

Female Empowerment in Goddess Worship,

by Saroj Chawla

À partir de ses expériences personnelles, l'auteure examine les effets «pratiques et thérapeutiques» du culte de la déesse Durga.



Goddess Kali, Naggar, Himachal Pradesh, India, 1996.
Photo: Brenda Cranney

Hindu philosophy conceptualizes reality as in a state of constant change and as indeterminate, experiential, and context specific. From the Hindu point of view no person, man or woman, is born powerful or remains powerful forever. According to the Hindu concept of time, reality is al-

ways becoming, and the focus needs to remain on what is desired rather than what it is. When caught in situations of vulnerability, it is legitimate for Hindus to appeal to the divine to help them in gaining control.

The Goddess is supposed to fulfill the wishes and desires of her devotees irrespective of their sex or the gender appropriateness of their wishes. The Goddess fulfills the wishes of all believers who worship her devoutly. In the court (*darbar*) of the Goddess, there are no men or women; they are just beings asking for favours (*sawali* or *yachak*).

The contemporary scientific worldview might label Hindu women's belief in the Goddess as superstition. But in most religions of the world the divine can be evoked to act as an intercessor for believers. Most religions accept that psychic acts in the form of prayer and ritual performed in the name of the divine can be directed toward achieving desired ends. Popular Hinduism firmly believes in the effectiveness of material and nonmaterial efforts. For Hindus words and images have magical components. The magical component might help them to avoid unhappy experience and attain desired results of a very concrete nature.

Personal testimony

My rational-agnostic existence was shaken one July when my 16-year-old daughter went jogging and did not return home. She had been visiting Iskcon temple in Toronto for the past six months. My husband and I drove to the temple; a woman leaving the temple informed us that she did see a young girl of our daughter's description with the temple head priest. The head priest informed us that our daughter, a Grade 12 student, was a simple person, not interested in studies; she wanted to devote

her life to Krishna. She could come home if we joined Krishna Consciousness. It would mean changing our life style completely, becoming vegetarian, shunning alcohol and tobacco, and all that I regard as normal social life. My husband was expected to manage temple accounts, and I to propagate Iskcon ideas and books in the university.

We made not very fruitful visits to lawyers and psychiatrists. The lawyer's opinion was that the age between 16 and 18 was legally a gray area. He could try to intimidate the temple authorities by arguing that they were unlawfully keeping a juvenile away from school and home, but said that it would be difficult to restrain a 16-year-old from going to the temple. The psychiatrist, who knew the Iskcon very well, told us that the temple was trying to emotionally blackmail us into its fold. His advice was also to let the influence wear off.

At this juncture I suspended my European educated self and examined my predicament as a Hindu mother. I sincerely believed that the followers of a male God Krishna had brainwashed my daughter. No Hindu belief system sanctioned temple leaders to live off the earnings of young boys and girls. By this time my daughter was selling incense, candles, and flowers on the street. She was also collecting funds for Iskcon charity. I thought that my daughter should live like an average Canadian teenager, albeit under a little parental supervision. To bring her back to the fold, I needed the influence of a Goddess, especially Goddess Durga—the one who rides a tiger, bears arms in six of her eight hands, and is willing to destroy the enemies of her devotees. I remembered how my mother used to worship Durga.

The March *Navratra* ("nine nights" devoted to goddess worship) were near. I bought two shallow earthen

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dishes and filled them with potting soil. In the living room I created an altar. The picture of Durga sat in the middle, flanked by the earthen dishes, barley was to be sown in them. I collected the items necessary for



Goddess carved in wood, Bhima Kali Temple, Sarahan, Himachal Pradesh, 1996. Photo: Brenda Cranney

Durga worship: incense, flowers, food offering of nuts and raisins; a small bowl filled with clarified butter, with a cotton wick sitting in the middle, was a lamp, and it accompanied a hymn book. I phoned the Vishnu temple to make sure when the *Navratra* was beginning. The night

before the *Navratra*-period was to begin, I had made all the preparations: the altar with the Durga picture, the earthen dishes, the incense, the lamp, the food offerings, the flowers were all ready.

For nine days, every morning I took a shower, lit the lamp and incense, offered flowers and food, “irrigated” the barley, and sat down to read hymns to the Goddess Durga. I repeated the routine in the evening except that instead of taking a shower, I washed my hands thoroughly. The barley sprouted on the second day. By the ninth day the shoots were six to eight inches high. On the ninth day, in the early morning, I worshipped the manifestation of Durga and tied the shoots in the two dishes with red cloth. After reciting the prayer to bid good-bye to the green shoots, the manifestation of the Goddess, I submerged everything—shoots, cloth, burnt matches and wicks, faded flowers, ashes of the incense—in a brook (flowing water). The Durga worship during the *Navratra* was over, but I continued praying for the well-being of my daughter. To make the prayers more potent, I started writing them.

On the first evening of *Navratra*, I visited a Sikh family and informed the lady of the house about my discovery of Goddess worship. She warned me that, once I decided to worship the Goddess Durga, I would have to observe the worship throughout my life—in spring as well as autumn—otherwise the wrath of the Goddess would affect me. On the second day of the *Navratra* my aunt visited me and noticed the two dishes sown with barley. She asked why two dishes—one is more than enough? My response was that the two barley planters represented my twin daughters—I was praying for their well-being. She thought I was crazy. I paid no attention.

The worship during the *Navratra* brought power into my house. My husband did not want the Durga altar in the living room. He wanted it moved to the spare bedroom on the second floor. I wanted to keep the altar in the living room so that I could “feel” her presence frequently. He also insisted that the household members follow a vegetarian diet during the nine days. In his mother’s home there was abstinence from egg, meat, poultry, onion, and garlic for nine days. My mother was managing a household of staunch meat-eaters, so that she could not impose such dietary restrictions without risking major strife in the household. She kept the discipline of remaining vegetarian herself, and meat, poultry, eggs, onion, and garlic were available to other members of the household. To avoid dissension I agreed to maintain a vegetarian kitchen during the nine days.

On the third *Navratra*, my other daughter, the second twin, phoned me at the university. She had a craving for meat; she did not like this vow of vegetarian diet. I thought for a split second. It did not make sense that I observe *Navratra* to regain closeness of one daughter and alienate her twin by denying her wishes. Very calmly I told her that she could take meat out of the freezer, cook it, eat it, and clean the dishes. The vow of vegetarianism was suspended to meet my daughter’s wishes. I could sense my daughter’s relief at my response. That episode made me realize the distinction between dogma and the essence of religion. When formal rules and individual needs conflict, individual needs take precedence.

Did my Goddess worship have the desired effect? On the second day of the *Navratra*, I spotted my daughter in a crowd on the street. A week after I had submerged the barley shoots in the flowing water, the Iskcon head

priest (under pressure from the community) did persuade my daughter to come home. She stayed with me until her eighteenth birthday, when she rejoined the temple. But, over a period of time, she began to understand the ways of the temple. The wedge created by the temple wore off. Now she phones to ask me to pray to the Goddess so that her wishes are fulfilled. I continue to perform Durga worship during the spring and autumn *Navratra*. And I repeat the names of the four Goddesses (Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Tara) morning and evening using the phalanges of my four fingers as the count. Over the years I have noticed that when I raise my voice against perceived injustice my voice comes out calm and firm, as if it is not Saroj but the Goddess speaking. A sceptic may say it is mere coincidence. Possibly, but my inner self feels that Goddess worship bore fruit for me.

Devout worshippers may find fault with my style of Goddess worship and may warn me that the wrath of the Goddess will fall on me. I do not

keep a vegetarian household during the *Navratra*, and I do not observe fruit-fast (*phalahar*) meaning only fruit can be eaten during the fast. And I do not perform *Kanya Puja*, literally "the worship of young girls." My mother on the eighth day of the *Navratra* invited five or seven young, unmarried girls to the house. Younger than nine was the most auspicious age. She washed their feet, tied red cotton thread on their right wrists, and adorned their foreheads with red powder. Auspiciously and reverentially she fed them a meal of fried flat bread, vegetables, and sweets and gave them a cash gift. *Kanya puja* is held in Toronto temples and in some households that can bring together young girls of the appropriate age. Personally I find it difficult to prepare an elaborate meal and collect young girls. Instead, I give my daughters raisins and almonds and a cash gift. I had observed my mother take such a route for young girls who were unable to participate in the worship.

From my point of view, the Goddess is omniscient and I expect her to

understand my constraints, but I avoid explaining this to devout worshippers. I do not want them even to mention the idea of the wrath of the Goddess. Their criticism of my style of Goddess worship will disrupt my personal relationship with the Goddess. Since criticism by devout worshippers may have negative impact upon me, I avoid their mention of the Goddess's wrath.

Other voices

Since last July I have interviewed women in their homes and in the temples about why they worship the Goddess. Most of the interviews were conducted in a casual and unstructured manner. The responses can be classified in two categories. The first are women who grew up in religious environments and continued the pattern of Goddess worship they had observed in their childhood and adolescence. These women were surprised at the naiveté of the question. The second are those women who in their childhood and adolescence had paid no attention to Goddess worship. In their married lives when faced by stressful situations, an older woman had advised them to pray to the Goddess and perform Goddess worship. Both categories spoke about their wishes coming true and their home environments becoming calm with the grace of the Goddess.

The women of the first category attribute their prosperity and good fortune to the belief in and worship of the Goddess. Mrs. N., for example, who after immigration to Canada with her husband experienced economic hardship and car accidents, together with her husband helped to establish the Jai Durga temple in Scarborough. She, her husband, and teenage daughter observe the fruit-fast (*phala har*) on the first seven days of *Navratra*. Her son, being the youngest, is a passive observer of the worship. Mrs. N. had been facing difficulty in announcing the engagement of her daughter. The young woman and the young man had made their decision, but the young man's

Hymn to Goddess Durga (power and courage)

*Bhujā cara atī sobhita
vara mudra dhari
mana vamchita phala pavata
sevata nara nari*

(Your four arms adorn your person, your hand is raised in benediction to bless your worshippers. All those men and women who worship you have all their wishes fulfilled.)

Hymn to Goddess Lakshmi (prosperity and wealth)

*Durga rupa nirantra
sukha sampati data
jo koi tumako dhyavata
riddhi siddhi dhana pata*

(In the form of Durga you grant both happiness and prosperity, and all those who focus their attention on you receive prosperity and accomplishments.)

Hymn to Goddess Saraswati (wisdom, knowledge, and learning)

*Man saraswati ki arati jo koi jana gavai
hitkari sukhakari jnana bhakti pavai*

(Whom so ever sings this hymn to Mother Saraswati, receives wisdom/knowledge, devotion, and great happiness.)

parents were reluctant to give their consent. Mrs. N. attributes the parents' eventual acceptance to her belief in and worship of the Goddess. She celebrated the fulfillment of her wish by holding a night-long hymn singing session (*jagran*) in the Vishnu temple.

Mrs. P. was unable to bear children for the first ten years of her married life. She thinks she bore two sons, the first one after eleven years of marriage, because of the beneficence of the Goddess.

Mrs. D. and Mrs. V. grew up in the United Kingdom. Products of British education, they inform me they did not think much about Goddess worship. Mrs. D., after her marriage and immigration to Canada, felt lonely. Her husband suffered from ill health and job-insecurity. Around this time in her life an older woman advised her to pray to the Goddess. She thinks her husband's health and job situation improved with the blessings of the Goddess. She was also able to get over her loneliness. Mrs. V. perceived herself as a non-believer and "liberated" woman. At a period in her life she felt very frustrated and overburdened with work. She had three young children to look after—a first-born son followed by twin sons—and she helped her husband in his business. The husband's input in housework and child care was minimal. In her own words, "I thought in terms of sharing work and equality and the lack of my husband's support was frustrating." Again, an older woman advised her to pray to and worship the Goddess. Over a period of time she stopped expressing frustration and her husband became more helpful in housework and child care. Of course, the young children grew up too.

Besides fulfilling the specific and concrete wishes of the worshippers, Goddess worship also generates a spirit of comradeship and togetherness. It bridges generations. For women it is an excuse to pamper themselves, an occasion to buy new clothes, a *sari*, a *punjabi suit*, a piece of jewellery. Among the Gujarati-

speaking women residing in the Greater Toronto area the *Navratra* are an occasion to perform *garba* dances to the clicking of colourful wooden sticks. Among the Bengali-speaking Ontarians, *Saraswati puja* (worship) in the spring and *Durga puja* in the autumn bring women, men, children together. The Goddess fulfills wishes and provides opportunities to celebrate good fortune.

The women involved in Goddess Durga worship are concerned with the practical effects of their devotion. Their worship is an attempt to resolve life's predicaments. They firmly believe that the impact of ill wishes, bad thoughts, and negative actions can be nullified, eradicated, neutralized with the help of the Goddess.

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Dr. Saroj Chawla teaches Sociology and Social Science at York University, North York, Ontario. After years of skepticism and agnosticism, she has returned to the fold of innumerable Hindu Goddesses and Gods.

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Worshipping the Goddess in the Greater Toronto Area

According to the 1991 census of Canada, Hindus are 0.6 per cent (157,010 persons) of the Canadian population, but 68 per cent of them reside in Ontario. Hindus in Ontario have organized and established more than fifty temples and organizations. Most of these are located in the Greater Toronto Area and nearby cities. The 1995 *East-West Connections Business Directory* lists nine major Hindu temples in the Greater Toronto Area, of these three are exclusively devoted to Goddess worship (Durga, Kali, and Vaishno Devi). The Toronto Kalibari temple in Brampton has held Saraswati and Durga worship (*puja*) in the Toronto area since 1969. Since 1986 Saraswati and Durga worship has also been held in a private house in Brampton. Vaishno Devi Temple, located on Highway 25, Oakville, is a recently (1991) constructed temple with a resident priest. The Jai Durga Hindu Society established in 1990 holds Durga worship in a strip plaza on Markham Road. The Vishnu Temple on Yonge Street, North of Highway 7, has in the middle of the altar the statue of Durga flanked by her nine incarnations, four on the left and five on the right. Vaishno Devi Temple and Vishnu Temple hold special hymn singing sessions (*chowki*) for the Goddess on Tuesday and Friday evenings. All other temples propitiate the Goddess during the nine days (*Navratra*, literally "nine nights") in spring and autumn. The *Navratra* fall close to spring and autumn equinoxes. Goddess worship is not restricted to women only—it is a family affair, in which women, men, and children participate.