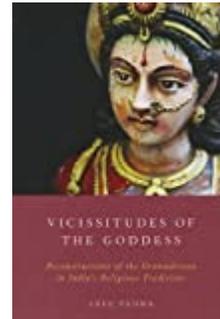




**Sree Padma.** *Vicissitudes of the Goddess: Reconstructions of the Gramadevata in India's Religious Traditions.* New York: Oxford University Press, October 2, 2013. 384 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-932502-3.



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## The Mutability of the Feminine Divine

South Asian religious studies has sometimes favored a canonized pantheon of gods, often at the exclusion of village practices that include the worship of nature and fertility goddesses. In this new vast study, Sree Padma, a historian of South Indian and primarily Andhra religious and visual culture, has focused on Dravidian manifestations of goddess worship and their transformations over millennia. Her work is particularly strong in addressing the artificial divide between textually endorsed Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina religious practices and village (or popular) religious praxis. The two have generally intermingled; thus this book necessarily treats the overlapping spheres of local, often agrarian, worship and more dominant, âmainstream Hinduâ practices.

Padmaâs main project is to contextualize *grĀmadevatĀ* (village goddess) traditions and to trace these goddessesâ transformations. She artfully dovetails iconographies and ideologies associated with fertility goddesses over time, using a combined methodology that spans archaeology, anthropology, and history. Padma draws upon interviews, oral traditions, textual and inscriptional

evidence, and historical and literary works of both North and South India. While her scope is ambitious, she has assembled a coherent and convincing thesis on goddess worship. However, the topic of *tantra*, certainly a significant factor in the changing manifestations of goddess worship across India, is noticeably absent from the book.

Padma is, perhaps, most successful in delineating a genealogy of recurrent symbols, themes, and ideologies. These include the goddessâs pairing with the bull as mate (or with another male sacrificial animal), the serpentâs connection to the fertility goddess and how it came to be adopted by Āivites, and non-anthropomorphic images of the goddess in stone and tree form. Her most virtuosic feat is her demonstration of the influence of popular worship on Brahmanical practices where these practices were later re-adopted in village worship in a Brahmanically approved guise.

The first chapter contextualizes prior studies of goddesses while addressing the Dravidian/Aryan dichotomy. Earlier ethnographic studies completed by foreign mis-

sionaries such as Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg were more objective than many later studies which marked village worship in opposition to a reified Brahmanical or Aryan religion. Ideas of ethnic or racial distinction spurred some of these later studies, completed by William Crooke and other colonial scholars. Thus scholars created an artificial divide between what was conceived as Dravidian worship (of the goddess, the snake, animal sacrifice, and spirit possession) and the real Hindu religion (based on Sanskrit scriptures). This sort of scholarship ignored the fact that the same people often participated in both forms of worship through the historical occurrence of the merging of various religious traditions (p. 33).

Chapter 2 theorizes that *grāmadevatās* and Brahmanical goddesses share the same ancient source and have influenced each other again and again in the multiple vicissitudes to which the volume's title refers. Padma argues that early visual sources of fertility goddess worship in the subsistence-based agricultural structures prevalent across South Asia until the fourth century BCE predated Buddhist material. The goddess, worshipped as fertile Earth, took the form of trees, snake holes, and stones such as the navel stone (*boddurai*). The *boddurai*, seen even in the present day in village centers, serves as a fertile navel for a community's growth. A detailed anthropological analysis of contemporary goddess worship in Andhra Pradesh traces auspicious symbols and patterns back to ancient sources, including pottery, burial slabs, rock paintings, and coins. These early pieces show symbols such as the *nandipada*, the footprint of the bull later known as the *triratna* in Buddhist and Jaina spheres, the lotus, the vegetative form of the *Ārāvatsa*, and the *triśūla* (trident). While the recurrence of these symbols throughout the material record is most intriguing, ascertaining their exact symbolic meaning in Stone and Iron Age imagery might be problematic. Can we be sure that Harappan seals show fertility goddesses and not simply full-bellied or pregnant women? Nonetheless, Padma's argument compellingly links early images to later examples, especially those appearing in Buddhist and Jaina incarnations, as with the *nandipada*. The bull appears in fertility worship as partner to the goddess, owing to his agricultural role in crop preparation, harvest, and guaranteeing cattle reproduction for milk and meat. Padma neatly links this analysis to the bull's iconography in later Āiava worship. Overall, Padma virtuously blends prehistoric content with contemporary religious practices, a daunting task to be sure.

In chapter 3 Padma relates ritual context to religious

symbolism. Here Padma differs from scholars such as Frits Staal who have argued that ritual might often be free of symbolic meaning. For Padma, ritual context is key in interpreting the prevalent symbols of anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic goddesses seen in the present day. She argues that the *svastika* and other symbols can be assumed to indicate a reference to the goddess in all instances. This, of course, might depend on contextual information that cannot always be determined with certainty. For example, the presence of the *svastika* in Buddhist images surely indicates auspiciousness, but can we be sure that it represents the goddess and female fertility in every appearance? The section on the Pot-bellied Lotus Goddess is most interesting; the symbolism of the brimming pot (*pāṛā'agha'ā*) and the womb merge with the lotus plant and with pots in ritual use. Her fascinating discussion of South Indian *nāga* worship reiterates one of the book's main arguments: that early motifs of goddess worship such as the *nāga* [are] understood in the Hindu temple context as being more a part of the Āiavite cult than a symbol of the goddess that has been incorporated into the *brahmanic* pantheon (p. 103). Some of the line drawings in this chapter lack clarity, although readers will certainly appreciate the extensive illustrations throughout the book.

The fourth chapter details how anthropomorphic forms of the goddess gained popularity in the Common Era and how fertility goddesses such as Durgā and Kālī came into Brahmanical literature and temples. Here the focus is on naked goddesses, tribal goddesses, and the Buddhist *Hārātā* cult. *Hārātā*, popular in Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere, was a *Mahāyāna* Buddhist figure, originally a child-devouring *yakā'ā*. With the aim of making *Hārātā* compassionate for those who have lost children, the Buddha kidnapped one of her five hundred (!) children, and she ultimately converted. According to legend, Buddhist monks fed her so that she would not consume children anymore. Eventually, she came to symbolize material well-being for the *samīgha* and Buddhist lay followers seeking children worshipped her. The visual and textual sources that Padma cites for this cult exemplify her method of showing the genealogy of goddess worship. This case study of *Hārātā*, narrowly focused in region and time span, is particularly successful for its historiographic integrity. The section on tribal goddesses consists primarily of contemporary retellings of narratives for which earlier versions lack verifiable dating. The thematic motifs of fertility women throughout the book weave also mark these narratives. For the naked goddess section, Padma traces the

worship of Dravidian fertility goddesses such as Ellamma and MĀtaá'gĀ« through terracotta carvings, ivory sealings, and stone sculptures dating from the fourth century BCE through the seventh century CE in Andhra Pradesh. Narrative sources include seventh-century CE Tamil literature, Buddhist texts, Telugu folk songs, and temple inscriptions dating up to the thirteenth century CE.

The last three chapters are arguably the most innovative. All three chapters use case studies from specific villages to explain the deification of historical women who met sudden or violent deaths. In contrast with earlier chapters, here the vicissitudes emerge from the human sphere, with actual women who have attained apotheosis through their deaths or through violence done to them. Padma explains mortal women's mutability into divine using notions of female fertile power as encapsulated in the Tamil concept of *aa'aa'ku*, a concept which includes the chaste power of virgin goddesses. On the local level, women's virginal status and auspicious fecundity might be seen as a protective force or might pose a threat for agricultural communities: they either protect from or inflict disease on people or famine on domesticated cattle. Communities might attempt to control or subdue this female energy through confinement of a woman or through the conduit of death performed for the community's sake (as in drowning, human sacrifice, or the practice of *satĀ«*). In chapter 5, *Bala Perantalu: Auspicious Virgin Mothers*, the type of vicissitude explored is the transformation from virgin to mother goddess, which often occurs through a purification process by heat, fire, or water. Other sources sometimes call this the trial of a female's chastity, like the trial by fire *SĀ«tĀ* endures in many renderings of the *RĀmĀyaá'a*. Padma explains that in some contexts, this feminine power can be subdued or concentrated through maintaining a vow of chastity or can be released into the community in the form of disease or a goddess's curse.

In chapter 6, on *Auspicious Wives*, Padma reexamines the typically sensationalized practices of *satĀ«*, including *sahagamana*, when a woman mounts her husband's funeral pyre, and *anumaraá'a*, when a wife makes her own funeral pyre to follow her husband in death. One can consider a controlled, deliberate death as a means of

releasing or preserving a woman's fertile powers or her chaste power of *aa'aa'ku*. Padma's analysis of these human beings transformed into village divinities elegantly demonstrates how women historically subverted Brahmanical power structures, colonial legislative authority, and the restrictive community standards imposed upon them. Particularly noteworthy are Padma's arguments that *satĀ«* may have originated in South India (not in Rajasthan, as often understood), and that *satĀ«* was frequently an empowering act for a woman to control her own sexual agency and potency.

The final chapter, *Deifying Victimized Women*, discusses premeditated deaths, sacrifices, and murders of women that are either attempts to please a supernatural power or punishment of the victims for their perceived violations of moral or social codes (p. 246). Padma sensitively shows that rural religion is much more complex and nuanced than a single religious tradition observed alone might suggest. Her discussion of sacrifice ranges from human females (virgins, married women, and widows) to the use of the coconut as a surrogate sacrificial human head in South Indian ritual. In the context of agricultural communities' sacrifices, male animals often present the ideal offering because they do not incur the economic disadvantage and reduction of reproductive potential that female animal sacrifice would.

Throughout the book, Padma's methodological approach combining anthropology, archaeology, history, and mythology is refreshing and boldly successful, even when such a vast sweep of source material might be expected to overstretch the feasibility of its incorporation in one single study. Her synthesis of pre-Vedic, Buddhist, Jaina, *Vaiá'Éá'ava*, and *Áaiva* material into the framework of village goddess worship enriches her findings and makes her study unique. Particularly useful is the way in which this book nicely builds off of pre-existing research on northern *satĀ«* practices, the goddess in Buddhist and *Vaiá'Éá'ava* traditions, temple iconography, and ritual symbolism. Although she privileges Dravidian content while dismissing Sanskritic sources, her appraisals of on-the-ground religious practices past and present offer much to experts and non-experts interested in a new lens through which to approach Indic religions.

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