

Goddesses in the Hindu Tradition

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Abstract

This article provides an overview and analysis of the two primary Hindu goddess traditions—the formal tradition (often called the Aryan, Pan-Indian or great) and the *gramadevata* tradition (also known as village goddesses, Dravidian, non-Aryan, folk or little). A broad sketch of each tradition is followed by an in-depth description of a goddess from each tradition. The overview of the formal tradition looks at six major goddesses in the formal tradition: Kali, Durga, Parvati, Sarasvati, Radha, and Sita. The overview of the *gramadevata* tradition examines origin myths, typical functions, common forms, and characteristics of worship. For the in-depth description of a goddess from each tradition, Sri-Laksmi is examined from the formal tradition and Mathamma from the *gramadevata* tradition. After examining the two traditions, I argue the two traditions are two separate traditions emerging from an ancient goddess tradition. Yet, these two traditions influence each other, resulting in significant similarities, with the *gramadevata* tradition exerting the most influence.

Goddesses in the Hindu Tradition

H. Chongloi summarizes what so many have said about “Hinduism”, “Elasticity may be considered the celebrated trait of Hinduism, for in its religious history of about four millennia, it is next to impossible to separate the different strands that had shaped Hinduism into clear-cut demarcations.” (Chongloi 2002, 31) The goddess tradition is no exception. “Hindu Goddess worship is a highly developed complex of myth, ritual and theology, with many regional variants,” (Erndl 1997, 20) and the Hindu goddess traditions of India are recognized as the only place where worship of the feminine divine exists in many diverse ways (Harvey and Baring 1996, 150). Despite the diversity, most scholarship breaks the goddess tradition into two categories. I call the first the formal tradition (often called the Aryan, Pan-Indian or great). I call the second the *gramadevata* tradition (also known as village goddesses, Dravidian, non-Aryan, folk or little). After examining the two traditions, I will argue they are akin to two separate streams emerging from a lake, yet downstream these rivers may flood and spill over into each

other at times, resulting in significant similarities, with the *gramadevata* tradition exerting the most influence.

Overview of Goddess Traditions

In this section I briefly describe the major goddesses in the formal tradition, and then survey the *gramadevata* tradition. In the following section I examine a goddess from each of the two traditions.

An Overview of the Formal Tradition Through Six Major Goddesses

Significant facts regarding six of the seven major goddesses¹ in the formal tradition are outlined here; then the seventh goddess (Sri-Laksmi) is considered in more depth below. However, this section does not represent all the goddesses in the formal tradition or all the ways the goddesses are worshipped, let alone encompass all their unique representations. In fact, a devotee may see the same goddess differently dependent upon the context (Orr 2005, 37).

The goddesses' interaction with male deities represents an important aspect of the formal tradition. Often the goddesses personify the male deities' *sakti* (personified power/energy). *Sakti* is not merely the power of creation, but also of delusion, destruction, or ignorance as the many aspects of *sakti* can have positive and negative connotations (Pintchman 1994, 198). Furthermore, the relationship of the gods and goddesses often reflects women's societal role (Preston 1985, 13).

Kali. Kali is a major goddess in the Tantric tradition, making her one of India's most worshipped goddesses. She is an example of a *gramadevata* who becomes a supreme deity (Curran 2005, 175). In some areas she is considered part of the Mahadevi (great goddess) along with Sarasvati and Laskmi (Sandness 2010, 510). The earliest references to Kali are found in the medieval period (Kinsley 1986, 116). Kali is generally associated with blood and death (Kinsley 1986, 128). Though not always paired with a male god, she is the fierce aspect of Siva's *sakti* (Santiko 1997, 212). The most known depiction of Kali and Siva together shows Kali standing or seated atop an either dead or sleeping Siva, perhaps demonstrating female dominance (Markale 1999,

174). Kinsley summarizes Kali's role in the goddess pantheon, "Kali puts the order of dharma in perspective, perhaps puts it in its place, by reminding Hindus that certain aspects of reality are untamable, unpurifiable, unpredictable, and always a threat to society's feeble attempts to order what is essentially disorderly: life itself." (Kinsley 1986, 129)

Durga. Durga, one of the most impressive, formidable, and popular goddesses, is often pictured straddling a lion; and embodies the anger aspect of Siva's *sakti* (Santiko 1997, 212). The gods created Durga to fight the buffalo demon Mahishashura, composing her body using parts of their bodies and each giving her a weapon. After Durga defeated Mahishashura, she cut off his head to drink his blood (Elmore 1915, 126).

In some areas of India, the *gramadevatas* are actually seen as various forms of Durga (Padma 2013, 34). The Durga *puja* is an important festival throughout India. Durga's temples are often near graveyards and cremation grounds (Brinkgreve 1997, 245).

Parvati. Parvati "is a true, conditionally benign Spouse Goddess" (Gatwood 1985, 109) as well as one of the three aspects of the Mahadevi (Sandness 2010, 510). Parvati's major responsibility is wooing and marrying Siva,² and she is often associated with Sati, Siva's first wife. When unrestrained by a goddess, Siva is a wild ascetic; therefore, Parvati exemplifies the calm aspect of Siva's *sakti* (Santiko 1997, 212). Padma identifies parts of Parvati as arising from the fertility goddess (Padma 2013, 109), while Kinsley places her origin with tribes in the mountains (Kinsley 1986, 41). Siva and Parvati are the parents of Ganesh.

A valley containing hot springs, where Parvati and Siva made love for 10,000 years after she wooed him, is associated with Parvati (Markale 1999, 173). Parvati's main role is a student studying under Siva, and her access to Siva places her as a mediator who can get from Siva what a worshipper needs (Kinsley 1986, 54). Parvati's entire identity revolves around Siva.³

Sarasvati. Sarasvati is the only Vedic goddess to not only survive, but rise to prominence. She is speech personified and is considered one of the Mahadevi's three aspects (Sandness 2010, 510). Identified as Visnu's consort (Bose 2010, 18), she functions as Krsna's *sakti* as speech personified and also represents Durga's virginal aspects (Bose 2010, 27). Her vehicle is the

swan, demonstrating her transcendence (Kinsley 1986, 62). Prostitutes, *devadasis*,⁴ and Brahmins worship Sarasvati, revealing a unique social position (Gatwood 1985, 115).

Sarasvati has a somewhat contentious relationship with Lakshmi, another wife of Vishnu. Sarasvati is worshipped not for her fertility, but her wisdom (Bose 2010, 28). Kinsley theorizes this suggests “perhaps, a tension between *bhukti* (sensual enjoyment) and dharma or *mukti* (spiritual liberation or perfection) in Hinduism.” (Kinsley 1986, 58)

Radha. Though not married, Radha and Krsna are closely linked. Born a human, Radha’s emergence as a goddess centers around her exuberant, uncontrollable love for Krsna (Bose 2010, 37). Radha, married and significantly older, falls in love with Krsna. Radha does not let the fact that her love is outside the social norm stop her. Krsna’s followers who worship Radha desire to devote themselves to Krsna with Radha’s passion, turning the romantic/erotic love language into devotional language (Martin 2007, 190).

Sita. Sita, Rama’s wife, is considered the ideal Hindu wife and rarely worshipped by herself.⁵ Associated with the earth, corn (Dhal 1978, 127) and sexuality, her name demonstrates this association, meaning “she who has been plowed.” (Gatwood 1985, 114) Sita’s story is found in the *Ramayana* “which was composed when patriarchal values were solidified in such a way that a husband was described as woman’s personal god. Sita’s character meets these patriarchal standards when she is perceived as leading her life in singular devotion to her husband.” (Padma 2013, 203)

An Overview of the Gramadevata Tradition

Gramadevatas, village deities who differ from goddess in the formal tradition as they are traditionally not found in the Hindu scriptures, play a central role in Hindu life. They represent two prevalent aspects of spirits in the ancient world as they can be found in almost everything and “through suitable procedures it is possible to summon them, to propitiate them or to ward them off.” (Mus 1933, 10) The life of the village and the *gramadevata* are linked together (Kinsley 1986, 198). Most village deities are female and single. Typically *gramadevatas* are not older women, though a few exist (Goudriaan 1987, 79). According to Padma,

A *gramadevata* often is “at home” in the outdoors and usually symbolized aniconically in the form of a shapeless rock, a snake hole, or a tree. While she may also be seen in the form of images within more humbly constructed and appointed shrines at the edge of a village, *gramadevatas* are usually worshipped directly by devotees without any *Brahman* priestly mediation and therefore without elaborate Sanskrit recitations....The priests and priestesses of these *gramadevata* are mostly from non-*brahmanic* castes and play a major cultic role only at the time of special festivals (Padma 2013, 49).

A village or community is not limited to worshipping just one *gramadevata*.⁶

Origin myths. Many times *gramadevatas* are represented as once being human (Elmore 1915, 18). Often a young woman suffers an untimely death at the hands of a male figure, with “the collective guilt emanating from her family and others or their attempt to tame her malevolent spirit results in her deification. This deified woman, in some instances, is then transmogrified within the village as a *gramadevata*.” (Padma 2013, 3)

Traditionally a stone marks the location of the *gramadevata*’s first appearance (Elmore 1915, 142). According to Padma, “the origin of the worship of a village goddess is usually regarded as the primordial social event of a village. Before any house is built in a village, an oblong stone is planted vertically in the center of what is to become the village.” (Padma 2013, 49)

Many *gramadevatas*’ names contain some form of *amma*. This word has at least two connotations: mother and pox (Bean, Susan S. 1975, 324). These two connotations convey a glimpse into the *gramadevatas*’ origin and function.

Typical functions. Typically the *gramadevata* rules over one or more defined aspects of the village’s life (Brubaker 1983, 148), with this role more important than her name (Padma 2013, 49). Often she serves the whole village, or a community within the village, not just an individual (Kinsley 1986, 200). However, Wiebe argues a change is occurring as *gramadevatas* are now approached for individual favors (Wiebe 1975, 44). *Gramadevatas* are not considered female role models (Padma 2013, 202), but “projections of the power of female fertility.” (Padma 2013, 199)

A *gramadevata*’s main function is village guardian, often against diseases. She not only protects the villagers from disease, but causes diseases if not placated (Santiko 1997, 214). Some

trace this disease relation to the medieval periods “during which child and maternal mortality rates may have been very high.” (Dandekar and Dandekar 2011, 221) The effect of improved health care on the village’s *gramadevata* worship is debated.⁷

The *gramadevata* is also typically associated with fertility, not only agriculturally, but also in weddings and reproduction (Babb 1975, 227). Since she can cause childbirth, but also the sickness of mothers and infants if not adequately appeased, this association demonstrates her ambivalence (Dandekar and Dandekar 2011, 221).

Common forms. A stone placed in the village’s center often represents the *gramadevata*. In certain areas the stone is accessorized, such as being given a mask. (Jayakar 1990, 166) She is traditionally not represented iconically, but instead an object contains her spirit or residence (Elmore 1915, 141).

The *gramadevata* may appear as a snake or reside in a snake hole (Padma 2013, 97). Often connected with ant hills, trees, and pots (Padma 2013, 125–128), some are associated with heat (Brubaker 1983, 156). *Gramadevata*, as noted above, can have shrines outside the village (Dandekar and Dandekar 2011, 221).

Characteristics of worship. *Gramadevata* worship varies. Some are worshipped cyclically (Padma 2013, 52), while others only in a crisis. *Gramadevata* worship links the village people to the space of the village, while also playing a role in forming the community (Schlemmer 2012, 24). Generally the village dedicates a festival to the *gramadevata*, whether regularly scheduled or in a crisis (Rani and Suguna 2002, 164). Many festivals play upon the *gramadevata*’s sexuality. A common festival theme is “male assault, usually sexual assault upon the female...the village, in short, is being raped. And the festival, then, is the village’s convulsive, expulsive response. In it the people relive the myth of their *gramadevata* defeating and repelling her male attacker.” (Brubaker 1983, 154) However, often defeat comes only after the *gramadevata* is sexually satisfied by the male attacker, a strange incongruity.

A low caste person often starts the festival by beating drums (Padma 2013, 52). Food offerings are made and traditionally the festival contains a buffalo sacrifice. The buffalo represents a demon attempting, and often succeeding in, a sexual encounter with the *gramadevata*. After the *gramadevata* accepts the buffalo’s advances, the villagers kill the

buffalo, sometimes pouring the blood onto the stone to appease the goddess (Elmore 1915, 129–30). The blood, mixed with cooked food, is spread across fields evoking the *gramadevata*'s role in fertility (Padma 2013, 247).

Another form of worship involves the *gramadevata* possessing a human being (a medium). At times men are possessed, though possession usually occurs to women (Merz 2007, 210). The medium performs healings, answers questions, and settles disputes (Merz 2007, 211). Though the medium is not worshipped directly, offerings for the goddess are made to the medium.

A Closer View Through Two Goddesses

After providing a general overview of the two goddess traditions, in this section I provide a closer view of a goddess from each tradition - Sri-Laksmi in the formal tradition and Mathamma in the *gramadevata* tradition. An important goddess due to her status as a spouse deity, Sri-Laksmi also holds significant power, sometimes seen as the ultimate power. Mathamma is an important *gramadevata* given her diverse and somewhat widespread worship.

Sri-Laksmi in the Formal Tradition

Sri-Laksmi is an extremely popular Hindu deity. She is predominantly known through her role as Visnu's wife (Brubaker 1983, 128). Through this role, she "exemplifies the orderliness of human society and human relations." (Kinsley 1986, 28) However, Sri-Laksmi's development starts before her marriage to Visnu. This section examines Sri-Laksmi before and after her marriage to Visnu, then briefly discusses her worship.

Pre-Visnu. Sri-Laksmi's aspects can be found in the Vedas, though not usually as a goddess or even personified (Kumar 1997, 15). The RgVeda does not mention her, but later verses appended to the fifth book reference her (Dhal 1978, 1). The word *laksmi* meant "mark" or "token" (can be a positive or a negative mark), while *sri* meant "prosperity" or "beauty;" and many consider the words related. These words and concepts transition into goddesses. The *Sri-Sukta* treats Laksmi as the goddess of plenty and prosperity associated with the lotus (Dhal 1978, 59–62). The goddess Sri appears in the *Vajasaneya Samhita* where both Sri and Laksmi are seen as distinct

goddesses (Dhal 1978, 47). Sri's development has been attributed to a pre-Aryan fertility goddess (Kumar 1997, 16); and Laksmi was worshipped as a fertility goddess as early as the third century B.C.E. (Santiko 1997, 214).

Precise dating for the merging of Sri and Laksmi remains unclear. Kumar states, "While there is no satisfactory evidence...the merging of Sri and Laksmi seems plausible, in view of their seemingly overlapping attributes and characteristics, certainly over a period of time between the Vedic texts and the epic texts." (Kumar 1997, 17)

In the *Panca Lakšana* Sri-Laksmi (from here just referred to as Laksmi) is the daughter of Dhksa and Prasuti, married to Dharma (Dhal 1978, 68–69). Laksmi is Dharma's wife, Brahma and Daksha's daughter, and Dhatr and Vidhatr's sister in the *Mahabharata* (Brubaker 1983, 127). In the *Daksa-Prajapati* Laksmi is Bhrgu's daughter; and in the *Pancalakšana* Laksmi is half of the great goddess Sati (Dhal 1978, 73–76). Another Laksmi origin story claims she is from the heart of Krsna while in another she is from the left side of Prakrti/Radha (Brown 1974, 157). The song *Jamba Purana* places the origin of Laksmi from the ashes of the dead goddess Sakti (Padma 2013, 85–86).

Olson claims Laksmi was most likely a *yakshini*,⁸ given that Laksmi has many *yakshini* attributes. Olson believes these aspects demonstrate her pre-Aryan roots, as when she comes from Prajapati's side (*Satapatha Brahmana*) she is subsequently stripped of all her powers by the gods in "a form of gang rape that initiated her into the Vedic pantheon." (Olson 1983, 127) The gods tame her through this action. Olson also argues her *yaksini* origin since Laksmi rejects the *asuras* in the *Mahabarata* because they eat meat (Olson 1983, 127).

Laksmi associated with various male deities before her union with Visnu. These include Bali, Indra, Kubera, Dharma, and Agni.

Though the earliest forms of the ocean churning myth do not reference her, it is considered Laksmi's traditional myth. Durvasa's curse or Indra's insult drives Laksmi into the ocean, causing the world to wither. The gods then churn the ocean to bring her back. Laksmi emerges out of the ocean with great beauty and power. When she emerges she shuns Indra for Visnu (Bailly 2000, 140).

Consort of Visnu. During the Gupta period, the *Puranas* finalize Laksmi and Visnu's union (Dhal 1978, 97). Given her association with other gods, Kinsley states, "it is as if in Visnu she

has found the god she was looking for and, having found him, has remained loyal to him ever since.” (Kinsley 1986, 26) After becoming Visnu’s consort, Laksmi joins Visnu in all his incarnations (Dhal 1978, 98).

Laksmi’s relationship with Visnu is considered a model relationship as she evolves from a somewhat uncontrolled goddess to Visnu’s wife (Bose 2010, 21). Laksmi and Visnu are often pictured together as Visnu reclines, foot on her lap, her massaging his foot, picturing her relational position to Visnu and her service for his comfort. Laksmi is only pictured two handed with Visnu, yet when pictured alone she commonly has four hands (Olson 1983, 137).

Laksmi shares Visnu’s functions taking “part in the function of creation, maintenance and destruction of the universe.” (Dhal 1978, 99) These functions demonstrate her ambivalence between beneficence and malevolence. In some places this dichotomy is demonstrated through a second goddess—Alaksmi (Jayakar 1990, 129). Laksmi’s development into the model wife also creates new associations. Along with her previous association with fertility and prosperity, she becomes associated with “righteous behavior, orderly conduct, and correct social observance.” (Kinsley 1986, 29)

Visnu and Laksmi are intimately linked together, even appearing as one bisexual figure (Kinsley 1986, 29). This unity becomes a major factor in Laksmi’s development. For Ramanuja, Laksmi and Visnu are inseparable and one reality (Kumar 1997, 66). Bhattar also sees them as inseparable with no ontological distinction (Kumar 1997, 85). The Northern and Southern schools differ concerning Visnu and Laksmi’s unity. The Southern school claims Laksmi is ontologically inferior to Visnu, but functionally essential, while the Northern school sees them functionally and ontologically one (Kumar 1997, 148).

Laksmi also mediates between a sinful devotee and Visnu.⁹ However, in the *Laksmi Tantra*, Laksmi takes a prominent role in Tantrism as the Universal Absolute where the worshipper appeals to her directly (Bailly 2000, 143). The *Devi Mahatmya* presents Laksmi as independent with the gods depending on her (Coburn 1985, 169).

Worship. Though Laksmi is worshipped regularly and during multiple festivals, including buffalo sacrifices (Hiltebeitel 2011, 521–27), the most significant worship of her occurs during a famous Hindu holiday, *Divali* (festival of lights). Worshipers celebrate the festival to invite Laksmi, the goddess of prosperity, to visit their home or office (Rodrigues, Hillary 2011, 144).

Roaming the earth seeking someone who is awake to bless, lights are lit showing her the way (Pintchman 2003, 330). Worshipers place Laksmi's image in the home, typically of her sitting on a lotus with two females and her vehicle, the owl (Foulston and Abbott 2009, 170). Laksmi's three aspects are worshipped: prosperity, fertility, and good fortune. Images are placed throughout the community and "the priests bring the images to life in the morning by performing the eye-opening ceremony (in which the eyes are repainted) and, using *mantras*, they ask the goddess to occupy the image." (Foulston and Abbott 2009, 170–71) After the day of worship is over, Laksmi's images are placed in a nearby river (Foulston and Abbott 2009, 171).

Some places celebrate Laksmi *puja* on Thursdays during the harvest time in *Margasira* (Nov.-Dec.). The women use the harvested rice in the *puja*. Using rice powder, the women draw footprints from the house entrance into the room where the *puja* occurs, drawing Laksmi into the house (Marglin 1985, 175–78).

Mathamma in the Gramadevata Tradition

Mathamma is a *gramadevata* also known as Ellamma or Matangi. A fertility goddess and a protector goddess, her roots are as a naked goddess. She is also associated with disease protection. She is one of the seven sisters of Kandukuru Talak.¹⁰ Though a *gramadevata*, she also is goddess of the outcaste in Tantrism (Foulston and Abbott 2009, 123). As with much in "Hinduism", the line between the worship of Mathamma in the *gramadevata* tradition and in Tantrism is blurred. Mathamma is significant, not only because her worship is fairly widespread, but also given the reversal of societal roles in her worship as a "Madiga (outcaste) is responsible for the ritual sacrifice and is the *asadi* (story teller)." (Harper 1989, 37)

Origin. Mathamma has multiple origin stories. One suggests "she is the daughter of Giri Raju...and that her husband is Jamadagni." (Padma 2013, 138) Jamadagni is a prominent figure in the *Ramayana*, linking Mathamma to the formal tradition (Reddy 1982, 155). Mathamma's head was chopped off along with an untouchable's head. When she was brought back to life, her body was inadvertently attached to the untouchable's head. Therefore, the outcastes worship the head as Ellamma, who is connected with a *surubesa* (human-lion-bird), *kamadhenu* (wish-fulfilling cow), and a golden sword; while the Brahmins worship the body as Renuka (Padma 2013, 135–38). Another myth equates her directly with the great goddess.¹¹ A Saivite origin story

places Ellamma as one of seven sisters born to Siva and Parvati, vying for their uncle's hand. Their uncle, Buddha, rejects the sisters. However, Ellamma succeeds in meeting Buddha's ascetic ideals, winning his hand in marriage (Padma 2013, 164).

Form. Mathamma is worshipped as a naked goddess and an anthill (Padma 2013, 97). One story of why the village worshipped the goddess at an anthill under a banyan tree tells how a man of low caste carry *sindhalu* (cymbals that are played in enacting the annual ritual dance for the goddess) of Ellamma in a basket, rested under the banyan tree and fell asleep. When he woke up, to his dismay, he found that his basket had been replaced by an anthill. And then he heard a mysterious voice announcing that Ellamma had decided to settle there and that he should place five *sindhalu* beside the anthill and assume priestly responsibilities during her annual ritual (Padma 2013, 99).

However, she can take any form she desires including bird, snake, and lightning (Padma 2013, 51). In poor villages she may be represented as a small stone image (Elmore 1915, 28). She is also worshipped in some places as a head wearing a crown evoking one of her origin myths (Padma 2013, 136).

Worship. A peculiarity of Mathamma worship is her association with a woman¹² known as a *matangi*. This is a Madiga woman possessed by the goddess (Foulston and Abbott 2009, 144). After being chosen by the village she fulfills this function for life (Elmore 1915, 29). The ritual to choose a new *matangi* is varied.¹³ Often after the girl has been chosen, she is dedicated at the temple in Malinthapadu (Padma 2013, 137). Ghandi campaigned against dedicating young girls to deities,¹⁴ and although the practice has been banned, it is still widespread (Black 2009, 181), with 16,799 *matangis* in Andhra Pradesh alone in 1999 (Rani and Suguna 2002, 161).

In some instances the *matangi* is married to a tree and “after that her life knows no moral restrictions.” (Elmore 1915, 30) Others claim her marriage to the goddess demonstrates surrender and commitment (Brückner 1996, 440). She is given the freedom of being practically married while remaining independent, giving her sexual freedom (Padma 2013, 137). This freedom led to her association as a *devadasi* or prostitute. Though not actually worshipped as the goddess, she takes an important role in the worship, including during the festival (Elmore 1915, 30). As a

representation of the goddess, some consider good deeds done to her to be for the entire community's good (Reddy 1982, 53).

During a festival, often called *mathamma kolupa*, the following things may occur: a buffalo is often acquired and set free until it is sacrificed; the goddess's image or stone is bathed; a sheep is slaughtered as an offering; intricate designs are made; and Mathamma's legends are retold (Reddy 1982, 52). During the last day the *pujari* cuts the head off a bird and, with the body, brushes away the *muggu* or sacred marks before the image, to represent wiping away Mathamma's evil (Elmore 1915, 29).

The *matangi* plays a crucial role in the festival, including visiting the homes of the Brahmins to humiliate them and receive gifts. If the village does not have a *matangi*, one will be brought from another city (Elmore 1915, 30). However, her main function during the festival is dancing.¹⁵ A *matangi* may receive a good deal of money for her dancing role (Black 2009, 188).

Two Traditions: Independent or Interwoven?

Though the two traditions vary, striking similarities abound and the relationship between the two traditions is apparent. The goddesses' ambivalent nature permeates both traditions. *Gramadevatas* protect, but also cause problems, traditionally disease, when not placated. Some formal goddesses, such as Kali and Durga, have great power; but the power has negative and positive connotations. Laksmi has both the power to create and destroy with Visnu. This ambivalence characterizes goddesses in both traditions demonstrating similar origins.

Both traditions contain direct ties to the naked and fertility goddess(es). Many formal goddesses are pictured naked, while many *gramadevatas* can be traced to naked goddess roots as well. The goddesses Laksmi and Sita are directly connected to fertility, while fertility is also one of the most predominant areas over which the *gramadevata* is responsible. Goddesses in the formal tradition continually developed into deities with powerful creative energy, whether individually or as a consort's *sakti*. Given the connection between creation and fertility, this signals a return to the powerful fertility goddess concept, while exceeding it.

Both traditions contain a sexual nature. Whether found within an origin story, celebrated with a festival, or the practice of dedicating girls to the goddess, each tradition contains a significant sexual aspect. Goddesses from both traditions are included in tantric practices and

some see Tantrism as one form of the *gramadevata* tradition being absorbed into the formal tradition (Chongloi 2002, 34).

A point of similarity and contrast arises regarding traditional female roles. The formal tradition contains goddesses who are the societal female ideal, such as Sita. Others, like Laksmi, are only brought into order through the presence of a powerful male god, such as Visnu. Yet, Kali, who, when associated with a male, is often pictured standing atop Siva's body, also represents female power. *Gramadevatas* are single, but if constantly appeased create order, even without the attachment of a male figure. However, when not appeased, a goddess festival involving a sexual liaison restores peace; yet, the male's representation is killed during the festival's climactic conclusion. Males also play a significant, usually negative, role in many *gramadevata* origin stories. Society is ordered through these myths demonstrating the power of a mistreated female. A misbehaving male is also found in the formal tradition in the story of Laksmi as the world withers when she goes into the ocean because of an insult from a male. The *gramadevata* tradition's significant interaction with males demonstrates the tradition's complexity regarding traditional female roles, a complexity also evident in the formal tradition.

From their seemingly innocuous Vedic origins to their place in "Hinduism" today, the formal goddesses have gained significant prominence, playing a central role in many Hindu traditions. Though the *gramadevata* has considerable power and plays a central role within her village, she only wields influence inside certain geographical boundaries. Goddesses in the formal tradition also have geographical ties, such as Parvati's association with a valley; however, these ties do not bind their power to a specific area. The goddess' mediatorial role in the formal tradition demonstrates a difference between the traditions as well. This concept is absent from the *gramadevata* tradition which is ultimately not concerned with the same sort of liberation questions as the formal tradition. However, in some *gramadevata* traditions, the medium fulfils some mediatorial roles between the worshiper and the *gramadevata* (Vijaisri 2005, 392). Therefore, some see the *gramadevata* tradition as a key foundation for the eventual rise of formal goddess worship (Bhattacharyya 1977, 223).

Much of the *gramadevata* tradition is primarily concerned with cadastral religion's horizontal or *samsaric* axis (Mus 1933, 33), while the formal tradition is concerned with the vertical or *nirvanic* axis, as well as the *samsaric* axis (Mus 1998, 54). Both traditions play significant roles in ordering the human world. Goddesses in each tradition started out as concepts

which became personified. Goddesses in each tradition play a prominent role in the prosperity of their worshippers. Both traditions have goddesses who started out as women. However, goddesses in the formal tradition are not solely concerned with ordering life, but also provide the worshipper a path to liberation.

Though significant differences in the practices and forms of worship between the two traditions are evident, they appear to have their roots in the same place (Bhattacharyya 1973, 165), and influence each other. Instead of two disparate streams, they are far more closely related (Reddy 1982, 55). Before the formal tradition, goddess traditions were in place. However, a significant religious change instituted the formal religious tradition, starting with the Vedas. This created a new, separate, and meager goddess stream, which swelled to the present day formal goddess tradition, of which some goddesses sprung directly from the *gramadevata* tradition (Bhattacharya 2007, 926). Yet, the *gramadevata* tradition continued out of the preexisting goddess traditions playing a prominent role in the growth of the formal tradition over the course of time (trickle up effect) (Misra and Rao 2002, 4). Though each development may not trace directly to the *gramadevata* tradition, the rise of the formal goddess tradition, even to the point of some goddesses being seen as the ultimate reality, is likely due to continual influence upon the formal tradition by the local traditions (Sinha 2006, 90). In turn, the *gramadevata* tradition appears to be influenced by developments in the formal tradition.¹⁶ Therefore, though there are two goddess streams, they are not independent of each other, but their interwoven nature is apparent in their similarities and the influence each has had on the other, though it is clear the *gramadevata* tradition has exerted the greater influence.

¹Foulston and Abbott address five major goddesses, while Kinsley includes Radha and Sita as major goddesses (Foulston and Abbott 2009; Kinsley 1986).

² The Tij Festival celebrates their marriage (Gatwood 1985, 109).

³Siva and Parvati are often shown in one figure known as *Ardhanarisvara*, a half male and half female figure, Siva the right half and Parvati the left.

A *devadasis* is a woman dedicated to the goddess, referred to in anthropology as a theogamy.

⁴(Elangovan 2013, 1; Misra and Rao 2002, 1)

⁵Kinsley places Sita as one of the dominant Hindu mythological figures (Kinsley 1986, 77).

Gatwood claims the ideal is only taken seriously by women of the higher castes (Gatwood 1985, 114).

⁶One village of five thousand people was found to worship at least one hundred goddesses (Foulston 2002, 18).

⁷“[T]he improved health services for human beings and domestic animals do not alleviate the need for worshiping *gramadevatas*.” (Padma 2013, 202) Wiebe states, “female deities are losing influence....with the introduction of modern medicines and methods of disease control, explanations of epidemics and illnesses in terms of the activities of the goddesses have been drastically curtailed.” (Wiebe 1975, 42–43)

⁸“A semi-divine chthonic spirit...guardians of wealth...Possessing the power to assume any shape, they are known attendants of Kubera....They are closely connected to the essence of the water of Life....often represented holding a lotus.” (Olson 1983, 126)

⁹Yamuna (61) and Lokacarya (105) view Laksmi as a mediator, while Ramanuja (68) and Bhattar (93) see her as a mediatrix (Kumar 1997).

¹⁰Her sisters include other *gramadevatas*, such as Poleramma (smallpox and cattle), Ankamma (represented by a pot), Mutyalamma, Dilli Polasi, Bagaramma, and Renuka (Harper 1989, 37).

¹¹A king with sons desired a daughter, and the great goddess appeared to him, eventually going down into a twelve holed ant hill as a cobra. The king worshipped at the ant hill, and had his men dig to find the goddess. To make it easy for the king to find her, the goddess appeared as a baby—Ellamma (Padma 2013, 51).

¹²Though traditionally a girl/woman, rarely a boy/man will become a girl/woman to be dedicated to the goddess (Brückner 1996, 442).

¹³According to Elmore, “One method of making the choice is to bring all the unmarried girls of the village before the shrine of Mathamma. Songs are then sung, drums are beaten loudly, and the goddess is invoked to descend upon the chosen one. Soon one of the girls will act as if possessed with the spirit, and it is understood that the choice has fallen on her.” (Elmore 1915, 29)

¹⁴Often this practice effectively led to a life of prostitution and abuse (Vijaisri 2005, 397).

¹⁵Elmore describes part of the *matangi*’s role, “She marches behind the master of ceremonies in the procession, and when her time comes she becomes possessed by the spirit of Mathamma. She then runs about among the people, touching them with her stick, spurting toddy from her mouth over them, and backing up against them, all the time uttering strange wild cries. Not only the Madigas, but the higher castes, even Brahmans, stand in line, as anxious to be spat upon and touched by her stick and her person as are the lowest. There is a current story of a rajah who was omitted by the Matangi, she thinking that he was too great for her humiliating ceremonies, but he insisted upon sharing the blessing.” (Elmore 1915, 31)

¹⁶The *gramadevata* tradition is becoming more personal. Though *gramadevatas* are still primarily worshiped communally, a trend has been recognized. This change was likely influenced by formal goddess worship, especially given the rise of the *bhakti* tradition.

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