

Is the Goddess a feminist?

the politics of
south asian goddesses

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Usha Menon and Richard A. Shweder

*Power in its Place:
Is the Great Goddess of Hinduism a Feminist?*

Feminist discourse has fractured in so many ways these days that the specific implications of actually being a feminist have become far from clear. At the very least one can identify three camps of 'feminists', who are separated from each other by deep ideological fault lines: (1) liberal feminists, who argue that men and women are essentially alike and equal; (2) ecological feminists and goddess worshipers who argue that men and women are essentially different and unequal, and that women are superior beings who should be free to cultivate and take advantage of their femininity independent of men; and (3) deconstructive feminists, who argue that nothing is essentially anything and that everything, including (indeed especially) 'gender categories', are essentially historical and accidental and should be despised as little more than figments of an ideologically motivated imagination. Given these very different kinds of 'feminist' voices any attempt to answer the question 'Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?' must either specify the question further (Is the Hindu Goddess a liberal feminist? Is she an ecological feminist? Is she a deconstructive feminist?) or else unify the idea of feminism around some general criterion such as a sense of moral outrage over the subordination of women by men.

In this essay we are going to argue that the answer to the question 'Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?' is 'yes and no, but mostly no'. On the one hand, in South Asia, there are heterodox, more specifically 'tantric', discourses about the Great Goddess that might offer a sliver of encouragement to the view that the Great Goddess is an ecological feminist, although as we shall see, such an interpretation can be quite hazardous, and is probably misleading. On the other hand, in the local Oriya community of the temple town of Bhubaneswar with which we are most familiar, the canonical or 'culturally correct' discourse about the Great Goddess strongly suggests that the answer to the question is 'no'.

We are going to focus on a local canonical story about the Great Goddess and on the way gender relations are organized in the temple town of Bhubaneswar in Orissa, India. More precisely, we are going to present material on the relations that exist between husbands and wives in this community. We believe that these relations are profoundly influenced by indigenous perceptions about the goddess and the nature of her power, her *sbakti*. By examining these relations it is possible to arrive at what could be described as an indigenously valid answer to the question 'Is the Goddess a Feminist?' We shall assume that feminism, in its broadest sense, refers to advocacy of women's rights based on a belief in the equality of the sexes. We shall assume that feminists are those who are aware of and are seeking to end the inequality of men and women (Tuttle 1986). We shall argue that from the point of view of most local men and women in Orissa, the Great Goddess is not a feminist.

Before describing the ways in which gender relations are structured in the temple town of Bhubaneswar, a word or two about this neighborhood. Bhubaneswar, today, consists of two distinct parts: there is the modern city, barely 50 years old, which is the capital of the state of Orissa and the temple town that claims to be at least 900 years old. Life in the temple town revolves around the tenth- to eleventh-century temple dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva, who is represented here as Lingaraj—the Lord of the Phallus. Bhubaneswar is a pilgrimage center of some note although it does not rival Puri, one of Hinduism's four sacred centers that lies about 40 miles to the south. For the most part, households in this neighborhood have hereditary links with the temple, the menfolk performing different services for the deity. While everyone is aware of the world outside (the television being a ubiquitous presence in every household), people continue to adhere to traditional custom and practice in their daily lives: most marriages are arranged, most women remain secluded in family compounds, menstrual taboos are observed, upper caste widows do not remarry or wear colored clothes or ornaments, and untouchability continue to be practiced as far as entering the temple is concerned—except for the day following *Shivaratri* (Shiva's Night, commemorating Shiva's marriage to Parvati), when everyone is welcome.

Perhaps, the most remarkable feature of worship and rituals in the temple town is its inclusive quality. Although the presiding deity

is Shiva, the worship of Vishnu is explicitly integrated into temple rituals, and the priests often describe the granite *lingam* as representing both Shiva and Vishnu—Hara and Hari. Devi, the Great Goddess, also has her special significance in their neighborhood. Practically every lane has a small shrine dedicated to one or the other forms of the Goddess—Chandi, Jogeshwari, Parvati—and to cap it all, there is the Koppali temple where she is represented with her foot on a supine Shiva and her tongue hanging out.

Is the Great Goddess an Ecological Feminist? An Example of 'Tantric' Discourse

Figure 1 is an iconic representation of the Great Goddess of Hinduism in her manifestation as Kali or Chandi. The icon is well known among Oriya Hindus in the temple town of Bhubaneswar. In 1991, Usha Menon conducted interviews with 92 women and men in that community, asking each person for his or her understanding of the icon. The sample was composed entirely of upper-caste men and women: 73 of the participants were Brahmans while the remaining 19 belonged to what are referred to locally as clean castes. While almost all informants identified the icon correctly as representing the Goddess in her manifestation as Kali, very few appeared to recognize its Tantric origins. Of the few who did, one male informant did offer the following interpretation of the icon (see Menon and Shweder 1994; Menon and Shweder 1998; Shweder and Menon forthcoming).

The narrator is a 70-year-old male Brahman, married with two sons and two daughters. All his life he has been a priest in the Lingaraj Temple in Bhubaneswar. During the interview he admitted having attended some Tantric ceremonies, although he claims that he is not a 'siddha' or a fully initiated worshiper of Kali.

Question (Q.) Do you recognize this picture?

Answer (A.) This is the Tantric depiction of Kali. Kali here is naked. She has thrown Shiva to the ground and is standing on him. She displays here absolute overwhelming strength. She is in a terrible rage, wearing her garland of skulls and in each arm a weapon of destruction. Look: in this hand, the *trishul* (trident), in this the *chakra* (discus), in this the sword, in this the sickle, in this the

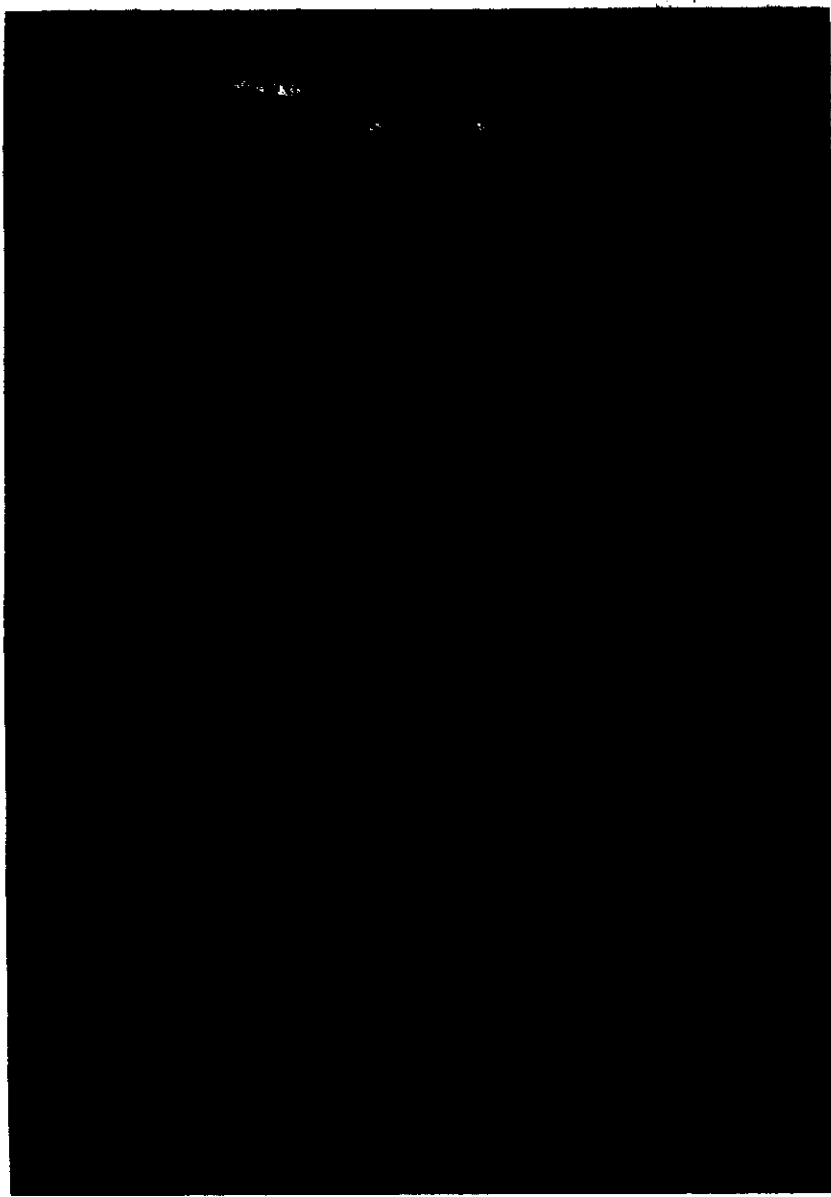


Figure 1: *Kali standing on Shiva*

bow and arrow. This is how Kali is shown in Tantric *pujas*, where the devotee is praying to the goddess for perfect knowledge and awareness. All this kind of worship goes on in the Ramakrishna Mission. The monks there are all Tantrics and they know all about it. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, both great sages, knew all about such *shakti pujas* and Tantric rites.

Q. Can you tell me about the story that is associated with this picture?

A. In all these Tantric *pujas* the goal is to acquire perfect knowledge and ultimate power. The naked devotee worships Mother on a dark moonless night in a cremation ground. The offerings are meat and alcohol. Ordinary people cannot participate in such worship. If they were even to witness it they would go mad. I have attended such worship once, but I am not a true worshiper and I have no special knowledge of Tantric worship.

Q. How would you describe Kali's expression here?

A. She is the image of fury.

Q. You mean she is angry? She is in a rage?

A. Yes...yes. You must understand that this is how she appears to her devotee. He has to have the strength of mind to withstand her fierceness. She is not mild or tender but cruel and demanding and frightening.

Q. Do you think that she has put out her tongue in anger?

A. Yes, she has put out her tongue in anger. Kali is always angry. She is always creating and at the same time destroying life. Here you see her with her foot placed squarely on Shiva's chest. When the time comes for the universe to be destroyed entirely, no one will be spared, not even the gods, whether Vishnu or Shiva. Everyone will be destroyed.

Q. Some people say that she is feeling deeply ashamed at having stepped on her husband and that is why she has bitten her tongue. You don't agree?

A. People have different views. People believe whatever makes them feel comfortable and if they like to think that Kali is ashamed, then let them. What I have told you is what the special devotees of Kali believe. They believe that Mother is supreme. Even Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are her servants.

Q. Can you tell me why Shiva is lying on the ground?

A. Kali has thrown him on the ground and she puts her foot on him to make clear that she is supreme.

Q. So you don't think he is lying on the ground to subdue Kali?

A. No, that is beyond Shiva's capacity. If Kali becomes calm, it is because she wishes to, not because she is persuaded to do so. Even to her most faithful devotee, Kali's actions sometimes don't make sense. But life itself often doesn't make sense, so what can one say?

Q. Who would you say is dominant in this picture? Is it Kali or Shiva?

A. Obviously Kali. But it is also important to realize that while *sbakti* [female energy] is absolutely necessary for the creation and evolution of the universe, by itself even *sbakti* cannot achieve anything. *Sbakti* has to combine with consciousness for the process of creation to take place. And so consciousness as symbolized by Shiva has a unique position. Just as it is only through the union of a man and a woman that a child is conceived, so too, only when *sbakti* and *cit* (consciousness) come together does creation occur.

Now this is the kind of Tantric interpretation of the power and superiority of the Great Goddess that excites the imagination of ecological feminists up and down the west coast of the United States. 'Everyone knows about Tantra in Marin County' a female friend from northern California told us as we began to explain to her what Tantra was about in India. These days, in our new age postmodern world, Mother Kali has her bookstores and devotees in lands distant from India, where people are free to see new meanings in her image that may not have their origin in South Asia.

It is worth noting, for example, that even in this heterodox Tantric interpretation of Kali by a Hindu temple priest, the emphasis is on the fundamental or essential difference between female and male (energy versus consciousness) and on their asymmetrical interdependency (in this case with males doing service for the female). This is not an egalitarian story about equal rights. It is not a protest about the subordination of one gender by the other. It is not even a claim for autonomy for females. The Great Goddess is not parthenogenic. She needs men to make the world go round.

More important, this Tantric discourse about her is not canonical in most communities in India. It is certainly not the standard or 'culturally correct' interpretation of the deeper meaning of the icon in the temple town of Bhubaneswar.

A More Canonical Oriya Story about the Great Goddess

In the temple town today, the most commonly told story of the icon in Figure 1 goes something like this (see Menon and Shweder 1994). To the extent that this local contemporary version is the ideal story for most upper-caste women and men in this neighborhood, we present it as the canonical story of the icon. This particular narrator is a 74-year-old male Brahman, who is a retired businessman and hotel owner.

Q. Do you recognize this picture?

A. Kali.

Q. Can you describe the incident that is portrayed in this picture?

A. This is about the time when Mahishasura [the buffalo demon] became so powerful that he tortured everyone on earth and heaven; ...he obtained a boon from the gods according to which no man could kill him. All the gods then went to Narayana [Vishnu] and they pondered on ways to destroy Mahishasura; ...each contributed the strength and energy of his consciousness—his '*bindu*'—and from that Durga was created. But when Durga was told she had to kill Mahishasura she said she needed weapons to do so and so all the gods gave her their weapons. Armed thus, Durga went into battle. She fought bravely but she found it impossible to kill the demon; ...he was too strong and clever. You see the gods had forgotten to tell her that the boon Mahishasura had obtained from Brahma was that he could only die at the hands of a naked female. Durga finally became desperate and she appealed to Mangala to suggest some way to kill Mahishasura. Mangala then told her that the only way was to take off her clothes, that the demon would only lose strength when confronted by a naked women. So Durga did as she was advised to. She stripped and within seconds of seeing her, Mahishasura's strength waned and he died under her sword. After killing him a terrible rage entered Durga's mind and she asked herself: 'What kinds of gods are these that give to demons such boons, and apart from that, what kinds of gods are these that they do not have the honesty to tell me the truth before sending me into battle?' She decided that such a world with such gods did not deserve to survive and she took on the form of Kali and went on a mad rampage, devouring every living creature that came in her way. Now the gods were in a terrible quandary. They had all given

her their weapons. They were helpless without any weapons, while she had a weapon in each of her ten arms. How could Kali be checked and who could check her in her mad dance of destruction? Again the gods all gathered, and Narayana decided that only Mahadev [Shiva] could check Kali, and so he advised the gods to appeal to him.

Now Shiva is an ascetic, a yogi who has no interest in what happens in the world. But when all the gods begged him to intervene he agreed to do his best. He went and lay in her path. Kali, absorbed in her dance of destruction, was unaware that Shiva lay in her path, and so she stepped on him all unknowing. When she put her foot on Shiva's chest, she bit her tongue, saying 'Oh! My husband!' There is in Mahadev [Shiva] a '*tejas*', a special quality of his body that penetrated her, that made her look down, that made her see reason. She had been so angry that she had gone beyond reason. But once she recognized him she became calm and still. This is the story about that time.

Q. How would you describe the expression on her face?

A. She had been extremely angry but when her foot fell on Mahadev's chest—after all he is her own husband—she bit her tongue and became still. Gradually her anger went down.

Q. So is there still any anger in her expression?

A. Oh yes, in her eyes you can still see the light of anger shining.

Q. And her tongue? What is she feeling when she bites it?

A. What else but shame [*lafya*—perhaps best translated as 'respectful restraint']? Shame. Because she did something unforgivable she is feeling shame.

Most members of the temple town community, both female and male, tell stories about this icon that are consistent with the above narration (Menon and Shweder 1994). Their stories express the sense of moral outrage experienced by the Great Goddess over the deceit and incompetence of the male gods. But the ultimate message of their stories is that anger (even over exploitation) is destructive of society and nature, and that it is important for the sake of social reproduction for the Great Goddess to exercise respectful restraint and to nurture rather than devour the universe. The story celebrates wifely virtues and presupposes the asymmetrical inter-

dependency of husband and wife. Again it is not an egalitarian story about equal rights. It is not a protest against the subordination of one gender by the other. It is a story about the power of women to create and destroy and to have the proper judgment to choose life over death. The story reveals much about normal gender relations in the South Asian cultural world.

Oriya Hindu Women and the Great Goddess

Oriya Hindus of the temple town describe the Great Goddess, Devi, as embodying *sbakti*, for it is her energy and power that keeps the world going. They state quite explicitly that even the gods have no *sbakti* of their own and they play on the words *Shiva* and *shava*. *Shiva* without *sbakti*, they say, is a corpse, a *shava*. According to the origin story from the *Shiva Purana* that they quote, Shiva accepted Devi the Great Goddess without reservation. That is why he is immortal, never reborn, unlike Vishnu who recoiled from accepting her completely and is therefore condemned to being incarnated several times. Whenever Vishnu's *sbakti* is depleted, he is reborn into the world and his *sbakti* replenished.

Oriya Hindus of the temple town, both men and women, also say that human females, like the goddess, simply by being female, embody *sbakti*. In ordinary everyday conversations, Oriya women will say that they embody *adya sbakti* (primordial power), *matru sbakti* (mother's power), *stri sbakti* (women's power). Both men and women are liable to say that women have more of the *gunas* (the three 'qualities' or constituents of the phenomenal world) in terms of absolute quantities than men do, and that therefore women can turn the *asadhya* (the undoable) into the *sadhya* (the doable), the *asambhav* (the impossible) into the *sambhav* (the possible). Women are commonly described as *sbaktidayinis* (givers of power/strength), as being *sampoorna sbakti* (full of strength/energy). Women are said to control and direct the family and the flow of life (they are *samsarore chalak*), they maintain the family and the world (*samsaroku sambhaliba*), they ensure peace and order (*sbanti sbrunkhala rakhiba*).

Oriya Hindu Women and the Family

Most Oriya Hindus of the old town believe that social reproduction

is the primary task of any group. They believe that the family represents the most appropriate site for social reproduction. Both men and women will say, 'We are born into this world to play our roles in *samsara*, to participate in the ebb and flow of life, to build families, to raise children'. They emphasize the impermanence of all things in this world, the fact that continual change is the only stable feature of life. They believe that only through procreating and raising children to responsible adulthood does a group achieve immortality.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Oriya Hindu women, and their menfolk too, regard the home and the family—the domestic domain—as an important sphere of human action. And with women controlling and managing all household affairs, this responsibility for enculturating the next generation rests almost exclusively in their hands, making them important and influential social actors.

We should mention that Oriya Hindus dichotomize space into domestic space or inner space (*ghare*) and public or outer space (*babare*). According to their ways of thinking, domestic or inner space is sacred, for it is a space that doesn't progressively pollute the person. Public or outside space on the other hand is polluting, in the sense that continued and prolonged involvement in the world outside the home leads to a coarsening of the human being. That is why people in the temple town will say that men are coarser than women, less civilized, less refined, more *abbadra*. Men, it is argued, display their emotions, for instance, of anger (*raga*) or mocking laughter (*basa*) more readily. Men, it is argued, are not reticent or respectfully restrained and are less capable of experiencing refined and refining emotions such as *lafya* or 'shame'. All such coarsening things are associated in the Oriya mind with the occupation of public or outside space.

Both men and women believe that men have only a peripheral role to play in achieving prosperity for the family and the well-being of its members. Men earn, but this marks the limit of their contribution. Whether what men earn is utilized effectively and productively depends on the sagacity and capability of the women of the household, particularly mature adult women.

Men readily acknowledge that women shoulder many more responsibilities than they do (*striro daitva purusa opekhyia jvateshtha adbhika*) and that the work women have to do is six times as

much as that which men have to do (*stri jatinkoro karma chhobhoga adbhika*). As one quite articulate informant put it: 'Look at a twenty-two-year-old man. What is he? He is nothing but a child, a twenty-year-old child. He knows nothing. He just roams here and there. But a twenty-year-old girl, she has become the mother of two children. She runs her household and family. She cares for the cows and calves under her care, the children and the house. She cooks and serves her husband. She cleans the children, dresses them and sends them to school, makes sure that they are well. She manages the parents of her husband. She cleans the house... Compared to a man, a woman's responsibilities are far more. When you compare men and women of the same age, that is what you find.'

Hierarchy and Difference as Natural and Moral

We wish to emphasize that in our view such popular Oriya recognition of the worth of women's work and such widespread acknowledgment of greater female effectiveness in this world is not equivalent to espousing a feminist viewpoint. For in Orissa very few men and women believe that men and women are equal, in any sense of the term. In fact, the preferred view in the temple town of Bhubaneswar is that gender relations are built on the logic of difference and solidarity rather than on equality and competition. Most residents of the temple town would find the notion of 'gender equality' either incomprehensible or amusing or perhaps even childlike. For these people the most common and cogent metaphor for society is the human body, where no organ is exactly substitutable for any other and yet all work together so that the body functions efficiently, survives, and lives. Temple town men and women believe that male and female are the only two *jatis* or 'castes' in the world whose differences can never truly be transcended.

For Oriya Hindus then, difference and inequality are natural and moral facts, although the particular prerogatives and privileges enjoyed, and the power exercised, are fluid, and as A.K. Ramanujan (1990) has suggested, vary with particular contexts. Men, in terms of the constitution of their substances, have disproportionately more of the *sattva guna*. They are thus regarded as 'purer', and because of their relative purity they enjoy greater privileges in some contexts. Women, on the other hand possess more *gunas* in

absolute terms. They thus exercise more power and control than men in other contexts.

This fluidity in the privileges enjoyed and the power exercised by men and women relative to each other complicates any description of the relations that exist between husbands and wives. At one, perhaps the most obvious level, Oriya Hindu husbands in the temple town do dominate their wives and they are the absolute unquestioned heads of their households. In terms of public presentation, the Oriya Hindu wife is extremely careful to display the utmost respect and deference to her husband. Women explicitly refer to their husbands as their gods (*ame tanku amor debata manuchbu*, we accept them as our gods) and publicly display rituals of deference and worship. In fact, the Oriya word for 'husband' is *swami*—meaning 'lord'—while the Oriya word for 'wife' is *stri* or 'woman'. Thus, wives in the old town will commonly say, 'For a woman, her husband is her god...we [that is, people/everyone] call to *paramesbwar*, *bbagwan*, but for a wife her husband is every kind of god' (*gote naritro pati bela tar devata, ame jo paramesbwar, bbagwan dakuchbu, nari patin tar swami bela sabu kicbi bbagwan*). Thus, traditional wives will perform an *aarti*—the worshipful gesture of honoring by holding out and circling a lit flame—to their husbands every morning before eating anything, and even for those who fancy themselves 'modern', the very first duty of the morning is to bow their heads to God and then touch the feet of their (often sleeping) husband.

This acceptance of inequality by Oriya Hindu women is rooted in their belief that they are continually in a state of relative physical impurity. The fact of menstruation, a natural process that is difficult to regulate through fasting or any other cultural means, reinforces the belief in the natural inferiority of women. Perhaps this point may seem arguable to a 'Western mind' suspicious of the idea of natural hierarchies, but we believe that Oriya women voluntarily acknowledge the existence of natural gender hierarchies, and that they would themselves describe this acknowledgment as a mature recognition of a natural fact. Alternatively stated, Oriya men do not need to exert brute force to ensure this recognition of a hierarchical relationship between men and women.

But men are often unworthy superiors. Confident in their 'natural' lordship, they see no need to control their desires or their pas-

sions. They are often untruthful and treacherous. Women, on the other hand, will tell you that women are different. They will tell you that when they voluntarily subordinate themselves to men, when they serve men, they have to exercise self-discipline, they have to control their emotions, they cannot let their passions sway them. They may suffer but such suffering, because it is voluntarily accepted, ennobles rather than degrades them.

Such self-discipline has its inevitable impact on women. According to the more articulate Oriya Hindu women informants, an exercise in self-control strengthens and develops the capacity for further self-control. In terms of emotional functioning and moral development, they believe they become superior to men. They grow in moral stature. They gain such moral authority that finally even their 'natural' masters are ready to acknowledge and respect it.

The logic appears to be that in terms of nature (or physiology), man is superior to woman, but in terms of culture he is not. Women may start off as 'naturally' inferior. But they work upon that inferiority. They rework themselves to transcend that inferiority. And ultimately, as cultural artifacts they make themselves superior to men.

Thus we partially agree with Reynolds (1980: 35-57) when she says, in her paper on 'The Auspicious Married Woman', that for Hindus power lies in subordination. But we would contend that this subordination is not the result of explicit male domination but rather a voluntary subordination. Within the Oriya Hindu worldview only such a subordination that comes from within is truly moral, completely ennobling, and carries with it real power.

The Meaning of the Icon

And it is here that the meanings that Oriya Hindus attach to the icon of Kali (Figure 1) become particularly relevant. Men and women in the temple town of Bhubaneswar say that the goddess was morally justified in her murderous rampage because the male gods had betrayed her, sending her in to do battle with the buffalo demon, Mahishasura, without telling her that the boon the demon had received from Brahma protected him from every living being but a naked female and that to kill him, she would have to strip. But they also say that she became calm, regained her composure, not

because of anything Shiva did but because of a sense of her duty as a wife to Shiva, and as a mother to the world. Shiva, after all, they argue, could have done nothing to prevent her from continuing on her murderous rampage. If she had wished, she could have crushed him and gone on with her destruction. According to them, this story exemplifies voluntary subordination, a deliberate exercise in self-control. It is such self-control that is culturally valued and it is through such self-control that women gain power.

Therefore, when it comes to Oriya Hindus, Sherry Ortner's 1974 formulation 'nature is to culture as woman is to man' does not really seem to apply. For Oriya Hindus a woman derives her power from her natural substance but such power gathers its full significance only because it is subject to cultural, ultimately moral, control that originates from within herself. As Ramanujan points out, the Lévi-Straussian opposition between nature and culture is itself culture-bound: in the Hindu alternative, and here we quote him, 'culture is enclosed in nature, nature is reworked in culture, so that we cannot tell the difference' (1990: 50). This is another of the reversible 'container-contained relations' (1990: 50) that extend to other Hindu concepts and ideas.

And so, to end, the Oriya Hindu answer to the question 'Is the Great Goddess of Hinduism a feminist?' should probably be 'no'. Oriya women and men see the goddess as full of power. But it is a power that is reined in and held in check. It is a power that is controlled from within. It is a power that is capable of destroying men and all of creation. It is a power that is exercised most responsibly by enduring the sacrifices and hardships that are necessary to keep the social order from tumbling down. Thus, while it is conceivable that in Marin County, California, these days Kali may have become a symbol of feminism, among Oriya Hindus in the temple town of Bhubaneswar, the Great Mother of us all stands for neither gender equality nor for any transformation of society.

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