Chapter 12

Women and Religion in the Indian Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, a multimillionaire businesswoman of Ukrainian descent credits the goddess Lakshmi for her wealth and prosperity. Another wealthy American woman displays a picture of the goddess in her Hollywood bathroom. The Odisha goddess has been incorporated into the lives of these Americans but women in the Odia diaspora are still trying to figure out how to honor the goddess. Through the creation of altars and the meditation of morning prayers, practitioners of new age religions have more leeway to incorporate goddess veneration into their lives without regard to Indian tradition. Women in the Odia diaspora realize that weekdays are to be devoted to the goddess, that special household activities should be completed, and that these are not easy to fit into a household where both parents work and children have to be taken all over town after school. In this paper, the author argues that for Odia American women in particular, the goddess Lakshmi represents not just wealth and prosperity, but also women’s agency beyond their roles as wives and mothers. Odia women living in the United States maintain their traditions through community and religious groups. Many see the goddess Lakshmi as an ideal, recognize and honor the feminist powers of the goddess Lakshmi, but seldom do the elaborate rituals because of the constraint of time and space.

INTRODUCTION

A friend in social media in Los Angeles shared with the author that when she visited an American millionaire friend’s house in Hollywood, the photograph of goddess Lakshmi was prominently displayed in their bathroom, the apparent place for meditation in American households. On inquiry, she learned that the successful entrepreneur gives credit to Lakshmi for all her wealth and prosperity. She observed that goddess Lakshmi is very popular among many affluent Americans in California, especially in the Hollywood circle. The goddess is given credit for all the name and fame of the celebrities.
Zhena Muzyka, of Ukrainian descent with a gypsy heritage, started a tea business from a capital of six dollars, bought a tea garden in Sri Lanka, and has become a very successful multimillionaire entrepreneur, author, and an inspirational speaker. Her book *Life by the Cup* (2014) credits Lakshmi for all her wealth and prosperity. In her blog, she recommends creating a sacred place in everybody’s life for Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune. She observes in her blog:

*Dear Sacred Reader, on one of my first trips to Asia, I woke up in a small hotel room in Bangkok and peered out my window into the alley way. What I saw changed my life. I saw little altars everywhere—sacred spaces carefully arranged in a traffic dense, dirty alley! It gave me a moment of mindfulness, which shifted my day from mundane to magical …*

*Today’s sacred post is about making a space for the Goddess of Fortune in your life. Lakshmi is the symbol of prosperity, and her name actually means “goal” in Sanskrit. Lakshmi is synonymous with the goal of spiritual and physical prosperity. She has four arms symbolizing the four Hindu goals of human life: righteousness, genuineness, wealth and liberation from the cycle of life and death. I also happen to think the four arms of the Goddess are meant to remind us we have Divine powers beyond our two hands. Where in your home or office could you create a sacred space to remind yourself of the grace of prosperity? Perhaps a small table in your room, a corner of your desk, or a shelf in the dining room? The first sacred spaces I saw outside of my church were in the alleyways in Bangkok, reminding us that even an alleyway is sacred. Sending you sacred love and Lakshmi’s blessings. (Zhena’s blog)*

As Zhena’s blog indicates, globalization and New Ageism have made it possible for the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of spirituality, wealth and good fortune to evolve as a transnational divine entity. Goddess Lakshmi has become a global phenomenon. This cultural appropriation of the goddess, as fetish for wealth and good fortune, is undoubtedly well-intentioned, not at all surprising in our current cultural passion for mixing, perhaps kitschy, but certainly within the rights of people looking for inspiration in their lives. For the Odia-American diaspora, however, it carries with it a much more complex and powerful history and tradition, as well as deeply moving family and community links. We need to understand how Goddess Lakshmi and her associated rituals practiced by the Odia-American women have been altered, modified and adjusted while being imported by them to the new world. And how it has impacted the lives of people, especially Odia-American women in the diaspora to have a genuine insight into how lives and cultures are shaped in these challenging circumstances. For the Odia-American women, it is a constant struggle to remake their identity, adapting to the alien world where they create their place in a world that is ever changing and fluid, nothing like their old world. Goddess Lakshmi means more than a yearning for wealth and prosperity. She embodies a goal, an aspiration to be like her, fiercely independent even in the role of a wife, mother, being an embodiment of femininity. Unlike the western new age practitioners, Odia women in the diaspora have not been flashing Lakshmi as a showpiece and are not conventionally celebrating the Lakshmi ritual out of some inability to use or adopt old ones (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012, p. 9). Rather, they are adapting to the new culture and internalizing the strength and power of the goddess who serves as a role model in the Hindu patriarchal system. Goddess Lakshmi has proved her independence in the role of a wife and when she was chastised by her husband for her independence and autonomy, instead of walking out of marriage, she taught her husband, Jagannath, how to do everything right in his role as a husband, the lord of the family and society. Hence the Hindu Odia-American women aim to become like Lakshmi in their new home in the diaspora.