

My Mother, Myself:  
Female Mystical Identity in Bengali Shaktism

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Feminist theologians have long argued that having God in the form of a woman would be empowering for human women. In West Bengal, India, the Shakta tradition worships an all-powerful goddess, variously called Devi or Shakti or Kali. Is this tradition empowering for human women, especially for female mystics? It is, but only in certain cases. Let us examine the situation more closely.

There are many types of Hinduism in India, with different understandings of mysticism. There is Vedanta, in which one seeks union with Brahman or ultimate consciousness, and Raja yoga, in which the goal may be Samadhi, pure awareness, or sometimes an awareness of the eternal dualism of spirit and matter. In Gaudiya Vaisnava bhakti, mysticism is intense devotional love of the god Krishna, while in Sahajiya Vaisnavism, the worshipper identifies with lovemaking of Radha and Krishna. In folk or tribal Hinduism, the mystical goal is union with a deity through possession.

In the goddess traditions of India, there are also several different forms of mysticism. In West Bengal, we see three major types of goddess mysticism. In the tradition of Folk Shaktism, the goddess is associated with nature and supernatural power (*siddhi*), and the worshipper is aware of her through dreams and in possession trance. Mysticism is found in the prophetic call and in the dream command, , and union with the mother goddess in nature and in trance states. In Tantric or Yogic Shaktism, the goddess may act independently or be a part of a divine couple, and the worshipper reaches her through the practices of kundalini yoga, meditation, asceticism, and possession within the ritual *cakra*. Mysticism is the ritual identification with Shiva and Shakti, or identification with the goddess as creator of the universe. In Shakta bhakti, the goddess oversees the universe, and controls both creation and destruction. She may exist in *nirguna* form, as

an ocean of consciousness, or in *saguna* form, as a particular goddess (usually in the form of Kali, occasionally Tara, Durga and Lakshmi). Mysticism is passionate love of the goddess, especially as mother, and union with her through love.

All three of these types have both male and female worshippers of the goddess. However, in modern West Bengal, the women with the highest status are those who are identified with the goddess, and such women are viewed with higher respect than any male devotee. Those female worshippers who merely love the goddess have relatively little status, for love is believed to be easy for women, while detachment and wisdom are difficult. Let us look at these traditions more closely.

In Folk Shaktism, the major religious professional roles are those of magician (*ojha* and *gunin*), and trance medium. Magicians are mostly male, for women in this role are often condemned as witches, especially among tribal or Adivasi groups. However, trance mediums are mostly female- it is virtually impossible to find a male who gets possessed by Kali in West Bengal (though we do find this in South India). Mediums may be merely possessed, entering the state of *bhar*, in which they have no awareness at the time of trance and no memory of the state when the trance is over. There is no union- the deity simply displaces the human soul temporarily. However, they may also enter the state of *bhava*, in which they have both awareness and memory. This is considered to be a mystical state of union with the goddess, and is highly valued. The deity and the human soul merge, united by love and respect. The woman becomes an embodiment of the goddess, who may speak or act through her. Often the deity who is embodied is called Old Woman Goddess or *budi ma*, the ancient ancestress of the village.

I interviewed a tribal Santal trance medium, Parvati Soren, who would get possessed by the snake goddess Manasa. As a child she had visions of snakes, which would lead her to other worlds. Later she got a severe fever, and she was ill and near death, and had a vision of the goddess. The goddess called her to be her devotee, and Parvati got well when she agreed to be medium and priestess for the goddess. She understood this to be a spiritual illness, with the dream command given by the goddess. Manasa demanded worship, and gave Parvati matted hair or *jata* to show her religious status. She became a married healer, respected by the village as an important religious figure. As a tribal woman following a folk Hindu deity, she would not have high status, but her role as a holy woman had caste Hindus coming to her for blessings. In many rural areas of India, possession trance is the highest union.

Yogic or Tantric Shaktism in West Bengal differs from some modern Western ideas of tantra and yoga. In Bengal, celibate female tantrikas and yoginis are highly respected, while sexually active ones are seen as inferior. In the West, tantra is associated with Rajneesh's ideas of neo-tantra, which emphasized sensuality rather than transcendence. This reverse of traditional tantra has become popular, and given a distorted image of tantric goals to observers in the USA and Europe.

In West Bengal, Tantra is a style of worship involving special *bija* mantras, visualizations, localization of deities in various parts of the body, sacred objects and places, and control of natural and supernatural beings and worlds. In the rare situation in which sexual ritual is practiced, it is performed to conquer desire. According to female tantrikas interviewed, it is generally needed by males rather than females, as males are indulged and spoiled as children, and hence they have less ability at renunciation.

I interviewed a respected female tantrika, Jayashri Ma, who had a circle of male disciples up in Birbhum. She was a celibate tantrika and yogini, who had the goddess Adyashakti Kali (or Kali of primordial power) enter into her heart during her teens while she was performing meditation on a *pancamunda asana*, a seat of five skulls. Adyashakti became her permanent mystical identity, with her earthly identity as secondary. She differentiated between her deepest spirit or *atma*, and her more superficial soul or *jiva*. She said that her *atma* was permanently fused with the goddess, while her *jiva* was her own, and was needed to communicate with and work in the world. Her disciples were impressed at her celibacy and her detachment, and found these to be the marks of a true mystic. Sometimes the goddess would speak through her, and give predictions about the future. She came of relatively high caste, and could read, though she could not speak English. Hers was a conscious and long-term mystical union.

In the third type of Shaktism, Shakta bhakti or devotion, we have the fewest female leaders and respected holy women. Bhakti is love and emotional dedication to a goddess, and its greatest figures- Ramprasad Sen, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya, Ramakrishna Parama-hansa- are all male. There are many famous poets, singers, and saints of Bengali Shakta bhakti, and virtually all are male. There are no famous female love mystics in Shakta devotionism. Why is this?

Women are believed to have a greater ability at loving than men, but this love is normally directed towards their families. There is almost an aesthetic clash, a *rasabhasa*, in having a female human with greater love towards a female goddess than her human husband (though we do hear of women in love with male gods, such as Krishna). There are many married women who worship and perform hymns to the goddess, in groups

called Kali-kirtans, but this is considered to be ordinary devotion. We have wives of Shakta saints who are respected (such as Sarada Devi and Manikuntala Devi), but the respect is primarily for their devotion to their husbands, not towards the goddess.

It would make sense to have widows devoted to Kali, and I have encountered strong Shakta widow-matriarchs of extended families, but their high status came from their religious discipline and ritual practice rather than from their love of the goddess. These widows were rulers of their households, able to correct Brahmin priests in the midst of rituals. There are also unmarried women who focus their worship on the goddess, but they tend to be *brahmacarinis*, celibate women who practice yogic meditation. Many young girls perform ritual *bratas* to goddesses in order to get a good husband (or as it is phrased, a husband who is not a dunce), but this is understood as simply proper behavior.

As for the goddess herself, she seems to be like many Indian mothers, and tends to show a preference for her sons. There are many miracle stories which describe the goddess' special favors to her male devotees, but few for her female devotees.

We see Shakta devotion in households on the holiday of Durga Puja, when the Durga is the beloved daughter and young bride returning to her family, and villages would sing her songs of joy and sorrow (the *agamani* and *vijaya* songs). The most intense love here is between the mother and daughter, who have missed each other when the daughter went off to her husband's extended family. The female devotees become the mothers of the young goddess. Durga also appears as a heroine, in statues in her street shrines which portray her as a female warrior, conquering the demon of lust. She represents virtue and knowledge, beyond worldly temptation, a role model for girls who

are bothered by lustful males (and currently the symbol of the Indian feminist movement). She is respected and feared in this form by devotees.

Where women in the Shakta bhakti tradition do gain special status is when devotion is mixed with the other strands of Shaktism, and women not only love the goddess but become her. Women do not gain status in Bengali society by their love of the goddess, for women are expected to be loving, but they do gain status through identification. A woman who incarnates Kali or Tara is revered, for this is not expected. Women by nature are believed to have some element of Shakti or female power, but it is innate and unconscious. For a woman to realize this fully, to mystically merge into the female essence of the universe, or to have it possess her, is rare and valuable.

One person who shows devotion mixed with folk Shaktism is Lakshmi Ma. I interviewed Lakshmi some years back in Calcutta. She had a hard life- she had visions of Kali as a child, and her parents thought she was insane. She underwent painful and difficult exorcisms forced on her by her in-laws after her marriage, and she was chained up to a wall and tortured, until the exorcists gave up. Her husband later accepted her visions as true and became her devotee. She became a *grihi sadhika*, a married holy woman, who left her husband and family to wander through India, following the call of the goddess who had demanded her love and loyalty. She spoke of her love for the goddess, and was also possessed by her- as well as by the god Shiva. She carried a large Shiva trident to protect herself in her wanderings, and she had disciples in Calcutta. Though she came of low caste, her disciples did not care, for the goddess had chosen to dwell within her.

There is no single term which is a direct translation of mysticism in either Bengali or Sanskrit, but a good equivalent might be *bhava*, a state of consciousness or altered state, especially when it is used as an abbreviation of *mahabhava* or highest state. In Bengali Shaktism, this term may be used, along with *mahajnana* (greatest knowledge), *brahmabhava* (union with infinity), *devibhava* (union with the devi or goddess), or *bhavamukha* (the union of spiritual and secular consciousness). These are extraordinary mystical states. Such states as *divyadrsti* (spiritual vision) or *devadarsana* (vision of the deity) and *svapnadarsana* (visions during sleep) are respected as intermediate states, while love, obedience and service would be part of ordinary religious experience. Such Vaishnava terms as *prema* or selfless love, *madhurya* or erotic love, and *kama* or passion, are rarely used in the literature of Bengali Shaktism, in which the goddess is primarily the powerful mother and protector, in life and after death.

Women are more prone to states of love because they are understood to be more permeable than men, being dominated by blood and soft tissue rather than semen and bone. They must try harder to avoid impurity, especially because menstruation is believed to be death impurity, the death blood of the potential fetus. However, because Bengali Shaktism involves the transformation of death into transcendence- especially in rituals like *sava-sadhana* or the corpse ritual- death impurity is not a problem for women, and they can participate freely in Kali's power or *shakti*. The realization of the goddess' presence in the woman's body, as the movement within the heart and the blood in the veins, is a mystical state in itself.

This permeability also makes women more prone to possession, for as women can be vessels for children, they can also be vessels for deities. The issue is partly who is

possessing a woman (some deities are more valued in some villages than in others), and partly the nature of the possession (is the woman conscious or unconscious, able to perform miraculous healing or give boons, can the goddess speak clearly through her, or does she mumble and go into convulsions)?

Thus, does goddess worship lead to respect for female mystics? In the case of Bengali Shaktism, love is simply not enough- only some form of embodiment will do. While Christian mysticism has a tradition of mystical marriage with Jesus and love-mysticism for women, Shakta mysticism emphasizes a woman's identity with the goddess in which the deepest aspect of the human spirit is merged with female divinity. Holy women are valued by Bengali society not for natural inclinations such as love, but for conquest of love for the sake of union.

Female mysticism has social power in West Bengal- it makes men become devotees of their wives, thus giving wives power in the home; it gives women a career track (for many women, trance is a biweekly job, with payment for prophecy and blessings); it creates groups of male disciples who support the woman, so that she need not work; it allows women to be heads of ashrams and yoga centers, and to be called 'Stri-guru' or 'Guru Ma.' It lets widows and low-caste women, who normally have low status in India, become valued leaders, healers, and teachers.

Feminist questioning involves looking at the sociological situation of women 'on the ground,' as well as the theological construction of deities. In Bengali Shaktism, full union through identification with the goddess often gives a woman religious status and even divinity, while partial union through love does not.

If a woman understands the goddess to be ‘My mother,’ the odds are that her status will be ordinary, and she will be respected as far as her caste and behavior allow. But if she understands the goddess as ‘Myself’, then she may well be extraordinary, a holy woman, or a saint, or a goddess in her own right.

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