The Suffering Mothers – The Hindu Amman Goddesses as Empowering Role Models for Women

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An examination of the characteristics and mythology of the Dravidian *Amman* Goddesses of south India indicates clearly that their interests are women-centred. I believe that this extremely ancient and unique form of religion, usually overlooked or dismissed by most scholars as too concerned with calamity and darkness, has the potential to offer women a feminist theodicy that can explain and alleviate the suffering they experience because of patriarchal demands.

Introduction

From the earliest manifestations of Hinduism, devotees have been familiar with divinity envisaged as both female and male, and, as Erndl points out, this tradition

> ...has survived the ravages of time and has emerged triumphant in the modern age...coexisting with male gods and in many cases making them superfluous (1993:7).

The village or folk tradition, which is dominant in rural India, particularly in the Dravidian areas of Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh in the south, involves the worship of predominantly female deities. Richard Brubaker maintains that there is increasing evidence of a continuity between the Indus Valley Civilization (c.2500-1500 BCE) and the south Indian Dravidian cultures (1983:149). Thus this is the most ancient form of Indian religion (Whitehead 1921: 11,17), and quite probably one of the oldest existing manifestations of human worship.

Although Hinduism is unique among the world religions in its rich tradi-

tion of Goddess worship, there is an obvious discrepancy between the respect paid to these divine females and the reality of the daily lives of Hindu women.

I believe, however, that the Tamil Amman Goddesses have preserved an extremely ancient form of religion which offers a unique form of Goddess veneration of value to women, presenting them with liberating and empowering role models. I shall show that the myths associated with these Goddesses (eg. Draupadi and Mariamman) contain stories of women, both divine and human, violated, exploited and betrayed by men, but whose courage and purity brought them vindication against males whose violent behaviour threatened disruption of the social order. I maintain that recovery of knowledge of some of these myths has the potential to provide contemporary Hindu and Western women (and men) with a post-patriarchal spirituality which could assist with social transformation.

In KwaZulu-Natal, the veneration of these Dravidian folk Goddesses, can be traced back to its practice in south India, which the early Tamil settlers brought with them to South Africa from 1860 onwards.

Characteristics of the Amman Goddess Tradition

Dravidian is the name given to the aboriginal inhabitants of India, found mainly in the southern and eastern parts of the country. Their presence long predates the advent of the Aryan peoples (c.1500 BCE), but lack of literature results in a scarcity of information about their early existence. Over the course of time, the Aryans became the rulers of India, relegating the Dravidians to an inferior place in the caste system (Elmore 1913: 1,3). However, there still remain vital aspects of religion in these areas that are pre-Aryan and non-Vedic (Klostermaier 1989: 278). Although in many ways it is discontinuous with the Brahmanical tradition of Goddess worship, in other ways it is continuous.

Unlike the pan-Indian Brahmanical Goddesses, the indigenous folk deities who are predominantly female are particularly identified with a specific village. There may be more than one in a village, but some are completely unknown outside their own village. Others, however, have a wider, more regional, recognition, such as Mariyamman/Mariamman in south India, and Manasa in north India.

Although indigenous Goddesses abound throughout India, their especial prevalence in the south almost certainly indicates that the patriarchal Aryan influence was not felt so strongly here among the ancient Dravidian groups who had long venerated the female principle.[1]

Whitehead says,

> Siva and Vishnu may be more dignified beings, but the village deity is regarded as a more present help in trouble, and is more intimately concerned with the happiness and prosperity of the villagers (1921: 16; Fuller 1992: 51).

Their names often indicate their character and function, for example, Pandilamma, the Goddess from Pandil; Mamillamma, the Goddess who sits under a mango tree; Kokkalamma, Goddess of coughs; and Poleramma and Ellamma, both boundary Goddesses (Whitehead 192: 23f). *Amma* or *Amman* simply means "mother" or "respected woman" (cf. Amba, Ambika, Ma, Mata). Goddesses from the Brahmanical tradition have been added to the folk tradition, such as Kaliamma (Kali), and Gengamma (Ganga), the water Goddess of the Ganges. In turn, there has been some annexing of these folk Goddesses onto the Shiva tradition, so that both Kali and Durga are considered part of the Brahmanical tradition although they almost certainly have non-Vedic roots (Payne 1979: 68; Elmore 1913: 5).

Despite their great numbers and variety of functions, these folk deities share a considerable number of characteristics, many of which highlight a tradition which places women's experience at centre stage. But, as Elmore points out: "There is no systematized teaching connected with village cults of worship" (1913:ix).

Firstly, unlike the Brahmanical Goddesses, these folk Goddesses are often represented not by anthropomorphic images, but by natural features such as trees, unhewn stones, or anthills, an indication of their close associations with the natural world, typical of the great Earth Mother (Kinsley 1986: 198).

Secondly, they are concerned almost entirely with local interests, particularly the wellbeing of the inhabitants of the village, being regarded as protector of the village. The Goddess is Mother (*Amman*) of the village; she gave birth to it as its Creator, and, in a sense, the villagers are sustained by her body, the earth. She is worshipped to ensure fertility, of earth, animals and humans, prosperity in the form of rain, good crops, and protection from famine, disease, snakebite, demons and premature death. She is considered as married to the village.[2]

Thirdly, these *Amman* deities are frequently violent, even punishing, Mothers, directly associated with disasters, diseases and death. They are not primarily associated with quiet peacefulness, but with the darker, fierce, untamable sides of human life and the natural world. Their characteristics are independence, arousal, anger, ferocity, destruction and a general lack of predictability, at times reflecting the sometimes terrifying and unpredictable Indian climate. As Earth Mother, they are reminders of the inherent ambiguities of life; that those same forces of nature that uphold the stability of life and the social order, also ultimately threaten its existence.

Fourthly, another significant characteristic of these Goddesses is that they usually do not have male consorts. Their independence from male control is often described as "virgin", although this does not usually mean sexually inexperienced or inactive, but undominated, "her own person". This status as virgin and mother is not as paradoxical as it at first seems, and is not without parallels in other religious traditions (Preston 1987: 41; Esther Harding 1982: 103). This

combination of the images of mother and virgin, but not of wife, is for Hindus powerful rather than contradictory, as it tends to be for Westerners, the appellation "mother" not being interpreted to mean that birthing and nurturing the young is their (or women's) only or most important function, but simply to act in a life-giving, creative fashion. The sexual independence of these Goddesses also reflects their potentially dangerous nature, as being not answerable to any external authority. By contrast, Brahmanical Goddesses with male partners, such as Lakshmi, Sarasvati and Parvati, are usually gentle and mild, lacking the uncontrolled wildness often manifested by the sexually autonomous Goddesses.

The ambivalent sexuality of the folk Goddesses is further reflected in their mythology, often involving stories of a faithful and virtuous woman, unjustly and violently treated by men, sometimes through sexual assault (Kinsley 1986: 200-201). The woman expresses her outrage in anger and revenge, and, after her violent and premature death, is transformed into a Goddess (Fuller 1992: 49; Blackburn 1984: 260). This is reminiscent of the mythology of the virgin Goddess Durga, who rejects the sexual advances of all male suitors and their attempts to dominate her, and is victorious in battle over a male buffalo demon, Mahisasura, who threatens the stability of the universe. (Kali, too, is shown in the *Devi Mahatmyam* defeating male demons of chaos and disorder.) These myths are often recounted or acted as dramas at the festivals of the folk Goddesses (eg. Draupadi; see below). Sometimes the women who are deified are faithful wives who have become *sati* by throwing themselves onto their husbands' funeral pyres.

Linked to this sense of outrage in many of the *Amman* Goddesses, is the tradition that frequently they demand blood sacrifices of male animals, who are often seen as representing either their consorts or some other male opponent. Kinsley comments:

> The goddesses still need males to invigorate them, but they ensure that the males will not dominate them or threaten their powers (1986:202).

Blood sacrifice has a lengthy association with the Brahmanical Goddesses Kali and Durga, both of whom are depicted as thirsty for the blood of their male adversaries. Many folk Goddesses are also regarded as carnivorous, thirsting particularly for the blood of buffaloes, reminiscent of the Buffalo Demon, symbol of chaos and destruction, slain by Durga. Elmore explains that the buffalo sacrifice is one of the most abiding features of Dravidian worship (1913:128).[3]

From the above characteristics it is evident that this tradition emphasises the immanence of the divine in the world and in human affairs. There is no real separation between the sacred and the secular; all life is sacred, the entire natural world is infused with spirit (anima), and the divine is encountered at every turn. This is particularly clear in the phenomenon of possession, very

frequent in *Amman* religion, where a deity is believed temporarily to inhabit the body of a devotee. The Goddess chooses human bodies in which to manifest herself, to show her power, and her ability to communicate and to heal. The divine can, therefore, frequently be experienced in human form, particularly in female bodies. Kathleen Erndl has written about the phenomenon of the worship of certain women who are regularly possessed as Maters/Mothers or living goddesses... (1993: 113; Diesel 1998a & b).

Also, the elevating of humans to divine status, particularly those who were renowned for their power or purity, or who died strange, untimely deaths, were murdered, or women who died in childbirth, is an indication of the interweaving of the divine and the human (Fuller 1992: 50).

There are few written sacred texts recording origins, belief or practice of *Amman* religion. Obviously, because the original devotees were illiterate, any stories and legends were orally transmitted, probably for centuries, before being committed to manuscripts of palm leaf (Whitehead 1921: 122, 126; Elmore 1913: ix). (The one clear exception is the Draupadi myth, central to her festival, but this has its origins in the Brahmanical *Mahabharata*, a later text than the majority of myths of the ancient folk Goddesses.[4]

A further characteristic is that the religion shows practically no acknowledgement of the caste system which it obviously pre-dates, but operates in a more egalitarian fashion (Kinsley 1986: 199). There is no priestly caste; the *pujaris* who officiate can come from any class, and all who wish may participate in the worship, regardless of gender or caste background, outcastes included (Whitehead 1921: 154), which makes it a religion with appeal to the poor and marginalized, especially women and Dalits.

Finally, female pollution and the accompanying need for ritual purification do not appear to be given the same emphasis as in the Brahmanical tradition. The Goddess herself is believed to give birth and to menstruate, so these female functions are regarded as more naturally acceptable than in the mainstream tradition (Bhattacharyya 1977: 8-9, 19). The Goddess, too, is closely associated with death, disease, and blood, all traditionally polluting, and so is not considered to be as ritually "pure" as many of the gods of the Brahmanical pantheon. Whitehead also comments on the prominent role often played by women in some of the rituals (1921:79,150).

The Feminist Meaning of the Amman Goddesses

It is in the festivals of the *Amman* Goddesses that these diverse and complex characteristics come together to provide some overall meaning to the function of these seemingly paradoxical deities. In the past a festival would be called when some crisis, such as drought, flood, or disease, overwhelmed the village. The festival involved the people of the village, the children of the Goddess,

springing into action to elicit her assistance in dealing with the calamity. The various rituals performed are designed to deal with and overcome the disorder and disaster, to revere and propitiate the Goddess, and so to restore a situation of order and wellbeing to the community.

The climax of the festival, and its core ritual, is the blood sacrifice. This can be interpreted either as an offering, a gift, made directly to the Goddess, to placate her so she will withdraw the effects of her anger; or as representing her defeating and slaughtering the invading and disruptive demons of disease and disruption (Kinsley 1986: 205). Buffaloes were the original and most usual sacrifices offered to the Goddesses, and are directly associated with Mahisasura, the Buffalo Demon beheaded by Durga in the *Devi Mahatmyam*. Brubaker draws attention to the fact that the buffalo is a "powerful and unpredictably dangerous beast with a well-deserved reputation for brutishness..." (1983:152). Often it invades cultivated fields causing great destruction to crops, so it is most appropriate that it features in the Durga myth as a symbol of power out of control, of chaos and disruption to the civilized order. Its beheading in the festival symbolises the Goddess's victory over the encroaching demonic forces. The blood of the sacrificial victims is seen either as placating and cooling the Goddess's anger, and/or as revitalizing her by offering her the life of these creatures (Kinsley 1986: 113).

It is significant that the sacrificial animals are always male, as this links with the mythological theme of the anger of the Goddess, aroused by some injustice done to her by males. The demons of chaos and destruction who invade the village, the territory of the Goddess, her body, are invariably depicted as male, so that the image of a rape is evoked. Brubaker believes that the theme of sexuality and violence is inherent in the mythology and ritual of the village Goddesses. He says,

> An enclosed, domesticated, sacred space personified by a divine female attracts and is penetrated by a wilderness-roaming horde driven by distinctly masculine forms of lust and aggression (1983:154).

The Mothers (*Amma*) have to help protect the civilized world from such disruptive and violating attacks, and the villagers, her children and devotees, must identify themselves with her struggle with these demons. Their world has been invaded by malignant male forces, and only by acknowledging the power of the Goddess can order, health and wellbeing be restored. The activity and excitement of the festival reminds all participants of the presence in their midst of sacred power, a force above and beyond the experiences of everyday, material existence, and of the eternal conflict between good and evil, order and chaos.

The crucial question is, however: why are these deities female? What is it

that specifically requires the presence of a divine female (a Mother) to restore the balance of society? Most scholars, like Elmore, Whitehead and Babb, who have studied these fierce, independent Goddesses, express puzzlement and even discomfort that females, especially Mothers, should behave in such seemingly uncharacteristically wild and uncontrolled ways. Babb explains what he considers to be the fundamental key to the dichotomy between the two kinds of Hindu Goddesses: namely that "married" Goddesses are benevolent, givers of life, wealth, and children, and display devotion to their husbands. In contrast are the "unmarried" Goddesses who are alone, malevolent, bloodthirsty, dangerous and terrible, "surrounded with the paraphernalia of killing", all apparently attributable to "feminine malice" (Babb 1975: 222). He goes on to claim that the marriage of Shiva and Parvati shows the desirable transformation achieved by the pairing of God and Goddess, as husband and wife:

> An appetite for conflict and destruction is thus transformed into the most fundamental of social virtues, that of wifely submission which, on the premises given in Hindu culture makes the continuation of society possible... When the female dominates the male the pair is sinister; when male dominates female the pair is benign (ibid.:225-6).

It is true that in any relationship with males, the Goddess does indeed dominate her male partners, and it is this reversal of the usually expected male and female roles that appears to confuse and possibly offend some people. A patriarchally ordered society considers it "natural" that women, especially mothers, should be primarily benevolent protectors of life, caring for the wellbeing of their husbands and children. The independent, untamed, angry behaviour of the Goddesses appear, then, to be an "unnatural" reversal of the acceptable order, where women are expected to be pliable and subservient. However, this very patriarchal, and ultimately misogynist, view, expressed by Babb, simply reinforces socially accepted stereotypes and expectations, suggesting that the "feminine malice" and frustration of unmarried Goddesses, and possibly of their human daughters, is responsible for the disruptive, harmful forces in society (ibid.:145). This view can only be sustained by ignoring several crucial facts about the indigenous Goddesses: for example, the theme of sexual violence in their myths (Kinsley 1986: 203); the concept of "virgin" as applied to their sexual independence; and, closely connected to this, a male fear of female sexuality.

The analysis of Brubaker and Kinsley contradicts Babb's view, pointing to the fact that *Amman* Goddess myths frequently show that it is males who are most often violent and disruptive in society, so that the Goddess, the divine female, is then needed to protect and preserve the stability of life (Kinsley 1986: 203). In her myths and festivals, it is she who challenges the destabilizing

male invasion, and, finally, brings about the restoration of order that is essential for society to continue to exist and to thrive. This is her role as fiercely protective Mother. So, her violence is almost entirely a reactive type of violence; a response of righteous anger to the violent situation created by invading and disruptive males.

> The village goddess represents the order of the cultivated field and the security of hearth and home. She is preeminently the being who protects the village from attacks by wild, unstable, demonic spirits from the uncivilized outer world. Those demons, furthermore, are often said to be male... (Kinsley 1986: 203).

Developing further the theme of female sexuality, Brubaker shows that the distinction between the consort ("married") and the independent ("unmarried") Goddesses reflects that:

> ...traditional images of women are polarized in a way that parallels the polarization of the sacred. And in India this familiar split is found in extreme form (1983:158).

He draws attention to the traditional Hindu (and Western) patriarchal situation which requires the ideal woman be married, virtuous, and submissive to her husband. A woman's *stri-dharma* (womanly duty) prescribes her role as that of wife and mother. Connected to this is the belief that a wife's lack of complete faithfulness and virtue can endanger the physical safety and health of her husband. This is shown in the *Ramayana* story of Sita, who believes that Rama's misfortune must be connected to some moral failing of hers, even though she is unaware of any such thing (Kinsley 1986: 76); and in the story of Renuka/Ellamma, whose envy of another couple's love causes her husband to accuse her of unfaithful desires, and perceive her as a threat to his wellbeing (Elmore 1913: 101; Wilkins 1989: 165-166; see below). At the same time, there is a traditional Hindu belief

> that women have stronger sexual drives than men - drives which if properly controlled and sublimated, can produce a saintliness beyond the capacity of the male, but which, if allowed to run rampant, can be very threatening to men (Brubaker 1983: 159).

In the light of these ambivalent attitudes to women's role, Brubaker believes that understanding the "untamed" *Amman* Goddesses is connected to the male

fear of the female, especially the power of her unfettered sexuality. As well as desiring them, men fear women and their powerful *shakti:* their sexual and spiritual power. One can develop this by acknowledging that women's powerful sexuality can be expressed in two different ways. Ideally, in a patriarchal society (reflected by Babb and others), they should be married and under the supervision of their husbands, so that their powerful and potentially dangerous sexuality can be expressed in safely controlled ways. In a sense this serves to neutralize their *shakti*, to "tame" and limit it to patriarchal demands and requirements. Unmarried women, widows, and to some extent childless women, are without properly defined patriarchal status, so they are regarded as inauspicious, and are feared for their unrestrained sexual power. This other alternative for women involves independence from men, possibly expressed in sexual abstinence, a self-imposed or chosen sexual restraint, which is not a negation or denial of sexuality, but to be "virgin", like the Goddesses, in the sense of being independent of any male control or domination.[5] Conserving and channelling sexual energy constitutes the kind of austerity that generates *tapas*, great spiritual heat and power, which can be expressed either positively or negatively. It is this second option that truly allows women as autonomous beings to express their sexuality as they wish, to explore and discover the fullness of their own female nature, and so to unleash their physical and spiritual powers (*shakti*). (Most feminists would hope that this sexual independence, epitomized by the Goddess, is also achievable within a heterosexual marriage relationship.)

This human situation is reflected in the two kinds of Goddesses: those who are married, the consorts of males to whom they are submissive and obedient; and those who are independent, "virgin", uncontrolled by males, and therefore potentially threatening to the usually accepted stereotype of gender relations. *Shakti* is always powerfully challenging and threatening to patriarchal institutions. The Goddess's power is directly linked to her independence and sexual abstinence or control.

The truth encapsulated here is that sexual relationships in a patriarchal society are nearly always ambiguous and ambivalent, where males are expected to control women, and sex is too often confused with violence and domination, which has harmful results, particularly for the female. There is a mixture of attraction and repulsion, of submission and the need for independence, of surrender and yet conflict, of trust as well as suspicion, of eroticism tinged with violation/violence.

Kinsley believes that in the context of these sexually unstable and unpredictable relationships:

> It could be said of these fiercely independent goddesses that they have "learned their lesson", that they have learned that they only receive injustice from males; consequently

> they are determined to remain independent from men in their transformed positions as goddesses (Kinsley 1986: 202).

So the phenomenon of the Dravidian *Amman* Goddesses, keeps alive awareness of the conflict between the sexes in a patriarchal context. Can the example and independence of the Goddess be regarded as representing the possibility of challenging and overcoming the institutionalized and destabilizing aggression and violence of patriarchal structures?

The Worship of the Dravidian Amman Goddesses in KZN

Throughout their more than 140 years of residence in South Africa, religion has certainly been the most powerful stabilising force in the Hindu community (Kuper 1960: 269; Pillay et al, 1989:145). Wherever they settled, shrines and temples were soon constructed, obviously playing a major role in helping these early settlers maintain awareness of their heritage, and to re-construct their identity in the often difficult conditions of their diaspora experience.

Because the Tamil community is the largest (approximately 45% of the total), their form of traditional ritual and practice predominates, especially in KZN.[6]

Although most of the early Hindus were illiterate, they had a deeply instilled knowledge of their familiar rituals, relating both to daily *puja* performance, and to the grander annual festivals. Generally, there has been considerable resistance to change in patterns of worship, and devotees' familiarity with the ritual has been faithfully transmitted over the generations in the new environment.

Most South African Hindus, particularly Tamils, are Shaivites, with the worship of Muruga/Murugan/Soobramoniar, a deity with south Indian, non-Vedic, origins, later regarded as a son of Shiva, being probably the most popular expression of this tradition (Clothey 1978). Shiva's other son, Ganesha/Ganapati, also receives much attention. Hanuman is another much venerated deity, although, strictly, he belongs within the Vaishnavite family. However, like the non-Vedic Shiva himself, both Ganesha and Hanuman probably have non-Vedic origins in the indigenous tribes of India, thus fitting comfortably alongside the other indigenous Dravidian deities (mostly female), of the areas of south India from which the Tamil immigrants came (Elmore 1984:6). For most South African Tamil people, and many other traditional Hindus, the Mother Goddess, in one form or another, is the most visible and popular focus of their worship. The most venerated Goddesses in KZN are the *Amman* deities Mariamman, Draupadi, Ankalamman/Angalamman, and Gengaiamman; the fierce Goddesses Kali and Durga who also probably have non-Vedic origins (Elmore 1984:5); and Sarasvati, Lakshmi, and Parvati, the consorts of the great

Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva respectively.

The most characteristic features of traditional Tamil religion in KZN are: the performance of elaborate, ancient rituals; the taking of vows; practising austerities such as the sticking of pins and hooks through the body, as well as firewalking; possession trances; the pre-occupation with the propitiation of deities; and the focus on healing, both psychological and physical, which is hoped will result.

KZN has many temples dedicated to Mariamman, the most widely worshipped south Indian Goddess, with the largest and most important being at Isipingo Rail, south of Durban, to which thousands of devotees come to attend her festival during the long weekend coinciding with the Christian Easter, mainly to seek healing. There are also temples dedicated to Angalamman (often identified with Kali), Gengaiamman, and one to Draupadi. All these *Amman* places of worship are extremely busy, their annual festivals drawing large crowds, and many devotees regularly visiting to do *puja* which frequently involves supplications for healing various ailments. Many older and more traditional Tamils still believe illness and disease are caused by divine wrath or displeasure (usually of one of the *Amman* deities), so that the appropriate treatment is to seek propitiation through the correct rituals.

The rituals performed for these deities in South Africa appear to have been very carefully preserved; for example, comparing the ritual details of Draupadi firewalking ceremonies held in present day KZN with those of south India, researched by Hiltebeitel, reveals a remarkably close correspondence (Hiltebeitel 1988; Diesel 1994). A description of a Draupadi festival observed in India in the 18th century by the French traveller Sonnerat, and reported by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, also reveals details practically identical to those still performed in KZN ceremonies (Frazer 1913: 6-8).

However, it appears to me that ritual has tended to become divorced from its controlling mythology, with most people only aware of some very rudimentary, and at times garbled, details of the various stories. Reasons for this are largely that for several generations few people were able to read, accompanied by a scarcity of religious literature, and, more recently, because of the loss of knowledge of the vernacular languages. For example, until recently, two temples in Durban performed one of the Tamil plays in the cycle of *Terukkuttu* dramas which recount some of the major events in the Draupadi saga (Hiltebeitel 1988). Performed in the temple precincts throughout the night before the firewalking ritual, this setting evoked powerful images re-enacting the fulfilment of Draupadi's vow and her final vindication, which was timed to coincide with dawn (Kuppusami 1983: 104-5; Diesel 1994: 78-82). These dramas can be compared to the Christian medieval "miracle plays" which helped teach scriptural stories to a largely illiterate populace. Unfortunately, this production has ceased in the last few years, largely because there are now insufficient actors

familiar with the script, and it is performed in Tamil which many people no longer understand.

In the recent past in South Africa many have predicted the decline and abandoning of this type of indigenous Tamil ritual, because it is a crude remnant of popular religious expression with no further contemporary relevance (Kuper 1960: 215, 269; Naidoo 1982). Contrary to this expectation, at present worship of the Dravidian deities appears to be flourishing, with larger and larger crowds attending the festivals each year (Diesel 1990: 29-30; 1994: 89-90). Reasons suggested for this resurgence of interest in these festivals are the threat and fear of illness, especially measles and AIDS, and escalating medical costs; the perceived economic instability of the country, and the fact that many poorer Indians feel they have yet to benefit from recent changes in government policy. Other factors include the social and political insecurity of a society in transition, the ongoing violence, and the knowledge that the Indian community will continue to be a permanent minority.

My experience in observing the annual Draupadi firewalking festival in KwaZulu-Natal for the past 12 years, and in talking to many women participants, indicates that the image of Draupadi, Goddess patron of the festival, is to some extent acting in an empowering manner for certain women. This is probably the most popular Hindu festival in KZN with steadily growing attendance, and media interest.

In Pietermaritzburg media attention since 1996 largely focused on the fact that the all-male temple committee forbade women to walk across the fire, although other temples in the province welcomed their full participation, as do most temples in India (Hiltebeitel 1988; 1991). The committee's reasons were blatantly sexist, claiming that women were more likely to be burned than men, and that certain women wished to dominate the proceedings. Because of this, a small group of Pietermaritzburg Hindu women, led by an lively and outspoken devotee of the "Mother", led a campaign to overturn the temple committee's ban. After several years of pleadings, petitions, and newspaper articles presenting their protests, the women were finally allowed to cross the fire at the 1999 festival, accompanied by much jubilation on their part and by their supporters (Diesel 1998b).

I have pointed out elsewhere that in the South African Hindu community, which under the apartheid system was politically, socially and religiously marginalized and discriminated against, participation in the various rituals of these festivals can bring considerable empowerment (Diesel 1998a & b). Many of the descendants of the original south Indian indentured labourers have remained relatively economically depressed, suffering from considerable stress, frustration and anxiety. This has resulted in much physical and psychological illness. Many people are unable to afford the ever-increasing doctors' fees, while others despair of the ability of conventional Western medicine to cure their

ailments. In this context, the entire worshipping community can be seen to experience a strong sense of identity and solidarity from their participation in the symbolic religious rituals and their powerful mythology. To come through the fire unscathed, viewed as affirmation of one's purity and devotion to the Goddess, is itself empowering, and is claimed by many to bring healing. Loring Danforth who researched two very different firewalking communities, the Greek orthodox Anasternaria, and the American firewalking movement, maintains that participants:

> ...are rhetorically moved from their present state, negatively defined as one of illness, to a new state positively defined as one of health. Through firewalking they are empowered; their lives are transformed. They gain an enhanced sense of self-confidence and self-esteem and are able to function more effectively in the world in which they live (1989:288).

These claims certainly appear to apply to local Hindu firewalkers, and, as Danforth observed, it is women whose lives are probably most radically transformed (ibid. 5, 96).

The traditional status of women in Hinduism accords them little independence or identity separate from their husbands, requiring them to maintain a fairly low profile at public events. However, at *Amman* Goddess festivals in KZN, women sometimes form the majority of devotees, many of whom move out of their subservient roles to perform relatively important and visible functions which bring them considerable recognition and status. The small group of Pietermaritzburg women challenged the patriarchally controlled temple committee and won, which, together with their jubilant and safe passage through the fire, brought them a strong sense of achievement. The trance possession experienced by many women causes them to display the wild behaviour of one of the fierce Goddesses, behaviour not normally acceptable in a respectable Hindu woman. Possessed people (women and men) are revered as divine, their supernatural powers enabling them to bless others, to act as oracles, and, very often, to heal. Many women who usually become possessed are regarded with great respect and reverence, some being regularly consulted as spiritual healers and counsellors (Diesel 1998a).

Some distinction needs to made between *Amman* religion as practised on a large scale at official festivals, arranged by temple committees where male leadership dominates, although women devotees often outnumber men; and the small scale largely women led healing practices operating from smaller Goddess temples, or private homes. Many women come to seek healing and advice for dealing with abusive husbands, and are thus especially concerned with the

preservation of such practices. This women dominated aspect of *Amman* religion is extremely popular, so much so that it sometimes appears to pose a threat to the male temple leadership, some women having been dismissed as simply running "backyard temple cults" (Diesel 1998a & b).

A number of these women have spoken of the connection between divine females and human females, viewing their close relationship with the Goddess as contributing to their identity and worth as women (ibid.). These possessing Goddesses can, I suggest, be regarded as the "alter egos" of the women, their other selves, free of the restraints and subservience normally experienced by traditional Hindu women. Emily Kearns has drawn attention to the potency of the image of these Goddesses: that the wildness and anger of the Goddesses allows women to express something of their own stored-up anger against patriarchal oppression (1992:219). By emulating the behaviour of the Goddesses, women are able to achieve a sense of independence, confidence and worth, which challenges patriarchal control, and has the potential to bring healing.

The growing popularity of firewalking for Draupadi, and other Tamil Goddess festivals such as the Mariamman and Gengaiamman festivals, indicates the power still accorded these ancient female deities and their ability to remind a community, far from its spiritual home, of its roots. Local Hindus will, one hopes, attempt to recover some knowledge and appreciation of the rich symbolism and mythology of Tamil religion, which forms part of their cultural and religious heritage. The recent emphasis on the revival of the vernacular evidenced in SA Hindu circles might encourage a re-reading of Tamil religious literature, including the mythology of the *Amman* Goddesses.

Some Myths of Amman Goddesses

The mythologies of many *Amman* Goddesses can be regarded as "texts of terror", recounting the stories of hosts of women, usually faithful and virtuous, who were abandoned, deceived, betrayed, insulted, raped and killed by men (Kinsley 1986: 200-4). These abused and righteously angry women drew strength from their virtue, and gained victory over male intimidation and violence, bringing healing to their communities. In many instances human women were transformed into Goddesses, thus demonstrating the vindication of women's strength.

The Draupadi myth is a particularly characteristic and compelling example of a story detailing the experiences of a woman much exploited and misused by men. The origin of the Draupadi story is in the great classical epic, the *Mahabharata*, where she is presented here as a human woman, but a Tamil version, dating to c.1400 CE, includes additions which relate her apotheosis to the powerful Mother Goddess of Fire, and her annexation to the south Indian *Amman* tradition (Hiltebeitel 1988).

The story of Draupadi is a dramatic epic of fortunes lost and won, of treachery and faithfulness, of defeat and final victory and vindication. A strong, spirited, and outspoken woman, she was the faithful wife of the five Pandava brothers. When, through the treachery of their relatives, the Kauravas, her family lost their inheritance and went into years of exile in the forest, she courageously devoted herself to their welfare. She survived numerous attempts by men to seduce and humiliate her, her religious faith and purity bringing her safely through these ordeals. In the Tamil version of the *Mahabharata*, after her vindication, she demonstrated her faithfulness and purity by walking unscathed across a pit of burning coals.

The pivotal episode in the Draupadi narrative is the attempted disrobing, when the eldest Kaurava brother, Duryodhana, had her dragged by her long hair into the men's court, and tried to strip off her sari. Draupadi's desperate appeals to Krishna resulted in his miracle of the endless garment unable to be removed. This is a turning point in the narrative: in the immediate, and eventual, fortunes of the Pandava family, and in the development of Draupadi's personal spiritual quest for exoneration. Such provocation and challenge of one patriarchal power group to another could only culminate in warfare. This insult to Draupadi reverberates throughout the rest of the epic, being regarded as justification for the awful carnage that follows (Falk 1977: 96). In her anger, Draupadi vowed revenge, pledging not to retie her hair until she had washed it in her enemies' blood.

Reminiscent of Helen of Troy, Draupadi is a woman viewed by many men as a great prize, a valuable object to be competed for and squabbled over, who becomes the central reason for internecine conflict, which brings disorder (*adharma*) and devastation to society.

Draupadi's odyssey is a quest for spiritual perfection where, having endured and overcome various trials and hardships, she finally achieves victory over her adversaries, and, with it, purification and sanctification. Her ultimate ordeal of walking through fire confirms and seals her divine nature, transforming her into a Goddess worthy of the worship of her devotees, who must imitate her faithfulness and virtue.

Throughout the attempted disrobing, as well as at other moments in the narrative, Draupadi's actions and responses are reminiscent of other fierce Goddesses: of Kali, in her victorious stance on the battlefield; and of Durga, a female figure recognising and condemning patriarchal forces, represented by male demons, for their denial and destruction of the moral order (*dharma*) of society (*Devi Mahatmyam*).

Of the indignities suffered by Draupadi, particularly during the attempted disrobing, Nancy Falk comments that they constitute "... a sequence of the most intense insults to be found anywhere in the literature of the world" (1977:99).

There are numerous other *Amman* Goddess myths which recount how women who suffered similar ill-treatment by men were then elevated to divine status, and could be regarded as role models for their contemporary sisters. This is a textual tradition which focuses on women's experience of injustice, suffering and vindication.

The Goddess Mariamman has a number of different myths recounting her origins. One of these, also connected with the Goddess Renuka, depicts her as a young, pure and pious woman married to a holy man or Brahmin. Her purity bestowed her with miraculous powers, much admired by local people. When one day she saw two people making love, and felt envious of their happiness, she lost her powers. Her husband, on discovering this, suspected her of unfaithfulness, and ordered their son to kill her. On doing so, the son also cut off the head of an untouchable, or *dalit*, women who tried to protect her. Later, at the son's request, the husband agreed to restore his wife's life, but her head was inadvertently put on the body of the untouchable women, and the untouchable woman's head put on his wife. The woman with the Brahmin head and the untouchable body was then worshipped as a Goddess (Elmore 1913: 93f). Kinsley points out, that this account reflects the ambivalent natures of the *Amman* Goddesses, as well as reminding devotees that Brahmins head the religious and social system (1986:201). One should add that this is also a reminder that traditional Brahmanical Hinduism has marginalized women in the same way as outcastes or *dalits* (oppressed), and that this indigenous religion's more egalitarian attitude has welcomed all devotees, whatever discrimination they may suffer from religious, social, or gender requirements.

Another Mariamman story involves a young Brahmin girl cruelly tricked into marrying an untouchable who had disguised himself as a Brahmin. On eventually discovering the injustice done to her, she despaired and set the house on fire, burning herself to death to expiate the evil she had involuntarily been forced to commit. When she was transformed into a Goddess, she declared to the villagers the great wrong done to her, demanded that they worship her, and wreacked revenge on her tormentor (Whitehead 1921: 117-8; Kinsley 1986: 200).

Elmore recounts a story associated with the Goddess Podilamma of south India (1913:69). A young woman was sent to take their midday meal to some members of her family, low caste farmers who were working in a field some distance from their village. On the way, she met a man with whom she stopped to speak, which made her late in delivering the food. Her relatives, assuming she had allowed herself to be seduced, angrily threw her under the feet of the threshing oxen where she was trampled to death. Later, on removing the straw from the threshing floor, they discovered her body had disappeared, and only a stone was found to represent her (typical of the Amman tradition). A man at the site became possessed with the spirit of the girl, and she spoke through him,

expressing her outrage at being unjustly killed, and demanding that she now be worshipped or calamitous retribution would befall the community. So the remorseful villagers placed the stone at the centre of a shrine constructed in her memory.

Elmore also refers to the story of Mundla Mudamma (1913:70-71). A little girl of the Sudra caste herded cattle daily with other children. The children often played a game with stones and sticks, considered to be a boys' game. The little girl, however, won every game, despite the boys' best efforts. A traveller passing by one day was most impressed by the girl's skill particularly because of the assumption that it was not possible for a female to have superiority over males. While he watched the children playing the game, the cattle strayed into a neighbour's field. When the stranger drew the children's attention to this, the small girl uttered a shrill cry which brought all the cattle running back to them. After the traveller had told the villagers about the girl's skill, and control over the cattle, they watched her carefully. On another day when they witnessed the girl calling the cattle again in this way, they began to fear her, largely because of the traditional belief that females should never challenge the power of males. So, the villagers decided that the extraordinary girl should not be allowed to continue to flaunt gender roles, and plotted to kill her. Differing versions of the account record that either she heard of their plans and drowned herself in a well, or she disappeared, and all that was found of her was a stone. Her spirit then appeared in the village, condemning the injustice done to her, and demanding worship, whereupon the stone was shaped into her form, and placed in a temple built and dedicated to her.

Many versions exist of the commonly experienced theme involving a man with a beautiful daughter; against her wishes he arranged for her to be married to an elderly rich man whom the father regarded as a desirable husband. The girl wept and pleaded to be spared what she considered to be an undesirable and frightening fate, but the father was cruelly unconcerned about the daughter's happiness and wellbeing, and insisted on the marriage. So, after praying, the daughter went to the village tank where she threw herself in and drowned. Later, the girl appeared to one of the family members in a dream, announcing that she was now divine, a Goddess, who required their reverence and worship in order to ensure the continued health and wellbeing of the villagers (Whitehead 1921: 126).

The *Devi Mahatmyam*, the great hymn of glory to the Divine Mother, expresses very clearly many of the seminal characteristics of the *Amman* Goddess myths. Involving the Goddesses Durga and Kali, who almost certainly had their origins in non-Aryan indigenous religion (Payne 1979: 68; Elmore 1913: 5), this epic relates how it was necessary for a female to do battle with, and overcome, a series of male demons who threatened the worlds with chaos, and whom the male deities were unable to defeat. The best known of these demons,

and the prevailing sacrificial victim in Goddess festivals, is Mahisasura, the Buffalo Demon. The dangerous buffalo is a symbol of power out of control, of chaos and destruction to the civilized order, invading cultivated fields and devastating crops. Its sacrificial beheading in the festivals encapsulates the Goddess's victory over encroaching male demonic forces.[7]

There are numerous accounts of women who became *sati*, by being burnt to death on their husband's funeral pyres, either "voluntarily" or involuntarily, frequently with considerable encouragement from their family and community (Dubois 1906: 405-6). Many stories tell of women speaking from the flames demanding to be remembered, and worshipped as Goddesses (Elmore 1913: 75; Dubois 1906: 404-5, 408-415). Two recent incidences of *sati* are that of Roop Kanwar in 1987, and Charan Shah in 1999, both of whom have had shrines constructed for their worship which have become sites of religious pilgrimage (Bumiller 1990: 62-74; Manushi 1999: 14-34). Such shrines generally become renowned for the occurrence of miracles of healing, particularly of childless women conceiving (Dubois 1906: 415). These accounts indicate the persistence and power of the tradition of venerating women who have lived and died in extraordinary ways, suffering because of the demands of patriarchal traditions.[8] New folk Goddesses continue to be created.

This collection of ancient, and more recent, imaginative, and contemporarily potent, texts mirror the experience of hundreds of thousands of women worldwide. They can be viewed as sacred texts because of their ability to penetrate beneath the surface and reveal some important truth about human experience, here the alienation of the sexes (which features in the sacred stories of many other cultures, for example, ancient Greek mythology). They highlight the sexual abuse of women both in society and within the home. They tell of the men who perpetrate it, and the complicity of those who are aware of it and yet remain silent. Women are thus enabled to identify with the women protagonists and so be freed to tell their own stories; to be assured that they are not alone. It is silence that disempowers. When women share their stories and support one another, they encourage each other to become survivors rather than victims of the structural violence engendered and fostered by androcentric culture.

The Amman Goddesses as Empowering for Women

Hinduism is familiar with the practice of using Goddesses as role models for women where, as stated above, the divide between divine and human has always been thin, with deities frequently being incarnated as human and exceptional humans elevated to divine status. Indira Gandhi was often compared to the beautiful and regal Durga, formidable in vanquishing evil demons who threatened the stability of society. But generally, it has been the milder consort

Goddesses, particularly Sita, the wife of Rama, who have been presented as paradigms for women in a culture obsessed with marriage. Women have been urged to emulate Sita as the ideal selfless and submissive wife (*pativrata*) who is expected to remain passive, silent and devoted to her husband however badly she is treated (Kinsley 1986: 70-78). A male dominated religious hierarchy has made use of these female images to encourage women to conform to patriarchal demands.

In spite of a number of pleas for women to recognise and claim the potential for empowerment in the image of the divine female as preserved in the Hindu tradition,[9] I have not as yet seen anything encouraging the acknowledgement of the Dravidian *Amman* Goddesses as particularly able to perform this function.[10]

It is certainly a break with tradition to suggest that Draupadi, Mariamman, Durga, Kali, and other strong, autonomous Goddesses should consciously be appropriated as role models by women, as such independent, self assertive women have been regarded as threatening and potentially dangerous to the order of society. These Goddesses offer an image of womanhood freed from the demands and constraints of wife and mother, so allowing women to explore roles not defined and controlled by men.

I believe that the female figures and mythology of this ancient and possibly pre-patriarchal *Amman* tradition offer a potentially far more powerful and liberating group of role models for contemporary women than the consort Goddesses, who continue to uphold patriarchal norms. It is exciting that these stories and rituals have retained their ancient power, and are capable of offering an explanation for, and even the alleviation of, much of the suffering endured by women, past and present.

Lena Gupta believes that even Kali, probably the most fiercesome of all Goddesses, offers,

> a religious paradigm for understanding and appropriating the feminine in Hindu traditions ... to post-patriarchal Hindu women. [Kali] represents, not only to women but to all people, a way of facing and transcending any limitation, whether the limitation is self-created or imposed by others, thus offering a way of liberating tradition itself from its patriarchal bias (1991:16-17).

That certain women, in disparate parts of the world, as well as those in KZN already dealt with above, have experienced the figure of Draupadi as empowering, is borne out by the work of Purnima Mankekar in Delhi and Marie Gillespie in Southall, London (Mankekar 1993; Gillespie 2000).

Mankekar and Gillespie used the serialization of the *Mahabharata* ("an an-

cient tale told anew by Indian television") to question women's reaction to the episode of the attempted disrobing of Draupadi. In both Delhi and London women viewed this incident as a climactic point in the narrative, and were powerfully moved by the scene, finding it a frightening reflection of the contemporary oppression and abuse of women. They saw Draupadi as a symbol of female vulnerability, and were shocked that her abuse occurred in the presence of her husbands and relatives, yet nobody moved to challenge the act nor to protect a defenceless woman. Draupadi was stripped of her dignity, and rendered nameless by being referred to as "that woman with five husbands", suggesting some moral and sexual deviance in her family situation. This appears to her taunters to justify their insulting behaviour. Despite expressing surprise that women have suffered sexual abuse since the time of the great epics, every woman interviewed, identified in some way with Draupadi's experience, and compared this with their own daily realities of sexual harassment and exploitation both at home and in the workplace. Some were able to appropriate Draupadi's rage as motivation to confront the indignities and injustices they and other women regularly endure (Mankekar 1993: 481, 487).

These reactions of women as far part as Delhi and London illustrate the power of texts, however ancient, to challenge and empower women to gain insight into their lives, and to emulate Draupadi's rage at injustice by critiquing and working to change the conditions of injustice and humiliation they often have to endure.

The Pietermaritzburg women, by contrast, had not as far as I am aware, seen the TV epic, but their experience of participating in the rituals of the Draupadi festival motivated their challenge to the sexist and domineering attitude of the temple committee.

Conclusion

In order for the healing and empowering potential of the *Amman* Goddesses to be realised, some knowledge of their mythology needs to be recovered at a popular level. These stories relate how female deities have suffered the same violations and terrors endured by their human daughters, but whose anger at injustice, and whose ultimate victory, can motivate all women to continue the battle against the demons of patriarchy. These tales of women who were transformed into Goddesses represent "the personified wrath of all women in all cultures" (Gupta 1991: 31). They are able to illustrate the strength of women's energy (*shakti*), which is there, waiting to be appropriated by all who wish to triumph over the circumstances of their lives.

Here, then, is a feminist theodicy: the question of the violence done to women by patriarchal attitudes and institutions is at the heart of *Amman* mythology. A woman orientated explanation is offered for the cause, as well as the

alleviation, of the evil and suffering that is specific to their experience. The *Amman* Goddess is a "wounded healer" figure: she shares and understands the situation of women, exploited, manipulated and often broken by patriarchal constraints and demands, lacking autonomy, and powerless to take control of their own destinies. Suffering women have a figure they can recognise and identify with, able to say, in effect, "That's me; that's my life; I too can overcome this predicament, and experience healing." Out of affliction and agony comes hope, followed by spiritual and psychological wholeness and triumph, a central theme in religion.

Probably the most profound message of these enigmatic *Amman* deities is to preserve awareness of the necessity for women to become the initiators in the resolution of the sexual conflict and injustice of patriarchally controlled society, something that is impossible for most men (cf. *Devi Mahatmyam*). The figure of the Mother Goddess summons her daughters to join in her continued battle against male violence, to convert their anger into the healing and transformation of society.

Too often in the past, the *Amman* Goddesses, their myths and ritual, have been dismissed as too focused on darkness, violence and destruction, but paradox and conflict are as much a part of the sacred as are light, reconciliation and deliverance. Thus the ancient and possibly pre-patriarchal power of the *Amman* folk religion may be able to contribute to a more human scale women's spirituality, and a post-patriarchal vision that promotes a social order with more egalitarian gender relationships, resulting in the overcoming of the endemic sexual violence that appears to be overwhelming South Africa and other societies.

Notes

1 Whitehead, however, does point out that in recent centuries Brahmanical influence in Tamil country has been strong, so that in many areas the two strands exist side by side, borrowing considerably from one another. Many people participate in rituals from both traditions, often without being aware of this (1921:12-13).

2 She and the village are dependent on one another; her fate and theirs are inextricably bound together. Thus, an outbreak of disease among the villagers indicates that the Mother, too, is afflicted, and her cure will be their cure, and vice versa (Kinsley 1986: 198,200).

3 Erich Neumann points to the universality of this practice:

> ...the Great Goddess everywhere demands sacrifices... Because the decisive moments of life of the female - menstruation, deflowering, conception, and childbearing - are intimately bound up with a sacrifice of blood, the goddess perpetuates life by exacting bloody sacrifices that will assure the fertility of game, women, and fields, the rising of the sun, and success in warfare (1963:279).

It is significant that in India only the fierce Mother Goddess demands blood sacri-

fice; male deities do not have this association with, or need for, blood (Bhattacharyya 1977: 66; Kinsley 1978: 494).

4 Elmore explains:

> The Dravidians are not a literary people, and their religion has no literature... Their history is contained in the somewhat confused legends recited by wandering singers who attend the festivals and assist in the worship. These legends are always recited from memory; and as usually the singers cannot read, written stories would be of no value to them ... The written sources of information ... are limited. The most important are the government gazeteers, district manuals, and bulletins of the Madras Government Museum. (1913:ix; xii).

5 The *Brahmacharini* and the *Sannyasinni*, the women who choose the status of celibate student or renunciate respectively, have achieved independence from any male control of their sexuality.

6 Kuper points out that: "South African Hinduism diverges in many respects from classical Hinduism, reflecting different social conditions and opportunities, but ... many of the basis rituals and beliefs persist (1960:186).

7 The Beast, The Demon Lover; cf. Robyn Morgan, 1989.

8 Cf. Elmore: "The tendency to deify widows who have become *sati* is always strong" (Elmore 1913: 60).

9 Cf. Rita Gross, 1978 ; Lena Gupta, 1991; Judy Tobler, 2001.

10 Except Aruna Gnanadason, who encourages Asian women to a rediscovery of Shakti, the female force and energy, and to appropriate folk religions as a force for the transformation of society (1994: 358-9).

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