Pilgrimage and Politics in Colonial Bengal

The Myth of the Goddess Sati

Imma Ramos

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ROUTLEDGE

Pilgrimage and Politics in Colonial Bengal

From the late nineteenth century onwards the concept of Mother India assumed political significance in colonial Bengal. Reacting against British rule, Bengali writers and artists gendered the nation in literature and visual culture in order to inspire patriotism amongst the indigenous population. This book will examine the process by which the Hindu goddess Sati rose to sudden prominence as a personification of the subcontinent and an icon of heroic self-sacrifice. According to a myth of cosmic dismemberment, Sati's body parts were scattered across South Asia and enshrined as Shakti Pithas, or Seats of Power. These sacred sites were re-imagined as the fragmented body of the motherland in crisis that could provide the basis for an emergent territorial consciousness. The most potent sites were located in eastern India, Kalighat and Tarapith in Bengal, and Kamakhya in Assam. By examining Bengali and colonial responses to these temples and the ritual traditions associated with them, including Tantra and image worship, this book will provide the first comprehensive study of this ancient network of pilgrimage sites in an art historical and political context.

Imma Ramos is curator of the South Asia collections at the British Museum in London. Her research interests revolve around the relationship between religion, politics and gender in South Asian visual culture.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2017
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 9781472489449 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781315223148 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Saxon Graphics Ltd, Derby

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their guidance, advice and support: Professor Jean Michel Massing, Alex Wolfers, Professor Deborah Howard, Dr Sona Datta, Atish and Koel Chakraborty, Debarati Basu, Saurav Banerjee, Soumi Dutta, Anya Rai Sharma, Manas Barua and family, Hemen Sharma, Jon Mogul, Maria Zarzycka, Professor Hugh Urban, Professor Susan Huntington, Dr Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes, Professor Julius Lipner, Professor Christopher Pinney, Shubhojit Biswas, Mark Baron and Elise Boisanté, Lynne Taggart, Guillem Ramos-Poqui, Nicolas Maclean, Qamar Maclean, Dr David Oldfield, Professor Christiane Brosius, Professor Sukanya Sharma and Niharika Dinkar. I am also extremely grateful to the following funding bodies: the Cambridge Home and European Union Scholarship Scheme (CHESS), the Pembroke College Scholarship Trust Fund, the Kettle's Yard Travel Fund and the British Museum Scholarly Publications Fund.

This book is the product of research carried out for a doctorate thesis at the University of Cambridge, funded by CHESS. Earlier versions of Chapters 1–4 have been published previously as follows: 'The Fragmentation of Sati: Constructing Hindu Identity through Nationalistic Pilgrimage Souvenirs,' *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, vol.27 (Special Issue: (eds) Mogul, J. and Zarzycka, M. 'Souvenirs and Objects of Remembrance'), 2015, pp.12–35; 'The Visual Politics of Menstruation, Birth and Devotion at Kamakhya Temple in Assam,' in Motrescu-Mayes, A. and Banks, M. (eds) *Visual Histories of India* (Delhi, 2017); 'Impurity, Auspiciousness and Power: The Tantric Transformations of Lajja Gauri at Kamakhya,' *Abraxas: The International Journal of Esoteric Studies* (Fulgur Special Issue: (eds) Zamani, D. and Oakley-Harrington, C. 'Occultism, Magic and the History of Art. Selected Papers from the University of Cambridge Conference'), 2013, pp.19–29; 'The Sweetening of Death: Bamakhepa's Visualisation of Tara at Bengal's Tarapith Temple,' *Journal of the LUCAS Graduate Conference*, vol.2 (Special Issue: 'Death: The Cultural Meaning of the End of Life. Selected Papers from the Leiden University Centre for the Arts Conference'), 2014, pp.127–46; and 'Contesting the Colonial Gaze: Image Worship Debates in Nineteenth-Century Bengal,' *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol.31, no.2 (Special Issue: 'Divine Intervention: The Role of Religion and Ritual in South Asian Visual Culture. Proceedings from the 40th AAH Conference'), 2015, pp.237–46.

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Introduction

A myth of dismemberment

There are many variants of the story of the Hindu goddess Sati, who immolated herself and was dismembered as her grief-stricken husband Shiva embarked on a frenzied dance of destruction.[1] According to versions of the story in the *Kalika* and *Devibhagavata Puranas* (religious texts devoted to the veneration of the divine feminine, or Shakti, dated to around the tenth and eleventh centuries respectively), Sati's father, King Daksha, did not invite Shiva to his *yajna*, a ceremonial sacrifice during which oblations are poured into a ritual fire. Humiliated by this act of disrespect towards her husband, Sati performed self-immolation. The distraught Shiva retrieved her body, and began to dance with it in his arms across the cosmos. His grief risked the destruction of the world, so Vishnu, god of preservation, threw his discus and cut Sati's body into pieces, which were scattered across the Indian subcontinent. Each place where one of her body parts fell was sacralised and temples, which became known as Shakti Pithas or Seats of Power, were built to enshrine each piece.[2] These shrines dated from at least the seventh century onwards, and many were originally associated with non-Vedic, tribal goddesses. The Shakti Pitha sites extend all over South Asia, animated by Sati's presence.

Abul Fazl (1551–1602), the court historian of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605), wrote an informative account of the Pithas in his *Ain-i-Akbari* (Constitution of Akbar), indicating how important they were considered by the sixteenth century, acknowledged even by the Mughal powers.[3] Today it is commonly accepted that there are fifty-one Pithas, as listed in the *Mahapithanirupana* (1690–1720), all of which form a powerful pilgrimage network that affirms the notion that the subcontinent itself is a goddess.[4] Forty-one are believed to be in India, four in Bangladesh, three in Nepal, one in Pakistan, one in Sri Lanka and one in Tibet. However, there have been discrepancies regarding the number and the names of the Pithas.[5] Not all of these places are identifiable with certainty today, and there is disagreement on exact locations; some name a river or a region, while others are temples which no longer exist or have diminished in importance.

The goddess at the Pithas was and still is approached for the granting of health, procreation, longevity and protection from danger, as well as enlightenment. The sites, however, are dedicated not only to Sati's relics, but to local goddesses as well. Hindu deities can be simultaneously conceived as merging into one absolute deity, as well as assuming the forms of numerous minor deities, a paradox resulting from the belief that deities are both formless (cosmic and unified) and form-bound (in local

manifestations). The Shakti Pithas articulate this paradox, since the goddess is presented to pilgrims as both individually manifested (as a specific temple deity) and as the one overarching goddess (Sati) that unifies the disparate temples.[6] Indeed, the idea of the Pithas may have originally been conceived as a way to legitimise and integrate shrines and temples dedicated to various tribal, rural and non-Vedic goddesses into the Brahmanical (orthodox Hindu) pantheon.[7] This attempt to affirm the unity of all the Pithas was made by adding the episode about dismemberment to the Sati myth, bringing together shrines dedicated to a multitude of goddesses under the same umbrella.[8] There is evidence to suggest that active shrines existed prior to being associated with the network of Pithas.[9] For example, it is believed that long before its association with Sati, a mother goddess was worshipped at the Kamakhya Pitha in Assam by tribal communities such as the Khasis and the Garos.[10]

Although the myth describes the dismemberment of Sati's corpse, the emphasis at the sites is not on the worship of Sati's relics but on the worship of living goddesses, who are all understood as manifestations of Shakti.[11] Since Sati's 'relics' are often either concealed from view or else take the form of a rough, uncarved stone, devotees often focus their devotion on the *murti* (divinely embodied icon) of the local goddess. A contemporary print includes the *murtis* of Kali and Tara, who are the local goddesses at the temples of Kalighat and Tarapith in Bengal (Plate 1), two principal case studies of this book. While Kalighat houses Sati's right toes, Tarapith enshrines her third eye. The print reveals the prioritisation of these two sites as major Pithas in Bengal: their anthropomorphic *murtis* are shown beside the central figures of Sati and Shiva. At many of these sites, particularly those in Bengal, the representation of Shiva carrying Sati functions as a visual reminder of their dedication to Sati's relics, as at Nalhati, home of the goddess Kalika and Sati's vocal pipe (Figure I.1). Before devotees reach the Fullara Attahas temple in Birbhum a gate, commissioned in 2001, welcomes them; at the top is a statue of Shiva carrying the corpse of Sati, while fifty-one panels all around classify each body part (Figure I.2–I.3). There are believed to be twenty-three Pithas in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, which account for more than forty-five per cent of the total in South Asia. One explanation for this high concentration is the prevalence of Shaktism (goddess worship) in the area, especially Bengal.[12]

Bengal and Assam were and are the homeland of Shaktism, with three of their most famous temples at Kalighat,Tarapith and Kamakhya. During a period of doctoral field work (2012) I visited all fourteen sites currently regarded as Shakti Pithas across Bengal, as well as the major Pitha shrine of Kamakhya in Assam. Many of the sites in Bengal are located in rural areas difficult to access by public transport, and therefore visited primarily by locals. Indeed, today the most popular Pithas are those which are easily accessible. In Bengal these are Kalighat (located in the state capital, Kolkata) and Tarapith in the district of Birbhum (which can be easily reached via the aptly named Maa Tara Express from Kolkata). I was accompanied by Atish Chakraborty from Kolkata, a former engineer who is spending his retirement visiting all fifty-one Pithas; when I met him he had already visited forty-two. His motivations for embarking on such a pilgrimage circuit are not only religious; he is also interested in the cultural, historical nature of the sites. When asked about the role and importance of the Pithas today he replied: 'all fifty-one Pithas are equally important because devotees believe in their miraculous power and that they will grant all their wishes'.[13] Exploration of the Kamakhya temple in Gauhati (the largest city in Assam) required several days; it is the most historically well preserved of the Pithas, dating back to before the tenth century.