnataka, Akkamahadevi wandered as a nude ascetic before joining the Virashaiva hermitage and attaining a beatific release. The metaphor of spiritual separation and union stemmed from the depiction of secular, star-crossed lovers (*mithuna*) in Sanskrit dramas. Initially separated in the mundane world, the predestined pair (*jodi*) eventually unites. Secular Tamil love poems by both genders inspired the first medieval Hindu *bhakti* hymns by women and men saints.⁷²

CLASSICAL SANSKRIT LITERATURE

Apsaras and Mithuna

The classical era is notable for its secular Sanskrit dramas and poems. The male authors' works embodied the urbane connoisseur's (*nagaraka*) aesthetic appreciation of women, nature, and life. The royal patrons were the Shungas of Ujjain (184–178 BCE), king Vikramaditya of Malwa (57 BCE), and emperor Chandra Gupta II of Ujjain (fourth to fifth century) at whose court lived the extraordinary poet and dramatist Kalidasa.⁷³

The framework of the poetic drama was defined by Bharata's *Natya Shastra* (100 BCE–100 CE), which declares that it was available to women and men of all castes. Bharata may have drawn upon his Tamil traditions of women performers, since his work incorporated poetry, music, dance, and mime, which soon appeared in the Sanskrit drama.⁷⁴ *Natya Shastra* also set the stage for the medieval tradition of women artistes dedicated to the temple deity (*devadasis/teyvadiyals*). *Devadasis* extended the rituals through dance drama (*natya*), which combined dance steps (*nritta*), facial and body language (*abhinaya*), and hand gestures (*mudra*). *Natya Shastra* stated that drama's aim was to depict the affairs of the world truthfully and aesthetically by evoking nine human emotions (*rasas*) in the viewer. These *rasas* were love (*sringara*), bravery (*vira*), ferocity (*raudra*), fear (*bhaya*), loathing (*bhibatsa*), laughter (*hasya*), pathos (*karuna*), wonder (*adbhuta*), and serenity (*shanta*).⁷⁵

Women played female parts, but the viewers were largely men who dominated the public arena. The *Natya Shastra* shows the perspective of the *nagaraka*, a man of "character and pedigree endowed with composure, conduct and learning" who viewed life in terms of the *rasas*. While Bharata respected women of taste, he cautioned:

It is not to be expected that all these qualities will be present in a single spectator . . . The young, the common folk, the women would always like burlesque and striking make-up.⁷⁶

However, Bharata also recognized that women artistes could best depict the *rasas*. He describes this in his own myth on the origins of drama. When the god Brahma first created drama as a literary genre, Bharata had insisted on women players who would guarantee its success. Brahma therefore created celestial nymphs (*apsaras/yakshis*) who embodied nature's infinite variety and beauty. *Apsaras* were born in the waters of creation, and they appear in sculptures as *yakshis* and in classical plays.

Kalidasa's seven extant works reveal his sensitivity to women, children, animals, and his love of natural beauty as the marks of civilization. This is evident in his masterpiece, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* (Shakuntala's Recognition; henceforth *Shakuntalam*), and his poem *Rtusambharam* (Song of the Seasons).⁷⁷ While his epic *Raghuwamsham* (Raghu's Dynasty) was inspired by the *Ramayana*, *Shakuntalam* is derived from an archaic love legend in the *Mahabharata* (1.62–69).

Shakuntalam begins with a country scene with *apsaras*. Her beauty is compared to flowers, dew, fragrant bushes, and innocent honeybees (Act 1: 22–23).⁷⁸ Kalidasa describes Shakuntala and Dushyanta as drawn together by the magnet of mutual love (*kama*), so that the predestined *jodi* inevitably unite on a bed of leaves. This suggests that their union was pristine, although not conducted by *Vedic* rites. Dushyanta described his feelings through images from nature:

To inhale the fragrance of your face
is itself a favor granted to me;
is the honey bee not well content
with the mere fragrance of the lotus?
Act 3: 37⁷⁹

Dushyanta gives Shakuntala a ring as his commitment to their sanctified clandestine (*gandharva*) union, one of the eight types of marriages listed in the *Manu Smriti* (3.27–35)⁸⁰ and in the *Kama Sutra* (ca. fifth century). These were the (1) Vedic ritual (*brahma*); (2) father's gifting of his daughter to a *Brahman* priest (*daiva*); (3) bridegroom's payment of a bride-price instead of a dowry (*arsa*); (4) when the father neither gave a dowry nor accepted a bride-price (*prajapatya*); (5) clandestine celestial union (*gandharva*). The texts found homosexual relations and forms 6–8 objectionable, viz., (6) purchase of a wife (*asura*); (7) forceful taking of a wife (*rakshasa*); (8) seduction of an inebriated or sleeping woman (*paischa*).

Kalidasa also described the steps of love at sight, desire, yearning in separation, and final rapture in *Rtusambharam*. The style is more romantic than erotic, as the images are delicate, and women are eulogized through similes in nature. Canto on Rains echoes the Ajanta's frescoes:

This season of massed rain clouds arranges
chaplets of *bakula* blossoms twined with buds of *malati*,

yuthika and other fresh blooming flowers
 on the heads of young wives as a fond husband would,
 and fresh *kadamba* sprays to fall over their ears.
 Women adorn their beautiful breasts with nets of pearls
 and drape pale delicate silks round their shapely curving hips;
 the fine line of down above the navel rises up
 to meet the cool tingling touch of fresh raindrops:
 how charming are the folds that furrow their waists!
Rtusamharam 2:24 25⁸¹

Kalidasa's style differed from the straightforward narratives in *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, but it became a tour de force for later poets. His Canto on Spring explicitly connected women's desire with nature, and the lovelorn woman is shown amidst flowering plants, parrots, and cuckoos. As implied by his name, Kalidasa was probably a devotee of goddess Shakti (Kali), and he clearly exalted sexuality in nature. He wrote:

Lines of petal and leaf are delicately traced
 on the golden lotus faces of graceful women
 beautiful, like pearls set in between gems
 amid the tracteries spread beads of sweat.
 Women whose limbs unknot and become limp
 under the nagging ache of love, take heart
 reviving from the nearness of the husbands they love;
 they are now filled solely with impatient longing.
 The Bodiless One makes women thin and pale
 languid from desire, to stretch and yawn greatly
 again and again; breathless and flustered
 from the excitement of their own loveliness.
 Without form, Love now shapes himself many ways:
 in women's roving, wine heavy eyes,
 in their pale cheeks and in their hard breasts,
 in their sunken middle, in their plump buttocks.
Rtusamharam 6:7 10⁸²

Sex and Separation: Female and Male Views

Male writings describe elite women through the perspective of the *nagaraka*. Bhasa's drama, *Swapna Vasavadattam* (third century), on the love between princess Vasavadatta of Ujjain and king Udayana of Kausambi, relates escapades, jealous anxieties, and final happiness.⁸³ However, Dandin's (ca. seventh century) ribald prose farce, *The Ten Princes*, shows wives accepting co-wives and mistresses with sophisticated nonchalance. His drama advises a young *nagaraka* on how to manage a courtesan insatiable for sex and wealth, whose prime loyalty is to her mother. The latter

shows that matriliney was common among courtesans whose mothers had followed the trade themselves. Dandin warns him that she had been taught to please, but not to love, and that “she should not disobey her mother or grandmother.” He describes his own married life in this empty, bored fashion:

Greatly pleased, he married the girl with all due ceremony, and took her home. After marriage, however, he neglected her and kept a mistress, whom the wife also treated as a dear friend. Her husband she served as a god, indefatigable in personal attention, indomitable in household duty, winning the devotion of domestics by inexhaustible considerateness. Subjugated by her merits, the husband subordinated the entire household to her, made her the sole mistress of life and person, and thus enjoyed virtue, money, and love. And that, I may say, is how good wives please the soul.

*The Ten Princes*⁸⁴

The views on sex and marriage clearly differed between the genders. Women mourned unfaithful lovers and resented sharing favors with co-wives. In the *Therigatha* poem in Pali, nun Kisa Gotami declared that the loss of a child was immeasurably painful, but “To live with co-wives is suffering.”⁸⁵ Tamil poet Velli Vitiyar candidly describes her feeling of wasted sexual passion when her fickle lover departed:

What she said

Like milk
not drunk by the calf
not held in a pail
a good cow's sweet milk
spilt on the ground,
it's no use to me
unused by my man
my mound of love
my beauty
dark as a mango leaf
just waiting
to be devoured
by pallor.

*Kuruntokai 27*⁸⁶

Some male authors portrayed the cruel neglect of women. In *Shilappadikaram*, Ilango Adigal describes a pale and thin Kannaki waiting for her errant husband Kovalan, her “dark left eye” brimming with tears. She greets him valiantly with a smile, thus deepening his shame on his return (cantos 5 and 9).⁸⁷ Others like the misogynist Sanskrit poet Bhartrhari blamed women as

obstacles to spiritual fulfillment, although his sexual indulgences were unrestrained. In *Sringara Satakam* (Verses on Sexuality) and *Vairagya Satakam* (Verses on Asceticism), Bhartrhari describes his dual preoccupations:

Only two things are worth a man's attention
the youth of full breasted women, prone to fresh pleasure,
and the forest.⁸⁸

At last, he decided that passion for spirituality had greater merit than sexual passion. *Sringara Satakam* scapegoats women for his personal weakness in elegant, but morally flawed poetry:

Remembered she will bring remorse;
Seen she makes the mind unclear;
Touched she nearly drives one mad!
Why call such a creature dear?

Whirlpool of doubts, home of immodesty, harbor of cruel deeds, treasury of faults, made of deceit, a mine of double dealing, blocking the door of heaven, the gate of hell, a casket of illusions, why was woman created of poison and nectar, the snare of all things living?⁸⁹

Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* on erotic love is well known in the West, but it remains ambiguous even to scholars. The elaborate discussion of etiquette, sexual dalliance, and courtship (*kama*) in seven chapters is evidence of affluence and refinement, and the belief in sexual fulfillment as the third of four goals, i.e., *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*. Various chapters teach the *nagaraka* how to arrange his quarters, choices of musical instruments and books, and how to groom himself for elegant society. Others instruct him on the art of wooing women and how to conduct an affair with a woman in a harem. Dry descriptions of sexual play and poses indicate that Vatsyayana wanted to write a scholarly work on sexuality, rather than an erotic text. The book instructs men on how to arouse desire in a virgin bride and in lovers, but it does not encourage adultery. One chapter contains information on magical formulae to enhance desire; another teaches the courtesan on how to satisfy men.⁹⁰ Female and male sexuality are viewed as normal, and these mores became embedded in literature and are echoed in modern Indian cinema. The *Kama Sutra* teaches men how to detect desire in a woman, and the marks on her body after sex:

Signs of love in a girl: She never looks the man in the face, and becomes abashed when she is looked at by him; under some pretext or other she shows her limbs to him; she looks secretly at him though he has gone away from her side, hangs down her head when she is asked some question by him . . . *Marks of love in a girl's body:* When love becomes

intense, pressing with the nails or scratching the body with them is practiced . . . Even when a stranger sees at a distance a young woman with nail marks on her breast, he is filled with love and respect for her.⁹¹

CONCLUSION

Classical literature and art describe the secular and religious life. The mundane and the sublime were seen as twin forces interwoven in subtle, mysterious ways. Various philosophical schools devoted considerable energy to the intermeshing of the divine and human on earth. This view was elaborated in a theology of an engendered universe. The Sankhya and Yoga schools which influenced the author of the *Bhagavad Gita* saw the universe as a composite entity propelled by dual-gendered forces. The Male was the single spirit Purusha, and the Female Prakriti (Nature/Primordial Matter) consists of 24 diverse strands. This gave rise to the worship of the mother goddess Devi as infinite energy (Shakti) and Prakriti having a varied and mutable nature. As Devi is the divine seed bearer, the female body is the instrument for reproduction. This makes female sexual desire more potent and compelling than the male. However, ordinary women were also sometimes regarded as obstacles to male spiritual advancement as ascetics. The theological and social implications of this vision have been subtle and profound in India.

NOTES

1. A. K. Ramanujan, trans., *Poems of Love and War from the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 183.

2. Hazra, *Puranic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs*, 201-27.

3. Devi texts are available in Swami Tapasyananda, trans., *Sri Lalita Sahasra nama* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2003); Swami Tapasyananda, ed., *Saundarya Lahari: Inundation of Divine Splendour of Sri Sankaracarya* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1999); Swami Jagadiswarananda, ed., *Devi Mahatmyam (Glory of the Divine Mother): 700 Verses on Sri Durga* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2002); C. Mackenzie Brown, trans., *The Devi Gita, the Song of the Goddess: A Translation, Annotation, and Commentary* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998).

4. R. S. Pandit, trans., *Kalidasa's Ritusamhara or The Pageant of the Seasons* (Bombay: The National Information and Publications, Ltd., 1947); Rajan, *Kalidasa: The Loom of Time*; Arthur W. Ryder, trans., *Dandin's Dasha Kumara Caritra: The Story of the Ten Young Men* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1927); Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 1; Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*.

5. Jasleen Dhamijia, "Folk Art," in *Encyclopedia of India*, ed. Stanley Wolpert, vol. 2 (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), 86-90; Jayakar, *The Earth Mother*,

17 32, 115 16, 156 60, 165; Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India: Ritual Arts in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia: Museum of Art, 1980).

6. See E. M. Forester's *A Passage to India* (1924; repr., New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 162 64; and George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (1934; repr., New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1962), 100 111.

7. Annapurna Garimella, "Engendering Indian Art," in *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (Delhi: Kali for Women and The Book Review Literary Trust, 1997), 22 41.

8. Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 30 33, 85 87, 91 92. Metcalf cites Robert Orme, *Effeminacy of the Inhabitants of Indostan* (ca. 1750), and an Victorian art critic who described Buddha statues akin to "a boiled suet pudding" (92).

9. These essays from Dehejia, ed., *Representing the Body*, Visakha Desai, "Reflections on the History and Historiography of Male Sexuality in Early Indian Art," 42 55; Joanna Williams, "The Construction of Gender in the Painting and Graffiti of Sigiriya," 56 67.

10. Studies include Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography* (1935; repr., New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2004); Ananda Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (New York: E. Weyhe, 1927); T. A. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, 2 vols. (1914; repr., New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997); Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*; Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols of Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell, 2nd ed. (1946; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); Stella Kramrisch, *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

11. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBE and Penguin Books, 1972), 47; and Vidya Dehejia, "Issues of Spectatorship and Representation," in *Representing the Body*, ed. Dehejia, 1 21.

12. Srinivasan, *Temples of South India*, 6 7; Sivaram, *Early Chola Art*, 71 72; Meister, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, 11 12; Amritalingam, *Sacred Trees of Tamilnadu*, 25 50; Raman, "Popular Pujas in Public Places," 165 98.

13. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 154 57; and Craven, *Indian Art*, 43 48, 50 77; Minoru Hara, "A Note on the Concept of Plants and Trees," in *Jainism and Early Buddhism: Essays in Honor of Padmanabh S. Jaini*, ed. Olle Qvarnstrom (Fremont, California: Asian Humanities Press, 2003), 465 89; Amritalingam, *Sacred Trees of Tamilnadu*, 41 46.

14. Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 48, slide 32; Jayakar, *The Earth Mother*, 109 12 on serpent virgins (*naga kanyas*).

15. Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*, plate 24.

16. Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote: "Women, accustomed to invoke the blessings of a tree spirit, would approach (these images)," in *Yakshas* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institute, 1928), 33.

17. "Anna," ed., *Devi Suktamkalum Upanishadankalum* (Devi Hymns and Upanishads; Sanskrit with Tamil translation; Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2003), 2 13; Ashudoshananda, *Veda Mantrangaal*, 171 77, 177 206. Coburn, *Devi Mahatmya*, 258 64.

18. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols of Indian Art and Civilization*, 92, plate 15 of Lakshmi (Padma) on a lotus; Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 19 22.

19. Kelting, *Singing to the Jina*, 8 10.
20. Taddei, *Monuments of Civilization: India*, 48 49.
21. Kelting, *Singing to the Jina*, 8 10, 53, 134 77.
22. Raman, "Popular Pujas in Public Places," 165 98; K. R. Srinivasan, *Temples of South India*, 3rd ed. (1972; repr., New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1993), 7; Meister, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, 12 13; Sivaram, *Early Chola Art*, 70 71.
23. Taddei, *Monuments of Civilization: India*, 48 49; Susan Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain* (New York: Weatherhill, 1985), 90 100.
24. J. C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 2nd ed. (Pen guin Books, 1986; repr., New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 46.
25. Craven, *Indian Art*, 61, 77.
26. *Ibid.*, 77.
27. Dehejia, *Indian Art*, plate 42, 72.
28. Barnes, "Women and Buddhism in India," 47.
29. *Ibid.*, 45.
30. Gregory Schopen, "Of Monks, Nuns, and 'Vulgar' Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism," in *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 238 57.
31. Vidya Dehejia, *Early Buddhist Rock Temples* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 95 96.
32. Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*, 156 57; Craven, *Indian Art*, 51 80; and Akira Hirakawa, *The Rise of Mahayana Buddhism and Its Relation ship to the Worship of Stupas*, *Memoirs of Toyo Bunko Research Society*, vol. 22, 1963, 57 106.
33. Short translations of each inscription in Burgess, *The Buddhist Stupas of Amaravati and Jaggayyapeta*, 37 119.
34. Burgess, *The Buddhist Stupas of Amaravati and Jaggayyapeta*, 37 38.
35. *Ibid.*, 53.
36. *Ibid.*, 62.
37. Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*, 128 32.
38. Barnes, "Women and Buddhism in India," 48 50.
39. Schopen, "Of Monks, Nuns, and 'Vulgar' Practices," 238 57; Barnes, "Women and Buddhism in India," 48, 65 n. 29.
40. Philip Rawson, "Early Art and Architecture," in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. A. L. Basham, 6th ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 200 201.
41. Dehejia, *Early Buddhist Rock Temples*, 123 34.
42. Williams, "Constructions of Gender in the Paintings and Graffiti of Sigiriya," in *Representing the Body*, ed. Dehejia, figures 3 and 4, 56 67.
43. Taddei, *Monuments of Civilization: India*, plates 60 and 61, 106 7; Dehejia, *Indian Art*, 116 23.
44. Dehejia, *Indian Art*, plates 85 and 86, 116 17.
45. Stella Kramrisch, *Exploring India's Sacred Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983), 61; Heinrich Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformations*, vol. 1 (1955; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 321 23; Avvai Natarajan and Natana Kasinathan, *Art Panorama of the Tamils* (Chennai: State Department of Archaeology, 1992), 16.

46. Kramrisch, *Exploring India's Sacred Art*, 61; Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia*, 1:323-24.
47. Kramrisch, *Exploring India's Sacred Art*, 59-66.
48. Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization*, 311-26, 385-87, 392-94; Natarajan and Kasinathan, *Art Panorama of Tamils*, 1-10; Thapar, *Early India*, 300; Jha, *Ancient India*, 156-59.
49. Dhamijia, "Folk Art," 2:86-90.
50. Jayakar, *The Earth Mother*, 97-116, 153-60.
51. Alvapillai Velupillai, "Jainism in Tamil Inscriptions," in *Jainism and Early Buddhism*, ed. Olle Qvarnstrom, 315-32; Sastri, *A History of South India*, 92-101; Jha, *Ancient India*, 118-25; Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization*, 14-18, 27-35; Natarajan and Kasinathan, *Art Panorama of the Tamils*, 56-60; Irvatham Mahadevan, "Corpus of Tamil Brahmi Inscriptions," in *Seminar on Inscriptions*, ed. R. Nagaswamy (1966; repr., Madras: Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology, 1968); Clarence Maloney, "Archaeology in South India: Accomplishments and Prospects," in *Essays on South India*, ed. Burton Stein (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1975), 1-35.
52. Raman, "Popular Pujas in Public Places," 165-98; Hart, *The Poems of the Ancient Tamil*, 81-119.
53. P. V. Somasundaranar, ed., *Paripatal* (Text with commentary, in Tamil; Tirunelveli: Saiva Siddhanta Society, 1969).
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55. Hart, *The Poems of the Ancient Tamil*, 98-99.
56. *Ibid.*, 100.
57. Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 1:70-77; George L. Hart III, *Poems of the Tamil Anthologies: Ancient Poems of Love and War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
58. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, 323; A. K. Ramanujan, trans., *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology*, 5th ed. (1967; repr., Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 119-22.
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61. Varadarajan, *A History of Tamil Literature*, 26-59, 80-95, 100-101, 118; C. Rajagopalachari, *Avvaia: The Great Tamil Poetess* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1971); Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, 145-47; Raman, "Popular Pujas in Public Places," 165-98.
62. Rajagopalachari, *Avvaia*, 9.
63. P. V. Somasundaram, ed., *Ilango Adigal Iyarrunaruliya Shilappadikaram* [Ilango Adigal's Graceful Work Shilappadikaram], in Tamil (Chennai: Saiva Siddhanta Society, 1969); Danielou, *Shilappadikaram*; P. V. Sundaram, ed., *Madurai Kulavannikan Sattanar Iyarrunaruliya Manimekhalai* (Chennai: Saiva Siddhanta Society, 1971).
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65. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 1:382–85.

66. Somasundaram, *Ilango Adigal Iyarrunaruliya Shilappadikaram*, 44–45; Danielou, *Shilappadikaram*, 76–85; Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, 96–97; and Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 145, 201; Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 1–2, 93, 103–4; Sastri, *A History of South India*, 125–27, 145, 372–73; N. Subrahmanian, *Social and Cultural History of Tamil Nadu to A.D. 1336*, 2nd ed. (Udumalpet: Ennes Publications, 1998), 30–33, 39.

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69. *Ibid.*, 105–7, 60–62. Hart cites *Akananuru* (70), *Purananuru* (378), and four verses cited by Mayilai Cini Venkatasami in 1967.

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71. Sundaram, *Tiruvalluvar: The Kural*, 7; also see Rajagopalachari, trans., *Kural: The Great Book of Tiru Valluvar*, 4th ed. (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1975), 4–6; Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 268, quoting V. V. S. Aiyar, trans., *The Kural or the Maxims of Tiru Valluvar* (Tiruchirapalli: V. V. S. Krishnamurthy, 1952); Rev. W. H. Drew and Rev. John Lazarus, trans., *Thirukkural* (repr., New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1989), 12–13.

72. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*; Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, 139–41; Hart, *The Poems of the Ancient Tamil*, 93–119; Srirama Bharati, ed., *The Sacred Book of Four Thousand* (*Nalayira Divya Prabandham* Rendered in English with Tamil Original; Chennai: Sri Sadgopan Tirnaryanaswami Diya Prabandha Pathasala, 2000), 92–127; Vidya Dehejia, trans., *Antal and Her Path of Love: Poems of a Woman Saint from South India*, SUNY Series in Hindu Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Danielou, *Shilappadikaram*.

73. Rajan, *Kalidasa: The Loom of Time*, 25–28.

74. *Ibid.*, 25, 29.

75. Sunil Kothari, “Dance Forms,” in *Encyclopedia of India*, ed. Stanley Wolpert, vol. 1 (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), 286.

76. Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 344. The quotation is cited from Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:267, 268.

77. Besides *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* and *Rtusambaram*, Kalidasa’s extant works are plays *Malavikagnimitram* and *Vikramorvashtyam*, the epic *Raghuvamsham*, and *Kumarasambhavam*.

78. Rajan, *Kalidasa: The Loom of Time*, 35–36, 39–41, 120, 176–77.

79. *Ibid.*, 211.

80. Doniger and Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, 45–46; Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 168–70.

81. Rajan, ed., *Kalidasa: The Loom of Time*, 114. See also Pandit, *Ritusambhara or The Pageant of the Seasons*, 40–41.

82. Rajan, *Kalidasa: The Loom of Time*, 131.

83. “Bhasa: Svapna Vasavadattam,” in Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 347–75.

84. B. N. Pandey, ed., *A Book of India* (Delhi: Harper Collins, Ltd., 2000), 212-13, 214-15.

85. Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, 87.

86. Translation by Ramanujan, in *Poems of Love and War*, 183 and 69, respectively. See P. V. Somasundaranar, ed., *Kuruntokai: With Commentaries* (Tamil; 1955; repr., Tirunelveli: Saiva Siddhanta Society, 1972), 77. Somasundaranar attributes the second poem to Velli Vitiyar; Ramanujan suggests Kolan Alici or Velli Vitiyar.

87. Danielou, *Shilappadikaram*, 25, 54.

88. Translated by Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 425-27, 536 nn. 28-30.

89. Pandey, *A Book of India*, 218, citing A. L. Basham's translation of Bhartrhari's *Sringara Satakam*.

90. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 168, 170-72, 205-6; Daud Ali, "Kama Sūtra," in *Encyclopedia of India*, ed. Stanley Wolpert, vol. 3 (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), 2-3.

91. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:254-59; also Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, *Kamasutra* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

THE DIVINE FEMININE: *DEVIS*, *YOGINIS*, *TARAS*

In the first age of the gods, existence was born from non-existence. After this the quarters of the sky were born from her who crouched with legs spread (Aditi Uttanapad).

Rig Veda 10.72.3

HINDUISM

Early Goddess Icons and *Yoni*

The earliest goddess emblem is a stone vulva-uterus (*yoni*) with concentric markings from a Paleolithic rubble shrine at Baghor.¹ The artifact resembles symbols of the divine female worshipped in Indian villages even today. Other evidence from the Indus Civilization confirms that iconic fertility rites have long been central to pre-Aryan religion. A terra-cotta mother goddess from Sara Dheri (3000 BCE) with elaborate jewelry and headdress has a single round breast in the center of her chest and legs tapering into a triangle representing the *yoni*.² Other terra-cotta goddesses occur at Zhob and Nal, while at Harappa they were simply fashioned with small additive clay clumps for breasts, eyes, and nose. Their flat bases indicate they were placed on domestic altars, and lamp-like protuberances on each side of the head have sooty residue, probably from a burnt wick or incense. They were discarded after rites in a manner reminiscent of the disposal of clay icons after Hindu festival *pujas* today. Interestingly, goddess figures are absent at the later city of Kalibangan (ca. 2000 BCE), possibly as the new elites no longer favored iconic rites.

Despite India's dominant patriarchal framework, its religions emphasize female and male as complementary cosmic forces. This compels a discussion of both gender ideals in scriptures and art. Besides goddess icons, the Indus

cities contain anthropomorphic images of a male ithyphallic divinity carved on seals in Harappa or painted on pottery in Dholavira. Sexual emblems include round stones with a central hole (*yoni*), and cylindrical phallic objects reminiscent of later icons of Hindu god Shiva as the male procreative force (*lingam*).³ The horned ithyphallic yogi is also surrounded by animals, presaging legends of Shiva as the Great Ascetic (Mahayogi) and Lord of the Beasts (Pashupati). Another seal depicts the yogic divinity in a tree rite with seven braided priests/priestesses. Dravidian culture later mystically associated the tree-pillar with Shiva, evident in ongoing Tamil folk rites to *lingams* on platforms at the base of trees.⁴ Sangam-era Tamil poems (200 BCE–400 CE) first mention votive images (*patimam*) and brick or stone tree-platforms (*padi*) where devotees offered flowers (*puja*), fruits, grain, and meat to nature deities (*Ainkurunuru* 245; *Akanamuru* 149.12).⁵ Tamil reverence for Shiva as the male creative force is visible in the Gudimallam *lingam* with a nude carving of this god (first century CE).

In ensuing mergers with Indo-Aryans, popular imagination coalesced the tree shrine with the sacred Vedic pillar in fire rituals. The tree-pillar-shrine theme resonated in *stupas* whose friezes show devotees doing *puja* to the *bodhi* tree symbolizing Buddha's enlightenment (200 BCE). It also appears in a votive column-shrine for Vasudeva (Krishna-Vishnu) dedicated by Heliiodorus the Indo-Greek (180 BCE) at Besnagar in north India.⁶ The sacred pillar became an architectural prop for Buddhist *chaityas* (ca. 150 BCE) and for early Hindu brick temples at Sanchi, Eran, and Nachna Kuthara (ca. 450 CE).⁷ Many Hindu temples also house a sacred tree (*sthala vriksha*) within their precincts.⁸ The shrine is regarded as the *axis mundi* connecting earth and sky, but the life sap of the tree is venerated as female.⁹

Pre-Aryan and Vedic ideas of fecund maternal deities also shaped Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina goddess icons, with a startling continuity across millennia.¹⁰ The folk *yakshi* in Buddhist *stupas* became mythically linked to Vedic fertility goddesses (*devis*) Prakriti or nature, Prithvi or seed-bearing earth, and Sri-Lakshmi as earthly bounty. For example, a gray terra-cotta goddess from Sara Dheri (150 BCE) was constructed additively like Indus figurines. This goddess now had two breasts, unlike its Indus ancestor with a single breast, but similar flayed arms and *yoni*-like triangular torso with legs held together.¹¹ A Bhulandibagh goddess (200 BCE) has a flat base as in Harappa, an elaborate hairdo, heavy anklets, pearl necklaces between pronounced breasts, broad girdled hips, and bulbous eyes a gleam with benign humor.¹² An embossed gold plaque from Lauriya Nandangarh (300 BCE) shows Prithvi with open palms in the gesture of generosity (*varada mudra*).¹³ Bountiful Gaja-Lakshmi is displayed with elephants symbolic of royal power at Sanchi *stupa* (ca. 250 BCE) and as Padma on a lotus (*padma*) at Bharhut.¹⁴ A Gaja-Lakshmi from Kaushambi (200 CE) attests to a vibrant goddess tradition on the Ganges.¹⁵ A Padma-Lakshmi at Basarh (150 BCE) with lotus armbands sits on an open lotus, but the absence of elephants and her open wings

suggest a West Asian influence.¹⁶ An intricate terra-cotta plaque from Tamluk, Bengal shows a full breasted, benign *devi-yakshi* with curvaceous girdled hips, long legs, and plump arms. She has unspecified markings on her thighs, bangles, pendulous earrings, and a ceremonial headdress with five pins. Three pins are shaped like an axe, trident, and elephant goad, which were instruments later associated with the Hindu goddess Durga.¹⁷ Devi's devotees flourished across India, drawing strength from scriptural legends of her diverse forms and feats, depicted by artisans on temple walls.

Hinduism: Female, Male, Neuter, and Androgyne

Purusha and Prakriti

There are many creation hymns in the *Vedas* after 1000 BCE, some attributing a sexual origin to the cosmos, while others are abstruse on the gender of the primal Being. The later *Rig Vedic* hymn, Purusha Sukta (*RV* 10.90), describes creation through the primal sacrifice of Purusha (First Man/Spirit). It speculates on Purusha's own origin from a primal mother Prakriti (Matter), but enigmatically states that she also emerged from him, thus hinting that both Spirit and Matter were required for creation. From now on, male theologians equated Prakriti with the natural world, perhaps due to the physical act of birth. Another hymn states that goddess Aditi crouched (Aditi Uttanapad) when giving birth to the gods, humans, and all else (*RV* 10.73.3–4). One bard suggests that the cosmos emerged from the golden egg (*hiranyagarbha*) of the father Creator Prajapati (*RV* 10.121). A fourth suggests the golden egg, but concludes that the prime cause was the yogic self-heat (*tapas*) of an androgynous Creator (*RV* 10.129).¹⁸ The *Atharva Veda*, *Upanishads*, and Sankhya philosophers offered engendered theories on Spirit and Matter.

The oldest *Upanishads* (ca. 700 BCE) by male sages reiterated the cosmic unity of male and female in formless, nameless Brahman who was also the individual essence Atman. This truth transcends the multiple phantom realities of a material world and is the central tenet of Hinduism. Later *Upanishads* (300 BCE) focused on Brahman manifested in deities like Vishnu-Purusha (*Svetasvatara Upanishad*) and Shiva (*Narayana Upanishad*). *Mahanarayana Upanishad* describes Purusha-Prakriti as emerging jointly from androgynous Brahman and identifies Purusha with Shiva-Maheshvara (Great Lord Shiva) and Prakriti with Devi/Mahadevi (the Great Goddess). *MNU* lauds Devi as Energy (*MNU* 2.2) for creating the world from elements like water (23.1; 1.4–5). Her composite nature is evident in myriads of names and forms beginning with Durga and Uma (Knowledge). This Hindu prayer is to the Female-Male in Brahman:

Supreme Brahman, the Absolute Reality, has become an androgynous Person (Purusha) in the form Uma-Maheshvara, dark blue and reddish

brown in hue, absolutely chaste and possessing uncommon eyes. Salutations to (Him) the Soul of the universe, or whose form is the universe.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the Sankhya school of male philosophers reinterpreted the Purusha Sukta to formulate a seminal theory on Spirit and Matter. They postulated that suffering occurred when Spirit was enmeshed in the web of natural matter or Prakriti. Thus, to reach equipoise, one must disentangle the Spirit from transient, worldly illusions (*maya*). The *Bhagavad Gita* reinforced this doctrine, which was also modified by Buddhists and Jainas. Despite her identification with the material world, Devi/Mahadevi is not diminished in Hinduism as she is Shakti who activates all gods and humans, and in union with the Male, she too governs the universe. Yet, some misogynists have misconstrued this embracing doctrine for shallow purposes.²⁰

Hindu Trinity

Various pre-Aryan legends about local goddesses of rivers, mountains, and trees combined with Aryan myths to create the Hindu tradition of Devi/Mahadevi. After the *Bhagavad Gita* sanctified *bhakti-puja* to immanent gods/goddesses, *brahman* authors compiled the 18 great (*Maha Puranas*) (200 BCE–1000 CE) with legends of the Hindu Trinity, divine incarnations/emanations, and minor deities.

Gods	Goddesses
Brahma (Creator)	Saraswati Devi (Wisdom/Inspiration/Enlightenment)
Vishnu (Preserver) 10 incarnations, including Rama and Krishna	Sri Lakshmi Devi (Auspicious Bounty) Incarnate as Sita Devi (wife of Rama)
Shiva (Destroyer)	Devi as Shakti (Energy) as Uma Parvati (the gentle consort) as independent Mother (Durga, Kali)

Theological and gender ambiguities in the *Puranas* are due to their composition over a millennium and to their multiple authors. Abstruse legends on the gods' divine play (*lila*) became entertainment for ordinary devotees. Creator god Brahma's functions were absorbed by the increasingly popular Vishnu and Shiva whose *Puranas* laud each as Supreme Brahman. Devi was portrayed as Uma/Parvati, Shiva's docile consort and Vishnu's sister. However, later majestic hymns exalted Mahadevi (Great Goddess) as Supreme Brahman through her Shakti (divine energy). The Devi/Mahadevi tradition subsumed all goddesses from pre-Aryan Durga and Kali to Vedic

Lakshmi and Saraswati. Saraswati represented Mahadevi as enlightenment in Brahman, although her consort became less important to the Trinity.²¹

Although the *brahman* authors of the *Puranas* were convinced that male domination was a natural phenomenon, they also implicitly believed that Devi was central to the Trinity. Devi was the “glue” who held together querulous gods and nature’s disparate forces, an idea surely inspired by mortal women who forge complex family relationships. The entire corpus cannot thus be labeled misogynist, even if the celestial gender ideal became flawed on earth.²²

Mystic symbolism permeates Hindu shrines with icons of Devi as *yonī* and Shiva as *lingam*. Classical male emblems include the Gudimallam *lingam* engraved with a nude, standing Shiva in south India (first century); and Shiva’s face carved on *lingams* at Mathura (first century) and Udayagiri (fifth century) in north India.²³ As the idea of a unified Shiva-Shakti as Brahman gathered adherents, rites centered around a *lingam* placed upon a *yonī*.²⁴ The most perfectly executed anthropomorphic representation of this union is of Shiva Ardhanari (Half Woman) in an immense wall sculpture at Elephanta Caves near Mumbai (sixth century). Shiva and Devi are fused seamlessly in a bisexual body but with detailed feminine and masculine traits.²⁵

DEVI TRADITIONS

In the classical era, regional territorial squabbles led kings to worship Devi as the formidable foe of enemies. New Sanskrit hymns lauded her celestial exploits, while containing her domestic power as Shiva’s wife and Vishnu’s sister. This bridged the two sects, and also validated Devi’s lower-caste devotees in the kingdom.²⁶ Later legends on Mahadevi’s emanations paralleled Vishnu’s 10 incarnations (*avatars*) like Rama and Krishna, and her identification as both Shakti and Brahman challenged the Vishnu and Shiva sects who hailed their deities as Supreme.

Three gendered theologies elucidate how each sect regarded the Female Principle. Vishnu devotees believe that he is Brahman manifest as the savior god. Sri-Lakshmi as Vishnu’s shakti or energy, but she resides demurely on his breast and is saved by him. Male dominance is evident in his incarnations in the loving pairs Rama and Sita, Krishna and Radha. While both Krishna and Radha yearn for union, he is the Great Soul (Paramatma), she is the individual soul (*jivatma*). Shiva devotees believe that the union of Shiva-Shakti is Brahman. This idea appears to have more gender parity, but many equate Shiva with Brahman, and Devi as merging into him.

In contrast, Devi devotees venerate her as Divine Mother, First Cause, and Shakti who activates the entire universe, including Shiva.²⁷ When Dravidian and aboriginal communities were absorbed into Hindu kingdoms, *brahmans* “gentrified” their powerful independent divinities like Durga and Kali through Sanskrit scriptures, lineage, rituals. Thus, although Devi sects draw upon non-Aryan myths, these were transformed and contained in Sanskrit

scriptures. However, theologians frowned upon incorporating the deities of tribal hunters like the Sabaras or Dravidian village goddesses like Peyaacchi Amman (Tamil Nadu), Bhagawati (Kerala), Seranavali (north India), and Vindhyaivasini (Maharashtra).²⁸ *Brahmans* also prohibited blood sacrifice, meat offerings, liquor, and possession in most Hindu temples after eighth century CE. However, in village shrines, Shakti devotees (Shaktas) still imbibe liquor and meat to heighten the experience of possession, as conducive to a mystical vision (*darsan*) of the goddess.²⁹ Some esoteric Shaktas also practice Tantra Yoga to attain Brahman embodied in the union of Shakti-Shiva, sometimes through sexual intercourse with a Tantric teacher.³⁰

Vedic Era Hymns

The three oldest Sanskrit *mantras* stem from the *Rig Veda*, while others occur in later Vedic texts and the *Puranas*. The *Rig Veda*'s Sri Sukta (RV Khila, 2.6) describes Sri-Lakshmi as stirring the muddy earth into life (2.6.11); stimulating rain clouds to sprout seeds (24); dwelling in a lotus (25–26); having slender limbs (1), lotus eyes and hands, and wide hips that promise progeny (26). She is accompanied by a horse and two elephants representing prosperity (3). The *Rig*'s Devi Sukta (RV 10.125) is to Vak (Speech)/Saraswati who inspires the sacred chants. The short Ratri Sukta (RV 10.127) is addressed to the dark goddess Night who yet dispels our dark fears.³¹

In later *Vedic* hymns, Hindu *brahman*s sanctified powerful Durga Devi as the nurturing yet fiercely protective mother who destroys demons. A *Vedic* hymn to fire god Agni includes the short, laudatory *mantra*, Durga Sukta (*Taittiriya Aranyaka* 4.10.2). Durga is invoked as all-knowing savior who like Agni has a golden complexion and incinerates evil through her energy.³² *Kena Upanishad* (3.12) describes Brahman's guise as Uma Devi who is serene Knowledge.³³ The *Mahanarayana Upanishad* allots verses to Devi in various iconic forms, claiming that she "multiplies by the hundreds and grows by the thousands" (MNU 1.36) and that she is Sri "the mistress of all created things" (1.47–48) and Durga who is "fiery of lustre, radiant," "the Power residing in actions" (2.2).³⁴ Shakti scriptures include the minor *Bhvricha*, *Tripura*, and *Bhavana Upanishads*. *Bhvrichopanishad* (2–5) describes Devi as love (*kama*), the energy in desire (*iccha shakti*) and in life (*jiva shakti*). She is the Creator, Source in eggs and seeds, and Atman, and hence Brahman.³⁵

Three foundational hymns to Shakti are the Durga Stava and Durga Stotra (ca. 250 CE) in the *Mahabharata*, and a Durga prayer in the sequel epic *Harivamsa* (ca. 300 CE) on Krishna's life.³⁶ These depict Durga with anthropomorphic characteristics and list her exploits based on popular legends. Durga Stava (MHB 4.5) describes Devi as "queen of the three

worlds” and sister of Vishnu-Krishna (verse 4); as “black like the dark cloud,” a chaste virgin “born from the lotus,” with four arms and faces, carrying a noose, sword, discus, bell, and vessel (5, 10, 15). She is called “*Durgat*” as she helps devotees to reach safety (35), so that she is the “boon giver” (70).³⁷ Durga Stotra is placed in the *Mahabharata* (MHB 6.22.16) just prior to Krishna’s teachings in the *Bhagavad Gita* (MHB 6.23), the philosophical apex of the epic. Perhaps the compilers also wished to pay respect to a goddess tradition preceding the Krishna sect, hinting that she is his elder sister (10) in the Durga Stotra. Thus, Krishna asks Arjuna to pray to Durga as the virgin goddess Kali adorned with skulls (5) and as Chandi who wields a spear, sword, and shield (10). Durga is called the “black” and “white” goddess who destroyed evil demons Mahisha and Kaitabha (15). Drawing upon the *Rig Veda*’s Devi Sukta, Durga is exalted as Savitri/Vak, mother of the *Vedas* (20) and of god Skanda (20). She is savior of the virtuous, and she lives in reclusive “dreary forests, fearful spots, and places of difficult access” (25).³⁸

Myths were revamped by different bards. As the *Harivamsa* concerns Krishna legends, he is the older brother who presages Durga’s birth. Durga is described as dark complexioned like Krishna, and with broad arms. She carries a three-pointed sword, lotus, and honey pot (47.i.39–40), and wears a dark blue lower cloth and a white upper cloth. Her face resembles the moon, and her hair is braided (41–43). She is a virgin (47.45) who destroys demons Shumbha and Nishumbha (49) and grants boons to devotees who offer her meat (50–51). As the Divine Mother (47.ii.20), Durga dispels bondage, death, and sickness (55–56). The Dravidian goddess was popular even among *brahmans* in the classical era, as the Sanskrit text lauds her as “Aditi among the gods, Sita (furrow) among plowmen, and Dharani (earth) among creatures” (47.ii.30).³⁹ Other hymns in *Harivamsa* (HV 105–6) describe Durga as seated on a lion and frightening foes; as independent Mahadevi, and also Parvati-Uma, Shiva’s shy wife and Vishnu’s sister.⁴⁰ These Vedic-era hymns shaped later *Puranic* legends on Durga as Devi (ca. 400–1200 CE).

Classical and Medieval Hymns

Devi Mahatmya

The most significant Devi hymn is the lengthy Devi Mahatmya (ca. 400 CE) in *Markandeya Purana*. Devi Mahatmya developed Devi’s earlier epithets and exploits for a stronger theology for the powerful, protective Mother Goddess. If the earlier Durga Stava depicted her as the raft for humans to transcend difficulties (*durgat*), Devi Mahatmya described her as the Divine Mother whose *grace* enables devotees to cross the ocean of existence.

In Devi Mahatmya, Durga appears as a chaste, independent virgin, the energy and essence of the gods. She is called Narayani as she is Vishnu-Narayana's sister. The powerful "Ya Devi" *mantras* highlight her cosmic presence, yet pointedly trace her royal genealogy to her father the king of the Himalayas and to her son Skanda the war god (*DM, Purva Bhaga* 1.3). Durga remains calm even when assuming an angry mien to confront inner and outer demons personified as Madhu-Kaitabha, Mahisha, Raktabija, and Shumbha-Nishumbha. Durga rides a lion, and seven mother goddesses (*sapta matrikas*) emerge from her, each a secondary shakti of a male deity. Durga's emanations defeat evil, just like Vishnu's incarnations (*avatars*) Rama and Krishna. Later sculptures depicted the exploits of Durga and the *matrikas*, each holding a weapon resembling those of their divine consorts. Indrani thus carries a thunder bolt like her husband Indra (8.21); Varahi resembles Vishnu's boar incarnation; Vaishnavi holds a discus like Vishnu; young Kaumari sits on a peacock like Skanda; Maheshvari (World Ruler) holds a trident and is accompanied by a bull like Shiva (8.34); Brahmani is Brahma's serene wife with a meditative girdle and rosary; pre-Aryan Chamundi-Kali is single, dispelling fear in the virtuous, while instilling terror in demons whose blood she drinks and whose skulls she wears as a garland (8.57).⁴¹ Non-Aryan Kali was contained and transformed with the Sanskrit epithet Kala Ratri (Dark, Timeless Night) borrowed from the *Rig Vedic* goddess Ratri or Night (1.4). However, Durga was exalted as the Prime Cause for her secondary shakti, *Rig Vedic* Sri-Lakshmi (1.76, 82–83). Durga is also called mother Ambika; Mahamaya who spins illusions (*maya*) in the universe (1.54–56); Savitri or inspiration; the *Rig Vedic* Gayatri hymn (1.74–75); Prakriti whose three strands comprise the material world (1.78).⁴²

Later *Puranic* hymns depicting a compassionate Devi with a gentle visage are popular in southern and western India. The most significant is Devi Gita (Devi's Hymn) located in the *Devi Bhagavata Purana* (1000 CE), extolling her as Mahadevi or Bhuvaneshvari the world ruler (3.54), and the Supreme Reality (Devi Gita 1.50; 4.48). In Devi Gita, a devotee asked for Bhuvaneshvari's grace in receiving beatific knowledge and freedom from rebirth as *moksha* (6.14). Bhuvaneshvari reveals her sublime form as Prakriti and Maya, as the primal source behind gods Vishnu and Shiva, and as the seven *matrikas*. The scene echoes Krishna's display of his grand universal form (*vishva rupa*) in the *Bhagavad Gita*, after which Devi comforts her awestruck devotee by resuming her gentle, kind aspect.⁴³ Other Sanskrit hymns like Kurma Devi Gita in the *Kurma Purana* are also dedicated to a compassionate Devi.

Lalita Sahasranama and Saundarya Lahari

As Shaktas became popular in the early medieval era, other Sanskrit scriptures elaborated on Devi's legends and aspects in philosophical verses

(*mantras*) and ritual liturgies (*tantras*) for Tantric Yogic sects. Tantric theology posits that Devi-Shakti's power is situated in the cosmos and also in the body's recesses, and that a metaphorical serpent Kundalini representing the ego and base desires is lodged at the base of the spine. The mediator focuses on releasing Kundalini from this base to travel across six inner nerve centers (*chakras*) and channels to the seventh Sri-Chakra in the brain, the seat of Shiva-Shakti. The yogic spiritual climax is attained on reaching Sri-Chakra, which is represented as a lotus with a thousand petals in two major Tantric hymns, Lalita Sahasranama (thousand verses to Lalita Devi) and the abstruse Saundarya Lahari.

Lalita Sahasranama is located in the *Brahmanda Purana* (600 CE). This hymn describes Lalita Devi as the effulgent half of Shiva's body (LS 392); as Shiva's beloved (409); as worshipped by Shiva (406); as the Infinite Supreme (413); as the First Cause (397–398); and as the primordial power (Adisakti). The devotee meditates on Divine Mother Lalita Devi whose body is bathed in vermilion (*kumkumam*), who has three eyes, whose face is like a luminous moon, who holds a noose, a cup of wine, and a red lotus in her hands.⁴⁴ If the earlier Devi Mahatmya highlighted Devi's immanence, Lalita Sahasranama dwells on both the immanent, compassionate mother (LS 14) and the transcendent Supreme.⁴⁵

Saundarya Lahari is attributed to Shankara (780–820 CE), the preeminent theologian exponent of Advaita or Vedanta monism, one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy. An ascetic from southern Kerala, Shankara established four monasteries across India to promote Advaita and to rid Hinduism of blood sacrifices common to local non-Aryan rituals. It is probable that Shankara composed Saundarya Lahari as a meditative tool for monks, although later monks perhaps expanded the hymn to mediate between Advaita intellectuals and lay Tantric devotees of Devi. Thus, although Devi was originally a non-Aryan divinity, this Sanskrit hymn helped to weed out such rites and to sanctify Devi in *brahmanical* Hindu rituals. Saundarya Lahari hails Mahadevi as Supreme Mother (SL 12–14).⁴⁶ It also highlights the union of Shiva as cosmic Being (1) and Shakti as Knowledge, Action, Love (2), the three paths to *moksha* laid out in the *Bhagavad Gita*.⁴⁷

For those who needed icons, the hymn provided verbal, poetic icons of Tirupura-Sundari Devi's vermilion body (42–99) to guide monks to their spiritual goal. A classical erotic style thus compared Tirupura-Sundari's face to the moon (63), while her sweet voice shamed Saraswati's lyre (*vina*; 66). Shiva and Vishnu bowed to her feet reddened with the juice of the *henna* plant (84–89); her thighs were like an elegant elephant's trunk (82). Monks hoped to control their sexuality by focusing instead on Devi's slender waist with three folds, and her bountiful breasts (79–80) like ruby jars (72–73) overflowed with the immortal nectar of knowledge (*amrta*). She gave this nourishment to her wise son Ganesha who remained celibate (73).⁴⁸ This metaphor is common in Tamil *bhakti* literature. Shiva saint Sambandhar

(seventh century) wrote that he had imbibed wisdom from Devi's breasts, about a century prior to Shankara.⁴⁹

Tamil Male *Bhakti* Saints and Shiva-Shakti

Regional language hymns attest to Devi's great popularity after the fifth century. One of the earliest invocations of Devi are found in saint Tirumular's weighty hymnal *Tirumantiram*, one of the 12 books of the Tamil Shiva canon. Tirumular, one of the 63 Tamil Shiva saints or *nayanars* (fifth to sixth century), lauds Shiva-Shakti as Brahman, and also praises Shakti as Mahadevi and Benevolent Mother (4:8:1155–1254); as Cosmic or Parashakti (4:5:1045–1074); as All Encompassing or Purnashakti; as Primal or Muladhara Shakti; and as Knowledge or Jnana Shakti (4:7:1124–1155).⁵⁰ One verse thus described Devi:

She is the damsel of the mountain regions
of shapely breasts and delicate beauty.
If you in devotion adore Her,
She cuts the bonds of birth asunder;
grants the prowess of mighty tapas;
scorches the soul's forgetfulness;
and leads you to liberation's path.

Tirumantiram 5:17:1524⁵¹

In the eighth-century work *Tiruvachakam*, Tamil mystical saint Manikkavachakar sang passionately of his longing for union with Shiva. He described Devi as World Mother and as Shiva's gentle "mistress-wife" (*utaiyal*) who subdued Shiva's eccentricities. Manikkavachakar compared Devi to a dark cloud whose grace (*arul*) was like benign rain (*Tiruvachakam* 7.16).⁵² Other verses recall how Shiva tamed Kali in a dance contest (*TV* 12.4) and subdued the river Ganga when she threatened to flood the earth (4.146). Manikkavachakar also stated that goddesses like Uma and Kali were simply aspects of the great Mahadevi. Although an enlightened saint, his personal battle with erotic desire sometimes caused Manikkavachakar to express disdain for mortal women as sexual traps in a spiritual minefield. To conquer lust, he adopted the voice of a subordinate woman weak with love for Shiva, and this gives an erotic undertone to his hymns. That he succumbed often to his flesh and later felt remorseful agony is seen in this verse:

Down into the waters of lust I plunged,
where the crocodiles, those red lipped women,
bite and devour me.
Look, don't leave me who trembles (in fear).
This diseased body full of rotting flesh
I cannot endure.

O Shiva! Is it just? Is it just?
 O Half of the Lady
 Whose breasts are adorned with jewels
 and yellow beauty spots!
 O my Salvation (Shiva kati)!

Tiruvachakam 6.41⁵³

Devi Icons

Classical Era

In the classical centuries, stone and bronze icons of Hindu deities proliferated when rulers supported the sects of Devi, Shiva, and Vishnu devotees. Terra-cotta and stone sculptures from the Deccan reveal the fusion of Vedic and Dravidian notions of fecund goddesses (200–600 CE). They include a faceless nude female torso (*nagna-kabandha*) whose head is represented by a lotus as the symbol of purity, with maternal breasts, and legs splayed out with bent knees and open vagina while giving birth (Uttanapad). The earliest terra-cotta images of Aditi Uttanapad is from the Shatavahana dynasty (early third century) in Ter, Maharashtra. The goddess icon lies flat upon the temple floor as an altar for libations of milk, water, and turmeric water.⁵⁴ The deity was obviously inspired by the *Rig Vedic* verse on Aditi Uttanapad who gave birth to the gods and the universe:

The earth was born from her who crouched with legs spread, and from the earth the quarters of the sky were born. From Aditi, Daksha was born, and from Daksha Aditi was born.

RV 10.72.3–4⁵⁵

Another basalt icon of a pregnant goddess in labor is from Alampur in the Deccan during the reign of the Chalukyas (ca. 600 CE).⁵⁶ Here also Aditi Uttanapad serves as a flat altar for libations of milk and turmeric water, her “majestic maternal body” with full breasts, taut thighs, and open vagina being in contrast to a relaxed upper body. In lieu of a head, she has a lotus with drooping petals symbolizing serene fertility, and purity even in muddy waters. Icons of Lakshmi and Saraswati also show them seated on lotuses, and their limbs and eyes are compared to this flower. For example, a fifth-century medallion shows royal Lakshmi with horses standing on a lotus with a blossom in her hands.⁵⁷ The flowers suggest ample harvests without an overt reference to fecundity, unlike the explicit icons of Aditi Uttanapad subdued by the sacred lotus motif.⁵⁸ Obviously, this patriarchal society respected mothers and women’s anatomy, since life begins in their wombs and is nourished by their breasts. These cultural norms must have protected women from overt physical abuse in this era, although it may not have completely averted it.

While Aditi Uttanapad icons were popular in villages, artisans developed more subtle iconography for Devi. The Gupta emperors in north India, with their Vakataka subsidiary in western India (fourth to fifth century), greatly supported sculpture in caves and freestanding temples. After the sixth century, regional kingdoms proliferated, each expanding on Guptan artistic models. Sculptures and legends of Devi, Vishnu, and Shiva now appear in profusion on shrine walls. Devi sculptures show Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, Mahadevi, seven *matrikas*, and river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna. An early Guptan image at Udayagiri Caves is a rough-hewn buff sandstone legend of Durga slaying the demon Mahisha. A brick temple at Ahichchatra contains two realistic and finely crafted reliefs of Ganga and Yamuna, their aquatic connections highlighted by water urns and lotuses in their hands, clinging saris, and river animal mounts such as a mythical crocodile (*makara*) for Ganga and a turtle for Yamuna.⁵⁹

Medieval Images of Devi

Medieval styles reflected both classical continuity and innovation. The first significant testament to motherhood is a tenderly hewn gray schist icon of Skandamata Devi (Mother of Skanda) from Tanesara-Mahadeva (sixth century CE). She has a luminous halo and face, ample hips and bosom, while her *sari* is loosely draped over her head.⁶⁰ Similar styles are visible in Rajput icons in western India under the Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty (eighth to ninth century)⁶¹ and the Maitraka era (tenth century CE). From the latter are three sets of Durga's seven emanations (*sapta matrikas*), each goddess associated with a male god. As Devi sects gathered strength, earlier tensions between sensual motherhood and yogic abstinence were partially resolved in art. Brahmani or Saraswati, goddess of wisdom, thus appears as the embodiment of sacred female sensuality in a green schist icon of Brahmani alone⁶² and in a pink sandstone of Brahma holding Brahmani on his lap.⁶³ A fine sandstone lintel now survives with images of some *sapta matrikas* and Shiva the Great Ascetic (Maha-Yogi). Three remaining *matrikas* are Kaumari (Youth) on a peacock like her consort Skanda; Maheshvari (Great World Ruler) with a bull and trident like Shiva; and Brahmani clad in a yogic girdle, sitting on a lotus with a lute and scroll.⁶⁴ The missing *matrikas* are Vishnu's consort Vaishnavi; Varahi associated with Vishnu's boar incarnation; Indrani or Indra's consort; and independent Kali.

A red mottled sandstone Parvati from Mathura reveals that the artist had resolved some aesthetic tensions in portraying divine and mortal femininity. Devi is at once the sensual wife and mother with abundant breasts adorned with pearl necklaces, and the serene ascetic with matted locks reminiscent of Shiva Maha-Yogi.⁶⁵ A marble icon from Rajasthan is of an androgynous Uma-Mahesvara as Shiva-Shakti. Uma sits comfortably on Shiva's lap with his hand gingerly holding her waist, the goddess's uplifted head proclaims

her independence, which is reaffirmed by her arm cast boldly over his shoulders.⁶⁶

Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina artisans shared broad aesthetic visions, but their temples had regional stylistic variations. The most powerful Durga images occur south of the river Narmada. The Chalukyas of Karnataka and the Tamil Pallavas of Kanchi first developed distinct yet converging styles for Shiva and Devi images and temples (seventh century). The Kalachuris commissioned the masterpieces at Elephanta Caves near Mumbai (eighth century), while images and temples reached their apex under the Tamil Cholas (ninth to fourteenth century) who promoted *bhakti* saints and pilgrims. The most notable early Chalukya temples for Durga are at Aihole and Alampur. The apsidal temple for Durga at Aihole contains loving pairs (*mithuna*) on the pillars and fine sculptures of Durga and Shiva. Also at Aihole are four smaller temples to Kunti, mother of the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*.⁶⁷ A giant carving in Ravanphadi cave at Aihole depicts a bold Shiva with a coy, graceful Parvati by his side.⁶⁸ Bala Brahma temple at Alampur contains an image of *matrika* Brahmani in serene yogic repose.⁶⁹

As staunch devotees of Shiva and Devi, the Pallavas built temples and cave shrines at Mamallapuram. There was also a workshop where architects experimented with five styles of monolithic freestanding temples. One of these resembles a thatched roof wooden hut dedicated to Durga with her image carved on the back wall. Two large statues of women gatekeepers guard the entrance, while Durga's lion—also the Pallava insignia—sits serenely in front, its face to one side. The most magnificent carving of Durga's battle against demon Mahisha is on a large cave wall at Mamallapuram. The savior goddess is astride an intricately carved lion with weapons in her several arms, her right-hand sword wielding a furious battle against demon Mahisha, while the gods superintend Durga's victory. Disguised as bull, Mahisha returns to his anthropomorphic form when slain by the goddess, a clear warning to lustful, demonic humans. The cave also has gentler images of Devi as Lakshmi rescued by her consort Vishnu in his boar incarnation.⁷⁰

Two exquisite carvings of Parvati are in Elephanta Caves near Mumbai. One shows her in domestic comfort, engrossed in a game of dice with Shiva. In the carving of Shiva Ardhanari discussed earlier, the feminine and masculine halves are distinct, but fused harmoniously. Shakti is dignified, wide bosomed, with slim waist and elegant, drooping shoulders, and one hip is bent gracefully. In contrast, Shiva's virile arm rests confidently on his bull Nandi. Male and female sexuality breathe serenely under yogic control.⁷¹

Pallava and Chola sculptures depict Devi independently as Parvati, Lakshmi, or Saraswati, or with their consorts; or in her local or composite forms. An eighth-century frieze at the Pallava Shore temple at Mamallapuram shows Parvati seated beside Shiva.⁷² This was echoed in a Chola bronze from Tiruvalangadu (eleventh century).⁷³ Several temple friezes

show the bridal couple hand in hand, as at Vadakkalattur (ninth century)⁷⁴ and Tiruvengadu (eleventh century).⁷⁵ Other Chola bronze icons include a standing Parvati at Tirumeyjnanam (925 CE)⁷⁶ and Sita as Lakshmi at Tirucherai temple (ninth century).⁷⁷ South Indian bronze sculptors reached their apex in the portrayals of Devi as sensual and maternal, yet wise, some based on the model of their patron queen Sembian Mahadevi.

There are other icons of compassionate, yet ascetic motherhood. A green sandstone Brahmani shows her as a *yogini* seated on a swan symbolizing enlightenment, holding a meditative cup and scroll in two upper hands, while her lower right points to her full breast.⁷⁸ A granite icon of a sensual yet serene Brahmani from Kanchipuram (ninth century) has three faces, her upper right arm holds a rosary, lower right in a gesture of solace from fear (*abhaya mudra*), lower left hand is open in the gesture of beneficence (*varada mudra*). The missing left hand probably held the ascetic's water pot.⁷⁹ A sandstone lintel from western India shows seven, haloed *matrikas* dancing with Shiva, feet elegantly poised, right hands in the *abhaya mudra*.⁸⁰

Tantric Traditions

Hindu worship to Devi as the Supreme accelerated around the fourth century. Among them were the "left hand" or Tantric sects who disagreed with *brahmanical* restrictions on the consumption of meat and liquor, sexuality before rites, and who also believed in magical possession. Among the Tantric sub-sects were the Sakti-samagama who venerated the *yoni* and the Kaulas who advocated ritual sexual intercourse.⁸¹

The Indian belief that human sexuality mirrors the divine union of Shiva-Shakti thus resulted in two sets of sub-sects not only in Hinduism but also in Buddhism. Mainstream Hindu devotees of Devi visit *brahmanical* shrines, such as the Meenakshi Amman temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. This ancient Dravidian goddess shrine was expanded by the Pandyas and Nayakas (thirteenth to sixteenth century) with the Devi icon in the sanctuary womb house (*garbha griha*). The theme of Meenakshi-Shiva's marriage is reenacted each spring in the Chitrai Harvest Festival.⁸² Such *brahmanical* temples follow Sanskrit texts and rituals, do not allow magical possession, and regard meat, liquor, and sex before rituals as deterrents to spiritual understanding. In contrast, non-*brahmanical* temples to folk goddesses allow devotees to imbibe liquor, offer animal sacrifices, and experience possession. Goat sacrifice is common for Durga and Kali, and some communities like the Gurkhas of India and Nepal sacrifice buffaloes during the festival of Durga Puja. Some of these pre-Aryan ideas were taken to another level in the medieval era by esoteric Tantric sects.

If Hindus and Mahayana Buddhists largely focus on sacred chants (*mantras*), Tantric sub-sects emphasize divergent yogic practices (*tantras*).

Hindu Tantricists use mystical diagrams and icons of Shiva-Shakti as Supreme to attain *moksha*. Vajrayana Buddhists use meditative symbols and icons of female *bodhisattvas* to attain *nirvana*. Tantric sects also use five devices (*pancha makaras*) to heighten the mystical experience, and their rites are antithetical to *brahmanical* Hinduism. Each *makara* begins with the Sanskrit letter “m,” i.e., eating fish (*matsya*), meat (*mamsa*), and parched grain (*mudra*); drinking wine (*mada*); and having sex (*maithuna*) before or during the rites.⁸³ The medieval esoteric sect of the Kaulas believed that sexual intercourse actually heightened the mystical experience. Their main patrons were the Rajput Chandella dynasty (tenth to eleventh century) who commissioned the magnificent Khajuraho temples in Madhya Pradesh. The Kaulas also flourished under royal patrons in Kashmir and Orissa. Today these temples are defunct, although they are valued as national monuments.

Khajuraho Hindu temples have façades with panels of explicit sexual acts. The most magnificent is Kandariya Mahadeo temple to Shiva containing panels of goddesses and profusely carved friezes of coital pairs (*maithuna*) and groups.⁸⁴ Devi Jagadamba temple contains relief panels of a *maithuna* couple;⁸⁵ and the Chausat Yogini temple dedicated to Kali and her 64 *shakti-devis* probably witnessed Tantric rites of possession. A nearby Jaina shrine to *tirthankara* Parshvanatha also contains erotic sculptures. The Orissa patron of the Kaulas was Narasimhadeva (twelfth to thirteenth century) who commissioned the Sun temple at Konarak. This masterpiece is shaped like a chariot with horses, and it too has erotic sculptures. Another Tantric temple in Orissa is dedicated to Chamundi-Kali and Shiva-Bhairava, two non-Aryan deities whose myths depict their blood thirst for evil demons. Despite scholarly speculations, bloody sacrifices may have been less common, as the wall panels show seductive, wealthy women absorbed in beautification, in a manner suggestive of courtesans.⁸⁶ Sexual mores were obviously far from ascetic in this era in north India.

While mainstream theology highlights the unity of Shiva-Shakti, many Tantric sects believe in Kali as Supreme Devi. While most Hindus view enlightenment as an asexual state that is retarded by imbibing meat and drink, and by having sex before or during rituals, Tantricists take the opposite view. Tantric theology states that the primal ecstasy of the divine pair during creation can be reenacted in human sexual intercourse, whose bliss temporarily ends sorrow, as well as self-identity.⁸⁷ Hindu Shaktas and Vajrayana Buddhists also challenge some central Hindu assumptions on celibacy and menstruation.⁸⁸ Mainstream societies believe that sexual chastity promotes spirituality, making it necessary for ascetics to hoard this vital energy, known as *bindu* in Hinduism and *thig-le* in Buddhism. Men thus withhold semen or the “white fluid”; women avoid sex during menstruation when the “red” fluid is shed. The belief that menstrual blood was a source of

ritual pollution probably originated in early Dravidian culture. Hindu and Buddhist Tantric sects contest this by encouraging the mixing of fluids, rather than condemning sex during menstruation as in *brahmanical* Hinduism.⁸⁹

Clearly, the raw power of the Devi Mahatmya caught the fascination of kings and ordinary folk. The Shaktas used a folk base to challenge *brahmanical* rites, so that elite-caste theologians tried to contain their popularity through diverse approaches. The most intellectual response stemmed from Shankara's followers who emphasized ascetic renunciation as the prime path to knowledge of Brahman. Meanwhile, theologians compiled *Puranic* theistic legends for Devi, Vishnu, and Shiva as Brahman manifest. Medieval *bhakti* saints pleaded fervently to these deities for divine grace (*arul*) in attaining *moksha*. Devi's devotees worshipped the Divine Mother as Supreme; Shiva's devotees envisioned Brahman as the union of Shiva-Shakti; Vishnu theists hoped that their individual soul (*jivatma*) would unite with the Lord (Paramatma).⁹⁰

Shakta sects elevated Devi as Divine Mother, and Shiva sects exalt her as loyal wife (Meenakshi/Uma/Parvati) and tender, bountiful mother (Amman). Vishnu legends often focus on Krishna as a child with selfless mothers. Human motherhood was rendered divine in art, as seen in a sandstone sculpture from Gurgi, Madhya Pradesh (tenth century). It depicts a reclining mother with a protective hand over her baby who probably represented Krishna. A black basalt image of Devi Purnesvari or fulfillment from Bihar (twelfth century) shows this mother goddess seated on a lotus with a child on her lap.⁹¹ There are innumerable folk icons of Devi Annapurna or goddess of food with a ladle across both hands. Devi images often have full breasts and ample lap, with gestures like open palmed benefaction (*varada mudra*) or comfort from fear (*abhaya mudra*).

The divine-mortal hierarchy is engendered most notably in medieval *bhakti* literature to Vishnu. The *Padma* and *Brahmavaivarta Puranas* introduced the theme of the lovelorn pair of Krishna as the Great Soul (Paramatma) and his lover Radha as the individual soul (*jivatma*).⁹² While both yearned for union, the *jivatma* sought divine grace for salvation, sometimes through Sri Devi's mediation. In this ardent theology, the devotee or *bhakta* often assumed the subordinate, female role to the male Beloved. As the metaphor of physical yearning was transposed on the spiritual quest in the style of classical secular literature, the profuse outpouring of *bhakti* literature and art had erotic undertones. The stages of courtship began with a brief rapture followed by a long separation, and end with union. One of the most poignant and eloquent compositions is the *Gita Govinda* in Sanskrit by saint Jayadeva of Bengal (twelfth century) who assumed Radha's voice to woo Krishna. Legends relate that Krishna amused himself by writing some couplets for his beloved devotee.

In his spiritual journey, Jayadeva was assisted by Padmavati, a dancer at Jaganatha temple at Puri, Orissa.⁹³

Women's Rites

Despite the low social rank of many tribal and low-caste communities, they were spiritually empowered by their dedication to local goddesses. Village rites to resilient *shakti-devis* strengthened community morale during epidemics and natural catastrophes, but they had a special significance for women after traumatic pregnancies, childbirth, and physical abuse. The goddesses often acquired an auspiciousness even for high-caste women, and as they could not be obliterated by the Sanskrit Mahadevi tradition, *brahman* theologians incorporated them into the umbrella of Hindu beliefs. Perhaps these elites had plebeian connections themselves, or their family women were devotees. Moreover, India's artisanal caste autonomy allowed for manifold creative visions of Devi in syncretic forms in each region or village.

Women's domestic and public rites to such deities were thus fairly common. Although their ritual niches are smaller than those of upper-caste priests in temples, female rites have sustained them emotionally in a largely male dominant society. Women's public rites are often to icons of village- or caste-based goddesses, to Durga or to Kali. They pray for strength, wisdom, children, prosperity, and protection from sickness or violence. Their offerings differ according to the goddess in question. If sedate housewives offer fruits to Devi, others sacrifice to Kali in her many forms. Other women have found that mystical possession by Kali has provided a psychological outlet for their inner rages and frustrations.

Fasts for Devi form an important element of women's worship. In south India, married women celebrate Vara Lakshmi Nombu through a prolonged fast and by tying a turmeric stained thread around their wrists. Women also sometimes conduct their rites separately from the lower- or upper-caste priests on festival days at village or tree shrines. An example is the festival for the Dravidian goddess Mariamman common to coastal communities near Chennai, Tamil Nadu. During this occasion, women decorate the temporary shrine, smear the icon with turmeric and vermilion, offer fruits, coconuts, and rice porridge cooked with fish or meat in a communal pot. Men play drums and pipes, and spectacles of possession by both genders are common.

Other women sing hymns at home, offer special prayers at temples to celebrate their life stages or the seasons. Female domestic rites include special prayers to Devi before weddings, during pregnancy, and upon a daughter's menstruation, and these vary across seasons, castes, and regions. Women appear to have considerable autonomy over these resilient folk festivals, which *brahman* priests have not tried to nullify.⁹⁴

Some festivals include strict vows and fasts for husbands or brothers. On such festive days, the women then tie a thread stained with turmeric around their necks or wrists. Such festivals include Karadai Nombu in south India and Karava Chauth in the north, both commemorating heroine Savitri who rescued her husband in the *Mahabharata*. The festival of Rakhi in north India celebrates the bond between sisters and brothers in a patriarchal society. She prays for her brothers' longevity, and they promise her unstinting protection. In the south, women pray for brothers in the cool month of January, with the brother reciprocating her good wishes through gifts of money and clothes.

While some are communal rites of each caste with women playing a specific role, other festivals are entirely conducted by women and cross caste boundaries. For example, in the festival of Naga Panchami, low- and high-caste women today conduct rites to snake icons of Shiva and Vishnu associated with snakes, placed under sacred trees near temples with *brahman* priests. Snake worship stems from autochthonous tribal rituals, but it became popular among the high castes in the *Puranic* era. Women chant Sanskrit *mantras* or regional language hymns; light lamps; burn incense; offer fruits, flowers, milk, and coconuts; and smear turmeric on the icons of Shiva and Vishnu.

JAINISM: DEVI TRADITIONS

Icons of Saints and *Devis*

Icons of divine matrons appear in some Jaina temples. In Gujarat and Rajasthan, there are depictions of a four-armed Saraswati Devi clad in a delicate girdle, necklaces, and headdress suitable for this dignified goddess of wisdom. Her sensuality is evident in rounded breasts and in her elegant hand poised to apply a vermilion mark (*tilak*) on her forehead.⁹⁵ A Chalukya icon (seventh century) from the Deccan depicts Ambika, wife of the 22nd *tirthankara* Neminatha, as protector, mother, and symbol of fertility. Like Hindu Durga, Ambika rides a lion, but she also holds a child in her arms. Drawing upon folk fertility myths, she is placed between *sal* trees with *yakshi* attendants in iconography reminiscent of Buddhist *stupas*.⁹⁶ The serene faced Jaina *yakshi* Chunda in Madhya Pradesh (tenth century) sits gracefully with one leg folded, a lotus between her breasts. Her right hand applies vermilion (*tilak*) upon her forehead, and an attendant pays homage with folded palms.⁹⁷ The Jaina temples at Khajuraho were also probably frequented by Tantric Kaula or Vishnu devotees. Thus, the temple to *tirthankara* Parshvanatha contains an exquisite image of Shiva-Parvati; and the Ghatai temple shows Mahavira's mother's 16 dreams before his birth, but also a many-armed goddess on Vishnu's eagle Garuda.⁹⁸

VAJRAYANA (TANTRIC) BUDDHISM

The Vajrayana (Diamond Path) sub-sect of Mahayana Buddhism also offered Tantricians an avenue for nontraditional worship in eastern India, Nepal, and Tibet. Vajrayana's popularity stems from its retention of local pre-Aryan respect for goddesses and priestesses. Vajrayana biographies of women yogic teachers (*siddhas*) were compiled under the Pala dynasty in Bengal (700–1200 CE), reminiscent of earlier Indian royal munificence to Mahayana monasteries, as recorded by Chinese pilgrims.⁹⁹ Vajrayana began as a protest by some monks and lay Buddhists against monastic worldliness and sterile intellectualism, but it thrived due to royal generosity. Erudite monks then compiled Vajrayana manuals of Tantric rites (*tantras*) based on lay rituals. Since the *tantras* were taught to both Buddhist and Hindu students at Nalanda and Vikramasila universities, Vajrayana and Hindu Tantricism are remarkably alike in their use of yoga, sacred verses (*mantras*), diagrams, and sexuality to attain spiritual goals.¹⁰⁰ Vajrayana thus exalts Hindu Shiva as the Great Ascetic (Maha-Yogi) who resides near cremation grounds, while Hindu Tantricians were influenced by Vajrayana after Turko-Afghan Muslim kings destroyed Buddhist monasteries in Bihar and Bengal (twelfth century).

Women *Siddhas* and *Yoginis*

As stated earlier, Hindu and Buddhist Tantricians embrace ritual sexual intercourse and do not regard it as a threat to yogic insights. As Vajrayana practitioners regard the emotions as the fertile mud in which to cultivate virtues like generosity and compassion, they are called the brave (*viraa* [f]; *vira* [m]). There are many hagiographies of medieval male and female Vajrayana *siddhas* who formulated these traditions, as well as their spiritual heights and pitfalls. While all *siddhas* were respected as *yoginis* (f) or *yogis* (m), some were stark ascetics residing in cremation grounds, caves, or forests, while others were married householders. There were noteworthy plebeian and aristocratic *siddhas* like the princesses Lakshminkara and Mandarava. Lakshminkara feigned insanity, smeared her body with ashes, distributed wealth to the poor, and left her husband's palace for the cremation ground. When Mandarava refused to be married, her father confined her in a dungeon, but she scratched her face and pulled off her hair to frighten suitors, and escaped to be a *yogini*. Working-class *yoginis* included hunters Padma-Lochana and Jnana-Lochana, the roaming wine-seller Sahavrija, and Manibhadra, the wife and mother who remained at home. The Tibetan aspirant Niguma and her husband Naropa faced a domestic crisis when he wished to leave to become a *siddha*. They agreed to dissolve their marriage for Vajrayana, and both became famous *siddhas*.¹⁰¹ Tilopa, a celebrated woman *siddha*, had two students who were liquor merchants, one of whom became a respected *yogini* whose wisdom converted the king

to Vajrayana. The male *siddha* Khambala learned from his *yogini* mother that prejudices against women, the lower castes, and prostitutes were delusions. Vajrayana's humane attitudes is seen in the fact that one of Lakshmin-kara's students was a cleaner of latrines.¹⁰²

Female spiritual prowess is respected in the northeast culture, and Vajrayana's fluid organization fostered a close interaction between female *yoginis* and monks in the medieval era. This led to a secret rite centering on women's inner divinity (*stri-puja, guhyapuja*).¹⁰³ The manual *Hevajra Tantra* advises the male Tantric aspirant to learn meditation from a *yogini* descended from five honored Buddhist families. The text also recommends disciplined sexual intercourse for spiritual understanding, and pointedly refers to the mixing of body fluids, with the power flowing from the *yogini* to the male student.¹⁰⁴

Taras and Female Bodhisattvas

Vajrayana Buddhists worship icons of female *bodhisattvas* who resemble forms of Hindu Devi, in contradiction to earlier Mahayana scriptures like *Bodhisattvabhumi* (fourth century), which stated that as the female body was "full of defilement and of weak intelligence," there could be no female *bodhisattvas*. Moreover, as Buddhist theology emphasized asexual enlightenment, monks proposed that women were transformed into men upon attaining *nirvana*. In opposition, the Vajrayana *Chanda Maharosana-Tantra* (eighth century) exalts women. While Siddhartha and other male Buddhas were the sons of his mother Maya, the text states that female Buddhas were embodiments of Siddhartha's wife Gopa.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, Vajrayana *tantras* exalt enlightenment (*prajna*) as female, a noun with a feminine gender. As folk devotees then venerated Prajna and some other virtues as goddesses, Vajrayana theologians developed a pantheon of female and male *bodhisattvas*.¹⁰⁶

Like Hindu Durga and other *devis*, Vajrayana female *bodhisattvas* have both benign and fierce forms. The most famous is Tara the protective mother associated with Avalokitesvara, the *bodhisattva* of compassion. An origin legend for Tara states that when Avalokitesvara attained *nirvana* and left the world, all creatures wept. The kind *bodhisattva* then wept a tear, which became the female *bodhisattva* Tara who is therefore the "essence of the essence of compassion."¹⁰⁷ In the culture that reverences the female, other Tibetan legends attribute a local inspiration for Tara as mother and queen protector. Vajrayana traditions absorbed local non-Buddhist legends and ideas in the depiction of Tara as either gentle or fierce. Like Durga, Tara is the divinity who protects devotees from death and other hurdles.¹⁰⁸

One of the most popular benign versions of Tara is depicted in texts as having a body like forest verdure, while her purity is represented by a lotus seat. Texts refer to Tara as 16 years old, with blooming breasts, and wearing

ornaments.¹⁰⁹ Like Hindu Sri-Lakshmi, Nepali icons depict Tara and the divinity Vasudhara with the lotus emblem of purity and with benefaction (*varada mudra*).¹¹⁰ These qualities are also evident in an early bronze Tara (eighth to ninth century) from Khurkihar, Bihar. The haloed *bodhisattva* sits on a lotus, her leg folded beneath her lap, and her two hands in the gestures of open generosity and of teaching (*dharmachakra mudra*), the latter associated with Buddha's sermons.¹¹¹ A seventh-century Tara stands on a lotus, holding a lotus and the ball of generosity, which is like the *varada mudra*. The gilt gold face of an elegant, standing Tara (fourteenth century) suggests that this icon was worshipped. Her slim beauty resembles a lotus stalk, she has lotus bands on her arms and sides, and her hands gesture teaching and generosity. A splendid image of Maha-Sri Tara (tenth century) clearly links her to Sri-Lakshmi, as the *bodhisattva* is seated on a lotus beside two *devis*, her hands together in the gesture of teaching. A green watercolor painting of Tara on cotton cloth (fourteenth century) is ornate with Tantric symbols associated with animals. Her right hand blesses a monk, her left holds the gesture of instruction, while her full breasts and benign eyes and smile emphasize maternal wisdom.¹¹² After the destruction of Buddhist monasteries, Hindu Tantricians adopted some Vajrayana practices, as reflected in the meditative rite of "Tara bhakti suddharnava" (worship of Tara).¹¹³

Vajrayana manuals and rites for female *bodhisattvas* are attributed to both historical and legendary women teachers. Thus, the lay *siddhas* Yasodatta and Yasobhadra are believed to have authored the manuals for the female *bodhisattva* Vagisvara and her male counterpart *bodhisattva* Manjusri. The most notable *yogini* author is Vajravati (Diamond-like Woman), the author of the manual for Pithesvari, the Wrathful Red Tara. Women teachers Lakshminkara, Mekhala, and Kanakhala composed the manuals for Severed-Head Vajra-yogini Tara.

Vajravati's narrative states that she was once a respected, pure minded *brahman* woman who carefully observed caste rules. Sensing her spiritual potential, a Tantric Buddhist of the weaver caste invited her to reject orthodoxy and to become his disciple. Convinced that he could teach her Buddha's wisdom, Vajravati accepted him, thus crossing the barriers of gender and caste. Vajravati later devised a meditative technique through which the aspirant imagined she was Red Tara in a standing yogic pose on a lotus. Red Tara is often shown with a bone necklace signifying communion with death, and her hands hold a diamond spear (*vajra*) and a blue lotus. Despite the fearful symbols, the technique is believed to bring enlightened bliss.¹¹⁴

One of the most popular but fearsome female *bodhisattvas* is Vajra-yogini or Chinnamasta, whose Hindu counterparts are Durga and Kali in eastern India.¹¹⁵ Texts describe Vajra-yogini as having a bright red body, flowing black hair, a bone necklace, and as crushing demons, who are metaphors for the ego and sensory deceptions. Vajra-yogini is depicted holding a severed head and cup of mead, like Hindu icons of Kali, and her ferocious male

counterpart was probably the *bodhisattva* Vajrapani. Another wrathful Tara is Simhamukha (Lion Faced) who is clad in a tiger skin and drinks from a skull-bowl. As the champion over illusions, Simhamukha's diamond spears (*vajra*) aim in all directions, while the demon of fear and negativity lies crushed at her feet.¹¹⁶ A spectacular Tara is red Kurukulla who stands in a "dancing pose, haughty with furious rage," wearing a crown of five skulls and a tiger skin.¹¹⁷

While these female divinities were conceived as ascetics by *yoginis*, Vajrayana highlights the revelatory potential of sexual intercourse. Tantricians emphasize that such union erases individual identities, and physical bliss becomes an echo of sublime bliss. This nuanced verse from *Chakrasamvara Tantra* reveals the relationship between *yogini* teacher and male aspirant, who learns to use his sexuality to scale spiritual heights:

Because her great bliss is imperturbable,
 She is a mountain.
 Because lesser beings cannot fathom her profundity,
 She is a forest.
 Because her cavern is filled with nectar,
 She is a cave.
 Because her union of wisdom and skill is deep,
 She is a riverbank.
 Because she [knows] the natural state beyond birth and death,
 She is primordial.
 Because she is the object of great bliss,
 Her activity is natural.
 Because she burns the views of early disciples and solitary
 achievers in the fire of great passion,
 She is the cremation ground.

*Chakrasamvara Tantra*¹¹⁸

Icons of some benign *Taras* represent historical women *siddhas* like Siddharajini (twelfth century) from Uddiyana in northwestern India. Siddharajini's biography and manuals center on the Buddha Amitayus of Infinite Life, and they are foundational to Tibetan Buddhism. Icons show a two-armed Tara seated on a lotus with a vase of immortality in her hands. Haloes encircle her head and body, she is clad in tiger skin, while the ring of skulls and lamps around her head cautions the devotee against illusions.¹¹⁹

Bhikshuni Lakshmi (ca. ninth century) was an aristocratic Kashmiri nun and another compassionate, brilliant *yogini* who defeated monks in philosophical debates. Thus, when she later contracted leprosy, jealous monks chased her into the forest to die. Legend states that she was saved after appealing to Avalokitesvara, the supreme male *bodhisattva* of compassion. She then devised a meditative program of fasting and yoga combined with

devotional *bhakti* for Avalokitesvara, and this transformed Tibetan Buddhism. She recorded her experience in a poem which also states that Avalokitesvara's kindness enabled him to assume a female form and to understand women. Now translated by Tibetan monks (*lamas*), this poetic adulation provides a historical clue as to how Avalokitesvara came to be venerated as goddess Kuan-Yin/Guan-Yin in East Asia. Bhikshuni Lakshmi wrote:

Moonlike mother of Buddhas,
Whose form is that of a beautiful goddess
Empty by nature, you [emerge] from emptiness
In the form of a woman
And tame living beings thereby.¹²⁰

Vajrayana theology exalts the cosmic non-duality of female and male, a theme captured by Nepali and Tibetan artists in erotic, naturalistic sculpture free of sexual prudery. The sublime union was represented in slightly different ways in Tantric art, depending on the divinity being idealized. Some cults worshipped icons of Lokeshvara or Compassion in a coital union with Prajna-paramita, Goddess of Wisdom, and their child was the Buddha as the perfect human savior of mortals. Other images represent the Tantric union of *bodhisattva* Vajra-sattva and his consort Vajra-sattvamika. One silver polychrome icon depicts the cosmic coital couple largely from her perspective. She has her arms entwined around his head, her hands gesture Unity, while he holds a double thunderbolt (*vajra*) and a bell shaped like a thunderbolt. Their benign faces are caught in a rapturous gaze, the male and female figures are well matched, and their union appears complete.¹²¹ Tibetan Buddhists depict the embracing figures of Yab-yum or the *bodhisattva* Vajrapani and his consort Wisdom or Prajna, a vision highlighting the union of male and female as leading to wisdom.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, J. M. Clark, J. D. Pal, and G. R. Sharma, "An Upper Paleolithic Shrine in India," *Antiquity* 57:88-94; V. N. Mishra, "Prehistoric Human Colonization of India," *Journal of Bioscience* 26, no. 4 (November 2001): 491-531, 498.

2. Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*, 18, plate 6A; Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols of Indian Art and Civilization*, 90-92, plates 16 and 24; Stella Kramrisch, *The Art of India* (London: Phaidon, 1955), plate 6; George Michell, Catherine Lampert, and Tristan Holland, eds., *In the Image of Man: The Indian Perception of the Universe Through 2000 Years of Painting and Sculpture* (New York: Alpine Fine Arts, 1982), 50, plate 59.

3. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols of Indian Art and Civilization*, 94-95, plate 25.

4. Raman, "Popular Pujas in Public Places," 165-98.

5. Srinivasan, *Temples of South India*, 7–8; Sivaram, *Early Chola Art*, 70–71; P. V. Somasundaram, trans., *Ainkurunuru* (Chennai: Saiva Siddhanta Society, 1972), 324; P. V. Somasundaram, trans., *Akananuru*, vol. 2 (Chennai: Saiva Siddhanta Society, 1970), 100.
6. Philip Rawson, “Early Art and Architecture,” in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. A. L. Basham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 200–201; Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 49, 56, 98, 112–13.
7. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 49, 56, 98, 112–13.
8. Amritalingam, *Sacred Trees of Tamilnadu*, 34–44, 47–53.
9. Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 41–48; also Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 26.
10. Hardy, *Viraha Bhakti*.
11. Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 110, plate 53.
12. A goddess with less jewelry is in Kramrisch, *The Art of India*, fig. 6. One with elaborate hairdo, heavy anklets, pearl necklaces is in Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 50, plate 59.
13. Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*, 24, plate 6C.
14. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols of Indian Art and Civilization*, 92, plate 15.
15. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 40, plate 25.
16. Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols of Indian Art and Civilization*, 90–92, plates 16, 24, 100; Balraj Khanna and George Michell, *Human and Divine: 2000 Years of Indian Sculpture* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2000), 14, 82, plate 54.
17. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 39, plate 24. A similar figurine with mold broken to the neckline from Bengal is in Khanna and Michell, *Human and Divine*, 14, 80, plate 4.
18. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:18–21, for English translation of “Purusha Sukta,” “Hiranyagarbha Sukta,” and “Naasadiya Sukta.” Also Ashudosh ananda, *Veda Mantrāngal: Mantrāngal, Shanti Mantrāngal, Suktāngal*, 73–82, for “Naasadiya Sukta” (Sanskrit with Tamil translation).
19. Swami Vimalananda, ed., *Mahānarayana Upanishad* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1957), 7.
20. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 134–37.
21. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*.
22. Roy, “Vedic Cosmogonies,” 9–19. Roy makes the specious argument that the *Rig Veda*’s Female Creator Aditi was demoted to Prakriti as created matter by later *brahman* philosophers of the Sankhya school, since her 24 parts balanced a single male Spirit Purusha. Despite many misogynists, Hindus associate Devi with Prakriti (Primal Matter) and Shakti (Primal Energy). Thus, the male authored *Mahānarayana Upanishad* (2.2) praises Durga as “productive power” in a verse central to this self-sustaining Devi without a consort. Vimalananda, *Mahānarayana Upanishad*, 95–96.
23. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 271, plate 209; 93, plate 68 of single faced (*ekamukha*) *lingam* from Udayagiri Cave (fifth century CE). On sculptures of *lingams* (first to twelfth century CE), see Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 214–15.
24. Glenn Yocum, *Hymns to the Dancing Siva: A Study of Manikkavacakar’s Tiruvacakam* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1982).

25. Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Siva* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), plate 3; Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (1997; repr., London: Phaidon, 2000), 126, plate 91.

26. From John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, eds., *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995) these essays: Diana Eck, "Ganga: The Goddess in Hindu Sacred Geography," 166 83; Dimmitt, "Sita: Fertility Goddess and Shakti," 210 37; C. Mackenzie Brown, "The Theology of Radha in the Puranas," 57 71; Glenn E. Yocum, "Comments: The Divine Consort in South India," 278 81; Thomas B. Coburn, "Consort of None, Shakti of All: The Vision of the *Devi Mahatmya*," 153 65.

27. Frederique Apffel Marglin, "Types of Sexual Union and Their Implicit Meanings," in *The Divine Consort*, ed. Hawley and Wulff, 298 302; Brenda Beck, "The Courtship of Valli and Murugan: Some Parallels with the Radha Krishna Story," 262 77.

28. From John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, eds., *Devi: Goddesses of India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) these essays: Humes, "Vindhyavasini: Local Goddess Yet Great Goddess," 49 75; David R. Kinsley, "Kali: Blood and Death Out of Place," 77 86; Kathleen M. Erndl, "Seranvali: The Mother Who Possesses," 172 94; Sarah Caldwell, "Bhagawati: Ball of Fire," 195 226.

29. Joanna Punzo Waghorne, "The Gentrification of the Goddess," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 5, no. 3 (2001): 235 75.

30. Tapasyananda, *Sri Lalita Sahasranama*, 20 22.

31. "Anna," *Devi Suktamkalum Upanishadankalum*, 2 13; and Ashudoshananda, *Veda Mantrangaal* (Sanskrit text with Tamil commentaries), 171 77, 177 206. See also Coburn, *Devi Mahatmya*, 258 64.

32. Ashudoshananda, *Veda Mantrangaal*, 153 61.

33. My translation of the verse in Sarvananda, *Kenopanishad*, 30 31.

34. Swami Vimalananda, trans., *Mahanarayana Upanishad* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1995), 53, 65 66, 95.

35. "Anna," *Devi Suktamkalum Upanishadankalum*, 27 51.

36. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, 90.

37. Coburn, *Devi Mahatmya*, 268 71 (Durga Stava).

38. *Ibid.*, 272 75 (Durga Stotra).

39. *Ibid.*, 276 80 (*Harivamsa*).

40. *Ibid.*, 284 89 ("Aniruddha's hymn").

41. Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 220 21.

42. "Anna," ed., *Devi Mahatmyam*, Sanskrit text and Tamil translation (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1999), 7, 63 64, 70 73, 193, 197 204; Swami Jagadisa warananda, trans., *Devi Mahatmyam (Glory of the Divine Mother): 700 Mantras on Sri Durga* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 88 128; Tapasyananda, *Sri Lalita Sahasranama*, 15 22.

43. Brown, *The Devi Gita, the Song of the Goddess*, 42, 70, 118, 156.

44. Tapasyananda, *Sri Lalita Sahasranama*, 20 21.

45. *Ibid.*, 43, 142, 154 56, 167 68.

46. Tapasyananda, *Saundarya Lahari*, 55 58.

47. *Ibid.*, 127.

48. *Ibid.*, 126, 128, 134 35, 140 45.

49. Sekkizhaar's *Periya Puranam* (verses 1965–1968), in which Mother Uma mixed *amrta* into her breast milk and fed it to Jnana Sambandhar in a cup. See G. Vanmikanathan and N. Mahalingam, eds., *Periya Puranam: A Tamil Classic on the Great Saiva Saints of South India by Sekkizhaar* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1985), 155.
50. B. Natarajan, trans., and N. Mahalingam, ed., *Tirumantiram: A Tamil Scriptural Classic by Tirumular* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991), 165–68, 169–75, 176–80, 181–94.
51. *Ibid.*, 217.
52. Yocum, *Hymns to the Dancing Siva*, 116–17.
53. *Ibid.*, 121–22, 134 n. 37.
54. Kramrisch, *Exploring India's Sacred Art*, 156–57; and Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 109, plate 52 of a terra cotta image from Ter, Maharashtra.
55. O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, 38–39.
56. Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 110, plate 55 of the basalt image at Alampur.
57. Kramrisch, *Exploring India's Sacred Art*, 148.
58. Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 115–16, plate 76.
59. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 94, plate 70; 117, plate 90.
60. *Ibid.*, 115, plate 88.
61. Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 114, plates 72 and 73.
62. *Ibid.*, 110, 114, plates 54, 72, and 73.
63. Nalini Rao, *Boundaries and Transformations: Masterworks of Indian and Southeast Asian Sculpture from the Collection of Dr. and Mrs. William T. Price* (Amarillo, Texas: Amarillo Museum of Art, 1998), 10, plate 1.
64. *Ibid.*, 17, plate 11.
65. *Ibid.*, 23, plate 18.
66. *Ibid.*, 22, plate 17.
67. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 176.
68. *Ibid.*, 175, 177, plates 132 and 134.
69. *Ibid.*, 187, plate 141.
70. Dehejia, *Indian Art*, 193, 196, 198–99, plate 133.
71. *Ibid.*, 127, plate 91; Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 124–26.
72. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 277, plate 213.
73. *Ibid.*, 307, plate 241.
74. Vidya Dehejia, *Art of the Imperial Cholas* (New York: Columbia University, 1990), 20, plate 14.
75. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 306, plate 240.
76. *Ibid.*, 305, plate 239.
77. Dehejia, *Art of the Imperial Cholas*, 28, plate 21.
78. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 191, plate 226.
79. Lorna Price and Rand Castile, eds., *Asian Art Museum of San Francisco: Selected Works, Avery Brundage Collection* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994), 31.
80. Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 221, plate 461.

81. Philip Rawson, *The Art of Tantra* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 15, 30, plate 4.
82. Jayakar, *The Earth Mother*, 73–96, 174–95; Erndl, “Seranvali: The Mother Who Possesses,” 173–94; Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 132–211. Also the film *Wedding of the Goddess*, Parts 1 and 2, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1979.
83. Dehejia, *Indian Art*, 167–68.
84. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 232–39, 248; Dehejia, *Indian Art*, 154–68; Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 217, 437–40; Mario Bussagli and Calembus Sivaramamurti, *5000 Years of the Art of India* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1983), 203, 235–50.
85. Rawson, *The Art of Tantra*, 33–34, plates 14–16.
86. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 161.
87. Rawson, *The Art of Tantra*, 11–12; Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 213.
88. On the Dravidian Tamil origins of views on menstruation as a ritual pollutant, see Hart, *The Poems of the Ancient Tamil*, 93, 96–97.
89. Rawson, *The Art of Tantra*, 31–40, *vide*, 33–35, plates 13–16.
90. Jan Brzezinski, “Women Saints in Gaudiya Vaisnavism,” in *Vaisnavi: Women and the Worship of Krishna*, ed. Stephen J. Rosen, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), 59–85; Katherine K. Young, “Theology Does Help Women’s Liberation: Srivaisnavism, A Case Study,” in *Vaisnavi*, ed. Rosen, 235–94; Vasudha Narayanan, “The Goddess Sri: The Blossoming Lotus and Breast Jewel of Visnu,” in *The Divine Consort*, ed. Hawley and Wulff, 224–37.
91. Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 119, plates 87 and 88.
92. Cheever Mackenzie Brown, *God as Mother: A Feminine Theology in India: A Historical and Theological Study of the Brahmavaiavarta Purana* (Hartford, Vt.: Claude Stark, 1974), 180–86; also Brown, “The Theology of Radha in the Puranas,” 57–71.
93. Barbara Stoler Miller, “The Divine Duality of Radha and Krishna,” in *The Divine Consort*, ed. Hawley and Wulff, 13–26.
94. Raman, “Popular Pujas in Public Places,” 165–98.
95. Khanna and Michell, *Human and Divine*, 42, plate 45.
96. Michell, Lampert, and Holland, *In the Image of Man*, 110, plate 56.
97. Khanna and Michell, *Human and Divine*, 62, 83 front cover, plate 62.
98. Rohini Sharma, “Khajuraho: Where Sensual Meets the Sublime,” *India Perspectives* 18, no. 11 (November 2005): 2–15.
99. Reginald Ray, “Accomplished Women in Tantric Buddhism of Medieval India and Tibet,” 191–200.
100. Miranda Shaw quotes the seventh century pilgrims I Tsing and Hsuan Tsang in *Passionate Enlightenment*, 20.
101. Ray, “Accomplished Women in Tantric Buddhism of Medieval India and Tibet,” 192–93.
102. *Ibid.*, 193, 195, 199.
103. Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, 32, 48, 130–38.
104. *Ibid.*, 158.
105. *Ibid.*, 27–28.
106. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:191.
107. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 165.
108. *Ibid.*, 166–68.

109. Pratapaditya Pal, *Nepal: Where the Gods Are Young* (New York: Asia Society & John Weatherhill, 1975), 10.
110. *Ibid.*, 57, 81, plates 41–42.
111. Harle, *The Art and the Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 211, plate 159.
112. Pal, *Nepal: Where the Gods Are Young*, 53–56, 80–81, plates 36, 38, 39, 40.
113. Rawson, *The Art of Tantra*, 28–29.
114. Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, 102–3, 107.
115. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 172.
116. Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, 30–31.
117. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 170.
118. Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, 150–51.
119. *Ibid.*, 122–25.
120. *Ibid.*, 128–29.
121. Pal, *Nepal: Where the Gods Are Young*, 46 and 78 (plate 28); 45 and 77 (plate 27).

QUEENS, SAINTS, COURTESANS

Brother, you've come
 Drawn by the beauty
 Of these billowing breasts,
 This brimming youth.
 I'm no woman, brother, no whore.
 Every time you've looked at me,
 Who have you taken me for?
 All men other than Chenna Mallikarjuna
 Are faces to be shunned, see, brother.

Akkamahadevi, twelfth century¹

ROYAL DHARMA, GENDER, AND CASTE (SEVENTH TO EIGHTEENTH CENTURY)

Striking contrasts form the warp and woof of India's historical tapestry. Luminous ideals of a Devi and humanism thrived amidst somber social hierarchies, tolerance and cultural fusions rubbed shoulders with conservative patriarchy. These social tensions increased after the seventh century when regional kings (rajyas) competed for martial glory and women escaped from moving armies into domestic seclusion. However, guided by benign ideas of royal *dharma*, *rajyas* also constructed dams and reservoirs and promoted the arts. In north India, they included the Palas and Senas of Bengal (eighth to eleventh century) and Bhoja Paramara of Malwa (1000 CE) who composed books on medicine.² Rajendra Chola (d. 1044) deployed a navy to protect Tamil merchants in Sumatra, while his dynasty fostered village councils, dug irrigation tanks, built temples to "royalized gods."³ Chola shrines reinforced royal "ritual sovereignty," redistributed wealth, and brought peripheral groups under the Sanskritic umbrella.⁴ Chalukya queens held administrative posts and were philanthropists. However, India's semi-feudal economy excluded most women and lower castes from the centers of learning, while relying on female domestic labor, and on *shudras* as sanitation, cremation, and leather workers. *Shudra* women bore the twin burdens of gender and caste inferiority.⁵

Women were pawns in dynastic competitions. In north India, a heroic *kshatriya* ethic demanded a commensurate female honor code requiring seclusion and vows of chaste fealty to the husband as lord, rendering such a wife into a *pativrata*. These attitudes intensified during political confrontations with Muslims, viz., Arabs in Sind (eighth century); Turkish-Afghan sultanates in Delhi, Deccan, Gujarat, Bengal (thirteenth to sixteenth century); and the Mughal empire (1526–1857). Female spousal fealty served as the moral linchpin to reassert ethnic identity and to safeguard the homeland. Rajput society ardently adopted an archaic Indian and Central Asian custom requiring the “true wife” (*sati*) to immolate herself on her husband’s funeral pyre, the penultimate sacrifice being the mass suicidal conflagration (*jauhar*) of palace women eluding capture after a lost battle.⁶ *Sati* immolation has festered like a canker in India, erupting during political and economic crises.

Despite such violence, other women agents mediated some of the extraordinary cultural fusions of this period. Revolutionary devotional (*bhakti*) saints stirred social conscience by challenging gender and caste hierarchies. Although women and low-caste *bhakti* saints could not completely overturn the edifice of elite power, they succeeded in mapping out a route to spiritual freedom, as their hymns were powerful pleas for justice. Art, literature, and inscriptions provide evidence of philanthropic queens and of women saints, writers, courtesans, musician-dancers, farmers, weavers, spies, temple and court servants. As women were instrumental in forging radical social agenda, they cannot be regarded simply as victims of patriarchy. This chapter focuses on medieval Hindu women, taking into account the presence of Islam in India.

WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Clothing

Although classical Hindu lawgivers laid emphasis upon familial duties, women moved about freely in public in fields, markets, temples, and courts. Loose, unrestrictive clothing enabled women and men to work both indoors and outside in the tropical climate. Classical female clothing consisted of an unstitched length of cloth (*lungi*), sometimes pleated in the front, tied at the waist and extending to the ankles. A loose shawl covering the bosom after puberty was considered decorous in many regions of South Asia. Occasionally, the unstitched cloth was a long garment (*sari*) whose upper end (*palav*) was draped over bosom and shoulders. Men wore a *dhoti*, sometimes long enough to be pleated in front or merely a short loincloth for the poor. Climate, region, culture, and work decided the length and styles of the women’s *sari*. In the colder northwest, Gandhara sculptures show women in warm, heavy drapery (250 CE) that were influenced by Graeco-Bactrian styles.

A *devi* icon from Hariti, Punjab (100 CE) has a *sakachcha sari* with front pleats pulled between the legs and tucked in the back. Conducive to horse riding and other movement, the *sakachcha sari* was popular in the Deccan.⁷

The veil is absent in pre-Islamic Indian sculptures such as Buddhist *yakshis* from Didarganj (250 BCE) and Bharhut (200 BCE) and a Hindu *devi* icon from Ahichchatra (ca. fifth century) whose uncovered head is adorned with jewels. However, after the Huna invasions of north India (ca. sixth century), a new matronly decorum appears in a gray schist Skandamata Devi from Tanesara-Mahadeva where the *sari* is draped over the head. In contrast, southern sculptures (seventh century) depict bareheaded goddess like Durga at Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu, and dancing *sapta matrikas* at Aihole, Karnataka.⁸ With a growing Turkish Muslim presence in north India in the eleventh century, Hindu women of Punjab and Kashmir used the Indian shawl over the bosom and shoulders (*odini/dupatta*) to partially cover the face, while adopting baggy Turkish pyjamas (*shalvar*) and a long tunic (*kameez/kurta*). The *shalvar-kameez* provided warmth and decorum, and facilitated riding horses and field work. Later Rajput and Mughal paintings (sixteenth to seventeenth century) depict Hindu women in long ruffled skirts, tight bodices, with the *dupatta* over the bosom, but not the face. Muslim women appear in long shifts, and the veil over the head and face (*hijab*—Arabic; *pardah*—Persian).

Some classical sculptures depict women who appear nude above the waist. However, this was not a realistic depiction of clothing styles, but probably an artistic device to highlight the bosom, which Indians regard as the essence of femininity. A careful examination often reveals the faint lines of a thin cotton shawl and a bodice, revealing as much about India's superfine textiles as it does about its aesthetic norms.⁹ Fine muslin cloth also appears in the thinly etched shawl of male figures such as in a seated Buddha icon from Mathura (fourth century CE). In the colder northern regions, teenaged girls and women covered the bosom with a cloth shawl and a tunic in the medieval era.

Due to intense tropical heat, some Adivasi and south Indian women dispensed with the upper bodice, wound the *sari's* upper end (*palav*) tightly across the bosom, leaving the arms free for forest and field labor. Some Kerala women were bare breasted, until made self-conscious by visiting West Asian Muslim and Christian Europeans who commented that both genders wore little on the upper body. Clad from head to toe, Europeans did not feel squeamish about portraying female nudity in art. However, they attributed sparse Indian upper body clothing to heathen moral laxity, and not to the tropical climate. In 1293, Marco Polo remarked satirically that the king and his court were adorned in pearls and gold necklaces, but wore just "a piece of fine cloth," and made this exaggerated comment:

... everyone goes naked! For decency only do they wear a scrap of cloth; and so it is with rich and poor, aye, and with the King himself.¹⁰

An exception was Ibn Batuta (1333–45), an African Muslim scholar who did not pass moral judgments when describing women's clothes in Hanaur (Onur) in southwestern India:

The women of all the coastal districts do not wear stitched cloths, but only un-sewn garments. They tie one end of the cloth round their waist and drape the rest over the head and chest. They are beautiful and chaste; each of them wears a ring of gold in her nose.¹¹

Indian culture eulogized the matronly breast in sacred and secular art. In south India where female decorum was manifested in behavior, rather than in clothes, bare breasts were not regarded as exhibitionist. Even after embracing Islam, some southern women did not adopt the *hijab* veil or the cumbersome full cloak. Ibn Batuta noted that Maldivian women wore Muslim tunics merely to impress foreign visitors, despite discomfort and awkwardness:

The women of these isles do not cover their heads, not even the queen. They comb their hair and gather it on one side. Most of them wear only one cloth which covers them from the navel downwards; the rest of the body remains bare. It is in this dress that they walk about in the bazaars and elsewhere . . . Some women wear, in addition to the cloth, a chemise with short and broad sleeves. I had some girls who dressed like the inhabitants of Delhi. They covered their heads, but this rather disfigured than adorned them, as they were not used to it.¹²

Living Spaces

Despite the focus on upper-class female domesticity in classical dramas, women freely visited public areas like the temple and market, especially in south India. Working women did not have the luxury of private rooms, nor were they afraid to be seen by men. After Muslim kingdoms were formed in north India, elite Hindus often adopted their customs of *pardah* and separate living quarters for women (*zenana*). In large households, women's rooms were often adjacent to a central courtyard where the family and close friends congregated, and were waited upon by trusted servants. Family men thus brought the outside world to the attention of their women. During the numerous male wars of this era, aristocratic Hindu and Muslim women studied, prayed, wrote, birthed and raised children, sewed, painted, sang, and played instruments in luxurious confinement. While some queens planned diplomatic maneuvers, other women negotiated with household authority figures like the mother-in-law who was a common denominator in the lives of Hindu and Muslim women.

Female reproduction and agricultural productivity are clearly connected in Indian cultures. Rural women not only birth, feed, and tend to children

and the aged at home, but they sow, weed, harvest, husk grains; provide fodder to draft animals; gather firewood; draw water from rivers and wells; repair canals and houses. Men plow and attend to market affairs, but without women, the farms would be handicapped. Clothing is therefore practical and suited to the climate. Southern women are often bare breasted when toiling in subtropical fields, while northern women are shielded by thicker, voluminous clothes. The restricted space within huts and small houses makes gender segregation less practical, and families generally meet in a central courtyard or verandah. Hindu and Muslim patriarchs define the broad rules of family conduct, but matriarchs supervise the daily affairs of the household.¹³

Hindu Ranis

Regents and Administrators

Several Indian queens (ranis) ruled as dowagers. A particularly vibrant tradition of female governance and philanthropy existed south of the river Narmada as early as 275 BCE, when an Ikshvaku rani financed a Buddhist *stupa* in the Deccan.¹⁴ In northern India, Guptan coins (310 CE) reveal that emperor Chandra Gupta I ruled jointly with his queen Kumaradevi of the powerful Lichchhavi clan of Bihar. Their descendent Prabhavati, daughter of Chandra Gupta II and his queen Kuberanaga, served as regent for her two minor sons for 15 years after the death of her husband, the Vakataka king of western India. The Ajanta cave frescoes are monuments to Vakataka tolerance, prosperity, and cultural innovation.¹⁵

Royal and aristocratic women were well educated. Chalukya, Rashtrakuta, Pallava, Chola, and Hoysala ranis in south India managed large properties, assumed public office, administered districts, and served as benefactors of temples. Although the male dramatist Bilhana portrayed Chalukya women as docile in his play *Vikramanka-deva-charita* (eighth century), inscriptions reveal that Rani Vijayabhattacharika (seventh century) governed a large region near Mumbai and issued an important charter in her fifth regnant year.¹⁶ Pallava inscriptions show that Rani Rangapataka (seventh century) financed and supervised the building of Kanchipuram's Kailasanatha temple.¹⁷ Rashtrakuta rani Silamahadevi (eighth century) bore the titles Paramesvari (World Ruler) and Paramabhattacharika (Ritual Sovereign), issued land grants with coruler and husband Dhruva. Rashtrakuta princess Revakanammadi (ninth century) governed a district. Chief Chalukya queen Maliladevi (ninth century) governed a large province, and second rani Ketaladevi governed a *brahman* village. Chalukya rani Akkadevi (eleventh century) governed regions of her brother's kingdom. Hoysala Bammaladevi (twelfth century) ruled several districts of her husband's realm.¹⁸

Dynastic marriages resulted in cultural exchanges, as brides often brought artists and writers in their entourage to their new home. This was the case

when princess Gauri of the Rajput Rathaur clan married a Chalukya prince of Karnataka (tenth century). When two Pallava sisters became co-wives of Vikramaditya Chalukya II (eighth century), the architectural innovations of their Tamil masons shaped the Virupaksha and Mallikarjuna temples in Karnataka.¹⁹ On the negative side, some Dravidian queens adopted the Rajput *kshatriya* custom of *sati* to strengthen the dynasty's claims to Hindu royal power. For example, Chera (Kerala) princess Vanavan Mahadevi became a *sati* on the death of her Tamil husband Sundara Chola, although his second Chera queen outlived him by 16 years.²⁰

The Graeco-Bactrian ambassador Megasthenes (ca. 300 BCE) was the first to take note of Dravidian matriliney in south India. Mixing fact with legend, Megasthenes noted correctly that "The Pandaeon nation is governed by females," but he imagined that the first queen was a "daughter of Hercules."²¹ A tradition of female authority also prevailed in Kerala whose rulers inherited from the maternal uncle due to a system of avuncular matriliney (*marumakkatyam*). Travancore queens were regents for underage sons, but few directly inherited the throne. Despite this restriction, benign regents like ranis Lakshmi Bai (1810–15) and Parvati Bai (1815–29) helped to introduce modern education. *Marumakkatyam* also prevails in Malabar among the Nayar caste who follow matrilineal inheritance rights. Vestiges of this Dravidian custom also linger across India in the honor and responsibility given to maternal uncles.

There were dowager regents like Rani Katyayani of Kalinga in Orissa in early India. After the deaths of her husband Lalitabharana-deva and son, Katyayani became sovereign until her grandson's birth.²² However, few queens could successfully overcome rebellious nobles who often overthrew them. Sultana Raziya of Delhi (1236–40) was her father's chosen heir, but she was killed after a few short years. Two Hindu queens who remained in power despite opposition were Didda of Kashmir (tenth century) and Rudrama-devi of the Kakatiya dynasty of Andhra (1259–95).²³ Didda's father Simharaja and grandfather Bhima Saahi were Lohara chiefs of Poonch, and she became queen upon her marriage to king Ksemagupta (950–58). After his death, Didda became regent, using her political acumen to control conniving nobles and *brahman* ministers. Her independent views on gender and caste led to the appointment of a tribal named Tunga as her advisor. Although this stirred resentment in the elite clique, Didda remained sovereign for 23 years (980–1003).²⁴

Rudrama-devi ruled over the Telugu Kakatiya kingdom (1259–95) whose feudal system laid the foundation for the Vijayanagar Empire (1336–1556). The capital of Warangal, near modern Hyderabad, had a central palace and fort from which arterial roads radiated to a set of defensive, circular forts. The kingdom's wealth of diamonds, gold, silk and cotton cloth brought foreign ships to the port of Motupalli.²⁵ It is unclear whether Rudrama-devi inherited the throne from her father Ganapathi-deva;²⁶ or if she was born

a Yadava princess from Maharashtra before her marriage to her Kakatiya husband.²⁷ Marco Polo the Venetian described her as a regent (1295–1323) for her grandson Pratapa Rudra and praised her thus:

This was formerly under the rule of a King, and since his death, some forty years past, it has been under his Queen, a lady of much discretion, who for the great love she bore him never would marry another husband. And I can assure you that during all that space of forty years she had administered her realm as well as ever her husband did, or better; and she was a lover of justice, of equity, and of peace, she was more beloved of those of her kingdom than ever was Lady or Lord of theirs before. The people are Idolaters, and are tributary to nobody. They live on flesh, and rice, and milk.²⁸

Another intriguing figure is the Jaina queen Abakka Devi (d. 1598) whose life and legends are enacted in *yakshagana* folk theater of Karnataka. Abakka Devi belonged to the Chauta matrilineal dynasty of Ullal, a small port-principality on the Arabian Sea. Like Calicut and Cochin, Ullal had grown wealthy through trade in pepper and spices with Arab and Indian Muslims. The Tulu-speaking population of Jaina, Hindu, and Muslim merchants lived amicably, but the fortunes of small port-states were altered completely when the Portuguese captured Goa (sixteenth century). Driven by mercantile and religious animosity for Muslims, the Portuguese converted locals to Christianity, wooed Hindu Vijayanagar as a trade ally, and repeatedly invaded Ullal which refused to pay them tribute.

The legends about Abakka Devi as an “abhaya rani” (Fearless Queen) indicate that she was seriously wounded in battle against the Portuguese in 1581 and died fighting in 1598. However, it is unclear whether a single queen ruled for 54 years, or whether the narratives of a mother and her two daughters coalesced into a grand myth. The real persona is described by the Italian visitor Pietro della Valle (1586–1652) as an impressive dignified queen of middle age, stout but agile, dressed simply without jewels in a *sari* and armor. Although the dynasty was Jaina, Abakka Devi’s uncle Tirumala Raya (d. 1544) educated her in diplomatic and military techniques. A political marriage with Lakshappa of the Banga dynasty of Mangalore did not result in an ally, and they were probably estranged. Abakka Devi sealed a defense pact with the Zamorin of Calicut who also refused to pay taxes to the Portuguese. Legend states that the Hindu Zamorin and his Mappila Muslim soldiers shielded a wounded Abakka Devi in a mosque during a devastating Portuguese naval attack in 1581. Another describes the death of the last Abakka Devi in 1598 in Ullal fort, after resisting Portuguese land and naval forces sent by Viceroy d’Noronha. Abakka Devi’s martial bravery was later emulated by the Maratha rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi who died fighting British forces in the Revolt of 1857.

Property and Philanthropy

Many inscriptions attest to the proverbial generosity of Tamil Chola queens. In addition, portrait sculptures of such queens proclaimed the grandeur of their dynasty in various shrines, like the Nagesvara temple at Kumbakonam (ca. 886 CE).²⁹ The first inscription (941) states that the pious Sembian Mahadevi first donated jewels and gold as a princess, continued her philanthropy as chief queen of Gandaraditya, and remained a benefactor as a widow until her death in 1006. She commissioned important temples, some of whose bronze icons of Devi (969) were patterned after her slim, royal figure. In 972, she established a flower garden in memory of her husband at Koneri-rajapuram temple. To her generosity are attributed several sculptural niches at Kailasanatha temple, Kanchipuram (980), a school for Vedic study, and a village in her name for *brahmans*. Inscriptions detail her donations of food, incense, sandal paste, lamps; wages for gardeners, garland makers, potters, conch blowers, musicians, reciters of Shiva's hymns, even accountants of temples. Her grandnephew Rajendra I and his queen Lokamahadevi arranged for his noble ancestor's annual birthday with rituals to icons of her favored deities at Nallur temple, and had garlands placed on images of Sembian Mahadevi. Lokamahadevi is also described as a benefactor as she installed 63 bronze icons in two major temples (1012 CE).³⁰

In the tenth century, portrait bronzes were cast of Chola princess Kundavai Pirattiyar who ruled jointly with her younger brother Rajaraja I (985–1016). Rajaraja I was the first great ruler of this dynasty, relied on his sister's political advice, and named his daughter after her. Inscriptions inform us that after her marriage to a feudatory prince, Kundavai Pirattiyar installed her mother's portrait bronze icon in a temple and made munificent donations of gold to Rajaraja's great temple at Thanjavur.³¹ Kundavai the younger is believed to have assisted her father in negotiating treaties, including her own marriage treaty with a Chalukya prince. The Chola and Chalukya lines converged through this marriage, and Kundavai's grandson Kulottunga I (1070–1122) inherited both thrones.³² Chola women were key players in their dynastic history, and several queens are remembered in inscriptions for their generosity. For example, Kundavai's niece Arulmozhi-nangaiyar presented a pearl umbrella to a temple at Tirumalavadi. Kulottunga's chief queen Madhurantaki was described as "mistress of the whole world," and her successor queen Tyagavalli as "mistress of the seven worlds."³³

The merits of educational philanthropy were taken seriously by southern royalty. Thus, despite the *Manu Smṛiti's* strictures on women's property rights, records show that Tamil and Kerala princesses financed temple schools, and even Christian schools in the nineteenth century. This tradition emanated from two empowering sources, the first being the Dravidian belief in inherent female power, so that wise women were honored. The second derived from sage Jaimini's writings (ca. second century BCE), which preceded the *Manu*

Smriti. Jaimini argued that despite female social inferiority, as both genders shared identical religious aspirations, women must be allowed to make ritual offerings. It followed that women must inherit property to make these offerings, even if they were nonaristocratic women. This explains the thirteenth-century Chola inscription of a wealthy landowner in Thanjavur who left his wife his entire estate, including money, jewels, and serfs.³⁴

Women, War, and *Sati*

When waging war against Hindu or Muslim enemies, medieval Hindu kings often invoked Durga to justify their actions. While soldiers died in face-to-face combat, women were raped or killed when villages were pillaged. Victorious kings also held aristocratic women hostage and cemented peace treaties with royal marriages.³⁵ Widows were often compelled to become *satis* or coerced into a fearful marriage born of the victor's lust. Thus in Sind in 650 CE, the *brahman* minister Chach defeated the king and ascended his throne, but he first forced the royal widow into marriage.³⁶ Vishnuvardhana IV of the Chalukyas of Andhra (ca. 780 CE) gave his daughter Silamahadevi as a peace offering to king Dhruva of the Rashtrakuta dynasty. After a successful invasion of the Pallava capital (750 CE), Rashtrakuta king Dantidurga offered his daughter Reva as a peace offering to his enemy Nandivarman. A Chalukya inscription accused Rajendra Chola who invaded Bijapur (1006 CE) of having "plundered the entire country, and slaughtering women, children and Brahmins."³⁷ Rashtrakuta Krishna II (ca. 910 CE) defended his grandson's succession rights through his Chola mother by invading her natal home. After defeating Rajaraja Chola III (1225 CE), Sundara Pandya captured his chief queen.³⁸

Prior to the ninth century, Hindu law books (*dharma shastras*) favored restoring a raped woman to her family after ritual penances, and the child of the union was given up in adoption. However, the frequency of medieval wars meant that raped women were often abandoned, and women's position became precarious in war.³⁹ Upper-caste rules became more stringent on female behavior, but genetic and cultural fusions ensued due to rape, as well as the settlement of some soldiers with local wives.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, women sought safety in domestic duties like rearing children and nursing the elderly.

Sati: Early Inscriptions

The earliest reference to a widow's suicide upon her husband's death (*sahagama*) appears in the *Rig Veda* (RV 10.18) whose bard urged a grieving widow to arise from the pyre and return to the world. *Sati* was also not advocated by *Manu Smriti* (100 BCE–200 CE), the most influential law manual (*shastra*) for middle- and high-caste Hindus. Instead, the authors recommended that the widow be celibate and abstinent like the male hermit (*sadhu*):

When her husband is dead she may fast as much as she likes, (living) on auspicious flowers, roots, and fruits, but she should not even mention the name of another man. She should be long-suffering until death, self-restrained, and chaste, striving (to fulfill) the unsurpassed duty of women who have one husband.

MS 5.157–158⁴¹

The first textual reference to *sati* occurs in Megasthenes' *Indika* (300 BCE). As this is in the context of Greek and Central Asian military occupation of Gandhara, *sati*'s purpose was probably political, rather than theological.⁴² The custom may have festered quietly during minor wars, but it erupted dramatically when Hunas attacked the Guptan Empire, as seen in a pillar at Eran, Madhya Pradesh (510 CE). This inscription eulogizes prince Bhanu Gupta for valor, and his wife as a meritorious *sati*:

Hither came Bhanu Gupta, the bravest man on earth,
 A great king, a hero bold as Arjuna;
 And hither Goparaja followed him,
 As a friend follows a friend.
 And he fought a great and famous battle,
 And passed to heaven, a god amongst chieftans,
 His wife, loyal and loving, beloved and fair,
 Followed close behind him into the flames.⁴³

Dravidian Tamil Texts: Widows and Death

A Central Asian origin for *sati* is suggested by the fact that it is most common among Rajputs as descendants of Central Asians. However, Tamil texts from the classical Sangam era also refer to suicides by royal widows and the followers of a brave, deceased king. This custom may have stemmed from the Tamil belief in a mystical power (*ananku*) that reposed benignly in virgins and matrons of chaste honor (*karppu*), but could wreak havoc through the latent sexuality of the inauspicious widow.⁴⁴ The poetic anthology *Purananuru* (ca. 100 BCE–100 CE) contains references to widows with tonsured heads (*Pur.* 280), drab attire devoid of flowers and jewels (*Pur.* 224), abstemious diets, stone beds. Some widows, including queens and their retinue, chose to avoid perpetual mourning through suicide. Yet in one verse (*Pur.* 246), the dowager of king Bhuta Pandya advised her followers not to die, as she would live on as their sovereign guide:

Listen, you good men!
 I am no woman to suffer austerities
 Eating for food
velai leaves

boiled with tamarind
 with white sesame paste
 and a squeezed ball of rice
 untouched by fragrant ghee.⁴⁵

A royal widow suicide is also described in the Tamil epic *Shilappadikaram* (fifth century), when the Pandya queen of Madurai declares that a loyal wife could not survive her husband (II.19.14–15).⁴⁶ As wars required valor even in women, Dravidian belief in the brave chaste wife with *ananku* coalesced with the Indo-Aryan heroic ideal of the avowed wife (*pativrata*).

Epics and *Puranas*: Fire Ordeals

Secondary Sanskrit texts in the classical era reaffirmed the *pativrata*'s power as a true wife (*sati*) to confer good or evil. The *Vayu Purana* thus related the myth of Parvati-Sati who protested her father's inhospitality to her husband Shiva by leaping into the fire as his *wife (not widow)*. In the medieval context of regional wars that reduced auspicious wives into blighted widows, society sought scriptural validation for a custom that salvaged family honor, while eluding the enemy. This required distorting the *Vayu Purana* myth, since Parvati-Sati had entered the flames in Shiva's lifetime, not after his death.⁴⁷ A final chapter ("Uttara Kanda") was now added to Valmiki's original *Ramayana*, which had ended with Rama-Sita's coronation, after her rescue from Sri Lanka. *She* proved her chastity to the public in a fire ordeal, *he* proved that he placed public welfare above private happiness. However, Uttara Kanda's new narrative reopened the debate on Sita's purity. To ease his subjects' doubts, Rama banished pregnant Sita into forest exile, where she delivered their twin sons. Although Rama later beseeched her to return, Sita disappeared into Mother Earth. Valorous medieval kings emulated Rama as a martial hero and prized chaste Sita *devi*, but society clearly felt mortal women were sexually vulnerable.

Medieval *bhakti* poets composed *Ramayanas* in regional languages, and they praised Sita's chastity and tried to explain a cruel flaw in an otherwise perfect god.⁴⁸ Kampan's lyrical Tamil *Iramavataram* (ninth century) ends happily with the coronation.⁴⁹ However, in an earlier chapter, Kampan explained that Rama's sharp words to Sita stemmed not from belief in her guilt, but to reiterate the *bhakti* premise that painful separation preceded joyful union as *moksha*.⁵⁰ In the Hindi *Ramcharitramanas* (sixteenth century), Tulsidas dwelt upon Rama's heroic masculinity and Sita's docile chastity. In contrast, lower-caste woman poet Atukuri Molla's *Molla Ramayanam* (sixteenth century) described Sita's coming of age, her choice of a husband, and her sorrow in captivity in mellifluous, simple Telugu accessible to all.⁵¹ Yet, Molla apologized that she had "no rules of

combination, no large vocabulary,” dedicated her epic to Rama, and claimed she was guided solely by “the grace of the famous Lord.”⁵²

Sati Stones and Group Identity in North India

Bana, the poet laureate at Harsha’s court in Thaneshwar (seventh century) near Delhi, deprecated *sati*, but widow burnings became a marked feature of Rajput society, especially after the rise of the Pratihara dynasty (eighth century).⁵³ Rajput legends exalt their Hindu origins, *kshatriya* lineage, and *sati* mothers (*sati matas*) some of whom have great auspicious power (*saubhagya*) and are revered as deities (*kuldevis*).⁵⁴ After Muslim rule in north India (1211 CE), Rajputs adopted the Persian *pardah* to seclude women, due to common attitudes about female chastity.⁵⁵ While the widow had to emerge from *pardah* to immolate herself, the honor that accrued to her as a virtuous *sati mata* negated the dishonor of this public appearance. In Rajasthan and Gujarat, valiant queens were honored for mass suicidal conflagrations (*jauhar*) after a lost battle, but others lived on to defend the kingdom. As *sati* signified Hindu female valor and purity, and also Hindu identity, it coincided with anti-Muslim rhetoric. The legend of the valiant Rajput king Prithviraj Chauhan of Mewar (twelfth century) is related in Chand Bardai’s Hindi epic, *Prithviraj-raisa*. The play describes the romantic elopement of Prithviraj and princess Samyukta in Kanauj. She then exhorts her husband to resist the Turks and promises to become a *sati* if he died:

Sun of the Chauhans! . . . Is life immortal? Therefore, draw your sword, smite down the foes of Hindustan; think not of self—The garment of this life is frayed and worn. Think not of me—we two shall be as one. Hereafter and forever—go, my king!⁵⁶

Although Samyukta chose to be a *sati mata*, her companion Kurmadevi stayed alive after her husband’s death. Kurmadevi governed and defended Mewar against Qutb-ud-din Aybak, the first Turkish sultan at Delhi (d. 1211).⁵⁷ Legends also circulated about the capture of Kamala-devi of Gujarat by sultan Ala-uddin Khalji (fourteenth century). Ala-uddin’s lust for Rajput queens is most vividly recounted in the story of Padmini of Mewar’s *jauhar*. Padmini first tricked Ala-uddin into believing she would come, but instead sent a palanquin of armed Rajputs. When the Rajput women learned that the battle was lost, but were still unsure if their husbands had survived, Padmini and her palace women committed *jauhar*.⁵⁸ However, not all Hindu queens killed themselves out of fear of capture in a lost battle. When Rana Sangha of Chittor was killed by Babur the Mughal in 1527, his ranis Karnavati and Jawahirbai successfully defended their fort. They died in a later battle against sultan Bahadur Shah of Gujarat.⁵⁹

Female sacrifice served to assert Hindu-Indian identity during geopolitical contentions with Muslims and Europeans. With the spread of Muslim rule in the Deccan (fourteenth century), Hindus erected memorial stones to heroes (*virgal*) and *satis*, the latter engraved with an upraised woman's arm with bangles symbolizing her marriage in perpetuity to a warrior husband.⁶⁰ Akbar the Mughal emperor (sixteenth century) banned *sati*. However, the colonial wars of the eighteenth century witnessed its eruption in Bengal, until Viceroy Bentinck made it illegal in 1829 in British India.

Sati in South India

Sangam Tamil texts do not describe the burning of widows as *satis*. However, Dravidian society erected memorial stones (*natukkal*) to kings and chaste aristocratic women whom they called "*satis*" in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka (tenth to eleventh century). Tamil Chola inscriptions at Tiruvalankadu laud two queens who actually ascended their husbands' pyres as *satis*, but whose families were unhappy over their sacrifice. This indicates that *sati* burnings were alien to southern culture, and that the women were guided by personal sentiment, rather than by social compulsion. The first Chola queen was Ganga-Mahadevi-yar (ca. 907) who first donated sums for the perpetual lighting of a temple lamp before she ascended the pyre of her husband, prince Ilangovelar. The second queen *sati* was Vanavan-Mahadevi, chief wife of Parantaka II Sundara Chola, and mother of the imperial Rajaraja I (985–1016). Rajaraja greatly respected his mother, as did Kundavai Pirattiyar, his coruler and elder sister. Also from the tenth century are three Karnataka inscriptions, which indicate that royal *sati* was becoming popular. The first describes the *sati* suicide of a princess Dekabbe (1068) after her husband died in a wrestling match. Her parents, the chieftan of Nunganad and his queen, tried unsuccessfully to dissuade Dekabbe. Wealthy women who became *satis* are also mentioned in Karnataka inscriptions. One widow pleaded to be allowed to die as she feared more powerful co-wives would enslave her. While most south Indian widows remained alive, they were shunned as inauspicious blights, often eking out a marginal existence with relatives. Moreover, as polygamy was common among aristocrats, a favorite wife who was overly dependent upon her husband may have preferred dying as a *sati* to living with abusive co-wives.⁶¹

In the classical mergers of Dravidian and Sanskritic societies, Tamil ideas on the *ananku* of chaste women like Kannaki fused with a *kshatriya pativ-rata* like Sita. In the medieval fusions of Hindu and Perso-Islamic cultures, women's bodies served to assert group identity. Hindu royalty ensured their women's chastity through the Islamic *pardah*, but asserted Hindu identity through *sati*. Kampiladeva of the Telugu Kakatiya dynasty (fourteenth century) advised his women and ministers to die on his pyre, rather than be

captured by sultan Mohammad bin Tughlaq.⁶² In 1422 the Venetian visitor Niccolo da Conti noted that 3,000 harem women and officials pledged suicide after the death of Vijayanagar emperor Devaraya I.⁶³

Political uncertainty fueled *sati* immolation even in regions where it was not originally practiced. The Marathas fostered a martial ethic in women and men, so that *sati* was not initially the normative practice. Thus, dowager rani Tarabai fought beside her son emperor Shivaji (1627–80) against the Mughals; and Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi died on the battlefield in the 1857 Revolt against British rule.⁶⁴ Yet in the colonial wars of the eighteenth century, incidences of *sati* escalated even among *brahmins*. This led the *brahman* Peshwa ruler Baji Rao (d. 1720) and others to forbid *sati*, as most law manuals (*shastras*) like *Manu Smriti* did not sanction the burning of *brahman* widows.⁶⁵ In Bengal, where *brahmins* followed the liberal Dayabhaga law code that allowed the widow to inherit her husband's property, disinherited male relatives conspired with priests to invoke spurious scriptures to justify con-cremation. Here, male rapaciousness, rather than religious belief, was a major cause behind *sati*. Twentieth-century Indian nationalist Sarojini Naidu romanticized *sati*, and Rani Padmini's *jauhar* as a noble feminine sacrifice against injustice.⁶⁶

WOMEN'S SECULAR WRITINGS

Encouraged by Chola and Pala rulers (eighth to thirteenth century), Indian bankers and merchants flourished in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, Indian financiers mediated with Arabs in Malabar and in Sind. There is evidence that Indian women signed some foreign business contracts.⁶⁷ The Arab occupation of Sind also led to cultural exchanges, such as translations of Sanskrit texts on medicine and mathematics into Arabic, one being a work by the Hindu midwife Rusa.

The scholarly tradition of Aryabhata (fifth century) was emulated by later Indian mathematicians like Bhaskara Acharya (Karnataka, twelfth century), who wrote texts on trigonometry, astronomy, and arithmetic. His work *Lilavati* is particularly intriguing. When originally translated by T. N. Colebrook (nineteenth century), Western scholars assumed that the Sanskrit aphorisms were erotic metaphors for Bhaskara's mistress. Since then, however, it has been proposed that Bhaskara posed the mathematical problems in order to instruct his gifted, "fawn-eyed" daughter Lilavati, possibly when she was widowed. We know that other women of talent were taught in domestic privacy by family men in this era. However, questions remain as to the extent of Lilavati's computations in the text, and the exact reasons for masking her contributions under her father's name. *Lilavati* consists of 13 chapters in which Sanskrit aphorisms are used as metaphors for arithmetic and geometric formulae. Bhaskara compared *Lilavati* (Gracious One/Arithmetic) to a woman of high *jati* (i.e., "noble lineage," and also

“reduction of fractions to a common denominator”).⁶⁸ He posed problems of Lilavati in the manner seen in this verse:

Oh, Lilavati, intelligent girl, if you understand addition and subtraction, tell me the sum of the amounts 2, 5, 322, 193, 18, 10, and 100, as well as the remainder of those when subtracted from 10,000.

*Lilavati*⁶⁹

T. N. Colebrook’s translations throw light on why he erroneously assumed that the aphorisms were erotic symbols for Bhaskara’s mistress:

Whilst making love a necklace broke.
A row of pearls mislaid.
One sixth fell to the floor.
One fifth upon the bed.
The young woman saved one third of them.
One tenth were caught by her lover.
If six pearls remained upon the string
How many pearls were there altogether?

Lilavati 3.54

The classical Sanskrit *kavya* (poetic drama) continued to fascinate many in the medieval era. While official records praised women’s Sanskrit *kavyas*, few were considered superior to those by men, although female works in regional languages were acclaimed as exemplary. One of the rare women whose Sanskrit *kavya* was lauded was Shila (seventh century) who was compared favorably with her contemporary, the famous Bana of Harsha’s court in Kanauj near Delhi. This was probably intended as a compliment to Shila, as it was considered respectful to emulate an acclaimed artist. Another famous woman dramatist was Vijayanka or Vijjika at the court of Chalukya Pulakesin II (seventh century). In her play *Kaumudi-mahotsava*, Vijayanka called herself the “dark Saraswati,” perhaps due to her complexion.⁷⁰ Medieval critic Rajasekhara honored her by comparing her style with that of the genius Kalidasa (fifth century).⁷¹ Princess Gangadevi (fourteenth century) of Vijayanagar was praised for her Sanskrit epic poem, *Madhura Vijayam*. Gangadevi described her husband Kampana’s victory against Madurai’s sultan and his restoration of purloined icons to Hindu temples.⁷²

WOMEN, BHAKTI, AND CASTE

The medieval era witnessed an outburst of folk devotional fervor (*bhakti*) for Hindu divinities as an alternative to *brahmanical* rites. *Bhakti* saints (*bhaktas*, *sants*) were women and men from high and low castes who shed domestic comforts to wander as pilgrims to favored shrines. Their hymns

form a notable literary compendium in regional languages. Convinced that gender and rank were worldly illusions, the saints broke conventions on menstrual and caste pollution, inspired by the *Bhagavad Gita's* promise of salvation to all who loved God. The verses state:

Whoever offers me a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water with the devotion
of a pure heart, that I accept.

BG 9.26

Whoever takes refuge in me, women, vaishyas, and shudras, and even
those born in the womb of sin, they too will reach me, the highest goal.

BG 9.32⁷³

The *Ramayana's* "Forest Book" (RMY 3.74–75) also highlights this egalitarian message in an episode about the salvation of Sabari, a tribal woman ascetic. Knowing Rama was Vishnu incarnate, Sabari eagerly awaited Rama's visit to her hut, tasting fruit to verify their sweetness before offering them to Rama. Although these were doubly polluted by her low caste, Rama accepted Sabari's genuine gifts of *bhakti* and granted her *moksha*, whereupon the fulfilled ascetic ascended her funeral pyre. However, this act was not one of a *sati*, nor a fire ordeal such as Sita's that proved her chastity.⁷⁴ Later *bhakti* saint Mirabai (sixteenth century) retold Sabari's tale:

The Bhil woman tasted them, plum after plum,
and found one she could offer him.
What kind of genteel breeding was this?
and hers was no ravishing beauty,
Her family was poor, her caste quite low,
her clothes a matter of rags,
Yet Ram took that fruit that touched, spoiled fruit
for he knew that it stood for her love.
What sort of Veda could she have learned?
But quick as a flash she mounted a chariot
And sped to heaven to swing on a swing,
tied by love to God.
You are the Lord who cares for the fallen;
rescue whoever loves as she did:
Let Mira, your servant, safely cross over,
A cow herding Gokul girl.⁷⁵

Tamil *Bhakti*

Fervent Tamil mystics renewed conviction about *bhakti* in the fifth to twelfth century, and thus challenged society's feudal hierarchies. Twelve Vishnu saints (*azhvans*) and sixty-three Shiva saints (*nayanars*) drew upon

folk-Dravidian traditions of pilgrimages to sacred shrines and icons to appeal directly to God, thus bypassing priestly rituals.⁷⁶ Besides the Sanskrit *Gita*, Tamil saints were highly influenced by two classical Sangam texts. These were *Tiru-murukkarruppatai* (Guide to Murukkan's Shrines) on pilgrimage sites of this Tamil god and *Paripatal* (Holy Songs) describing the charms of Murukan and Krishna, the northern god.⁷⁷ The *azhvans* and *nayanars* visited Tamil temples, singing mesmeric hymns about Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi, convinced that complete surrender (*prapatti*) was necessary for divine grace (*arul*).

As Dravidian-Tamil culture accorded respect to women sages, it is not surprising that the first *nayanar* was the woman yogi Karaikkal Ammaiyar (ca. 550 CE) whose complex, but eloquent hymns begin the *Tirumurai*, the Shiva canon of 12 books. There are no records of the hymns of the two other women *nayanars*, queen Mangaiyyakkarisi and *shudra* musician Isai-jnani. The sole female *azhvar* was Andal (ninth century) whose masterpieces, *Tiruppavai* and *Nacchiyar Tirumozhi*, are central to the Tamil Vishnu canon, *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* (Four Thousand Scriptural Hymns). The canons are a rich storehouse of Tamil *bhakti* literature.

Sekkizhaar's *Periya Puranam* (thirteenth century), a hagiography of the *nayanars*, describes the brutal rejection of low-caste saints from temples and the divine intercessions granting them *moksha*. Thus, the meat offerings of tribal hunter Kannappa were rejected by a *brahman* priest until Shiva's eye bled tears for his devotee. Saint Nandan, a Dalit skinner of carcasses, was kept out of Chidambaram temple until a pathway miraculously cleared. After the thirteenth century, bronze icons of all 63 *nayanars*, irrespective of caste or gender, were placed near the inner sanctum of temples for veneration. Painted frescoes of the saints are also in Chitra Sabha, a shrine with a music hall erected by Nayaka rulers (seventeenth century) near Tenkasi, Tamil Nadu.

Saguni and Nirguni Bhakti in India

As the *bhakti* movement spread across the subcontinent, *bhaktas* composed hymns in other regional languages, drawing inspiration from oral local traditions, as well as Sanskrit texts. Their own legends describe their success in challenging social constructions of gender and caste.⁷⁸ The mystics believed implicitly in universalism and in the beatific experience. Two theological schools of *nirguni* and *saguni bhakti* advocated the *Upanishadic* goal of *moksha* as enlightened salvation, but differed on the relationship between cosmic Brahman and the individual Atman. Tamil saints and the Varkari saints of Maharashtra were lower-caste *saguni bhaktas* who worshiped Brahman as manifested in Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi. In north India, *saguni bhaktas* often belonged to the elite, but *nirguni sants* were largely lower-caste artisans and peasants. *Nirguni sants* like the woman Lalla of Kashmir (fourteenth century) and the male weaver Kabir (fifteenth century)

lived in regions dominated by Muslims. *Nirguni sants* exalted transcendent Brahman devoid of attributes, rejected iconic *puja*, meditated to attain enlightenment as *moksha*, and took part in group hymns (*bhajan*). *Nirguni sants* thus shared some common visions with working-class Muslim Sufi mystics and some Jinas.⁷⁹

Medieval *saguni bhaktas* believed that the individual Atman searched for union with Brahman who had all attributes, but was manifested in Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi to whose icons they did *puja* and sang *bhajans*. Women saints included Andal (ninth century), Akkamahadevi (twelfth century), Janabai (fourteenth century), Mirabai (sixteenth century). Some male saints were Chaitanya (b. 1486), Surdas, Tulsidas, Eknath (sixteenth century). Female and male saints visualized God through human relationships, seeing God as the divine lover (e.g., Vishnu for Andal; Shiva for Akkamahadevi); divine child (e.g., Krishna for Surdas); mother Devi (e.g., for Janabai and Eknath); and friend (e.g., Rama to Tulsidas).

Women's Ramayanas and Sitayanas

Atukuri Molla (Telugu)

Molla Ramayanam is a unique creative work by Atukuri Molla (sixteenth century), a gifted daughter of a humble artisan of south India. *Molla Ramayanam* is a mellifluous Telugu epic imbued with fervent *bhakti* for Rama, and it breaks free of classical Sanskrit conventions by adopting the ancient narrative style of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Molla's Virashaiva community of Shiva devotees rejected caste, and she obviously rose above the educational restrictions on lower-caste women. She was also probably inspired by earlier Dravidian-Tamil *bhaktas*, especially Tamil saint-poet Andal, as Molla lived during the reign of Krishna Deva Raya of the Vijayanagar Empire, who dramatized Andal's life in his play, *Amukta Malyada*.⁸⁰ Legend states that when the famous court poet Tenali Raman taunted Molla's village with ignorance, she composed *Molla Ramayanam* in five days. The charm of Molla's epic lies in its lucid, elegant Telugu poetry.⁸¹

Chandrabati (Bengali)

The search for the "indigenous" origins of female opposition to patriarchy led some modern Indian feminists to Chandrabati (ca. 1550), a woman writer in Bengal during the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605). Chandrabati composed three extraordinary compositions in varied genres, the first being a short Bengali *Ramayana* as a *bhakti* tribute to Vishnu. Taught by her scholarly, but impoverished father, Chandrabati asked for a private shrine for her prayers, since she was depressed over her rejection by a childhood sweetheart. Although the lover returned contrite, an embittered Chandrabati closed the temple doors against him, and

reputedly spent her life in worship, although she continued to write. Chandrabati composed the Bengali drama, *Dasyu Kenaram* (Kenaram the Dacoit), and her opus, *Sundari Malua*, a rare political work by a learned woman. *Sundari Malua* is an elegant poetic opera of 1,247 verses, a genre used to relate legends, but used by Chandrabati to protest against unjust taxes to emperor Akbar. A legacy from Turko-Afghan kings in the thirteenth century, the taxes were now collected by rapacious officials and landlords.⁸² Chandrabati described the imprisonment, rape, and abuse of women whose families could not pay the extortionate taxes, and the women's cruel rejection after returning home. Chandrabati made a subtle analogy between their sufferings and that of innocent Sita after returning from exile in Ravana's palace. She wrote poignantly:

A village elder said, "Taking this woman back
Will cost us rank and caste. For three long months
She lived within Muslim walls. The shame of it
Would shatter a tiger! Who can save a doe
Caught in the wild beast's claws? We can do
Nothing once chastity and caste are gone."⁸³

Oral Ramayanas and Sitayanas

The devotional route, or *bhakti marg*, especially appealed to women and low castes who were largely excluded from learning the *Vedas* in the medieval era. They thus took pleasure in creative, oral retellings of legends from the Sanskrit epics and *Puranas*. The *Ramayana* holds a special fascination for women due to its poignant narratives of Sita. Oral Ramayanas were thus sung by Telugu *brahman* and *shudra* women, with some notable differences.⁸⁴ The narratives of *brahman* women reflect their sharply defined gender roles. Those of working-class *shudras* like the Malas highlight the enormous caste chasm in gender attitudes. The first scholarly study refers to their songs as Sitayana, as the lens is turned away from the male heroic to feminine themes like marriage and childbirth. *Brahman* women's songs included more women characters, like a sister for Rama called Shanta, and women have their moral victories. Thus, Rama dies repenting his cruelty to Sita who attains fulfillment through her sons. *Shudra* women's songs reflect the heavy oppressiveness of caste over gender inequities. As Mala women are agriculturalists, their men share their domestic chores. They are also less preoccupied with household rituals and have fewer sexual inhibitions than high-caste women.⁸⁵

Some Famous Women Saints

The differences among the women saints included the choice of a deity and mode of *bhakti*; social rank and caste; status as married, single, or

widowed women; and legacies. The hymns of women visionaries stand on their own literary merit and have dignified *bhakti* canons in regional languages. The most extraordinary compositions are those of two early Tamil saints, Shiva yogi Karaikkal Ammaiyar (fifth century), and Andal (ninth century) whose songs to Vishnu are set to music and danced; Kannada yogi Akkamahadevi (twelfth century) who wrote searing hymns (*vacanas*) to Shiva; Marathi saints Muktabai (thirteenth century), Janabai (fourteenth century), Bahinabai (seventeenth century) who sang hymns (*abhangs*) to Krishna; Mirabai (sixteenth century) who delighted in reciting Krishna's names (*nama*) and forms (*rupa*), and whose hymns in Rajasthani, Avadhi Hindi, and Gujarati have been recorded extensively. These are discussed later in the chapter.

Unlike these famous composers, minor women *bhaktas* often left no written records, but sang about their experiences, retold or painted divine legends in ephemeral, household decorative art. Some female poems lie buried in the larger male corpus or have disappeared from mundane records. Some minor saints are revered for association with a preeminent male mystic like Chaitanya (sixteenth century) who founded the Gaudiya Vaishnava sect in Bengal. Thus, Sachi is revered not just for wisdom, but for being Chaitanya's mother; abstemious widow Sita Thakurani received disciples because she witnessed his birth; and his virtuous wife Vishnupriya is praised for initiating the *puja* of his icons.⁸⁶

Despite such diverse backgrounds, they were united by the *bhakti* route, which was ideally suited to female life in India. *Bhakti* could be practiced in palaces or huts, confined or noisy households, alone in forest hermitages, through *puja* or *yoga*. What they all shared was the belief that love of God superseded carnal and familial love, and many remained celibate in the midst of family life. Bengali washerwoman Rami (fifteenth century) was a *saguni bhakta* whose hymns laud Vishnu, but she enjoyed a relationship with Chandidas, a *brahman* who shared her yearning for God above their physical bond.⁸⁷ The Marathi Bahinabai suffered her husband's blows, then resolved philosophically to serve her spouse and thus attain knowledge of Krishna. She thus became a beacon for women *bhaktas* unable or unwilling to forsake their families like Gangasati (thirteenth century), a Gujarati *nirguni sant* who composed 40 hymns that are orally transmitted. Others flouted convention by remaining single or rejecting their lovers or husbands. Atukuri Molla was probably single, as she signed her natal village name Atukuri in *Molla Ramayanam*. Beautiful Akkamahadevi frightened predatory men because of her passion for Shiva. Mirabai was so besotted with Krishna that she refused conjugal relations with her Rajput prince.

Even lesser saints wished to shed physical desire to attain *moksha* as union with the Divine. This was true of Vishnu devotees like Hemalata the Bengali ascetic (seventeenth century) and the faithful Tamil wife

Kuresa (twelfth century).⁸⁸ It was also true of low-caste prostitutes like Sule Sankavva (twelfth century) whose Kannada hymns declare that she gave up her profession for love of Shiva.⁸⁹ The Marathi saint Kanhopatra (fourteenth to fifteenth century) declared her aversion to becoming a courtesan like her mother, and praised Krishna as her true mother.⁹⁰ Those who exchanged sexual desire for sublime love sometimes composed sensual or erotic *bhakti* poetry. Others trivialized the body, emotions, and gender identity that were transcended in the spiritual experience. Muktabai chided a male yogi for his false shame upon inadvertently seeing her nude while in her bath in this verse:

One is not ashamed to stare at
The niches in the wall
Do the cows grazing in the
Fields have any clothes!
I too am like the cows.
Why are you embarrassed at my sight?⁹¹

Both women and men saints expressed their desire to lose their personal identity in the divine union. Manikkavachakar, the Tamil male saint, yearned as much for Shiva as the virgin Andal desired Vishnu. As the saints flouted contemporary social conventions, gender role reversal and “gender-bending” were common. Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s ghastly yogic appearance foreshadowed so luminous a spiritual beauty that her former husband fell at her feet. The sex of the Vishnu saint Jangali of Bengal is unclear. A legend states that Jangali was a beautiful woman meditating amidst tigers in the forest, until the king tried to rape her, but Jangali was then transformed into a man. Yet, upon being questioned about her sex, she replied that she had never been a man. In another myth, Jangali is described as a male disciple of Krishna.⁹²

Karaikkal Ammaiyar (Tamil)

Karaikkal Ammaiyar (fifth century), or the Lady of Karaikkal, was a Tamil mystic devoted to Shiva, the dancing lord of Tiruvalankadu. As the first *nayanar*, Karaikkal Ammaiyar helped to usher in the *bhakti* movement with her male *azhvar* contemporary Pudam. Her hymns are the first *bhakti* compositions in the *prabandha* mode, later popularized by saints. Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s three long hymns are in the 11th *Tirumurai*, the canon of the Tamil Shaiva Siddhanta school. Her complex style reveals that this accomplished poet was familiar with Sangam secular poetry and early *bhakti* texts, *Tiru-murukkarruppatai* and *Paripatal*. Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s three hymns of 22 classical verses in *Mutta-tirup-patikankal*; *Tiru-irattai-manimalai*, 20 verses of two alternating styles; and *Arputat-tiru-vantati*, 101 verses in the *antati* genre, as a sonorous web of praises in which the last word of each verse is echoed in the first word of the next.⁹³

Karaikkal Ammaiyar was born Punitavati, and later married a *vaishya* merchant. This differs from the narrative about Andal who resisted an earthly marriage from love of Vishnu. The myth of Punitavati's transformation from chaste wife to yogi is recorded by Sekkizhaar in *Periya Puranam*. One day, Punitavati's husband handed her two mangoes received as gifts from a sage. Punitavati fed one to her husband at mealtime and the other to a hungry Shiva devotee. When her husband asked for the second fruit, she prayed to Shiva and magically produced more mangoes. Frightened by this display of magical power, her husband fled, and later remarried. Punitavati became a yogi whose severe austerities earned her the title of Karaikkal Ammaiyar. In a significant reversal of spousal roles, her husband prostrated humbly at her feet. The myth reaffirms the chaste wife's *ananku* and her evolution into a yogic renunciant. This echoes the earlier legend of Kannaki, the docile *pativrata* transformed into a fiery, demigoddess in the epic *Shilappadikaram* (ca. fourth century).

Karaikkal Ammaiyar sang of her joyful bondage to Shiva whose grace alone could free her from earthly *samsara* bondage, and she begged Shiva for the boon that she would always remember him. Sekkizhaar states that even Shiva respectfully addressed her as "Ammaiyar" or Mother when she received *moksha*. A thirteenth-century Chola bronze icon shows the ghoulish, yet gleeful yogi who described herself as a *pey* (ghost), and whom Sekkizhaar described as "a female wraith of shriveled breasts, swollen veins, protruding eye-balls, white teeth, sunken stomach, fiery red hair, two protruding fangs."⁹⁴ Wall frescoes in a modern shrine at Karaikkal depict the life of this venerable saint to whom young women offer mangoes even today.⁹⁵

Andal (Tamil)

Andal (ninth century) was the only woman Tamil Vishnu saint or *azhvar*. While many saints are revered, Andal is unique because she alone is venerated as goddess Lakshmi in her aspects of joy (Nila), auspiciousness (Sri), and prosperity (Bhu). Andal-Lakshmi's bronze icon (tenth century) is housed in a shrine within the Vishnu temple at Srivilliputtur. Andal's date is partly attested by her adoptive father Vishnu Chitta's visit to Srimara Srivallabhadeva Pandya (815–862 CE). Vishnu Chitta was a weaver of temple garlands, but he was also Periazhvar, the "elder mystic" who composed cradle hymns to the infant Krishna.⁹⁶

Incidents in Andal's life echo those of Sita in the *Ramayana*, and legend states that Lakshmi took birth as Andal as she wished to be the greatest devotee of Vishnu, whom Tamils call Tirumal. While Sita was discovered by her father Janaka in a furrow (*sita*) in the ground, Periazhvar discovered the infant Andal beside a *tulasi* (basil) bush. He named her Kodai for her magnificent hair, and she became known as Kodai-Andal. As a girl, she was

enchanted with his garlands for Vishnu-Tirumal, wore them in his absence, and peered at her reflection in a well. Upon noticing the strange fragrance in the garlands, Periazhvar chided her for desecrating the offerings to the deity. However, Tirumal appeared in a dream and informed Periazhvar that he desired Andal's used garlands. The father then realized that Andal was Lakshmi incarnate. Andal's obsession for Tirumal grew, and she refused to marry anyone else. The myth states that the 14-year-old Andal dreamt that Vishnu invited her to visit his shrine at Srirangam. She then wore her bridal finery and merged into the temple icon of Vishnu-Ranganatha, her beatific disappearance presaging similar later myths about saints Akkamahadevi and Mirabai. A twelfth-century inscription states that a garden was created in Andal's name at Srirangam.

Tiruppavai *and* Nacchiyar Tirumozhi

Andal wrote two elegant, sensuous compositions, *Tiruppavai* and *Nacchiyar Tirumozhi* to Tirumal as Krishna. Andal's writing was influenced by the Sangam literary mode of interior emotive (*aham*) poetry and by the Sanskrit epics. These works form an integral part of the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* (Four Thousand Sacred Verses), the Tamil canon for Vishnu. She described Krishna with broad shoulders and lotus eyes (NT 7.7) as her "lord dark as a rain cloud" (NT 8.2) with "coral lips" (NT 5.1). She frankly declared, "my swollen breasts are meant for Krishna" (NT 1.5), and that her bosom "rises and throbs with excitement" (NT 5.7) from desire. Despite the semi-erotic tone, Andal's quest was spiritual as she calls Vishnu the formless One, "the sweet sap of the four Vedas" (NT 4.10).⁹⁷

In *Tiruppavai*, Andal assumed the role of a *gopi* or milkmaid in love with Krishna. Its 30 stanzas realistically depict human emotions and village customs. The poem shows women singing songs in the cool month of Marghazhi (December–January) before the harvest festival of Pongal. *Tiruppavai* describes women bathing in the river, anointing themselves with turmeric, and fashioning clay images of Lakshmi as they pray for a fruitful life. This genre of women's festival songs (*pavai patal*) was described in *Paripatal* and in *Bhagavata Purana* (tenth century), a Sanskrit text inspired by Tamil *azhvans*. *Tiruppavai* has been translated into Kannada and Telugu. Andal also appears as the chief character in *Amukta Malyada*, a drama by the Telugu king Krishna Deva Raya of Vijayanagar (sixteenth century). Andal's maturer work *Nacchiyar Tirumozhi* consists of 14 hymns in 143 stanzas that evoke the four stages of *bhakti*, viz., hope, yearning, separation, and ecstasy. The canto, "*Varanam ayiram*," on her marriage to Vishnu is sung even today at weddings. Andal sang:

The velvety red
of the ladybirds
whose flutter fills the air

in the dark grove of Maliruncolai
 brings to mind
 the glowing red
 of the kumkum powder
 on my dark lord's forehead.
 Once he churned the ocean
 for the nectar of the gods
 using Mandara mountain
 as a churning rod.
 I flounder in the net
 of that lord
 of the handsome shoulders.
 Can I escape
 alive?

*Nacchiyar Tirumozhi 9.1*⁹⁸

Akkamahadevi and Virashaiva Sect (Kannada)

Akkamahadevi (twelfth century), or “elder sister” Mahadevi, was a *bhakti* saint from Udatadi, Karnataka in south India. She became enamored of Shiva's icon in her village shrine as a young girl. Akkamahadevi's 350 *vacanas* (spoken free verse hymns) are in the Kannada language, and the *vacanas* of all Kannada *bhakti* saints (*Shiva saranas*) constitute scripture for the Virashaiva sect. Although Virashaivas do not accept the *Vedas*, their *vacanas* reflect the blending of Dravidian and Sanskrit traditions, a hallmark of the *bhakti* movement. Akkamahadevi's beauty attracted the Jaina king Kaushika whom she probably married. However, realizing that she could not simultaneously serve Shiva and an earthly husband, she became a nude ascetic like Digambara Jaina monks, clothed only by her long hair. After receiving the unwanted attentions of lustful men, she reached Kalyana where the Virashaiva saints Basavanna (1106–67) and Allamaprabhu resided. To queries about her unusual methods of renunciation, she replied that it mattered little what happened to the body, as her chaste soul belonged to her true husband Shiva. Her reason for nudity is expressed clearly in one of her *vacanas*:

You can confiscate
 money in hand;
 can you confiscate
 the body's glory?
 Or peel away every strip
 you wear,
 but can you peel
 the Nothing, the Nakedness
 that covers and veils?

To the shameless girl
 wearing the White Jasmine Lord's
 light of morning,
 you fool,
 where's the need for cover and jewel?
*Vacana 124*⁹⁹

Like Andal and Mirabai, Akkamahadevi was preoccupied with God as lover, but their lyrical poems with descriptions of nature differ dramatically from her stark, semi-erotic hymns conveying her infatuation for Shiva Maha-Yogi, Lord of Dissolution-Creation. A few early *vacanas* describe his physical beauty, shining red locks, and even teeth (*vacana 68*). However, most poems are razor-sharp in their exposition of the irrefutable truth of a limitless, formless Being beyond desire and illusion (*vacana 283*). To probing male questions, this woman mystic replied that worldly passions must be experienced before being discarded for spiritual goals (*vacana 104*). In other verses, she compared a grand love for Shiva with trivial rituals, caste, and earthly preoccupations. Her signature line (*ankita*) addresses Shiva as “Chenna Mallikarjuna” or “Lord as White as Jasmine” or “Beauteous Lord of Goddess Mallika.”¹⁰⁰ She wrote:

I love the Handsome One:
 he has no death
 decay nor form
 no place or side
 no end nor birthmarks.
 I love him, O mother. Listen.
 I love the Beautiful One
 with no bond nor fear
 no clan no land
 no landmarks
 for his beauty.
 So my lord, white as jasmine, is my husband.
 Take these husbands who die,
 decay, and feed them
 to your kitchen fires!

*Vacana 285*¹⁰¹

Virashaivas

The Virashaiva sect offered one of the most radical challenges to Hindu traditions on caste and gender. Virashaiva ideology was shaped by the *vacanas* of the *brahman* founder Basavanna, a Kannada ascetic, and other teachers Allamaprabhu, Akkamahadevi, and Devara Dasimayya the weaver. The Virashaivas rejected Jaina atheism, and also the Jaina commercial castes

who dominated the region. Also called Lingayats, the Virashaivas affirm their *bhakti* for Shiva by wearing a *lingam* icon around the neck.¹⁰² Basavanna encouraged Akkamahadevi to reside in the hermitage at Kalyana as its first female renunciant (*sarana*). Akkamahadevi influenced 50 successive women yogi *saranas*, some of whom have composed *vacanas*. The women saints were Neelambika, Basavanna's learned wife; Lakkamma who described women's linga-puja initiation; Satyakakka; Muktayakka; Gogavve; Rekkamma.¹⁰³ Through them, the Virashaivas initiated progressive reforms favorable to Hindu women. These included the discarding of customs on the "five pollutions," which restricted women's activities during menstruation, childbirth, and widowhood. The Virashaivas began new rites to celebrate womanhood, and they removed social constraints on widows so that they enjoyed greater freedom and mobility.¹⁰⁴ Akkamahadevi's *vacanas* often expressed her radical views on female roles and chastity. She succinctly stated that for an ascetic, "She is a nun, a man to a woman a woman to a man" (*vacana* 145). Legend states that Akkamahadevi meditated in a cave near Srishaila, going through six stages before ecstatic union (Aikyas sthala), when her body reputedly disappeared into Shiva.

Varkari Women Saints (Marathi)

Muktabai (Thirteenth Century)

Like the Virashaivas of Karnataka, the working-class Varkari poets of Maharashtra also questioned the caste system. The Varkari *bhakti* movement began with Jnaneshwar (1271–96), elder brother of Muktabai, the earliest woman saint of this sect. In his *Jnaneshwari*, a Marathi commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Jnaneshwar emphasized its egalitarian message in a feudal society riddled with economic and caste exploitation.¹⁰⁵ Jnaneshwar described salvation as open to all *bhaktas*, teachings that attracted followers. He wrote:

There is a distinction between the Khaira and the Chandana trees only so long as they are not put into fire; but as soon as they are put inside, they become one with it, and the distinction between them vanishes. Similarly, the Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Shudras, and the Women are so called only as long as they have not reached Me. But having reached Me, they cease to be distinguished; as salt becomes one with the ocean, even so they become one with Me.¹⁰⁶

Lower-caste pilgrims visited the shrine of Krishna or Hari as Vitthal/Vithoba at Pandharpur. The hymns (*abhangs*) of their Varkari saints like Muktabai constitute the earliest *bhakti* verses in Marathi, an Indo-Aryan language. Varkari saints praised Vitthal as their savior and friend who eased their daily, burdensome chores. Unlike upper-caste northern saints like Mirabai

who yearned for Krishna as her lover, Varkari *abhangs* are straightforward and free of erotic imagery.¹⁰⁷

Once a *sanyasi* ascetic, the father of Muktabai, Jnaneshwar, and two other brothers had shocked the community by reverting to the householder's life. They faced great penury when both parents died, and their distress was heightened by the social scorn for their father's apparent fall from grace. This extreme deprivation probably shortened Muktabai's life, although it was spiritually enlightened. Having died as a teenager, Muktabai's hymns lack the emotional power that accompanies maturity, but her intellect and philosophical prescience enabled her to bear hardships with fortitude. Unlike many *bhakti* saints whose hymns are emotionally intense, Muktabai relied on her mind to guide her *bhakti*, so that her reputation for wisdom spread in the community. Muktabai's few *abhangs* reveal this clarity of vision, which earned her the reputation of being an "intellectual" *bhakta*.¹⁰⁸ Despite her youth, legend states that Muktabai became mentor to yogi Changdev Venkateswar who once saw her bathing nude in the river Tapti. She quickly chided him in a short *abhang* for his embarrassed inability to see the spirit behind the body.¹⁰⁹ Muktabai's delight in verbal ironies and her cerebral route to sublime ecstasy are revealed in this *abhang*:

Though he has no form
My eyes saw him
His glory is fire in my mind
That knows
His secret inner form
Invented by the soul
What is
Beyond the mind
Has no boundary
In it our senses end
Mukta says: Words cannot hold him
Yet in him all words end.¹¹⁰

Janabai (Fourteenth Century)

Jnaneshwar's contemporary was Varkari saint Namdev the tailor (1270–1350) whose followers included some important *shudra* devotees like Janabai the maid (1298–1350), Gora the potter, and Chokhamela the untouchable. The little girl Jani was seven years old when her mother died, and poverty drove her father to give her as a bonded servant (*dasi*) to Namdev's wealthier family. Despite a life of arduous toil, Janabai grew greatly attached to the child Namdev whom she tended, later becoming his disciple, and finally dying when he died.¹¹¹ Many of Janabai's 300 Marathi *abhangs* are located in Namdev's corpus of hymns. Janabai represents the voice of society's most marginalized, namely orphaned, low-caste females.

Janabai held Krishna close to her heart and referred to his names Vitthal/Vithoba/Hari/Gopala while performing her chores. In many *abhangs*, she called him the inner lord and friend who sustained the low-caste oppressed (*dalit*) by doing their unrelenting work:¹¹²

Jani sweeps the floor,
The Lord collects the dirt
Carries it upon His head,
And casts it away.
Won over by devotion,
The Lord does lowly chores!
Says Jani to Vithoba,
How shall I pay your debt?

Translated by Vilas Sarang¹¹³

Janabai also viewed Vitthal as her mother, asking humorously in one *abhang*, “Can the river reject its fish? Can the mother spurn her child?”¹¹⁴ She described how he tended to her needs:

Mother is dead, father is dead
now, Vitthal, take care of me
O Hari, my head is itching
I am your child
and have no one of my own.
Vitthal says to Rukmini,
“There’s no one to care for my Jani.”
Taking oil and comb in his hands
he combs and braids my hair,
finishing the braid he knots it.
I say, now please rub my back.
Jani says, O Gopala,
Help celebrate the festival
Of the powerless.

Translated by Sarah Sellegren¹¹⁵

Janabai’s verses presage the mystic “madness” of the Rajput princess saint, Mirabai, in the sixteenth century. Not only did Janabai resist the rules of decorum framed for upper-caste women, but she declared that she was a “whore” for Krishna. Varkari saints drew upon working-class and female oral traditions, and Janabai’s bold imagery suggests that her low-caste female body became the property of men in the household.¹¹⁶ Notwithstanding such exploitation, Janabai declared she was free from conventions, as she was a prostitute for the Lord, ready to parade in the marketplace with a lute in her hands, and perfumed oil on her wrists. One hymn declared gleefully that she had no false modesty before her lover Krishna, that “The sari

slips from my head to my shoulders,” and that her body was “for sale.”¹¹⁷ In some hymns Janabai praised the lot of the poor woman, since Hari himself became a servant (*dasi*) “to grind and pound [flour] like me,” that Hari washed her body and even soiled clothes, perhaps in bold reference to her menstrual flow.¹¹⁸ In others, she raged at her inferior status in a household whose master Namdev preached spiritual equality, but treated her as a servant. While chiding Namdev, Janabai prayed for divine union:

Your wife and mother stay at your feet
and sons are placed proudly in front,
This woman is kept on the doorstep
no room for the lowly inside.
O, God, how I want your embrace!
when will you call *dasi* your own?¹¹⁹

Janabai finally proclaimed her sense of freedom from such worldly turmoil:

i eat god
i drink god
i sleep
on god
i buy god
i count god
i deal with god
god is here
god is there
void is not
devoid of god
jani says:
god is within
god is without
and moreover
there is god to spare.¹²⁰

Babinabai (Seventeenth Century)

In the seventeenth century, several saints reinvigorated the Varkari *bhakti* movement among the Mahars who were Dalits. Their social revolution was inspired by Marathi folk and female poetry from earlier centuries. Mahars viewed Vithoba as the special lord who reduced the burden of the Dalits who performed menial jobs rejected by others. Significant male saints were Tukaram whose hymns testify to his creative inspiration through *bhakti*; and the *brahman* scholar Eknath who empowered the Mahars by republishing *Jnaneshwari*, by paying homage to the poor:¹²¹

God baked pots with Gora; drove cattle with Chokha; cut grass with Savata Mali; wove garments with Kabir; colored hides with Ravidas; sold meat with butcher Sajana; melted gold with Narahari; carried cowdung with Janabai; and even became the Mahar messenger of Damaji.¹²²

Of the Varkari women of this generation, Bahinabai (1628–1700) stands above the others, as she came to terms with her stultifying marriage to an abusive husband.¹²³ As one who chose to remain a householder, Bahinabai is unique in her philosophical restructuring of some essential features of the *bhakti* movement. Her husband had grown jealous over her spiritual strength and threatened to desert her if she did not desist from attending *bhakti* lectures (*harikatha*) and group hymn singing (*bhajans*). To resolve this dilemma, Bahinabai philosophically chose to be a “sister” (*bahin*) to Krishna and to her mentor Tukaram, but simultaneously to serve her husband to her full capacity. Despite her domestic frustrations, Bahinabai wrote over five hundred *abhangs* and analyzed her feelings in the autobiography, *Atmanivedana*. She cogitated:

1) What am I to do with my Fate? I must bear whatever comes to my lot. 2) I am not one who is possessed. My body is not subject to demonic possession. 3) Therefore, holding to my own special duties, I will give my mind to listening to the Scriptures, and the winning of God. 4) My duty is to serve my husband, for he is God to me. My husband himself is the Supreme Brahma . . . 8) This then is my determination, and the desire of my heart. I want my thoughts concentrated on my husband.

Atmanivedana 35¹²⁴

Bahinabai trained her mind to accept her husband wholeheartedly by seeing him as the “life” to her “body,” the “water” to her “fish,” the “sun” to her “brightness,” even while praying to Krishna. Her verses give us a glimpse of how women molded the *bhakti* movement to override personal constraints in patriarchal marriages. This appears in her plea to Krishna:

In worshipping Thee, I can still be true to my duty of devotion to my husband. Thou, O Lord who has the color of dark clouds (Meghashyama), must thus think also.

Abhang 68.2¹²⁵

Lalla (Kashmiri)

Lalla was a Kashmiri *nirguni sant* (fourteenth century) whose sayings (*vakhyas*) have been kept alive in a region that became predominantly Muslim. Although Lalla was a Shiva devotee, she spread the message of

devotion to Shiva as formless Brahman of the *Upanishads*. She probably rejected iconic *puja* due to the Islamic presence, which frowned upon religious images and symbols like the *lingam*. Many working-class Hindus in north India may have willingly chosen *nirguni bhakti* as an easier spiritual path. Lalla's oral verses (*vakhyani*) are compiled in *Lallavakhyani*. This somber verse eloquently describes her tormented separation from Shiva and desire for union:

With a rope of untwisted thread am I towing a boat upon the ocean
 Where will my God Hear? Will He carry even me over?
 Like water in goblets of unbaked clay do I slowly waste away
 My soul is in a whirl.
 Would that I reached home.

*Lallavakhyani*¹²⁶

Lalla's derision for icons and shrines is evident in this *vakhya* describing her beatific experience during a meditative, yogic trance:

I, Lalla, went out far in search of Shiva, the omnipresent Lord; after wandering, I, Lalla, found Him at last within my own self, abiding in His own home.

Temple and image, the two that you have fashioned, are no better than stone; the Lord is immeasurable and consists of intelligence; what is needed to realize Him is unified concentration of breath and mind.

*Lallavakhyani*¹²⁷

Mirabai (Rajasthani, Gujarati, and Hindi)

Mirabai (ca. 1500–45) is one of India's most popular *bhakti* saints, a Rajput princess who wrote fourteen hundred ecstatic *padas* (short devotional songs) to Krishna. Her favorite image of Hari was as Giridhar Gopal, the divine cowherd who lifted a mountain to save his followers. Mirabai composed hymns in Rajasthani; in the Hindi dialect of Braj Bhasha spoken in Mathura on the river Yamuna, Krishna's mythical birthplace; and in Gujarati spoken in his mythical kingdom Dwaraka. That her *padas* were sung is apparent in her imprint on north Indian classical music in the naming of a *raga* (melody) as Mirabai ki Malhar.¹²⁸ Mirabai's sensuous verses highlight her divine lover's beauty, the agony of separation, and beatific union. Her metaphors describe Krishna's lips as nectar, sweet as curds, and her pain as the agony of a tree gnawed by insects. Despite her tone of intimacy with Krishna with whom she declares she is besotted, her verses do not have the frank sensuality of either Andal's songs or Akkamahadevi's *vacanas*, although the goal of all of these saints was sublime, divine union.

Inspired greatly by the *Bhagavata Purana*, Mirabai regarded Vishnu as the Lord of the universe who also resided within the soul (*antarayamin*).¹²⁹

That her life had become legendary is seen in the earliest hagiography dated 1712 containing facts enriched by myths. Mirabai's father was the powerful Rathor clan *rana* (ruler) of Jodhpur (Marwar), and her family ruled Merta near Ajmer. In 1516, the Rathors became political allies of the Sisodias of Chittor (Mewar) through Mira's marriage to Bhoja Raja, heir to Rana Sangha who valiantly fought but lost to Babur the Mughal in 1527. As a young girl, Mirabai showed no interest in court affairs, but instead identified with tribal and low-caste devotees, and nonconformist hermit *sadhus*. She became enamored with an image of Krishna given to her by the hermits. Since Mira often flouted royal Rajput conventions, the elite regarded her as a renegade, and they rarely sing her hymns. This contrasts with Bhil tribals and the low castes for whom Mira's sanctity almost exceeds that of Krishna. That great *bhaktas* are venerated as semi-divinities is also apparent in the iconic worship of the male Bengali saint Chaitanya, almost on a par with Krishna.¹³⁰

Declaring Krishna as her true husband, Mira shunned her husband's bed, and never bore a child. Not only did she thus reject two traditional roles of loyal wife and mother, but she also flouted Rajput ideals of clan honor and the loyal wife by dancing in the company of *sadhus* before temples. At first, her husband Bhoja Raja suspected her of infidelity, but he realized that her lover was divine. When he died soon afterward, Mira refused to become a *sati*, as she did not consider herself his wife or his widow. In one poem, Mirabai described his family's attempts to kill her, but Krishna's miraculous intercession saved her. The poem states that their gift of a basket of snakes turned into a garland around her neck; the poison they sent turned into ambrosia when she drank it. Although hounded by the powerful Rajput community, Mirabai later went on pilgrimages to Krishna's birthplace in Mathura and to his legendary kingdom of Dwaraka. The legend thrives that like Andal, she too disappeared into Krishna's image in his shrine.

Renegade or Conformist?

The *bhakti* movement was marked by revolutionary women who questioned elite patriarchy, such challenges occurring even in conservative sects like the Srivaishnavas of south India.¹³¹ Despite Mira's marital insubordination, some feminists criticize her for reinforcing gender and caste hierarchies as she called herself Krishna's *dasi* (slave). However, it is anachronistic to judge medieval women liberationists by modern feminist guidelines. Feudal society judged a high-caste woman by her outward decorum and her virtue as a loyal wife. Instead of being a docile *pativrata* ready to be a *sati*, Mirabai broke conventional boundaries between the elite and lower caste, rejecting a Rajput prince for a divine savior and using *bhakti* as her path to liberation. Her society viewed this as a serious rebellion, but even so radical a woman saint could not have predicted that a later generation would call her a conformist. The proof of her rebellion lies in Rajput society whose royal clans repudiated her, whose high castes still refuse to sing her *bhajans*, but whose

Dalit and *shudra* menials keep her music alive in Dwaraka.¹³² That she identified with the marginalized low castes is evident in her poem about the tribal woman Sabari. In the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi and Indian nationalists were inspired by Mirabai's life popularized in films and records by M. S. Subbulakshmi (1916–2004). Although Mirabai called herself Krishna's slave (*dasi*), she became an icon of female rebellion during India's freedom struggle. Yet, she was no simple *dasi*, but a formidable *bhakta* who composed this verse that was radical and feminist even in her time:¹³³

Mira's father made her sit in the wedding seat,
 My bangles, the bridal veil, I discarded them all.
 Ranaji, when did you ever know what was in my mind?
 In my mind, the *sadhu's* mind,
 In my mind, the *bhakta's* mind;
 Ranaji, when did you ever know what was in my mind?
 Mira's father sent her to her marital home
 My beloved's face remained in front of me.
 Ranaji, when did you ever know what was in my mind?
 Bai Mira sings of Giridhar (Krishna).
 Without Hari *bhajan*, my heart thirsts.
 Ranaji, when did you ever know what was in my mind?¹³⁴

COURTESANS AND PHILANTHROPIC TEMPLE WOMEN

Classical India

The Theravada Buddhist canon in Pali records the philanthropy of courtesans (*ganika*, *vesiya*) in early India. Ambapali was the intelligent, wealthy courtesan-mistress of king Bimbisara of Magadha (d. 490 BCE) to whom she bore a child. After hearing the Buddha preach, Ambapali became his lay follower, donating a grove to his order. It was at this hermitage that the great sage rested for some months before his demise. Buddha's respect for Ambapali is seen in his promise to share a meal with her and his keeping of this appointment, even by refusing the invitation of important officials. Ambapali later became a nun, and her elegant poetry is found in the *Therigatha*. The poem makes an analogy between physical and moral decrepitude, and describes the transient nature of all talents, including her own:

My voice was as sweet as a cuckoo's,
 who flies over the woodland thickets
 now in old age, it is broken and stammering.
 Not otherwise is the word of the untruthful.
 Verse 5¹³⁵

Sanskrit and Tamil literature reveals that some *ganikas* were talented composers, musicians, and dancers who occupied a respected social niche. Unlike commercial prostitutes, these well educated women were often mistresses of a single, powerful patron to whom they were loyal. After amassing some wealth, *ganikas* bought their freedom or married their patrons. This is described by Shudraka (fifth century) in his play *Mricchakatika* (The Little Clay Cart) whose *brahman* hero marries his *shudra* mistress Vasantasena.¹³⁶ In Ilango Adigal's Tamil epic *Shilappadikaram*, courtesan Madhavi is a gifted dancer, lyricist, and instrumentalist admired by the community. Her lover and patron Kovalan is a wealthy merchant who returns to his wife, leaving Madhavi pregnant and bereft. After the birth of their daughter Manimekhalai, Madhavi becomes a Buddhist nun dedicated to charity, a path followed later by her daughter.

Temple *Devadasi*/*Teyvadiyal* (Eighth to Fourteenth Century)

Other Sangam era Tamil poems describe women who danced and sang (*aatu-makkal*) in mystical possession at folk rituals.¹³⁷ These archaic customs involving honored women musicians and ritualists merged into the medieval tradition of the female servant of the temple deity (*teyvadiyal* [Tamil]; *devadasi* [Sanskrit]). Chola inscriptions (850–1300) and Tamil *bhakti* literature inform us that *teyvadiyals* performed ritual dances for the shrine either singly or in groups.¹³⁸ In the ninth century, saint Manikkavachakar described *teyvadiyals* as young women with slender waists and red lips, singing hymns, lighting the temple lamps, unfurling its flags, decorating it with flowers, rubbing sandalwood, holy ash, and gold powder on its walls. During festival processions when the icon was carried through the streets in a chariot with priests, *teyvadiyals* danced ahead, while devotees received a mystical visual blessing (*darsan*).¹³⁹ An important inscription from the reign of Rajaraja Chola (1014) states that 400 *teyvadiyal* lived in the four streets around the huge Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur, and that they danced in festival parades.¹⁴⁰

Early Chola inscriptions also indicate that temple *teyvadiyals* bequeathed property in matrilineal succession to daughters who were also *teyvadiyals*. The women's names reflect their native place or the temple to which they were attached. For example, an inscription about a *teyvadiyal* named Kanchipura-nankai (woman at Kanchipuram) states that her mother was also a *teyvadiyal*, but attached to a temple at Ekampam. While the meaning of “*nankai*” is still being debated, some *teyvadiyals* took the title of “*utaiyal*” (owner) to indicate that they were property holders. Thus, Tillaivanam-utaiyal Matatilli owned substantial acreage near Chidambaram (Tillaivanam) temple.¹⁴¹ A Dravidian origin is likely for the *devadasi* tradition as it was most prevalent in Tamil Nadu and peninsular India, although it existed across the subcontinent. Over 700 inscriptions thus attest to

teyvadiyals' functions and donations in Tamil Nadu (409), Karnataka (148), Andhra Pradesh (138), and Kerala (24).¹⁴² In addition, other records show that *devadasis* were attached to temples in Maharashtra (5), Gujarat and Rajasthan (4), Bengal and Bihar (3), Uttar Pradesh (2), Orissa (1), Madhya Pradesh (1); and in Sri Lanka (6).¹⁴³

Clearly, the *teyvadiyal* served a respectable role in the Chola temple, which served as a religious, cultural, and economic institution. Royalty and the wealthy gifted vast acreages during rituals (*arcana bhogam*) for the community, and its rice fields supported hundreds of servants of various cadres, such as *brahmans*, accountants, caretakers, and menials. As a *teyvadiyal* was ritually married to the temple deity, she was known as a *nityasumangali*, or "eternally auspicious wife."¹⁴⁴ While more talented and royal *nityasumangalis* probably remained chaste and performed their ritual services, over time, some ordinary *teyvadiyals* became mistresses of priests and temple functionaries. Temple women were sustained by special grants (*nrtta bhogam*) for performing rituals and dancing for the temple icon.¹⁴⁵ These endowments were made by kings and queens, aristocratic and *brahman* women, and the *teyvadiyal* themselves.¹⁴⁶ Chola inscriptions use other titles for high-ranking temple women such as *manikkam* (ruby), *patiylar* (temple woman), and *rudra-ganika* (woman of Rudra-Shiva).¹⁴⁷ Other names were *tali-chcheri pentukal* (girls living around the temple streets) and *valvacci* (fetchers of water for rituals).¹⁴⁸ *Teyvadiyals* of a high rank enjoyed financial independence, rare in a society where women received marital property, but not landed inheritance from their fathers.¹⁴⁹ *Teyvadiyals* donated icons, lamps, and sums for rites and prayer recitations to the temple, which was their sole mainstay, while aristocratic and *brahman* made similar contributions. As donors, temple women helped to define the rituals and icons to be venerated on special days. They thus shaped the content of temple religion in south India. Local contacts and associations helped temple women to develop a community identity in the Chola era.¹⁵⁰ Clearly, while some women were victims of feudal patriarchy, some medieval women had more power to shape their lives.

NOTES

1. Susan Daniel, trans., in Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 79.
2. Tripathi, *History of Ancient India*, 364–65, 381–84.
3. Hermann Kulke and Deitmar Rothermund, *A History of India*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 136–40.
4. Arjun Appadurai, "Kings, Sects, and Temples in South India, 1350–1700 A.D.," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 14, no. 1 (January–March 1977): 47–75; Burton Stein, "The State and the Agrarian Order in Medieval South India: A Historiographical Critique," in *Essays on South India*, ed. Burton Stein (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1975), 64–95.

5. N. Vannamalai, "Feudalism & Chola Rule" (paper presented at Second International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies, <http://www.tamilnation.org/heritage/chola>, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, January 1968). The paper cites the Government of Madras, Oriental MSS. Library Temple Inscriptions, 3 vols. Nos. 2868, 637, 713, 727, 738 D 3355, 111 D 2868, 785 D 3367, 94 D 2875.

6. Lindsey Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women: The Ethic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 120-33; Harlan, "Perfection and Devotion: Sati Tradition in Rajasthan," 79-91; Ann Grodzins Gold, "Gender, Violence and Power: Rajasthani Stories of Shakti," in *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*, ed. Nita Kumar (Calcutta: Stree, 1994), 26-48; Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "The Continuing Invention of the Sati Tradition," in *Sati, The Blessing and the Curse*, ed. Hawley, 159-73.

7. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 115 (plate 88).

8. *Ibid.*, 128 (plate 100), 277 (plate 214).

9. *Ibid.*, 30 (plate 15), 46 (plate 29), 117 (plate 90).

10. Marco Polo's records in Sastri, *Foreign Notices of South India*, 163-64.

11. Ibn Batuta's records in Sastri, *Foreign Notices of South India*, 233-34.

12. *Ibid.*, 253.

13. William Sax, "Gender and Politics in Garhwal," in *Women as Subjects*, ed. Kumar, 172-203, *vide*, 181.

14. Sastri, *The History of South India*, 100.

15. Tripathi, *History of Ancient India*, 250; Sastri, *The History of South India*, 109; and Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 186-87.

16. Thapar, *Early India*, 392. Bilhana's eulogy is questioned by Tripathi, *History of Ancient India*, 421; K. A. Nilakanta Sastri and G. Srinivasachari, *Advanced History of India* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1971), 320.

17. Sastri, *The History of South India*, 168.

18. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 189-90.

19. Sastri, *The History of South India*, 452; R. Champakalakshmi, *The Hindu Temple* (Delhi: Roli and Jansen, 2001), 64-65; Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, 178-79. Harle believes that the temples reflect Tamil Pallava dynasty styles.

20. K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Colas* (1937; repr., Chennai: University of Madras, 2000), 156; and Subrahmanian, *Social and Cultural History of Tamil Nadu*, 123, 135, 146.

21. Sastri, *Foreign Notices of South India*, 41.

22. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 185-86.

23. See Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamilnadu* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 37.

24. Tripathi, *History of Ancient India*, 348.

25. Thapar, *Early India*, 367; Sastri, *Foreign Notices of South India*, 174.

26. Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, 36-37, citing Cynthia Talbot, "Master and Servant: Bonds of Allegiance in Medieval Andhra" (paper presented at the 16th Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1986).

27. John Keay, *India: A History* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 252, 257-58.

28. Marco Polo's records in Sastri, *Foreign Notices of South India*, 174.

29. Dehejia, *Art of the Imperial Cholas*, 13–15 (plates 8–9).
30. *Ibid.*, 1–10 (plates 1, 3, and 5), 74–76.
31. Sastri, *The Cholas*, 156, 169, 226, 653–54.
32. Sastri, *The History of South India*, 181, 325.
33. Sastri, *The Cholas*, 228, 332.
34. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 258.
35. Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, 79–82.
36. Tripathi, *History of Ancient India*, 135, 337.
37. Sastri, *The History of South India*, 181–82, 188.
38. *Ibid.*, 156, 176, 213.
39. Altekar quotes sages Atri, Parasra, and Brihaspati who wrote that a woman should not be abandoned after rape. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 308–10.
40. Medieval political contests occurred between Chalukya Pulakesin (seventh century CE), Harsha of Thanesar, and the Pallavas of Kanchipuram; during Tamil Rajendra Chola's march to the Ganges (eleventh century CE) in which he subdued the Bengal Palas over trading rights in Southeast Asia; when Delhi sultan Ala-ud-din Khalji's general Malik Kafur marched to Madurai and established a Muslim kingdom (1296–1310).
41. Doniger and Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, 115.
42. Oldenburg, "The Continuing Invention of the Sati Tradition," 159–73, *vide*, 166.
43. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India* (1965; repr., Delhi: Rupa & Company, 1999), 188. Basham cites *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, 3:92.
44. Sastri, *The Cholas*, 91–92, 553–54; Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 156–64.
45. Hart, *The Poems of the Ancient Tamil*, 102–3.
46. Somasundaram, *Ilango Adigal Iyarrunaruliya Shilappadikaram*, 259; Daniellou, *Shilappadikaram*, 129.
47. Vidya Dehejia, "Comment: The Broader Landscape," in *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse*, ed. Hawley, 49–53; and Courtwright, "The Iconographies of Sati," 27–49.
48. Paula Richman, "Introduction: The Diversity of the Ramayana Tradition," in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 3–21.
49. Aiyar, *Kamba Ramayanam: A Study*, 38–39, 339–43.
50. Shulman, "Fire and Flood," 89–113, *vide*, 99–100.
51. Sastri, *The History of South India*, 415.
52. B. V. L. Narayanarow, trans., "Molla Ramayana," in Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 94–98, *vide*, 95–97.
53. Romila Thapar, *A History of India* (1966; repr., New York: Penguin, 1990), 242, 244–45, 247–48.
54. Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, 48, 52–90; and Harlan, "Perfection and Devotion," 82–83.
55. Although medieval Hindu and Muslim rulers adopted Perso-Indian styles, it is an exaggeration to refer to the subcontinent as "Islamic India." See James W. Laine's *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), and my comments in Sita Anantha Raman, "Flawed Historian Meets Vandals," *The National Review* 2, no. 3 (March 2004): 86–88.

56. Sastri and Srinivasachari, *Advanced History of India*, 259. I have modernized and shortened the verse given by these authors.

57. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 187, quoting James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Grooke, 1920), 303 4, 362.

58. Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, 182 87.

59. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 187 88.

60. Courtright, "The Iconographies of Sati," 36 37 (plates 2 3); also Thapar, *A History of India*, 304, 423 24.

61. Cited by Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 188; also Sastri, *The Colas*, 91 92, 553 54.

62. Sastri, *The History of South India*, 234 35.

63. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 188.

64. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 187 88.

65. A. R. Kulkarni, "Sati in the Maratha Country: An Historical Perspective," in *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Literature and Religion*, ed. Anne Feldhaus (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), 171 98, *vide*, 177 88.

66. Sarojini Naidu's poem "Suttee" in which she asked, "Shall the flesh survive when the soul is gone?" She also addressed the Indian National Congress in 1917 with the request that patriots "remember that the spirit of Padmini of Chittor is enshrined with the manhood of India." Quoted by Vishwanath S. Naravane, *Sarojini Naidu*, 2nd ed. (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1996), 95, 101.

67. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 180 85.

68. Francis Zimmerman, "Lilavati, Gracious Lady of Arithmetic India A Mathematical Mystery Tour," *UNESCO Courier*, November 1989, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1310/is_1989_Nov/vol_18/1045.

69. Also this Web site: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilavati>, dated February 2007.

70. A. K. Warder, "Classical Literature," in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. A. L. Basham (Clarendon Press, 1975; repr., Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 194.

71. Sastri, *The History of South India*, 345.

72. *Ibid.*, 266.

73. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Swami Vireswarananda (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1982), 193, 196.

74. A fairly simple retelling of this popular story is by Swami Chinmayananda and Kumarit Bharati Naik, *Bala Ramayanam* (Bombay: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 1968), 86 87.

75. Jonathan Stratton Hawley and Mark Jeurgensmeyer, trans., in Tharu and Lalitha, eds., *Women Writing in India*, 1:93 94.

76. On *bhakti* in south India, see Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning*; Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*; Hardy, *Viraha Bhakti*; R. Champakalakshmi, "From Devotion and Dissent to Dominance: The Bhakti of the Tamil Alvars and Nayanars," in *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology: Essays in Honor of Romila Thapar*, ed. R. Champakalakshmi and S. Gopal (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 135 63; Varadaraajan, *A History of Tamil Literature*; Sastri, *A History of South India*; Hart, *The Poems of the Ancient Tamil*; Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*.

77. Primary Tamil *bhakti* texts are J. V. Chelliah, ed., *Tiru murukarruppatai*, in *Pattupattu: Ten Tamil Idylls* (1946; repr., Thanjavur: Tamil University, 1986); P. V. Somasundaram, ed., *Paripatal* (Chennai: Saiva Siddhanta Society, 1957); Karaikkal

Ammaiyar's hymns are in K. Subramanian, ed., *Patinonran Tirumurai* (Eleventh Tirumurai), Saiva Siddhanta Math series (Srivaikuntam: Kumara Guruparan Sangam, 1972); Bharati, *The Sacred Book of Four Thousand*; P. S. Sundaram, ed., with Tamil original, *The Poems of Andal: Tiruppavai and Nacciyar Tirumozhi* (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1997); Vanmikanathan and Mahalingam, *Periya Puranam*.

78. Studies of north Indian *bhakti* include: Parita Mukta, *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); David N. Lorenzen, ed., *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action* (Albany: State University of New York [SUNY], 1995); Eleanor Zelliot, "Chokhamela: Piety and Protest," in *Bhakti Religion in North India*, ed. Lorenzen, 212-20; Eleanor Zelliot, "Chokhamela and Eknath: Two Bhakti Modes of Legitimacy for Modern Change," in *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, ed. Jayant Lele (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 136-56; Jonathan Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1988); Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 1.

79. For *nirguni bhakti*, see these essays in Lorenzen, ed., *Bhakti Religion in North India*: David N. Lorenzen, "The Lives of *Nirguni* Saints," 181-211; Joseph Schallen, "Sanskritization, Caste Uplift, and Social Dissidence in the Sant Ravidas Panth," 94-119; John Stratton Hawley, "The Nirgun/Sagun Distinction in Early Manuscript Anthologies of Hindi Devotion," 160-80.

80. Sastri, *The History of South India*, 415.

81. B. V. L. Narayanarow, trans., "Molla Ramayana," in Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 94-98.

82. Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 102-7.

83. Chandrabati, "Sundari Malua," trans. Madhuchhanda Karlekar, in Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 106.

84. Rao, "A Ramayana of Their Own," 114-36, *vide*, 128-30.

85. *Ibid.*, 130-33.

86. Brzezinski, "Women Saints in Gaudiya Vaisnavism," 59-86, *vide*, 63-66.

87. Rami, "Where Have You Gone?" trans. Sumanta Banerjee, in Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 85-87.

88. Brzezinski, "Women Saints in Gaudiya Vaisnavism," 72; and Nancy Ann Nayar, "The 'other' Antal: Portrait of a Twelfth Century Srivaisnava Woman," in *Vaisnavi*, ed. Rosen, 212-13.

89. Sule Sankavva, "In my Harlot's Trade," trans. Susan Daniel, in Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 81.

90. Sellegren, "Janabai and Kanhapatra: A Study of Two Women Saints," in *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Literature and Religion*, ed. Felhaus, 213-38, *vide*, 227.

91. Vidyut Bhagwat, "Marathi Literature as a Source for Contemporary Feminism," in *Feminism in India*, Issues in Contemporary Feminism Series, ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri (Delhi: Kali for Women, 2004), 296-317, *vide*, 305.

92. Brzezinski, "Women Saints in Gaudiya Vaisnavism," 66, 83 n. 23.

93. Vanmikanathan and Mahalingam, *Periya Puranam*, 537.

94. *Ibid.*

95. Harle, *Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*; Khanna and Michell, *Human and Divine*.

96. Dehejia, *Antal and Her Path of Love*; Dennis Hudson, "Antal's Desire," in *Vaisnavi*, ed. Rosen, 171 210.
97. Andal, "Nacchiar Tirumoli," in *The Sacred Book of Four Thousand*, trans. Srirama Bharati, 115, 116, 110, 104, 111, 110, respectively.
98. Dehejia, *Antal and Her Path of Love*, 107.
99. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*, 126 27; also Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 77 82.
100. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*, 111 42.
101. *Ibid.*, 134.
102. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 1:347 50.
103. Leela Mullatti, *The Bhakti Movement and the Status of Women* (Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1989), 28 43, *vide*, 39 42.
104. *Ibid.*, 29, 31.
105. Dilip Chitre, ed., *Says Tuka: Selected Poetry of Tukaram* (New York: Penguin, 1991), xix.
106. Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996), 3 32, 267 92, *vide*, 22.
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108. *Ibid.*, 137.
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111. Sellegren, "Janabai and Kanhapatra," 213 38, *vide*, 216.
112. Tharu and Lalitha, eds., "Janabai," in *Women Writing in India*, 82 84.
113. Vilas Sarang, trans., "Jani Sweeps the Floor," in *Women Writing in India*, ed. Tharu and Lalitha, 83 84.
114. Sellegren, "Janabai and Kanhapatra," 216 17; also Margaret Macnicol, ed., *Poems by Indian Women* (Calcutta and London: Association Press and Oxford University Press, 1923); Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande, "Janabai: A Woman Saint of India," in *Women Saints in World Religions*, McGill Studies in the History of Religions, ed. Arvind Sharma (Albany: State University of New York, 2000), xi, 244.
115. Sellegren, "Janabai and Kanhapatra," 217.
116. Ruth Vanita, "Three Women Saints of Maharashtra: Muktabai, Janabai, and Bahinabai," *Manushi* 50 52 (January June 1989): 45 61.
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118. Sellegren, "Janabai and Kanhapatra," 221.
119. *Ibid.*, 218 19.
120. *Ibid.*, 225.
121. Zelliot, "Chokhamela: Piety and Protest," 212 20; and J. T. F. Jordens, "Medieval Hindu Devotionalism," in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. A. L. Basham, 6th ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 268 71.
122. Quoted by Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 22.

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124. Bahinabai, "Atmanivedana, abhang 35," trans. Justin E. Abbot, in Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, 115.
125. McGee, "Bahinabai," 152-53.
126. G. Grierson and L. D. Barnett, trans., *Lalla Vakyani* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1920), in Alphonso Karkala, *An Anthology of Indian Literature*, 442-43. I have modernized the language in the last line.
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128. Krishna Kripalani, "Medieval Indian Literature," in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. Basham, 309; and N. A. Jairazbhoy, "Music," in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. Basham, 237.
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131. Young, "Theology Does Help Women's Liberation," 235-94, *vide*, 235-38.
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135. In Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, 456, 536 n. 44.
136. *Ibid.*, 184.
137. Kersenboom Story, *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India*, 14.
138. *Ibid.*, xv, xx n. 2. Leslie Orr argues convincingly that Chola temple women were not called *nityasumangali*, in Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God*, 149-53.
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