



GTU

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

The Journal of the Graduate Theological Union

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

Volume 2, Issue 1

ISSN 2380-7458

24th Distinguished Faculty Lecture, Graduate Theological Union

The Technology of Transformation: Sacred Texts and the Divine Feminine

Author(s): Rita D. Sherma

Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 2, no. 1 (2016): 32-46.

Published By: Graduate Theological Union © 2016

Online article published on: February 28, 2018

Copyright Notice:

This file and its contents is copyright of the Graduate Theological Union © 2015. All rights reserved. Your use of the Archives of the Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology (BJRT) indicates your acceptance of the BJRT's policy regarding use of its resources, as discussed below.

Any redistribution or reproduction of part or all of the contents in any form is prohibited with the following exceptions:

- You may download and print to a local hard disk this entire article for your personal and non-commercial use only.
- You may quote short sections of this article in other publications with the proper citations and attributions.
- Permission has been obtained from the Journal's management for exceptions to redistribution or reproduction. A written and signed letter from the Journal must be secured expressing this permission.

To obtain permissions for exceptions, or to contact the Journal regarding any questions regarding further use of this article, please e-mail the managing editor at bjrt@ses.gtu.edu

The Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology aims to offer its scholarly contributions free to the community in furtherance of the Graduate Theological Union's scholarly mission.

The Technology of Transformation: *Sacred Texts and the Divine Feminine*

Rita D. Sherma

*Mira and Ajay Shingal Center for Dharma Studies
Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California, U.S.A.*

The 24th Reading of the Sacred Texts Lecture, 2016 Graduate Theological Union

In 1993, John Pairman Brown gave a lecture entitled “What Makes a Text Sacred?” The lecture would become the first of the annual Reading of the Sacred Texts Lecture. The 2016 lecture was given by Dr. Rita Sherma, who is Associate Professor of Dharma Studies at the GTU and Director of the GTU’s Mira and Ajay Shingal Center for Dharma Studies. Holding a Ph.D. from Claremont Graduate University, she is a prolific author and is vice-president of the Dharma Academy of North America, the co-founder of the Hinduism Program Unit at the American Academy of Religion, Associate Editor of the *Encyclopedia of Indian Religions* and Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Dharma Studies*.

Published in: BJRT, vol. 2, no. 1 © Graduate Theological Union, 2016

The absence of the feminine divine in Christian traditions has been mourned by theologians and ministers who have sought resources for the evocation of a feminine aspect of the Christian conception of the Divine.¹ The Hindu religion, the world’s third largest, in continuity with a nearly 4,000-year old

¹ See, for example: Cynthia Bourgeault and Rami Shapiro, *The Divine Feminine in Biblical Wisdom: Selections Annotated and Explained* (Nashville, TN: SkyLight Paths, 2011); and June Boyce-Tillman, *Unconventional Wisdom: Gender, Theology and Spirituality* (New York, Routledge, 2014).

living tradition of thought and practice offers, arguably, the only extant, widely-accepted systematic theological tradition of God the Mother as the Supreme Divine—transcendent and immanent, the efficient and material cause, sustenance, and final destination of all existence. The majority of scholarship on Hinduism’s Divine Feminine in the western academy focuses on the liturgical, ritual, festive, pilgrimage, and other praxis elements associated with Her. Some examine the impact of the strong presence of the Feminine Divine in Hinduism on the lives and liberties of Hindu women.

However, all such efforts at understanding a phenomenon that has no western counterpart are most often undertaken without consideration of the diverse theological visions associated with the Divine Feminine. This oversight is understandable. Hindu philosophical theology—with extensive theological commentaries (*bhāṣya*) on scripture—is systematic and associated with particular theological denominations (*sampradāya*-s). In contradistinction, *mystical theology* is often arrayed in the language of mythopoeia allowing for the narrative structure of the theological text to be transformed into popular recitation and ritual, feasts and festivals, ceremony and liturgy, as well as esoteric theology and praxis accessible only to the initiated. In the process, the theological content can recede to the background—hidden, but in plain sight. The theology of God the Mother falls into this latter category. She is known to Hindus as Śakti (divine power), Devī (Divine Feminine), Mahādevī (Great Goddess or God the Mother), and Īśvari (God, in terms of a feminine pronoun), amongst other titles.

Feminine deity, in the Hindu tradition, is ubiquitous for a number of reasons. Across diverse Hindu theologies, the Feminine Divine is associated with divine power (*śakti*), the force of active creation (*kriyā-śakti*)², the material cause of creation (*pradhāna*), various natural forms

² In the Pratyabhijñā philosophy of Kashmir Śaivism, Śakti is understood to have three primary modes manifestation which are: *Icchā Śakti* (the divine volitional power/energy); *Jñāna Śakti* (the power/energy of knowing which manifests first in the divine consciousness before concrete manifestation can occur); *Kriyā Śakti* (the power/energy of action)

and phenomena (such as rivers, forests, the dawn, water, and the earth itself), as well as certain inherent capacities that exist in the cosmic manifold (and within humans who are part of the cosmos) such as, for example, the divine potency of abundance (Lakṣmī). However wide-ranging the conceptions of the feminine principle in Hindu thought and practice across the historical record, the specific understanding of the Divine Feminine as the Supreme Reality, is first glimpsed in a hymn from the *Rig Veda* (1900-1700 BCE) — the earliest texts of the Hindu canon — known as the *Devī Sūktam* (“Praise to the Divine Feminine,” RV 10.125) that envisions the Feminine Divine as: Ultimate Source, Creative Force, Pervasive Universal Power, and as Supreme Divinity. The *Rig Veda* is contains 1,028 hymns and 10,600 verses, systematized into ten books. The *Devī Sūktam*, written by a renowned woman sage (*ṛṣika*) known as Ambhrani, appears to have been composed in a state of ecstatic, unitary mystical experience of the Self as pervasive, unlimited, and non-local. Verses from the hymn bear testimony to her experience (*Rig Veda* 10.8.125, *Devī Sūktam*):

I am the Queen, the gatherer of treasures, established
in/as Ultimate Reality, the Primary Object of Worship.
The Luminous Divine Powers (*devāḥ*) have dispersed me
in many places, having many abodes, causing me to be
All-Pervasive.

(Verse 3)

Even eating, seeing, breathing, or hearing the spoken
word is accomplished through me alone. Even the non-
perceivers amongst you dwell near me. Hear me, for I
reveal the truth.

(Verse 4)

While creating all beings, I merely breathe forth like the
wind. So expansive is my power, possessing a greatness
beyond heaven and earth.

(Verse 8)

The *Devī Sūktam* is a testament to the early Vedic authority granted to women’s enlightened awareness and an initial harbinger of the vision of the Divine Feminine as immanent, experienceable, creative power and

presence. Nearly four millennia later, the *Devī Sūktam* is still recited as part of the *Devī Māhātmyam*, the sacred text of God the Mother and, here, the subject of our exploration. Its integration into the *Devī Māhātmyam* is a testimony to the living stream of the vision of the Divine Feminine as the immanent supreme reality in the Hindu experience of the phenomenal world.

In Hindu theology and philosophy, the feminine principle functions as the active and creative pole of the ontological binary that is posited across schools of thought. In addition, “God” (in Hindu Theism), or “the Divine,” (in Hindu non-dualism) is dyadic—an integrated divinity that includes both the divine masculine and divine feminine. As such, the two major visions of God (distinct but related) in Hindu Theology—that of Viṣṇu and Śiva—are incomplete without their feminine and dynamic counterparts. Their feminine counterparts, Lakṣmī and Pārvatī—who is strongly identified with Śakti/ Mahādevī—respectively, are presented in mythic theological narratives as the divine feminine aspect/consort/partner. Yet the theological understanding interprets the divine masculine and feminine as coterminous, co-necessary, and coeval. They form two modes of a divine dyad. We have briefly examined the position of Śakti/ Mahādevī vis-à-vis the Supreme Deity with whom She is associated. We will examine, in the *Devī Māhātmyam*, the vision of Śakti in Śakta texts in which She does not merely inform the nature of the Absolute but where She *is* the Absolute.

Hindu theology is most often structured in terms of a divine biunity. The binaries of reality as cast as the masculine and feminine principles as in the Chinese concept of Yin-Yang. Such biune pairs include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Transcendence – Immanence
- Consciousness – Matter/Energy
- Stasis – Dynamism
- Infinitude – Finitude
- Eternality – Temporality

- Divine Potential –Phenomenal Actualization
- Being – Becoming

The *divine feminine principle* (Śakti/ Mahādevī) in Hindu theology and philosophy is associated/identified with: (i) Immanence and Creativity (ii) Matter-Energy; (iii) Dynamism; (iv) Genesis and Emergence of Forms & Phenomena; (v) the Body-Mind; (vi) Transitions and Transformations; (vii) the Power inherent in the Cosmos; (viii) both the Formless Absolute *and* the Divine Mother. The *divine masculine principle*, in theologies associated with Śiva, is identified as: (i) Transcendence over Time; (ii) Consciousness (iii) Divine Quiescence/Stillness; (iv) Infinite Potentiality; (iv) Ground of Being/Reality; (v) Consciousness; (vi) the Ultimate Subject/Self who Experiences all things through Sentient Beings; (vii) the Wielder of Cosmic Power (viii) both the Formless Absolute *and* the Divine Lord/Creator.

Śiva in the form of “Rudra” is a deity in the *Rig Veda Samhitā*. But Śiva is envisioned as the Supreme Lord in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (400-200 BC), presenting the earliest textual roots of theistic devotion to Rudra- Śiva. He is identified as the creator of the cosmos and liberator of souls. The era from 200 BC to 100 AD also marks the beginning of the Śaiva tradition focused on the worship of Śiva as the Supreme Divine. Śiva is associated with Pārvatī, the gentle aspect of Śakti/ Mahādevī. By the period of the composition of the Purāṇa-s (from circa 400 BCE – 400 CE), she is identified clearly as the feminine aspect of the divine dyad of Śiva- Śakti. The *Devī Māhātmyam*, Pārvatī is explicitly associated with the Mahādevī in all Her forms, thereby theologically linking the Devī of the *Devī Māhātmyam* to Śiva in the minds of worshippers.

It is appropriate to begin an exploration of the nature and function of Śakti in Śakta texts with the *Devī Māhātmyam*, a seminal text for the theology, liturgy, and ritual life of Śakta-s (those for whom She is God the Mother). The *Devī Māhātmyam* can be translated as the “Inherent Greatness of the Devi” and the glorification of the Devī as the “Great Supreme Self.” In this text, crystallized for the first time, is the vision of the

Mahādevī that now colors the various strands of the Śakta tradition. This vision is what N. N. Bhattacharya has famously called “independent Śaktism” as opposed to the “dependent Śaktism” of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava theologies.³

The *Devī Māhātmyam* of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* comprises chapters 81-93 of the Purāṇa, one of the early Sanskrit Purāṇa-s (a category of Sacred Text that interweaves theology with mythic and legendary narratives), and is attributed to the sage Mārkaṇḍeya. The thirteen chapters of *Devī Māhātmyam* are divided into three major episodes. Amongst the important forms of the Divine Feminine introduced by the *Devī Māhātmyam* into Hindu Theology is Kali.

The text is known by several other names, the best known of which are: *Durgā Saptashatī* (700 Verses to Durga, the sacred name by which name She is referenced in the text) *Caṇḍī* (one of the names of Durga), and *Caṇḍī Pāṭha* (“pāṭha” means liturgical recitation). The fact that the text is known as a “recitation,” points to its primary function. Although the text forms the basis of Śakta theology, it is most commonly viewed as a 700-verse mantra to be chanted, rather than a theological text to be understood. Mantra itself has a nearly four millennia history in the Hindu tradition and is the basis of Hindu “sonic theology,”⁴ whereby specific sound vibrations are associated with certain states of awareness; mantra is meant to be orally and aurally experienced as transformative to one’s consciousness.

Composed circa 400-600 CE, the *Devī Māhātmyam* is highly significant as the foundation, testament, summation, and theological heart of the Śakta tradition, and has been translated into most Indian languages. There are several commentaries on the text, and numerous ritual manuals associated with it. The commentaries and ritual manuals differ according to region. This variegation has led to a democratization of

³ N. N. Bhattacharya, *The History of the Śakta Religion*, 2d. ed. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1996), 96.

⁴ Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).

the text and its popularity and availability to the rural poor, illiterate persons, those outside the scholastic theological circles, and to women across social, linguistic, and educational demarcations.

The elaboration of the theology of the Mahādevī that first occurs in the *Devī Māhātmyam* melds together various philosophical constructs—such as *śakti*, *māyā*, *prakṛti*, and the notion of Ultimate Reality (Brahman)—to create a portrait of God the Mother. The text portrays Her as the causal agent of creation and implicitly identifies Her with the ground of being—thereby endowing Her with transcendence. As Śakti, She is the creative, sustaining, and dissolutive (or reabsorptive) power underlying the manifest cosmos. She is the matrix of the universe and, as *prakṛti*, its material substratum. Hence, She is fully immanent in the world as its efficient and material cause and essence. Indeed, according to the *Devī Māhātmyam*, the Mahādevī does not employ a specific power or force to create the world; ultimately, She is the world and all its diverse forms are aspects of Her Being—yet, Her creation does not delimit Her and She maintains the power of transcendence.

Thomas Coburn has noted that while this “comprehensive statement” of Her identity is not the earliest example of devotion to the feminine divine, it is undoubtedly the first in which this devotion is anchored to the heritage of the important category of texts known as the *Purāṇa*-s (theology rendered through mythopoesis) and to the two great epics of Hindu sacred literature. This anchoring occurs through the incorporation of the theological functions and narratives from the mythos and logos associated with other divinities so that the Mahādevī is able to include and transcend other conceptions of Deity.

The *Devī Māhātmyam* is most widely known as the *Durga Saptashatī*. Indeed, although the Mahādevī is addressed by many titles and epithets in the text, Durga has become the name consistently associated with God the Mother in a pan-Hindu context. The text itself has a life of its own and is widely used in both Indian and abroad in numerous worship scenarios including the popular *jāgrata*, which are all-night vigils

devoted to the liturgical chanting of the text. This form of praxis is common in the Hindu diaspora where it can be performed in private homes amongst friends and family. The text is also variously applied in temple contexts in centers dedicated to different aspect of the Mahādevī. There are numerous liturgical manuals associated with the text.

For our purposes, however, it is the theological elements embedded in the narrative that are of greatest interest. The vision of God the Mother expressed in the *Devī Māhātmyam* is encyclopedic in a theological sense. It attempts to appropriate to Her all the capacities, functions, and powers of both the masculine and feminine principles that have been attributed, in other texts, to God—variously conceived. Theological elements are not explicitly delineated in the text but are woven, instead, through the strands of the mythic narrative in which the theology of the Mahādevī is framed. The three-fold narrative begins with a king who has lost his kingdom, and a merchant who has been duped out of his wealth and property by his own kin. Both men are at the hermitage of a sage. They turn to the sage for counsel in dealing with the pain and suffering associated with their losses. The sage tells them about the grace of the Mahādevī and reveals to them Her mythos, which consists of three different episodes in which She acts to restore justice and eradicate the preeminence of evil. The three narratives are punctuated with hymns of praise that glorify Her majesty and benevolent care for creation and reveal, through their verses, the hidden theology of God the Mother.

The first episode actually requires Viṣṇu to eradicate two malevolent beings (*āśura*-s) but He is under the influence of a deep sleep induced by the Mahādevī Herself in Her form as Mahāmāyā. Brahmā, contemplating the manifestation of the next cycle of the universe at Viṣṇu's behest, is prevented from his creative work by the two *āśura*-s. Brahmā sings a hymn to the Mahādevī that presents Her theology through the glorification of Her names, and invokes Her presence for the release Viṣṇu from His cosmic slumber. She does so and Viṣṇu is able to awaken and dispatch the *āśura*-s. This mythic narrative is a reformulation of an

earlier narrative centered on Viṣṇu but, here, Viṣṇu is under the active control of the Mahādevī. Devī does so and Viṣṇu awakens and vanquishes the *āśura*-s. Through this narrative, two primary masculine divinities, Viṣṇu and Brahmā, are conceptualized as divine agents dependent on the Mahādevī. She is presented as the power that allows the cosmic order to be restored and as having primary agency.

The second episode presents the theodicy of God the Mother and Her care for the world. The Mahādevī, in the form known as Caṇḍī, represents the irresistible force of divine justice when released against malevolence. The world is under attack by Mahiṣāsura, a potent and wildly destructive *āśura* who, in a number of popular accounts, is morphogenic—just as malevolence always changes form according to circumstances. The *devatā*-s, diverse divine beings, are unable to counter Mahiṣāsura, and endow the Devī with their potencies and capacities. She is henceforth envisioned as the wielder of all divine powers. Astride a lion (representing majesty), She destroys the *āśura* who has taken the form of a buffalo. Through this act, she not only dissolves the power of the *āśura* but liberates his spirit as well. Chaos dissolves and order emerges. As Thomas Coburn notes:

The conclusion seems inevitable: The conception of deity as periodically incarnate for the sake of redeeming the world has been employed in the service of both Kṛṣṇa and the [Mahādevī]. ... That this affinity is not merely casual is suggested by the fact that virtually all the other early hymns to the [Mahādevī] as found in the Mahābhārata ... contain this same emphasis on salvific activity in the teeth of adversity.... The synthesis that is accomplished in the *Devī-Māhātmya* [sic] is therefore extraordinarily and uniquely broad. It reaches deep into the Sanskrit heritage, identifying the [Mahādevī] with central motifs, names, and concepts in the Vedic traditions.⁵

Noted Śakta practitioner and teacher, Devadatta Kali offers a commonly held interpretation of the three episodes as “allegories of outer and inner experience.” The *āśura*-s “represent the all too human impulses arising

⁵ Thomas B. Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devī-Māhātmya and a Study of Its Interpretation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

from the pursuit of power, possessions, and pleasure, and from illusions of self-importance. Like the battlefield of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Devī Māhātmya*'s [battlegrounds] represents the field of human consciousness on which the drama of individual lives plays out in joy and sorrow, in wisdom and folly.”⁶

In the third episode, the Mahādevī manifests different forms of Herself from within. An organic unity is established between Śakti in her aspects as the gentle Pārvatī, the dark Kālikā, and the motherly but fierce Ambika. Entreated by the celestial *devatā*-s, who have endured the ascendance of malevolent forces, the Mahādevī once again enters the arena of duality and counters evil. In the cosmic battle that ensues, the ferocious Kali is born in a burst of light from the Mahādevī's forehead as a manifestation of the fierce love of the Divine Mother for creation. The Mahādevī confronts an *āśura* named Raktabīja in the third episode. Each drop of blood shed by the *āśura* morphs into a brand new *āśura* as it touches the earth. From a fire that appears from the third eye (the eye that sees into eternity) on Her forehead, emerges Kali, who laps up every drop of the blood of Raktabīja the moment it has fallen, thereby inhibiting the emergence of new forces of malevolence. In the concluding battle, Devi absorbs Kali back into her being. From each of the masculine divine powers present, their *śakti*-s (feminine powers, counterparts, capacities) emerge and join the cosmic battle for the return to light, peace, and harmony. Eventually, the Mahādevī absorbs all the *śakti*-s into Herself. At the conclusion of the episodes, after accepting the devotional praise of the grateful *devatā*-s and the celestial hosts, the Mahādevī proclaims that whenever any form of profound danger threatens the flourishing of creation, divine care and restoration will occur, proclaiming that She will come to the rescue if “Once again, when there has been no rain, no water, on the earth for a hundred years...” (*Devī Māhātmyam* 11.42-45).

⁶ Devadatta Kali, *In Praise of the Goddess: The Devimahatmya and Its Meaning* (Lakewirth, FL: Nicolas-Hays, 2003)

The Goddess, in the *Devī Māhātmyam*, is the creator of the universe (1.43), the very process of temporality and change within it (11.8), all-pervasive and eternal (1.47) cause of the cosmic creation (1.56), maintenance (1.53, 5.66), and dissolution (1.57). She is, at once, the gnosis that liberates (1.44, 1.58) and the illusory nature of experiential knowledge (1.58). While she is the divine redemptress for those seeking liberation, she is also the source of fulfillment for those seeking worldly satisfaction (12.38). She is identified with the primary modes of the feminine principle such as *māyā* (5.12), and *prakṛti* (1.59, 4.6)—with its three innate characteristics (*guṇa*-s) of luminous purity, dynamic activity, and dissolutive or entropic states—that weave through and condition all of matter. But at the same time, she is the self-existent, eternal divinity (11.10). She is characterized as both tremendous and awe-inspiring in her power (1.61) and the epitome of gentleness (1.62). Within all life, she resides as the consciousness (5.13), intelligence (5.14), power (5.18), activity, perception (5.27), and compassion (5.29). She is the omnipresent, all-pervasive divine immanence (5.33- 34) in the material universe, comprising all forms which are Her transformations (11.6). Ultimate Reality, as presented by the text, is none other than the Devī of *Devī Mahātmyam*.

Descriptions of the nature of the Mahādevī are woven through the text in the form of songs of praise and invocation. These descriptions, names, and epithets are not elaborated upon but, nonetheless, given the use of these terms of reference in the Purāṇic theology and other theological literature, the implications are clear. The descriptions of the glory of God the Mother contain a great deal of implicit theology, elucidated by some of the theological commentaries on the text. From these hymns of embedded theology worshippers have surmised much about the nature of the Divine that is put forward by the *Devī Māhātmyam*. Of the many hymns of evocation that offer the theology of the Mahādevī in the text, the final one is known as the *Tantroktam Devī Sūktam*. Below are

examples of verses from the hymn that allows for an appreciation of the use of epithets to signify the nature of the Divine:

TANTROKTAM DEVĪ SŪKTAM⁷
Hymn to Aparājitā (“In Praise of the One Who is Undeclared”)
Devī Māhātmyam [Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa]

*1 Namō Devyai Mahādevyai
Śivāyai satataṁ namaḥ
Namaḥ Prakṛtyai Bhadrāyai
niyatāḥ praṇatāḥ sma tām*

Praise to the Goddess, to the great Goddess, to the energy of the auspicious one.
Praise to Nature, to She who is pure beneficence.
Salutations to Her

*2 Raudrāyai namo Nityāyai
Gauryai Dhātryai namo namaḥ
Jyōthsnāyai cendurūpiṇyai
Sukhāyai satataṁ namaḥ*

Praise to the tremendous one, to the eternal, to Gauri Devī, to the embodiment of the luminous. Salutations to the One who manifests as the form of moonlight,
Salutations to the One who is endless joy.

*3 Kalyānyai praṇatām Vṛddhyai
Siddhyai kurmo namo namaḥ
Nairṛtyai bhūbr̥tām Lakṣmyai
Śarvāṅgyai te namo namaḥ.*

Praise to the benevolent One, to growth, to success, to Nairṛti,
And to the abundance which sustains the earth,
Salutations to you, the One who is immanent in all

*7 Yā devī sarva-bhūteṣu
cetane-tyabhidhīyate
Namas-tasyai, namas-tasyai
namas-tasyai namo namaḥ.*

Praise to the Divine Mother immanent in all, who is the Consciousness in all beings
Salutations to Her

⁷ Translation by Rita D. Sherma.

8 *Yā devi sarva-bhūteṣu
buddhi-rūpeṇa saṁsthītā
Namas-tasyai, namas-tasyai,
namas-tasyai namo namaḥ.*

Praise to the Divine Mother immanent in all, who abides in the form of
Wisdom
Salutations to Her

12 *Yā devi sarva-bhūteṣu
śakti-rūpeṇa saṁsthītā
Namas-tasyai, namas-tasyai
namas-tasyai namo namaḥ.*

Praise to the Divine Mother immanent in all, who abides in the form of
Divine Energy.
Salutations to Her

17 *Yā devi sarva-bhūteṣu
śānti-rūpeṇa saṁsthītā
Namas-tasyai, namas-tasyai
namas-tasyai namo namaḥ.*

Praise to the Divine Mother immanent in all, who abides in the form of
Tranquility
Salutations to Her

18 *Yā devi sarva-bhūteṣu
śraddhā-rūpeṇa saṁsthītā
Namas-tasyai, namas-tasyai
namas-tasyai namo namaḥ.*

Praise to the Divine Mother immanent in all, who abides in the form of
Faith
Salutations to Her

25 *Yā devi sarva-bhūteṣu
matṛ-rūpeṇa saṁsthītā
Namas-tasyai, namas-tasyai
namas-tasyai namo namaḥ.*

Praise to the Divine Mother immanent in all, who abides in the form of
Mother
Salutations to Her

God the Mother, according to Her sacred text is all in all and, yet, cares deeply for the welfare of sentient beings. For those who seek enlightened liberation, She is the liberator. For those seeking satisfaction in life, She is the source of blessings. The *Devī Māhātmyam* identifies Her with materiality and transformation but, at the same time, proclaims that She is the self-existent, eternal, unconditioned Absolute. She is characterized as fierce in her power and the personification of nurturance in Her care for creation.

The three tales narrated by the sage to the dispossessed king and the cheated merchant are often viewed as metaphors for both psychological and physical life experience. The *āśura*-s, the forces of malevolence that are confronted by the Devī, are symbolic of the worst of human tendencies: they seek to overpower the divine order in their delusion, and craving for power, pleasure, and possessions. They are the inner unawareness of humans in regards to the teleological thrust of the cosmos towards emergence, order, symbiosis. The *Devī Māhātmyam*'s battlefields represent the field of human effort and endeavor and can be analogized to the battlefield of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. The Devī, envisioned as one Supreme Divinity that contains all other divinities, challenges the *inner demons of the human mind*: that of the delusional ego forgetting that nothing belongs to oneself but everything belongs to the Supreme Self. Chapters 1, 4, 5, and 11 describe the adoration offered to the Devī, who opens one's eyes to the possibility of transcending one's own lower nature. In chapter 1, the *deva* always shown with four faces for the four directions, Brahma, proclaims that the Devi has created everything including himself. God the Mother, the Primordial Power (Adi-Śakti), is presented as the source of all other divine potencies and cosmic forces, embodying the combined energy of the luminous cosmic powers (*deva*-s). She possesses both material and causal agency. Ultimate Reality, proclaims the text, is none other than the Devī of the *Devī Māhātmyam*. Through this abrogation of powers, capacities, and agency that are the purview of *both* the masculine and feminine principles, the text integrates the ontological

binaries, which I have discussed earlier, and protects against any potential disjunction between the transcendence and immanence.

Bibliography

Beck, Guy L. *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Ground*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009.

Bhattacharyya, N. N. *The History of the Śakta Religion, 2nd ed.* New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1996.

Coburn, Thomas B. *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devī-Māhātmya and a Study of Its Interpretation*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991.

Kali, Devadatta. *In Praise of the Goddess: The Devimahatmya and Its Meaning*. Lakewirth, FL: Nicolas-Hays, 2003.