

Chapter 1



The Tantric and Vedāntic Identity of the Great Goddess in the Devī Gītā of the Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa

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The Birth of the Goddess and Her Identity

Around the sixth century of the common era, in the Devī-Māhātmya of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, the Great Goddess (Mahādevī) makes her first formal appearance in the Hindu Sanskrit tradition. The Devī-Māhātmya recounts the story of the birth of this Great Goddess from the combined wrath of the gods just prior to her battle with the demon Mahiṣāsura. The story nicely reveals her awesome might and martial fury. The intense anger of the gods, arising from their defeat at the hands of the demon, issues from their bodies in the form of light. The several lights unite into a single mass, from which emerges the Goddess herself:

The gods beheld a dazzling concentration of light, like a mountain ablaze, pervading all directions with its flames. Then that incomparable light, born from the body of all the gods, pervading the three worlds with its brilliance, coalesced into the form of a woman. . . . Honored by the gods, she roared on high with a boisterous laugh over and over, filling the entire heavens with her dreadful bellow. . . . The demon Mahiṣāsura [rushing towards the roar] then saw her brilliance pervading the three worlds, her feet trampling the earth while her crown scraped the sky. The twang of her bowstring jolted the underworlds. Her thousand arms reached out in all directions. (2.12–13; 2.32; 2.37cd–39ab)¹

This much beloved story of the Goddess's birth has at times been closely associated with the ultimate origin of the Goddess. As such, it is seen as the defining event that molds her essential character. Thus, Lawrence A. Babb has written of the Goddess as she appears in the *Devī-Māhātmya*: "the only discernible emotion of the goddess is anger—black, implacable, and bloodthirsty. She is something emerging from the highest gods; she is the very essence of their anger" (1975, 221). Babb goes on to suggest that while "she seems more powerful, certainly more terrible, than her creators," she is in the end controllable by them. This control comes about especially through marriage, according to Babb, as seen in such benevolent consort-goddesses as Lakṣmī and Pārvatī. As the Great Goddess is all goddesses, she is both unmarried—in her horrific and destructive forms such as Kālī—and married—in her tamed forms—obedient to her husband and fulfilling the fully auspicious role of conventional wife.

Birth stories are significant as a mythological means for constructing the identity of a deity. The origin story of the Goddess in the *Devī-Māhātmya* is eminently suitable for a divine being perceived primarily as powerful and violent, and whose appeasement is seen as the best recourse for securing prosperity by enlisting her aid for the destruction of enemies. The success and appeal of this vision is attested by the countless Hindu retellings and reenactments of the myth in numerous variants.

The author or authors of the *Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (composed many centuries after the *Devī-Māhātmya*, probably sometime between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries) admired the origin story sufficiently to retell it twice (5.8.27–5.9.38, and 10.12.3–25). But the *Devī-Bhāgavata* sees the birth story of the *Devī-Māhātmya* not as an account of the origin of the Great Goddess herself, but only of the manifestation or incarnation of one of her lesser forms. Such an interpretation is already explicit in the *Devī-Māhātmya*, which asserts that the Goddess is eternal, but that she incarnates in the world in manifold ways (1.64–66).

Within the *Devī-Bhāgavata* is a long dialogue between the Goddess and her devotee Himālaya that represents the philosophical and theological consummation of the text. This dialogue, known as the *Devī Gītā* (Song of the Goddess),² is introduced by a frame story that provides an alternative birth story to the *Devī-Māhātmya*'s. In the *Devī Gītā*'s account, the Goddess once again emerges from a blazing orb of light.³ But the *Devī Gītā*'s story thoroughly redefines the Goddess, constructing her identity in a radically different manner.

The occasion for the birth of the Goddess in the *Devī Gītā* (at least ostensibly), as in the *Devī-Māhātmya*, is another dire predica-

ment of the gods—this time harassment by the demon Tāraka. The Goddess here arises not spontaneously out of the wrath of the gods, but as a gracious response to years of their devoted praise. Finally she appears before them:

Suddenly, on the ninth lunar day in the month of Caitra, on a Friday, that lustrous power revealed in scripture appeared before the gods. Praised on all sides by the four Vedas incarnate, it blazed like ten million suns, yet soothed like ten million moons. . . . Without beginning or end, it had no body, no hands, no other limbs, nor did it have a woman's form, a man's form, nor the two combined. The dazzling brilliance blinded the eyes of the gods. When again their vision returned, the gods beheld that light appearing now in the form of a woman, charming and delightful. She was exceedingly beautiful of limb, a maiden in the freshness of youth. Her full, upraised breasts put to shame the swelling buds of the lotus. Her girdle and anklets jingled with clusters of tinkling bells. . . . Three-eyed and four-armed, she held a noose and goad while gesturing her beneficence and assurance of safety. She was dressed in red and appeared lustrous like blooms of the pomegranate. Richly adorned in garments all suited for love, she was worshiped by all the gods. Satisfying all desires, she is the Mother of all, the Deluder of all. The Mother's kindly face, so gracious, displayed a tender smile on the lotus mouth. This embodiment of unfeigned compassion the gods beheld in their presence. (1.26–27; 1.29–32; 1.39–41)

In order to see more clearly the new identity of the Goddess manifested in this birth story, let us examine in some detail its two major motifs: the aniconic blazing orb of light, and the iconic form of the Goddess that emerges from that light. The first motif is critical for constructing the Vedāntic identity of the Goddess, the second for her Tantric identity.

The Vedāntic Identity of the Goddess as Brahman

The blazing orb of light from which the Devī emerges symbolizes and embodies not the collective anger of the gods, but the supreme consciousness that is the non-dual Brahman of Advaita Vedānta. The Devī Gītā describes the Goddess as infinite being, consciousness, and bliss (*sac-cid-ānanda*), the three primary aspects of Brahman (2.25 and 10.4).

The central and quintessential aspect, that of consciousness, is symbolized in the Devī Gītā by this blazing light, referred to as “*mahas*.” This term, meaning “greatness, power,” as well as “light, luster,” appears in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad (1.5) as the fourth (*catvurthī*) mystic syllable, beyond *bhūh*, *bhuvah*, and *svah*. Specifically, it is identified with Brahman (*maha iti brahma*), and as the power by which the various worlds and entities “become great.” The notion of *mahas* as the fourth also suggests the idea of the fourth state of consciousness (*turīya*), beyond waking, dream, and deep sleep, and thus further evokes the transcendent form of the Devī as pure consciousness.

The Devī Gītā does not simply utilize Upaniṣadic terminology in establishing the Advaitic identity of the Goddess. The text also assimilates features of an important mythic drama from the Upaniṣads that discloses an ancient association between the Goddess (or rather, originally, a goddess), and Brahman. The myth, appearing in the Kena Upaniṣad (3.1–4.3), concerns the famous story of the humbling of the gods Agni, Vāyu, and Indra. This same story appears in an elaborated version in the Devī-Bhāgavata itself (12.8.12–86) and serves as mythological background for the manifestation of the Goddess in the frame story of the Devī Gītā.

The basic myth as told in the Kena Upaniṣad concerns the arrogance of the gods in claiming for themselves a victory that was actually achieved by Brahman, the supreme power, on their behalf. To curb their false pride, Brahman appeared before the gods in the form of a spirit or *yakṣa*. The gods were curious to know who or what this spirit was and sent the fire-god Agni to find out. Agni, approaching the spirit, was suddenly asked by the *yakṣa* what power he possessed. The fire-god replied that he had the power to burn anything on Earth. The spirit then placed before him a blade of grass, which Agni was unable to burn. Humiliated, Agni returned to the gods, who then sent the wind-god Vāyu, who has the power to blow away anything on Earth. But Vāyu was unable to blow away the blade of grass placed before him by the spirit. Finally Indra was sent to the *yakṣa*, but it disappeared in front of him. Then, in that same space in the sky, Indra came across a woman, the brilliant and beautiful Umā Haimavatī, who revealed the identity of the *yakṣa* as Brahman, to whom the victory was due. In the subsequent tradition, Umā Haimavatī came to be identified with Brahavidyā, the knowledge revealing Brahman.

The Devī-Bhāgavata, in its elaborate recounting of the Kena story, explicitly identifies the Goddess with the *yakṣa*, and thus with Brahman itself rather than just with a mediator of Brahman. Further, the Devī-Bhāgavata adds a number of other details. The *yakṣa*, when it first appears, is described as a mass of light (*tejas*) like ten millions

suns, without hands, feet, or other limbs. This spirit is also referred to as the supreme lustrous power (*paraṃ mahas*). When it disappears before Indra, it instructs him to recite the single mantric syllable Hrīṃ, the significance of which we shall consider later. For one hundred thousand years Indra devoutly carries out the repetition of this mantra. Then suddenly, on the ninth lunar day in the month of Caitra, the light reappears, in the midst of which manifests a beautiful young woman, referred to as Umā Haimavatī Śivā. Her iconic description is the same as that of the emergent maiden in the frame story of the Devī Gītā: she is three-eyed and four-armed, holding a noose and goad in two hands while gesturing her beneficence and assurance of safety with the remaining two.

The manifestation of the Goddess in the Devī Gītā is closely parallel to the Kena myth (as interpreted by the Devī-Bhāgavata), which further helps to explain the Devī Gītā's reference to the "lustrous power revealed in scripture." That lustrous power, the *mahas* of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, is also the Umā Haimavatī of the Kena Upaniṣad. Clearly, then, the Goddess is understood to be both the supreme revealer Brahnavidyā and the supreme Brahman that she is to reveal.

There is another interesting mythic parallel to the Devī's birth from the blazing light. The emergence of the Goddess out of the brilliant orb is reminiscent of Śiva's self-manifestation in the famous myth of the origin of his infinite Liṅga.⁴ As told in such Śaivite texts as the Śiva Purāṇa (Vidyeshvara Saṃhitā 1.68) and Liṅga Purāṇa (1.17), Śiva appears before the quarreling Brahmā and Viṣṇu as a shaft of light (Jyotir-liṅga), a massive pillar of fire with no top or bottom. Then, as the syllable Om (the sonic symbol of Brahman/Śiva, as Hrīṃ is of the Goddess) reverberates through space, from out of that blazing column steps forth Śiva in his iconic form as Maheśvara, five-faced and ten-armed. The aniconic Jyotir-liṅga represents Śiva as the supreme Brahman without parts (*niṣkala*) and without marks (*aliṅga*); the iconic form represents him as with parts (*sakala*) and as the qualified Brahman that oversees the cosmic processes of creation, maintenance, and destruction, as well as liberation. This Śaivite myth clearly serves, among other things, to identify Śiva with the supreme reality taught in the Upaniṣads and elaborated upon in the later schools of Vedānta.

The Goddess's own myth of emergence functions, on the one hand, as a counterpart to the famous origin myth of the Jyotir-liṅga, belonging to one of her major male rivals, Śiva. On the other hand, in a manner parallel to the Śaivite myth, it establishes in dramatic fashion the Devī's own transcendent, aniconic identity with the supreme Brahman of the Upaniṣads, an identity enhanced by her ancient association with Umā Haimavatī/Brahnavidyā.

At this point we are ready to consider in specific terms the second motif in the Devī Gītā's birth story: the particular nature and identity of the Goddess who arises out of the blinding light of pure consciousness, and whose sonic symbol, the syllable Hṛīṃ we have already encountered.

The Tantric Identity of the Goddess as Bhuvaneśvarī

Of special importance in the Tantric understanding of the divine is the notion that all deities along with their powers are manifested in monosyllabic symbols or sonic condensations called "seed-mantras" (*bīja-mantras*). The seed-mantra Hṛīṃ, often referred to as the "Hṛllekhā" or "Heart-Sign" Mantra (*hṛd* = heart, + *lekhā* = mark or sign), has traditionally been associated with the Tantric goddess Bhuvaneśvarī, "Ruler of the Universe." Hṛīṃ embodies Bhuvaneśvarī's heart or essence, and the syllable is recited when the essential core power of the Goddess is invoked. It is the recitation of this syllable by the gods that brings forth the Goddess, precipitating, as it were, her visible form out of the subtle sound vibrations of Hṛīṃ that permeate the universe.

This visible precipitation of sonic energy, as we have seen, occurs in two stages: first in the aniconic manifestation of blinding light, followed by its resolution into the iconic form of a young maiden. The iconographic descriptions in the Devī-Bhāgavata of the woman emerging out of the orb of light accord with the typical visual meditations (*dhyānas*) of the Goddess Bhuvaneśvarī found in such ninth- to fourteenth-century Tantric works as the Śāradā-Tilaka Tantra (9.14) and the Devī Upaniṣad (verse 24). The former text almost certainly was known to the composer of the Devī Gītā, the latter definitely, as we shall see.⁵

All the descriptions of Bhuvaneśvarī clearly emphasize her benign and auspicious nature. As a modern devotee affirms, her "four hands represent *dharmā*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *moksha*," that is, her powers to bestow the four chief ends of human existence: virtue, wealth, pleasure, and spiritual liberation (Ayer 1988, 46). Bhuvaneśvarī's specific role in the Devī Gītā is not to fight demons, but rather to bestow spiritual wisdom upon the gods. She teaches them the mysterious nature of the universe with its attendant sorrows, and the yogic disciplines that will lead to liberation from those sorrows. Regarding Tāraka, Bhuvaneśvarī simply promises the gods that she will send a manifestation of herself, Pārvatī, to bear Śiva a son, who will slay the demon. As Bhuvaneśvarī, the Goddess is no longer primarily the implacable warrior, but rather a spiritual preceptor.

Who, then, is this Bhuvaneśvarī? Whence does she come? The Tantric Goddess Bhuvaneśvarī may well have first appeared in the late Purāṇic pantheon (probably after the eleventh century) not as a separate individual figure, but as a member of a company of female deities known as the ten Mahāvīdyās.⁶ The ten represent, on an esoteric level, the various forms of knowledge (*vidyā*) and power that constitute the universe. On a mythological level, they are ten facets or aspects of the Great Goddess. The group in some ways represents a late medieval Śākta counterpart to the Vaiṣṇava notion of the ten main avatars of Viṣṇu, whose role frequently is to maintain cosmic order through the destruction of demons.⁷ The Mahāvīdyās at times function in a similar role, as in the Śiva Purāṇa (Umā-Saṃhitā 50.28–29) where they come forth from the body of the Great Goddess as she fights against the demon Durgama.⁸ But unlike Viṣṇu's avatars, the Mahāvīdyās usually work in concert, and their primary role is not necessarily the preservation of cosmic order (Kinsley 1986, 161–164; 1997, 21–22).

The mythic origin of the ten is recounted in the Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa (8.62–71), a late Śākta Purāṇic text perhaps belonging to the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries.⁹ Here the Mahāvīdyās are said to arise out of a fearsome form of the goddess Satī in order to frighten Śiva into granting her permission to go and disrupt Dakṣa's sacrifice.¹⁰ In addition, Satī herself portrays these emanations as a means of providing her devotees with various worldly and other-worldly benefits. The ten Mahāvīdyās procure these benefits in large part by exercising their terrifying and destructive powers to subdue or defeat enemies. Nonetheless, despite the fierce nature of the Mahāvīdyās as suggested by their origin, they also have a more benign potential that is emphasized in later texts, where at least some of them are described as beautiful in appearance.

While the early myths and texts generally do not specify the particular functions of the individual Mahāvīdyās, the relatively late Uddhārakośa (sec. 1, last five verses) expounds the efficacious nature (*guṇa*) of the ten as follows.¹¹ Tripurā gives liberation (*mukti*), Lakṣmī prosperity (*lakṣmī*), Vāgdevī (Sarasvatī) wisdom (*vidyā*), Tārā knowledge and release (*jñāna* and *mokṣa*), Bhuvaneśvarī sovereignty (*aiśvarya*), Mātāṅgī freedom from fear of female demons and enemies (*rākṣasīśatrubhīti*), Śārikā happiness (*śam*), Rājñī royal authority (*rājyam*), Bhīḍādevī all-pervading expansiveness (*santati viśvavyāpīnī*), and Jvālāmukhī wealth (*dhanam*). These functions are somewhat repetitive and overlapping, but what is noteworthy in the present context is the association of Bhuvaneśvarī with sovereignty.

The word *aiśvarya* (sovereignty), deriving from *īśvara* (lord), suggests a supreme divine power that oversees the universe. It is linked

not only with wealth and affluence, but also with omnipotence and omnipresence. *Aiśvarya* is thus a quite natural property of Bhuvaneśvarī, “She who is Lord (Queen, Mistress) of the World.” Further, *aiśvarya* subsumes most of the efficacious qualities of the other ten Mahāvidyās, with the exception of those relating to liberation, associated especially with the goddesses Tripurā and Tārā. Bhuvaneśvarī, as we shall see, developed fairly early a certain affinity and synergism with Tripurā (Tripurā-Sundarī or Lalitā, as she is also known) that led to an apparent convergence of the two.

In the Devī-Bhāgavata, Bhuvaneśvarī assumes the roles of all the other Mahāvidyās, including those of liberating knowledge and ultimate release. She is the source of all female manifestations or Śaktis, including the Mahāvidyās. In the Devī-Bhāgavata’s version of the slaying of Durgama, for instance, various of the traditional Mahāvidyās are named among the Śaktis emanating from her body, but—unlike in the Śiva Purāṇa’s version—Bhuvaneśvarī is not included (7.28.54–56). Emphasizing that she is no longer just one of the ten Mahāvidyās, the Devī-Bhāgavata regards her as Mahāvidyā (Great Wisdom) herself, whose avatars include many of the earlier members of the standard ten, along with other renowned incarnations of the Goddess. Accordingly, in another demon-slaying story involving the *asura* Aruṇa, the gods address the Goddess as Mahāvidyā, who assumes various forms to favor the gods. Among these forms are named several of the usual Mahāvidyās, plus other incarnations such as Śakambharī and Raktadantikā from the Devī Māhātmya (Devī-Bhāgavata 10.13.87–103). As in its story of the slaying of Durgama, the Devī-Bhāgavata here does not include the name of Bhuvaneśvarī among the forms. Rather, the gods in concluding their hymn of petition use the name Bhuvaneśvarī to refer to the one, supreme World-Mother, who dwells in the Jeweled Island of Maṇidvīpa.

The supremacy of Bhuvaneśvarī in the Devī-Bhāgavata is marvelously evoked in a detailed description of this paradisaical island home of the Goddess, highest of all heavenly realms (12.10–12). The island, lying in the Ocean of Nectar, is forested with a great number of fantastic flowering trees, perfumed with the scent of divine blossoms, and resplendent with ornamental lakes and rivers. The palatial structures include a number of walled enclosures, concentrically arranged. Within each enclosure dwell various classes of celestial beings, gods and goddesses, and their incarnations. In the enclosure just outside the central circle reside the closest associates or helpers of the Goddess, her great divisions (*mahā-bhedās*) referred to as Mahāvidyās (12.11.106). In the innermost enclosure dwells Bhuvaneśvarī herself. Her distinctness from, and transcendence over, the Mahāvidyās is hereby amply demonstrated.

Within the final enclosure is the Goddess' own mansion, a magnificent dwelling constructed of wish-fulfilling gems (*cintāmaṇi*). Inside the mansion are situated four halls (*maṇḍapas*), in which she conducts four different sorts of business: amorous sport, delivering souls from the bondage of rebirth, discoursing on truth, and consulting with her ministers on running the universe. Within the palace also is a great couch of remarkable design, composed of five *pretas*, ghosts or corpses. The four legs are the lifeless bodies of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Rudra, and Īśāna (the latter two being forms or aspects of Śiva), and the seat is the outstretched corpse of Sadāśiva (the eternal Śiva). Upon this throne Bhuvaneśvarī rests in ease. This conception of Bhuvaneśvarī seated on her Pañca-Pretāsana (Seat of Five Corpses) reveals her supreme sovereignty, especially over masculine pretensions to cosmic power. Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva are the three male deities traditionally associated with creating, overseeing, and destroying the universe. But here, as elements of Bhuvaneśvarī's throne, they represent her latent cosmic energies, unconscious and inert, residing under her feet until aroused by her desire.

Sitting on this great couch in the midst of her jeweled palace, Bhuvaneśvarī manifests herself in a manner remarkably similar to that of the goddess Tripurā in the South Indian Tantric text, the Tripurā-Rahasya (Jñānakhandā chap. 20, p. 135), and of Lalitā in the Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa (3.4.37). Indeed, the Devī Gītā's Bhuvaneśvarī seems especially to fuse the characters of her own self as ruling queen with that of Tripurā, who as mentioned above is associated with the granting of liberation. Of all the Mahāvidyās, it is Bhuvaneśvarī and Tripurā who are generally the closest iconographically. Like Bhuvaneśvarī, Tripurā/Lalitā is charmingly beautiful, clothed in red, three-eyed and four-armed, bearing a noose and goad, though her other two hands hold a sugarcane bow and flower arrows, rather than gesturing Bhuvaneśvarī's beneficence and assurance of safety. The easy fusion of these two Mahāvidyās reinforces the Tantric ideal that the Goddess is the giver of both *bhukti* and *mukti* (worldly enjoyment and liberation).

The convergence of the two goddesses is found already, in implicit fashion, in the Devī Upaniṣad, an important Tantric text referred to above and probably composed sometime between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. It is one of several Śākta Upaniṣads dedicated to one or another particular goddess conceived as supreme, or to a form of the Goddess. The Goddess in the Devī Upaniṣad is addressed in the most general and universal of terms, as Mahādevī, and is thought to be all goddesses. The Upaniṣad provides two brief iconographic descriptions of the Great Goddess. According to the first, "She is the power of the Self; she is the enchanter of all, holding a noose, a goad,

a bow, and arrows; she is the auspicious Mahāvidyā” (verse 15). This is a concise description of Tripurā/Lalitā.¹² According to the second depiction, “She resides in the middle of one’s lotus heart, shining like the rising sun; auspicious, bearing the noose and goad while gesturing her beneficence and assurance of safety, she is three eyed, dressed in red, granting all wishes to her devotees” (verse 24). Here, of course, is Bhuvaneśvarī. The author of the Devī Gītā was greatly indebted to the Devī Upaniṣad—his conception of the Goddess is clearly inspired by the fusion of the two great Mahāvidyās responsible collectively for all worldly and spiritual well-being.¹³

The Tantric character of Bhuvaneśvarī in her early career is apparent. By the time of the Devī-Bhāgavata, she has undergone a process of thorough Vedicization, a development already well underway in the aforementioned Devī Upaniṣad. The Devī Upaniṣad is a Śākta Tantric work that understands itself as fully within the domain of Vedic (Vedāntic) truth, indicated by the very fact of presenting itself as an Upaniṣad. Its Vedic pedigree is further affirmed by its quoting the famous “Devī-Sūkta” from the Ṛg Veda (10.125). Its concern with various root and seed mantras of the Goddess, including Hṛīṃ, attests to its Tantric nature. The Devī Upaniṣad thus points to an important step in the evolution of the Great Goddess: the fusion of her Tantric and Vedāntic personalities, a fusion that becomes fully elaborated in the Devī Gītā. The Vedicization of the originally Tantric Bhuvaneśvarī had considerable appeal to the composer of the Devī Gītā. He was aware of the Devī Upaniṣad, as he quotes five verses (8–12) of its “Devī-Stuti” (hymn to the Goddess) (quoted in Devī Gītā 1.44–48). It is no wonder, then, that the Goddess herself in the Devī Gītā (10.22) mentions the Devī Upaniṣad as one of those texts whose recitation is pleasing to her.

This synthesis of the Vedic and Tantric within a Śākta perspective stresses the identity of Bhuvaneśvarī with Brahman and her absoluteness and complete independence from any male consort. As Bhuvaneśvarī, the Great Goddess is wholly auspicious and benign. As the supreme Brahman, she is one alone without a second. As both Bhuvaneśvarī and Brahman, she is paradoxically the benign World-Mother beyond all relationship, identical with all and subject to none.

The Sonic Synergism of Brahman and Bhuvaneśvarī: Cosmogonic and Soteriologic Functions of Oṃ and Hṛīṃ

The story of the birth of the Goddess in the Devī Gītā is a dramatic narrative that reveals her Tantric and Vedāntic personalities and their

essential unity. The fusion of these two aspects is further indicated on a more subtle level by the integration of the mantric embodiments of Brahman and Bhuvaneśvarī, the seed-syllables *Om̐* and *Hrīm̐*, respectively. The explicit identification of the Goddess with both sacred syllables is presented in the hymn of praise offered to her in the first chapter of the *Devī Gītā*: “Hail to her in the form of the syllable *Om̐*;¹⁴ hail to her embodied in the syllable *Hrīm̐*” (1.53). The importance of this double identification is underscored by its repetition, in slightly altered form, two chapters later: “Hail to you, Ruler of the Universe [*Bhuvaneśānī*, synonymous with *Bhuvaneśvarī*]; hail to you, composed of the syllable *Om̐*. Hail to you established in the whole of Vedānta, embodied in the syllable *Hrīm̐*” (3.45). The cross-correspondences here (the Tantric *Bhuvaneśvarī* with the Vedāntic *Om̐*, and the established truth of the Vedānta with the Tantric *Hrīm̐*) attest to the thorough commingling of her two fundamental aspects.

The identification of the Goddess with both *Om̐* and *Hrīm̐* represents a sonic encryption of her dual nature as the essential ground of existence and as its manifesting and ruling power. The author or authors of the *Devī-Bhāgavata/Devī Gītā* elaborated upon the interplay between the two symbols in various cosmogonic and soteriological contexts. In the process, the Tantric and Vedāntic functions of the Goddess as *Mahāvīdyā*, the powerful and benevolent World-Mother, and as *Brahmavidyā*, the revealer of ultimate truth and the truth itself, are incorporated into each other, her dual nature integrated.

The Cosmogonic Interplay of Om̐ and Hrīm̐

According to Advaita Vedānta, Brahman is not only one alone without a second, but also absolutely unchanging, beyond all modification. Thus, the world of duality or multiplicity is, in some sense, an illusion, less than fully real. Otherwise, the absolute oneness of Brahman would be compromised. Yet Brahman is somehow the source of the world—it brings forth the world through the mysterious power of *Māyā*, neither real nor unreal. Associated with *Māyā*, Brahman appears in three successive forms or bodies, causal, subtle and gross, which represent stages of manifestation of the material universe.

The *Devī Gītā*, in accord with this Advaita perspective, sees the Goddess as the one alone without a second, associates her creative power with *Māyā*, and affirms the three bodies as manifestations of her own highest Self. Thus, both ontologically and cosmologically, the Great Goddess fully implements her “Brahman-nature.” Yet, unlike in Advaita, she not only wields *Māyā*, she also is *Māyā*. *Māyā* in the Tantric perspective is not so much an illusory power, but rather is the

mysterious, generating force, feminine in nature, by which the Goddess transforms herself into the various psychophysical energies and entities that constitute the manifest world. Māyā is the measuring and constructing force (related to the verbal root *mā*, to measure or measure off) which forms out of itself the material universe. This material power is thereby readily linked to maternal creativity, a link made evident in the Sanskrit noun *mā*, meaning both “mother” and “measure.”

Māyā is intimately connected to Bhuvaneśvarī, the World-Mother of the Devī Gītā, as revealed in the common Tantric name for her sacred syllable Hrīṃ: *māyā-bija* (Māyā’s seed-mantra).¹⁵ Hrīṃ represents in a cosmogonic context the initial sonic vibration and dynamic point from which all the material world arises. It contains within itself the master plan and patterns for all manifest forms. Hrīṃ is the sonic essence of the World-Mother reverberating throughout the universe and within the hearts of beings (cf. Kinsley 1997, 134–136). Thus, Hrīṃ embodies the power of Māyā, whose essence is embedded in the very structure of the syllable itself, in its letters and parts, according to various esoteric, Tantric explanations. The Varadā Tantra, for example, provides the following esoteric correspondences: “The letter ‘h’ signifies Śiva; ‘r’ means Prakṛti (Nature); the ‘i’ indicates the Great Māyā; the *nāda* (the nasal sound of the ‘m’) represents the Mother of the universe; and the *bindu* (the dot of the ‘m’, the silent reverberation of the syllable following its audible recitation) signifies that she is the remover of sorrow.”¹⁶ We shall consider the salvific aspects of such esoteric etymologies below, but will here focus on the cosmogonic.

The Varadā Tantra’s explanation encodes a basic Tantric conception of creation. Tantra in general presupposes a bipolar, gendered view of ultimate reality, of the One unfolding into Two as God and Goddess, associated with various other complementary opposites, also gendered in their symbolic associations. Especially important among such pairs are spirit (Puruṣa, masculine) and nature (Prakṛti, feminine), consciousness (masculine) and energy (Śakti, feminine). Both creation and liberation are seen as the result of the union or reunion of the two co-ultimate principles/deities, a process usually expressed in terms of the interaction between Śakti (the Goddess as Power) and Śiva. The relationship may be one of dependency or codependency (in the strict meaning of the term), or it may be one of radical independence, or something in between. Śākta Tantrics, focusing on Śakti and her relationship with Śiva, stress to greater or lesser degree her supremacy. According to the Varadā Tantra, Hrīṃ contains within itself both the masculine and feminine creative principles, Śiva and the World Mother, including her aspects as both Māyā and Prakṛti.

The Varadā’s interpretation of her sonic symbol suggests that the Goddess is inclusive of all the “masculine” qualities and attributes

embodied in Śiva, who becomes simply a lower manifestation of the Devī herself. Such, in any case, is the position of the Devī-Bhāgavata as a whole. According to the latter, the Goddess is both male and female, and only for the sake of *her own* amusement, and for the sake of creation, does she bring forth out of herself her masculine side as a separate entity, to sport with it in the form of Śiva (12.12.13–14, 17, 39). As ultimate reality, the Goddess is beyond gender differentiation, and thus the sexual, bipolar symbolism of the general Tantric perspective is somewhat muted in the Devī-Bhāgavata. It is primarily in a cosmogonic context that the Goddess manifests her female form alongside the male principle that derives from it.

The Goddess herself in the Devī-Bhāgavata presents this cosmogonic motif in familiar sonic terms. Śiva is subsumed into the supreme Brahman, thereby taking on a neuter rather than masculine appearance, though the gendered aspect echoes in the background. Brahman is represented by the *brahma-bīja* (seed-mantra of Brahman, Om̐), corresponding to Bhuvaneśvarī's *māyā-bīja*. The account appears in the story of the humbling of Agni, Vāyu, and Indra referred to previously. After the Goddess has revealed herself to Indra in her iconic form as Umā Haimavatī (Bhuvaneśvarī), the perplexed and humbled god asks her about the identity of that blazing light or spirit (*yakṣa*) in whose midst she has appeared. She responds that the spirit is none other than her form as Brahman. This Brahman, she goes on to explain, has its sonic manifestation as the single syllable (*ekakṣara*) Om̐, which is composed of the syllable Hrīṃ (*hrīṃ-māyā*) (12.8.64). These two seed-syllables are her chief mantras, and she assumes these two aspects or parts in order to create the world. She concludes: "The former part is called infinite being, consciousness, and bliss. The second part is known as Māyā and Prakṛti—that Māyā endowed with supreme power is I, the Īśvarī (Ruler/Queen)" (12.8.65–66).

Interestingly, it is the second part, Hrīṃ, which appears as the underlying substrate or inner essence of Om̐ (defined as *hrīṃ-māyā*). While the Goddess bifurcates herself into the two syllables, Hrīṃ seems in one sense to be prior, and to include within itself both itself and Om̐. The dominance of Hrīṃ becomes even clearer in the soteriology of the Devī Gītā.

The Soteriological Assimilation of Om̐ by Hrīṃ

Since the time of the ancient Upaniṣads, Om̐ has played a significant soteriological role. In the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, the final goal of union of the Self with Brahman is likened to hitting a target (Brahman) with an arrow (Self), shot by the bow of Om̐ (2.2.4). The Muṇḍaka adds: "Meditate on Om̐ as the Self; may you fare well in crossing to the far

shore beyond darkness" (2.2.6). The Devī Gītā acknowledges the salvific, meditative role of Om̐, as it quotes (in 6.6 and 6.9) these same passages from the Muṇḍaka. But it grants a far greater soteriological role to Hrīṃ, at times even supplanting Om̐ entirely.

In the esoteric etymology of Hrīṃ from the Varadā Tantra given above, its salvific sense is suggested by the silent reverberation at the end of audible recitation, signifying that the Goddess is "the remover of sorrow." An alternative etymology develops the same basic motif: the letters of the syllable embody the mother who shines within, or pervades (from *ī*, to shine, and to pervade) the heart of beings, removing (from *hr̥*, to carry away) their pain (Brooks 1992, 103). Or, still differently, the *h* represents Śiva, the *r* Śakti, and *i* their union that produces tranquility (Beck 1993, 138). This latter alludes to a major Tantric conceptualization of the salvific process, Kuṇḍalinī Yoga.

According to this yoga, the divine is not something merely external to humans, but is also the inner guiding force and psychospiritual energy within an individual. This force is symbolized in the figure of the coiled serpent, or Kuṇḍalinī Śakti. In the unenlightened, she lies dormant in the root center (*mūlādhāra*) at the base of the spine. When aroused by the practice of Kuṇḍalinī Yoga, she ascends the central mystic channel (the *suṣumnā*) parallel to the spine, passing through various energy centers (*cakras*) to the crown of the head, uniting with her male counterpart (Śiva), and then descends. In the process of ascent and descent, she bestows both worldly powers and the bliss of liberation.

The Devī Gītā closely associates, or rather implicitly identifies, this Kuṇḍalinī with Bhuvaneśvarī and the salvific power of Hrīṃ, in accord with general Tantric views. As a contemporary Hindu explains: "In Tantric lore, Bhuvaneswari is called, among others, by the name of Hrillekha [Hrīṃ]. It means the Power which is resident in the heart of man in the form of a creeper holding fast to him and guiding him. . . . Now, competent authorities identify this Hrillekha with the *Kundalini Sakti* resident in man" (Ayer 1988, 45; cf. Kinsley 1997, 135–36).

The Devī Gītā in its final chapter describes a Tantric form of worship that begins with various internal visualizations of the Goddess. The worshiper calls to mind the Kuṇḍalinī form of the Goddess, wandering in the internal central channel (the *suṣumnā*). She is to be meditated upon as the embodiment of being, consciousness, and bliss (the primary characteristics of Brahman). Then, by an inner visualization process, the meditator installs the letters of Hrīṃ along the energy centers of that channel, and contemplates the Devī within the

lotus heart. There she is seen as sitting on the Sofa of Five Corpses, the traditional seat of Bhuvaneśvarī in the Jeweled Island. The five deities lie under her feet, while she herself transcends them, being in the form of pure consciousness. Through such worship and meditation, the practitioner comes to realize the essential oneness between him or her self and Bhuvaneśvarī.

The installment of the letters of Hṛīm along the mystic centers of the *suṣumnā* in the above Tantric worship serves to embed the psycho-physical energies of the Goddess within the meditator. As the central channel represents an *axis mundi* in Tantric thought, the centers embody different levels of the universe, which in turn are correlated with different levels of consciousness. Such correspondences have long been associated with the component letters (or sounds) of Om̐, as in the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, and utilized in contemplative practice.

One such meditative practice, briefly outlined in the Pañcikaraṇa attributed to Śaṅkara, involves first a comprehension of the correspondence between the three parts of Om̐ (Auṃ)¹⁷ and the three bodies—gross, subtle, and causal—of the Self, with their individual and cosmic counterparts, as well as their correlative states of consciousness. In a cosmogonic context, the three bodies are seen as progressively evolving one from the next: the gross from the subtle, the subtle from the causal, and finally—though not explicitly stated in the Pañcikaraṇa—the causal from the pure consciousness of Brahman/Ātman.

The second phase of this meditation, known as Laya Upāsana (resorptive meditation), consists in reversing within oneself the cosmogonic process. This is accomplished by dissolving or reabsorbing in due order the three bodies, states, and so forth, back into their source, until the meditator finally merges into the supreme, non-dual Self. This resorption is actualized in the contemplative practice by regressively dissolving the letters of Om̐ (*a*, *u*, and *m*) back into their origin: *a* into *u*, *u* into *m*, and *m* into Om̐, and finally Om̐ into the supreme (the Ātman or Brahman). In such fashion the meditator is able to realize fully the identity of the individual soul with Ātman/Brahman.

This Laya Upāsana of the Pañcikaraṇa, especially as explained and elaborated upon by Sureśvara in his commentary thereon, serves as a model for the Goddess' own concluding discussion of Jñāna Yoga (Knowledge Yoga) in the fourth chapter of the Devi Gītā. However, it is not Om̐ but Hṛīm that is regressively dissolved, and she refers to Hṛīm as the Devī-Praṇava. The word *praṇava*, meaning "humming," was originally used as a name for Om̐. Here, then, we find the complete sublation of this prime Advaitic, sonic symbol by its Tantric counterpart.

Sonic, Aniconic, and Iconic Identities: The New Birth of the Goddess

We began with the famous birth story of the Goddess, or more accurately, her manifestation, as told in the Devī-Māhātmya. On the level of mythic narrative, we saw a transformation of the Goddess as her iconic emergence from the aniconic blazing light was radically reinterpreted in the Devī Gītā. Crucial to this reinterpretation was the fusion of the Tantric and Vedāntic identities of the Goddess. Complementing the mythic transformation was the mantric elaboration of the Devī's identity. Her visible, luminous forms, the aniconic as well as the iconic, were seen in one sense as derivative from yet a more subtle germ, the quintessential seed-syllable Hṛīṃ. The new birth of the Goddess in the Devī Gītā is thus a multiphased process, her two luminous manifestations, one iconic, one aniconic, both arising ultimately from the sonic.

The development of the sonic dimensions of Bhuvaneśvarī/Brahman allowed for the integration of the various cosmological, cosmogonic, and soteriological concepts of Advaita and Tantra. In the process, the Vedāntic aspects were thoroughly assimilated by the Tantric Bhuvaneśvarī, so that on the sonic level, the former are often sublated by the latter. The sonic essence of the Goddess makes clear that her truest, most sublime nature, is not the implacable and bloodthirsty warrior of the Devī-Māhātmya, born of the anger of the gods. Rather, she is the benevolent World-Mother, manifesting herself out of the subtle vibrations of pure consciousness that is the transcendent fourth (*turya*), referred to by Vedāntists as Brahman, but by those who know her real creative and salvific power, as the Goddess Bhuvaneśvarī.

Notes

1. All translations from the Sanskrit are by the author. The translations are sometimes slightly condensed. Translations from the Devī Gītā are based on the author's translation of the text, published by the State University of New York Press, 1998.

2. The Devī Gītā constitutes chapters 31–40 of the seventh book of the Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Thus, references to Devī Gītā 1–10 equal Devī-Bhāgavata 7.31–40.

3. The Devī-Bhāgavata presents the alternative birth account in two versions, the first occurring in the frame story of the opening chapter of the Devī Gītā. The second, and almost certainly earlier, version of the Goddess' birth in the Devī-Bhāgavata appears in 12.8. This second account will be considered in some detail in the next section on the "Vedāntic Identity of the Goddess as Brahman."

4. While the term *liṅga* is often taken in a phallic sense, its most literal meaning is “mark” or “emblem.” Since the mark of a male is the penis, the phallic significance is natural enough. However, such an interpretation is often overemphasized in the case of Śiva, where his primary defining quality or mark is that of pure consciousness, symbolized by an infinite column of light, the Jyotir-liṅga or emblem of light.

5. The Devī Gītā was composed in all probability after the Śaradā-Tilaka Tantra (ca. twelfth century), as the Devī Gītā almost assuredly quotes from it (see Brown 1998, 162–164). The Devī Gītā also quotes from the Devī Upaniṣad (ninth to fourteenth centuries) and actually refers to the latter text itself. For the dating of the Devī Upaniṣad, a critical text for understanding the historical context of the Devī Gītā, see Farquhar 1920, 266–267; Winternitz 1927, 239–240; Dasgupta 1922, 1:28; and Brooks 1990, 12–13.

6. The specific ten goddesses named vary in different lists, and sometimes there are more than ten. Bhuvaneśvarī appears in most lists, often as the fourth, fifth, or sixth Mahāvidyā (Chakravarti 1963, 85–86; Bhattacharyya 1974, 135–136; Pal 1981, 9–10, 57–59; Kinsley 1997, 9).

7. In certain late Tantras, there is an explicit correlation made between the Mahāvidyās and Viṣṇu’s ten avatars (Bhattacharyya 1974, 136; Kinsley 1986, 161; 1997, 20–22).

8. The ten named in the Śiva Purāṇa are:

1. Kālī
2. Tārā
3. Chinnamastā
4. Śrīvidyā
5. Bhuvaneśvarī
6. Bhairavī
7. Bagalā
8. Dhūmra
9. Tripurasundarī
10. Mataṅgī

9. Hazra (1963, 282) dates the text as probably from the tenth or eleventh century. Kinsley (1997, 22) suggests that it, along with the Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa which provides a similar origin account of the Mahāvidyās, was probably composed after the fourteenth century.

10. The occasion for Satī’s desire to disrupt her father’s (Dakṣa’s) sacrifice arose when he insulted her by refusing to invite her husband Śiva to the great rite. This famous story is told in countless versions.

11. The Uddhārakośa also refers to six other “Daśavidyās,” who often appear in other lists: Bhadrakālī, Turī, Chinnamastakā, Dakṣiṇakālīkā, Śyāmā, and Kālarātrī. The Uddhārakośa is a late collection of quotations from forty-seven other Tantric works.

12. The Sanskrit subheading in the text refers to the Goddess as Ādi-Vidyā (Primal Wisdom), similar to the name Śrī-Vidyā (Auspicious Wisdom), an alternate designation of Tripurā.

13. The Devī Upaniṣad, in its description of Ādi-Vidyā, specifically says she grants both *bhukti* and *mukti* (verse 19).

14. The text here refers to *Om̐* by the term “*praṇava*,” (humming). It is a common designation of this sacred Vedic syllable. The *Devī Gītā* also uses the term *praṇava* to refer to Bhuvaneśvarī’s seed-mantra *Hrīm̐*, calling it the “*Devī-praṇava*” (4.41). But here in the first chapter it clearly refers to *Om̐*.

15. The *Devī Gītā* refers to *Hrīm̐* as the *māyā-bīja* in 5.32.

16. The *Varadā Tantra* text (from chapter 6) is quoted and translated in Woodroffe 1922, 244. The translation is mine.

17. The *o* is a diphthong, composed of *a* and *u*, and thus the three elements are *a*, *u*, and *m* (disregarding the fourth element represented by the dot, symbolizing the silence following the *m*).