

MMW3, Section Co4

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Prospectus

Historically, Hinduism has been a religion dominated by three powerful male deities: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Female deities were traditionally classified based on their relationships with male gods as their consorts, and they played a lesser role in religious worship. In the sixth century C.E., however, the concept of the Great Goddess emerged in India, giving rise to goddess cults. Many Hindus began worshipping goddesses as distinct and independent entities with power that rivaled that of their male counterparts. Considering this surprising new change, my research question is: why was there an emergence of the Great Goddess in sixth-century India? I plan to examine the trends that caused these new ideas of female power and independence to arise.

Many scholars have addressed the issue of the Great Goddess, but most discuss the different representations of the goddess and the ideals she portrays. For instance, scholars argue about whether the Great Goddess signifies new ideas of femininity. They draw on the independent and strong aspects of the Mahadevi (Great Goddess) that were introduced in the *Devi Mahatmya*, a Sanskrit text celebrating the female deity that dates to the sixth century. Some go as far as claiming that the Mahadevi is the all-powerful deity that represents Brahman and supersedes Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Others, however, continue to argue that all goddesses were understood according to their roles as consorts of the male gods. These scholars insist that goddesses, like women at the time,

were submissive to their male counterparts. Another scholar combines the two ideas when she asserts that Devi is associated with women of low castes who are relatively equal to their husbands. This scholar also asserts, however, that the “spouse goddess” was associated with high-caste women who were regarded as being inferior to their husbands. Most scholars interested in this field do not touch on the reason behind the rise in importance of the Great Goddess. One who does mention this aspect believes that this development was affected by the Tantra movement within Hinduism, which professed new and controversial ideas about women’s sexuality. The Tantra movement spurred new religious writings dealing specifically with the goddess cults, which could have inspired the idea of the Great Goddess.

I believe that none of these scholars adequately addresses the issue of the Great Goddess’ origins. I propose that the Great Goddess emerged as a result of an increase in the queen’s power in the politics of the Gupta Empire. With the introduction of gold coins depicting the queen, and the ability of Queens Dhruvadevi and Prabhavati to obtain political influence and power, ideas regarding women must have been shifting. Women were being represented in more influential roles. This then led to the writing of the *Devi Mahatmya* and the emergence of Devi as a powerful and independent goddess who much resembled the queens of the fourth through sixth centuries. My paper will address what exactly occurred in the sixth century pertaining to the increase in goddess worship. I will then attempt to explain why this new way of thinking about the power of influential women, and the corresponding changes in cultural and religious movements, came about at this time. I will show that the trend of having stronger women as queens of the Gupta

Empire is the most likely reason female deities were acquiring more powerful roles in religion. It is significant for our appreciation of the concept of the Great Goddess to understand the causes of her relatively sudden emergence.

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