

South Asian Goddesses and the Natural Environment



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edited by

Marika Vicziany and Jayant Bhalchandra Bapat

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Cover: The aftermath of Durga Puja in Kolkata (photo Susanta Kumar Banerjee).

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For Eva Ilorna Bosnyak (19.12.1953 - 5.1.2019)
Beloved sister of Marika and Gabi

and

Anagha Bapat (6.7.1965 - 6.10.2020) who enjoyed life fully
till the very end and fought death valiantly.
Beloved daughter of Sunanda and Jayant



Contents

Contributors	viii
Preface	xi
References	xiv
Chapter 1: South Asian Religions and the Natural Environment.....	1
Marika Vicziany	
Chapter 2: The Archaeological and Religious History of Lajjāgaurī, a Pre-Vedic Fertility Deity on the Indian Sub-continent.....	22
Ravi Korisettar	
Chapter 3: Female <i>Avatāra</i> and Guarantor of Fertility: Does the Great Goddess Relate to Nature and the Environment in Some <i>Purāṇas</i>?.....	50
Greg Bailey	
Chapter 4: The Adoration of Mother Earth in Brāhminic, Folk and Tribal Beliefs and Practices in India.....	64
Jayant Bhalchandra Bapat	
Chapter 5: In the Ocean of Suffering: Tārā as Protector from Real or Psychological Waters? ...	88
David Templeman	
Chapter 6: <i>Dariyadev</i>: The Koli sea god and the Fishing Environment in Mumbai	108
Anusha Kesarkar-Gavankar and Marika Vicziany	
Chapter 7: Entering the Goddess’s Womb: How a Rainforest Valley Became a Tibetan Sacred Site.....	132
Ruth Gamble	
Chapter 8: Durgā Pūjā and the Environment	157
Pratish Bandopadhyay	

Chapter 9: Weapons of the Weak: Koli Deities and the Indian Courts in Koli Responses to Environmental Destruction 174
Marika Vicziany, Jayant Bhalchandra Bapat and Anusha Kesarkar-Gavankar

Chapter 10: The Descent of the Ganga in India and Mauritius..... 209
Peter Friedlander

Chapter 11: Reflections on Dhere’s research on ‘Lajjāgaurī’ and ‘Śrī Ānandanāyaki’ 224
Jayant Bhalchandra Bapat

List of Figures and Tables

Chapter 1: South Asian Religions and the Natural Environment

Table 1.	Air quality measured by particulate pollution in 2020: the ranking of South Asian Countries from the most to the least polluted (IQAir 2022).....	1
Table 2.	Examples of cures, punishments and measure to ameliorate ‘pollution’ in the classical Hindu texts given by Dwivedi and Tiwari (Dwivedi and Tiwari 1999: 179-182)	6
Figure 1.	Diagram of India showing the location of eight elephant reserves that are named in the <i>Arthashastra</i> (Drawing by Vicziany and Harris adapted from Trautmann 2015 Figure 1.4).....	10
Figure 2.	Lord Curzon and Lady Curzon Tiger Hunting in Hyderabad, 1902 (photo 556/3/(61) British Library, viewed 22 July 2022, https://imagesonline.bl.uk/asset/46923/)	11

Chapter 2: The Archaeological and Religious History of Lajjāgaurī, a Pre-Vedic Fertility Deity on the Indian Sub-continent

Figure 1.	Map showing the distribution of the South Asian sites (Map based on Google Earth and designed by R. Korisettar and R. Arjun, Central University of Karnataka, Kalaburagi, Karnataka).....	23
Figure 2.	Miniature Lajjāgaurī representation on the <i>lalāṭa paṭṭi patti</i> of Sangameshwara temple, Basavana Bagewadi, Karnataka (photo Korisettar)	25
Figure 3.	The Lajjāgaurī image from an indisputable historical context from Nagarjunakonda in the Krishna river valley, Andhra Pradesh (photo Smitha Kumari, Superintending Archaeologist, Hyderabad Circle, Archaeological Survey of India, Hyderabad, Telangana).	26
Figure 4.	The label inscription at the base of the Nagarjunakonda Lajjāgaurī image clearly mentions the historical context and describes the deity as one who protects the queen from widowhood and her children from premature death. We are yet to find another record of this kind (photo Director, Epigraphy, Archaeological Survey of India, Mysuru, Karnataka)	27
Figure 5.	A nondescript Lajjāgaurī shrine at Banavasi in Karnataka. Stone plaques of this type are common in the Deccan during the Pre-Chalukyan times (photo Uthara Suvratan, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru)	28
Figure 6.	The Lajjāgaurī stele in the Alampur museum in the Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh, ascribed to the Eastern Chalukyas. Note the typical lotus head frequently found since the emergence of Chalukya patronage, post 5th century AD (photo Director Department of Archaeology and Museum, Government of Telangana, Hyderabad, Telangana)	28
Figure 7.	The Kamakhya Lajjāgaurī represents the living tradition in north-eastern India. She represents the fourth category of Bolon’s classification (Bolon 1990). The Kamakhya Devi is a Tantric deity and the image is dated between 10th and 12th century AD (photo Sukanya Sharma, IIT Guwahati, Assam).....	29
Figure 8.	A unique Chalukya period bas-relief of Lajjāgaurī with a human head, accompanied by a papal tree to the right and the bull to the left, preserved	

	in the Badami museum of the Archaeological Survey of India (photo Superintending Archaeologist, Dharwad Circle, Archaeological Survey of India, Dharwad, Karnataka).....	30
Figure 9.	A limestone plaque of Lajjāgaurī from Adalageri preserved in the museum of Kannada Research Institute, Karnatak University, Dharwad, Karnataka. It is interesting to note the positions of her feet covering the pudenda (photo R.M. Shadaksharaiah, Director in Charge, Kannada Research Institute, Karnatak University, Dharwad, Karnataka).....	30
Figure 10.	A Lajjāgaurī plaque from Majati in Karnataka. The feet are spread out revealing the pudenda (photo Head of the Department of Ancient Indian History and Epigraphy, Karnatak University, Dharwad, Karnataka).....	31
Figure 11.	A variant form of Lajjāgaurī, from Maleshankar, Shivamogga, with a head different from the Chalukyan tradition. Perhaps the rectangular block represents a bull's head and recalls the Neolithic representations in the Levant (photo Shejeshwar Nayak, Directorate of Archaeology, Museums and Heritage, Government of Karnataka, Mysuru, Karnataka).....	31
Figure 12.	A miniature Lajjāgaurī image with a human head from Mandsaur, Malwa in western Madhya Pradesh (photo Wakankar Shodh Sansthan, Ujjian, Madhya Pradesh).....	32
Figure 13.	Lajjāgaurī plaque from Mahurjhari, Vidarbha, Maharashtra. Mahurjhari is well-known from Iron Age and Early Historic sites. Several images were recovered during the course of excavations at the site. A series of Lajjāgaurī images dating the Satavahana period are known from the Vidarbha region (photo Rabi Mohanty, Head Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Deccan College, Pune).....	34
Figure 14.	Lajjāgaurī plaque from Kesaraghatta in the Ranga Reddy district of modern Telangana, clearly depicts the Shaiva affiliation accorded to the deity (photo Director Department of Archaeology and Museum, Government of Telangana, Hyderabad, Telangana).....	35
Figure 15.	A modern concept of Palaghat (also Pālāghāṭa Devi) depicted with a head. Pālāghāṭa symbolizes fertility and prosperity and is worshipped by the Warli tribe in the Konkan region of Maharashtra. Traditionally Pālāghāṭa is a headless fertility deity (photo Sonali Jagatkar, the Raha Foundation, Mumbai, Maharashtra).....	37
Figure 16 a.	Terracotta figurines of woman and the bull from Chalcolithic Inamgaon in Maharashtra (photo Rabi Mohanty, Head Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Deccan College, Pune).....	38
Figures 16 b.	(front view) and 16 c. (back view) of a woman mounted on a bull from the Late Neolithic context (1400 BC) at Kurugodu a multicultural Neolithic to Early Historic site near Ballari in Karnataka (photo Archaeological Survey of India, Excavation Branch, Mysuru, Karnataka). ¹⁰	39
Figure 17.	The Neolithic context of the woman and the bull combination of female and male fertility deities in the archaeological record. In the Levant these representations appear from c.9500 BC (photo Cauvin 2007).....	40
Figure 18.	The worship of Visirikal is a living tradition in Tamil Nadu. Some scholars identify the human form megaliths with the fertility mother goddess cult (photo K. Rajan, Pondicherry University, Puducherry).....	46

Chapter 3: Female Avatāra and Guarantor of Fertility: Does the Great Goddess Relate to Nature and the Environment in Some Purāṇas?

- Figure 1. Image of the Devī combining her fierceness and beauty (photo <https://kausiki.com/product/devi-bhagavatha-purana-8/>) 55

Chapter 4: The Adoration of Mother Earth in Brāhminic, Folk and Tribal Beliefs and Practices in India

- Figure 1. Stick-on feet of Goddess Lakṣmī (photo Bapat) 70
- Figure 2. The Sarasvatī Yantra (photo Bapat) 73
- Figure 3. A typical Rāngolī in front of a village house (drawing Harris) 75
- Figure 4. A Madhubani painting (photo Mendelsohn) 77
- Figure 5. Lajjāgaurī image from Nagnathakolla (photo Bolon) 79
- Figure 6. A palm-size image of Lajjaguri (photo Rajapurkar) 80
- Figure 7. Shyam Mayank, renown Gond artist (photo Chemould Gallery, Mumbai) 81
- Figure 8. ‘The Harmony’, Anita Baria, Bhil artist (photo Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Delhi) 82
- Figure 9. Goddess Pālaghaṭa with the Sun and the Moon (photo Dalmia) 83
- Figure 10. Pālgḥaṭ with Pūrṇa Ghaṭa [Pūrṇa Kumbha] (photo Dalmia) 84

Chapter 5: In the Ocean of Suffering: Tārā as Protector from Real or Psychological Waters?

- Figure 1. Clay pressing of the Buddha enshrined at Bodh Gayā after His Enlightenment. This 13 cm image accompanied early Tibetan pilgrims back to Tibet where it was found. At the Buddha’s right knee is a small image of Tārā. Site and dates: eastern India, Pāla period, 10-11th century AD (photo private collection, Melbourne) 95
- Figure 2. The more usual representation of Tārā showing her pendant foot resting on a lotus bloom. Site and date: western Tibet, 16th century AD. Bronze with semi-precious stones and polychrome (photo private collection, Melbourne) 103
- Figure 3. An unusual representation of Tārā showing her pendant foot resting on churning ocean waves. Site and date: Mongolia, 19th century AD. Clay. Polychrome (photo Todd Barlin Collection, Sydney.) 104

Chapter 6: Dariyadev: The Koli sea god and the Fishing Environment in Mumbai

- Diagram 1. Koli understandings of the directions of the wind (drawn by Kesarkar-Gavankar based on a model drawing by WNKMY1 and interviews with WKMY4 2021, WKMY2 2021, WKME12 2021, and WKME13 2021) 112
- Diagram 2. Koli religious sites in the sea or on the foreshores, as per our research to date (drawing by Kesarkar-Gavankar, Vicziany and Sahay) 118
- Figure 1. A map of the key sites on Khanderi Island (photo Kesarkar-Gavankar) 119
- Figure 2a. Preparing the first palanquin carrying offerings to Dariyadev (photo Kesarkar-Gavankar). The 3.5 foot image sitting on the right side of the miniature model of a Koli wooden boat represents the ideal Koli fisherman: young, muscular, happy and attired in Koli clothing, jewellery and the distinctive red Koli cap. The small figure on the far left of the boat is the Maratha king Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, standing in warrior position. In 2019, an actor was hired to

Figure 2b.	dress as Shivaji and accompany the procession on a horse. A Koli clan head added that Shivaji also represents Kolis who had served with Shivaji's army125 The second palanquin carrying offerings to <i>Dariyadev</i> (photo Kesarkar-Gavankar). The poster behind the centre of the palanquin is an advertisement acknowledging the Life Insurance Corporation of India for their sponsorship. The palanquin is designed to look like a chariot used by the gods. Three garlanded figurines represent married Koli women, who as symbols of good luck (<i>sowbhagya</i>) and fertility, appeal to <i>Dariyadev</i> 's generosity towards all Kolis. All three rotate on their pivots once the procession starts to move. The tallest figure carries the <i>jamaat</i> coconut to be offered to <i>Dariyadev</i> in her left hand; the royal umbrella over the coconut also rotates in its place..... 125
Figure 2c.	The third palanquin carrying offerings to <i>Dariyadev</i> as it approaches the Koliwada's foreshore (photo Kesarkar-Gavankar). A large umbrella, a metaphor for royalty, features prominently in this expression of devotion. <i>Dariyadev</i> spans the religious and secular worlds for he is the sea god and the king. The decorated coconuts are carried on the shoulders of five Koli fishermen. The men said that the shoulder-borne palanquin is in the oldest Koli tradition in this village. However, the palanquin is made of steel and this speaks to India's economic modernisation 126

Chapter 7: Entering the Goddess's Womb: How a Rainforest Valley Became a Tibetan Sacred Site

Diagram 1.	Pemakö on the Sino-Indian border (designed by MacNeil)..... 133
Diagram 2.	Pemakö Chung and Pemakö Chen (designed by MacNeil)..... 134
Diagram 3.	Pemakö Chen (designed by MacNeil) 145
Figure 1.	Ngesang Dongak Jangchup Dargye Ling Monastery (photo Gamble) 151

Chapter 8: Durgā Pūjā and the Environment

Figure 1.	The basic shape of the idol is created with straw, bamboo and wooden frames (photo Banerjee)..... 159
Figure 2.	A clay-covered straw idol drying in the sun (photo Banerjee) 160
Figure 3.	An artisan mixing jute shreds with clay (photo Banerjee)..... 161
Figure 4.	Painting a <i>murti</i> (manifestation of the Goddess <i>Durgā</i>) (photo Banerjee)..... 162
Figure 5.	An artisan painting the face of an image (photo Banerjee) 162
Figure 6.	A fully decorated idol during the five-day <i>pūjā</i> celebration (photo Banerjee).....164
Figure 7.	Two half immersed idols during <i>visarjana</i> (photo Banerjee)..... 166
Figure 8.	To reduce water pollution, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation recovers idols from the river after <i>visarjana</i> (photo Banerjee)..... 168

Chapter 9: Weapons of the Weak: Koli Deities and the Indian Courts in Koli Responses to Environmental Destruction

Diagram 1.	The location of eight Koliwadadas (Koli villages) in Mumbai, India, and the five most important pilgrimage sites for Mumbai's Kolis, 2022 (image by Vicziany and Gilad)..... 175
Figure 1.	The Lakhmya Temple near Thal, with the ancestor in the centre surrounded by the <i>Sat Asaras</i> (photo Kesarkar-Gavankar) 176

Figure 2.	Aaditya Thackeray (3rd from the left) at Worli Koliwada’s <i>Narali Purnima</i> (The Full Moon Coconut Festival) celebrations in August 2023 (Photo Instagram: @worliaplus18 and @adityathackeray)	177
Figure 3.	The <i>Khadadevi</i> Temple inner shrine (from right to left): <i>Mahishasura</i> , <i>Khadadevi</i> , the <i>Sat Asaras</i> (seven water spirits) (photo Bapat). Above the <i>murti</i> can be seen numerous silver swings given to the Goddess <i>Khadadevi</i> by devotees thankful for her support	180
Figure 4.	The <i>Sat Asaras</i> manifest themselves to the right of <i>Khadadevi</i> (photo Bapat). Each has one mouth and one eye, the ‘seeing, piercing eye’	181
Diagram 2.	The seven original islands of Mumbai c. 1843 (Image from The British Library@Flickr Commons, https://www.flickr.com/photos/britishlibrary/11238247766).....	182
Diagram 3.	Hornby Vellard running from just north of the <i>Mahalaxshmi</i> temple, past the entrance to Haji Ali and on to Worli (diagram by Vicziary and Dr Uri Gilad)	183
Figure 5.	Yellow municipal stickers on the front door of a house in the Khar Danda Koliwada (photo Kesarkar–Gavankar)	186
Figure 6.	Plastic pollution of the upper part of Thane Creek near the flamingo sanctuary ²⁵ (photo Vicziary).....	191
Table 1.	An outline of two case studies of Koli petitions to the Indian courts.....	194
Diagram 4.	The location of the 4th container terminal at the Jawaharlal Nehru Port (JNPT) in Navi Mumbai. The new container terminal is pinpointed with a white arrow, the mudflats likely to be affected by the project are the blue polygon and the Panje Wetland is marked as the red polygon (Image Bajarú <i>et al.</i> 2019)	195

Chapter 10: The Descent of the Ganga in India and Mauritius

Figure 1.	A family worshipping a <i>murti</i> of Ganga on the shore of the Grand Bassin in January 2017 (photo Friedlander)	221
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Chapter 11: Reflections on Dhere’s research on ‘Lajjāgaurī’ and ‘Śrī Ānandanāyaki’

Figure 1.	Stylised image of Lajjāgaurī (drawing by John Harris)	225
Figure 2.	Lajjāgaurī Image at Ellora (photo Bapat).....	228
Figure 3.	Lajjāgaurī image from Bhinmal, Rajasthan (photo Bolon)	228
Figure 4.	Lajjāgaurī from Arna, Rajasthan (photo Bolon)	229
Figure 5.	Lajjāgaurī from Karlapalem, Andhra Pradesh (photo Bolon).....	230
Figure 6.	Lajjāgaurī from Nagpur Museum (photo Pawar and Garge)	230
Figure 7.	Lajjāgaurī from Nagnathkolla, Karnataka, Badami Museum (photo Bolon)....	231
Figure 8.	Lajjāgaurī from Dhank, Gujrat State (photo Bolon)	231
Figure 9.	A self-displaying image (photo Bapat).....	234
Figure 10.	Life-sized image of Lajjāgaurī (photo Bapat)	236

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After 50 years of research in the field of archaeology, a recent tribute to Professor Korisettar noted that he was a 'key contributor to Indian Palaeolithic archaeology, specialising in geoarchaeological methods and approaches to understanding the relationship between prehistoric humans and their environments. He has published eight books in India and two abroad and is a Section Editor for *Current Science*, India's leading science fortnightly journal. Ravi has also held the position of Honorary Director of the Robert Bruce Foote Sanganakallu Archaeological Museum in Karnataka since its establishment in 2010. (<https://conversationsinhumanevolution.wordpress.com/2020/07/17/conversations-with-professor-ravi-korisettar/>).

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Preface

I is for India a land in the East

Where everyone goes to shoot tigers and feast (Ames 1899).

The British baby patriots who were taught nursery rhymes such as the one above, were not only learning their alphabet but also learning their empire (Mugglestone 2012: 186). Implicit in the lessons of empire were complex values that asserted European superiority and the right to exploit India (i.e. 'feast') and kill and capture its exotic offerings (i.e. 'shoot tigers'). The arrogance of empire was immune from angst about environmental degradation, the subject of this book.

The present collection of essays is the third in a trilogy collated by Australian based scholars about South Asian Goddesses. The first volume was published in 2008 (*The Iconic Female*) and the second in 2017 (*Conceiving the Goddess*). Now, another eight years have passed and the same team of Australian scholars have collaborated on the third volume focussing on a question that directly connects classical, pre-modern understandings of the goddess with current concerns about the environment. We ask whether the worship of goddesses, strongly linked to fertility rituals, might have mitigated the ecological decline of South Asia in the pre-British and post-colonial eras.

The contributors to this volume share a passion for South Asian Studies, multi-disciplinary research and a commitment to fieldwork as an important method for understanding how religious beliefs work in practice. We also remain committed to the development of Indology in Australia, an area of research that in Australia dates from the appointment of Professor A. L. Basham as the foundation professor and head of the new Department of Oriental (Asian) Civilisation(s) in the faculty of Oriental (Asian) Studies at the Australian National University (ANU), Canberra. During his time in that position (1965-1979) Basham not only promoted studies of Indian history, language and culture at the ANU (Jordens 2007), but he also inspired a new generation of Australian scholars who recognised the enduring importance of Australia's engagement with South Asia.

During the last two decades, there has been an undoubted attrition in South Asian Studies - that decline has had a negative impact on the study of humanities in Australia but not on research and teaching about South Asia in the faculties of economics and commerce. This mismatch, however, has detrimental implications for long term Australia-India relations. It raises serious questions such as where will the much-needed Australian expertise about Indian languages, society, history and culture come from, who will undertake the long and arduous fieldwork that South Asian Studies demands, and who will understand the complex interplay between the politics and religions of the region? These are important issues that affect the long-term outlook for Australian foreign trade and investment.

Today, the Australian National University and La Trobe University are the only two remaining centres where Australians can become proficient in Hindi- a language spoken by some 44% of

native speakers in India compared with 11% who speak English. The ANU also runs a full major in Sanskrit, based on the expertise of two lecturers. Sydney University also offers a first-year course in Sanskrit, with students able to continue at higher levels through arrangements with the ANU. The ANU used to teach a stream in Urdu, but the numbers were never large so that option was discontinued. There is, however, talk at the ANU of renaming the Hindi degree as a degree in Hindi-Urdu. Such a development would be greatly welcomed by world scholarship, given the common origins and long history of these two sides of Hindi/Hindavi or Hindustani. In the words of one reviewer of Rai's seminal work on the co-mingling of the Hindi-Urdu language steams: 'for more than six centuries Hindi/Hindavi served as the chief literary vehicle of North India for Hindus and Muslims alike, and the bifurcation of this language into modern Hindi and Urdu is artificial and unnatural' (King 1986; cf. Rai 1984). As Snell emphasises in his comments on the wisdom of Rai's work, the artificial separation of Hindu and Urdu through political processes driven by either Sanskritisation or Persianisation are highly regrettable (Snell 1987). Estimates suggest that Urdu is spoken by at least 4% of the Indian population and in Pakistan by about 7%. Together, Hindi-Urdu share rich literary and philosophical traditions.

The decline of the kind of South Asian Studies nurtured by Basham, has paradoxically coincided with the rise of India as a major trading partner for Australia. On the 29 December 2022, the first major bilateral trade agreement between India and Australia came into effect (the Australia-India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement).

Given these trends, this third volume of research about the religions of South Asia hopes to signal that Indology in Australia need not die out as an area of research and teaching. Most of the essays in this collection come from scholars who have encouraged post-graduate students to study in this field. We have all contributed to fostering the next generation of Australians with strong commitments to South Asian Studies as understood by Basham. One of our contributors recently completed a doctoral thesis at the IITB-Monash Research Academy (Mumbai, India) on the subject of 'Religious Worship in a Changing Urban Environment: Mumbai's Worli Koliwada (Worli fishing village)'. The joint doctoral program between Monash University in Melbourne and the IIT Bombay represents a collaborative approach towards promoting South Asian Studies in both Australia and India. Such collaborations can, we believe, promote the Australia-India bilateral relationship within a wider, more complex context beyond mutual business interests and in doing so enhance our intellectual, cultural and economic engagements.

Another approach to fostering South Asian Studies is to work and publish with established Indian scholars, such as Ravi Korisettar, one of India's leading archaeologists. His unique research on the long historical evolution of Lajjāgaurī as a fertility goddess from the Middle East to the Indian subcontinent is presented in the second chapter of this book.

A third approach is to demonstrate to Australian and international readers the immense value of studying classical texts and languages as a way of understanding South Asia's contemporary problems, including environmental pollution. Half of the chapters in this collection depend on Australian expertise in the classical languages of the region, in particular Sanskrit (see for example, Chapter 3 by Bailey).

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