

INTRODUCTION

The Goddess Arrives in Delhi

It was autumn in Delhi, that majestic time of year when the sky sparkles a bright blue and evenings resonate with a gentle coolness. A season of delightful reprieve from the summer's heat, autumn is a time to celebrate life's bounty. As its refreshment mediates against all kinds of torpor, many experience this season as an expression of the goddess. Even the name *Autumn* is one of her names.¹ This is a time of movement and excitement, a time of visiting and of receiving guests. It is therefore no wonder that this is the time to receive the most desirable guest of all, for this is when the gracious goddess visits her earthly devotees and infuses them with her blessings. In particular, autumn is the most auspicious time for invoking Lakṣmī, beloved goddess of beauty, wealth, prosperity, and abundant good fortune.

In every neighborhood, people were cleaning house, some of them also scrubbing the exterior walls, applying fresh coats of white-wash or paint. They were preparing for Dīvālī,² the Festival of Lights celebrating Lakṣmī. Everyone and everything seemed to be in on the celebration. Temples, homes, shops, taxis, and the streets themselves were decorated and made ready for the goddess's arrival. In the marketplaces, strings of tiny electric lights sparkled in the trees and from awnings. When night fell, firecrackers would compete with the sound of devotional music on public loudspeakers.

On the day of the new moon, women decorated the steps leading to their doors with beautiful designs in bright-colored powders, tracing footsteps for the goddess of wealth to find her way into their homes. Alongside the footsteps they placed rows and rows of small clay lamps, and at nightfall, they lit the lamps, their cotton wicks saturated with *ghee*,³ which emitted an exquisite, golden brilliance. These small lamps were also placed up on the flat rooftops, so that the entire house was lit up in a kind of landing pattern for Lakṣmī to follow as she descended from the heavens. With an invitation of

such beauty and luminosity, how could the goddess resist gracing these homes with her presence?

I had been invited to attend my first *pūjā*, or ceremonial worship of the deity, in a private home on the outskirts of Delhi. Veena, the woman of the house, was performing a *Dīvālī pūjā*, for which she had set up a temporary altar in a corner of the bedroom. Having spent the past few days in cleaning and preparation, she appropriately began the actual ritual at dusk, when lamps are lit to dispel darkness. The central image of worship was a small framed lithograph print of the goddess Lakṣmī, which had been set into a large stainless steel bowl filled with puffed rice. Veena lit several sticks of sweet, highly fragrant incense and began to recite prayers and make offerings as she waved a small brass lamp fueled with *ghee*. Here again was that exquisite golden light. She was invoking the goddess, inviting her to enter the home and impart her blessings.

Despite the steadfastness with which she performed the ritual motions, however, there was an impression of mild disorder, imprecision, and distraction: some of the liquid offerings spilled out of their containers, while powdered offerings blew away and onto the nearby bed, staining the bedcover with indelible vermilion and turmeric splotches. Children (hers and the neighbors') were running through the house and out into the lanes. Her husband would chase after them and bring them inside, after which they would wriggle free and resume their gleeful romping and attempting to get into the box of firecrackers. Despite the distractions and having to stop and start several times, Veena continued, nonplussed. It was clear from her relaxed demeanor that all was proceeding well. Although as a visitor I could only perceive the ordinary messiness of life that would somehow stand in the way of drawing down the divine into that house on that night, the hostess proceeded with a calm certainty that this *was* the *pūjā*, with spills, color, ringing bells, and interruptions, for as Veena sang supplicatory prayers to the Mother of the Universe, her own children were beseeching her to please hurry up and give them their sweets and sparklers. This jumbly melange of activities struck me as what the goddess of abundance must stand for—life, bright and awake, burgeoning, and despite all distractions and possible encumbrances, was ever moving in and around the human realm. This was certainly a far cry from the peaceful feeling of stillness I had expected. But the ceremony was not yet complete.

Toward the close of the ceremony, Veena lit another lamp, this one with camphor, which sent out an initial blaze of sparks and then

settled into a diamond-like, piercingly brilliant white light along with an astringent and pungent fragrance. Very suddenly things got quiet. Of their own accord, the children gathered close to the altar, standing still and with an attitude of expectation. I noticed that the street noise had subsided, and the darkening room seemed to spread with light. Within an instant, everything had changed. A deep and peaceful fullness settled over the house. That yogic point of perfect quietude flooded the heart and stilled the mind. I let go of compulsive, dualistic queries: Is Lakṣmī a goddess of the worldly realm? Or a goddess of transcendence?

In that moment when the *pūjā* imploded into perfection, when the supplications from the human realm seem to have succeeded in drawing the goddess into our space, crowding out mundane restlessness with a deep and abundant tranquility, existence within the world and transcendence beyond the world seemed as one. The *pūjā* elicited a point of perfect suspension, a window into the infinite that exists between the movements of coming and going, of past and present, of mundane and holy. What was the cause of that glorious hiatus? When that splendid moment subsided and we began to move about, the first words out of anyone's mouth came when Veena's son Ramesh, all of three or four years old, announced: "*Devī ā rahī hai!*" That is, "*The goddess has arrived!*"

What Does It Mean to Invoke a Goddess?

The goddess had arrived. What exactly did that mean? What exactly is *a goddess*? Who is the goddess Lakṣmī? And if she had arrived, where had she come from? How had Veena convinced her to come? Certainly, there were preparations, ceremonial actions, and singing to the goddess, which, I later discovered, were conceptualized as invitations extended to a magnificent guest. Invitations, however, do not always guarantee arrivals. What was in Veena's invocation that seemed to spell success?

Invoking Lakshmi: The Goddess of Wealth in Song and Ceremony addresses these questions. The answers—or perhaps, speculations—are based upon songs of praise that are offered to the goddess and that constitute the essence of her worship in its countless variegations. All of the songs in this volume are originally in Sanskrit. None but a few of these verses has ever appeared in translation. This is, to my knowledge, the first English-version collection of devotional songs dedicated entirely to Lakṣmī. With this volume, we offer an entirely

new resource for the study and the invocation of the goddess of prosperity.

Lakṣmī is by far the most popular and the most widely worshiped goddess in all of India. Her shrines appear everywhere—in homes, along roadsides, in most shops and places of business, and of course in the great temples across the entire subcontinent. For centuries, her devotees have invoked her in song and ceremony. Authorship of many of these songs is attributed to the gods themselves, and their words are said to have been imparted for the benefit of humankind, so that they may be used to invoke the goddess with efficacious results. All of these songs are invocations—the tradition holds that if a worshiper sincerely invokes Lakṣmī with these words, she will listen and respond to the call.

Why do people invoke the goddess Lakṣmī? A better question might be: Why would they *not* invoke her? Who does not have at least some concern for physical and emotional well-being, material comfort, harmonious relationships, and spiritual insight? Not everyone may be focused entirely upon all of these, all of the time, and some may insist that they have no need for any of them. It is no secret, however, that when people seek the advice of spiritual, psychological, or religious counselors, their most pressing concerns overwhelmingly involve health, career, love, or existential crisis. The labels placed upon these issues vary, of course, according to cultural, religious, and historical frameworks, but they remain a constant in one form or another. The songs to Lakṣmī in this volume give voice to these concerns, and they also provide insight into the nature and personalities of this goddess as she is envisioned both by her human devotees and by the gods themselves. As we shall see, Lakṣmī's devotees have turned to her again and again for blessings of good fortune in every aspect of life, for she is recognized as the limitless source-energy of all abundance, prosperity, and power, and her wealth takes infinite forms.

Ancient India was renowned as a land of bounteous splendor, majesty, and wealth: It was an abundant source of precious metals and gemstones; of exquisite spices and condiments and gorgeous fabrics; of sophisticated medical sciences and equally sophisticated arts of sensual pleasure; and of a multitude of philosophical schools and spiritual traditions whereby one could contemplate how to integrate these many ways of being or simply abandon them altogether in pursuit of spiritual liberation. India's majestic confluence of material and spiritual prosperity reflects the nature of this goddess who embodies the rich and diverse ways of experiencing one's walk through this world. This explains why her devotees extol her as *bhukti-mukti-*

pradāyini—“bestower of material enjoyment and spiritual liberation.” By worshiping the goddess of abundance, one is free to experience the fullness of *all* of life’s blessings.

Invoking Lakṣmī, Invoking Divine Luminosity

Before moving forward with our study, we pause to address the question: What exactly is a goddess? The Sanskrit word for *goddess* is *devī*; the word for *god* is *deva*. Both derive from the verbal root *div*, which means to shine, to play, to sparkle, to rejoice. In English as well as in Sanskrit, luminosity and playful movement are two ways of verbalizing a singular phenomenon, as when we say, for example, that sunlight *plays* upon the waters. The verbal root *div* also means to gamble, to cast dice. The term, then, also conveys the excitement of uncertainty, the expectancy of luck, and the vibrant sensation that anything can happen—all of these as opposed to the frozen stagnancy of absolute certainty. Of course, depending upon perspective, playful uncertainty may be experienced as a chaotic abyss, and absolute certainty, a tranquil haven. This dichotomy is not lost as we move through this book and consider the many gradations of meaning in Lakṣmī’s name, how she expresses herself, and what happens when she is forced into hiding. We shall see that Lakṣmī is the epitome of luminous energy in action: without a doubt, the goddess of prosperity is the quintessential *devī*.

The *devas* (gods and goddesses collectively) are “luminous beings.” When a worshiper invokes any of the *devas*, he or she is first calling upon their essence—divine, undifferentiated luminosity. Every impulse toward invoking Lakṣmī begins with a desire for that source of delight, splendor, and source-energy. When the energy of that source is aroused, then one may consider a particular focus, of which there are infinite expressions. These expressions may be seen as moods or personalities of the gods, making them perceptible to the world qualified by name and form. This is why the particular avenue of expressing divine energy to break past obstacles, for example, is embodied in the form of Gaṇeśa, lord of obstacles. So too does that luminous essence take form as the lovely one who shapes sound into eloquent speech, and artistic impulse into glorious refinement of artistic expression, as Sarasvatī, goddess and patron of the fine arts. When that luminosity expresses itself as bounteous beauty, delight, harmony, abundant wealth, and spiritual liberation—in short, prosperity of every kind—then it is recognized and called upon as Lakṣmī, goddess of abundance. To invoke and draw forth the luminous source of all abundance and prosperity is the purpose of the songs in our collection.

On the Format of This Book

We offer this book as a source and resource for various types of readers. Scholars and students of Indic religion will find that this collection of original sources greatly enhances the study of goddess worship, devotional poetry, and, above all, the rich complexity of the goddess Lakṣmī herself, about whom surprisingly little has been written. Spiritual seekers will find that these songs are indeed conversations with the goddess, and that the words to these songs may give voice to their own joys and concerns as they navigate their way through the material expression of this world. And finally, devotees of the goddess in any of her forms will find in this volume a worship manual—a compendium of invocatory songs and the text of a worship ceremony—to use as a guide in their own worship, much as the original Sanskrit volume containing the texts of these songs was compiled as a guide for worshippers of the goddess in India.

The heart of this book is a corpus of texts invoking the goddess Lakṣmī, both in song and in ceremony. I have organized this volume into four parts, as follows.

In Part One, I portray the divine personalities of Lakṣmī as they emerge in the Vedic, Purāṇic, and Tantric texts—three major areas of Sanskrit sacred literature. In Part Two, I discuss the power of poetry in summoning the goddess, that is, I explore how each genre of song is understood to “work” in invoking the goddess. In Part Three, I present my translation of a complete Lakṣmī *pūjā* text. Here, in systematic detail, we revisit our impressionistic description of the Lakṣmī *pūjā* performed by Veena in her home in Delhi. I introduce this with a discussion of the nature of *pūjā*, explaining how to appreciate what *pūjā* is and how it “works.” Then I present the translation of the *pūjā* text, accompanying each verse with additional analysis and commentary specific to that aspect of the ceremony. In Part Four, I present what I consider the heart of this book—my translations of Vedic, Purāṇic, and Tantric songs invoking Lakṣmī.

For scholars and for those devotees who wish to address the goddess in the original Sanskrit, I include, at the end of this volume, the texts in transliteration.

Three Categories of Song, Three Emerging Portraits of the Goddess

When viewed sequentially, the songs invoking Lakṣmī reflect an increasingly complex portrait of the goddess as she is envisioned by her devotees. Each “divine personality” of the goddess builds upon and

enhances the nuances of the previous one. In order to get a glimpse into the nature of the goddess we are about to encounter, we offer here the highlights of our first three chapters (constituting Part One of the book), as follows.

Chapter 1, “The Awesome Power of Auspiciousness: Lakṣmī of the Vedic Traditions,” introduces the goddess in her form as the lotus and the lotus goddess, as well as an embodiment of *śrī*—splendor and majesty. The Vedic hymns invoke the goddess to come to the earthly realm, specifically to assist the king, whose sovereignty ensures the well-being of the kingdom. The realm of the goddess’s blessing, then, is this earth, this world that we inhabit as embodied beings and as social creatures seeking abundance and prosperity.

Chapter 2, “Living the Good Life: Lakṣmī of the Purāṇic Traditions,” opens to a wider universe and engages the presence of the goddess not only across the fertile earth and propitious kingdom, but throughout the three worlds of heaven, earth, and the netherworlds. Prosperity expands in time and space, and, thematically, the goddess’s blessings are now expressed through the more subtle and complex avenues of pleasure (*kāma*), material wealth (*artha*), virtue (*dharma*), and spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*). These songs engage both the king and the householder, and many of their verses are said to have been uttered by the god Indra, king of the heavenly gods, in gratitude to the goddess for restoring harmony among the three worlds.

The Purāṇic songs address the goddess as Lakṣmī, majestic goddess of wealth, and consort or wife of Viṣṇu. Together they embody the divine couple that preserves harmony in and among the worlds. These songs reflect the concerns of householders—whether the “house” is that of one’s immediate family, the larger community, or the entire three worlds. The petitioners may be seeking prosperity or they may be expressing thanks to the goddess for having restored prosperity that had been lost and regained. The goddess is also addressed as Mahālakṣmī, or “Great Lakṣmī,” the expansive form of the goddess who creates, preserves, and destroys the universe, as well as obscures and reveals supreme reality. Most of the songs use the names Lakṣmī and Mahālakṣmī interchangeably, with little technical distinction regarding the divine attributes of the goddess.

Chapter 3, “Living the Powerful Life: Lakṣmī of the Tantric Traditions,” moves into the esoteric realms of interior worship and the transformation of consciousness. Whereas the Vedic songs elicit the goddess’s presence as the display of wealth and glory in this world, and those of the Purāṇas seek her presence as the harmonious blending of all types of wealth throughout the three realms of heaven, earth, and

the netherworlds, the Tantric songs locate the power of the goddess in even more subtle universes embedded deep within the multiple strata of the human body and consciousness. Some of the Tantric songs invite the goddess's blessings by requesting that the goddess's powerful aspects come to dwell upon and within the practitioner. Most of the Tantric songs, however, reflect a monistic viewpoint: Here, the essence of the goddess is the ground of all being, inviting the Tantric worshiper to engage in her worship not only through external means but internally. The songs of the Vedas as well as those of the epics and Purāṇas invoke the goddess by *drawing her down* from her heavenly realm; the Tantric songs invoke her presence by *waking her up*, for she is the divine power that lies within us all.

The songs throughout our collection seek the "favor" (*prasannā*) of the goddess, or for her to grant a boon (*vara*). The Tantric songs seek also to generate *siddhi*—the spiritual power of attainment and perfection—within the practitioner's own body and consciousness. The Tantric poets invoke the goddess in her most subtle forms, for not only do they seek those blessings that make their mark in the material world, but they seek to live in complete alignment with the source energy of those blessings.

Sources: Sanskrit Texts and Popular Worship Manuals

My intention with *Invoking Lakshmi* is to present a collection of devotional songs and ceremonies that most closely replicates what a Hindu worshiper would use to invoke the goddess. I have therefore drawn upon a compilation of Sanskrit worship texts presented in a *paddhati*, or manual for popular worship. The *paddhati* is an intriguing popular genre that has received relatively little attention by scholars, especially as a source of Sanskrit texts. Although basing my selection of songs upon a *paddhati* has not been without some scholarly problems (mostly concerning the origins and lineage of the texts as well as some variants in language and spelling), I have found that presenting a body of work based upon the indigenous category of the *paddhati* offers an exciting new way to experience Sanskrit texts in translation.⁴

Most of the texts in this book are taken from *Śrī Lakṣmī Upāsana* [Adoration of the Glorious Lakṣmī], edited by Pandit Rajesh Dixit. This manual contains Sanskrit texts dedicated to Lakṣmī that originate from a variety of sources and worship traditions. Since the main purpose of a *paddhati* is to facilitate ritual, it is therefore not surprising that the texts included in such a manual have not been categorized

in any way, nor has much information been given concerning their original sources.

Some of the texts provide source information in the colophon, although this is not always reliable. Such disparity is a feature not only of the *paddhati* but of the textual traditions themselves, which, as they developed with complexity across time and region, may have come to exist in varying recensions and editions. For example, the colophon of the *Song for the Lakṣmī of Spiritual Power* (*Śrī Siddhalakṣmī Stotram*) indicates that it is found in the *Brāhma Purāṇa*, although inspection of that *purāṇa* has not revealed that text. Clearly, the very first questions often asked by scholars about the specific origin of a text may never be addressed within the tradition. However, this should not deter us from translating these texts, listening to what they have to say, and allowing them to increase our appreciation of how worshipers and deities communicate with each other.

Sanskritists may find interest in the slightly nonstandard forms of the language exhibited in some of the Tantric selections. The text of the *Song-Amulet of the Lotus Goddess* (*Kamalātmika Kavacam*), for example, suggests an Eastern transmission of Śākta literature (as in Assam or Bengal), employing the doubling of consonants instead of consonant clusters (such as *samāttam* for *samāptam*), or the doubling of the semivowel *v* (such as *sarvva* for *sarva*, *purvva* for *purva*, and *pārsvvatī* for *pārvatī*).

Locating the Heart of a Text

It is not always possible to ascertain the exact origin of some devotional texts, for a couple of reasons: First, the tradition itself does not always provide the types of answers we are looking for. Even the most easily identifiable songs—our first two, which are from the Vedas—are actually *appended* to the Vedas. We do not know where they “existed” before that. Second, the nature of Sanskrit devotional poetry is fluid and malleable. When a text is said to be found within a larger work, it is never entirely clear whether that text was *derived* from the larger work or whether it was later *inserted into* that work. Two well-known examples of this may be seen when we consider whether the *Bhagavad Gītā* was inserted into—or derived from—the *Mahābhārata*, or whether the *Devī Māhātmyam* was inserted into—or derived from—the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*.

This feature—whereby entire segments may be inserted into or extracted from larger texts—actually begins with individual verses comprising the texts themselves. As I note throughout *Invoking Lakshmi*,

certain verses in one song appear verbatim in other songs. Sometimes, these are the initial verses that establish a visualization for meditation on the deity. Perhaps the most striking example of this malleability is in the final song of our Tantric section, the *Secret Lakṣmī Incantation That Yields Immediate Results* (*Sadyaḥ Phaladā Lakṣmīstava Hṛdayam*); eleven of this song's sixteen verses also appear within the 108 verses of *The Secret Heart of Lakṣmī* (*Śrī Mahālakṣmī Hṛdayam*).

Another example of this feature may be seen when some songs, such as the two earliest texts in our collection—*The Hymn to Śrī* (*Śrī Sūktam*) and the *Hymn to Lakṣmī* (*Lakṣmī Sūktam*)—may appear as either two separate texts or as one blended text. And again, when they appear separately, they may vary in their number of verses. Some editions of the *Śrī Sūktam* contain fourteen verses, whereas others contain fifteen, and yet others, sixteen. The differences between these numbers are significant according to the tradition that employs the text in its ceremonial worship.⁵

The narrator of a Purāṇa or Tantra may shift into song to express the heart of a passage, for the richest, most memorable essence is always with song. We may not be too far from this concept if we think of the devotional hymns in these texts as akin to the musical interludes that punctuate the story lines of a Broadway show or a Bollywood musical. The songs accentuate the movement of the story, and so too they may be extracted to be sung and cherished independently, existing as memorable works that resonate with viewers long after the prose-dialogue has receded into the background of one's consciousness.

Worship Texts Versus Worship Traditions

Although the *Śrī Lakṣmī Upāsanā* does not divide these texts according to any specific lineage or origin, I have presented them in three broad categories: Vedic, Purāṇic, and Tantric. It is not my intention here to document the precise schools and subschools that may claim these texts as their own. Even the earliest of our songs, the *Śrī Sūktam*, while acknowledged as an appendage of the *Ṛg Veda*, is also incorporated into the worship texts and traditions of various sacred lineages. Two south Indian traditions, the Pāñcarātra and the Śrī Vidyā, for example, employ the *Śrī Sūktam* in a particularly Tantric way; to label that song Tantric, however, would be misleading. Therefore I feel it is important to reiterate that these categories are *broad*; the designations of Vedic, Purāṇic, and Tantric in this volume have as much to do with thematic considerations as they do with textual origins. Further, each

of these categories is filled with its own complexities and resistance to categorization. It is for this reason that I have chosen to compose the introductory sections with a strong focus on the texts themselves. To discuss with accuracy the ways in which various schools have employed these texts in their worship or textual traditions could well require several large volumes. In addition, it would detract from our immediate purpose—to present a collection of poetry invoking the goddess, allowing that poetry to occupy a space of its own in all of its variegations and complexities.

The three broad categories will help us to understand the general themes and perhaps the origins of these texts, but we would be somewhat remiss in stating that any of these texts “belongs” solely to a specific tradition. This helps us to keep in mind the original audiences for whom the worship manuals were compiled. This also helps us to see that categories of “Hindu worship” are indeed quite fluid, that worshippers of the goddess may move freely within the vastly rich layers of these textual traditions as they seek words to express the deepest concerns of the heart.

Our focus, then, is not so much on who owns these texts, but on the goddess within them. How is she portrayed? How is she addressed? What do her devotees ask of her, and what do they expect to receive? As mentioned earlier, no other source in English presents such an abundant body of poetry to the goddess Lakṣmī. I have found that the sheer volume of these verses, taken together, evokes a sense of the goddess’s abundant presence that cannot be experienced when we encounter such works piecemeal. I would therefore invite the reader to discover the goddess section by section, moving at will between the introductory chapters and the texts, perhaps reaching a point where the texts alone become a cherished place to return again and again. As for filling in the blanks where we have not provided precise details of school or origin, I invite future generations of scholars to use these translations as a guide into aspects of the goddess that are just beginning to come to light. The Hindu goddess of prosperity first expresses herself in this world in the form of a lotus. With that in mind, let us behold the petals of her divine personalities as they unfold, one layer at a time.