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Like Mother, Like Son: Sita and Hanuman

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Like Mother, Like Son

Sita and Hanuman¹

○ Philip Lutgendorf

VANARANAM naranam ca
kathamasit samagamah (How
can there be a relationship
between men and monkeys?)

Women and Monkeys

Roughly midway through the *Sundarakanda* of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Sita, doubting whether the monkey Hanuman is truly an emissary of her husband, incredulously poses the above question, which suggests the implausibility of a "coming together" or "union" (*samagama*) of the human and simian species.² Thereby hangs a tale, for the query leads to a long recital of the events since Sita's abduction, and especially of the alliance forged between the Raghu brothers and Sugriva, the monkey ruler of Kishkindha. But Sita's pointed query suggests deeper ironies relevant to the larger epic: first, to the low status of the monkey (*vanara* or *kapi*) in the hierarchy of the ancient Indian bestiary, and hence to its being a singularly inappropriate companion for an Aryan prince who exemplifies civilization and decorum (*maryada*). Moreover, the pairing of human beings and monkeys, which seems so inappropriate to the princess, has in fact been made previously in the story, not in order to magnify the human at the expense of the simian, but rather to signal their shared cosmic insignificance, as creatures unworthy of a mighty *asura* lord's attention, when Ravana solicits the boon of

immunity from all classes of beings—*devas*, *danavas*, *gandharvas*, *nagas*, etc.—who might potentially cause his death.³ The incongruity so apparent to Sita is thus paradoxically linked to the devious workings of the *devas*, for, as we all know, the nearly-immortal Ravana, tyrant of the universe, is fated to be slain by a mortal man assisted by monkeys.

Let me extend the quest for missing links in this verse by monkeying around with Sita's question in order to pose several more: first, what have *women* to do with monkeys? More specifically, what relationship or "union" could the chaste wife of an Aryan prince have with a feral forest-dweller? These questions will lead me to yet two more: what do certain kinds of divine women—independent, virginal, and potent Mother goddesses—have to do with monkeys? And finally: what, if anything, does Sita, whom many regard as the patriarchally-regulated "spouse goddess" par excellence, have to do with these wild, independent women? My interest in all these questions arises from my interest in the *Ramayana* tradition and in Hanuman himself, and in the meanings which his monkeyhood (*kapitva*) seems to encode for Hindu society. I will argue that the relationship of this so-called "men's deity" to Sita, and to women in general, is in fact a

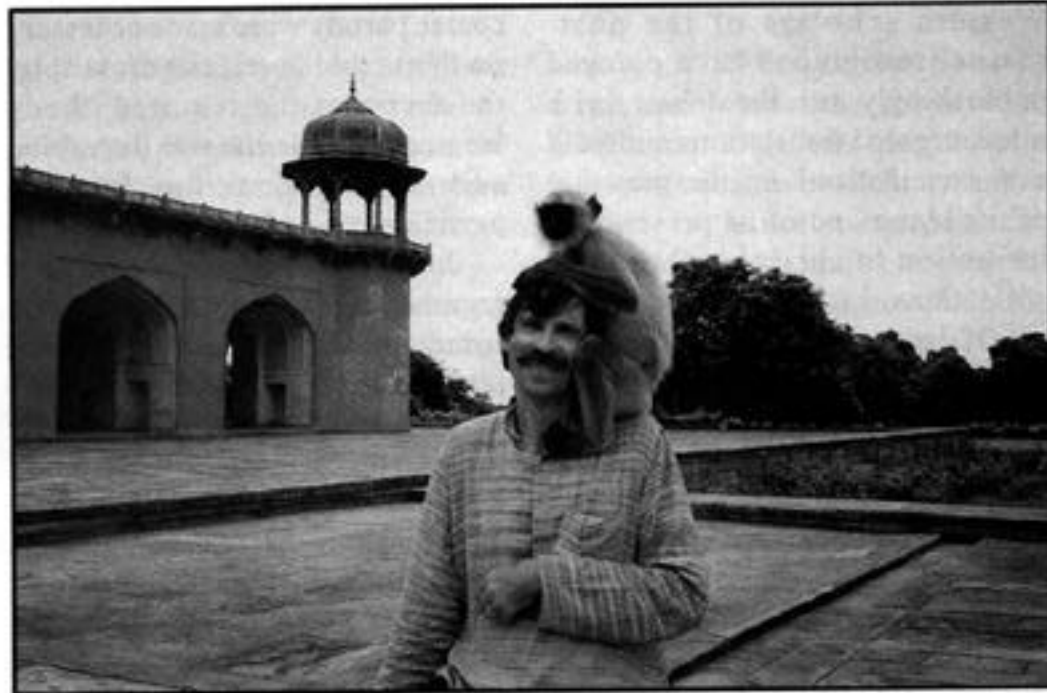
"special" one. Folklorists have pointed out the worldwide presence of the motif of the "animal helper"—a clever supernatural sidekick of the hero of tales. Generally, however, the treatment of this motif assumes a male point of view, and the diminutive assistant typically facilitates a hero's material attainment of the goals of his quest—victory, fortune, and a princess bride. The materials that I will be considering, however—a late-vedic hymn, various versions of the *Sundarakanda*, and contemporary folk practices and songs—give us pause to consider that a woman's "animal helper," especially if he is a man-like monkey, may assume a different and indeed wider range of roles, not excluding the provision of protection, emotional support, and various kinds of intimacy.

Indrani and Vrishakapi

The creators of the 1933 Hollywood film *King Kong* were not the first artists to fantasize that a large, virile monkey might have erotic designs on an attractive human female. An inspired poet in northwestern India appears to have had a similar idea some three millennia earlier. It found expression in an anomalous hymn in the tenth *mandala* or anthology of the *Rigveda*—the so-called *vrishakapi* hymn, 10.86. Louis Renou called this "the strangest poem in the *Rigveda*" (quoted in O'Flaherty: 257)

and generations of vedic scholars have puzzled over the question of why it was placed in the sacred collection at all, a problem sharpened for many, especially in the Victorian era, by the evident obscenity of certain verses. My aim in revisiting this problem hymn is necessarily modest; not being a vedic scholar I cannot hope to “explain” it, only to examine and summarise the explanations of others. My interest arises from the fact that *vrishakapi* is generally taken to mean “bull-monkey” or “virile monkey.” Scholars who have studied the history of Hanuman-worship in South Asia have examined this hymn closely for evidence of a vedic “proto-Hanuman,” and a few have claimed to find it, or to find signs of a “non-Aryan” cult of “monkey-worship” being acknowledged and somewhat nervously incorporated into the brahmanical fold via this enigmatic text (Lutgendorf 1994:219-20).

Hymn 10.86 belongs to the genre of *akhyana* or dialogue, a form which occurs particularly in the first and tenth *mandalas*, generally assumed to belong to the later strata of the *Rigveda*. Here the conversation is between at least three speakers—Indra, his wife (referred to as *Indrani*) and *Vrishakapi*—though some find evidence of four or even five participants. The hymn opens with Indra (or possibly his wife) complaining of a decline in both Indra-worship and *soma* offerings, a situation which succeeding verses (2, 4-5)—evidently spoken by the wife—blame on the monkey’s “erring ways” and defilement of “precious, well-made, anointed things.”⁴ Indra defends the monkey, whom he characterizes as his friend. There follows an exchange in which *Indrani* boasts of her ability to satisfy a sexual partner—an invitation to which the



Philip Lutgendorf (below, in photo)

monkey apparently responds, at least verbally and by being physically aroused (6-7). Indra and his spouse continue to argue over the beast (8-9), and the monkey, and possibly his wife (*vrishakapayi*, “Mrs. *Vrishakapi*”) get into the discussion in verses 10-11, praising *Indrani*, whose “husband will never die of old age.” In verses 12-15, Indra, who says he is not happy without his friend, again receives an abundant offering of *soma*, together with meat of “fifteen bulls,” which fully satisfies him. Verses 16 and 17 mirror each other with riddling assertions regarding the sexual act. Verses 18-22 allude to the distant wanderings of the monkey, perhaps in banishment, and entreat him to return “home.”

The history of interpretation of the hymn was summarised by J. R. Joshi in *Minor Vedic Deities* (1978). The medieval commentator Sayana (perhaps following up on verse 7, wherein *Vrishakapi* addresses *Indrani* with the vocative *Amba*—“mummy” or “little mother”) identified the monkey as the “son of Indra”—although we may feel that this only adds incest to injury.

Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century scholars typically advanced allegorical interpretations associating *Vrishakapi* with various climatic and astronomical phenomena (e.g., the sun, the moon); Joshi observes that these theories are “far-fetched” and “seem to neglect the general spirit of the Rigvedic hymn” (Joshi: 115-16). There was good reason for such neglect, since the hymn’s “spirit” is best described as jauntily bawdy, even obscene; thus Ralph Griffith, in his 1896 translation, took recourse to several euphemisms and skipped verses 16-17 entirely, “which I cannot translate into decent English” (Griffith 1896:597). Scholars in the second half of the twentieth century, including Joshi’s teacher R. N. Dandekar, began to take a more forthright look at the imagery and innuendo of the hymn, and advanced the view that it related to the worship of “fertility gods” or embodied “a virility-charm”; “Indra...is spoken of as having been exhausted when a bold lascivious monkey administered to him some medicine through which Indra regained his manly power.”

Western scholars of the post-“sexual revolution” have plunged unblushingly into the debate, with unexpurgated translations and bold new speculations on the meaning of the hymn and of its presence in the holiest of ancient brahmanical collections.

Of late, several scholars have entertained the suspicion that the word *kapi* (“monkey”) itself is being used in the hymn as a slang or mocking euphemism; the most sustained such argument yet to appear in print is that of Stephanie Jamison in her 1996 study of the role of women in vedic ritual, *Sacrificed Wife, Sacrificer's Wife*. Following the observation of O’Flaherty on the resemblance between elements of the hymn and of the great royal ritual of the horse sacrifice (O’Flaherty: 261), Jamison offers a meticulous analysis in support of her bold hypothesis that the hymn presents, in effect, a “mock *ashvamedha*,” possibly preserving an earlier, uncodified version of some of the obscene banter ritually exchanged by key participants (priest, sacrificer, and sacrificer’s wives) during one of the climactic events in the rite: the period when the sacrificer/king’s chief queen “mimes” sexual intercourse under a cloth with the just-slain consecrated stallion (Jamison: 75,88). The uncouth, sexually forward “monkey,” in this interpretation, was a sarcastic, diminutive euphemism for the huge and stately horse—one of the most revered animals for the vedic people and a surrogate for the king himself—which had just suffered a ritual death by suffocation and hence was in a state of “reflex-conditioned tumescence and emission,”⁵ so that, as Jamison persuasively shows, the sexual manipulation explicitly prescribed in the ritual manuals was hardly “symbolic.” Euphemism and

coarse parody were made necessary on the verbal level, she argues, by the fact that the required “body language” of the rite was disturbing and even shocking for the participants.

Just as Jamison rejects earlier arguments that the “crude” hymn somehow accidentally stumbled into the stately vedic corpus when no one was looking (hence her surmise that it must have had a role in some important ritual), so she insists that the *ashvamedha*’s “showcasing of extreme public sexuality....is not a freakish and aberrant spectacle, as it is sometimes presented, but the logical, if extreme, fulfillment of woman’s function in ritual...” (Jamison: 65). Further, she reminds us that the horse sacrifice was not simply a costly and elaborate way to glorify a king; its invocation in narrative literature points to its performance at times of crisis, especially when a king was without issue and hence potentially seen as “impotent” or flawed, and thus unfit to rule. The well-established homologising of the stallion with the king (through its consecration and year-long processional “campaign”) and the transfer of its potency to him when he ultimately inhales the vapor of the broth in which its dismembered body simmers, both presuppose, Jamison insists, the active participation of his wives as sexual partners, who likewise absorb the stallion’s virility.

We think we understand why the vedic people homologised kings with stallions; as a result, the structure of the *ashvamedha* is at least partially comprehensible to us. But, assuming for the moment that Jamison’s hypothesis about *Rigveda* 10.86 is correct, why would an ancient poet call a horse a “monkey”? Long before Darwin revolutionised biology and

scandalised the Western establishment by postulating a direct genetic link between simians and humans, the latter speculated, pondered, and joked about the unmistakable resemblances between themselves and these (mainly) diminutive primates. I have argued elsewhere that there is no convincing evidence for a “monkey-worshipping cult” in ancient India, and that textual references, on the contrary, show that monkeys were commonly viewed as feral, promiscuous, dirty, sometimes cunning (though not particularly intelligent), and generally inauspicious (Lutgendorf 1997:323). Jamison likewise observes that “Though it is hard to know where a monkey would fit in the varna system, I would wager that he would be a Shudra” (Jamison: 77). To call a consecrated royal stallion a “bull-monkey” is thus a transgression and a taunt. We may similarly observe—putting aside the *ashvamedha* theory for the moment—that to call a subordinate male a “bull-monkey” (as Indrani does in the hymn) is likewise an ambivalent indicator potentially of both desire and hostility.

Whether the ritual and the hymn are indeed related, the purpose of the taunting of the animal-surrogate in both cases would appear to be the same: to restore vigour and credibility to the “real man” (O’Flaherty’s translation, in this context, of *vira*): the husband/sacrificer/Indra. Thus Indrani, in verse 9, calls the monkey an “imposter” who has set his sights on her “as if I had no man,” adding immediately, “But I *have* a real man, for I am the wife of Indra....” (O’Flaherty: 259-60; emphasis in original). Like the horse in the royal ritual, the bullish-monkey of the hymn is ultimately used to heighten

the stature of another male. This is achieved through a curious and erotically-charged triangle in which the monkey is at once the “raffish pal” (as Jamison puts it) of the husband and the desired/detested familiar of the wife. Just as the verbal obscenities released at the climactic moment of the *ashvamedha* serve to ultimately reconstitute a weakened king via his wife’s ambivalent union with an animal surrogate, so the hymn’s descent into lewdness ultimately serves to restore sacrificial offerings and even self-confidence to Indra—a reading which explains, at least, why this puzzling hymn concludes each verse with the ringing affirmation “Indra above all!” (*vishvasmad Indra uttarah*).

Sita and Hanuman

In this section I will focus on the *Sundarakanda*, the “Beautiful Book,” of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, which has recently appeared in a readable and richly-annotated English translation by Robert and Sally Sutherland Goldman. Since academic scholars in the past were often inclined to unduly privilege this earliest-surviving written version of the complete story, much recent *Ramayana* scholarship (my own included) has focused instead on the immense variety of later *Ramayana* tellings in regional languages, visual arts, and performance genres (see, e.g., Richman). Yet there is no denying the influence of Valmiki’s epic, as both a literary

and ideological exemplar, on many subsequent retellings; hence its portrayal, at a key moment in the narrative, of the interaction between Sita and her husband’s monkey-emissary deserves close scrutiny.

This is all the more so in view of the fact that the *Sundarakanda* has long enjoyed a special status as the “heart” of the epic, both structurally and emotionally. Located almost exactly midway through the text, it marks the point at which the protagonist’s fortunes, having reached their nadir, take a decisive upward turn. In addition, its multiple recapitulations of the greater story (most of which are narrated by Hanuman) “enhance still further the sense that the poem is centered here, that the *Ramakatha* itself is inscribed within

the book even as the book is contained within the *Ramayana*” (Goldman: 15). This special status has long been maintained by Indian audiences, hence the widespread tradition that the book represents the *bija* or “seed” from which the greater epic grew (sometimes more specifically identified as *shloka* 5.34.3, in which Hanuman hands Rama’s signet-ring to Sita). We may likewise note the fact that, in both manuscript and printed editions, this “epic within an epic” is the portion of the poem most frequently reproduced independently and used for ritual recitation (Goldman: 5, 20, 37, 80).

Equally striking is the fact of the physical absence, from virtually the whole of the book, of the *Ramayana*’s titular hero, who reappears only in the final five chapters as a passive listener to Hanuman’s account of meeting Sita. As the translators note, Rama’s absence contributes in its own way to an atmosphere of “profound and pervasive devotion to him,” but it also provides the audience with alternate ideals. Through the epic’s most detailed and emotionally-compelling portrait of its heroine, “the *Sundarakanda* emerges in many ways as the Book of Sita”; and it likewise constitutes “a kind of epiphany of Hanuman... to the status of a divinity” (Goldman: 19, 60, 40).

Thematically, the book divides into two principal components: descriptions of Hanuman’s extraordinary feats, which are characterised by



ferocious energy (his great leaps, his sudden growth to colossal stature, and his destruction of enemies and of the physical environment); and his encounter with Sita, which is bracketed by these passages and comprises, both in its placement and in its emotional tenor, the very heart of the book (*sargas* 28-39). These two components suggest the twin themes of *shakti* and *bhakti* ("power" and "devotion") that, in modern times, are often cited in explanation of the divine monkey's great appeal. The action of the book is launched—literally—with the account of Hanuman's leap and flight to Lanka (at 190 *shlokas*, the longest chapter in the entire *Ramayana*), which is punctuated with aggressive encounters with challenging supernatural females. This mood of *virya* (heroism/virility) is replaced by one of voyeuristic *adbhuta* (wonder) during his subsequent tour of Lanka in search of Sita, in which he witnesses the spectacle of the post-orgy slumber of Ravana's half-naked wives (5.9.38-39). When at last his gaze falls on Sita herself, the mood changes to one of *karuna* (pathos), as Hanuman watches Sita threatened by Ravana and hears her despairing resolution to end her life, which finally cements his resolve to reveal himself.

Here I wish to point to two aspects of their encounter which are relevant to my present topic. The first is the theme of restoration through an intermediary or surrogate. Hanuman, in effect, brings Rama to Sita, first through

language (his recounting of the *Ramakatha*), and then through a physical token (the ring, which causes Sita to feel—in the book's celebrated, pivotal verse—"as joyous as if she had rejoined her husband"; 5.34.3). Despite her concern over a monkey's inherent "inauspiciousness" (on which she twice remarks; 5.30.4, 5.32.21), Sita literally drinks in Hanuman's words, and when she begs him for more, he obliges with a remarkable word-portrait of her husband. In twelve couplets (5.33.8-19) Hanuman catalogues Rama's physical attributes in a minute detail that seems to anticipate both the *nakha-shikha* conventions of classical literature and the *shastras* on temple iconography. In effect, we witness the fabrication, through the medium of language, of the

body of the ideal man (*purushottama*). This "restoration" of Rama—which finally convinces Sita that the ludicrous monkey is truly his emissary—is not merely "symbolic," for in renewing Sita's hope it also saves her life and thus literally effects Rama's eventual success.

This leads to my second theme: the intense emotional flavour of the interaction which follows, beginning with the message from Rama which the monkey proceeds to deliver. Its portrait of a prince suffering the pangs of separation from his beloved (5.34.39-44) in fact exceeds in tenderness anything that we have heard Rama say in dispatching Hanuman. Sita responds accordingly: "No one is dearer to him than I or even as dear: not his mother, his father, or anyone else" (5.34.29). She completes the

exchange by offering two tokens of her own—again, one verbal and one tangible. For the first, she discloses an intimate incident from their life in exile—beginning with Rama asleep with his head on her lap—of which the audience has till now been unaware (the story of the crow, 5.36.12-32). For the second, she hands Hanuman an "exquisite, heavenly hair ornament," which she has likewise kept concealed (5.36.52). Soon after, as Hanuman prepares to leave, Sita begins to cry and begs him repeatedly to stay another day, as she cannot bear "my grief at not being able to see you" (5.37.19-22).

This exchange between Sita and Hanuman constitutes, in effect, one



of Rama and Sita's tenderest moments within the epic narrative; indeed, it is their only extended intimate "conversation." The quotations are necessary, of course, since Rama is not actually present, his place being taken by his messenger. It is hardly surprising, then, that the audience has always found it to be singularly "beautiful" (*sundara*), in a way that Rama's later reunion with his wife will most emphatically not be. At the risk of going out on a limb, I propose that this scene, nestled in the "heart" of the *Sundarakanda*, is about as close to "lovmaking" as Rama and Sita ever publicly come in Valmiki's dignified narrative.



narrative of the *Sundarakanda*; rather it is to point to a shared way of thinking about or "through" animal surrogates who become vital intermediaries. The vedic sacrificial horse is not a "scapegoat" in the Biblical sense, but rather an extension of the king himself; hence his transformation into a victim (*bali* or *pashu*) is problematic and must be bracketed with verbal denials both sublime (the famous hymn to the dying horse at *Rigveda* 1.162, containing the verse "You do not really die through this, nor are you harmed..."; 1.162.21) and ridiculous (the obscene banter about "horsikins" during the queen's night with the dead animal; see Jamison: 69). Like the

At this point I wish to return to the coarse dialogue and imagery of the *vrishakapi* hymn and its postulated linkage with the disturbing climax of the *ashvamedha* in order to point to some structural resemblances. The king who wished to perform a horse sacrifice consecrated an animal-surrogate and outfitted him with tokens of himself (royal parasol, etc.), and then sent him on a long journey, accompanied by an army, in order to ultimately effect, through the returned animal's sacrificial death and union with the king's wife, the restoration or enhancement of the king's virility (*virya*) and his "royal fortune" (*shri*). Rama, deprived of both his kingdom and his wife and hence in the deepest crisis of his career, sends Hanuman on a crucial mission, giving him his signet ring. Accompanied by an armed force, the monkey ranges far before he

ultimately proceeds alone to his fateful encounter and exchange of tokens with the princess. In the course of their interaction, the princess' absent husband—represented at every moment through his animal surrogate—is similarly "reconstituted," though not through the gross mimesis of the vedic rite, but on the refined level of language and feeling.

The author of the *Ramayana* was of course well aware of the details of the *ashvamedha*; he had described one—performed by King Dasharatha in order to obtain sons—at length in *Balakanda* (1.11-13), right down to the three principal queens' night under the blanket with the horse (1.13.27-28). But my purpose in citing the rite here is not to suggest any direct or conscious parallel between the sequence of the ritual and the

horse, Hanuman is an animal-surrogate capable of effecting the reversal of a king's waning fortunes, and he is likewise, in certain contexts, a comical figure. The German Indologist Herman Jacobi complained of the often "burlesque" quality of the *Sundarakanda* and concluded that large portions of it were "spurious," a judgment rejected by more recent scholarship (Goldman: 28). Unlike the vedic horse or *Vrishakapi*, however, Hanuman serves only as a go-between for sundered lovers and can play no direct sexual role himself; hence Valmiki's monkey is "a virile but largely de-eroticised figure whose libidinal energies are sublimated in the service of his master" (Goldman: 55). I believe that this sublimation, at least, was a conscious strategy on the epic poet's part, an intentionally

supernatural transformation of the observed behaviour and popular conception of aggressive, virile monkeys.

In dealing with most of the moral dilemmas presented by the story, the *Ramayana's* main characters do not behave according to baser human or animal instincts of self-protection and self-aggrandisement; in short, according to "normal," worldly expectations. It is precisely this that makes them exemplars of a culturally-cherished ideal of behaviour. The Indian audience scarcely needs to be reminded of the fact that, as Rama remarks to Sugriva in Book 6, "In this world, Friend, all brothers are not like Bharata, all sons do not behave toward their fathers as I did, nor are all friends like you" (6.18.15). We may add that most worldly inheritance disputes are not resolved like the one in Chitrakut, in which two brothers attempt to *give away* a kingdom to each other (2.98-104)—a scene that Indian audiences must inevitably contrast with the equally familiar but bloody climax of the *Mahabharata*. It is the Ragu brothers' ability to sublimate their personal desires to the higher law of *dharma*, and the poet's ability to project *adharma* beyond the realm of the patrilineal family—to animals, demons, and a handful of women—that makes their story important and exemplary. However, the powerful characterisation of Sita and Hanuman in *Sundarakanda* further extends this moral exemplification beyond the story's inner circle of human male siblings.

One way in which Hanuman's relationship to Sita has traditionally been understood is as a symbolic "son," a fictive kinship that is expressive of their intimate but de-

eroticised relationship. It also reflects psycho-social patterns in Indian families, in which a son often appears as a young woman's "saviour" in the context of her in-laws' home, and as a sustaining replacement for the affection of a sometimes emotionally-distant husband. Here, Rama's physical distance from Sita—which, in her desperate ruminations, she periodically interprets as the willful withholding of his affections—is bridged by his messenger, who first appears to her in tiny form, "the size of a cat." When Sita laughs at this childlike being's claim to be able to rescue her, Hanuman proudly swells to display his "mountainous" form, inviting her to climb on his back. One need not be a strict Freudian to suggest that Hanuman's behaviour invokes the boy-child's wish to "show-off" and "be big," (like his father) for his mother. The fact that Hanuman and Sita's relationship invokes the traditional closeness of the mother-son bond in patriarchal families suggests one sense in which these characters are indeed "akin."

They are akin in another sense too—as embodiments of *shakti* or "power." Hanuman repeatedly observes that Sita herself possesses "the blazing power" to destroy Ravana and his city (5.49.21,33, 35; 5.53.18, 23); he attributes all of his deeds to the power of Sita's asceticism, and declares that as a result, Ravana is as good as dead, and that Rama will serve as "the mere instrument of his destruction" (5.57.2-5, 16). Hanuman likewise reveals that he is capable of rescuing Sita himself, and she twice confirms that this is so, but each time asks him to refrain from acting, lest "Raghava's reputation would be diminished" (5.35.57; 5.54.3). These passages reveal the importance of the theme

of sublimation and subordination—to the authority of "Rama's orders" and to Rama himself—that is such a central preoccupation of the epic poet and that provides a firm counterweight to the glimpses of rampant *shakti* that periodically punctuate his *Sundarakanda*. Later storytellers, however, would often expand on this shared characteristic of the heroine and the monkey, in some cases tilting the balance away from subordination to a more autonomous exercise of power and agency.

Devi and Langurvir

Here I leap forward more than a thousand years to consider two sets of narratives, icons, and practices that again pair a divine female with a powerful monkey, and that begin to appear in medieval texts but remain widespread to the present day. The first set comprises narratives that belong to what A. K. Ramanujan sometimes termed the "meta-*Ramayana*," which is inclusive of variant but related tales in all the languages of South and Southeast Asia. The second set is much more loosely related—if related at all—to the *Ramayana* narrative as it is generally understood, and is attested primarily through modern ethnographic accounts of popular religious practices. All these materials highlight an ambivalent relationship between a mother goddess and a monkey sidekick; a relationship expressed through devotion, protection, violence, and (more occasionally) transgressive sexuality.⁶

Several popular stories place Hanuman in encounters with menacing supernatural women. There are, of course, the challenges of the "mother of snakes," Surasa, and the *rakshasi* Simhika, which he faces in the course of his flight over

the ocean, defeating the first by trickery and the second by violence (5.1.130-178). In both cases, Hanuman's victory is achieved through swelling his body to enormous stature in response to the demoness' gaping maw, then quickly contracting it (in the case of Surasa) to rapidly enter and exit her mouth, then salute her and receive her blessings, and (with Simhika) to enter and kill her by piercing her vitals with his tiny but "adamantine" form. The psychosexual overtones of this scenario—the boy-child's response to the devouring maternity of an approving "good mother" and a threatening "bad mother"—

seem too obvious to warrant comment.

A third challenge, however, appears as Hanuman is about to enter Lanka, in the form of a female gatekeeper who is generally understood as the personification of the city itself (she bears the name Lanka or Lankini) and hence as its *bhudevi* or protective local goddess. Though deleted from the critical edition of the Valmiki *Ramayana*, this passage of some seventy lines is found in most of the epic's southern manuscripts and modern printed vulgate versions, and is retold in many later *Ramayanas*. Again, it involves a violent challenge and an increase in size on Hanuman's part, but the exchange stops short of murder when the gatekeeper-goddess, recognizing the monkey as the fulfillment of a prophecy regarding the downfall of Ravana,



Surasa

gives him her blessing to enter the city. She then disappears from Valmiki's account, but in some retellings she is ordered by Hanuman to leave Lanka (since Rama will be unable to conquer the city as long as she, the personification of Ravana's *shri*, remains present) and is dispatched elsewhere, sometimes under his escort, on the promise that she will receive worship there. Thus the story figures in the origin myths of certain local goddess temples and explains Hanuman's presence at the shrines as a guardian/sidekick to the resident Mother. Hanuman's "besting" of the local goddess takes another form, however, in the *Padmapurana*, a ca. seventh century Jain retelling by Ravishena; here Hanuman's battle with a princess named Lankasundari ("the Lankan beauty") ends with their sexual encounter—a motif in keeping with the general Jain

portrayal of Hanuman as a heroic playboy and also found in most Southeast Asian retellings (Govindcandra: 37).

More peripheral to the central *Ramayana* narrative, but very popular and widely circulated is the story of Hanuman's defeat of a bloodthirsty tantric goddess of the netherworld in the course of his journey there to rescue Rama and Lakshmana, who have been captured by Ravana's subterranean alter-ego Ahiravana (a.k.a. Mahiravana, Mayiliravana). This story is best characterised as a semi-independent narrative cycle in which

Hanuman, rather than Rama, becomes the central hero (Smith: 153, Zvelebil: xxxix-xl). Again, the besting of the goddess involves, in different versions of the story, varying degrees of violence or collusion (e.g., Hanuman kills or deposes her, and assumes her form to greedily consume food offerings from the demon-king before ultimately slaying him; alternatively the goddess herself reveals how the demon may be destroyed, and receives the boon of being worshipped elsewhere). The monkey's sexual potency is highlighted in this tale as well, though not in his encounter with the resident Devi; instead, we learn that Ahiravana's subterranean city is guarded by a monkey-champion known as Makardhvaj ("fish-banner") who is identified as the son of Hanuman, sired through a drop of sweat which fell into the ocean and was swallowed by a female fish. In some racier southern

and Southeast Asian variants, this incident is linked to another long tale in which Hanuman romances a serpentine fish-queen who had challenged the construction of the causeway to Lanka, thus achieving Rama's purpose while enjoying himself and siring a chthonic son/double (Govindcandra: 236).

The final goddess encounter I will mention is with Sita herself, though not as the desperate, imprisoned queen of the *Sundarakanda*, but as a ferocious martial goddess celebrated in several Bengali and Assamese narratives as the destroyer of yet another Ravana—this time a hundred- or thousand-headed clone against whom Rama and his forces are powerless. In several versions of this story, Hanuman is dispatched to Ayodhya to fetch Sita, who emanates or assumes a ferocious form, assisted by bloodthirsty "mothers," and destroys the demon. In an anonymous Assamese play on this theme summarised by William Smith, the *Shataskandharavana vadha*, the aroused goddess then emits a fiery brilliance that threatens to destroy the universe; Rama is unable to face her and Hanuman must again be summoned. He falls at the goddess's feet and delivers a song of praise which transforms her, at last, into a modest and auspicious wife. In analysing the play, Smith finds himself puzzled by its mixed Vaishnava-Shaiva/Shakta subject matter, and offers the opinion that Hanuman's climactic role in appeasing the goddess "could have been played just as well by one of the other characters" (Smith: 141). However, as I have suggested elsewhere, the divine monkey's own cultic career challenges the assumption that "Vaishnava" and

"Shaiva/Shakta" elements can be decisively separated (Lutgendorf 1994: 240-42), and he evidently enjoys a peculiar relationship with and influence over the martial goddess, though this needs to be explored further.

To do so, I will take a field trip to the northwestern states of Kashmir, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, western Uttar Pradesh, and eastern Rajasthan, where local mother goddesses with strong mythical connections to both Vishnu and Shiva are sometimes worshipped together with two servants or bodyguards: Langurvīr ("hero monkey/virile monkey"), who is identified with Hanuman, and Bhairō (a.k.a. Bhairava), who is understood to be a manifestation of Shiva. The "seven mothers" of the Punjab hills were recently the subject of a comprehensive study by Kathleen Erndl, who associates Hanuman's presence in the shrines with the gradual "Vaishnavisation" of older Nath, tantric, and Shakta cults in the region. This process has led to the partial "taming" of these goddesses, who are understood to be both virgins and mothers, through linkages with Vaishnava narratives (including the *Ramayana*), and through the abandonment of animal sacrifice and other tantric, power-generating rites at their shrines (Erndl: 43). The most popular of these goddesses today is Vaishno Devi, who is worshipped in the form of three stone mounds in a cave-temple high on a mountain above Jammu, which has in recent times become the goal of large-scale pilgrimage. Her origin story places her birth in the south during the lifetime of Rama, as a maiden named Trikuta, who undertakes austerities in order to

win Vishnu as her husband. When Vishnu (incarnate as Rama) protests that he can have but one wife, Sita, he promises to marry her in his future advent as Kalkin, the tenth *avatara* of the current cosmic cycle, who will bring the dismal *kali yuga* to a close. He then sends her to the Himalayas, accompanied by Hanuman, to practice austerities and await his coming, but she is pursued enroute by the lustful Bhairō, who desires to unite with her and whom she eventually decapitates with her trident, granting him the boon of receiving worship near her shrine.

In Erndl's astute interpretation, Langurvīr and Bhairō incarnate the dual roles of the *vir* or virile hero: the devotee who embodies *bhakti* (Hanuman), and the tantric adept "who seeks union with the goddess through meat, wine, and sex" (Erndl: 161). Yet to directly aspire to sexually possess the goddess is to court death, and Erndl suggests the parallel between Bhairō and another unlucky "bullish" figure, the buffalo-demon Mahishasura, who is decapitated by Durga in the classic Sanskrit praise-poem *Devimahatmya*.⁷ The alternative is to become a non-threatening "son/servant," and in the popular but sanitised posters of Vaishno Devi now sold throughout India, her narrative is compressed into an icon of a benevolent lion-riding Durga/Vaishno Devi, flanked by a rampant, banner-waving Langurvīr/Hanuman and a smiling, childlike Bhairō (who nevertheless holds a bloody sword and severed head).

Significantly, Vaishno Devi's supposed original name, Trikuta ("three summits," also the name of the mountain on which she presently resides) was likewise the epic name

of the peak on which Ravana's capital was situated in the *Ramayana*, and was thus another epithet for the local *bhudevi* of Lanka, who had to be overcome in order for the city to be vanquished. There are two ways to "vanquish" a protective goddess (who, being the life force or *shakti* herself, cannot be slain): by marrying her, or by devotionally submitting to her as a "son/protector." Rama, being already married, defers the former course to a future incarnation, and pursues the latter course through his subordinate, Hanuman. Bhairo, who like Hanuman is popularly understood to be an *avata* of Rudra/Shiva, embodies the darker, tantric side of goddess worship (in which the Mother *can* become the sexual partner of the power-seeking adept,



Poster of Devi (usually identified as Vaishno Devi) accompanied by Langurvir and Bhairo

who aspires himself to become Shiva); he too is present at the shrine, though he must sacrifice his "head" to remain there. Erndl notes that the myths which link Vaishno Devi and other foothill goddesses to the Rama narrative appear to be late and contrived, but fails to consider the possibility that the virile monkey himself may not be merely a recent Vaishnava import. Certainly, India abounds in mother goddesses who do not require monkey guardians at their doors; one is inclined to ask whether, in the case of these particular local mothers, their monkey-bodyguard serves any other function apart from conveniently linking them to the respectability of a

(recently arranged) future match with Vishnu/Rama.

To answer this question I undertake another field trip, though not far this time—to eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Rajasthan, where several contemporary researchers have documented the worship of Hanuman, often under the name of Mahavir ("great virile one/hero") as well as Langurvir and Languriya (to be explained below). In Rajasthan, Komal Kothari distinguishes between two aspects of the god that he terms *das* and *vir* Hanuman—the deity in respectively "servile" and "virile" (or indeed, *virulent*) modes. The former is most com-

mon in the shrines built and frequented by the urban middle classes; the latter is more commonly worshipped on the outskirts of villages (Kothari 1996). This distinction suggests the widespread identification of Hanuman as an exemplar of both *bhakti* (self-sacrificing devotion) and *shakti* (self-empowering energy), frequently made by his devotees and analysed in recent published research (Alter: 204-212; Lutgendorf 1994:240-41)—with the difference that the "power" here is of a more raw and ambivalent, even malevolent sort. According to Kothari, veneration of Hanuman as "the great *vir*" presupposes the Rajasthani folk and tribal cult of "the fifty-two *vir*s"—prematurely-slain heroes who demand propitiation—and their female counterparts, the sixty-four *yoginis* (or *joginis*)—wild women who feast on blood and entrails. Both these categories of spirits pose a threat to human beings, especially children. Mahavir is understood to control them because, with his ferocious energy and Shaiva/Shakta resonances, he partakes of their nature. His shrines are normally placed outside villages and avoided after dark, except by those who seek to appeal to his *tamas rup* ("dark side"). These may include women, who undertake a vow of going to him on nine successive Mondays after midnight, applying a coating of

pitiation—and their female counterparts, the sixty-four *yoginis* (or *joginis*)—wild women who feast on blood and entrails. Both these categories of spirits pose a threat to human beings, especially children. Mahavir is understood to control them because, with his ferocious energy and Shaiva/Shakta resonances, he partakes of their nature. His shrines are normally placed outside villages and avoided after dark, except by those who seek to appeal to his *tamas rup* ("dark side"). These may include women, who undertake a vow of going to him on nine successive Mondays after midnight, applying a coating of

vermillion-and-oil (*sindur*), offering garlands, and finally, themselves: removing their clothing to embrace his image (cf. Crooke 1:87, on a similar rite in Maharashtra). The practice is thought to cure barrenness, but it can have more selfish aims: a woman who completes the vow can obtain one of the *vir*s in Hanuman's entourage as her personal servant, though she will have to keep it satisfied (*tush*) by allowing it to feed on the livers of children—such a woman thus becomes a dreaded *dakin* or “witch” (Kothari). Kothari's observations on Rajasthani folk practices (now fast disappearing, he says, as urban ways invade the countryside and the divine monkey's *das* aspect obscures that of the *vir*) both resonate with and counterpoint themes implicit in wider public worship—thus popular devotional poems like the *Hanuman chalisa* note his power over malevolent spirits, and several shrines under his jurisdiction cater to their exorcism, while the well-known taboo against women touching his “chaste” temple icons appears as a kind of diurnal counterpoint to the reported midnight liaisons with the potent *vir*.

The fact that Hanuman can facilitate a woman's acquisition of an aggressive yet servile “familiar” is especially interesting in light of a further body of lore in this region: the genre of folksongs known as *languriya*. Attested in both Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, these songs have received modest scholarly attention (cf. Entwistle, Manuel), but (in my view) inadequate explanation, particularly of their simian imagery. *Languriya* is the name both of their predominant melodies and of their principal

character, a being who (in the context of popular goddess temples such as those of the “seven sisters” of Punjab or of Kaila Maiya in eastern Rajasthan, where the songs are often sung at fairs) is readily identified with Langurvir/Hanuman, the Mother's bodyguard. Some of the songs are indeed simply *bhajans* to the goddess, but others appear “secular” in theme, and involve the singer's address to an imaginary companion whose relationship to her own body is evidently as something other than a guard. Indeed, many of the songs (sung with gusto by both women and by men assuming women's voices) are plain lewd, which is hardly surprising since the genre's name derives from the word *laangur* (and its variant *langul*) which identifies a species of black-faced, long-tailed monkey, but also means both “tail” and “penis.” It also has the adjectival sense of “impudent” and “mischievous,” and, in the slang of the Braj region, can refer to a woman's paramour and/or to her younger brother-in-law (*devar*) with whom she is intimate and can exchange saucy and teasing remarks, or more (Entwistle: 90). Entwistle glosses the name as “one who has a large tail/penis” (I personally favour “the long-tailed rogue”) and describes *Languriya* as “a boyish or youthful figure” who shares the task of guarding Kaila Devi with a shadowy “low-caste” devotee known as Bahora Bhagat.⁸

Entwistle's brief study includes lyrics to fifteen *Languriya* songs, in which “long-tail” is described as fond of meat, wine, and hashish, as always sleepy (due to nocturnal activities), and (in more

devotional lyrics) as waiting on the richly-ornamented goddess in her mansion, fanning her as she reclines on her sandalwood bed. Entwistle adds that other songs, “not recorded here, deal in sexually-explicit terms with their relationship” (Entwistle: 92-95). Kothari similarly reports that village *Languriya* songs sometimes identify him as a helpful friend to barren women, but warn, through sexually-explicit lyrics, of his wayward ways, “He'll come by night, he'll sleep with you, he'll do this, he'll do that” (Kothari). In the Braj region, Manuel likewise notes the widespread popularity, great variety, and imaginative but coarse imagery of *Languriya* songs, such as the automotive-metaphor-laden “Langur's bore is down” (Manuel: 45).

Although Entwistle's short article offers the best study to date of the *Languriya* phenomenon, in my view it misses the point of the tradition's simian imagery. Overlooking data from other goddess temples, it briefly tries to link the Devi's ambivalent sidekick with Krishnaite themes, before concluding that *Languriya* lacks “a fixed identity,” and that hence “the popular imagination has been free to make up songs about him more or less at whim” (Entwistle: 91). I would argue, however, that although *Languriya* songs are clearly imaginative and whimsical, the tradition reveals enough consistency to suggest that his fluid identity—as trickster, son, confidant, servant, protector, ardent flirt, and paramour—is connected with a desirable sort of deviousness, and is broadly consistent with the longtime characterisation of “virile monkeys” as both protective and threatening, comical and alluring, as

well as with mythological motifs (albeit often sanitised in recent times) still found in numerous goddess temples in the northwest.

Scholars and Their Tales

I have presented three examples, spanning as many millennia, of the relationship between a divine woman and a monkey: a single, enigmatic hymn from the early first millennium BCE; an epic narrative dating at least to the fifth century BCE and continuously retold ever since; and a series of stories, icons and folk practices documented in recent times but of indeterminate age. It remains to consider their meaning, by pondering what connections—if any—may exist between them; in short to construct (as scholars are wont to do) an explanatory narrative linking them. I can suggest three ways of doing so.

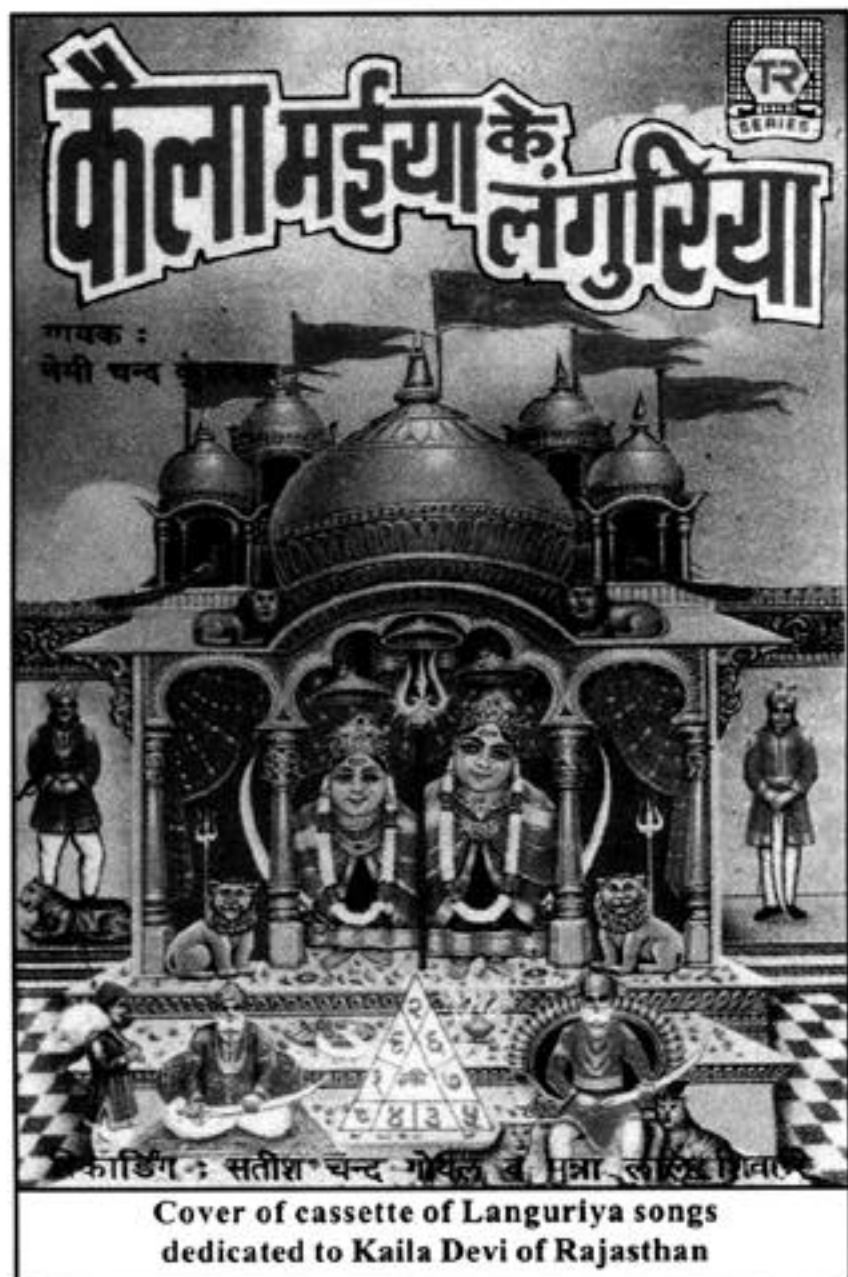
The first is to conclude that, interesting as these sets of materials may be in themselves, there is in fact little or no connection between them. The *vrishakapi* hymn is anomalous within the *Rigveda*, and so obscure and burdened with wildly different interpretations (including 'some that lack a monkey at all') that we can conclude nothing from it. Valmiki's talkative and shape-shifting simians may be his own invention, with no conscious link to previous monkey lore, albeit with affinities to

the worldwide motif-type of "animal helper" in heroic tales. The association of Devi and Langurvir may likewise have arisen independently, and the latter's identification with Hanuman may be only a weak and retrospective attempt to connect local traditions to a prestigious and pan-Indian narrative. Having stated it, I will quickly add that I find this explanation unappealing and uninteresting. It is not much of a story.

A second approach is to suggest that the *Vrishakapi* and *Languriya* themes, despite the vast temporal divide which separates them, both reflect an indigenous

and archaic folklore in which women (and men) fantasize about a diminutive but oversexed monkey "other" who might threaten and/or tantalize a woman. At a certain historical moment, this theme was adopted and transformed through a brilliant literary narrative that became so influential that it largely effaced the older lore, and that transformed both monkey and woman into powerful but ultimately subordinate figures, "united" primarily in their extreme self-restraint and shared devotion to a male authority figure. The old lore subsequently survived only in marginalised retellings (e.g. Jain and Southeast Asian *Ramayanas*).

In this interpretation, the modern *Languriya* folklore would represent a modern resurfacing, in a non-elite context, of some of the repressed but implicit themes of the encounter. This interpretation is in keeping with much modern scholarship which views high-culture, normative texts like the *Valmiki Ramayana* as ideological tools in the maintenance of the caste and gender-based hierarchical status quo, and regards dissenting or non-standard practices and retellings, especially among women and low-caste or otherwise disadvantaged males, as marginalised but persistent forms of "subaltern resistance." Though it is still highly speculative in view of the thin ancient evidence, this explanation seems to me to have merit, at least as a



Cover of cassette of *Languriya* songs dedicated to *Kaila Devi* of Rajasthan

partial approach to this body of material. It should be noted, however, that it is a decidedly "etic" view, from the (assumed) Olympian perspective of the modern academy, and is pervaded by that intellectual community's own (mostly unacknowledged) post-Freudian, post-Marxist ideology, which presumes the pursuit of self-aggrandisement and power (mainly in the form of wealth) to underly and explain most human behaviour.

A third explanation also posits a historically-based developmental trajectory, but of a different sort. This theory sees the first and second narratives as relatively closely linked, both temporally and thematically, since the portrayal of the woman and the intrusive animal in both is essentially as a foil or surrogate to highlight a male authority figure. The woman is utterly devoted to, or but a feminine shadow of, her husband. Indrani is important, in the long run, because she is the *wife* of a "real man, a hero" (two readings of *vira*), who, in the last analysis, stands "above all"—as does Sita's spouse in the *Ramayana*. However, moving beyond the simple narrative of the Sanskrit epic to a consideration of its historical destiny, both in its own right and as a source for later retellers, we note that, over time, the woman and the monkey gradually begin to steal the spotlight. This process becomes particularly apparent in the late-medieval recastings in regional languages, and in the dramatic upsurge, after about 1000 CE, of both Devi and Hanuman as relatively independent deities. Though this process is also accompanied by much devotion to Sita's husband, he is simultaneously elevated and (in everyday terms) distanced to rejoin or sup-

plant Vishnu as supreme deity, or else is abstracted into the two syllables of his "unmanifest" name (*ram-nam*), which is used as a mantra even by people who have little interest in the details of his earthly story (e.g., Nath yogis, and *sant*-poets of the *nirguna* orientation). But as Rama recedes into the celestial background, the goddess and monkey come to the fore, a phenomenon strikingly illustrated in the temple cults of northwestern India, where the force of "devotion" continues to counterbalance that of "power," but it is now the monkey's devotion to *her* that is important. Erndl notes that these virginal yet maternal goddesses don't fit neatly into the two categories, postulated by much recent scholarship, of "spouse" and "independent" mothers (or "breast" and "tooth" mothers), but seem to lie in between (Erndl: 156), a fact that may have something to do with the social profile of their devotees. Thus a goddess like Vaishno Devi gets to have all the respectability of marrying Vishnu/Rama, but this is put off to the distant future. In the meantime—and for the duration of this interminable *kali yuga*—everyone's two favourite characters from the *Ramayana*'s most popular book are back, "playing" in the spotlight at center stage: the goddess and her frisky son/servant/paramour. The "Vaishnava" connection at such shrines, reflected in the Mother's generally benign temperament, vegetarianism, and long-standing "engagement" to Rama, make it acceptable for urban middle class devotees to make pilgrimages there. Yet these associations are largely peripheral to actual activities at the temples, which often reflect themes of violence (e.g., myths of decapitated

devotees, and sporadic though controversial animal sacrifices), risqué outbursts (the Languriya songs), and, most characteristically, possession phenomena, in which the goddess "plays with" her (mainly female) devotees in the form of *pavan* or "the wind" (incidentally, Hanuman's father and alter-ego), making them prophesy, dance ecstatically, or whip their unbound hair about them wildly.

Although this third paradigm involves elements that are alien to Hindu conceptions, it may also be seen from an "emic" perspective. Indeed, it readily adapts to the traditional temporal scheme of four ages, since the Veda—in which Indra is truly "supreme above all"—belongs (as everyone knows) to the Golden Age (*krita yuga*), and the *Ramayana* narrative unfolds at the end of the *treta* and the beginning of the *dvapara yugas*. The puranas, medieval *Ramayanas*, and of course modern Languriya songs all belong to the Dark Age (*kali yuga*), which is a time of decline or disappearance of *dharma*, when society is in disarray and women no longer obey their husbands or servants their masters. Yet whereas people may conventionally bemoan this, they may also note that the present age is not without its perks: salvation, once reserved for high-born males who sponsored intricate sacrifices or practiced interminable austerities, is now accessible to all through simple, inexpensive devotional practices: pilgrimage, faith, and repetition of the holy Name (see e.g., *Ramcharitmanas* 7.102a, b; 103). Nowadays, both Devi and Hanuman are commonly cited as "deities of choice" (*ishtadevi/ishtadev*) for stressful modern times, and are said to be

jaग्रit or "awake"—especially alert and responsive to devotees' needs.

Yet if I posit an evolutionary trajectory for goddess-monkey narratives, I do not mean to imply that a later one ever fully effaces its antecedents. Apart from the Rigvedic hymn, all of the traditions I have described enjoy some currency in popular Hinduism, and individual worshippers exercise agency in determining which to highlight. This is a point overlooked in some recent scholarship, with its penchant for labelling people as "subjects," only to stress their *subjugation* to various hegemonic powers—especially those of the modern state—while giving little importance to their *subjective* values and experiences (which may run counter to the scholar's own ideology). The same woman who adores the *pativrata* Sita and the servile Hanuman in the context of urban, *Sanatan Dharmi* temple worship, may undertake a pilgrimage to the independent and more ambivalent Vaishno Devi and her sidekick Langurvir, or, in the context of a wedding or fair, may herself assume the sung-role of mistress to the lecherous Languriya. Respectability and "dignity" (*maryada*) may at times be a straitjacket, but it may also be a strategy, and female agency may equally express itself through the choice of a moral standard based on self-satisfaction or on self-restraint.

To close with a final bound back to my title, in the Dark Age it is now possible to "like" both Mother and simian "son," without necessarily having to like, be like, or even bother with her husband. This also suggests that one answer to the question posed by Sita with which this essay opened—albeit one that

defies Darwinian evolutionary logic—is that, in the long run, an impish, bullish, love-able and faith-full monkey may supersede even the most ideal man. Moreover, when this happens, women may not even mind. □

Notes:

1. The author is grateful to the Dharam Hinduja Indic Research Center and to its then-Director, Professor Mary McGee, for the invitation to present this paper in the "Sita Symposium" held in May, 1998.
2. The half-*pada* occurs in the second line of 5.33.2 of the Baroda Critical Edition, and in 5.35.2 of the so-called vulgate edition. I quote Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman's recent translation, p. 201.
3. The actual pairing of men and monkeys is not made in Brahma's recounting of the boon or initial suggestion (of Vishnu's incarnation as a human being) for its countering (1.14.13-19), but is implicit in his order, immediately following Vishnu's incarnation as the sons of Dasharatha, that the other gods assist him in a disguised fashion through fathering sons "in the form of monkeys" (1.16). The importance of *vanaras* as exempt from the boon is again pointed out in Hanuman's speech to Ravana (5.49.25-26), in which he warns that Rama's ally Sugriva "is not a god, an *asura*, a human, a *rakshasa*, a *gandharva*, a *yaksha*, or a serpent."
4. I use O'Flaherty's translation throughout; pp. 259-61.
5. Jamison: 68, citing J. Puhvel, "Aspects of Equine Functionality," in *Myth and Law Among the Indo-Europeans*, ed. by J. Puhvel; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970: 162.
6. A full examination of the complex mythological character of Hanuman and his historical development as a deity is beyond the scope of this paper. I have written of it elsewhere (Lutgendorf 1994, 1997), following on the research of others (e.g., Govindcandra, Narula, Nagar). Here I wish to examine a group of related stories that concern Hanuman's interaction with female deities in the course of his adventures in Rama's service. A necessary background to this discussion is an understanding of Hanuman's longtime linkage in popular narrative and practice not

only with Vishnu/Rama but also with Shiva, and especially with Shiva's aggressive alter-ego Rudra/Bhairava, as an *avatara* ("incarnation, embodiment"), *amsa* ("portion"), or indirectly-begotten son. I have discussed this linkage at some length (Lutgendorf 1994:225-29, 240-42), and will merely note here that although it is familiar and unproblematic to most of his contemporary worshippers throughout India and is textually attested at least as far back as the twelfth century C.E., it continues to surprise some modern scholars who perhaps place undue faith in the distinction between the abstract categories of "Vaishnava" and "Shaiva/Shakta" in their understanding of Hindu religious orientations—a distinction which collapses in the persona and cult of Hanuman.

7. Cf. Indrani's threat to cut off Vrishakapi's head in 10.86.5.
8. Although Entwistle identifies the name as a corruption of *bahula* meaning "abundant," and connects him with the swaggering Balarama of Braj folklore (Entwistle: 89-90), I am more inclined to think, based on evidence from other shrines in the region, that it is a variation on Bhairava.

This paper is a revised version of a paper presented at the "Sita Symposium" organised in May, 1998 by Prof. Mary McGee, the then director of Dharam Hinduja Indic Research Centre, Columbia University, New York. This essay will be included in a forthcoming anthology on Sita to be jointly edited by Mary McGee and Madhu Kishwar.

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We invite our readers to send us material on Sita from the folk songs of their region or Sita's portrayal in different versions of *Ramayana* for possible inclusion in our forthcoming book on Sita.