

CHAPTER 1



Introduction

Traditions of goddess worship on the Indian subcontinent have deep historical roots. However, our knowledge of the nature of the goddesses and the ways they were worshipped in the earliest times in India is limited. We can, for instance, discern traces of goddess worship in the Indus Valley Civilization, an ancient South Asian culture that flourished in the second millennium B.C.E.¹ But we cannot say with certainty that the origins of contemporary Hindu worship rituals belong to the Indus Valley or any such ancient civilization. Nevertheless, modern Hindu goddess worship clearly derives many elements of practice from a culturally varied and remote past. Symbolic, verbal, and gestural components from ancient rites were utilized, rearranged, supplemented with newer elements, and syncretized into ritual mosaics that prove meaningful to worshippers today. A detailed study of any contemporary goddess-centered ritual would therefore provide us with a rich array of information grounded in an equally rich and ancient cultural soil.

During the Indian lunar month of Āśvina, on the first nine nights of the waxing new moon, Hindus celebrate the autumn worship of the Great Goddess or Mahādevī.² The Great Goddess is most often identified with Durgā, an irresistibly beautiful female who rides a lion. Durgā embodies the powers of all the gods and symbolically wields all of their weapons (See Figure 1.1). She is regarded as the mother of all creation and the power that sustains the entire cosmos. During the nine-day autumn festival, throughout the subcontinent, communities buzz with excitement as worship activities reach a fever pitch in homes and temples. Festival activities actually begin months earlier, as communities organize themselves, collect money, purchase votive materials, and commission artisans and priests to prepare images and perform the rituals. And then, over the course of those nine autumn nights, the preparations culminate in a remarkable blend of revelry, visual pageantry, emotional catharsis, and high ritual in the votive rites to the Great Goddess.



Figure 1.1. Commercial lithograph of the Great Goddess Durgā slaying the Buffalo Demon, Mahiṣa

This book is primarily a description of the Durgā Pūjā, an elaborate ritual of worship (*pūjā*), which for many Hindus constitutes the climax of their varied devotional rites to the Great Goddess.³ The Durgā Pūjā begins on the sixth day of the nine-night festival and continues for approximately five days. The *pūjā* peaks on the cusp of the eighth and ninth lunar day, but

actually concludes on the day following the nine-day festival. Of the hundreds of religious festivals celebrated annually in Hindu India, few can match the Durgā Pūjā in its combination of widespread popularity, visual splendour, community participation, and ritual complexity. Furthermore, popular interest in this *pūjā* is increasing among Hindu communities in India and abroad. A detailed examination of the Durgā Pūjā reveals an abundance of information on the practice and meaning of Hindu *pūjā*, and on the perceived nature of the Great Goddess herself. Although my main intent is to provide a comprehensive description of the ritual (constituting Part II), Part I, comments throughout Part II, and Part III do contain interpretive material on such themes as the nature of *pūjā*, the Great Goddess, the function of the Durgā Pūjā, and even religious ritual in general, but these are supplemental and not exhaustive.

GENESIS OF THIS STUDY

My interest in this ritual developed from my intention to conduct a study on the Great Goddess Durgā for my doctoral dissertation. I decided to base myself at a renowned centre of Durgā worship and so selected the Durgā Kuṇḍ temple in Banāras, perhaps the best-known temple to the Great Goddess, under the epithet of Durgā, in all of India.⁴ I was aware that during the autumn nine-night (Navarātra) festival to the Goddess, a large number of temporarily constructed shrines would mushroom throughout the city. Although the Durgā Kuṇḍ and other permanent goddess temples thronged with imposing numbers of devotees during this period, worship at the temporary shrines was an equally striking phenomenon. Some community shrines attracted tens of thousands of visitors. Furthermore, instead of the temples, certain of these temporary shrines, particularly those in homes and religious institutions, served as *the* primary locus of Goddess worship for many people. I was particularly intrigued that the ritual being performed by the priests at these temporary shrines differed from the worship at the large Durgā Kuṇḍ temple. This was the Durgā Pūjā, a ritual deemed unnecessary by the permanent temples housing the Goddess, for the rite involves the awakening and installation of the Great Goddess into an impermanent abode, where she is worshipped and eventually dismissed. By a stroke of extremely good fortune, I had been invited to attend the Durgā Pūjā celebrations at the home of the late Manindra Mohan Lahiri, a Bengali brahmin (*brāhmaṇa*) gentleman, who had retired to Banāras.⁵ The Lahiris' home *pūjā* is one of the few elaborate Bengali-styled domestic *pūjās* to survive in the city. During that first Navarātra, I spent my time frantically racing between the *pūjā* celebrations at the Lahiri home and worship rituals at the Durgā Kuṇḍ and other temples and temporary shrines in the city to conduct observations.

When the Navarātra had ended, I found myself intrigued by what I had seen at the Lahiris' home. Previous readings on the Durgā Pūjā and conversations with the Lahiris had provided a fair understanding of the events of those five days, but I was puzzled by certain observations. For instance, a cluster of plants appeared to be venerated as the Goddess, but was referred

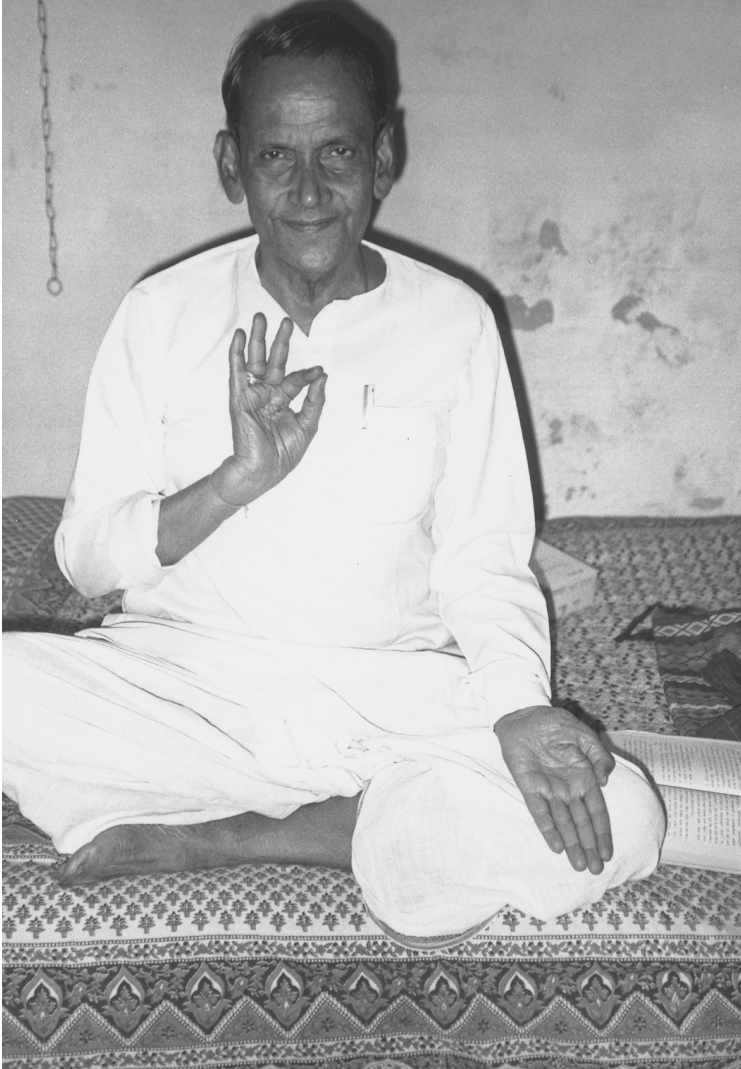


Figure 1.2. Pandit Hemendra Nath Chakravarty, scholar and ritualist. (All unacknowledged photos are by the author).

to by votaries as the wife of Gaṇeśa. My training in Sanskrit piqued my curiosity about the content of the prayers being uttered by the priest, during what appeared to be countless offerings and anointments. Could the ritual acts and prayers perhaps tell me more about the nature of the Great Goddess Durgā, whom I had set about to study? The Lahiris' ritualist, Pandit Nitai Bhattacharya Bharadvaja, whose facility with English was limited, directed me to Pandit Hemendra Nath Chakravarty (see Figure 1.2), who graciously offered to help and became my main source of information on the book that follows.

During my early studies of Hinduism a couple of decades ago, I endured a certain insecurity about the mechanics of Hindu *pūjā*. This is because many presentations within the scholarly literature on *pūjā* either left me overwhelmed with the form, detail, and expectations of background knowledge, or underwhelmed with the lack of detail.⁶ Documentary films and even firsthand observations of *pūjā* at temples and in home shrines would leave me with the nagging feeling that I had only experienced a small portion of what was actually occurring. A rite before a lithograph with a duration of thirty seconds and a ritual spanning several days were both referred to as *pūjā* and often analyzed in the same way. What were the priests or votaries doing and saying? Anthropological accounts of *pūjā* were similarly unsatisfactory because they only referred to the general nature of the worship ritual and provided an abbreviated account of the items offered.⁷ “The priest offers flowers and utters prayers of homage to Durgā,” struck me as woefully inadequate. What prayers? What does he actually say and do? Purāṇic texts were not always much more helpful.⁸ They sometimes provided general advice on specific *pūjās*, with injunctions that assumed an esoteric knowledge of the exact ritual action on the part of the reader.⁹

I had not originally intended to compile an exhaustive description of the Bengali Durgā Pūjā. A Bengali city would have been the more obvious site for such an undertaking. The focal point of my doctoral dissertation research, as previously mentioned, was to construct a portrait of the Great Goddess Durgā, grounded in temple worship in Banāras.¹⁰ However, I could not ignore the significant impact the Durgā Pūjā celebrations had on city life and on people's perception of the Devī. Goaded by my previous insecurities and a determination to “understand *pūjā*,” I seized each opportunity to watch closely and tried to comprehend what was going on as best I could. While the daily *pūjās* to Durgā in temples, conducted by priests and votaries, were not particularly enigmatic, I was deeply impressed by the complexity of the Durgā Pūjā, and of the two main types of the Durgā Pūjā (i.e., the Bengali and non-Bengali) that I had discerned, found myself progressively immersed in a study of the so-called Bengali style. Since it is an annual ritual, I realized that I would have only one opportunity to view it again before my dissertation

fieldwork was completed. I wanted to have a much deeper appreciation of the rite before the next autumn celebrations.

I merely began by asking Pandit Chakravarty questions in order to satisfy my curiosity about details I was sure I had missed. The review of his comments from one meeting, however, in which he would mention consecrating baths or the use of imprints (*nyāsa*) would inevitably lead me to further questions at our next session. “What are the nine kinds of water in which the plant form of the Devī is bathed?” Or, “What exactly is done in a *nyāsa*?” I would ask. “Oh, you want to know about that?!” he would reply and proceed to give me more details. In our meetings over the first month or two, in response to questions about the prayers uttered by the priest, Pandit Chakravarty was casual. He might respond by saying, “The priest says a quick, ‘Obeisance to Gaṇeśa’ and a prayer,” or as he recognized my familiarity with Sanskrit, would simply say, “*Om gaṇeśāya namaḥ.*” As my requests for details increased, and the complexity of the prayers swelled correspondingly, he would often recite the prayers from memory, and I would endeavour to scribble them down. Here I overreached the limit of my abilities with oral Sanskrit comprehension, a capacity further inhibited by my inability to distinguish between his pronunciations of the three Sanskrit sibilants, as well as “v” and “b.”

So it was in an accordion fashion, with certain compressed and incomplete sections expanding over the months and years, that the details of the Durgā Pūjā description that follows came about. It initially derived from my questions based on close observations of the Lahiris’ home *pūjā*. These were followed by details of ritual act and Sanskrit prayers derived from Pandit Chakravarty’s memory of his own extensive experience performing the *pūjā*. The translation of the Sanskrit was sometimes his and sometimes mine. When I had reached the limits of my ability to record the oral Sanskrit accurately and translate it quickly enough, Pandit Chakravarty took to providing me with both the Sanskrit prayers and their English translations. These I sometimes modified slightly in phrasing, but tried not to deviate far from the form he provided. It was by this time clear to both of us that I was interested in a thorough description of the rite. When he was no longer able to remember exact details of the ritual (such as comprehensive lists of substances offered and their corresponding prayers), Pandit Chakravarty consulted the *Purohita Darpaṇa*, an exhaustively detailed manual that contains information on most rituals. At several stages, he reread most of the manuscript of the *pūjā* description we had produced, correcting sections and validating the accuracy of its content. I thus clearly cannot assign particular verse translations to either him or me, since the effort was collaborative. Nevertheless, Pandit Chakravarty’s memory was the source of the bulk of the Sanskrit verses, and as such they may contain minor deviations from printed versions of the

prayers. For a majority of these prayers, he provided both a preliminary English translation, and later, an approved version of any modifications that I had made. He ought to be credited for what is commendable and grammatically sound within the translations.

My methodological approach, from the start, leaned toward an anthropologically grounded study of a ritual, to provide me with an understanding of *pūjā* and the nature of the Great Goddess. It was not aimed at creating a work of textual scholarship on the Durgā Pūjā grounded in translation. Had this been my intent, I would have maintained scrupulous records of the origins of elements of the liturgy, as well as the sources of the translation. However, since I had amassed such a detailed description of the rite, I was encouraged by colleagues and mentors to publish this useful resource and hope that it is received in the spirit in which it was conceived and realized. In order to bring the manuscript to completion, I did not then start again from scratch, but instead worked to complete the missing sections of the *pūjā* description. Rather than provide the reader with the bare bones of a description, I have added what I hope are useful interpretive chapters.

As a result of the process through which this description emerged, some of the translations of the simpler Sanskrit prayers are entirely mine, and I had subjected many which were not mine to slight modifications in wording (e.g., adding or removing articles) and phrasing. However, since I was particularly interested in how a ritualist understood the *mantras*, I generally deferred to Pandit Chakravarty's choice of terms and syntax. Those who have facility with the language and can translate the Sanskrit for themselves, may thus note how the Sanskrit *mantras* are understood by an actual practitioner of the *pūjā*. I hope that what follows is a most comprehensive description of the Durgā Pūjā, which simultaneously conveys, through the translation of the litany, not a Western scholar's erudition, but much of an actual ritualist's sentiments and understandings.

THE DURGĀ PŪJĀ

The nine-night (Navarātra) festival of the Great Goddess (Devī or Mahādevī) attracts worshippers even from the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sectarian traditions centered on the male deities Śiva and Viṣṇu, respectively.¹¹ However, the most elaborate forms of worship are conducted by those belonging to the Śākta branch of Hinduism. Śāktas identify Śakti, the Feminine Power that governs creation, as the supreme form of divinity.¹² Śāktas worship the Devī in numerous ways within their own homes. These domestic celebrations vary in their ritual complexity. In certain homes, prayers of homage are uttered daily, and a votive lamp may be lit and kept burning before the Devī's

image for the entire nine days of Navarātra. It is common for votaries, both male and female, to engage in some sort of vowed ascetic observance (*vrata*), involving forms of fasting or night-long vigils, for a few if not all the days of Navarātra.¹³ In other homes, a pot/jar (*kalaśa*) embodying the Devī may be



Figure 1.3. A traditional Bengali clay image complex. Durgā, her lion, and the demon, as well as the attendant deities, are grouped in a single arrangement topped with a painted arch.

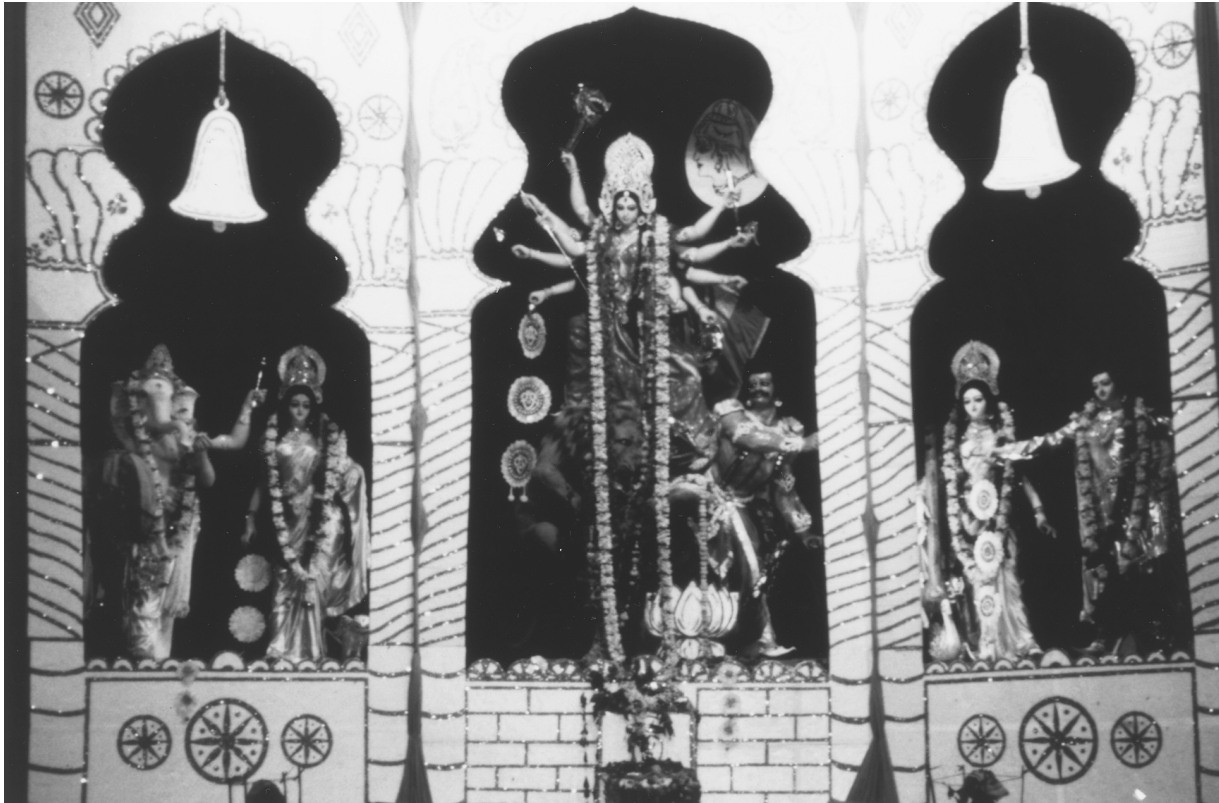


Figure 1.4. Large clay images installed in a community (*sārvajanīna*) group's temporary shrine (*paṇḍal*).

established, and the *Durgā Saptasatī*, an influential scripture that glorifies the Goddess, is recited daily (see Figures 4.2.1 and 6.1).¹⁴ But of all the domestic forms of Devī worship, the Durgā Pūjā that originated in the state of Bengal is the most elaborate and includes most of the rites performed in non-Bengali Devī *pūjās*.¹⁵

The domestic celebration of Durgā Pūjā differs from the highly visible public *pūjās* (*sārvajanīna pūjā*), in that the latter are performed for a community with funds gathered by that community. Home *pūjās*, by contrast, are staged by families using their own financial resources.¹⁶ One major expense in the Durgā Pūjā is the purchase of the brightly colored, eye-catching clay images (*mūrti*) of Durgā and her lion-mount portrayed in one of her best-known mythic exploits, the act of slaying the buffalo demon Mahiṣa. This dramatic triad of figures, together with certain other attending deities, forms a large, polychrome, image-array that is usually installed in a temporary shrine (*paṇḍal*) erected especially for the ritual. The attending deities most commonly present in the clay image-array are the goddesses, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, and the gods, Gaṇeśa and Kārtikeya (See Figures 1.3 and 1.4). At the end of the *pūjā*, these images are delivered into a venerated body of water, such as the river Gaṅgā, and the shrine, which in communal celebrations may be several stories high, is dismantled.¹⁷ Due to the escalating costs of staging such a *pūjā*, domestic celebrations are only commissioned by wealthy votaries who set aside a spacious part of their homes as the place of worship. By contrast, public (*sārvajanīna*) *pūjās* are only limited by the enthusiasm and economic circumstances of the community that stages them. As a result, the proportion of the images, the shrines, and the overall costs continue to escalate as local clubs and communities compete with each other through the scale of their public celebrations (See Figure 1.4).

As the costs grow prohibitively expensive for families to stage such a ritual, the elaborate Bengali-style home *pūjā* is disappearing.¹⁸ In Banāras, a city renowned as a centre of Hindu culture, certain organizations, such as the Ānandamayī Mā Āśram, Bhārat Sevāśram Saṅgha, and the Rāmakṛṣṇa Mission perform Durgā Pūjā in the elaborate domestic style with their own funds.¹⁹ Thus they continue to keep this ritual tradition alive, although within the confines of a spiritual community center. The Bengali style of domestic *pūjā* has strongly influenced the growing phenomenon of public Durgā Pūjās even among non-Bengali communities in Banāras. The public worship among the oldest non-Bengali community clubs (which incidentally are Bengali) is certainly derived directly from the elaborate Bengali style of domestic worship. The community *pūjās*, however, tend to streamline their rituals making them less suited for the most thorough examination.

Although the size of the clay image complex in a home *pūjā* may be smaller than those used in the community celebrations, the domestic *pūjās*

are often more attentive to the rituals of worship. These are closely observed by the patron and his family members and may incorporate elements drawn from the family's own worship traditions. The domestic *pūjās* also enjoy a mood of intimacy, evoking a devotional fervor altogether different in character from the atmosphere generated by the large surging crowds at the public celebrations.

The casual observer might be inclined to think that the clay effigy (*mūrti*) is the only image of the Goddess worshipped during the Durgā Pūjā, when in fact, in the very same ritual, the Devī is actually worshipped under a plethora of other forms and names.²⁰ Although closer observation of the ritual reveals several explicit images of the Goddess, such as an earthen jar and a cluster of plants, there are numerous other names and forms of the Devī not perceived by most votaries. This is because most devotees are unaware of deeper layers of symbolic meaning inherent in the ritual items and in the activities of the priest (*purohita*) who performs the *pūjā*.²¹ For instance, most votaries do not understand the Sanskrit litany that the *purohita* recites during the liturgy. Sanskrit is a classical Indian language mainly known by scholars and religious specialists. Although most Hindu ritualists recite Sanskrit prayers, many of them, too, do not know the language or even the meanings of these prayers. When I asked people (devotees, ritualists, and Sanskrit-speaking/reading pandits) for a rough estimate of what fraction of the ritualist (*purohita*) class who performed the Durgā Pūjā actually understood the Sanskrit prayers, I received responses ranging from “very few” up to “perhaps 25 percent.” The litany of the Durgā Pūjā actually refers to the Goddess through a wide assortment of epithets and, on occasion, even offers explanations of the meaning of symbols and symbolic acts. Thus, a detailed description of the ritual acts of the Durgā Pūjā, including its litany, evidently has a vital role in furthering our understanding of the Great Goddess in the Hindu tradition. Such a description, which constitutes the backbone of this study, is also intended to provide reference material toward a deeper understanding of the ritual of *pūjā*, the preeminent act of Hindu devotional worship. For instance, the Durgā Pūjā reveals that *pūjā* is a series of acts that impels deities and votaries toward each other, bringing about and intensifying the desired encounter known as *darśana*.

Many of the Devī's astonishing array of epithets and forms revealed in the course of the Durgā Pūjā clearly originate from earlier, related, cult worship of the Goddess. These conceptual and manifest images, conjoined with the ritual process of the Durgā Pūjā, testify to my proposal that the Durgā Pūjā is a yearly ritual of cosmic renewal. Throughout the book I advance evidence that the Durgā Pūjā is designed to elicit the manifestation of the Great Goddess into a ritually reconstructed cosmos. This manifestation, however, is not a movement by the Goddess from a transcendent abode to an immanent

presence within the creation. Rather, it is perceived as an awakening of the Devī from her latent presence within the constituent elements (e.g., earth, water, and life) of Nature into active and expansive, yet accessible manifestations. The *Kālikā Purāṇa* 60.78 is explicit in this regard, stating that the Goddess “being awakened (*bodhita*)” is conceptually identical with her “being manifest (*prādurbhūta*).”²² This awakening of divine feminine energy in forms that are personal and approachable as well as comprehensive, encompassing nothing less than the fullness of the manifest cosmos, brings about a rejuvenation of the entire creation.

Without ignoring several of the *pūjā*'s diverse functions, many of which involve empowerment at personal and communal levels, I dwell at some length on the effect the yearly rite has on women in the household. I suggest that an important function of the *pūjā* is to orchestrate the movement of creative energy within the household by influencing the “human feminine.” Women in particular states of development (e.g., pre-menarche girl, mother) are venerated, while other states of womanhood (e.g., post-menarche unmarried girls) are tacitly slighted. The ritual aims at releasing the creative potential within the feminine, but also controlling that energy through marriage, motherhood, or religious dedication. The Durgā Pūjā is thus an attempt to orchestrate the movement of creative feminine energy, at both the cosmic and human levels, from dormancy to activity, and to regulate that power in ways that are manageable and construed as traditionally desirable.

I conclude by offering a general definition of religious ritual. I use the Durgā Pūjā to illustrate the definition and the definition to provide further commentary on the ritual. Although such a cursory presentation cannot possibly address the countless minute and thorny theoretical issues that arise in the contemplation of ritual, I hope my contributions will add to our understanding of this pervasive human activity. Since gender assumptions by readers about the author's voice definitely affect the readings of texts, especially one such as this, which concerns the Goddess, I ought also to state at the outset and by way of introduction that despite the feminine gender evoked by my name, I, Hillary Peter Rodrigues, am male.