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Hindu Thinking on Śakti : A Historical Perspective

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Chapter 1

Hindu Thinking on *Śakti*: A Historical Perspective

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1. THE THREE CHIEF GODS OF HINDUISM

The Hindu pantheon to be observed in Kathmandu is virtually the same as that on the Indian subcontinent. In this sense Hinduism in Kathmandu also comes under the umbrella of the so-called "great tradition." The core of the pantheon of the Hindu "great tradition" consists of three male gods, namely, Brahman, Viṣṇu and Śiva, but in the early stages of Hinduism the Śaivites worshipping Śiva, whose prototype was the Vedic god Rudra, and the Vaiṣṇavites worshipping the sun-god Viṣṇu, who appeared in late Vedic times, predominated. The traditions of these two schools have survived down to the present day. The exploits of Śiva and Viṣṇu were described in epics such as the *Mahābhārata* and enjoyed considerable popularity, while by comparison Brahman was not especially popular. The word *brahman* originally signified words endowed with magical power, but the philosophers of the Upaniṣads came to conceive of it as an impersonal cosmic principle. Later this cosmic principle became the anthropomorphic god Brahman, but there did not develop any sect devoted solely to the worship of this anthropomorphic Brahman. During the Gupta period (4th–6th cent.), when the influence of Hinduism began to overshadow that of Buddhism, there evolved a system centred on the three chief gods, Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahman, who came to divide the "work of the gods" amongst themselves; Śiva presided over the destruction of the world, Brahman over its creation, and Viṣṇu over its preservation. Until then there had not been much contact between the Śaivites and Vaiṣṇavites, but they now became linked, with Brahman acting as a buffer, and thus the core of the "great tradition" of Hinduism was formed. The overall structure of Hindu mythology as centred on these three chief gods has changed little since then, but from about the tenth century onwards goddess worship gradually came to the fore, and the nucleus of the Hindu pantheon came to consist of these three chief gods, each accompanied by a goddess or consort.

The importance of the triad of Śiva, Brahman and Viṣṇu has at any rate remained unchanged, and evidence of this can be seen in sculptures and other artistic representations to be found in Kathmandu. For example, Fig. 1 shows a relief of these three gods carved on the *torana* above the entrance to the main sanctuary of Bhāt Bhateni,¹⁾ with Brahman, depicted in the centre, having been



Figure. 1. *Torāṇa* above entrance to main sanctuary of Bhāt Bhateni (Kathmandu), showing Brahman (centre), Śiva (left), and Viṣṇu (right).



Figure. 2. Śiva-*līṅga* in the compound of Kumbheśvar Temple (Patan).

provisionally accorded precedence. Hindus have almost no personal communion with Brahman himself, and images of him, although not completely nonexistent, are incomparably fewer than those of Śiva and Viṣṇu. A carving of Brahman's face standing in the precincts of the ancient Hindu temple of Kumbheśvar² in Patan is reproduced in Fig. 2. Brahman is usually represented with four faces, each with a different expression.

2. VIṢṆU

Hindu myths usually start with Śiva, who is responsible for the destruction of the world, and then move on to Brahman, lord of creation, but for convenience' sake I shall here begin with Viṣṇu, who in the Kathmandu valley shows a greater diversity of forms than Brahman, and is made the object of festivals and religious rites attended by greater numbers of people. A rich assemblage of outstanding representations of Viṣṇu is to be found in the temple of Changu Narayan, situated on a hill about fifteen kilometres east of Kathmandu city. Lying scattered about the temple courtyard, these images represent Viṣṇu's various incarnations.

The Kathmandu Valley is replete with the energy of ritual activities. Its population has now grown to more than 1,800,000, and it has become a large metropolis where one can even experience traffic jams, but the energy expended by its inhabitants throughout the year on religious events would be inconceivable in other cities. Even when compared, for instance, with Poona, a centre of Brahmanic culture with about the same population in the Indian state of Maharashtra, Kathmandu has a far more religious atmosphere. Setting aside the question of the merits of expending so much energy on religious activities, Kathmandu stands out in today's world, outside the realms of Islam, as a locality where religious energy is expended in concentrated form.

On Kṛṣṇa's birthday (*Kṛṣṇa-jayanti*) women from throughout the Kathmandu valley gather in front of one of the two temples dedicated to Kṛṣṇa in the Darbar Square in Patan. The cowherd Kṛṣṇa is one of Viṣṇu's incarnations, who, according to Hindu myth, sported with the other cowherds' wives, and their dalliances are believed to have taken place in this world. On Kṛṣṇa's birthday the local maidens put on their best clothes and throng the square in the hope that they too may become Kṛṣṇa's "wives." In other words, they also hope to participate in the disports of Kṛṣṇa and the cowherds' wives.

Later Viṣṇu took Lakṣmī as his wife, but Sarasvatī is also looked upon as his wife. These two goddesses are often depicted flanking Viṣṇu in the painted banners (*paṭa*) of Kathmandu.³ Vaiṣṇavī, one of the Eight Mothers, represents the feminine form of 'Viṣṇu,' but she is a goddess who was created later artificially, as it were, and she does not have a history of her own within the mythic corpus. However, Vaiṣṇavī too already has a long history since her appearance as one of the Eight Mothers.

Viṣṇu is frequently likened to a king. The central figures among the images to

be seen around the "Royal Bath" in the quadrangle of Sundari Chowk in Patan are Viṣṇu and his consort. Kings are men of strength who defeat their enemies with their strength. Male deities too generally rely on strength or power in their actions, and naturally enough they do not have much interest in giving birth to things.

The most powerful god in the Vedas was Indra (later incorporated into Buddhism and also known as Śakra). Some scholars regard him as a creator-god, but he was certainly not a lord of creation in the same way as is Yahweh (Jehovah) in the Old Testament. Heaven and earth already existed when Indra was "born." Indra is renowned for his subjugation of the demon Vṛtra, and although he controls changes in the appearance of the world, he is not the actual wellspring of the world itself. The essence of the hero-god Indra was, in other words, also power. But later this power (*śakti*), characteristic of male deities, came to be identified with their female partners (also called *śakti*). Power, the quintessence of male deities, thus came to be conceived of as their spouses.

3. ŚIVA AND GODDESS

In the Kathmandu valley there are many temples, such as Paśupatināth, that are dedicated to Śiva. The image of a "divine family" would seem to be stronger in these Śaivite temples than in Vaiṣṇavite temples. This is probably because no son of Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa plays any role in Hindu mythology. Kṛṣṇa himself often takes the form of a child, being referred to as "the boy Kṛṣṇa" (*bāla-kṛṣṇa*), and is even depicted as an infant crawling on all fours. Viṣṇu's wives are goddesses of wealth and knowledge, and they do not strike one as being particularly "motherly" in nature. Prince Rāma, the hero of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, who later came to be identified with Viṣṇu, does not have any children by his wife Sītā either.

In Śaivite temples, on the other hand, there is an abundance of images relating to Śiva and his wife and sons. Śiva's wife is Pārvatī, daughter of the Himalayas, but she is also known as Umā, which probably means "mother." They have two sons, called Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya (or Skanda). Depictions of Śiva with Pārvatī standing beside him holding Gaṇeśa in her arms constitute the most popular motif in contemporary Hindu painting.

Another important element in the image of Śiva is that of an ascetic. According to Hindu mythology, Pārvatī captured the heart of the ascetic Śiva, and as a result of their marriage Kārttikeya, the god of war, was born. This tale later became the subject of Kālidāsa's poem *Kumārasambhava* (Birth of the Prince).

The chief deity of Bhagavatī Temple in the district of Hadigaon, in the northernmost part of Kathmandu, is Kārttikeya, seated astride a peacock and often depicted with six faces. Facing the figure of Kārttikeya in this temple is an image of Śiva (Maheśvara) with his wife Umā sitting on his left knee. This composition is known as Umā-Maheśvara and is famous not only in Nepal but also throughout India. The braces supporting the roof of the ground floor of Bhagavatī Temple are adorned with images of the Eight Mothers, who surround and protect Kārttikeya.

This Bhagavatī Temple thus gives expression to a cosmos composed of Śiva and his “family.”

Śiva’s essence is power, especially sexual power. Although he is known as the god who destroys the world, his essence is life energy, as is evident from the fact that his most popular symbol is the *liṅga* (phallus). This image of the *liṅga* as Śiva’s symbol plays an important role in Haṭha Yoga, the main current in later schools of Yoga, manifesting itself in the person of the practitioner of Haṭha Yoga. The theories of Haṭha Yoga posit an invisible “meta-body” of the same shape and size as the practitioner’s physical body. The centre of the meta-body is traversed from top to bottom by a channel with nerve centres called *cakras* in the coccyx, genitals, solar plexus, chest and throat. In the lowest *cakra* is a *liṅga*, around which is coiled a sleeping snake called Kuṇḍalinī. This snake is female and represents power (*śakti*). Through exercises involving “breath” (*prāṇa*), the *yogin* or practitioner sets about arousing this sleeping goddess. After having gradually guided the snake with its raised head up the central channel over a period of about forty days, the practitioner draws it into the thousand-petalled *cakra* in the crown of his head. He then experiences the union of the male principle represented by Śiva with the female principle represented by Kuṇḍalinī, and through this union he achieves his goal of the merging of the individual with the whole or the “sacred” cosmos.⁴⁾

In this type of Yogic theory, the female principle is considered to be active, and Śiva is both the place where the goddess sleeps and the abode that awaits the snake goddess at the end of her journey. Thus Śiva, at least in the context of the *yogin*’s meta-body known as the “subtle body” (*sūkṣma-śarīra*), is less active than the serpentiform goddess. It might also be noted that the goddess is conceived of as pushing open the central channel as she ascends: this too is a reversal of the normal image. The female is here directly identified with the male’s active energy.

If the goddess Kuṇḍalinī represents the active energy (*śakti*) of the god Śiva, what then is Śiva himself? There are no traces of Śiva as the god of destruction in this *liṅga* that serves as the goddess’s abode. Śiva is represented in many different forms (*mūrti*), including the *liṅga*, and one of these is called the “form of coming forth from the *liṅga* (*liṅga-udbhava-mūrti*).” In this form, Śiva manifests himself by bursting up through a cylindrical *liṅga*. But Śiva does not spring forth from the *liṅga* inside the *cakras*. In this case, Śiva’s *liṅga* functions as a receptacle of power, a function that is usually allocated to the female. This could be regarded as the result of a bifurcation of the two functions of power and its locus (or receptacle) with which Śiva was originally endowed, with power having come to be conceived of as a goddess.

In its external appearance, the *liṅga* is definitely a phallus, and the making of *liṅgas* as symbols of Śiva derives from ancient phallicism, which was incorporated into Śaivism with the emergence of Hinduism. This symbol presumably signifies life energy, which might be described as a primordial symbolic meaning that can be inferred directly from the shape of the phallus.

Although the *liṅga* usually takes the form of a phallus, it is sometimes represented in the shape of an egg. Not only in Kathmandu, but also in India, egg-shaped stones from two or three centimetres to more than ten centimetres in length are worshipped as *liṅgas*. These stones are generally semitransparent, and those with bright lines resembling veins are especially popular. They are clearly symbols of the "cosmic egg." This symbolism of the cosmic egg can be seen not only in the case of oviform stones, but also in the case of the phallic *liṅga*. Like the phallus, symbols of the cosmic egg also contain elements of a primordial symbolic meaning. But it is also true that their significance as symbols of the cosmic egg includes doctrinal meanings that have been nurtured within mythic and philosophical traditions.

At any rate, Śiva's *liṅga* originally had the two meanings of "power" and "the world as the locus of power," but in the doctrines of Haṭha Yoga "power" became the goddess Kuṇḍalinī while "the world as the locus of power" became the god Śiva. The *yogin*'s goal is to experience the union of the female principle of power (or energy) and the male principle of the locus of power (or matter) within his own body.

The male god Śiva had the two functions of energy and matter (or mass) not only in Haṭha Yoga but also in all schools of Hinduism. Of these two functions, that of energy (*śakti*) came to be conceived of as a goddess following the emergence of goddess worship. However, energy operates with matter as its locus, and in the ancient world this "matter" was conceived of as the "mother." Because goddesses held little sway in the Vedic religion and early Hinduism, the phallus also bore the symbolism associated with the archetypal mother. But as goddess worship began to flourish in the later stages of Hinduism, the power of male gods came to be symbolized by a woman, and at the same time there was also a growing tendency to conceive of the matter constituting the world in female terms as well. In other words, there developed in late Hinduism a strong tendency to envision both energy and the world representing its locus in female form. Thus, in goddess worship (Śāktism), the activity that unfolds on the locus (matter), ruled by the female principle also came to be conceived of in female terms, and the generation of the phenomenal world came to be discussed in the context of the female principle.

4. BHAIRAVA (BHAIRAB)

Śiva in his terrifying form is known as Bhairava (Bhairab in Nepali). The *Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa* compiled in India lists eight manifestations of Bhairava (Ruru, Unmatta, Saṃhāra, Bhīṣaṇa, Asitāṅga, Kapāla, Krodha and Pracāṇḍa), although it is not clear when Bhairava became eight in number.⁵⁾ In addition, there is also a tradition on the Indian subcontinent of sixty-four forms of Bhairava.⁶⁾ But today various types of images of Bhairava may be seen, and the Kathmandu valley is typical of those areas where the Bhairava cult remains deep-rooted.

The name Bhairava means "terrifying," and as may be seen in Fig. 3,



Figure. 3. Śveta-Bhairava. A typical depiction of Bhairava's face, taken from a line drawing purchased in Kathmandu (31.5 cm × 24 cm).

representations of him emphasize his frightful aspects, showing him with a gaping mouth, protruding fangs, raised eyebrows, wrathful eyes, hair standing on end, and a hair ornament of human skulls. As is indicated by the skull-cup filled with blood that he holds in his right hand, Bhairava is a god who demands blood rites. The eight Bhairavas form pairs with the Eight Mothers and are positioned on the periphery of the Hindu pantheon. The Eight (or Seven) Mothers became members of the Hindu pantheon as the wives of gods who were already well-known in the early stages of Hinduism, and later they became the partners of the eight manifestations of Bhairava. Some of these forms of Bhairava have, for example, a *garuḍa* or boar as their mount, and they thus appear to preserve vestiges of their partners' former "husbands." However, the form of Bhairava that rides a *garuḍa*, for instance, has no direct relationship with Viṣṇu. Bhairava represents one aspect of Śiva, but there are virtually no connections between the different forms of Bhairava and the former spouses of the Eight Mothers.

5. GODDESSES AND THEIR FAMILIES

The Kathmandu valley has many temples belonging to the Śākta sects of goddess worship, and in these temples one often encounters statues and paintings of

a goddess surrounded by her "family." In early Hinduism Śiva was depicted together with his family, but in later Hinduism one often finds depictions of family images centred on a goddess. One such "holy family" centred on a goddess can be seen at the entrance to Taleju Temple in the Old Palace at Bhadgaon. Here the goddess takes a form of Kālī identified with Cāmuṇḍā, and she is accompanied by her sons Kārttikeya and Gaṇeśa, her husband Śiva in the form of Bhairava, and also Viṣṇu. This is an example of a Hindu pantheon centred on a goddess.

Another example of a pantheon centred on a goddess may be seen at the Śākta Pūrṇacandī Temple.⁷⁾ The façade of the multitiered pagoda of this temple has three doors, each surmounted by a *torāṇa*. The middle *torāṇa* depicts the goddess Pūrṇacandī, while the *torāṇas* to the left and right (facing) represent Bhairava and Viṣṇu's incarnation Nṛsiṃha ("Man-lion") respectively. In addition, at each of the four points of the compass there are four braces supporting the roof of the ground floor, and these four braces have carvings of the same goddess, Bhairava, and their two sons. The Pūrṇacandī Temple thus gives expression to the Hindu pantheon as centred on a goddess in the form of a three-dimensional cosmos represented by a multitiered pagoda.

6. TYPICAL IMAGES OF THE GODDESS IN KATHMANDU

In this fashion the "man" known as "India" has nurtured a great variety of goddess images (or goddess animas). These images may be of a demon-slaying beauty, as depicted in the *torāṇa* above the entrance to Taleju Temple in Bhadgaon, or of a terrifying woman who devours raw flesh, as may be seen below the same *torāṇa*. The images of the goddess in the Kathmandu valley are typified by the beautiful Durgā, who kills the buffalo-demon, and Kālī, who drinks blood from a skull-cup. In the Kathmandu valley Kālī and Cāmuṇḍā are often regarded as being one and the same. As is indicated by the fact that the eight-armed form of Cāmuṇḍā is known as Bhadrakālī, in many parts of the Indian subcontinent the worship of Kālī and the worship of Cāmuṇḍā partially overlap. Durgā and Kālī (or Cāmuṇḍā) are also said to represent Taleju, the tutelary goddess of the Malla dynasty.

During the period of the Three Kingdoms (1620–1768) a palace was built in each of the three towns in the Kathmandu valley, with a temple dedicated to Taleju, the tutelary goddess of the Mallas, being erected in each palace, and these have survived down to the present day. The symbol of the goddess Taleju in Kathmandu is said to be a jar,⁸⁾ which is a fitting symbol for a goddess, especially a mother-goddess. Jars serve as receptacles for storing grain, and they also represent pouches for enveloping anything living. The overall shape of the symbol of the goddess Taleju in Bhadgaon is also that of a jar, the "belly" of which has been moulded into the visage of the goddess. The symbol of the chief deity of Annapurna Temple in the Asan district of Old Kathmandu is also a jar.⁹⁾

7. MOTHER AS "MATTER"

C.G. Jung looked upon the "mother" as the archetype of mental functions. According to Jung, an archetype does not pertain to content, but is recognized merely as form, and then only in a rather limited way. Nevertheless, Jung recognized that the archetype "mother" assumed a variety of forms, such as mother, goddess, earth, cave, womb, pot, and vulva.¹⁰⁾

The "mother" who is both the earth and a womb represents the body that gives birth to and nurtures creatures. It is the locus or ground from which all things are born, where they grow up, and to which they return upon death. At least in Hindu philosophy there has been since ancient times an underlying belief in the existence of such a ground underpinning everything else. This ground is not a creator that transcends the world. Rather, it is considered that the very matter of which the world is composed unfolds and reveals itself. In *Sāṃkhya*, a representative school of Hindu philosophy that also provided the basis of Hindu beliefs, it is considered that the world arises through the unfolding of primary matter (*prakṛti*). This *prakṛti* corresponds to the archetype "mother" possessed of mass. *Prakṛti* has not yet assumed the manifold appearances of the phenomenal world, and as such it is recognized only as form, but it should not be forgotten that it already represents matter. This matter is composed of three elements or qualities, namely, *sattva*, the essence of which is light, *tamas*, the essence of which is darkness, and *rajas*, the essence of which is the movement linking *sattva* and *tamas*. These three elements reflect compassion, darkness and passion, which are the three essential aspects of the "mother." At the same time, these three qualities also represent the constituent matter of all phenomena, or the ground of their qualities. The philosophically distinctive feature of these three constituent elements of *prakṛti* lies in the fact that they represent both qualities and matter. This also parallels the essential character of the "mother" in Hinduism. In other words, the (mother-) goddess in Hinduism is both the power involved in the self-formation of the world and the matter from which the world is created.

It was noted earlier that Śiva's *līṅga* signifies the world or the cosmic egg, but in the Śākta sects the goddess has recovered her original symbolism of the jar of living creatures or the earth-goddess as cosmic egg. In addition, power (*śakti*), which had represented the essence of Hindu male deities, also became a characteristic of goddesses.

In a world characterized by this kind of archetypal "mother," rather than trying to free themselves from "her," the ground of their life energy, there develops a tendency for the actions of living creatures to lead them further into her depths.

Let us consider Fig. 4. Here, as soon as something is born, it seeks to break away from the mother and stand alone, but eventually, after having expended all its energy, it returns to nature, its constituent matter. Arrow a indicates the strength of the "spirit" seeking independence from the "flesh" of the mother, while arrow b represents the strength of the mother calling the "spirit" back into the "flesh." C

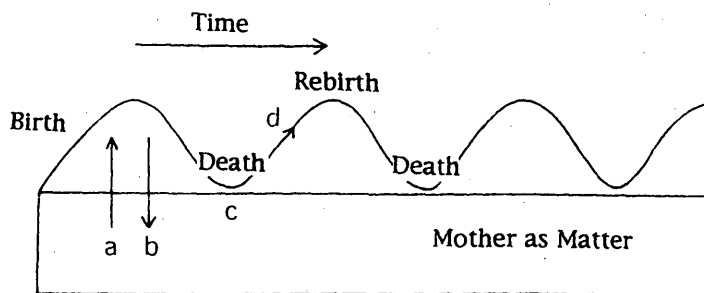


Figure. 4. Example of life activities extending outside the “mother.”
a Force drawing living beings away from the “mother”
b Force drawing living beings back to the “mother”
c Death
d Vector leading to rebirth

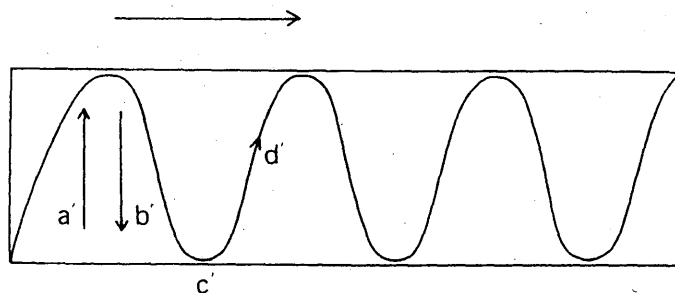


Figure. 5. Example of life activities being conducted within the “mother.”
a' Active energy within the “mother” as matter
b' Vector leading to cessation within the “mother” as matter
c' Cessation of activity
d' Vector leading to rebirth

indicates “death,” the result of all energy having been expended, while *d* is the vector where the same being starts anew the activities leading to rebirth. In this diagram living creatures are thus considered to seek independence from their mother to whom they then return and from whom they are reborn. This is probably close to the scheme envisaged by Jung.

Next, let us consider Fig. 5. Here, both life energy (*śakti*) and its ground (matter, nature, world) correspond to or reside within the “mother.” The energy whereby that which has been born strives to grow is female, and so is the constituent matter of the bodies of living beings. Therefore, in this case the cessation of activity (*c'*) provides the chance for escaping from the brute force of the “mother.” In the classical Yoga school, based on Sāṃkhya philosophy and established between the second and fourth centuries A.D., it is believed that when one has brought to cessation all mental activity, which represents the activity of the female

principle *prakṛti*, one is able to make contact with one's goal, the male principle *puruṣa* (soul or spirit). Classical Yoga does not, of course, form part of the Śākta sects, but it is a fact that already before the Śākta sects had established their influence, there existed in India a tradition that considered both energy and its ground to be female.

In a world such as this, dominated by the female principle, regardless of the individual's efforts to break free from the "mother," it is ultimately impossible to escape from her. This is because effort, or the energy underpinning all activity, is itself nothing other than the "mother's" energy. The aim of classical Yoga is to control the activities of *prakṛti*, the embodiment of the "mother," and to be thereby liberated from her brute force. In this instance, *prakṛti*, corresponding to the "mother" or the female principle, represents the "profane," which must be brought to cessation, while *puruṣa*, corresponding to the male principle, represents the "sacred" goal.

In the Śākta sects, on the other hand, *prakṛti* has a positive value as the sacred and something that is to be affirmed. The activities of living organisms by no means pertain to the profane, which is to be negated. What holds importance for the adherents of these sects is activating the energy of the living organism rather than bringing it to cessation. This does not mean, however, that the male principle represented by Śiva is part of the profane that is to be brought to cessation. Here Śiva has almost none of the "electric charge" of the energy characteristic of religious conduct such as might be described as either sacred or profane, and instead he serves as the locus where the female principle, with her sacredness raised to dangerous levels, preserves her energy.

This way of thinking in the Śākta sects is also related to the practices of Haṭha Yoga. These practices, which were systematized after the establishment of classical Yoga and probably after the tenth century, show evidence of the strong influence of goddess worship. In these practices, which attach great importance to psychophysiological exercises, the practitioner awakens the sleeping goddess, who has ceased all activity, and gradually activates her energy. Eventually the female energy, in a state of constant activation, rests within the male locus. This represents the union of the two. As Tantric trends, or a tendency to affirm reality, grew stronger in India, the "mother" recovered her symbolism of the earth-goddess and regained her value as the sacred. But the images of the goddesses who give form to this "mother" are not uniform, for the "mother," representing the fountainhead of life energy, is also the goddess of death.

NOTES

- 1) PRUSCHA 1975: K. 314; Tachikawa 1984: 25.
- 2) PRUSCHA 1975: Pl. 150.
- 3) TAMURA *et al.* 1986: No. 148.
- 4) TACHIKAWA 1988: 155.

- 5) SHASTRI 1973: IV, 19, 77-78.
- 6) GUPTA 1972: 76.
- 7) PRUSCHA 1975: Pl. 33.
- 8) This information was obtained in 1987 from a priest at Taleju Temple in Kathmandu.
- 9) TACHIKAWA 1987: 123.
- 10) JUNG 1986: 15.

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