CONCLUSION
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I started the discussion with the assertion that the vision of female deities in Indian religious tradition emanates from the Samkhya interpretation of Prakrti. Just as there is shift in emphasis in the individual status of the two ultimate principles (Purusa and Prakrti) in Samkhya philosophy, so also in the popular sectarian religions. For instance, while Siva is considered as the Supreme deity in Saivism, Sakti is worshipped as Supreme Power in Saktism. Also, in certain forms of Vaisnavism (Caitanya Vaisnavism), the male and the female aspect of God-head got equal status.

While conceding that Saktism is identified wholly with the worship of the female principle, I have tried to show that even there, there is no dirth of efforts on the part of scholars to somehow show Sakti as subservient to Siva (male). She is either highlighted as Siva's spouse, sometimes as his counterpart, or is treated as a substitute for the Upanisadic Brahman, conceived in feminine terms and images. Rarely is the independent nature of Sakti emphasised.
Historians generally point out that Saktism, in particular, Tantric philosophy raised the status of women in India. Earlier (Manusmriti) women were regarded as obstacles for any spiritual progress. In the Tantras they were allowed to initiate in matters of religious and spiritual practices. This high position of the woman in the Tantra goes against the Brahmanical notion that a woman is never fit for independence. So also, the Tantras have given special importance to virgin worship (Kumari-puja). The Vaisnava-Sahajia cult conceived the Kula-Kundalini-Sakti as Radha (female principle of Vaisnavism). R.G. Bhandarkar opines:

"The ambition of every pious follower of the system (Tantra) is to become identical with Tripura Sundari, and one of his religious exercise is to habituate himself to think that God is a woman."

The Sahajias also believe that at a certain stage of spiritual culture man should transform himself into a woman because without realising the nature of woman he cannot have the experience of true love. It is found in one legend (Devi Bhagavata) that Brahma, Visnu and Siva were transformed into women before they were allowed to see Devi in her highest form.\(^1\)

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In the Buddhist Tantra the disciple is initiated with Prajñā or Sakti. Buddhahood is possible only by accepting Vidyā or Sakti.²

There is also the historical fact of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa's veneration for womanhood. Sri Ramakrishna, whose family deity was 'Raghubir Ramachandra', became a worshipper of Mother Kāli. For him the Mother was a living reality and in course of his Sādhanā he had numerous mystical visions of goddess Kāli. He was initiated into Tantric rites by a woman-guru Yogeswari whom he used to refer to as 'Bhairavi Brāhmani'. After undergoing the disciplines of sixty-four principal Tantraś, he looked at all women as embodiment of the divine mother. And his deep and instant respect for women got an unparallel expression when he worshipped his virgin wife Sarada Devi as symbol of goddess Sodosi, one of the ten Mahavidyāś and offered the fruit of all his spiritual disciplines at her feet.³

But all these remain in the larger Indian context as aberrations. The female principle never appears to gain the upper hand in comparison with the male.

² Ibid., p. 97.
Chapter IV of my thesis tries to show the unique position of the Goddess in Saktism. As recognised in the Devi Māhātmya, a portion of the ancient Purana, (The Markandeya) it is said:

"She is the supreme eternal knowledge that becomes the cause of release from bondage to mundane life ...."

This surely could have given the female deity the highest status of being the ultimate truth that sets one free. This could not be so in practice because the same text which I have referred to earlier characterises Devi as Mahamaya (Ref. page 83, Visnumaya).

"This blessed Devi Mahāmāyā, having forcibly seized the minds even of men of knowledge, leads them to delusion."4

Then again, the association of the female deity with Prakrti and Māyā which means magical power, a power that is frequently regarded as belonging to the Asuras—the enemies of the Gods, confirms my stand-point. The philosophical efforts to reconcile the equation of the Devi, Māyā and Prakrti are undoubtedly there. The three concepts have been adopted to both theistic as well as

atheistic philosophical needs. In the Upanisads as well as in the school of Samkhya, for example, one can understand Prakṛti not as the material possession of Purusa but as itself supremely divine, as Devi herself. Indeed, she has been conceived as such by Saktism and other religious cults as I have pointed out. But rarely has the tradition sustained & nourished the female deity as the ultimate principle. Let me refer here to another powerful deity namely the Goddess Prthivi (Ṛg Veda) signifying an awe for the earth itself. The idea of the earth as a personified Goddess persists in most Indian traditions. She too is identified with Maha Devi.

In the Lalitā-Sahasranāma she is called 'she whose form is all (sarvamayī), she whose body is matter (ksetrasvarupa), she who is the world (jadātmika), she whose womb contains the universe (Visvagarbhā), and she whose form is all existing things (Bhumarupa). She is also called Mahi and Dharā, two common names for the earth.5

The image of the earth as Great Goddess remains but then one does not hear of any religious sect appearing in her name. It captured the imagination of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Anada math) in the late nineteenth century,

when he advocated the modern cult of Mother India. The concrete evidences of this reverence for the country as a feminine deity are there in modern India. (Tagore). In spite of these I do not think that this image has succeeded in demolishing the supremacy of the male principle.

The worship of the river Ganga and the reference to her as Gangā matā (Mother Gangā) in the Hindu tradition supports the point I have been trying to make in Chapter IV. Ganga is claimed as the consort of Siva and Visnu. Her waters are said to be the embodiment of Sakti, and her descent on earth is said to bring her power to the plains of India. Wherever she goes, pilgrimage places appear, Gōrgōtri in the Himalayas, Hardvar in North India and so on. One can see in her all the great virtues of the mother Goddess. While bathing in this one river it is said one bathes in all rivers.

A secular understanding of this sacred river which denies any religious significance to it is undoubtedly there. I do not at this juncture, wish to go into that. I wish to present here the river, Ganga as the Supreme Goddess for the land that is known as India. Now, right from the time of ancient mythology, we can see that the rishis or seers of truth see the universe as a vast ecosystem in which each part is inextricably related to the
life of the whole (Ref. to the image of the Golden embryo, Hiranyagarbha in the Rg Veda).

It is in this cosmos that the holy Ganga moves. She is everywhere — just as each village has its gram-devatā and its sacred forest, it also has its sacred river. This was a very strong imagery of the mother Goddess, her waters as divine and as Goddesses set gree from their heavenly source by Indra. Unfortunately, in no religious cult she is the supreme deity though of course, the Hindus worship her till this day as one of them. She gets identified with Prakṛti with Radha, Saraswati, and Lakṣmi, hence is female and therefore, secondary to Purusa.

Another point that needs deliberation is the following:

The association of the Mother Goddess with Prakṛti seems to convey the insight that the Goddess's fundamental being is natural. Being Prakṛti/Nature, she e.g., Ganga can be destructive. But when subjected to Purusa's, in this case Śiva's control she becomes a source of abundance. This attitude to nature finds expression also in the general attitude of ways in which all goddesses are viewed. Women, being natural creatures are full of power whose most striking function has to do with the propagation
of life itself. There lies their valuable contribution. But the fact remains that like the natural environment they are essential and attractive but potentially dangerous. That is the reason why in the Indian tradition Goddesses who are independent of male-control or who dominate over their husbands tend to be ferocious and malevolent. Only when properly domesticated and brought under male control they are benevolent, compassionate and accessible.