

Scrutinizing goddesses, interrogating religious traditions: some methodological issues

R Mahalakshmi¹

The study of religion has primarily been undertaken from the disciplinary bounds of sociology, anthropology and psychoanalysis. It has only relatively recently become the subject of historical inquiry, and particularly in the Indian sub-continent, since the 1920s there have been serious attempts to locate the growth of religious traditions, institutions and ideologies in specific historical contexts. As a historian engaged in the study of religious processes and a feminist involved in issues of women's empowerment, it may seem more than coincidental that I have chosen to focus on the study of goddess cults and traditions in early India over the past decade. It is this complex interweaving of subject positions that I seek to interrogate for myself and other scholars who seek to understand and provide meanings with regard to the evolution of goddess traditions, the significance attached to goddess cults, their inclusion in pantheons and hierophanies, and their place in the making of religious ideologies. I would wish to illustrate with reference to some cults and traditions, and also indicate the possible directions in which such research agendas may lead.

Key words: Religions, Goddesses, Sociology, Anthropology, Psychoanalysis

¹ Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi