

ping up, and even "standard" lists such as the Seven Sisters are fluid. This fluidity is possible because of the theology of unity discussed in chapter 1, the belief that "they are all *śakti*." Yet each place, each goddess, has its own uniqueness, its own history and individual personality. Kālī in one place is both the same and different from Kālī in another place. Jvālā Mukhī is both the same and different from Vaiṣṇo Devī. E. Alan Morinis, writing in the same vein, has observed that the tendency within Hinduism is

to represent its deities as both converging into supreme deities and splintering these into a myriad of lesser deities. The paradox in thought which makes this even more complex is the belief that even at the most lowly, form-bound level, the goddess is simultaneously her cosmic, formless self, and that in that cosmic, characterless aspect, she is still Durgā, Kālī, Tārā, Ūmā and the rest.⁵⁰

This paradox defies distinctions between monotheism and polytheism, spirituality and materialism, "great" and "little" traditions. This phenomenon, which David Shulman calls "the phenomenon of localization"⁵¹ and Kees Bolle calls "the symbolism of being there,"⁵² allows for a rich variety within a unified tradition. In fact, the deity and the place become identified with each other. It is difficult to say which is named after the other. For example, Vaiṣṇo Devī and Jvālā Mukhī both refer to physical places with geographical features as well as to the goddesses who live there. The individual goddess is the place and the place is the goddess. In order to experience the Goddess as place, to get the feel of "being there," devotees journey into the mountains, receiving the sacred vision (*darśan*) of the Goddess in her concrete local forms. Chapter 3 provides a glimpse into this pilgrimage process.

The Call of the Goddess

The Dynamics of Pilgrimage

You called me, Śrāṇvālī
Here I am, here I am, Śrāṇvālī.
O Flame Mother, Mountain Mother, Gracious Mother.

The whole world is but a wayfarer
Whose destination is your door.
High mountains, long roads
Couldn't keep me away, Śrāṇvālī.

In an empty mind, a flame has ignited
On your path, friends have joined.
How can I open my mouth and ask you,
Without asking, I get everything, Śrāṇvālī

Who's a king; who's a beggar?
All your worshippers are equal.
Giving *darśan* to all,
You draw them to your breast, Śrāṇvālī!

We'll come every year, Ma, we'll come to you
Bringing coconuts, offerings, umbrellas,
Lighting your flame during *ārīṭi*,
Offering a red flag, Ma, we'll come to you.

Mothers are like a cooling shade.
Sons have lapses; mothers never do.
Look after us, Ma, we'll come to you.

With children you shower us with happiness,
Rid us of desire, hunger, and thirst.
Bringing our family, Ma, we'll come to you.

Give happiness, peace, intelligence, Ma.
Give the children milk, Ma.

Fulfill our request, Ma, we'll come to you.

Send children to us,

Teach them good works, auspicious works.

May the eighty-four snares vanish, Ma, we'll come to you.²

While worshippers of the Goddess often express the sentiment that she is present everywhere and that one could worship her within oneself, at home, or in a local temple, her pilgrimage places are śakti pīṭhas (seats of power), which exert a tremendous pull on her devotees. Those who visit her sacred places do so, they say, in response to her "call." As one pilgrim (female, Brahmin, age about forty-four) told me,

The reason why I have come on this pilgrimage is that there was a *kīrtan* [devotional songfest] in my neighborhood, and the Mother became manifest [through possession] in someone and told me to come to Vaiṣṇo Devī. The Mother called me. I wished for my health to improve, and by the Mother's grace I was able to climb the fourteen kilometers.

Pilgrimage to places sacred to the Goddess is one of the most vigorous and visible aspects of the cult—indeed, one could call it the focal point. Discussions I had with devotees of the Goddess about her powers and attributes inevitably centered around the physical places where she manifests herself and the motivation the devotee feels to visit those places. Most of the devotional songs make reference to one or more of these "personalities" of the Goddess. In this chapter I describe the ritual elements, what pilgrims do while on pilgrimage. I also hope to give a taste of what the experience of pilgrimage is like for those who undertake a sacred journey. While I make reference to individual shrines as examples, my emphasis will be on the features common to Goddess pilgrimages in general.

In the Footsteps of the Goddess

All the myths and legends of the Goddess discussed in chapter 2 concern events that can be located in time and space. Even those

that took place in mythic time or what Eliade has called *in illo tempore* can be visually and physically reexperienced in the here and now by the pilgrim on his or her sacred journey. The story of the "flame tongue" at Jvālā Mukhī, for example, is not just a picturesque fable for pilgrims, for the flame can still be seen and experienced as a manifestation of the Goddess. Similarly, pilgrims who worship Vaiṣṇo Devī at Trikuṭ mountain today trace the steps the Goddess took in her flight from Bhaironāth, including the literal crawl through the womb cave at Ādikumārī. Thus, they are reexperiencing Bhairō's pursuit of Vaiṣṇo Devī. Since the stations of the pilgrimage are more clearly delineated at Vaiṣṇo Devī than at any of the other Goddess temples, I will describe them here.

Arriving in Katra, usually by bus, pilgrims register for a *yātrā* (pilgrimage) pass that will be checked later on in an attempt at crowd control. If they have arrived late in the day, they may wish to spend the night at one of the pilgrims' hostels or hotels. In the bazaar they may purchase the items to offer at the main shrine, usually a packet including a coconut, sweets, *sindūr* (red powder), incense, *maulī* (red string), and a red flag wrapped in a red *amūṭ* (scarf). Since no leather is allowed on the mountain, pilgrims may rent canvas shoes for the hike as well as other items such as umbrellas, flashlights, and cameras. Most pilgrims will choose to make the nine-mile climb on foot, either by the steep path with many stairs or by the longer but more gradual bridal path, while the very ill or elderly may rent a donkey. Several years ago, a helicopter pad was built near the top of the mountain to accommodate the busy schedules of visiting dignitaries. The pilgrimage route is lined at intervals with small temples and images, tea stalls, and young girls (*kanyās*) who collect offerings of small coins from pilgrims.

The atmosphere is exuberant. Colorfully dressed pilgrims of all ages sing devotional songs as they walk the steep path. When the going gets rough, they will shout to each other: *jay mātā dī* (victory to the Mother). Groups chant in unison, adding line after line:

Say it softly: *jay mātā dī!*

Say it loudly: *jay mātā dī!*

Say it with love: *jay mātā dī!*

People in the front: *jay mātā dī!*

People in the back: *jay mātā dī!*

English people also: *jay mātā dī!*

Everybody say: *jay mātā dī!*

Remover of troubles: *jay mātā dī!*

Śērānvālī: *jay mātā dī!*

The first stop on the route is Darśanī Darvāzā, a stone gate from which one gets the first view of the mountain. Passes are checked here. Second is Bān Gaṅgā, the sacred stream in which many pilgrims bathe, so named because this is the spot where the Goddess shot her arrow (*bān*), causing a river to flow. A small temple to Vaiṣṇo Devī is here. Third is Carāṇ Pādūkā, where a temple has been built around the Goddess's still-visible footprints. Pilgrims stand in the same spot Vaiṣṇo Devī did when she turned around to catch a glimpse of her pursuer. Fourth is Ādikumārī, the fifteen-foot cave where the Goddess meditated. The cave is barely wide enough to accommodate one pilgrim slithering through on his or her stomach, but the smoothness of the rock makes it easier than it looks. Inside is an alcove where a priest sits cross-legged, reciting prayers. This is the main stopping place along the route; a spacious plot of land holds a temple, water tank, tea stalls, restaurants, and overnight accommodations for one thousand people. Fifth is Hāthī Mathā, a face of the mountain that looks like the forehead of an elephant. Sixth is Sānjhī Chat, the highest point on the track (7,215 feet). From here the path begins a gradual descent first to the Bhairo temple, which pilgrims bypass, and then to the main temple, the *darbār* of Vaiṣṇo Devī. A new road built by the Dharmarth Trust circumvents the Bhairo temple completely, so that now pilgrims must make a special effort to visit it.³ The *darbār* area is a large complex of shops, restaurants, dormitories, and enclosed areas with piped-in water for bathing. Just outside the cave is a square platform with seating room for about one hundred people. Waiting time for entering the cave is usually several hours, considerably more during the Navarātras. Pilgrims enter the cave single file, stepping over the rock said to be Bhairo's body. They must slither through a dark, narrow passageway ankle deep in ice-cold water. At the end of the ninety-foot tunnel, three steps lead to a room barely large enough to hold four or five crouching people. Here the pilgrims experience the fulfillment of their journey in the *darśan* of the three *piṇḍis*. They make their offerings and are quickly ushered outside, where they receive part of their offerings back as *prasād* from one of the attending priests: a *biñḍī* on the forehead, a scarf around the head, a red

string around the neck, and some small coins that are said to ensure wealth if kept with one's money. From here the pilgrim hurries back down the mountain (possibly making the no longer compulsory stop at the Bhairo temple) to catch a bus for home or another pilgrimage place.

Intentions and Actions

What motivates a person or group to undertake a pilgrimage? Some devotees have a custom of going every year to a particular place or places, some go as a group with their guru or other religious organization, some go because their relatives or friends have gone, some go out of curiosity, some to make or fulfill a vow, some to conduct life-cycle rites, some for "peace of mind," and some because they feel called by the Goddess. The specific reasons for undertaking a pilgrimage are as numerous as the pilgrims themselves, but the element underlying all these reasons is the belief that pilgrimage is *effacious*, that whatever results one desires will come about through the grace of the Goddess.

Through reading pilgrim guidebooks and talking with pilgrims, it becomes obvious that it is not merely the mechanical performance of the pilgrimage that produces results, but the attitude of the devotee. One must approach the pilgrimage with the proper *bhāvanā* (feeling or sentiment). Once the pilgrim has formed the intention (*saṅkalpa*) to undertake a pilgrimage, then he or she is obligated to do so. On the journey one's thoughts should be directed toward the deity. In premodern times pilgrimage was done primarily on foot, with parties singing devotional songs along the route. Nowadays buses have become the primary means of transportation, eliminating some of the rigor and asceticism. Still, I was told, one should cultivate physical, mental, and ritual purity through fasting or at least avoiding meat and liquor, abstaining from sexual activity, avoiding arguments, sleeping on the ground, and wearing clean clothing. Women should not undertake pilgrimages during their menstrual periods. A bath is obligatory before entering the temple and may be taken at the river or tank adjacent to the temple, at the rest house or pilgrims' hostel where one is staying, or, if the journey is not too far, at one's home. In any case, the pilgrims will at least wash their hands, face, and feet and remove their shoes before entering the temple. The Goddess is said to respond to the emotion

of the devotee and will forgive minor ritual errors as long as the devotee is sincere and has faith. On the other hand, she will punish those who show disrespect as in the following anecdote, which I heard from several different devotees:

A group of college boys were making a pilgrimage to Vaiṣṇo Devī. Instead of chanting *jai mātā dī* [victory to the Mother] along with the other pilgrims on the steep climb up the mountain, the boys began to joke and chant *jai pitā dī* [victory to the Father]. The other pilgrims became nervous and tried to make them stop, but they persisted. After a while, the Goddess came out of the sky in the form of lightning and turned them into stones.

The primary reason pilgrims give for going on pilgrimage is to receive *darśan*, and indeed, this is the *sine qua non* of a pilgrimage, regardless of the more specific purpose for undertaking the journey. *Darśan* means "seeing the divine image,"⁴ participating in the power of the deity by viewing him or her in a manifest form. At pilgrimage places, *darśan* of the Goddess means, usually, viewing her in the form of a *piṇḍī* or a *mūrti*. A *piṇḍī* is a lump of stone, resembling somewhat a Siva-linga, which is believed to have been self-generated (*svayambhū*) on the spot. It is believed to be imbued with *śakti*, that is, to be a manifestation of the Goddess herself. While the worship of stones as male and female deities is common throughout India, the term *piṇḍī* seems to be unique to the Panjab Hills cult. The Goddess is also worshiped in the form of a *mūrti*, an iconic image that is "enlivened" with her power.⁵ Often these *mūrtis* are said to have appeared miraculously or are "discovered" buried in the earth after being seen in a dream.

When pilgrims arrive at a temple, the first thing they do after bathing is go for *darśan*, and only then do they perform any other rituals for which they have come. They approach the deity, make their offering, and receive part of it back as *prasād*. The standard offering at Goddess shrines is a red flag (*jhāṇḍā*), red powder (*sin-dūr*), small metal umbrella (*chattrā*), and a coconut tied with a loosely woven red thread (*maulī*). This type of paraphernalia is not associated with shrines of the major male deities and may have some connection with animal sacrifice.⁶ Red is an auspicious color associated with the blood of life, and thus is the color for a bride's clothing. Bridal symbolism is also evident in the red powder offered to the Goddess, for the powder is worn by brides on their wedding day and also by married women as a sign of auspicious-

ness. The flag and the umbrella are emblems of royalty and martial prowess, as the Goddess is also a queen and warrior. Other types of offerings include sweets, flowers, cash, red scarves (*amūṭ*), and more expensive items such as jewelry or a crown.

The temple priest (*pūjārī*) accepts the offerings on behalf of the deity and recites in a mixture of Hindi and Panjabi a request or supplication, called *ardās*, which follows this basic formula: "So and so's [the pilgrim's] *ardās* of x rupees offered at your feet. O Devī, make their pilgrimage successful, fulfill their wishes, keep their children healthy, give them blessings. Victory to the true court!" The pilgrim stands with palms together or prostrates in front of the deity, then receives from the priest a portion of the offering, usually some sweets and flowers and a *maulī*, which is tied around the neck. This is the *prasād*, or "consecrated leavings," which the deity has blessed and returned to the worshiper. Pilgrims will consume some of the *prasād* and distribute the rest to other pilgrims, to beggars, or to friends and relatives after returning home. I have often seen pilgrims handing out *prasād* to everyone in the vicinity, without regard to caste. Since it comes from the deity, it is the purest form of food and can be shared by anyone. *Prasād* should not be disposed of except in a body of water.

Popular songs praise the Goddess with such epithets as Vardātī, Grantor of Boons. Many, if not most, pilgrims to Goddess temples have made and fulfilled a vow (*sukhṇā*, *manauṭī*) at one time or another. A vow takes a form such as this: "If you grant me x, I will visit your temple at y place and offer z." The favors pilgrims ask for are normally of a personal nature such as curing a disease, obtaining employment, ensuring a successful marriage match, winning a lawsuit, giving birth to a (usually male) child, passing an examination, or just general well-being. These are a few examples of vows pilgrims told me about:

I started worshipping Devī when I had given the exam [State Account Services]. Fifteen days before the results came out, in a dream I went past a temple to Devī and did prostrations [*pranām*]. She told me to take the *prasād*. Seven days before the results came out, I saw in a dream a stencil of the results with my name written on the list of those who had passed. (male, Kayasth caste, age about thirty)

I have no particular reason for making this pilgrimage. But my mother-in-law, who is with me, wishes to recover from a mental illness. (female, Kayasth caste, age twenty-eight, wife of above)

I got all my children from *Mansā Devī*. In my family, we go there for blessings after marriage and have the first head shaving of our children done there. On this pilgrimage, I just ask that everyone in my family remain in good health and that we all have peace of heart and faith. (female, Agrawal caste, age about thirty-five)

I have been ill with cancer for a year. My daughter made a wish that if I got better, she would send me to *Vaiṣṇo Devī*, so that is why I have come. After climbing *Vaiṣṇo Devī* yesterday, I feel even better. (female, Sikh Khatri, age fifty)

I have been to all the Goddess temples several times. My father was a staunch *Arya Samajist* and did not worship *Devī*. But when I was in the sixth class, I had tuberculosis and my mother took me to *Vaiṣṇo Devī*. She made a vow that if I were cured, my father would take me back there the following year. When we got back I was completely cured, so my father took me, and I have gone back every year since. In 1934 when I got my B.A., I promised I would go to *Vaiṣṇo Devī* if I was successful in the exam. I got first place in English. I got several jobs through her grace. Once my family lost all its wealth, and *Devī* came to the rescue. Now my son-in-law is sick and confined to bed. All diagnoses have failed. He has reduced from 72 to 42 kgs., so I have come to request his cure from *Vaiṣṇo Devī*. (male, Rajput, age seventy-three)

This time I have come with no special wish. I planned this visit just to see the places in the hills. In the past I remembered *Devī* only whenever I was in trouble. I never remembered her out of faith, only out of greed. Now I have developed full faith. *Devī* is very generous and kindhearted. She fulfills your every demand. (male, Arora, age twenty-eight)

The most extreme form of fulfilling a vow is to cover a certain predetermined distance to the temple by prostrating one's body each step of the way. Pilgrims who choose this method, called *daṇḍautis*, are a common sight along roads leading to Goddess temples, particularly during the *Navarātra*. A less strenuous way of fulfilling a vow is by making an offering in a particular temple. At *Jvālā Mukhī*, pilgrims often vow to make a special offering at the *sejā*, an elaborate and impressive ceremony for which this temple is especially known, in which the Goddess is put to bed. This takes place after the evening *ārī* has been performed in the main shrine to the flames. At about 9:00 P.M. attention shifts to the *Sejā Bhavan*, a large room across the courtyard from the main shrine containing

images of various forms of the Goddess, including the ten *Mahāvidyās*. The *Sejā Bhavan* is used during the day for recitation of sacred texts, singing of devotional songs, and resting. At night a cot is placed in the middle of the room, and pilgrims sit around it. The priests drape it with several layers of cloth while another priest performs *mudrās* (sacred gestures) and recites Sanskrit verses. Then several of the priests leave the room while another *ārī* is performed in the main shrine. They return a few minutes later with an old man carrying a gun and remove the Goddess's jewelry from a locked chest, placing it in the proper position on the bed. The jewelry includes a crown, several necklaces, toe rings, four ankle bracelets, bracelets, bangles, and silver slippers (which the priest touches to his forehead before placing on the bed). A *yantra* (mystical diagram) carved on silver is also placed on the bed. Three pillows are placed in such a way as to resemble a head and two arms, and two small pillows are propped up on the inside of the two side pillows to resemble breasts. A pink *kurtā-pajāmā* outfit, which serves as the Goddess's sleeping garb, is laid out on top and covered with several large scarves. Laid on top is a final scarf offered by a pilgrim fulfilling a vow, along with items for the Goddess's personal use: *sindūr*, glass bangles, nose ring, henna, mirror, comb, toe rings, *bindī*, blouse, and red ribbon. The priests lead the singing of a Sanskrit hymn from the *Saundāryalaharī* and then allow the people to approach and make cash offerings. The temple is closed immediately after this. Two or three of the priests and the man with the gun sleep in the room to protect the jewelry. In the morning the Goddess is awakened with a reading of the *Devī Mālātīnīya*. The priests say that the bedclothes are always wrinkled.

As Bhardwaj has stated, the prominent *Devī* shrines specialize in helping people with their personal problems.⁷ Bhardwaj therefore argues that the worship at *Devī* temples is more "material" and less "spiritual" than those to the high male deities such as *Krishna* and *Śiva*. While agreeing that vows are a characteristic feature of Goddess worship, I have come to question the distinction between material and spiritual. Goddess worship is not any less sacred or spiritual for being oriented to "this-worldly" concerns. In *Sākta* theology the material world is a manifestation of the Goddess, so the desire for material benefits does not contradict feelings of devotion (*bhakti*) or the ultimate goal of liberation.

All of the Goddess shrines in this study are known as being

traditional places for the performance of *muṇḍan*, the first head shaving of a child. Usually it is done for a boy, and sometimes for a girl, at the age of two or three. This ceremony, also called *cūḍakarma*, is counted among the major *saṃskāras* (life-cycle rites) that go back to Vedic times. Some families have the *muṇḍan* done at home; others have it done at a particular Goddess shrine. For example, many residents of Uttar Pradesh will have it done at Kāṅgrevāli Devī, while Panjabis traditionally go to Jvālā Mukhī or one of the other temples. Some families do not have a customary place for *muṇḍan* but will make a vow to have it done in a certain place if the child lives that long.

The ritual itself is quite simple. The parents offer some money to the temple priest, who performs a *pūjā* to the Goddess. Then a man of the Barber caste shaves the child's head, after which the child is given a bath and dressed in new clothes. The priest then brings the child to get the Goddess's *darśan* and puts a *tilak* (auspicious red mark) on his forehead. The hair is considered to be an offering to the Goddess and is ultimately disposed of by burning or throwing into a body of water.

The question of when and why *muṇḍan*, as opposed to other life-cycle rites, became associated with Goddess shrines has not been sufficiently investigated. The *muṇḍan* can be seen as a vow fulfillment; that is how many informants explained it to me. If a devotee has asked the Goddess for the birth of a child, and that request has been fulfilled, the family will return to the shrine to conduct the *muṇḍan* as a thanks offering. It would seem, moreover, that the *muṇḍan* is a kind of symbolic sacrifice.⁸ The mythic motif of offering a human head to the Goddess, which I will discuss further in chapter 4, and reports of devotees' cutting out their tongues to offer to the Goddess are ubiquitous. Thus, it does not seem too farfetched to see the hair offering as symbolic of a head offering, especially taking into account the element of vow fulfillment that is implicit in the performance of *muṇḍan* at Goddess shrines.

In contrast to such famous Śākta shrines as Vindhyavāsinī in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Kālīghāt in Calcutta, where the ancient practice of animal sacrifice continues unabated, at the Panjab Hills shrines it has been, to the best of my knowledge, almost completely eliminated. Every temple in this study, with the possible exception of Vaiṣṇo Devī, whose name reflects her vegetarian nature, has allowed the practice in the past. The Goddess, as the giver of life

and death, is strongly connected with blood symbolism. The sacrifice of a buffalo (or the less expensive goat) is a reenactment of Devī's mythic killing of the buffalo demon.

Today at some places animal sacrifice (*balidān*) is allowed outside but not inside the shrine. When questioned, many of the temple priests exhibited strong ambivalence about the issue. For example, in 1983 a priest at Jvālā Mukhī informed me that animal sacrifice is not and never was practiced there; when pressed he said that it had been practiced previously but that the temple committee had decided to discontinue it five to seven years before. The reason given for stopping the practice was that many of the devotees disapproved and that it is not necessary. S. M. Bhardwaj, who visited Jvālā Mukhī in 1968, writes that goats were actually sacrificed in an enclosure after being offered symbolically in front of the sanctum and that a stream of blood could be seen coming from the enclosure.⁹ Fifteen years later, I saw no evidence of animal sacrifice but did see goats offered symbolically and given over to the temple without being killed. Symbolic sacrifice is done in the following way: The devotee brings the goat into the temple courtyard, makes a supplication to the Goddess, then dumps a pail of water over the animal. If the animal shakes, that means the Goddess has accepted it. If actual sacrifice was being done, the goat would then be slaughtered, but in a symbolic sacrifice it is led away alive and given to the temple priests.

There are several reasons for abandoning animal sacrifice. The most important is the influence of Vaiṣṇavism, which forbids meat eating and animal sacrifice, in the Panjab Hills from about the seventeenth century on. A related factor is that with the increasing popularity of Vaiṣṇo Devī, the other temples are following suit in forbidding animal sacrifice although in other respects they remain close to their Tantric and Śākta roots. The general atmosphere engendered by such reform movements as Sikhism and the Ārya Samāj as well as Western values has also been hostile to animal sacrifice. Still another factor is changing patterns of patronage. Goddess temples were traditionally patronized by Hindu rulers of the hill states. As Kṣatriyas, these rulers were meat eaters and were not unduly concerned if animal sacrifice was conducted at the temples. Now the temples depend on generous donations from wealthy pilgrims, many of whom are of the merchant castes, which are traditionally vegetarian and opposed to animal sacrifice. It is per-

haps to attract these pilgrims and to avoid offending their sensibilities that the shrines are discontinuing animal sacrifice or allowing it only in a very low-key way.

The shrines of Jvālā Mūkhī, Kāṅgrevālī Devī, and Nainā Devī have traditionally had a stronger connection with animal sacrifice than have the other shrines. These shrines (as well as many other smaller shrines in the area) are under the control of *pujārīs* of the Bhojki caste. Although they consider themselves Brahmīns and wear the sacred thread, they are considered to be inferior by other Brahmīns, who will not intermarry with them. Although many of them will now deny it, they have a reputation for consuming meat and liquor. The Bhojki have in recent years attempted to raise their status through learning Sanskrit, establishing Sanskrit colleges, and abandoning animal sacrifice.

To say, however, that the move away from animal sacrifice is "Sanskritization" would be an oversimplification. After all, the most revered of all Sanskrit texts, the Vedas, enjoin animal sacrifice. Besides, it is generally recognized, even in the Sanskrit Śākta texts, that animal sacrifice is a traditional part of Goddess worship.¹⁰ One temple priest at Kāṅgrevālī Devī, the most well versed in Sanskrit and Sanskrit rituals of all the priests I met and an expert on Tantrism, used this argument, saying that he himself had performed animal sacrifice. He further explained that Vaiṣṇavism and Śāktism are two separate paths, each of which has its own rules. He said that when a goat is sacrificed to the Goddess, it is cooked and distributed as *prasād*. All will eat it, except for Vaiṣṇavas, who will only smear a drop of the blood on their foreheads. Another priest, this one at Nainā Devī, said that a goat is sacrificed there twice a year, and that this is the proper procedure (*vidhi vidhi*) for worshipping the Goddess. He also maintained that animal sacrifice is still carried out, albeit secretly, at all the Panjab Hills Goddess shrines.

Although actual animal sacrifice is no longer (if it ever was) central to the cult, the imagery still remains in the symbolic goat offering, the coconuts, and the red flags and strings.

Another characteristic feature of Goddess temples that immediately strikes the observer is the prominence of young, unmarried, prepubescent girls (*kanyās* or *kumārīs*) who are given free run in the temples. The Goddess is considered to be both virgin and mother, often choosing to manifest herself in the form of a virgin girl, so by extension all *kanyās* have a share in her sacred status. I have often

seen these girls playing tag in the temple courtyard or huddled in a corner playing a game of jacks. Such sights are not seen in temples to the major male deities. The girls may be of any caste and are often the daughters of *pujārīs* or other local residents. During the festival season they come to the temples from miles around. They line the approaches to the temples and play in the temple courtyards, often harassing pilgrims to give them money. No one scolds these girls, for they are considered to be representatives of the Goddess. There is an attitude of playful indulgence toward them. After all, their divine status is short-lived; after their marriage they will not lead such carefree lives.

The worship of *kanyās* is considered to be extremely pleasing to the Goddess, and almost every pilgrim will perform it with a greater or lesser degree of formality. It is usually done after receiving *darśan* and is considered an adjunct to other rituals such as fire sacrifice (*havan*). The most informal type of *kanyā pūjā* is simply to give a few of the girls some sweets and a few coins and touch their feet. On a more elaborate scale, nine girls (representing the Nine Goddesses) are fed a meal of *pūrīs* and sweets and given a *ṭikā* on the forehead, a red scarf, flowers on their head, a string on their wrist, and a larger amount of money. I once witnessed at Cintpūrī a *kanyā pūjā* done by a wealthy business family for 150 girls; 9 were chosen to get the full offering, while the rest received sweets and two rupees each.

All the temples have a place for performing *havan* (fire sacrifice), which is done according to the Śākta method with the accompanying recitation (*pāṭh*) of the *Durgā Saptasatī* (*Devī Māhātmya*). Although the temple priests may perform this or have it performed for them for their own benefit, it is not considered one of the services that they perform for pilgrims. Pilgrims wishing to have one performed bring along their own *paṭṭī* or make arrangements with one locally. Usually there are Brahmīns not formally associated with the temple who are available to recite the *Durgā Saptasatī* for pilgrims for a fee.

My discussion of pilgrimage has so far described the experience from the point of view of the pilgrim, that is, someone who is passing through for a short period of time and will be returning home. Besides the Goddess herself, there are those for whom a pilgrimage place is home. I will make a brief mention of them here. Of course, there are the local residents of the town or village,

farmers, craftspeople, shopkeepers, restaurant owners, and the like, many of whose livelihood is dependent upon pilgrim traffic. And then there are the temple priests. The duties of the temple priests fall into two main categories, the care of the deity herself and the performance of services for the pilgrims. In the first category, the priests are required to perform the daily round of *pūjā* for the deity; this is independent of the pilgrim and is usually done behind closed doors. The schedule, which varies slightly from temple to temple, includes bathing the *pīṭhī* or *mūrti*, dressing and decorating it, offering cooked food (*bhog*) two or three times a day, performing *ārāṭi*, and putting the deity to bed for the night. These activities would continue on a daily basis whether or not any pilgrims visited.

The duty of the temple priests to pilgrims is to accept their offerings to the Goddess, say the *ardās* (supplication), officiate over special rituals such as *mūṇḍan*, and show them around the temple and tell them stories about it. Some priests provide housing for their clients, especially at places such as Nainā Devī that do not have other pilgrim accommodations. Some families have a traditional relationship with a particular priest that may go back generations. Records of these relationships are kept in large, red registers called *baḥis*. At each visit the priest records the name of the pilgrim, names of others in the party, father's and grandfather's names, place of residence, amount of money or other gift offered, and any special rituals done. The relationship between the priest and the pilgrim is one in which the priest acts as an intermediary between the deity and the pilgrim.

Pilgrimage places are gathering spots for all sorts of religious specialists in addition to those officially in charge of the temples. As *śakti pīṭhas*, Goddess temples particularly attract Tantric *sādhus* and *yogīs*, many of whom spend their lives traveling from one pilgrimage place to another. At Jvālā Mukhī, the Gorakhnāth order has control of part of the temple, as discussed in chapter 2. Most of the Goddess temples have nearby shrines or tombs of local saints that house resident holy men, some of whom have reputations as healers or spiritual teachers. Pilgrims have an opportunity to interact with these holy men, thereby enriching their experience further.

Unlike Varanasi and Hardwar, pilgrimage centers associated with death and funeral rites, the Goddess shrines do not seem to attract large numbers of elderly people who move there with the intent to live out their lives in a sacred place. Nevertheless, one does

come across people who came as pilgrims and ended up staying for good. One of these stands out in my mind, and I cannot resist telling his extraordinary story here. He was a middle-aged man who struck up a conversation with me at one of the open-air restaurants on the path to Cintpūrṇī. As he was addressed respectfully by the restaurant staff as *Pañḍitjī* and spoke with authority about the Goddess and her worship, I at first assumed he was one of the temple priests. Describing himself as an "outsider," a Maithili Brahmin from Bihar state, he proceeded to relate how he had come to reside at Cintpūrṇī.

He had been employed in the chemical department of a large company located near Ujjain in Uttar Pradesh when he became severely ill due to exposure to some chemical. He spent time in a hospital, having sold off his land to pay for treatment, but no doctor was able to diagnose his illness. Finally, he was forced to resign from his job and return home to Bihar. But there no one treated him with respect. His money was running out, and he had the constant worry of how to pay for his daughter's upcoming marriage. Unable to bear the insults and with no hope of recovery, he decided to commit suicide. His plan was to drown himself in the tank of a nearby Śiva temple.

Stealing out of his house at 11:00 P.M., after everyone had gone to sleep, he encountered a holy man (*mahātmā*) on the road. Thinking that he was about to breathe his last, he decided it would be a good idea to speak with the holy man first and told him the whole story. The holy man dissuaded him from committing suicide, saying that it is a grave sin in the Hindu religion. Instead, he said the Brahmin should go to Himachal Pradesh, to the temple of the Goddess Cintpūrṇī, who takes away all worries, and that she would cure him. The holy man then vanished from that spot and was never seen again. The Brahmin went home, borrowed some money from a friend, leaving some with his children, and set off on foot for the Madhubani railway station, ten kilometers away. He did not know how he could make it there in the middle of the night, but a rickshaw happened to pass by and gave him a ride. Somehow, he made it by train to Ludhiana in the Panjab and from there took a bus to Cintpūrṇī.

At the temple he found a place to sit and, crying, began to recite the *Durgā Saptasatī*. From that time on he did not suffer any more illness. He remained at the temple for nine days, cooking his own

food on a stove he had brought with him and sleeping in a place the *pūjārīs* provided for him. At the end of nine days, he said to the Goddess, "I have recited your *pāthi* for nine days. I had some money with me, but now I have spent it all. I don't have any money and can't continue to live in your *darbār* like this. Give me permission to leave." It was then 10:00 A.M., and he was planning to leave on the noon bus when a man from Taran-Taran, a paper manufacturer, asked him to perform a *havan* for him. He agreed to do so, provided he could finish it in time to catch his bus. The paper manufacturer had all the necessary materials with him, so the Brahmin was able to perform the *havan*. The paper manufacturer gave him fifty-one rupees and insisted on taking him to a restaurant to feed him. Then the paper manufacturer began to pour out his troubles concerning the difficulty in arranging his daughters' marriage; he asked the Brahmin to help him out by staying on for some time to do the *Durgā Saptasatī* recitation for him. A few other people also asked him to do recitations, and he ended up staying for forty more days. On the fortieth day he was approached by a wealthy industrialist from Chandigarh who employed him to do recitations and *havans* for several more months, paying him four thousand rupees. That was still not enough to get his daughter married, so once again he asked the Goddess for help. Immediately, he was approached by a wealthy industrialist from Ludhiana, who upon hearing about the Brahmin's troubles asked him to make a list of what things he needed for his daughter's wedding and then provided all those things plus some money. The Brahmin went home, got his daughter married, then returned to Cintpūrṇi.

When I met him, he had been there about three years. A local restaurant provided him his meals and tea for free, and he had a constant flow of clients for whom he would perform recitations, *havans*, and astrological readings. He told me that the *śakti* of this place is only for those who have faith. He came here with faith, and the Goddess fulfilled all his wishes and granted him peace.

Communitas Revisited

Pilgrimage is a ritual that requires passage through space as well as through time.¹¹ Pilgrims leave the familiarity and relative mundaneness of their homes to venture out into a sacred zone where more direct communication with the Goddess is possible and where

ritual actions take on a more intense quality. As Victor Turner has pointed out, there is an initiatory quality to pilgrimage in which the pilgrim moves from a familiar to an unfamiliar place and then is reintegrated into the familiar setting again, but only after having undergone a transformation. The time spent at a pilgrimage place is similar to the "liminal" phase of an initiation in which the usual norms of society are suspended and the pilgrim experiences a sense of "communitas" with other pilgrims.¹² As a devotee of the Goddess would say, "All are equal in the Mother's *darbār* [royal court]."

Many of the activities practiced at Goddess temples are of an individual or family nature and differ little in form from the same ritual done at home. For example, although *munḍan*, *havan*, recitation of *Durgā Saptasatī*, and the like can all be done at home, performing them at Goddess temples which gives them even more efficacy.

Other activities have a more communal nature and contribute to the quality of "communitas" that Turner has described. On pilgrimage people have a chance to meet and mingle with other types of people with whom they would not come in contact in their daily lives. Status and hierarchy are temporarily put aside. On a group pilgrimage such as that arranged by a religious organization or nowadays by tour companies, seating is without regard to caste. Goddess temples in any case have always had low-caste clientele and have, so far as I have been able to ascertain, never refused entry to untouchables. Pilgrims experience a feeling of unity and camaraderie, singing devotional songs while riding together on the bus, approaching the temple on foot, or sitting in the temple courtyard. Some may join a spontaneous group of ecstatic dancers. Sometimes a whole village or neighborhood will take up a collection to donate a painting, image, or large flag to a temple and will form a procession to bring it there. The all-night communal ceremony called *jagrātā*, which will be discussed in chapter 4, is often held by a group of people at a pilgrimage place.

Similarly, at Goddess temples, the feeling of unity is reinforced by the communal meal called *laṅgar*. This meal, considered to be the *prasād* of the Goddess, is provided once or twice a day by the temple or sometimes (especially during the festival season) by a charitable organization. Pilgrims of all castes, Hindus and Sikhs, together partake of this meal, which is served by volunteers as an act of devotion to the Goddess. The word *laṅgar* comes from Sikhism,

and its practice at Goddess temples is probably due to Sikh influence and the more relaxed attitude toward intercaste dining found among Panjabi Hindus. However, even those high-caste Hindus who would not normally dine with lower-caste people will do so at the Devi's *laingar*, because her *prasād* is pure and cannot be polluted.

I did see much of what Turner would term "communitas" on pilgrimages to the Goddess temples. Unrelated groups of pilgrims would strike up friendships, and many people told me stories about how they had been helped by strangers. Even I, a nosy foreign woman with a camera, was always welcomed as a fellow pilgrim, as one who had been "called" by the Goddess, never as an outsider who did not belong.

In June 1983, I was fortunate enough to participate in a week-long group pilgrimage to several Goddess temples, organized and led by a Chandigarh religious leader known as Bābājī. I was already acquainted with Bābājī, a guru in the Nāth Sampradāy, an order of practitioners that in the Panjab is closely associated with the worship of the Goddess. He calls himself a *gr̥hasik-h-yogī*, that is, a yogic practitioner who is also a householder. He is also a government employee. In addition to leading about twenty *jagrātās* per month, he holds two major Hindu gatherings per year and leads a yearly pilgrimage to the major Goddess temples. I had paid several visits to his home and had attended *jagrātās* at which he and his *manḍalī* (singing group) had performed. It was at one of these *jagrātās* that my research assistant, Man Singh, and I heard that there were openings in this upcoming pilgrimage and decided to sign up. At that point in my fieldwork, I had already visited all of the temples in this study several times, had participated in numerous rituals, had collected stories and songs, and had interviewed dozens of pilgrims. I jumped at the chance to go on this pilgrimage, since it would give me the opportunity to observe the interactions of a large, cohesive group of pilgrims. While the rituals we did at the temples followed the general pattern described earlier, it would be useful at this point to give a very brief account of our journey in order to convey some of the rhythm and flavor of traveling with such a group.

When Man Singh and I arrived at Bābājī's house at about 9:00 P.M. on the night of departure, a large crowd had already gathered in the adjacent open field. Bābājī, cutting a striking figure in his long hair, beard, and flowing saffron robes, was moving about giving last-minute directions. His assistant, a young woman renun-

ciant known as Bahnjī (sister), was carrying a clipboard and handling the logistics. A loudspeaker had been set up outside to broadcast instructions to the waiting pilgrims. We were told that the buses would be arriving soon and that no one should try to board until their names were called with the seat assignment. We were also told that we should all behave properly and cooperate with each other; no one should argue, and anyone with a complaint or need should go directly to Bābājī. From time to time the announcer, one of Bābājī's close disciples, would lead the crowd in chants of *jai māā dī!* The buses, three of them, arrived after some time, and a few names were called. For reasons unknown to me, this system broke down almost immediately, and people began to climb into the buses. Man Singh and I, eager to obey all the rules, sat there and waited for our names to be called. Finally, when we realized that we were the only ones not on the bus, we asked what we should do. We were then given the last two seats. The three buses were all full, with the total number of passengers at over 150.

In the course of our seven days together, we visited six major Goddess temples, with a few brief stops for other sights and shopping along the way. Much of our time was spent, of course, getting from one place to another, and most of us kept our original seats throughout, so that each bus became a kind of miniature community unto itself. While on the bus we sang devotional songs, especially at the beginning of each day and as we approached each sacred destination. In between we would chat with nearby passengers, read, look out the window at the spectacular mountain scenery, or attempt to catch a few winks of sleep.

The group of pilgrims was extremely diverse, a mixture of young married couples, families with children, single men and women, and elderly people. A wide range of castes was represented, from Brahmin to Blacksmith, with Rajputs and merchant castes such as Khattri, Arora, and Baniya being most numerous. With few exceptions, all were Panjabis and about a fourth were Sikhs. Everyone lived in Chandigarh, except for a few relatives of people living in Chandigarh who had come from out of town. The most important common denominator was a connection with Bābājī. Some were his family members or disciples; others said that they were friends of his family or disciples and liked him but were not his formal disciples. The bus owner also brought his wife and sons. Some had heard about the pilgrimage and decided that it

would be a convenient way to see all the temples. Many remarked that it was auspicious to go on a pilgrimage with a *satsang*, a group of like-minded devotees. Some had gone on a pilgrimage with Bābājī before, others were coming with him for the first time. Most had previously gone on pilgrimage to the same temples on their own. As I would have expected, all the pilgrims I spoke with said that their main motivation was devotion to the Goddess, though many also had taken vows.

Our first destination was Vaiṣṇo Devī. We rode the whole night on the bus, making several stops on the way for water, latrine (in fields along the roadside), and breakfast. Some people bathed in a river along the way, men in their underwear, women in their *sāris* or *salvār kamīz*, though some of the older women took off most of their clothes. By the time we reached Katra, the base camp for Vaiṣṇo Devī, it was about noon. Bābājī had arranged for several rooms at a pilgrims' hostel near the main bazaar, where some people rested and took baths, while others ate lunch in the bazaar. Small groups of people gradually set off on the climb. Bābājī's assistants had taken orders on the bus for *prasād* packages at twelve rupees each. The packages would be given to us at the main shrine, so that we would not have to carry them ourselves. We accompanied Bābājī and Bahijī to the bazaar to make arrangements for buying and transporting the *prasād*, and also for Bābājī to get some tennis shoes and a walking stick. We reached the main shrine area at about 7:30 P.M., most of us exhausted from the hot, strenuous climb and lack of sleep. I had gotten to know many of the pilgrims by that time and went off with a group of women to bathe and change clothes. Our group was scheduled to have *darśan* at 10:00 P.M., and as the time grew nearer the mood became more and more exuberant. Bābājī had gotten permission from the temple *pūjārīs* for me to photograph the *piṇḍīs*, something I had never attempted on my previous visits. When the crucial moment arrived, squatting in the dark, narrow cave with hundreds of people lined up behind me shin-deep in icy water, I was so nervous that I could not make my flash go off. After *darśan* we went off in small groups to eat in various open-air restaurants near the shrine, and about midnight stretched out blankets on the *dharmasālā* floor and fell asleep. At 5:00 A.M., Bābājī's assistants, who seemed never to sleep, woke us up to climb back down the mountain. When we reached Katra, we re-

turned to the same pilgrims' hostel, where Bābājī had arranged for a feast (*bhauḍārā*) for our group.

Leaving Vaiṣṇo Devī in the afternoon, we stopped along the way in Jammu to see the impressive Raghunāth temple and do some shopping. We continued on through the night, stopping for dinner and a brief nap and to see the Śaivite cave at Triloknāth, arriving at Cāmuṇḍā Devī in the morning. There we stayed for two days, with group activities centered around evening *satsangs*, singing devotional songs, and feasts provided by Bābājī. One afternoon the "ladies *maṇḍalī*" led by Bābājī's wife, Kṛṣṇājī, performed devotional songs in the temple hall. The bus owner arranged an optional excursion to nearby Dharmasala; those wanting to go had to pay extra. Bābājī and his close disciples stayed behind, as did Man Singh and I, taking advantage of the first real leisure time to do informal interviews with some of the pilgrims we had not spoken with before. One of the pilgrims, a man who had lived in Great Britain for some years, took an interest in our work and helped us with the interviews.

On the sixth day we went to Kāngrevāli Devī, where we all marched in one big procession through the street to the temple, Jvālā Mukhī, where Bābājī led us in an hour of devotional singing, and to Cintpūrṇī, where we spent the night. On the final day we made a brief stop at Nainā Devī and then returned home to Chandigarh. At Cintpūrṇī there was no special program, as Bābājī spent most of his time preparing a delicious *karḥī* and rice dinner for the whole group. Instead, people went to the temple for *darśan* in small groups, wandered around the bazaar, and did some shopping. The most popular items were mango *pappas*, a dried mango puree that is a specialty of the area, and bangles. Some of the older women instructed me to buy some glass bangles, because that is the auspicious thing to do at a place of pilgrimage. I had already bought glass bangles in Kangra, so I bought mother-of-pearl bangles at Cintpūrṇī. I noticed at Cintpūrṇī that tempers were beginning to get a bit frayed. We had been eating, sleeping, bathing, and riding in the bus together for almost a week, and people were beginning to think of the comforts of home. What was most irritating was that, of the two pilgrims' hostels we were staying in, one did not have any latrines and the other's latrines were locked up, because there had been no water for over a week. As we were on the side of a

steep mountain, there were no large fields that could be used. Bābājī diffused the situation by getting permission for us to use the latrines at another pilgrims' hostel.

The journey had its humorous moments as well. Our bus trip had been remarkably uneventful, given the propensity of Indian buses to break down and the high accident rate on the narrow, winding mountain roads. Everyone commented on this, saying that we were under the protection of the Goddess and Bābājī. The only mishaps on the road were occasional bouts of motion sickness; the unfortunate young woman in front of me sat with her head hanging out the window more often than not. A few people had expressed concern that my presence as a foreigner might attract the unwanted attention of the authorities, but no one even bothered to check my passport. We were on the way to Nainā Devī, approaching the stretch of road that runs past the Bakra Dam, a restricted area where photography is forbidden. Knowing that there was a checkpoint ahead, Bābājī stopped the buses and sent a message back to me that I was to remain inconspicuous and not say anything when a guard came through looking for cameras. I followed his instructions, not wanting to hold up the whole group. As it happened, the bus I was on was passed through with no problem. But on Bābājī's bus, when the guard asked if anyone had a camera, a small boy yelled out, "I do, I do," waving a plastic toy camera, a souvenir from one of the temple stalls, in the air. The guards, not content to confiscate the toy, held up Bābājī's bus for over an hour while they tried to decide what to do. The absurdity of the situation struck everyone as hilarious, and we all took the delay in good spirits.

I saw much on the group pilgrimage that would support Turner's thesis that pilgrimage serves a social function and fosters a sense of commonality among diverse groups of people. But at the same time, based on my observations and conversations with the pilgrims, I would have to say that that is not its only, or even its primary, significance. Pilgrimage is an intensely personal experience, so much so that individual pilgrims traveling together for convenience or companionship may have vastly different understandings of what it all means and may not even tell each other their private reasons for undertaking the pilgrimage.¹³ Even on the group pilgrimage I have just described, for most of the pilgrims, the pilgrimage had a personal or family significance that had nothing to do with the group as a whole. Also, a pilgrim's experience may

differ greatly at different times in his or her life. At times it may be more social, at other times more personal. For example, one pilgrim told me that his first visit to Vaiṣṇo Devī was a last-ditch attempt to cure his tuberculosis, after more conventional treatments had failed. After his cure, which he attributed to the Goddess's grace, he became her devotee and now sees pilgrimage as a form of *sādhanā*, or spiritual discipline. Another pilgrim reported that she initially visited Jvālā Mukhī out of curiosity, because all her friends were doing so. Only after receiving *darśan* did she undergo a personal transformation and become a devotee of the Goddess, so that now she regularly undertakes pilgrimages.

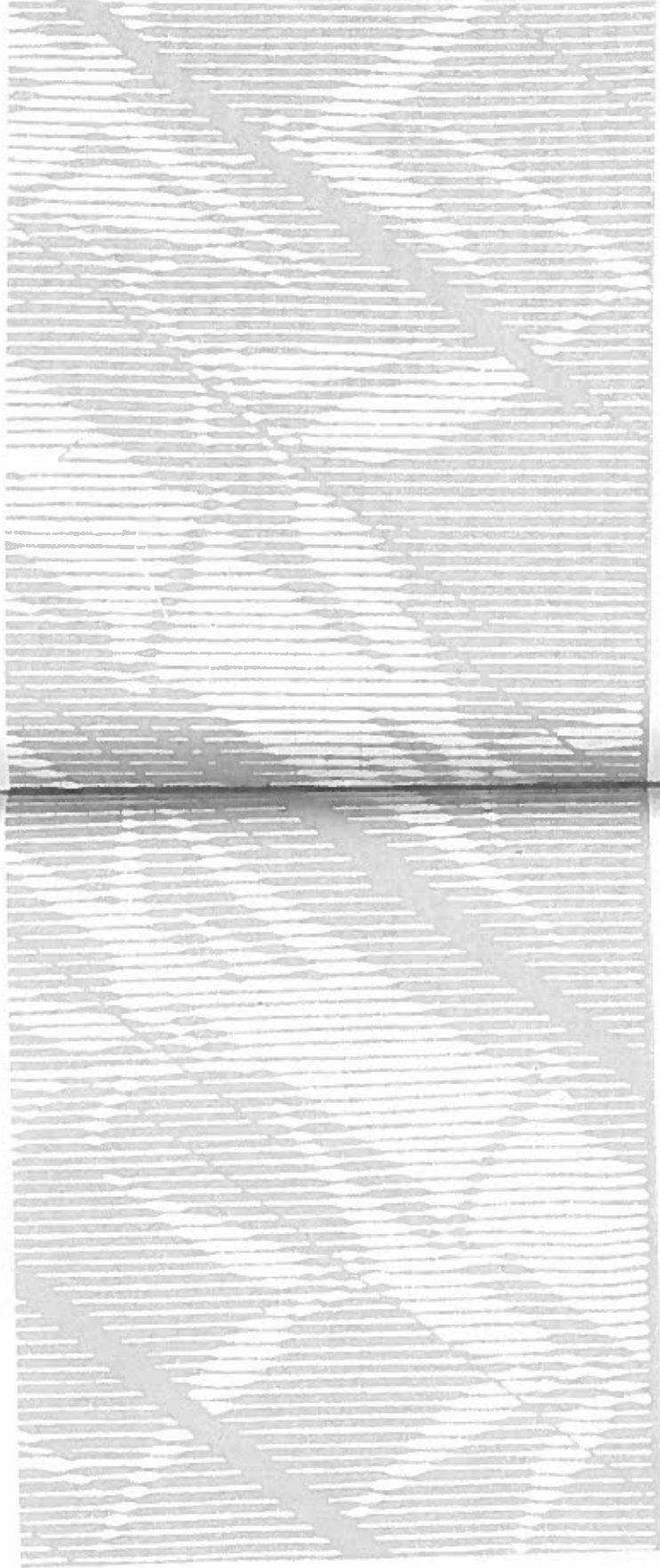
A pilgrimage place is a physical, geographical place where the Goddess has manifested herself in a particular localized form. It is a place imbued with power and as such attracts pilgrims who come with specific desires they wish to have fulfilled or just to experience and participate in that power. It is both in the world and removed from the world, a transition zone between the realm of gods and the realm of humans. Goddess temples lie on the fringes, removed from populated areas, in mountains that have mythical associations. Stories of modern-day miracles abound; almost every pilgrim I spoke with claimed to have witnessed a miracle or knew someone who had. Thus, it is appropriate to conclude this chapter with a miracle story current in the oral tradition:

Once a husband and wife and their small daughter were climbing the mountain to Vaiṣṇo Devī. They were planning to ask the Goddess for a son. On the way, their daughter fell into a ravine, and they could not find her. The wife refused to go for *darśan*, saying that she had come to get another child and instead had lost the one she had. The husband wanted to get *darśan*. He went up and started looking for his daughter in the jungle. Suddenly, he came upon her sitting with a lap full of dried fruits and eating contentedly. Her father, overjoyed to find her safe, asked if she wasn't afraid being alone in the jungle. The daughter replied that she was not alone, that a girl with a big dog [the Goddess with her lion, which the girl mistook for a dog] had made friends with her and given her something to eat.

Victory to the Mother

*The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India
in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol*

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