

John Stratton Hawley & Donna Marie Wulff (eds.), *Devi: Goddesses of India*.
Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1998.

[Review published in *India Today*.]

This engaging and illuminating collection of essays is an *aṃśavatāra* or partial reincarnation of the same editors' collection entitled *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* which was published a decade ago. But the overlap is small: most of the essays appear here for the first time. The title *Devi: Goddesses of India*, with its teasing juxtaposition of the singular and the plural, accurately indicates the "unity in diversity" aspect of the goddess, or Goddess, in Hinduism; and the essays map out an impressive range of material, ranging from Radha, Shri and Bhagavati on the one hand to Santoshi Maa, Bharat Mata and "the western Kali" on the other. The new title is to be contrasted with that of the earlier collection: the Goddess is no longer viewed as a mere consort, but is given a more individual status which may often elevate her much above the mere male of the divine species. Many of the papers are themselves informed by a perspective which, although not necessarily or overtly feminist, clearly derives much intellectual strength from the articulations of feminism made over recent years, particularly perhaps in India. The Kali impress, as it were.

A full list of the dozen essays and their authors would overflow this brief column. Let us look instead at just one of them: Diana Eck's excellent piece on "Ganga: the Goddess Ganges in Hindu Sacred Geography". Like many of the other essays, Eck's piece blends the methodology of textual Indology with an anthropological attitude, this powerfully-flowing *saṅgam* being joined by a more abstract third source, that of a sympathetically interpretative consideration of meanings and images. The texts drawn on extend from the Mahabharata and the Puranas to such streams of popular consciousness as the deliciously undulating *Gaṅgā Laharī* of the 17th-century poet Jagannatha. Quoting from the translated text, and contextualising it within the legends about its author (a protégé of Shah Jahan and Dara Shukoh), Eck leads the reader towards an almost tangible sense of the significance of the Ganga in the minds and hearts of people for whom the river's divinity is virtually an article of faith. With a clarity denied the waters of her subject, Eck transmits her own evident fascination for this cultural history to the reader, while a rigorously intellectual poise ensures that her enthusiasms do not burst the banks of scholarship.

This book was first published by the University of California Press in 1996, and now comes to India in a handsome Motilal Banarsidass edition. How has it travelled? For the most part, without any grave damage to any likely

sensibilities (though a reviewer equally remote from India has little authority to make such a judgement). Yet there is a sense in which this book is marked as a work by and for outsiders: Indian readers hardly need to be told what a *rath* or a *tīrtha* is, as they are here; and one wonders what cultural game is being played by Lise McKean in her (otherwise fascinating) piece on “Bharat Mata” when she repeatedly points rather scoffingly to the poor English used in a temple guidebook. Such irritations aside, Professors Hawley and Wulff are to be congratulated on producing a very useful collection. And finally: readers hoping for *darshan* of the Devi of American Indology, Wendy Doniger, will not be disappointed: her essay on “Saranyu/Samjna: the Sun and the Shadow” is one of the book’s high points.

Rupert Snell