

‘Yoginī’ in South Asia
Interdisciplinary approaches

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12 Alternative yoginīs with alternative powers

Singing the blues in the Causaṭī Yoginī Devī Mandir of Vārāṇasī

Fabrizio M. Ferrari

O great sage, ever since then, till today the Yoginīs never left Kāśī and stayed elsewhere, though they wander through all the three worlds.

(*Kāśīkhaṇḍa* 45: 23)

To write on Tantra and yoginīs entails a critical engagement with a genre. Not only is it necessary to familiarize oneself with primary sources in both Sanskrit and vernacular, but one also needs an awareness of the proliferation of Tantric narratives at both scholarly and more popular levels. The body of academic writings on Tantra in general, and on yoginīs in particular, is vast. My interest, however, distances itself from the majority of studies conducted on similar matters. Although I make use of scriptures and (mostly postmodern academic) secondary literature, I privilege contemporary oral narratives and regional folklore. Such a multiform – and naturally contradictory – body of narratives barely resemble discourses celebrated and disseminated by Indologists, philologists, historians (of art, religion, etc.) through academic publishing, university courses and international conferences. My aim is therefore not a quest for truisms. As Gimzburg noted: ‘The fact that a source is not “objective” [...] does not mean that it is useless.’ (1992: xvii). In fact, all sources – whatever their degree of objectivity and/or bias – may serve to obtain a better understanding of social and cultural facts. The primary sources for my research are living informants who are contributing to the maintenance, transformation, transmission and – to some extent – neglect of the yoginī folklore in a rather alternative/dissenting way. My research has been conducted among subaltern individuals (poor, low-caste and often widowed females) in an environment that, for reasons that I will discuss later, has been neglected by the mainstream tradition of academic work on Tantra.

This chapter examines the ritual practice of female devotees in the Causaṭī Yoginī Devī Mandir of Vārāṇasī. My interest in this particular temple arises from a number of questions that emerged while I was conducting research on healing rituals and medical folklore in the city of Vārāṇasī. In the last three years I increasingly concentrated my attention on the Causaṭī Yoginī Devī Mandir as a powerful site for holistic healing performances, as well as for performances of social resistance. Fieldwork, however, is not limited to the last few years.

Because of my long-term friendship with members of the family of the *mahant* of the temple, I have been able to observe the activities of the *mandir*, their evolution and transformation over almost fifteen years.

I will here report from my research among the principal ritual actors of the temple, a group of women popularly known in the neighbourhood as the ‘ladies of the temple’. The study has a twofold purpose. First, it will enrich existing micro-ethnographies of ‘yoginīs’. Despite the ever-growing fashionableness of Tantra, the Vārāṇasī ‘yoginī *mandir*’ has seldom attracted the attention of scholars and researchers. This is a vacuum in the history, archaeology and anthropology of yoginīs. The temple, though named after the 64 yoginīs, bears no evidence of the iconography and worship of yoginīs. The central deity, Causaṭī Devī, is basically a ‘modified’ version of Durgā. Neither the *mahant* nor the ‘ladies of the temple’ or other devotees (including pilgrims and local religious authorities) perform practices vaguely suggesting Tantric affiliation or Tantric background. In other words, the temple contradicts all the expectations of the mainstream Tantric studies agenda (e.g. discourses on and around the presence/absence of ritual sex, consumption of sexual fluids, ritual sacrifice, blood/meat/alcohol offerings, initiation, esotericism and ‘altered states of mind’). Perhaps not sufficiently spicy for orientalist, postmodern and neo-orientalist scholarly traditions, the temple is an arena for alternative considerations. With its established tradition of subaltern and marginal ritual performers, it allows an interesting and much-needed re-reading of *bhakti*-ized Tantra as counter-culture and of ‘(neo-)yoginīs’ as agents of revolutionary praxis.

The context

The Causaṭī Yoginī Devī Mandir of Vārāṇasī is a late seventeenth-century small *śākhā* temple located in the Bengali neighbourhood of the city, right behind Rāṅmāhal Ghāt. Restructured sometime around 1670 and 1680 by the King of Udaipur,¹ who also renovated the whole area (now known as Rana Mahal Ghāt), the origins of the temple are actually debated. Devotees, including the *mahant*, believe it to be a very ancient site and inevitably refer to the story of Divodāsa in *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* 45 (*Skandapurāṇa*).

The *mandir* has a rectangular planimetry, an unusual arrangement for a yoginī temple (Dehejia 1986: 39–42; Sinha 1990: 45). Inside there are no yoginī icons. Shrines and/or images of the yoginīs are believed to be spread around Rana Mahal Ghāt, even interred below the floor of the temple. Singh (2010: 259) notes that: ‘Out of 64 Yoginīs’ shrines 60 are assumed to be in the Rāṅmāhal at Chausaṭhi Ghāt (cf. KKh, 45.34–41; also see Dehejia, 1986: 215–216). Presently only 13 Yoginī images exist and are mostly attached to other temples.’²

The yoginīs are collectively represented as Causaṭī Devī (or Causaṭī Mā), The large brass *mūrti* of the goddess – which shares distinctive features with Durgā (she is slaying a buffalo) – faces another female deity: Bhadrā Kālī (an auspicious form of Kālī). Both icons are kept behind gates in their sanctum (*garbhagrha*). Although the gates allow the sight in, the goddesses’ chambers are

opened for *darśan* only on the occasion of major celebrations. The two *garbhaghāṣas* are aligned on the east (Causaṣiṭī Māī) to west (Bhadra Kālī) axis, while the entrance is on the northern side. The chamber of Causaṣiṭī Māī is not attached to any wall, so that it does not interfere with the devotees' circumambulations. Behind it, enshrined on the eastern wall, there are small niches. Some are empty; others contain statues of Bhairō Nāth, Gaṇeśa and Kālī and rows of Śiva *lingas*.

After entering the temple through two small wooden doors, the visitor immediately notices on the southern wall a number of lithographs and posters representing the *navadurgās*,³ and a large diagram (*cakra*) in Bengali and corrupted (Bengalized) Sanskrit inscribed on the wall. The *cakra* is not ancient. At its base it has an inscription (in English) saying: 'By K. N. Bhattacharjī, Manmandir.' The date, in Bengali, is not fully readable. It says: '29 śrāvana [date illegible], 30 years.'⁴ It has been suggested to me that the diagram might have been commissioned by a member of the Bengali community to fulfil a vow to the goddess. At its centre, the *cakra* has the sacred syllable *aum*. This is surrounded by geometric figures: hexagrams (the union of Śiva and Śakti, or *siddha* and *yoginī*) and triangles pointed downwards, a symbol of the goddess. Such figures have monograms inscribed (*yam*, *ram*, *lan*, etc.). At the four corners are mantras dedicated to various deities (*auṁ śāntaṁ śivam suṁdaraṁ*) or simple invocations (*auṁ śrī bhadrakālī namaḥ*). None among my many informants is aware of any ritual use of this diagram, nor did I detect any form of worship related to it.

In front of Causaṣiṭī Māī stands a decorated stone tiger, the vehicle of Durgā. Ritual paraphernalia, including a large *naḡāṅā* drum for the annual goddess festival, are scattered over the southwestern corner of the temple. Numerous marble plaques – almost all in Bengali – are fixed on the floor and the walls. (They generally bear witness to donations.) Pilgrims and devotees have recourse to other means to 'fix' their devotion: they write with their fingers names or dates on the moist walls of the temple. This kind of inscription is now considered a popular form of vow (*vrata manantī, manantī*). A further development can be observed. It is not uncommon for young lovers to visit the temple and, unwatched and unpervised, to write their names in hope of a romantic future together. (Some of my younger informants ask the goddess for protection against 'arranged marriage'.) The temple is considered a public space. A number of activities take place within its walls. Some are secular in nature (for example courses in Indian classical dance, music, singing and yoga,⁴ *pūjā*-related business, chatting over *chāy* and the playful activities of local children), others are strictly linked to the religious life of the city and the neighbourhood. For instance, *brahmachārīs* from surrounding ashrams gather in the early morning for the *homa* oblation. Marriage ceremonies are performed or, when a marriage is celebrated in another temple, the bride and the groom often visit the Causaṣiṭī Devī Mandir en route to the Śīlā Mandir on Daśāśvamedh Ghāṭ. Among other rituals, I observed affluent members of the Bengali community sponsoring articulate *pūjās* for their sons' birthday. The temple is also a pilgrimage site. Śākta devotees – but not only – from all across

India and beyond (Nepal and Bangladesh) visit the temple and pay homage to Causaṣiṭī Māī and Kālī.

The most important event for the temple is the annual Causaṣiṭī Devī Pūjā on the full moon of the month of Chaitra (March–April).⁵ Devotees flood into the narrow lane flanking the temple and wait for *darśan*. (Rules concerning gender and caste are not observed during such forms of worship.) The high point of the celebrations is after sunset when a large crowd turns out and locals spend the night singing devotional songs, bringing offerings, enduring continuous circumambulations and prostrations, making promises to the goddess and waiting for *prasād*. The celebration is very sonic in nature. Professional drummers perform all night long while the blasts of conches echo at regular intervals. The *homa* burns at the centre of the temple and the fragrance of pungent incense sticks fills the air. Though the mood is festive, one cannot help but notice the gravity of many devotees who ask the goddess for forgiveness or intercession. The celebration is followed by a morning bath. This is believed to cleanse from sins and to heal from pain.

Next in importance is the annual offering to the goddess (*vārsik annakū*, lit. 'annual heap of grain'). This, too, coincides with a pilgrimage, which is performed on the fourteenth of Aśvin (September–October) (cf. KKh 45: 49).⁶ In the weeks preceding the celebration, the temple committee, which is made up of the elder male members of the *mahant*'s family, commence the arrangements for the communal worship. Money has to be collected for food, candles, incense, flowers, garlands, painting the walls, cleansing the icons and hiring professional singers and musicians. During the celebration, devotees are given *darśan* of the goddess and the *prasād* they paid for in advance through a ticket reservation system.

The third most important ceremony of the year is Holi. People throw coloured water and powders inside and outside the temple of the goddess, who is propitiated with offerings. During the festival, devotees join in a festive atmosphere of devotion, piety and joyfulness. Another significant festival is Durgā Pūjā (KKh 45: 58). This, however, seems to be more important for the Bengali community, which is increasingly dominant in the administration of the temple and the coordination of its activities.⁷

As for the worship of the yoginīs, not only is there no evidence of any *sādhana* related to the 64 yoginīs, but Causaṣiṭī Māī is considered either as Mā (the Mother Goddess) or Durgā. After all, the temple is not a *causaṣiṭī yoginī mandir* (a temple dedicated to the 64 yoginīs) but – as informants emphasize – the Śrī Causaṣiṭī Devī kā Mandir (or Śrī Causaṣiṭī Yoginī Māā kā Mandir). The dominant female presence (the temple is almost exclusively frequented by women), the fact that the *mahant* belongs to a *gotra* (lineage) of *śākta brāhmanas*⁸ and its importance to local (Bengali) *śākta* gurus and devotees bear evidence to a *śākta* heritage. However ritualists, devotees, pilgrims and the 'ladies of the temple' are unfamiliar with the yoginīs of the Śākta Tantric tradition and show little, if any, literacy in Tantric scriptures or Tantric rituals.

The myth of the yoginīs in the folklore of Vārāṇasī

Stories of yoginīs are extremely popular in the Bengali *toḷā*. The majority of them belong to the oral tradition in Hindi, Bhojpuri, and Bengali. As for scriptures, two Sanskrit sources are prominent: the *Kaulajñānārinīya* and the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* (*Skandapurāṇa* 4.1). In this section, I will discuss the modification of the figure of the yoginī: from Tantric practitioner, magician and disturber of *dharma* to that of devoted ritualist and healer (restorer of *dharma*).

In the *Kaulajñānārinīya* (KJIN) of Matsyendranāth – a ninth-century Kaula work dealing with magic, the attribution of *siddhi* and esoteric practices – the yoginīs are discussed as powerful ritual specialists and the epitome of the Kaula tradition. They are half-female and half-animal, semi-divine beings (KJIN 23: 2–4). The aspiring *siddha* should summon the yoginīs and by engaging with them in a highly sexualized ritual practice (*maithuna*), which includes consuming sexual fluids (KJIN 11: 11 and 11: 32), he will share their powers (KJIN 16: 8). The yoginīs also remove obstacles and defend *tantrikas*, especially women (KJIN 23: 11–16).

Despite their immense power, the yoginīs were stigmatised as dangerous sources, and lurid portraits of malignant beings, bearers of impurity and social disorder were perpetrated. In Vārāṇasī, the yoginīs continue to be linked to an otherized, obscure, fearful and threatening imagery.⁹ (Mothers often scold their children and threaten them to call the yoginīs should they not behave.¹⁰) However, local folklore (through the devotional repertoire of the 'ladies of the temple') emphasizes the caring aspect of Śrī Causaṭī Devī. The goddess, a hot-tempered being oscillating between anger (*ugra*) and a more peaceful (*sāmya*) state, is extremely sympathetic to women and is worshipped for practical matters.

An example of such ambivalence can be found in the *Kāśīkhanda* (circa fourteenth century). There the yoginīs are powerful (but not dangerous) females. They have long-distance sight (KKh 45: 1) and the power to change form (KKh 45: 4–9).¹¹ The narrative (KKh 43–64) tells that king Divodāsa was ruling over Vārāṇasī so righteously that he was given the title of Dharmarāja. Śiva, however, longed to re-establish his abode in Kāśī. He sent all the gods down to earth to disturb the equilibrium kept by Divodāsa. The 64 yoginīs were the first to be summoned (KKh 45) but they failed. The same happened to Sūrya, Brahmā, the *ganas* and Gaṇeśa. Only Viṣṇu was successful. But he had to turn into a Buddhist monk (*bikṣu*). By spreading the Buddhist message he caused the breakdown of *dharma*. As a consequence, Divodāsa had to leave Vārāṇasī, handing back the city to Śiva.

Despite the actual marginality of the yoginīs in the Purāṇic account, the tale is regarded by the locals as a foundational myth that, rather than reiterating the *adharmik* trait of the yoginīs, commemorates their move from the benches (*pīṭhas*) of the Forest of Bliss (*ānandavana*) in the city of Vārāṇasī (KKh 45: 24–28). The temple is thus celebrated in local oral narratives as a *śāktapīṭha* and a centre of healing (KKh 45: 12, 42, 54).¹² This last aspect attracted my attention. Although I found no evidence of actual healing rituals,¹³ I noticed that the acts of ritual devotion performed by the 'ladies of the temple' are in fact considered beneficial by the community on a number of levels.¹⁴ They represent a *de facto*

way to acknowledge the power of Causaṭī Mātī and to ward off her rage. The *Kāśīkhanda* (45: 42–44) bears witness to such a custom:

If any man repeats these sixty-four names [of the yoginīs] everyday at dawn, midday and dusk, all his sufferings due to evil spirits are relieved. Neither Dākṁinīs nor Śākṁinīs, neither Kūsmāṇḍas nor Rakṣasas afflict him who recites these names. They give peace to infants and the unborn. They accord victory in battle, royal households and debates.

The text goes on describing ritual practices, including fasting, recitation of mantras, celebration of festivals and offerings. None of them suggest hardcore Tantric rituals such as *maithuna* and animal sacrifice (*balidāna*). Initially I believed this to be due to local hegemonic processes. Yet if this may be true for the text, after many years of direct observation as well as discussions with local informants, I doubt the temple has ever been a 'Tantric' site. It never hosted *yoginīsādhana* and, according to the information provided by devotees and *pandits*, it never was a sanctuary for human female yogic practitioners.¹⁵ The *mandir* is a *śākta* centre where two powerful goddesses (i.e. Kālī and Durgā) are worshipped according to the modes of the *bhakti* tradition. Durgā is celebrated in the form of Śrī Causaṭī Devī or Śrī Causaṭī Yoginī Mātā. In both cases, she is the Mother.

The folklore of the 'yoginīs' of Vārāṇasī

In the last twelve years, I observed – and more recently participated in – the lives and ritual practices of a group of women who are collectively known in the neighbourhood as the 'ladies of the temple'. This has given me the opportunity to reflect on micro-history and micro-ethnography as research methodologies that, although addressing vernacular culture, may contribute to inform larger discourses in the study of religion. In the case of the Causaṭī Devī Mandir, I acknowledged the persistence of differences between various ways to practise Tantra. In particular, the increasingly popular phenomenon of Tantric *bhakti*-fication – at both urban and rural levels – seems to be dismissed by both academic and 'hardcore' Tantric practitioners who look at it as 'non-Tantric'. This section will serve the twofold purpose of reinforcing the idea of pluralism within Tantra and empowering the interpretations of those who worship Tantric deities (Causaṭī Devī) but are neither *tantrikas* nor *śāktas*.

The 'ladies of the temple' – in a number variable from 5 to 25 – meet every day before sunset for communal singing, *ārṭī*, *vrata* performances and individual *pūjā*.¹⁶ All these activities are coordinated by a leader, an elderly woman known as Mahārājī. A charismatic figure (also known to local shopkeepers and residents as the 'head of department'), Mahārājī performs evening *ārṭī* and other worship services, and despite her low-caste background is widely recognized as the temple *pūjārī*. (The *mahant* and his brother are seldom involved in the ritual life of the *mandir*, except for large celebrations such as the annual *annakūṭ*.)

In the early years of my fieldwork the party was predominantly made up of widows, but this is changing. In the last three years I have noticed that an increasing number of married women regularly attend ritual sessions. Among these I observed newly wedded women, pregnant women and even young girls in their teens. With the generational alternation the degree of literacy also improved; the younger devotees all have a basic education in Hindi and, usually, Bengali. (None is familiar with Sanskrit and English.) Notwithstanding a general improvement in terms of literacy and wealth, the majority of the women I worked with led a marginal existence. This, however, is not due – as I initially suspected – to an acquired condition of long-lasting impurity due to widowhood or low-caste background. Rather it is related to a chronic state of subalternity, which they unambiguously attribute to their being female.

Stories (including personal ones) of gender exploitation are passionately discussed before, during and after ritual sessions. These are generally divided into three stages: (1) the singing/composing of devotional songs; (2) *ārṭī*; and (3) physical manifestations of individual devotion (circumambulation, lying on the ground in front of the goddess, touching elements of the temple structure, recitation of mantras, etc.). Songs are the principal means for the expression and transmission of *bhakti*. These are composed in Hindi or, more often, in *banārsī bolī* – the local variant of Hindi mixed with Bhojpuri.¹⁷ While the structure of such songs is rather repetitive and the use of instruments fairly limited (the songs borrow from the North Indian devotional *kīrtan* and *bhajan* tradition, and the instruments include percussion only, e.g. *dholak*, *majirā* and hand-clapping), the lyrics are revealing. Themes include health and wealth issues, love for the goddess, auspicious rhymes for mothers-to-be, calls for protection (especially against barrenness) and desperate cries for help. Evening sessions may last several hours (it is not unusual for a meeting to finish at 23:00 and beyond.) Chatting over the most disparate facts between one song and another is ordinary praxis. It is so that the lives, joys, sorrows and expectations of the women of the Bengali *folā* become part of the myth of Causaṭī Māi.

But how is it possible for the 'ladies of the temple' to transcend issues of purity and impurity and affirm themselves as powerful ritualists? Despite the social and ritual pollution traditionally ascribed to women in general and widows in particular, the sacred arena of the temple, the closeness to Causaṭī Māi and the power which female devotees derive from a powerful arena allow them a niche in which to exercise the two most distinctive traits of Tantra, i.e. *kāma* (desire) and *śakti* (power) (Urban 2010: 19–22).

Material needs, desire for social emancipation, the occupation of a space where it is possible to 'have a break' and cultivate friendships as well as the sincere devotion towards a goddess who is fervently believed to be sympathetic to women, all converge and give meaning through a powerful series of assertions, most prominently a desire for inclusion. But other questions arise. Since the temple is named after the 64 yoginīs, is there any way to connect these women to the Tantric yoginīs? More specifically: are the 'ladies of the temple' aware of the yoginī-ness of the deity they worship? What significance do they attach to the fact that the object of their devotion is called Causaṭī Māi? What does being a yoginī mean to them? And ultimately: do they consider themselves yoginīs? The responses of the 'ladies of the temple' are unanimous and unambiguous:

1. Causaṭī Māi is Durgā. Alternatively she is just Mā (Mother).
2. Historical yoginīs (or jeginīs) are women who live in a state of impurity. They are shameful (*śarmī*), dirty (*ganidī*) and impure (*aśuddha*). They are also dangerous witches (*vidūgarī*)¹⁸ and lack honour (*lajjā*).
3. Mythical yoginīs are the Goddess's helpers. They might be dangerous but their closeness to Devī mitigate some of their 'antisocial' traits.
4. The 'ladies of the temple' do not consider themselves yoginīs. They are all sisters (*dhī*) to each other and call themselves daughters of the Goddess. (Also, they are not regarded as goddesses, as in many Tantric traditions.)¹⁹

As for the supposed Tantric background of the temple, typical elements of Śākta Tantra – sacrifice of living beings (*balidāna*, *yajñā*), blood/meat offerings, ritual consumption and offering of liquor and sexual *sādhana* – do not take place in the Causaṭī Yoginī Devī Mandir. According to my informants, the temple has never been a ritual arena for *tāntrikas*. Another important trait of Tantra that is lacking is the actual worship of the (mythical or historical) yoginīs, or a more or less explicit worship of the *yoni* (cf. Young 2004: 133).²⁰ Neither have female ritualists been worshipped in the temple, nor are the charismatic leaders of such parties considered *gurus*, or dangerous holders of threatening and subversive powers and antisocial desires. High-caste male devotees and local *paṇḍits* do not avoid contacts with the ladies, even if their gender, caste and marital and social status locate them at the bottom of the Hindu hierarchical structure. On several occasions I observed the ladies joking with brahmins (even making fun of them), while interaction – to my surprise – often turned physical (e.g. patting shoulders, mock slaps, touching hands, etc.). How is it possible for the 'ladies of the temple' to infringe both caste and gender exclusion rules? Douglas partially answers this question when she notes that: 'Pollution ideas work in the life of society at two levels, one largely instrumental, one expressive' (2008: 3). The ladies, a lively and permanent element of the temple system and a visual example of the culture of the Bengali *folā*, are not silent victims of their condition (or their gender). If a link between the 'ladies of the temple' and the yoginīs can be found, this is represented by transgression. Yet while the 'ladies of the temple' indulge in behavioural patterns and ritual devotional acts that do not dramatically conflict with social customs, the yoginīs embody a more radical performance in that the yoginīs are true perpetrators of 'progressive folklore', a concept theorized by Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino and identified as a conscious proposal of the people against its own subaltern condition, and a way to comment in cultural terms on their struggle for emancipation (de Martino 1951). Conversely, the ladies engage in a more tactical performance. Their transgression is manifest, but it is the fruit of a long-lasting negotiation that finds a positive response (acceptance, inclusion) only in the limited cultural environment of the Bengali *folā*.²¹ As Foucault observed: 'The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable' (1999: 60).

While the behaviour of the ladies is occasionally aggressive (e.g. making loud explicit comments on males, including their own family members, but also local businessmen and *panchās*), this is certainly not enough to label them *tāntrikas*. What I believe is 'Tantric' is the way they administer the power accumulated by performing *bhakti*, a practice that some of the ladies referred to as similar to the *tapas* (heat) developed by *sādhus* in that they perform symbolic inversion, a concept defined by Babcock as: 'Any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political' (1978: 14). The *śakti* of the 'ladies of the temple' is a form of power arising from desire (*kāma*) for inclusion and actualized through experiential learning (social practice, *habitus*) and embodied (gendered) transmission (ritual praxis). The resolution of conditions of 'imbalance' in the community in general and among fellow daughters of the goddess in particular leads to a profound awareness of injustice (*adharma*) or, in other terms, of uneven development (e.g. social disorder, gender exploitation, illness, misfortune, anxiety, etc.). The ladies of the temple explain this as physical pain (*dard*), something that negatively affects them, their extended families and the community. By operating on, contrasting and resolving 'imbalance', they act as holistic healers.

Sufferance, healing and devotion: the Vārāṇasī blues

In the Bengali *tolā*, the distinction between mythical and historical yoginīs fades away and the two characters merge. The yoginīs of the Tantric and Purāṇic traditions and female Tantric practitioners are almost invariably portrayed as bearers of injustice. Conversely, the *bhaktas* of the yoginī temple in Vārāṇasī are the keepers of local/domestic order. Deprived of its transgressive, esoteric and erotic character and transformed by what White calls the 'masculinization of Tantra' (2006: 220), ritual praxis in the Causaṭī Yoginī Devī Mandir is a devotional performance. *Bhakti* is indeed a way out for the ritual subject. However, this approach eschews traditional *bhakti* notions of love and affection and it is presented, discussed and received in the community as a healing performance generated by mundane desire and actualized through the power of identification with the goddess.

In Hinduism, rituals are built on variegated patterns of embodiment that suggest diversified manifestations of personhood. Ritual actors move from history to meta-history (i.e. myth) in a series of fluctuations that impact on the body on a number of levels. Entangled in such performance, they are expected (and expect) to experience a physical encounter with the deity through vision (*darśan*). In the Causaṭī Yoginī Devī Mandir, female devotees engage in a series of devotional practices resembling the *laukik vrat* (folk vow) of vernacular traditions: daily gatherings (*mīlan*), communal singing (*kīrtan*, *bhajan*), repetition of sacred formulae (*mantra jap*) offerings (*pūjā*, *bali*, *sevā*), storytelling (*kathā*), drawing auspicious sketches (*rekhā-citra*) and plain chatting (*gopśap*). It is this last aspect, however, that despite its non-official and non-ritualized trait is of interest here. Verbal communication – the *parole* of poststructuralism – is in fact a powerful signifier,

especially in situations of subalternity. Because of their status, the 'ladies of the temple' are repositories of all sorts of information, e.g. births, marriages, deaths, illnesses, migration, failures and successes. Such information is shared every evening before *arṭī*, and again after that. After an initial process of elaboration (from a few hours to a couple of days), information becomes a pedagogical narrative (*kathā*) and serves to inspire new devotional songs. These have an extremely simplified structure: invocation/refrain – crisis – refrain – solution – refrain.²² Devotional singing is believed to be a powerful way to keep the goddess satisfied and therefore to maintain a favourable equilibrium. Yet most of all it is service (*sevā*) to the goddess. Such practice emphasizes a form of love, which is not only built on a surrendering attitude but is motivated by deep physical sympathy.

I will wake up the sleeping mother.
I will wake up the sleeping mother.
A poor lady is calling you, Mother
With waiting eyes.
Give money to the poor, o Mother,
My heart is at your feet.
I will wake up the sleeping mother.
I will wake up the sleeping mother.
I will play the flute and wake up my mother.
Please give *darśan* to those who worship you,
Give *darśan* to your daughters, mother.
I will wake up the sleeping mother.
I will wake up the sleeping mother.

What should we say in the house of the mother?
What should we say in the house of the mother?
The dumb is starting to speak and the deaf is hearing again
People are coming and praying
Even thieves are coming and praying
In the house of the mother nobody is lying.
What should we say in the house of the mother?
What should we say in the house of the mother?
Like a pupil I'm coming asking for knowledge
Give knowledge to this child, mother
He will leave and bring it to his house.
People come to pray and to worship you
Give *darśan* to those who pray
Then they will leave happy.
What should we say in the house of the mother?
What should we say in the house of the mother?²³

²⁴ The ladies happen to know everything and do not request any remuneration. Their function is not institutionalized in a healing system, nor do they pretend to

be healers. They are *bhaktas*. Through rituals leading to embodiment – the identification with Causatī Māi and her power to heal and protect – performers seek to achieve practical results that will impact positively on their presence and that of the community.

In a Tantric fashion, the ritual arena of the Causatī Yoginī Devī Mandir is a place to exert revolutionary willpower, an event deliberately occurring to attract meaning on otherwise distressful experiences through otherized experience (the obsessive request of *darśan*). But ritual and devotional sessions are also a means to reflect on the existence of borders and limits and the negotiations between subjects and objects. As Žižek puts it:

The subject is an answer of the Real (of the object, of the traumatic kernel) to the question of the Other. The question as such produces in its addressee an effect of shame and guilt, it divides, it hystericalizes him, and this hystericalization is the constitution of the subject: the status of the subject as such is hysterical. The subject is constituted through his own division, splitting, as to the object in him; this object, this traumatic kernel, is the dimension that we have already named as that of a 'death drive', of a traumatic imbalance, a rooting out. (1989: 204)

In the context of the Causatī Māi Mandir, traumatic imbalances are heavily marked by personhood, gender and physicality. On the one hand they trigger manifestations of willpower that find their confirmation in the myth of the goddess and the ritual arena of the temple. But on the other, they tend to be 'neutered' and silenced by the community that does not recognize the transgressive nature of the ladies' performance and looks at them as necessary to a general equilibrium rather than personal rancour or social revenge. In other words, the ladies' behaviour is accepted because they help/heal the community by mediating with the goddess, and their performance is limited to either the temple and/or a restricted social environment (the Bengali *toḷā*).

The negotiation processes actualized by the 'ladies of the temple' are expressed through gender and devotion, the only ways to manifest and validate their power (of affirmation) and desire (of inclusion). The outcomes of such praxis (health, well-being and good fortune) suggest a materialist approach. This, however, eventually serves as a deflector, a mechanism of defence performed and transmitted by the ladies to counter the endemic mechanism of exploitation towards females in the world out there. Healing becomes a self-reflective practice informing and resolving community disorder, but also informing the degree of affirmation and confirmation of the afflicted presence of the ladies.

Conclusion

In Tantric contexts, women are goddesses because of their body. Their capacity to generate, breastfeed, menstruate, host and dominate the male during intercourse make them the embodiment of the Tantric goddess. But the female body is often the object of violence. This is perceived as injustice and generates a form

of unevenness expressed as weakness (*durbalāṅ*). Local exegeses, constructed on emic understandings of 'gender' and 'subalternity', do not see the ritual norm as an exploitative praxis imposed on the subaltern to maintain the status quo, as Marxist anthropologists would argue. Rather they see in ritual an opportunity to react to the superstructure so that the religious symbolism expressed, represented and reproduced as ritual and conveyed through devotion becomes a marker of underground power and a way to understand the hermeneutical circle of exclusion promoted at all levels by the Brahmanic culture.

But actors and spectators do not receive the devotional rites in the same way. In fact there are differences in the ideological stances motivating the objects and the subjects of exclusivist praxis. More specifically, the needs of a yoginī are not those of a twenty-first-century Banārasi widow. On the one hand, *adharna* is implemented to justify and maintain exclusion as a form of empowerment (Tantric *siddhi*); on the other, due to historical and cultural circumstances, *dharma* (justice) is sought through *bhakti* and used as a means of inclusion. As intrinsically subaltern, the actions of yoginīs and those of the 'ladies of the temple' speak about a dialogic system informed by cultural exploitation. I thus suggest discussing the ritual performances of the 'ladies of the temple' as the aesthetic strategy of a revolutionary who is conscious of her heterodox and dissenting praxis, in other words a performance aiming at a radical, though temporary pursuit of happiness. Eventually the Causatī Yoginī Devī Mandir proves itself an arena for the empowerment of the female, despite its degree of illusion. Although its history and (lack of certain) ritual practices may disappoint many Tantra scholars, the 'ladies of the temple' offer a precious opportunity to move on. While their praxis may sound 'boring' to many audiences, what I called '*bhakti*-ized Tantra' is a reality. As discussed by Saran in his study on individuality, well-being and gender in Tantra (2008), Tantrism retains a distinctive counter-cultural taste. In the same way I believe the 'ladies of the temple' embody counterculture at its best. In particular, they provide a non-normative response to the two major religious and cultural Indic mainstream systems, i.e. the strict rules, norms and obligations of Brahmanism and Tantrism. Ultimately, they also counter academic tropes.

Just as 'Brahmanism' and 'Tantrism' are complex religious, cultural and social realities so we should be more careful in including/excluding rituals and ritual performers in pre-formatted boxes. Tantra has evolved. Its popularization at a domestic level – a process facilitated by *bhakti* – has come to emphasize other priorities (health, well-being, good fortune, etc.). Tantric practices and Tantric deities have been 'normalized' – some even 'neutered' – and are now at the core of many Hindu performances. The 'ladies of the temple' are not yoginīs, as they strongly state. However, with their reinterpretation of *śakti* as the power to resist imbalances and *kāṁ* as the desire for inclusion, they represent the evolution of the yoginīs in twenty-first-century India.

Glossary

adharna disorder

ārti ceremonial worship of a deity. From *ārti*.

<i>bhajan</i>	devotional song
<i>bhakti</i>	devotion
<i>brahmacārī</i>	celibate student
<i>cakra</i>	disk-shaped diagram (lit. wheel, discus)
<i>darśan</i>	vision
<i>dharma</i>	order, righteousness, law
<i>gana</i>	a class of divine attendants of Śiva
<i>garbhagrha</i>	the innermost sanctum of a Hindu temple where the icon of a deity resides
<i>harā pattā</i>	lit. 'green leaves', generally <i>nīm</i> (<i>Azadirachta indica</i>) leaves
<i>manauṭ</i>	vow; offering promised to a deity on fulfillment of a desire
<i>mandir</i>	temple
<i>manant</i>	vow; offering promised to a deity on fulfillment of a desire
<i>mūrti</i>	icon of a deity
<i>prasād</i>	ritual food
<i>pūjā</i>	ritual worship
<i>pūjārī</i>	ritual specialist
<i>sādhana</i>	spiritual discipline, practice
<i>sādhu</i>	holy man, ascetic
<i>siddha</i>	perfected, accomplished one
<i>siddhi</i>	supernatural power
<i>toḷa</i>	quarter neighbourhood
<i>vrat</i>	vow, including fasting
<i>yātrā</i>	pilgrimage

Notes

1. Some informants argue that the *ghāṭī* area was renewed by Rana Pratap Singh. This seems unlikely in that Pratap Singh died in 1597. Others mention Rana Raj Singh I, King of Udaipur from 1654 to 1681. However, it seems more plausible that it was Rana Jay Singh (who reigned in Udaipur from 1671 to 1700) who financed the reconstruction of the *ghāṭī*. Rana Jay Singh was of the Sisodiyā Chatraṭ Rājput dynasty of Mewar, whose kings claim to be descendants of Rāma and are of Vaiṣṇava background.
2. Singh eventually corrects himself and mentions 15 images.
3. Śaīlapuṭī, Brahmācārīṅ, Candiraghaṅṭā, Kusmāṅḍā, Skandamāṅḍā, Kāyāyānī, Kālārārī, Mahāgaūrī and Siddhidāūrī.
4. Both the *mahant*, Chunnial Pandya, and his wife are artists and performers. They teach *sitar* and classical singing, respectively. Other teachers are hosted in the temple for the most disparate classes. Nowadays the teaching activity is mostly targeting tourists.
5. The last two festivals I attended were on 9 April 2009 and 30 March 2010.
6. The *vāśik amakuṭi* coincides with the *piṭr viśarjāna*, the commemoration of the ancestors.

7. Since my earliest visit in Varānaśī and the Bengali *toḷā* in 1997, I noticed that the two communities sharing the area (i.e. Bengalis and Hindi/Bhojpuri-speakers) are increasingly growing estranged. Although there is no evidence of hostility between the two groups, the overall wealthy Bengalis are accused of having created a ghetto and to have flourished at the expense of 'true' Banāśīs. Conversely, Bengalis claim that their Bengaliness is threatened by the surrounding environment. Exogamy is thus discouraged as well as other forms of social relations, such as, for instance, business

8. The last six *mahants* belong to the Pandya family. They are Visvanath Pandya, Vaikunthnath Pandya, Ramnath Pandya, Jagesvarnath Pandya and Bhajinath Pandya. The current *mahant* is Chunnial Pandya.

9. The editor of the *Kāśīkhanda*, G. V. Tagare, comments that: 'The names in this list show that these so-called Yoginīs must be ogresses worshipped by the masses before their Brahmanisation. They came to be called "Yoginīs" after their absorption in the Śaiva cult.' (1996: 495) Such exegesis bears witness to the primitivism still dominating the study of marginal(ized) deities in Indic culture.

10. During my sojourns in Varānaśī I heard a number of legends about powerful images of yoginīs. One, for instance, tells the story of a *mūrti* of Kālī (or a powerful yoginī) hidden below the Rana Mahal. This, every year, requires blood. In this way local residents explain strange deaths, suicides, etc. Stories about female voracious spirits or ghosts are also popular.

11. Dehejia (1986: 53–4) lists eight supernatural powers (*aśtanmahāsiddhis*): (1) the ability to become minute in size (*annimā*); (2) the ability to assume the form of a giant (*mahimā*); (3) the ability to levitate and leave one's own gross body (*laghimā*); (4) the ability to become heavily weighted (*garimā*); (5) the ability to control others' minds (*prākāmyā*); (6) control over all living creatures (*tīrṭhā*); (7) control over natural elements (*vaśīṣā*); and (8) the ability to fulfil all desires (*kāmarāśayitā*).

12. Here the Purāṇic yoginīs represent the reverse of the Tantric yoginīs. While the former heal, the latter are linked to dangerous forms of possession resulting in various illnesses.

13. Rituals contextualized in a healing/medical system (e.g. Āyurveda) or a body of practices widely intended for negotiating health issues. In subaltern strata of the Hindu society, the presence/absence of a deity is invariably discussed as being at the origin of imbalance (illness, misfortune, etc.). According to local exegeses, gods, goddesses and spirits cause and remove 'illness' and misfortune. 'Healing' is therefore a more complex performance that aims at restoring a disrupted order and a series of contingencies widely perceived as injustice, misfortune or imbalance.

14. The ladies' behaviour contradicts most stories of Tantric healing (including ritual music and singing) as heavily ritualized performances depending on texts and initiation.

15. The *Kāśī-khanda* confirms that one can obtain yogic *siddhi* in the Yoginī Pīṭha, in the mythic Ānandavāna, and the Yoginī Tīrtha, presumably Causaṭī Ghāṭ, where the yoginīs arrived (KKh 61: 176; 79: 106).

16. The ladies have special meetings when more complex ritual performances are needed, e.g. the annual *amakuṭi*, when they spend the day before the festival cooking rice and vegetables, peeling fruits, preparing/purchasing sweets and disposing of flowers and auspicious *harā pattas*.

17. The 'ladies of the temple' have notebooks where they write down their songs. In recent years, I have been able to copy a good number of their compositions (which I then translated). Other compositions have been recorded with the help of my research assistant, Vijay Baijpai – for whose precious collaboration I am ever so grateful.

18. The goddess herself is called both mother and witch in many of the women's devotional songs: 'What to say about my mother, the magician? / Are you listening to our pain, mother? / I'm bringing flowers from my garden / I'm bringing flowers for you *piṭā* / You are the magician, mother / Please listen to my pain! [...]?' (Song recorded by the author, May 2010).

19. The ladies of the temple seem to reverse White's assertion: 'from mothers to yoginīs' (2006: 188–9), and show how in the microcosm of the Bengali *toḷā* they have successfully (re-)appropriated the role of the mother. Causaṭī Yoginī Devī herself is Causaṭī Mātā.

20. There is also no evidence of initiation (*dikṣā*) or initiatory practices.

21. The leader of the group told me that when she goes on pilgrimage outside Varānaśī – she was specifically referring to her recent *yātrā* in the Kāhmandu valley – she has to obey the strictest of rules.

22. The goddess's *mahāmantra* is also repeated for its power to heal, protect and bestow good fortune: *mā śrī causaññī dāī śakti ke caraññ meñ samarpita*.
23. Song recorded by the author, May 2010.
24. Only when they perform in private households- e.g. on occasions of births – they are remunerated with gifts such as food, *pān* and occasionally cotton *sāris*.

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13 Invoking the erotic Mother

The outcaste priestess and the heroic men

Priyadarshini Vijaisri

Introduction

This paper explores the notion of the sacred and dangerous feminine within the Śakti tradition across villages of Andhra Pradesh, Southern India. In this religious domain the outcaste clan goddess Mātamma or Mātāngi, the *kuladevatā* of the Mādigas, occurs as the primordial feminine power in her wholesomeness, as the terrifying and nurturing Mother. References to her abound and are manifold: creator, protector, virile, incestuous Mother, a corpse-eating demoness, a sorceress with multiple forms residing on the boundaries and associated with a troupe of minor and deadly spirits. These references suggest the complex religious and cultural notions that underlie both the myths and ritual practices. The *jōgini* (Telugu form of the Sanskrit 'yoginī') and the *mātamma/mātāngi* are variations of the priestess in this ritual domain.¹ As discursive categories, these models offer immense scope to broadly delineate the mutations and interconnections between esoteric ritual practices and communal traditions.

First, an attempt is made to locate the priestess within a broader religious context as embodying the notion of transcendent femininity in contrast to the priest and the ascetic. It will focus on specific ritual practices that signify the exceptional being of the priestess. In these practices, her bodily substance, speech and acts are believed to be saturated with the dangerous power of the goddess. Second, a crucial dimension is the relationship between the priestess and the *virulu* (heroic men) in the invocation of the mother goddess. This ritual bond between feminine transcendent power and worldly masculine power forms a basic principle for understanding issues of religious power and caste structure. Finally, the absolute religious power of the outcaste indicates the need to rethink the boundaries and nature of marginality in caste societies. This ethno-historical exploration deploys notions of dangerous marginality in rethinking these issues and largely draws from field-data and the sacred lore of the outcastes in the region.

Esoteric yoginī, exoteric jōgini

One of the evocative questions that surfaced during the anti-devadāsī and anti-caste movements during the 1970s was 'why only women belonging to the