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Published online: 05 Nov 2010.

To cite this article: Heather Elgood (2004) Exploring the roots of village Hinduism in South Asia, World Archaeology, 36:3, 326-342, DOI: 10.1080/0043824042000282777

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0043824042000282777
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Abstract

This paper explores the roots of contemporary village religion. The eclectic nature and interaction of both rural and orthodox Puranic Hinduism have made any attempt to dissect the traditions difficult. The question arises as to which had the greatest impact, Puranic Hinduism or the non-Vedic cults, on the development of village religion. To answer this, this article will first establish the principal features of village Hinduism. Because of the constraints imposed by a short paper it will focus specifically on the ritual worship of the goddess in her various forms, through the development of an associated iconography. It will also explore historical continuity, through a study of texts, archaeological materials and evidence from ethno-archaeology. The paper concludes that rural religion represents an amalgam of local superstitions, non-Vedic cultic practice and orthodox Puranic Hinduism, which is itself an assimilation of many of these elements.

Keywords

Hinduism; non-Vedic; goddess; Sri/Lakshmi; Lajja Gauri; Yaksha.

Many of the problems faced by village communities in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and to some extent even today, remain precisely those which have affected rural communities throughout history. The most important of these involved the uncertainty of the coming of the rains and the production of crops without which life itself could not be sustained. Next in importance were the periodic outbreaks of disease in people and animals which swept through these close-knit communities, taking life at random. Among other major preoccupations were a desire for children, protection against the evil eye and a desire for prosperity. Scholars such as Kosambi (1956) suggested that rituals resorted to as a means of controlling these potent forces, and used by village people even today, had their origins in early cults which date from the early centuries BC. According to Thapar, Kosambi noted sites such as trees, sacred groves and stone, ‘which have shown remarkable continuity as sacred centres and often provided a greater historical continuity both in object and ritual than many written texts’ (2000: 58). The principal deity appealed to by most Indian rural communities over the centuries has been
the goddess. The goddess takes many forms and it is by untangling her origins that we may uncover the purpose and antiquity of these village rituals. If the problem remains the same across the centuries it cannot be assumed that the ritual solution remains constant but the possibility must be considered.

This paper seeks to explore the origins of village Hinduism. The eclectic nature and interaction of both rural and orthodox Puranic Hinduism has made any attempt to dissect the traditions difficult. The method employed here is to predicate links of contemporary ritual with ancient practice based on a continuity of iconographic symbols. Village rituals have been carefully observed, initially by anthropologists and administrators in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Archaeological material, early sculpture and textual sources make up the remainder of the relevant evidence. The question arises as to which had the greatest impact, Brahmanic Hinduism or the non-Vedic cults, on the development of village religion. To answer this I shall first establish the principal features of village Hinduism. Because of the constraints imposed by a short paper I shall focus specifically on the worship of the goddess in her various forms, through the development of an associated iconography, and explore historical continuity through a study of texts and the interpretation and links between archaeological material and contemporary village rituals.

Difficulties arise due to the perishable nature of much of the material evidence and the speculative nature of the interpretation of symbols. The historical evolution of mainstream Hinduism has relied almost exclusively on textual evidence but this has clear limitations for tracing the development of rural practices where the participants are usually non-literate and excluded for reasons of caste from any active role in orthodox temple Hinduism. However, scholars have become increasingly aware that, despite their differences, village religion and Puranic temple Hinduism are related, with the subsuming of popular folk idols into what was to become mainstream Hinduism (Biardeau 1989: 238).

Reference to the worship of cult images which evolved within Hinduism, a practice not associated with Vedic Brahmanism, is first seen in the principal Vedic text the Rg Veda (c. 1200 BC) where the Sishnadevas and Muradevas, meaning the worshippers of the phallus and of the fetish, are referred to with derision (Sontakke and Kashikar 1933–51, V11 27.5, X 99.3). The contribution of non-Vedic sources may also be seen in the rich inheritance woven into the spells and magical rites found in the Atharva Veda (c. 900 BC), the last of the four books of the Vedas. The dating of this oral tradition is imprecise but according to O’Flaherty (1975: 16–18), the early Vedic texts date from ca. 2000–900 BC. The grammarian Panini (11 2, 3, 4) mentions, in the fifth century BC, worship of Yaksha and Yakshini images, male and female tree spirits associated with the ancient cult of tree worship (Coomaraswamy 1971: 4–38). The Mahabharata (3, 83, 23) (300 BC–AD 300) refers to a Yakshini shrine as ‘world renowned’, portraying the Yakshinis as ambivalent protectors, similar to the goddesses of disease worshipped in the modern village such as Sitala (Coomaraswamy 1971: 9). On the other hand, elements of Brahmanic Hinduism were adopted by villagers and cult images became increasingly anthropomorphized and Hinduized (Eschmann 1978: 79–97). The precise date for the written compilation of these texts, which represent a much earlier oral tradition, is uncertain.
In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the evolution of village Hinduism was studied by European observers such as Crooke and Whitehead. They witnessed buffalo sacrifice and the burial and trampling of a pig, which Whitehead believed stood for an earlier tradition of human sacrifice, a fact supported by Thurston who noted child sacrifice among the Lambadis, a nomadic tribal group from southern India. Human sacrifice, recorded by numerous European writers, was assumed to be a continuation of earlier ritual practice (Crooke 1894, 1: 167; Whitehead 1921: 61, n.13). However, the external practice may not be the most important part of the ritual act and the intention of the participants cannot be assumed to be universal or constant so claims concerning ritual continuity are at best tenuous.

Village Hinduism

Village Hinduism (in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and continuing to the present) offers the means by which villagers seek to allay problems attributed to the spirit world. Despite a multitude of names and different manifestations, the generic goddess has been pre-eminent in the village. Historically, the goddess in her various local forms seems to have evolved into two main groups: the cooler earth goddesses associated with vegetation and fertility and the hot goddesses who must be cooled and propitiated. Fear lay at the root of the ritual devotion to the latter. Villagers, particularly women, offer gifts and promises of gifts to secure spiritual merit and protect the family against disaster. The villagers also believe in and fear Yakshas, Bhutas (ghosts) and preternatural beings from the lower echelons of the spirit world, who are thought to haunt the village and forest. There is a belief in a subtle hierarchy of gods, spirits, animals and men, with no clear division between them.

The non-Brahmanic nature of village devotion can be seen in the fact that devotees do not require Brahman priestly intercession to access their deities and, in their worship, resort to spirit possession and the propitiation of ghosts (Bhutas). It should be noted, however, that propitiation takes a form similar in many respects to that developed in mainstream devotional Hinduism, with offerings of incense, flowers, food, money and flags, but differs in that it includes votive animal figurines (Huyler 1996). In the case of the hot goddesses, propitiation may include the smearing of blood on the participants and the splashing of blood over aniconic marker stones following live sacrificial offerings.

It is often difficult to date extant village shrines, many of which consist of a rough stone platform under a tree. The locus of worship marked with a simple stone is in marked contrast to the transient nature of the ceremony of sacrifice associated with Vedic culture. Certain places are identified with the worship of the goddess such as specific trees, hills, mountains, caves and the limits of village boundaries. Goddess shrines are frequently placed on village boundaries for the purpose of protecting the village (Whitehead 1921: 36). Some are sited at places that have acquired sanctity by association with violent death, following which sacrifices were held to appease the spirits. Echoes of non-Vedic cults can be seen in the worship of both natural symbols, such as stones, earthen and termite mounds, trees, snakes and rivers, and ritual symbols, such as iron spears, tridents or flags,
which are still venerated in present-day tribal and village India. The depiction of the goddess varies from, at the simplest level, the aniconic form to something more sculpted and figurative. During festivals a temporary covering of bamboo or vegetation is sometimes constructed to house the deity (Plate 1).

One link between more recent (i.e. nineteenth and twentieth centuries) village Hinduism and the practices prevalent in early India, as this paper will demonstrate, is the regular recurrence of decorative motifs, attributes and symbols across the centuries. Interpretation of such motifs and symbols may vary, but their form can frequently remain the same. This faithfulness to tradition is assisted by the village social structure that encourages occupational grouping and the preservation of trade practices through the caste system. Practical skills and ritual behaviour are passed from father to son and from mother to daughter. It is especially in women’s customs that we see the greatest adherence to an unchanging pattern of ritual (Plate 2).

Plate 1 Shrine with remains of sacrificial offerings (‘Goddess Shrine in Tamil Nadu’, with kind permission of Dr Robert Elgood).
As noted above, villagers believe in a variety of goddesses, some auspicious and some malevolent, all of whom require pleasing through gift giving and worship. For example, the village of Khalapur in Rajasthan has four goddess types: a benign earth goddess called Dharti Mata, goddesses associated with smallpox and other epidemic diseases, others associated with calendrical festivals and a more orthodox Hindu goddess associated with Kali (Kolenda 1981: 228). The likelihood of a non-Brahmanical or folk origin for the goddesses is reinforced by the fact that, while several minor goddesses appear in the early Sanskrit texts (1200–900 BC), there is an absence of reference to any major goddess, such as Durga, Kali, Ambika or Uma, in them (Bhattacharya 1999: 100).

The most significant goddess mentioned in the *Rg Veda* is Ushas, the goddess of dawn, who declines in importance in later Vedic literature such as the *Atharva Veda* (900 BC) and is practically absent in the *Epics* (300 BC–AD 300) and *Puranas* (AD 300–500). There is also mention of Sita, goddess of the furrow in one of the hymns of the *Rg Veda* (Sontakke and Kashikar 1933–51, IV 57.6–7), who becomes more humanized in later epics, and additionally there is a reference to Aditi, the mother of the gods (Bhattacharya 1999: 94–5). The *Atharva Veda* provides evidence of a corpus of beliefs and practices that include many non-Vedic customs, cults and superstitions. In the Harivamsa, Aditi is identified with Durga and with the earth, while Durga is associated with the non-Brahmanical
hunting peoples like the Sabaras. In the epics (300 BC–AD 300), Sri (also known as Lakshmi) begins to play a significant role as the bestower of prosperity and is associated with Kubera, while Sita takes a more human role as the wife of Rama (ibid.: 104). The Mahabharata refers to the Saptamatrikas suckling and protecting Skanda (son of Shiva, brother of Ganesh). Skanda’s relationship with the goddess Sasthi, the protectress of children, may also reveal something of the primitive substratum of the mother goddess cult. The Mahabharata (3, 84, 105) also provides textual evidence of the form of early shrines associated with the worship of Yaksha and goddess shrines associated with Hariti (Coomaraswamy 1971: 9–10), essentially a stone table or altar placed beneath a tree sacred to the Yaksha or at a shrine to the goddess (ibid.: 17–22).

Textual sources, such as the Mahanarayana Upanishad (700 BC) (IV: 1–18) elaborate the ethnography of some folk gods absorbed into the Vedic pantheon. The exclusive nature of Vedism forced the lower strata of society to establish their own alternative religious practices. This pool of excluded people was trawled by new religious movements such as Buddhism and Jainism and these cults adopted some of the iconography of their converts. Prior to their appearance in Puranic literature (from AD 300) references to nature spirits were recorded in Jain texts (second–first century BC), Buddhist texts such as the Aupapatika Sutra (second century BC) and in some of the Jataka stories (third–second century BC) (e.g. Dumedha Jataka); their continuing importance can be judged by their prominence within the iconography associated with these teachings. Yakshas, Yakshinis and Gaja Lakshmi were also depicted on second-century monuments such as Bharhut. In Pali texts (second century BC) the earth mother, Prthivi or Dharani, and the goddess of fortune, Lakshmi or Sri, were given a place in the Devalokas and the Brahmalokas (the abodes of the celestials).

**Earth goddess**

A number of terracotta figurines have been found from sites in Mehrgarh dating from the fourth millennium BC, and from Zhob and Kulli from Baluchistan dating from the third millennium BC. These represent the earliest forms of female imagery (formerly believed to represent the ‘mother goddess’) found in the subcontinent (Chakrabarti 2002: 16–23). Female figurines have been found at various Harappan sites of the third and second millennia BC. The majority are draped in a short loin-cloth, with fan-shaped headdress, and are highly ornamented with jewellery. These figures have pronounced breasts, necklaces, large beaklike noses and circular eye holes. Male figurines also occur, as do bull and other animal clay images (ibid.: 38).

The Harappan seals show a complex arrangement of figures and an undeciphered script. Many scholars regard these seals as forerunners of the iconography of later Hinduism (Parpola 1993). While this may be overstated, the attempt to link the figures on these seals with fertility is supported by the well-known image from the Indus valley of the female with spread legs and a plant issuing from her womb (Kinsley 1986: 218; Marshall 1931: pl. X11, 12). One Harappan seal shows a kneeling female with a male figure standing over her with a sickle which may associate female fecundity with crops or denote her ritual sacrifice. Another seal depicts what appears to be a female goddess in a tree revered by another
female, below which are seven standing figures (Marshall 1931: pl. X11, 18); this might imply tree worship and by extension fertility, and may provide a precedent for the saptamatrika (‘seven mothers’) goddesses. The large number of bull figures both on the seals and in the figurines may also imply the link with the bull and fertility, as in many goddess cults in other cultures. The propitiation of Bhumi, the female earth spirit, is an aspect of the seasonal life of many villages, the origin of this practice being ancient but unknown, though Gauri, who is identified with the Brahmanical goddess Parvati, is the most widely regarded of such agricultural deities. Gauri is associated with ripening corn and features in many of the vratas regularly observed even today by village women as well as in some of the grander festivals (Bakker and Entwhistle 1983: 1). Vratas, still commonly practised in contemporary villages when devotees ask for a blessing in return for undertaking some act of devotion, may be an example of this ancient non-Vedic inheritance.

Apart from Indus seals, most of the archaeological evidence relating to ritual practice from the third–first century BC comprises clay or terracotta figurines of the Maurya and Sunga periods (Plate 3). Several scholars have understood these figures to be votive offerings destined for an ancient goddess shrine or to be immersed in water. Jayakar (1953: 27–32) gives a contemporary example from a tribal group in Surat where terracotta offerings are linked to funerary gifts. Similar offerings are found in the Nilgiri district in South India, a rite drawn from cults of the dead, tree worship and a mingling of a local mother and goddess cult (Mode and Chandra 1985: 115). Despite a lack of visual evidence, particularly works in durable materials such as stone sculptures from 1000–300 BC, terracottas provide a key to the preoccupations and ritual non-Vedic practices. They are particularly relevant as they represent work destined for lower-caste non-royal patrons. In his important study of terracottas from 300 BC to AD 200, Ahuja illustrates examples which provide the earliest historical evidence of symbols that can be identified with the later iconography associated with village religion. Examples provide evidence for early shrines, in the form of terracotta tanks, from the period 500–200 BC (first published in Marshall 1951: pl. 136, figs 153–63; see also Ahuja 2001: 67). These shrines show a female figure placed to one side of a rectangular tank with steps alongside her leading up to the shrine from the base of the trough (Siudmak 2002). Marshall (1951: 466–7) connected these tanks to the Yama-ukur-brata, a Bengali ritual where unmarried women make offerings to Yama the god of death.

Historical links with contemporary village goddesses and ritual practice are evident in a female terracotta plaque from the first century BC from Chandraketugarh, West Bengal district (Plate 4) (Haq 2001). The woman has weapons in her hair and holds a protective parasol which suggests she is a goddess. Her left hand rests on her waist while her right proffers a bestowing gesture; a worshipper offers a tray of floral gifts. The figures are framed by two pillars which are supported by earthen pots while the goddess stands on a pedestal which is decorated with right-hand palm prints, parasols, flower buds and perhaps chowri whisks and cornucopia. Other evidence of similar female figures can be seen on a pot (Ahuja 2001: 172, figs 3.190, 3.191). According to Ahuja, these post-Mauryan female goddesses share a pool of common attributes, such as attendants carrying fans, mirrors, chhatris and chowri whisks. Often portrayed is a female figure, showering coins, accompanied by a devotee who carries flowers, fruit and sweetmeats to the shrine to
receive the blessing of the goddess (ibid.: 178, fig. 3.202). Such female images may be associated with Sri/Lakshmi, though the weapons in her hair suggest some precursor deity now assimilated into the orthodox identity of Lakshmi. Lakshmi today is associated with earthen vessels, palm prints, parasols, and specifically with floral offerings, mirrors and showering coins, all visible in these early terracottas.

Although the goddess Sri/Lakshmi does not figure in early Vedic literature, the term Sri appears frequently referring to capability and power, suggesting glory, lustre, beauty and high rank. Kinsley (1986: 20, n.3, 223) suggests that she may have derived from an Indo-European goddess. According to Saraswati (1971: 291–6), the most detailed picture of Sri/Lakshmi in Vedic literature is found in the Sri Sukta, a hymn in praise of Sri, which is part of an appendix to the Rg Veda and which is probably pre-Buddhist in date. Sri/Lakshmi
may have absorbed some features of earlier non-Vedic deities seen particularly in the hymn by her association with fertility. She is described as moist, perceptible through odour, abundant in harvest and dwelling in cow dung. Her son is said to be Kardama which means mud, slime or mire. Lakshmi is associated with the lotus, vegetation and thus by extension with the Yaksha and Yakshini fertility cults. She is also associated with Kubera, while in Buddhist legends Hariti as the wife of the Yaksha Nanda is assimilated into Sri /Lakshmi, known since pre-Buddhist times as one of the most popular pan-Indian goddesses. Although in later periods this aspect of Lakshmi is not prominent in orthodox Hinduism, it has endured at a village level.

The earliest depiction of Lakshmi, lustrated by two elephants, a form identified as Gaja Lakshmi, appears on the railings of the Buddhist stupa at Bharhut (Plate 5). The elephants are said to represent rain-bearing clouds and, by association, fertility and abundance. From the second century BC we find, in addition to Vedic sacrificial rituals, evidence of
parallel cultic practices in the form of free-standing stone Yaksha and Yakshini sculptures and named Yaksha and Yakshini sculptures on the pillars of Jain and Buddhist religious monuments, such as Bharhut. Ahuja mentions examples from Kausambi from the first century BC (Ahuja 2001: 67, figs 3.15, 3.16) and a Gaja lakshmi of the same period (ibid.: 67, fig. 3.82). Her image is frequently seen on seals, coins, terracotta and ivory reliefs of Bharhut and Sanchi (see Ahuja 2001: 216, fig. 3.304). Other representations which may reinforce the ubiquitous nature of the goddess cult are seen on first-century BC coins from Koshambi, Ayodhya and Ujjayini and on coins from Mathura dating from the first century AD (Bhattacharya 1999: 157).

An early link with Sri/Lakshmi can be seen in the depiction of a related female goddess with a lotus head, commonly known as Lajja (shy, shameful) Gauri, a popular goddess from the second century BC until the eleventh century AD (see Plate 6). Bolon (1992: 70) links Lajja Gauri, through her association with vegetation and water, to the Yaksha and Yakshini spirits and explains how Lajja Gauri became brahmanized by assimilation into

Plate 5  Gaja Lakshmi, Bharhut, second century BC.
the identity of both Sri and Parvati. Lajja Gauri’s precise religious function is not revealed by contemporary texts or by any known rites but her habitual posture is described by Kramrisch as ‘uttanapad’ meaning one whose legs are extended in parturition. According to Bolon, this image develops over time from an aniconic pot-like form to a more anthropomorphic image with arms. Inscriptions testify to the fact that the Calukyan kings of the seventh century described themselves as devotees of Sri, nourished by the Sapta Matrikas (the seven goddess servants of the warrior goddess Durga) and sons of the goddess Hariti (a Buddhist deity and reformed child stealer, earlier a goddess of disease) (ibid.: 33). Ancient sites such as the Chalukyan Lakulisa temple at Siddhanakalla and Bala Brahma temple at Alampur have shrines to these goddesses. It is interesting to note the juxtaposition of the Lajja Gauri shrine at Siddhanakalla with a shrine dedicated to the Sapta Matrikas guarded by a goat-headed male figure and the frequent citing of Lajja Gauri shrines near springs (ibid.: 25). Further inscriptions from the seventh century identify Gauri with Parvati, Hindu consort of Shiva, and compare her to a lotus (ibid.: 31–2). Childless women still today approach these early shrines and it is likely that current worship reflects earlier cultic practice (ibid.: 4).

Despite Sri/Lakshmi’s formal role in temple Hinduism relating to material prosperity and royal authority, and her absorption into orthodox Hinduism as the consort of Vishnu, her non-Vedic heritage persists in the village context. As mentioned above, she is associated with fertility, cow dung, the lotus and vegetation, and can be identified with Lajja Gauri. Associated with Hariti through links with the Yakshini, Lakshmi echoes a deity who may well have represented a more ambivalent bloodthirsty form of goddess than her assimilated form. It seems possible that her role has been sanitized in the process of becoming Hinduized and her less agreeable roles have transferred to other incarnations of the goddess.

Plate 6  Lajja Gauri, Osmanabad district, Deccan, Central India, third century AD (BM 0A 1958.10.17.2) (Courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum).
In north and south India the goddess is found everywhere in single or multiple forms such as the Sapta Matrikas or ‘seven mothers’. Tiwari (1971: 215–44), in his study of goddess cults in north India, argued that the Matrikas are mentioned in Vedic literature, but Kinsley (1986: 151) suggests that the earliest textual reference is more precisely the later layers of the Mahabharata from the first century AD. The lack of significant reference in the Vedas, and the link mentioned in the Mahabharata to Kartikeya, further supports the argument for a non-Vedic origin of the gramadevata or village god. One of the most powerful forms of the goddess in Indian villages even today is the goddess of disease. She is perceived as a hot, fierce, unmarried and childless and yet is addressed as mother (ibid.: 198). Feared as Sitala, goddess of smallpox, she is worshipped as a form of appeasement throughout India under such names as Mahamai, Masani, Mariyamman (Tam. Mari), or simply as Mata in the north and Amman in the south. The goddesses also demand blood offering, although the associated smearing and splashing of blood is frowned upon by Brahmanic Hinduism. The references in the Mahabharata make it clear that these goddesses are dangerous, with unappealing physical characteristics, and are specifically threatening to children. Similar dangerous goddesses are Hariti, Putana, Jyestha and Sasti. Related bloodthirsty goddesses later known as Durga and Kali have been assimilated into Puranic Hinduism but are often included in the range of deities worshipped in the village, alongside non-Puranic deities. Historically the link of Hariti to the bloodthirsty goddess and to Lakshmi suggests a precursor cult deity who was supremely ambivalent, with the power both to take and to bestow life and abundance.

Visual evidence showing the development of the disease goddess is difficult to identify. Possibly the female figure with weapons in her hair (Plate 4) is a precursor to the non-Vedic goddess Hariti, who is assimilated and frequently depicted as a Buddhist deity from the first century BC. This is suggested by Hariti’s link to both Lakshmi, through association with the Yakshinis, and Durga, by reference to the goddess with weapons in the hair who bestows abundance (Plate 4). The earliest representation of Durga, a terracotta plaque dating from the first century BC–first century AD shows her slaying the buffalo demon Mahisa with a trident (Bhattacharya 1999: 162). This image was popular from as early as the Kushan period (second–fourth century AD) and was frequently depicted from the third century AD till the present day in temples built for royal patrons. Somewhat later in popularity are the reliefs of the mother goddesses (matrikas) who are often depicted with their children. The matrikas were popular with the Chalukyas in the seventh century AD and a representation is in the Kailasanatha temple of Kanchipuram dating from the early eighth century AD. Later still the cult of the sixty-four yoginis, referred to in literature as attendants of Durgas, was also introduced into Hinduism or revived by it, as can be seen in a series of Causath Yogini temples in Orissa (tenth century AD) and central India (ninth–tenth century AD). These Hindu temple goddesses also feature in varied manifestations in the village. In the contemporary village the goddess holds the ambivalent position of being powerful, dangerous and untamed and yet is believed to uphold the well-being, stability and order of the village (Elgood 1999: 192). With the appearance of disease a festival is held to propitiate her wrath.
Ritual worship

The interpretation of past rituals by an examination of the present has to be approached with caution. Despite regional variation there is a degree of commonality of practice. The worship and propitiatory offerings involved in village ritual have some similarity to devotional bhakti observed in urban communities, but this mainstream devotional Hinduism has in turn assimilated some early cultic practices. The earliest textual references to non-Vedic religious customs date from the early period of the epics and describe rituals associated with early Yaksha shrines (second century BC) (Coomaraswamy 1971: 28). Buddhist texts such as the Dummedha Jataka (no 50) also refer to a crowd of worshippers with blood offerings at a Banyan tree 'praying to the devata who had been reborn in that tree to grant them sons and daughters, honor and wealth' (ibid.: 9). Complex details of the pattern of sacrificial rituals in the early part of this century are also recorded and show the continuation of practices which seem to indicate a much older origin (Whitehead 1921: 140). The goddess is believed to be appeased by the spirit of a live victim, the spirit being resident in the blood of the sacrifice.

Village shrines diverge from temple Hinduism in their independence from the brahmin priesthood. Village worship includes rituals similar to mainstream Hinduism, such as the pujari or non-brahmin priest bathing the image to cool the goddess’s temper and then anointing it using ghee and turmeric. The worship of the disease goddess departs from orthodox practice, however, in the copious smearing and splashing of blood. This blood ritual sometimes involves communion with the victim by the wearing of its entrails and shamanistic trance and possession. Today this is achieved by animal sacrifice, but in the past human sacrifice was not uncommon (Plate 1) (ibid.: 148). Scholars have suggested that the splashing and communion with the blood of the sacrificial offering is an archaic rite that has its ancestry in non-Vedic sources on the grounds that no such practice is recorded in the Vedas and that blood is perceived as polluting (Elgood 1999: 192; Sekine 1993: 173).

Sri/Lakshmi’s worship at the village level in many ways echoes mainstream devotional Hinduism with offerings of food, flowers, incense and flags, which, in turn, have their roots in offerings to non-Vedic tree, pillar or naga cults (Coomaraswamy 1971). She is enticed into the village home by regularly cleansing the house walls with fresh cow dung, and decorating them with auspicious painted designs. Sri/Lakshmi’s actual presence can also take the form of an earthenware vessel. Today faithfulness to tradition is seen to be largely due to women who usually control the religious life of the rural family. Evidence of this continuity can be seen in the female custom of applying palm prints to the walls and floors of their homes, a practice that is mentioned in the early texts and is visible on terracotta plaques of the second century AD (Plate 4). A Buddhist Sutra provides evidence of this custom at an early Yaksha shrine, dedicated to the Yaksha Purnabhadra.

Near Campa there was a sanctuary named Purnabhadde. Of ancient origin, told of by men of former days, old renowned rich and well known. It had umbrellas, banners and bells, it had flags...to adorn it. It had daises built in it and was reverentially
adorned with a coating of cow dung and bore figures of the five fingered hand painted in gosirsa sandal. There was in a great store of ritual pitchers. On its doorways were ritual jars and well fashioned arches. It was haunted by actors, dancers, ropewalkers, story tellers.

(cited in Coomaraswamy 1971: 19–20)

The protective power of cow dung is referred to in this early description. Evidence of this in contemporary India is widely recorded. For example, in a ceremony of propitiation to the goddess Bhagauti Mai in Senapur village in Rajasthan, Luschinsky (1962) recorded how women spread fresh cow dung on the walls of the house to cleanse them, followed by whitewashing. After purification through fasting, the most senior woman places her right hand in rice paste and makes a number of palm prints on a small square area of wall and on the floor of the room selected for the rite (ibid.: 645–6). The women explained that ‘the hand impressions were so that the goddess would remember the ceremony and would not harm the family members’ (ibid.: 680–1). Luschinsky referred to a ceremony called Asarhi Joh in June–July, where families sprinkle crushed flowers and barley inside their homes and make a line of liquid cow dung paste on the outer wall of their homes. According to one Thakur woman:

in the old days men used to draw these lines of cow dung around various objects and as they drew the lines, they recited the verses. . . . The lines were drawn for protection. Now there are no longer any people who have power to protect people’s possessions in this way. These lines are of no use any more.

(Luschinsky 1962: 682)

The use of a circle of cow dung to protect against demons is similar to the rice powder drawing of kolams, a web of protective circular designs placed on the threshold of houses, a common practice throughout India. Another long-standing custom mentioned as being in the early Yaksha shrine is the full pot. Ceremonial objects associated with the worship of Bhagauti Mai included a large earthen pot containing water, placed on a circle of mango leaves, and tied around with a cord on which was placed the image of the goddess. Luschinsky described how water was circled over the pot to cool the deity and finally the senior woman pressed her hands together, touching the pot and then her forehead.

Women desiring children have worshipped at the shrines of the lotus-headed Lajja Gauri from as early as the seventh century to the present day, with rituals and offerings similar to those noted above (e.g. palm prints on the walls and floors of the shrine) (ibid.: 675). Ritual similarities between past and present can also be seen in the association of the goddess with the earthen vessel and the identification of Lakshmi with a goddess showering coins. However, speculative interpretation of past and present rituals is open to misunderstanding. Even with the palm print, assumptions of it acting today as a signature may not be the same as its past significance. Other interpretations, such as the full pot as an expression of abundance and the purification and sanctity of cow dung, seem to be relatively secure readings of these common symbols.
Conclusion

Unravelling the constituent elements of contemporary village religions is difficult. However, drawing together ethno-archaeology, archaeological material and textual references allows one to make some tentative interpretations. Any conclusion is however questionable, due to the subjective nature of the interpretation of symbols and reliance on only non-perishable archaeological materials. Nor can continuity of ritual intention over two thousand years be assumed solely on the basis of similarities in ritual form.

The greater part of contemporary village religion has as its origin a corpus of non-Vedic custom. Evidence for non-Vedic sources in village religion is seen in the Vedas’ lack of reference to a pre-eminent or ambivalent goddess and the absence of Brahmin priestly intercession. A study of the character of contemporary village goddesses reveals deities such as Sri/Lakshmi, the Matrikas and the goddesses of diseases (e.g. Mariyamman or Sitala), which are largely absent from Vedic Brahmanism. What becomes clear is a world where certain non-Vedic goddesses gradually fragmented into separate identities with specific responsibilities and requirements. These goddesses fall into two categories: the hot goddesses, who must be calmed, and the cool earth goddess identified with springs and the essence of life.

The Hindu epics, and Jain and Buddhist texts, provide historical evidence in descriptions of non-Vedic cult worship showing ritual practices and offerings which are absent from the prescriptions of the Vedas. The cult of offering and gift giving can be seen to have its source in the customs associated with the offerings to Yakshas as early as the first–second centuries AD. Terracottas from the second century BC point to an established repertoire of mudras (hand gestures) and symbols, such as the pot, the trident, the spear, the lotus, the royal umbrella, palm-prints, the offering of flowers and the bestowing of abundance in the form of the showering of coins. Further associated attributes – the axe, trident, mace, cakra, spear, and mangalas such as the lotus, palm-print, paired fish and the pot – continue up to the present to be associated with the worship of the village goddess (Ahuja 2001: 225). All of this has been largely assimilated by Puranic Hinduism, but the blood offering and communion with the spirit through the smearing of blood associated with the worship of the disease goddess is largely absent from puja, the ritual devotions of temple Hinduism. The customs of shamanic ritual and protection from the spirit world are also derived from non-Vedic sources. Sacrifice was central to Brahmanic Vedism, but, according to Biardeau (1989: 238), in the Vedic texts, this ritual is linguistically and conceptually differentiated from blood offerings to inferior deities.

It is not possible to unravel the interrelationship between the non-Vedic and Puranic in present-day village religion. Many non-Vedic deities have become Hinduized and then in turn re-adopted into the village pantheon of deities. One must conclude that rural religion represents an amalgam of local superstitions, non-Vedic cultic practice and orthodox Puranic Hinduism, which is itself an assimilation of many of these elements.
References


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