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The Role of the Mahadevi in the Hindu Patriarchy

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The Role of the Mahadevi in the Hindu Patriarchy

Abstract

[From the introduction]

The Hindu religious tradition contains over three hundred and thirty million gods, all of which represent a particular aspect of the Supreme Being. I focus on the divine creative feminine force, known by Hindus as Shakti. In the Hindu pantheon, Shakti manifests itself in the form of the Mahadevi, the supreme goddess. In turn, the Mahadevi manifests herself through many different avatars, or deities. The devi, or goddess, that my study focuses on is Durga, or Maa Durga (Mother Durga). My interest in Durga stems from her warrior persona and her existence in the state of Svātantrya, or the ultimate state of self-sufficiency and independence from anything and anyone in the universe. Durga’s “primary mythological function is to combat demons who threaten the stability of the cosmos” (Kinsley 1986:95). Likewise, while all other Hindu goddesses are associated with a consort, or male counterpart, Durga stands alone. My study examines how a goddess such as this is able to exist within a patriarchal religion and society. Similarly, my study also investigates the social roles in which women are able to emulate Durga within the patriarchal framework.

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Introduction

The Hindu religious tradition contains over three hundred and thirty million gods, all of which represent a particular aspect of the Supreme Being. I focus on the divine creative feminine force, known by Hindus as Shakti. In the Hindu pantheon, Shakti manifests itself in the form of the Mahadevi, the supreme goddess. In turn, the Mahadevi manifests herself through many different avatars, or deities. The devi, or goddess, that my study focuses on is Durga, or Maa Durga (Mother Durga). My interest in Durga stems from her warrior persona and her existence in the state of Svātantrya, or the ultimate state of self-sufficiency and independence from anything and anyone in the universe. Durga's “primary mythological function is to combat demons who threaten the stability of the cosmos” (Kinsley 1986:95). Likewise, while all other Hindu goddesses are associated with a consort, or male counterpart, Durga stands alone. My study examines how a goddess such as this is able to exist within a patriarchal religion and society. Similarly, my study also investigates the social roles in which women are able to emulate Durga within the patriarchal framework.

I first discovered Durga in artistic depictions of the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses. I was intrigued by the image of a ten-armed woman wielding a weapon in each hand while riding a lion, or sometimes a tiger. I was also fascinated by the fact that Durga “is not submissive, she is not subordinate to a male deity, she does not fulfill household duties, and she excels at what is traditionally a male function, fighting in battle” (Kinsley 1986:97).

I found these particular qualities interesting because of my personal participation in wrestling. Wrestling is a combative, male-dominated sport in the United States. Being a female in an aggressive male-dominated sport, I connected with Durga's main representation as that of a female warrior. I too felt like I was acting as a female warrior whenever I stepped on the wrestling mat for a match. Similar to Durga's encounter with the demon Mahishasura, who scoffed at the notion of losing a battle to a woman, I too was often underestimated by male opponents. I specifically recall a match in which a former coach of mine, who was at that time coaching my opponent, warned his wrestler to be smart
about wrestling me. The boy then replied, “Don't worry coach, I got it. She's just a girl.” After less than a minute into the first period of the match, I had thrown the boy to his back and the referee had called the pin. I could tell I had shaken his perception of what a “girl” truly is by the look of consternation on his face once he walked off the mat after my hand had been raised.

My initial fascination with Durga was also sparked by the artistic depictions of her. Even though she is a female warrior conveying masculine qualities, she is always displayed as an attractive woman with a tranquil expression. This representation also occurs in depictions of her in battle! I find it interesting that she epitomizes physical female power while still managing to look serene and stunningly beautiful. Her stunning appearance causes me to wonder if it is this beauty that allows her to act aggressively without subverting patriarchal authority.

I believe this topic deserves anthropological and sociological analysis because it will contribute to the discourse on female based forms of worship and the role it fulfills in patriarchal societies. I believe this knowledge is important because it demonstrates how women are able to maintain positions of power without upsetting an established patriarchal tradition. Understanding power structures and roles that people play within their society is central to a holistic understanding of a society and its culture. I also feel that my research will contribute to the general knowledge and understanding of Hindu religious practices and forms of worship.
Literature Review

David Kinsley’s book *Hindu Goddess: Visions of the Divine Feminine in Hindu Religious Tradition* (1986) serves as a survey of Hindu goddesses. In his book, Kinsley states that his goal “is to provide portraits of the most important goddesses of the Hindu pantheon” (1986:1). Kinsley provides a description of Durga’s historical origins which appear “to be among the indigenous non-Aryan cultures of India” (1986:96). In the Vedic tradition, which is the basis of Hinduism, there are no goddesses mentioned that resemble Durga. The earliest references to her associate her with the Vindhya Mountains and tribal peoples like the Sabaras. These references to mountain ranges as well as different rivers add to the concept of Durga as the Mother of India. In *Devi: Goddess of India*, John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff further the concept of the Mahadevi as the Mother of India with the belief that Durga “spreads herself across the landscape of much of India” (1996:96). These origins add to the multifaceted role Durga holds as the mother and protector of her devotees.

In Kinsley's earlier work, *The Sword and the Flute: Kali and Krsna* (1975), he explores Durga's wild and ferocious manifestation, the dark and chaotic goddess known as Kali. Kali first appears in the Devi-mahatmya purana. Kinsley acknowledges that Kali's “role in this scripture is clearly defined: she is subservient to the goddess Durga and is called upon to help or rescue the Great Goddess” (1975:92). However, Kali begins to become independent of Durga in the Bhagavata purana where she is portrayed as “the patron goddess of a band of thieves” (1975:93). Kinsley's goal in this book is to examine how the goddess Kali becomes separate from Durga and gains her own myths, rituals and devotees. This background information provides further insight into the mythology surrounding Durga and her other well-known blood-thirsty avatar, Kali.

asks similar questions to my own such as: “How will the images of 'dark' Kali interpret womanhood in the light of the women's role and status in the Hindu society?” and “Does 'dark' Kali suggest alternatives to the male-dominated Hindu religious tradition?” (2005:3). Patro also investigates the role a fierce goddess plays within the patriarchal Hindu society. However he chooses to focus on the goddess Kali. His study differs from my own because Kali, although fierce and wild, is often affiliated with Shiva as her consort. But, as I suggest above, Durga exists in the state of Svātantrya and is never directly associated with a consort.

In looking for authoritative sources on the aspects associated with the Mahadevi, the book _Hindu Goddesses: Beliefs and Practices_ (2009) by Lynn Foulston and Stuart Abbott acts as a general primer on the subject. Foulston and Abbott give in-depth explanations of the three main elements associated with the Devi: Shakti, _maya_, and _prakrti_. Shakti is defined as, “power, ability, [and] strength” and is personified in Durga in her warrior persona and Kali when she is intoxicated by blood (2009:9). Foulston and Abbott note, “Both maya and prakrti in many contexts have negative connotations, but when they are associated with the goddess, they become positive powers” (2009:14). Maya is the Mahadevi's ability to create illusion, which she uses to delude her demon foes in battle. For example, Durga utilizes maya when she manifests warriors to aid her in battle. Foulston and Abbott explain that although the Mahadevi “creates the illusory nature of the world...[she] is also the means of liberation from it” (2009:14). Thus, devotees of the Mahadevi follow her in hope of gaining her blessing to liberate them from the veil of maya, enabling the devotees to see the true world. Prakrti is the material world and nature that is associated with the Mahadevi. Prakrti can represent the chaos Durga and Kali bring to battle or it can represent the mothering aspects the Mahadevi. Understanding these three aspects adds to the understanding of the Mahadevi's duality as both mother and warrior.

Susan S. Wadley's article, “Women and the Hindu Tradition,” (1977) examines the personalities of goddesses who submit to their consorts and those who do not. Wadley finds that “if control of [the
goddess's] sexuality is transferred to men, the female is fertile and benevolent” (1977:116). On the contrary, “if [the goddess] controls her own sexuality she is potentially destructive and malevolent” (1977:117). Thus, the Mahadevi acts as both benevolent provider and malevolent protector. This article helps to convey the position Durga takes within the Hindu patriarchy. Durga does not submit to a consort; therefore, she is perceived as infertile and treated as male. Likewise, in this form she may also act as a protector. It is in the Mahadevi's benevolent, submissive form that she is able to be fertile and thus functions as the nurturing mother.

The ritual surrounding the worship of Durga is known as the Durga Puja. Inherent within this ritual is the practice of mother worship. Robert Trotter's article, “God: She's Alive and Well” (1976), and James J. Preston's book, *Cult of the Goddess: Social and Religious Change in a Hindu Temple* (1985), both examine the objectives that drive the practice of mother worship. Trotter explains that prior to modernization, people prayed to the Mother Goddess for general protection and for things necessary for survival. Trotter goes on to say that “now, with the stresses of modern life, they ask her for cash, material goods and opportunities for upward mobility” (1976:110). Preston further inspects these goals and concludes that the primary purpose of devotional rituals to the Mother Goddess is to “surrender to the deity in exchange for her benevolent protection and good fortune” (1985:19). Therefore, through the practice of Mother worship, devotees hope to gain blessings which will further their lives. Likewise, devotees also desire to venerate the goddess whom they perceive as their mother.

After examining the goals that drive the worship of the Mahadevi, I examine the act of performing the devotion ritual. The most common form of Hindu worship is the *puja*, which is an offering to a god. Lawrence A. Babb describes the typical puja in his book *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India* (1975). According to Babb, before an offering can be made to the gods devotees must purify their surroundings, the offering, and themselves. Following this purification process, devotees show respect to the god by greeting them with a gesture known as *pranam*. Pranam is
performed by making “a slight forward inclination of the head with both hands brought together at the
elevation of the face” (1975:51). After greeting the god, devotees offer food. Food offerings are known
as prashad and are central to pujas. Babb explains that “without a food offering of some kind the ritual
would simply not be puja in the conventional sense of the term” (1975:54). Once the god eats his or her
fill of the offering, the food is taken back and distributed among the devotees to be eaten. The goal in
eating the remaining offering is to be close to the god by consuming that which the god has touched.

In her book, *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess: the Liturgy of the Durga Puja with Interpretations* (2003), Hilary Peter Rodrigues catalogs and analyzes the intricate events of the Durga Puja that occur every fall in India at the Navaratra festival. Likewise, Rodrigues also examines the Bengali style of domestic Durga Puja because it is “the most elaborate of the Durga Pujas...and encompasses most of the ritual elements found in non-Bengali types of celebration” (2003:17-8). I use this source to gain a deeper understanding of the elements involved in the annual and daily domestic Durga Pujas that take place throughout India. Rodrigues also looks at the purpose of the Durga Puja. These purposes include showing adoration to the Mahadevi, manifesting the divine Shakti, and obtaining empowerment for individuals as well as communities.

Hindu society is predominantly stratified by gender and class. As Shireen J. Jejeeboy and Zeba A. Sathar explain in their article “Women's Autonomy in India and Pakistan: The Influence of Religion and Region” (2001), Hindu society is “characterized by patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence, inheritance and succession practices that exclude women, and hierarchical relations in which the patriarch or his relatives have authority over family members” (2001:687). Aside from my own ethnographic observations, I utilize this article as a textual understanding of the autonomy Hindu women may exercise within their families and society as a whole.

Stephanie T. Lama explains another facet of Hindu society that has adopted fierce and malevolent goddesses, like Durga and Kali, as appropriate role models for women in her article, “The
In her article Lama explains, “In independent India, the Goddess seems to be associated exclusively with individual women, that is, to women leaders” (2010:5). The women leaders Lama is referring to are specifically politicians. This association was first made to Indira Gandhi who served three consecutive terms as the Prime Minister of India from 1966 to 1977. In establishing this role of the goddess as a model for female political figures, Lama also asks what the social consequences are in doing this. Lama believes that “the banalization of women's leadership [is avoided] by placing them on a superhuman plane;” however as a result of this, “these leaders...cannot serve as role models for other women” (2010:7). This article also helps to convey the role women exemplifying Durga are able to maintain within Hindu society.

In further investigating historically powerful Hindu women, I came across Antonia Fraser's book, *The Warrior Queens*. In her book, Fraser examines the life and “the story of the Rani of Jhansi, which ended with her death leading her men in the course of the Indian Rebellion” (1989:272). The Rani Lakshmi Bai, the former queen of the Jhansi principality, is commonly perceived to be the Indian equivalent of western Europe's Joan of Arc. Likewise, the Rani is often compared to Durga because of the accounted image of her “practising the art of managing her horse with the reins in her teeth and two swords in her hands” (1989:286).

The literature on the mythology of Durga and the religious practices of Hinduism are vast. Thus, I use the literature with the richest data that is most relevant to my study to build a foundational understanding of Durga, Durga Puja, and the structure of the patriarchal Hindu system. Likewise, when applied to my ethnographic data this literature also provides tools for analysis.
Methodology

Qualitative research strives to find meaning within society's structures as well as people's lives, experiences, and beliefs. In order for this to occur, the research must function as the primary tool for data collection. The researcher is able to gather data through fieldwork, the act of actively entering a community and its setting and interacting with the community's members. The more descriptive data the researcher is able to obtain, the more inductive research they are able to derive. From this data, qualitative research allows them to construct inductively construct new theories and concepts about the community he is studying.

Method of Data Collection

My study utilizes the ethnographic research techniques of participant observation and interviewing. In utilizing ethnographic research techniques I believe I am able to attain a more holistic understanding of why Hindus worship Shakti, divine feminine power, and how they utilize the power of Shakti in their lives. Howard Becker and Blanche Greer “propose that observation of events in context yields a more complete record and understanding of events than reliance on interviewing about those events alone” (Atkinson et al. 2003:418). Thus, participant observation enables me to follow informants through their devotion rituals, or pujas, and in doing so I am also able to experience the ritual firsthand. Participant observation, therefore, gives me a reference point on which I may base and compare interviews.

Interviewing and participant observation require similar skills; for instance, both involve “the interweaving of looking and listening, [and the skills] of participating and asking” (Lofland et al. 2006:18). By using both forms of data collection, I am able to gain a macro and micro perspective of the Hindu community I study. While participant observation provides a macro view, interviewing provides a closer, more intimate micro perspective of goddess worship within the Hindu community. Anne Ryen explains that obtaining rich and valid data from a respondent hinges on “the interviewer's ability to develop trust and rapport and establish relationships” with respondents (2003:431). Thus,
through participant observation, I am able to build a relationship with respondents which yields a richer interview. I.E. Seidman states that “interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior” (1991:4). By speaking with community members through interviews, I focus on their personal ideas behind their ritual practices and religious beliefs.

The Role and Biases

As stated earlier, in qualitative research the researcher acts as the primary tool for data collection; therefore, it is important for the researcher to acknowledge their values and biases so that they may attempt to prevent these things from skewing data. For instance, I envision myself to be a strong, intelligent and independent woman. I feel that women should have equal access to opportunities such as education and economic opportunities. My own beliefs in equality affected my perception of India's, and specifically Hindu, social structure.

From June to August of 2010, I backpacked nearly the entire perimeter of India with a close friend. However, prior to this trip, I read extensively on the cultural beliefs and practices of Hindus in India. It was then that I discovered both the Hindu patriarchal system and the fierce goddess Durga. Before embarking on my trip, I perceived the Hindu patriarchy to be domineering, leaving little room in its system for strong females, especially ones like Durga exemplifies. Likewise, as I made my way through northern India and experienced a large amount of sexual harassment from condescending men, my biased view was reinforced. However, this perception changed once I began to explore India's southern region. In this region, I felt more accepted by men as an equal. I believe this shift occurred due to the fact that the southern state of Kerala is currently the most literate country in India. Overall, these features were evident when I conducted some of the interviews while in India. These experiences may have swayed my interviews within the Brahma Premananda Ashram and Temple community; however, I do not believe they have had as great an impact because this community is located within the United States.
Parameters of the Study

The demographic I studied consisted of men and women currently practicing Hinduism and goddess worship. This demographic included Hindus from the Brahma Premananda Ashram and Temple as well as some Hindus I encountered at religious sites in India associated with Durga and Kali. The study was set in and around those who chose to participate. Thus, the study was at the Brahma Premananda Ashram and Temple, located in Tigard, Oregon, and the religious sites mentioned above: Varanasi and Kolkata.

Data, observations, and interviews were stored in notebooks as notes. Interviews were coded and kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms which correspond to numbers in the event that my data is found by anyone other than myself. However, the nature of the questions that were asked is not sensitive. Still again, the participant’s identity was kept confidential through coding of the data collected in the interview and by keeping the names and data in separate secure locations. However, there is no reason to break confidentiality because questions that were asked have to do only with demographic data and religious beliefs and practices. Following its collection, data was then analyzed to discover ways in which devotees worship the Hindu Goddess, Durga, and utilize her as a role model.

The materials that were used during interviews were an interview schedule, pen and notebook for taking notes, and a tape recorder to record the interview. The interview schedule was used as a guideline for questions to ask during the interview. Seeing that interviews were unstructured, it was possible that not all questions were covered during each unstructured interview. An unstructured interview is an interview that asks open-ended questions in order to allow the participant the ability to discuss questions not previously thought of by the investigator. An unstructured interview allows a discussion rather than a question and answer session to occur.

There were no anticipated risks to participants. The questions that were asked pertain only to methods and forms of the participants’ religious practices. The participants were not asked questions about emotionally-charged life events; thus, there was no risk of emotional distress. An inconvenience
of time for the participant occurs occasionally. I minimized this risk by making sure that participants did not have pressing engagements to attend to before participating in an interview.
Understanding the Malevolent Mahadevi

The Myth of Durga

In the Vedic tradition, which is the basis of Hinduism, there are no goddesses mentioned which resemble Durga. The earliest references associate her with the tribal people of the Vindhyya Mountains, “such as the Sabaras, and [with] non-Aryan habits such as drinking liquor and blood and eating meat” (Kinsley 1986:96). Durga becomes a more prevalent character within the Hindu tradition in the puranic texts. She appears in the Visnu-purana where “Visnu enlists her aid to help delude a demon king who is threatening the infant Krsna” (96). She does this by taking Krishna's place in the womb and allowing herself to be murdered by the demon king. In exchange for her sacrifice, Visnu promises to eternalize her in heaven; thus making her a goddess. This event is why one view of Durga's creation perceives her as the embodiment of Visnu's creative powers.

The direct accounts of Durga occur in the puranic text known as the Devi-mahatmya. The Devi-mahatmya is divided into three major episodes which appear in the Markandaya Purana. In the first episode Durga is created to defeat the demon, Mahishasura, which she is most often depicted slaying in her artistic renderings. Mahishasura is a demon that is granted a boon, or blessing, by the gods after performing heroic austerities. This boon makes Mahishasura invincible to all gods, men, and beasts. Using this boon, Mahishasura begins to tear apart the heavens and wreak havoc among the gods. Fearing for the stability of the cosmos, the gods come together to create Durga and fortify her with weapons-“[Shiva] gave her his trident, Visnu gave her his cakra (a disc-like weapon), Vayu his bow and arrows, and so on” (97). After her creation, she bellows a fierce roar and leads an army of Matrkas (reproductions of herself in various ferocious forms) against Mahishasura and his demon warriors. Durga and the shaktis smite Mahishasura's army which enrages Mahishasura and drives him to take the shape of a savage buffalo demon. Durga then duels Mahishasura's buffalo form and slays him by cutting off his head. Consequently, Durga is also known as Mahishasuramardini, which literally means 'slayer of the buffalo demon'.
In the second episode, the demons Chanda and Munda subdue the gods and challenge Durga. “When they approach Durga with drawn swords and bent bows, she becomes furious, [and] her face [becomes] dark as ink” (Kinsley 1975:91). It is in this episode that she manifests the fearsome goddess Kali who “springs forth from her brow...armed with a sword and noose” to slay the demons, Chanda and Munda (91). As stated above, when Durga is in battle she is known to manifest female helpers of
herself, or Matrkas. Of all the Matrkas, the goddess Kali is the most well-known manifestation. These goddesses always appear “to embody Durga's fury and are wild, bloodthirsty, particularly fierce” (Kinsley 1986:97). I will further discuss the goddess Kali and her role in the third episode of the Devi-mahatmya in the latter section on the myth of Kali.

Durga's Purpose

Durga's primary function within Hindu mythology is that of a warrior defending the divine order. David Kinsley writes that “the creation of the goddess Durga...takes place in the context of a cosmic crisis precipitated by a demon whom the male gods are unable to subdue” (1986:97). For example, the gods have no choice but to create a female warrior, Durga, as a result of the boon granted to Mahishasura. In manifesting the divine feminine force, Shakti, the gods create an independent female deity. In her primary role as a demon slayer and a “great battle queen,” Durga is said to be “irresistible [to males]in battle” (95). Despite her ferocity, male foes find her desirable. This desirability
presumably arises from her independence and beauty. In defeating her, male foes hope to tame her aggressive nature and control her sexuality.

In his book *Hinduism: the Universal Truth* (1993), Dr. Bhupendra Kumar Modi describes Durga, the Great Goddess, the Devi, as “gentle like the moon” for the pious and “destroyer incarnate” for the wicked, thus conveying the duality of her personality as the benevolent and protective Mother (1993:35). Foulston and Abbott further this dualistic perception by stating, “It would appear that Durga is the embodiment of both the benevolent and the terrible aspects of goddesses combining the two within herself” (2009:34). Durga's duty is to defend; therefore she takes on the fierce qualities similar to those of a mother bear protecting her cubs. She will strike out at any being that dares to harm or threaten those she is petitioned to defend and protect. James Preston explains, “She is part mother because she protects her devotees and part malevolent within her capacity as [an] enemy of evil, capable of immense cruelty and destruction” (1985:12). Thus, Durga holds a dualistic role of compassionate mother and menacing warrior.

**The Ritual Worship of Durga**

The most common form of Hindu worship is the puja, which is an offering of food and gifts to a god. Pujas may occur at a household altar or, most often, within Hindu temples. For Hindus, a temple is the residence of the god to whom the temple is dedicated. Therefore, each day the temple's god must be bathed, fed, and adored. In exchange, the temple's god listens to the prayers put forth by devotees and accepts their offerings. But before an offering can be made, devotees must purify their surrounding, the offering, and themselves. Following this purification process, devotees show respect to the god by greeting him or her with a bow. After greeting the god, devotees offer food (prashad), an act that is central to pujas because “without a food offering of some kind the ritual would simply not be puja in the conventional sense of the term” (Babb 1975:54). Once the god has a portion of the offering, the prashad is taken back and distributed to the devotees to be eaten. By eating the remaining portion of an
Durga's importance and popularity is recognized annually during the last five days of Navaratra, a nine day festival that honors the Mahadevi in all her manifestations. This celebration usually takes place in late September or early October and the last five days of the Navaratra festival are known as the Durga Puja. The purpose of the Durga Puja is to show adoration to the Mahadevi in order to manifest Shakti to obtain empowerment for individuals as well as communities. Hilary Rodrigues explains, “Festival activities actually begin months earlier as communities organize themselves, collect money, purchase votive materials, and commission artisans and priests to prepare images and perform the rituals” (2003:1). These images, or murti, are brightly colored and made of clay. They can be placed on shrines that may climb several stories high and are usually the major expense in most Durga Puja displays. At the conclusion of the festival the murti are deposited into a venerated body of water, such as the Ganges.

Devotees of the Mahadevi worship her for numerous reasons-- “to be healed, to assure abundant harvests, or for the relief from many kinds of physical and spiritual suffering” (Preston 1985:9-10). Prior to modernization, people prayed to a Mother Goddess for general protection and for things necessary for survival. Thus, it is in this search for relief from life's hardships that devotees perceive and pray to Durga as a maternal figure. However, “now, with the stresses of modern life, they ask her for cash, material goods and opportunities for upward mobility” (Trotter 1976:110). Likewise, native Indian Hindus ask the Mahadevi for help to “resolve new problems arising from rapid urbanization [such as]...new pressures resulting from less reliance on caste and kin and the need to fit in with unfamiliar occupational and neighborhood groups” (107). Essentially, the primary goal of viewing the goddess as a mother allows devotees to “surrender to the deity in exchange for her benevolent protection and good fortune”(Preston 1985:19). In fact, toward the end of the Devi-mahatmya, Durga states “that she is quick to hearken the pleas of her devotees and that she may be petitioned in times of distress” (Kinsley 1986:102). Through this form of worship devotees hope to gain blessings which will
further their lives.

**The Myth of Kali**

Kali does not appear as the goddess she is known as today, “having a cycle of myths and a consistent description...until the epic and Puranic periods (circa 200 B.C. To A.D 300)” (Kinsley 1975:86). Prior to this representation, the Vedic literature describes a dark goddess known as Nirrti. Nirrti is portrayed as “the personification of death, destruction, and sorrow” and all the prayers that are associated with her are meant to ward her off rather than to call upon or glorify her (87). Nirrti and Kali bear a similar dark, dreaded appearance and both are “associated with suffering, misfortune, and death” (87). However, the two seem to have more differences than similarities. First, Kali is described as naked while Nirrti is clothed. Second, Kali is depicted with long, black, disheveled hair; conversely,
Nirrti is said to have golden hair. Third, and most importantly, Kali is always presented as a warrior, while Nirrti is not; rather, she is comparable to the Western idea of the Grim Reaper or Death.

The third episode of the Devi-mahatmya conveys Kali's most notable conquest over the demon Raktabija. The gods grant Raktabija with a boon that enables him to reproduce himself whenever a drop of his blood falls to the floor. Using his boon and his army of demons, Raktabija gains control of the heavens and begins to cause chaos within the cosmos. Unable to defeat him, the gods once again call upon Durga to defeat the demon and protect the universe. Durga, initially unaware of Raktabija's boon, flies into battle and begins to cut away at the demon. As they fight, blood falls from Raktabija's body and hits the floor. Soon the entire world is filled with Raktabijas. Realizing Raktabija's boon Durga manifests herself as the wild and crazed Kali. Kali then opens her mouth and uses her outstretched tongue to lap up any blood that has fallen from Raktabija and proceeds to swallow him and his duplicates whole.
Kali's primary role within Hinduism is to represent and remind followers of the dark and disorderly aspects of life. In executing this function, she is often portrayed as the embodiment of many goddesses' fury. Kali does not only appear on the battlefield as a manifestation of Durga's wrath, she also demonstrates the anger of benign goddesses such as Parvati and Sati. For instances, in the *Linga Purana* Shiva requests Parvati to vanquish the demon Daruka, “who has been granted the boon that he can only be killed only by a woman” (Hawley and Wulff 1996:78). Following Shiva's request, Parvati enters his body and drinks the poison he carries in his throat. Parvati then emerges from Shiva as Kali, “and with the help of beings who include *pisacas*, flesh-eating spirits, she begins to attack Daruka and his hosts” (78). The *Vamana Purana* conveys a story in which “Parvati is called Kali because of her dark complexion” (79). Parvati is offended by Shiva calling her this “and does austerities to rid herself of her dark skin” (79). When Parvati finally sheds her dark complexion, she becomes Gauri, the golden one. Her “dark sheath...subsequently creates Kali herself” in Parvati's fury (79).

A similar story of untamed fury appears in the myths surrounding the goddess Sati. When a sage named Daksa chose to perform a large sacrifice, “he invited all the gods except [Shiva]...because of his antisocial behavior” (79). While Shiva was not offended by this, his wife Sati became enraged by the social insult. Consequently, Sati “filled the ten directions with furious forms, the first of which was Kali” (79). Again, Kali performs the mythological function of manifesting the wrath of benign goddesses.

David Kinsley believes, “Kali may be one way in which the Hindu tradition has sought to come to terms, at least in part, with the built-in shortcomings of its own refined view of the world” (1986:129). Kali's wild nature and connection to blood and death remind her devotees that unexpected events, such as death, can occur at any point in life. Kali represents the unpredictability life can bring by reminding Hindus that certain aspects of reality are untamable. In this way, Kali functions as a means for Hindus to meditate and accept the inherent chaos of life.
The Ritual Worship of Kali

The worship of Kali is often directly associated with the practice of Tantrism, specifically the “left-handed, esoteric tradition, [the] aspect of the Tantric tradition that emphasized the path of the hero” (Kinsley 1975:109). The origin of Kali's connection to Tantrism is not entirely apparent. Tantrism seeks to unite opposites in the pursuit of moksha, the release from the cycle of life, death, and reincarnation. In the uniting of opposites, the 'Tantric hero' must confront both the fruitful and the forbidden in life. Kali represents the forbidden because she “conveys the image of death, destruction, fear, [and] terror,’’ which the 'Tantric hero' must face boldly and unite with life, creation, courage, and strength (112). In addition, Tantrism seeks to unite the powers of Shiva and Shakti. Thus, Kali's connection to the practice of Tantrism also stems from her connection to Shiva as a consort and her representation as a manifestation of Shakti.

Devotional services and literature to Kali are also widely practiced and created in West Bengal. The Bengali traditional worship of Kali views the goddess as a gruesome mother who devotees should approach as a child. David Kinsley expounds upon this idea stating, “Even though the child's mother may be fearsome, at times even hostile, the child has little choice but to return to her for protection, security and warmth” (1986:125-6). By approaching Kali as a child, the devotee hopes to release his expectations of life and view the foreboding truth Kali reveals—that death, ferocity, and chaos are inevitable aspects of our world. Kinsley explains, “Redemption lies in the realization that one is in the hands...of Kali and that ultimately one is directed by the the Mother's will” (1975:122). The Bengali devotional practice is an approach of acceptance rather than confrontation, like the 'Tantric hero's' challenge with the dark goddess to unite the forbidden with the fruitful. It is “in appropriating these truths [that] the devotee...is liberated from the fear these truths impose on people who deny or ignore them” (127). Thus, in attaining this liberation from fear devotees are also closer to attaining moksha.
Defining Shakti, Maya, and Prakrti in terms of the Mahadevi

The majority of puranic texts primarily describe the goddesses mainly as the consorts of the gods, but their association “with three significant principles-energy (s[h]akti), primary matter (prakrti), and illusion (maya)—thereby establish a relationship between female divinity and creative power” (Foulston and Abbott 2009:11). The Mahadevi controls and embodies these three forces and it is through these forces that she is able to convey her power. When existing alone, “both maya and prakrti in many contexts have rather negative connotations, but when they are associated with the goddess, they become positive powers” (14). Basing their definitions on the Devi-mahatmya purana, Hawley and Wullf describe these forces as such:

For the Devi Mahatmya, maya is not complementary or subordinate to Visnu, as other texts would have it. Nor is prakrti balanced-or suspended-by the principle of maleness, purusa, with which it is so often paired. Nor is s[h]akti paired with, or subsumed in, the male god Siva. In Devi, these qualities stand on their own, constituting reality in a manner that is independently female. (1996:10)

For many Hindus, shakti is the female power that exists within each god. Often a god's consort embodies the god's shakti, and when necessary he uses his consort to increase his own powers. However, in the case of the Mahadevi, specifically Durga, she is created through the gods drawing on their own energy to generate her rather than drawing on her to boost their own energies. Likewise, Durga's lack of a consort further prevents a god from drawing on her power. Durga's “role as s[h]akti...differs from that of the benign goddesses, as she does not empower the male deities” (Foulston and Abbott 2009:33). She does not lend her shakti, or power, to the male gods, but rather takes power from them in order to fight in battle and perform heroic deeds.

Essentially, “s[h]akti then, in its most abstract sense, is the energetic principle of Ultimate Reality, conceptualized as primordial power, but it is also personified by the myriad goddesses that are an integral part of Hindu religious expression” (Foulston and Abbott 2009:9). When shakti is embodied within the Mahadevi, she functions as a source of feminine creativity and power. This power enables
the Mahadevi the ability to create, sustain and destroy. Thus, “in a general sense, both Durga and Kali represent the power of protection” because both goddesses utilize their shakti to destroy demon foes who may threaten their devotees (31). This perception of shakti as Ultimate Reality, or Brahman, is prevalent within the Shakta sects of Hinduism. These sects revolve around the Shakta texts which portray the Mahadevi as the supreme deity.

When the Mahadevi is connected to both shakti and maya, “she embodies the power of illusion, encompassing ignorance (avidya) and knowledge (vidya), and is thereby presented with a dual personality,” a benevolent mother who imparts knowledge and a powerful warrior who can delude her demon foes (14). In this dual personality, the Mahadevi “is not simply the knowledge that sets one free. She is also the great illusion (mahamaya) that keeps one bound” (Hawley and Wulff 1996:33). Thus, it is through worship that devotees hope to please the Mahadevi and attain freedom from maya, rather than continue to be bound by it.

Shakti is believed to be abundant in the physical universe humans inhabit, thus:

Goddesses tend to be strongly associated with the forces of nature (prakrti) and the earth—sometimes in its nurturing, material aspect, sometimes in its natural periodicity, sometimes in its uncontrollable, destructible power. (7)

Essentially, prakrti is the physical and natural human in which people reside. Kinsley describes prakrti as “nature in all its complexity, orderliness, and intensity” (Kinsley 1986:3). Kinsley also states, “The identification of a particular goddess with prakrti is a commentary on her nature” (3). Therefore benign goddesses are identified with nature's tranquility, while fierce goddesses are identified with nature's more chaotic and destructive aspects. Kinsley continues by stating, “At the same time, descriptions of her [the goddess's] nature and behavior are a commentary on the Hindu understanding of physical reality” (3). Prakrti then also functions as an explanation for natural phenomena for Hindus.

This background knowledge is essential to understanding the information conveyed to me by my respondents and through my participant observations. Likewise, this background knowledge
enables me to perform a more extensive analysis of women's ability to emulate Durga within the rigid Hindu patriarchy.
Respondent Profiles

My first respondent was a twenty-one year old female I met while attending an afternoon puja at the Sri Durga temple in Varanasi, India. She had traveled approximately 350 kilometers to Varanasi to take an exam necessary for her to enter the graduate biochemistry program at Benares Hindu University. I asked her why it is important to worship Durga. She explained, “Durga Devi...is a symbol of woman power. In my view, Durga Devi is like our mother. She is always with us. In fact, she always helps us. She is a natural power.” I then asked her why she had chosen to visit Durga's temple before her exam. She explained that she hoped to petition Durga to help her do well on her exam. Delving further, I asked her what other things people may petition her for. She replied, “We ask for happiness of all people and generally man ask[s] about his self (his some needs).” I found it interesting that she believed men were more likely to petition Durga for their own needs, while implying that the community's women were more likely to pray for the greater good of the group.

It is interesting to note that my interview with my first respondent was repeatedly interrupted by a man who insisted that I should interview him as well. He asserted that he had much more knowledge of Durga of her worship than the girl I was currently speaking with. This was a prime example of the perceived place of women within normal Hindu society. The man truly believed that he was more knowledgeable about a female goddess than a girl could possibly be. In addition by insisting that I speak with him, he blatantly implied that I would be stupid not to do so by stating, “I know much more for your report than the girl does about this temple.” Finding the situation to be increasingly frustrating, I chose to finish my interview with my first respondent and promptly left the temple before he could continue to badger me.

The second respondent I interviewed was a twenty-six year old female. I had the opportunity to teach with this woman for two weeks at an all-girls' school, the Piyali Learning Center, in the village of Piyali located approximately 25 kilometers east of Kolkata, India. In addition to this time, she was kind enough to open her home to my travel partner and me for one week. We stayed in her family's home.
during this time with her mother, father, brother, sister-in-law, and her two year old nephew. The dynamics of the Hindu patriarchy became readily apparent while I resided in this home. Her father was the patriarch who had worked for many years until he became infected with tuberculosis. He beat the disease but not before it had taken its toll on his body. Consequently, it was up to my respondent to provide for her mother and father. Her brothers assisted her, both the one living in her family home and the other living in a neighboring village, but they had their own families to care for as well. Despite her father being the recognized patriarch, the dynamics of the family did not revolve around him. Her father's frailty had left her mother as the head of household and her mother was very outspoken about asserting this role. Aside from her mother, the household attention revolved around her young nephew, known as Bobbly. Simply put, he was the prince of the family's domain.

Some examples of his princeliness I witnessed was the control he exercised over my respondent via her family. He was very attached to her and whenever he became upset and she was home, the family expected her to soothe him. Essentially any whim Bobbly had was fulfilled by either my respondent, his mother, or his father. Likewise, he was also given much free reign around the house. One crude incident I witnessed occurred one afternoon after we had all shared a light lunch. After finishing his meal, Bobbly decided he would defecate right in the front garden. Granted he was only three and most children his age do not see the problem with a behavior such as this until they are corrected by their parents. However, none of the family scolded his behavior. Rather, they all laughed and joked with him about the situation.

When I was finally able to interview my respondent about her understanding and relationship to Durga, she expressed views very similar to those of my first respondent. She too believed Durga is symbolic of female power and should be petitioned by devotees to obtain power to conquer obstacles. I asked her how it is that Durga is able to possess such great power. She explained this is possible because Durga was given power from all the gods, thus she embodies all of their strengths. She went on to explain that Durga is able to help us because of this great power. Like my first respondent, she also
believed Durga's primary practical function was to provide aid to her devotees. This concept of using power to aid devotees further implies Durga's role as a benevolent mother who is happy to help her children whenever they are in need. My respondents' devotional practices often focused on Durga and Kali most likely as a result of her location. Her village is located in the state of West Bengal, which is a region that focuses on the worship of Kali. The reason for this region's focus on the fierce aspects of the Mahadevi is still unknown to me.

My other two interviews were conducted with two members of the Brahma Premananda Ashram and temple in Tigard, Oregon. Every first Sunday of the month the BPA holds the “Chanting of Mother Durga” and it was following this celebration that I conducted my interviews. Both members interviewed were males in their fifties and sixties. Both respondents described Durga as the Great Mother and the ultimate example of what a mother should be. One respondent also described Durga as the remover of sorrow, thus conveying Durga as a soothing mother who seeks to provide for the needs of her children. Neither of them spoke of her as an example of female power or independence, unlike my female respondents who chose to explain Durga first as powerful then as motherly.

I find it interesting that my female respondents recognized Durga's duality while my male respondents did not. The females perceived Durga as a symbol and source of power, specifically feminine power, while the males failed to mention these aspects at all. All of my respondents acknowledged Duga's motherly aspects, but the males focused solely on this point. In addition to this, all of my respondents explained that, as a mother, Durga provides for her devotees' needs. However, only one of my female respondents recognized that men and women petition Durga for different needs—men ask for help with their own needs while women ask for the needs of their community. These finding reinforce the gendered divisions of labor within the patriarchy as well as the gendered access to religious enlightenment and self-actualiztion. Women are expected to pray for and work towards the betterment of the family and community, while men may focus on their own improvement.

Furthermore, it is through their husbands' religious improvements that women are allowed to be apart
of attaining enlightenment. To practice this on their own would deter from their responsibilities to their families and communities.
Analysis

The Symbolism of Durga within the Patriarchal Family

The mythological and artistic depictions of Durga as a fierce warrior in the state of Svatantrya (ultimate divine independence) starkly contradict the typical patriarchal ideal of a Hindu daughter and wife. In fact, “most goddesses in their mythologies and natures also express Hindu thinking about sexual roles and relationships” (Kinsley 1986:4). The goddess that is most often put forth as exemplifying an ideal Hindu wife is Sita, who appears in the epic Ramayana. Sita is loyal to her husband Rama, even to the point of death. Another submissive goddess is Durga's tamed avatar, Parvati. Like Sita, Parvati also exemplifies the ideal Hindu wife through her mythology. In order to obtain the love of her consort Shiva, who is a devoted ascetic, Parvati leaves her lavish lifestyle to meditate for decades alone. Her commitment to her meditation finally forces Shiva to acknowledge Parvati's utter devotion to him. David Kinsley notes that “goddess mythology to a great extent is probably a means by which the Hindu tradition has thought about sexual roles and sexual identity” (Kinsley 1986:4). Thus, these benign goddesses have been exemplified as the 'ideal' Hindu wives and daughters, faithful and obedient.

Durga and her volatile, non-traditional, and masculine manifestations turn these ideals on their head. This unconventionality allows for experimental thinking about sexual roles within the patriarchal Hindu society. In the guises of a masculine, independent warrior, Durga is traditionally sexually unavailable and therefore more desirable. When manifestations of the Mahadevi are not affiliated with a male consort, the goddess can be identified “as cosmic power, with Absolute, Brahman,” and Ultimate Reality (Foulston and Abbott 2009:12). Similarly within the patriarchal framework “Indian women are supposed to be absolutely devoted to their husbands, who are respected as embodiments of the deity, [however] women may also reign supreme in their own domain as mothers of their children” (Preston 1985:13). Outside of this framing, many Indian women have limited autonomy. Shireen J. Jejeebhoy and Zeba A. Sathar's research on the autonomy of South Asian women concluded:
Women are largely excluded from family decision making; they have limited access to, and exercise limited control over resources; their freedom of movement is severely constrained; and few are free from threat and violence at the hands of their husbands. (2001:707)

Thus, within their homes, women are only able to exercise Durga's “masculine” qualities in relation to children and their daughter in-laws.

While it is necessary for women to submit to their husbands, fathers, and other males in positions of power, it is in the case of their children that mothers may express “masculine” traits such as aggression and dominance. For instance, aggression may be expressed by a woman seeking to protect her children. Aggression and dominance may also be conveyed by a woman when she must discipline her children, especially her daughters. Discipline is one means in which a mother indoctrinates the Hindu patriarchal ideology in her daughter. A mother must pass this ideology and additional household skills along to her daughter so that she may survive in her future husband's home and within Hindu society. Once a daughter marries she must obey not only her husband and father-in-law, but her mother-in-law as well. It is in this relationship between mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws that women may once again express aggression and dominance. A mother-in-law may convey aggression toward her daughter-in-law if she does not like her daughter-in-law. Likewise, a mother-in-law may also express dominance if she believes her daughter-in-law is not acting appropriately in her role as a wife, mother, or daughter-in-law.

The Symbolism of Durga within the Politics of India

Susan S. Wadley explains in her article, “God: She's Alive and Well” that “if control of [the goddess’s] sexuality is transferred to men, the female is fertile and benevolent” (1977:116). On the contrary, “if [the goddess] controls her own sexuality she is potentially destructive and malevolent” (1977:117). Using this perspective, it begins to become clear to me how an independent warrior goddess like Durga may be used as a symbol and representation for certain roles women hold in India
without upsetting the Hindu patriarchy. Durga does not submit to a husband, thus she is seen as infertile and treated as male. The case of women being treated as males, specifically as “honorary males” is readily apparent in Indian politics, which often blurs the boundaries between gender and power. This was especially true during India's century long struggle for independence from the British. In her article, “The Hindu Goddess and Women's Political Representation in South Asia: Symbolic Resource or Feminine Mystique?,” Stephanie T. Lama explains how it is that gender roles have become less rigid in Indian politics:

The translation of political activism into religious terms transforms its very nature: engagement with politics, hitherto synonymous with the public sphere, and thus the preserve of men, can then be construed as performances of one's religious duty, which is opened to women as well. The translation operated through the invocation of the Goddess thus prevents potential role conflict for women. They can walk in the streets, mix with strangers, even with men who are not family members, without losing respectability. They can engage in a traditionally masculine activity without threat to their femininity. (2001:5)

Women serving as politicians in India are therefore seen as a human being performing a necessary duty. When and if a female politician's gender becomes an issue she is either regarded as an “honorary male” who is allowed to participate in certain “masculine” activities, or she is compared to the Mahadevi. This connection of the Mahadevi to “women leaders prevents the banalization of women's leadership by placing them on a superhuman plane. These leader thus cannot serve as role models for other women” (Lama 2001:7). Two examples of this godly comparison and the use of the “honorary male” title occurred with India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the Indian queen Lakshmi Bai.

Entering office in 1966 at the age of forty-eight, Indira Gandhi was the first woman to serve as the Prime Minister of India. She had previously served as the President of India's Congress Party in 1959 but had “resigned after less than a year in favour of her maternal duties” towards her two sons (Fraser 1989:308). Prior to this, she had also had experience in the political realm through participating in activism in her youth and growing up around her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister
of India. During her time as Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi became compared and connected to the fierce Hindu goddesses, Durga and Kali, amid India's successful war with Pakistan in 1971. Through this comparison, Indira Gandhi was then perceived as India's protective mother. As explained earlier by Lama, this comparison between the Mahadevi and Indira Gandhi enable her to wield militant power without her gender being called into question. Additionally, Indira Gandhi was often quoted saying things such as, “As Prime Minister, I am not a woman. I am a human being,” and, “I do not regard myself as a woman but as a person with a job to do” (309). This sentiment was also shared by her cabinet members and other politicians. Likewise, she was also described as “the only man in the cabinet of old women” (308). Thus by utilizing both concepts of deity comparability and the “honorary male,” Indira Gandhi was able to serve as India's third Prime Minister without upsetting the patriarchal order.

Although the year of her birth is unknown, Lakshmi Bai was originally born Manukarnika, which is “one of the many names of the holy Ganges,” and was “brought up in the wing of a palace in Benares on the bank of the great river itself” (Fraser 1989:274). Her original name and place of birth would later be used to further connect her to the Mahadevi. She was born into a brahmin family, brahmins being the highest levels of the Hindu caste system, and her father served as the chief political adviser to the nobility of Benares (Varanasi). As a result of her family's status, she was married to the Raja of Jhansi at the age of fourteen. It was the Raja who renamed her Lakshmi Bai following their marriage. The Raja allowed Lakshmi Bai a considerably extensive amount of freedom in the activities she chose to pursue. For instance, Lakshmi Bai was trained in techniques such as self-defense, horsemanship, swordplay, and archery. Furthermore, she also encouraged her fellow female courtiers to join her in learning these skills. Her daily routine “included shooting at a target with a rifle and a pistol, and...riding” (286). One account recalls Lakshmi Bai practicing “the art of managing her horse with the reins in her teeth and two swords in her hands” (286).
Prior to his death, the Raja of Jhansi had adopted an heir due to Lakshmi Bai's inability to provide him with one. However, the British colonial rulers did not recognize this adoptive son as a legitimate heir to the Jhansi territory. Consequently, the British claimed the Raja had violated his administrative duties and used this as an opportunity to seize control of the region. In March of 1858, the British began a two week siege on Jhansi. Lakshmi Bai led Jhansi's defense against the British siege until the British took control. She then fled from Jhansi to aid Indian rebels in Gwalior. Approximately one year prior to this, the Sepoy (soldier) Rebellion had sparked the Indian resistance to the British colonizers. The rebellion had moved throughout India over the course of the year at it was at the battle for Gwalior Fort that Lakshmi Bai became a part of this rebellion. Here she led rebels valiantly against the British for three days before dying due to an injury. It was during this time which she became renowned for her beauty and ferocity, comparable to the goddess Durga. Thus through taking on the imagery of Durga's warrior persona, Lakshmi Bai was acknowledged as a warrior queen-mother defending her people.

Therefore through the use of the Mahadevi and her malevolent manifestations as applicable
symbols to women in power, women are able to wield power outside of the home without disrupting the traditional Hindu patriarchy. The concept of the protective mother enables females to lead aggressively without threatening their gender identity. As Stephanie T. Lama explains, “The Goddess, therefore, even while she legitimizes the participation of women in a traditionally male field, does not question the sexual division of labour beyond the exceptional circumstances in which she is invoked. As such she is also a resource for the dominant social consensus” (2001:7). By making the application of the image of the Mahadevi applicable only to women in power and not women in the household, the traditional Hindu familial framework may go on undisturbed.

**Conclusion**

Overall, there are realms within Hindu society in which women may subvert the patriarchy without experiencing extremely negative consequences. To further this research in this area, I would like to investigate cases in which Hindu women have subverted the patriarchy in the name of Shakti outside of the household and political realm. It would be interesting to see what the consequence of disrupting the patriarchy are for average Hindu women.
Works Cited


