

# Madness and Power in India

by *Kishwar Ahmed Shirali*

*L'auteure de cet article examine les différentes formes de «folie» dont souffrent les femmes de l'Inde. Les*

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*Indian society proudly presents the female image of Shakti-power incarnate in Ma Durga, Ma Kali; benevolence and prosperity in Lakshmi, Sri; chastity, piety, and loyalty in Parvati; long-suffering wifehood in Sita; and knowledge in Saraswati.*

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*symptômes de dépression, d'hystérie et de possession dont souffrent ces femmes sont souvent une forme de résistance aux restrictions patriarcales dont elles sont victimes.*

A veil, dark and thick, has been drawn on the face of Indian women's realities. Their faces and their voices, their needs and their stresses, their strengths and their sickness, their anger and their losses are unseen and unheard. All that is seen is their shame, their bodies, their guilt, and their madness.

A young working wife from a small town outside Shimla, of Hindu, upper-caste, middle-class background, went into deep depression at the death through sickness of her male first-born. She expressed guilt with tears: "Perhaps I did not take care properly. Perhaps . . ." and then paradoxically she continued, "perhaps it is the 'fruit' of 'past karma.'" That seemed to console her somewhat. A distanced, unknown responsibility is perhaps more acceptable. It is less immediate, less real, and therefore less painful than the immediate helplessness in the face of something so totally annihilating as death, and that too of the valued male first-born, through which her own female existence/birth is re-deemed and validated. The past

karmic self has no face, no voice. Guilt originating from "karmic" deeds may be handled by socio-cultural religious behaviour: rituals, fasting, asceticism, penance, vegetarianism, celibacy, giving of donations to the poor, fire purification rituals, and Vedic rhythmic chantings.

Women across caste and community do express feelings of guilt and shame, mostly around the social sex roles. If a woman talks or laughs a little loudly, she feels ashamed and guilty; if she is assertive or even asks a question, she feels ashamed and guilty; if she gets into an argument or a fight, she feels ashamed and guilty; if she eats or asks for a little more, she feels ashamed and guilty; if she steps out of house alone or wears different dresses, she feels ashamed and guilty. The list is endless. No matter what she does or does not do, she is to blame. It is even said in India that a woman's main adornment is her sense of *Sharam* (a cross between shyness and shame). This sense of *Sharam*/shame seems to have its locale in a woman's body.

## **Woman as body and female power**

Miriam Greenspan analyzes how a woman's development as a person means to "develop herself as a body for men" (163), a "situation in which being seen is both mandatory and dangerous" (180). The male gaze is even more complicated in India. There is a thin line between an attractive woman pleasing to men and the whore flouting and challenging that very male gaze. Woman as body in India is still the reproductive body and woman as mother. But with the recent invasion of the consumer cul-

ture, there is another shade. Beauty pageants, even in remote hill areas like Shimla, are gaining popularity. This Indian scenario is the consumerist endorsement of women as body. The ancient temple of Khajuraho and Konark and books like the *Kama Sutra* also endorsed woman as body, the difference being that woman then had a right to the aesthetics of her body, a right to her sexuality. The notion of woman as body is not without its costs, both socially and emotionally. Crimes of rape and violence against women and the girl child are on the increase even in rural areas.

Indian women have no words, no voices. It is through non-verbal figure drawings that a picture of their self-body emerges—bare stick figures, without torsos, breasts, and vulvas. School, college, university girls draw mostly heads of infantilized little girls in frocks and ribbons. Himalayan Indigenous women draw large prominent hands and feet with misshapen bodies—their work identities. Older rural unschooled poor women draw smaller figures. Traditional psychoanalysts would consider stick figures and ill-defined figures as problems of "ego-boundaries." Miller asserts that the concepts of "ego" and "ego boundaries" may not apply to women at all. Miller's arguments seem to be very true for women in India in understanding their self-identity. "They do not have the right or the requirement to be full-fledged representatives of the culture" (Indian goddesses/*devis* notwithstanding).

Further, women as a "sex class" have socio-economic functions, in which women provide emotional, nurturant, sexual, and physical maintenance services. In India's mixed economy, women's labour, even outside the home, is devalued, leading to a greater marginalization and disempowerment. A woman who is depressed and no longer productive

from the loss of self-worth is discarded on the rubbish heap and eventually locked up in the "protective" custody of the Indian asylum.

Against the backdrop of a rich and colourful heritage of goddesses, Indian society proudly presents the female image of Shakti-power incarnate in Ma Durga, Ma Kali; the image of benevolence and prosperity in Lakshmi, Sri; the image of chastity, piety, and loyalty in Parvati; long-suffering wifehood in Sita; and learning and knowledge in Saraswati. In addition, there are village and family goddesses (*Kul devis*) for well-being. All are idealized archetypes of varying degrees of power and relationships. Except for Durga and Kali, all are consorts of the mighty Shiva, Vishnu, and their incarnations. Neither Durga nor Kali was born of parents. Durga was born out of cosmic energy and special powers of gods, to destroy the indestructible demon Mahisasur. Durga then pulled Kali out from her forehead as helper. In another myth Durga created Kali from her protective body sheath; Kali is never recommended as a role model for Indian daughters and mothers. Power-in-relationship lessons are provided subtly and not so subtly by the many goddesses. However, the power of Durga and Kali are appropriated by male devotees. But the Shakti of Ma Durga and Ma Kali and all the benevolence of all the other goddesses are silent when daughters are silenced in wombs and cradles, brides are burnt, little girls molested in the safety of their homes, mad women raped on the streets and in safe custody of asylums, and the mentally handicapped de-wombed in institutions, even a thirteen-year-old girl.

It becomes painfully clear for whom the myths are told and retold to uphold and perpetuate the rule of the Father, the mighty Shiva.

### Hysteria and possession

Hysteria, the mover of wombs, has been associated with women. For this "honour" women have been blamed for their own victimization. Freud based his unconscious and its complexes on the dreams, recollections under hypnosis, of his patients with hysteria, mostly women. In 1895 he knew of the sexual abuse of little girls by close relatives, fathers, and brothers. Yet two years later he declared that the incestuous acts were not real but fantasies of infantile desire for the father. French has also pointed to the political aspect of incest. Freud's female patients felt raped by intimate older males (the power establishment); Freudian theories are essentially a theory of power under patriarchy (373-374).

However in India the reality of rape of little girls, within the so-called safety of homes, by older step-fathers, uncles, and cousins, and in schools, both in urban and rural areas, by teachers, is being brought to light by various social organizations.

Women have represented sex in the patriarchal world. The more

also reflections of certain social conditions prevailing in the society. Erikson had noted that there is no individual anxiety that does not also reflect latent concern among the group.

"Spirit possession" is a common phenomenon across lands. Anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists have understood "spirit possession" in women in terms of rebellion or frustration due to loss of support and status, financial, social, and emotional, which adds up to a powerlessness of oppressed women in a patriarchal culture. A study of possessions by ancestral spirits in rural Rajasthan concludes that it is a culture-bound reaction to a stress situation in the beginning and it proceeds to work as community therapy, finally resolving the initial stress after few years of such behaviour.

"Possessed" persons have a magical/supernatural quality—leading to the gross misunderstanding of them as "witches" and "sorcerers" and "spirits" of all hues. Perhaps this phenomenon can be demystified. Such individuals are in a heightened state of arousal, which may be (a) self-in-

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highly organized the world becomes, the more the burden of everything unorganized falls upon women.

In India, Sudhir Kakar, a student of Erikson, feels that the wide prevalence of hysteria among Indian women and their particular cultural "myth of passivity" (Krohn's 1978 term)—seeing themselves the passive vehicles of gods and goddesses—are

duced by prayer-incense-head movements stimulating the inner ear-rhythmic music-drum beats or, (b) triggered by unconscious stimuli. In such a state of arousal the persons might be open to "subliminal perception" (Dixon), perceiving that which is not seen or heard in the "normal" non-arousal experiencing.

The shadows of the rural Indian

psyche are richly inhabited with spirits and ghosts, hovering around for the fulfillment of frustrated desires. Disasters and illness, especially emotional, are said to be the works of these "evil" beings. The "witches" (*dain, churail*) specialize in devouring little children, husbands, and young lovers. Their signature is feet pointed backwards (female contrariness?). Women who do not fill the passive dependent socio-gender bill, besides belonging to the weaker class and caste, are scapegoated. Carstairs relates how the mother of his Rajasthani friend was beaten and burned to death. She had a reputation for a nasty temperament (probably was not passive and acquiescent). She was said to be a witch. She was also poor, illiterate, and of low caste. But she had fought and saved her son's property from men, who finally got her instead.

*Eyes of Stone* (Vachani), a film about "possession" by an "evil" spirit of a young Rajasthani woman, married at eleven to a truck driver, is about pain, guilt, and coping (in the cultural idioms of powerful gods/goddesses), with the rape of the "lamb" to appropriate and "silence" the lamb. Child marriages being a common practice, pre-sexual trauma in young girls finds expression in "possession" by "evil spirits."

In Bihar among the 35 "witches" identified, *Badki devi* and *Kajri devi* were hounded out of their villages with dire threats to life, property, and family. These "witches" were likely to be "ugly," of "unpleasant personality," "helpless and powerless of having weak support and poor family" (Vidya Ben). In Tribal Jharkhand, Bihar, the women labelled as "witches" had a "certain defiant look in their eyes."

But the question still teases: why women? Men with special powers of "possession" are not labelled evil. Instead they are venerated as seers, and they can even choose different life styles. But a woman outside marriage and society (outside male control) is a "witch." Why, magnet-like, do they attract violence? And whatever hap-

pens to their own anger? Does it boomerang onto their own fragile selves or their own kind? Socio-political answers are just not enough.

Either women are the weakest in all the hierarchies, or somewhere in the depths of the male psyche lies embedded a primordial fear of female (Kali, "witch"-like) power. If she can give life, she can take life as well!

### Depression and self-destruction

"Women are three times as frequently depressed as men and try to kill themselves twice as often.... Depression is more common in married than single women" (Greenspan 1985, 185, 161). Depression is anger turned inwards. A depressed woman is filled with self-hatred, self-blame. She is ill-fated, with a bad karma, bringing misfortune on family and self; she is a woman. This is her script. If she self-destructs, that is her fate, like the goddesses Sati and Sita.

Indian women of the silver screen of the '50s and '60s would burst into a soulful song whenever depressed, mostly at separation and loss of the lover. They were the glamorized tragedy queens. One image that has survived over time is of Meena Kumari (the actress) as the "Bibi" in the *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam* ("Master, Wife, and Slave"). In a decadent family of the ruling class, the beautiful "Bibi" slowly self-destructs with the bottle, coping with devaluation and rejection by the Sahib, her lord, who is more involved with his pet pigeons and colourful courtesans. The Ghulam ("slave") can only silently collaborate in the slow death.

In *Abhimaan* (*Pride*), a talented woman's spirit and self-worth is crushed by the brooding ego of a husband who cannot stomach the wife's success and greater popularity. She withdraws into her silence of self-blame and hate: "I am bad as I am a woman." And to add to her devaluation she loses her baby; motherhood is also denied her. An Indian woman's worth and sense of self again and again is through "the other" as wife and mother.

In a recent movie *Rudali* ("Traditional Mourners"), the subject is a single woman totally alone, no family, no relations, no friends, a woman without the "other," without any "affiliation," a woman lost without self. Her emotions, feelings are shattered, fragmented, and frozen, until she meets the *Rudali* women whose tears are hired out, the traditional mourners, woman who beat their breasts and cry for the loss of others. When our heroine joins the communal (though impersonal) expression of pain, she is able to find at least a connection-in-relation and get in touch with her own pain and loneliness.

In the regional Bengali cinema Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and the young woman director Aparna Sen (*36 Chowringhee Lane*) have thrown up sensitive cameos of women's lives and realities, rural, urban—the landlords, the peasants, the urban middle class, and ethnic minorities: the Anglo-Indian female teacher, a single woman surviving in Calcutta's 36 Chowringhee Lane, seeking the comfort of relationships, only to be let down once again. In *Megha Dhake Tara* ("The Clouded Star") of Ritwik Ghatak, the older sister is entrapped, being the only employed member, and the family lays a guilt trip on her when she finds a lover. She cannot escape. The tragedies of marginalized women, scrounging the earth, selling their bodies to keep their children (and men) fed, and of the talented courtesans who were poets, singers, and dancers, rejected by "respectable" society, were a common theme of Indian movies.

An Indian woman's depression is either romanticized or woven into the socio-cultural weave. But it is rarely analyzed and understood in the context of that very same fabric.

Amra-ki-ma liked to sit by the tall oak trees of the hills, when she needed to bring in the fodder and leaves for the cows, to sweep and clean, to cook and feed the family. She was sent back to her natal family for treatment. Amra-ki-ma had been twice

widowed, the first time as a child of twelve. Since remarriage is not really approved of, such women are informally “placed”/“seated” with a widower or divorcee, usually older. This is not a legal marriage; no legal claims to property, maintenance can be made. So Amra-ki-ma was placed with an older man and bore him a son, Amra. When Amra was nine years old, the father died, and both Amra and his mother were thrown

that Sita was under the *Chaaya* of the *Devta* (“shadow of the gods”). One day when no one was looking, Sita climbed the ledge above the rushing Sutlej river and jumped. It is called *Chalaang* (“the jump”), the goddess Sita solution. Sita, the wife of the ideal man-king Rama, suffered with her lord through his 14 years of banishment in the wilderness. Yet he had her go through the fire test of chastity not once but twice. The second time

round, she asked Mother Earth (from whom she was born—Sita means a “furrow”) to open up and take her.

### Women’s ways of healing

Women have found ingenious ways of healing. Some women have found the “Secret Mantra,” the healing idiom. The “Secret Mantra” is of a female power (thus mysterious and magical), creative but not only reproductive, the Female Principle of all creation. To get in touch with that mystery, to feel that magic, to get lost in that wonder, to become one with the Divine is to be “possessed.” The *Akka*

*Mahadevis* of the south and the *Lal Deds-Lalla* of Kashmir threw off their clothes with the social fabric of their times, let down their hair, and roamed the country singing in ecstasy.

Through “possession” women have radically transformed both their disease and their social garbs of passivity for the well-being of their real holistic selves. By taking on the “voices,” stances, and even names of goddesses and *devis*, they have turned their helplessness and powerlessness inside out into fearsome visages of Shakti and the “Supernatural.” They are basi-

cally confronting the central issue of power relations in their status-less existence as women in the patriarchal Indian society, both traditional and “modern.”

In “possession” a woman takes on the identity of the significant “other,” in the personage of the goddess or spirit with whom she has a special connection, a supportive relation. “Possession” is perhaps the public manifestation of a very private, intimate “affiliation.”

The *Kul devi* presides over most socio-cultural events of the family. One is the *mundan* ceremony of shaving the head—symbolic of head sacrifice to the deity. It is essentially a ritual for the male child, but it is done for the girl child as well. I was a witness to one such ceremony for an upper-caste child living in a semi-urban area near Shimla. A van was hired to transport all the extended family members to the *devi* temple on top of a hill, more than a hundred kilometres away. Much religious singing of Mother-*devi* songs and folk dancing went on. The men took charge of the community cooking and feeding while the women decorated themselves with Henna and relaxed.

Early in the morning, the priest (to perform the shaving ritual Puja) failed to show up at the auspicious time—so an elder uncle symbolically clipped the locks, to the accompaniment of much chanting and singing and drum beating. The priest came an hour late and started making a lot of fuss about the arrangement, concerned that some defilement had taken place. The men of the family started to appease him. Yet he was raising his *bhav* (“value”) by getting more upset. Just then, in all this impasse, an elder aunt stood up and became “possessed.” The priest now had to give way to this event. It was the *Kul devi* who had appeared. The family members asked whether they had committed some wrongdoing. She, “the *devi*,” on the contrary blessed them and said that she was happy that all the family members had come to the step of her temple.

Later I asked this elder aunt, who



Tamara Thiebaut, “Gwen,” watercolour, 13.5” x 11”, 1995.

out of that family. It was not clear which came first—the events or the problem. But Amra-ki-ma had forgotten how to smile or talk. Her only life was Amra, whom she could not bear to be out of her sight. She would sit at the school gate, when, at last at nine years old, he was put in school.

Sita was from a village in upper Shimla. She was traditionally married at 16. After a couple of years, childless, she returned home to her parents. Slowly, day by day she started withdrawing, sitting in a dark corner, refusing food. The family believed

works in the state welfare department and lives independently at her work place (though married to the elder uncle), what had happened, and what she was feeling when all the argument with the priest was going on. She frankly said that she had wanted to "slap" the priest for his *badmaashi* ("cussedness"); and it was then that something happened—of which she remembered nothing. As a woman she could not interfere with the male transactions with the priest, but being a woman of action and intelligence, she resorted to the cultural idiom and found her "voice," through "possession" by the *Kul devi*.

On the return journey of this same trip, another woman found "voice." The mother of the *mundan* children is a tribal, an orphan in the sense that her mother had died and her father had deserted the children. At 15 she was married into the family, to a border-line mentally handicapped brother, but had "adjusted" very well in the family. At this *mundan* ceremony, her father had appeared with his new family and was hardly giving any attention to her or her children. Also being the youngest daughter-in-law in this family, with a not-so-smart husband, her status was quite low. Especially at times of social-religious ceremonies she could have no say/voice at all. So for the rest of the day she seemed to have a glazed cheerless look. She did not seem to be enjoying herself as the rest of us, even in the community bathing in hot springs where all the women got together and there was much teasing and fun.

Later, at night the van was proceeding homewards when all the singing suddenly stopped, and the van was halted. This young mother was flat on her back on the floor of the van, screaming and thrashing about, throwing a fit—she was "possessed" by her *Kul devi*, who said that she, the *devi* of *Bhima Kali-Sarahan*—a very famous and prestigious temple—had not been remembered. So promptly apologies were made and some money set aside to be sent to that temple. But that was not enough, the "voice" kept

saying that the elder sisters-in-law (the mother-in-law being already dead) were after her and would destroy her. After much cajoling and reassurance she sat up and the journey continued.

But the mood had changed, the elder sisters-in-law, especially the one who was possessed earlier, were all upset and crying at the accusations. Later the young mother insisted she did not know what had happened. The psychological dynamics and political undercurrents in the joint family do not provide opportunities for sorting out differences between people. Again an idiom was found within the *devi* context. It is interesting this happened only at this function. In the ten years I have known this family, at no other time I have seen them being "possessed."

Among Indian Muslim women, "possession" also occurs, with slight contextual variations. Tara (Tahera) was a slender young beautiful girl married at 15 to an older man. A few months later she returned to live with her mother. After her son was born her husband also joined her. Tara's mother Zohra Baribee ("elder sister") was a helper-cook in my mother's household. Tara's father, who had been a cook with the British, went mad, cooked his food in a "chamber pot," and had run off and not been heard of since. Tara started getting "possessed" by a spirit that spoke in a male voice and tongue and identified "himself" as "Sheikh Shuddo."

Legend had it that "Sheikh Shuddo" was a holy man who died in the arms of a woman in a state of *naapak* (defilement/pollution), probably after fornication. The women of some working-class Muslim families in Jabalpur, Central India, pay homage to the "Sheikh" by holding a night-long sing-song of a semi-religious, mystic, folksy nature, while frying sweet-spicy flour balls called *gulgulas*. Most people keep away for fear of being possessed by the "Sheikh." Tara's in-laws were part of such a group, and that is how Tara got possessed. Whenever she heard religious songs, she would start sigh-

ing and asking for her hair braids to be opened. She would thus start swinging her head and arms from side to side. After a while she would start speaking in an authoritative male voice demanding a *murga* ("chicken") and a *gulgula* party. Zohra Baribee would make promises to comply. After another 15 minutes of swinging, Tara would collapse in a heap, exhausted. She would have total amnesia about the event. Tara had no more children (no contraceptives were known of in the '40s). It is whispered that these "affiliates" of the Sheikh would experience sexual assault. She was eventually cured after five or six years of being taken on pilgrimages from one *mazaar* (a holy shrine/tomb of a holy saint, mostly male) to another. Tara and Zohra then adopted a baby girl, who turned out to be mentally handicapped. But they loved her dearly. Tara grew into a strong wise woman.

The *Mullani* ("priestess") came to live behind our house, in a room no bigger than a chicken coop. She was a petite, good-looking woman in her mid to late 40s, without any source of income. She wore *salwar-kameez* (north Indian loose pants with a long shirt dress), and a green scarf on her head tied as holy men, *Babas*, do. A deserted young daughter took care of her. The *Mullani* challenged the male order. During the yearly commemorations of the martyrdom of the prophet Mohammed's grandsons, Jabalpur of Central India becomes a city "possessed." Small bands of young men and boys chanting "Yaa Ali," "Yaa Hussain" to the sound of kettle drums roam the city. In the centre of the band is the charismatic figure of a man, almost always "possessed," the vehicle of the spirits of the martyred souls or other local "Saints." The "possessed" would be answering questions and dispensing solutions and cures for diverse problems of sickness, madness, loss, theft, court cases, even familial rows, in the form of *Jhar-phuk* ("sweeping and blowing"), with a broom of peacock feathers sweeping the devotees/supplicants from head to toe three times and

blowing deep breaths on their heads and faces; or giving of flowers/ashes, etc. to be worn on person as *taveez* ("amulets") or flowers, sweets, dried fruits to eat. Sometimes detailed complex instructions would be given for a particular ritual/fast/offering to be performed on Mondays or Thursdays, full or new moon nights at certain holy places, or to feed so many beggars and orphans.

Into this all-male world, the *Mullani* had dared to venture. She, with a band of followers, would make the rounds of the city. But after a few years she disappeared; she was either run out of town or had died somewhere, unknown, unsung.

Through "possession" Tara and the *Mullani* had found the secret solution—a way to get in touch with their egos and yet bypass the guilt through the culture's very own religious-cultural mode. Tara had amnesia for the period of "possession"—for the *Mullani* mostly it was under a semi-conscious control. For both it was a brilliant healing of a damaged and scarred self, subliminally getting in touch with the wells of Shakti, sexuality, and power.

*This paper was presented at the Centre for Feminist Research's "Conference on Female Spirituality: A Celebration of Worshipers, Goddesses, Priestesses, and*

*Female Saints," held at York University in March 1996. Funding assistance from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for the presentation and publication of this paper is gratefully acknowledged.*

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## JOANNA M. WESTON

### Teenage in Bosnia

Used needles pin her hands  
and feet  
to the sidewalk  
while she is raped by a gun.

No tombstone  
where an 8-month-child  
was shot  
within his mother  
who fell sideways  
amongst torn fences.

A teenage girl tied braids  
with barbed wire,  
wore bracelets of steel,  
and stole names from soldiers  
for people in the hills.

Her own name  
disappeared.

*Joanna M. Weston lives beside a lake with her three sons, husband, and tortoiseshell cat. Her latest chapbook is All Seasons (Clarity Press, 1996).*

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