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FROM BLOOD TO FIRE:  
THE CHANGING CULTURE OF THE VILLAGE GODDESS IN ORISSA

My presentation is based on an analysis of five seasons of field work on the culture of the gramdevi, the village goddess, in Orissa conducted in collaboration with Dr. Rita Ray of the Sociology Department, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar. The impetus for this joint project was two-fold: the first my own intellectual curiosity. In an earlier publication I had chronicled the archaeological evidence for the worship of the goddess in the West in prehistory and early historical times before the advent of Christianity, a work based on library research I longed for firsthand experience with the culture of the goddess, still very much alive in India, a tradition that can be traced back at least 5000 years. Fieldwork is an encounter with life as it is actually lived. I was aware of the cult of the village goddess, and also that little serious academic study had been done on this tradition. The Indian goddess, the devi has been studied from the perspective of text, from the top down and neglected as a grass roots, vernacular tradition. When ethnographers have included the village goddess within their study they have given a brief account under the heading of religion without any socio-cultural analysis. And secondly, I sensed the urgency to get on with such a project in view of the rapidly modernizing Indian society. As the late M.N. Shrinivas, the pre-eminent Indian sociologist remarked some forty years ago in his seminal work, *The Remembered Village*.

The importance of such a study cannot be overstated as the village goddess was not only the integrator of all village life but also a living institution whose origins lie in the dim mists of prehistory, were the bedrock on which later cults of earthmother, shakti (female energy) and cosmic goddesses were founded. This institution was beginning to change and it should be studied before it changed totally (19).

On the other hand, Dr. Rita Ray, my collaborator who has been working on development issues throughout the state of Orissa for more than 25 years, continues to be worried about women and their invisibility. She finds it very frustrating to work on development projects and see the neglect of the female principle at all levels of policy and implementation. In her experience, development policy makers consider that women, having been confined to domestic space have no power at all; women's worldview is stigmatized. Furthermore, the institutions, the

administrative machinery and the bureaucratic authority responsible for the incorporation of women into the public sphere also have little or no understanding of the female principle. Women's voices are not captured; they go unnoticed, unheard. While there is a consistent attempt to include women, it is the understanding, the recognition of women's inner world that seems to be beyond their ken. On the women's side the lack of recognition by the developers of their inherent values further diminishes their self-confidence. This collaboration of a sociologist and cultural historians has been a very fruitful one. Our methodology has been eclectic—using the research tools of sociology, cultural anthropology, history of religions and cultural history...all of the above from a feminist, that is a woman-cantered point of view. We are looking at the religious worldview from the bottom up, not top down...what is being practiced...understanding the cultural system. We are deconstructing the hegemonic worldview that rendered the gramadevi peripheral or invisible and reconstructing the inherent meaning of the village goddess through the villagers' own categories.

We have situated our study in Orissa because of the long continuity of this institution there. The gramadevi is found in both the villages of the rural peasants of the coastal areas and plains, and the tribals of the forested hills. We are exploring a vernacular Hinduism which in its basics is far removed from the practices and pantheon of Brahmanic Hinduism. The tradition of the village goddess has its roots in prehistory, thus predating theistic Hinduism and ritual practices. Her cult is part of the non-brahmanical, non-Sanskritized folk practices of the majority of rural peasantry. The fluid and porous boundaries of her cult are characteristic of the vernacular worldview. In the current cultural ferment of modernizing India there are considerable pressures to bypass the gramadevi and impose a monotheistic brahmanic tradition worshipping the god Rama. We will return to this issue later but first let me introduce the gramadevi

## I

### **Who is She? What is She?**

Ashis Nandy reads the institution of the gramadevi as a psychological-ecological balance, drawing parallels between women and nature.

That (concept) springs from a matrifocal culture in which femininity is inextricably linked with *prakti*, that is nature and the female principle with *hala*, (the) activity (of nature). Similarly, the concept of *adyashakti*, the primal or original power is entirely feminine in India. It is the male principle of the godhead, *purusha*, that is reliable but relatively passive, weak and secondary. That is why the deities that reside over the critical sectors

of life which one cannot control such as the success of the crop and the occurrence of famines (food), protection against cholera and smallpox (personal survival) and childbirth and child health (perpetuation of the race) are all motherly figures ( ).

Her origin is the origin of the village itself. She was there before the village which grew up around her numinous presence. Her ethos is essentially that of the indigenous pre-Aryan culture which preservers as the foundation of the villagers' religio-cultural worldview. For the villager, the model of the divine is ancient humanity's universal model, both of humankind's intrinsic needs, shaped by their extrinsic perceptions, endowed with analogous attributes, defined by their analogous interpretation of their own existence and that of the world around them.

The gramadevi is generic; she was always there. Although there are many variations in her origin stories, all have a common thread. She was there in a tree, below the tree, up on a hill, in the anthill, in a stone or a tree in the middle of the paddy field, or in the middle of the river. The villagers see her as an elderly wise woman. She speaks to them, often through a dream, giving them an intimate, cultural connection with the land, with the place where she stays and the people who live there. She protects them. As the villagers displaced by dams, highways, and mines lament: "Without her protection our children will not live long."

Each has her own name, although many names are repeated. Even though the original names may not be lost or changed, they had definite social connotations such as Janugli, the lady of the jungle; Dakulei, the branch that the forest dwellers fed her. Names change within the social context but she always has only one name. This is in contrast to the high pantheon whose deities have thousands of names. In their day to day relationships the villagers refer to her respectfully as Thakurani (Lady) or Budi Thakurani (Old Woman), an address that is not pejorative in a culture where the wisdom of the elderly is respected. They call her Ma with great affection.

She is a reality in their lives, a real presence. The basic difference between woman and thakurani is that the later is superior but not a superwoman. Unlike the deities of the high Hindu pantheon who are super-beings, she does not create miracles but facilitates desired earthly things. She doesn't promise but will try. Her behaviour and actions are human. The villagers see her moving around in the night, walking very fast or

taking a bath with her hair unbound. They hear her soft womanly voice answering “yes” when they call.

We are restructuring the original gramadevi and her dynamics in village culture. She is both the ordering principle and the symbol of the village’s existence. She is synamic, moving around in contract to the static nature of the temple icon. She is not a symbol but a living entity within the culture itself. Like the villagers she accepts difficulties and troubling problems. Like them she copes with all kinds of diversity without becoming violent. She holds the paradoxes of village life in equilibrium.

She protects them from disease, from all kinds of destruction...violence, accidents, crop failure. The village goddess is an aggressive but not vengeful protector, whose function is threaded into the matrix and continuity of life. Mothers worship her for the health and wellbeing of their children. Villagers worship her for their general welfare, not just for physical sustenance. Human continuity, children are more important than cultivation.

The concept of ‘the welfare of the village’ includes the well-being, health and prosperity of the inhabitants as well as their security—both physical and emotional, and regeneration. Their lineage should be secure; they shouldn’t be devastated by barrenness or death of children, and they need favourable weather conditions for agriculture. Regeneration means the continuity of human birth, living free from disease and evil spirits, as well as successful crops. When men plant the fields they select a stone or stick that represents the devi and keep it at the border. She places humans in harmony with nature, and reaffirms their connection to nature. For example, the tree that is one of her primal manifestations is also a symbol of regeneration. The tree trunk splits open and reveals her presence within. The stone manifest her sacred power. The villagers believe that she comes out of the earth.

The villagers have tremendous confidence in their Ma. Early one morning we stopped to talk to some women walking along a local dirt road near the village of Hirapur in coastal Orissa. My colleague Rita chatted with an older woman initiating their conversation by asking where they were going so early in the morning. It seems that they were on their way to bathe in the river. Rita commented that she wished that she had brought a change of clothes so that she could join the village women. The older woman

spoke at length and with so much feeling about her relationship with the village goddess that I would like to quote from her comments:

Mayamayi is so alive that she responds by saying ‘yes to every call you make. She says “O” when you call her. ( In the villagers’ ordinary consciousness when they call her, she answers “yes” which in Oriya is O.) She has so many forms and with so many animals clinging to her that you will not be able to count them. The whole locality, at least, four *panchayats* come and get all their wishes fulfilled. First thing, when we get up in the morning we remember her.

If we are stepping out of the house, we remember her. If we are slightly unwell we remember her and she immediately relieves us of any physical pain. Whatever we promise her we definitely make it a point to keep our promises. She is so alive that she keeps on fulfilling all the demands of the people and everyday people surrender whatever they promise to give her. She is not for one moment left in isolation in conversation with one or another in the locality. She is there for so many hundreds of years that my mother-in-law, her mother-in-law and so one and so forth have worshipped her. She is *mahan*, omnipotent and omnipresent. She is just a mother like one of us.

The thakurani is not worshipped in the brahmanical sense, but her living spirit is internalized by touching her, rubbing her with oil and tumeric. She is neither polluted nor purified by any ritual. Women of all stages of their so-called bodily impurity can touch her. Their relationship with her is a very intimate, very personal one. Another woman comments on her understanding of Ma:

Why should we go to another village when we have our Mother She is more important than any other. The whole village is a family and we are her children....some are good; some are bad. The bad ones are not devoted to her. They destroy the peace and harmony of the village. She is careful to feed them and to raise them properly so she is generally kind but there are persons who are uncontrollable and in order to get them to the right path, she has her weapons; the diseases of pox and cholera. She is very fearful, fierce if you have neglected her. If you have not kept her satisfied, she will not protect you. She tries her best to protect good people but unfortunately sometimes she kills them. To prove that she is powerful she sometimes destroys through flood, famine, fire and cyclone. These are her tests.

If you have not kept her satisfied, she will not protect you. If you are not keeping all your habits according to her wishes such as bathing, eating, it is like any mother will do with her child, prescribing do’s and don’t. If you are not doing justice to her, if you lack devotion to her, if you are not taking care of her, she will not bless you.

Even if their goddess is the most powerful being known to the villagers, they address her with the familiar *tu* which is the least hierarchical form of speech. Village goddesses are not worshipped in the brahmanical way; they are interacted with. To the villagers, she is like a human being. As one old man told us:

I am sitting here. I get a pain in my chest. I run to the gramadevi. She tells me that I ate a stone in the rice. I get a pain in my tooth. I tell my feelings to gramadevi. She is like a mother, a true grandmother who has love and affection and qualities of taking care...the taking care qualities are more like those of a grandmother.

The primacy of the village deity is reinforced in multiple ways. Commonly known as Budhi Thakaruni, that is elderly woman, she is different than a Devi which means goddess in the High Hindu pantheon whereas thakaruni signifies her mundane presence in everyday life. When she is referred to as Buddhi, which means old, the Thakaruni is related to the villagers, men and women alike. She has no consorts or husband therefore her motherhood is not biological as between men and women but more relational, like a woman and her children. Culturally, in Orissa a woman is a mother for everyone. Young girls, elderly woman, the newborn girlchild are referred to as “Ma.” The gramadevi’s functions reinforce one another, thus providing life strategies for women and protection of the oppressions of patriarchy while keeping the principle of regeneration as a priority.

An integral part of thakurani’s identity is her mobile nature. Though she does not like to be uprooted from her place of origin, she moves around the village at night, riding on a terracotta horse that has been given to her as votive offering, checking to see if any mischief is going on. This provides a check on men’s transgressive behavior. They are afraid of her anger.

She is the source of justice, constantly struggling to keep a moral balance. The villagers demand justice; they always negotiate to set things in the proper order. In times of crisis she intervenes not for individual benefits but to keep the village in balance. The villagers look to her for restitution of justice. Negotiations are held before her shrine as they believe no one would like in front of Ma.

She doesn’t want a roof over her head because it disconnects her, alienating her from nature of which she is a part. She places humans in harmony with nature and reaffirms the human connection to nature, for example, the tree, her primal form is a

symbol of regeneration. Patriarchy on the other hand is in opposition to nature; one of its essential tasks is the control of nature.

Most scholars have viewed Orissan /Indian society only through the lens of the caste system with its rigid restrictions that restricted their interest in gender ideology. The gramadevi is a unifying force beyond the hierarchy of caste. However, her powers are limited; the caste system and socio-economic powers are much stronger. Nevertheless, she has been able to use her power to mitigate in gender issues.

### **How She Functions**

There is no prescribed ritual. When the villagers walk by her, they recognize her space and show their respect through body language. They might offer something out of gratitude. Offering is not obligatory. They do not offer every day but if there is something excess in the village, perhaps food or unneeded object they will share it with her because she is part of their community. If they do not share with her, she may become angry. They understand crises of any kind as manifestations of her anger and will try to ask her the reason. When they don't hear an answer they will keep on asking and this is how rituals have developed.

This is just the opposite of the situation with the deities of the high pantheon. You have to offer them what they want. Each has their prescribed food; Shiva eats bananas and Ganesh likes sesame ladoos. People feel that the gramadevi, Ma is part of the village; she lives with them. She moves around and takes what she needs. With her the structure of communication is direct; she uses the same language as the people. There is physical intimacy; you can touch her.

In her primal form she communicates directly with the villagers, often through dreams. She also communicates directly through ritual possession of human mediums, the *kalasis*, the shaman and the *hukum*, magician and healer. *Kalasis* formerly were women, now they are mostly men who wear a sari in order to give themselves a female form. The terms for both practitioner and practice are the same. Ma makes her presence felt through the *kalisi* once or twice a year. The day chosen is governed by astrological calculations, solar and lunar interactions. Someone dreams that she has come; villagers ask what has she to say? The *kalasi* goes into trance and is possessed by her. She is the predictor of the fortunes for the year. For example, there will be an epidemic, there will be a flood, there will be a drought, there will be a good crop and there is the possibility of

a bad man coming to the village. Injustices are going on without the villagers' knowledge. There is a collective interaction with the devi through the medium of the *kalisi*.

The *kalisi* has a lot to do with women's childbearing, child-mother health conditions, as well as the neglect and torture of women. For example, in the village of the Gocha tribe four women went up to him. It had been decided collectively who would go. Eight of their children had died at birth. The most recently born, only seven days ago was still alive. The *kalasi* ran to the house and brought the newborn baby to the devistala, the goddess' place. About a hundred people were sitting around. Some asked "Ma, why are you taking all our children. We will never believe in you if you take this child."

The *kalasi* is in a fix. He will try. They think that his bringing the child means that it will die. The villagers ask "What are you going to do with this child? How can we see this woman every year losing her child?" He accused the woman of irresponsibility...a situational difficulty, not quite blaming her. He didn't promise that the child would survive, but assured the woman that some of her children would definitely live. He whispered something to her. She seemed reasonably assured. The villagers are temporarily reassured. Although each woman must feel her loss, that children are dying is not seen as an individual problem but a collective one. This village is in a remote area. In the absence of medical, paramedical or alternative medicine, their faith is the only thing that keeps them going.

Now with increased problems, *hukum*, another kind of healer is also there to settle problems. With increased corruption in society. Ma is not happy with her people, but this has not generally reduced their dependence on her. Nor have things become easier for them in a scientific world. With infant and child mortality rising, how are they going to cope? Some kind of uncoded alternative medical system operates very much like a New Age healer with a whole repertoire at his disposal which includes magic. Alas, some would appear to be charlatans, and their powers feared as black magic.

*Diya mangala*, the taking of the marriage water, literally means arousing the deity to come and be with the bridal couple throughout their marriage, to bless the fruitfulness of their union. Marriages are arranged and are exogamous; one must marry someone from another village. On the day of the wedding, before the ceremony, a group of elder women from the respective villages of both bride and groom go in procession to their own

gramadevis and bathe her with tumeric flavoured water. Then bride and groom, each separately take the water in which the devi of their village has been bathed for their own ritual bath. Even though the gramadevi is herself not married, she has a symbolic role to play in the marriage rituals. The villagers give her bangles, a symbol of marriage; Marriage is the most important life cycle ritual and its purpose is regeneration. Water represents regeneration; all life comes from the waters. Waters break when you give birth. The water of the womb, the amniotic fluid protects the foetus.

### **Blood sacrifice**

The gramadevi is responsible for the fertility of both humankind and the earth. Since she is treated as a woman the regeneration of the earth through blood offerings is an important part of her ritual. The paradox is that although they view her as an elderly woman, blood is the symbol of her regenerative powers. *Bali*, blood sacrifice, is made to her. After the animal is sacrificed they pour blood on the ground before her and worship that blood; the blood must flow on the earth.

The villagers do not surrender to the gramadevi; they negotiate with her. Blood is the key here. The process of brahmanization is from blood sacrifice to the fire sacrifice (*yagna*). But even in this change from *bali* to *yagna*, before they start the fire sacrifice, the brahmin priest first offer to the gramadevi asking her blessings, thus supporting both her material existence and transcendence. Nothing is totally replaced; the people's original faith has not been totally demolished.

*Raja parva* is an annual festival celebrating the menstruation of the goddess held every June right before the onset of the monsoon and the beginning of the agricultural cycle honoring the earthmother in the persona of the gramadevi. It is the most important festival of the year for the rural peasants who worship menstruation itself. For the tribals *raja* symbolizes fertility. They celebrate it for two weeks, the length of the earth mother's fertile period that for them is the season when the boys and girls choose their mates.

The power of blood to give life is so powerful that the brahmins in order to control it have made it polluting. While for all non-brahmins the blood symbolizes regeneration; for the brahmins it means surrendering to female power. They want her shakti and hope to get it by offering the head of the sacrificed animal, the symbol of the male ego that marks their surrender to the devi.

My colleague Rita views blood sacrifice as a male phenomenon of surrender to Ma related to regeneration and the control of male power. Only male animals are sacrificed. Only the head, symbolic of the phallus, is offered. The purpose of the sacrifice is to control male aggression. Blood is spilled on the earth for regeneration; the head is offered to the devi and thus regeneration without patriarchal domination is maintained. Everything that goes with male dominance is sacrificed to her. Men make a commitment to surrender to her. Traditionally, the animal sacrificed was the buffalo, the most aggressive of all male beasts. The major pan-Indian festival celebrated all over the sub-continent in the autumn harvest season is Durga Puja in which the goddess overcomes the buffalo demon, thereby slaying evil.

Recently there has been considerable outside pressure to discontinue animal sacrifice, not just in Orissa but all over India. It is already illegal in many places. There are various reasons behind this, the most recent being the rise of animal rights activists, but another in Orissa is the powerful presence of the cult of Jagannath, known as the Lord of Orissa, whose sectarian tradition is vegetarian. However, the villagers strongly believe that if *bali* is discontinued there will be no crop.

### **Networking**

The gramadevis in the surrounding geographic and social areas are connected through a network of sisterhood. They are sisters because of the social and economic interdependence of the villages. Marriages are negotiated through this network. There is less networking among tribals because they do not live in contiguous villages. They only have sisters when their village is located about those of others of the same ethnicity.

### **The Ambivalent Goddess: A Controversial Issue**

Both Indian and Western scholars have authoritatively described the village goddess as ambivalent, both benevolent and malevolent, not unlike the split mother of psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, her behavior can sometimes be seen as destructive. However, this widely held belief is the outcome of dualistic thinking, not part of the villager's worldview. The devi's character and persona cannot be judged in moral terms. As Rita comments, from her broad understanding of the Oriya culture: "She demands total surrender and if you are not surrendering to her, the devi takes her fierce form. She

also gets angry where you are interfering with her independence; she is benevolent when you are not interfering. For villagers the bringing of the disease is not malevolent; it is the act of her emerging. The conventional definitions of malevolence and benevolence are limited, not capturing the sense of the gramadevi.”

She brings the disease, she is the disease and cures the disease. In Ayurveda, an indigenous medical practice, there is no real distinction between affliction and relief, between disease and its cure. The disease is the fiery wrath of the goddess. Epidemic diseases like smallpox and cholera are thought to be inflicted by the village goddesses either to announce their presence or because they have been angered by disrespectful communities under their protection, although the individual victims are not normally held to be particularly blameworthy. Moreover the victims, especially of smallpox that until 1970 was the most feared and dreadful epidemic disease, believed that the disease was a form of the goddess who possessed them lest her rage grow to lethal proportions.

## II

### **Changes**

Everyone agrees that the gramadevi is changing. We have been monitoring changes in the tradition of the village goddess in a rapidly evolving culture. There is no longer one worldview held by all in the village. In many places there is diminished faith in her powers. There is increasing pressure to transform her direct, unmediated worship into mainstream Hinduism with icon, liturgy, canonical temple structure and brahmin priest in attendance. Whenever her cult has become fully brahmanized, the separation between woman and the gramadevi is complete.

It would be more appropriate to name the changes in her cult that we are observing as brahminizing rather than Hinduizing. Hinduism is a cultural system with a sense of hierarchy and otherworldliness embedded in it. Brahmanism is the ritualization of the Hindu ethos.

One early sign of changes to come is the Sanskritizing of the devi’s name, for example from the Oriya Samalei to the Sanskrit Samaleswari. Sanskrit has more prestige than the regional languages. The devi’s primal form of worship was as a stone, tree or pole literally smeared with red sindur paste. Changes come when she is given metal eyes. Later a face is demarcated, then the face is covered with a metal mask. Decorated with a

crown, dressed in a sari, and finally she is worshipped in the form of a metal or stone sculpture, usually representing Durga slaying the buffalo demon.

Along with these come changes in her immediate surrounding from an open setting under a tree in nature, to a low-three sided concrete enclosure, to a one cell temple---despite her repeated requests not to put a roof over her head—and in her final transition, she is housed in a canonical style temple complex with a marble floor and a donation box outside.

More importantly, her worship is no longer direct. The relationship between devotee and goddess is not mediated through the presence of a priest, be he a *mali* of the gardener caste, a *khondiat* from the warrior caste or a brahmin. In keeping with their training, or lack of, they do some sort of puja, the worship service ranging from a perfunctory bathing and dressing of the idol. to mumbling some incoherent Sanskrit words to the performance of a proper brahminic ritual. A final state of brahminization is the inclusion of a *yagna*, a Vedic fire sacrifice by brahmin priests, performed for *shanti*, universal peace, a far cry from the role of the gramadevi as protector of the local village territory and the well-being of its inhabitants.

How do these changes impact on the villagers' faith in their MA? There is diminished faith in her powers. There is so much corruption in the world about them that for some the stone is now often only a stone. Her power is reduced, people are no longer going to her. They are turning to other deities, to Mangala who offers good fortune, or to Tarini, who promises safety on the road, so important in view of all the motor accidents. Large temples are being built in the villages to Ram and Hanuman and beside them the gramdevi looks very small and insignificant. The sculptured image that replaces the primal tree or stone seems more sophisticated, more prestigious. The younger generation says that she has been marginalized. However, in most tribal areas, the goddesses' shrine remains unchanged, in the open, under a tree, the sacred enclosure bounded by low upright stones.

Her sphere of influence is still present everywhere in rural areas and to some extent in urban areas as well. In some sense, the principle of gramadevi is expanding but there is a general feeling that she is more malevolent, she is angry about all the corruption, and this is reflected in women's fears. The integrative space of gramadevi has turned into a place of political contestation.

Originally her function was the well being of the village, now it is more often focused on individual well being and problems relating to material things: property, examinations, husband's job, court cases and the like.

In some areas she has been less brahmanized and has kept something of her original status but when you inquire where is the goddess, the villagers reply there is no temple. However they still see her as an inseparable part of the village. They say to us "You have to have her...she is the core of the village." In that sense her power is not lost. It is only lost completely when the villagers are forced to dislocate. The displaced villagers who had to leave their devi behind when their village was flooded because of the construction of a dam, cried out that their children will die..."How can our children live without mother?" This was the voice of both men and women.

## CONCLUSION

Religion is a cultural system. We have looked at the gramadevi in the context of rural peasant and tribal culture. Her worldview is their primal worldview. However, the institution of the gramadevi is now in crisis, threatened with ultimate distinction. Although it is now expanding, it is becoming more masculinized and therefore her power is not necessarily increasing. When villagers after displacement due to the takeover of their land by development migrate to the city, they seek to recreate the ritual space of the gramadevi but find that they can no longer touch her essential power. They encounter logistic difficulties. Their community has been fractured; their neighbours are no longer from their own village.

They don't know how to sustain their worldview in the new place. Their gramadevi becomes more vulnerable to influences of brahmanization and to the economic impact of the hegemonic globalization. Because she deals with grounded reality she is still there but her power is now becoming a liability.

As the gramadevi as an institution largely serves women and children, with the dilution of her powers violence against them is increasing. The city is not a safe place for women. Dowry deaths and rape have become epidemic there. In the village the gramadevi as the focus of life controlled the social space so that there was a limit to masculinization of the culture.

We need to restore the feminine aspect to men's nature. Men and women need not be defined as one against the other, one over the other. At a time of heightened awareness of women's contribution to culture and society it is all the more necessary to sustain rituals that acknowledge and capture a women's spirituality. For the continuity of civilization in this perilous nuclear age we need to restore the balance of nature, not only of the forces of life and death, but also of male and female powers.

In our study we have recovered a vision of the sacred held by the indigenous peoples since prehistory. The implications that the cultural tradition of the gramadevi and her cult present of the continuing presence of the structure of society and the religious conception of a faraway age are important for our present day understanding of humankind's engagement with their environment as well as religion as a cultural force for social justice.