

DANAM CONFERENCE 2008

SESSION RFDT

Theme: **Revisiting the Feminine in Dharma Traditions**

Organizer and Presiding: **Phyllis Herman**, CalState University Northridge

Panelists: **Deepak Shimkhada**, Claremont McKenna College, **David Gray**, Santa Clara University, **Veena Howard**, Lone College, University of Oregon, **Christopher K. Chapple**, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, **Staneshwar Timalsina**, San Diego State University, **Phyllis Herman**, California State University, Northridge

PANEL PROPOSAL

This panel brings together papers dealing with multiple aspects of the sacred feminine in Hindu and Buddhist Dharma. They range geographically from considerations of the Himalayan goddess Goma, the north Indian Dakshinis and Yoginis, and the widely traveled epic character of Sita and trace historically the notions of the earth as goddess from the pre-Vedic period to modern Hindu views of ecology. The first paper, *Goma: An Embodiment of the Goddess*, examines the character of Goma, born of cow dung and her associations with the mortal woman as well as the Great Goddess Durga. The second paper, *Dashinis and Yoginis: On the Origin and Development of an Early Medieval Indian Buddhist Goddess Tradition*, traces the connections between certain early female deities and the classes of unconventional female deities that are discussed Yoginītantras. The papers shift to a consideration of the Earth as Goddess in *Sita Masala: From the Vedas to the Kitchen*, which discusses pre-Vedic, Vedic, epic and modern constructions of the agricultural great goddess figure. The Earth is also dealt with in *The Goddess and Ecological Sensitivity: The Cultivation of Earth Knowledge*, wherein the panelist will explore the material that links the feminine aspects of the Indian worldview with enhanced appreciation of the natural world. *The Body of the Goddess: Eco-Awareness and Embodiment in Hindu Myth and Romance* explores the opportunities for goddess imagery to support new and vitally important views not only of ecological awareness, but of right action in modern Hindu Dharma. The panel concludes with *Gandhi's Construction of Femininity: Negotiating Traditional Values for Modern Goals*, a consideration of M.K. Gandhi's vision for the modern woman.

ABSTRACTS

Deepak Shimkhada, Claremont McKenna College

Goma: the Girl Born of Cow Dung

This paper examines the character of Goma, the protagonist of the Swasthani Brata Katha, a text written in the 16th century in Nepal in the style of a Purana. Although in the text Goma is portrayed just an ordinary woman, the extraordinary circumstances in which she was born and the challenges she underwent clearly place her in the category of a goddess. In this paper I will argue that Goma is indeed the goddess in a mortal form who, like her counterparts Sati and Parvati, performed hardships to please Shiva and did attain respect, fame and fortune. Born of cow dung, Goma the mortal girl transforms herself into a goddess incarnate in her later life.

David B. Gray, Santa Clara University

Dākinīs and Yoginīs: On the Origin and Development of an Early Medieval Indian Buddhist Goddess Tradition

An important development in early medieval Indian Buddhism was the composition of the Yoginītantras, a genre of scripture that focused on female deities such as Vajrayogini and Vajravahā,

which, by the ninth century, became the basis of important Buddhist movement in North India. These scriptures highlight classes of female deities, the Dākinīs and Yoginīs, which were notorious for their unconventional behavior. They were particularly associated with charnel grounds and the black magic which was performed there, and while they were transformed into enlightened beings of great power in these scriptures, they retained a strong association with the “sinister” phenomena, or “left-handed conduct” (*vāmācāra*). This essay examines their origins in earlier classes of Indian female deities and traces their development in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist religious literature.

Veena Howard, Lone College, University of Oregon

Gandhi's Construction of Femininity: Negotiating Traditional Values for Modern Goals

In the modern era, Gandhi is considered to be one of the most active proponents of women's rights: he fought against patriarchic systems of child-marriage, dowry, gender-inequity, etc. However, Gandhi's views regarding the roles of women are complex and are deemed controversial. On the one hand, Gandhi advised women to hold on to their traditional roles as described in Indian myths; and on the other hand, he directed them to assume social and political roles as catalysts for social change. How did Gandhi reconcile these apparently contradictory positions? Perhaps the mythical models of women to which Gandhi often referred provide an insight into his vision for women. In this paper, I analyze the myths that Gandhi chose and reinterpreted in order to transform traditional values and achieve modern goals for women such as autonomy, equity, and public and social participation.

Christopher K. Chapple, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles

The Goddess and Ecological Sensitivity: The Cultivation of Earth Knowledge

From the Rig Veda and Atharva Veda to the Yogavasistha, passages from classical Indian literature have the beauty and power of the earth. Additionally, Samkhya philosophy has provided detailed classifications of the elements in relationship to the human body that predate similar insights in contemporary phenomenology and neuropsychology. This paper will explore material that links the feminine aspects of the Indian worldview with enhanced appreciation of the natural world.

Staneshwar Timalina, San Diego State University

The Body of the Goddess: Eco-Awareness and Embodiment in Hindu Myth and Romance

This essay explores select Hindu myths of the goddess found reverberating in romantic literature in light of embodied cosmology and ecological vision. The body of the goddess here is a multi-layered placeholder, representing self-sacrifice, the paradoxical character of presence-in-absence, an image of regeneration, mortification, union, food and milk, while simultaneously the suppressed, dark, scary, and wild. The carnal bliss of the goddess in light of these myths and romances is that of emptying oneself while also giving birth to cosmic and organic forces through shattering one's own body. The body of the goddess addressed here, therefore, is both the sacrificial object and also the source of immortality. The deconstructive method applied in this paper does not seek the historical context to confine the meaning to India of the past, as these myths and narratives still resonate within the larger, contemporary culture. The mythical, along these lines, outlives the historical, and the 'fictional' that lives in the imaginative realm of human consciousness contributes to shaping collective consciousness with no less impact than the phenomenal. In this reading, the meanings attributed to the plot narratives may not be limited to the original intent. Myths live through civilization and gain their own voice. The reality of this romantic realm is immediately felt and not placed in a distant past: this is after all the tender side of the body of the goddess that is being touched.

Phyllis Herman, California State University, Northridge
Sita Masala: From the Vedas to the Kitchen

This paper will consider a few of the episodes, particular characterizations, and descriptions of Sita in the Valmiki Ramayana that seem to reflect devotional notions distinct from and predating the Vedic tradition. As well, the paper will point out possible Vedic texts that are fairly obvious examples of devotion to a goddess directly identified with Sita. In the modern era, Sita can be found as presiding goddess and object of worship in her Sita Rasois. The ‘popular’ and/or devotional paradigms and descriptions that appear in the Valmiki Ramayana with regard to Sita could be fundamental to understanding her modern role as a chef de cuisine. The Valmiki heroine, Sita, the “embodied furrow,” encompasses and integrates many of the pre-historic and historic functions of an agricultural Great Goddess figure.