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Walking in the Mother's Footsteps: Dravidian Virgin Goddesses as Empowering Role Models for Women

The ancient Dravidian virgin goddess tradition, which is very popular among the Tamil majority of South African Hindus, preserves a unique and possibly pre-patriarchal form of religion which places women's interests and suffering at centre stage. An examination of some of these goddess myths reveals stories of women, usually virtuous and faithful, who have suffered because of the demands of patriarchal traditions, and sometimes died or been killed, but have eventually been vindicated by being transformed into goddesses. I believe that these vigorous and powerful female divinities, too often dismissed as malevolent and destructive, have the potential to provide women, even those outside the Tamil tradition, with empowering role models, encouraging them to challenge patriarchal injustices and gender abuse, and possibly make a contribution to a Tamil renaissance currently gaining momentum in KwaZulu-Natal.

Professor Pratap Kumar, School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and Academic Director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

The Study of Hinduism: How did We Get to Where We Are?

The discipline that some of us identify today as 'Hinduism' has had a long and convoluted history going back to several centuries of how a people identified as Hindus represented themselves and were represented by others during and after the Mughal period. Perhaps, prior to the Mughal period the idea of Hindu did not mean very much as a category of differentiation, let alone Hinduism as a religion that we tend to think of it today. In today's context, Hinduism may be tentatively defined in simple terms as a study of Hindus, their traditions of past and present. The most difficult part of defining Hinduism is in dealing with its diversity—linguistic, cultural and geographical. No matter how we circumscribe it, some things tend to be left out. Therefore, most ways of defining tended to be underpinned by some ideological profiling. What we today call 'Brahmanical' ideology has overwhelmingly dominated the intellectual tradition of Hinduism. However, on the other hand the daily practice of Hinduism is overwhelmingly dominated by local and vernacular traditions. Even here, those who viewed from the Brahmanical lenses tended to circumscribe around Sanskrit based vernacular traditions to the detriment of the so-called village variants of Hinduism, viz., the predominantly non-Brahmanical traditions. Most of us, or perhaps all of us, who have come to study Hinduism, have all been introduced to it through the Brahmanical/Sanskrit based traditions. When Hindus are so diverse in their practice with very little unifying features, how did we come to begin the study of Hinduism where we did? This is a thorny issue that has dogged scholars both in the west and in South Asia for a very long time. Did this happen by a long process of internal profiling by Hindus themselves or could this be attributed solely to external factors, such as the Empire or was it a combination of both and several other factors? So, in the following, I shall examine some of the writings of some

selected scholars from the early Indological and Orientalists traditions (I refer to them as classical approaches), as well as writings of some contemporary scholars.

Dr Valerie Roebuck (University of Manchester)

Dhammapada and Dharmapada: Early Buddhist Wisdom Literature?

The Dhammapada, from the Khuddakanikāya of the Suttapitaka, is among the most popular texts, and the most frequently quoted, of the Pāli Canon. Its format is simple: it is a collection of verses, arranged in chapters (*vagga*) with one-word titles, which may refer to the format of the chapter (e.g. *Yamaka*, 'twins', consisting mainly of contrasting pairs of verses), or to key words (e.g. *Puppha*, 'flowers', made up of verses which refer either to flowers in general or to particular kinds of flowers.) The verses give ethical advice, or remind the hearer of the transience of life and the delusiveness of sense desires. Their terse summaries of the Buddha's teachings tax the translator's skill with their simple, proverb-like language.

Each verse or sequence of verses comes with a commentary, sometimes attributed to Buddhaghosa, describing the occasion on which the Buddha is said to have given the teaching, often including the antecedents of the events in previous lives in the manner of a Jātaka story. It seems to have been composed in the 5th century CE, about 1000 years after the events described, though containing a great deal of earlier material.

But the Pāli Dhammapada of the Theravādins was not the only one, and it is likely that many if not all the Canons of the early Buddhist communities included Dhammapadas or Dharmapadas of their own. Traces of a number survive, including substantial parts of versions in Gāndhārī, a Prakrit from North West India, and Sanskrit. There are three complete versions in Chinese translation, and one in Tibetan.

The problem is that almost all these are different Dharmapadas. The format (though not the number) of the chapters remains constant, and many of the verses recur, with variations. But the chapter headings can vary widely, and even when they are similar, their order is different, and shared verses may be assigned to different chapters. Where a commentary survives, we find the same kind of stories about the origin of the verses, but they are not, on the whole, the *same* stories.

On current evidence, there appears no reason to regard any of the surviving versions as closer than any other to a lost original, and no possibility of reconstructing a single original that could lie behind all the known versions. Is it possible, in fact, that what lies behind them was not a fixed text, but a pool of wise sayings in verse, attributed to the Buddha, from which different compilers could draw? The apparent simplicity of the Dhammapada turns out to challenge many assumptions about the nature and transmission of canonical texts.

Professor Ian Harris (St Martin's College, Lancaster and Documentary Centre of Cambodia, Phnom Penh)

Buddhism, 'Buddhist Law', and War Crimes in Cambodia

The international community is close to providing the funds necessary for the establishment of Extraordinary Chambers for the prosecution of alleged crimes and serious violations of Cambodian penal law, international humanitarian law and custom, and international

conventions recognized by Cambodia, that were committed during the period from 17 April 1975 to 6 January 1979 by senior surviving Khmer Rouge leaders [UN General Assembly resolution 57/228B; adopted 13 May 2003]. The trials could commence shortly yet the process will take no cognizance of indigenous legal traditions. This paper will review the concept of Theravada Buddhist law and suggest ways in which any trial or truth and reconciliation process in Cambodia might draw on more culturally meaningful resources.

David Azzopardi, School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London
Buddhism, Community and Identity on Websites Produced by Members of the Sinhalese Diaspora

In recent years much has been written in the fields of anthropology and cultural studies about the forms of community and identity that are found within diasporic groups. My paper draws on this work in order to present an analysis of the approaches to Buddhism and Sinhalese identity found on diasporic Sinhalese websites.

The paper begins with a discussion of two sets of theories which present very different portrayals of the forms of identity and community found among contemporary diasporic groups. The first of these argues that diaspora communities, because of their experience of living in between two cultures, tend to reject essentialised notions of national, ethnic or religious identity, and embrace instead identities based on ideas of hybridity and diversity. The second suggests that contemporary diasporic groups are increasingly embracing essentialised forms of identity based on allegiance to deterritorialized, transnational ethnic and religious communities, and that the emergence of new forms of electronic media (such as the Internet) is increasingly enabling such transnational diasporas to come together in 'diasporic public spheres' in which they can maintain forms of community and identity which are unaffected by the national territories in which their members live.

The remainder of the paper looks at the presentations of Buddhism and Sinhalese identity found on two groups of diasporic Sinhalese websites: those focusing on Sri Lankan politics and those of Sri Lankan Buddhist centres based in the diaspora. These are found to call into doubt both of the sets of theories discussed above. The dominance of the ideology of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, which presents a highly essentialised notion of Sinhala-Buddhist identity, on many of the political websites problematizes the theory that diaspora communities inevitably reject essentialised forms of identity. In addition, the separation between Buddhism and politics which is made on both sets of sites, and which is read as being influenced by dominant ideas about the nature of religion in the 'host' nations of these sites, suggests that the discourses of religion, community and identity found on diasporic websites are not completely unaffected by the host nations in which these sites are based.

The paper concludes by arguing that drawing on material from the field of diaspora studies can help us to gain a better understanding of the relationship between Buddhism and questions of cultural identity in diasporic Buddhist communities.

Dr Matthew Clark, School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London
The Curious History of the Daśanāmī-Samnyāsīs

This paper examines the history of the Daśanāmī-Samnyāsīs, one of the largest sects of Indian renunciates, founded, according to tradition, by the famous *advaita* philosopher Śankarācārya, who may have lived in the eighth century CE. It is argued that it is highly improbable that Śankarācārya founded either the sect or the four (or five) main Daśanāmī monasteries, which are the seats of the reigning Śankarācāryas. The locus of identity for the Daśanāmīs (meaning ‘ten names’) lies in several short texts, known as *mathāmnāya-s*, which were most probably produced around the time the Daśanāmīs became organised as an order, in the late sixteenth or seventeenth century. The political and religious circumstances of the time provide an adequate – though not definitive – context for the production of a distinct Hindu identity for the sect. The process of forming an identity integrated several lineages of ascetics, some of which had no previous connection to each other. There are two main branches of the order: one being what might be called the Brāhmanical monastic *advaita* tradition, extensively promoted for the first time by the early Vijayanagara rulers in the fourteenth century; the other being the military branch of *nāgā-s* who have a non-orthodox, semi-Tantric background, and who were particularly conspicuous when they served in the standing armies of various north Indian regents during the eighteenth century. Initiation procedures illustrate the merging of the two branches. In this paper, for the first time, an account of the history of the Daśanāmīs is presented that is an alternative to that espoused by the orthodox tradition. The various and complex roles that *samnyāsī-s* have played – and continue to play – in Indian religious history are also briefly summarised.

Dr Simon Brodbeck, School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London
Observations on the idea of non-attached action (asakta karman) in the Mahābhārata.

This presentation will discuss the idea of non-attached action (also known as the *karmayoga*) in terms of the Indian history of ideas, with particular focus on its textual role in the *Mahābhārata*.

1. The idea of *asakta karman* theoretically allows progress in terms of a *moksa* soteriology, without involving the renunciation of social action traditionally associated with such soteriology. It does this by suggesting renunciation not of action itself, but of attachment to the fruits of action, and it thus allows *dharma* and *moksa* to be pursued in parallel, closing the distance between the *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* worldviews. The implications of this will be discussed in terms of social ideology.

2. An attempt will briefly be made to investigate the non-soteriological uses of the idea of *asakta karman* in the *Mahābhārata*, beginning with Arjuna’s situation in the *Bhagavadgītā* (he is apparently not interested in *moksa*, but fears psychological and existential trauma), and including discussion of the five Kaurava *senāpatīs* and their attitudes to the Kuruksetra war.

3. Discussion of the paradox of freedom and inevitability. Throughout the *Mahābhārata* the non-attached attitude as a soteriological tool is associated with an appreciation of inevitability and the shifting of agency away from the human individual (examples will be given), and yet the autonomous agency of the aspirant is a presupposition of most of the *Mahābhārata*’s soteriological discourse (again, examples will be given, including those of Yudhisthira, Arjuna

and Dhrtarāstra, who are told about the possibility of *asakta karman* in order that they choose not to shirk their responsibilities).

4. Discussion of the paradox of invisibility. Since the renunciation of attachment to the fruits of action (as also the spiritual reward of such renunciation) is a private process, salvation is empirically unmarked (examples will be given). Differences of opinion over whether certain characters act without attachment will be outlined and explained, with particular reference to Kṛṣṇa and Janaka. The latter's much misunderstood exchange of views with Sulabhā will be discussed. I will show that Sulabhā's arguments (to the effect that Janaka's *karman* is not *asakta*) are question-begging and miss the point; despite this, the situational success of her speech raises questions about the attitude of the text's authors towards the idea of *asakta karman*. I will suggest that they present the idea principally as something about which one might strategically talk during a rhetorical performance (and they themselves do this too). The idea in the text turns on issues of praxis, authority and hierarchy. Its philosophical aspects play a secondary role, but one that is nonetheless cumulatively extremely interesting.

5. Gendered narratives and *asakta karman*. The text presents salvation in terms of the escape of a masculine soul from a feminine material world, and the *nivṛtti* approach, which involves a man renouncing his wife (examples will be given), maps this gender disjunction. The *asakta karman* soteriology uses the same gendered picture of the soul leaving the material world, but allows the aspirant to stay with his wife. Yudhisthira's relationship with Draupadī and with the Bhārata kingdom will be explored in light of this. I will discuss possible interpretations of the text's several 'man loses wife then finds her again' stories (*Nalopākhyāna* and *Rāmopākhyāna* as well as the main Pāṇḍava story), and show that these stories both mirror and make the new soteriology.

Dr Kathleen Taylor, School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London
Myth and Magic in Theosophy

The influence of the Theosophical Society, first founded in New York in 1875 but making its headquarters in India from 1879 has had many political and cultural ramifications far beyond its two places of origin. It was the first international religious organisation to be based in India. Its significance as a movement claiming to work for the 'brotherhood of humanity' in the colonial period extended beyond its members and those drawn into its inner circle. It claimed to rediscover a secret doctrine, which it proclaimed was the hidden truth behind all religions and religious symbolism, thus fusing 'east' and 'west', but with the 'east' as decidedly the superior part. Its influence on nationalist movements is well known; its significance for social reformers and feminists is also acknowledged; and several studies have charted its history as part of the counter-cultural movement of the late 19th and 20th centuries. Here I would like to focus on its occult doctrines or – from another point of view – its occult myth, which Madame Blavatsky built up initially out of the stock of images in the European imagination of India. This paper draws inspiration from two books: Peter Bishop's *the Myth of Shangri-La* about the image of Tibet in European travel writings from the 18th century to the present; and Catherine Wessinger's *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism*, which shows the influence of the theosophical myth of the Masters or *mahatmas* upon Besant's political idealism. Both writers deal with the power of imagination in cultural and political-historical studies respectively. I believe it is even more important in Religious Studies.

Jameela Siddiqi, Novelist and Broadcaster

Ecstasy: Indian Music in the Devotional Context

Of all the arts of India, it is music that is said to be the Divine Art -- in both senses: first that it is a gift from the Divine to humankind, (so it is *from* God) and, second, its performance is said to be the highest way to make God a perceived reality-- to feel closer to the Creator. It is interesting to note that the relevant words for "performance" in this context, in Hindi as well as in Urdu, include the listener. The act of listening is also a form of devotion. The listener is, of course, required to listen with the heart rather than the ears and the focus is on a heightened spiritual awareness rather than an appreciation of musical technicality. That said, the musicians (and singers) are required to be technically flawless.

For the musician, technical perfection is achieved through years of gruelling practice, often begun in early childhood. Most of these Draconian methods of training would certainly fail any test in the European court of human rights. Thankfully, these traditional methods are, by and large dying out, but one aspect, absolutely central to this tradition remains intact: "Guru-Shishya Parampara", or a teaching tradition in which the respect, deference and submission to the teacher, or Guru, is the first prerequisite of all knowledge. This applies equally to vocal and instrumental music and also to classical dance.

While organised religion serves as a differentiating factor -- with each group and sub-group of a belief system convinced that it has the sole monopoly on Truth -- where music is concerned, the emphasis is on UNITY -- the oneness of human destiny and the commonality of life's problems. It is little wonder that music becomes the main form of worship for the mystic of any religion, with identical melodies being sung as Bhajjan, Qawwali and Shabad by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, respectively. Even so, orthodox sects, especially within Islam, have sought to ban music on the grounds that it is a highly potent force that cannot be harnessed by the clerics.

Systems of training in music are an almost exact mirror image of the system of spiritual training in general, whether with a Hindu Pandit/Guru or a Muslim Sufi Master. The disciple is expected to surrender totally, unlearn all that he or she holds dear and "book learning", as it's called, is particularly frowned upon. There are those who would argue that such total submission leaves the way wide open for false gurus, charlatans, and fraudulent posers. But Sufi masters have taught that it is ultimately the sincerity of the pupil that determines the quality of the teacher. Many a fake guru is said to have been reformed by the sheer dedication of his pupil.

The traditional method, especially for singing, is to repeat note for note, after the Master. The knowledge, thus transmitted orally, is less susceptible to modernisation or corruption. Music teachers don't just teach music. They act as guides for all of life's problems -- big and small. For a non-musician, outsider, such as myself, attempting to present Indian music on something like Radio 3, it's not just a different music that has to be delineated, but the entire tradition that lies behind it has to be deciphered. The system is very difficult to penetrate. Written material is scant and most music teachers, who run their schools strictly along a

family system, known as *Gharana* (which means extended family) are reluctant to divulge secrets.

Dr Alex McKay, Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at University College, London

In Search of Mount Kailas: The Kailas Mountains of the Indian Himalayas

Mount Kailas, in what is now the western Tibetan region of China, is popularly described in such terms as “the most sacred place in Asia” and it is said to have attracted pilgrims for thousands of years. But as the work of scholars such as Toni Huber demonstrates, Kailas was not, historically, regarded as more sacred than other Tibetan mountain pilgrimage sites such as Tsari, while my research suggests that within Indic society Kailas was considered sacred only by a small group of Saivite renunciates and was specifically not a popular pilgrimage site. I have previously argued [McKay 1998, 1999] that Kailas largely owes its current status in Indic understanding to the writings of a British colonial official, Charles Sherring ICS. Sherring, who hoped to attract pilgrims to his Almora district as a means of raising revenue, claimed that Kailas was the ‘most sacred site in Hinduism’, but while he was able to draw on early Indic textual references to a Kailas mountain to support his claim, Rheinhard Gruenendahl has showed that there is little evidence that the Kailas of the Mahabharata is the Kailas we now know in western Tibet.

Further problematising this issue is the existence of (at least) five Indian Himalayan mountains known as Kailas; these are the Kaplash Kailas (J&K), Manimahesh Kailas (H.P.), Kinnaur Kailas (H.P.), Adhi/Chhota Kailas (U.P.) and Sri Kailas (Uttaranchal). To date, these mountains have attracted little academic attention.

In this paper I will present the results of fieldwork carried out in 2001-2004 at the five Indian Kailas mountains, and discuss them in the context of the understanding of the Tibetan Kailas site. I draw on the work of A.W.Macdonald in regard to the “Sanskrit-ization” and “Buddha-cization” processes, and develop the model of Tibetan sacred mountain pilgrimage sites developed by Katia Buffetrille, who distinguishes between Buddha-cized and *yul-lha* sacred mountains. The former are those where the annual ritual of worship of the local protective mountain deity (*yul lha*) carried out with animal sacrifices on the side of the mountain has been replaced by the Buddhist ritual of circumambulation, with the central deity conceived of a Buddhist one, reducing the former *yul lha* to the status of a protective deity in a Buddhist mandala. I will argue that this model may also be applied to a Hindu process that may be observed at some of these Indian Kailas sites.

Professor Gavin Flood, University of Stirling

Text and Body in Tantric Traditions

When we examine Hindu tantric texts and their commentaries it is striking how relatively little of their contents we might classify in terms of classical philosophical concerns about epistemology, ontology and the development of arguments. Rather we find material focussed on the construction of mantras, daily and occasional rites, and cosmology. These texts were composed within what Sheldon Pollock has called the 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis' at a time when there was an increasing tendency towards the literary use of vernacular languages; yet the Tantras seem to insist on their Sanskrit inheritance and legitimisation within that world. Part of this legitimisation is the claim of the texts to be revelation along with a theme of the

importance of the body and its divinisation. I wish to examine two claims, firstly that in spite of divergent metaphysics and different social locations, the texts share a common process of the divinisation of the body which is mapped in text-specific ways. Secondly, a sense of subjectivity emerges dependent on text and tradition; the index of the first person pronoun operates within textual and liturgical boundaries. These points can be illustrated by reference to the Pancaratra's *Jayakhya-samhita* and the Saiva *Dehastha-devata-cakra-stotra*.