

The Goddesses' Henchmen

Gender in Indian Hero Worship



LINDSEY HARLAN

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Note on Transliteration

The system of transliteration I have used avoids diacritics and allows for approximate pronunciation for readers who are unschooled in the mysteries of diacritical marks. I have provided diacritics as well as definitions of important and frequently used terms in the glossary. Respecting different decisions on transliteration made by other authors, I have retained diacritical marks in quotations as well as in the titles of books and articles.

Relying on government maps, I have adopted typical, if not universal, spellings and transliterations of geographical names. I have also adopted what I believe to be the best-known spellings and transliterations of people's names. This has resulted in some inconsistencies, especially in the variant spellings of names that use retroflex consonants (for example, the consonants *ḍ* and *ṛ*).

Utilizing various languages and dialects, this book, which is based on fieldwork, privileges Hindi forms over Sanskrit ones (thus *Ramayan* rather than *Ramayana*). To avoid confusion, it also uses standard Hindi forms of terms from Rajasthani dialects (Marwari, Mewari, and so on) when they are available (thus *parca* instead of *parco*), except when providing direct quotation from Rajasthani dialects. Because many of the conversations that served as sources for the book were conducted in standard Hindi, which serves as a sort of *lingua franca* in Rajasthan, many direct quotes include standard Hindi terms. I use Rajasthani dialect terms (such as *malipannau*) where standard Hindi ones are lacking or where a standard Hindi equivalent differs markedly from the Rajasthani dialect term.

Transliteration of Hindi accords with accepted conventions. These include the dropping of unpronounced final *a*, the representa-

tion of the vowel *ṛ* as *ri*. The Rajasthani dialects' retroflex *ḷ* appears as *l* (and so the Rajasthani dialects' *kuḷ* becomes *kul* in the text and glossary). The Hindi *v* is represented as *v* except where conventional proper noun transliterations utilize *w*. The Hindi *ś* and *ṣ* appear as *sh*. The Rajput designation *Singh* appears in this conventional English form, except in the transliteration of authors' names from Hindi and Rajasthani sources. Note that *c* is always pronounced *ch*.

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I

Introduction

Arrival

Like many travelers in India, I have spent long hours in battered taxis bumping along single-lane highways. During the past ten years I have crisscrossed the state of Rajasthan many times on such highways and watched its rocky yellow landscape speed by as my intrepid drivers played chicken with oncoming cars, scattered inattentive pedestrians, and sliced through herds of sheep and sleepy buffalo. It is impossible to nap in these taxis: crackling radios blare popular film anthems, dusty air roars in through rattling windows, and high-pitched horns broadcast insults and indignation. And so I have watched the desert lands and parched farms stream by while slipping into fantasies about long cool showers and sweet hot tea.

Frequently my reverie has been interrupted by shocks of color from roadside shrines displaying images adorned with shiny silver, magenta, and aqua foil or with flecks of real silver strewn across encrusted vermilion. Situated between scraggly cactus fences and gritty road shoulders, the shrines are modest structures—usually slightly elevated cement platforms bearing crudely carved stelai or aniconic rock images—but finding them compelling. I have annoyed more than a few drivers by pleading, “Stop! Back up! Seriously! Let’s see those images!” Not sharing my enthusiasm, the drivers have inevitably muttered something like, “Nothing to see, madam, just some village gods and goddesses or someone’s ancestors.” No doubt they have wondered: Why waste time on these meager monuments when we were off to see some grand ancient temple or maharaja’s palace?

Bored or intrigued, some have followed me from the car and, with evident amusement, listened to me grill hapless passers-by about the identity of the divinities and the particulars of relevant ritual activity. Noting my special interest in shrines that commemorate the violent death and deification of heroes, they have sometimes informed me about heroes worshiped in their families or villages. Many drivers have identified themselves as Rajputs, members of the martial caste that governed much of the area now known as Rajasthan, and have been quite ready to recite tales of heroism from their families' ancient or recent past. Their accounts were often much more detailed and animated than those given by the poor passers-by I accosted, most of whom knew little or nothing about the images near which they happened to be standing when we arrived. From these drivers I heard about decapitated warriors who killed many, even hundreds, of assailants before stumbling and sanctifying the earth with their blood; I heard about opium-sated youths who single-handedly rescued cows from tribal rustlers and returned them to crying calves; I heard about "freedom fighters" who preserved Hindu *dharm* (religion, law, and custom) or *Hindutva* ("Hinduness") from menacing Muslim invaders.

Whereas my attraction to roadside shrines stemmed from a desire for diversion on long trips, my fascination with hero memorials developed out of the research on the religious narratives of Rajput women that I conducted during my first long research stint in Rajasthan, eighteen months in 1984–1985.¹ In the early days of my research, when I called on Rajput women with letters of introduction in hand, I was usually greeted by men, who were understandably curious about the nature of my work. When I explained that I was interested in women's religious traditions, they often expressed disappointment. My project, they indicated, was unimportant: Why not forget women's religious traditions and write about something that mattered, like Rajput history and heroism? Frequently they went on to narrate stories about ancestral heroes worshiped in their household shrines or at monuments on the borders of the estates (*thikanas*) their families once ruled. While waiting to interview women in their comfortable and sometimes elegant Rajput homes, I collected many tales of headless horsemen, cattle thieves, and marauding Muslims.

As a strategy for getting past these guardians at the gates of *parda*, but also because of a genuine fascination with their stories, I said that the next time I came to work in Rajasthan I would try to do something that they felt was important: I would write on heroes. Meanwhile, I decided to record all the heroic narratives that came my way and visit hero shrines that belonged to the families I visited. Slowly I came to realize that although the men with whom I spoke tended to represent heroism as a subject that concerned and appealed to men, women also tell hero stories, and they perform rituals for heroes. Unlike men, the women with whom I spoke did not readily volunteer hero stories or use the stories to demonstrate the illustriousness of lineage and family. Rather, they narrated brief hero narratives, if asked, and focused overwhelmingly on ritual.² From them I learned about offerings and the rewards of ritual veneration.

1. This research was published as Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*.

2. Telling tales of heroism from one's illustrious past has been a common pastime among older Rajput men in Rajasthan. At social gatherings, men tell such stories and also tell tales that taunt other men about

Moreover, because the women in the household tended to be responsible for maintaining household shrines, they were frequently more knowledgeable about ritual than men were. Whereas women often suggested that I talk to men in the family if I wanted to learn the details of a hero's history, men often recommended that I talk to the women in the family to find out what offerings are suitable for various household deities, including heroes.³ Women usually made the offerings themselves, though sometimes they gave the offerings they had prepared to husbands or sons who were particularly devoted to a household hero, or to Brahmins, in the few families that still regularly employed Brahmin *pujaris* (priests) to service household shrines.

Finally, I learned from women about the hero songs women sing during *ratijagas* (wake rituals) that accompany auspicious occasions such as birth and marriage.⁴ In these songs are found depictions of heroes that differ significantly from the images of heroes found in other contexts and in genres performed overwhelmingly by men. In short, my work on women revealed clearly that hero worship was not simply something about or for men.

Research: Lacunae, Foci

In 1990 I returned to Rajasthan to keep my promise. I spent the academic year researching hero worship. I also returned to the field in 1998–1999, 2000, and 2002 to update my findings. As I gathered my data, I was continually struck by how little we actually know about hero worship in India. As archaeologists and classicists avidly continue to piece together the traditions of cultic hero worship in ancient European cultures, and as Indologists continue to speculate about kingship and heroism in ancient India from representations in literature and art, Rajasthan continues to offer an abundance of thriving hero cults and active hero shrines presenting splendid opportunities to collect heroic narratives and songs, observe ritual performances, converse with devotees, and confront tradition unfolding and changing moment by moment.

In a 1973 article entitled "The Folk Hero and Class Interests in Tamil Heroic Ballads," Stuart Blackburn bemoans the paucity of research and reflection on hero worship in India. His essay identifies various historical factors that contribute to neglect.⁵ For one thing, those scholars who were initially interested in Indian concepts of heroism hailed from a background in or were very much interested in classics. Blackburn's article speaks of the "established cultural hegemony"

improprieties allegedly committed by their ancestors. Good-humored insults about possible illegitimacy and cowardice are traded as men sip scotch in the late evening hours. Much more is to be said on insults in chapters 2 and 3.

3. For reflections on the brevity of such accounts, see Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, and "Heroes Alone and Heroes at Home," as well as Ramanujan, "Two Realms of Kannada Folklore."

4. For a selection of *ratijaga* songs, see Harlan "Women's Songs for Auspicious Occasions." I am grateful to Princeton University Press for allowing me to reprint some of these songs in chapter 5. Another occasion for which *ratijagas* are sometimes performed is the consecration of a new home or place of business.

5. "The Folk Hero and Class Interests in Tamil Heroic Ballads," 131.

effected by Greco-Roman biographical paradigms presented by Hanh, Rank, Raglan, Campbell, and others, and shows how heroic biographies from around the world have come to seem incomplete or deviant when measured against those of classical heroes such as Achilles, Odysseus, and especially Oedipus, the only hero to merit full marks according to Raglan's twenty-two-point hero paradigm.⁶ Aptly demonstrating that the construction of the scale serves as a commentary on the constructors' social orientation and class interests, says Blackburn, is the fact that Raglan's scale affords the fewest points to Robin Hood, the social bandit. Moreover, he continues, "The bias of these 'comparative' studies was demonstrated without even crossing the Bosphorus when Alfred Nutt applied Hahn's criteria to Celtic material and found it wanting."⁷

As non-European heroes once failed to measure up to classical European standards, Indian folk heroes have often failed to measure up to Indian classical standards gleaned from ancient Sanskrit texts. Blackburn refers rather loosely to the typification of these standards as the "puranic hero," that is to say, the courtly hero who predominates in myth compendia known as *puranas*. In a heuristic typology, he distinguishes these heroes from "local heroes," who are far more likely to be protagonists expressing what we have come to refer to as "subaltern" values and interests.⁸

In the decades since Blackburn's article, there has been a significant eruption of interest in folk heroes, which has manifested in some superb studies of folk epic.⁹ A major moment in the study of heroes arrived with the publication of an edited volume entitled *Oral Epics in India*.¹⁰ There have also been some intriguing epic studies, including a fine introduction to and translation of *Pabuji*, an oral epic about a popular Rajasthani Rajput hero.¹¹ Most recently there is Alf Hiltebeitel's ambitious and provocative volume, *Rethinking India's Classical and Oral Epics*, which, inter alia, critiques Blackburn's theory that marital epics develop in predictable paths from cults of deified heroes and proposes various ways in which oral epics "reenplot" classical epics.¹² These works have demonstrated

6. Blackburn, "The Folk Hero and Class Interests in Tamil Heroic Ballads," and Nutt, "The Arayan Expulsion-and-Return Formula in the Folk and Hero Tales of the Celts." On life pattern, see also de Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*, as well as discussion in Beck, "The Hero in a Contemporary, Local Tamil Epic."

7. Blackburn, "The Folk Hero and Class Interests in Tamil Heroic Ballads," citing Nutt, "The Arayan Expulsion-and-Return Formula in the Folk and Hero Tales of the Celts," 132.

8. Blackburn, "The Folk Hero and Class Interests in Tamil Heroic Ballads." See also his "Patterns of Development for Indian Oral Epics" and "Death and Deification." For a thorough critique of Blackburn's ideas on development and spread, see Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics*.

9. A list of major works that consider epic and/or cultic context includes, inter alia, Beck, *The Three Twins*; Blackburn, Claus, Flueckiger, and Wadley, eds., *Oral Epics in India*; Flueckiger and Sears, eds., *The Boundaries of the Text*; Ann Grodzins Gold, *A Carnival of Parting*; Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics*; Hitebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi*, vol. 1, *Mythologies* and vol. 2, *On Hindu Ritual and the Goddess*; Lutgendorff, *The Life of a Text*; Miller, "The Twenty-Four Brothers and Lord Devnārāyaṇ"; Richman, ed., *Many Rāmāyaṇas*; Roghair, *The Epic of Palnāḍu*; and Sax, *Dancing the Self*. There is also ongoing work by John D. Smith on folk *Mahabharats* and by Susan S. Wadley, whose title for a book manuscript is currently "Raja Nal and the Goddess: Inscribing Caste and Gender in the North Indian Oral Epic *Dhola*."

10. Blackburn et al., eds., *Oral Epics in India*.

11. Smith, *The Epic of Pābūjī*.

12. Smith, *The Epic of Pābūjī*. For concise presentation of these arguments, see Hiltebeitel's second chapter "Oral Epics," 11–47. For application of his theory in the Rajasthani context, see his third chapter, "The Epic of *Pābūjī*," 88–120.

the variety and complexity of heroic scenarios in the Indian context and have proven time and again another of Blackburn's points: heroes under investigation cannot be understood without taking into account the social location and strategic interests of performers.¹³

Although the work on oral epic has done much to broaden our understanding of hero veneration in India and to correct the elitist bias that results from inordinate attention to upper-class traditions, especially those transmitted by Brahmins, in some ways the work has inadvertently bolstered another old standard, which is also troublesome. Because so much of the literature on heroism has been located in the sphere of epic, scholarly focus on epic has tended to render the paltry research on nonepic hero veneration as background or context.¹⁴ There are some good treatments of epic narrative that do seriously explore, or even privilege, cultic context, and they are all the richer for it (Philip Lutgendorf's *Life of a Text* is a prime example), but they are limited by the scope of inquiry, which is determined by a primary interest in epic and its tellings. In most cases, expanding the focus to explore at length nonepic heroic traditions in the area would render any such study an unwieldy and unmarketable tome.¹⁵ One exception to the tendency to focus predominantly on epic is work on hero memorials, but the studies on commemorative stones have generally been preoccupied with iconography or with speculation about patterns of diffusion in martial cultures.¹⁶ These works have not been able to tell us much about narrative representation or ritual veneration.

Understanding more fully the range and depth of the heroic requires that our gaze shift every so often to inspect sources inadequately investigated or utterly ignored or, best yet, previously unknown. In my work I have chosen to utilize epic as context and focus on two subjects, which are too vast to be treated adequately in a single volume. Following the advice of colleagues and editors, I have therefore decided to treat them separately. The first subject, which I address in this volume, comprises largely Rajput ancestral or domestic hero traditions in which Rajput women typically serve as performers of rituals for deceased heroic family members. The second is the intricate constellation of cultic hero traditions performed either by *bhopas* (loosely translated as "mediums" in that they communicate with divinities, in this case through possession), who hail from a variety of caste and class backgrounds, or by Brahmin priests, who are few and far between but quite visible in their association with the royal hero cult in Udaipur.¹⁷ Shrines that service hero cults draw devotees from a variety

13. The point is made frequently in recent folklore studies. See, for example, Narayana Rao, "A Rāmāyaṇa of Their Own," 115.

14. A good example of exploration of the heroic outside the epic context is the much-cited work by K. K. N. Kurup, *The Cult of Teyyam*. See also Peter J. Claus, "Heroes and Heroines in the Conceptual Framework of Tulu Culture," and his essay, "The Siri Myth and Ritual." Stuart Blackburn's work on epic development is related to work with bow songs; see his *Singing of Birth and Death*.

15. Or multiple volumes in a series, such as Alf Hildebeitel's *Draupadi* volumes.

16. Good examples are Settar and Sontheimer, eds., *Memorial Stones*, and Thapar, "Death and the Hero."

17. Another term that might be used loosely is "shaman," but this term is troublesome in that it tends to connote otherworld journeys, which are not made by *bhopas*. For recent reflection on the difficulties of employing the term "shaman" interculturally, see Smith, "The Disappearance and Recovery of Possession in Sanskrit

of backgrounds, but are considered *déclassé* by many members of high castes, including Rajputs. Although these subjects merit separate volumes, however, I want to make some preliminary observations about them both by way of providing a foundation for this two-part project.

Domestic and cultic traditions portray heroes and heroism in ways that diverge considerably from the representations that proliferate in epic. For example, they often feature themes that are either muted or absent in epic. Looking at cultic and domestic traditions enables us to expand our notion of the heroic and of “what counts” as heroic; those whose enduring interest is epic can thereby understand more fully the choices made by epic performers, who are doubtless familiar with many of the constructions of heroism contained in their mothers’ and fathers’ stories and with cultic depictions by priests or by *bhopas* as they compose and relate their songs.¹⁸ The sexy bejeweled bridegroom hero of whom women often sing in *ratijaga* rituals (the lovely man with dangling *lalas* [glass turban pendants], an alluring pajama string, and luxurious velvet slippers) may also be an epic’s saffron-donning ascetic who dies with detachment but, while alive—and this is often deemphasized in epics devoted to deified heroes and may be altogether lost in the scholarship on epic—is intermittently, ambivalently, or poignantly lovesick.¹⁹ Such themes, however faintly whispered or even explicitly and heartily denied in some epics, presumably resonate with women who hear epic performances, and even with men who have had their mothers’ songs reinforced in their memories by the repeated performance of women’s *ratijaga* songs on auspicious occasions.²⁰ In cultic traditions as well, eroticism finds expression. In this vein I might mention that one of the major duties of heroes is to cure female infertility—a duty that has often resulted in accusations of improper client-patient relations.²¹

Epics and other narrative traditions largely concerned with war frequently thwart relationships between men and lovers or wives and affirm the values of renunciation expressed metaphorically (by the hero’s saffron turban) or contextually, as when the hero is initiated by an ascetic, or he is disguised for a time as an ascetic, or he is reluctantly dragged into marriage and then fortu-

Literature.” I use the term here to refer to a professional healer ritually possessed by a hero. Further discussion on usage follows in my forthcoming volume on cultic hero worship.

18. On the matter of “what counts” and “who counts,” I thank Joyce Flueckiger for her oral communication, February 12, 1997. For extensive discussion of women’s voices and intertextuality, see Harlan, “Heroes Alone and Heroes at Home”; Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, 79–107; and Ramanujan, “Toward a Counter-System” as well as his “Two Realms of Kannada Folklore.”

19. On “the celibate body” evoking “a divine and heroic mystique of epic proportions,” in the context of an illuminating discussion of colonialism, nationalism, and asceticism, see Joseph S. Alter, “Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India,” especially pp. 45–46.

20. For an interesting discussion on Pabuji’s struggles with asceticism, see Hildebeitel, *Rethinking India’s Classical and Oral Epics*, 96–105. For reflection on the notion that epic is not read, or heard for that matter, for a first time, see Ramanujan, “Repetition in the Mahābhārata,” 419, cited in Hildebeitel, *Rethinking India’s Oral and Classical Epics*, 44–45.

21. For instructive conversation on this point I thank Helen Lambert, personal communication, January 1996.

nately liberated by a call to arms just before consummating wedlock.²² Typically the women in such epics are invested with desire to which the men fall prey or which they are somehow obligated to satisfy.²³ The tendency to portray women as invested with carnality and as romantically aggressive or dangerous has a hoary heritage. Stephanie Jamison has shown how many ancient texts, including epics, represent men as the passive victims of unrestrained female lust.²⁴

Moreover, in epics representations of women are frequently unflattering in a variety of other ways. In epics that feature martial heroes (as in many contemporary American action films) women distract, interfere, and make trouble. Pabuji, who is repeatedly referred to as an “ascetic of the desert” but who marries the love-struck woman pursuing him despite his initial disinclination, is called away from his marriage ceremony by a village woman (a goddess incarnate) who wants him to get back her stolen cows, even though she knows he will be killed. In this epic, again as in many action films, women tend to appear at dramatic moments to distract or waylay heroes, instigate conflict, and/or ruin the best-laid plans. And here, as in other epics concerned with war, representations of male heroes and their female relations often reveal a general disinterest in women and an antipathy toward particular women. As John D. Smith has observed, the perspectives offered in epics are overwhelmingly male, and they are at times inarguably misogynist.²⁵

Some of the scholarship on epic reinforces the tendency to minimize or marginalize women characters. For example, the informative and otherwise valuable introduction to the volume *Oral Epics in India* presents a typology of oral epic that sets out three models of what epics are “about”: the martial epic, the romantic epic, and the sacrificial epic.²⁶ According to this scheme, martial epics feature male heroes who die in battle and then are worshiped; romantic epics relate romances between men and women who are not worshiped, as well as other romantic matters such as journeying and miracle working; sacrificial epics tell of women who are victimized by injustice and who are worshiped as divinities (goddesses or *satis*). In many cases, assigning one of these genres to specific epics requires a bold determination of what is central to epics. Although designed to present ideal types to which real epics do not adhere perfectly, the typology tends to essentialize, to rob epic of its complex plot, which often includes multiple heroes, some of whom express ambivalence about their roles

22. A frequently cited typology of such traditions is Jason, *Ethnopoetics*.

23. *Pabuji* is a case in point.

24. Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife, Sacrificer's Wife*. See also Harlan, “Nala and Damayanti's Reversals of Fortune”; Shulman, “Battle as Metaphor in Tamil Folk and Classical Traditions” and *Tamil Temple Myths*, 105–130; and Anand Pathwardan's film, *Father, Son, and Holy War*, in which a seller of semen-thickening medicine claims that women are nine times more sexually driven than men are. The more typical and conventional/legal (*dharmashastrik*) ratio is 3:1.

25. See Harlan, “Heroes Alone and Heroes At Home,” 240, and Smith, “Scapegoats of the Gods,” 188.

26. Other typologies utilize these titles but explore different relationships. For example, Heda Jason classes romantic epics as a subgenre of historical epics in *Ethnopoetics*.

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