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Editor's Note

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The current issue of *Monsoon* honors goddess traditions and noted historical women in South Asia. The monsoon season in this region typically commences in June and continues until late August or early September. The publication of this issue, therefore, has been strategically timed to coincide with the Monsoon season, which is a vital source of sustenance for millions of individuals living in this part of the world.

After having edited *The Constant and Changing Faces of the Goddess: Goddess Traditions of Asia* (2007) with co-editor Phyllis K. Herman, I was deemed qualified by the Board of Directors of the South Asian Studies Association to edit another volume about goddesses and women in South Asia. I was honored to accept the task and here is the fruit of that labor.

There are seven papers in this issue, all written by scholars with expertise in the field of goddess and women studies. Importantly, most of these papers were presented in an abbreviated form at the annual conferences of the South Asian Studies Association in March 2022 and 2023. We thank our contributors for submitting their papers on short notice.

The study of the feminine in modern society is relevant today. All cultures regardless of their religious traditions have recognized the power of women in their societies. It is more so in the Dharmic traditions, especially in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism than in the Abrahamic traditions. Goddesses are revered for their strength, beauty, wisdom, and compassion, and are considered powerful spiritual entities who can help guide and protect their devotees.

In Hinduism, the worship of goddesses can be traced back to the Vedic period, where goddesses were considered to be important deities, and were honored with their own rituals and festivals. The Hindu pantheon features a vast array of goddesses, each with her own unique attributes and mythology. Some of the most well-known goddesses include Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati. Durga is the fierce and protective mother goddess, who is worshipped during the Navaratri festival. Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and prosperity, who is invoked during Diwali, the festival of lights. Saraswati is the goddess of knowledge and learning, who is revered by students, artists, poets, and scholars.

In Jainism, the worship of goddesses is also an important aspect of the faith. Jainism recognizes a variety of goddesses, including *yakṣī-s*, who are believed to protect and guide the spiritual journey of the faithful. These deities are considered to be manifestations of the pure energy of the universe, and their worship

is seen as a way to connect with this energy and attain spiritual enlightenment.

The importance of goddesses in both Hinduism and Jainism extends beyond their roles as spiritual entities. They also serve as symbols of the divine feminine, embodying qualities such as compassion, nurturing, and intuition. In a world where masculine qualities are often valued more highly, the worship of goddesses provides a space for the celebration and veneration of the feminine. Overall, the importance of goddesses in Hinduism and Jainism is rooted in their spiritual significance, as well as their symbolic representation of the divine feminine. Their worship offers a way to connect with the energy of the universe and embrace the qualities of the feminine, making them an integral part of these ancient faiths.

One reason for the continued relevance of goddesses in modern society is the need for representation and empowerment of women. As patriarchal structures continue to persist in many societies, the worship of goddesses can serve as a reminder of the power and potential of women. This is particularly true in cultures where goddesses have been traditionally worshipped as divine mothers. Images of divine mothers can be seen as early as 2000 BCE in the Indus Valley. Perhaps the evolution of Mother Goddess in a more theological form developed in later years as the worship of her offered a sense of comfort and healing for those who have experienced trauma or are struggling with issues related to identity and self-worth. Many goddesses are associated with specific aspects of human experience, such as love, creativity, and wisdom, and can provide guidance and support for those seeking to connect with these qualities within themselves.

In contrast to other contributors, Nalini Rao, an art historian, focuses her research on the theme of goddesses and female figures as heroic entities in ancient and medieval India. Specifically, she examines their representations in visual art, particularly sculpture. It is worth noting that, regardless of the field of study, the perception of goddesses and women remains consistent among the various authors. Women are predominantly associated with beauty and fertility. From the perspective of an art historian, Rao's paper delves into the portrayal of beauty through the idealization of the female form, tracing its evolution over centuries in India. Whether the images date back to the Indus Valley civilization around 2000 BCE or the 3rd century CE, most representations depict earthly and sensual qualities. Due to women's significant roles in agricultural societies—such as planting and harvesting crops, as well as their maternal roles—they were revered as Earth Goddesses with a chthonic nature. The notion that women assist the Earth in its productivity can be observed in the later art of the Mauryan period, particularly in the voluptuous figure of the *śālabhañjikā*, depicted

on the gateway of the great stupa at Sanchi. Her association with a fruiting tree symbolizes abundance and fertility. The motif of women and trees became popular in Indian architecture, both in Buddhist and Hindu contexts. One might question why such alluring depictions of women with curvaceous bodies are present in monasteries meant to be inhabited by renounced Buddhist monks who have rejected all forms of temptation. Rao endeavors to address this question by providing numerous examples from visual arts.

The relevance of goddesses extends beyond specific cultures, as many people today draw inspiration from a variety of goddesses from around the world. For example, the goddess Kali from Hindu mythology is often associated with transformation and the overcoming of obstacles, while the Jaina Padmāvati is associated with motherhood and healing. Two papers deal with the topic of this important goddess in Jainism. While Robert Zydenbos examines Padmāvati as located in Karnataka, a region of South India, Venu Mehta examines Padmāvati from Western India especially Gujarat. Although they are the same goddess, each is viewed slightly differently and worshipped accordingly because the function each plays differs in relation to where she is situated. According to Mehta, Padmāvati remains associated with her esoteric identity, her portrayal as a feminine energy, a mother who can protect, heal, and reward devotees and help them in their religious endeavors as a manifestation of ‘*Śakti*’ is powerfully expressed in the three cand song. Zydenbos, on the other hand, is of the opinion that she has her origins in the *yakṣī* cult of India found both in the north and south of the land. Hence, he questions whether “The apparent similarities between goddesses in different Indic religious traditions have often led to questions like ‘is Padma vati actually nothing but a Jainified version of the Hindu Manasa or Kalī ?’” Parallels between Padmāvati and the Buddhist deity Tara and Manasa do exist because they were cross-pollinated which are true aspects of all Indic religions.

Nandini Sengupta and Moupia Basu in their jointly authored article discuss Rani Durgawati, who became a goddess in local and folk traditions. There are other examples of women in India throughout history who have bravely fought battles like the mythical Goddess Durga and have set examples of *vīra-aṅgana* (braveheart) tradition. Such examples show that Indian women were not only mothers and wives, but also brave enough to go to battle for safeguarding their families, communities, and countries and who, after sacrificing their lives have become the subject of adoration and veneration as cult heroes. Folk songs have spawned around their exploits, leading to deification of historical figures whose valor and dedication to dharma have set them apart in popular imagination. The authors write, “Nowhere is this better exemplified than in

central India, the land that was once known as Gondwana, the home of the tribal Gond. Gond folk songs routinely reference history, using myth and memory as much to remember and revere as to resist and reconstruct. For the tribal Gonds, their story is intrinsically connected to their identity and their community pride. To be Gond is to remember and one of the most oft-remembered figures in this land redolent with *itihāsa* and *saṃskāra* is Gond Rani Veerangana Durgawati.”

Sowmya Ayyar’s paper, Analysis of Mai Bhago and Amrita Devi Bishnoi, runs along the same line in which she takes up the works of Amrita Devi Bishnoi, Mai Bhago, and Onake Obavva, amongst others, to demonstrate how their thinking, as activists, stood for social justice, inspiring others even 300 years later with their works. These women lived and worked during the 1700s when India was under foreign domination. Even then they risked their lives to challenge the social norms with their daring steps. They were no less than the warrior goddess Durga.

The last two articles in this issue address the role of economics in the lives of women, both in theory and in practice. Mahatma Gandhi advocated women’s empowerment in the economic sphere, as explained by Purnima Bhatt. Punam Madhok provides contemporary examples of how traditional textile skills continue to make a significant contribution to contemporary, fashion, a major global industry.

As can be seen from the above analyses, this special issue of *Monsoon* comes to you as a kaleidoscopic study of the goddesses and women seen and understood by our contributing authors of various disciplines through their multiple lenses, which we hope you will find to be valuable contributions to the goddess and women studies.

Deepak Shimkhada
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