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This is a rich and stimulating book charting the fortune of Kālī, and to a lesser extent Uma, devotional poetry and worship in Bengal from the eighteenth century to the present day. It is one of the new crop of studies that seek to place devotional Bhakti movements within the broader context of social and cultural history (e.g. Peter van der Veer, William Pinch, Vasudha Dalmia’s essays on the Vallabha sampradāy and on Bhārīndu Hariśchandra as a modern Bhakta, or Mark Juergensmeyer’s and Nandini Gooptu’s studies of Bhakti revivals among the urban poor). This is a very worthwhile and even urgent enterprise if we are to understand the place religion and religious ideas continue to play in the making of the modern and post-modern world.

Specifically, the book places the sudden appearance of devotional Śākti poetry centred on Kālī in the mid-eighteenth century within the turbulent political history (ch. 1) and the religious and literary traditions (ch. 5) of Bengal. The two early practitioners of this new genre of Śākti padaśāhit, Rāmprāsad Sen (c. 1718–1775) and Kamalākānta Bhatācaryā (c. 1769–1821), as well as their patrons, belonged to the elite world of royal courts and zamindari estates, and increasingly that of Calcutta nouveaux riches. Composing poetry to Kālī was thus a high-caste, elite pursuit, not a popular movement. Zamindars were attracted to this deity, the author argues, because ‘her prowess and majesty mirrored what they were themselves attempting to obtain, as they jockeyed for power and prestige in a difficult political climate’. From as early as the late sixteenth century, zamindars had ‘used the public worship of Durgā, and later Kālī, to indicate social standing and prestige proper to those who attempted to imitate Mughal court lifestyles’ (p. 31). The eighteenth century, in particular, witnessed an explosion of raja-sponsored Pūjās, a phenomenon associated with the patron of Rāmprāsad, Mahārājā Kṛṣṇacandra of Nadia. Given the long-standing association of Śākti, the feminine principle, with royalty, the deliberate adoption of Śākti deities by several of the landowning families of Bengal can be interpreted, therefore, in the context of their claims to royal identity and power (p. 32). It can also be seen as a way for these ruling families of marking caste boundaries, at a time of low-caste social mobility through Vaiṣṇavism, while at the same time they extended their sphere of influence through conscious techniques of popularization (p. 33).

It was probably Rāmprāsad Sen who popularized the singing to the Goddess beyond these elite circles. In doing so, he straddled exoterism and...
esoterism, Tantra and Bhakti, and softened the Tantric Goddess into a
caring Mother. In the absence of the institutional framework of a sampra-
dāya and a lineage, the transmission of this kind of poetry has been largely
oral, and McDermott skillfully uses this fact to give us a mini-history of its
reception. While successive generations of transmitters and anthologizers
have played down the Tantric references and elements in Rāmprasaṅd’s
poems (the ratio between Tantric and Bhakti poems tilts unmistakeably
towards the latter, p. 93), McDermott rightly restores the Tantric layers,
which show that Rāmprasaṅd sang as a Tantric sādhak or practitioner. Curi-
ously, her analysis of the hagiography around Rāmprasaṅd and the other
Sākta poets (chs 2–4) shows that while those writing on them have played
down the Tantric elements in the poetry, they have gradually elevated the
poets themselves to the position of ‘great sādhaks’, whose miracles and
powers (siddhis) are proof of their exalted spiritual status. Another result
of this exercise is the interesting difference between hagiographical and
historical accounts: while the hagiography sets great store to/ın the special
relationship between the poet-saints and their royal patrons, following the
well-known pattern of worldly ruler acknowledging the superiority of the
spiritual figure, the historical sources make no special mention of the poets
within the context of the kings’ patronage. The land donation made to
Rāmprasaṅd, for example, can only be counted as average and is drowned
among a myriad such donations to other scholars and holy men.

The development of devotional Sākta poetry to Kālī and Umā can also be
seen as a chapter in the long and composite history of these two goddesses.
McDermott sets the stage for it in chapter 5, which is a wonderfully clear
and concise overview of the religious and literary history of Kālī and Umā,
as well as an example of her careful and thoughtful approach to the subject
which combines textual, ritual and poetic sources. Here we see that the
fierce, non-Brahminical Goddess (who is mentioned at times as the deity of
marginal people and tribes) gradually acquires benevolent aspects and
greater philosophical depth and complexity. She appears centrally in the
Tantras, with a range of iconographic descriptions (which are also aids to
meditation) and a variety of statements about her philosophical essence.
With the Maṅgalakāvyas (15–18c), long narrative poems in Bengali which
tell the story of a god or goddess, of how he or she consolidate their position
in the pantheon and acquired following among humans, Kālī’s auspicious
character is further strengthened. Already Maṅgalakāvyas incorporate the
short lyrical songs (padas) popularized by Vaiṣṇava devotion into their nar-
rative frames. The Sākta poets, too, inherited from Vaiṣṇava devotionalism
a poetic style and ‘a set of familiar conventions for indicating the divine-
human relationship in all its emotional timbres’ (169). McDermott dis-
cusses the Sahajiyās and Bauls as other possible influences, but her conclu-
sion is that Sākta Padāvalī derives from Sākta Tantra and Gauḍiya
Vaiṣṇavism (172). Umā, for example, already the long-suffering wife of an
irresponsible Śiva in some Maṅgalakāvyas, becomes for Rāmprasaṅd and the
other Sākta poets the subject of emotional poems that focus on the expecta-
tion of her mother Menakā for Umā’s arrival in the autumnal season, and
on her grief at Umā’s annual departure for her husband’s abode (200).
With a phenomenon typical of Bhakti poetry (think of Mīrā Bāī, Sūrdās and Kabīr), folk songs are given a new spiritual twist.

But what does it mean that Rāmprasaḍ and his followers ‘popularise’ and ‘soften’ the Tantric Goddess? The remaining three chapters of the book examine the Śākta Pāḍāvālt in order to answer this question (and there is a companion volume with translations of the poetry by the author, Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kālī and Umā from Bengal, brought out by Oxford University Press in 2000). The poems, as they have come down in oral transmission and have later been collected in printed form, show Rāmprasaḍ delighting in the contrast between the fierce, the beautiful and benign aspects of Kālī, more often called Śyāma, the Dark One. In the majority of the poems, however, she is beautiful most of the time. A characteristic of these poems, typical of Bhakti religiosity, is the closeness between the devotee and the deity (for a different spin on the theme, see the translations and essay in the Ramanujan, Rao and Shulman book When God is a Customer: Telugu courtesan songs by Kṣetrayya and Others, University of California Press, 1994). The poet pleads to, chides and delightfully lambasts a Goddess who is all-powerful but also close to his heart. Commenting on Kālī’s nakedness (a feature fading out of modern Kālī, as McDermott points out) and on her standing on the chest of her consort, Śiva, Rāmprasaḍ says:

Kālī, why are You naked again?
Good grief, haven’t you any shame?
Mother, don’t you have clothes?
Where is the pride of a king’s daughter?
And, Mother, is this some family duty—
This standing on the chest of Your man? (p. 195)

Typical of Bhakti poetry is also the use of imagery taken from everyday life and occupations, and in modern poets such as these one finds striking images of law-courts and estates, rents and sale deeds (see p. 198). A Tantric sādhak and a Bhakta, Rāmprasaḍ in his songs shows a tension between valuing and rejecting ritual; many of those dabbling in Śākta Pāḍāvālt were not themselves sādhaks, and Tantric references are rare or absent from their poems.

An impressive overview of nineteenth-century poetic production (in ch. 8) allows the author to make some general points about the diffusion of this genre during this period. Elite-courtly composition continued in private circles, though changing tastes among the elites made it into somewhat of a minority genre. Rāmprasaḍ had popularized this kind of poetry beyond elite circles, we have seen, and poems to the Goddess (but more often to Durgā than to Kālī) figure in the sea of popular compositions, though vastly outnumbered by those centred on Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, a subject, according to the author, which offered greater possibilities for poetic invention. Only those poets who were personally devoted to Kālī wrote compositions dedicated to her. One aspect of the democratization and diffusion through song was that the specific focus on Kālī and the Tantric dimension are watered down or absent. Song genres meant for elite consumption, like the tāppā,
by contrast feature Durgā and Kālī and with none of the softening and sweetening of popular devotion (but also without the Tantric undertones). Several things may account for this relatively limited diffusion of the Śākta Padaśāh in the nineteenth century. One is the absence of a Śākta sampradāya which would collect and preserve the poems; another is undoubtedly greater popularity and diffusion of Vaiṣṇavism among various strata of Bengali society, but also the greater ability of Vaiṣṇavism, through Orientalist speculations and Indian intellectuals like Bankimchandra Čaṭṭopādhyāya or Dvijendralal Mitra, to project Vaiṣṇavism as the ‘national religion’ of the Hindus (see the chapter in Vasudha Dalmia’s book The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions, 1997). Last but not least came the Western-influenced distaste of the Bengali Hindu bhadralok for what they perceived as the idolatry, blood sacrifice and primitive mythology associated with the worship of the Goddess (p. 295).

Two factors counteracted this retreat into private worship. One was the great popularity of Rāmakṛṣṇa, himself a devotee of the Goddess. Though this aspect was somewhat downplayed in the subsequent construction of Hinduism by his spiritual successor and founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, Svami Viyekananda, the Mission is still a major patron of public performances of Śākta Padaśāh (see ch. 4). The second factor was that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Śāktism ‘once again’ became media for political aspirations for Bengali nationalists. ‘No longer an embarrassment, Kālī’s world was a source of strength, power and independence’ (296). Bankimchandra’s hymn ‘Bande Mātaram’ is the most famous example and became a nationalist slogan, but Kaji Najrul Islam’s many poems to the Mother also testify to the range of political aspirations that came to be attached to the genre. This was also a period of renewed scholarly interest in the Śākta poets and their compositions. In conclusion, McDermott speculates whether there would be a resurgence of interest in Kālī’s martial symbolism were the BJP to oust the communists in Bengal (296).

Other fascinating questions raised by the author relate to the specificity of Bengali Śāktism and its difference from other strands of Bhakti. Why, she asks for example, were there no women among Śākta poets in Bengal? And why is Bengali Śāktism theologically inclusive, making way for Kṛṣṇa, Vaiṣṇava gurus and Vaiṣṇava images in its temples, while the reverse is rarely the case? In the first case, McDermott points to the history of acceptance of female gurus in Bengali Tantrism, and indeed to the substantial presence of female devotees to the Goddess, but argues that among the elites who practised and patronized the genre, female literacy was not encouraged and female authorship even less so. She put the question to some interviewees, and her conclusion was that ‘bhakti expressed through ritual seems just as important’ to them ‘as that verbalized through poetry’ (154). Among street performers of Śākta songs we do find some women, but they did not sing exclusively of the Goddess and were in no way comparable to the phenomenon of the wandering Vaiṣṇavīs: ‘unlike the Bengali Vaiṣṇava sampradāya, which provided a structure to which women who had dropped out of normal societal roles could belong, the Śākta community
was more centered on ritual and more difficult of access’ (153). Certainly
the feminist publishing house Kāli for Women thinks that Kālī has a lot
for women, too. As to the second question, one can point to the peculiar
social openness but theological exclusivity of Vaiṣṇava sampradāyas, where
stories (vārtās) warned members against the terrible punishments they
would incur for even the most minor slip from the single-minded devotion
and loyalty to the chosen deity and the Ācārya.

The book ends with some discussion of the current popularity of Śākta
poetry, thanks to the cheap technology of audio cassettes. Her coverage of
the existing repertoires and interviews with singers and listeners show that
despite the continuing popularity of the Durgā Puja festival, the taste for
Goddess songs is a minority one in Bengal today, and the emphasis is almost
exclusively on the beautiful, benign Goddess of calendar art, the deeper
Tantric roots forgotten by all but a few. In the conclusions she takes up this
point again in the context of other instances of ‘religious development’ of
goddesses in South India and Shri Lanka.

This is a wide-ranging, rewarding and successful book, to be recom-
mended to students of modern history and all those interested in religious
studies and in the region of Bengal. In the coverage of history, both general,
religious and cultural, it is admirable for its breadth as well as its attention
to detail, and it contains a wealth of both specific as well as general argu-
ments. A most impressive first work by a promising scholar.

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