

TITLE: ORTHODOX HINDU ATTITUDES TO MENSTRUATION

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To Charlie, Helen, and Mark Hensel

ABSTRACT

Although menstruation is a biological process that occurs for women of a sexually mature age, many cultures associate it with symbols that shape and affect women's lives within these societies. This thesis examines orthodox Hindu beliefs about the origin and meaning of menstruation, which is fundamentally viewed negatively (i.e., adharmically). Drawing upon sources from the earliest to more recent Dharmasastra literature, the thesis demonstrates that orthodox Hindu menstrual taboos derive from menstruation's adharmic associations, which in turn affect attitudes towards women. The Dharmasastras also attempt to realign women with *dharma* by prescribing appropriate roles for them and act in tandem with the Hindu goddess tradition. Orthodox interpretations of Hindu goddesses configure these deities to serve as dharmic models "for" and "of" women, thereby transmitting *dharma* to women in ways that are perhaps more meaningful, accessible, and effective than the sastric literature alone.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- DM - *Devi Mahatmya*
LM - *Laws ofManu*
SDP - *Stndharmapaddhati*

INTRODUCTION

Approximately every twenty-eight days, for about five to seven days, most healthy women who are biologically mature menstruate. In most cases the onset of menarche indicates a girl has become a woman as she is now at childbearing age. While this process happens to be inextricably centered in the body, many cultures view it as something more than a physiological process. One of the cultures which has developed religious views about menstruation is the Hindu tradition. Hindus have a wide spectrum of beliefs on the process and origin of menstruation and menstrual fluid. It is this range of symbols, rituals and taboos which is the topic of the study to follow. Due to the complexity of the material, I have chosen to focus on the orthodox texts, myths, symbols and rituals of Hinduism.

The orthodox Hindu tradition has a pronounced view of the symbols relating to and the status of menstruating women. In general, even a cursory examination would indicate that it interprets the menstruating woman as negatively potent. However, a more thorough examination would require us to address several questions. For instance, how do orthodox texts and practitioners understand menstruation? What do they prescribe as appropriate actions for women who are menstruating? What is the mythological origin of menstruation? What does menstruation symbolize? Next, how does each interpretation of menstruation fit into orthodoxy's overall metaphysical framework? Finally, how do these multivalent connotations become integrated and manifest themselves within Hinduism

writ large? Most importantly, what is the cultural or social mechanism that results in a negative interpretation of menstruation?

Beyond the questions mentioned above, a particularly intriguing question arises in relationship to another crucial feature of Hinduism. The Hindu tradition has a rich, dynamic and active goddess tradition, which is pervasive in many expressions of Hindu thought and practice. Naturally, there are complex relationships between goddesses and women derived from Hindu interpretations of "the feminine principle" and its powers and characteristics, divine or human. Thus, a key question I hope to shed light on is, how does the goddess tradition mesh with Hindu conceptions of menstruation?

This research should fill in a gap in the scholarly corpus. Early academic research in Hinduism focused on the textual tradition which is written by educated, high caste males. Outside of textual research much of the earlier scholarship still dealt with men and their religious duties and concerns. With the development of the feminist movement came increased interest in women's issues. More recently, Hindu studies has also seen an upsurge in the number of projects analyzing women's practices and the goddess tradition. Despite these developments comparatively little research has been conducted on the diverse Hindu attitudes to women and menstruation. Many studies mention that women are segregated during their period or that they must abide by certain rules. Little has been done to explain what cultural aspect of the Hindu tradition determines these attitudes/prescriptions. I postulate that just as *dharma* sets the norms for how Hindus should behave, it also forms the basis for the negative potency of menstruation through its construction of women's roles. Throughout the course of this study I posit that the origin

myths for menstruation establish and reinforce the fears associated with the act of menstruating, which thrust women outside of the realm of *dharma*. Once the woman has become, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas calls it, "dirt," I argue that there is no way for her to be positively potent. In order to combat this temporary state of *adharmā*, rules are set forth to realign her with the concerns and proper actions for the ideal woman. Beyond that I argue that the goddess tradition reinforces and is reinforced by these perspectives on the nature of women.

Some important textual translations and interpretations that have contributed to my understanding of this topic include, Wendy Doniger's translation of *The Laws of Manu* (LM)¹, as well as Julia Leslie's *The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Woman according to the Stridharmapaddhati of Tryambakayajvan* [SDP].² These works will serve as vital sources throughout this paper. The LM is an earlier example of an important Dharmasastra text. While its date offers some insight into what one stream of thought on the nature of *dharma* was in antiquity, the LM is a general text. It lays out proper religious behavior for members of different castes, stages of life and gender. Women make up a part of that picture, but they are by no means the bulk of it. Leslie's work is a translation and analysis of the SDP, a much later text. The advantages of looking into this text are that one may gain a sense of the continuity of belief and practice between the SDP and the LM; more importantly, the SDP focuses entirely on women. Thus, the SDP offers a much deeper insight into the complexities of women's *dharma* and

¹ *The Laws of Manu*, trans. Wendy Doniger, with Brian K. Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

² Julia Leslie, *The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Woman According to the Stridharmapaddhati of Tryambakayajvan*, Oxford University South Asian Studies Series (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

its connection to the orthodox interpretation of menstruation. These two texts serve as a framework for my analysis but neither of them fully articulates the mechanism by which menstruation's negative potency is determined, nor what the role of the goddess tradition is within this process. Therefore, this research project seeks to contribute to our understanding by asking previously unasked questions. Below is a brief overview of the content of this study.

Chapter One delves into theoretical discussions of menstruation in various cultural contexts. The first part provides a general orientation to how scholars have examined menstruation in the past. A valuable source for this is *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* by Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb.³ Mary Douglas' seminal work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*⁴ offers one compelling theory for understanding why menstrual taboos are created. I will also discuss Clifford Geertz's concept of "models for and of a culture."⁵ Chapter One also utilizes Wendy Doniger's *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*⁶ to define what a sexual fluid is and how Hindus regard and categorize semen, menses, and other bodily substances in various textual genres. Finally, I discuss how I will interpret Hinduism and menstruation.

³ *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, eds. Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1966).

⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

⁶ Wendy Doniger O'Haherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Chapter Two focuses on orthodox approaches to women and menstruation. First, I define *dharma* and propose it as the overarching category within which to examine Hindu approaches to menstruation. Next, I explain what an "orthodox woman" is within the context of this paper. My textual analysis begins with a discussion of the conceptualization of women as noted in the LM, followed by a detailed overview and analysis of the SDP through Leslie's *The Perfect Wife*, with particular attention to her discussion of menstruation and references to other important *dharma-sastra* texts. Finally, I discuss how the *dharma* of women in general helps to determine and maintain the orthodox perception of menstruation and the rituals and restrictions associated with it. The purpose of this chapter is to determine how menstruation is interpreted, why it is interpreted as such and how this interpretation is reinforced through prescriptive rules.

Chapter Three departs from the human realm and enters into the divine one. Beginning with an overview of individual goddesses, cluster goddesses and the Great Goddess, it transitions into a discussion about the orthodox tradition's approaches to goddesses and how they act as models for and of women. I focus on two major goddesses, LaksmI and KalT. The former is a typical example of an "orthodox" goddess. She and her various or related forms are typically married to gods and they often embody roles related to motherhood. In some cases they are mothers to their offspring and in others, they are mothers to their devotees. Kali's mythology and appearance do not usually bring the orthodox tradition to mind. She is generally equated with the tantric tradition, as she is terrifying and unwed. Despite her immediate appearance, many devotees who identify as orthodox, offer a different interpretation of her. I will examine

how this alternate Kali can also serve as a model for and of orthodox women. Beyond that, I will postulate ways in which one might or might not draw parallels between these goddesses and menstruating women. Finally, I briefly examine a distinctive festival. At the Kamakhya temple in Kamarupa, the goddess's *yoni* (vagina) is said to have fallen. Once a year the rains cause the water from the *yoni* spring to run red. At this time, the goddess is said to be menstruating. The festival which occurs during the goddess's menstruation is known as Ambuvasl. This event is perhaps one of the only times when a goddess is so unanimously considered to menstruate. The widespread acceptance of this occurrence leads to both orthodox and tantric Hindus coming together to worship her during the festival. The result is a unique blend of tantric and orthodox impressions of menstruation which merge during Ambuvasl. While the festival's veneration of a menstruating goddess may lead the scholar to interpret it as a tantric ritual, I argue that much of the symbolism during the festival is connected to the orthodox tradition. Thus, this final chapter acts as an example about how the previous material comes together in the living, practiced manifestation of Hinduism.

To conclude this thesis, there will be a general summary of the topics discussed throughout. I will once again take up the primary questions with the intent of providing more complete answers, as well as making note of those that are as of yet, unresolved. Finally, I will point to how Hindu approaches to menstruation can explain something about the complexity of Hinduism in general.

CHAPTER ONE

Hindus, Scholars and Sexual Fluids

Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb's book *Blood Magic*⁷ is a collection of essays written by several anthropologists on many aspects of menstruation found in various cultures. The essays provide some insightful material⁸ and Buckley and Gottlieb's introductory chapter serves as a well rounded examination of how scholars have studied menstruation in the past. It is this introduction which will concern a considerable portion of this chapter. While an in-depth look at this material is beneficial in and of itself⁹ the secondary goal of this overview is to help sketch the approach that will be taken within the greater part of this study.

According to Buckley and Gottlieb⁷ scholarly ethnographies about menstruation rituals have been reductionistic and have often led to the conclusion that the menstrual substance is negatively potent. Hence⁸ 'taboo' and 'pollution' are categories often employed to describe it.⁸ While the scholars' categorization may be appropriate in some cases⁹ Buckley and Gottlieb have deemed this approach redundant.⁹ They argue more recent scholarship has opened up new doors for the theory and study of menstrual symbolism. These include knowledge emanating from our understanding of human biology⁹ perceptions of menstruation as a positively potent process⁹ a recognition of

⁷ Buckley and Gottlieb.

⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

⁹ Ibid., 4.

cultural and gender variations and much more.¹⁰ Their introductory chapter is divided into categories regarding how scholars have approached the subject of menstruation, namely, "Taboo as Oppression of Women,"¹¹ "Taboo as Neurosis,"¹² and "Taboo as Praxis,"¹³ which includes discussions of menotoxins, odor and more. Finally the last half of the chapter delves more deeply into the subjects of menstrual symbolism and pollution, as well as the limits of that approach,¹⁴ and concepts of folk biology.¹⁵ What follows is an overview of Buckley and Gottlieb's material. While I will discuss most of the subject matter in the order they did, I will leave their discussion of menstrual symbolism and pollution until last, as it is particularly relevant to this study.

Before delving into a discussion of menstrual theory, however, it is necessary to briefly define "taboo," as it is commonly used in the analysis of menstruation. Frazer's treatment of taboo in *The Golden Bough* pertains to a wide variety of categories.

However, he says the application of a taboo is typical when it is:

only the special enforcement in particular circumstances of a general rule; in other words, its observance is particularly enjoined in circumstances which are supposed especially to call for its application, but apart from such special

¹⁰Ibid., 4-5.

¹¹ Ibid., 9-15.

¹² Ibid., 15-18.

¹⁰ Ibid., 18-24.

¹⁴ Ibid., 24-40.

¹⁵ Ibid., 40-47.

circumstances the prohibition is also observed, although less strictly, as an ordinary rule of life.¹⁶

In other words, to Frazer, a taboo often has a particular set of rules associated with it.

Eliade also mentions taboos in his work, *The Sacred and the Profane*. His definition is in some ways similar to Frazer's, as he states that taboos are prohibitions.¹⁷ Eliade goes beyond declaring that taboos are rules. For example, he provides a deeper sense of the term by juxtaposing modern life with primitive habits in the following excerpt:

For modern consciousness, a physiological act — eating, sex and so on — is in sum only an organic phenomenon, however much it may still be encumbered by tabus (imposing, for example, particular rules for "eating properly" or forbidding some sexual behavior disapproved by social morality). But for the primitive, such an act is never simply physiological; it is, or can become, a sacrament, that is, a communion with the sacred.¹⁸

Thus, taboos are more than simple bans; they can be concerned with "the holy."

Gerardus van der Leeuw's definition of taboo is the most compelling definition for the purpose of this paper. According to van der Leeuw, if a culture designates an object "taboo" it recognizes that item as being imbued with power.¹⁹ It is no longer just an

¹⁶ James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: The Roots of Religion and Folklore* (New York: Avnel Books, 1981), 178.

¹⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion: The Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual Within Life and Culture*, Willard R. Trask trans. (New York: Harvest/ Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁹ Gerardus Van Der Leeuw, "From Religion in Essence and Manifestation," in *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion: A Selection of Critical Readings*, ed. Carl Olson (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, 2003), 136.

object, or in many cases, a process or action, "holy," "sacred," or "numinous."²⁰ By "sacred" one should understand that it is set apart and distinct from other objects or behaviors.

Buckley and Gottlieb cite Steiner in support of this type of argument.²¹ He claims taboos are more opposed to concepts of profanity rather than sacrality.²² What comes from a deeper understanding of the term "taboo" is a sense of ambiguity. While taboos are commonly understood to be negative, the aforementioned definitions do not, in and of themselves, point to taboos as inherently bad. A taboo is merely a rule that is seen as set apart from other types of rules. If one understands taboo as being something sacred and powerful, one must ask, what kind of power is it? Is it positively or negatively potent? Can one alter the nature or use of something's sacrality?

As I explain in detail in the following chapter, orthodox perceptions of menstruation are largely negative. On the other hand, tantric practitioners have been known to emphasize the positive potency of menstrual blood for ritual purposes. While it is not within the scope of this study to contrast the differing perceptions of orthodox and tantric adherents, the variance of opinion does highlight an area that requires further research. Beyond contrasting opinions, one question that comes to mind is:

What is the mechanism that causes menstruation to be perceived negatively within the orthodox tradition?

²⁰ Ibid., 136-137.

²¹ Buckley and Gottlieb, 8.

²² Franz Steiner, *Taboo* (London: Cohen E West Ltd., 1956), 82.

Despite taboo's ambiguous meaning, Buckley and Gottlieb state that menstruation has often been determined by scholars to be negatively potent and therefore the taboos associated with them are argued to be oppressive to women.²³ They argue these interpretations can be true in some cases, but do not encompass the total complexity of cultural takes on menstruation.²⁴ Instead, they claim, "The 'menstrual taboo' as such does not exist. Rather, what is found in close cross-cultural study is a wide range of distinct rules for conduct regarding menstruation that bespeak quite different, even opposite, purposes and meanings."²⁵ This statement is particularly fitting for attitudes to menstruation within the Hindu tradition. Even one mode of Hinduism, the orthodox tradition for example, may interpret menstruation in ways that are multivalent and at times contradictory.

Some scholars have emphasized the androcentric side of menstrual taboos including, F. W. Young and Bacadayan,²⁶ who claim menstrual taboos are connected to women's reduced status and attempts to maintain male dominance within a culture.²⁷ While women's oppression is a common theme in scholarly interpretations of menstrual taboos, Buckley and Gottlieb argue this belief may stem from the fact that segregation is a common prescription for menstruating women. However, taboos may also be directed

²³ Buckley and Gottlieb, 6.

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

²⁹ Ibid.

²⁶ See F. W. Young, *Initiation Ceremonies: A Cross-Cultural Study of Status Dramatization*, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965); and F.W. Young and Albert Bacadayan, 'Menstrual Taboos and Social Rigidity', *Ethnology* 4, 225-240.

²⁷ Buckley and Gottlieb, 9.

toward others, including males, who may interact with a woman who is having her period.²⁸ Thus the "oppression" extends beyond the margins of gender. However, Buckley and Gottlieb differentiate between two types of menstrual taboos, which indicate that not all are meant to be oppressive to women. While some taboos restrict the menstruating woman's behavior, others restrict those around them.²⁹ Buckley and Gottlieb argue that the former type is likely meant to protect others from her dangerous status, while the latter may indicate a desire to protect the woman from others.³⁰

William Stephens posits a schema with five types of menstrual taboos. These are where: 1) the substance is dangerous, 2) isolation is required, 3) sex is forbidden, 4) cooking is restricted, and 5) a miscellaneous category.³¹ While these categories of taboo are useful, Buckley and Gottlieb argue they are often acknowledged and later conflated under the general category of a menstrual taboo, often due to the overarching argument that all menstrual taboos oppress women.³²

The problem with the oppression of women argument is that the evidence often points to negative consequences for men. Moreover, according to Buckley and Gottlieb, other women are also often at risk from menstrual contamination.³³ For example, a popular example of a so-called "oppressive taboo" is the seclusion of women during their

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 10.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 11.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

cycle. Scholars who support this argument may be subject to ethnocentric biases. In Western society segregation is not common and the rise of the feminist movement has highlighted views that women should have equal rights as men. Thus, Westerners may see segregation as a negative process due to the restrictions that often accompany it. Despite being cut off from public interaction, many women who are segregated during menstruation find pleasure in the restriction. Some may interact with their friends and in many cases, women are relieved from their responsibilities.³⁴ For example, menstruating orthodox Hindu women do not have to cook or adorn themselves.³⁵ Thus, due to their complexity, menstrual taboos cannot be universally linked to low status in women as they may also serve to enhance women's situations or to combine both control and enhancement.³⁶ If women's status is to be questioned in relation to menstruation, it must be done on a case by case basis, rather than lumping all menstrual taboos together as inherently indicative of androcentric societies or the oppression of women.³⁷

Menstrual taboos have also been analyzed by scholars as a form of neurosis. These interpretations stem from the psychoanalytic approaches of Freud.³⁸ Many of these theories centre on the concept of repression and "single motivating themes."³⁹ These themes can include castration anxiety, reproductive jealousy and childhood

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ For an in-depth discussion of orthodox Hindu treatments of menstruation, see Chapter Two below.

³⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

³⁷ Ibid., 15.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

regression in the form of PMS (perhaps mood swings can be akin to temper tantrums).⁴⁰

While the advantage of these theories is that they examine the symbolic nature of menstrual taboos, they are often criticized as too reductive. However, in many cases, they cause the interpretation of the taboos themselves to revolve around protecting men and their insecurities.⁴¹

If psychoanalytic theories promote the symbolic aspect of menstrual taboos, the scholars who argue for "Taboo as Praxis" claim just the opposite. These theories "locate the origins of menstrual taboos in rational responses to practical problems."⁴² They are "utilitarian strategies that have been *extended*... irrationally - to a vast assortment of apparently unrelated domains in culture."⁴³ One example of these practical responses lies in the supposed presence of menotoxins or toxicity levels of menses.⁴⁴ Ashley Montagu⁴⁵ and Clellan Ford⁴⁶ argue that cultures observed menstrual blood as dangerous to their surroundings (i.e. food spoilage, crop death or risk to sexual partners); thus it was a logical step for menstrual taboos to arise in order to prevent menotoxins from having any effect.⁴⁷ The problem with this theoretical approach is that it assumes menstrual blood

⁴⁰ Ibid., 16-18

⁴¹ Ibid., 17-18.

⁴² Ibid., 18.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁵ M. F. Ashley Montagu, *Anthropology and Human Nature*, (Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1957), 195.

⁴⁶ Clellan Stearns Ford, *A Comparative Study of Human Reproduction*, (reprint, Human Relations Area Files Press, 1964), 17.

⁴⁷ Buckley and Gottlieb, 19.

actually has a toxicity level in order for it to affect organic matter around it negatively. If this were true, all menstrual taboos would be exclusive rather than inclusive, yet, as this paper will demonstrate, menstrual blood is inclusively employed in certain rituals.⁴⁸

Menstrual odor is another postulation as to why taboos are created. This theory is based on the idea that the smell of menstrual blood will either repel or attract different species; thus it is particularly relevant to hunting cultures.⁴⁹

To sum up, practical explanations of menstrual taboos assume "Religion... is a kind of smokescreen created to ensure the adherence of simple peoples to procedures that guarantee their physical survival."⁵⁰ While these theories can be compelling, they ignore the symbolic dimensions of taboos. Buckley and Gottlieb state:

to assume that people cannot distinguish between practical rules (like the Beng rule that menstrual sex is to be avoided because it is messy) and taboos (like the Levitical taboo that sanctions menstrual sex with spiritual retribution) is to deny the very nature of religion itself.⁵¹

Thus, it is vital to include the symbolic sense of menstrual taboos in any study.

Much of the scholarly analysis on menstruation has examined the cultural or social side of taboos. However, little of it has asked questions about the biology of menstruation and its impact on menstrual taboos.⁵² To clarify, few scholars ask their

⁴⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁵¹ Ibid., 24.

⁵² Ibid., 40.

informants how long a menstrual period will last or how often it occurs and other such questions related to the physiological factors of menstruation. Rather, they simply assume western biological norms apply, even though such understandings of human physiological processes might not be the case.⁵³ Beyond this belief in the universality of western biological models, there may often be an accompanying sense of its superiority. In other words, folk-biological theories are deemed "irrational" compared to scientific ones, which are more "truthful."⁵⁴ According to Buckley and Gottlieb, "we have tended to view our scientific biology as independent of historical context... we presume... to "know" what menstruation *really* is and turn our attention to nonscientific "belief..."⁵⁵ For example, Rose E. Frisch provides evidence to suggest menarche starts later, menopause sets in earlier, and women may have their periods less frequently in societies that are non-industrial.⁵⁶ If menstruation occurred less frequently, societies might be more likely to find it strange or abnormal. For example, in a society where birth control is uncommon, and children provide a much needed source of labor and an economic boost, a woman might frequently get pregnant in order to produce children for her household. If a woman is pregnant frequently, she will menstruate less. Beyond that, menstruation might serve as a sign that she has failed to produce a child that would support the family. Victor Turner's theory of "liminality," a stage during a ritual where

⁵³Ibid.,40-41.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 41-42. For a good example of Hindu folk biology, see below. The discussion of Hindu interpretations of sexual fluids in general will provide examples of how cultural or religious groups can define the bodily process differently from ways that are assumed normative in Western cultures.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 42-4".

⁵⁶ Rose F. Frisch, "Demographic Implications of the Biological Determinants of Female Fecundity," *Social Biology* 22, no. 1, 17-22.

something or someone is in the margins, might be appropriate in analysis of menstrual taboos in societies where a woman's cycle is less frequent.⁵⁷ The foregoing points of considering folk biology or different manifestations of the menstrual cycle are meant to broaden our understanding of menstruation in general. In so doing, one can realize "that body, culture, and society are all implicated cybernetically in a single system of highly complex origins and functions,"⁵⁸ and use such knowledge to enrich one's work.

Pollution theory plays a significant role when examining cultural attitudes to menstruation. A seminal author in that area of research is Mary Douglas. Her work, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* will prove vital to the research that follows. Douglas took issue with scholars of the nineteenth century who claimed primitive religions thrived on a sense of fear and confused hygiene and defilement.⁵⁹ She dismisses the former claim but argues that hygiene can be a useful point for analysis.⁶⁰ She states, "As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder."⁶¹ The cultural concern with dirt is not necessarily about hygiene; rather it is a quest to find societal order.⁶² Her study determines that purity rituals serve the purpose of providing meaning and order for

⁵⁷ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of the Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 94.

⁵⁸ Buckley and Gottlieb, 47.

⁵⁹ Douglas, 1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶² *Ibid.*

the so-called dirt.⁶³ This liminal or ambiguous object, substance, person and so forth can be perceived and valued either negatively or positively. The first type of valorization will either cause a culture to ignore the anomaly or condemn it, while the second can attempt to make a space for it in the social framework.⁶⁴ The negative or positive evaluation of "the dirt" removes some of its ambiguity.⁶⁵ On the negative side, the object becomes dangerous, while on the positive side, the object can "enrich meaning."⁶⁶ This notion of varying cultural interpretations of a taboo is vital to my study. Orthodox Hinduism's interpretation of menstruation works particularly well with Douglas' theory. Objects or people that are designated as impure are not based on things being unclean; rather they are classified as negatively potent "dirt" because they fall outside of the social order. For example, cow dung is considered pure even though it is dirty, however unmarried, sexually mature women are "dirt" because they do not conform to the standards set forth for women their age (i.e. they should be married) and represent a threat to the social system. The social order and ideals for womanhood serve as crucial topics in the material that follows.

Clifford Geertz's seminal text entitled *The Interpretation of Cultures*⁶⁷ also contains information that is pertinent to the analysis of menstruation in Hinduism. Much

⁶³ Ibid., 2-3.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 39-40

⁶⁷ Geertz.

of his work centered on the use of symbol systems. According to Geertz, religion is a cultural system. He defines religion in this way:

religion is:

*(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely real.**

I will use Geertz's definition of religion in this study because it is particularly effective when dealing with the symbolism of sexual fluids. Menstruation is understood in various ways in the Hindu tradition, but as a particular kind of sexual fluid, it is a powerful symbol and it evokes many of the ambivalent responses alluded to earlier. It most certainly brings to mind powerful moods and motivations. Thus I will explore the relationships among symbols such as menstrual (and other sexual) fluids, as well as among female deities, to determine what roles these play in the construction of the Hindu tradition.

According to Geertz, symbols are more than just simple representations of ideas, people, and more. They are not merely a result of human existence. Rather, humans are able to function because of them. In other words, symbols and culture are created by humans, but at the same time, people depend on symbols and culture to help their world make sense.⁶⁸ These systems that are formed by humans are complex webs of meaning.⁷⁰ For example, *dharma* is a concept of right action, but each facet of *dharma* is described

⁶⁸ Geertz, 90.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 52.

and designed so as to both uphold a Hindu's ideal religious world and interweave with the many other *dharmas* (those of women, kings, priests, etc.) in order to best accomplish the goals of not one person or class, but the objectives of the totality of the Hindu cosmos. According to Geertz, symbol systems act as "models" in two ways. First, they can be models *for* a culture. In this sense they dictate what a culture should believe and how it should act. The second model type is *of* for the idea that a symbol system is constructed in such a way that it is a reflection of the culture itself.⁷¹ Below, I argue the divine feminine in Hinduism can act as a model of and for menstruating women.

What is Hinduism?

Before delving into a general treatment of Hindu interpretations of sexual fluids, it is useful to define Hinduism. The Muslim groups entered India around 700 CE. At that time the term Hindu was used to differentiate the people of the Sindh from the Muslims.⁷² When British academics and administrators started writing about India they identified people by their religious groups. While many religious traditions were familiar to those scholars, such as Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and so on, most people did not fit into those categories. Thus, "Hindu" became the term used to denote any Indian person who could not be identified as practicing a recognizable religious tradition.⁷³ The widespread use of this miscellaneous-type term led to the development of the category. Therefore,

⁷¹ Ibid., 93-94.

⁷² Axel Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present*, Barbara Harshav, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 13.

⁷³ Ibid.

Hinduism is multifaceted and fascinating, but the diversity of beliefs within it can make it difficult to offer scholarly generalizations. One often finds exceptions to a rule, or contradictory instances to any generalization.

Hence, in the broadest sense, Hindus fit five main requirements:

(1) they emerged or spread on the South Asian continent; (2) their social organization is characterized essentially by special rules of descent and marriage (the so-called caste system); (3) Vedic-Brahmanic values, rituals, and myths dominated (originally); (4) a manifestation of Siva, Visnu, Devi, Rama, Krsna or Ganesa is worshipped as god or divine force or at least not explicitly rejected; (5) an Identificatory Habitus prevails, closely connected with a salvation linked to descent, derived from the ancient Indian sacrifice, but which has broken with that to a large extent.⁷⁴

Sexual Fluids

The main focus of this paper is one specific type of bodily emission, menstrual blood. This particular fluid is not the only sexual substance discussed within the Hindu corpus. Here I will first discuss Hindu approaches to menstrual and other sexual fluids and finally, I will offer some indications as to how my research will shed light on the relationship between Hinduism and menstruation.

The designation, "sexual fluids," may seem fairly straightforward at first. One is likely to think of either those substances that have a direct influence on procreation, such as semen, or more generally those that issue from the penis or vagina, such as female sexual discharge, menstrual blood, and once again, semen. While all of these substances fall under the category "sexual fluid," there are a few more, which might be less apparent to the Western mindset, but which are nevertheless vital to the Hindu understanding of

⁷⁴Ibid.,20.

sexual, bodily functions. These include blood and also breast milk.⁷⁵ The reasoning for this will become more apparent in the discussion that follows, which details the complex relationships, especially in the female body, among these substances.

Wendy Doniger's book *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* includes a chapter entitled "Sexual Fluids in Vedic and Post Vedic India."⁷⁶ While the title itself seems general, the chapter actually focuses on Hindu approaches to sexual fluids with a division of categories based on Vedic⁷⁷ and Post-Vedic⁷⁸ treatments of them. Above I defined what is included within the term "sexual fluids." These substances will be vital to the material that follows, as Doniger's work attempts to contextualize them within the Hindu textual corpus. My summary of her treatment of sexual fluids provides an important framework, as it demonstrates that menstrual fluid is perceived to have different, mostly negative, qualities compared with other vital substances, such as semen and milk. Thus, it leads to an important question; why is menstrual flow set apart from the other bodily fluids?

According to Doniger, ancient Hindu perspectives maintain that birth, sex and conception are often linked to interactions between fluids. These sexual fluids are usually associated with eating food, sacrifice, weather (such as rain), and animals.⁷⁹ My examination of Doniger's work will attempt to pick up on overarching themes within each

⁷⁵ Saliva, urine or excrement may also be placed in this category. However, the discussion of them is not within the scope of this paper.

⁷⁶ Doniger, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*, 17-65.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 17-33.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 33-65.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

category of sexual fluids. This summary will show that menstrual blood (and sometimes vaginal discharge in general) has, especially in the orthodox tradition, a far more negative status than most other sexual fluids.

Blood (*rakta, sonitd*) has an important place within the array of bodily substances. It is described as basic and essential, often credited as the source of other sexual fluids.⁸⁰ Blood or the loss of it is also important in relation to death.⁸¹ While menstrual blood is not treated in Vedic literature, the *Rg Veda* does mention the blood that is shed when a woman's hymen is broken during sexual intercourse. This fluid is considered dangerous and is equated with poison.⁸² There is a reference to blood in a few of the Brahmana texts. The difficulty with these passages is that it is unclear what kind of blood is being discussed. They mention a river of blood and a river of butter guarded by a black man holding a club and a golden man with a golden bowl. These references contrast the negative aspects of blood with the positive, life giving aspects of butter (milk or semen).⁸³ Doniger argues that these early views of blood change in the post Vedic period. Blood is later downplayed as an important sexual fluid for women. Menstrual blood essentially takes blood's place.⁸⁴ This does not mean blood loses its importance all together; rather it is utilized more often as a metaphor/symbol/counterpart to semen.⁸⁵ For example,

⁸⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 20.

⁸³ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 33

⁸⁵ Ibid.

demons often create other demons through blood that is shed, and yogis who have been chaste shed semen from their wounds instead of blood.⁸⁶

As noted previously, women's association with blood is less about the blood that flows through her veins and more about her uterine blood. Some of the textual references to menstrual blood (*puspa, rajas*) are fairly neutral, stating only that it unites with semen to create children.⁸⁷ The Tantras are among these more neutral texts. For example the *Samvarodaya Tantra* 2:23 calls uterine blood seed. Other discussions of menstrual blood are far more negative. For example, a girl born from only menstrual blood is a man eater.⁸⁸

Ambiguities occur when the Hindu texts articulate what the creative fluid in a woman's uterus is (especially that which flows when a woman is aroused).⁸⁹ Is this fluid equivalent to female seed or to menstrual fluid?⁹⁰ As I will articulate in my summary of LM, intercourse with a menstruating woman is forbidden. However, as I will articulate more clearly in my discussion of orthodox women's *dharma*, sex between a married couple is encouraged and sometimes mandatory. So the ambiguity leads to a dilemma both for the Hindu (should I engage in intercourse or not?) and the scholar (how should I interpret references to the creative fluid in the womb?). This ambiguity, while problematic in some situations, is actually beneficial to my argument, as it still

⁸⁶ Ibid.,34.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

illuminates perceptions of menstruation as less culturally acceptable than female seed (i.e., the fluid that flows during sexual arousal and intercourse). While both come from a woman, and both are related to her sexual and biological function — in other words they have a rajasic or passionate quality⁹¹ — menstrual blood is prohibited and female seed is not.

Even though female seed is considered more positive than menstrual fluid, all fluids are considered more negative if they flow from the vagina, while those that flow from the breast are considered more positive. This is because the vagina is said to devour, while the breast feeds or gives.⁹² Beyond that, a woman's sexual fluid is seen as less potent than a man's.⁹³ Milk on the other hand is considered equivalent to semen.⁹⁴ As is typical in the Tantric tradition, this model is altered. Men are supposed to consume menstrual blood in rituals, without sacrificing their semen in the process.⁹⁵ Menstrual blood is therefore desired rather than shunned.

Semen (*retas, virya, bija*) on the other hand is considered highly fertile. It is often paralleled with rainfall, the seed of the gods, *soma* (a sacred plant and beverage), and other positive things. Of course it is also connected with childbirth.⁹⁶ Female seed or female sexual discharge (*rati, rasa*), has an interesting place in Hindu literature. In early

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.,36.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.* 36-37.

⁹⁶ Ibid.* 20.

writings, it seems both partners contribute fluid to the creation of a child, which is then milked from the woman.⁹⁷ This contrasts with later discussions where the woman "takes from her husband and gives to her son."⁹⁸ Women are said to produce both semen and menstrual fluid in the *Samvarodaya Tantra* (2.23). Perhaps this lends a sense of superiority to the feminine that produces so many sexual fluids versus the single sexual fluid produced by a man.

Milk (*payas*) is highly regarded within the set of female sexual fluids.⁹⁹ As it is a creative substance and a nourishing substance, milk is generally perceived in a positive light. It is usually associated with women or cows (however, the human reference is most relevant for the purpose of this paper). Milk can also act as a metaphor for semen because the act of milk flowing out follows a process similar to ejaculation.¹⁰⁰ Finally, milk is also equated with *soma* as both substances are creative and are churned.¹⁰¹ In the post-Vedic period, milk is said to be transformed from the menstrual blood that is blocked by the growth of a fetus.¹⁰² Milk falls under the breast category of sexual fluids; therefore, when it flows it is considered a form of giving rather than withholding or receiving. If menstrual blood is transformed in this way, it is no longer negative. However, withholding milk is bad as "women are meant to give, men to keep. Or, on

⁹⁷Ibid.,21.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 23-24.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰² Ibid., 42.

another level, maternal flow is good, while sexual flow is bad."¹⁰³ In Tamilnadu, while men increase their power by retaining their semen, women increase theirs by sharing their life-giving milk.¹⁰⁴ This relates to the idea that sexuality or lust is dangerous, while nurturing is positive. A man withholding his semen is restraining from passion, while a woman giving milk is caring for her child.¹⁰⁵

In sum, semen is considered powerful and it is connected to a man's power and to his progeny, as women are the field and men are the seed. Thus, semen is largely considered positive, unless it is being lost needlessly. Blood is neutral as it is present in both females and males. It serves as the basis for most sexual fluids. The only negative aspect of blood is the loss of it, which is associated with death, or in the case of the broken hymen of a woman it signifies the devouring female. Women's fluids tend to be more ambiguous and lower in the hierarchy than men's fluids. Milk is considered positive when it is flowing, but it is negative when it is not. Once again this evaluation connects to the greedy and devouring stereotype of the female. Female seed is less creatively potent than semen but generally non-threatening. Finally, in all orthodox contexts, menstrual blood is set apart.¹⁰⁶ It is *always* conceptualized in a negative light. It only gains a neutral or positive connotation when it is in a tantric context or when pregnancy transforms it into milk.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰⁶ I will discuss the negative connotations of menstruation in more detail in the next chapter.

Dharma

The basis of this paper is its examination of a complex web of symbol systems. The overarching symbol system being examined is Hinduism. In order to understand how Hinduism interprets the concept of menstruation, one must expose many of the smaller symbol systems that compose the larger one, and peel back the layers of meaning within these symbol systems. For our purposes, these smaller symbols systems may be classified as sub-sets of Hinduism. Tantric and orthodox Hinduism are two primary subsets. Within those strands of the tradition I shall examine one smaller symbol subset, menstruation, as it applies to another subset of symbols, namely, the feminine - especially women and goddesses. The symbol subset which is at the heart of this study is the Hindu concept of *dharma*. As I will demonstrate, *dharma* dictates how menstruation functions in orthodoxy, although I suspect *dharma* would have the same function in tantra as well.

According to Doniger, *dharma* is a combination of interrelated issues including "religion', 'duty', 'law', 'right', 'justice', 'practice', and 'principle'."¹⁰⁷ Axel Michaels defines it as "(a) Divine order; (b) law and morality, ritual and social norms that are cut to fit a certain group -- gods, animals, men (particularly for those who wear the Sacred Thread), women, inhabitants of a region, etc."¹⁰⁸ Within this study, *dharma* is understood as multiple sets of rules, each applying to various groups of people, based on their caste, gender, and stage of life. The goal of these rules is proper action, not just in the sense of right and wrong but also in terms of allowing each person to properly go about their duty in a manner that will advance their religious merit. I argue that Hindus, regardless of sect

¹⁰⁷ Doniger, *The Laws of Manu*, xvii.

¹⁰⁸ Michaels, 376.

or sub-group, have a sense of, and attachment to, *dharma*. This dharmic view is based on their values or those created for them by third parties. For example, it is highly likely the *Laws ofManu*, an important dharmic code, was composed by a collection of male Brahmins (i.e., members ofthe priestly class (*varna*) ofHindu society). However, the text does not just discuss the *dharma* ofthe priestly class; it also dictates that of women, outcastes, and more. The values that make up the dharmic framework can include material or spiritual goals, family structure, career path and more. Throughout the course ofthis study I will demonstrate that *dharma* indicates the way in which orthodox Hindus interpret menstrual symbolism and prescribe how women should behave during their menstrual period. Later, I will show that these views are reflected and also reinforced by the goddess tradition. By examining the iconography and mythology ofthe divine feminine I demonstrate that there are parallels between the idealized menstruating woman and the goddesses they worship.

CHAPTER TWO

Orthodox Women and Menstruation

In the previous chapter, I contextualized menstrual fluid within the Hindu tradition's understanding of various other bodily fluids, such as semen, women's sexual discharge, milk and blood. I also briefly discussed some scholarly theories regarding the way in which menstruation has commonly been analyzed in the past. In general, menstrual taboos have been largely over-generalized by scholars, who often argue they are methods for oppressing women, indications of male fear or envy of women, or cultural baggage that was attached to practical solutions. In terms of Hindu culture, Wendy Doniger's analysis indicates that menstruation is regarded ambivalently in the Hindu tradition, depending on whether one is aligned with orthodox or with heterodox (e.g., tantric) conceptions of reality. To examine and demonstrate this difference in attitudes, in the following two chapters I will look specifically at how menstruation is viewed within orthodox Hinduism in order to highlight the particulars of its interpretation of menstruation, as well as the rationale behind it.

In many respects, the prevailing attitudes towards menstruation are shaped by Hindu orthodoxy. I will therefore begin with a discussion of orthodox views, which will form the substance of this chapter. I am not suggesting that orthodox Hinduism is the only strand of the Hindu tradition that has a well developed perspective and set of rules with regard to menstruation. For example, tantra has a contrasting and compelling interpretation of menstruation, which would provide excellent fodder for further research.

Unfortunately, due to the complexity and esoteric nature of the tantric tradition, a comparison of tantric and orthodox values is not within the scope of this study.

It is beyond the scope of this study to examine all of the Dharmasastra literature from its most ancient sources to the contemporary period for their portrayals of women. Instead, I have chosen to look closely at two texts. The first is the *Laws of Manu* (LM), an early text that outlines dharmic behavior for Hindus from different castes, stages in life, and genders. The second is a relatively contemporary work that falls within the Dharmasastra tradition, and which is particularly appropriate in articulating the orthodox perspective on women for the purposes of this study. This text is the (SDP) a dharmic manual which is specifically focused on women's duty.

The Laws of Manu

As I will demonstrate throughout the course of this study, one of the underlying factors that determines whether menstruation is conceptualized positively or negatively is through women's status, and religious duty, that is, their *dharma*. To understand how women's roles are developed and laid out in Hinduism, it seems reasonable to begin with the ancient Vedic texts. These texts are considered particularly authoritative by Hindus as they fall under the *sruti* genre of literature. In other words, the texts are considered "heard" or revealed by a supernatural source. However, while the Vedas do provide an important basis for much of Hindu thought, such as philosophy, ritual and more, they do not provide adequate information, for the purpose of this study, on women's duties, status, or bodily processes. These topics are relegated to, and more substantially covered, in the

Dharmasastra literature. Although the Dharmasastras are classified as *smṛti* or "remembered," and thus of secondary importance in comparison to *śruti*, they are still highly influential texts for Hindus. The Dharmasastras lay out the "right action" or *dharma* for various sectors of Hindu society (i.e. priests, merchants, kings, women and more). Arguably, among the many sastric texts on *dharma*, the most authoritative Dharmasastra for orthodox Hindus is the *Laws of Manu*.

The *Laws of Manu* [LM], also known as the *Manusmṛti* or *Mdnavadharmasūtra*, consists of 2,685 verses. As is typical of *dharma* texts, LM contains several different categories of law or teachings. Who are these laws for, by, or about? The title indicates that they are "of Manu," but as one often finds with the Sanskrit language, even this two word phrase is a double entendre. Manu refers to a mythical king or 'wise one'. This mythical figure is believed to be the first human or, as Doniger says, the "Indian Adam." This reference to the origin of humans also leads to a symbolic generalization of all mankind.¹⁰⁹ In other words, the text gains a "by the people, for the people" connotation. The double entendre connects mythical history with the all encompassing nature of the text. By all encompassing I mean that the text acts as a "universalistic treatise."¹¹⁰ It attempts to reach all schools of Hindu thought as well as all types of people.¹¹¹

According to Doniger, the topics contained within its pages are "apparently varied — but actually intimately interrelated in Hindu thought."¹¹² They include cosmological issues,

¹⁰⁹ *The Laws of Manu*, xviii.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxv.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, xxxv-xxxvi.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, xvi. All textual references to the LM will be taken from this version unless otherwise specified.

such as the *yuga* system or the creation of the world and of the social classes. Much of this creative background forms an important basis for the rest of the text. This is especially true of the idea that "to protect this whole creation, the lustrous one made separate innate activities for those born of his mouth, arms, thighs and feet" [LM 87, 1], or in other words, the different castes. The vast majority of the text deals with the rules and roles of the castes, as well as rules that govern their interaction. In addition to concerns regarding social groups, LM deals with issues of gender. While the duties of women form only a small part of the text, LM does allow scholars and Hindus to have a glimpse of what I will later demonstrate: a complex and multifaceted tapestry of women's religious roles. As Doniger notes, "The text is, in sum, an encompassing representation of life in the world — how it is, and how it should be lived."¹¹³ It is necessary to keep in mind that LM is extremely important to this research for more reasons than the roles for women which are laid out within its pages. Dating to approximately the first century C.E.,¹¹⁴ this text is one of the best known, early examples of Dharmasastra literature. According to Kinsley, it is "the most famous and influential law book."¹¹⁵ Doniger agrees, as she states, "More compendiously than any other text, it provides a direct line to the most influential construction of the Hindu religion and Indic society as a whole."¹¹⁶ This prestigious status is partly related to the many texts and strands of Hindu thought

¹¹³ Ibid., xvii.

¹¹⁴ David R. Kinsley, *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1993), 153.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 134.

¹¹⁶ *The Laws of Manu*, xvii.

which have been shaped by the LM. One of the texts that will serve as a vital platform for this research, the *Stridharmapaddhati* [SDP] (*Manual on Dharma for Women*), uses much of the material from LM as a foundation. While only a fraction of LM discusses women's roles, this topic serves as the focus of the SDP. Since the LM acts as such a formative text for the SDP (and since its values are later transgressed against by tantra), it is logical to examine the LM's foundational treatment of the *dharma* of women before delving into the more thorough approach of the SDP (or even the subversive nature of tantra).

When discussing women within LM, it is important to mention how the text organizes its treatment of them. For the most part, the discussions of women, their duties and status are relegated to Chapter 9 of the text. However, this is not the only place where they are discussed. Brief mentions of women occur in chapters 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8 as well. I treat these brief references first before tackling the more thorough treatment given to women in the ninth chapter.

Dvija (twice-born) Hindus have a life plan laid out for them from very early stages of their existence on earth. Ideally, they travel smoothly through the four stages of life (*dsramas*) starting as a student, becoming a householder, retiring to the forest, and finally becoming a renouncer. Throughout these stages they aim for four goals: righteousness, money, love and enlightenment. As is common in Hinduism, many rituals are undertaken throughout this process. One of the most important of these life rituals is the initiation. For women, the initiation process (and as we will come to learn, many other rituals) takes place without Vedic verses (2:66). The lack of Vedic verses is particularly noteworthy, as

twice-born men's rituals take place with them. In addition, the transformative ritual for a woman is her marriage. Her husband becomes her *guru* (spiritual mentor) and "household chores are [her] rites of fire" (2:67). The symbolism of these vital rituals equates a woman's marital state with a man's student stage of life. In other words, she learns from and reveres her husband much like he learned from and revered his *guru* when he was in his student stage. Her husband's *grhastha* (householder) stage represents a period in his life where he acquires wealth and children. As I demonstrate below, she is an important part of that equation. Her married life combines reverence to her *guru* and God in the form of her husband, with her role as a mother and her acquisition of wealth taking place through her spouse. Therefore, one could argue that her *brahmacarya* (student) stage and her *grhastha* (householder) stage are compounded.

Chapter 3 of the LM continues to place the emphasis on a woman's domestic life. Rather than stating how important marriage is to a woman, however, Chapter 3 articulates that her marital bliss is important not just to her, but to the entire family. Verses 55 to 59 place the success of rituals and of the household at the feet of the woman. All males are advised to revere and adorn females in their home. In so doing, the gods are pleased and the family thrives (3:55-57). Women who are not revered have the power to destroy the success of their household (3:58). Verses 60-63 change the tone of the argument slightly. They state that the happiness of the woman affects that of the man. If the man is unhappy, children cannot be created. Her radiance transfers to her entire family (3:60-62). The final verse argues that the essence of families lies in the combination of good marriages, and proper religious observance (3:63). Chapter 3

continues to state that family is an important Hindu value but unlike Chapter 2, it articulates a woman's importance within her own family. If she is happy she has the power to activate her household and make their endeavors more fruitful. In some senses she represents the *sakti* or divine force of the household.¹¹⁷

Chapter 4 represents a major shift in topic with regard to women. The material from verses 40-44 deals with subject matter that is of the utmost importance to this research, namely, menstruation. Men are warned against having intercourse with or even sleeping next to menstruating women (4:40). What are the consequences should his willpower fail? He "loses his wisdom, brilliant energy, strength, eyesight, and long life" (4:41). If he abstains, all of those qualities are enhanced (4:42). However, avoidance of sex or any other physical contact is not enough. He must not interact with her when she could transfer her impurity to him (for example by eating food with him) or allure him in any way (by adorning herself). He also cannot interact with her when she is giving birth (4:43-44). While it is clear that a woman will pollute a man if she interacts with him during this phase, the readers of LM are not given any explanation as to why menstrual blood and menstruating women pose such a threat.¹¹⁸

Chapter 5 returns to the subject of a woman's domestic status. At no point in her life is she allowed to be independent from a man. As the saying goes, "In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons" (5:148). Independent women are said to make their

¹¹⁷ Michaels, 130.

¹¹⁸ The other instances where LM discusses menstrual blood (3.239, 4.57, 4.132, 4.208) reiterate the same themes. Men are especially warned against combining menstruating women with food or sex.

families "contemptible." Instead, women are instructed to do as their male supervisors wish and show them respect at all times, even in death (5:149-151). Men are thus meant to be the leaders of women. Chapter 2 equated a woman's husband to her *guru* (2:67). Chapter 5 takes men's symbolic authority one step further. Similar concepts are discussed in it. For example, marriage is said to be the woman's transformative ritual (5:153). As in Chapter 2, a man is said to have special status, but this time not as her *guru*, as her god (5:154). It is at this point in the text that a woman's religious duty is clearly defined. She is to worship her husband, serving him even if he misbehaves. Any sacrifices, vows, or fasts must be devoted to him. If she follows these rules, "she is exalted in heaven" (5:154-155). At the core of her religious life, she practices *bhakti* (devotion) toward her husband. Her domestic path *is* her religious path. They are one and the same. She can achieve success most fully through faithfulness and chastity. Even if she has no sons, women who uphold their husband's honor, regardless of whether he is still breathing, go to heaven (5:156-160). A woman should not have relations with or beget children by other men, or a horrible fate will come upon her (5:161-164). This is not the case for men, who may marry again once their wives have passed (5:167-169). Virtue and steadfastness are inseparable qualities prescribed for women.

Women are discussed as property of the king in the beginning of Chapter 8. They should be protected by him, but if they are stolen away by their relatives, a king should punish the relatives like thieves (8:27-29). The subsequent discussions about women in this chapter treats them like items in business deals. For example, "one thing mixed with another should not be sold, not anything that is spoiled, deficient, far away, or

concealed" (8:203). It should be noted that while Chapter 8 mentions more about women than what is alluded to above, it does not really deal with *their* duties. When women are discussed in this chapter, the duty in question is a man's. As a woman's *dharma* is the topic of concern, I will move on to Chapter 9, which deals with it more directly.

Chapter 9 entails the most lengthy discussion LM has to offer about women. It is interesting to note that a couple of the ideas are reiterated, in some cases almost verbatim, from Chapter 5. For example, LM 9.2-3 expresses that women should never be independent in a way that is very similar to 5.148. LM 9.29-30 discusses the parallels between virtue and faithfulness. This wording is mirrored in 5.164-5. This repetition accomplishes two things. First, it adds a certain amount of coherence to the text. Second, it reinforces important Hindu values. Thus it is clear that women should be tied to men throughout their lives and while they are tied to those men, they should be faithful to them (especially in the case of husbands). *Pativrata* (women who keep their vow to their husbands) are considered very virtuous and will be rewarded accordingly.

While Chapter 9 mentions "wives" most frequently, much of the discussion is related to inheritance rather than duty or the body. What is discussed in terms of physiology plays an interesting role in how the woman's role in conception is perceived. A common metaphor for impregnation is the seed and field concept. The man's semen is the seed and the woman's womb is the field. While both parties have a part in creating the child, the seed is said to be reflective of the type of child it will be. The husband is the owner of the field (9.32) and the child will be a manifestation of the qualities of the seed rather than of the womb (9.36-37). Through his seed and progeny, the husband is

born again from his wife's womb (9.8). The fear that is coupled with this sort of metaphor relates to the idea that the wrong sort of seed could grow in the husband's field. Therefore, men must guard their wives to "keep [their] progeny clean" (9.9).¹¹⁹ In order to accomplish this, he must keep his wife busy with domestic affairs (9.10). The need to guard them is related to 9.17: "The bed and the seat, jewellery, lust, anger, crookedness, a malicious nature, and bad conduct are what Manu assigned to women." Thus, their nature is inherently bad and prone to activities that are *adharmic*. To rein in those personality flaws, women should not engage in "drinking, associating with bad people, being separated from their husbands, wandering about, sleeping, and living in other people's houses" (9.13).

As I have demonstrated, LM's discussion of women, although small compared to the depth it undertakes to discuss the *dharma* of males, does provide significant clues to how women were traditionally perceived by orthodox Hinduism, and what their duties were supposed to be. There is a sense that all women will cheat on their husbands if left unchecked. Thus they should not be independent. Husbands and even wives themselves must be aware of their actions. Women's *dharma* is linked to acting against LM's description of them. If they prove they can be faithful wives, they will have a place in their husband's realm and ensure the success of their family. Thus, LM firmly places a women's domestic life within the religious realm. We can look forward to an elaboration of all of these values, including a more lengthy discussion of women and menstruation, during the discussion of the SDP in the following section.

¹¹⁹ For a discussion of who owns illegitimate children, see LM 9.48-55.

The *Stridharmapaddhati*

The *Stridharmapaddhati* (SDP) is a manual on *dharma* for women, written from a highly orthodox perspective. The title translates simply as *The Manual on Dharma for Women*. It was written in Sanskrit in the 18th century by Tryambakayajvan (hereafter also called Tryambaka) in Thanjavur, located in the southern half of India.¹²⁰ One might be tempted to inquire as to why I am focusing on one text in order to gain insight into the entire female, orthodox population. The answer to that is due to a simple lack of sources. While other Dharmasastra texts, such as the *Laws of Manu* discussed earlier, focus on *dharma* prescriptions for Hindus of all classes, they seem primarily concerned with male *dharma*, with women serving only as a small subset of their discussion.

Tryambakayajvan's text is particularly relevant to this study, as its sole concern is women. Since it has not been translated into English, I am relying upon Julia Leslie's analysis of the work.¹²¹ According to Leslie, within the Hindu corpus of *dharma* texts to which scholars have access, the SDP is unique.¹²² The date of this text is particularly significant, as it was composed prior to the 19th century reforms of Hinduism, spearheaded by the likes of Rammohan Roy and the Brahma Samaj movement in 1828, which advocated for changes in attitudes towards women. These reformers fought for the enactment of laws, such as the abolition of *sat!* (widow immolation on her deceased husband's funeral pyre) and many others, that would grant higher status to women.¹²³

¹²⁰ Leslie, 3.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 3.

¹²³ Hillary P. Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 283.

In this translation and commentary of the SDR Julia Leslie has taken some liberties with her analysis. While she covers the material in the order in which it is originally presented, her translation and treatment of the text draw attention to certain areas of the document while de-emphasizing others. These reflect Leslie's personal concerns and interests. Thus, although I cannot be absolutely sure that she has represented the text's perspective completely, my analysis draws, in as impartial a manner possible, upon the sections available to me.

On that note I shall present a brief overview of the sections of this text. "Section I" is Tryambaka's introduction. "Section II" provides a breakdown of the daily duties of a woman. This is further separated into sub-sections which refer to specific portions of the day such as, "Before Dawn," "At Dawn," "Day," and "Evening." This section is an excellent example of Leslie's particular treatment of the SDR. The original document discusses this material less than a fifth of the time. However, Leslie argues that not enough attention has been given to the daily duties of the Hindu wife, the subject matter of "Section II," and hence this material becomes the basis for the bulk of her analysis.¹²⁴ "Section III" discusses the "Inherent Nature of Women." "Section IV" discusses more general duties, including what women should do when they are menstruating or pregnant, or when their husband has died and they take on responsibilities of widowhood. Finally, "Section V" is particularly tailored to the duties of a wife and the manner in which she should serve her husband.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Leslie, *The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Woman According to the StrTdharma-paddhati of Tryambakayajvan*, 6-7.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, vii-x.

Like Leslie, I also have particular interest in specific chapters of this work. I intend to present an overview of the entirety of the text as it provides detailed insights into women's prescribed roles and the logic behind the prescriptions. However, my main concerns will obviously rest with that material which delves into women's bodily functions. Thus, "Section IV" will be of particular interest to me as it includes such subjects as proper conduct for the menstruating woman. Another area of the SDP which will be particularly useful in analyzing the orthodox understanding of menstruation is "Section III" which outlines the nature of a woman, much of which has to do with the act of menstruating and the mythology behind it.

Context of the *Strīdharmapaddhati*

When contextualizing this text and its intended audience one notes that Tryambaka is a male.¹²⁶ Critical analyses of the last several decades have alerted us to attend to authorial persona, particularly gender, when trying to situate a text within its context. This is because although authorial voices, particularly in the composition of scripturally authoritative texts, purport to speak for all of humanity, they frequently exhibit the concerns of the authors' own social or economic class, their own subculture's values, and the perspectives of their gender. Rita Gross discusses the issue of perspective through a discussion of religious studies scholarship. She argues that scholars who do not acknowledge their own worldview lack objectivity, even though that is the very trait they

¹²⁶ Ibid., 10-13. While there are two other potential authors of the SDP, all of the candidates are male and Leslie argues that Tryambaka is the most likely choice.

claim to exemplify.¹²⁷ She brings up this point with particular reference to the feminist approach to religious studies. For example, traditionally, scholars have purported to study religious traditions in total, when in actuality they are only studying men.¹²⁸ Much of the feminist study of religion attempts to uncover the author's own bias at the same time as focusing on women's religious experiences.¹²⁹ The same principle can be applied when analyzing sacred texts. By examining the authorship of a text, scholars reveal something about their perspectives and biases. The *Stridharmapaddhati* is a good case in point. When examining the text, one observes that it does not offer a woman's point of view on the subject of women's *dharma*. It is less likely that women, versus men, would have been able to read, as they had fewer chances to gain an education.¹³⁰ Therefore, this text would probably have been written for men. Unfortunately, the female perspective is usually transmitted through the oral tradition, such as women's songs. While scholars have access to some of these transmissions, many of them have not been recorded.

A related issue is that, despite the gender which makes up its subject matter, the SDP was probably never intended to be read by women. Since women were generally prohibited from the study of Sanskrit makes their ability to read Sanskrit religious texts particularly unlikely. As Kinsley states, Brahmin priests were more likely to be concerned with the Sanskrit tradition, while low caste men were more likely to be influenced by the

¹²⁷ Rita Gross, "From Feminism and Religion: An Introduction," in *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion: A Selection of Critical Readings*, Carl Olson ed., (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003), 515.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Michaels, 129.

regional traditions.¹³¹ As the SDP was composed in Sanskrit, it was probably read by Brahmin males. This is suggested by the way in which Tryambaka presents his material. For instance, he refers to females through the use of third person pronouns rather than second. Hence, when Tryambaka discusses which groups of women are bound by the rules put forth in his manuscript, he says, "the sacred duties he is about to expound are therefore to be performed by *women* only after *they* are married"¹³² rather than "the sacred duties he is about to expound are therefore to be performed by *you* only after *you* are married". His word choices could simply reflect a sort of objective presentation of information, or of the writing style at the time. However, it is also likely that his phrasing signifies that the text is addressed to males. If Tryambaka had intended for his readership to consist of women, it seems more likely he would have addressed them directly. Instead, the author's style reads as though he is attempting to decode women for other males, while at the same time offering a step by step guide as to how one might teach a wife (or perhaps a daughter who will become a wife) to live harmoniously within the cosmic order. The foregoing implications suggest that women would be the recipients of the teachings on their *dharma* through their husbands (or fathers, or some influential male teacher). These men would have had access to the text, or learned about its content from other educated males, such as members of the priestly class.

¹³¹ Kinsley, *Hinduism*, 8.

¹³² Leslie., 35, SDP 2r. 10-2v.1.

Content of the *Stridharmapaddhati*

Having briefly surveyed the history and orientation of the SDP, we are poised to examine its content. A vital aspect of the SDP is its attempt to decode women. Nowhere in the text is Tryambaka's attempt to demystify the woman and her place within the cosmos more clear than in "Section III: The Inherent Nature of Women." The overall sense of this chapter is that a woman is inherently impure, despite several of Tryambaka's assertions to the contrary. He states that the very fact a woman is born as a woman is proof she committed sin in a past life. Because she is considered to have the same religious status as a *sudra* (the servant class, which is lowest on the class hierarchy), she is *amantravat* or denied the right to perform purifying *mantras*; thus she is perpetually impure. When reading this chapter, one cannot help but feel as though the author is trying to answer the question: *if women are lower than men, fickle and unintelligible, lazy, sexually promiscuous, quick to anger and adharmic by nature, then why bother trying to teach them anything in the first place?*¹⁰ Tryambaka's argument follows three basic points:

1. Women are inherently pure.¹³⁴
2. Women are blessed with good fortune.¹³⁵
3. *Dharmic* behavior improves even the most cursed individual.¹³⁶

¹³³ Ibid., 247-248.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 250.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 261.

While the last point is rather straight-forward, the first two contradict his earlier statements. One must question why he would take so much time arguing how impure women are, only to assert the opposite later. According to Leslie, Tryambaka's contradictions stem from his goal, not to show how women fit into the order of the cosmos but rather to convince them to conform to society's wishes. He has already shown that they need tutelage and redemption through *dharmic* action; now he must demonstrate that they are not too far gone to benefit from it.¹³⁷ As stated above, *dharmic* behavior serves as an eraser for accumulated, negative *karma*. It is Tryambaka's first two points which require explaining, and he does so as follows. To imbue his points with a sense of authority, he cites the *Laws of Manu* along with other important Hindu texts.¹³⁸ This convincingly provides the SDP with a sense of continuity. It is not coming out of nowhere. Rather, it is building upon a pre-existing, well established value system dating to the first century CE.

First, Tryambaka deals with the innate purity of women. He offers two pieces of evidence. According to a Vedic matrimonial hymn, a woman's marriage to a human man is not her first, it is her fourth. Before her husband enjoys her she is married to Soma, the Gandharva, and Agni at different developmental stages in her life. All of these divine beings offer her special gifts including "all-round purity".¹³⁹ Next, Tryambaka argues that menstruation is another sign of her purity as it washes away all of her sins with each

¹³⁷ Ibid., 255-256.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 250.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 252-53.

passing cycle.¹⁴⁰ Despite the message of menstrual blood's cleansing power, one should not jump to conclusions on its status. This does not mean that menstrual blood or the act of menstruation is seen as positive. Menstruation and menstrual blood are associated with fears over women's infidelity and the murder of a Brahmin priest. However, I will discuss this issue at length when I reach Tryambaka's discussion of women's duties during their period.

Next, he claims that women are especially blessed. Here he refers to a particular passage in the *Visnupurana* (VI.2.15-17, VI.2.22-3) which details the privileged position of underprivileged ages and people (i.e. the *kaliyuga*, women and more). Women are credited to be blessed because their path to liberation or equal salvation attained by their husband is simple. They need not do extreme *tapas* or austerities which men are required to do, rather they need only to act as *patisusrusanam* or perfect wives. He argues that simply serving one's husband can acquire the same amount of merit that more extreme actions taken by a man can acquire.¹⁴¹ Hence, whether he is clear, contradictory or not, Tryambaka's three points serve as sufficient evidence, within the manuscript, to prove women are capable of redemption and require it, by his own estimation, desperately.

Next, I will briefly touch on some of the woman's daily rituals, then some of the duties particular to a wife, and finally a few of the prohibitions relating to a woman's body, whether she be menstruating or pregnant. From these paragraphs and the above material, I will extract what a woman's primary goals are. Then I will explain how these

¹⁴⁰Ibid.,254.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.* 257-58.

foremost concerns affect and maintain the orthodox Hindu population's views on menstruation.

There are several daily rituals which a wife must perform in order to properly carry out her day. These rituals fall into four categories, namely: rituals that are no different than those which men perform, rituals which serve the same purpose as men's rituals but are carried out differently, rituals where a woman helps her husband to carry out his rituals, and finally, rituals that are specific to women.¹⁴² Any of these categories may fall under the four subdivisions of the day: Before Dawn, At Dawn, Day and Evening. According to the text, these actions are likely meant for the Brahmin householder wife.¹⁴³ I have chosen to describe one ritual for each of these time periods in order to provide an adequate overview of a woman's daily ritual concerns.

Before dawn, one of a woman's most basic rituals is getting dressed and adorning herself. While the average Westerner's morning routine likely has very little ritual significance, this is not so for the orthodox Hindu woman. Tryambaka instructs the woman to apply *haridrd* (turmeric powder), collyrium (a type of eyeliner), *kunkuma* (paste used to make a *tilaka* mark on the forehead), *sindura* (to color the part in her hair), a short-sleeved bodice, betel, *mangalydbharanam* (a thread strung with beads which is given to a wife by her husband when they are married -- i.e. akin to her sacred thread, the symbol which makes a person initiated as a Hindu¹⁴⁴) and various other ornaments and well coiffed hair. All of these ornaments are meant to signify a woman's husband is

¹⁴²Ibid.,49-50.

¹⁴³ Ibid.* 46.

¹⁴⁴ Michaels, 83.

alive.¹⁴⁵ This is made even clearer because most or some (depending on the person involved) of this ritual may not be carried out by widows, menstruating women, and women whose husbands are away.¹⁴⁶ According to Leslie, the *tilaka* mark on a woman's forehead is not representative of her sect, unlike that of her husband who would make his forehead mark appear different, depending on his sectarian allegiance or obeisance to Visnu or Siva. She argues a wife's deity is her husband and the mark signifies that he is alive and she worships him.¹⁴⁷ She even goes so far as to say, "a man without his sectarian mark is a man without a god; a woman without her *tilaka* is one whose god is dead."¹⁴⁸ Since Leslie and Tryambaka use such strong language to explicitly state a woman's husband is her object of worship, it is a wonder that she does not precisely make the connection that a woman's "sect" *is* her husband. She may worship other deities but first and foremost, she pays homage to her spouse. Hence, one realizes that even the simplest action of getting ready in the morning has familial and religious significance.

At dawn, the wife must serve the sacred fire and worship the sun. While the husband's duties during the fire ritual, which takes place during the morning and evening, serve to ensure the sun continues to rise and set at the appropriate times, the wife's duties hold no such significance.¹⁴⁹ Even if she performs certain duties or officiates the ritual, she is never named as doing these things. The title of *yajamana* or sacrificer is reserved

¹⁴⁵ Leslie., 96, 98.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 97-98.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 100.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 102.

only for males and more specifically for the head of the house.¹⁵⁰ According to Leslie, the wife's significance is purely symbolic, while her actions throughout the ritual remain inconsequential. The only merit or blessing she can hope to gain while worshipping the sun, is to ensure a happy marriage and her husband's health.¹⁵¹

Before dinner the wife makes an offering of her food to the goddess Jyestha, who is responsible for misfortune. By completing this ritual, she ensures the desirable occurrence and accumulation of children, particularly sons and grandsons. She is also said to gain wealth from these offerings. Prior to this dinner time ritual, a wife's duties tend to revolve around her husband. While this activity does benefit him indirectly, her focus is directed more specifically at offspring. Children and more particularly male children are of the utmost importance to a woman's status and well being as well as to a man's. For the man the benefits are that his male children are in a sense rebirths of him. They may likely learn the family trade, they pass on the family blood line and in a sense he lives on through them. For a woman sons are important for other reasons. First, by virtue of providing sons for her husband to live on through, she is valued. Sons do not incur the same cost as do daughters, who require a dowry for their marriages and move away when they are married. Rather, sons stay in the family, bring wealth into the family both through marriage dowries they may gain from wives and through their occupation. Finally, sons who remain at home are able to care for their parents and especially for their mothers. This last point is particularly valuable to a woman as, according to the *Laws of Manu*, a woman must pass from her father's hands, to her husband's and finally to her

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 148.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 154-55.

son's as she is never fit for independence.¹⁵² Thus, even a simple mealtime ritual hints at concerns which are vital to a woman's well being.

Finally, at evening a woman's last ritual once again concerns her husband. According to Tryambaka, a wife must worship her husband's feet before going to bed and having sexual intercourse with him.¹⁵³ Some of the rules of engagement follow the typical pattern — do not do 'x' or your husband will suffer. For example, a woman may not wear a bodice or particular types of earrings or else she will become a widow.¹⁵⁴ What is interesting about the practice of sexual intercourse with one's husband is that a woman is permitted to display her sexual appetite and do things that would normally be forbidden in dharmic prescriptions for the interactions between others. For example, she may display jealousy and hit or scratch her husband while in the throes of passion, she may eat from his plate, and she may touch him with her feet.¹⁵⁵ Normally, a woman's sexuality is feared (see above discussion on the nature of a woman), however, when it is directed to her husband at the appropriate time, it is seen as a positive trait. Hence, when a woman acts in a way which benefits her husband and is within his jurisdiction, her behavior is no longer lecherous, but ideal.

The above passages have dealt briefly with some of the rituals practiced throughout a woman's day. This is by no means an exhaustive treatment, but it does illuminate some important factors of a woman's life. While not all of a woman's rituals

¹⁵² See above for in depth discussion of L M.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 237.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 241.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 242-243.

relate directly to her husband or children, it is interesting to note that in each section of her day her actions are specifically targeted to the well being of male relatives, whether they be her husband, her existing children, or the children she hopes to have.

"Section V" of the text includes duties that are specific to wives. What is more interesting is the heading of the author's concluding chapter, "Obedient Service to One's Husband is the Primary Religious Duty of a Wife."¹⁵⁶ The final selection of Tryambaka's manuscript is divided into three main points:

- 1) A woman should not consider her life when serving her husband,
- 2) she should accept her husband's choices even if he means to rid himself of her (for example by sale) and,
- 3) a woman's duty to her husband comes first, even when it conflicts with other religious tenets.¹⁵⁷

Leslie argues that this chapter in particular, unlike the majority of the manuscript, was tailored to young wives as it uses mythology to serve as examples for each of the three points, rather than arguing a point.¹⁵⁸ To quote her analysis, "It was presumably hoped that such lengthy retellings of favorite and traditional tales would inspire impressionable young women to conform to the highest ideals of the *stridharma*."¹⁵⁹

Examples of these "favorite tales" frequently come from the epics. For example, "Sit", the devout wife in the *Ramayana*, begs a demon to take her instead of her husband,

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.,305.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

Rama, and her brother-in-law, Laksmana, thus potentially bringing harm to herself rather than her husband. This tale is used by Tryambaka as evidence a woman should act in the best interests of her husband "without regard for her own life."¹⁶⁰ Tryambaka also uses an example from the *Mahabharata* to point out that a woman may do what is typically considered *adharmic* if her husband wills it. The story employed by the author is that of king Pandu and his wife Kunti's performance of *niyoga*, where she sleeps with others to obtain children at the request of her husband, who cannot provide them for her as he has been cursed to die in the act of sexual intercourse. Tryambaka's point is that even though Kunti's actions are typically seen as very sinful, even as punishable as foetus-murder, the fact her husband asked her to do them makes them proper.¹⁶¹ What Tryambaka's final example implies, is that a husband ultimately has the right to dictate a wife's *dharma*.

Above, I have demonstrated how a woman's husband and children are to be placed at the forefront of her mind both through daily rituals or through wife specific tenets, such as those found in Tryambaka's "Section V". I will now proceed to a discussion of menstruation, especially as discussed in the SDP. Thus the next few paragraphs will explore how the orthodox opinion of the act of menstruation and menstrual blood itself have come to be considered impure. They will also offer an explanation as to how these values are enforced and how they dovetail with a woman's primary concerns.

"Section IV: The Duties Common to All Women," continues on to discuss, among other things, menstruation. However, before delving into the specific restrictions which relate to the act of menstruation, it is important to gain some understanding of what Hindu

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 309-310.

mythology claims is the origin of the process. According to the article, *Indra's Curse, Varuna's Noose* by Frederick M. Smith, versions of one such myth exist within the *Taittiriya Samhitā*, the *Mahābhārata*, and elsewhere.¹⁶² The story tells how Indra murdered a Brahmin priest known as Visvarupa. Indra's grievous sin of brahminicide was split up — usually into thirds although certain versions involve larger numbers — between the earth, trees, and women.¹⁶³ In turn, each was given a boon. The women's third of the sin took the form of menstruation and their reward was that they were able to engage in intercourse at any time.¹⁶⁴ In some versions of the story the women become impure as a result of Indra's curse, whereas in others, the women are already impure to begin with, for example, they were foetus-killers.¹⁶⁵ In the second instance, Indra's curse acts as a kind of punishment for the sin the women had committed. One can only imagine that the weight of Indra's curse is symbolically great indeed, for every time a woman menstruates she is taking on penance for the sin of brahminicide. Perhaps the blood she sheds at the time is a symbolic reference to the blood that was shed by the brahmin. Smith explains that her impurity reaches one step further. He notes that a child conceived during her period will be cursed.¹⁶⁶ In other words, if a woman becomes pregnant during her period, her sin is not only borne by her, it is simultaneously transmitted to her child in the form of a curse.

162 Frederick M. Smith, "Indra's Curse, Varuna's Noose," in *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, Julia Leslie ed. (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991), 23.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Leslie, 255.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Smith, 23. According to Smith an expiation may be done to relieve this curse.

Earlier on I mentioned that the "Nature of a Woman" chapter claimed that menstrual flow was purifying. However, this does not mean it is seen as a positive occurrence. Instead, the scholar must look to what the menstrual flow is purifying women from to gain a deeper sense as to why orthodox Hindus perceive the process so negatively. It is clear from its purifying properties that menstrual flow is powerful. However, it cleanses women of their defilement from other men, whether it be mentally or physically. For example, LM 5:108 mentions that menstruation cleanses women of impure thoughts.¹⁶⁷ According to Leslie, "impure thoughts" refers to those which are about other men. In some cases, women should be abandoned for thinking about men, as this too is considered adultery.¹⁶⁸ Even though mental infidelities are negative, they can be overlooked. However, physical adultery is even more dangerous because it might lead to illegitimate children of mixed castes. These children could "deprive the man [husband] of the son he needs for religious observances."¹⁶⁹ LM 8:353 states that children born from adulterous relationships and of mixed castes result in "the destruction of everything." Presumably, the destruction refers to the dharmic system built up by the authors of the LM, as well as the merit gained by following a dharmic path. If the act of menstruation is believed to cleanse a woman of infidelities that could have such devastating consequences it must be considered negative. Furthermore, the substance

¹⁶⁷ It is unclear why menstruation is symbolically connected to infidelity. I suspect it has something to do with the nature of women as outlined in the SDP. For instance, women are considered to be promiscuous and untrustworthy in general. Menstruation is a bodily process that is unique to women. Perhaps when women are menstruating, the authors of texts like the SDP and LM fear that their dangerous characteristics will be enhanced at this time. In other words, menstruating women might become more sexual and therefore more likely to seek pleasure from other men or from their own husbands.

¹⁶⁸ Leslie, 255.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

menstrual blood could arguably stand as proof of a woman's sin and perhaps be infused with the sin itself. Hence, despite its purifying qualities, menstruation's association with priest murder and adultery or lecherousness cannot help but ensure that it is seen as negative as well as powerful.

This negative connotation is further articulated as women are called *rajasvala* (meaning full of impurity, covered with dust or full of passion) especially for the first three days and nights of her cycle.¹⁷⁰ That a woman is said to be "covered with dust" while she is menstruating brings to mind Douglas' discussion of taboos as "dirt." As she says, "dirt offends against order."¹⁷¹ During her period, the Hindu woman is said to be symbolically equal to an untouchable on the first day, a brahmin killer on the second and a washerwoman on the third. To put it simply, she is extremely impure for those three days. In the case of the first day, an untouchable is outside of the caste system. Thus, on the first day of her cycle, the woman is symbolically thrust outside of the social order. After the third day, she is considered pure once again and need only cleanse herself as she would after urinating. If she continues to bleed after the twelfth day she must ritually bathe every day until the eighteenth or until she has stopped bleeding.¹⁷²

An interesting conundrum arises when one considers Tryambaka acknowledges four types of menstruation. Included among those are menstruation due to illness, emotional disturbance, and imbalance of humors. However, while these types of menstruation derive from abnormal circumstances, it is only the fourth type, namely,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 283.

¹⁷¹ Douglas, 2.

¹⁷² Leslie., 283-284.

menstruation due to a woman's regular cycle that is considered ritually impure.¹⁷³ Leslie speculates this might have something to do with the perceived relationship between normal menstruation and establishing a pregnancy, or that such an appraisal is an attempt to draw power away from a woman. Alternately, it may simply be a matter of classification.¹⁷⁴ It is difficult to conclude if any of her hypotheses are correct.

During the first three days of menstruation, when a woman is extremely impure, there are several prohibitions placed upon her. Many of these prohibitions, if broken, are explained as leading to consequences for a woman's child rather than for herself.¹⁷⁵ For example, if she lines her eyes, her child will be blind. If she takes a bath, he will drown. If she roams about, he will be insane. If she cuts rope, he will be impotent or of indeterminate sex. If she has intercourse, her child will be a *chandala* (untouchable). All of these prohibitions caution her from doing anything that might affect her child.¹⁷⁶ Also, many of them seem to make her less attractive to the opposite sex, including her husband. Perhaps it is feared that at this time a woman fully embodies the nature ascribed to her by Tryambaka. Menstruation is said to cleanse her from infidelities. It connects her to one side of women that is considered to be adharmic, namely, licentiousness. Perhaps, orthodox Hindu males feared that women are more likely to be sexually promiscuous during their menstrual period. Thus, by prohibiting a woman from making herself attractive, as illustrated by the restrictions on adornments or bathing, and engaging in

¹⁷³ Ibid., 284.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 285.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

sexual intercourse, male Hindus may hope to ensure that she is under their control. If she is less attractive to the opposite sex, her womb or field will be pure and therefore, better suited to her husband's sperm. On top of that, a woman must not conceive a child during that time or it will be cursed. Therefore, it is in her best interest, as well as her husband's, to avoid sexual contact during her period in order to protect her offspring.

The SDP goes on to explain that on the fourth day of her period a woman becomes pure again. At this time she should perform a ritual bath, meditate upon her husband with the reverence due to a *guru* or god and then she should dress and make sexual advances toward her husband.¹⁷⁷ If she and her husband do not have intercourse, they must atone for their sin and she may be cursed to be a female dog, jackal, or hog in the next life, declared a foetus-killer and sent back to her father.¹⁷⁸

According to Leslie's analysis, Tryambaka and the SDP's stipulations on women's prohibitions and the release of them are governed by concerns for the gratification of the husband and safety of the offspring. It seems as though the primary goal of the author is to ensure the former. He does so by making a wife undesirable to other members of the opposite sex and then making it a sin for her to refuse to engage in intercourse with her husband when the prohibitions have been lifted. While, the woman not having sex with any man while she is menstruating might not seem like a positive consequence for her husband (who may wish to engage her at that time), it actually protects his best interests. As Leslie states, sometimes concerns about progeny overrule those related to sexuality.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 286-287.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 288.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 255

As Smith pointed out children conceived during menstruation are cursed.¹⁸⁰ This statement seems to imply that all children begotten under these circumstances are cursed, regardless of the legitimacy of their father. Since a man is reborn through his wife in the form of his sons,¹⁸¹ it is in his best interest to have male children and to avoid bringing them into the world as cursed individuals.¹⁸² Therefore, through his prescriptions, Tryambaka is better able to fulfill the desires and needs of the husband. The woman is more likely to act according to the SDP because it threatens the well being of her husband and children, which coincides with her religious duty.

In conclusion, menstruation is considered negatively potent by orthodox Hindus because it symbolically thrusts a woman outside of the realm of *dharma*. For a period of three days her menstrual cycle equates her with infidelity, lewd sexuality, social impurities, such as her symbolic status as an untouchable on the first day of her cycle, and murder. Even though her menstrual flow is said to be purifying, it is inextricably tied to concepts which are adharmic. That menstrual blood is purifying a woman from negative things implies that it is the substance which carries those impurities out of her. Therefore, while menstruation is purifying, menstrual blood itself is likely impure.

I argue that the restrictions placed upon a woman serve a purpose. They act as combatants against the negative, adharmic symbolism of menstruation. By limiting the qualities which make her attractive, a woman is less likely to engage in intercourse which

¹⁸⁰ Smith, 23.

¹⁸¹ Leslie, 32.

¹⁸² While contemporary knowledge of human physiology has demonstrated that it is unlikely for a woman to conceive a child during her menstrual cycle, it is difficult to say whether contemporaries of Tryambaka, the authors of the LM, Hindus in the past and more would have been aware of this.

would result in negative consequences for her and her family's well being. Perhaps those consequences are there to remind her of her duty toward her family. For example, many of the restrictions, if broken, will harm her children. By complying with the rules set forth in the SDP regarding menstruation, the woman, while in an adharmic state, is able to act dharmically. For example, each time she does not line her eyes, she protects her family by avoiding the chance that her child will go blind. Once her sexuality is no longer a danger to her husband, her first action should be to glorify her husband and engage him in intercourse. Thus, the events and rules concerned with the time during a woman's menstruation when she is impure and the time immediately following it reengage her with both aspects of her religious modality. She is loyal and devoted to her husband and she cares for the best interests of her children.

CHAPTER THREE

Goddesses as Models For and Of Orthodox Women

Throughout the SDP many prominent themes have developed. According to Tryambaka, the good wife's actions will aid her husband in his duties. If she behaves dharmically, her husband will live longer, be prosperous, and she will be able to bear him healthy children, especially boys, who will carry on the family line and take care of her in old age. If the wife behaves properly she will not suffer the trial of becoming a widow. Instead, she will die before her husband. If she does not have this luck, she is encouraged to perform *sati* in order to redeem herself and guarantee her husband's salvation.

Some of the themes or results which come from the proper behavior of an orthodox husband and wife are prosperity and fertility. While Tryambaka's SDP describes what a human couple should do, Hinduism does not simply rely on Dharmasastra texts to instill its tenets. This rich tradition has a vast number of deities, rituals, and mythology all of which have been sculpted by the tradition and in turn have become models for practitioners. Hinduism evolves, and changes in the perception of the divine feminine are a part of this process. I will discuss this in the material that follows. In the previous chapter I discussed how *dharma* is the key factor in determining why an orthodox woman's menstrual period is considered negatively potent. I demonstrated that orthodox *dharma* requires that a woman's activities be restricted during her menstrual period in order to bring her closer to the sphere of the *pativrata*, by muffling characteristics such as licentiousness, and avoiding mixing the symbolism of sexuality

and brahmin murder, which could potentially transfer Indra's curse to a child conceived during her period. A woman's duty in the orthodox sphere dictates that her husband is her god and *guru*. Therefore menstrual blood's symbolism of infidelity cannot allow that sexual fluid to be conceived in a positive light.

The notion that *dharma* dictates the nature of the potency of menstrual fluid has previously been applied to humans; however, much of the Hindu tradition details the lives and activities of the divine. If Hinduism worshipped only male gods the question of menstruation likely would not need to be applied here. However, goddess worship is widespread in Hinduism. With the existence of so many manifestations of the divine feminine one has to wonder whether or not they menstruate and also, whether or not they act as models for women. As, I will explain below, there are very few explicit connections between menstruation and goddesses. However, there is one festival, Ambuvaci, that celebrates the menstruation of the goddess Kamakhya at Ntialchal. The final part of this chapter will examine the festival in light of the multivalent perspectives of tantric and orthodox Hindus. Prior to that I briefly overview the complexity of the goddess tradition in general. The bulk of this chapter, however, examines a few goddesses in particular, namely, Lakshmi/Sita and Kali. While it is difficult, in most cases, to claim whether a goddess menstruates or not, I argue that goddesses who are worshipped by orthodox women are both models of and models for the *pativrata*.

Who is Devi?

When undertaking the study of Hinduism, the scholar will soon realize the material she is dealing with is not as straightforward as it might first appear. The study of Hindu goddesses (*devT*) is typically complex. For instance one might be tempted to claim all goddesses are subordinated to one or more gods. However, upon seeing an image of Kali drunk on blood and straddling a supine Siva, that theory must be reevaluated. A scholar might be quick to equate DevT with *prakrti* (nature or materiality) or *maya* (the power of illusion), but a brief encounter with the Great Goddess tradition will reveal that she is not only material reality but also *brahman* or the Absolute. Goddesses can be mothers, lovers, and warriors, pure and impure, benevolent and fierce. They can bestow boons or grant wishes, but they can also grant moksa. What then is the scholar supposed to do with such a complex and dynamic tradition?

Part of understanding how goddesses function as models for and of reality involves a deeper examination of the complexity of the divine feminine. In the section that follows I examine several goddesses in order to illustrate the multivalence of the goddess tradition in the greater system of Hinduism. Another goal of this study is to develop a sense of what a goddess is, in terms of her roles, descriptions, and locations. Due to the volume of material available on the goddess tradition, it is not within the scope of this paper to cover all aspects of the goddess. This study will attempt to examine some of the scholarly categories applied in the study of DevT, such as fierce/benevolent, the presence of clusters, traits of the divine and location of particular cults.¹⁸³ I will separate

¹⁸³ In the purpose of this study, I have chosen to avoid focusing on the details of rituals devoted to the goddess. I will however, provide information about acceptable offerings to the goddess where relevant.

the study into three parts for ease of analysis (although, as I hope to demonstrate, the delineation among them is not as clear as one might think). These sections represent how the Hindu tradition depicts the divine feminine. Consequently, they are also areas which scholars have chosen to study in depth.¹⁸⁴ First I will examine the "goddess" with an emphasis on the lowercase "g" spelling. This category will discuss the traits of goddesses as well as different modes which scholars have drawn upon in an attempt to typify the many deities present within the Hindu tradition. For instance, what is the first impression one gets when learning about LaksmI? Is she a consort or is she independent? Next, "goddesses" will delve into the presence of cluster goddesses within the Hindu tradition. This category will attempt to address questions such as: what types of goddesses are being organized together or what is the agenda behind the formation of goddess clusters? Finally, I shall discuss "Goddess", or the Great Goddess tradition as it is described in the *DeviMahatmya* and beyond. How does this category use the "goddess" and "goddesses" categories to its advantage? Can all of them exist simultaneously? By delving into the multivalence of the goddess tradition, I demonstrate that the categories applied to goddesses are not hard and fast. The "sacred" in this case, embodied by the divine feminine is a mutable category which can be developed in many ways to suit many strata of beliefs.

¹⁸⁴ For a depth study of: individual goddesses, see John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff eds., *Devi: Goddesses of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998); clusters of goddesses, see David R. Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahavidyas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); the Great Goddess tradition, see Thomas B. Coburn, *Devi Mahatmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002).

goddess: the Divine Feminine as an Individual

A newcomer entering an introductory class on the divine feminine is likely to be taught about the characteristics of specific goddesses. For example, SarasvatI is frequently described as possessing power over the creative arts (music, and poetry are two examples). She is the wife of Brahma¹⁸⁵, she is pure, and she rides a swan.¹⁸⁶

Many of these deities occupy certain realms or serve specific functions. One might even say, upon first glance, the goddesses appear polarized in either benevolent/pure or fierce/impure forms. Specifically, SarasvatI's qualities place her in the benevolent category along with others, such as LaksmI, who is associated with prosperity,¹⁸⁷ or SIta who serves as a model for the perfect wife.¹⁸⁸ KalT on the other hand, is typically considered fierce because of her horrible image, impure activities and possessions.¹⁸⁹ Other fierce goddesses include Chinnamasta, "The Self-Decapitated Goddess,"¹⁹⁰ and DhumavatT, a widow.¹⁹¹

Because of the seeming polarization of goddesses, one can easily discern, even from the few deities mentioned previously, that they represent a wide scope of traits. It is not long, however, before the scholar realizes the benevolent and fierce dichotomy is

¹⁸⁵ David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1987), 55.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 62.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 65.

¹⁸⁹ David R. Kinsley, "Kali: Blood and Death Out of Place" in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratum Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 77.

¹⁹⁰ David R. Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine* 144.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 176.

sorely inadequate. There are many ways to categorize the goddess as an individual. For example, one might discuss issues of local versus pan-Indian cults, those associated with material gifts or spiritual gifts, those goddesses who are new and those who are old, tantric versus orthodox and married versus unmarried goddesses, to name a few. While the schemes I have just mentioned may seem limiting, they can serve as useful tools with which to sketch the goddess' likeness. Even so, the aforementioned formats cannot act as crutches. The scholar who depends on them too much will find herself frustrated. Each goddess is likely to have traits which do not quite seem to fit the box into which academia is trying to place her. Take for instance, Kali. If one uses the fierce/benevolent dichotomy to describe this goddess, it is likely she will be classified as fierce. While the category is not wrong, it is not complete either. To illustrate, despite her penchant for lapping up the blood of her enemies,¹⁹² her devotees call her "mother"¹⁹³ and she gives boons to those who worship her.¹⁹⁴ These last two traits become problematic, as they tend to be associated with benevolent goddesses.

Another example of the difficulty scholars encounter whilst studying goddesses can be found in Cynthia Ann Humes' article on Vindhyavasini.¹⁹⁵ She outlines the nature of the cult of one particular goddess whose following is both local and pan-Indian.¹⁹⁶ An example of how this dual appeal is achieved is demonstrated both in pamphlets devoted to

¹⁹² Kinsley, "Kali", 78.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 82.

¹⁹⁴ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 125.

¹⁹⁵ Cynthia Ann Humes, "Vindhyavasini : Local Goddess yet Great Goddess" in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 49.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 51.

VindhyavasinT and the material which is referred to by the guides at her temple. The folk aspects of the goddess and mythology devoted to her can be found in the *Vindhya Mdhdtmya*. It is common for her to be described in relation to the more universally known *DeviMahatmya*.¹⁹⁷ It seems likely for the locals to be intimately aware of the specific details of VindhyavasinT's deeds and characteristics. However, by associating the goddess with the popular *DeviMahatmya*, pilgrims from all over can link her to a part of the tradition with which they are more familiar. Consequently, by eliminating VindhyavasinT's individuality, priests and guides make her more accessible to the public at large.

To sum up, a scholar can gain a sense of Devi by studying individual goddesses. Depending on the goddess chosen, one may understand her to be specific things. She may be particularly associated with material wealth or she may be more likely to grant *moksa* to her devotees. As demonstrated above, close examination of one particular goddess will not likely present a one dimensional portrait. Despite being more commonly associated with one text, one place, or one set of characteristics, Devi is likely to possess traits which seem to contradict the dominant side of her persona. As a result, it should not take the scholar long to realize that even for a "little g" goddess, the tradition is diverse to say the least.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 59. Also, see below for a more thorough description of this goddess's universal cult.

goddesses: The Divine Feminine as a Cluster

Another popular phenomenon within the Hindu tradition is the existence of multiple goddess groups. For example, the cluster of goddesses known as the ten Mahavidyas is comprised of ten individual goddesses.¹⁹⁸ Although the names of these goddesses vary slightly in certain texts, these ten Mahavidyas most often make the list: Kali, Tara, Tripura-sundan, Bhuvaneshvan, Chinnamasta, BhairavT, Dhumavati, Bagalamukhi, MatangT, and Kamala.¹⁹⁹ Each goddess maintains her particular traits as an individual. That is to say, MatangT belongs to a low caste, accepts polluted offerings and does not require her devotees to be specially initiated or pure. Therefore, she may be worshipped by menstruating women.²⁰⁰ Kamala on the other hand, is seated on a lotus, is particularly auspicious and bestows wealth or luck on her devotees.²⁰¹ Included in the cluster are both well known goddesses such as Kali and those less known such as Bagalamukhi.²⁰²

Referring only to MatangT and Kamala one can understand this group of goddesses as very diverse. With only these two goddesses, the cluster is already associated with purity and pollution, low castes, and material wealth. The other goddesses continue this trend of defying oversimplified categorisation. Included are a naked, blood-stained warrior woman, a goddess who stands in the cremation ground and

¹⁹⁸ Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, 9.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 211, 215-216.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 223, 225.

²⁰² Ibid., 9.

tells her devotees to have no fear, a regal, sixteen year old girl, a lactating woman, a goddess who has cut off her own head and feeds two goddesses standing beside her, an intoxicated goddess who possesses a book and a rosary, a widow with sagging breasts and cranky temperament, and a woman who holds the tongue of a demon while she beats him with a club.²⁰³ This is not the only cluster of goddesses with diverse traits. One may discover similarities when studying the Matrkas,²⁰⁴ or the nine Durgas.

A person might be tempted to ask, what does the formation of goddess groups say about Devi? Once again, there is no easy answer. In reference to the Mahavidyas, according to Kinsley, they have been analyzed as being particularly associated with Siva, they may be sisters, represent stages of womanhood, display creative and destructive characteristics, correspond to phases of the moon, or have ties to the left and right paths of Tantra.²⁰⁵ I am inclined to think that the diversity of the goddess cluster is meant to correspond to the diversity of the feminine. Women, like goddesses, have multiple traits; they may be young or old, serve as warriors and mothers, and be single or married. Utilizing many goddesses in a group serves as a gross representation of the potential and realized complexity of womanhood.

Goddess: the Divine Feminine as the Ultimate

Inevitably, the scholar who is embarking on a discovery of the Hindu goddess tradition will encounter the Goddess or Devi. Previously, the goddess has been spelled

²⁰³ Ibid.,9-14.

²⁰⁴ See Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 151-160.

²⁰⁵ Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, 39-46.

with a lower case 'g'. The capitalization of the word marks a deliberate change of focus from an individual deity to the all encompassing Great Goddess tradition. Thomas Coburn discusses the rise of this concept in regard to the *DevTMahatmya*, a 6th century C.E. text.²⁰⁶ He describes the Goddess as ultimate reality, as a consort and also beyond the status of a consort, as deceptive, as demonic, as *prakrti*, as a warrior, and more.²⁰⁷ In short, she has many different aspects.

Within the *DevTMahatmya* the Goddess has many epithets. As such, the text has associated DevT with many individual goddesses including, Kali, who manifests from the brow of the Goddess in order to slay demons,²⁰⁸ Ambika, the mother goddess whose brow serves as the birth place of Kali,²⁰⁹ and Candika, the passionate or violent form of the Goddess.²¹⁰ Within the narratives of the *DevTMahatmya*, the Great Goddess also forms a cluster of goddesses called Matrkas in order to slay demons.²¹¹ Hence, the text effectively subsumes the individual goddesses and groups of goddesses under one heading known as the Great Goddess. What the reader is left with is a sense that all goddesses are in fact one; this Goddess is frequently known as Durga.²¹²

²⁰⁶ Thomas B. Coburn, "Devi: The Great Goddess" in *DevT: Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 31. For more information on the development of the Great Goddess see: Tracy Pintchman, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 32-37.

²⁰⁸ Coburn, *DevT Mahatmya*, 109.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 99.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 94-95.

²¹¹ Coburn, 'Devi', 38.

²¹² Ibid., 31.

The all encompassing nature of Devi is not limited to the *DeviMdhdtmya*. An example of an individual goddess cult becoming more closely associated with the Goddess is described in Humes' article on Vindhyavasini. She describes how priests and guides use the *DeviMdhdtmya* to accomplish this. According to Humes, Vindhyavasini appears in the *DeviMdhdtmya* as a destroyer of demons.²¹³ Her role as a universal goddess is thus emphasized while details of her mythology and sectarian differences are downplayed.²¹⁴ While one might claim Vindhyavasini's presence in the *DeviMdhdtmya* is the reason for her association with the Great Goddess, it is likely she could have experienced the transition regardless.

The Goddess' ability to form clusters occurs outside the *Devi Mdhdtmya* as well. For instance, Kinsley describes several origin myths of the Mahavidyas. One example states they manifest from Sati when Siva prevents her from going to her father's sacrifice.²¹⁵ Other "source" goddesses include Pavati, Kali and Durga.²¹⁶

Who is Devi?

As this case portion of the study comes to a close, perhaps it is best to revisit the initial question. Who is Devi? It is clear from the above that she is many things. She can be one, she can be many, and she can be ultimate. It also seems as though she can encompass the categories individually or in combination, as is the case of Vindhyavasini.

²¹³ Humes, 68

²¹⁴ Ibid., 69.

²¹⁵ Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, 23.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 27, 29-30

Hence the diversity of Hinduism is reflected in one of its parts. The scholar who chooses to study the goddess tradition must keep the multivalence of the divine feminine in mind, so that she may accurately sketch the Goddess' likeness.

Goddesses as Models For and Of Women

The goddess, goddesses, and Great Goddess model tells scholars something essential about the goddess tradition; it is dynamic. No symbol is confined to one particular story line. The categories scholars have used to define them are fluid and even the goddesses themselves seem to shift from one category to another. The advantage of having such maleable deities, is that they have the potential to suit the diverse needs of the Hindu populace. This is particularly easy within the goddess tradition. As I articulated above, the Great Goddess tradition adheres to the concept that all goddesses are essentially one. If there is a belief in one divine feminine that encompasses all reality, one must assume that she possesses the full gamut of qualities within that reality. In other words, MahadevT, regardless of the epithet identified with her, must be a diverse goddess. Even though she must have a broader range of traits to be a "G" goddess, she still retains some of her "g" goddess traits, as in the example of Vindhyavasini. These three categories will be essential analytical tools in the content that follows. The individual characteristics of Devi will often serve as fodder for her status as a model for or of women. In Geertz's theory, they will mirror the traits of the ideal wife and at the same time reinforce the values set forth by texts like the LM and the SDR²¹⁷ This is especially

²¹⁷ Geertz, 93-94.

true in the case where a goddess easily fits the image of the *pativrata*. For goddesses whose traits tend to cater to tantric practitioners, their individual qualities may not be suited to the wifely ideal. By having a maleable image of the divine, one that might allow for a Great Goddess to be both terrifying and benevolent or married and independent, Hindus can emphasize or focus upon the characteristics that match their beliefs. In the next portion of this study I look at two goddesses who are exemplary of the multivalence of the Hindu tradition. Both of them or the forms closely associated with them can and have been discussed as "goddess," part of a cluster of "goddesses," or the Great "Goddess." They are LaksmI and KalT. I have chosen them as examples because on one hand they represent the ultra orthodox and the ultra tantric respectively. On the other hand, both of them serve as models for and of women.

To facilitate this analysis, it is necessary to articulate what qualities constitute the *pativrata*. During the course of the previous chapter I discussed *dharma* for women in the LM and the SDP. These texts highlight several traits and duties that make up the perfect wife. These roles are nuanced and complex encompassing everything from ritual worship of deities, the adornment of her body, the nature of her sexual advances and more. When it comes to bodily processes, such as procedures for the menstruating or pregnant woman, it becomes difficult to make definite connections to the divine feminine. In many cases human biological functions do not apply to gods and goddesses. For example, in the *DevI-Mahatmya* (DM),²¹⁸ the demons Madhu and Kaitabha are born from the dirt in Visnu's ear (1:68). In this case beings are not only created from a site and

²¹⁸ All references to the DM are taken from Thomas B. Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the DevI-Mahatmya and a Study of Its Interpretation* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991).

substance that is not responsible for human reproduction, but they are also made by a male figure. Later in the DM there are examples of female creation. For example, during Ambika's battle with Canda and Munda, she becomes angry, turns black and Kali is born from her forehead (7:5-6). Later, she unmanifests all of the goddesses she had previously created and declares that she is the only one who exists in the world (10:5-6). Passages 7:5-6 and 10:5-6 display creation through the act of manifestation. Beyond that, they help to solidify the supreme nature of the Great Goddess and reiterate the idea that all goddesses are essentially one. Needless to say, divine creation frequently occurs in ways that are not akin to human biology. Thus, one must be careful about drawing parallels between human and divine physiology.²¹⁹ Therefore, when examining goddesses as models for and of women, it is best to look at overarching concepts rather than the minutia that is found within them. From an in-depth analysis of the LM and SDP one can discern that at her most basic level, *apativratā* is two things: (1) unstintingly devoted to her husband, and (2) concerned for the well being of her children. A third quality results from the wife that embodies these two traits. Namely, she takes on a *sakti*-esque role. By being a happy, dutiful wife she empowers the activities of the household, enabling its activities to be prosperous and successful. Throughout my analysis of both goddesses, I will draw attention to these three characteristics.

²¹⁹ I discuss ways in which one might draw parallels between menstruating women and goddesses below.

LaksmI

The goddess LaksmI²²⁰ and two goddesses that have been identified with her, Slta and Kamala, are the subjects of this next analysis. They represent those goddesses typically aligned with orthodox Hindu traditions.²²¹ LaksmI, by that name, does not have a role in the Vedas.²²² She becomes a very popular goddess through epic and puranic Hinduism. She is not typically seen as an independent goddess, by which I mean she is usually a consort goddess.²²³ When defining her character in relation to *dharma* her status as a wife or consort automatically makes her more suited to the orthodox tradition than to the tantric one. While LaksmI is typically linked with Visnu, her characteristics tend to remain the same regardless of whom she is associated with. She is known for her role as *apativrata*, her ability to bring luck and power, fertility and well being to those associated with her.²²⁴ In other words, she is linked to the material world and the concerns of an orthodox householder. An excellent example for the purpose of this paper is her marriage to Dharma, the god of virtuous conduct. Their connection unites her characteristics with his. It acts as a, not so subtle, method of asserting that dharmic action (the realm of Dharma) leads to luck, fertility and well-being (the realm of LaksmI).²²⁵

²²⁰ I will use LaksmI and Sri interchangeably throughout the course of this discussion.

²²¹ I recognize that there are many goddesses who fall under typically tantric or orthodox categories; however, it is not within the scope of this paper to examine them all. Thus, I have chosen to focus on two major goddesses who seem to exemplify one mode of Hinduism more than another.

²²² One of her epithets, Sri, does appear in the Vedas. See Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 19-22.

²²³ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 23.

²²⁴ *ibid.*, 19.

²²⁵ *ibid.*, 23.

Her relationships with other gods still utilize the power of her influence; however, where her connection to Dharma can be more easily applied to human action (i.e. if people act dharmically LaksmI will bestow her grace upon them), her connection to gods like Indra has a more definite influence over them. Whether she is coupled with gods (Indra or Visnu) or demons (Bali), she brings success to all of their realms and actions. For example, when she joins Bali, a demon, he becomes a virtuous ruler and his kingdoms flourish. As with other consorts, when she leaves him, her lack of influence results in a lack of prosperity.²²⁶ In essence, LaksmI as wife acts as her consort's *sakti*. Her influence empowers the god and enables him, and those under his rule, to carry out his actions in an effective and righteous manner.

By 400 C.E. LaksmI is firmly established as Visnu's consort.²²⁷ Their union is usually linked to the churning of the ocean of milk undertaken by the gods in order to obtain the nectar of immortality. She is one of the wonderful things that come out of the ocean. As Visnu is in charge of the churning of the ocean, he gains her for his wife.²²⁸ Throughout their marriage, she is frequently associated with qualities attributed to the ideal wife. For example, she is submissive to her husband, she cooks and she aids Visnu in all of his endeavors, strengthening their success.²²⁹ One common image of LaksmI depicts her rubbing Visnu's feet (see Figure 1). She is smaller than he is, her hair is

²²⁶ Ibid., 25.

²²⁷ Ibid., 26.

²²⁸ Ibid., 27.

²²⁹ Ibid., 28.

covered and she bows her head to him. Thus, even in her iconography, she pays obiesance to her husband.

Above, I explained LaksmT's role as a wife and how she brings success to the gods she is associated with. The other trait common to ideal women is their connection to their children. In LaksmT's case, her children are frequently her worshippers. For example, Vasudha Narayanan calles her a mother. In particular, her role is to act as a mediator between the adherent and her husband Visnu.²³⁰ His role mirrors that of a father, in that he is approachable, yet at the same time he is concerned with justice and discipline.²³¹ Therefore, it is more difficult for the worshipper to gain his favor. Laksmi's position as the mother to her worshippers allows her to be more forgiving and loving than her husband. She is not as concerned with justice and she will bestow her grace upon her followers without asking anything from them in return.²³² Thus, by approaching Laksmi, a worshipper need not be afraid. They are able to access Visnu through her divine grace and motherly nature.²³³ Beyond forging a connection between Visnu and his followers, LaksmI is worshipped for the success of rituals, prosperity, agricultural success, marriage and more.²³⁴ Thus, she is firmly linked to material desires, especially those of the householder who seeks to fulfill the goals of *kdma* and *artha*.

²³⁰ Vasudha Narayanan, "Sri: Giver of Fortune, Bestower of Grace" in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998), 92-93.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid., 93.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Upendra Nath, *Goddess LaksmT: Origin and Development*, (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 1995), 55-56.

Even when Laksmi's characteristics as a wife are downplayed she is still considered to be an auspicious goddess. For example, Kamala is a goddess who is typically included among the Mahavidyas, a tantric cluster of goddesses. Kamala is an epithet of Laksmi.²³⁵ While Laksmi is generally associated with a male god, Kamala is an independent goddess. Even though she does not fulfill the duties of a wife, she is still associated with sovereignty and fertility denoted in her imagery through elephants and jars.²³⁶ Thus, even when she is not a *pativrata*, Laksmi or goddesses associated with her are depicted in a positive light.

Lynn Foulston places goddesses like Sita and Laksmi into the category of "essentially benign goddesses."²³⁷ She describes them as "pleasing to look at," "approachable," able to "coax the devotee towards a close and harmonious relationship with divinity."²³⁸ She explicitly labels them as being beacons of *dharma*²³⁹ All in all these are feminine goddesses who comply with the ideals of womanhood. They are not terrifying; they are consorts, and Foulston claims they are highly "human" in their embodiment of the *pativrata*.²⁴⁰

While Laksmi falls solidly into the goddess category, albeit one who still emulates the ideal woman, Sita is an interesting case as she straddles womanhood and divinity. In

²³⁵ Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, 223.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

²³⁷ As compared to "essentially fierce goddesses. See Lynn Foulston, *At the Feet of the Goddess: The Divine Feminine in Local Hindu Religion*, (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002), 16.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

the *Ramayana*, she is born as a woman, however, she is also revered as a goddess. Even though both Lakshmi and Sita are considered benevolent goddesses, the latter seems to reach to a deeper level of identification with the Hindu orthodox woman. As in Geertz's definition of religion discussed earlier, she acts as a symbol which creates a lasting impression and model for women (and the orthodox community in general).²⁴¹ Madhu Kishwar explores this concept in the article "Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Hold of Sita on Popular Imagination in India."²⁴² According to Kishwar, Sita is more than just a *pativrata*. She serves as an example of the ideal woman India-wide.²⁴³ Women may not be able to live up to her standards but they aim for them.²⁴⁴ For example, they laud Sita's actions and beyond that, they criticize Rama for being a bad husband.²⁴⁵ Sita was even used by Gandhi as a symbol for women because she was pure and fearless.²⁴⁶ Indian women often consider Rama to have acted unjustly toward his wife. For example, he sent her to the forest when she was pregnant and he asked her to endure the *agnipariksha* (trial by fire) twice. Therefore, she is seen as being more *dharmic* than her husband.²⁴⁷ Sympathy toward Sita's trials and her adherence to duty is even recorded in

²⁴¹ Geertz, 90.

²⁴² Madhu Kishwar, 'Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Hold of Sita on Popular Imagination in India,' in *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, Paula Richman ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

²⁴³ Ibid., 286.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 287.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 298.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 304.

poetry. One such example is "Sita Speak" by Bina Agarwal.²⁴⁸ Agarwal describes STta's compliance when she was married to a man she never knew, her willingness to enter exile with her husband, her chastity, her endurance of the trial by fire without question, her second exile to the forest while pregnant, her abandonment by her sons and her final dissolution into the earth.²⁴⁹

Some examples of STta's treatment in the *Ramayana* inextricably link her to *dharma*. For example she happily makes love to her husband, is more devoted to Rama than he is to her, and her loveliness and virtue strengthen her relationship to her husband.²⁵⁰ While other women are seen as fickle, she is without fault.²⁵¹ When Rama rescues Sita he questions her purity. She decides she cannot live without her husband and immolates herself. However, Agni could not burn her because she had been solely devoted to her husband.²⁵² Later, when she is exiled alone in the forest, she does not commit suicide so she may protect her husband's children.²⁵³ Thus, she remains devoted to her husband and protects her offspring so he may be reborn through them. Her virtue is not merely an interpretation of her character in the epic; it is made explicit in the text

²⁴⁸ Bina Agarwal, "Two Poems on Sita," in *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, Paula Richman ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 239-240.

²⁵⁰ Robert P. Goldman trans., *Ramayana: Book One Boyhood by Valmiki* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 76:11-21.

²⁵¹ Robert P. Goldman trans., *Ramayana: Book Three the Forest by Valmiki* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 12:5-8.

²⁵² Swami Venkatesananda trans., *The Concise Ramayana of Valmiki* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 341-342.

²⁵³ M. N. Dutt trans., *Ramayana of Valmiki: Vol. IV Uttara-Kanda* (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 2004).

itself. Therefore, it seems that Sita is especially meant to be a model for women because of her behavior and virtue.

Kali

Goddesses like LaksmT immediately bring to mind the image of the demure, properly behaved woman. Kali on the other hand, does not. She is typically shown naked, standing atop a supine Siva; she wears a garland of heads; she is covered in blood, holds weapons, has wild hair and bulging eyes. In some cases she appears ready to engage in sexual intercourse with Siva whose penis is erect (see Figure 2). When compared to the image of LaksmT in figure 1, KalT appears gruesome and unorthodox. David Kinsley calls her terrifying appearance the main reason why she has been maligned by Hindus and Westerners alike.²⁵⁴ She is labeled "other" and "extreme."²⁵⁵ Alternatively, she is extremely popular, not simply as an indigenous goddess but as an essential part of the brahmanic tradition.²⁵⁶ I will begin with a brief examination of her more extreme qualities and follow with a discussion of how parts of the Hindu tradition have interpreted her in ways that make her more appropriate as an orthodox role model.

Tantric Hinduism is often associated with symbolism of the body, death, and pleasure. Its practice may include the use of *mantras*, *yantras*, magic and the use of specific texts, many of which are esoteric. Practitioners often try to gain *siddhis* on their

²⁵⁴ David R. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute: KalT 2 Krsna: Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 81.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

path to knowledge of *brahman*.²⁵⁷ Kali's image in figure 2 connects her with all three symbols: the body - through the erect *linga*; death - through severed heads and arms, as well as a supine Siva; and pleasure - she grins wildly and stands over an erect penis. Here, the woman is the focal point and her tantric adherents hold her to be the ultimate reality or *brahman*.²⁵⁸ Although she may be shown with a god,²⁵⁹ she is not subservient to him. On the contrary, as *brahman* she is all encompassing. Thus, everything that exists is manifest through her.

Beyond her status as *brahman*, Kali's actions do not conform to orthodox Hindu conceptions of the ideal woman. In many cases her mythology casts her in the role of a warrior. For example, she slays the demon Raktablja in the *Devi-Mahatmya*. Unlike typical stories of a deity's triumph over evil, she does not vanquish him with weapons. Instead she defeats him by draining him of all his blood. When she drinks his blood, she and all of the goddesses become drunk (8:51-62). Thus, she is associated with violence, war and wild behavior. To put it simply, nothing about her behavior aligns her with orthodox views on traditional women's roles. She acts more like a warrior than a demure woman who would worship her husband and serve as a mother.

Despite her imagery and mythology, she is worshipped by orthodox people. As Elizabeth Harding says, even Swami Vivekananda called her mother.²⁶⁰ To those who

²⁵⁷ June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 69-70.

²⁵⁸ ItM, 8CA

²⁵⁹ In addition, Kali is shown touching Siva, an unacceptable act in the eyes of orthodox Hindus

²⁶⁰ Elizabeth Harding, *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakineswar* (York Beach: Nicolaus Inc., 1993), xxix.

worship her, Kali *is* a mother. Unlike her more orthodox counterparts, this role is not simply there to forge a connection between the devotee and a male god. She protects her children or worshippers by conquering demons and showing them a way out of *maya* (illusion).²⁶¹ She brings balance to the world and gives her followers the courage to follow the path to *moksa*.²⁶² It is significant to note that *ma* or mother is Kali's most common epithet.²⁶³ While the nature of the two goddesses differs it is clear that, like LaksmI, Kali's status as a mother is a significant aspect in the formation of her relationship to her devotees.

Kali is a mother figure, but understanding the view of some that she is an ideal wife seems more difficult. Jeffrey Kripal, Usha Menon and Richard Shweder discuss the reinterpretation of Kali's character at length. For example, most Oriya Hindus, upon seeing an image like figure 3 would not argue that Kali has stuck out her tongue in ecstasy. Instead they say she is biting her tongue in *lajja* or shame.²⁶⁴ She does so because she has become wild and angry and has stepped on her husband Siva.²⁶⁵ Even though she reacts in shame, she is not being controlled by her husband, he is gently

²⁶¹ Ibid., xxxi.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 88. Kripal makes note that "mother" is used in both a mother and child sense but also in an erotic sense by tantric practitioners.

²⁶⁴ Usha Menon and Richard A. Shweder, "Dominating Kali: Hindu Family Values and Tantric Power," in *Encountering Kali: in the Margins, at the Center, in the West*, eds. Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 82.

²⁶⁵ Kripal, 250-251.

reminding her to watch her actions.²⁶⁶ This interpretation of Kalī is significant for a few reasons. First, she is no longer an independent goddess. By being married, she fits more snugly into the outline of the ideal woman set forth by the SDP and the LM. Next, although she transgresses social norms by touching her husband with her foot, she becomes calm when she realizes her mistake. By examining figure 3, one can see that her appearance reflects this change when compared to figure 2. For example, her face is less demonic, in fact she looks quite pretty. She almost looks surprised that she has stepped on her husband. She is wearing more clothing, and much of the sexual innuendo has been removed from the image, along with the depiction of Siva's erect phallus.²⁶⁷

However, she still cannot entirely fit the role of the *pativrata*. After all, she is not submissive. Even in the more orthodox interpretation of Kalī, she becomes calm because she wants to, not because her husband forces her to.²⁶⁸ Also, she is Saktī- Great Goddess, rather than a *sakti* - a consort who empowers her husband. Yet, Geertz's theory still holds true here, as she is still a powerful symbol that is uniquely real to those who worship her.²⁶⁹ How does she act as a model for and of women? It appears as though her symbolism within the orthodox tradition is far more realistic to women's actual experiences than a goddess like Sita. For instance, people do get angry and lose track of their behavior and they occasionally need to be reminded to calm down. Perhaps Kali's

²⁶⁶ Menon and Shweder, 86.

²⁶⁷ It is important to note that the tantric and orthodox interpretations of Kali do not necessarily reflect the chronological development of her cult. My treatment of them here, along with my discussions of her mythology and cult, are merely illustrative of different modes in which Hindus envision her.

²⁶⁸ Kripal, 251.

²⁶⁹ Geertz, 90.

lajja serves as a model to remind women to act dharmically even when they fail to fulfill every standard set forth by writers like Tryambaka.

Having examined goddesses of two categories (typically benevolent or fierce), I have demonstrated that they emulate the ideal woman in three ways, although less so in the case of Kali. First, she is devoted to her husband. Second, she is concerned for her children. Third, she empowers those associated with her through her dharmic actions. One might be tempted to ask why the goddess is able to accomplish this. As I discussed above, the Dharmasastra texts analysed for the purpose of this study were composed in Sanskrit, a language women were unlikely to learn. Therefore, it seems unlikely that these texts would have directly informed women's value systems. It is probable that goddesses partially functioned as more accessible teaching mechanisms for women. As Michaels said, "it is precisely women in India who uphold traditions, not as architects... authors or artists, but in their everyday practices, their religious life, their language, their songs, and their lifestyle..."²⁷⁰ In other words, they are more connected with the divine on a regular basis. One might conclude they would relate more to an image of the goddess, especially one who closely resembles the ideal woman, than a text that lists their duties, especially one they might not be able to read. Beyond the simple gender connection between women and goddesses, the way in which the divine feminine is constructed is potentially more endearing. By this I refer to epic and mythic traditions. Stories such as the *Ramayana* use relatable characters as a medium for the lessons held within. In addition, the epics were not just part of the written tradition. An important factor in their

²⁷⁰ Michaels, 125.

influence and popularity is that they were recited throughout India in the languages relevant to each region.²⁷¹ In other words, it seems likely that the goddess tradition, while partially informed by the SDP and the LM, transmitted and mirrored women's *dharma*.

AmbuvacF

The final portion of this chapter is dedicated to a brief analysis of Ambuvaci. It is a festival that takes place in the state of Assam, at the Kamakhya temple in Kamarupa. The site is one of the *iaktipithas* (places where the goddess's body parts are worshipped).²⁷² The temple of Kamakhya is built atop a hill, around a cleft in a rocky cave fed by a spring. This cleft is the temple's inner sanctum, and is regarded as the reproductive organ (*yoni*) of the goddess Kamakhya. Once a year, during the month of Asadha, the water from the spring runs red from the goddess Kamakhya's *yoni*.²⁷³ Earth scientists recognize that this colour change in the water is largely due to laematite deposits in the soil that flow into the spring water during the rainy season.²⁷⁴ However, in the context of Hindu belief, the red fluid is regarded as the menstrual blood of the goddess. Below I examine how some of the aspects of the ambuvacl festival are targeted toward orthodox Hindus, and also reflect the tenets set forth in the SDP.

²⁷¹ Paula Richman ed., *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 4.

²⁷² Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, 17.

²⁷³ Nihar Rajan Mishra, *Kamakhya: A Socio-Cultural Study* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2004), 51.

²⁷⁴ Kali Prasad Goswami, *Kamakhya Temple: Past and Present* (New Delhi: A. P. H. Publishing Corporation, 1998), 26.

An important element of the festival is the *yoni* itself. There are several tales that detail the origin of the goddess Kamakhya. For example, the *Yoginī (antra (1/15))* says that the creator god Brahma angered the goddess. She created a demon to teach him a lesson. Brahma sought the help of Visnu. Neither of them were able to conquer the demon. Thus, they sought the help of the goddess. After she successfully defeated the demon Kesi, Brahma and Visnu asked where they could worship her. She directed them to the site where she killed the demon. That place, she said, is *ayonimandala* (a sacred space that is a cosmic creative orifice) associated with Kamakhya. She told Brahma that if he allowed his cattle to graze there and if he himself meditated there he would be forgiven for his arrogance.²⁷⁵

While this myth articulates how worship began at the Kamakhya site it does not offer much insight into the development of the actual *pltha*. One particular example of the origin of the *yoni* at Kamarupa highlights an important theme regarding the site. According to Kinsley, there are two pertinent versions of this myth that can be found in the *Brhaddharma-* and *Mahabhadgavata-puranas*²⁷⁶ They were likely composed after the fourteenth century C.E.²⁷⁷ They are more compelling than a similar account in chapter 18 of the *Kalika Purana* because they specifically refer to the Mahavidyas, a cluster of goddesses that has shrines around the main site at Kamarupa. According to the myth, Daksa decided to perform a sacrifice. He invited all of the divine beings except his

²⁷⁵ Mishra, 145-146.

²⁷⁶ Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, 22. *Brhaddharma-purana*, Madhya-khanda 6:73-133 and *Mahabhadgavata-purana* 8:45-9:82.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

daughter Sati. He refused to invite her because he did not approve of her marriage to Siva, whom he also refused to invite to the sacrifice. His son-in-law was wild, wandered around naked, lived in cremation grounds, meditated for long periods of time, and hung around with ghouls and other nasty characters. How could Daksa's daughter be happy with a man like that? While Sati was incensed at her father's actions, her husband did not care. On top of his indifference to the slight, Siva refused to let his wife attend the sacrifice. Then, Sati became furious. Her appearance transformed until she was an old, horrifying goddess with a lolling tongue. When Siva tried to run away from her, she surrounded him with the Mahavidyas and claimed them all as herself. Finally, he relented and told her she could go to the sacrifice. She went to Daksa's *yajna* and ruined his sacrifice by throwing herself into the fire.²⁷⁸ While Kinsley's telling of the myth focuses more on the Mahavidyas, important events occur in the story after Sati throws herself on the sacrificial fire. The *Brhadharma*-(2.40. 18-54), *Devibhagavata*- (7.30.44-50) and *Mahabhagavata-purdnas* (11.32-118) discuss what occurs after Sati's death. Siva eventually takes up her corpse and roams around with her body. His actions threatened to destroy the cosmos so Visnu used his discus to slice pieces of her body off. When nothing was left of his wife, Siva became calm. Wherever a piece of Sati fell, he took up the form of a *lihga*. In the case of the site at Kamarupa, his *lihga* became a mountain to support her *yoni*.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Ibid.,22-25.

²⁷⁹ Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 298-299.

There are two orthodox themes that arise from this myth. First, Sati goes to extreme lengths to defend her husband. Even though Siva is not dead, she is willing to burn herself to death to defend his honor. According to SDP, three kinds of wives merit the title *pativrata*: one who dies before her husband, one who will commit *sati*, and one who stays celibate as a widow.²⁸⁰ Sati in a way, exemplifies the first two of these classifications for ideal wives. Beyond that, her death brings about another result that is particularly essential from the orthodox perspective. As the title of Doniger's book, *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic*, implies, Siva's mythology is constantly playing with the tension between his erotic and ascetic natures. As she argues, the stories act like a pendulum swinging from one destructive extreme to another but finding balance along the way.²⁸¹ In this instance, when the *yoni* falls to the ground, Siva's mad wandering ceases. He takes the form of a *linga* ending his mad cycle of destruction and joins with her in sexual union. Thus, he is fully involved in the creative process.²⁸² Both of them become more accessible to their worshippers and invigorate the cosmos through this coupling.²⁸³ In this sense the site at Kamarupa becomes a beacon of creation and fertility. This sensibility fits perfectly for the householder as his goals are *kdma* and *artha*. These connect him with material concerns like prosperity, and love. As the previous material has discussed in detail, an important part of that householder stage is procreation which comes from *kdma* and, especially in the case of boys, helps to bring wealth or *artha* into the family. This

²⁸⁰ Leslie, 304.

²⁸¹ Doniger, *Siva*, 317.

²⁸² Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 39.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 40.

runs in opposition to the goal of *moksa* or enlightenment, when one renounces the world. While enlightenment is an important goal for the orthodox Hindu, it is meant to take place after he or she has taken part in the material reality. Thus, the Sati myth and the coupling of the *yoni* and the *linga* strikes a cord with the SDP's stress on the woman's *dharma*. She is concerned with love and devotion for her husband and creation and prosperity for her family.

Not all of the events that take place during Ambuvaci bring orthodox Hinduism to mind. Blood sacrifice, a typically tantric form of worship, occurs every day at the temple and continues to take place during this time.²⁸⁴ Even the location of the temple, Assam, is said to be the "heartland" of tantra²⁸⁵ and tantric practitioners. In addition, the festival celebrates the menstruation of the goddess, although the LM and the SDP condemn menstruation as negatively potent. After the goddess's menstruation has ceased, worshippers are invited to take *prasad* (sanctified offering) of red water²⁸⁶ and are given a piece of the red cloth that covers the *yoni* during the festival.²⁸⁷ In other words, the thing which has been labeled as "dirt," in the symbolic, theoretical framework of Mary Douglas, a substance that is thrust outside of the *dharmic* system is now seen as sacred

²⁸⁴ Mishra, 52.

²⁸⁵ Hugh B. Urban, "The Path of Power: Impurity, Kingship, and Sacrifice in Assamese Tantra" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 69, No. 4, (December, 2001): 778.

²⁸⁶ Patricia Dold, "The Mahavidyas at Kamarupa: Dynamics of Transformation," *Religious Studies and Theology* 23 no 1. (2004), 101.

²⁸⁷ Mishra, 54.

and positive. By accepting it as *prasad*, worshippers are transgressing against orthodox norms, thereby temporarily shattering the values of the social structure.²⁸⁸

Despite these unorthodox elements, the veneration of the Ambuvaci festival is one of orthodoxy. For example, Kamakhya is called a mother and the temple is shut down during the three²⁸⁹ days of her menstruation because devotees will be cursed if they come into contact with her menstrual blood.²⁹⁰ All worship, even at the Mahavidya temples, occurs outside of the *pithas*.²⁹¹ Only a couple of priests, the *athparia* and the *dudri*, are allowed to attend to the goddess at this time. Although blood sacrifice occurs, she is also given fruit, rice and curd, more typical orthodox offerings.²⁹² The goddess's ritual impurity is not merely observed at the temple, but by surrounding houses as well. People undertake *vrats* (vowed ascetic observances) and abstain from the same types of work that are forbidden to menstruating women.²⁹³ Many pilgrims flock to the site at this time. According to Mishra, they praise the goddess, discuss philosophical matters and seek advice from holy men regarding personal matters.²⁹⁴ Finally, when the temple is reopened, the goddess is bathed and dressed in new clothing.²⁹⁵ Although the menstrual

²⁸⁸ Urban, 785.

²⁸⁹ Other accounts list the number of days at five (Dold, 101). On the other hand, Mishra's three day figure would comply more with the SDP's discussion of a woman's menstrual impurity, which is also listed at three days. Leslie, 283.

²⁹⁰ Mishra., 52.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 53.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 52.

blood is offered as a symbol of the goddess's grace, the treatment of the *yoni* and the temple site bears a striking resemblance to the religious duties of the menstruating woman laid out in the SDR²⁹⁶. If one were to extrapolate the ritual process of the goddess's menstruation, one might infer that subsequent to this festival she would engage in intercourse, a creative act.²⁹⁷ According to Dold, the auspicious nature of the event is displayed in a more subtle way, through the use of the color red. It can be seen through the blood of the sacrificial animals, smeared on images throughout the temple and as the color of menstrual blood.²⁹⁸ She mentions that an image of a nursing mother is painted red, along with a statue of Ganesa.²⁹⁹ The image of the mother feeding her child also brings to mind the symbolism of fertility.³⁰⁰

The color red is also connected to passion and to the bride adorned in red from her clothing to her part line. In other words, red has a connection to creativity and prosperity.³⁰¹ Thus, even though the Ambuvaci festival celebrates something that is negatively potent and falls outside of the dharmic realm, several of the rituals associated with the celebrations bring the goddess and those attending the festival back into synchronicity with the orthodox conception of cosmic order and its attendant values. This

²⁹⁶ Leslie, 283-288.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 287.

²⁹⁸ Dold, 102.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ The concept of fertility is highlighted in other Ambuvaci festivals. For instance, the goddess Chandi's menstruation is celebrated in Bengal. She is the goddess of both menstruation and the earth. During her festival, women celebrate and have fun and do not work. See McDaniel, 37.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 102-103.

is accomplished through shared impurity, proper conduct for menstruating women (in this case in the form of a goddess) and finally, communion with Kamakhya after her menstruation is complete. On top of this, if the Sat/Siva myth is taken into account, the goddess is coupled with her husband in sexual union after she has menstruated and been purified.³⁰² Therefore, the rituals and symbols at Kamakhya help to bring her back into the dharmic worlds constructed in the LM and the SDP.

³⁰² The complexities of this union also imply that she is coupled with him during her menstruation. This represents an element of the festival that would likely appeal to the tantric practitioner. While tantric interpretations of Ambuvaci would provide a dynamic view of the festival, it is not within the scope of this paper to delve deeper into that material.

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters, I have examined the negative potency of menstruation. What has become clear throughout the course of the study is that menstrual taboos acted as a lens, merely one way of understanding the complexities of the Hindu tradition. In essence, this study has closely examined how roles for women are constructed and reinforced in orthodox Hinduism. Menstruation is considered negative, but not because it is dirty. As Douglas points out, it is taboo because it falls outside of social norms.³⁰³ The SDP and the LM dictate that a woman should be faithful to her husband and should take care of her children. These two rules serve as a woman's religious path, her way to salvation. When a woman is menstruating she is symbolically connected with infidelity and the murder of a *brahmin*. Her cycle cleanses her of impure thoughts and actions with regard to other men. Infidelity is dangerous because she should regard her husband as her god and she should ensure that he is reborn by giving birth to his male children. There are also lineage and inheritance concerns. If she becomes pregnant by another man she does damage to her husband's well being. In other words, because a woman's religious duty is focused on her husband and protection of her male children, and insofar as menstruation is linked to infidelity it cannot be a positive thing.

Douglas argues that taboos can be controlled in order to realign them with the social order.³⁰⁴ This also occurs in the Hindu treatment of menstruation. For the first three days of her cycle, a woman is secluded. She must refrain from contact with men, even her husband (for a child conceived at this time will be cursed), she cannot adorn

³⁰³ Douglas, 35.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 39.

herself and she must not undertake certain kinds of work (such as cooking). Many of these rules have consequences that make them more compelling for women. If they are broken the punishment often involves danger to her children, such as blindness or death by drowning. In most cases the prohibitions counteract her sexual attractiveness (she cannot line her eyes and her hair must be unbound), so that her chance of attracting sexual contact with men at this time is reduced. In other words, the rules set out in the SDP attempt to bring her back into the fold of *dharma* by reconnecting her with the best interests of her husband and children.

In the second half of this study, I changed focus. Instead of analysing Dharma-sastra texts, goddesses were examined as models for and of the orthodox woman. Geertz's definition of religion sets symbols at the forefront of religious meaning. They create a sense of order, they motivate the adherent and they are "uniquely real."³⁰⁵ In other words, symbols such as goddesses are powerful. They both inform and are informed by cultural norms.³⁰⁶ Orthodox goddesses like Sita represent the ideal woman as outlined in the SDP. Women look to them as role models. While women might not attempt a trial by fire, they feel sympathy for Sita and they try to live up to her standards. Goddesses who are not typically orthodox, like Kali, can and have been reinterpreted by the orthodox tradition. Kali may never be a *pativrata* but she can be aligned more closely with the goals and behaviors of orthodox women. The festival of Ambuvaci works in a similar way. While there are elements that are tantric, such as the recognition of Kamakhya's menstrual blood as *prasada*, the goddess is subject to some of the same rules

³⁰⁵ Geertz, 90.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 93.

and regulations set out for women in the SDP. The festival is clothed in orthodox symbolism, such as the closing of the temple during Kamakhya's menstruation. Thus, these deities act both as models for and of the orthodox ideals of womanhood.

A particularly compelling factor about goddesses is their accessibility. Texts such as the SDP and the LM are not formulated in ways that target a female readership. They are written in Sanskrit so it is unlikely they would be read by women who were historically less educated than men. Beyond that, these texts are primarily lists of rules to teach *dharma*. In contrast, the epics and myths associated with goddesses also teach *dharma*. However, they are dharmic lessons presented in more entertaining ways, through stories to which women can relate. They were also transmitted as part of the oral tradition, meaning women could understand them, learn them and pass them on. Most importantly, goddesses are associated with a diverse array of *dharmic* standards. While women look up to STa's perfection, they may find they relate more to Kali, who sometimes acts in unbecoming ways but is able to catch herself and regain her composure.

In conclusion, texts such as the SDP and the LM work in conjunction with the myths and images of the goddess tradition. Only in tandem can they present a convincing model for the ideal woman, including interpretations of menstruation. The SDP and LM help to set the standards for the perfect wife, however they target male audiences. The goddess tradition reflects these rules but transmits them in ways that are diverse and accessible for women.

APPENDIX: FIGURES



Figure 1: Lakshmi and Visnu, contemporary lithograph. Public Domain.

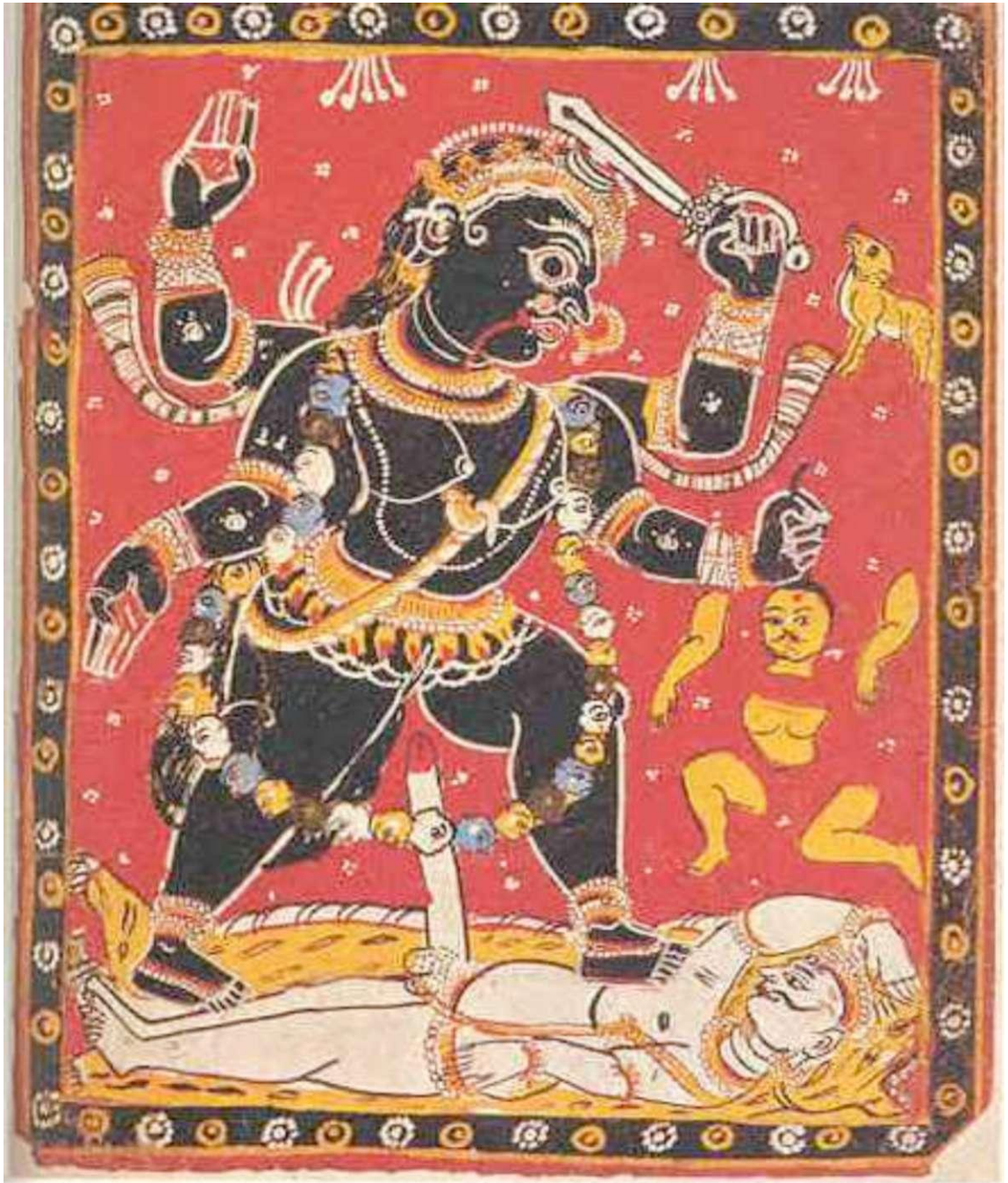


Figure 2: Kālī and ithyphallic Śiva. Public Domain.



Figure 3: Kali and Siva, contemporary lithograph. Public Domain

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