Book Reviews


With this pūjā I ask for a boon to get a husband like Rāma,
With this pūjā I ask for a boon to be a satī like Sītā,
With this pūjā I ask for a boon to get a brother-in-law like Laksāmanā,
With this pūjā I ask for a boon to get a father-in-law like Daśaratha,
With this pūjā I ask for a boon to get a mother-in-law like Kausalyā,
With this pūjā I ask for a boon to be a mother like Kuntī,
With this pūjā I ask for a boon to be as good a cook as Draupadi,
With this pūjā I ask for a boon to be as powerful as Durgā,
With this pūjā I ask for a boon to be able to bear burdens like Pṛthivī,
With this pūjā I ask for a boon to be able to bear long-lived children like Śaṣthī.

(Bose 2010: 143–144)

The Hindu understanding of the feminine is vast and complex both in relation to goddesses and to women. It can even be argued that complexity, or maybe better paradoxicality, is the key to coming to a closer understanding of the goddess worship and goddess narratives found in Hindu texts. And the crucial questions, “Does a goddess have an identity of her own?” and “Can she be understood as an autonomous agent in her own right?”, can be answered both with a yes and a no, depending on which texts are consulted. The same seems to be the case if one is trying to get hold of the perception(s) of the role or roles of Hindu women in Indian society of the past as well as today, as there are multiple and contradictory images of women in the various texts dealing with the special features of womankind.

According to Dr. Mandakranta Bose (MB), who is professor emerita at the Institute of Asian Research at University of British Colombia, Canada, the two levels are interwoven — as the vrata (vow) above, recited by young five-year-old Bengali girls, shows very clearly. In the book Women in the Hindu Tradition: Rules, Roles and Exceptions, she has taken up the task of trying to give an answer to the question of how they are interconnected, and what the
outcome has been in relation to Hindu women’s self-understanding and their role in society. The conclusion is as expected: that the picture is as blurred, many-layered, and plural as all other aspects of the Hindu tradition, which is maybe why the title includes the word “Exceptions.” Or as she writes herself in the introduction: “…Hinduism does not speak of women with one voice… Hindu thought has thrived on controversy and contradiction, perhaps more so on the subject of women than on any other…. It is through ambiguities and paradoxes that the Hindu tradition projects its conception of women” (p. 10).

Especially the first statement, “that Hinduism does not speak of women with one voice,” is important to remember while reading the book, because MB cannot get all the different layers or aspects into a book only 170 pages long. She uses her scholarly voice or expertise as a scholar in Sanskrit, as an Indologist, and as a historian, and she does that well. Especially her vast overview of important Hindu textual material in relation to the subject is remarkable. The book is based on a series of lectures she gave at Oxford University in 2006, and it is divided into six chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion.

In the introduction (Chapter 1) her methodology as an Indologist and historian of thought is made clear. As her point of departure, she will listen “to voices of historically established authority from within” the ranks of Hindu culture. And she sees it as a pressing need to pull together the views of women enshrined in the authoritative text instead of looking at it indirectly through the commentators of the present. In that way she will try to construct a general framework, which can be used in an understanding of women's roles and self-understandings in the present. She knows it is a difficult task, and she knows that a system of thought is never independent of social practice or, as I would add, the historical and social setting in which the text or thought has been formed, but keeping the risk in mind, this is her aim. Like it or not, it gives the reader an introduction as well as an overview that can be used both in a comparison to more local or contemporary research.

Chapter two, called “Gendered Divinity,” is a general introduction to goddesses in the Hindu tradition. It is a bit sweeping but still very fruitful. As MB writes, she has chosen to…“begin our navigation of this complex history by examining the many goddesses that the Hindu imagination has created through the ages, their attributes, their relationships to other deities, and their place in the Hindu scheme of metaphysical and social existence. We shall then move on to see to what extent the construction of the goddess has proved to be the paradigm for the construction of women in Hindu thought” (p. 14). To keep the line of evolution clear, she looks at these topics more or less chronologically.
In the beginning of the chapter, before the description of important goddesses from Vedic times until the present, the reader is introduced to a philosophical as well as social-archetypal framing, dividing the goddesses into four types in relation to their functions (p. 13). These types are good to think with and are not isolated from each other. A goddess can be either/or, but also both/and, and her role can differ in relation to circumstances and other figures, etc. Later in the book MB gives very good examples of this. The four archetypical roles are: 1) mother/nurturer, 2) wielder of power/protector, 3) wife/helper/daughter, and 4) destroyer.

The second section of the chapter contains selected textual passages from Vedic times onward, with Bose's translations. This anthology is well done and gives the reader a good opportunity to grasp the constructions of the goddesses throughout history. The texts, though, stand a bit “naked” and could have benefited from MB's own analysis.

Chapter three, like chapter two, has two sections, but it takes into account the discursive construction of women, especially in relation to ethical but also biological discourse. With this chapter MB wants to show the continuity between the early Brahminical texts and the subordination of women in Indian society today. This is an interesting chapter which gives the reader an understanding of the power of ancient texts in modern India.

Chapter four is MB's answer to women on what to do in a male-dominated world and within a social system which allows women only little self-determination. The answer is poetry, and MB gives examples of how women have raised their voices throughout history, as she depicts some of the great women poets and mystics. This chapter takes up a subject that is too little encountered in Indian research, and the discussion of the women poets' relationships to goddesses both as protectors and role models leaves the reader wishing for more.

Chapter five on women and home worship, or religion in the domestic space, is with its eleven pages the shortest chapter in the book. This is a pity, because by looking at women's daily pūjās and their performance of vratas or vows, and not least their worship of the goddesses in relation to these rituals, we could have seen the possible interrelationships between the goddesses as such and mortal women. As MB writes, domestic rituals are the domain of women and thereby carve for women a territory of their own.

The conclusion resembles the introduction, restating that Hindu discourse on womankind is vast and more often than not divisive. But it also notes that the seemingly inescapable dependency which the Hindu belief system imposes on women also provides room for liberation, as shown in the chapter on women poets. Bose could have supported this point with further examples. Might the political scene in India have been apropos in this regard?
It is clear that MB’s theoretical and methodological orientation is mostly historical, and her aim is to show that history matters, but I disagree when she states: “The containment of women within the network of duties to the family that Hindu thought has woven lies rooted [in a] deeper, darker and essentially metaphysical conception of existence rather than a sociological one. This is evident in the ever-renewed linkage between women and goddesses” (p. 151). The text as bearer of metaphysical concepts is nothing in itself, but only something in the human making of the text, and later in the human interpretation of the same text. That means that the text is bound to the social, geographical, historical setting and to the situation in which it is constructed and used. MB’s examples of the women poets would have been more illuminating if she had followed that path as well as history a bit farther.

As indicated above, I recommend the book — especially for people interested in the historical background needed for understanding the role of Hindu women in the past as well as today, but also for people interested in Hindu goddesses and the possible interrelation between the perception of the goddesses and the perception of Hindu women. It is a handy little book that could have been twice the length. The sociological or anthropological “missing link” is something that can be filled in by other experts doing sociological or anthropological research. This book is a good one with which to begin.

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