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THE GODDESS IN HINDU-TANTRIC TRADITIONS

DEVI AS CORPSE

Anway Mukhopadhyay

ROUTLEDGE

The Goddess in Hindu-Tantric Traditions

The Great Goddess, in her various puranic and tantric forms, is often figured as sitting on a corpse which is identified as Shiva-as-*shava* (God Shiva, the consort of the Devi and an iconic representation of the Absolute without attributes, the Nirguna Brahman). Hence, most of the existing critical works and ethnographic studies on Shaktism and the tantras have focused on the theological and symbolic paraphernalia of the corpses which operate as the asanas (seats) of the Devi in her various iconographies.

This book explores the figurations of the Goddess as corpse in several Hindu puranic and Shakta-tantric texts, popular practices, folk belief systems, legends and various other cultural phenomena based on this motif. It deals with a more intricate and fundamental issue than existing works on the subject: how and why is the Devi – herself – figured as a corpse in the Shakta texts, belief systems and folk practices associated with the tantras? The issues which have been raised in this book include: how does death become a complement to life within this religious epistemology? How does one learn to live with death, thereby lending new definitions and new epistemic and existential dimensions to life and death? And what is the relation between death and gender within this kind of figuration of the Goddess as death and dead body? Analyzing multiple mythic narratives, hymns and scriptural texts where the Devi herself is said to take the form of the *Shava* (the corpse) as well as the Shakti who animates dead matter, this book focuses not only on the concept of the theological equivalence of the *Shava* (Shiva-as-corpse) and the Shakti (Energy) in tantras but also on the status of the Divine Mother as the Great Bridge between the apparently irreconcilable opposites, the mediatrix between Spirit and Matter, death and life, existence-in-stasis and existence-in-kinesis.

This book makes an important contribution to the fields of Hindu Studies, Goddess Spirituality, South Asian Religions, Women and Religion, India, Studies in Shaktism and Tantra, Cross-cultural Religious Studies, Gender Studies, Postcolonial Spirituality and Ecofeminism.

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This book is dedicated to Sri Ma Saradamani Devi and Sri Anandamayi Ma, considered to be two loved enfleshments of the divine feminine in India in the last two centuries. Even though history has witnessed their corpses, those corpses have not been able to translate these two "Mothers" to the domain of "absence".


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Anway Mukhopadhyay

Introduction

This book explores the figurations of the Goddess as corpse in several Hindu puranic and Shakta-tantric texts, popular practices, folk belief systems, legends and various other cultural phenomena based on this motif. The Great Goddess, in her various puranic and tantric forms, is often figured as sitting on a corpse which is identified as Shiva-as-*shava* (God Shiva, the consort of the Devi and an iconic representation of the Absolute without attributes, the Nirguna Brahman). Hence, most of the existing critical works and ethnographic studies on Shaktism and the tantras have focused on the theological and symbolic paraphernalia of the corpses which operate as the *asanas* (seats) of the Devi in her various iconographies. However, this book deals with a more intricate and fundamental issue: how and why is the Devi – *herself* – figured as a corpse in the Shakta texts, belief systems and folk practices associated with the tantras? How does the Shakta-tantric culture see and theorize the "death" of Sati, which gives rise to a unique religious tradition based on the petrified body parts of Sati scattered over various places? And what connection can we establish between the corpse of Sati and the primacy of the corpse in the *shava sadhana* (which may be loosely called corpse-based spirituality)?

The tantrically oriented puranas and upapuranas like the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana* claim that, after the demise of Sati, Shiva became obsessed with the parts of her corpse, as those were the only physical and palpable remains of his beloved wife. Shiva, the great ascetic, needed these visible tokens of the physical existence of Sati who was no more available as a living consort. He was angry when he was denied the company of the *whole* corpse of Sati and Vishnu cut up the corpse into fifty-one parts. The whole body was reduced to body parts, and in order to accompany, out of love, these multiple parts of the body of the beloved, Shiva had to pluralize himself, choosing to be present with each of these body parts in the fifty-one Sati *pithas* – in his *linga* (phallus-shaped stone images) forms. While in orthodox Hinduism death and dead bodies are seen as the supreme instances of

impurity and the dead body is not supposed to be preserved but cremated, the particular tantric religious culture associated with the mythic topos of Sati's corpse is based on the theological sacralization (and preservation) of the corpse. What Shiva (and the world, according to the tantric episteme) preserves are not the ashes of Sati's burnt corpse, but rather the scattered limbs of her dismembered body, enshrined as the epitomes of the sacred. These body parts, paradoxically, serve as the most powerful sources of the kinetic energy of life. They are worshipped not just to achieve *moksha*, liberation from physical existence, but also, and perhaps more importantly for the popular dimension of this religious episteme, in order to live meaningful, happy and even hedonic lives. On the other hand, in theological and spiritual terms, each *part* of the sacred corpse is supposed to lead one to the spiritual *whole* that throbs at the heart of the universe.

The issues raised in this book include: how does death become a complement to life within this religious epistemology? How does one learn to live with death, thereby lending new definitions and new epistemic and existential dimensions of life and death? And what is the relation between death and gender within this kind of figuration of the Goddess as death and dead body? How does this tantric concept of death challenge the conventional idea of death as that which signals a total delinking/a radical break from life? How can the Kristevan concept of the corpse as "abject" (Kristeva 3–4) be challenged with reference to a culture where the goddess-as-corpse sacralizes the dead body and establishes an entirely different mode of relation between dead and living bodies? And what relevance does such an epistemology have in our eco-conscious age?

These are the basic questions addressed in this book. Though in the tantric systems it is Shiva who is often identified as the symbolic corpse, we need to underline the central mythic trope of Sati's corpse which propels the Shakta-tantric sacred geography and the sadhana related to the members of Sati enshrined in the Sati *pithas*. And we also need to look at multiple mythic narratives, hymns and scriptural texts where the Devi herself is said to take the form of the *shava* (the corpse) as well as the Shakti who animates dead matter. Therefore, we need to focus not only on the concept of the theological equivalence of the *Shava* (Shiva-as-corpse) and the Shakti (Energy) in tantras but also on the status of the Divine Mother as the Great Bridge between the apparently irreconcilable opposites, the mediatrix between Spirit and Matter, death and life, existence-in-stasis and existence-in-kinesis.

When we focus on the Devi-as-corpse in Shakta-tantric Hinduism, the corpse becomes a complex epistemic category defying the binaristic division of life and death. The apparent death of the human avatar of the Devi, even in its most conspicuously physical aspects, retains the surplus of life – something

that is indestructible. It is a momentous image: the corpse, even *physically*, carries the energy of life. And this image of the living corpse, so to speak, becomes most horrendously and powerfully represented by the figure of the Goddess Chhinnamasta, who is alive while decapitating herself and drinking her own blood. Following Adriana Cavarero, the Italian feminist theorist, we may see the figure of the corpse of Sati as the encapsulation of the "spirituality of the flesh" and "fleshiness of the spirit" (Cavarero, *Relating Narratives* 112), in the most radical context of death.

On the other hand, following Mary Douglas, one may say that the body may be seen – fundamentally – as a limited (and limiting) and bounded system (Douglas, *Purity and Danger* 116). This ordering and delimitation of the contours of the body is challenged when the dismemberment of Sati's corpse pluralizes that body and makes it limitless. The dismemberment of the body frees it from the orders imposed on it by the delimiting discourses, the "discursive" or "regulatory" (Butler 1–2) limits of the body. Besides, drawing on the observations of Cavarero (*In Spite of Plato* 118–119), we may suggest that, when we cease to see the death of individual beings as the negation of life, and rather focus on the interminable chain of life, in which these short narratives of individuality are but temporary loops, then we can construct a materialist concept of the sacredness of life. This sacredness of life would qualify as the supreme instance of what Lata Mani, the Indian cultural critic, calls the "sacredsecular" (1–4). In the practices of *shava sadhana*, the corpse, on which the tantric spiritual aspirant sits and meditates, is said to be possessed by the Devi. Here, the Devi as the universal life energy is figured as a neutral *elan vital* which can channel itself through corpses as easily as through living bodies.

Evidently, this particular religious epistemology operates on the border of life and death, embodying the most exciting form of liminality. This book reads the corpse motif in Shaktism and tantra with the contemporary ecocritical and feminist cultural theories that seek to theorize life and death in radically new ways. It also involves an investigation of the tantric corpse by critically setting in motion Irigaray's "ethics of sexual difference" (7–19): while the corpse as Shiva is the transcendent Absolute detached from the plurality constituting life, the corpse as Devi is life-sustaining and life-promoting, not singular but plural, and not detached from life but interwoven with life in most unexpected ways.

Another important issue raised in this book is: how can the dismemberment of Sati's corpse be seen as giving rise to not a unified Mother India but rather a radical eco-theological aesthetics of fragmentation which shows us that the whole is in each of the fragments and not in any ulterior conceptualization of a unified entity, whether it is cultural or political? And hence, while Imma Ramos, in *Pilgrimage and Politics in Colonial Bengal: The*

Myth of the Goddess Sati, analyzes the cultural appropriations of the Sati *pithas* in the context of Indian nationalist politics during the colonial and postcolonial periods, my focus is on the possibilities of articulating an eco-epistemological resistance to any attempt at *totalizing* the *pithas*, and the scattered body parts of Sati, into a political entity. Precisely, I have concentrated on how Sati stands for the energy of existence, the essence of what Frankenberg and Mani's Devi Amma calls "isness" (12–18) – which breaks down all hierarchical arrangements of existent entities. For me, as someone positioned within the Shakta-tantric tradition and not outside it, it is more important to draw out the alternative meanings provided by the Sati myth than remaining confined to what it has meant so far or how it has been made to mean something. All myths have endless interpretative potentials, and Hinduism being a living religion, the Sati myth is an open-ended myth, calling for multiple interpretations. My focus is on what it can mean to us today – and how it can heal the wounds in our psyche produced by our "hyper-separative" (Plumwood 54) epistemologies.

An understanding of the Shakta-tantric goddess spirituality of Hinduism may be relevant in our contemporary world where eco-awareness has forced us to change our conventional notions of life and living beings. However, without an expansively and radically altered notion of death, we perhaps cannot insist on an altered and expanded notion of life. Devi-as-corpse is a trope which most forcefully necessitates this eco-epistemic expansion.

Chapter 1 of this book re-contextualizes the Sati myth within the philosophical framework of defining the "corpse", a framework inflected by two different epistemologies – that of death and that of the body. Moreover, these epistemes are supplemented by that of the sacred, in the context of Sati.

Chapter 2 discusses the possibilities of reading the myth of Sati in a totally new light, without reference to the devoted wife trope. One can see this myth as that of a devoted husband rather than that of a devoted wife, when one focuses on certain Shakta puranic and tantric texts.

Chapter 3 analyzes how the dismemberment of Sati's corpse, by dismantling the "borders" of the body which would paradoxically constitute its apparent wholeness, pluralizes the body that is supposed to appear singular in a normal condition. This chapter puts forward the argument that the dismemberment of Sati's corpse is not a *reduction* of the whole body into its parts, but rather the *expansion* of one body into many bodies. It also contains critical reflections on certain texts of puranic and tantric Shaktism where Shiva is presented as pluralizing himself to accompany Sati's body parts in each of the *pithas*.

Chapter 4 upholds the fact that Sati's corpse is not a passive object but an active reservoir of the immanent Shakti. In all the Sati *pithas*, the parts of Sati's corpse are celebrated as active encapsulations of Divine Energy.

Besides, this chapter insists that Sati's body does not give rise to a body politic, a nation-state that would imply a metaphoric re-assemblage of her dismembered body. The most radical implication of this myth lies in its acceptance of the pluralization and expansion of the sacred body through its dismemberment, the theo-aesthetics of fragmentation.

Chapter 5 explores the issue of who is represented by the corpse in the *shava sadhana* (the corpse ritual/corpse spirituality): Shiva or Shakti? This chapter argues that the corpse is probably a figuration of not just the transcendent Shiva but also the pulsating Energy of the universe, the inner spirit and the propelling force of the multiplicity of life, figured as Devi in the Hindu tantras.

Chapter 6 attempts a cross-cultural reading of the Devi's corpse, discussing multiple issues pertaining to the figuration of the Devi-as-corpse and the theme of the Shakti *pithas*, with reference to various comparable cultural formations all over the world, including the mythology of Osiris, the Chod meditation practices of Tibetan Buddhism, the Egyptian and Tibetan Books of the Dead, the Vedic concept of Purusha Yajna transformed into the trope of Prakriti Yajna by Sri Aurobindo, the links between corporeality and sacredness in Indian aboriginal myths, the practice of human sacrifice in various ancient societies and in Shaktism, the practice of burial instead of cremation in certain contexts of the Shakta-tantric culture, the phenomenon of *jivantasamadhi* (voluntary self-burial while one is still alive) in Shaivism and/or Shaktism, the iconography of Goddess Chhinnamasta common to both Hinduism and tantric Buddhism, and so on and so forth.

Chapter 7 refers to the *vishva-rupa*/cosmic form of Devi presented in various texts of Shaktism, and, drawing on Adriana Cavarero's philosophical insights, analyzes how the Devi's cosmic form, when metonymically associated with her corpse form, may corroborate Cavarero's insistence that a de-individualized concept of death would ultimately lead us back to the interminable chain of life itself.

Since some of the versions of the myth of Shiva and Sati that have been referred to in this book are not widely known to the Western and even many Indian readers, I have added three Appendices which briefly sketch out the narrative variations of the Sati myth found in two puranic texts, the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana* and the *Brihaddharmapurana*, and a Bengali text, *Annadamangal Kavya*.

Appendix I presents a brief outline of the mythological narrative of Sati in the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana*.

Appendix II adumbrates the unique features of the narrative of Sati in the *Brihaddharmapurana*.

Appendix III summarizes the narrative of Sati presented by Bharatchandra Raygunakar in his *Annadamangal Kavya*.

1 The human death, the divine corpse

If we try to define a corpse in the simplest way, it should be called a dead body. This definition, however, involves two basic concepts: the concept of death and that of the body. Interestingly, for many orthodox and ascetically oriented religious and spiritual doctrines in Hinduism, corporeality and death would be symbolically, metonymically and functionally correlated. As Patrick Olivelle observes, "Brahmanical ascetics are frequently encouraged to contemplate their body as a corpse" (107). If the Spirit is seen as radically different from the body, then, of course, consciousness and corporeality are totally antithetical. And the logical consequence of this argument would be that the body as such is essentially inert, unconscious, *jada*, part of the conceptual framework of "death". The Samkhya philosophy, for instance, would divide existence into two elements: Purusha (consciousness, soul) and Prakriti (the material realm including the body, mind, sense organs etc.) [Pradhan 17]. As Basant Pradhan rightly points out, in Samkhya philosophy, the mind is also part of this material realm, and hence the dualism insisted on by this doctrine is different from the Cartesian dualism (17).

However, let us bracket off the issue of the mind for the moment and focus on only the body. If the body is *jada*, inert, unconscious, then where is the difference between a body and a dead body, or to be more specific, between a living body and a dead body? To frame the question in a different way: where is life located – in the body, or in the consciousness? Is it coterminous with consciousness, or lesser or greater than it? And, what is death? Is it the negation of life or absence of consciousness? Of course, here we are speaking of consciousness with an esoteric and spiritual inflection on the term, and not just in terms of what a doctor clinically defines as consciousness. However, interestingly, as Keshav Prasad Varma has rightly observed, in the Samkhya doctrine, Prakriti is, paradoxically, *jada*/inert but active and dynamic (Ch. 5, "Hindu Philosophy"). If that is the case, then, following the idea that consciousness is the only essence of being and that the body is essentially unconscious, can we say that a living body is a dancing corpse, while a

corpse is an inert body? Or, to make matters more complex, can we say that the corpse is the inert body in stasis because the inert-but-dynamic mind is sleeping in it, and hence dynamic no more, whereas the living body is living, because the inert or *jada* mind is active herein? But that will make life and mind (or at least the activity of mind) coextensive, which is unacceptable.

Samkhya says that Prakriti is *jada* but creative, whereas Purusha – the masculine, spiritual, trans-corporeal principle – is totally passive, unengaged in the activity of *jada* Prakriti. It is only the *drashta*, the seer, of the dance of Prakriti. Prakriti keeps dancing before him, but once the Purusha, as it were, stops being enticed by this dance, she returns to her original inert, motionless state, while the Purusha achieves liberation (Varma, Ch. 5, "Hindu Philosophy"; Biernacki 3).

Now, the questions are: which and how many metaphors for a corpse can we find in this complex philosophical doctrine? As a passive seer of the dance of Prakriti but never participating in it, and taking no part in Creation, is not the Purusha of Samkhya corpse-like? And it is his similarity with the *shava* (corpse) which has led many commentators to believe that Samkhya has a great impact on the Shakta-tantric figurations of Shiva as the inert corpse (Dasgupta 70–71). The Absolute as figured by the *Mahanirvana Tantra* is similar to the corpse-like passive seer, the Purusha of Samkhya (*Mahanirvana Tantra* 70). However, this is not the only figure of the corpse that Samkhya provides us with. After the end of her dance, Prakriti returns to her motionless state. Can we say that she actually returns to her original corpse-like state, or to put it more grossly, that she becomes a corpse? This would, then, be the second figuration of the corpse for us. But even that is not all. We have a third and the most intricate corpse here: the dancing corpse that Prakriti is, in her active aspect. If she is insentient, then there is no fundamental, ontological difference between her and a corpse. Even when she is dynamic, she does not become sentient, let alone conscious (in the esoteric as well as ordinary sense of the term). Hence, as the dancer before the Purusha, she is nothing but a corpse-in-motion.

Let us look into the deeper problematics of these concepts. All the corpses delineated previously are incompatible with our conventional sense of the corpse as the symbol of a closure, a finality, a sad "ending" because these corpses entail massive paradoxes, and hence continually deviate from the received ideas of death and life. When the passive Purusha sees the dance of Prakriti, he, though corpse-like, paradoxically deviates from the expected nature of a corpse. Even when you do nothing and only *see* something, you are not wholly passive. Similarly, when the inert Prakriti is able to dance, her materiality, as it were, is not wholly material.

As far as the closest resemblance with a corpse is concerned, both Purusha and Prakriti, in the Samkhya doctrine, assume it, when the dance of

Prakriti is over. For Prakriti, there is no "liberation", as she is *jada*. But for the Purusha, the absolute and ultimate stasis is liberation, *kaivalya* (Burley 138–142). In this philosophical framework, don't we see a continuous dynamics of the nirvana principle, a kind of thanatotic drive? And if the *kaivalya* of Samkhya actually resembles death and the liberated Purusha, a corpse, then is the liberation offered by this framework a happy one? Liberation, here, becomes totally dissociated from a vision of simultaneously spiritual and material eudaimonia which the tantras foreground.

Probably, one can see the tantras as offering a complex critical commentary on the Samkhya philosophy. Besides, there are some problems with the conventional reception of Samkhya. While it has been seen as an atheistic doctrine (Stenger 206), if we follow Alain Danielou's interpretation of the Samkhya doctrine, we may say that Samkhya is neither theistic nor atheistic; it is "sacredsecular" (Mani 1–4), a different, deeper and all-encompassing paradigm of sacredness. It is debatable whether Samkhya as such offers this new paradigm, as Danielou's analysis of Samkhya is more applicable to the tantric texts (which may have radically reworked the Samkhya discourses) than to the Samkhya doctrine itself. Nevertheless, it is important to dwell on Danielou's tantrically inflected (as I would like to argue) reading of Samkhya:

> According to the concepts of the Samkhyas, the universe is made up of two fundamental elements, consciousness and energy . . . Matter is merely organized energy. There is no material element that exists without being inhabited by consciousness. No element of consciousness exists without an energy-giving support.
>
> (Danielou, *While the Gods Play*, qtd. in Gabin xxiii)

When we begin to introduce the doctrine of "energy" (in scientific terms) or Shakti (in spiritual-theological terms), the matter-spirit binary – i.e., the Samkhya dualism described at the beginning of this chapter – begins to break down. Energy is a peculiar category; it is neither consciousness nor matter, and yet partakes of the characteristics of both. It is the bridge between the ostensibly irreconcilable categories of spirit and matter, Purusha and Prakriti. If the Purusha can see, despite being passive and corpse-like, it is so only because it embodies (spiritual) energy; if the Prakriti can dance, in spite of being "inert", *jada* and hence corpse-like, then it is also due to the play of the energy that makes matter dance. Shakti, in this remodelled philosophical framework, becomes the great mediatrix between consciousness and matter, life and death. The corpse, any corpse, becomes sleeping energy, because, as apparently inert matter, it still embodies "organized energy". If energy and consciousness are complementary and inalienable, and this conscious

energy "inhabits" all material elements, then the corpse is as much inhabited by this conscious energy as the living body. From this perspective, death and life can be radically rethought. They can be re-conceptualized as forming a continuum rather than indicating any ontological disjuncture.

As H. P. Blavatsky argues, for the occultists, life is an energy which is present in everything – whether it is organic or inorganic – and there is nothing such as *dead* matter. For the occultist, like matter, energy is also an objective reality, and it pervades everything. In an inorganic atom, the life energy is dormant, whereas, in an organic atom, it is active (Blavatsky, "Transmigration of the Life Atoms"). Pranab Bandyopadhyay, while discussing the role of occultism in the tantras, writes:

> Mind and body represent two aspects of a single process of change of emergence, according to the Indian thought. They represent different degrees of condensation of the original creative force on (sic.) *shakti*. The inert is the sub-dued (sic.) expression of life and consciousness. The phenomenon of dematerialism proves the supreme control of mind over body. Matter is plastic, and the psychic can assume any form. The process of change is subtle, but it can express itself without the gross form. The psyche can express itself through subtler forms of matter. It is a form of re-incarnation which does not necessarily mean the complete dissociation of matter from the spirit, for in the evolutionary ascent some form of thin material sheath is necessary for the spirit's expression. The psychic being a luminous matter energized by spirit becomes the vehicle of expression of the adepts.
>
> (77)

The image of the conscious energy mediating between matter and spirit, which is foregrounded by Danielou, may be represented by the image of the dancing goddess, Mahamaya as Devi Kamakhya, on the Nilachala Hill in Assam. Comparing the image of Devi Kamakhya, dancing for her own pleasure, with the dancing Prakriti of Samkhya, subjected to the gaze of the male spectator, the conscious Purusha, Loriliai Biernacki writes:

> Both of these women dance, and in dancing, spin an enchanting web of motion for those who watch. Yet the two stories differ in how they present why and for whom the woman dances. In the classical Samkhya story, the woman dancing serves the male *purusa*'s interests. *Prakrti*, the primordial female, exists to fulfill his goals; she herself is simply an object, first inciting his desire and delight, and then his bored rejection. He is the center of the story, the subject viewing the world, and the dancing revolves around his needs and desires . . .

> When the goddess at Kamakhya dances, however, she dances for herself, for her own delight. When she chooses, she may grant a vision of her dancing to her devotee, but this vision of her dance is hers alone to give, and may not be taken without her consent, at least not without dire consequences.
>
> (3–4)

While the Samkhya philosophy would figure the dancing Prakriti as a dancing corpse, the tantric vision would see the Great Goddess as the Immanent Energy in matter and spirit who can dance – if she wishes – even in an apparently inert corpse. And it is this shift which, in my opinion, signals the shift from the dualism of Samkhya to the more complex conceptual patterns of the tantras.

We have seen that the positing of the Great Energy, the Mahashakti, as the Mother of the Universe in whom Consciousness and Energy are de-alienated changes the philosophical framework that associates corporeality itself with the features of a corpse – or to put it in simpler terms, lessens the ontological gap between "death" and "body", thereby implying that a body is essentially dead, a corpse. I will come back to this point just after telling the story of Shiva and Sati.

The basic narrative of the Shiva-Sati myth runs thus: Sati is the daughter of Daksha, a great king who has a semi-divine status. According to the Shakta texts, the Great Goddess is born to him as his daughter, due to his penances to propitiate Her. This daughter is named Sati. Sati is spontaneously devoted to Shiva since her childhood, and finally marries him. Daksha is angry with his daughter, as he does not like Shiva, due to his apparently unorthodox ways of living. Sometime after Sati's marriage to Shiva, Daksha arranges a great *yajna* (fire sacrifice). He invites all the gods and goddesses, except Shiva and Sati. Sati, however, shows her willingness to visit the *yajna* ceremony organized by her father. Shiva does not want to let her go to the ceremony, as he knows Daksha will malign him in front of Sati, and that the basic intention of the king is to insult him and Sati. Sati remains stubborn, and even, according to some puranas, frightens Shiva by showing him her Mahavidya forms. She finally manages to force Shiva to allow her to go to the great *yajna* ceremony attended by all the gods and goddesses. There, Daksha, as expected by Shiva, begins to overtly malign Shiva in front of Sati. Sati cannot tolerate this and leaves her body which is biologically linked to that of Daksha (Dasgupta 42–46; Sircar 5–6; Niguranda 9–10; Chattopadhyay, "Bhumika" (Introduction); Kinsley 37–41; Achyutananda 31–39; *Mahabhagavata* 34–146; *Srimad Devi Bhagawatam* Book 7, Ch. 30, verses 17–102; *Brihaddharmapurana* 128–157; Raygunakar 10–18).

There are various versions of this episode. Some texts say that she leaves her body through a yogic process (*Srimad Devi Bhagawatam* Book 7, Ch. 30, 26–37). The *Kalika Puranam* does not present Sati as going to Daksha's fire sacrifice. According to this purana, when Sati comes to know from Vijaya, Sati's niece, that her father has arranged the *yajna* and has deliberately invited everybody except Shiva and Sati, she, burning with anger, leaves her body through a yogic process (108–118). In the *Brihaddharmapurana*, Sati, angry to hear Daksha's harsh words on Shiva, curses him and storms out of the place of the *yajna*. Then she reaches a dense forest near the Himalayas and leaves her Daksha-born body there (155–157). However, according to the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana*, Sati creates a Chhaya Sati, a Shadow Sati, and asks her to enter the sacrificial fire of Daksha's *yajna*. It is not the original Sati, but the Shadow of Sati who immolates herself in the fire. And this Shadow is, paradoxically, corporeal (99–103).

After coming to know of Sati's "death", Shiva becomes greatly enraged, and destroys Daksha's *yajna*. Then, mad with grief, he begins a destructive dance with Sati's corpse on his shoulder. In order to preserve the stability of the universe which is threatened by Shiva's dance, Vishnu applies his chakra to Sati's corpse and cuts it into pieces (*Mahabhagavata* 105–133). In another mythic account, it is Brahma, Vishnu and Shanaishchara who enter the corpse, through yogic powers, and cut it into pieces (*Kalika Puranam* 123). These fifty-one pieces fall at several places on earth and turn into stones (*Mahabhagavata* 132), as the result of which, at each of these places, a *pitha* (a scared pilgrim place for the Shaktas) is set up, where Shiva accompanies the body part of Sati in his *linga* form, out of his tremendous affection towards his wife (*Mahabhagavata* 137; *Brihaddharmapurana* 170–172; Raygunakar 16–18; *Kalika Puranam* 124).

The story poses several epistemological and onto-theological problems for the Shakta-tantric texts. First of all, these texts do not endorse the Samkhya binary of a spiritual male principle and a material female principle. Hence, unlike the Samkhyavadis, the authors of these texts cannot see the female principle as confined to the realm of matter. The maternal-feminine principle, the Shakti as Mother, is the Ultimate Consciousness, the metaphysical Absolute, for them. And yet, the story of Sati necessitates a reading of the body of the human avatar of the Great Goddess *as body*. Hence, these texts cannot deny the materiality of the corpse of Sati, as it is on the basis of this corporeality that their pilgrim centres are formed. If you don't accept the bodily nature of Sati's body, you cannot say that the sacred parts of that body become stones and give rise to the Shakti *pithas*. The body-as-body is the origin of these *pithas*, as the link between the Devi and these spots is corporeal in nature.

In fact, there is a marked difference in the Hindu-tantric traditions between – on the one hand – a Siddha Pitha, where a spiritual aspirant

obtains *siddhi*, that is, succeeds in his worship of the Conscious Energy of the Devi, but which does not contain a body part of Sati, and – on the other hand – a Sati Pitha, which enshrines a part of Sati's holy corpse (Kanchhal 4–5). In the theological hierarchy of tantric Shaktism, a Sati Pitha enjoys a higher status than a Siddha Pitha. Hence, we must understand, the body of the humanized Great Mother lies at the core of this Shakta-tantric epistemology of the sacred.

However, the problem is that, it is the same epistemology which insists on the fundamentally metaphysical, abstract, transcendental nature of the Great Goddess. So, in the Shakta-tantric doctrine, a radical reconciliation is required between Devi-as-pure-transcendence and Devi-as-pure-corporeality, Devi as the ultimate source of universal life and Devi as a corpse. I strongly believe that it is this profound problematic which gives rise to the most exciting, "heroic" and challenging eco-theological exploration ever undertaken in the subcontinent. The solution to this problem would mean the solution to the essential questions of existence: what is life? What is death? Can they ever be reconciled? Can we erase the border between life and death and make possible a situation where they bleed into each other? Can we find a divinity which occupies the most palpable forms of materiality as well as the transcendental realms? And that is precisely why I don't hesitate to claim that the corpse of Sati, whose "death", however, *cannot* be seen as death, lies at the heart of the Shakta-tantric modes of worship, especially those developed in the Eastern parts of India, that is, the practices developed within the Kali Kula, the Kali-centric Shaktism.

It is noticeable that the Shakta-tantric version of Shiva is affectionate to the corpse of Sati in the same way as he was affectionate to the living Sati. He appears to be the archetypal embodiment of the enchanted Purusha of Samkhya, bound to Prakriti, the dancing corpse, by desire. However, Shiva is actually full of desire not for the corpse as corpse, but rather for the corpse of Sati as the living remnant of – or rather, the arcane *presence* of – Sati. The corpse, in other words, is not the end of the living Sati, but a baffling *continuation* of the living avatar of Devi.

There is a contradiction at the heart of the trope of Sati's corpse in the Shakta-tantric texts: if Sati leaves the body because she no longer wants to inhabit the body produced from Daksha's body (*Mahabhagavata* 103; *Srimad Devi Bhagawatam* Book 7, Ch. 30, 26–37), then how can we attribute sacredness to this body? How can a human death give rise to a divine corpse? Should we believe that what we humans understand to be death is not death at all, that it is only the concept of a closure imposed on something which cannot be closed off at all? Some versions of the myth say that the corpse of Sati remains sacred because it lies on the shoulder of Shiva, the Lord of the lords (*Kalika Puranam* 123; Achyutananda 38). However, this is

an incomplete explanation, as, even after being cut off by Vishnu's chakra – that is, after getting detached from Shiva's body – Sati's corpse does not become decomposed or impure but rather falls on the earth as bodily fragments which immediately turn into sacred stones. Hence, we should not try to locate the sacredness of Sati's corpse in its physical proximity to Shiva's body, but somewhere else – in some more intricate concept of the sacred. The sacredness of Sati's corpse is immanent in it, and not located outside it.

In Buddhism, there are some meditation practices centred on corpses. However, these are totally different from the *shava sadhana*, the corpse-centric sadhana, in tantric Shaktism. The Buddhist *Visuddhimagga* teaches the monks how to meditate on corpses and compare them with their own bodies. The basic principle of this meditation is this: the corpse is what my body is going to be (Conze 103–104). In other words, this meditation is targeted at lessening the ontological gap between a living body and a dead body. The impurity of the body is foregrounded (Olivelle 107), and the corpse gives an incentive to the ascetic sensibility. However, in Shiva's case, the proximity of the corpse only enhances his desire, and, according to the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana*, after the fragmentation of Sati's corpse is completed, Shiva, along with Brahma and Vishnu, sits in meditation, praying to the Great Goddess that she should become his wife again (139–146). This purana continuously focuses on the passionate nature of Shiva. While the Buddhist meditation practice centred on the corpse would try to rectify the passionate nature of people (Dhammaratana 44), Sati's corpse only enhances Shiva's passion.

Shiva becomes an ascetic not only because of the absence of the living wife; rather, it is the disappearance of her corpse from his shoulder (when the corpse has been totally fragmented and Shiva finds nothing on his shoulder) which ultimately turns him into an ascetic, engrossed in deep meditation on the Devi, waiting for her new avatar (*Mahabhagavata* 140–142). However, here too, the asceticism is not based on the nirvana principle; it is "intentional" in the Husserlian sense of the term (Zahavi 22–23). For Shiva, Sati's corpse does not act as a *memento mori*. He is the deathless god who never needs to focus on the decaying nature of his own body. He would never need to see Sati's corpse as what his body is going to be like. However, Sati's corpse offers him an understanding of how important material life is, and he begins to comprehend the continuum of material life which the innate Energy of the universe sustains. One may argue that here the movement is not from secular desire to sacred desirelessness – precisely, Shiva moves from the sacred vision of divinity to the sacredsecular vision of life which combines the human, the divine and the material, threaded by the Energy which is worshipped as the secret of existence in the Shakta tantras.

The meditation practices of the Buddhist *Visuddhimagga* suggest that the vision of scattered and fragmented corpses would induce an understanding of the fragility of the grace of the body, either as parts or as a whole, in the seer (Dhammaratana 44). Ironically, for Shiva, even the scattered limbs of Sati do not arouse aversion or repulsion. Rather, his affection surges towards these limbs, as much as it surges to the memory of the whole body of the beloved wife. In short, Sati's corpse, either in its totality or in its fragmented state, is sacred to him, and his passionate desire for Sati is also sacred in his eyes. It is the sacredness of this desire which lies beneath the myth and sacred geography of the Sati *pithas*. These *pithas* are not just places for meditating on the transcendental Absolute, turning away from the ostensibly secular, and even impure, aspects of life; they are the great seats where *bhoga* and *moksha*, enjoyment and liberation, become one. These are not places where one would see earthly existence as deplorable. These are places where the mundane and the trans-mundane crisscross, and the body and the soul cease to be antitheses.

That is precisely why I believe that Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's reading of Shiva's affection towards Sati's scattered limbs as indicative of his "excessive sexuality" (299) is a gross and unjust over-simplification of the complex emotional and epistemic issues at stake in this narrative. Like Doniger O'Flaherty, Stella Kramrisch too provides a reductionist reading of Shiva's attachment to Sati's corpse. She says, "He clung to her charred, dead body, losing even that carnal residue of her existence, and turned into a rock to find permanent union with her in their symbol shape of *linga* and *yoni*" (320). What these commentators fail to notice is that Shiva accompanying the remains of Sati's corpse is by no means reducible to the single manifestation of the union of the *linga* (phallus) and the *yoni* (vulva) at Kamarupa. In the other *pithas* too, which contain the organs of Sati other than the *yoni*, Shiva accompanies Sati's members. With reference to the body of Sati qua body, this accompaniment is thematically more complex than the erotic-generative motif of the union of the *linga* and the *yoni*.

Unlike Doniger O'Flaherty, I see Shiva's affection towards Sati's limbs as embodying a greater epistemological significance, indicative of a noticeable distance from the Cartesian approach to the body. For Shiva, and especially the tantric Shiva, love is not a matter of the "soul" alone. The body is as sacred in a discourse of sacred love as the soul is. A dead body reminds one of the soul which inhabited that body. The tantric concept of memory is integrally connected with the discourse of the body. In this episteme, a dead body or the parts of that body remind one of the soul which was associated with that body. That is to say, a body, even when dissociated from the soul animating it, contains some palpable remnants of that soul (Niguranda 176). As if, the dead body is not just an absence of the soul, but rather a

living trace thereof. Shiva is said to wear the parts of Sati's corpse – her bones, for example – as his ornaments, so that he is continually reminded of the lost wife (Kara 103).

In the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana*, while Shiva is fully aware of the fact that Sati is indeed the Primordial Conscious Force of the universe, the abstract metaphysical Absolute, he is obsessively attached to her bodily remains, especially her vulva which, after getting cut off from her corpse, falls on the Nilachala Hill in Kamarupa (123–124,137). It is wrong to think that this is indicative of a necrophilic *eros* or an obsessive melancholy that overflows the psychic space for mourning (to echo the Freudian terminology [Kavaler-Adler 49–55]). The Goddess herself tells the Trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshvara – that wherever the body parts of Sati fall, a sacred *tirtha* will emerge (*Mahabhagavata* 126–127). So, the Goddess, as the Chinmayi Devi, the Conscious Energy, ensures the sacredness of the body parts which would be, even after becoming dissociated, as it were, from Sati's Soul, no less sacred than when they were part of her living body. The conventional homologizations of life, sacredness and spirituality on the one hand, and death, impurity and materiality on the other, which form the basis of most of the discourses of orthodox Hinduism (Kinsley 124), are challenged and undermined here.

We must understand that this also implies a radical epistemic and ritualistic shift from the common posthumous rituals in orthodox Hinduism. Whereas a dead body, in mainstream Hinduism, is seen as impure and hence is removed from the house as soon as possible after the death and cremated quickly to totally negate the link between the dead material body and the deceased soul/spiritual substance which is the "true" identity of the deceased one, Sati's bodily remains – for the tantric Shiva – must not be negated through conflagration. They should literally remain *with* him, as part of a material memory, as it were, and also as part of a sacredsecular memory. The body is, as it were, a repository of the spiritual residue of the deceased one. By preserving the body parts, Shiva can preserve not just the corporeal *memory* of his wife, but also her spiritual *presence*. Presence is generally associated, in any logocentric discourse, with the Spirit, while absence would be associated with some kind of materiality that is a feeble reminder of the Spirit or the spiritual thing. Hence, borrowing Derrida's anti-logocentric lens (Barker 84), one may insist that Socrates' aversion to writing emerges from the suspicion that the written word is the dead thing, the feeble encasement of the corpse of the living, spoken word. On the other hand, interestingly, the entire metaphysical framework of mantric power in tantra is, paradoxically, a convergence of physicality and metaphysics. Let me explain further.

The tantric texts focus as much on the written text as on the spoken word. The mantras and *kavachas* are to be preserved through writing, and when

written, they become sacred objects, material/physical tokens of the sacred *logos*. You can write a mantra on a metal plate and then wear the plate on your body, and the plate, with the mantra written on it, would become a sort of sacred armour containing metaphysical power. However, the writing down of a mantra does not mean a total freezing of the *logos* into a non-phonic, inanimate realm. You can write down the mantra on a copper plate or on a palm leaf and thus preserve the spoken word in its written form. However, that does not mean that the written word is a dead one. Whenever you read the written text and chant the holy mantra, it connects itself with the holy energy of the metaphysical realms, the aura of the *Logos*, and the mantra becomes *siddha*, completely efficacious, after a certain number of times of ritual chanting. The written word, here, is not a dead word. Rather, it is a *sleeping* word.

The parts of Sati's sacred corpse, worn by Shiva as ornaments, are also like these sleeping mantras. They are not wholly dead – they are, as it were, the sleeping spirit in the corpse, or – to draw on my earlier arguments on the basis of Danielou's observations on the Energy mediating between matter and spirit – the sleeping Energy that never dies, not even in a corpse. If we believe that wherever there is matter, there is a sleeping energy, we have to acknowledge that the corpse cannot help but contain energy, in spite of its apparent deadness. As the tantras worship this Energy that remains intact in all material and spiritual forms, in living and dead bodies, when Shiva remains attached to the vulva of Sati's corpse, he is not a necrophiliac but rather a devoted husband of the Energy-entity which constitutes Sati's Self. We need to focus on Sati's corpse to investigate how it changes our conventional ideas of selfhood. Whereas we accept the received idea that the basic ontological dichotomy regarding the issue of identity is that of the body and the spirit, the corporeal and the metaphysical, Sati's corpse, loved by Shiva, makes us remove our conventional orthodoxies and radically rethink the locus of one's true identity.

If we believe, like the Kashmir Shaivites, that the true Self is not an absolute erasure of I-hood but a complete, holistic I-hood, the *Purnahanta* (Padoux 171–174), then we have to think of an ostensibly impossible concept of the self where everything, the dead bodies of the world as well as the living beings, become part of the Self. The Self becomes at once one and plural. Even the distinction between one and many gets erased. According to Kashmir Shaivism, this Purnahanta is impossible without the primacy of the primordial Shakti. And hence, Shiva is never without Shakti (Padoux 174–181; Kaviraj, *Tantrika sadhana o siddhanta* 38–39). Sati, even in her corpse form, remains Shakti, and hence, her identity, her selfhood, cannot be accounted for in terms of exclusive materiality or exclusive spirituality. She is the Shakti-Self, the Energy-Entity, which mediates between matter and spirit and hence operates as the secret of the continuum of the living Sati and the dead one.

Adriana Cavarero argues that when we jettison the individuated idea of death – the idea that a person, once dead, is no more – and rather see individual lives and deaths as part of a larger continuum of life, including animal as well as human life forms, the perennial chain of birth-givings, we realize that death need not be the ultimate source of fear which would make one turn away from the mother, from the body, from the worldly existence centring round corporeality (Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato* 116–119). We may say that Sati's corpse indicates this continuum of birth-givings, and, moreover, offers a more recondite discourse of the continuum of life than Cavarero provides. Sati is the Energy that pervades everything, dead as well as living. And this energy, when seen as greater than the epistemic category of "life", appears to be connecting life and death, matter and spirit, simultaneously. One may say that one's spiritual self (the incorporeal identity) dies in the corpse, but the Energy-Self does not die, even in the material corpse. Even if that corpse is disintegrated, the immanent Energy would continue to *be* in different forms, and even formlessness. Shakti is seen as both formless and corporeal in the Shakta tantras and puranas. Cavarero deconstructs the epistemic category of "death" materialistically, by foregrounding the continuation of life, in its throbbing materiality. However, this view fails to respond sufficiently to the problem of death.

We may adopt, from the perspective of the Sati myth, another hermeneutic framework to analyze death. While a materialist would presuppose the constant epistemic entity of "matter", a philosophy that believes in the primacy of Energy and the commonality of spirit and matter in terms of the Energy immanent in both would begin with the premise of the interchangeability of matter and spirit. Hence, if we believe, like Danielou, that matter is organized energy, then we have to replace materialism with Energy-ism. An Energy-ist doctrine would see "death" as the epistemic outcome of a discourse that insists on the Self and life being coterminous. So far, our Energy-ist ethos would be compatible with Cavarero's materialism. However, the Energy-ist would differ from the materialist in that the former would not see an individualistic notion of death as troublesome, and will not seek the solution to the problem of death in an objective approach to life. In terms of their *material* aspects, death and life will always be different. One can never say that the problem of human death can be solved by referring to the universal and perennial material life throbbing in the amoeba. Life does not continue through the corpse, but the Energy does, due to its capacity for mediating between and linking up corporeality and spirituality, the living body and the dead one. Secondly, if we believe that our Selfhoods are dynamic, continuously self-evolvable energy-entities and not fixed spiritual (abstract identity) or material (fixed corporeal identity designated by the fixed borders of the body) entities, then we can see death as a false concept of closure that presents as discontinuous that which is continuous.

The concept of the Purnahanta would naturally alter any fixed notions of the unified, *singular* self. The Purnahanta of Parama Shiva in Kashmir Shaivism is essentially His Shakti (Kaviraj, *Tantrika sadhana o siddhanta* 38–39). Hence, the Self is here identical with and constituted by Energy. The Self of Shiva, thus, becomes the Energy-Self I have spoken of. The Energy of the Parama Shiva is Spanda Shakti, the vibrating energy, whose intervention brings the world into existence and dissolves it (Kaviraj, *Tantrika sadhana o siddhanta* 38–39). This *spandashastra* of Kashmir Shaivism, which offers a useful theoretical model for understanding the play of Energy in the cosmos, thereby making energy as important as consciousness, must be used to interpret and elucidate the tantric discourses framed in the Eastern parts of India. The theoretical and ritualistic disjuncture between Kashmir Shaivism and Bengali/Assamese Shaktism has led to the obfuscation of the theoretical/philosophical potentials of the tantras of the Kali Kula, that is, the tantras developed in the Eastern parts of India, thereby relegating them to the sphere of anthropological, and not philosophical, investigations.

Now, to apply the concept of the Energy-Self to the trope of the Devi-as-corpse, we have to amalgamate the philosophical ideas developed in Kashmir Shaivism and Bengali/Assamese/Eastern Indian Shaktism. This needs a deeper inter-doctrinal negotiation between different discourses of tantra developed in different geo-cultural zones of India.

When Shiva sees the corpse of Sati, does he witness something where the creative vibration of the Self has stopped altogether? And if the *spandana*, the creative vibration, is the essence of the Self, then what is the essence of the un-vibrating corpse? Probably, the corpse can be seen as a mode of materiality where the vibration of Shakti has not stopped or got suspended, but slowed down to a great extent, as it is the sleeping state of Shakti. However, just as a sleeping person is still identifiable as a living being, perhaps the sleeping energy in a corpse is also identifiable as energy. In the *Todala Tantram*, Goddess Parvati asks Shiva:

> *Trailokyajanani nitya sa katham shavabahana*.
> (5)
>
> How did the eternal Mother of the Three Worlds come to be seated on a corpse?
>
> [Translation mine]

Shiva answers:

> *Samhararupini Kali yada vyaktasvarupini*.
> *Tadaiva sahasa devi! Shavarupah Sadasivah*.
> *Tatkshanat chanchalapangi sa devi shavabahana*.
> (5)

> When Kali, the Form of Destruction, manifests herself as a cognizable form, Shiva, due to her coming out of Him as the manifest *devi* form, becomes a corpse (*shava*). Then and there, Goddess Kali becomes seated on the corpse.
>
> [Translation mine]

Here, the image would correspond with the trope of Shiva as *shava* without energy; that is, the idea that Shiva becomes a corpse when the Divine Energy/the Great Goddess leaves him. However, interestingly, in the Sati myth, it is Sati, the avatar of Shakti, who turns into a corpse, and Shiva remains apparently active, dancing madly with the wife's corpse on his shoulder. But I would insist that we need to read this trope much more carefully. The image conjured up in the *Todala Tantram* implies that when Shakti becomes manifest, Shiva becomes a corpse, but the corpse, however, becomes the seat of the Shakti. Hence, if we ponder this image in its entirety, we may say that, here, the image of the Goddess seated on the corpse implies that the corpse is never wholly abandoned by the Great Energy, as it is still linked with the Devi as her seat. The *Todala Tantram* in fact clarifies that, even when a corpse, Shiva is never totally devoid of Energy (5).

Georg Feuerstein insists that the tantric vision of Reality is characterized by "omnipresent vibrancy" (75). One may, perhaps, combine the episteme of Kashmir Shaivism with that of the *Todala Tantram* and claim that the vibration of the Energy is limited in the corpse, whereas it is fully manifested in the living body. As Savita Gaikwad, Priyedarshi Jetli, Devendra Bapat and Rajesh Gaikwad observe, there are parallels between modern physics and the theory of Spanda Shakti in Kashmir Shaivism/Spanda Shastra, and both of them foreground the law of the conservation of energy. According to modern physics, as well as Spanda Shastra, Energy only changes its forms but is neither created nor destroyed (19–23). If we follow this concept and apply it to the image of Sati-as-corpse, we may say that, here, the Energy only turns into the form of a corpse but is not destroyed or dead. At the same time, we may say that the corpse is as much legitimate and even *sacred* as a form of Energy as the living body. It is as the Energy-Self that a corpse can be seen as the continuation, and not closure, of the living body. Here the topos of the "soul" legitimizing a body while inhabiting it and delegitimizing it when it leaves the body becomes superfluous. The Energy in the tantras and in Shaktism in general is said to inhabit both Consciousness and the insentient things. Hence, while Feuerstein focuses on the essentially conscious nature of the tantric Reality (75), we may say that the Energy, the Mahashakti, bridges the gap between consciousness and materiality, and hence, is probably more important than consciousness as the informing principle of – at least – the Shakta tantras.

On the other hand, one may say that, if matter is but involved consciousness, or rather involved conscious force, as Aurobindo would argue (Phillips 129–130; Aurobindo 15, 25–26), a corpse, as matter, may also be seen as involved/sleeping conscious energy. In that case, living with the parts of the corpse, as Shiva does, would imply the bravest application, to life, of the tantric wisdom of the omnipresence of the conscious energy (or rather, the energy that bridges consciousness and materiality, life and death, apparent inertia and apparent motion). An abstract notion of "omnipresence" is totally different from a continuous, concrete awareness of the omnipresence of the Divine, even in the most adverse situations of life. It is easy to speak of the omnipresence of the Energy, but it is difficult to perceive the omnipresent Energy in a corpse. When we dwell on *virachara* in tantra, we need to underline the heroic aspect of tantric philosophy and its practical application, a heroism rooted in one's ability to break one's "bondage to a world that is artificially fragmented" (Kinsley 124). Here the *hero* dares to see the corpse as the sleeping Energy of the Goddess, as the embodiment of the omnipresence of Sati as the Divine Mother. Seeing the corpse as sacred requires the courage to break the policed borders of socio-culturally legitimized knowledge and imagination. Death does not die when you move about with the thought of death in your head. But death *does* die when you move with the physical tokens of "death", re-epistemologizing the corpse-tokens as coiled-up Universal Energy, and thus making powerless the essentially *human* vision of death-as-annihilation. The physical proximity of the parts of a dead body to a living body is what reduces the shock effect of the corpse.

Let us dwell for the moment on Julia Kristeva's approach to the corpse as a supreme example of the "abject":

> The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. . . . In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver . . . the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. . . . Deprived of world, therefore,

> *I fall in a faint*. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.
>
> (3–4)

Interestingly, while the corpse is seen in this mode of theorization as the disgusting threat to life, as the infectious intrusion into life of its inevitable negation, we can see in the figure of Shiva as tantric hero the exact opposite of what the Kirstevan subject would feel, being overwhelmed by the "powers of horror". David Kinsley argues that Kali signifies death and the power of the forbidden, while her *sadhakas*, the tantric heroes, try to confront the forbidden boldly, instead of fearing or avoiding it. "By affirming the essential worth of the forbidden, he causes the forbidden to lose its power to pollute, to degrade, to bind" (Kinsley 124). However, I would say that the tantric Shiva (and the tantric "hero", by extension) is neither the abject-phobic Kristevan subject nor the hero Kinsley foregrounds – who tries to tame the obstreperous power of the "forbidden". Rather, though the ritualistic focus of the Kali-centric tantric texts of the Eastern parts of India often gives the impression that they are grounded in the tantric practices of appropriating and spiritually or materialistically utilizing/re-channelizing the subversive powers of the "forbidden", the tantric attitude developed in them is actually oriented towards a radical re-epistemologization of the "forbidden" itself.

If death is seen as the *ultimate* border of life, one may argue that Shiva, by wearing Sati's bones round his neck or by placing himself as *lingas* beside all the body parts of Sati scattered on earth, challenges this border as a legitimate bio-epistemic "limit". While society would separate the world of dead bodies (the crematorium) from the world of the living beings, Shiva *lives* in the crematorium. The border between the living and the dead which constitutes the dead body as the absolute instance of the "abject" gets shaken by Shiva's transgressive love for Sati's corpse. What he underlines, precisely, is that the forbiddenness of the corpse is only a fallacy. The corpse is neither subject nor object, nor is it the abject. For Shiva, Sati's corpse is the materialized Energy of Sati (or rather the Energy that *is* Sati) mediating between subjects and objects, selves and others, spirit and matter, consciousness and insentience. The concept of death is, probably, totally different from the *experience* of what we designate as death,

as the experience can't be captured in the "prison-house of language" (à la Nietzsche [Heller 152]).

This *concept* is, one may argue, an anthropocentric one, as the other/non-human life forms on earth would not try to bring death into a "conceptual" framework. Whereas we conceptualize things while we are alive, we can never conceptualize anything while we are "dead". Being dead and thinking of death will never be coterminous, while thinking of life and being alive will always be coterminous – necessarily. In this context, it would be relevant to refer to Rilke's eighth Duino Elegy. Here, Rilke suggests that, while all non-human creatures have direct access to the "open", the human beings keep anticipating death and hence miss the joy of being part of the infinite "open" and immediately touching what *is* (Rilke 55–57).

As Matthew Calarco points out, for Rilke, the "open" is reserved for the animals only. While the humans are unable to directly access what *is*, animals are able to do so. Heidegger's concept of the open, on the other hand, is anthropocentric. For Rilke, however, "rationality" and "human consciousness" are "flawed means of accessing what is" (Calarco 34–35).

Herbert F. J. Muller analyzes the Eight Elegy of Rilke in this way:

> We see ontic fictions, and we force even the early child "to see gestalt formation backwards, not the open": the formation that had previously been structured and approved by others; the judgements have already been made. We walk away from the unstructured, not looking back, and do not approach the open. . . . If we are committed to a mind-independently prestructured world view, it will eventually come to a point where it no longer works; it decays.
>
> (32)

Drawing on Rilke's observations, one may say that whereas the animals don't conceptualize death while living, whereas their experience of living is never thwarted by the thought/imagination of a still non-experienced death, the human beings keep conceptualizing death while living, thereby living in the cleft between life-experience and death-thought, and always projecting death as the ultimate "closure" which darkens the "open". As Cavarero would argue, a de-patriarchalized view of life would bring animality, divinity and maternity together. It is, in other words, the patriarchal, matricidal discourse of the Western philosophy which begins philosophy and theology with the idea of death, thereby relegating the corporeal experiences of living (Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato* 101–120). But when we do not exclude corporeality and animality from the realm of divinity, we come across a radically different vision of divinity. Lata Mani would like to call this experience "sacredsecular" (Mukhopadhyay, *Literary and Cultural Readings* 109–110).

However, the "open", the unstructured space before us, is the locus where all our prestructured views of death would become irrelevant. As Muller insists, "What Rilke calls 'the open' is, as I understand it, the unstructured background . . . and seen from this point of the open, the unstructured, all the prestructured views are preparatory stages: 'ladders' to be thrown away, as Wittgenstein said" (32). Whatever conceptual or imaginative ladders we may build up to capture death in our prison-house of language (and thought) will ultimately be violently thrown away by the experience of death. So, ultimately, what matters is not the imaginative ladder of death-thought projected by our brains, but rather the "heroic" attempt to bring death itself into the "open". If it is true that, as Rilke says, death makes us one with the "pure space", "in which flowers endlessly open" (Rilke 55–57), then we must acknowledge that living with the tokens of death, touching them, sensing them continuously (rather than thinking on death, creating new conceptual structures or harping on prestructured views of death), would, in a way, bring us, and death itself, into the "open" to which the animals have direct access.

The tantras, I would argue, bring animality (Devi is said to appear in animal forms during the heroic sadhana), physicality, sexuality and divinity together, thereby radically questioning the anthropocentric view of death as closure. The open, in the tantric context, would be the field of the Energy that permeates everything. While one lives with the parts of a corpse, as Shiva does, one becomes able to defy "death" as a concept at a fundamental level. One lives in the open that the animals have access to, and yet, here animality and humanity are not placed in opposition to each other, but rather both experiences are seen as part of a divinity that transcends the structures of human rationality, the nets of thought, to capture "what is". Again, this line of argument would dissociate the concept of *being* from all possible anthropocratic snares. Being and life may not be wholly synonymous; and what we understand as "death" may also be a continuum of, rather than a closure to, being-as-energy.

"Death" is, we may argue, a specifically *human* anticipation and imagination of a closure, which, when undermined by a "heroic", subversive approach to the "ontic fictions" of the closure to being, ceases to be a "reality". When the corpse is seen as a different play of the Energy than that in the living body, it becomes divine. This divinity is not in conflict with its apparent materiality or inertia; rather, this divinity is the ecstasy of the de-abjected corpse and the de-abjected figure of the Mother. For Kristeva, the mother/maternal body and death/corpse are equally abjected, and seen as the source of a "fundamental pollution" (Menninghaus 374). Sati is the avatar of the World Mother, and her corpse, when de-abjected, simultaneously de-abjects her status as the M(m)other. Her corpse is divine, but, as

a human avatar, she undergoes an apparently "human" death. As we have already seen, death itself is probably a human concept which is never coterminous with the experience it tries to denote. Sati's corpse, overcoming the "humanness" of "death", gets united with the world of trans-rational passion, the earth, and the mountains, the sacredsecular divinity that is the ever-expanding *oikos*, without limits.

The noted Bengali writer on the Shakti *pithas*, Niguranda, sees Sati as the Energy of Shiva, the Ultimate Reality. He reads the myth of Sati as a metaphoric narrative of the manifestation of the world from the Big Bang, through the successive vibrations of Energy at different levels. The fifty-one Shakti *pithas* or mundane seats of Shakti are seen by Niguranda as the metaphors for the fifty-one energy waves which make possible the manifestation of the universe (167–169). Niguranda does rightly point out that, in the Hindu-tantric philosophy, energy and matter are seen as interchangeable. The subtle energy becomes the gross body, and through sadhana, one can transform the gross body into subtle energy again (168–171). However, Niguranda's approach does not take into account Sati's corpse as corpse, which, while containing the sleeping Energy that the Devi is, remains corporeal, body-qua-body. When Niguranda speaks of the parts of Sati's corpse as *corporeal* remains, he, like David Kinsley, presents the bodily remains of Sati as figurationally and functionally correlative to Mother Earth (164).

Kinsley writes:

> Sati's death is thus transformative. Through her death she provokes Siva into a direct conflict with the sacrificial cult and then an accommodation with it. In this way Siva is brought within the circle of dharma, within the order of established religion. Similarly, Sati's corpse, or pieces of her corpse, sacralize the earth. In dying she gives herself up to be accessible on earth to those who need her power or blessing. In transplanting or transforming herself into the earth, she also brings into the sphere of human society the invigorating power of Siva in the form of the linga.
>
> (40)

He further explains:

> The Sati myth again reminds us of the archaic type of divine pair in which a male deity is associated with the sky and a female deity with the earth. Their union or marriage is necessary for life to be generated and sustained. Sati's identification with the earth and Siva's identification with the distant Himalayas and their subsequent union as yoni

> and linga seem to be a variant on this theme. The main point of the Sati mythology is to bring about a marriage between these two deities so that creation may continue and prosper. The concluding chapter of Sati's mythology makes it clear that this has been accomplished. In the form of the yoni (all individual women) she attracts Siva (all individual men) eternally.
>
> (40)

This view is, unfortunately, totally reductionist. First of all, Sati's body parts which are scattered on earth and are accompanied by Shiva in his *linga* forms include *all* the organs of her body, and not just the *yoni* (vulva). A puranic text like the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana*, or a vernacular text like *Annadamangal*, which foregrounds the simultaneously transcendental and immanent nature of the female deity, would obviously bring both the sky and the earth into the orbit of the "female deity", thereby falsifying the gender binaries endorsed by Kinsley. The *Mahabhagavata Upapurana* clearly says that Sati is the Primordial Energy, the Adyashakti, herself (123–125).

Of course, Sati's corpse, dismembered, does sacralize the earth. However, in the entire symbolic frame of the Sati myth, her corpse is not limited to this sacralizing function only. Her corpse, qua corpse, has a great role to play in the re-epistemologization of death and of the body. Besides, while it is true that her corpse, in a certain sense, does become one with the earth (or rather the earthly ecology), we need to bring out its more radical epistemic and ontological implications, especially with reference to Goddess spirituality, and underline the ways in which the earth itself can be seen as a vast seat of Energy, containing both living and "dead" forms, but always remaining implicated in the cosmic web of the Energy whose divinity the tantras proclaim. If Sati's corpse retains the coiled-up (to draw on the tantric vocabulary) Energy of the Goddess, then even as a corpse it remains sacred or sacredsecular, "divine" in a certain sense. Shiva weeps over the body parts and yet every part retains the seeds of new life, the intimations of the coming of the new avatar of the World Mother, Parvati, who is to be the perennial wife of Shiva. It is not simply the Indic belief in rebirth. Each of the body parts contains the energy which permeates the materiality of all living and dead bodies. And Hence, Sati and Parvati are woven in this uninterrupted chain of energy which is not just the universal life force Cavarero dwells on but rather what ensures the motion of the living and the rest of the dead.

Finally, to elucidate the paradoxes involved in the trope of the Devi-as-corpse, I would like to modify Mircea Eliade's schema of "hierophany" through the intervention of the discourse of the "sacredsecular" (à la Mani) and that of matter as "organized energy" (à la Danielou).

Eliade writes:

> The sacred tree, the sacred stone are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are *hierophies*, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the *sacred*, the *ganz andere*.
>
> It is impossible to overemphasize the paradox represented by every hierophany, even the most elementary. By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. A *sacred* stone remains a *stone*; apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. In other words, for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany. (12)

The basic problem with this schema is that, in the modern parlance, it is not so much the profane as the "secular" which operates as the antithesis of the "sacred". And hence, while a sacred stone as *both* sacred and stone may be an epistemic problem for the secular observer, for the *sacredsecular* observer this hierophany is no anomaly, no antithesis of the empirical "immediate reality" of the stone. Sati's corpse, I would argue, can be brought – from the domain of the "sacred", "heroic", tantric hierophany of the Energy sleeping in the corpse – into the domain of the sacredsecular, where it will be sacred as a *material* corpse (a corpse-shaped *material* organization of Energy) rather than as a metaphoric one. Kinsley sees her corpse as a metonym for the earth, while Nigurananda, seeing the (dismembered) corpse as the symbol of vibrating, outwardly expanding energy waves, metaphorizes it. However, the corpse of Sati can simultaneously be a metonym for the earth and the Energy involved in apparently dead materiality, without becoming metaphoric, without getting distanced from the materiality of the corpse qua corpse.

If we accept the interchangeability of visible matter and invisible energy, then the corpse would belong to neither exclusively *secular* corporeality (let's exchange this term for "profane") nor exclusively sacred energy. It will be matter and energy at once, as these are interchangeable categories, and the corpse is "material" *as organized energy*. All materiality, in this new vision of matter, would be energy-filled, and hence sacredsecular, especially when we remember the tantric focus on the sacrality of energy. Eliade suggests that:

> for primitives as for the man of all premodem societies, the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*. The sacred is saturated with *being*. Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacity.
>
> (12)

We may insist that the correlation of power and the sacred is as much important for the modern human being as it was for the pre-modern one. Besides, we may overwrite Eliade's quasi-metaphysical category of "power" with the "sacredsecular", physical-metaphysical category of "energy". Energy as the internal reality of matter can be acceptable to the sacred as well as the secular epistemologies, and, in this sense, Sati's corpse may become the supreme example of the sacred energy-matter complex which is both physical and metaphysical reality, and hence, as significant in the modern age as it was in the pre-modern age.

Sati's corpse is sacredsecular: to use the interpretative schema of Eliade which I have sacredsecularized, it is always a corpse *and* something else. However, it is not just a metaphysical, imaginary ontological surplus which makes it sacred. Rather, if we accept the scaredsecularity of Sati's corpse, then we may see it as a corpse which itself is the "something else". As matter-as-organized-energy, it is a *thing* and the energy-self/energy-*being* at once. And hence, it is sacred as matter as much as it is sacred as energy.

Like Sati's corpse, the entire universe, as the tantras argue, would reveal its energy-filled reality at every moment, if the modern human being adopted a sacredsecular approach and looked afresh at the vibration at the core of all tokens of stillness.

2 Reinterpreting the myth of Sati

The devoted husband and the corpse of his wife

The Sati myth has always been interpreted by the patriarchally oriented discourses of Hinduism as the narrative of a wife exemplarily devoted to her husband. However, when we look at the tantrically inflected Sanskritic and vernacular texts like the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana* and Bharatchandra's Bengali text, *Annadamangal Kavya*, we find an alternative version of the story where Shiva is the devoted husband who is not just a passionate lover of Sati but also a votary of Sati, as he knows that she is the avatar of the Divine Mother who is the creatrix of everything and every being, including *himself*. In this chapter, we will see how the trope of the devoted wife associated with Sati gets deconstructed in the female-centric theology developed in these texts and an alternative interpretation/reconstruction of the narrative emerges through the foregrounding of a Shiva madly devoted to his wife.

Mandakranta Bose insists that, though the mythological story of Shiva and Sati "shows her devotion toward her husband, it shows equally her husband's devotion to her" (22). However, I would argue that, within the narrative universe of the texts mentioned previously, Shiva's devotion to his wife becomes more central to the myth than Sati's devotion to Shiva.

Generally, Sati is seen as the archetypal figure for the ideal wife, devoted to the husband, body and soul. It is thought that she should be followed by Hindu women as an example of wifely devotion. The term "Sati" has become synonymous in Hindu culture with a devoted wife who does not think, in erotic terms, of any man other than her husband. However, if we look at the texts like those mentioned previously, we will find how, in the texts inflected by tantric Shaktism, Sati assumes a totally different role. The *Kalika Puranam* foregrounds the fact that Sati is an avatar of the Adyashakti, the Primordial Energy as the Great Goddess, and that she is born so that the process of Creation can run smoothly (33–43). Most of the mythic accounts and traditional and modern commentaries agree on this point – that Sati is born to initiate a worldly orientation in Shiva, who is essentially

other-worldly. David Kinsley suggests that "in the logic of this mythology Sati plays the role of luring Siva from ascetic isolation into creative participation in the world" (38). However, the critical approach of Kinsley (and most other commentators, Indian or Western) appears to be Shiva-centric. Sati's role, according to this view, is to lure Shiva into the world of desires, the universe of plurality. The onto-theological centre of this hermeneutics is Shiva, not Sati.

However, when we come to the texts like the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana* and *Annadamangal*, we find a Sati-centric version of the myth, where it is Shiva who wants to get Sati as his wife and then becomes mad when Sati "commits suicide" at the fire sacrifice of Daksha. The *Mahabhagavata Upapurana*, the Shakta theology of which is reflected and echoed in *Annadamangal* (Acharya, "Shabdartha Tika" 151–152), tells us that, at the beginning of the Creation, it was the Divine Mother who gave birth to the Hindu Trinity: Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshvara. Three of them began to meditate on the Divine Mother. While they were meditating, the Mother came to them, assuming a frightening form, to test their perseverance. Vishnu and Brahma failed to understand that the frightening form before them was assumed by the World Mother herself, and hence their meditation was interrupted. Only Shiva could understand that it was none other than the Mother who was trying to test him and his power of concentration. Hence, Shiva succeeded in his spiritual endeavour, and, when the Mother, immensely pleased with him, asked him to reveal his desire, he asked the Mother for the boon that She herself would take an avatar and become his wife. The Mother agreed, and later on, assumed the avatar named Sati (*Mahabhagavata* 23–33).

However, when Sati was married to Shiva and Daksha arranged the *yajna*, he refused to let her go to the fire sacrifice of Daksha, because he knew that Daksha was trying to deliberately insult Sati and Shiva. When Sati found that Shiva *dared* to thwart her plan to visit her father's *yajna*, she was enraged. She knew that she was the incarnation of the Divine Mother and Shiva was actually her votary. Hence, Shiva's audacity angered her. She assumed the forms of the ten Mahavidyas and frightened Shiva. Finally, Shiva, humbled by the manifestation of her divinity, let her go to Daksha's *yajna* (*Mahabhagavata* 77–88). When, however, she left both Shiva and Daksha by placing a Shadow Sati at Daksha's place and the Shadow Sati entered the sacrificial fire to punish Daksha, Shiva became mad with grief. After destroying Daksha's sacrifice, he began a destructive dance with (Shadow) Sati's corpse on his head, when Vishnu, to preserve the universe, cut off Sati's corpse into pieces. After the completion of the dismemberment of the corpse, Shiva, mad with grief, cursed Vishnu. Finally, accompanied by Vishnu and Brahma, Shiva once again began to meditate on the Mother. When the Mother was pleased with their penance, she promised to Shiva

that she would reincarnate herself as Parvati and would become Shiva's wife again, but added that since Shiva had committed the sin of angering her, being unable to honour her authority over him, he would have to suffer the absence of the physical proximity of the Devi as his corporealized wife (*Mahabhagavata* 99–126).

As Loriliai Biernacki has observed, the tantric texts centring round the geo-cultural zone of Kamakhya (the temple of the Devi on the Nilachala Hill) and grounded in the cultural texts and practices associated with Goddess Kamakhya exhibit a more female-friendly attitude than what one can find in the more canonical or "mainstream" scriptures of Hinduism (4–6, 13–16). The *Mahabhagavata Upapurana* is evidently grounded in the geo-cultural primacy of Kamakhya in the theological scheme of Shaktism foregrounded in this text. Perhaps, Biernacki's view can be substantiated by a closer look into the radical re-working of the Shiva-centric version of the Shiva-Sati myth in the *Mahabhagavata*. This version is not taken up for discussion by Kinsley, as he focuses on the somewhat "mainstream" version of the story of Sati. While in the Shiva-centric accounts of the story, Shiva is essentially an ascetic, a divine figure free from desires, a symbol of pure transcendence, in the Sati-centric, Shakta account of the story such as that provided by the *Mahabhagavata*, Shiva is shown as driven by a desire to get the Divine Mother as his wife.

However, we must closely investigate the nature of this desire. This desire is not just an aggressive masculinist *eros*, but rather, an intrinsically spiritualized *eros* which combines devotion and reverence towards the Divine Mother as well as the desire to get her as his wife. Throughout this puranic text, Shiva is shown to be respectful towards his wife who is none other than the Divine Mother (who is also the mother of Shiva) in her different avatars. Here, we may say, it is not that Sati brings Shiva into the domain of materiality and earthly plurality, but rather, Shiva himself invites, through a spiritualized *eros*, the Divine Mother to the domain of relationality. It is through Shiva's desire to get Her as his wife that She becomes connected to the earthly realm, the Creation in all its diversity. While the mainstream account would say that Shiva is the other-worldly deity engrossed in a *nirvikalpa samadhi* (a negation of the intentionality [à la Husserl] of consciousness), the accounts in the texts like the *Mahabhagavata* would present Shiva's meditation as essentially "intentional": at the beginning of the universe, after he was given birth by the Divine Mother, he engaged in deep spiritual meditation, not to get rid of desires or to remain grounded in a rigorously de-intentionalized consciousness, but to get the Divine Mother as his wife (*Mahabhagavata* 32).

According to the more orthodox Shiva-centric accounts (many of which don't mention the emergence of the Sati *pithas* at all), after Sati's death,

Shiva becomes a *sannyasi*, losing all interest in sexual desire and in women. Various puranic accounts (where Sati is not the centre of an all-pervasive, strong Shakta theology) and Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhavam* underpin this logic of Shiva's asceticism after Sati's disappearance (Dasgupta 39). In these narratives, it is not Shiva's desire for Parvati but her desire for him which ultimately brings him to the domain of samsara. This paradigm, interestingly, is totally reversed in the account we find in the *Mahabhagavata*. Shiva, after Sati's "demise"– or rather "disappearance" – becomes engrossed in meditation, but this meditation is deeply *intentional*, oriented towards the goal of regaining Sati as his wife (*Mahabhagavata* 209, 142). Shiva's desire for Sati, in this account, operates as the centre and circumference of his *dhyana* (meditation) and *samadhi* (deep meditative trance). Interestingly, Kamakhya becomes the sacred place for Shiva, as Sati's vulva fell here. He sits in deep meditation on the Kamakhya Hill, and is finally blessed by the Goddess with the promise that she will re-manifest herself as another avatar, Parvati (*Mahabhagavata* 137–142).

The myth of Shiva-Parvati, which has a peculiar male-centric approach in most of its mainstream versions, is presented as a Parvati-centric narrative in the *Mahabhagavata*. Here, Parvati is, from the very beginning, perceivable as an avatar. Her father, Himavan, is instructed by her in the highest spiritual sciences (*Mahabhagavata* 167–203). When Shiva burns to ashes Madana, Eros, who tried to disturb his spiritual concentration, the Parvati of the *Mahabhagavata* – unlike the Parvati of many other versions of the myth (for instance, those presented in Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhava*, and even in the otherwise Shakta text *Kalika Puranam*, which occasionally gives rise to a Shaivite discourse [Dasgupta 85]) – is neither dismayed nor pained. Rather, she reveals to Shiva that she is Sati's new incarnation. Shiva is so deeply attached to Sati that he asks Parvati to manifest herself in the form of Kali which Sati assumed while going to Daksha's fire sacrifice. She grants Shiva's request, and Shiva, elated, sings to her the Kali Sahasranama, the Hymn to Kali with Her Thousand Names (*Mahabhagavata* 237–264).

Here, Parvati is not the passive recipient of Shiva's patriarchally inflected husbandly grace. Shiva is not the Lord of the transcendental realm who mercifully accepts the plea of a human female and agrees to be her husband. Rather, the Shiva of the *Mahabhagavata* himself is mad for Sati/Parvati, just as the Shiva of *Annadamangal* is. I will elaborate this point further, but, before that, it is necessary to focus on the fallacious generalizations about the Shiva-Sati myth that may emerge from an exclusion of the Kamakhya-centric narratives of the myth and the tantric (especially with a focus on the Kali Kula) discourses of the Sati *pithas* from a discussion of Sati as a distinct mythic phenomenon in Indic cultures.

Now, let us focus on two famous essays by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Moving Devi" and "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In both of these essays, she revisits the Sati myth, but nowhere does she mention the *Mahabhagavata* or the *Annadamangal*. In "Moving Devi" she speaks of the *Devi Bhagawata Purana* and places it on a comparative spectrum alongside the *Markandeyapurana*.

While speaking of the gender dimension of the Indian mythological texts in the context of Sati's narrative, Spivak writes:

> Within this division, in the high Puranic texts, male gods are allowed elaborate courtship privileges. Brahma is represented as publicly (although transgressively) spilling his semen on earth, lusting after Sati. But the devi celebrated in the Puranic account is the pleasureless mother. Sati punishes herself for pleasuring others.
>
> ("Moving Devi" 132)

She draws on the mythic narratives in the *Kalika Puranam* and the *Devi Bhagawatam* (Spivak "Moving Devi"131) but does not focus on the *Mahabhagavata* narrative. According to the *Mahabhagavata*, Sati is not the "pleasureless mother". She does not punish herself, but punishes both her husband and her father for failing to persistently recognize her divinity and her greatness. As we have already seen, she is the avatar of the World Mother who agrees to become the wife of Shiva, one of her primordial sons, being pleased with his penances. She is not outside the network of desire and pleasure but rather weaves that network. And yet, in the context of the Sati narrative, unlike the *Kalika Puranam*, the *Mahabhagavata* does not focus on the veiling/deluding power of the Divine Mother as Vishnumaya or Yoganidra (*Kalika Puranam* 35–36), but rather upholds the essence of the Mother as the transcendental Absolute (the *Kalika Puranam* too upholds the status of the Devi as the Absolute, but the Sati myth recounted there centres around the power of the Devi to delude Shiva).

Therefore, the *Mahabhagavata* Sati is the creative force and the pure onto-theological essence at once, and hence, is not just *maya* or illusive force. Preferring to translate *maya* as fiction, Spivak says, "However the great goddess is made to occupy the place of power, it is always as fiction, not as 'truth'" ("Moving Devi"134–135). Here, she makes, once again, a big mistake by failing to take into account the other narratives of Sati. The Sati of the *Mahbhagavata* is essentially the other name for the ultimate spiritual "truth" of the universe. Here, let me dwell on Spivak's take on the semantic delimitation of "Sati" in Hindu culture, which, I would argue, could have been much more nuanced, had she taken the pains to peer into the *Mahabhagavata* narrative of Sati. She speaks of the "fracture inscribed in the very

word *sati*, the feminine form of *sat*" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 305). She goes on to elaborate:

> *Sat* transcends any gender-specific notion of masculinity and moves up not only into human but spiritual universality. It is the present participle of the verb "to be" and as such means not only being but the True, the Good, the Right. In the sacred texts it is essence, universal spirit. Even as a prefix it indicates appropriate, felicitous, fit. It is noble enough to have entered the most privileged discourse of modern Western philosophy: Heidegger's meditation on Being. *Sati*, the feminine of this word, simply means "good wife".
>
> ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 305)

I would emphatically argue that *sati* does not mean only a "good wife", at least in the Shakta context. Especially, when we come to Sati's story in the *Mahabhagavata*, we realize how "Sati" is etymologically and theologically re-linked with the "universal spirit" that the "sacred texts" would foreground. Sati is the universal spirit in the *Mahabhagavata*, and her spiritual quintessence is so important that She is said to create a Shadow Sati and ask the latter to enter the sacrificial fire (i.e., to commit suicide), since, as the spiritual essence of the universe, she is indestructible (*Mahabhagavata* 121–123). Shiva later on comes to realize that the "suicide" has been committed by the Shadow Sati and not the real one (*Mahabhagavata* 123). There is a linguistic, thematic and theological play on the word "Sati" in the *Mahabhagavata*. This text seems to foreground the idea that, as the "*sat*" (in the sense that Spivak explains the term), Sati is indestructible. The *Mahabhagavata* Sati covers the entire "sacred" semantic range Spivak assigns to the term *sat*. If Shiva desires her, it is a desire for the Universal Spirit, the Absolute, a desire to find "her" constantly in the domain of worldly plurality – and not just sexual desire or desire for a "good wife".

In many ways, the *Mahabhagavata* Sati is not a typical "good" or *obedient* wife. She does not listen to everything that her husband tells her to do or not to do. She is the primordial Freedom. Again, I would contaminate the Kali Kula tantric episteme with the theological principles of Kashmir Shaivism. Kashmir Shaivism promulgates that Shiva's essence is constituted by *Svatantrya* or *Svatantrya Shakti*, that is, the Power of Absolute Freedom. It is this *Svatantrya Shakti* which is figured as the divine feminine in Kashmir Shaivism (Kaviraj, *Tantrika sadhana o siddhanta* 38–39; Padoux 181). If that is the case, then Kali/Sati as the essential power, or rather, the energy-essence of Shiva, is bound to be absolutely free, rather than being a *pativrata* (a wife devotedly subordinate to her husband) in the conventional way. Sati, thus, functions as an uncontrollable energy in the *Mahabhagavata*.

However, she is not the energy which, when it becomes uncontrollable, can be controlled or even mollified by Shiva. She is peace and passion at once, power and love co-configured. When Shiva refuses to allow her to go to the sacrifice of Daksha, she becomes furious. She is angered by the fact that Shiva, who is basically her devotee, dares to contradict her. Angered, she frightens Shiva with her ten Mahavidya manifestations, some of which are really terrific. However, while in popular Hinduism it is believed that Shiva alone can pacify an enraged Devi (and there is scriptural sanction for this belief as well), in the *Mahabhagavata*, Sati's fury unsettles Shiva so much that he no more remains the serene Shiva but exclaims in horror:

> *Ka tvam shyama Sati kutra gata matpranavallabha?*
> (83)
>
> Who are you, o swarthy lady? Where has Sati, the queen of my life, gone?
> [Translation mine]

Sati (by this time she has become totally identified with Kali in the narrative) relents, seeing the frightened husband, and reassures him with her nourishing self (*Mahabhagavata* 83–87). Sati, rather than remaining confined to the good wife trope or to the fictional/fictive function of *maya*, as opposed to "truth" (as Spivak argues), manifests the horrors of the *sat*, the unsettling aspects of Reality and Truth. Like the omnivorous Kala (Time-force) embodied by the cosmic form of Krishna in the *Gita* (Miller 10–11), Sati's Kali-form in the *Mahabhagavata* represents the "truth" of destruction and entropy, the *truth* of an "ending". Sati in the *Mahabhagavata* defies two dominant paradigms of male arrogance: that of the father and that of the husband. Sati wants to teach her father a lesson: the arrogant king must be punished. However, she knows that, as a daughter, she should not punish her father herself; she should not kill him. Hence, she creates a situation which will lead to the death of the arrogant father. Here, she is angered by her father's arrogance towards *her* as much as by that towards her husband (*Mahabhagavata* 87, 98–100, 122–123). She is not the Spivakian silent female subaltern whose gestures of resistance are indecipherable to the "mainstream". Whatever she does is conspicuously an act of defiance of anything or any agent which/who hinders and hampers her freedom and dignity. Hence, the *Mahabhagavata* Sati is by no means a passive good wife who dies for the sake of the husband.

Spivak, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", slightly touches upon the elements in the Sati myth which are in stark opposition to the Sati Pratha, the

institution of widow immolation which was banned by the British in colonial India. She writes:

> The story of the mythic Sati, revers[es] every narrateme of the rite . . .: the living husband avenges the wife's death, a transaction between great male gods fulfills the destruction of the female body and thus inscribes the earth as sacred geography. To see this as proof of the feminism of classical Hinduism or of Indian culture as goddess-centered and therefore feminist is as ideologically contaminated by nativism or reverse ethnocentrism as it was imperialist to erase the image of the luminous fighting Mother Durga and invest the proper noun Sati with no significance other than the ritual burning of the helpless widow as sacrificial offering who can then be saved. There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak.
>
> (307)

The basic problem with this argument is that, though Spivak here reminds us that Sati is an avatar of Durga, she is unable to draw out the more radical, anti-patriarchal elements in the narrative of Sati presented by the *Mahabhagavata*, a text which she never mentions, let alone discusses. I would argue that the *Mahabhagavata* Sati does offer a proto-feminist and "goddess-centered" version of the myth. Besides, if we closely look at Spivak's agenda, we will find that she is unwilling to allow that there is any possibility of a resistant voice within the *native* tradition, except in the mode of "subaltern writing" or "rewriting" (Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 307–308). One may quip that for Spivak, as for some other non-resident Indian scholars, the texts like the *Mahabhagavata* which may contradict their theses formulated in the Western metropolises function as *excludable* texts. We need to point out the fact that there is no single, unified Hindu tradition, but – always – a maddening multiplicity of traditions jostling in the energy field called Hinduism.

These traditions refresh, re-fashion and re-dialogize each other. It is this constant hermeneutic flux which turns some of the later texts into commentaries on earlier texts as well as creative, new works. As we know, commentaries and re-working have something in common. One can argue that whenever you "comment" on something, you cannot help but "rework" it. If the cognitive process is seen as an active and creative procedure rather than a passive one, we must admit that all comments are necessarily re-workings or re-creations. Precisely, – to follow the basic lessons of reception aesthetics or reader response theory – all readings/interpretations are writings/rewritings. The *Mahabhagavata* may be seen as a goddess-centred

or proto-feminist rewriting of the dominant version of the Sati myth in mainstream Hinduism. Here, Sati is not the prototype of the passive good wife who ascends the pyre of the dead husband; rather, as the text clarifies later, it is due to Shiva's fault – the fault of angering Sati by trying to control her – that Sati disappears from his life as an *embodied* wife (*Mahabhagavata* 126).

Sati, in a way, punishes both Daksha and Shiva, as both of them, out of their androcentrist arrogance, dared to challenge Sati's freedom and her choices of action. We need to remember that Sati herself chose Shiva as her husband. So, by denouncing Shiva, Daksha actually denounces Sati's *choice*, her love. In a way, it is as much a denunciation of Sati as that of her husband. We must remember that the *Mahabhagavata* narrative offers a peculiar image of Sati as the ideal "woman" (not the ideal "wife"): she loves her husband but terrorizes him when he tries to insolently interfere with her *choice* to go to the religious ceremony organized by her father. She wants to punish her father, but, she decides not to do so herself, as, being a daughter, she should not perform such an act. However, she *does* punish her father indirectly, and induces Shiva to shake the cosmic order which dares to exclude him.

Ironically, Spivak confuses the possible theological and secular readings of the myth, and, while alluding to Sati's status as an avatar of Mother Durga, fails to notice that Sati can be included in either a goddess (Devi)-centred theology or a god (Shiva)-centred one. The gender dynamics of this myth cannot be grasped if one fails to appreciate the theological dimension of this narrative. It is not possible to see Sati's body only as that of a "woman". She is a goddess in a human body. However, let us focus, for the moment, on the topos of suicide which Spivak places at the heart of her reflections on the *shastric* discourses on a "good wife's" self-immolation on her spouse's pyre as a virtuous act. She notices that, though, in general, suicide is seen as a great sin in the Hindu *shastras*, a devoted wife is often encouraged to commit suicide after her husband's demise, as that would release her from her female body.

Spivak writes:

> Even as it operates the most subtle general release from individual agency, the sanctioned suicide peculiar to woman draws its ideological strength by *identifying* individual agency with the supraindividual: kill yourself on your husband's pyre now, and you may kill your female body in the entire cycle of birth.
>
> ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 303)

Now, let's turn to the *Mahabhagavata* Sati. Of course, Spivak makes an acute observation that when you pretend to assign agency or free will to a

woman by allowing her to kill herself, while simultaneously suggesting that such a self-killing will release her from her female embodiment from the entire cycle of birth, you actually deny any meaningful agency to women. However, the *Mahabhagavata* Sati subverts the discourse of suicide effectively. First of all, she *does not* commit suicide. It is said that, without being noticed by anybody present at the *yajna*, she creates a Shadow Sati and asks her to enter the sacrificial fire. She herself vanishes. Hence, what dies is the *fictive* (à la Spivak) female body, while the real Sati remains *sat*: real, existent – and, as the *sat*, the truth, she does not die. However, this *sat*, within the theo-ontological framework of the *Mahabhagavata*, is figured as feminine, the ultimate female deity. So, what leaves the (fictive) body behind is as much feminine as the body itself.

Besides, this moment of illusory (or fictive/mayic – [à la Spivak]) suicide is a moment that encapsulates the real omnipresence of the *female* Divine/Absolute – the *sat*, the death-transcending truth being figured as feminine, and the Shadow Sati, the fiction (again, in Spivak's sense of the term) created by the omnipresent and omnipotent "truth", gendered feminine as well. Sati creates the "fiction", the Shadow Sati, and lets it be burned. And yet, the burnt "fiction" remains palpably real, *sat*, in all the Sati *pithas*, where its members fall, embodying her indestructible energy-self. The *sat* remains intact.

In general terms, we may say that, when the Sati/Shadow Sati of the Shakta texts commits "suicide", she actually does flaunt her agential role in it, her free will. She does not do it to prove anything. In the ultra-orthodox, regressive normative orders of Hinduism, this story is twisted and distorted for the sake of the patriarchal ideology, and a good wife's self-immolation is presented as the ultimate proof of her *satitva* (devotion) to her husband. She is unfree, because the act of self-immolation is committed under the pressure of the requirement of the *ultimate* performance of chastity postulated by patriarchy. Interestingly, Sati's self-immolation is not targeted at the *telos* of getting released from a female body forever. Rather, she as the Primordial Energy promises to Shiva, after the dismemberment of her corpse, that she will reincarnate as a *woman* and choose Shiva again as her husband (*Mahabhagavata* 141–142). So, Sati's "suicide" has nothing to do with the "shame", "pain" or "embarrassment" of womanhood. She dies to become a woman *again*. In the Shakta versions of this tale, she is the primordial female deity, who takes *female* avatars to maintain the cosmic order. This is not just "maya [as] the apparent magic of fertility" (Spivak "Moving Devi" 135).

The Shadow Sati, though an apparent self-fictionalization (to improvise on the Spivakian term for *maya*) of Sati, is a fiction that partakes of the "truth" called Sati. Otherwise, it would have become impossible for her

burnt and chopped off limbs to be counted as sacred. However, we need to focus on the fact that Sati actually does not commit suicide in the *Mahabhagavata* but simply disappears, leaving the Shaodw Sati behind, in order to punish her (momentarily) arrogant husband and her supercilious father. The trope of suicide-as-self-sacrifice-for-the-husband, which informs both the patriarchal versions of the Sati myth and the system of widow immolation sanctioned by the Sanskrit texts mentioned by Spivak, becomes a sort of hoax in the *Mahabhagavata*. And hence, if we are to gauge the extent to which this text (as well as *Annadamangal*) subverts the patriarchal ramifications of the Sati myth, we have to pay adequate attention to the annulment of the topos of the devoted wife's suicide to prove or maintain (in the case of the Jauhar Vrata, also mentioned by Spivak ["Can the Subaltern Speak?" 303]) her chastity in texts such as this which present Sati as an *independent* woman rather than as a chaste/good/devoted wife. What the *Mahabhagavata* Sati does would be unacceptable to most of the mainstream Hindu husbands – mythic as well as real life ones.

The *Mahabhagavata* Sati is the "luminous fighting Mother Durga" as well as the creatrix of the Shadow Sati who enters the fire. Would Spivak (or we) accept her as the emblem of the "feminism of classical Hinduism"? I would suggest that when we speak of the *Mahabhagavata* Sati we have to think of the late (Shakta) puranic Hinduism or Shakta-tantric Hinduism, especially that which evolved in the eastern parts of India. As I have already pointed out, Loriliai Biernacki has underlined this female-friendly theology gradually developing in the tantric Hinduism of late medieval Eastern/North-Eastern India, especially around the cult of the Goddess Kamakhya. However, Spivak, unlike Biernacki and Miranda Shaw, holds on to the opinion that the tantras were never female-friendly. Of course, she is no professional Indologist, and her claims are often generalized and not supported or substantiated by adequate textual or other kinds of proof.

As I have already shown, she is not interested in exploring how a later Hindu text like the *Mahabhagavata* totally and radically re-arranges the "narratemes" of the mainstream or rather mainstream-ized Sati myth, in the process indirectly subverting the ideologies of the rite of *sati*, or widow immolation. While speaking of Hinduism in generalizing terms, Spivak homogenizes Hinduism in the same way as the Hindutva ideologues would do. She completely brackets off the heterogeneity which constitutes Hinduism and hence is its epistemic kernel. In spite of being a world-famous advocate of pluralism, she overlooks the pluralism closer to home, the puranic-textual continuum beyond the *Devi Bhagawatam* and the *Kalika Puranam*, as far as the Sati myth is concerned. She does not pay attention to the "other" Satis who would not fit into her own scheme of the subaltern(ized) Sati. Just as the orthodox, mainstream, patriarchal advocates

of Hinduism would argue that the tantric Sati is not the "proper" Sati, that the rebellious, "ferocious" goddesses are not real participants in the religious dynamics of Hinduism, Spivak would also restrict her discussions of the Sati myth to the *subalternizable* Satis.

However, is her approach really so complexifying and nuanced as it is supposed to be? I will address this issue with reference to Miranda Shaw's observations on the general trends in Tantra Studies.

Spivak writes:

> I cannot think that tantra ever allowed for women's sexual agency. Although in the supernatural the devi is dominant, in the yantra-inspired activities the actual women representing her are the affectless receivers of foreplay. In the act itself, the goal is to arrest male ejaculation, so that orgasmic pleasure can lead to a transcendental rather than merely organic fulfilment. An actual event of this type, described by an ecstatic participant from the orthodox Bengali middle class, is rather horrible in the implications of what actually happened to the passive young woman involved. If the evidence of this book is to be believed, the woman-advisers within the system feel no hesitation in acting as procuresses.
>
> ("Moving Devi" 148)

I would urge the reader to carefully notice the rhetoric of this passage. *I cannot think that tantra ever allowed for women's sexual agency*. Spivak's "ever" is, of course, not Shaw's "ever". What does Shaw write?

> Tantra in both its Hindu and Buddhist sectarian varieties appears to represent an arena in which Indian women can engage in religious disciplines freely, seriously, and at their own initiative. This is the conviction primarily of Indian scholars and of Westerners like Sir John Woodroffe and Lilian Silburn who have spent long periods in India as Tantric novitiates . . . women can be gurus and perform rituals of initiation in Tantric traditions, and in some Tantric lineages women are regarded as preferable to men as gurus. Proponents also point out that male Tantrics are required to respect, venerate, and ritually worship women. . . . Rare firsthand accounts have provided an intriguing glimpse of women in Tantra as a living tradition. For instance, the feisty female Sakta and Vaisnava Tantrics interviewed by anthropologist Bholanath Bhattacharya displayed a complete lack of subservience to their male companions and belie any suggestion that they practice Tantra for the sake of someone other than themselves. In her anthropological fieldwork on women ascetics in Benares, Lynn Denton found the female Tantrics to be unconstrained by social conventions and freely and forthrightly to

> choose their own male partners and life patterns. In his spiritual autobiography, Brajamadhava Bhattacharya describes the instruction and initiations he received from his Tantric guru, the "Lady in Saffron", a coconut-vendor in his native village who initiated and taught disciples independently of any male authority. Indologist Lilian Silburn's technical descriptions of sexual yoga in Kashmir Saivism, enriched by teachings she received as an initiate, demonstrate the complete reciprocity of male and female adepts in the performance of advanced *kundalini* practices, for which both partners must be comparably qualified and from which they derive equal benefit. These studies . . . confirm that women can be active, independently motivated participants in Tantric movements.
>
> (Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment* 6)

It is obvious that the fieldwork of the scholars mentioned by Shaw totally demolishes the universalizing claims of Spivak. Shaw has noticed that, among the tantric scholars, there is a tendency to negate or trivialize women's role in tantric religious culture (which, of course, she criticizes) [Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment* 3–6]. Hence, Spivak is basically saying nothing new. She is rehashing the argument that tantras do not liberate women and hence tantra should *never* be seen as a female-friendly system of faith or practice. However, ironically, there is a *tantric* text – the *Mahanirvana Tantra* – which explicitly prohibits the practice of *sati*/widow immolation (Bose 27). As Neela Bhattacharya Saxena points out:

> The notorious practice of sati is expressly forbidden by Shiva, the speaker of *Mahanirvana Tantra*: "Do not burn the woman with her husband. Because woman is your own form [*swarupa*], her body appearing in the world in your concealed form, if she, under delusion, climbs the funeral pyre, she will surely suffer hell".
>
> (141)

Can we ignore this tantric prohibition of the practice of *sati*? Does not this kind of tantric enunciation seem to be more compatible with Shaw's view than with Spivak's?

Of course, one can never argue that tantra per se is a panacea for women. Neither should one deny that some tantric texts present sexist, androcentrically oriented visions of *eros*. But the point is that the tantras and the (later) puranas are as diverse as "classical Hinduism" is. Hence, the approach Spivak takes up is vitiated by illicit generalization.

However, one perhaps cannot pit the tantras against orthodox Hinduism, as any kind of homogenization of either of these categories will lead to

severe epistemic confusions. Yet, for the sake of convenience, we need to maintain, heuristically, the difference (if not binaristic opposition) between the orthodox, mainstream Hinduism (with its illusory idea of a purity grounded in its allegiance to what is homogenized as "Vedic culture") and tantric/late puranic Hinduism. Nevertheless, what Spivak forgets is that the texts she refers to are not ones that can have the last word on the tantras. Besides, it does not seem that Spivak has come in touch with a wide array of practising female tantrics. Unlike Biernacki or Shaw, Spivak does not show either deep or wide knowledge of the realities of tantric culture. She does focus on the subversive potentials of Kali ("Moving Devi" 143–144), but also undercuts these potentials when she sees tantra as exclusively anti-feminist.

The basic problem is that she would foreground the "passive" woman at any cost, and would deny all kinds of agency to her, except that of subaltern writing. But, we need to ask ourselves: do we need to subalternize the mythic Sati at all? Here, one may be reminded of Andrea Nye's view of Diotima. She writes that, unlike Luce Irigaray, she would not see Diotima as a marginal female figure who somehow manages to enter the Platonic discourse via Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*, but rather as a priestess who belongs to "a religious order that had maintained its authority from Minoan/Mycenaean times". Nye goes on to add: "As Mantinean prophetess, Diotima does not speak as a lone woman who has painfully managed to gain entrance to a male party. She speaks out of a tradition of female power and female thought still alive in Greek culture" (85–86). Shaw and Biernacki are precisely saying the same thing with reference to women's participation in the tantric culture (Mukhopadhyay, *Literary and Cultural Readings* 11–20). Hence, if we interrogate the tantra-phobia of both the Hindu fundamentalists and the tantra scholars criticized by Shaw, we can access the tantras with a liberal critical attitude. The tantras should be seen as verbal, ritualistic and cultural texts which, even though not "feminist" or "proto-feminist" intrinsically, can offer us potentials for feminist cultural interventions. They must be subjected to creative re-readings rather than interpretative closures. And that is where lies the difference between Spivak's approach and that of a scholar like Lata Mani.

Mani, unlike Spivak, draws out the radical potentials of the tantras and yokes them to the purpose of building up a feminist, eco-conscious and "sacredsecular" approach. When we take up the approach espoused by Lata Mani and Ruth Frankenberg rather than that of Spivak, we realize that the tantras are often helpful in the re-epistemologization of our received ideas – about society, about women, about "closures" (Mukhopadhyay, *Literary and Cultural Readings* 161–163). I would strongly argue that the Sati myth, from the tantric perspective, radically gets altered in terms of its mytheme

of "love". While in most of the patriarchal versions of the myth Shiva is indifferent to erotic love and it is Sati – and then Parvati – who incites the erotic propensity in him, in the Shakta-tantric myth, Shiva is essentially a lover. His sadhana is – like the sadhana of various folk saints, marginal religious sects and Shakta or Vaishnavite erotico-spiritual aspirants (*boshtam-boshtamis* or *bhairav-bhairavis* – heterosexual couples engaged in erotico-spiritual sadhana) – grounded in his erotic love for Sati and then for Sati-reborn-as-Parvati who are the manifestations of the Divine Mother.

Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, drawing on the accounts of Devi's testing the Trinity in a terrifying form (the *Mahabhagavata*) or in the form of a corpse (*Brihaddharmapurana*) [see the Appendices], argues that this account of "testing" is tropologically akin to a narrative of seduction. She writes, "she tests Siva just as, in the earlier texts, he tests her before agreeing to marry her. In both versions, the object of the *tapas* is marriage, which amounts to the seduction of the ascetic" (155). The basic problem with this reading is that, testing is *not* the same thing as seduction. Shiva does not need to be seduced by Devi in the Shakta-tantric accounts, as he is willing to get Devi as his wife. If the object of the *tapas* is marriage, then, of course, the trope of "the seduction of the ascetic" becomes redundant.

In the *Annadamangal*, Shiva, even after his marriage with Parvati, is always haunted by the fear of losing her. The disastrous memory of the loss of Sati remains entrenched in his self, and he tries, in all possible ways, to please Parvati so that she is not angry with him (27–28).

Annadamangal gives a fine account of this anxiety on Shiva's part to ensure that Parvati, unlike Sati, would never leave him. While describing the story of Shiva becoming Ardhanarishvara, by having half of his body exchanged with half of the body of Parvati, this text presents Parvati as taunting Shiva by saying that men are always less sincere in love than women. As an example, she cites the fact that while a widow immolates herself after the husband's death, a man, after his spouse's demise, will readily have another woman. Shiva tells her immediately that he is not the archetypal insincere male lover she conjures up (27–28). Here, interestingly, the reincarnation of Sati herself – Parvati – points out the discrepancy between the society's attitude to the widow and that to the widower, thereby ironically subverting the discourse of wifely devotion that legitimizes the institution of *sati*/widow immolation.

Shiva goes on to passionately describe to Parvati how deeply he was pained by the disappearance of Sati (the earlier incarnation of Parvati):

> Taking your body on my head,
> You have seen me move across the earth.
> Cutting you off with his discus, the discus-holding Vishnu

Removed you from my head.
Wherever your limbs fell,
I am there, as the Bhairava.
Then why do you say such things to me?
Will you leave me once again?
(28) [Translation mine]

We need to notice that "your body" here refers to Sati's corpse. Shiva, by using the term "your", establishes the ontological continuum of Sati and Parvati. Here, the complex syntactic arrangement of the passage encapsulates certain theological and mythological elements of the tantric narrative of Sati. Parvati, as Parvati, could not have seen Shiva traversing the earth with Sati's corpse on his head/shoulders. Similarly, Sati, being a corpse at that point of time, could not "have seen" Shiva carrying her corpse and dancing across the world. Then, who is the "you" who "have seen" him move across the earth with Sati's corpse on his head? It is, no doubt, the Primordial Mother with whom, according to the tantric and puranic texts, both Sati and Parvati are identical.

Another interesting point is that when Shiva says that Vishnu had cut "you" off and "removed you" from his head, he again introduces a difficult proposition: Parvati could not have been literally this "you", as the corpse was that of Sati and not that of Parvati. So, this "you" too, we may assume, denotes the World Mother whose avatars Parvati and Sati both are. However, the more problematic part of Shiva's statement is the one in which he identifies "you" with the corpse. How can one say that Vishnu cut off – not the corpse of Sati the avatar of the Mother – but Sati-Parvati-World-Mother h/Herself? In this apparently impossible proposition which equates Sati's corpse with Sati herself and by extension with Parvati and – both of them being avatars of the Divine Mother – even with the Mother herself, Bharatchandra actually deftly brings out the most baffling message of the Shakta version of the myth of Sati: Sati's corpse is as much Sati as her eternal Being is. The text does not conform to the gross versions of *dehatmavada*, the concept that the body is the Self; nevertheless, it promotes the Shakta idea that the body is also part of the semantic horizon of the "Self". The selfhood which is being foregrounded here is not just a metaphysically oriented one. The physical corpse is as important as the metaphysical "Being" of Sati. Or, rather, the corpse is also part of this Shakta schema of "Being".

At a very basic level, we have to acknowledge, the corpse *is*. It *exists*. The World Mother is immanent in the corpse as well as in the living Sati/Parvati. Hence, Shiva's message actually ruptures the temporal compartmentalization of past, present and future, and upholds an eternal present woven by the

threads of love. He says that wherever the limbs of her corpse fell (a matter of the past), he *is* there as the Bhairava (a matter of the present). Hence, the past and the present are woven together not by a metaphysical magic, but by the "spirituality of the flesh" and "fleshiness of the spirit" (Cavarero, *Relating Narratives* 112) which constitute erotic love. It is ultimately Shiva's love which is able to address, as "you" (implying an addressee who is the thread joining the past, present and future), the integrative energy-self, the essence of the female deity of Shaktism, that holds together Sati's past and Parvati's present, both integrated in Shiva's consciousness through the affective dimension of his love for his spouse. Here, erotic love is a creative virtue, a unifier of time and space, consciousness and *eros*, wisdom and passion. Shiva is, indeed, enlightened through passion – to echo the vocabulary of Miranda Shaw – and that is why he can acknowledge the true worth of his wife.

In real life, too, we don't immediately discard a dead body as "hyper-separated" (Plumwood 54) from the person whose corpse it is. The link between the "Self" and the corpse is always admitted by the sacred and secular modes of recognizing a corpse – not just as the corpse of someone, but rather as that person. The relatives of the deceased one caress the corpse as the one who is deceased. Flowers are put on the corpse, and so long as it is publicly visible, we cannot treat it as a *thing*, an object. In everyday Hinduism, there is the practice of showing respect to a corpse. In Varanasi, whenever a corpse is carried to the famous crematorium at Manikarnika Ghat, the passers-by would bow to the corpse and show respect to it. There are multiple shops near the burning ghats of Varanasi which sell special clothes for covering the dead body. The corpse occupies a peculiar onto-epistemic space between the physical *presence* and intangible *memory* of the dead one. Nay – it is more than that. The corpse is the physical memory of the dead, as well as the physical presence. Would we not, all of us, love to perpetuate the presence, and ward off the memory, the inner burden that deepens the absence and makes it too heavy to bear?

In Sati's case, we have the impossibility made possible. The body of Sati, which is not cremated but scattered across the earth as a dismembered body (and not as ash) makes possible the perpetuation of the physical *presence* of the deceased one. Here, the dismembered body as physical remains/memory of Sati gives way to a perpetuated *presence* of Sati as the loved one. In all the places where her limbs fall, there arise Sati *pithas*. These pilgrim spots of the Shaktas are built up on the logic of presence, the intense presence of the energy-self of Sati. Ken Jeremiah notices a universal trait in humankind which incites humans to preserve the dead. He points out that while Buddhism and Christianity would insist that the body is not the true identity of a person, these religions too include the practices of the mummification of

religious teachers and saints. Even while the Christians would focus on the corruptibility of the body and the Buddhists would focus on the necessity to shed off all attachments, especially the attachment to the body, these religions would, in practice, sometimes engage in the enterprise of mummification (Jeremiah 10). Even though we may call the body worthless, this ontological devaluation of the body does not square with the affective dimension of our approach to the beloved's corpse. If a teacher, relative, lover or friend is dead, no matter what your intellectual take on the "body" as an epistemic category is, you won't be able to consider the corpse to be a "thing".

Francoise Dastur writes:

> [T]here is no experience of death as such. Epicurus expresses this perfectly in his statement that when we exist death is not, and when death is we no longer are, so that for us it is nothing. Only the death of the other is experienced, and only in this first experience of mourning does one's relationship to oneself as a mortal take hold.
>
> (7)

The (beloved) other's body, in other words, is always more than a body. Its ontological status is heightened in the relational dimension (we come to consider our own mortality in the presence of the corpse of a beloved person) of death. Love – whether erotic or non-erotic – makes the corpse endowed with sacred or quasi-sacred meanings. The Sati myth points out this semantic surplus induced by *eros*, by love. However, while Shiva is immortal, one may eschew the reading which sees his approach to Sati's corpse as the peculiar instance of an immortal's confrontation with death. In the *Iliad*, the immortal Olympian gods including Zeus, the king of gods, witness the deaths of their mortal offspring. But Sati's myth is different from this motif of an immortal's shocking exposure to the (beloved) other's mortality. What Sati's corpse denotes – at least in Shakta-tantric theology – is not mortality, entropy or decay, but an apparently implacable absence.

However, absence is never pure absence, in the context of the death of a beloved one. Death is preceded and followed by desire and love. Death is, like the body, never complete in itself, never frozen in itself in terms of its spectrum of meanings. The absence it denotes is always filled with the traces of a presence. We need to notice that the logic of mummification tries to turn the preserved body into preserved presence rather than preserved memory. However, in Shiva's case, the mummification logic is inapplicable. Sati's body is not preserved but fragmented and scattered. And yet, the limbs, which become stones while falling on earth, are full of her presence. The Devi is said to be specially present in the spots where Sati's

limbs fell. Here, mortality and immortality crisscross, and death dies in a matrix of love.

Shiva lives in all these spots not to guard the preserved body parts of Sati, but to perceive her presence in these places, in the limbs that have fallen off. Memory is crossed out by presence. Sati becomes the "you" that Parvati is. And this you-hood is attributed to her corpse as well. Can we see the Sati-centric tantric religion as an Indian version of relic worship? It does not appear to be so. Sati's remains do not merely operate on the plane of the sacred but rather occupy the sphere of the sacredsecular. Sati's limbs are not mere relics (Kinsley 187); they are not preserved by culture but internalized by Nature, which is the ever-changing body of the World Mother as well. Besides, in Hinduism, the mortal remains of a person are cremated, and not buried. The body is physically negated, turned into ashes. Sati's body, on the other hand, does not become ashes. It is burnt by the fire and yet it remains a body in all its solidity. Challenging the Vedic sacrifice and its exclusionary politics, her body remains a body, even after entering the sacrificial fire. Love triumphs over the fire, over the Vedic orthodoxy, over the limitations of the body and the closure of death.

The Hindu fundamentalists have time and again appropriated the Sati myth to further their agenda. Let alone thinking of the tantric Sati, they have even neglected the basic narratemes of the Sati narrative, such as those that Spivak has rightly pointed out. The entire myth is based on the plight of a widower and not that of a widow. However, the fundamentalist episteme would reverse the inner logic of this story and institutionalize the moment of Sati's entering the fire as the moment of the manifestation and auto-projection of the "ideal wife". Radha Kumar has described how profit-making business motives have contributed to the emergence of the *sati-sthals* as prominent pilgrim spots. These are spots claimed by the Hindu fundamentalists to have been sacralized by the widows who – in historical reality – immolated themselves (Kumar 175). Let us attempt an analysis of the politics behind this.

If you can really see the practice of widow immolation as connected to the myth of Sati, then why would you need new *sati-sthals*? Won't the age-old Sati *pithas* suffice? But, in the fundamentalist Hindu epistemology, these Sati *pithas* are always a source of subconscious anxiety. They perennially foreground the *active* nature of the female self which asserts itself, and finds itself eternally linked with the maternal-feminine source of the world. They foreground the energy-self of Sati, the self of Sati as Shakti. Sati's corpse is not the passive corpse of a devoted wife, but an *active* corpse, as it were, which does not only retain the energy-filled presence of Sati the Goddess but also enjoys the husbandly devotion of Shiva to Sati – something any patriarchal culture would readily dismiss. Hence, to overwrite the Sati

pithas, the fundamentalist forces propose their own alternative sacred map of the *sati-sthals* where immolated widows will be deified, rather than passionate widowers drowning their sorrow into the ecstatic, energy-filled, intense presence of their beloveds.

While the *sati-sthals* will try to present murder as sacrifice and magnify only the anti-feminist potentials in certain branches of orthodox Hinduism, the Shakti *pithas*, if read in a radically tantric/sacredsecular way, would reveal the mundane magic of the interconnectedness of earthly existence, involving the most complex amalgamation of the living beings and ostensibly dead things.

However, when read as a mythic text on erotic love, the Sati narrative may instruct us in re-reading and rewriting the ideologies and practices of romantic love. The death of the beloved woman often spawns the cultural and literary models of romantic heterosexual love. The romantic male poets often mourn for or converse with the dead beloved woman, and this conversation/mourning takes the form of great love poetry. Either the woman or the love affair is dead – and great poetry is born. However, while these poets would entextualize the (really or metaphorically) dead beloved in their poetry, some people, the romantic lovers who find it unbearable to accept the death of the beloved, bring back the dead one, physically, into the heart of their lives. They can't entextualize the beloveds, they can't lend the beloveds a second order reality in and through poetry, through language. And hence, they create a space for the dead in their lives – not a melancholic space for the heavy burden of their absence, the saddening space for memory, but rather a space for the physical presence of the dead. This is apparently outrageous.

Le Van, a man from the Quang Nam provice, Vietnam, lost his wife in 2003. However, he could not accept this death as the final alienation between his wife and him. He did not want the corpse of his wife to be buried. But it was buried, and he grew obsessed with her grave. Then, one day, he dug up the mortal remains of his wife and transformed the corpse into a doll by plastering it. It was a mummification of sorts. He kept sleeping with the doll, his "wife", everyday (Unkenholz).

Outrageous, no doubt. But the problem is that, as we have already seen, there is no way in which we can pinpoint what death is. We think we can be sure about other people's death. However, this presumption of certainty is based on the logic of objectification. Simone Weil, while discussing the *Iliad*, describes a corpse as a human being turned into a thing (Weil 14). But, this logic of the corpse-as-thing is not tenable when the corpse and its cause – death – are not seen objectively, but intersubjectively. The corpse, for Le Van, was not corpse-as-object. With it, he tried to maintain an intersubjective relation. The problem with intersubjectivity is that it does not

have any ultimate limits. We do not know where it can end. Unlike objectivity, which itself is a closure imposed on the dynamic interweaving of things and beings, intersubjectivity always invites the impossible. However, it goes without saying that it is difficult to legitimize the ostensible necrophilia of people like Le Van, though it is also true that what they love is not probably a corpse but the perpetuated presence of a being through an apparent thing, the energy of life transferred to the silence of death but preserved nonetheless.

In the *Kalika Puranam*, when Sati comes to know that her father has arranged a *yajna* to which she and her husband are not invited, she leaves her body through a yogic *kriya*. When Shiva comes to see her corpse, due to his intense affection towards her, he can't recognize the corpse as a corpse. Rather, he begins to wipe her face affectionately. Then he comes to hear from Vijaya, Sati's niece, that Sati is indeed dead, and the reason for her death is the arrogance of Daksha. He then rushes to Daksha's fire sacrifice and jeopardizes it. *Yajna* itself (the divine spirit of Fire Sacrifice) becomes afraid of Shiva and takes shelter in the corpse of Sati. When Shiva sees the corpse again, he forgets about the *yajna* and begins to lament for Sati, sitting beside her corpse.

Kamadeva, the deity of erotic desires, attacks Shiva now, and he becomes mad with the simultaneity of sorrow for the dead wife and the erotic desire for her, now only a corpse. He begins to behave like a madman, and falls on the ground and embraces the corpse of his wife, smiling madly. He wipes the body of Sati, takes the ornaments of Sati off her corpse, and then places those ornaments again on and around the limbs of the corpse. Afterwards, he begins to move eastwards, with Sati's corpse on his shoulders. Then the gods, through a yogic process, dismember the corpse, and finally, Shiva becomes less restless. Along with the limbs of the dismembered corpse of Sati, he keeps staying in *linga* forms in all the *pithas* (*Kalika Puranam* 108–124).

Here, Shiva's initial attitude is somewhat like that of Le Van. He – under the spell of Eros – seems to fetishize the corpse. However, when the dismemberment of the corpse is completed, the fetishizing *eros* gives way to an ontologically more complex, self-pluralizing *eros* which helps Shiva in becoming many Shivas, in order to accompany the multiple Satis embodied in the limbs of Sati's dismembered corpse in various *pithas*.

Thus, it is the tantric Shiva, the Shiva pluralizing himself into many Bhairavas to accompany the parts of Sati's corpse in the *pithas*, who becomes different from Le Van. The dismemberment of Sati's dead body – which is a central motif in tantric Shaktism in the Indian subcontinent – is what makes Shiva sane, not by destroying the corpse and letting Shiva get rid of Sati, but rather by giving him the opportunity to enjoy an earthly togetherness

with the remains of Sati, throbbing with her energy, in all the *pithas*. When the body is dismembered, it resists its fetishization with some finality. It is released from self-engrossed *eros* into a liberating, expansive love assuming a cosmic dimension, from the prospect of mummification into the possibility of unification with cosmic nature.

Shiva sees Sati's corpse getting dismembered and thus slipping from his shoulder. However, he does not try to reassemble the limbs and create a statue of Sati. He lets Sati get pluralized and become a part of nature, of "matter", as the energy-self of Sati will throb even in matter, thanks to the interchangeability of matter, mind and energy. Sati's corpse is, for Shiva, not a fetish which is essentially a closure, but an opening into a new horizon of life – into the future that is Parvati. However, it is also the perennial present/presence that is scattered among the Sati *pithas* where the Divine Energy sits on and in the dead limbs of Sati, and is worshipped by those who desire happy lives, and not just liberating deaths.

Sati's corpse is a "dead" body that defies "death". Love has to expand itself, instead of exclusively focussing on a particular moment of loss. It needs to move away from memory to presence. However, this presence should not be just an imprisonment of the past in the present – Le Van's doll-wife, for instance. Rather, this presence, this expanded presence of the beloved – the beloved presence – should let the lover expand his "Self" towards the universe, and undermine the limits of his own being.

3 Dismemberment as pluralization

The scattering of Sati's body parts and the self-pluralization of Shiva

In this chapter, I will discuss how the dismemberment of Sati's corpse, by dismantling the "borders" of the body which would paradoxically constitute its apparent wholeness, pluralizes the body that is supposed to appear singular in a normal condition. Shiva becomes plural, placing himself in all the Shakti *pithas* as the companion(s) of the parts of Sati's corpse, in his *linga* forms. Each of Sati's body parts, paradoxically, embodies the *whole* of Sati, and hence, what Shiva engages in is not a necrophilic desire, but a desire for the whole embodied in the parts, a mystic principle of wholeness which is as old as the Ishopanishad. Hence, the binary of the One and the Many also gets challenged here. If the *pindanda* (the physical body of an individual) represents the *Brahmanda* (the body of the cosmos) [Brown 180], the parts of the *pindanda* may also represent the whole of the *pindanda*, and – by the extension of this metonymizing logic – the whole of the *Brahmanda*. Even while accompanying a minute part of Sati's corpse, Shiva accompanies Sati herself. As if, the dismemberment of Sati's corpse is not a *reduction* of the whole body into its parts, but rather the *expansion* of one body into many bodies.

Mary Douglas writes in *Natural Symbols*:

> The scope of the body as a medium of expression is limited by controls exerted from the social system. Just as the experience of cognitive dissonance is disturbing, so the experience of consonance in layer after layer of experience and context after context is satisfying. I have argued before that there are pressures to create consonance between the perception of social and physiological levels of experience... Some of my friends still find it unconvincing. I hope to bring them round by the two bodies going much further, following [Marcel] Mauss in maintaining that the human body is always treated as an image of society and that there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension. Interest in its apertures depends on the preoccupation with social exits and entrances,

> escape routes and invasions. If there is no concern to preserve social boundaries, I would not expect to find concern with bodily boundaries. The relation of head to feet, of brain and sexual organs, of mouth and anus are commonly treated so that they express the relevant patterns of hierarchy. Consequently I now advance the hypothesis that bodily control is an expression of social control – abandonment of bodily control in ritual responds to the requirements of a social experience which is being expressed. Furthermore, there is little prospect of successfully imposing bodily control without the corresponding social forms. And lastly, the same drive that seeks harmoniously to relate the experience of physical and social, must affect ideology. Consequently, when once the correspondence between bodily and social controls is traced, the basis will be laid for considering co-varying attitudes in political thought and in theology.
>
> (77–78)

Douglas's observations become extremely relevant to the exploration of the meanings of the dismembered body of Sati. Interestingly, Sati's corpse is indicative of all kinds of subversion of the body as an image for social hierarchy. She dismantles the boundaries of both society and the corporeal body in the most radical ways. At the basic level, we must remember, Sati challenges the exclusionary structures of the Vedic sacrifice. According to the Shakta traditions, Shiva is reluctant to challenge the sacrifice arranged by Daksha. It is Sati who reminds him of the necessity for defying Daksha's arrogance (*Mahabhagavata* 75–77). Even in the *Mahabharata*, which presumably pre-dates most of the later Shakta puranas and tantras, it is the wife of Shiva who is"responsible for pointing out, to her husband, Daksa's impertinence in disregarding the great god", although "she is neither said to have been Daksa's daughter nor to have died at Daksa's house as a result of the latter's ill-treatment" (Sircar 5–6). While pointing out "Daksa's impertinence" to Shiva, she is actually underlining the exclusionary nature of the brahminical order grounded in the mystique of the fire sacrifice.

Here, I would argue, she performs the operations which David Kinsley attributes to Kali as the consort of Shiva (116–117). As Kinsley observes:

> Many texts and contexts treat Kali as an independent deity, unassociated with any male deity. When she is associated with a god, however, it is almost always Siva. As his consort, wife, or associate, Kali often plays the role of inciting him to wild behavior. Kali's association with Siva, unlike Parvati's, seems aimed at exciting him to take part in dangerous, destructive behavior that threatens the stability of the cosmos.
>
> (116)

It is interesting to notice that the *Mahabhagavata* Sati *actually* appears as Kali while going to Daksha's fire sacrifice. She not only shows her ten Mahavidya forms to Shiva (including that of Kali), but also assumes the physical form of Kali (along with all her metaphysical connotations) while preparing for her journey to Daksha's fire sacrifice, in order to punish him (*Mahabhagavata* 79–90). Here, Sati-as-Kali does incite Shiva to "wild behavior", a behaviour "that threatens the stability of the cosmos". However, though here Sati-as-Kali is the wife of Shiva, she also retains her "independent" status, and is able to challenge the dictates of both Shiva and Daksha. It would be wrong to see Sati as a devoted wife who defies her father for winning her husband's rights. Rather, she can defy Shiva himself – as is evident from the *Mahabhagavata*, the *Brihaddharmapurana* and the *Annadamangala* (see the Appendices at the end of this book) – when he refuses to let her go to her father. Rather than being a devoted wife, she appears as the rebellious daughter of an orthodox father who, however, is also capable of becoming a rebellious wife.

She does not let her living body turn into a corpse as a gesture of self-sacrifice for the sake of preserving the husband's honour, but rather, as the deathless Mother of the Universe, lets her body "die" and be dismembered (*Mahabhagavata* 126–129), so that her physical body and the body of the society she defies get dismembered, and their boundaries shattered, simultaneously. Bodily control and social control always go together, and, by refusing to let her body be controlled by either her husband or the father, by refusing to let her body become an "image" of the social hierarchy and "stability", she introduces chaos to the hierarchy that passes off as the "cosmos". When her body is dismembered, the boundaries of the body become meaningless, as there is nothing to be bounded by those boundaries. As a corollary to this, the socially constructed hierarchical relations between different parts of the body also become superfluous. Whereas a whole (un-dismembered) body would be subjected to the socially imposed hierarchical arrangement of different body parts, with different kinds of value attached to them, the dismembered body, which is no more a body as such (Mary Douglas argues that a body is basically a bounded system [*Purity and Danger* 116]) because it has jettisoned its boundaries, would dissolve the bio-social epistemology which underpins the hierarchical/vertical arrangement of different limbs and would rather place all these body parts along the horizontal axis of equality/equivalence. For instance, the places where the lower parts of Sati's body (vulva and anus, for instance) fell are as sacred as those where the upper parts of her body fell. In this horizontal cartography of the scattered members of Sati, there is no hierarchy. The Devi, in these sacred *pithas*, is often worshipped in pits in the earth, in caves, in tunnels or mouths of the tunnels. She is figured as that mode of the sacred that

rises from below rather than falls from above – the grace that springs up rather than rains down. In fact, especially among the Sati *pithas* of Eastern and North-Eastern India and Nepal, the *pithas* containing the energy of the lower parts of Sati's body are considered very sacred and powerful. The Guhyeshwari temple of Nepal, where Sati's anus is supposed to have fallen (Niguranda 83–85), the Kamakhya temple where her *yoni* is said to have fallen, and the Yogadya temple of Kshiragram, a village near the town of Burdwan in West Bengal and the famous Kali temple at Kalighat, Kolkata – the two *pithas* said to contain the energy of the toes of Sati – are all immensely auspicious *pithas* where the Devi is said to be eternally awake and responsive to the cries of her devotees.

The dismemberment of Sati's body has always been seen as the process of restoring cosmic stability. However, I would prefer a more radical reading of this mythic event. The Shakta texts foreground the fact that Devi is the Will Power of the Absolute. And hence, even the dismemberment of her body takes place not by the will of the Trinity but by her own will (*Mahabhagavata* 126–129). The *Brihaddharmapurana*, however, presents the will of the Trinity as clashing with Devi's will, and Devi as cursing the Trinity for "destroying" the corpse of her avatar, Sati, which she had planned to revivify through Shiva's touch (*Brihaddharmapurana* 176–178). Nevertheless, as the *Brihaddharmapurana* too presents Devi as omnipotent, the narrative logic is confused here: the omnipotent Devi who is worshipped by the Trinity and can curse them should be expected to exert the supremacy of her will over that of the Trinity. The *Mahabhagavata* account, on the other hand, seems to be more logical and consistent, in the context of its presentation of the Devi as the supreme, omnipotent theological entity.

We must remember that Shiva first destroys the fire sacrifice of Daksha and then begins to dance, Sati's corpse on his shoulder. In a way, his dance – apparently destructive – is a symbolic encapsulation of what has already happened – the destruction of an exclusionary ethos. What has been destroyed is an "order" that sees as chaotic everything that refuses to conform to its norms. Shiva has lost his wife – and the exclusionary order has lost its foundation. The dance symbolizes both sorrow and liberation; and the dismemberment of Sati's body is a symbolic solution to this sorrow. The dismemberment is actually the symbolic – but also cathartic – repetition of the destruction of one bounded system through the destruction of the solidity and stability of the epitome of all bounded systems: the body. The relation between the body as bounded system and a social order/political state as bounded system is metonymic. In the case of the dismemberment of Sati's corpse, we first witness the dissolution of what is metonymized – the bounded social order that denies access to certain groups – and then, finally, the dissolution of the metonym itself, the dismemberment of the

body as an archetype of boundedness. However, this is only one aspect of the dismemberment trope – the liberatory aspect. There is another, and more important, aspect of this trope:the mythic overwriting of sorrow with hope, anticipation, and the pluralization – and hence expansion – of the corpse of the beloved wife of Shiva. This is what I would like to tropologize as dismemberment-as-pluralization, which necessitates and facilitates the self-pluralization of Shiva as well.

There is a wild paradox encapsulated in the mythic event of Shiva's destructive dance with Sati's corpse on his shoulder. This moment of dancing, though it is induced by grief, appears to transcend grief and mix up the joy of liberation with the sorrow of loss. This is, again, something which can be seen as fundamental to the Shakta philosophy of salvation. The Shakta salvation, unlike the Vedantic one, is a salvation which is impossible without the integration of this world and the other world. The body is sacred, or at least capable of becoming sacred, in Shaktism. The Shakta body participates in the bliss of salvation which does not preclude but rather celebrates the *jouissance* of existence. Within such an epistemology of "liberation" the dismemberment of the body would not signify merely a happy liberation from the bounded system called the body. The Shakta is supposed to look at this bounded system with tenderness, and not with horror or hatred. Hence, in order to make the dismemberment of the body of the human incarnation of Devi a tolerable event, the Shakta culture needs to radically reconstellate the epistemic significance of this narrateme. As I have already shown, in the Energy-centric epistemology of Shaktism, the corpse is an organization or condensation of energy through an apparently inert material form. The corpse is a transformation, and not negation, of the energy that appears to be coterminous with the life force which actually has a far wider scope than what we mean by "life". Hence, the dismemberment of the corpse is only a reorganization, and not "fragmentation", of this energy, as energy cannot be fragmented.

The Sanskrit term *sat* has the connotation of "permanence" as well as "real". In other words, in Vedantic and tantric philosophy, *sat* is what is permanent, deathless. However, the Adyashakti, the Primordial Energy, pervades both *sat* and *asat*, permanent and impermanent, things from within (Ravi 395). Hence, in the context of Shaktism which figures energy as feminine, the feminine version of the *sat* – that is, Sati – would paradoxically mean something greater than *sat* – something that can integrate the *asat*, the impermanent, into its ontology. The entire narrative of the dismemberment of Sati's corpse is a play of the shuttling tropes of permanence and impermanence – the impermanence of the body as a bounded system and the paradoxical permanence of the body parts. While we do speak of the law of the conservation of energy, we tend to forget the playful, aesthetic side of

this conservation. The image of a dancing figure, like Nataraja Shiva, may represent this grand playful dance of energy – the *spanda shakti* (vibratory energy) expanding outward from the Absolute and yet maintaining the permanence and immutability of the Absolute, as insisted by the Spanda theorists of Kashmir Shaivism (Capra 11–12; Coomaraswamy 83–95; Dyczkowski 20–27). Sati's corpse, even when dismembered, affirms the Shakta concept of the all-pervasiveness of Shakti, inhabiting the impermanent and the permanent alike, by making possible the preservation of her members.

Let me now attempt an investigation of the complex metonymic parallels between Shiva's dance and the dismemberment of Sati's corpse. It appears to me that if we bracket off the intervention of the gods who are said to have been instrumental in the dismemberment of her corpse (Brahma, Vishnu and Shani according to the *Kalika Puranam*, and Vishnu according to the *Mahabhagavata*), the dismemberment motif and the trope of dance become symbolically and functionally compatible, and tropologically interactive. Fritjof Capra has observed:

> Modern physics has shown that the rhythm of creation and destruction is not only manifested in the turn of the seasons and in the birth and death of all living creatures, but also in the very essence of inorganic matter. For modern physicists, then, Shiva's dance is the dance of subatomic matter.
>
> (qtd. in Kapur 311)

If Shiva's dance can symbolize not just the dancing cosmos but also the "dance of subatomic matter", then one can find certain parallels between the dancing dismemberment of the material form of Sati's corpse and the *tandava* dance of Shiva. The corpse is not just inert matter resting on the shoulder of the dancing husband; it is, essentially, a material form embodying the organization of energy, hiding but embodying the dance of energy in subatomic matter. The dominant image here is that of expansion, movement – the image of throwing away all limits. Dancing is a process whereby the body's boundaries become flexible. While dancing, especially dancing like Shiva, one becomes part of the dancing cosmos, where permanence and impermanence, stillness and motion, are always – at every moment – forming and dissolving a rhythmic whole. The rhythm of the dismemberment and the rhythm of Shiva's dance match arcanely. And it is this motion on Shiva's part which differentiates him from the necrophiliacs who would preserve the corpse of the beloved in a static way and lament or jubilate over that corpse. While it has been suggested that the Shakti *pitha* narrative which focuses on the preservation of different parts of Sati's body betrays parallels with the culture of relic preservation in Tibetan Buddhism

(Sircar 7), the basic difference between relic preservation and the sacralization of the places containing Sati's members is that Sati's members are not the static "relics" but dynamic body parts that, moving in the rhythm of Shiva's cosmic dance, fall from above on earth. There is something peculiarly meteoric about Sati's members. They are, as it were, particles of energy-filled cosmic matter which fall on earth, burning, and then turn to stones. And it is this dynamic nature of the fragmentation of the corpse which makes us ponder over the secrets of this dance-and-dismemberment narrative.

Let me now return to the proposition that I have made earlier. I have said that the sorrow of the loss of Sati is peculiarly balanced by the dynamic image of dance during the event of the dismemberment of Sati's corpse. The Shakta culture, by foregrounding the play of Shakti, energy, through this ostensibly destructive dance of a grief-stricken Shiva, shows the interplay of destructive and creative forces. At a fundamental mythic level, the dismemberment of Sati's corpse makes Shiva realize that the physical remains of his beloved are no more proximate to his own body. Corporeally, they are totally separated. And then, he sits in meditation, a meditation, which is, according to the *Mahabhagavata*, a penance for getting Sati back in the form of Parvati. So, the dismemberment of Sati's corpse, in a way, prepares the way for the coming of Parvati.

However, we need a more complex hermeneutic to analyze the dismemberment motif. When probed deeply and carefully, the dismemberment narrative appears to harbour a peculiar paradox. While the *Mahabhagavata* says that after the dismemberment of Sati's corpse, Shiva becomes grief-stricken once again and finally, to overcome this grief, gets engrossed in deep meditation on the World Mother so that she should shower her grace on him and re-manifest herself as his wife (*Mahabhagavata* 139–142), it is interesting to notice that this story of loss and absence is peculiarly connected to the theme of the energetic *presence* of the corporeal remains of the Devi at various places on the earth (the Sati *pithas*), accompanied by Shiva at each of these places. If Shiva gets absorbed in meditation after the dismemberment of his beloved's corpse, then how can he be said to be present – simultaneously and synchronically – at all the places where Sati's members fall? We must remember here that the Hindu views of time make possible simultaneous and synchronic pluralization of the Self, especially the Divine Self. The tantric ontology would always insist on this synthesis of One and Many – the idea that Shiva is the unchangeable Absolute and yet he is implicated in the World – he is both world-transcending and world-permeating. The Shakta philosophy would say precisely the same thing about the Mother – and thus, permanence and impermanence would cease to be antithetical ontological issues.

In this Shaiva or Shakta view of the world and of Divinity – as opposed to the dualistic Samkhya view of Prakriti-as-dancer and Purusha-as-seer-of-the-dance – the dancer and the seer of the dance become one (Kaviraj, *Tattva o sadhana* 453). Nevertheless, the point is that while the mainstream Hinduism has tended to see the dismemberment of Sati's corpse as a kind of closure, after which the new episode – that of Parvati – begins, the Shakta-tantric culture of Eastern India, by foregrounding the Sati *pithas* as central to its sacred epistemology, has effectively ruptured all possible readings of the dismemberment of Sati's corpse as a narrative closure that allows the myth, and the mythologist, to smoothly and smugly move on from Sati to Parvati. In the Shakta-tantric narratives of medieval Hinduism, the description of the Sati *pithas* operates as a loop, as a sort of description-as-rupture-in-narration that is so common in all Hindu mythological texts. However, while the scholars have focussed on the role of the Sati *pithas* in fashioning the "sacred geography" of Shaktism, seldom have they focussed on the larger and deeper epistemological implications of the loop-like positionality of the little narrative of the formation of the Sati *pithas* in the larger narrative of Shiva-Shakti – between Sati's departure and the arrival of Parvati.

The dismemberment of Sati's corpse, which finishes off the body-as-a-bounded-system, is seen by most of the exegetes and secular scholars as a decisive event which leads to Shiva's meditative silence and detachment. However, when the Sati pitha narrative is seriously taken into account, we realize that, in parallell with the meditative Shiva, a passionate Shiva operates at a synchronic level of mytho-historic existence scattered across the geographical present. That is to say, whereas the meditative Shiva would be part of the temporality that moves from Sati to Parvati, the passionate Shiva enjoys his togetherness with Sati within a frozen temporality – the spatially frozen eternity – in all the Sati *pithas*. The meditative Shiva remains One, or returns to the metaphysical One where all stirrings end; the passionate Shiva pluralizes himself in order to accompany *each* of the fallen members of Sati which turn certain places of the earth into *pithas*, the sacred seats of the primordial Energy. Mainstream Hinduism has forgotten – or at least desperately wished to forget – this disturbingly passionate Shiva who perpetuates Sati's story by accompanying each of her body parts in the several *pithas*. For this passionate Shiva, there is no closure to Sati's story; rather, she is perennialized through her body parts, preserved in all these *pithas* as energy or energy-filled matter.

When Sati's body is dismembered, it is, paradoxically, not fragmented but pluralized. The Ishaopanishad says:

Purnamadah Purnamidam
Purnat Purnamudachyate

Purnasya purnamadaya
Purnamevavashishyate.

That is the whole, this is the whole,
From the whole emerges the whole
When the whole is taken from the whole
What remains is nothing but the whole.
(*Ishopanishad* 2) [Translation mine]

If we follow this ancient mystic vision of the Purna or "whole" and apply it to the narrative of Sati's body being dismembered, we may say that the whole body is not merely fragmented into parts – rather, the parts are also wholes. One may raise the question: if I have already argued that Sati's body must be seen as the physical body, then why should I bring in the Upanishadic metaphysics here? The interesting thing is that, as we have already seen, the physicality of Sati's body can be seen not just in terms of matter but rather in terms of energy which mediates between physicality and metaphysics, "spirit" and "matter". That is the secret of Shaktism. Now, when Sati's body is seen as the *whole* energy, and not just matter limited by boundaries, it ceases to be seen as the bounded system Douglas speaks of. In fact, the concept of the body as a bounded system would be the very antithesis of the Purna, the whole which is unlimited. However, if we re-interrogate the bodiliness of Sati's body, we will find that it is a very peculiar kind of body – a kind of body which, by becoming fragmented, becomes a non-body (if the body is a bounded system); as a body that becomes unbounded through dismemberment and gets scattered over the earth, and yet lets each of its parts retain its immanent energy which one may describe as sacred-secular, Sati's corpse appears to be a body which puts its bodiliness under erasure (I deliberately prefer to sound Derridean here).

Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's and Donna Haraway's statements on the body, Judith Butler suggests that there should not be any deterministic vision of the boundaries or "outline" of the body (1). She proposes to see the "matter of bodies as the effect of a dynamic of power", and recasts the "matter of bodies" as "indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects" (2). In other words, it is the *regulatory* power of the socio-cultural discourse of the "body" which materializes the body as such (1). Sati's body, by erasing its boundedness through the fragmentation which, however, fails to rob the body of its inherent energy and hence conserves the energy while scattering the members, challenges the regulatory power which produces and controls the body as such, which creates the boundaries for the bounded system that

is the body. At the level of its energy-essence, the body remains the *whole* energy whose boundaries are only ostensible: effects of the demarcating and delimiting discourse of "matter" which creates illusions of boundaries. If seen as a "material" body, Sati's corpse is a limited object. However, when it is seen as a certain kind of organization of energy which is capable of changing itself – it can be seen as the Energy which is always *whole* and can never be fragmented, not even through the dismemberment of the material body. As Energy, it is the whole which gives rise to only energy-as-whole. When the body is fragmented, each of the parts embodies the same energy which the whole body embodied. Only the arrangement of the energy changes.

The body-as-such ceases to exist once its dismemberment is completed – however, the parts also embody the *whole* energy that the corpse is. And what remains is not zero, but the whole energy which has already de-articulated the bounded system that the corpse was. What the Shakta philosophy of the Sati *pithas* tells us is that the different *pithas* are all equally filled with the energy that Sati was. And hence, in each of them, Sati is not just a past, is not what *was*, but rather what – perennially – is. The energy-self of Sati does not get diminished in any of them. Rather, in each of these *pithas*, the Devi remains present as the immanent energy of the universe. Though it is undoubtedly true that Kamakhya is seen by the Shakta puranas and tantras as the most important Sati Pitha because the generative organ of Sati fell here, it is also true that, in terms of their spiritual significance, the other *pithas* containing the other parts of Sati's body are no less important. The Devi is worshipped in all these places as the ever-awake Energy of the universe. All these places, in other words, become the microcosms of the universe. The various versions of the *Pithanirnaya*, the text where the Devi herself details the *pithas*, attach different amounts of importance (generally high importance it is) to Kamakhya (Sircar 47–49, 60, 63). However, though Kamakhya is the most important Sati Pitha for the Shaktas of the world, the pluralized energy-self of Sati is equally present in all the other *pithas* as well. Interestingly, the completion of the dismemberment implies the absence of the body as such, but also, the presence of it through different forms. The fragments of the body, which are generally seen as meaningless outside the context of the "whole" body, are radically rethought in this myth, because the "whole" becomes the *whole of energy* here, and the body defies its boundedness.

In the *Brihaddharmapurana*, after Sati's corpse gets dismembered and Shiva becomes deeply saddened, Brahma and Vishnu, along with Shiva, pray to Devi to manifest herself before them. Devi appears before them as a thousand women, who keep changing their forms continuously and keep

appearing on all sides, swiftly changing their positions from one direction to another. The Trinity realize that She is unbounded, and plural as well as singular (176–177). Here, the plurality of the Energy-self of Sati is foregrounded. One may discern tropological and functional parallels between the multiple goddesses/energy-selves located in the multiple *pithas*, and these countless, mystic female forms that Devi as the disembodied, transcendent Sati forces the Trinity to perceive.

As I have already argued, we ought to read the myth differently from the conventional exegetes, and should not see the dismemberment of Sati's body as a way of taking Shiva away from the past called Sati towards the future called Parvati, but rather as the beginning of a pluralized togetherness of Shiva and Sati. In such a reading, the corpse of Sati can be seen as the storehouse – or rather an *arrangement* – of the energy which pluralizes the Absolute and also scatters itself along the axis of multiplicity. When the Sati *pitha* motif is placed between the episodes of Sati and Parvati, between the disappearance of Sati and the appearance of Parvati in Shiva's life, it seems to occupy a liminal space in Shiva's theo-biography. However, if considered as an autonomous mytheme, the Sati *pitha* theme reorganizes the trope of the "new" beginning which emerges after Sati's "death"/ "leaving the body"/*dehatyaga*.

Conventionally, this new beginning is seen as being heralded by Parvati's arrival. However, there is another beginning heralded by the dismemberment of Sati's corpse. When the scattered parts of her corpse fall at several places on earth, Shiva, driven by his deep affection for Sati, pluralizes himself to accompany those parts, each of which is not just synecdochic of, but rather *synonymous* with, the *whole* body of Sati which represents a "death"-erasing energy-self defying its embodiment-as-boundedness. Shiva accompanying the body parts of Sati implies his self-expansion, driven by the expansion and pluralization of Sati's body through its dismemberment. Sati's body, while getting dismembered, gets pluralized in a certain way – each of the body parts becomes a reproduction of the *whole* energy field that her corpse represents, and this is what is metaphorized by the episode from the *Brihaddharmapurana* mentioned previously. Besides, as I have argued in earlier chapters, Sati's body, within an energy (Shakti)-centred epistemology, erases the difference between life and death. Hence, the dismemberment of Sati's body, in the Sati-*pitha*-centred version of the myth, gives rise to the beginning of a new dimension of togetherness of Shiva and Sati/Shakti. Here, in all these *pithas*, they stay together, thereby overwriting the sorrow of loneliness (of Shiva – underlined by the mainstream versions of the myth) with the pluralized, globally expanded togetherness of the couple in all these places sacralized by the body parts of Sati. This is what Bharatchandra seems to hint at in his *Annadamangal*.

Interestingly, just before he embarks on the description of the *pithas* in *Annadamangal*, Bharatchandra presents a tiny lyric on the immanence of Shiva and Shakti. It runs like this:

> Bhava and Bhavani wander
> in the heart of the phenomenal samsara.
> They wander inside the nine-doored bodies of humans,
> in the bodies made of elements,
> in the bodies of men and women.
> Though they are beyond all *gunas* (qualities/attributes),
> They are engaged in various plays with various *gunas*.
> In the higher and the lower, in the static and the dynamic, they play.
> They play in the hearts of the human and other beings.
> The Conscious Being and the Consciousness,
> They, together, wander as bodies and embodied beings.
> Though they are undifferentiable, they manifest differences,
> And do wonders in the cosmos.
>
> The poet Raygunakar has somehow got a hint of this play. [Translation mine]
>
> (Raygunakar 16–17)

Here, Bharatchandra delineates how Shiva and Devi are always engaged in a play of togetherness immanent in the material universe. It seems to me that he deliberately places this lyric at the beginning of the description of the *pithas*, and encapsulates the spiritual secret of the concept of the *pithas* in the previous lines. Shiva and Devi wander in the bodies of human beings; the pluralization of Shiva and Devi that is at the heart of the tantric view of the *pithas* is brilliantly figured forth by Bharatchandra. They dwell together – in all beings, in all things. It is their eternal play. They play as Consciousness and its energy, but also as the energy-filled essence of the static things. Although the rhetoric of the lyric mainly focuses on living beings, it is interesting to note that the abstract spiritual omnipresence of the Shiva-Shakti duo presented in this lyric is actually thematically linked with the pluralized, apparently "material" presence of Shiva (in the form of stone *lingas*) and Devi (in the form of Sati's body parts turned to stones) in all the *pithas*. In Bharatchandra's vision, the human bodies and inert material objects are also the temples of Shiva and Shakti; they are too, in a way, *pithas*. This is the play of plurality, the play *with* plurality, and it begins with the togetherness of two entities, Shiva and Shakti. In this way, *Annadamangal* presents the *pithas* primarily as the dynamic play of plurality that Shiva and Shakti engage in, and this play is propelled by the unparalleled

erotico-spiritual love between Shiva and Devi. This lyric is followed by the description of the fifty-one *pithas*, but this lyric actually implies that the entire phenomenal universe, the whole earth, along with its earthly beings and things, can be seen as an assemblage of Sati *pithas* where Shiva and Sati are engaged in their loving play of self-pluralization.

Creative Eros is a force facilitating pluralization. If procreation can be seen as motivated by an urge towards self-pluralization, then the procreative Eros is similar to the creative Eros. Eros is what brings creation closer to procreation, as Diotima had taught Socrates (Plato 36–43). While in love, one finds oneself expanding towards the entire cosmos. The pluralizing force of Eros is sometimes denigrated in Advaita Vedanta as *maya*, but, in the Bhakti and tantric traditions this pluralizing force of Eros is often celebrated. In the *Bhagavata Purana*, when Sri Krishna plays the *Rasa*, the erotic play, with the Gopis, he pluralizes himself (Frazier 179). Each of the Gopis finds a Krishna beside her, and hence, all of them are happy. Here, the erotic force pluralizes Krishna's body, which is figured as a yogic magic (Dehejia). In the case of the pluralization of Sati's body (the apparent dismemberment of her corpse into multiple parts each of which is one with the whole), Shiva pluralizes himself in multiple *linga* forms and resides along with Sati in all the Sati *pithas*. The centrality of the immanence of both Shiva and Shakti in all beings in Shakta-tantric philosophy is reflected in this narrative. The "scattering" of Sati's body parts implies the expansive revelation of this immanence.

David Kinsley reads the narrative of the dismemberment of Sati's corpse as the symbolic statement of Sati's "luring Siva from ascetic isolation into creative participation in the world. This theme is further developed and embellished in the Parvati cycle of myths" (37–38). However, when probed deeply, Kinsley's reading appears to be problematic on many an account. One major problem is that Kinsley draws on the mainstream versions of the narrative of Shiva and Sati and does not think about the Shakta-tantric epistemology such as developed in the *Mahabhagavata* where Shiva's asceticism is always intrinsically motivated by his desire for the Devi. Precisely, Shiva is not a naturally dispassionate being who is "lured" (Kinsley 38) by his beloved wife towards the world. The *Mahabhagavata* in fact places Shiva's love for the Devi at the heart of the narrative of Sati. There is a logical sequence – from Shiva's penances for getting the Divine Mother as his wife, and the incarnation of the Divine Mother as Sati to fulfil his wish – to Sati's disappearance to punish her husband as well as father for their inability to uninterruptedly accept and appreciate her absolute autonomy as the Primordial Energy, and the consequent dismemberment of Sati's corpse. Within this narrative framework which places Devi at the centre of the erotic dynamics as the autonomous beloved as well as lover, Shiva's

love for Sati and his attachment to her dismembered limbs can be seen as the natural expression of his passionate character, rather than as the effect of his being lured by Sati.

Secondly, Kinsley focuses mainly on Kamarupa and foregrounds Shiva's proximity to Sati's *yoni* in the *linga* form (38–39). However, I think here he overreads the sexual imagery because, in the other *pithas* too, Shiva is said to be present as the Bhairavas of the different forms of the Devi inhabiting those *pithas*, and these Bhairavas are present there in *linga* forms. Hence, the self-multiplication of Shiva is based on a more complex and deeper understanding of the immanence of Sati in all the parts of her corpse, than what Kinsley's analysis implies. While Kinsley puts forward the view that Sati brings down Shiva onto the earth (39–40), we need to understand that such a reading focuses on the Sati myth from the perspective of the earth (the earth identified with Sati) rather than from the perspective of the passionate Shiva which the *Mahabhagavata* delineates. It appears that Kinsley ultimately falls into the trap of the clichéd interpretation of Shiva as the sky god and Sati as the earth goddess (39–40). However, we need to remember that such a reading brackets off the radical implications of Shiva's (and Sati's) self-pluralization. Shiva, in such a reading, becomes the undifferentiated "Sky", and Sati, a homogeneous version of the "Earth". However, what we do need to underline is that Shiva places himself in *multiple* places of the earth, and that Sati's members are dropped at *multiple* places of the earth. The narrative of the origin of the *pithas* is grounded in this plurality, and not just in a shift from asceticism to passion or from the inaccessible divinity to the accessible one.

Shiva searches for (and finds out) Sati in all the parts of her body which have fallen on earth. The dancing Shiva, the meditating Shiva, also becomes the still *lingas* passionately attached to the different body parts of Sati. In all these places, what emerge are not only the multiple forms of the Devi worshipped in different *pithas*, but rather the multiple homes of Shiva and Sati. As the Primordial Energy Sati mediates between the Spirit that Shiva represents and the *matter* which her members apparently embody. However, just as the spirit is characterized by its inherent energy, the matter is also a *material* organization of energy. Hence, in a way, like the lightning that seems to touch and stir both the firmament and the earth, Sati is the energy mediating between and linking the sky and the earth. But more importantly, she, along with her passionate husband, foregrounds the basically *plural* nature of the universe. Therefore, the myth can be read as the representation of the movement from Two towards Many – from the duo of the beloved and the lover to the sheer plurality that the earth is – something which implies the capacity of Eros to unite the entire universe as well as the lover and the beloved.

In the narratives of the Sati *pithas* such as those presented by the Shakta puranas and *Annadamangal*, Shiva is, even after the disappearance of the

whole body of Sati, ever united with the *whole* Sati, the energy-self of the Devi, residing in each of the *pithas* – *wholly*. These *pithas* do not mourn the absence of the whole body of Sati, but celebrate the *full* presence of the divine couple.

Nigurananda argues that the scattering of Sati's members actually implies the vibratory expansion of the primordial energy that is Sati. He also opines that these fifty-one *pithas* could be seen as the mystic metaphors for the fifty-one letters (varnas) which get scattered in different levels or layers of space from the original vibration and outward expression of the Shabda Brahman (168–169). If we focus on this interpretation from the perspective of Kashmir Shaivism, we may offer a metaphoric and tropological reading of the dismemberment and scattering of Sati's corpse. It is always thrilling and productive to engage in a play of hermeneutic cross-referencing between the tantric cultures of Western/Northern India and those of Eastern India. According to Andre Padoux, Para Vak – the Primordial Word – is the source and receptacle of all earthly and celestial objects, all thoughts and things, and also, is immanent in all of them. It is peculiar in nature. Unmanifest, it still carries the thrilling, bubbling wonders of all manifestations. It is characterized by the "*camatkara*, wonder, thrill of joy, wonderment, and ecstatic rapture, experienced by consciousness at its self-revelation and its self-awareness, or when contemplating the manifestation that it holds within itself" (Padoux 174). Kashmir Shaivism replaces the undifferentiated consciousness of Advaita Vedanta with the vibrating Para Vak or Purnahanta. Like Sati's corpse, the Para Vak, though unmanifest, and hence, in a certain way, corpse-like, is actually an energy-self which contains all vibrations within and yet remains apparently still. When the manifest sounds, the uttered or utterable *varnas* (letters) come out of it, they are also inhabited by the energy of the Para Vak, and this energy never gets diminished, even in the most outward manifestation of audible sounds. In a similar way, Sati's corpse can be seen as the repository of all vibrations, all words and worlds bubbling within its apparent silence and stillness. When the words/body parts come out or off her body, and become the *pithas* on earth, they still house the complete energy of the Para Vak that is represented by Sati's corpse.

Nigurananda and Sircar focus on the practice of *pithanyasa* in tantric rituals whereby various *varnas* (letters) are invoked in various parts of the body of the *sadhaka* and the *sadhaka* experiences his body as the repository of all these letters (Sircar 4,7; Nigurananda 30). Thus, the body of the tantric sadhaka, in the ritual, becomes what Gavin Flood calls the "entextualized" body (Flood 112). These writers suggest that Sati's corpse may also have a semiotic connection with this entextualized body of the tantric *sadhaka*. In that case, there will emerge a unique co-configuration of the living body of the tantric spiritual aspirant and the "dead" body of the undying Sati.

Loriliai Biernacki argues that the tantric mantras make possible the overlapping of the female body and the female speech:

> [A]s bodied, feminine, performative speech, this magical speech disrupts the normative order of language. It disrupts the idea of language as logocentric. Andre Padoux, as well, notes for the Tantric mantra more generally its nonlogocentric character, its fundamental dissimilarity from the Western notion of the word as logos.
>
> (113)

Biernacki does not just focus on the closeness of the body and the word in the mantric practices in tantra, but rather upholds the "bodied language" which is central to the performative, tantric magical speech – the mantras.

She writes:

> Bodied feminine speech, these dancing goddess-words, offers us a word that acts like a body rather than a sign. With this we find a recoding of the value attached to the body, matter and materiality. I also suggest that a consequence of this is a notion of identity that is multiple. Not constructed upon the exclusion of that which is "other" to the self, this model does not reject the body and matter and offers an image of the feminine self conceived multiply.
>
> (113)

If this is the case, then, rather than seeing Sati's body as an entextualized body, we can also see it as "bodied" language or bodied speech. Biernacki speaks of a "fusion of word and body" in the mantric practices in the tantras (113). If that is the case, then Sati's body may be seen as both body and Word – embodied Para Vak, and worded/extextualized body. It would then be the energy (Para Vak itself is a kind of spiritual energy) that brings into existence both body and word, matter and language. If the tantric goddesses are goddess-words which enflesh speech, then Sati, the Great Goddess enfleshed in Her avatar, can be seen as the source, receptacle and substratum of all these goddess-words, and the different goddesses stationed and worshipped in the different *pithas* can be seen as the manifestations or instances of the "bodied feminine speech", the dancing goddess-words Biernacki sees as the paradigms of embodied, non-logocentric language.

In fact, when we focus on the *Pithanirnaya*, one of the most important texts detailing the Shakti *pithas* associated with Sati's body parts, we come across a unique instance of the "notion of identity that is multiple". Here, the Devi speaks to Shiva. Shiva asks Devi to describe to him the details of the Shakti *pithas*. He addresses Devi as "*sarvajnanamaheshvari*", the Great

Goddess of all knowledge, and implores her to present the details of the *pithas* along with the description of the Bhairavas and Devis stationed there. Interestingly, all these *pitha-bhairavas* are the different manifestations of Shiva himself, and the Shaktis of these different *pithas* are but the different manifestations of the Devi herself. Devi tells Shiva that he should listen to her detailing the *pithas*. She proclaims that all the *tirthas* – the pilgrim spots – are to be located within her body (Sircar 62). Interestingly, here two kinds of immanence are being figured simultaneously. Devi says that all the different holy places are located within her (whole/un-dismembered) body but then immediately switches to the image of the dismembered body which informs the crux of the discourse of the Sati *pithas*. Let me quote a portion of this text:

> *Sarvatirthani sarvatra mamamge srinu bhairava.*
> *Angapratyangapatena Visnucakraksatena ca.*
> *Mamasya vapuso deva hitaya ca nrinam srinu.*
> (Sircar 62)

> Bhairava, hear of the *tirthas* or holy places everywhere, implicated in my body.
>
> Hear, for the good of humankind, of the holy places created by the fall of the limbs of this body of mine, dismembered by Vishnu's chakra.
> [Translation mine]

The very structure of this text implies a complex and pluralistic sense of selfhood foregrounded by the Devi. The first part of her statement implies that *sarvatirthani* – all the *tirthas* – are immanent in her (whole) body – *mamamge*. However, the second part of her statement focuses on the *tirthas* established through the scattering of her (*mama*-my) limbs cut off by Vishnu's chakra. When she uses the term *mama*, she is projecting a very complex mode of selfhood. A term like *mama* (my) implies an *aham* (I), and hence, even when she speaks of *her* dismembered *body*,she is implying an *I* which is not disembodied/incorporeal or trans-corporeal, as it is integrally connected to her body (parts). The body – whether whole or dismembered – is essentially connected with her sense of selfhood. Precisely, she presents her selfhood as embodied. However, this embodiment of the self also radically alters the conventional sense of the body. From her speech, it is not clear whether she speaks of the whole body or the dismembered one, as *anga* would imply a whole body, whereas *angapratyanga* would imply limbs and minor members of the body. However, we need to understand that it is in such kind of apparent confusion that the "multiply" conceived "feminine self" that Biernacki speaks of gets projected.

I would like to argue that, by refusing to undervalue the *materiality* of the body qua body (though also implying the interchangeability of matter and energy), the embodied self of the Devi in the *Pithanirnaya* actually foregrounds the *multiplicity* of the embodied selfhood of the Devi. The feminine self of the Devi is not singular but plural. While she is one in whose body all the *tirthas* are included, she is also one who is scattered over all the *tirthas* through her *angapratyanga* – her several body parts. At one point in the *Pithanirnaya*, she proclaims: "*Visheshatah kaliyuge basami Chandrashekhare*" (Sircar 63) – "Especially, in the Kali Yuga, I reside on the Chandrashekhara Hills (one of the Sati *pithas*)" [Translation mine]. This would obviously imply that the self of the Devi which includes all the *tirthas* in the embodied aspect of its selfhood also remains embodied, as it were, in all the *pithas* where her body parts have fallen. If that is the case, then just as the whole body implies a(n) (embodied) self, all the parts of the dismembered body would also imply the same self – pluralized. These different parts of the body are plural embodiments of the self – "multiply" conceived, which do not shut out but celebrate materiality and nature.

Again, the Devi who speaks here does not speak as a disembodied spiritual presence, as she does refer to her *anga*(body), but she also complexifies the status of this body by referring to her cut-off and scattered limbs. She accepts this body as her own by using the word "*mama*" (my) and yet implies a distance between the *I* and the *my*, the *aham*, and *mama*, by pluralizing the bodily dimension of her being through the reference to the multiple *tirthas* built around her multiple limbs. She apparently claims to own all these different, scattered limbs and associates them with an implicitly pluralized *Aham* (I), when she makes a statement like "I reside on the Chandrashekhara Hills". However, is this *I* singular, or plural? Is it associated with the owner of all the body parts scattered over the earth, or is it associated with only the body part that fell on the Chandrashekhara Hills? When her speech shifts from one whole body to its scattered limbs, is there not a concomitant shift from a singular self to multiple selves inhabiting the multiple *pithas*?

Biernacki's observations are, I think, validated by the *Pithanirnaya*. The Devi pluralizes herself through the scattering of the limbs of her body. In the discursive framework of the *Pithanirnaya*, Vishnu is mentioned only tangentially. First, she speaks of *mamamga*, "my body", and only then does she focus on the cutting off of her limbs by Vishnu's chakra. Vishnu's agency in the scattering of her limbs appears to be secondary here. As the Shakta puranas would also suggest, the dismemberment occurred thanks to Sati's own wish – Sati as the Divine Mother. Then, we may say that the *Pithanirnaya* is actually a performative self-expansion of the Devi. And, there is a motion towards the multiplicity of the universe, the movement from body

as closure towards body as opening. The body here becomes the dancing energy that projects itself outward continually, and its limbs, scattered over the world, become the *vidyas*, the dancing goddess-words.

In the Devi-centric accounts of this sort of self-expansion, Devi's self-pluralization can be seen as primary, which erotically invites and initiates the self-pluralization of Shiva. Interestingly, while the Upanishadic texts present the Absolute/One as having a desire for becoming Many (*Taittiriya Upanishad* 299–302), the tantric discourse surrounding the Sati *pithas* presents the desire-to-be-many as always embedded in the intersubjective experience of love. In the beginning, there is Devi-as-One, but she implicitly wants to be involved in the experience of love, and hence creates the Trinity. However, out of the Trinity, it is only Shiva who qualifies as her eligible husband and lover. Then, the experience of love is initiated, through Sati's marriage to Shiva. However, even after Sati's/Shadow Sati's leaving of her body, this drive-to-become-many continues, within the discursive and experiential framework of "love". When Sati's body is dismembered and the body parts scattered, Shiva pluralizes himself to accompany the multiply embodied selves of Sati in all these *pithas*. This multiplicity is occasioned by love and it is played out in the matrix of love. As I have already underlined, here the drive towards multiplicity is not based on the desire-to-become-many that resides within the One, but rather centred on the intersubjective duo of Shiva and Sati, the lover and the beloved (here each of them is simultaneously lover and beloved, the desirer and the desired). In other words, plurality radiates from Two and not from One. As if, between the sacred One and the secular Many, the tantras posit the sacredsecular Two, revolving on the experience of love.

However, the different Shaktis and Bhairavas residing in the different *pithas* do not simply represent the principle of (self-)pluralization; they also stand for the principle of interconnectivity. In *The Tantra Chronicles*, a collection of tantric teachings received and compiled by Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani, Devi Amma says that tantra is basically the doctrine which makes us understand that we are part of an "infinitely interconnected oneness" (4). Etymologically, "tantra" is related to the topos of weaving. Besides, the verb root *tan* which gives rise to the term "tantra" also means to extend or to stretch (Urban 25; Breaux 6). Hence, the themes of stretching or extending/expanding and interconnectivity (which is the essence of weaving) together form the kernel of tantra. A tantric universe is multidimensional – it is an expansion of the divine duo of Shiva and Shakti – but more importantly, it is an interconnected, *interwoven*, extension of them. Shiva's self-pluralization and that of Sati are interconnected, and hence, the multiple selves of Shiva as the *pitha-bhairavas* are interconnected with the multiplied selves of the *pitha-shaktis*. Plurality is seen in

this mythic structure not just as an unqualified multiplication of One, but rather as the interconnected pluralizations of Two. Plurality, in other words, is not only expansion but also interconnectivity.

Rana P. B. Singh insists:

> Using theory of crystallography as an analogy, it may be explained that all the parts of the body have the main essence of the whole body. It means that all the 51 sacred places have their unique character and importance, nevertheless all are the part of the same cosmic force – wholeness becomes holy.
>
> (148)

Drawing on this view but also critically qualifying it, I would like to argue that the Shakti *pithas* are not grounded in an ideology which seeks to reconstruct the "whole" body of Sati. Rather, while the discourse of the Shakti *pithas*, by dwelling on the apparent (self-)fragmentation of the whole, seeks to foreground the holiness of the parts as well – the parts which crystallize the essence of the whole – the same discourse, nevertheless, shifts the theological and spiritual focus from the sacrality of the "whole" to the "interconnectivity" of the "parts". That is the secret of the tantric lessons.

While the whole body of Sati would imply an organic oneness, the Shakti *pithas* built around her body parts would uphold the tantric play of weaving the points of the sacred, the energy points that dot the universe. This (inter-)weaving is the quintessence of the joy of tantra. And hence, rather than seeing the Shakti *pithas* as giving rise to any geographical "whole", we should see them as celebrating interconnected fragments of the *whole*– each of which, however, throbs with the entire vibration of the whole. This is how the Devi teaches the tantric worshippers to weave experiences. After all, love too is a kind of weaving. It is not just togetherness or "union" of two; more importantly, it is a way of interweaving the experiences, lives, dreams, hopes, sorrows and joys of two. That is the subtext of the Shiva-Sati myth. And hence, when we focus on the downward movement of Shiva towards the earth, to accompany the body parts of Sati scattered over the earth surface, we realize that the story of the love of Shiva and Sati does not end with the dismemberment of Sati's corpse. It, rather, assumes a different dimension of "weaving": on the earth, becoming multiple selves, Shiva and Sati extend the play of togetherness throughout the interconnected universe of the tantras. All the Shakti *pithas* foreground the significance of linkages, of connectivity. When the organic image of wholeness characterized by fixed borders of the (social and physical) body is dismantled, there still remains the possibility of re-conceptualizing holiness and wholeness. However, this wholeness, in the tantric epistemic framework, is marked by

interconnectivity. It is based on the linkages between the "parts" (which themselves are wholes) rather than the immutability of an artificial, bounded whole.

Tantra weaves the body parts of Sati not to construct a political body of the "motherland". It knows that the Mother (not motherland) is always engaged in self-multiplication, and hence, the true Mother's Land is always plural. Singh observes that the Shakti *pithas* actually symbolize a continuous back-and-forth movement between the local, the national and the planetary/universal spaces, between microcosm and macrocosm (121). This is also a *weaving* of the microcosm and the macrocosm, the local and the universal, the *anu* – the atomic – and the *mahat* – the vast/great. The life force that is celebrated within this framework is a continually moving, vibrating, dancing energy. At the heart of this principle, there is not the stillness of *samadhi*,but rather the motion of love which begins with the *eros* that moved the Primordial Couple and extends itself towards the *agapeic* play of weaving the whole universe lovingly. What this implies is that no *oikos* is given; it has to be woven through a loving orientation to the divine and the cosmos, through the interconnection of places and stories, faiths and hopes, experiences and perceptions.

4 The Shakti *pithas*

The active corpse, the immanent Shakti and the sacred geography of Shaktism

In the Shakti *pithas* (literally seats of Shakti [Kinsley 186]), Shakti, as it were, sits on the petrified parts of Sati's corpse. However, those very body parts are themselves seen as the sources of this divine Shakti. From this, we may offer a different kind of reading of the corpse figured in some of Devi's Mahavidya forms: these Mahavidya forms of Devi which apparently focus on the duality of the active Shakti and the passive corpse are not actually manifestations of a duality, but a theological defiance of the notion of duality. The corpse which operates as the seat of the Devi in some Mahavidya forms is not just a passive corpse indicating the transcendent Shiva unperturbed by the turmoil of the dancing universe, but rather another image of the Devi herself. Perhaps these Mahavidya icons represent the truth that no corpse is ultimately only a passive corpse; it is an *active* corpse and contains Shakti. Life is not stopped in the corpse, but only asleep. One can awaken the hidden universal life force in the corpse, and the corpse on which the glorious goddesses sit may be seen as the more mystic form of the Goddess which flowers into the beautiful female forms, when the *active* nature of the *elan vital* (Gillies 14) sleeping in a corpse is revealed and released.

If a mountain can laugh through its springs, can't a corpse burst into the laughter that is shaped as a beautiful goddess?

What Shiva (and the world, according to the tantric episteme) preserves are not the ashes of Sati's corpse but the scattered body parts of that corpse and her ornaments (which, though ostensibly material objects and not organically linked with Sati's body, partake of the energy she embodies), enshrined as the epitomes of the sacred. These physical fragments of the corpse, paradoxically, serve as the most powerful sources of the kinetic energy of life. They are worshipped not just to achieve *moksha*, liberation from physical existence, but also, and perhaps more importantly for the popular dimension of this religious episteme, in order to live meaningful, happy and even hedonic lives (Kinsley 186). On the other hand, in theological and spiritual terms, each *part* of the sacred corpse is supposed to lead one to the spiritual *whole* that throbs at the heart of the universe.

The corpse of Sati, in other words, is an active corpse, not just a passive object. While the tantric Shiva is often metaphorized as a *Shava* (corpse) which has no capacity for action, Sati-as-*shava*–that is – the Devi-as-corpse, is an *active* corpse, capable of fulfilling the wish of the devotees, bestowing them with good fortune, happy life and even sensual pleasures. The parts of this corpse, scattered across the earth and enshrined in various *pithas*, are, as it were, energy packets. While the tantras say that Shiva becomes a corpse if bereft of Shakti, when Devi becomes a corpse, she is – paradoxically – not at all devoid of energy/shakti, because energy is her essence. Shiva as corpse is a corpse without Shakti, but Devi-as-corpse is a corpse endowed with energy. This is something which is central to our understanding of the trope of the Devi-as-corpse in the tantric culture. Sati's corpse is capable of doing what Shiva-as-corpse cannot do. Shankaracharya's *Saundaryalahari* says that Shiva, if not united with Shakti, cannot even move an inch (*Saundaryalahari* 27). On the other hand, the parts of Sati's corpse are seats of ever awakened energy which can offer the devotees everything they desire. Whereas most of the times the tantra scholars and tantric *sadhakas* have focused on the figure of Shiva-as-*shava* when not united with Shakti, seldom has the focus been on Devi-as-corpse, which is an energy-filled, active corpse, representing the immanence of Shakti even in a "dead" body.

When we apply Irigaray's discourse of the "ethics of sexual difference" (7–19) to Shaiva and Shakta theology and pit Shiva-as-corpse against Devi-as-corpse, we come to understand that while Shiva (the masculine form of the Absolute), in his corpse form, is detached from the "world", Devi (the feminized Absolute), even when figured as a corpse, is implicated in the multi-coloured forms of earthly life.

Noticeably, in Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal*, the Creation begins with this active corpse, the Devi-as-corpse. After giving birth to the Trinity without any intervention of the material dimension of birth, the Goddess orders the Trinity to engage in penances on the *karan-jal* (the causative waters or the sea of wine). Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva begin their meditation. In order to test their concentration and perseverance, Devi assumes the form of an odious corpse and comes to baffle the three gods. On seeing the stinking, decomposed corpse, floating on the waters and approaching him, Vishnu is repulsed, and quickly moves away to escape the smell. Brahma, on seeing it near him, tries to avoid the bad smell by turning his face away. In this way, he turns his face away four times and thus develops four faces on his neck. Thus, the penances of Brahma and Vishnu are interrupted and unsuccessful. Finally, Devi in the form of the corpse goes to Shiva. Shiva, being the wisest of all, touches – with gentle care – the floating corpse which has touched his body. Then, he sits on the corpse and turns it into his seat. Devi is pleased with this heroism on his part – this is exactly the feature of the

tantric hero Kinsley speaks of – and becomes his wife. Then, through their erotic engagement, the entire material universe comes into being (Raygunakar 10).

This narrative seems to have been influenced by a similar narrative of the Creation beginning with Devi-as-corpse, presented in the *Brihaddharmapurana*. According to this purana, when Mula Prakriti (the Primordial Nature as the Great Goddess) comes to test the concentration of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva as an odious, decomposed, mangled corpse, it is only Shiva who is able to satisfy Devi with his unwavering concentration. Shiva sits on the corpse and, immediately, he realizes that it is the Great Goddess in disguise. He then takes the form of a *linga*, and, Devi too abandons her corpse form and appears in the form of a *yoni* (vulva). The *linga* is placed in the *yoni* and this *linga-yoni* formation then gets submerged in the primordial waters. This *linga-yoni* formation is said to be the origin of all male and female beings on the earth (*Brihaddharmapurana* 122–125). If we closely examine this *Brihaddharmapurana* account of the magical transformation of the heroic Shiva seated on Devi-as-corpse into the *linga-yoni* combination, then we may interpret this trope as prefiguring the active corpse of Sati, the parts of which are accompanied by Shiva in his *linga* forms, and are, like the primeval creative symbol of Prakriti, the corpse-turned-*yoni*, sources and embodiments of the Life Energy.

Commenting on this mythological narrative, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty writes:

> Even the corpse is an erotic motif in Saiva mythology, which preserves a strong tie between love and death, for Devi appears as a corpse when Siva, mad with passion, takes up the body of Sati and dances with it; Visnu then dismembers the corpse, and the place where the *yoni* falls becomes particularly sacred, just as in the present myth the corpse of Devi turns into the *yoni*.
>
> (155)

However, unlike Doniger O'Flaherty, I will read this myth not merely as an erotic trope, but rather as a trope that successfully problematizes the epistemologies of life and death, as the corpse-turned-*yoni* may represent not just the "strong tie between love and death" but also the porous border between death and life. I would also disagree with O'Flaherty's view that Sati is the "subject of a *Liebestod* or erotic death" and that her myth is aligned with "the cycle of myths of the castration of Shiva" (cited in Ramos' *Pilgrimage and Politics in Colonial Bengal* 41–42). Rather, the point I would like to focus on is this: a corpse that can become a *yoni* may stand for a corpse, an apparent token of death, which is able to emerge as a birth-giver.

We need to notice that, according to the mythological account of the *Brihaddharmapurana* and *Annadamangal*, in the beginning there is – not the Word, nor a living Goddess – but a corpse. However, this corpse is not the Shiva-as-corpse which the *Saundaryalahari* would envision. This is an active corpse, full of potentials, and represents not a closure but endless openings. It is not the end but the beginning. When Shiva sits on it, the Shakti embodied in the corpse is not only awakened but also united with him. His penances are successful, and he is given the rare opportunity of having the Devi as his wife. Brahma and Vishnu, the gods associated with the orthodox systems of mainstream Hinduism, are unable to decode the mystic symbol the corpse embodies. They see the corpse as a closure, and hence are unable to awaken the energy embodied in it. The tantric Shiva, on the other hand, knows how to reveal the secret of the Devi-as-corpse, how to open it up to new possibilities, and hence is gifted with co-creatorship with the Devi. The immanent Shakti in the corpse is unpacked when Shiva sits in meditation on it, and the divine union becomes possible.

We need to ponder on this primordial figure of the Devi-as-corpse in the context of the corpse of Sati as well. Sati's corpse, in a similar way, invites Shiva to sit on its parts and unpack the energy embodied in them, for the benefit of humankind. The Creation begins with the corpse form of the Devi, and the sustenance of the material universe becomes possible thanks to the scattering of Sati's energy-filled members over the earth. Just as the primordial corpse form assumed by Devi had indirectly urged Shiva to participate in the process of creation, the members of Sati also invite Shiva to engage in the act of preserving the stability of human life and offering the humans complete eudaimonia.

David Frawley describes Sati as the "power of existence (Sat-Shakti)". For Frawley, Sati is actually the power of the Absolute Being that cannot be confined to the realm of becoming, the playfield of the outward mind, that is, the world of Daksha. Hence:

> The soul must sacrifice its involvement in the external realm and go beyond its conditioning in order to discover its real being. This is indicated by Sati's offering of her own body into the sacred fire. Sati is the power of Being within us that will not confine itself to the realm of becoming. In her essence, therefore, Sati herself has no body. As the power of existence, she must return to pure eternal existence beyond all manifestation, which is Shiva. Her reflection in time is but a shadow. . . . Sati, like Shiva, can be represented as a corpse, meaning both are beyond time and action. Shiva and Sati rest as one, sleeping together, as it were, in eternal peace and delight. Theirs is the great night of eternity, *Maharatri*, where no thought or breath stirs. Theirs is

> the great day of eternity in which there is a perpetual dance of lightning, love and delight, without the need for any separate or manifest form.
> (Frawley, *Inner Tantric Yoga* 183–184)

However, though Sati may be seen as – or, rather, *is* – the power of existence, that proposition need not exclude the possibility of her having a body. The point is that Sati's body can be seen, from the philosophical perspective which sees her as the power of existence, as something which is *existent*. When we focus on being, or existence, we have to accept that even a corpse *exists* in the spatio-temporal reality. If existence is not theoretically linked with consciousness or life, it is common to living and dead bodies, and coterminous with what Frankenberg and Mani's Devi Amma calls "isness" (*The Tantra Chronicles* 12–13). Hence, as the power of existence, Sati is as much existent in her dead body or body parts as in her living body. *Existence* encompasses both being and becoming, stasis and motion. And, as the power of existence, Sati is both the power of being and the power of becoming. Even when she "can be represented as a corpse", she represents the power of both being and becoming, as she is essentially the dynamic energy of being which would never foreclose becoming.

Frawley conceptualizes the blissful, static togetherness of Sati-as-corpse and Shiva-as-corpse in the "great night of eternity, *Maharatri*, where no thought or breath stirs" (Frawley, *Inner Tantric Yoga* 184). Their togetherness in the Shakti *pithas* can be conceptualized in this way as well. However, in the Shakti *pithas*, the religious ethos encapsulates both the static and dynamic aspects of their togetherness. It is the "great day of eternity in which there is a perpetual dance of lightning, love and delight", as well as the "great night of eternity" (Frawley, *Inner Tantric Yoga* 184). Sati and Shiva don't just sleep together in these *pithas*; they are also wide awake. In fact, the Shaiva-Shakta believers think that in the Shakti *pithas*, both Shiva and Shakti are *jagrata*, awake, and would fulfil the desires of the devotees readily. A Shakti pitha is not a place which you visit only for the sake of other-worldly gains. It is a place where one goes with desires. If our (fulfilled) desires can be seen as lending forms to our lives, then these Shakti *pithas* are the providers of forms to our lives as well as the givers of the *meaning* of life – which is beyond desires, a kind of spiritual core comparable to the blissful, paradoxically sentient *shava* that represents Sati as well as Shiva – the power of existence, as well as existence itself. Sati-as-corpse is an active corpse, as I have insisted time and again in this book. As the immanent Shakti of existence, Sati presents herself as a paradoxically self-animating corpse.

If, as the *Brihaddharmapurana* and *Annadamangal* depict, Creation begins with the Devi-as-corpse, then the corpse is the embodiment of a

creative force – the Sat-Shakti, the Energy of Existence – that is never non-existent, not even in the apparent stillness of the corpse. Drawing on the Spinozean terminology, we may say that Sati's corpse, or the primordial manifestation of Devi-as-corpse with which the Creation begins in the *Brihaddharmapurana* and *Annadamangal*, is not just *natura naturata* but *natura naturans*, not just what is created, finite, but the creative force animating it, the infinite Energy of being and becoming (Guardiano 12–16; Lermond 6–8). The energy-entity of Sati's corpse stands for the simultaneous existence of *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. Creation is not two-pronged, in this corpse-Shaktism: it is not that the creative force and the created object are different or even sequential along the temporal axis, the force or energy preceding the appearance of the created object. Rather, the creative energy and the created object are coterminous; *natura naturans* is *natura naturata*, and vice versa: this paradox is captured in the figure of the corpse. And hence, in eco-critical terms, Sati's body always resists the objectification of Nature.

While Prakriti (Nature) in the Samkhya system of thought is presented as *jada*, insentient, the object of the vision of the Purusha as Drashta/seer – that is to say, a kind of corpse – Sati's corpse forces us to realize that a corpse should not be seen as the closure of life or the absence of consciousness – there is always the surplus: a mystic link between the individual corpse and the undying Being that the cosmos is. Val Plumwood suggests that the rationalist anthropocentrism of the West has visualized the reason/nature binary as paralleling the mind-body binary (52; 51–78). However, Sati's body – as a corpse – is never just a body in the conventional sense of the term. It is a body – and yet, it is more than a body, embodying the Energy-Self that does not die with the "death". Or, from a slightly different perspective, we may say that if the body and the mind can be seen as two different manifestations or reorganizations of the same Energy, then the binaries of mind/body, conscious/unconscious will break down. That is to say, we can see Sati's corpse as providing enormous potentials for an eco-critical or even eco-feminist re-reading of the sacred and the profane, nature and culture, and, most importantly, life and death.

We must notice that the creation of the Shakti *pithas* denotes a centrifugal movement of Sati's corpse from the limited sphere of culture/civilization to the unlimited sphere of Nature. Interestingly, though the Daksheshwar Shiva temple at Kankhal, Uttarakhand, and Daksha's sacrificial pit (the Yajna Kunda) on the temple premises – where Sati is supposed to have burnt herself – are visited by pilgrims, this temple is not given the status of a Sati pitha (Achyutananda 28–31). This is the place which the corpse of Sati departed from, carried by Shiva. This place is marked by her absence, whereas the Sati *pithas* are marked by her intense, eco-theological presence.

The place of the Daksha Yajna is the place marked by the hubris of the anthropocentric civilization which failed to appreciate the autonomy and power of the Para Prakriti, Great Nature, whose incarnation Sati was. This is the civilizational centre that is ruptured by Sati's corpse, which is finally dismembered and scattered over the unlimited domain of Nature.

Most of the celebrated Sati *pithas* which are said to enshrine her powerful presence are located at the heart of wild nature – springs, volcanic flames, mountain tops are said to be filled with the presence of Sati and to contain Sati's members, turned to stone or some other natural object. Sati's members, after falling on earth, become one with nature: the power of ever living nature, the *natura naturans*, becomes one with the energy-selves of the parts of Sati's corpse. Val Plumwood writes of the colonialist ideology embedded in the anthropocentric opposition to Nature; she notices that this ideology is marked by a focus on the hyper-separation between binarized entities. Nature becomes, in this epistemology, a "hyper-separate lower order" (54). Sati's corpse radically decentres the anthropocentric arrogance of "civilization" by causing the destruction of that civilizational order – the Daksha Yajna – and leads to the creation of alternative, eco-friendly civilizational centres built round her members fallen in the lap of nature.

The pilgrim sites created around the natural loci of sacrality containing Sati's members or their energy-essence are, unlike Daksha's kingdom, places encouraging a dialogue between nature and culture, the human and the non-human. Deep ecology seeks to decentre the position of "Man" in the universe; the scattering of Sati's members over natural landscapes, away from the civilizational centre, may operate as a metaphor for this decentring. Whereas the anthropocentric episteme would insist on hyper-separation between nature and culture/"the human" (as well as between different groups/classes of humans), Sati's members, falling on earth, necessitate a hyper-union of nature and the humans, forcing human beings to acknowledge and respect the sacrality of nature and natural objects. Whereas the place of the fire sacrifice of Daksha at Kankhal is one that is grounded in the anthropocentrism of "history", "culture" and "civilization", the Sati *pithas* are a departure from it. The Sati *pithas* represent the violent entry of the eternality and infinitude of Nature through the ruptured surface of history, forcing us to acknowledge that nature is the ultimate base on which we build up all forms of superstructural arrogance.

As Rana P. B. Singh, drawing on the works of David Kinsley, argues, the Sati *pithas* are characterized by the inherent sacrality and special power/spirit of the geographical places where they are located. For Kisnley, the *pithas* are the places where the Mother Goddess manifests her earthly omnipresence and motherly compassion, allowing the devotees to pray for their mundane welfare and well-being (186). Singh notices the close connection

between the Sati *pithas* and the natural objects/landscapes and the concomitant local mythology associated with them:

> All of the 51 *pithas* are closely associated with natural objects and indigenous local tales. Most of the shrines occupy either hill/mountain tops or an elevated point. . . . The contemporary location of these shrines reflects their close association with nature. As a matter of fact, eleven of them are on riverbanks, three on rivers' confluence, three on river sources, seven in hilly tracts, and so on.
>
> (134–135)

Singh observes that "In Hinduism, with special reference to the goddess worship, divine power is directly associated with natural features – ponds, lakes, mountains, hills, rivers, oceans, etc." (130). Similarly, D. C. Sircar notes:

> There is reason to believe that tanks or pools of a particular shape were often conceived as the *Yoni* of the mother-goddess. A pair of hills or peaks of the shape and position of female breasts appear sometimes to have been likewise regarded as the *Stana* of the goddess. . . . Water coming out of the springs on such hills could be very naturally taken to be the milk of the mother-goddess.
>
> (8)

Interestingly, Stass Paraskos has observed similar eco-theological formations of the cult of Aphrodite in various places of Cyprus which is called the Island of Aphrodite (1–4, 31–34, 40–41, 76–82). Is it possible, then, to associate Goddess spirituality with an essentially ecologically oriented theology? And is it not true that such a reading may facilitate the eco-feminist explorations of Sati's myth? Singh comments that the tantric figurations of the goddesses can facilitate the integration of "the contrasts and contradictions among the oppositional forces of nature" through an eco-feminist ethics (152). For Singh, the places of goddess worship, the *pithas*, become "sacredscapes" "where the nature spirit merges with the divine and those places apparently possess the Nature spirit" (148).

The fragments of Sati's corpse embody the throbbing energy, the *natura naturans*, that lies at the heart of creation. Hence, by visiting these places, and paying respect to each of the fragments of Sati's corpse, we touch the whole of Sati, just as, while experiencing a particular aspect of nature, a natural landscape or object, we touch Nature as a whole. As Imma Ramos rightly observes, in the Sati *pithas*, the focus is not on "relics" but on living goddesses (2). I would add that each of these living goddesses is not just synecdochic of Cosmic Nature Herself – the Para Prakriti – but also

epitomizes Her. In *Nature Ethics*, Marti Kheel observes that the holistic visions of ecology often end up seeing nature as a homogeneous, over-arching, conceptual whole, rather than as a conglomeration of individual objects and beings. However, Nature is not just a conceptual whole, but a complex web of individual beings and things each of which should be given care, attention and respect (1–5). When we muse over the Sati *pithas* as multiple sites of worshipping sacred Nature, we realize that they are the living reminders of the essential multiplicity of nature: nature is not an abstract whole, but a complex, poly-locational web of sacredsecular experiences.

Finally, I would like to come to the point of the eco-aesthetics and theo-aesthetics of fragmentation generated and underpinned by Sati's corpse. The scattered body parts of Sati were not gathered by the gods. Rather, they were allowed to lie scattered across the subcontinent. Their *multiplicity* as parts of her dismembered corpse should not be seen as capable of getting displaced onto a sacred map of a singular, unified "India". The body of Sati does not give rise to a body politic, a nation-state that would imply a metaphoric re-assemblage of Sati's dismembered body. The most radical implication of this myth lies in its acceptance of the expansive pluralization of the sacred body facilitated by its dismemberment, the theo-aesthetics of fragmentation. If the "whole" of the theological content is to be sought, it should not be sought in the *totality* of the sacred geography the myth ostensibly entails, but rather in the *fragments* themselves which encrypt the Whole in mystic ways. In other words, there is no way to imagine the dismembered sacred body of Sati as getting resurrected through the political body of Bharat Mata.

Rana P. B. Singh relates the Shakti *pithas* to the concept of the Bharat Mata (122). He draws on Kinsley's comment that the entire Indian landscape is metonymically connected to the body of Sati, certain parts of the physical landscape of India being identified with certain parts of Sati's dismembered body (Kinsley 187; Singh 128). Both Kinsley and Singh opine that it is the sacred places of India which give India the status of a unified politico-cultural entity (Kinsley 185; Singh 129). However, such an epistemic or even figurative association of India with Sati's body is problematic. We must remember that Sati's members are never re-arranged into an imaginary or mythic totality. Nor should we think that Sati's members have fallen only over the territorial entity called "India" rather than over the "earth". The eco-theology of Sati associates her body parts with nature – even wild nature – rather than a culturally constructed political entity. While discussing the fifty-one Shakti *pithas*, Singh himself observes:

> In terms of interaction between universality and locality, two levels may be identified: (1) from local to regional, pan India level and finally

> the infinity symbolizing the 'march from *micro* to *macro* cosmos'; and (2) from pan-India to local level – the 'march from *macro* to *micro* cosmos'.
>
> (121)

Therefore, it is wrong, in my opinion, to assume any simplistic equivalence between Sati's body and that of India. Sati's body – though it may include India within the wide range of the topographic semiotics associated with it – basically moves between two poles of spatial semantics: the microcosm and the macrocosm, the "local" and the "infinite". As Ramos also observes, the particular temple deities of various Shakti *pithas* would be unique goddesses associated with those temples as well as the various manifestations of the single goddess, Sati (2). Ramos focuses on Hindu nationalism's appropriation of the Sati *pithas* as offering an opportunity to reimagine them as "the fragmented body of the motherland" (4). However, the spiritual aspirants engaged in sadhana in these *pithas*, as well as the lay devotees visiting them for obtaining material prosperity, are not concerned so much with the "fragmented body of the motherland" as with the perennial presence of Sati in the fragments of her body, each of which denotes – paradoxically – the *whole* of Sati.

Sati, as the power of existence/isness (à la Devi Amma), denotes the unfragmented nature of being in the midst of all modes of fragmentation. The fragments of Sati's body enshrined in the *pithas* would stand for the absolute infinitude characterizing the unbounded *sat* or Being, rather than the bounded entity called India. Any nation-state denotes a bounded system, and the boundaries of a body and the boundaries of a nation-state connotationally and functionally parallel each other (Mukhopadhyay, "If the Moon smiles . . ." 3–6). As I have already argued, Sati's body, through its fragmentation, pluralizes itself and becomes boundless. It seems to me that it would be a mistake to present her body as the metaphor for the bounded territory called "India".

Singh writes:

> Using theory of crystallography as an analogy, it may be explained that all the parts of the body have the main essence of the whole body. It means that all the 51 sacred places have their unique character and importance, nevertheless all are the part of the same cosmic force – wholeness becomes holy.
>
> (148)

I think Singh's statement needs to be partially modified. As each of the members of Sati has "the main essence of the whole body", each of the

Shakti *pithas* is not only a "part" of the "cosmic force", the Great Goddess, but rather a microcosmic manifestation of Her. And hence, the wholeness which is coterminous with holiness can be experienced through the proximity of the devotee to any of the "parts" of Her body, even without trying to imaginatively gather together the parts of her body into a conceptual or discursive totality, be it the nation, or the 51-Shaktipitha temples of Gujarat (near Ambaji) and Lucknow (at Nandanvana), mentioned by Singh.

Singh says that the 51-Shaktipitha temples in Gujarat and Lucknow are designed as "archetypal microcosms" where "all the 51 Shaktipithas are represented as microcosm" (148). In the 51-Shaktipitha temple at Nandanvana, Lucknow, there are fifty-one kalashas (pots) "possessing the sacred soils from all the Shaktipithas" (149). Singh goes on to describe: "at the second floor all the 51 Shakti images along with the associated Bhairavas and the parts of body fell there, are arranged clock-wise symmetrically in the sequential order in the circular-form inner sanctum" (149). It is, indeed, a grand project. However, is this really a putting together of the fifty-one Shakti *pithas*? One may bring the sacred soils from the fifty-one Shakti *pithas*, but can one bring in the entire landscape, the complete natural and cultural context, of each of these *pithas*? The *pithas* cannot be transplanted onto alien lands. Each member of Sati, it seems, has become one with the spirit of the ecology of the concomitant *pitha*. One can experience all the Shakti *pithas* together only by becoming boundless – in other words, by becoming coterminous with the fragmented, scattered limbs of Sati herself, and thereby pluralizing and expanding oneself – at least epistemically or imaginatively – all over the earth, thereby breaking down the borders of one's own being.

Shiva knew this, and he pluralized himself in order to be in the company of all the fragments of Sati's corpse. Being the God of gods, he could have gathered the body parts and put them together. But he knew that this was not the meaning of the fragmented body of Sati. Her dismembered body asked one to expand oneself by becoming boundless, rather than creating new bounded entities like a nation-state or any "microcosmic", "archetypal" bounded system like a temple enshrining the soils of all the Shakti *pithas*. No bounded system can enshrine the fragmented body of Sati; no bounded being can become one with her as a "whole". One has to take the risk of imaginatively fragmenting oneself, and of becoming plural, jettisoning the safety of the bounded totality of one's mind-body complex. While discussing the iconography of Goddess Chhinnamasta, David Frawley points out that the image of a headless being frightens us because we always believe in an illusory totality of our bodies (*Tantric Yoga and the Wisdom Goddesses* 112–114). We forget that this totality is only a bounded, illusory totality which is essentially fragile. In order to perceive and appreciate the

ontological plurality denoted by Sati's members, we will have to overcome the fear of becoming headless, and will have to imaginatively experience the fragmentation of our own mind-body complexes – something like the meditative exercise taught by Machig Labdron through the Chod meditation (discussed in detail in Chapter 6).

No external, illusory organization of the *totality* of Sati's body can give one the real experience of the omnipresence of Devi, in plurality as well as singularity, in the corpse as well as the living body, in the severed parts of the body as well as the *whole* of the body. This omnipresence is a *play*, and not just a metaphysical "fact".

In other words, to experience the *whole* of – or *as* – the fragments of Sati's corpse, one has to let one's "phallic self" (Moi 8) die.

5 *Shava sadhana*

Who is the corpse? Shiva or Shakti?

One of the most – or rather *the* most – secret and baffling tantric ritual is the *shava sadhana*: the meditation in which the *sadhaka* engages while seated on a corpse. While the ritualistic aspects of this practice have been commented on by Indian and Western scholars alike, seldom have the scholars felt the urge to relate it to the Shakta-tantric trope of the Devi-as-corpse which this book seeks to foreground. The trickiest question regarding *shava sadhana* is: whom does the corpse in the corpse-meditation embody or represent, Devi or Shiva?

Here it would be relevant to ponder a very significant aspect of the narrative of Sati presented in the *Mahabhagavata*, the *Brihaddharmapurana* and *Annadamangal*. In these three texts, Sati goes to the *yajna* of Daksha in the form of Goddess Kali. It is this Sati in the form of Kali (in the case of the *Mahabhagavata*, the Shadow Sati is also a replica of the Kali-form of Sati) who leaves her body. Precisely, it is the form of Kali which turns into a corpse (see the Appendices). It is a unique vision of Kali-as-corpse, as Kali is generally seen as the intensely, fiercely *living* deity in the midst of the tokens of death. While in the conventional iconographic paradigms, Kali is seated or standing on Shiva-as-corpse, in these Shakta narratives of Sati, Kali is presented as that fierce form of Sati which turns into a corpse. Shiva carries this corpse – Kali's corpse, in fact – and it is the dismembered body of Sati-as-Kali-as-corpse which gives rise to the Shakti *pithas*. Here, the motif of Devi-as-corpse even turns the iconography of Kali upside down. Rather than seeing the still and silent Shiva-as-corpse lying under Kali's feet, we see here the actively dancing Shiva, Kali-as-corpse on his shoulder or head. However, here too, the corpse remains an active, and not a passive, corpse, as it physically and spiritually bears the potential of the multiple goddesses who would be located in the fifty-one *pithas*. If, thus, Kali – the central deity of the tantras, especially within the Kali Kula of Eastern India – herself appears as a corpse, then there is valid reason to believe that the corpse in the *shava sadhana* may very well be a representation of Kali, the Empress of the tantric religion in Eastern India.

The tantric texts offer contradictory and confusing descriptions of the *shava sadhana*, thereby making it difficult to understand the divine connotation of the corpse: whether it is a representation of Shakti or that of Shiva. The *Kuvjikatantram* describes various kinds of *abhicharika kriyas* (apparently, certain rituals performed for harming others or destroying enemies), associated with the funeral pyre. In these rituals associated with the funeral pyre, the Goddess in her various terrible forms plays a predominant role (*Kuvjikatantram* 68–70). However, when it comes to the rituals centred on the corpse, the situation becomes trickier. Before bathing the corpse for the sadhana, it is suggested, one should meditate on Goddess Chamunda who undermines the pride of the demons (*Kuvjikatantram* 70–71). Nevertheless, during the *shava sadhana*, the *sadhaka* is exhorted to meditate on the *shava*/corpse as Shiva. Clearly, here the corpse is associated with Shiva and not Shakti. The worshipper is asked to pray to the corpse, embodying Shiva, with these words:

> *Shavarupa Mahadeva Sarvadeva namohastute*.
>
> (*Kuvjikatantram* 71)

> O Mahadeva (Shiva), the form of the corpse and the embodiment of all gods, I bow to you.
>
> [Translation mine]

However, after this, the *sadhaka* is asked to sit on the back of the corpse and to engage in mantra *japa*, for getting the desired results. It is, nevertheless, noticeable that the text clearly says that, after the *japa*, the *sadhaka* is required to worship Karali/Kali there (*Kuvjikatantram* 72). Now, it is totally unclear as to with whom the *sadhaka* is seeking an ontological identification here – with Shiva, or with Shakti? The text says that by following the rules of this worship ritual, the *sadhaka* becomes equal to Bhairava (a form of Shiva) [*Kuvjikatantram* 72]. However, what is necessary for obtaining this ontological equivalence with Bhairava is the worship of Kali. Still, it must be acknowledged that this text does not establish any direct equivalence between the *shava*/corpse and Devi.

In other tantric texts, however, we get a different picture. In the sixth *patala* of the *Mundamala Tantra*, Devi tells Shiva:

> *Pura shruta, Mahadeva, shavasadhanam eva cha*.
> *Shmashana-sadhanam, Natha, shrutam paramam adarat*.
> *Na stotram kavacham, Natha, shrutam na shavasadhane*.
> *Kavachena Mahadeva, stotrenaiva cha Shankara*.
> *Katham siddhirbhaved Deva, kshipram tad bruhi sampratam*.
>
> (93)

> I have earlier heard the description of the corpse-sadhana (from you). O Lord, I have also heard the details of the great crematorium-centred sadhana with loving attention. However, o Lord, I have not heard the *stotra* (hymn) and *kavacha* (verbal armour) regarding the corpse-sadhana. O Lord, please tell me quickly now how the desired results can be obtained by dint of the hymn and the *kavacha*.
>
> [Translation mine]

And, interestingly, the *kavacha* revealed to Devi by Shiva in response to her query is the Durga *kavacha*, the verbal armour associated with various names of Devi, which exhorts the Divine Mother to protect the *sadhaka* in various ways (93–95). Here, it becomes apparent that the deity presiding over the *shava sadhana* is actually none other than Devi (in her various forms).

The *Sri Nila Tantram*, however, makes it conspicuous that the Devi possesses the corpse during the sadhana and gives the *sadhaka* his desired fruit. This text says that the *sadhaka* should sit on the corpse and meditate on the Devi in his heart, silently performing the *japa*. If the corpse begins to move, the *sadhaka* should not be afraid (146). If he becomes afraid, he should say:

> *Yam prarthayasi Deveshi, datavyam kunjaradikam*
> *Dinantare cha dasyami svanama kathayasva me*.
>
> (147)

> O Queen of the gods, whatever you want from me (e.g., elephant, etc.), I will offer to you the next day. Kindly tell me what your name is.
>
> [Translation mine]

The text goes on to say that, if the Goddess tells the *sadhaka* her name, he should ask her for the desired boon. If she grants the boon, the *shava sadhana* would come to an end and it would be fruitful (147).

From this, we may conclude that the corpse in the *shava sadhana* can be seen as the representation of Devi as well as Shiva. The Jagaddhatri Stotra (Hymn to Goddess Jagaddhatri) addresses the Devi as *Shavakara* (the Form of the Corpse) and *Shaktirupa* (the Form of Shakti) [Gambhirananda 333–337], thereby denoting that Shakti and *shava* are not two opposite ideas in the Shakta tantra but rather peculiarly interchangeable. Philosophically, ontologically, and epistemologically, both Shiva and Devi – in different contexts – are figured as corpses. If we recall the *Annadamangal* cosmogony, where Devi comes as an odious corpse to Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and only Shiva has the courage to sit on the corpse and meditate on her, we may see this event as the primordial moment of *shava sadhana*.

As the reward for his courage and perseverance, he gets Mother Shakti, the Creatrix of the universe and of the Trinity, as his spouse. Thus, Shiva's originary *shava sadhana* leads to the creation of the world of living beings, and also makes possible his *garhasthya* (householder-ship).

In the *Brihaddharmapurana*, the corpse-centric cosmogony is more complex – this cosmogony is simplified by Bharatchandra in his *Annadamangal*. In the *Brihaddharmapurana*, when Shiva sits on the corpse in the shape of which Devi came to the Trinity and becomes engrossed in deep spiritual meditation, Devi is pleased with his steadfastness and spiritual stability and decides to accept him as her consort. Immediately after sitting on the corpse, Shiva, too, after a momentary reflection, realizes that the corpse is Devi herself, the Original Prakriti, the Creatrix of everything. Then and there he assumes the form of a thumb-sized *linga*. On seeing Shiva assume the form of a *linga*, the corpse-shaped Devi assumes the form of the *yoni* and places that *linga* in her triangular *yoni*. Then, along with the *linga*, she, in the form of the *yoni*, gets submerged in the primordial waters. The *Brihaddharmapurana* says that this *yoni-linga* complex representing the union of the Prakriti and the Purusha is at the origin of all creation. If they become separated, immediately there will be *pralaya* (the Final Dissolution). The source of all living beings, this *yoni-linga* complex is the most venerable of all deities (*Brihaddharmapurana* 121–123).

Here, the *shava*/corpse appears as the seat of Shiva, and as the source of the Creation, but the most interesting point is that it becomes a symbol of creation and procreation thanks to its reconfiguration as the *yoni*. Stella Kramrisch, while discussing the symbols of *linga* and *yoni* in the context of Shaivism, dwells on this episode from the *Brihaddharmapurana*.

She writes:

> The combined symbol shape of *linga* and *yoni* in this late, Tantric myth was separated into its constituent parts, which were personified as god and goddess until they resumed their original position in nature during coitus. The active part was played by the goddess. In the above parable, her anthropomorphic, symbolic shape was that of a putrid corpse.
>
> (243–244)

The most important aspect of this myth is, it seems to me, the *active* nature of the goddess, the *yoni* and the corpse. The conventional figuration of materiality (corpse), femininity (goddess, woman), and the *yoni* (the female genitalia) as *passive* is shaken by the projection of Devi-as-corpse, the trope which magically turns into the trope of Devi-as-*yoni*. Whereas in the iconography of Kali, Shiva lies as a passive corpse under the active female principle: Kali, in the case of the Shiva-*linga* figured forth in the

Brihaddharmapurana, the corpse-turned-*yoni* under the *linga* is neither a passive corpse nor a passive *yoni*.

Here, let me dwell on Stella Kramrisch's reading of the "paradoxical visual symbol" of the "*linga* in the *yoni*":

> The abstract, geometrical shape, however, of the *urdhvalinga*, the repository of the ontology of existence, placed on the *yoni* as its pedestal, rises out of the *yoni*, the womb; it does not enter it. The "*linga* in the *yoni*" emerges from the *yoni*; it does not penetrate it. This paradox in the coital proximity of the sexual symbols is consonant with and amplifies that of the *linga* itself.
>
> (242–243)

This is something which often escapes our notice when we dwell on the *linga-yoni* symbolism. The *yoni* operates as the womb wherefrom the *linga* comes out. It is not the archetypally vulnerable, *penetrable* vulva envisioned by phallocentric hetero-patriarchy. Going beyond Kramrisch's interpretative schema, I would argue that the *yoni* in the *linga-yoni* complex – at least in the Shakta-tantric context – is the active womb that has an agential role to play in the emergence of the *linga* (within this religious epistemology, Devi gives birth to Shiva, as well as Brahma and Vishnu), and not the vulnerable vulva waiting to be penetrated by the *linga*.

Kramrisch writes:

> In the dual symbolism of *yoni* and *linga*, *prakrti* appears extrapolated from the comprehensive *linga* symbol and transposed into the *yoni*. . . . The knowledge of ultimate reality and of contingent reality, in which the former dwells, has the linga in the *yoni* as its visual equivalent. Yet, the *urdhvalinga*, facing upward, rises from the *yoni*, away from it, in the opposite direction. It stands for Siva, the ascetic, who is always seen along with the goddess.
>
> (248–249)

However, when we focus on the Shakta point of view from which the mythological discourses of the *Mahabhagavata* or the *Brihaddharmapurana* emerge, we can notice that Prakriti-as-*yoni* actually includes the spiritual meanings of the *linga* as interpreted by Kramrisch, and hence, is not less but rather more "comprehensive" than the symbol of the *linga*. In the Shakta ideology articulated in texts like the *Mahabhagavata*, the *yoni* would not be just the "contingent reality"; it would be the "ultimate reality" as well. Interestingly, this symbolic *yoni* representing the ultimate reality is primarily figured forth as a corpse in the *Brihaddharmapurana*. Shiva, as a *linga* seated

in the *yoni* (the most popular aniconic form of Shiva-Shakti that operates as a composite symbol), when seen from the perspective of Devi-as-corpse, the perspective provided by the *Brihaddharmapurana*, may represent for us the primordial *shava-sadhaka* seated on a corpse that magically transforms itself into the creative *yoni* of the Devi, the ultimate reality that is Prakriti as the Absolute.

From this perspective, can't we say decisively that the corpse in the *shava sadhana* is none other than Devi who can magically present herself as the enlightening and liberating *yoni*, the creative symbol of the ultimate reality? It is Shiva's primeval *shava sadhana* which brings organic life into the world through Devi's grace. Kramrisch writes, "By being born, Sati acquired the body of her own reality. It was the idea of woman represented by the female sex. The *yoni* was its seat and symbol" (248). However, Sati's female body, marked by the *yoni*, is – if we follow the Shakta puranic and tantric traditions – something that comes from a primeval corpse – the Devi-as-corpse – which transforms itself into a symbolic *yoni*. The corpse precedes the *yoni*, and both of them precede the human form of Sati, the daughter of Daksha. If the Shiva *linga* itself can be seen as the reminder of the primordial *shava sadhana* depicted in the *Brihaddharmapurana* and *Annadamangal*, then we can see it as the symbol of the *shava-sadhaka* drowned in the Mother's grace. However, the *shava-sadhaka* will have to continuously keep in mind that the corpse which is his seat is not a passive corpse, but the embodiment of the active Creatrix of the universe, the *yoni*/source of the phenomenal world, and the "anthropomorphic, symbolic shape" (à la Kramrisch) of the Mother, of the "ultimate reality".

The corpse, when seen as a manifestation of Devi, can thus release the *shava-sadhaka* from all limitations, and can give him perfect mundane pleasure. As June McDaniel rightly observes, "From the folk perspective, the power of the corpse ritual leads to enhancement of life on earth" (123). It offers "nondeath, a situation implying long life, wealth and power" (123). Of course, from this perspective, the corpse is not just the Nirguna Brahman, beyond all mundane desires and aspirations, but the active Shakti of Devi which makes possible earthly prosperity. McDaniel finely summarizes the various and even contradictory tantric statements regarding the exact onto-theological correlative of the corpse – as to, whether it is Shiva or Shakti:

> If he [the *sadhaka*] is successful [in the *shava sadhana*], he may . . . become one with Shiva using the corpse as a mediator, or have a vision of the goddess. In the visionary case, she may appear to possess the corpse, or appear before the practitioner as a beautiful woman, a little girl, or a great goddess in the sky.
>
> (124)

The interesting point is that the *shava sadhana* offers the most powerful vision of the omnipresence of Devi. She may speak through the corpse as well as through the mouth of a celestial deity or a human female – a woman or a girl. As the omnipresent energy, she may make her presence felt in a corpse – as acutely – as in a living and speaking woman or girl. McDaniel states that the practising *tantrikas* she met in Bengal told her that the goddess herself chooses the corpse for the *sadhaka*, and the *sadhaka* is not supposed to kill anybody to obtain a corpse on which he can practise the sadhana. Finding the right corpse for the *sadhaka*, they told McDaniel, is the job of the goddess (124–125). This statement made by the *tantrikas* implies that the entire process of *shava sadhana* is centred on the cult of the Mother Goddess. It is the Divine Mother who guides the *sadhaka* on every path of this sadhana.

As McDaniel observes, there are various corpse rituals prevalent in various parts of India which are associated with black magic – where one tries to capture or gain control over the soul/spirit of the deceased person (125–126). While discussing the Aghoris of Varanasi, Jonathan Parry writes that the Aghori, engaged in *shava sadhana*, is supposedly enabled to gain, through this sadhana, "an absolute control over the deceased's spirit, through which he communicates with other ghostly beings" (253). Parry dwells on the ritual necrophagy that the Aghoris engage in (255), and suggests that this necrophagy may be seen as "an act of communion in which he [the Aghori] ingests Shiva (represented by the corpse), and thus re-creates his consubstantiality with him" (263). This corpse, representing Shiva, is a passive corpse that one can eat up, unlike the active corpse of the Devi which is the source of a baffling and even horrifying play of energy over which the spiritual aspirant does not have any direct control.

However, when the Goddess is said to possess the corpse and speak to the *sadhaka* through it (as is described in the *Sri Nila Tantram*), the corpse is pushed into another epistemic framework of "death". Here, the corpse is not supposed to contain any residual spirit/soul of the dead person; nor does it represent a passive, enfleshed Shiva who is consumable necrophagically. Rather, it is seen as a material field which can be transformed into an energy field by the Devi. Such an experience would undermine the conceptual barrier between life and death, the living and the dead. The dead body may begin to move; being possessed by Devi, it may become (albeit temporarily) alive. Reorganizing the Energy common to the living beings and dead bodies, the corpse in the *shava sadhana* radically alters the *sadhaka*'s epistemology of life and death. Death ceases to be, for him, a limit to life. It becomes part of the eternal and infinite, imperishable Shakti/Energy that can turn the corpse into a source of more meaningful and resourceful temporal life. The womb and tomb become synonymous in this vision – literally, as we will see soon.

McDaniel foregrounds the centrality of Devi in the Shakta-tantric corpse ritual. Drawing on the work of John Woodroffe and texts like the *Tantra Tattva*, she shows how, as opposed to the Shaivite version of the ritual associated with the topos of detachment from the world, the Shakta version of the same centres round the grace and compassion of the Goddess. In this discourse, Devi is seen as the compassionate and loving Mother whose grace becomes intensely perceived in the death-saturated setting of the crematorium, and not in the normal conditions of social life (127–129). This is, as McDaniel finely explains, the bhakti aspect of the Shakta *shava sadhana* (128). She writes:

> The ritual of *shava sadhana* is a powerful way to call down the goddess, for her power (shakti) is understood to dwell most strongly in corpses, burning grounds, jackals, and natural sites. In this ritual, the corpse itself becomes the body of the deity, and the practitioner also becomes ritually sanctified. The goddess is often worshipped in other bodies. . . . She may be worshipped as Kumari in the bodies of young virgins, as Uma in jackals, as Mother of Siddhis within the brahmani bird or kite. She may enter the corpse itself, and speak through its mouth, or she may appear in a vision.
>
> (129)

These elements of the immensely diverse worship rituals of the Goddess make prominent an internally consistent, complex epistemology of life and death based on the idea that Devi represents the Energy, both at the macrocosmic and microcosmic levels, both in the living and in the dead. She runs through the bodies of young virgin girls as the Kumari; she runs through the corpse as the fierce but compassionate Kali or Durga; she remains present – throbbingly – within natural sites, objects and beings.

The *shava sadhana* ritual, when seen through the lens of the trope of Devi-as-corpse, makes us rethink the notion of "life" itself. It necessitates an ecological re-orientation that would broaden the *oikos* so as to accommodate the dead as well as the living. Is nature exclusively a field of the living? Or rather does it necessarily operate as an all-inclusive spectrum of all living and dead beings and things? Besides, what is a *thing*, and what is a *being*? If we believe that a being becomes, through death, a thing, we would be profoundly mistaken. All things, the so-called material objects, are the source of life; without them, the living cannot sustain their life. The dead beings who turn to stone or soil or sand continue to be part of the play of life, by contributing to the resources of life that make possible the livingness of the living beings. Food, though organic, is not itself living, but it is indispensable for life. Water is not animate, but without it, life is impossible. Devi

shows the miracle of Shakti/Energy through the *shava sadhana*. Just when you think Shakti is absent, or at best "sleeping", in a corpse-as-a-thing, she rises as a wave of life in it, and makes the corpse move.

McDaniel retells the legend of Sarvananda of Mehar. Vasudeva Bhattacharya, a devout Shakta, received a divine message telling him that he would attain liberation in his next birth as his own grandson. When the grandson is born, he is named Sarvananda. Vasudeva's servant, Purnananda, attends Sarvananda, and also tells Sarvananda about the corpse ritual. Later, Purnananda strangles himself, so that Sarvananda can perform the *shava sadhana*, sitting on the corpse of Purnananda. Sarvananda becomes successful in his *shava sadhana*, and the Goddess revives Purnananda and offers Sarvananda all kinds of siddhis, i.e., occult powers (129–130).

Interestingly, whereas none of the texts like the *Sri Nila Tantram* or *Kuvjikatantram* speak of the permanent revivification of the corpse used in the *shava sadhana*, in the legend of Sarvananda and Purnananda, the corpse used in the *shava sadhana* becomes a living being through Devi's grace. This implies that the corpse is not just a "medium" used by the *sadhaka* in the *shava sadhana* through which Devi manifests herself. Rather, the Goddess reveals, through this event, the secrets of her energy-self. The energy of life and the energy encapsulated in the corpse become one. And the Devi reorganizes the energy of the dead – Purnananda as the corpse – into the energy of life – the live Purnananda, both forms of energy being her own Shakti.

McDaniel offers a fascinating array of interpretative possibilities for exploring the iconographic, tropological, philosophical or spiritual interconnections between the *sadhaka*, the Devi and the corpse (and also Shiva, in the context of Shaiva tantra) [130–131]. However, she does not focus on the possibility of Devi being an immanent Shakti in the corpse rather than an external Energy that descends into the corpse and animates it. McDaniel mainly sees Devi as an external agent which enlivens the *sadhaka*'s heart/body and the corpse. She builds up a tropological equivalence between the body of the *sadhaka* and the corpse. It is a fine interpretative enterprise for understanding the *shava sadhana*, but I think McDaniel misses the most radical implication of the *shava sadhana*, when she differentiates between the "physical death of the body" and the "ritual death of the soul", and identifies the corpse as a liminal entity between life and death, thereby locating the possibility of the descent of the Divine Energy in the liminality of the corpse (131).

However, first of all, we need to understand that in Hinduism there is nothing such as the "death" of the "soul". The soul does not die and a living being becomes dead, according to the Hindu beliefs, only when the soul has left the body. Many Shakta *sadhakas* have been buried rather than cremated, and hence, McDaniel's differentiation between the time of physical death and the time of cremation, on the basis of which she proclaims the

liminality of the corpse, is irrelevant to the deeper epistemic implications of the corpse in the *shava sadhana*.

While differentiating between the folk and classical versions of tantric discourses and practices, she again falls into the traps of an exclusivist binarism. She says that the folk tantric traditions focus on the transmutation of the energies associated with sexuality and death into supernatural energies, whereas such supernatural or occult powers are not central to the classical tantric discourses, and the latter do not focus on gaining supernatural powers but concentrate on knowledge and enlightenment (142). Even though, in the present context, I would like to bracket off the problems that may emerge from an exclusivist binarization of classical and folk tantric practices and discourses, it has to be noticed that Kashmir Shaivism too – just like what McDaniel identifies as "folk" tantra – focuses on power/energy/Shakti. Shiva in the classical tantra is the spiritual locus of Shakti, and not just the Nirguna Brahman of Advaita Vedanta.

Besides, McDaniel fails to acknowledge the profound knowledge and enlightenment gained by the *shava-sadhaka*. Texts like the *Sri Nila Tantram* or the *Kuvjikatantram* dwell on both the enlightenment aspect and the "folk" (à la McDaniel) aspect of the tantric practices. When a *sadhaka* performs the *shava sadhana*, he gains an absolutely fresh vision of life and death, and not just some supernatural powers. The understanding of the possibility of the erasure of the boundary between life and death through the intense experiential, and not merely notional, exposure to the omnipresence of the immanent Energy of Devi – common to corpses and living beings – turns the *sadhaka* into an enlightened human being. This enlightenment has the most conspicuous practical aspect too – Purnananda's corpse is revived by Devi. I would insist that this kind of revival – whether permanent (the exceptional case of Purnananda) or temporary (the general *shava sadhana*) – of the corpse by Devi should not be seen as an external intervention but rather as an internal reorganization of Shakti.

Like McDaniel, Nigurananda, the famous Bengali writer on tantra and the Sati *pithas*, opines that in the *shava sadhana* the corpse is used as a medium or yantra (machine) which Devi uses temporarily to communicate with her devotee (177). However, such interpretative approaches to the *shava sadhana* offer a mechanical reading of the corpse, rather than a spiritually/philosophically/epistemologically grounded one, and overlook the fact that the tantric world view is grounded in the immanent dimension of the Divine Energy.

If the figuration of the corpse in *shava sadhana* as Shiva (in the view of Shaiva *tantrikas*) is philosophically and spiritually oriented (McDaniel 131), then there is no reason to think that the co-configuration of the corpse and Devi is only a matter of "folk" or bhakti-centric approach to

Her and totally devoid of any strong philosophical or spiritual content. Of course, McDaniel herself notes the existence of a spiritual element in the co-configuration of the *sadhaka*, the corpse and Devi: "Others [that is, some other *tantrikas*] say that the practitioner himself becomes both the goddess and the corpse, realizing in him or herself both the divine spirit and the physical body" (130). Nevertheless, she does not tease out the deeper philosophical, "enlightenment"-oriented implications of her own observation. The *sadhaka* actually operates in this context as the ontological hyphen between the corpse and the Devi. It is by becoming this hyphenating agent that he understands the presence of Shakti in the physical body as well as in the divine spirit, in the dead body as well as in the living body. Devi as eternal vibration and the corpse as absolute stillness become integrated in the *sadhaka*'s experience, and it is this intensified realization of the oneness of the still energy and the moving energy which makes him feel the vibration in the corpse. I would like to insist that the corpse does not move due to the descent of an external energy into it, but rather because of the awakening of the omnipresent energy that is existent in it as well as in the *sadhaka*. It is an energetic enlightenment, so to speak; a practical understanding of the inefficacy of the strongest ontological and existential binary that determines our all other epistemic superstructures – the binary of life and death.

To be very precise, the moving corpse in *shava sadhana* is not a signal of the descent of Shakti from outside, but rather an index of the awakening of the Shakti immanent in the corpse. Here, the first co-configuration is that of the corpse and the *sadhaka*, while the second level of co-configuration is that of the corpse, the *sadhaka* and the Devi. In the practice of the awakening of the Kundalini, the inherent Energy (figured as Devi) in the psychophysical self of a human is awakened – the common, sleeping human becomes a fully awakened, enlightened being. Here the enlightenment is grounded in practice as well as knowledge. In the case of the *shava sadhana*, as McDaniel too would concur (130), the unenlightened human condition is tropologized as a corpse, and this tropological corpse is co-configured with the real, physical corpse. However, just as the tantric doctrine of the Kundalini replaces the metaphor of death with that of sleep, suggesting that the unenlightened human being is not actually a corpse, a *thing*, but a sleeping *being*, the *shava-sadhaka* too gradually understands that he himself and the corpse on which he sits are not actually corpses (whether tropological or physically "real") but sleeping beings in which the Shakti is asleep. Through the mantras and other spiritual practices, he awakens this Shakti, in the corpse as well as in himself, and, consequently, Devi rises with her full energy-self in the corpse as well as in the *sadhaka*.

The *Shaktanandatarangini* quotes the *Gandharva Tantra* as suggesting that only one who has become one with one's god/goddess can worship the

latter (Brahmanandagiri 139). Hence, while the *shava-sadhaka* begins his sadhana by identifying himself with the corpse, he has to simultaneously identify himself with Devi as well. And hence, a complex co-configuration of Devi, the *sadhaka* and the corpse is an essential part of the *knowledge* of life and death, Energy and the Self, that is the result of a successful *shava sadhana*. It erases the "hyper-separation" Plumwood speaks of and introduces a radical hyper-union of beings and things, the material and the spiritual, the living and the dead. Every*thing* becomes a being – as, Devi as the Energy-Self is present in all things. Thus, all the "inanimate" objects, in the vision of the Shakta *tantrika*, would become sleeping *beings*, the inner Shakti of which may rise up at any moment, just as, at any moment, the immanent Shakti may begin to move the corpse on which you sit.

Finally, there is an issue which needs special attention. While the trope of Devi-as-corpse necessarily centres around the co-configuration of the corpse and the divine feminine in Hinduism, the corpse featuring in the Sanskrit texts or folk practices related to *shava sadhana* is not necessarily feminine. *Annadamangal* presents a cosmogony which begins with Devi-as-corpse. However, the gender of this corpse is not specified. On the other hand, Sati's corpse is evidently a female corpse. The *Sri Nila Tantram* says that the *shava-sadhaka* or *vira* should not use the corpse of a woman (143). But Nigurananda relates a case of *shava sadhana* where the corpse of a girl was used, a case narrated to him by a German spiritual aspirant (181–183). So, it is clear that the corpse in *shava sadhana* is to be identified with Devi not in terms of a feminine body, but rather in terms of a feminine energy-self which may manifest itself through a male corpse, as well as a female corpse. However, when the binary of life and death itself is challenged by the manifestation of Devi-as-corpse, it is only natural that the gender binary would become superfluous in this context.

And still, there is one image of the Devi which presents her as a specifically *female* corpse. It is Goddess Chhinnamasta.

Devi-as-corpse in the *shava sadhana* may be seen as metaphorically enfleshed in the figure of Goddess Chhinnamasta who, as Elisabeth Anne Benard points out, beheads herself to indicate "her ability to transcend the relative dichotomy of life and death" (97). Chhinnamasta's iconography is brilliantly explained by both Benard and Kinsley. However, in the context of Devi-as-corpse, I would read her iconography as the living female corpse which does not lie passively, but *stands* with divine grandeur. For Benard, she is a goddess who "pushes one beyond dualities into the realm of the unconditioned and unconditional – a spiritual experience eagerly sought but frightening and repelling when actually experienced" (xi). Of course, this experience is as frightening as the experience of witnessing the speaking corpse that the corpse ritualist (*shava-sadhaka*) has. As far as the trope of

Devi-as-corpse is concerned, Chhinnamasta is unique in that she is the most striking graphic manifestation of the *active* corpse I have highlighted time and again. She holds her severed head in her hand, and her blood flows out, sustaining her two female companions. She is the most powerful representation of Devi as a specifically *female* corpse, a corpse in which the Energy-Self is awakened fully and operates as a nourishing power. Kinsley says that her iconography forces us into the coruscating and jolting awareness of "the truth that life feeds on death, is nourished by death, necessitates death, and that the ultimate destiny of sex is to perpetuate more life, which in turn will decay and die in order to feed more life" (173).

However, Kinsley's view is problematic in that he does not see the goddess herself as the corpse that is paradoxically the source of life; rather, he sees the copulating couple of Kama and Rati beneath her feet as the source of her vital energy (173).

He writes:

> Chinnamasta takes life and vigor from the copulating couple, then gives it away lavishly by cutting off her own head to feed her devotees. Such is the way of things in a world where life must be sustained by organic matter, where metabolism is maintained only by ingesting the corpses of other beings.
>
> (175)

However, it is not wise to invest the couple beneath her feet with the agency to supply vital energy, as it is the goddess herself who is seen in this paradoxical image as simultaneously "killing" herself, turning herself into a corpse, and yet making this corpse into a perennial source of life and nourishment. If the iconography represents the continuum of life and death, then it is the goddess herself who is the embodiment of this continuum. I would like to refute the interpretative schema provided by Kinsley – "The cycle is starkly portrayed: life (the lovemaking couple), death (the decapitated goddess), and nourishment (the flanking *yoginis* drinking her blood)" (173). One should not endorse such a compartmentalization and breaking up of the whole image that represents Chhinnamasta the paradox. There is no organic relation between the copulating couple and the Devi; she nourishes the yoginis with her own blood, that is, her own endless energy that is never stilled – not even when she is a corpse.

In the place of the Kinsleyan interpretative model, I would rather advocate the reading of Chhinnamasta as the awakened Energy-Self of Devi-as-corpse. She erases the dualism of life and death, and foregrounds the universal continuum of energy that forecloses the possibility of *death*. As I have already shown, in terms of the energy-self, every*thing* in the world is

a being, the inanimate world being only the world of sleeping beings, and not of corpses. The corpse is not the non-being of a being; it is the sleeping energy-self of that being which can awaken itself at any moment. A food chain is not a network of beings living on the corpses of other beings but rather a rhythmic movement of ecological energy through living and nourishing corpses like Chhinnamasta herself, through the alternating states of sleeping and waking being.

Chhinnamasta is that manifestation of Devi-as-corpse which reveals that energy is immanent in all corpses, waiting for an impetus to wake up. All the Sati *pithas* are the storehouses of the energy that the members of Sati embody. Shiva, in his Bhairava forms, is, as it were, engaged in *shava sadhana* in all these *pithas* over the fragments of Sati's corpse. He knows that the parts of the dead body may open up their energy-selves at any moment, and so waits, patiently, for the awakening of the intense power of the beloved's inerasable existence – her *presence* – that is the meaning of *Sati*.

6 Placing the Devi's corpse on the shore of a thousand streams

A multicultural and comparativist reading of the Devi as corpse

This chapter will attempt a cross-cultural reading of the Devi's corpse, discussing multiple issues pertaining to the figuration of the Devi as a corpse and the theme of the Shakti *pithas*. Metaphorically speaking, in this chapter, I will lay down Devi's corpse at the confluence of several cultural streams where it would become possible to present a comparativist reading of Devi's corpse and other similar cultural and religious phenomena from diverse cultural formations all over the world.

While discussing the origin of the Shakti *pithas*, D. C. Sircar reminds us of the "Buddhist legends regarding the worship of Buddha's corporeal relics and the construction of *Stupas* in order to enshrine them" (7). Other scholars, too, have focused on the Buddhist *stupas* while speaking of the Sati *pithas* (Bandyopadhyay 344, Chattopadhyaya 34–35).

Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya writes:

> [T]he *pithas* developed in India at the initial stage under foreign influence. The course of ancient Indian history shows that foreign elements primarily worked in the field of religion in India centring round Buddhism. It should be noted that one of the earliest Mahayana texts (*the Hevajratantra*), refers to the *pithas*, and the *Kubjikamata* which also was inspired by traditions of the west . . ., refers to them. If we remember the fact that after the death of the Buddha various *stupas* were built on the different remnants of his mortal coil, we can at once realise wherefrom the idea of the *pithas* came into the field of Hindu religion. (34)

However, we need to remember that, in the case of the emergence of the Sati *pithas*, what is most crucial is not relic worship but the dismemberment of Sati's body, which can by no means be related to the Buddhist traditions. Besides, the Buddha was cremated (Strong 118), while Sati's body did not turn into ashes even though she is said (in certain versions of the myth) to have entered the sacrificial fire of the *yajna* arranged by Daksha.

With reference to the motif of dismemberment, Sircar dwells on the Osiris myth in the context of the Sati *pithas*:

> Osiris's brother Set put Osiris in a wooden coffin which he nailed up and cast into the sea; the waves bore it to Syria where, long after, Osiris's sister and wife Isis found it and took the body to Egypt; there unfortunately Set "found it and scattered the bones far and wide, whence came the innumerable relics of Osiris shown to the faithful of later days in the temples of Egypt".
>
> (7)

However, Frances Vaughan reads the myth differently: she says that Isis was the divine mother of Osiris,and happened to be his bride as well. It was Isis who:

> put his dismembered body back together and raised him from the dead. She married him and conceived his reincarnation, Horus, who became Osiris again. She also took him to heaven where he reigned as the father god, Ra. They were cyclically reincarnated as father-son, and son-father, dwelling in the Mother as fetus, lover and corpse.
>
> (63)

According to Vaughan, in the Persephone-Demeter myth, Isis-Osiris myth, and the Grail legends:

> [T]he feminine plays a significant role in restoring the earth to fruitfulness and healing what has been broken. The power of the feminine, manifesting as love and compassion, restores what has been dismembered to wholeness and transforms the wasteland into a garden. . . . She attends the cycles of birth, death and rebirth.
>
> (63)

Vaughan thematizes these mythic tropes as "transcendence of sexuality beyond death" (64).

Nevertheless, the trope of Devi-as-corpse in the Sati myth problematizes this easy equation of wholeness, sexuality, natural fecundity and the sacred feminine. In the Sati myth, the divine feminine herself appears as a corpse and then gets fragmented. Here we don't have a myth of the dismemberment of a male body which is made whole by the sacred feminine. When the body of Sati gets fragmented, it is not reassembled. The reincarnation of Sati as Parvati forms the core of a different mythic narrative in the life of Shiva, but Sati's myth ends with the dismemberment and scattering of

the body parts on earth, her members in effect sacralizing earthly existence and becoming one with living nature, making obvious the continuity of the sleeping energy in a corpse and the dynamic energy in living nature. Here, dismemberment is not followed by the reassembling of the members – however, the dismemberment does not produce a "wasteland", either. I have persistently opposed those readings of the Sati myth which see the scattered members of Sati as giving rise to a whole, the "garden" (à la Vaughan) called India. Just as Vaughan focuses on the role of the divine feminine in restoring wholeness and constructing the "garden", Kinsley too reads Sati, the central figuration of the sacred feminine in tantric Shaktism, as a force that makes herself a "whole" after the dismemberment of her body by becoming one with India. He writes:

> According to this myth, then, the Indian subcontinent has been sacralized by the remains of Sati. India is in effect her burial ground. The subcontinent is sown with the pieces of Sati's body, which make the land especially sacred. The myth also stresses that the numerous and varied *pithas* and goddesses worshipped at them are part of a larger, unified whole. Each *pitha* represents a part of Sati's body or one of her ornaments; taken together, the *pithas* found throughout India constitute or point toward a transcendent (or, perhaps, better, a universally immanent) goddess whose being encompasses, underlies, and unifies the Indian subcontinent as a whole. In short, the Indian subcontinent *is* the goddess Sati.
>
> Although the myth speaks of the dismemberment of Sati's corpse, the emphasis at the *pithas* is not on the worship of Sati's relics but on the worship of living goddesses, who are all understood as manifestations of the living Mahadevi. The point is not so much that India is the reliquary of the Devi's corpse as it is that India is the Devi's living body.
>
> (187)

Kinsley forgets that, unlike the Egyptian or Greek myths of dismemberment (that of Dionysus, for instance), the Sati myth presents very powerful, subversive images of first, the sacred feminine as a corpse; and then, its dismemberment. I would say that the myth of the Sati *pithas* powerfully disturbs the "cycles of birth, death and rebirth". Parvati as Sati reborn is a trope bracketed off by the myth of the *pithas*. When the fragments of Sati's corpse drop on earth, they themselves become multiple sources of life and fruitfulness without looking forward to any ulterior image of the "whole" or the "rebirth" of the en-corpsed divine self whose fragments they are. The fragments of Sati's corpse – each of them – paradoxically embody the whole, the whole of life, the sacred energy of the universe. They are not just

parts of the whole called India – as Kinsley argues – but rather, each of them is the whole, the Mahadvei. My formulation would be – precisely – that India *is not* Sati. The myth of the Sati *pithas* foregrounds a theo-aesthetics of fragmentation, and the Shakta spirituality associated with this myth actually does not try to transcend the fragments by dwelling on a whole beyond or ulterior to them, but rather sees the whole in each fragment itself. In fact, I would argue, Devi-as-corpse interrogates the binarization of the garden and the wasteland, death and life, the whole and fragments.

In this context, it would be relevant to refer to the issue of "sacrifice" in the Vedic discourse of the Purusha Yajna. The dismemberment or division of the Primordial Being operates here as a cosmogonic myth. However, this Being is not figured as a corpse here. J. C. Chatterji, while discussing the Purusha Yajna, opines that here division does not mean diminution, but rather the created universe embodies the fullness/wholeness of the Primordial Being (gendered masculine), just as, in physics, when the storehouse of universal energy gives rise to the "energy units", each of these units would "seem to be as inexhaustible as the entire storehouse from which it is produced" (22–24). This observation is applicable to the case of Sati's corpse as well. As a storehouse of energy (albeit coiled in a corpse), this corpse, when dismembered, gives rise to the energy units embodied in its members which are – in terms of energy – equal to the whole energy-house which the corpse as a whole signifies.

However, interestingly, Sri Aurobindo transforms the trope of the Purusha Yajna into that of Prakriti Yajna, "the holocaust of Prakriti, the sacrifice of the Divine Mother" (17). Aurobindo says that, out of her immense affection for the created beings and due to her desire to elevate the world of Darkness to the eternal light of the Life Divine, she has:

> borne to pass through the portals of the birth that is a death, taken upon herself the pangs and sorrows and sufferings of the creation, since it seemed that thus alone could it be lifted to the Light and Joy and Truth and eternal Life.
>
> (17)

Through brilliant rhetorical devices, Aurobindo feminizes and physicalizes the trope of sacrifice which is figured through highly symbolic and not so obviously corporealized figurations in the "Purusha Sukta" hymn (Rosen 54–58). For Aurobindo, Prakriti – the Divine Mother – goes through the physically painful process of self-sacrifice such as Sati had gone through while immolating herself. In other words, metaphorically speaking, Prakriti consents to become a corpse and get dismembered and scattered over the unenlightened world so that the unenlightened beings can become enlightened

through a kind of *shava sadhana*, by perceiving and appreciating the continuum of the divine energy in the apparently dead matter as much as in the living spirit.

Again, by drawing on my previous observations on dismemberment as pluralization and self-expansion, I would insist that the Prakriti Yajna is, beyond its apparent connotations of getting limited and veiled, and those of suffering, potentially an exercise of the power of self-expansion that characterizes the Divine Energy. If this pluralization is not seen as leading to chaos, and to the "wasteland" (à la Vaughan), and if the cosmos is not seen only as an *ordered* plurality, the "garden" of Vaughan, then we may say that the self-sacrifice of Prakriti, just like that of the Purusha (according to Chatterji), leads to a plurality of wholes rather than a plurality of parts.

Let's now move from the trope of self-sacrifice to that of a joyful, mystic, imaginative destruction/fragmentation of the body by the embodied being, as is seen in the Tibetan Chod meditation practices taught by Machig Labdron, who was said to be an incarnation of Goddess Prajnaparamita, the Buddhist Goddess of Perfect Wisdom (Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses* 182).

Natalie Marsh writes:

> Chod is a meditative and ritual methodology, based on the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita) teachings, in which one severs all attachments to ego through the envisioned destruction and offering of one's own body to deities and demonic spirits alike. Although rooted in Prajnaparamita literature, with its emphasis on nondual wisdom and boundless compassion, Chod practice incorporates many Tantric elements and motifs, including mantra recitation and visualization in cremation grounds.
>
> (155)

It is also a kind of self-sacrifice (or rather ego-sacrifice), oriented towards the goal of gaining perfect wisdom. The imaginative fragmentation of the body in the Chod meditation practices of Buddhist tantra can be compared to the physical fragmentation of Sati's corpse, both implying a spirituality that walks hand in hand with death. If there can be built up a spiritual or meditation tradition based on the myth of the Sati *pithas*, it may be like the Chod meditation practice: identifying himself with the Devi's corpse that gets fragmented, the *sadhaka* may visualize his corporeal self as getting fragmented and hence pluralized and expanded. The Prajnaparamita tradition, in theory and practice, negates the concept of the unified ego (Mukhopadhyay, *Literary and Cultural Readings* 88–102). A meditation on oneself as a dynamic corpse like that of Sati would lead to the dissolution of the "phallic self", and at the same time, will produce thrilling joy rather than stasis.

By imaginatively fragmenting the body, the Chod meditator undermines the boundaries of the body which make the body a bounded system – and, in this process, makes himself/herself unlimited. The phallic selfhood is seen in such meditation practices as a matter of limitations. Elisabeth Benard, while discussing the figure of Chhinnamasta/Chhinnamunda in the context of the Buddhist tantric and siddha traditions, relates the symbolic act of severing one's own head to the "non-attachment to self" (12). In order to be totally free and self-expansive, one should not be a unified, concrete self that asserts its existence in a totalitarian way, but should rather be the pluralized self that has scattered itself and has achieved "nondual wisdom" and "boundless compassion". It is interesting that Machig Labdron – though a *female* tantric teacher and said to be a manifestation of Prajnaparamita, the divine feminine in Mahayana Buddhism – does not present a trajectory from dismemberment to wholeness (as argued by Frances Vaughan), but rather indicates the journey from an illusory wholeness to dismemberment, followed by the experience of boundlessness.

Both Sircar and Nigurananda focus on the possible connections between the Sati myth and the incest myth associated with the tropes of "sacrifice" and dismemberment which can be found in the Rig Veda and the Brahmanas (Sircar 5; Nigurananda 24–26). However, I think what is more important for the exploration of this myth is a focus on the interlinked topoi of femininity, corporeality and death. In the context of the Sati *pithas*, Nigurananda refers to the folklore of the Oraon community which tells the tale of a sparrow which, when shot with an arrow, flew away and the blood that dropped from its head sanctified certain places of the Oraon country as the Mahadania villages (Nigurananda 29; Saraswati 357). This trope of the sparrow's blood sanctifying natural and social space may be seen as providing a parallel to the organic connection between Sati's body parts and the natural landscapes which are, as it were, energized and sanctified by them.

Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya points out that "the earliest *pithas* developed in the region outside Madhyadesa, identical with the Aryavarta of the *Baudhayana* and *Vasistha Dharmasutras* and the *Mahabhasya* of Patanjali, regarded as the citadel of orthodox culture" (41). He goes on to insist, "This would show that the concept of *pitha* was generally heterodox in character and this also shows that the earlier tantras referring to them were of heterodox nature" (41). Probably, thinking along similar lines, Nigurananda offers a possible "historical" interpretation of the Sati myth. He says that Shiva may have been a sage from Manasa Kailash in Tibet who propounded *sahaja yoga* after coming down from the Himalayas to the plainlands of Aryavarta. After a tussle with the brahminical system of thought, this new spiritual doctrine was finally accepted by the brahmins. After the death of his wife, his followers preserved her body parts as relics, in consonance

with the tradition of relic worship in Tibet (32–33). However, this can be seen only as a comparable cultural parallel, rather than as a possible interpretation of the Sati myth, as we have already seen that the body parts of Sati are worshipped not as relics but as goddesses dwelling in the *pithas*, the seats of living Shakti.

In this context, we also need to mention the practice of human sacrifice which was associated with the fierce forms of the goddess in various parts of India. Nigurananda speaks of human sacrifice in the context of ancient Mesopotamian, Mayan, Mexican and Nicaraguan religious cultures. In some of these cases, the sacrificed human was supposed to be homologous to the deity worshipped (42–43). However, in the context of human sacrifice in Shaktism, no direct homology is established between the Mother Goddess and the sacrificed human.

Nigurananda and Sircar offer a piece of information with respect to the practice of human sacrifice in Kamarupa, Assam, famous for the worship of Goddess Kamakhya and one of the most significant Sati *pithas* in India. There used to be a group of men called *bhogis* in Kamarupa. They offered their lives to the Goddess Ai who was said to live in a cave. The *bhogis* could hear the mystic summons of the Goddess Ai, and after this they were marked as the prospective human sacrifices for the Goddess (Sircar 16; Nigurananda 43–44). In this case, the practice of human sacrifice is based on a mystic communication and connection between the Goddess and the human being to be sacrificed. This, of course, does not imply a homology between the sacrificed being and the Goddess, but we must underline the mystic relation between the Goddess and the *bhogi* – which implies something more than a ritualistic human sacrifice, representing, instead, a kind of self-sacrifice.

As far as the Goddess Kamakhya, one of the central tantric goddesses of India and the presiding deity of one of the most important Sati *pithas*, is concerned, there is a very interesting connection between the etymology of her name and the trope of Devi-as-corpse. Banikanta Kakati suggests that the formation *Kama* in *Kamakhya* may have come from some extra-Aryan origins, most notably the Austric formations like *Kamin*, grave or *Kamet*, corpse (Khasi) [Kakati]. However, whereas her association with the *Kamin* or grave would tend to link her with the aboriginal traditions of ancestor worship (as Kakati suggests), her association with the *Kamet* or corpse may directly bridge her aboriginal and Hindu histories, and link her with the Devi-as-corpse that the figure of Sati represents. Kakati suggests that the aboriginal facet of Kamakhya may present her as the "Ancestral Mother". The representation of Devi as the Originatrix of everything in the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana*, a text that highly celebrates the Kamakhya Pitha, intricately equates the aboriginal Ancestral Mother with the Mother

of the Universe in Shaktism, and also with the *yoni* (vulva) of Sati's corpse that gave rise to this *pitha*. If we remember the cosmogony of the *Annadamangal*, a text evidently influenced by the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana* and the *Brihaddharmapurana*, we will be reminded of the fact that Devi-as-corpse propels that cosmogony. The formless Devi first takes the form of a corpse and then tests the Trinity, and finally Shiva wins her admiration as the greatest yogi. Besides, as we have already seen, the *Brihaddharmapurana* co-configures Devi-as-corpse and Devi-as-*yoni*, something which is absolutely relevant to the cult of Goddess Kamakhya.

Nigurananda highlights an interesting aspect of the practice of human (self-)sacrifice in the context of the cult of Goddess Kamakhya, an aspect that may remind us of Kinsley's observations on the image of Goddess Chhinnamasta. Nigurananda writes:

> Nature (Prakriti) creates in order to destroy. Life flourishes in order to be destroyed. Life and death go on side by side. Each of them is the shadow of the other. The Goddess of Nilachal [Goddess Kamakhya] is the life-giving Devi, the goddess of love or *eros*. And, simultaneously, the goddess of death. Even the highly intellectual Hindus believe that the mortal being can serve this goddess, by getting excited by *eros* and giving birth to progeny, and by sacrificing his/her own life.
>
> At one point of time, Chattagram [now in Bangladesh] was also part of the kingdom of Kamarupa. In the temple of the Mother atop the Chandrashekhar Hills of Kamarupa, human sacrifices used to be conducted. The human sacrifices were made with the hope that this would fill the kingdom with plenty of crops. But Devi used to reveal to the people the fact that, just as she was the goddess of life and *eros*, the goddess of happiness and harmony, she was also the goddess of death. If human sacrifices were not made in her honour, Devi used to cause natural calamities, thereby automatically ensuring the human sacrifices due to her.
>
> (101) [Translation mine]

This is a significant observation on not just Devi Kamakhya, but also Mother Nature herself. Nature is both womb and tomb, the motion of life and the stasis of death, the continuum of living and dying beings. She is the giver and taker of life at once. Sati, however, lends another dimension to this paradox – as Kali, she is the giver and taker of the lives of the others, but also, and more importantly, the taker of her own life. She can play the game of creating and destroying the universe, coupled with the game of becoming a corpse. Like Sati-as-Kali and like Chhinnamasta, Nature (Prakriti) – in the

Shakta myths discussed in this book – is not just simultaneously creative and destructive; she is the corpse and the creatrix (*yoni*) at once.

Suman Gupta, while exploring the rise and growth of shamanism in Birbhum, the district in Bengal in which Tarapith, the great temple of Goddess Tara, is located, notes that at one point of time Buddhism and Jainism had deep connections with shamanism. He mentions the legend that Jain Mahavir, the great Tirthankara of Jainism, also took lessons in shamanism. Gupta notices that the shamanism of Bengal was closely related to a sadhana associated with corpses and the bones of dead humans. Besides, the aboriginal people associated with this belief system, as Gupta observes, are still staunch believers in ancestor worship (Gupta 18–22). This mode of faith is based on the topos of the communication between the living and the dead. In this cultural formation, the dead are not totally a matter of the past, they are not totally *absent*; rather, they continue to be present in a particular layer of existence. They are both inside and outside the individual psyche. In the tantric practices, this existential continuum of the living and the dead is extremely important. As Nigurananda points out, for the Hindu believer, there is no death in the universe; there are only transformations (174). However, this belief assumes a practical dimension in tantric Shaktism. If there is no death, then the living and the dead can perceive that they exist in the same existential continuum. The dead can speak to the living.

Kazi Nazrul Islam, the noted Bengali poet and a writer of a number of devotional songs for Goddess Kali, had gone through excruciating grief after losing his son, Bulbul. He became possessed with the obsessive desire to see his dead son. In this situation, he met Baradacharan Mazumdar, a Shakta *sadhaka*. Baradacharan, despite his initial reluctance, finally gave Nazrul a mantra and asked him to regularly perform the *japa* of the mantra. Continuing to chant the mantra regularly, Nazrul, one day, obtained a vision of his dead son (Goswami 169–170). In this case, too, the Shakta tantra bridges the gap between the living and the dead and seeks to find a practical solution for the irresistible desire of the living to see the dead loved one.

Jonathan Parry observes that the Aghoris of Varanasi powerfully subvert the conventional idea of death as the ultimate limit to life. Parry observes that, by virtue of his perennial proximity to the tokens of death (skulls, corpses, etc.), the Aghori is able to realize the theological doctrine of the all-pervasive nature of the Divine, Its nondual existence as an all-embracing One, in the most radical – experiential – way. He can challenge the hierarchical social order, the orthodox concepts of pollution and purity, and the division between life and death or the living and dead bodies. And yet, such Aghoris, who, as it were, live with death, are seen by their lay devotees as

the miracle workers who can bless them with material prosperity and well-being (Parry 249, 256–257, 260–264).

As Parry notices, according to the popular beliefs, a really accomplished Aghori, who has achieved complete spiritual enlightenment, does not die. He takes *jivit-samadhi*:

> His body is arranged . . . in a meditational posture (known as *padma-san*), sitting cross-legged with his up-turned palms resting on his knees. He is then placed in a box which, in Banaras, is buried in the grounds of Kina Ram's *ashram* . . . A small shrine containing the phallic emblem of Shiva is erected over the site of the grave, the emblem transmitting to the worshipper the power emanating from the ascetic's subterranean meditation.
>
> By entering *samadhi* (the term refers to his tomb as well as to his condition within it) which he is represented as doing by conscious desire at a time of his choosing, the ascetic unequivocally escapes the normal consequences of death: the severance of the connection between body and soul, the corruption of the body and the transmigration of the soul. Provided that he has "taken *samadhi*" while still alive (*jivit-samadhi*), rather than being "given" it after death, his body is immune to putrescence and decay although it remains entombed for thousands of years.
>
> (260)

Parry also describes the phenomenon of the *jagrit-samadhi* ("awakened *samadhi*"):

> Endless stories nevertheless testify to a conviction that the body of the model ascetic is perfectly and perpetually preserved in its tomb; and it is widely believed that this body is at times animated by his peripatetic soul which may be brought back to its former shell in an instant by the fervent prayers of the devotee.
>
> (261)

In this occult epistemology, death is no more an issue; the corpse is both a corpse and a living body at once. It remains the source of power, full of salvific potentials for the distressed devotees. However, this corpse is at least a whole, un-dismembered corpse. On the other hand, in the case of Sati, though she is said to "leave" her body, she – or rather her energy-self – does not leave it totally, and even the dismembered body – the parts of her corpse – continue to operate as the embodiments of her living energy.

We have just seen how the buried corpse of a *sadhaka* or a sage may become a sacred object of worship in Shakta or Shaivite tantric belief

systems. In the precincts of the Malleshwar Shiva temple of Mallarpur, a town in Birbhum, West Bengal, there is the *samadhi*, the burial of Sri Krishnananda Sarasvati Agamavagisha, who was a great tantric saint and the guru of Ramprasad Sen, the greatest composer of Bengali Shyamasangits (the devotional songs for Shyama/Kali). It is said that Krishnananda had prayed to God Siddhanath Shiva and Devi Siddheshvari that everybody should get whatever they would ask him for. After the divine couple gave him the promise that indeed he would be the fulfiller of everybody's desire, he buried himself alive in the temple precincts. To this day, his burial place is seen as a very sacred and powerful place of worship. It is said that the desires of the devotees coming to the burial of Sri Krishnananda, called Sannyasibaba locally, are always fulfilled. Sannyasibaba is seen as an ever-awake deity (Goswami 114–115).

Here, and in many other instances of the tantric Shakta saints burying themselves alive (or getting buried after natural death) and then becoming divinized, we come upon the startling manifestation of the trope of a human death followed by a divine corpse. These saints prove that there is actually no decisive ontological break between one's status as a living being and one's status as dead. Death does not entail an absence, but rather continues the presence of the beloved or venerated one. Here, the corpse becomes a sacred embodiment of the undying Energy-Self. Sannyasibaba's sacred corpse, it is said, is always awake, and not "dead".

Such sacred corpses of the Shakta-tantric*sadhakas* actually replicate Devi-as-corpse. An apt and complex example would be the altar of the statue of Goddess Kali in the Kamalakanta Kali temple in the town of Bardhaman, West Bengal. Kamalakanta was a great saint and devotee of Kali, and a great composer of devotional songs for Her. When he was about to leave his body (this is not just a euphemism for death in the Hindu context, as some assume, but rather a radically distinct Hindu view of death as the Atman/Self changing bodies/vessels), the Maharajah of Bardhaman, his patron, wanted to take him to the Ganga, as, in Hinduism, death by the river Ganga is supposed to be very auspicious and to liberate the soul of the dead from the cycle of births. However, Kamalakanta refused to go to the Ganga. He said that he would leave his body before the image of Kali, his *ishtadevi*. Nevertheless, at the moment of his leaving the body, the waters of the Ganga are said to have risen mystically from under the ground. In the Kamalakanta Kali temple of Bardhaman, the marble altar, on which the statue of Goddess Kali stands, actually entombs Kamalakanta's corpse (Bharati 101–106). Here, one may be tempted to equate the devotee's corpse with the corpse-like Shiva under Kali's feet. However, it appears to me that, in this case, the *sadhaka*'s corpse is one with the goddess standing on the altar. The devotee-as-corpse is actually Devi-as-corpse, whereas the

smiling Kali on the altar is the Devi as dynamic Shakti. As we have already seen, according to the Jagaddhatri Stotra, Devi is both *shava* and Shakti, *Shavakara* and *Shaktirupa*.

As W. Y. Evans-Wentz points out, both *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in their own ways, focus on the phenomenon of coming out of one life form – through death – and entering a "New Life" (xvi). The focus, in other words, is on "the ever-recurrent Resurrection, the coming forth into a new life of things that had died" (xvii). However, in the case of the myth of the Sati *pithas*, we witness the bracketing off of the ostensibly non-material state between Devi leaving one body and entering another, which an Occultist would seek to foreground. The central message of the trope of the Sati Pitha is not grounded in the disembodied, spiritual state of the Devi between her Sati-avatar and the Parvati-avatar. Rather, the Sati *pithas* perpetuate Sati's *life* through the embodiment of Sati in her body parts preserved in the *pithas*. The apparent materiality of one life form/incarnation/avatar remains intact; and the myth reorients us to the overwriting of the death/birth dichotomy with an emphasis on the universal and perennial life force that undermines both the linear temporality of birth-to-death and the cyclical temporality of birth-to-death-to-rebirth. As Evans-Wentz puts it, "Over the bosom of the Earth-Mother, in pulsating vibrations, radiant and energizing, flows the perennial Stream of Life" (xvii). Sati's corpse, after its dismemberment, becomes one with this stream, and Sati remains embodied in it, rather than vanishing in the mystic intermediary state between (her) departure from Sati's body and arrival into Parvati's. Precisely, Sati does not "leave" her body, even though she has apparently left it. She remains immanent in it, and, even without reference to her later avatar, Parvati, Sati's devotees can touch her throbbing energy-self in all the *pithas*.

It is the living's yearning for the dead, and fear of death, which initiate all philosophies and religions. Shiva, being immortal, did not have the fear of death. But he did yearn for the dead wife, Sati. Through the establishment of the Sati *pithas*, where her members became the seats of her undying energy-self, Shiva sought relief from his grief. Turning from the grief over the illusory absence of Sati to the joy of her co-presence with him in all the *pithas*, he found a palpable – at once most corporeal and most spiritual – solution to the problem of the beloved one's death. It was the erasure of death itself, through the emergence of the awareness of the Energy-Self embodied in the corpse which became one with living nature.

In Kankhal, near the place of Daksha's fire sacrifice and the Dakshesh-war Shiva temple, there is a *ghat* on the Ganges named Satighat. On both sides of the way to this *ghat*, there are small stupa-like, or shrine-like structures, which are the memorials of women who had immolated themselves

on the pyres of their husbands, or, became *satis* (Achyutananda 30). On the other hand, it needs to be noticed that the place where Sati burned herself, the sacrificial pit of Daksha preserved in the Daksheshwar temple, is not a Sati pitha. Unlike those mortal *satis*, Sati did not become ash, memorialized by other mortals. Her ever-present husband carried her and roamed the whole world, and her members got scattered over the earth. Those members did not need memorialization, but rather became one with nature. Even though there are temples built on the *pithas*, they are not memorials like the shrines built over the ashes of the *satis* near Satighat. In the *pithas*, Sati is not a memory, but a living presence, ever warmed by the burning lamp of her husband's loving company.

7 *Shava-rupa* and *vishva-rupa*

The corpse form and the cosmic form of the Devi

When we focus on the cosmic form of the Devi presented in the Shakta puranas and tantras, we realize that this cosmic form can actually be read as the dancing alternation of life and death – or rather, waking and sleeping – that the universe is.

The Rig Vedic Devi-Sukta (Vak Suktam) offers a dynamic image of Devi's immanence. Here Devi (or rather the female *rishi* visualizing herself as the feminized Absolute) is said to *move* through all beings like air. She is the dynamic force creating and sustaining the universe (Vak Suktam, Rig Veda, Book 10, Hymn 125).

As Kinsley observes, texts like the *Devi-mahatmya*, *Devi-bhagavata-purana*, *Lalita-sahasranama* and Somadeva's *Yasastilaka* figure forth the immanent and all-pervasive nature of Devi. The *Devi-bhagavata-purana* builds up equivalences between parts of the world and parts of the Goddess's body; the description of the cosmic form of the Devi in this text is full of corporeal and earthly details. As Kinsley points out:

> The *Devi-bhagavata-purana* calls the earth the Devi's loins (5.8.72). The same text speaks of the oceans as her bowels, the mountains as her bones, the rivers as her veins, and the trees as her body hair. The sun and moon are her eyes, and the nether worlds are said to be her hips, legs, and feet (7.33.2141).
>
> (Kinsley 179)

In the same way, while celebrating the cosmic form of Goddess Kali, the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana* draws parallels between the body parts, as it were, of cosmic nature, and those of Mother Kali (574–575). The *Yogini Tantra*, too, in yogic terms, describes the cosmic form of Goddess Kali, in the pores of whose skin crores of universes shine forth (92–103).

If the Devi's body is equated with nature/earth/cosmos, it may appear that the cosmos is being metaphorized as a body, that of Devi. However,

whenever we conceive of a body we cannot but conceive of a limited, bounded system (à la Mary Douglas). Even if the cosmos or the universe is figured as a divine body, that figuration only serves to turn the universe into a bounded system. But, interestingly, in the vision of the Devi's body as a cosmic body in the Shakta-tantric tradition, her body epitomizes a wholeness which is coterminous with limitlessness – the cosmic body, in other words, is not a bounded system, and hence is not a *body* as such. It does not signify closure but the ultimate openness.

From this, can we envisage a figuration of the cosmos where it is not seen as the static totality of the bounded system that is Devi's undivided body, but rather visualized as a continuously throbbing, dynamic whole which dismembers itself into fragments, becomes plural and then each fragment manifests the whole, thereby setting in motion a continuous dialectical play of making wholes and making fragments? Can we see the dancing Kali of the *Yogini Tantra*, or the multiple dancing goddesses whose shape Sati assumes to baffle the Trinity in the *Brihaddharmapurana*, as a metonymy for this dancing universe? Fritjof Capra has seen the dancing Shiva/Nataraja as the metaphor of the dancing universe (11–12). Can we see the dancing Kali in a similar way – as a continuous rhythmic alternation of sleeping and waking that constitutes the cosmos? As I have already shown, Devi-as-corpse erases the ontic divide between beings and things, matter and spirit, life and death. Matter is only the sleeping mode of the *sat* (being), while life is its waking or opening mode. But in both modes, Sati, the Energy of the *sat* (being) is equally present.

Kinsley sees the cosmic form of Devi as Earth-as-Goddess or Cosmos-as-Goddess (179), while he sees the Sati *pithas* as emblematizing India as a Goddess and Sati's body parts being parts of the body of India in the same way as the parts of Devi's body are the parts of the body of the world in the *Devi Bhagawatam*. But the basic problem is that Devi's cosmic form does not embody the parts of a static body of the "world" but rather the dynamic natural forces and processes which together bring the "world" into being. Secondly, while the cosmic form described in the *Devi Bhagawatam* figures a whole body, the Sati *pithas* figure the fragments of a body, without unifying them. "India" as an entity with a whole body is but an interpretative superimposition on them.

However, in this context it would be better to focus on the description of the *pithas* in the *Devi Bhagawatam*. As Sircar points out, the *Devi Bhagawatam*

> refers to the holy places, associated in this work with the different manifestations of the mother-goddess and of her consort, as *pithas* without, however, mentioning the particular limbs of the goddess and the

> particular Bhairavas, although it says that the list contains the names of some *pithas* in addition to those that "sprang from" the limbs of Sati. (25)

As opposed to Gayatri Spivak, who sees this as an indication of the "loosening of connection between Sati's body parts and natural space" ("Moving Devi" 132), I would like to see this description as providing a mystic link between the corpse form and the cosmic form of Devi. By listing together the *pithas* directly associated with Sati's body and those which are not, the *Devi Bhagawatam* actually makes possible the imagining of the entire universe as a dynamic pluralization of Sati's body, where even those *pithas* that are not directly associated with Sati's limbs – the ostensible surplus of sacrality between the (dismembered) corpse and the cosmos – can be seen as the expanded body parts of Sati-as-the-cosmic-being. In other words, Sati as (fragmented and hence pluralized) corpse and Sati as cosmos are one, in terms of their fragmentary plurality, especially when the cosmos is seen not as a *totality* but as an unlimited domain of scattered points of sacrality.

If Sati's body is fragmented and thus pluralized, undermining the boundaries that would make it a bounded system, the fragmentation need not stop at the number fifty-one. And indeed, the *Shivacharita* lists twenty-six *upapithas* where the smaller parts of Sati's body and some of her ornaments are supposed to have fallen (Sircar 39–41). The fragmentation-as-pluralization need not have any ultimate limit. There are countless places in India – obscure as well as well-known – which claim the status of Sati *pithas* and claim to enshrine some or other part of Sati's corpse. In a way, the claims of all of them are justified. Only when Devi-as-corpse causes the fragmentation of that corpse – endlessly – does that fragmented corpse become tropologically and functionally one with the dancing universe/cosmos. The *shava-rupa* can become homologous to the *vishva-rupa* only when both of them are seen as – not bounded systems – but open fields of dancing energy.

The stasis of the corpse is only apparent, and at the heart of both the corpse and the cosmos there is the undivided dancing energy. Niguranda says that the entire cosmos is the body of Sati figured as the cosmic figure of Goddess Kali. The fifty-one waves of this cosmic energy-body are figured as the fifty-one members of Sati (163). It is the energy-self of Sati that connects her corpse with the cosmos. One may suggest that though the mystic number fifty-one has been traditionally associated with the Sati *pithas*, one may envisage countless points of concentrated energy on the earth – the *pithas* may be seen as existing everywhere on the planet, and thus making the corporeality of Devi an endless energy-matter complex that remains unlimited even after unlimited fragmentation.

Brahmarshi Satyadeva, in *Sadhana Samara*, his unique commentary on the *Devi-mahatmya*, says that, without embracing Kali, the embodiment of death, we can never experience immortality (394–395). It is only by placing ourselves in the hand of Kali as the Energy of Death that we can get rid of the fear of death and enjoy our lives fully and creatively. Swami Vivekananda too, in his famous English poem "Kali the Mother" and his Bengali poem "Nachuk tahate Shyama", echoes a similar sentiment. He embraces Kali as the force of death and destruction, and states that there is no other way to embrace eternal life, except taking shelter in the arms of Kali (Sen 97–98; Dasgupta 405–406). Kali necessitates the death of the limited self, and makes us infinite.

Now, drawing on Adriana Cavarero's reading of Clarice Lispector's *The Passion according to G.H.*, I would show how the Devi's cosmic form – when metonymically linked with her corpse form – may corroborate Cavarero's insistence that de-individuated concepts of death would ultimately lead us back to the interminable chain of life itself (Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato* 114–119). Cavarero writes:

> [T]he mother is also the link that leads from the individual to the "impersonal", to the infinite life described by Lispector, of which the "I" constitutes a temporary form.
>
> (*In Spite of Plato* 118–119)

At the moment of death, what dies is the "I", the "phallic self" (à la Moi), the "temporary form", but not the energy-self which, as the Divine Mother, continues to be in the corpse as much as in the living person. I deliberately end this book by focussing on the arcane link between Devi's corpse and her cosmic form. Both, in intricate ways, de-individuate the notion of death, shifting the focus from "I" to an uncharted infinitude, where the members of Devi's corpse need not be gathered into any new totality, any newer form of "I". The corpse and the cosmic form both imply freedom from the shackles of individuality, from the burden of "personality", from "borders" and "limits". Following Cavarero, one may say that a de-individualized notion of death introduces us to the vastness and grandeur of universal life and erases the gap between the human, the divine and the animal (Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato* 118–119). Cavarero, drawing on the insights of Hannah Arendt, argues that whereas the androcentric tradition of Western philosophy has always focused on death, one needs to articulate a birth-centric philosophy where the role of the mother should be respected (Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato* 6–9). Sati's corpse obliquely implies that we need not embark on the journey of philosophy and religion with the fear of death. Rather, when the corpse is seen as part of the network of animate and (apparently)

inanimate modes of existence interwoven through the spirit of the Divine Mother, the binarism of beings and things gets erased and the Shakti representing *elan vital* (à la Henri Bergson [Gillies 14]) is perceived as flowing freely even through the corpse, underpinning the perennial *non-finality* of what we mean by "death".

When the corpse is metaphysically associated with Shiva in Shaiva or Shakta tantras, it is seen as representing the Nirguna Brahman, the ontological Absolute where the world has ceased to exist as a phenomenal plurality. On the other hand, Devi/Shakti always operates as the link between the metaphysical Absolute and the physical plurality of the universe, the One and the Many. As Gopinath Kaviraj argues, the Divine Mother is the mediatrix between Jivas, the limited beings and Shiva, the unlimited Being, between Shiva and the physical universe (*Tattva o sadhana* 447–453). Hence, when Devi appears as a corpse, she is totally different from Shiva-as-corpse: while the corpse as Shiva is the transcendent Absolute detached from the plurality constituting *earthly* life, the corpse as Devi is life-sustaining and life-promoting, not singular but plural, and not detached from life but interwoven with the multifarious forms and energies of life in the most unexpected ways.

I will close this book by referring to an ostensibly impossible simile employed in the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana*. According to this text, Sati/Para Shakti, pleased by Shiva's penances, is reborn as two daughters of King Himalaya, Ganga and Parvati. After the birth of Ganga, Narada advises Brahma to ask Himalaya to offer Ganga as a bride for Shiva. This text, unlike many other puranic texts, establishes an ontic equivalence between Sati, Ganga and Parvati by seeing both Ganga and Parvati as the reincarnations of Sati. Shiva, according to this narrative, marries both Ganga and Parvati, as both are none other than Sati (*Mahabhagavata* 149–153). While advising Brahma to go to Himalaya to ask for Ganga as a bride for Shiva, Narada says that, just as the corpse of the Chhaya Sati was held by Shiva on his head, Ganga too would be stationed in her watery form on the head of Shiva. That would give Shiva pleasure (*Mahabhagavata* 153). Here, an ontological as well as corporeal-metaphoric connection between Sati and Ganga the river is established – mystically. While Sati *is* indeed Ganga in her new avatar, the corpse of the Chhaya Sati is metaphorically presented in Narada's rhetoric as prefiguring the stationing of Ganga on Shiva's head. The same metaphoric connection between Sati's corpse and Ganga, the river on Shiva's head, is established in the *Brihaddharmapurana*, too (182). It is a surprising simile establishing an equivalence between a corpse and a living river.

Generally, water, especially flowing water – a river – is seen as the joyful beginning of life. Water gives rise to and sustains life, while a corpse is seen

as the closure to life. But, in the rhetoric of the *Mahabhagavata*, the corpse and the river become one. While, traditionally, the river Ganga is related to corpses metaphysically and ritualistically, said to liberate the souls whose corpses are floated on the Ganga, she is never likened to a corpse. But the *Mahabhagavata* provides a subversive rhetoric, and sees the corpse as comparable to a river.

In fact, Devi-as-corpse is not different from Devi-as-water, Devi as a river. Just as a river may be seen as an essentially plural entity, flowing joyfully as millions of *wave-selves*, the corpse of Sati too is not a singular body but a plural site of energy waves, energy-selves. Just as water, though apparently insentient, is the source of all sentient beings, Sati's corpse too is paradoxically the closure to death and the opening of life.

Devi-as-corpse is the dancing cosmos and dancing water: the initiator of life and the destroyer of "death", she is the unbounded sacredsecular *isness* which runs through the corpse, through water, and through the cosmos.


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Appendix I

A brief outline of the narrative of Sati in the *Mahabhagavata Upapurana*

The *Mahabhagavta Upapurana* is a Hindu mythological text grounded in a very strong Shakta ideology. Like the more celebrated *Devi Bhagawatam*, it places the Mother Goddess at the heart of the universe and presents Her as the Formless Absolute who, out of Her own desire, creates the world of relativity, that of phenomena. It is She who gives birth to the Hindu Trinity: Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshvara.

I will summarize the relevant chapters or the relevant segments of certain chapters from this text so that the reader may get an idea of the way in which this text radically alters the patriarchal construction of Sati merely as an imitable model of wifely virtue. This outline, I hope, will effectively uphold the Shakta version of the Sati myth in which Sati is not just the docile wife of Shiva but rather the avatar of the Creatrix of Shiva himself.

Chapter 3

This chapter presents the conversation between Mahadeva (Shiva) and the Sage Narada, in the course of which Mahadeva narrates to Narada the history of the creation of the phenomenal world. Before the emergence of the phenomenal universe, there was no variegation in the (feminine) Eternal Entity, the Prakriti who is beyond speech, full of bliss and wisdom, the very nature of *Sat* (Truth/the Real). Then, suddenly, she was moved by the desire to create the universe and she, in spite of being formless, assumed a goddess-form playfully. This was the beginning of the phenomenal world, the world of variegation and relativity. Then, gradually, she created the Trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshvara, and ordered them to be engaged in the tasks of creation, preservation and dissolution of earthly beings. She made it clear that her will would be the ultimate controlling force in this threefold task assigned to the Trinity. She said that she would take up the forms of their consorts and, especially, becoming the consort of Shambhu/Shiva/Maheshvara, she would continue to awaken in the female

halves of all the species the desire to bear offspring. Through all the female beings, thus, she would project herself as the birth-giving force, *out of her own will*. Shiva, then, became engaged in an austere meditation on the Great Goddess, to get her as his own wife. When Vishnu came to know of this, he too began to meditate on the Devi, for the same purpose. Brahma too followed the footsteps of the other two gods, as he too wanted to get her as his consort.

The Great Goddess, Prakriti (Great Nature) came to them to test the substantiality of their *tapasya* (penances), to examine how far they had ripened in their spiritual life through the austere contemplation on her. She assumed a frightening form and approached the three gods. Both Brahma and Vishnu were frightened, and their hearts were shaken with terror. Thus, their *tapasya* was interrupted. However, when the Devi went to Shiva to disturb his meditation, he understood that it was none other than the Great Goddess who was present in front of him. Knowing this, he became engrossed in more profound meditation on the Devi. Pleased with the steadfastness of Shiva, Devi agreed to become his consort with her *whole* Self and also became the river Ganga, flowing in the heavens. However, as Vishnu and Brahma could not pass the test set for them by her, she only turned *parts* of her Self into their consorts. Then Brahma created the entire world.

At the end of this chapter, Devi tells Shiva that she will take birth as the daughter of Daksha and become Shiva's consort. However, once Daksha insults her and Shiva, she will confound Daksha and return to her own abode. Then there will be temporary separation between Shiva and Prakriti. Due to this separation, Shiva will become restless, and nowhere will he find peace without Devi. It is through this experience that the love between them would be permanent. Devi disappears after narrating these future events to Shiva.

(*Mahabhagavata Upapurana* 21–33)

Chapter 4

Brahma tells Daksha that, since Shiva had worshipped Devi Prakriti to receive her as his spouse, she would be born somewhere and make Shiva her consort to keep her promise to him. Brahma advises Daksha to pray to her so that she agrees to be born as Daksha's daughter. Daksha, accordingly, engages in austere penances to get Devi as his daughter. Pleased with his penances, she appears before him and gives him the boon that she will be born as his golden-hued daughter. She, however, adds that she will remain on the earth as his daughter only so long as his virtues are not wasted and he does not begin to disrespect her. When Daksha ceases to pay her due respect, she will come to him in the form of Kali (the form in which she

appears before him to give him the boon) and, bemusing the entire universe with her own *maya* (illusive power), she will return to her divine abode.

After this, Sati is born in the palace of Daksha and is brought up by him. However, when Daksha arranges a *svayamvarsabha* (the assembly of prospective grooms out of whom the prospective bride can choose any one as her consort) for his daughter, he invites everybody except Shiva to this assembly, as he considers Shiva to be below his status. The Rudras born of Shiva are under Daksha's control, and so he considers Shiva to be inferior to him. However, Shiva comes towards Daksha's palace and, stationed in the sky, he looks – from above – on the assembly arranged for Sati's choice of a groom. Sati, finding Shiva absent from the assembly, places the garland meant for the groom on the floor of the hall. Suddenly Shiva appears in the assembly hall and accepts the garland offered by Sati. Daksha becomes perturbed by this, and, it is only after being counselled by Brahma that he arranges the wedding of Shiva and Sati. However, displeased with his son-in-law who has an apparently bizarre look, Daksha begins to blame his daughter for her choice of the ascetic groom. Then, as soon as Sati leaves her father's house to accompany Shiva to the peak of the Himalayas, Daksha's natural divine wisdom – the knowledge that Sati is none other than the Great Goddess – disappears.

(*Mahabhagavata Upapurana* 34–43)

Chapter 5

Daksha, now angry with Shiva and Sati, begins to depreciate them. Dadhichi, the great sage, tries to bring him back to his senses by reminding him that the Great Goddess herself has been born as his daughter and hence, by denouncing Sati, he is denouncing the Great Goddess herself, thereby committing a sin. Dadhichi also reminds him that Shiva is the Great God, the pre-determined divine consort of the Goddess. However, Daksha cannot be reconciled to the union of Shiva and Sati as he thinks that Shiva is not the appropriate groom for Sati, the wonderful lady full of beauty and virtues. Daksha is, in fact, obsessed with the idea that, status-wise, Shiva is inferior to him.

(*Mahabhagavata Upapurana* 44–52)

Chapter 7

This chapter describes the joys of the marital life of Mahadeva and Sati in the midst of the scenic beauty of the Himalayas. The wife of Himalaya (the divine spirit of the Himalayas), Menaka, worships Sati regularly and prays that she might be born as her daughter in her next birth. Sati, pleased

with the devotion of Menaka, gives her the boon that she will be born as her daughter in her next birth. In the meantime, Daksha's antipathy towards Shiva keeps increasing.

Finally, Daksha decides to arrange a grand *yajna* (ceremony of fire sacrifice) to which he invites everybody except Shiva and Sati. Except Sati, each of the daughters of Daksha receives an invitation for the ceremony and, when they come, they are shown proper honour. Vishnu is entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the *yajna*. The Shaivite sages like Dadhichi, Gautama, Durvasa and others leave the *yajna*, as they can't tolerate the enterprise of dishonouring Shiva which was the major motive behind Daksha's arrangement of the *yajna*. Daksha is advised by his friends and relatives not to dare to disrespect Sati. [An important aspect of the Sati narrative in this text is that here Daksha's sin lies not just in disrespecting Shiva but also – and probably more importantly – in disrespecting Sati.] He does not stop disrespecting Sati and she, through her yogic powers, comes to know about the evil intent behind Daksha's fire sacrifice. Sati decides to materialize the pre-determined trajectory of her future actions. She plans to leave this world, as she had warned Daksha that she would cease to be on the earth as his daughter once he began to disrespect her. Besides, she also remembers her promise to Menaka that she would be born as her daughter in her next birth. In the meantime, Narada reaches Shiva and Sati and tells them that Daksha has arranged a grand *yajna* where everybody except the two of them are invited and welcomed with due honour. Narada urges Shiva to go to the *yajna* and claim the honour due to him. Shiva, however, is reluctant to go to the *yajna*. Narada, then, requests Sati to go to the *yajna* and shatter the pride of Daksha, as he understands that Shiva the yogi would remain unperturbed by the dishonour shown to him by Daksha.

(*Mahabhagavata Upapurana* 58–72)

Chapter 8

Sati urges Shiva to go to the *yajna* along with her. However, Shiva refuses to go, as he insists that visiting his in-laws without invitation from them would make him lose his dignity. Sati then urges him to allow her to visit Daksha's *yajna*. She insists that a daughter can visit her parents at any time, without receiving any invitation from them. She further argues that, if she is honoured by her father on her arrival at the *yajna*, she will make him show honour to Shiva as well. If, on the other hand, Daksha keeps denouncing Shiva in front of her, she will destroy Daksha's *yajna*. Shiva is apprehensive; he says that she would not be able to put up with the deprecatory words spoken by Daksha against Shiva and would probably end her life. Then, Sati tells Shiva clearly that she will go to the *yajna* ceremony even if Shiva does

not give her the permission to do so. Because, as she points out, the mortals on the earth will not honour Shiva or Sati any more if Daksha's *yajna*, grounded in his evil intent to disrespect the two of them, gets completed, unhindered. Sati thus decides to go to the *yajna* and to punish Daksha in case he does not show Shiva the due respect even on her arrival at the *yajna*.

Shiva gets angry at this moment and tells her harshly that she is no more remaining under Shiva's control, as she is grossly disobeying him. Sati is deeply angered by the harsh words of Shiva, and decides to reveal to Shiva her real self, full of her primordial power, as he, who once worshipped her with utmost devotion to get her as his wife, has dared to insult her. To bemuse Shiva and to bring him back under *her* control, Sati assumes the terrible form of Kali, the deity of the ultimate destruction or *pralaya* (dissolution of the universe). Then, one by one, she assumes the forms of the ten Mahavidyas, the ten great tantric goddess forms, and thus appears before Shiva when he, out of terror, tries to flee in the ten directions. Finally, exhausted with fear, Shiva stands still at one place, and, when he opens his eyes, he sees a dark goddess before him. Afraid, he asks her who she is and where Sati has vanished. Sati then tells him that it is Sati in her dark form who is standing before him. Sati reveals to Shiva the spiritual secrets of her Mahavidya forms. Finally, she assures him that she loves Shiva as much as he loves her. Shiva realizes that she is the primordial Shakti, the source of everything, the supreme Goddess, and then apologizes to her for the harsh words he has spoken to her. Then Sati, in the form of the terrible dark goddess, Kali, journeys towards the palace of Daksha, in a chariot drawn by thousands of lions. Shiva realizes that a great tragedy is going to befall him, and he begins to weep. The entire universe becomes filled with terror and apprehension on seeing Kali's chariot journey towards the place of Daksha's *yajna*.

(*Mahabhagavata Upapurana* 73–90)

Chapter 9

On arriving at Daksha's palace, Sati first meets her mother, Prasuti. Her mother, grief-stricken, tells her that Daksha has not listened to the advice of either the sages or the family members, and, full of pride, he is engaged in the unjust act of conducting the fire sacrifice without inviting the greatest god, Shiva. Prasuti sadly tells Sati that, as soon as she left Daksha's palace and went to the abode of Shiva, her parents were drowned in a sea of sorrow. Now she feels slightly happy on seeing Sati once again at her house. However, she also relates to Sati the nightmare that she dreamt last night. In the nightmare, a goddess black as the great clouds appeared in the midst of Daksha's *yajna* and, angry with Daksha's incessant denunciation of Shiva,

jumped into the sacrificial fire. After this, the *yajna* was destroyed and Daksha was beheaded. Finally, forgiving Daksha, Shiva revived Daksha and set a goat's head on his body to punish the latter for the sin of denouncing Shiva. Prasuti tells Sati that the latter's dark form reminds her of the goddess she saw in her nightmare. She wishes that her nightmare would not come true. She acknowledges the greatness of Shiva and expresses her wish to have the good fortune of being spared the pangs of separation from Sati.

However, after meeting her mother, Sati goes to Daksha, and, on seeing her, all the people present at the *yajna*, including Daksha, are surprised. Sati has come, but not as the golden-hued Sati; rather, the golden Sati has returned as the dark Kali. The people present at Daksha's palace discern in her the primordial Shakti of destruction. Kali's anger frightens everybody. The gods present at the *yajna* get terrified. Daksha is surprised to see her, and he has difficulties in recognizing the dark Kali as his golden-hued daughter, Sati. When he finally comes to recognize her as Sati after she greets him, he asks her whether she has become dark and is without robes because of her sad life with an ineligible husband. Daksha adds that he has nothing against her, as she is his dearest offspring. He tells her that he is antipathetic towards her husband, not towards her.

On hearing continuously from Daksha that Shiva does not deserve to be her husband, Sati decides to punish Daksha indirectly, as it would be unjust for her to kill her own father immediately. In order to punish Daksha, she creates the Chhaya Sati (Shadow Sati), who resembles her in form, and asks her to jump into the sacrificial fire so that Dkasha's *yajna* can be destroyed. Kali spreads her *mayic* power over all those present at the *yajna* and disappears into the welkin, leaving the Shadow Sati at the *yajna* ceremony. The Shadow Sati engages in heated altercations with Daksha, and he keeps denouncing Shiva. An angry Daksha finally asks her to get out of his sight. The Shadow Sati says that she would not only get out of his sight but also leave immediately the body that is produced from Daksha's body. Saying this, she jumps into the sacrificial fire. All sorts of ill omens surround the *yajna*.

(*Mahabhagavata Upapurana* 91–104)

Chapter 10

When Shiva comes to hear the sad news from Narada, he becomes mad with grief and rage. He creates a terrible being, Virabhadra, out of his anger, and orders him to destroy the *yajna* of Daksha. Virabhadra goes to the *yajna* ceremony, destroys the *yajna*, punishes all the invitees of Daksha who relished the denunciation of Shiva and did not protest when Daksha insulted Sati, and finally, after a fight with Vishnu, beheads Daksha. After the *yajna*

is destroyed totally, Brahma goes to Shiva on the Kailasa mountain and tells Shiva that he should not lose his temper, as he is the source of all wisdom. Brahma reminds him that Sati is the Mother of the World; she is the eternal essence of the universe, the form of Brahman (the Absolute). Brahma tells him not to forget that Sati created the Shadow Sati out of her and it was the Shadow Sati who entered the fire of the *yajna*. The real Sati, Brahma tells Shiva, was standing in the welkin when the Shadow Sati entered the sacrificial fire. Shiva is then requested by Brahma to let the *yajna* of Daksha be resumed. On the request of Brahma, Shiva lets Virabhadra revive Daksha by setting a goat's head over his headless body.Shiva ultimately forgives Daksha, and Daksha also acknowledges the greatness of Shiva, hymning and praising the latter.

(*Mahabhagavata Upapurana* 105–120)

Chapter 11

After Daksha's *yajna* is resumed and completed by Shiva's grace, Shiva becomes grief-stricken for the loss of Sati. He begins to weep as a common human being. Brahma and Vishnu tell him that he ought not to behave like a madman. Rather, they tell him, he should consider the fact that Sati is the form of Brahman, the Mother of the Universe, the indestructible, conscious substance of the universe. She it is who creates the universe and is the source of all wisdom. It is through her *maya* that all beings, including the Trinity, become deluded. They remind Shiva that the Trinity are also her images. One should not imagine that the Great Goddess could be dead. Even imagining this would be sinful. Brahma and Vishnu try to make Shiva understand that Sati had wanted to punish Daksha, because, though he was her father, he became sinful due to his pride. Sati, the preserver of the Dharma, could not be partial towards her father. On the other hand, she could not kill her father, either, as that would go against the ethical norms of the society. Hence, she created the Shadow Sati and made her enter the sacrificial fire. Shiva says that, though his head knows all these things and his intellect makes him understand that Sati is indestructible, his heart is restless because she has disappeared from his life. The three gods then sing a hymn to the Goddess and implore her to manifest herself before them, in the form she had assumed at Daksha's house. Otherwise, they say, they would consider themselves dead without her vision.

Witnessing the sorry state of all these gods, and especially the profound grief of Shiva, Devi manifests herself before them in the form of Kali. She then tells Shiva that she will be reborn as the daughter of King Himalaya and Menaka and will become the consort of Shiva once again. She soothes Shiva by saying that Mahakali's abode is in the heart of Shiva, and hence,

she is always in his heart. However, as he had told her some untender words when she wanted to go to the *yajna*, she would not accompany him in person for a certain period of time. Nevertheless, she urges Shiva to be patient and to remain hopeful. She tells Shiva that there is a way in which he can get her back as his consort. He should carry the corpse of the Shadow Sati, who jumped into the sacrificial fire, on his head and roam the entire world, praying to her. She tells him that the corpse of the Shadow Sati will be fragmented into numerous parts and, wherever on earth the parts fall, there will emerge Shakti *pithas* (seats of Shakti), capable of purging people of sins. Devi tells Shiva that the place where the *yoni* (vulva) of the Shadow Sati falls will become the greatest Shakti pitha. If he does penances at that place, he will be able to get her back.

Consoling Shiva in this way, she vanishes. Shiva enters the site of Daksha's *yajna* and finds the shining corpse of the Shadow Sati there. Mad with grief, he speaks to the corpse, telling it that he will never abandon "her" – i.e., Sati. After this, Shiva places the corpse of the Shadow Sati on his head and begins to dance out of joy. The entire universe throbs with his dance; the cosmos is threatened with absolute destabilization. Shiva thinks that it is a great fortune for him to be able to place Sati's corpse on his head, totally ignoring the social norms that find it bizarre to place the wife's body on the husband's head. On seeing the great threat coming to the cosmos, Vishnu decides to cut off the corpse of the Shadow Sati into fragments, and he recalls that it is the Devi herself who had foretold the fragmentation of Chhaya Sati's body and the creation of the Shakti *pithas*. He decides to apply his Sudarshana Chakra and cut off the corpse into pieces, finding assurance in the thought that Devi will rescue him from Shiva's wrath after he dismembers the corpse. Then, Devi herself tells Vishnu that she approves of his decision.

Vishnu then cuts the corpse of Chhaya Sati into several pieces, and the places where the body parts fall become Shakti *pithas*. These places become *mahatirthani* (great pilgrim spots) and *muktikshetrani* (places where one can attain salvation/liberation). These are the *siddhapithas* where one can attain Devi's grace easily. The worship of Devi or fire sacrifices made in her honour in these places will be extremely effective. One who chants the mantras of Devi in such places will be able to obtain Devi's divine vision. Even the greatest sinners, if they chant mantras at such places, would become liberated from their sins. As soon as the parts of the corpse of Chhaya Sati fall on the earth, they turn into stones for the sake of the good of everyone. Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Indra and the other gods come to these places to serve the Great Goddess there.

After Shiva realizes that the weight on his head has vanished, he becomes calm. Narada comes to Shiva to pacify him, and reminds him once again

that Sati, his divine consort, is indestructible. Narada relates to him that Vishnu has cut off the corpse of Chhaya Sati with his Sudarshana Chakra and the places containing those body parts have become great *pithas*, as had already been foretold by Devi. Narada tries to explain that Vishnu has only followed the will of the Divine Mother, as expressed by her, when Shiva, along with the other gods, prayed to her to get her *darshana* (vision) after the disappearance of Sati. Shiva, on hearing that Vishnu is responsible for his separation from the corpse of the Shadow Sati, curses him. Then he looks at the *yoni* of Devi fallen at Kamarupa and he becomes excited on seeing Devi's *yoni*. Taking the form of a hill, he holds the *yoni* of Devi at Kamarupa. In all the *pithas*, including Kamarupa, he assumes the forms of stone *lingas* (phallus-shaped stone images) and begins to dwell there in order to remain close to the body parts of Devi.

(*Mahabhagavata Upapurana* 121–138)

Chapter 12

Brahma and Vishnu visit Shiva and find him in a terribly distressed state. He is tearful, and cannot bear the pangs of his separation from Sati. Brahma and Vishnu ask him to patiently meditate on Devi at Kamarupa. They assure him that by Devi's grace he will get back Sati in her new avatar. Then Shiva, along with Brahma and Vishnu, becomes engrossed in meditation on Devi. Pleased with their penances, Devi appears before them and assures Shiva that she will quickly be reborn as Ganga and Parvati and accept him as her husband.

(*Mahabhagavata Upapurana* 139–146)

Note

The text used to present this narrative outline is *Shri Mahabhagavata Upapurana*, translated by Prema Khullar into Hindi and edited by Acharya Mrityunjaya Tripathi (Varanasi: Navashakti Prakashan, 2010).

Appendix II

The narrative of Sati in the *Brihaddharmapurana*: A summary

In this Appendix, I will present a brief outline of the narrative of Sati in the *Brihaddharmapurana*. This narrative closely follows the narrative presented in the *Mahabhagavata*, but there are some important variations as well. The *Mahabhagavata* and the *Brihaddharmapurana* inform an alternative puranic tradition that presents the Sati myth from the Devi-centric perspective rather than the one centred on Shiva. Like the *Mahabhagavta*, it too focuses on Kamarupa as the centre of the Sati-centric Shakta faith. Interestingly, to this day, the Kamakhya temple of Assam (in the district of Kamarupa) remains the centre of Shakta-tantric faith. Kamakhya is inalienably connected with the myth of Sati, and, thus, the Shaktism of Eastern India remains unimaginable without reference to Sati. Kamakhya is said to be a pilgrim spot where both spiritual enlightenment and material gains are granted by Devi to her worshippers.

Though a significant portion of the narrative of the *Brihaddharmapurana* is narrated by Goddess Parvati to Jaya and Vijaya, her *sakhis* (female friends/attendants) [*Brihaddharmapurana* 18–120], this purana is not predominantly Shakta in nature in the way the *Mahabhagavata* and the *Devi Bhagawatam* are. However, as far as the cosmogony presented here is concerned, it is deeply influenced by the cosmogony of the *Mahabhagavata*, even though the cosmogony of the *Brihaddharmapurana* is more dualistic (modelled on the Samkhya) than monistic (such as in the *Mahabhagavata*, which foregrounds a sort of Shakta monism).

The significant segments from the narrative of Sati presented in this purana are summarized below.

***Brihaddharmapurana*: Madhyakhanda**

Chapter 1

Before the emergence of the multiform universe, when neither the sun nor the moon came into being, there was only the dark void. There were only

Prakriti and Purusha, and no third entity apart from them. Then, when Purusha became willing to create, Brahman, though essentially one, became divided into three male entities. On seeing Purusha divided into three entities, Prakriti wondered who of these three would accept her (as his consort). She created water, and assuming a male form, began to stay on that water. This male form became famous as Narayana. Then Prakriti made the three males embodied. They began to wander on the waters. Suddenly, they heard an ethereal voice urging them to engage in penances.

When the three males were engaged in spiritual austerities, Goddess Prakriti planned to test their patience and perseverance, and began to float on the waters in the shape of a corpse. The corpse was terrible, with the limbs deformed, fragmented and full of worms, and the hair and flesh coming off it. Prakriti went to the three males in the form of such a terrible corpse and two (Brahma and Vishnu) of the three males failed to continue their penances in the face of this terrible presence of the corpse. However, when she went to the third (Shiva), his *samadhi* (deep meditative trance) did not get broken. Hence, Prakriti made the air thick with stench coming from the corpse. Shiva's *samadhi* got broken due to the stench. However, Shiva was bold enough to hold the corpse with his hands and sit on its breast, getting absorbed into deep meditative trance. Prakriti, pleased with this, mentally selected him as her consort. On the other hand, just after sitting on the corpse, Shiva could understand that the corpse was none other than the Mula Prakriti (Primordial Nature). Then and there he assumed the form of a thumb-sized *linga*. Then, the corpse-shaped Prakriti, on seeing Shiva take the form of a *linga*, took the form of a *yoni*. By placing the *linga* in her triangular *yoni*, the Great Goddess got submerged in the waters, so that various beings could be created. It was the union of the *linga* and the *yoni* which led to the Creation; their separation would result in the Great Dissolution.

Brahma and Vishnu, deprived of Devi's vision, prayed to her and, finally, Devi assured them that she would manifest as their consorts as well. She said that Shiva would be manifested as all kinds of male beings, and she would manifest herself as their female counterparts. These two types of living beings would be marked by *linga* and *yoni*, their origin being the union of the primordial *linga* and *yoni* submerged in the water.

(*Brihaddharmapurana* 121–125)

Chapters 2–3

Prakriti assumes three forms: Vidya (Knowledge) and two kinds of Avidya (Ignorance). These two modes of Avidya are called Maya and Parama. Vidya becomes divided into various parts and from these parts several goddesses are born. Sati is one of them.

When Daksha arranges the Svayamvar Sabha (the assembly of potential grooms out of whom the bride selects any one she likes) for Sati, all those present in that assembly become enchanted by Sati's incomparable beauty. Daksha asks her to choose a groom who would be as beautiful as she herself is. However, Sati is unhappy to find that Shiva is not present in the assembly and she silently, mentally addresses Shiva, telling him that none but he alone can be her husband. She mentally promises to Shiva that She will leave her body immediately if her ears are forced to hear denunciatory remarks on Shiva. She prays to Shiva that she might be reborn as his consort. She throws the garland meant for the groom on the floor and dedicates it to Shiva. Shiva too accepts it though the others can't see him. Daksha and the others are extremely angry and sorry to see her choose Shiva, the god living in the crematorium, ignoring all the other gods who are apparently full of the godly grandeur that Shiva seems to lack.

Daksha continues to insult the absent Shiva in front of Sati. Dadhichi the sage reminds him that Sati is the Primordial Prakriti and Shiva is the Absolute, the Purusha. Dadhichi asks Daksha to stop insulting Shiva and tells him that, as Sati has chosen Shiva, he should invite Shiva respectfully and arrange the wedding of Shiva and Sati. Daksha says that he will not accept Sati as his daughter any longer, as she has chosen Shiva whom Daksha hates. Sati, however, is unperturbed by the denunciatory remarks made by Daksha. She is absorbed in the joy of her spiritual union with Shiva.

(*Brihaddharmapurana* 125–132)

Chapter 4

Shiva, willing to see Sati, arrives at the place where Sati moves about with her *sakhis*. He comes in the guise of a beggar. He tells the *sakhis* that it is surprising that Shiva has not come to Sati in person even though she, the paragon of female beauty and virtue, is so devoted to him. He proposes that he should marry Sati. Ratnamukhi, one of the *sakhis*, is aghast at hearing this. She tells him that, when Sati has ignored all the great gods for the sake of Shiva, a simple beggar like him should not be so audacious as to put forward such an absurd proposal. However, Nilakuntala, the other *sakhi*, observes that Sati is looking at the beggar with rapt attention. She tells Ratnamukhi that the beggar is none other than Shiva. Ratnamukhi mocks her words. Finally, after the altercation between these two *sakhis*, Nilakuntala turns into a bull, desiring to carry Shiva on her back. Shiva too assumes his actual form and rides on the bull, and then disappears.

(*Brihaddharmapurana* 132–136)

Chapter 5

Shiva becomes impatient to marry Sati and enters the garden beside the palace of Daksha. There he assumes the form of a brahmin and Sati comes to bow to him. Shiva takes Sati in his arms, leaves the earth and ascends to the sky. Everyone sees Shiva and Sati moving along the ethereal path. When Daksha sees them, he cries out in agony and becomes deeply distressed. After Shiva and Sati vanish from his sight, he loses his divine knowledge and begins to lament for the disappearance of Sati. He believes that Shiva is a thoroughly ineligible husband for her and she will suffer as Shiva's wife. Dadhichi once again tries to pacify and counsel him, but Daksha remains stubborn in his antipathy towards Shiva. However, he tells Dadhichi that he knows that Shiva is the Parama Purusha and Sati is the Parama Prakriti; yet, he will acknowledge Shiva as the Parama Purusha only when the Rudras, who are under Daksha's control, terminate their subordination to him and become one with Shiva.

(*Brihaddharmapurana* 136–139)

Chapter 6

Daksha arranges a great *yajna* and invites all kinds of beings from the entire universe, except Shiva and Sati. Sati requests Shiva to go along with her to Daksha's *yajna*. Shiva tells her that they should not go to the *yajna*, as Daksha wants to insult both of them deliberately. He asks Sati not to go against the command of her husband, because that would be harmful to her. Sati tells Shiva that, as she is the daughter of Daksha, she can go to the *yajna* even without an invitation. However, she keeps insisting that both of them – Shiva and Sati – should go to the *yajna*. She believes that once she goes to the *yajna*, Daksha cannot but show her due respect. Sati argues that, as Shiva is the ultimate goal of all spiritual and ritualistic exercises, he is the lord of her father's *yajna*, even though he has not been invited by Daksha. Shiva tells her that, if she goes there, she may leave her body, as she will not be able to bear the denunciatory comments on Shiva. Alternately, if he goes to the *yajna* along with Sati, he may kill Daksha himself on hearing Daksha denounce him. In that case, Sati too would become angry with him, as she would consider him to be the killer of her father. Hence, Shiva insists, none of them should go to the *yajna*.

Sati tells Shiva that none can force her to hear the denunciation of Shiva, as she will leave her body as soon as denunciatory remarks on Shiva enter her ears. Shiva says that Sati must be willing to hear the criticism of Shiva, otherwise she would not have decided to go to the *yajna*. Sati becomes angry on hearing this and assumes the form of Kali. Then, gradually, she

shows Shiva her ten Mahavidya forms, and finally, when Shiva, exhausted with fear, appears to surrender to her, she reminds him that she is the Primordial Prakriti and he is the Absolute Purusha. She also reminds him of the incidents at the beginning of the Creation. She tells Shiva that, after the birth of the Trinity, she came to them, floating in the shape of a corpse. Brahma and Vishnu both ignored her due to her deformed form, but Shiva accepted her even in her corpse form. That is why she accepted him as her consort.

However, she tells Shiva that, as she has already decided to leave her body on hearing the harsh criticism of Shiva, and as she, by defying Shiva's order, has displeased him, she will not let her body live on. She says that she is ashamed of continuing to live inside the body produced from Daksha. She asks Shiva to give her the permission to spoil Daksha's *yajna*. Shiva wonders why she, being the autonomous Prakriti and the essence of the primordial Shakti, has still deigned to come under Shiva's control. Sati then begins to tell him the history of the Creation. She tells him how the primordial, omnipotent Prakriti wanted to create the universe, and hence created Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Then she ordered these three primordial male entities to do penances. Then she came to them as a corpse and only Shiva accepted her even in that frightening form. That is why, Sati says, she has decided to abide by his commands out of love for him.

She tells Shiva that she manifests herself as the consorts of Brahma and Vishnu as well, but she has accepted Shiva as her husband with the *whole* of her Self. The other goddesses like Savitri, Lakshmi and Sarasvati are only partial manifestations of her Self. However, Sati says that the Mula Prakriti is even greater than her, and the ten Mahavidyas are the partial manifestations of that Great Prakriti. [In this puranic text, there is a bit of confusion as far as the exact ontological status of Sati vis-a-vis the Primordial Prakriti is concerned. Sati keeps referring to herself as the Great Goddess, and yet at one place she says that, though she is greater than the other goddesses, the Mula Prakriti is even superior to her. However, it is to be noticed that she has already identified herself with the Primordial Prakriti, when she has told Shiva that she it is who came to the Trinity to test their perseverance when they were doing penances.] Sati then reveals to Shiva the significance of the Mahavidyas, and tells him that he will reveal to the world the procedures of worshipping these Mahavidyas. She tells Shiva that if he opens his divine eye of knowledge, he will see Sati as the World Mother. She tells him that he will produce the *shastras* (the regulatory texts) on the proper ways to worship her. As she is the purest and the most secret among the divine beings, only Shiva can be given the right to reveal her mantras and tantras. Sati then instructs Shiva in the secrets of the spiritual exercises for attaining higher truths.

Then, Sati, in the form of the sky-dwelling Kali, becomes one with the Mahavidyas and assumes an integrated form. Shiva tells Kali that, as he is totally inferior to her who is the Mula Prakriti, he can't have the power to keep her from going to the *yajna* of Daksha if she wishes to do so. He asks her to act according to *her* will. He feels ashamed of his rude words to Sati, and asks her to forgive him for his insolence emerging out of his mistaken idea of being the lord of Sati. Sati, in the form of the four-handed Kali, assumes a dark, fierce mood, and proceeds towards Daksha's *yajna*.

(*Brihaddharmapurana* 139–150)

Chapter 7

When Sati comes to the palace of Daksha, she is warmly welcomed by her mother, Prasuti. Prasuti says that Sati's absence has always saddened her. She also criticizes her husband's irrational and intense antipathy towards Shiva. Prasuti then goes on to describe to Sati the nightmare she has had. In the devastating nightmare, she saw her husband, beheaded, lying on the verge of a pit full of urin. Various demonesses and other evil beings were hovering around him. In her dream, Prasuti, along with the subjects of Daksha's state, wept bitterly on seeing the plight of the corpse of Daksha. Suddenly, there appeared a four-handed Great Goddess, dark as the great clouds, and her roaring voice frightened away the evil beings. Then one of the Rudras who had been subordinated to Daksha went to her and asked her who she was. She said that she was Sati, the daughter of Daksha; on seeing the havoc wrought at the *yajna* ceremony, she came to drive the troubles away. The Rudra asked her to revive her father. She, then, brought her husband, Shiva, immediately to the site of the *yajna*, and got Daksha revived. Then, with the head of a goat, Daksha began to hymn Lord Shiva. Finally, the *yajna* was resumed and completed.

Prasuti tells Sati that on seeing her, she realizes that the dark goddess she has seen in her nightmare is probably none other than Sati herself. She glumly tells Sati that the dream would probably come true, as the fair Sati has indeed come to her in the form of a dark goddess. She thinks that Daksha, after getting punished for the sin of denouncing Shiva, would probably be able to recognize the true selves of Sati and Shiva. She implores Sati not to leave her, and wishes Sati would live long. Then, Sati goes to Daksha, and he can recognize her only with difficulty. The moment he comes to realize that it is Sati coming to him in a dark form, he begins to censure Shiva. Sati rebukes him sharply for his denunciation of Shiva. However, Daksha keeps saying foul things about Shiva, and Sati implores him to show Shiva the respect that is due to him. Eventually, Daksha tells her harshly that, since the moment she accepted Shiva as her husband, he has considered her

to be a dead daughter. Sati, too, intensely angry with her father, tells him that she does not consider herself to be his daughter any more. She says that she has taken shelter under Shiva, and, for the last time, tries to explain to Daksha the greatness of Shiva and to make Daksha take shelter under Shiva and sing a hymn in Shiva's praise.

Daksha becomes infuriated and tells her that he considers Shiva to be a goat. He tells Sati to get out of his sight. At this, Sati becomes extremely angry, and curses Daksha that he would himself have the face of a goat and his voice would resemble that of a goat. Then she tells him that she will not only get out of his sight but also leave the body produced from Daksha. Then and there, Daksha's face is replaced with that of a goat, and he begins to bleat like a goat. Then, burning with tremendous anger, Sati storms out of the site of the *yajna*, and everyone gets afraid. Daksha tries to call Sati, but he can only bleat like a goat, instead of uttering the word "Sati". Everyone in the world begins to wonder about the whereabouts of Sati.

Sati reaches a dense forest near the Himalayas and leaves her Daksha-born body there. After this she proceeds towards the Himalayas. The goat-headed Daksha resumes his *yajna*, but everyone is terrified, and all those present at the ceremony wonder at the tremendous power of Sati. Some of the people begin to say that Sati has gone to Shiva. Only Prasuti in the inner chambers of Daksha's palace remains unperturbed, as she has come to realize that Sati is none other than the Primordial Prakriti, and it is only a folly to consider her to be a human daughter.

(*Brihaddharmapurana* 151–157)

Chapter 8

Narada goes to Shiva to give him the news of Sati leaving her body. Shiva, on hearing this, weeps inconsolably. Then he tells Narada that Sati has left Shiva as well as her own body, and he asks Narada to advise him what he ought to do. Narada asks Shiva not to mourn for Sati, as Sati belongs to none but Shiva and he will get her back once again. Narada tells him that he must go to Daksha's abode to see what the latter is doing and also to examine whether the news of Sati's death is true or not. Narada adds that if, Daksha, even with his goat-head, dares to denounce Shiva once again, he must be destroyed by Shiva, along with his *yajna*.

Shiva then assumes the terrible form of Maharudra and goes to Daksha's abode. Once there, he says loudly that he must be given alms. Everyone at Daksha's palace becomes terrified, and Daksha sends a god to Shiva to inquire about his identity. Shiva tells the god that he has come to ask for Sati as his alms. The god asks him to go to Daksha and ask him for Sati. The moment Shiva is seen by him, Daksha begins to insult Shiva by saying (in

his goat-voice) that Shiva has stolen Sati and tarnished Daksha's dynasty. Shiva then becomes fierce in his Maharudra form and the eleven Rudras who were subdued by Daksha are now merged into Shiva in his Maharudra form.

Maharudra asks Daksha to give Sati to him. Daksha, suddenly regaining his human voice, says that when Sati had accepted Shiva as her husband, she became dead to him, and she, on coming to the *yajna*, has only left her already dead body and has become a *preta*, a she-ghost. Daksha says harshly that, as Shiva is fond of the places infested with ghosts, he should look for Sati the ghost in ghost-infested locations. Daksha says that the site of his *yajna* is not a place for ghosts; nor is he the lord of ghosts (like Shiva). After this, terribly angry, Shiva, assuming the form of Virabhadra, destroys the *yajna* and beheads Daksha. Eventually, it is Prasuti who can pacify him with a hymn. Shiva, pleased with her devotion, assumes his beautiful and peaceful form. Brahma and Vishnu too reach that place and request Shiva to revive Daksha. Shiva is finally pacified, and Nandi brings a goat's head and sets it on the beheaded body of Daksha. Daksha, revived now, sings a hymn to Shiva.

(*Brihaddharmapurana* 157–163)

Chapter 9

Daksha sings the hymn to Shiva, who is pleased and forgives Daksha. Brahma and Vishnu ask Daksha to honour Shiva and Sati in the *yajna*. They say that, although Sati is not present in person, if Shiva is worshipped, Sati will automatically be worshipped along with him, as they are inseparable from one another. Hence, Shiva is worshipped by Daksha with utmost devotion.

(*Brihaddharmapurana* 163–168)

Chapter 10

Daksha begins to lament that he could not understand the greatness of Sati and Shiva and could not enjoy their togetherness as a proud father. He says that Sati will get Shiva as her spouse in her next birth, too, but her parents are drowned in the sea of grief. Shiva too becomes maddened by sorrow and begins to ask Daksha where Sati is. Then, addressing Sati aloud as "Sati" and also as "Kali", Shiva rushes northwards. Eventually, he reaches the place where Sati has left her body. He finds on the ground the corpse of Sati, unclad, with the face downwards. Though lifeless, her corpse shines with great lustre. Only her eyes seem to bear the sign of death. Shiva begins to lament madly, addressing the corpse as "Sati". He wonders whether Sati has

left both Daksha and Shiva because both of them had treated her disrespectfully. However, he says that, unlike Daksha, who could not know the real self of Sati, he will never abandon her. He thus laments like a layman, and then embraces the corpse of Sati and picks it up, placing it on his head. With great joy, he says that while during Sati's lifetime he never worshipped her lest the society should see this as shameful, today – when only her corpse is left – he will carry "her" on his head.

Then, with Sati's corpse on his head, Shiva begins to dance. The entire universe is threatened with instability due to this destructive dance. In order to pacify him and rescue the universe from destruction, Vishnu cuts the corpse into several parts with his chakra. Wherever the body parts fall, there emerge the Sati *pithas* which are the greatest and most sacred places on earth. These places are great *tirthas* and capable of giving salvation. Devi is ever present in those places. Immediately after the body parts fall on earth they become stones in order to shower Devi's grace on the living beings. All divine and semi-divine beings come to these places to worship Sati daily. The place where Sati's *yoni* falls (Kamarupa) is the crest-jewel of all *tirthas*. It is the place of great yoga. Narada finally tells Shiva what has happened. When Shiva sees the *yoni* of Devi fallen at Kamarupa, he becomes excited and, in the shape of a hill, holds it. Wherever Sati's body parts fall, Shiva begins to dwell in the shape of stone *lingas*, in order to worship Devi. Narada advises Shiva to patiently stay at Kamarupa as a yogi, and promises Shiva that he will bring Sati for Shiva.

(*Brihaddharmapurana* 168–173)

Chapter 11

Brahma and Vishnu try to console Shiva by reminding him of his and Sati's real spiritual essence. They tell him that he should remember that Sati is the Primordial Prakriti who manifests herself as the consorts of Brahma and Vishnu, too, although, as the consort of Shiva, her Self remains *fully manifested*. Brahma and Vishnu tell Shiva that they will together hymn the Goddess and request her to reunite with Shiva. They all begin to sing a hymn to Devi.

As soon as their prayer stops Devi appears before them, assuming a thousand female forms. These countless forms are all full of beauty and grandeur; they are dark at a moment, white at the next moment, and then suddenly become red in hue; they are now fully clad, now unclad, now young, now senile. Now they sing a song, now they dance. They spread in all directions. The gods become totally baffled at seeing these female forms, pervading all directions. They can't understand how they are to pray to them, how they are to concentrate on them, as they are everywhere. Devi,

then, out of compassion for them, emerges as a single female form – as if Sati has taken another form in order to manifest before them.

When she appears, Brahma and Vishnu request her to accept Shiva once again as her husband and to reunite with him. Devi says that she has left her body and hence, disembodied, she cannot become the consort of Shiva once again at this stage. She asks them why they dismembered the corpse of Sati, if they really wanted to see her reunited with Shiva soon, in an embodied form. Devi says that, had her body remained intact, she could have entered that body and reunited with Shiva, thus reviving that body. However, Vishnu has destroyed that body. Devi says that when Shiva had taken her body on his head, her corpse almost became revived, but the other gods have destroyed that body – thus spoiling the possibility of the revivification of that body. Devi then curses all the gods, as they have acted against her will.

Brahma and Vishnu say that Shiva, too, ought to be cursed, and Devi curses Shiva, too. However, as she has been pleased with the hymns sung by the gods, Devi also gives the gods certain compensatory boons. She instructs all the gods to be ever respectful towards women, as she declares that she resides in the hearts of women. She tells the Trinity that each of them is only an image of Devi. She asks them to work harmoniously and promises that she will divide herself into two goddesses and will be reborn as Shiva's wife/wives. Shiva becomes engrossed in meditation at Kamarupa. Devi is reborn as Ganga and Uma, the two daughters of King Himalaya and Menaka. When Shiva danced with Sati's corpse on his head, Sati decided to be placed on his head in her next birth too. That is why she is reborn as Ganga, the divine river goddess who is placed on Shiva's head.

(*Brihaddharmapurana* 174–182)

Note

The text on the basis of which this summary is prepared is *Brihaddharmapurana*, edited by Panchanan Tarkaratna and translated into Bengali by Ramanuja Vidyarnava, Jagannatha Vidyarnava, Dwarakesha Kavyatirtha and Panchanan Tarkaratna (Kolkata: Navabharat, 1396 Bangabda).

Appendix III

An outline of the narrative of Sati in Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal Kavya*

Annadamangal Kavya is an eighteenth century Bengali text by Bharatchandra Raygunakar. Generically, it is a peculiar text. Though it operates within the framework of the *mangalkavyas* of medieval Bengal, it simultaneously belongs to courtly and popular, sacred and secular discourses. The importance of this text in the context of the Sati *pithas* is great, because this text, closely modelled on Sanskritic sources and yet including a lot of popular materials, draws on both the Shakta puranic and the tantric traditions to construct the narrative of Sati. Besides, this text includes a special section, "Pithamala", which describes in detail the various Sati *pithas* along with the presiding deities of these *pithas*. Bharatchandra points out that the different puranic and tantric traditions have not reached any consensus regarding the details of the *pithas*, and that is why he has followed a particular tantric tradition for describing the *pithas*.

Though he closely follows the structure of the cosmogony presented in the *Mahabhagavata* and the *Brihaddharmapurana*, his chosen deity is Annapurna, and Annapurna's main shrine is located in Varanasi rather than in Kamarupa. However, he equates Annapurna with the Goddess Prakriti of the two mentioned Sanskrit texts, and presents Sati and Parvati as one with Annapurna. Any scholar dealing with the Sati *pithas*, whether Indian or Western, has to consult this text. Bharatchandra was operating within a very powerful and significant Shakta culture which informed the twilight phase between pre-modern Bengal and the incipient colonial modernity that would mark nineteenth-century Bengal. The Shakta monism of the *Mahabhagavata* (with the Goddess at the centre of everything) and the quasi-Samkhya dualism of the *Brihaddharmapurana* get curiously mingled in Bharatchandra's text, though it is also true that this mixing is discernible even in the *Brihaddharmapurana*, the theology of which is often confused, due to the imperfect synthesis between a Shakta mode of monism and a dualistic idea of the Godhead which projects the Parama Purusha and the Parama Prakriti as equally important in the process of Creation.

Annapurna is presented as Mahamaya (the Great Goddess with bemusing illusive power) in this text. As the text is a *managalkavya*, it does not have the structure of a Sanskrit puranic text with clear chapter divisions. What is presented here is the outline of the narrative of Sati presented in the text of Bharatchandra, which follows the Shakta cosmogony with which the main *gita*, the central narrative song of Annapurna, begins.

The Narrative of Sati in *Annadamangal*: A Summary

Annapurna is Mahamaya, the Parama Prakriti. The entire universe is her shadow. She is incomparable and formless and yet capable of Creation, Preservation and Destruction of the cosmos. Without physical hands, she shapes the universe; without a mouth, she breathes out the Vedic mantras; without a womb she gives birth to the Trinity. Then she orders Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva to engage in penances, and the three gods get engaged in penances on the *karan-jal*, the primordial waters which are the cause of Creation. Devi takes the shape of a corpse to test the perseverance of the gods, and then she floats over the waters and reaches Vishnu. Vishnu can't bear the proximity of the stinking corpse, and his *tapasya* is broken. The same thing happens with Brahma. However, when Devi as the corpse goes to Shiva, he carefully holds the corpse with his hands and then sits on it to meditate. Being the wisest of the gods, he is not deluded by the *maya* (illusive power) of Devi. For Shiva, there is nothing that should be hated or treated as repulsive. Devi is pleased with Shiva and decides to become his wife. Both of them engage in the act of Creation.

Devi is born as Sati to Daksha and Prasuti and later married to Shiva. On seeing Shiva's apparently unseemly visage, Daksha becomes antipathetic to him. Daksha then arranges a *yajna* to which everyone except Shiva and Sati is invited. Sati, however, becomes willing to go to Daksha's palace to participate in the *yajna*. Shiva says that she should not go to Daksha's abode because he wants to deliberately insult Sati and Shiva. Sati says that a daughter can always go to her father's house even without an invitation. She keeps imploring Shiva to permit her to go to the *yajna*, but he remains stubborn and does not grant her request. Angry, Sati assumes the forms of the ten Mahavidyas and frightens Shiva. Terrified, Shiva cannot recognize these fierce female forms as the forms of his beloved Sati. Then Sati, in the form of Kali, reminds Shiva that she is none other than the Parama Prakriti, the Great Creatrix, who created the Trinity and then asked them to engage in penances. Kali tells him that she chose him as her consort because he did not express revulsion at the sight of the corpse in the shape of which she had approached the Trinity. Sati/Kali reminds him that, rather than finding the corpse repulsive, he had made it his seat, and that was what pleased

her. She reminds Shiva that she is the Primordial Prakriti, and he is the Primordial Purusha. Sati appears to imply that it is her choice of Shiva as her beloved Purusha which made him the Parama Purusha. Sati then instructs him in the spiritual secrets of her ten Mahavidya forms and finally, letting the other Mahavidya forms vanish, assumes the form of Kali, jettisoning her fair complexion. Bemused by her absolute power, Shiva gives her the permission to go to Daksha's *yajna*.

He orders Nandi (his attendant and carrier in the shape of a bull) to bring a chariot for Sati. Riding that chariot, Sati goes to the palace of Daksha. When Prasuti sees the dark goddess that her daughter has become, she glumly tells her that in her nightmare she has foreseen the destruction of Daksha and his *yajna* after Sati's leaving of her body due to Daksha's denunciation of Shiva. She tells Sati that, on seeing Sati as Kali, she has come to realize that her nightmare would come true. However, even though Sati is the World Mother, she has addressed Prasuti as *her* "mother". Hence, Prasuti implores her to eat something before going to Daksha's *yajna*. Granting her request, Sati eats something, and then goes to see the *yajna*.

On seeing her dark complexion, Daksha begins to denounce Shiva. His main argument is that Shiva is not a suitable husband for Sati and he can never make her happy. He tells Sati that Sati has become dark due to the life of hardship to which she is subjected at Shiva's abode because of the latter's absolute wretchedness and poverty. Dadhichi, Agastya and the other sages leave the *yajna* on hearing these denunciatory comments on Shiva, but Daksha continues to censure Shiva. He tells Sati that he is ashamed to find Sati in such a wretched condition. He says that he will be able to provide for Sati only when she becomes a widow. Sati then says that she will leave the body produced form Daksha, and curses Daksha that his face will be replaced with the face of a goat. After this, she leaves her present body and goes to the Himalayas to be reborn as the daughter of King Himalaya and Menaka. Nandi goes back to Kailasa, Shiva's mountain abode, with the empty chariot and gives the sad news to Shiva. Shiva, mad with grief, journeys to Daksha's house along with his attendants.

Shiva assumes the terrible form of Maharudra and loudly tells Daksha to return Sati to him. Then, Shiva, along with his attendants, destroys Daksha and his *yajna*. Everything is jeopardized, and only Prasuti survives the catastrophe, out of Sati's grace. Eventually, she comes to Shiva and requests him to save her from widowhood. She is devastated by losing both her daughter and her spouse, and Shiva is pacified on seeing the sad state of his mother-in-law. He revives Daksha. However, Daksha is revived as a headless being. Brahma and Vishnu request that Shiva save Daksha from the disgrace of his headless state. Then Shiva asks Nandi to set another head on Daksha's body. Nandi says that, as Sati had cursed Daksha to become

goat-heated, he will set a goat's head on Daksha's body. Thus, Daksha is revived, and his *yajna* is completed.

However, when Shiva goes to the site of the *yajna* and finds Sati's corpse, he becomes mad with grief. He takes Sati's lifeless body on his head and begins to roam various places, singing the praise of his beloved Sati. Vishnu, after a consultation with Brahma, cuts the corpse of Sati into multiple pieces, so that Shiva's attachment to the corpse comes to an end. Thus, Vishnu cuts off Sati's corpse into fifty-one pieces, and wherever the pieces of the body fall, there emerge the great *pithas*. Brahma worships Devi in these places, and Shiva stays in all these *pithas* as the Bhairava or companion of Devi. The puranas give differing accounts of the Sati *pithas*, but Bharatchandra says that he will follow the descriptions given by the *Mantrachudamanitantra*.

Then, in the "Pithamala" section, Bharatchandra gives a detailed description of the fifty-one *pithas*. Before this description begins, he presents a brief lyrical section on the immanence of Shiva and Devi in every mundane thing and being. Bhava and Bhavani – that is, Shiva and Devi – are said to "play" within the mundane world, the samsara. Their play goes on in the embodied human beings, in the bodies as well as in the souls.

After the dismemberment of Sati's corpse is completed, Shiva becomes engrossed in deep meditation on the Himalayas. The gods pray to Mahamaya so that she is born again as Shiva's consort. She then takes birth as the daughter of Himalaya and Menaka and is named Uma.

(*Annadamangal* 10–18)

Note

The text used for preparing this summary is Bharatchandra Raygunakar's *Annadamangal Kavya* in *Bharatchandrer Annadamangal: Kavi o Kavya*, edited by Debeshkumar Acharya (Kolkata: Sahitya Sangi, 2010), pages 1–117.

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