

Women and Religion in the Indian Diaspora

Annapurna Devi Pandey

University of California, Santa Cruz

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.

Keywords: Goddess, Women in Hindu Religion, Ritual, New religious role for Women in the Diaspora, Odisha and Odia - Americans

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.

Figure 1. *Goddess Lakshmi*

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" (Zhená's blog)ⁱ

As Zhená'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.

GODDESS LAKSHMI – A BRIEF HISTORY

Lakshmi, considered by many a pre-Vedic goddess, may not have many temples of her own, but is widely worshipped by Hindus of all castes all over India in many names and forms, mainly associated with nurturance, food security, wealth, prosperity, well-being and good fortune symbolized by rice. Many businesses, restaurants, hotels, and financial organizations bear Lakshmi's name. She is also widely depicted as the consort of Lord Vishnu, the preserver of the universe. Besides, she is looked upon as the very embodiment of power, virtuosity, wealth and wellbeing. David Kinsley (1997) observes that Sri as she is widely addressed as Sri Lakshmi, is used in the Vedic hymns and suggests beauty, luster, glory and high rank (p. 19). Sri also refers to riches, prosperity, and abundance in general. It is an acquired status and puts the goddess on a high pedestal. She is associated with fertility, abundance of harvest; as a result, women in villages relate to her and worship her widely. Typically, to celebrate her day in the month of December, women decorate the walls, floors, and pots with paddy stalks. In eastern India, she is known as the goddess of sustenance, bounty and good harvest. In a predominantly agricultural society like India, where 70% of the people live in rural areas and are still engaged in agriculture, Lakshmi is known as the most pragmatic goddess, being kind to women who face

structural inequality in the family, caste and class. These marginalized and downtrodden women are Lakshmi's subjects and have gained her attention as depicted in *Lakshmi Puran*. Author Linda Johnson observes that Lakshmi is also known as the source of eternal knowledge and ultimate truth (Tate, 2006, pp. 196-197).

There are two symbols ubiquitous to Goddess Lakshmi, the lotus and the elephant. She is seated on a lotus, usually red in color. She is offered lotus flowers at the temple. Lotus in Indian art and iconography, both Hindu and Buddhist, symbolizes peace, purity, prosperity, fertility and beauty. Lotus growing from the mud but totally uncontaminated by it represents spiritual perfection and authority (Kinsley, 1997, p. 21).

THE WORSHIP OF LAKSHMI IN ODISHA, INDIA

The goddess Lakshmi has a ubiquitous presence in every Hindu household irrespective of caste, class, region and sect. She is widely worshipped as the consort of Vishnu, the preserver of the universe. Besides being paired with Vishnu, she is also worshipped as Gaja Lakshmi, being flanked by two elephants, showering grains and gold coins from their trunks. In Odisha, Gaja Lakshmi day is celebrated on a full moon day, five days after Durga Puja, the celebration of mother goddess bringing peace and harmony to the universe. On this day, Gaja Lakshmi is worshipped as the royal goddess of wealth and prosperity and the elephants are looked upon as the most sacred and auspicious symbols of royalty, fame and fortune. The festival of Gaja Lakshmi is associated with the birth of Goddess Lakshmi and is popularly known as *Kumara Purnima*. The unmarried women are the center of attention on this day. They wear new clothes, eat their favorite food and worship the full moon to get their desired partners in life. One can imagine the connection of Lakshmi with young women is for them to aspire to be like her, fiercely independent, royal and the very embodiment of wealth and prosperity.

Simultaneously Lakshmi is worshipped independently as the strong willed goddess of wealth, health, well-being and known as goal oriented, disciplined and determined and bestow her disciples with abundant blessings. Both as a consort and as an independent goddess, she is the most revered, adored and widely followed goddess in rural as well as urban India. In the state of Odisha, the whole month of *margashira* in the lunar calendar (November - December in the Roman calendar) is devoted to goddess Lakshmi and on every Thursday (known as Lakshmi's day) of the month, the married woman does special rituals to propitiate the goddess Lakshmi and also does fasting in her name.

Balaram Das, the reputed medieval saint poet of 16th century, one of the five poet companions (*Panchasakha*), known as revivalists of Vaishnavism, has a significant effect on Oriya literature. His *Lakshmi Purana* provided the other pillar on which subsequent literature was to thrive and was considered as the first manifesto of Women's Liberation and Feminism in Indian literatureⁱⁱ and looked upon as a feminist text. The whole text is devoted to the power and glory of Goddess Lakshmi and her miracles granting any wish to her worshippers. As a morality tale, on the one hand, it lays out various guidelines for married women to perform the strict ritual in order to be good wives and, on the other, it gives power to women – especially those from the lower caste, the doubly marginalized – to transcend their disadvantaged status by worshipping the goddess. According to the text, the outcaste woman lives at the end of the caste neighborhood. In the month of *Margashira*, on a designated Thursday, the lady takes a bath early morning to purify her body, prepares her house Lakshmi's arrival, gathers all the ingredients favored by the goddess, and, before eating anything meditates on welcoming the goddess. Lakshmi takes a stroll in the neighborhood to check on her disciples and is very disappointed that all the high caste women have forgotten all about her and are either asleep or totally distracted by their worldly desires and have forgotten to follow all the rules and regulations to welcome Lakshmi. She enters the outcaste woman's house and is mesmerized by this untouchable woman and her devotion, appears in front of her and grants her all her

wishes. When Lakshmi comes back to the temple, her husband Jagannath and his older brother Balaram would not allow her in, since she entered an untouchable's house and lost her purity. The goddess leaves the temple but makes sure that Jagannath and Balabhadra lose everything, including their clothes and personal belongings. The temple is deserted and ultimately both brothers become beggars. After many futile attempts to get food and shelter, both of them come to Lakshmi, ask for her forgiveness and beg her to return to the temple on her own terms.

Balaram Das, a 16th century Odia poet, wrote *Lakshmi Purana*, portraying Lakshmi as the empowering goddess – triumphant and glorious in the role of wife of Lord Jagannath and mother to all the women who take refuge in her. *Lakshmi Purana* is looked upon as a feminist text, which emphasizes the agency, power and authority of Lakshmi over her spouse Jagannath and his older brother Balabhadra, ensuring women have access to the goddess using their own voice and agency without any priest medium. *Lakshmi Purana* emphasized complementarity between women and men as husband and wife. This complementarity also reflects on the rice producing agricultural economy in the state of Odisha, where both men and women work in the field in order to produce paddy, the staple food of the state. Especially the lower caste women are actively engaged in agriculture, so without them the paddy cultivation would not be possible. Traditionally, men do the sowing of the seeds, and women do the transplanting of the paddy seedlings, which are vital in paddy production. Accepting the offering from an untouchable woman, she confirmed the vital role of women in a patriarchal agricultural economy, especially in Odisha; questioned Brahmanic supremacy and the hierarchical caste system that looked down upon the untouchables as the outcastes and made Jagannath, her husband, promise that there will be no caste distinction inside the Jagannath temple. Even the Brahmins will share the consecrated food with the lower castes. Balaram Das's *Lakshmi Purana* suggests the sense of agency that the goddess carries with her for people who have integrated her meaning into their life, as opposed to those who might get their ideas about the goddess from some kind of "Guide to the Goddesses" book.

LAKSHMI RITUAL AMONG THE INDIAN DIASPORA IN THE UNITED STATES

According to the 2010 census report, Indians comprise about 3.2 million in the United States, about one percent of the country's population. They are widely known as East Indian or now Asian Indians (according to the Census Bureau) and are recognized for their economic success. Since the 1990s, with the high-tech technology boom, there has been a dramatic shift in the population of Indian Americans in the greater Bay area and it has grown exponentially (46.4%) in the last decade. Indians are heavily concentrated in high tech related industries in Silicon Valley, which makes Shalini Shankar (2008) call it Desi Land. Indians come from different regions of the country and constitute a diverse group of immigrants in Silicon Valley.

Professional Odia-Americans have contributed to this swelling number of Indians in the greater Bay area. Odias from Southeastern India constitute a distinct immigrant community of more than a thousand middle class professional families, spread throughout the Silicon Valley. Among the Indian diaspora in the United States, the author has discovered that the women transplanted from different regions of India follow their regional tradition of worshipping this goddess. Lakshmi is not worshipped on the same day in every part of India. For example, in Odisha, Thursday is considered her day whereas in Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka (the southern belt), that day is Friday. Almost every married Odia woman reads the most popular folkloric text on Thursdays during the month of *Margashira*.ⁱⁱⁱ In the Odia-American diaspora, women continue to model themselves in the image of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune, the ultimate ideal every woman cherishes, while remaking themselves to adjust to the foreign land.

Lakshmi is one of the most popular goddesses worshipped among Hindu women across India. She is known as the *sakti*, the eternal energy without whom, her spouse Vishnu, would not move as the matter remains inactive without energy. In her spousal role, she is independent

mindful and bestows any boon to her devotee, irrespective of class, caste, creed and gender. As Kinsley observes, throughout the Lakshmi-tantra, it is she, not Vishnu, who is described as the object of devotion, the one who grants all desires and whose special mantra embodies salvific power. It is she, not Vishnu, whose form is described in detail and presented as the supreme object of meditation.^{iv1} In Odisha, Lakshmi is not just worshipped among Hindus; women from Buddhist communities also swear by the goddess and celebrate various festivals in her name.

GODDESS LAKSHMI AMONG ODISIA-AMERICAN WOMEN

With this background of worship of goddess Lakshmi in the author's natal home and in her home state of Odisha, she moved to California in December, 1989. As describes elsewhere (Pandey, 2005, 2010), including in a film about diasporic Odias in the Bay area (*Homeland in the Heart*), the author has been engaged in a longitudinal study of the Odia Americans in California.

Odias from the state of Odisha in southeastern India constitute a distinct Indian immigrant community of more than a thousand middle-class professionals, spread throughout the Silicon Valley in Northern California. There are about a hundred Odia families dispersed in various parts of Southern California. Even with their increasing number (from fifty families in 1989 to more than three hundred families in 2013), the Odias in California maintain their closeness electronically, through a database called Calnet, and by taking part in the celebration of various feasts and festivals such as performances of Saraswati Puja; Ganesh Puja; Durga Puja; the worship of Lord Jagannath; and the ubiquitous chariot festival, which falls in the months of June and July.

¹ Lakshmi-tantra 45. 16- 21, refer to Kinsley (1997), p. 30.

With these cultural performances and religious celebrations, Odia American women have taken a leading role in the process of helping to keep their community intact and also giving a new purpose and meaning to their own lives. Diasporic women who have retrained and re-skilled themselves as professionals are finding a new meaning and purpose in their lives celebrating various religious rituals and taking up leadership roles in the religious celebrations of the community. They are principal players in practicing their Hindu tradition through the performance of selected religious rituals at home and in the community.

Lakshmi in the Hindu goddess tradition remains a strong role model for the Odia women in the diasporic context and in celebrating religious rituals related to family prosperity, children's education, and wellbeing. As the Lakshmi of the household, the Odia American woman has reinvented herself to prove her own worth and contribute to her family income. Mrs. Manorama Mahapatra, an eminent writer from Odisha, during her visit to the Bay area in 1986 observed that: "Here Odia women have combined the role of Lakshmi and ten-armed Durga. Back home most of them did not even make a cup of tea. But here they are doing everything, working outside, still taking care of their family, cooking, cleaning, shopping, driving their children to school, taking them for their dance lessons, soccer practice, karate lessons and also entertaining their friends and family during the weekend. Indeed, they are Lakshmis and have become *dasabhuja* (ten armed) Durga!" (personal conversation with the author, 12th April, 2010).

The author has observed that women in the diaspora have not commonly practiced Lakshmi Vrata, one of the most important rituals practiced by women back in Odisha. She often wondered why, despite the fact that their religious life of the Odia women is so vibrant, they have discontinued the practice of Lakshmi Vrata in the diaspora. A forty-two-year-old Odia professional woman who has been living in the Bay area for the last five years explains:

"Even though I grew up in Gujarat, my mother practiced Lakshmi vrata religiously.

During the vrata, my mother offered *chenna* (homemade cheese) mashed with bananas

instead of *Manda* pitha (rice cake filled with coconut and molasses). But when I came here, my life became very hectic. I have to drive my kids to school and to different activities, besides my studies, job and child-rearing at home. So I have no time to perform the Lakshmi Vrata with day long fasting and its elaborate preparation.” (personal conversation with the author, 6th March, 2015])

Thus the major contributing factor is time constraints. As mentioned above, Lakshmi vrata is always performed on Thursdays, and it simply cannot be moved to the weekend. Other religious festivals, like *Ganesh Puja*, *Saraswati Puja*, and *Ratha jatra* (chariot festival), which are performed according to the lunar calendar, always move to the weekends in the diaspora. People are busy working during the week and the women mostly working outside home are prevented from performing these rituals on a weekday. But the Lakshmi vrata ritual has to be performed word perfect and cannot be moved to the weekend. It is celebrated only on a Thursday, the day of Lakshmi. The ingredients required for the ritual are very easily available in Odisha but are impossible to collect because they are rare in the diaspora.^v As many informants have said, if the ritual is going to be meaningful it has to be performed exactly as the text stipulates. The elaborate regimen of performing the vrata according to the text, such as cleaning the whole house with fresh cow dung, fasting the whole day on a Thursday, preparing the puja offerings by oneself, etc. becomes impossible for a working professional Odia woman who tries to combine professional and household responsibilities along with child rearing. As one participant in our research puts it,

“When my grandmother performed Lakshmi Vrata, she did only the puja. Somebody cleaned the house for her. Others brought the ingredients. All she had to do was just keep the fast. Here I am taking care of the house, raising the children, driving them everywhere. When do I have the time to do all this on an empty stomach? I simply have to be a super human. I would rather do just the puja than do everything. I simplify everything. I do not eat non-vegetarian food on Thursdays, cook it at home nor let my

children eat it too. I feel the reverence to goddess Lakshmi, so I do it.” (personal conversation with the author, 5th April, 2015])

Another defining feature of Lakshmi Vrata is that it is passed down from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law, and is practiced as a family tradition. On her recent visit to Odisha in January, 2014, the author spotted a young Odia bank officer wearing the *Sudasha vrata*^{vi} and asked her how she is managing to do such a regimented ritual along with the demands of her professional life, to be in the office from eight to six. She said, it is the tradition in her in-laws home. Her mother-in-law is the driving force behind it and she simply has to follow her as a tradition.

In the diaspora, most of the Odia women have moved to the USA through marriage, they are no more defined by their traditional roles as daughters-in-law or sisters-in-law. Their diasporic move offers them a new opening to redefine themselves as women of their choice. This new landscape gives them a sense of anonymity so that they can reshape and reconstruct their new identity by redefining the gender roles previously dictated by their Hindu tradition. Women coming from over-protective families in Odisha have adapted to this new land and constantly reinvented themselves to fit into the changing environment. The diasporic context has opened up a new space for women to redefine their gender roles in the sphere of religion as well. As mentioned earlier, Lakshmi Vrata is a woman’s ritual, which is held on a Thursday, and is practiced on consecutive Thursdays in the month of *Margashira*, has been selectively dropped in the diaspora, but the essence of this vrata as empowering for the self. A celebration of wealth, prosperity and family wellbeing has been quietly taken up in celebrating rituals which can be performed during the weekend. Also, women are selectively choosing rituals that also involve the children and their husbands, for example, Saraswati Puja, Ganesh Puja and Jagannath Puja etc.

During the last twenty years, the author has observed that several women are really redefining their roles by officiating as priests at the celebration of goddess Durga. Their participation is vital to the performance of other feasts and festivals but for Durga puja, they

have taken it upon themselves to prepare the script for the performance of the puja as well as officiate as priests instead of having male priests as is the custom back in Odisha.

In the context of the changing role of women in the field of religion, the author observes that women enact their tradition as an inspiration for their modern lifestyle. In using tradition, they are becoming leaders in their community and are exerting tremendous authority both within the Odia community and the broader American community where they earn their living and do community service. Without the immediate kin support, they relate to various religious traditions other than their own in the diasporic context. For example, many of these women are also very active and committed members of transnational religious organizations like the Self-Realization Foundation (SRF)^{vii}, Chinmayananda Mission, etc. Through these organizations, one of the respondents in our study, along with a group of Odia women, run Sunday schools, promote Indian culture through celebrating India nights and have made many friends across diverse cultures. She says, “I am so blessed to have my American spiritual sisters.” She has been performing the priestly role in the worship of Durga in the Odia diaspora.

In presenting diasporic women’s vibrant roles in the community religious life, the author emphasizes that some women have smoothly transformed their traditional domestic religious roles to public life and find new meaning in their roles as religious specialists. Rather than being a hindrance to their modern lifestyle, their orientation in Lakshmi Vrata strengthens their position in their own community and acts as an inspiration for their leadership in their socio-economic and political setting. The way women did Lakshmi Vrata by officiating the *puja*, now they are coming together to worship Durga, for which they have no restrictions as it is the case with the worship of Lakshmi. When asked about *Lakshmi Vrata*, a friend observed, “Who has the time to clean the entire house and do the elaborate cooking on a working day?” (personal communication with the author, 11th Oct, 2014). For these Odia women, Durga has become a surrogate Lakshmi, as they say.

The worship of Goddess Durga collectively signifies the strength and vibrancy of the community outside their homeland. The entire *puja* process reflects women's deep engagement in community affairs, including food preparation and distribution, chanting *mantras* and packing everything, including the goddess. Men are there to follow orders. What makes the *puja* successful is the joint support of women and men working together. Women promote a sense of attachment to Odia values and instill physical togetherness, which makes the members feel attached to and respected within the community. Here women are enacting the role of Lakshmi, feeding the entire community and making sure each member's need is taken care of. Kasturi, who has been organizing the community Durga *puja* in Los Angeles for the last several years, observes that "I always choose a community center over a temple so that the children can run around, play their favorite sports and are not bored during the *puja*." (Personal communication with the author, ...[12th Oct, 2014])

This is also the way the older generation is trying to inculcate their culture in the new generation born and brought up in a totally different environment. For example, Mukta, daughter of Kasturi, born and brought up in the USA, may not feel religious, but did a wonderful job in managing the social part on this occasion. She got other teenagers involved to help her in serving food for 350 attendees at the *puja*. Kasturi relies on her daughter to effectively serve the food so that she concentrates on the *puja* ritual. Mukta says, "I am not religious, but I am here to help my mother". Also Mukta has remained very close to her Odia friends and has a strong connection with the second generation Odias in the community. Women celebrate the religious festivals with a strong emphasis on Odissi dance, music, language, discourse on Odisha history and literature, which helps the second generation children learn about their Odia identity and cultural heritage. Men folk embrace it. According to Ram, a high-tech professional in the Bay area:

"We are fearful of losing our children to the White culture. We are very structure-oriented. We need to plan our lives, twenty five years from now, what our children will

study, and how they will settle down, get married and have a family. The White culture is different. They do not care about the future. We do not want our children to follow the white way. This fear of losing our children makes us emphasize (on) our identity, our difference from the whites. From the children's point of view, these discourses help them find their roots." (Personal communication with the author, ...[12th Oct, 2014])

SOME THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

The Odia women are consciously crafting a sense of agency and subjectivity – what Chela Sandoval calls “differential consciousness” in her essay, “US Third World Feminism”.

“Differential consciousness” is a mode of “weaving between and among opposition ideologies”, and it mobilizes a “tactical subjectivity with the capacity of reentering depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted” (Sandoval, 2000, p.14), developed from W. E. B. Du Bois’s notion of “Double Consciousness”. Odia women’s sense of family and community alludes to, as Kondo suggests, “the contractedness of “home” identity and culture, underlining the necessity for people on the margins to create, produce and assert our identities” (Kondo, 1996, p. 97).

One can conclude that diaspora is reshaping and redefining gender roles for both men and women in performing the religious rituals. Here women and men of different castes other than Brahmins are taking lead roles in religious performances, and are redefining themselves through tradition. It enables them to be in charge, which their tradition would not have allowed them back home. Besides gender, the diasporic experience varies in terms of class, race, and ethnicity. The pain of loss and displacement are highly relative. Women are producing and reproducing Odia tradition. In the words of a participant in our research, “this day reminds us that the inner power of a woman can stretch itself to eternity” (Swapnalata Mishra, Facebook post on June 7, 2013 on Savitree vrata).

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

As a transnational Odia, the author reflects on her personal experience. Her name, *Annapurna*, literally meaning “full of grain” (one of the hundred and eight names of Lakshmi) had always intrigued her. Her mother affectionately called her *Padmalaya* (after the lotus goddess, another name of Lakshmi)^{viii} and her father affirmed her auspicious identity by calling her ‘Ma’ (mother, invocation of the goddess). Her upbringing in an Odia home resonated the salience of the symbol of powerful and benevolent Lakshmi as the family deity, and she felt she was carrying the burden of living up to the goddess’ eminence. Her grandfather, who named her, must have had a dream for the grand daughter to fulfill, to be the namesake of the goddess Annapurna^{ix}, the other name of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, prosperity, kindness, affection and giving. Representing a priestly family in rural Odisha, where agriculture is the main source of sustenance, her grandfather, a vernacular schoolteacher in the village, must have held goddess Annapurna in highest esteem, who had tremendous power and influence in the family and the community.

In South India, Goddess Lakshmi represents the all-encompassing Hindu goddess system – a wider metaphysical thought (Pattanaik, 2009, p. 11)^x, unlike in northern India, especially Uttar Pradesh.^{xi} Lakshmi is a household name in Odisha. Like any other Hindu household, the author’s household had a central family deity – Lakshmi. The mother had her image painted on the wall in their *Puja* room along with her consort, Narayan (*Vishnu*). She was very devoted to Lakshmi as the main deity on her altar and all other gods and goddesses were next to her. Every Thursday, the mother washed her beautiful long black hair, recited *Lakshmi Puran* while offering Prasad, and cooked pure vegetarian meals in honor of the goddess. She faithfully celebrated Lakshmi *Vrata* in the month of Margashir, the most sacred month of the year. On the day of the *Vrata* (every Thursday of that month), she meticulously collected all the ingredients for the *puja* (worship): fresh mango leaves from the nearby orchard; fresh berry leaves; grass; banana leaves, etc. from the backyard, and most important of all, fresh cow dung

to prepare *panchamrit* (five nectars, milk, yogurt, ghee, cow urine and dung; made up of all the elements extracted from the cow) and prepared *satwik* food (purely vegetarian food cooked in clarified butter). On these Thursdays, when the author woke up in the morning, she would find the cement floors in their three room house spotlessly washed with water mixed a touch of cow dung; fresh *chittas* (paintings made up of freshly ground white rice flour paste) of Lakshmi's feet, paddy stock, and all the symbols in her image. The fondest memory during her childhood was that of savoring the heavenly *manda pithas* (steamed rice cakes filled with sweetened coconut) as *prasad* offered to Lakshmi on these Thursdays. Her mother would prepare a vegetarian meal consisting of *arua* (sun dried and milled paddy) rice, dal and vegetables cooked in *ghee* (unclarified butter) and *saag* (leafy greens), the favorite dish of goddess Lakshmi.

While growing up in Cuttack, the author frequently visited Jagannath temple in Puri where Jagannath, the main deity, is worshipped along with his older brother, Balaram, and younger sister, Subhadra. Besides being known as the incarnation of Krishna/Vishnu, Lord Jagannath is the principal cultural marker of the people of Odisha^{xii}. Goddess Lakshmi, the consort of Jagannath, has her own independent residence in the temple premises, where she is the main deity, and, according to the local custom, a visit to Lord Jagannath would not be complete without having a *darsan* of Lakshmi, the embodiment of power, wealth and prosperity. Unlike Sita -Ram temples in Northern India or Lakshmi-Vishnu temples in Southern India, it is intriguing that in the Jagannath temple complex, she has her own abode, not accompanied by her consort, Jagannath. Reading Balaram Das's *Lakshmi Puran*, one can surmise that even in the role of a wife, she has embodied her own identity as the giver of life and spiritual will. Traditionally a wife is known as the *sahadharmini*, companion of her husband and is defined as benevolent and tolerant of her husband in a patriarchal society. M. N. Srinivas defines the role of a wife not only as a husband's lifelong companion, but also the religious caretaker of her husband and children. Women perform many specific religious Vratas in order to fulfill their duties as wives.

Many a time during the author's visits to Jagannath temple in Puri, she noticed that Lakshmi temple in the temple complex would be more crowded with men and women of all ages, particularly newly married couples as she signifies the ideal womanhood, known as the mother of the universe. The pandas (priests) in charge of her worship sell red bangles, vermilion and aluminum bracelets offered to Lakshmi as a sign of *suhag* (marital bliss), *sampat* (prosperity) and motherhood. The devotees offer her garlands made of lotus flowers, butter lamps, and incense sticks. The author's mother always insisted that they sit down in her temple after her *darshan*.^{xiii} Upon reflection, the author realized that pilgrims sit down on the temple floor to attain the fulfillment of their wishes for prosperity in life (Mohapatra, 2013, p. 58).

During these visits, the author noticed that there were as many men as women in Lakshmi's temple, and on inquiry she learned that men also worship her for *sampat* (wealth) and *samridhi* (prosperity). Prosperity, as Hari Dutt Sharma defines in his book, *Glory of Spiritual India* (1999), is both "material and spiritual" (pp. 63-64). Rachel McDermott (2003), in her account of the Western Kali, points out that "goddess spirituality is attractive for women because it makes possible an affirmation of the female body of women's anger and aggression, and of the changing cycles of life which menstruation and birth so readily illustrate" (p. 134). No wonder Lakshmi *brata* (or *Vrata*) as a Hindu rite is a vowed observance^{xiv}, exclusive to women like the author's mother even though men would worship Lakshmi and frequent her temple. Now the author realizes that for her mother, like many other women she grew up with, worshipping Lakshmi early in the morning, and holding on to her as their "mother", protector, mentor etc, must have given them a sense of purpose, a goal and a sense of self identity as strong women in their role of wife and mother. In performing *Lakshmi vrata* as a ritual, the author observed that women not only embody Lakshmi, but in the process they also enact a sense of selfhood and agency in their roles of daughters, wives and mothers.

When the author read Balaram Das's *Lakshmi Puran* (2007), a 16th century text describing the worship of Lakshmi in Odisha, she was struck by the continuity of the religious

tradition characterized by both the structure of Vaishnavism as well as the protest organized by non-Brahmin men and women. As narrated by Balaram Das, Lakshmi defies the tradition of cohabitation with her consort Jagannath, and moves out to the lower caste neighborhoods to accept the offerings of her devotees, the untouchables, like *Sriya Chandaluni*. By doing that, Lakshmi asserts her own autonomy, and agrees to go back to Jagannath only with a promise that she will maintain her own independent status as the goddess of the marginalized.

CONCLUSION

Diasporic discourses reflect the sense of being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes the homeland not as something simply left behind but as a place of attachment in a contrapuntal^{xv} modernity. The diaspora being displaced may be structured around a tension between return and deferral (Clifford, 1997, p. 252). California is becoming a global hub – a multicultural meeting place with a growing Indian population educated and trained in the United States and working in Silicon Valley. We can see a new kind of society where Odia American women are playing a very important role in building their ethnic community, home away from home. Ong observes that “in an America being recast by continual waves of immigrants, the geosocial landscape has been transformed, as bridges are built between the cities on the West Coast and cities in Asia”. (2003, p. 260). Clifford argues in the context of the Indigenous diaspora, that “diasporic experience is necessarily both nationalist and antinationalist. Absolutist invocations of blood, land, and return coexist with the arts of conviviality, the need to make homes away from home, among different peoples” (Clifford, 2013, p. 88). One can see that the diaspora experience is a double consciousness: It is produced positively by transplanting the family rituals in the making of new home and at the same time identifying with the host country. For the Odia-American women, their subjectivity is tied to their religiosity. Goddess Lakshmi is the role model for these women and by enacting her life in the ritual performance of various

Pujas, they are giving life to and reaffirming their own sense of belonging for themselves as well as people like them in the Odia diasporic society.

As many theorists have pointed out, Lakshmi Puran is clearly a feminist text with a message for women especially in their role as wives to declare their autonomy by challenging the normative roles prescribed for them. The Odia-American Women redefine their roles vis-à-vis the challenges presented to them. These women have come a long way from their homeland in search of their destiny, have not shied away from the opportunities available in the host country and are redefining the patriarchal tradition by taking up leadership roles in the religious rituals.

This research clearly supports James Clifford's observation that diaspora is a gendered experience, but it also sheds light on other factors such as caste and class in reformulating the gender dynamics of Odia-Americans. In the context of Canada, Clarkson observes that diasporic experience is overall a positive experience where the subject redefines himself or herself and creates a new sense of belonging, a sense of community based on trust and cooperation (Clarkson, 2014). This clearly shows the positive contributions made by rituals to the lives of both men and women in the diaspora. Even though goddess Lakshmi has become a global deity, the mode of her worship defers to the interests and values of the worshippers attached to her adoption on the home culture and the diaspora.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ For Zhenā's blog on Lakshmi and sacredness visit <http://www.zhena.tv/node/5462>
Please check the artist, Paul Heussenstam's depictions of Lakshmi at
http://www.mandalas.com/mandala/htdocs/HinduGallery/hindu_gallery.php

ⁱⁱ For more information, see <http://redroom.com/member/sarojinisahoo/blog/beyond-misogyny>

ⁱⁱⁱ This is the ninth and one of the most auspicious months in Hindu lunar calendar. Lakshmi Vrat is observed on Thursdays of this month. For reference, visit <http://hindusphere.com/margashira-masam-2013-2014>.

^{iv} For Lakshmi-tantra 45, 16- 21, see Kinsley (1997), p. 30.

^v The ingredients required for the performance of Lakshmi Vrata are freshly harvested white paddy in a newly woven bamboo basket, cow dung among others as mentioned by Balaram Das in *Lakshmi Puran*, p. 37. These ingredients are difficult to procure in the diaspora.

^{vi} Sudasa Brata is a unique festival of Orissa among the women who take a vow for the well-being of their family. It is observed whenever there is a combination of (1) Shukla Paksha (waxing phase of moon), (2) Thursday and (3) Dasami. Goddess Lakshmi is worshipped during the day by offering 10 Manda Pithas in puja (see Oriya Foods page for recipe of Manda Pitha). A sacred thread (consisting of ten layers of thread) is prepared in the prescribed manner and tied by women on their arms until the arrival next occasion of Sudasha Brata (when the thread is replaced). For further information, see http://www.orissa.oriyaonline.com/sudasha_brata.html

^{vii} Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) is a worldwide spiritual organization founded by Paramahansa Yogananda in 1920.

^{viii} Padmalaya is the other name of Lakshmi because her abode is *Padma*. Mentioned in Balaram Das's *Lakshmi Puran*, p. 36.

^{ix} In Sanskrit, *Anna* means food, while *purna* (*pur* is pronounced like "pour" not "purr") means complete. Annapurna is the Goddess overflowing with food. Devdutt Pattanaik says: "She is the universal and timeless kitchen-goddess, Annapurna, the mother who feeds. Without her, there is starvation, a universal fear: this makes Annapurna a universal goddess." (Pattanaik, 2009, p. 27). Her most popular shrine is located in Kashi, on the banks of the river Ganga. In the course of time, since the Vedic period, with the changing needs and social situation, the goddesses must have been reflected in different images. Devdutt Das observes, "Annapurna, the goddess, becomes Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, dressed in red, standing on a lotus, flanked by white elephants and showering gold" (ibid., p. 27).

^x Devdutt Pattanaik (2009) explains that Goddess Lakshmi embodies wealth and fortune. She is well known all over India under several names – as Shri, she brings splendor in to our lives and

makes kings out of men and as Bhu, she is the gentle earth, providing home and shelter to all her children. Unlike the localized goddesses (*Gram Devatis*), she is not bound to one place but represents a wider metaphysical thought.

^{xi} When the author got married into a priestly family in Ballia district, Uttar Pradesh, she found out that Lakshmi was not the main deity there; instead, Ram, Sita, and Hanuman were the main icons of worship in that region. Sita is worshipped as the consort of Ram but not as an independent goddess on her own. Women practice a lot of rituals focused on the Gods rather than goddesses, for example, Chhath Puja (a ritual dedicated to the Sun god).

^{xii} Refer to Annapurna Pandey (2010), "Giving life to God: The Cohesive role of Religion in the Indian Diaspora: A study of Oriya Americans in the Bay Area" in the proceedings of South Western Anthropology Association meeting.

^{xiii} *Darsan* in Sanskrit, means seeing, to see and be seen by a deity or holy person, to make pilgrimage to behold a sacred place. Diana L. Eck writes in *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (1985, p. 3), "The central act of Hindu worship...is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with ones own eyes, to see and by seen by the deity... Since, in the Hindu understanding, the deity is present in the image, the visual apprehension of the image is charged with religious meaning. Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessing of the divine."

^{xiv} The term Vrata/brata is explained in James Freeman's chapter (1989) "The Ladies of Lord Krishna: Rituals of Middle-Aged Women in Eastern India", in Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross (Eds.) *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives* published by Cengage. THIS BOOK (James Freeman's article is listed in this book, hence the mention). IS NOT LISTED IN REFERENCES. In "Beyond Misogyny" Sarojini Sahoo (2009) observes that "Hindu ritual 'Vrat/Brat' are the Hindu rituals of fasting or Upavas, mainly observed by the women, to please a particular God or Goddesses on a particular day. THIS BOOK IS NOT LISTED IN REFERENCES. When devotees refrain themselves from food or water. Every Vrat/Brat has its own 'puranas' or legend describe in mythical poem form, which were to be recited at the rituals." (Sahoo, 2009, p.....)

^{xv} Edward Said used the term 'contrapuntal' to characterize one of the positive aspects of conditions of exile. THIS BOOK IS NOT LISTED IN REFERENCES. (I am using this reference in relation to James Clifford. If you think, it is out of place, please feel free to omit it). "Seeing the entire world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision. This plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal. For an exile habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally" (1984, pp. 171-172, see also 1990, pp. 48-50). James Clifford (1997) argues that these reflections on exile apply to experiences of diaspora, but with the difference that the more individualist, existential focus of the former is tempered by networks of community, collective practices of displaced dwelling, in the latter.