



Fig. 1: Preparation for Durga Pūjā festival of Navaratri. Unfinished Durga sculptures made from wood and straw. (Photo L. Safford)



Fig. 2: Durga Pūjā festival of Navaratri. Unfinished Durga sculptures made from wood, straw, and covered in clay. (Photo L. Safford)



Fig. 3: Finished Durga Pūjā statues.

Image source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pratima.jpg>.



Fig. 4: Durga statue lowered into the Hooley River at end of Pūjā.

Image source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pratim.jpg>.

Water, Wood, and Women

THE PERSISTENCE OF ANCIENT TRADITIONS IN MODERN INDIA

By Lisa B. Safford

In the state of Bengal, in northeastern India, the annual September–October harvest and fertility festival called *Durga Pūjā* (“offering to Durga”) generates a massive half-year effort of preparation for its nine nights (*Navaratri*) of celebrations.¹ Durga is a three-eyed, ten-armed, buffalo-demon destroying Hindu warrior goddess. Durga is constructed in wildly varied forms from wooden armatures wrapped in straw and covered with unfired clay dug from the bed of the sacred Hoohley River (a tributary of the Ganges) at dozens of flourishing workshops in the Kumartuli and Patuapara districts of Kolkata. (Figs. 1–2) The elements of construction—straw, wood, and clay—all come from the Cosmic Mother earth. After being anointed, painted, clothed, bedecked in jewels (Fig. 3), displayed, and venerated in makeshift shrines (*pūjā pandals*) situated throughout the city, the statues are solemnly paraded, accompanied by hymns and music, and tearfully lowered into the Hoohley River, returning the goddess to her source, having completed her yearly visit to bless her human children.² (Fig. 4) She is solemnly venerated with this invocation:

*We bow our heads to the Primal Spirit who covers the universe . . . to the feet worshiped by the world . . . to the Protectress of the world. Save us, O Durga. Thou art the only way in the forest, in wars, in the midst of enemies, in fire, ocean, deserts or in courts of justice. . . . We are sunk in the great and unfathomable sea of danger and thou art the only way to salvation.*³

During the Pūjā, shops, schools, and offices are closed and streets jammed far into the night with fancy-dressed devotees. According to reporter Somini Sengupta, the festival is quite something to behold: “Half Mardi Gras and half Christmas . . . [it] is the most important religious event for Hindus” in this region of northeast India. “It is art and kitsch, visual excess and noisy devotion.” Over 1,100 elaborately decorated, temporary, public (and countless private) enclosures are built to house the grandiose and often gaudy clay statues whose details describe the goddess’ dual aspects:

*martial prowess—spear and club in hand, she is portrayed as slaying a demon (half man, half buffalo) at her feet—and benign motherhood. The festival celebrates her homecoming with her four children in tow. Her story represents the oldest fable: the victory of good over evil.*⁴

Historians have conjectured that the urban society of the Indus River Valley created forms of worship centered on communal purification rites in large public baths, rituals at sacred tree shrines, and the creation of small clay female sculptures.

The largest of the Pūjā Pandals welcomes a half-a-million visitors a day, and plays Bollywood movie music and Strauss waltzes, while attendees compete for awards given for beauty and splendor. Sengupta observed some new features in the 2007 Pūjā:

some pavilions look more like cool, modern hotel-lobby installations . . . [and] the traditional system of neighborhood fund-raising is disappearing in favor of more lucrative corporate sponsorships.⁵

The Pūjā is clearly a big deal in Bengal.

Similar festivals are held throughout the year in other parts of India in celebration of many other deities. Great sums of money and

man hours are donated and devoted to these short-lived enterprises, but probably no greater than what ancient princes of South Asia over many millennia lavished upon the building of monumental temples and shrines surrounded by baths and religious statuary. These celebrate the source and mystery of existence, which is paramount to many Hindus before all else—today as in the past. To become prosperous, to create beauty, to enjoy a long and healthy life, all are meaningless without a deep core of worship. According to Carol Henderson, a cosmic perspective defines the Hindu worldview where all things are linked to everything else. The universe is an intertwining of supernatural and natural forces and “everyone and everything contains supernatural energy in one form or another.”⁶

Philosophically, the typical Western dualism of the natural and supernatural is entirely foreign to Hindus, replaced instead by a respect for dharma, literally duty, and karma, the cause-and-effect consequences that are at work holistically upon the individual and within the universe. Evil, purity, pollution, auspiciousness, piety, duty, action, and emotion are all mingled in a web of infinite relationships. All forms and actions have complex and interrelated meanings, as exemplified by the multifarious interactions of the three foci of this essay: water, wood, and women—embodied in the generative power of *devi*, the multi-dimensional goddess—in ancient and modern worship and art. What accounts for the durability of ideas and practices that are some five millennia old? This article will identify a few of the persistent and vigorous institutions, artifacts, and ideologies evident in today’s India that can be traced back to its distant past, and to search for connections accounting for India’s remarkably resilient cultural heritage, in order to understand more fully the ancient forces still visible within a rapidly modernizing country.

THE CENTRALITY OF RELIGION IN INDIA

A measure of how much religion is still a primary focus of contemporary daily life as it has been for millennia can be ascertained from statistics. There are more temples and shrines in India (2.4 million) than there are schools, colleges, and hospitals combined.⁷ Some argue that the doctrine of interrelatedness, of reincarnation and karma, discourages initiative and fosters a status quo defined by poverty, exploding population, and ethnic and political tensions, set within the context of today’s rapid technological transformations. These are the pressing secular issues of the moment, but to many Indic Hindus, “the moment” is not isolated, but rather is part of a continuum that is broader than these issues and that cannot be limited by time and space. Ethical choices and actions are core values in Hindu thought, guided by the ancient canonical texts—the Vedas, Upanishads, Purāṇas, The Mahabharata, The Ramayana, and so on—that have formed the basis of art, literature, drama, and dance for centuries. No efforts towards social change in India can be efficacious without the acknowledgement of the primacy of history, which is defined as not merely the facts and incidents of the past, but a recurrence of past in the present, and into the future.

Evidence found in the Neolithic age culture of the Indus River Valley in present-day Pakistan indicates that venerating water, trees, and female figurines are very old traditions.⁸ (See map, Fig. 5) This culture is believed to have developed well before the third millennium BCE and its most advanced stage, between 2600 and 1900 BCE, was contemporaneous with the earliest Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Chinese civilizations. Historians have conjectured that the urban society of the Indus River Valley created forms of worship centered on communal purification rites in large public baths, (Fig. 6) rituals at sacred tree shrines, and the cre-

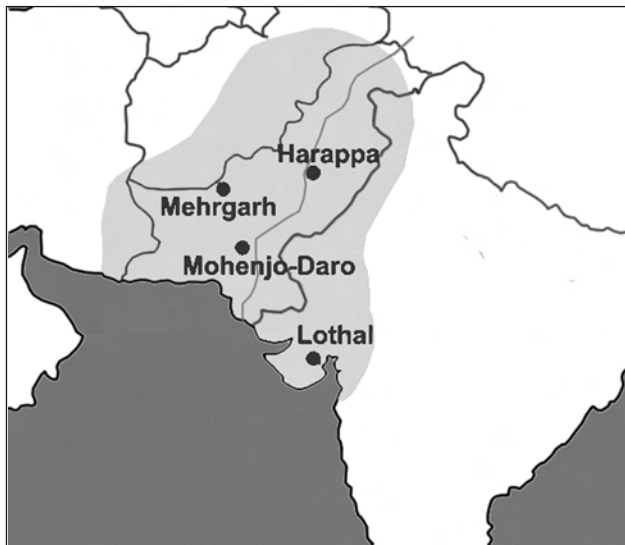


Fig. 5: Map of Indus Valley Civilization.

Image source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Civilt%C3%A0ValeIndoMappa.png>.

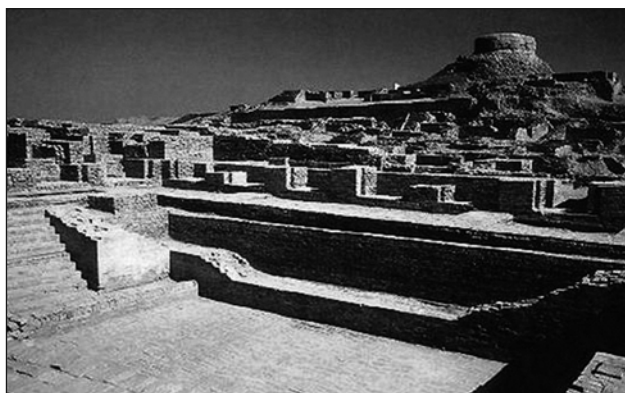


Fig. 6: Great Bath, Mohenjo-Daro, c. 2600-1800 BCE.

Image source: M. Imran at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mohenjodaro_Sindh.jpeg.

ation of small clay female sculptures.⁹ (Fig. 12) Today, these same three elements are found in temples, homes, and street corners throughout India, a testament to the longevity of beliefs and customs that finds no equal in the modern societies descended from the other ancient civilizations mentioned above. Indeed, of all of the ancient cultures studied by archeologists, India's is arguably the only one to sustain an unbroken, evolving thread of thought and practice throughout its over five millennia history and to demonstrate its continued vitality to this day.

The socio-political landscape of twenty-first century India is defined by well-known and astounding statistics: it has the second largest population on earth, with seventy percent of its humanity residing in villages lacking many modern amenities.¹⁰ It is the world's largest democracy and contains the largest middle class—all within a geographical region about one-third that of the US. Discussions on the effects of overpopulation—poverty, hunger, disease, and insufficient housing—dominate global discourse regarding India's present and future. But a consuming issue among much of the populous itself, taken from the headlines of English language newspapers during my visit in the summer of 2003, is one that still simmers with religious and political tension—whether the sixteenth century Babri Masjid Muslim mosque in the city of Ayodhya, itself considered one of the three holiest Hindu cities destroyed by Hindu Nationalist extremists in 1992—should be replaced by a Hindu temple dedicated to Ram, avatar of the god Vishnu (*Viṣṇu*) and hero of the epic tale The Ramayana, which was believed by polemicists to have been situated upon this site in ancient times. The Archeological Survey of India has been pressured to issue judgments regarding the validity of this claim in the hopes of co-opting science and history in the name of religion and politics. Religious tensions and their relationship to political institutions, in other words, are ever-present issues in contemporary India.

To understand the importance of this controversy in a broader context, it is worthwhile to note that since ancient times, religion and politics have always closely coexisted, and to modern observers, they are the bond that has sustained the continuity of India's Hindu traditions. There are three world religions that dominate Indic history. Islam is a late-comer, having arrived in the ninth century in India from its seventh century CE Middle Eastern origins, and Buddhism, of far greater antiquity—arising after the death of the Buddha in the fifth century BCE—was nevertheless all but eradicated from its land of origin not long after Muslims migrated east through the Kyber Pass in the northwest Himalayas. It is Hinduism that remains a vital force and faith to many of the over eighty percent of contemporary Indians who practice the religion. Hinduism is cement that bonds a culture of vast diversity both to its distant past and to its hundreds of contemporary languages, beliefs, traditions, and practices.

DEFINING HINDUISM

Like so much of Indian culture, Hinduism is not simple to define or understand, for it lacks many of the features typically associated with religions in Western culture. There is no founder and no defining scripture, but rather a wealth of poetic and narrative literature. The canonical texts recorded from an oral tradition between the eighteenth century BCE and the sixth century CE—the Vedas, Upanishads, Purānas, The Mahabharata, The Ramayana, and folk literature—continue to inform a cosmo-centric (vs. homo and ethno-centric) worldview, as well as to define individual morality, action, and the arts, to this day. Although in High Hindu belief all are one, there is arguably no single supreme deity, but many—333 million—according to some scholars.¹¹

In practice, there are no fixed rituals, although, as we shall see, some common threads play out in an array of related customs. There are no formal services, and no holy days set aside for worship, although festivals, such as the Durga Pūjā, abound. There is, as there was when Buddhism flourished, a tradition of pilgrimages to sacred sites. And while there are priests, called *Brahmins*, who perform marriage and death rituals, worship itself, called *bhakti*, is conceived as a personal and mutual interaction between worshipper and the divine known as *darshana*, where each encounters and visualizes the other, requiring no intermediary.¹²

Hinduism is a nearly exclusively Indic religion (although it did spread to parts of Southeast Asia). The term “Hindu” is of eighteenth century colonial British origin, and refers to the people of “Hind,” derived from “Sind,” an ancient Greek designation for the northwestern region of the South Asian subcontinent. What we think of as Hinduism can refer to forms of religious beliefs and practices in India from the most basic nature worship to the most intricate philosophical systems. Its origins lie in prehistory, in the Indus Valley Civilization, where artifacts have been unearthed in the past century whose meaning and vitality appear to still live in elements of the Durga Pūjā of modern Bengal.

Before exploring artifacts from the Indus Valley Civilization, it is instructive to understand the term for history in the Sanskrit language, *Itihasa*, which means “thus it happened,” or “this is how it was heard.” It references the role of village elders as the transmitters of oral truths. Many Hindus are aware of their history, of their cultural continuity, regardless of the historical legitimacy of the evidence, for they are not tied to documented sources but to the long tradition of spoken communal belief. Thus, the epic tales, such as The Mahabharata and The Ramayana, progeny of the most ancient oral narrative traditions, are considered as much history as they are literature.¹³ In Bengal today, painters of a folk art known as *kalighat* travel from village to village and sing the great ancient stories to accompany displays of their painted, serialized narratives on scrolls as a form of instruction of their timeless messages to the villagers. (Fig. 7) These ancient stories, however, are mingled with modern news stories that are also sung to serialized painted images, thus providing contemporary *itihasa* as a public service to the residents.



Fig. 7: Kalighat painter sings his story-scroll. The particular scroll shown tells of the destruction of the Twin Towers in 2001 in New York. Behind are story-scrolls of mythic narratives. Kalighat painters are the imparters of news stories both ancient and modern to villagers in India. (Photo L. Safford)

Hindu mythology is rich in personifications, both male and female, of water's purifying and life-giving powers.

THE ANCIENT INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

These ancient stories so often retold today are deeply rooted in the Indus Valley Civilization, which was first discovered in the 1920s when excavations were begun in two sites along the Indus River—Mohenjo-daro to the south and Harappa further to the northeast.¹⁴ Of over 2,600 sites discovered, 150 have since been excavated and five cities of populations between 40,000 and 80,000 are known today. These have revealed a remarkable collection of artifacts pointing to an advanced urban culture, home to indigenous peoples called *Dravidians*, who—according to a widely accepted, but still controversial, theory—were believed to have been displaced and absorbed into a later migration to the region of central Asian, Indo-European speaking peoples, called *Aryans*, beginning around 1800 BCE.¹⁵

The inhabitants were in many ways highly advanced: they developed a written language (still only partially deciphered) and constructed highly organized cities within enclosing walls. Buildings lined wide, paved streets oriented toward the cardinal directions that intersected at right angles to form blocks. Structures were made of fired bricks, each of the exact same weight and size. Many private houses had sophisticated plumbing, and there were large public structures, including baths and granaries. An advanced system of weights and measures, bronze and copper tools, and decorated pottery made from wheel-thrown techniques were found, as were small terracotta, stone, and bronze figurines. A “Tree Temple” and several fire altars probably marked the site of worship in one sacred quarter of the city. There were neither colossal sculptures, massive temples, or painted murals found, nor royal burials and great caches of funerary artifacts that celebrate prestige and authority (as found in Egypt, for example). Also lacking was any evidence of military pursuits, yet this was a highly developed civilization in many respects, comparable to other contemporaneous ancient cultures.

Of particular interest are the large water basins, tree shrines, and clay female figurines. The meaning and purpose of these artifacts can only be conjectured, but historians point to the bath as the locus for purification rituals. The tree, a ubiquitous natural form in a part of the world that was not yet the arid desert that it has become (forests, after all, provided the necessary fuel to bake the bricks used for construction), offered a vertical axis by which to focus contemplation of the generative forces which lay beyond this manifest realm. The female figurine was an embodiment, perhaps a personification, of these unmanifest forces. Although I shall examine each separately, they are linked, then as now, in the rituals and beliefs that permeate all of modern Hindu India.

WATER

The Great Bath of Mohenjo-daro (c. 2600–1800 BCE), with its eight feet thick walls lined with bitumen, is eight feet below floor level, and measures thirty-nine by twenty-three feet. It likely served as a means of performing ritual ablutions that may have been led by priests. Ritual bathing is common today at temple sites and, most famously, along sacred rivers such as the Ganges (Fig. 8), where pilgrims descend before dawn to the river on *ghats* or stone steps, similar to ones found at one end of the Mo-



Fig. 8: Early Morning bathing in the Ganges River, Varanasi. (Photo: L. Safford)

henjo-daro bath, for the purpose of washing away sins, evils, and all forms of suffering.¹⁶ Historically, shrines were built beside rivers, reservoirs, and ponds to accommodate these purification rituals.

A pious Hindu will bathe and don freshly washed clothes before eating each day.¹⁷ If one cannot make it to a sacred water source, then the ritual is performed with surrogate waters poured from containers. *Devi*, the multi-manifest goddess, is worshipped as the purifying waters of *Ganga*, *Sarasvati*, *Yamuna* or whatever form she may take, but her counterpart, the male principle embodied in the sun, *Surya*, is also venerated as it rises in the east. Religious statuary in shrines are also ritually bathed each day in sacred water and then doused in milk, honey, sandalwood paste, yogurt, fruits, coconut water, and sacred ash, before being dressed in silks, jewelry, and floral garlands.¹⁸ Finally, the devotee who worships the statue first sips holy water before it is sprinkled over his head. All of these rituals are performed to affect purification.

Pollution and the purification rituals associated with it stem from ancient beliefs that were codified into a system of castes or *varṇas* (classes), after the arrival in India of *Indo-Aryan* speaking peoples.¹⁹ Those who claim membership in higher classes are the least ritually polluted; those in low (or sub castes, today called *dalits* or untouchables) are the most polluted. Impurity is caused by contact with bodily fluids and dead flesh. Birth into a particular *varṇa* status is a consequence of karma, the accumulated merit attained through previous lives based on how obediently one follows dharma, which consists of duties or rules for maintaining ritual purity. Pollution and purity therefore were, and are, the generating powers underlying the forces of the universe as well as the hierarchies and social interactions of humans.²⁰

Hindu mythology is rich in personifications, both male and female, of water's purifying and life-giving powers. Supreme among them is Vishnu, the sustainer of the universe. He is often, as at the temple at Deogarh (c. 600 CE), depicted in stone carvings, lying upon a multi-hooded cosmic serpent, *Ananta*, and sprouting a lotus plant, the organ of procreative power, from his navel. Together they float upon cosmic waters embodying the source of the underlying energy that permeates all forms of life.²¹ Vishnu's female counterpart, or *Shakti* (energy), is *Lakshmi* or *Shri*, also a water entity. She is also known by the name *Padma*, which means lotus; thus it is she who arises from Vishnu's body. Serpents of all kinds, *nagas* and *naginis* (males and females respec-

The millions of trees worshipped throughout south Asia today are shrines typically devoted to goddesses.

tively), personify the rivers, lakes, and oceans of the earth, and every waterway likewise is personified by a goddess, as for example the great rivers: Ganges, Sarasvati, Brahmaputra, and Yamuna.

At Mamallapuram in southeastern India, devotees purified themselves at water basins before they entered the seventh century CE Shore Temple to worship a reclining stone statue of Vishnu. At the famous Great Relief carved on large boulders nearby, water, symbolizing the cleansing Ganges River, passed from a holding reservoir above to a pool below, along a cleft in the rocks carved with nagas. (Fig. 9) According to Vidya Dehejia, not only ritual purifications, but also political messages, were driven by the water's flow, for King Mamalla I (ruled c. 659–68), of the Pallava kingdom (c. 550–900 CE), bathed in the lower pool to purify himself while reinforcing his status as mediator between the divine and the human realms. Since it was the responsibility of kings to provide adequate water supplies to the people, the message may have been a confirmation of the divine efficacy of the ruler.²²

WOOD

Kings were also the primary patrons supporting the construction of temples throughout India's history. Stone temples are rooted in the second ancient form, the tree shrines, called *devasthanas*, which are surmised from archeological evidence to have existed in the Indus Valley Civilization.²³ An unbroken thread of tree worship is unmistakable, not only in Hindu stone temples that were built upon the sites of earlier tree shrines, but also in later Buddhist monuments. In the tiered umbrellas—*chattras*—placed over the earliest Buddhist mounded reliquary stupas of the second century BCE, symbolizing sacred trees that rise to heaven, the thread is continued.²⁴ Buddhism, which evolved and derived much of its symbolism from pre-existing traditions, richly employed tree imagery. The Buddha's enlightenment occurred at the base of a pipal tree, and his mother *Maya* gave birth to him upon touching the branches of a sal tree. Trees were conceived as sites of powerful generative forces both fecund and spiritual.²⁵ The most ancient Buddhist and Hindu relief carvings show holy trees surrounded by a low stone railing used to demarcate a sacred space, within which were placed, then as now, votive offerings. The god *Indra* was often depicted seated beneath an arbor of the “wish fulfilling tree,” the fruits of which were boons of jewels and silks, symbols of spiritual wealth to the devotee.²⁶ And before cast bronze portable icons became prevalent in the eighth century, during the Pallava and later Chola eras in South India, devotional statues were made out of sacred woods.²⁷

The millions of trees worshipped throughout south Asia today are shrines typically devoted to goddesses.²⁸ They are encountered on busy street corners or at temple compounds. (Fig. 10) Analogous to the female personifications of holy waters, trees were often represented in art entwined with youthful nude women—*dryads* who kick the trunks to fertilize them and bring forth their life energy, their potent sap.²⁹ Women desiring pregnancies leave votive stone tablets called *nagalkas*, carved with intertwined nagas and nagnis, at devasthanas, symbolically unifying the three entities of women, wood, and water in a common procreative cause.³⁰ (Fig. 11) Women in West Bengal worship Durga, “asking for sons, rice, and ploughs,” by offering milk and sugar

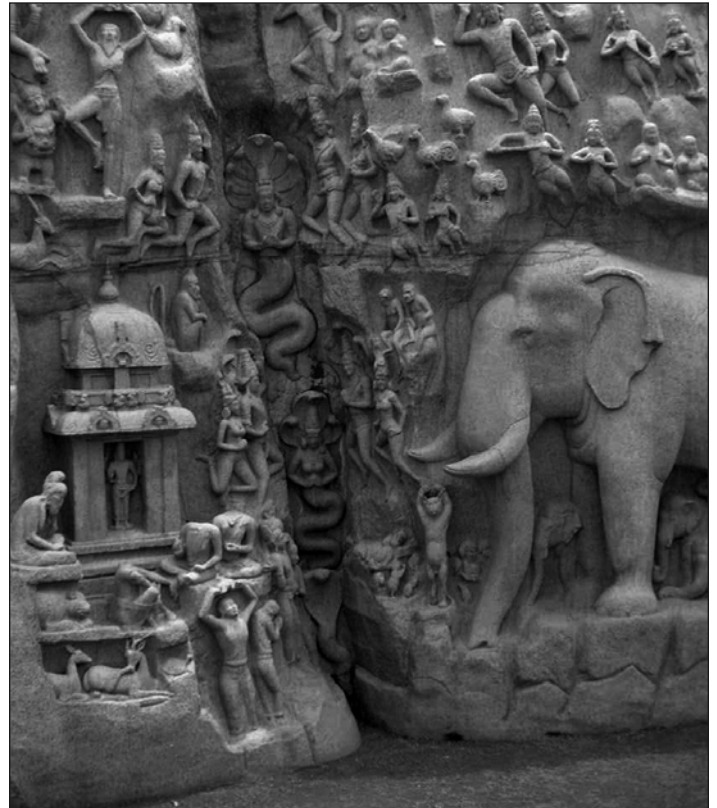


Fig. 9: Detail of The Great Relief, Mamallapuram, seventh century CE, showing nagas and nagnis in the cleft in the rock where water flows between the upper reservoir and the lower pool. (Photo L. Safford)



Fig. 10: Devasthana: Street-side tree Shrine, Mysore. (Photo L. Safford)



Fig. 11: Devasthana: Detail of Tree Shrine with Nagalkas, Mysore. (Photo L. Safford)



Fig. 12: Terracotta figurine, Mohenjo-Daro, c.2600–1900 BCE, 7" tall, National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi.
Image source: *Indian Art* by Vidya Dehejia. Page 34. ©1997 Phaidon Press Limited.

at sheora tree shrines, and “pregnant women or mothers whose children had died when young [will] tie pieces of new cloth dyed in turmeric to the tree after worship . . . [and] hug the tree as if it were a friend.”³¹ The goddess is believed to live within the tree, as well as in statues, “however, the tree roots are marked with vermillion, and called the original seat of worship.”³²

WOMEN

Devi, the mother goddess of the world and the third ancient devotional form was, according to recent studies, the supreme spiritual force in South Asia long before the arrival of a patriarchal veneration by *Aryans* and later rulers.³³ And whereas High Hindu practice reveres the male *Vishnu-Shiva-Brahma trimurti* (the holy trinity of Hindu gods) and its many avatars and incarnations—*Krishna*, *Rama*, and the *Shiva Lingham*, for example, it is *Devi*, creator and destroyer in countless forms, who is worshipped by most of the seventy percent of India's population who live in villages. She is called (among myriad other names) *Mata*, *Ma*, *Amma*, the Cosmic mother; the Womb of the Universe; *Bhagavati*, the supreme god of all existence; *Lakshmi*, goddess of abundance and prosperity; *Durga*, warrior deity who fights evil; and *Kali*, the ferocious destroyer of life. She is *Parvati*, consort of *Shiva*, and *Radha* or *Sita*, consorts of *Krishna* and *Rama* respectively, both avatars of *Vishnu*. She is symbolized by water, the lotus and other forms of vegetation—including trees and the elephant, a "rain cloud walking on the earth," from whose trunk holy waters are sprayed upon her.³⁴ She is earth itself, "the mother of all created beings," according to the ancient *Rigveda*.³⁵

A major source for subsequent female statuary in India can be traced to the various forms of Terracotta Women from Harappa (c. 2500–2000 BCE), a type of small clay figurine usually found inside houses. (See Fig. 12) Somewhat crude in its features, yet astonishing with its costume and jewelry details and especially its massive head ornament, some show signs of burning, perhaps in a ritual ceremony (recall that fire is a male principle). Terracotta clay, made of female earth and hardened with male fire, is a cheaper medium and utilizes simpler technology than either cast metal or carved stone, and was likely intended for mass, rather than elite production. These figures provide the first tentative evidence of an “hour-glass” proportion—full, exposed maternal breasts and hips, and narrow waist with a low slung hip band—which will be repeated in more exaggerated and detailed form in later Buddhist and Hindu statuary. They are conspicuous too for their copious jewelry symbolizing spiritual riches and triumph.³⁶

There are innumerable examples of the Terracotta Woman from Harappa transformed through the centuries into many of the avatars of the divine feminine. However, the most striking re-creation of her in contemporary practice is found in the ephemeral festival images of the Durga Pūjā that live only briefly before returning to their source in the sacred Hooley River. Through their annual creation and ultimate destruction, they define the natural processes of birth, death, and rebirth that inform the cosmos and are embodied in the marriage of water, wood, and women.

CONCLUSION

Water, wood, and women; these three elemental aspects of nature and their function in Hindu worship practices constitute an unbroken thread of ideology and tradition that is rooted in the ancient past, yet reappears with vital energy in many modern settings, such as the Durga Pūjā. Hinduism, as described in this example, is one of the most dynamic forces at play within the rapidly modernizing nation of India, and understanding its heritage is essential for grasping what many Hindus hold dear and why certain issues in modern culture (such as the previously mentioned Ayodhya mosque conflict, for example) are more important than others. ■

NOTES

1. June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls. Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 217. Each night a different aspect or persona of Durga is worshipped.
2. For complete descriptions of the Durga Pūjā see <http://www.businesstravelerindia.com/200210/festival1.shtml> and <http://www.indiaprofile.com/fairs-festivals/god-idols.htm>.
3. Quoted in McDaniel, 209. For a complete discussion of Durga worship in Bengal, including the Pūjā, see chapter 4.
4. Somini Sengupta, "Calcutta Journal: A 10-Armed Goddess Charms a Frenetic Megalopolis" *The New York Times* (October 22, 2007).
5. Ibid.
6. Carol E. Henderson, *Culture and Customs of India (Culture and Customs of Asia)* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 50–51.
7. *India Today*, (July 28, 2003), 34. Based upon the 2001 census; see <http://www.censusindia.net> (accessed June 16, 2010).
8. The Indus Valley culture has also been called *Harappan*, after one of its major cities, and Indus-Saraswati or Greater Indus Valley, in reference to its spread towards river valleys further to the east. For a complete overview of archeological evidence in the Indus Valley region to date see Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, "Cultures and Societies of the Indus Tradition," *South Asia Outreach*, University of Wisconsin, 2006 at http://74.125.155.132/scholar?q=cache:gQscI4YKpEJ:scholar.google.com/&hl=en&as_sdt=1000000000000 (accessed June 16, 2010).

9. The clay objects from the Indus region vary in type, and include male figures, children, and animals. The females may represent deities or worshippers; see Kenoyer, 12.
10. The population is officially 1.027 billion, according to the most recent 2001 census, 1.3 billion unofficially, placing it behind only China. Few villages have paved roads, electricity, etc.
11. High Hindu refers to the beliefs and practices of Brahmin priests at temples, and is distinguished from the daily practices of Village Hindu, or "Hindu on the Ground," where a great diversity of deities, mostly female, are worshipped.
12. See Diana L. Eck, *Darsan, Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 2nd edition (Columbia University Press: 1996).
13. "Hindu Scriptures," *A Tribute to Hindu Wisdom* at http://www.hinduwisdom.info/Hindu_Scriptures.htm (accessed June 16, 2010).
14. Regarding the evolution of the Indus civilizations from 10,000 to 1300 BCE, see Kenoyer, 5f.
15. Kenoyer summarizes the Aryan invasion/migration theory. The term *Arya* is found in the earliest Vedic texts and means "good or noble, someone who speaks Sanskrit, someone who practices the proper Vedic rituals." Sanskrit was the Indo-European language (called Indo-Aryan) spoken by these people, but there is no evidence to indicate a genetic heritage necessarily different from those speaking and writing a different language in the region. Nor is there any evidence that the Indus Valley Civilization was destroyed by Indo-Aryan speaking people, 1–2. See also J.M. Kenoyer, "Culture Change During the Late Harappan Period," *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Interference in Indian History*, Edwin Pryant and Laurie L. Patton, eds. (Routledge, 2005), 44; the Aryans "did not represent a single, distinct community."
16. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), 95; for a description of the ritual see Steven P. Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* (Yale University Press, 2002), 22–28, 55.
17. Henderson, 53.
18. Huyler, 56.
19. Varṇa means literally "color," but refers to the four major classes of Hindus: the *brahmins*—clergy, teachers, and keepers of religious tradition; the *kshatriyas*—warriors, nobility, bearers of political power; the *shudras*—servants or peasants; and, the *vaishyas*—merchants and farmers. The exact date these classes were first codified is debated, but a continued focus on purification rituals in India is embedded in the traditional values that defined the varṇas.
20. The link between caste, body parts, and concepts of purity and pollution is described in Henderson, 31. See also David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yogini*, (University of Chicago Press, 2003) for a discussion of the Tantric practices of medieval India that contravened traditional purity codes.
21. Zimmer, 60–61.
22. Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (Phaidon Press Inc., 1998), 192.
23. Huyler, 127–128; Kenoyer, "Cultures and Societies of the Indus Tradition," 12.
24. Henderson, 86.
25. For a complete discussion of trees as fertility symbols, see: Manohar Laxman Varadpande, "Woman and Tree," *Woman in Indian sculpture* (DK Fine Art Press, 2006), ch. 2.
26. Zimmer, 57.
27. Dehejia. *The Sensuous and the Sacred* (American Federation of Arts, 2002), 16.
28. White, 55–58.
29. Zimmer, 69.
30. Ibid, 72.
31. McDaniell, 212.
32. Ibid, 211.
33. Huyler, 144.
34. Zimmer, 109.
35. Ibid, 92.
36. Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington, *Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain* (Weatherhill, 1985), xxvii.

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