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Vaisnava Goddess as Plant: Tulasi in Text and Context

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VAISNAVA GODDESS AS PLANT: TULASI IN TEXT AND CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The Tulasī plant (*Ocimum sanctum*) is viewed within the purview of Hinduism as a form of the goddess Lakṣmī, or a consort of the god Viṣṇu. This designation seems to originate within the corpus of Purāṇic texts composed in the Sanskrit language from approximately the 5th to 15th centuries CE. The sanctity of the plant, and other forms of vegetation, resembles even earlier cults of Yakṣa and Yakṣī, or nature spirit, worship. The adoration of the plant continues into modernity in various ways. This paper examines the Tulasī plant through the various myths describing her sanctity, as well as how these myths are interpreted by modern devotees of the plant.
Introduction

Of all plants considered sacred within the purview of Hinduism, perhaps none are more omnipresent than the Tulasī (Lat. Ocimum sanctum). The Tulasī plant is considered a vegetative form of the goddess Lakṣmī, perhaps the only Vaiṣṇava goddess directly associated with a particular plant. Tulasī is also the name of the goddess associated with the plant as per the Purānic accounts. This study is concerned with how the Goddess Lakṣmī became associated with this plant; as well with some popular Hindu religious forms that have been derived from this belief. Tulasī gains the identity of Lakṣmī through Purānic sources, yet similar worship of yakṣas and yakṣis, nature divinities, as or through trees is earlier than the Purānic era. Tulasī and her worship in the modern day is linked to that of goddess Lakṣmī, and associated, like Lakṣmī, with Vaiṣṇava traditions.

The textual origin of the goddess Tulasī’s seems to be exclusively Purānic (circa 4th to 16th centuries CE), and some sources appear to call the same goddess the name Vṛndā.¹ In the clearly Vaiṣṇava influenced Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa (BVP), the story is centered on the daughter of a yakṣa named Tulasī who later became the wife of a powerful daitya, or demon, Śaṅkhacūḍa, who possesses the boon that he would be undefeated in battle as long as his wife’s chastity remains intact. The Śiva Purāṇa (SP) calls the goddess Vṛndā and her husband Jālaṁdhara, in a story with similar

¹ There are generally accepted to be 18 major Purāṇas each leaning to either Śaiva, Śākta or Vaiṣṇava orientations, and several subsidiary compilations. The Purāṇas discussed here are all of the 18 major ones. See Cheever Mackenzie Brown, God as Mother: A Feminine Theology in India (Hartford, Vt: C. Stark, 1974), 23-5.
themes. In both versions, beseeched by the other gods, Viṣṇu disguises himself to break the chastity of Tulasī by trickery, thus enabling Śiva to slay Śaṅkhacūḍa. When Tulasī understands what has happened she curses Viṣṇu to become a stone, the Śāligrāma Śilā. Viṣṇu then tells Tulasī that she will take the form of the Tulasī plant, as well as that of the Gaṅḍakī River, the source of the Śāligrāma stone, as well as status as a consort of Viṣṇu, and thus an expansion of goddess Lakṣmī.²

In the Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa, the story takes the form of questions from the celestial wanderer Nārada to Śiva, who narrates the story. In this account Nārada asks, “How did such a goddess turn into a tree and how was such a chaste lady entangled in the clutches of a demon?” This question frames the traditional conception of the Tulasī plant; that the plant itself is the incarnation of a goddess. There is no indication within the text that the plant was already in existence prior to the story, that is to say, that the qualities of the goddess were superimposed on the plant. Of course in the chronologically unconcerned Purānic literature, this raises no issue; the plant has simply appeared as the culmination of the desire of Viṣṇu for Lakṣmī to incarnate as such, and did not exist before. Tulasī, as an herb, is also mentioned in Āyurvedic texts (post 600 BCE) in a purely medicinal sense, lacking any of the metaphysical traits focused on in the Purānic accounts.³

The most extensive versions of this story are found in the Brahmavaivarta, Śiva, and Padma Purāṇas (PP). The first shows what I believe to be a more Vaiṣṇava oriented story; the others, including those not

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² Since Tulasī refers to both the name of a plant, as well as that of the female heroine of the Purānic stories, I refer to the name Tulasī with both neuter and feminine pronouns according to the context.

mentioned here, are possibly more Śaiva influenced. The names of Tulasī and Vṛndā, and those of Śaṅkhacūḍa and Jālaṇdhara seem for most purposes interchangeable; as mentioned above, the root stories are essentially the same. While the root stories seem very similar, there is the possibility that Vṛndā and Tulasī may be different goddesses altogether, though this is not the popular view.⁴

I adopt a thematic approach to this study, concentrating on the varied interpretations of Tulasī’s identity in myth, text, and ritual. Both Wendy O’Flaherty and Cheever Mackenzie Brown, stress the difficulty in approaching Purāṇic texts from a more historiographic orientation, with the intention of establishing a particular chronological development of themes.⁵

The contents of these books, virtual encyclopedias of history, mythology and practice of nearly two millennia, were often told and retold, in various forms and contexts. Thus it is impossible to ascertain the ‘first’ reference of Tulasī in the tradition and then track its development to present, although this was my original concern when undertaking this project. Such such analysis did not appear to be a concern for the writers and compilers of the corpus of Purāṇic literature.

What seems to have mattered most to the writers is to convey a sense of hierarchy of beliefs, that is to establish the role and status of particular personalities within the larger ‘family’ of gods, superhuman sages, and humans. These identities and roles shift according to the nature of the work, broadly speaking, whether Śaiva, Śākta, or Vaiṣṇava influenced. Some texts seem to even show favor to all three. What is a constant are the

⁴ See chapter 4.
players, although Viṣṇu may take a supportive role in Śaiva literature, and vice versa. In studying the Brahmavaivarta version there is no ambiguity entertained in discussing the Tulasī plant as an incarnation of Lakṣmī, and that the plant is meant to be worshipped as such by Vaiṣṇavas. This means that the comparisons between different versions becomes reflective not of the progression of the myth, chronologically or otherwise, but also of the point of view of the author. This seems to be true in general regarding Purāṇic literature, not just concerning the aspects of Tulasī. It is possible innovation in the Purāṇas, such as the emergence of Tulasī, represent the enhancement of different stories.

In this paper, within each specific chapter, I most often start with the older references and progress to the newer. This makes sense as some developments in the story of Tulasī, are dependent on earlier conceptions of her identity. However, I suggest that the identity of Tulasī, both as plant and divinity, is directly related to that of divine or semi-divine nature spirits or yakṣas, whose worship pre-dates the Purāṇas, yet is mentioned in early Buddhist, Jain and Vedic sources. There is no concrete way to establish the correct or singular identity of Tulasī; as with other features of Indic religion, particularly the Purāṇic, the primary texts themselves are collections of myths and modes of worship, varying according to regional and sectarian redactions, as with the later vernacular compositions on related devotional themes. For the sake of clarity, I will group the subsections of chapters roughly in order from older to newer, when approximate dates can be determined.

Within the apparently Vaiṣṇava story dealt with in this thesis, are strands from worship and belief that stretch back to possibly archaic non-textual traditions. The iconography and worship of Śrī-Lakṣmī, for instance,
bears signs of non-Vedic traditions such as yakṣa worship, which themselves are nearly extinct today, having been absorbed into the flow of popular and modern Hinduism.  Tulasī worship (pūjā), as a living feature of popular Hinduism, bears similarity to the ancient worship of sacred trees and their inhabiting deities, such as yakṣas and yakṣīs. Some scholars have pointed to a likely correlation between goddess worship, in particular, and “pre-Aryan” practices. Ananda Coomaraswamy states:

The ongoing study of pre-Aryan Indus Valley now forbids the drawing of any sharp distinctions between ‘Aryan’ and ‘non-Aryan’…a much closer study of the original texts have made it impossible for me to recognize any longer a ‘progress’ or ‘evolution’ of the Vedic tradition, or anything but an explication or adaptation of it accompanied to a limited extent by the use of new expressions.  

In this case, Coomaraswamy was writing specifically in response to suggestions of some interpretations of the early Vedas (also made by himself in earlier works) that certain deities of the pantheon, such as Varuṇa were indigenous to the subcontinent, while Āryan gods such as Indra were perhaps brought by migrating Āryans to the region. This may or may not be the case, yet the fabric of what has emerged as modern Hinduism, of which Tulasī worship is a part, is woven of many inseparable strands as well as practice and beliefs of millions over at least three millennia. Chapter one is concerned with how the conception of the goddesses Śrī and Lakṣmī attained such prominence, and how the connection of these goddesses with

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6 I define popular tradition as those traditions and practices that are either inclusive or exclusive of Brahmical and sectarian Hinduism, and practiced by the common person, not necessarily the religious specialist or renunciate. For more on modern yakṣa worship see Ram Nath Misra, Yakṣa Cult and Iconography (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981), 167-8.


nature was similar to the natures of the yakṣa and yakṣī nature spirits that were at one time commonly worshiped. Chapters two and three discuss the Purāṇic narrations of the Tulasī myth, and how the conception of Tulasī as forest guardian and goddess perfectly fit into the medieval revival of Kṛṣṇa worship in the north Indian region of Vraja. Chapter four describes modern worship of Tulasī in India, and as well as the exportation of Tulasī’s worship from India to many parts of the world by western converts to Vaiṣṇavism such as the members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

The etymology of the name Tulasī in Sanskrit is somewhat unclear but perhaps derives from the stem *tul*, which according to Monier Williams, means “to lift up, raise”. Further meanings include: “to determine the weight of anything by lifting it up, weigh, compare by weighing and examining, ponder, examine with distrust”. The term *vṛnda*, as a noun means a “bunch, cluster of flowers or berries” according to Mahābhārata era usage; and as used in the Bhāgavat Purāṇa can mean “a chorus of singers and musicians”. The verbal root *vṛṇ* means “to please, gratify, exhilarate”. All of these terms aptly describe the forest goddesses Tulasī, and Vṛndā, especially her role in the Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa based medieval dramas, such as those of Rūpa Gosvāmin.

In botanical terms Tulasī, commonly spelled Tulsi, is classified as a short stemmed woody perennial. The plant has numerous branches, in

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9 I have focused on solely north Indian based examples of modern Tulasī worship because it offered the most detailed sources, not because the practice is not present elsewhere.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 1011.
13 See chapter 3.
opposite placement to the stem, and serrated, downy, oval shaped leaves.\textsuperscript{15} The plant is a botanical relative to varieties of culinary basil (\textit{Ocimum basilicum}) used in other parts of the world. Thai basil (\textit{Ocimum basilicum thyrsiflora}) is often confused with Tulasī, being also called 'holy basil' mistakenly. William Dymock mentions two varieties, known in devotional terms as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa Tulasī, the former producing green colored leaves, and the latter leaves of varying shades of purple.\textsuperscript{16} There is also a related species known colloquially as \textit{van} (or forest) Tulasī. \textit{Van} Tulasī is more closely related to the mint family, and bears the Latin names

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\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 87.
Ocimum tenuiflorum and Ocimum gratissimum.¹⁷

Figure 1 - Tulasi plant (Ocimum sanctum); (photo by author)

¹⁷ Ralph Miller, Tulasi Queen of Herbs: India’s Holy Basil (Salt Spring Island, Canada:The Green Isle Enterprise, 2003), 4.
Chapter 1- Tulasī as the Plant Form of Lakṣmī

The significance of Tulasī lies in the importance of the goddess Lakṣmī, popularly known as both the wife of Viṣṇu and a goddess of fortune and wealth. This chapter discusses goddesses Śrī and Lakṣmī, their iconography, as well as Śrī’s theological role in her namesake lineage the Śrī Vaiṣṇava lineage, codified by the highly influential Vaiṣṇava theologian Rāmānuja (1017-1137 CE). This chapter will also explore the relation between the yakṣa and yakṣī nature spirits and early representations of Śrī-Lakṣmī.

Śrī and Lakṣmī in the Vedas

The goddesses Śrī and Lakṣmī were originally two separate goddesses, yet at least by the time of Rāmānuja they were conceptually one. 18 The name Lakṣmī is not among the goddesses mentioned in the Rg Veda itself, although the famous Śrī Sūkta appears in the Khila appendices of the Rg Veda, in which goddess Lakṣmī is invoked. 19 Within the Śrī Sūkta however the goddesses are clearly addressed as different entities. 20 Although there is no consensus, U.N. Dhal places this text at approximately the 4th century B.C.E. 21 Interestingly, Śrī Sūktas appear in other Vedas as well, perhaps indicating the growing importance of the goddess within the later Vedic pantheon. 22

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20 For example mantras one and two are invocations to goddess Lakṣmī and the following ten are devoted to Śrī. The text continues in the same fashion, praising one or the other goddess. See Dhal, 47-53.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
Jan Gonda relates the word Śrī as being a common adjective used to describe features of male Vedic gods, most commonly Agni. The term is used to convey a variety of attributes, which all seem to point to a sense of prosperity, nourishment and brilliance of appearance. It is a term associated with positive and nourishing divinity in the earliest Vedic texts. The term also denotes high status, or even royalty, and in some uses denotes the related qualities of fire, light and vision or the ability to see.

What is significant for our purposes is the early vegetative representations of the goddess Śrī. According to Gonda śrī-phala was the original name of the fruit of the bilva or wood apple tree (Aegle marmelos). The tree itself was considered a representation of Śrī. Gonda theorizes that this was possibly due to the fruits at one time being used as a cure for barrenness, thus holding with the general conception of the goddess as being a catalyst or even possessor of all that is good and auspicious. This is also interesting in that the tree was also, perhaps in later times taken to be representative of Śiva, and this is the idea that persists into modernity, rather than the bilva tree as goddess Śrī. Fire for sacrifices to Śrī were to be performed with the wood of this tree. According to the Vāmana Purāṇa the tree was born from the hand of Lakṣmī. The word Śrī compounded variously is the name of other plants as well, such as śrīkhanda, or sandal tree, the śālmali, or silk cotton tree (of which Gonda states: "the erotic and magical characteristics are well known") and others. It is apparent that the

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24 Ibid.
25 See Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, 732, 1034; and Dymock, Pharmicographia Indica: A History of the Principle Drugs of Vegetable Origin Met with in British India, 277-79, for more on Śiva and the Bilva tree.
26 Dhal, Goddess Lakṣmī: Origin and Development, 104.
27 Ibid., 210.
goddess had her roots in nature, as a type of nature divinity, from very early on. While the conceptions of Vedic male, and to some extent female, deities were concerned with power and justice, Śrī became the personification of nourishment, and positive potential, or one could say, the power of the powerful, the energetic (and procreative) śakti. This idea of the energetic interplay of the male and female divinities would later be codified and expanded upon in Tantric and Purāṇic texts.

The Śrī Sūkta verses that deal with Lakṣmī conceive of her as “the goddess of gold and wealth”. 28 Gonda discusses the root of the name Lakṣmī as derived from lakṣ, which is to “observe, recognize, know by sign, characteristic” so Lakṣmī may have ‘originally’ have been the divinity representing the signs, evidence, or prognostications (of luck and prosperity). 29 While Śrī seems to have been more associated with fertility in relation to vegetative forms, Lakṣmī was closely connected to ripe yellow corn, perhaps due to the connection between Lakṣmī and gold, and corn as nourishment. The epic Mahābhārata says of Lakṣmī: “She lives in maidens, in ornaments, in sacrifices, in rain clouds, in byres, in lakes filled with lotus flowers, in rivers, elephants, in kings on the throne”. 30 Lakṣmī, like Śrī had various qualities and representations of similar nature, thus it is not surprising that the two became seen as the same goddess.

It is probable that the repertoires of these two goddesses included those of other female divinities, as they became associated with such a wide range of items, qualities, and places. Gonda posits that Śrī, who

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28 Gonda, Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism, 215.
29 Ibid., 215, 217.
30 Mahābhārata 13, 11, 14; as quoted in Gonda, Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism, 218.
individually “does not appear before the Vajasaneyi Samhitā, is a pre-Aryan goddess of fertility and prosperity in general”.  

**Purāṇic Śrī and Lakṣmī**

While the earlier texts mention Lakṣmī’s origins variously, the most popular version of her origin as emerging from the churned ocean of milk, is found in different forms in the epics and Purāṇas. In the opinion of Dhal the oldest ocean churning myth appears in the Rāmāyaṇa; yet of the various items and persons produced from this churning, Lakṣmī is not mentioned.  

The essence of the story is that in the Kṛtayuga, the first of four Hindu time cycles, the sons of Diti and Aditi (the demons or āsuras and the gods, suras, respectively) sought immortality by churning the mythical milk ocean, a story that is recounted in many texts variously. The gods and demons used the snake Vāsuki as the rope and the Mandara Mountain as the churning rod. Of the various auspicious items that appeared as a result of this churning, the most important (in most versions) is the goddess Lakṣmī whom Viṣṇu takes for his wife. By the Purāṇic age it seems that Śrī and Lakṣmī are conceptually the same.

According to Dhal, Lakṣmī is not associated with a consort until the 1st century CE. However, she is mentioned as one of the independent Vaiṣṇava deities in the Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra, though Dhal says the the exact period in which Lakṣmī becomes Viṣṇu’s wife is not entirely clear. Viṣṇu was not the only consort ascribed to Lakṣmī however. TheMahābhārata as well as the Rāmāyaṇa describe her relation to Indra, which

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33 See Bhāgavata Purāṇa 8.8 for a version of the churning myth.
34 Ibid., 99.
35 Ibid.
according to Dhal is not surprising as Indra was originally associated with rain, vegetation and fertility (or virility, more accurately), at least until he was overtaken by Viṣṇu, with whom Indra was amicably associated with in Vedic myth. Later, the worship of Indra was overshadowed by that of Viṣṇu, and the beautiful goddess was assigned to the most powerful and popular of the two.

The Mahābhārata also relates Lakṣmī as the consort of the yakṣa Kubera. Kubera is an interesting link between the Vedic pantheon and that of popular nature-spirit worship; he seems to straddle both worlds. The goddess, opulence and plenty being her attributes was paired with similar male figures, Indra being the king of the Āryan gods, and Kubera the king of the semi-divine yakṣas. Kubera in particular, is associated with wealth; his iconography often depicts him holding an urn full of coins. In the passage of time Lakṣmī became associated primarily with Viṣṇu, though not exclusively.

**Yakṣa, Yakṣī, and Śrī’s Iconography**

Śrī-Lakṣmī’s iconography seems to be very much related to that of Yakṣas, as well as that of Āryan gods and goddesses. Lakṣmī seems to be present in different traditions, bearing the symbols and nature relevant to the orientation of the worshipper. As mentioned she is often worshipped with yakṣas Kubera and Ganeśa. Śāktas following references in the Mārkandeya Purāṇa view Mahālakṣmī as the supreme entity, who expands herself to different forms. The goddess Śrī is held by the south Indian ‘right-hand’ tantric Śrī Vidyā sect to be the supreme Brahman, being primarily worshipped as the Śrī-yantra, a mystical diagram in either two or three

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37 See figure 4, page 23.
dimensional form. Vaiṣṇavas, on the other hand, honor Śrī-Lakṣmī as the wife and consort of their supreme deity, Viṣṇu, also called Nārāyaṇa. Over time, the goddesses’ representations were influenced, by several different schools of thought, but her general attributes, and in many cases her depictions, remains the same.

Śrī-Lakṣmī carries certain features similar to yakṣas; yakṣas themselves being the subject of some of the earliest sculpture on the Indian subcontinent. Ananda Coomaraswamy cites the existence of various forms of the word yakṣa in many south Asian languages. The root of the word has been described by scholars variously; possibly from the root yakṣ, meaning something akin to a quick appearance of light, or the verbal root yaj, meaning to worship, adore, or honor.

Coomaraswamy has determined that in essence, with reference to Sanskrit and Pali literature, the meaning of yakṣa seems to be the same as that of deva, or devatā, god or goddess. Early (and even late in some cases) Vedic, Jain, and Buddhist texts all have references to these divine, or semi-divine, beings. They take both benign and malefic forms in all traditions though are not generally objects of worship, at least in an orthodox sense. Yakṣas and yakṣīs were worshipped by various offerings; some vegetarian, others requiring animal sacrifice to ensure material boons to worshippers. The Vedic god Varuṇa is described as being a “yakṣīn” in the Rg Veda, and yakṣas are invoked in a list of deities found in the Atharva Veda. The oldest nominally Hindu sculpture discovered in India was that identified by various scholars as Yakṣa Kuṇīka, also known as the Pārkham

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38 These different forms of Lakṣmī devotion will be discussed later in this chapter.  
39 See figure 4, pg. 20.  
40 Coomaraswamy, Yakṣas: Essays in the Water Cosmology, 9.  
41 Ibid.  
42 Rg Veda , vii.88.6; Atharva Veda xi.6.10.
image, after the village in the northern Indian district of Mathura where it was found, still being worshipped as a devatā by villagers. The actual date of the sculpture is a matter of controversy, but Coomaraswamy places it in the Maurya period (321-184 BCE). The inscription on the image states it was produced for a guild of Yakṣa Māṇibhadra bhaktas, or devotees. Images of different yakṣas and yakṣis of similar antiquity have been found across north and central India, indicating their popularity.

Coomaraswamy suggests further that the modes of worship of yakṣas and devas:

- correspond almost exactly with those of other bhakti religions
- in fact, that the use of images in temples, the practice of prostration, circumambulation, the offering of flowers, incense, food, cloths, the use of bells, lighting of lamps, the singing of hymns, the presentation of a drama dealing with the lila of the deity, all these characteristic of Hindu worship even in the present day.

The worship of sacred trees, yakṣas, devas, and nāgas, mythical snake-like beings, were essentially religions of bhakti, or devotion; much like the relation between Śrī-Łakṣmī and her worshippers now. These ancient, non-textual bhakti traditions are sometimes known as “autochthonous bhakti”. Ted Solomon suggests the development of Vaiṣṇava bhakti to be “the finest results of the Hindu synthesis of Aryan religion and aboriginal religions”. This assumes that the Aryan elements of religion were dissimilar to “aboriginal”, yet it seems to be fundamentally true.

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43 Coomaraswamy, Yakṣas: Essays in the Water Cosmology, 234.
44 Ibid.
46 For more on Pan-Indic yakṣa worship see: Ram Nath Misra, Yakṣa Cult and Iconography (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981).
47 Coomaraswamy, Yakṣas: Essays in the Water Cosmology, 80.
that there was syncretism, perhaps from many different sources. Yakṣa devotees considered themselves bhaktas. ⁴⁹ Coomaraswamy says even the offering of meat and liquor to some yakṣas continues to the present day in some Śākta cults; and many of the other features of worship exist in Vaiṣṇava pūjā. ⁵⁰ Boons such as wealth and progeny were sought by such worship; some also believed yakṣas and yakṣīs were capable of having sex with their devotees. ⁵¹ Much of modern Hindu practice can be traced, not to the Vedic religion, but to worship of the yakṣa and deva.

Figure 2 Lakṣmī standing on a lotus from Sonk, Mathura; Pre-Kushan (60-240 CE). In Upender Singh, "Cults and Shrines in Early Historical Mathura (c. 200 BC-AD 200)" (Sep., 2004): 391.
By the era of the epics Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, the yakṣa was frequently mentioned. Kubera, also known as Vaiśravana, was an important
figure in both literature and popular worship, described as having gained guardianship of the northern directions due to his friendliness with Śiva, and is known by various names describing him as the lord and giver of wealth.\textsuperscript{52} His wives are listed variously as Bhadrā, Ṛddhī, and Śrī-Lakṣmī.\textsuperscript{53} Kubera is typically depicted, as in much yakṣa sculpture, as having a round belly, adorned luxuriantly, often carrying a money purse or pot, and a drinking vessel. These objects befit the conception that the yakṣas and yakṣīs were possessors and grantors of the wealth of the Earth: grains, gold, jewels, sexual pleasures, fertility and the like. The popular elephant headed Hindu god Ganeśa associated with removal of obstacles is also identified as of “a yakṣa type”, though he is not named in any early yakṣa lists.\textsuperscript{54} Yakṣīs were often depicted as voluptuous goddesses, often seen in sculpture as either inhabiting or being represented by a tree. Coomaraswamy further identifies the Hindu river goddesses Yamunā and Gaṅgā as yakṣīs from archaic representations and their iconography that includes the lotus, and makara, a mythological water animal.\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{52} Coomaraswamy, \textit{Yakṣas: Essays in the Water Cosmology}, 36.
\bibitem{53} Ibid.
\bibitem{54} Ibid., 46.
\bibitem{55} Ibid., 150, and 170-72.
\end{thebibliography}
Kubera seems to have maintained his yakṣa identity into modernity, while the important river goddesses Gaṅgā and Yamunā, whose symbols are the makara and tortoise respectively, became identified more with Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa (as well as Śiva in the case of Gaṅgā) through Purāṇic lore. These goddesses are identified by Coomaraswamy as “directly derived from

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56 For more on modern devotional sentiments for Yamunā, as both goddess and river, see David L. Haberman, *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamunā River of Northern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 90-140. For more on Gaṅgā see David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 187-91.
the yakṣi-dryad”. The *makara* and tortoise, both water creatures, are also symbols of the Vedic Yakṣa Varuṇa, the lord of the waters. Trees and water/rivers are both identified with yakṣas, *devas*, as well as other celestials such as *gandharvas*, semi-divine musicians, the *apsara* nymphs, and the like, but Coomaraswamy is of the opinion that the identification with water was of primary importance, at least conceptually, to worshippers, and vegetative identifications secondary. Water, in general, symbolizes “the operations of life”, such as fertility and nourishment. As well as the rivers themselves, and goddesses Gaṅgā and Yamunā, the symbol of water exists in Vaiṣṇava theology as the ocean upon which Viṣṇu rests before the creation of the universe. The mythical serpent or *nāga* (beings also associated with water), is also present in the Vaiṣṇava motif, acting as the couch or resting place of Viṣṇu, as well as Śrī-Lakṣmī as Viṣṇu’s consort and attendant. It seems significant in this connection that in the BVP version of the Tulasī story Viṣṇu says Tulasī will become both a plant and a river, the Gaṅdaki, on Earth.

Yakṣa symbols, relevant for this discussion, include the lotus, the *makara*, and the water or money pot, as well as the tree. The *makara*, a form of mythical crocodile-like water creature, is a symbol of the waters of life according to Coomaraswamy. Mythologically, water is seen as the source of generation of life, both animal and plant. The *makara* is the vehicle of Varuṇa, and is also the symbol on the banner of Kāmadeva, the

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58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 99.
61 Ibid., 109.
62 BVP, Pr. Kh. 21.32. To my knowledge, the Gaṅdaki River is not worshipped in a personified form.
64 Ibid., 98.
deva of lust and sexual desire. It is also the vehicle of various other yakṣas, and survives today as the carrier, or vāhana, of the river goddess Gaṅgā. The water pot, or pot of gold, is seen also in current depictions of Lakṣmī, and carries much the same connotations of life and prosperity as do the yakṣa-yakṣi symbolism. The lotus is nearly always carried by or associated with Lakṣmī. Kubera also is thought to carry a lotus-jewel, or padma-nidhi which represents both a source and symbol of his wealth.⁶⁵ Coomaraswamy also sees connection between the waters of life and the lotus; the lotus rises from the water fully alive and becomes the living symbol of beauty and enjoyment.⁶⁶ Coomaraswamy also states that it represents the symbolic creative center of life; in mythology the lotus rises from the navel of Viṣṇu and is the seat of Brahmā’s creation of the universe.⁶⁷ The symbol is closely related to Lakṣmī, although Viṣṇu is also said to carry the lotus, and the lotus is depicted as the seat for various gods and goddesses.

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⁶⁵ Ibid., 38.
⁶⁶ Ibid., 108.
⁶⁷ Ibid., 109-10.
The symbol of the tree is of importance in yakṣa worship, as well as Hinduism and Buddhism. The tree was thought to be either the abode of certain yakṣas and yakṣīs, or that the particular yakṣa or yakṣī would accept worship through the tree, typically banyan or nyagrodha (*Ficus benghalensis*) in the case of Kubera, as well as the aśoka (*Saraca indica*),

*Figure 5* Modern image of Śrī-Lakṣmī holding (clockwise from bottom left) gold coins, lotus, and water pot, seated on a lotus. (Public domain)
and other species. Similar identifications were made in the Vaiṣṇava context; according to Ted Solomon: "The presence of Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa were devoutly felt in the aśvattha, nyagrodha, and udumbara trees, former worship centers of yakṣas and nāgas, and in the tulasī, an aniconic symbol of pre-Aryan gods". Several sculptures of yakṣīs are shown in conjunction with trees. Coomaraswamy sees these tree goddesses as a significant and often repeated theme and says of them:

Sometimes they are adorning themselves with jewels, or are using a mirror. Sometimes one foot is raised and rests against the trunk of the tree. Sometimes there are children, either standing beside the dryad mother or carried astraddle on her hip. Of the trees represented, the aśoka, mango, and śāla are most usual. Very often they hold with one hand a branch of the tree under which they stand, sometimes one leg is twined round the stem of the tree…

Coomaraswamy goes on to cite passages in the Hattiphala Jātaka, a Buddhist text, and the Mahābhārata wherein trees, or the deities residing in the tree grant boons to their worshippers. Tulasī is not mentioned in direct relation with any yakṣa or yakṣi, and is somewhat conspicuous by its absence in the quite early sources and sculptures that Coomaraswamy is dealing with in his discussion of yakṣas. The tree was worshiped as the yakṣa or yakṣi, just as the Tulasī plant, though a bush rather than tree, is worshiped as Lakṣmī, who maintains features in common with yakṣīs.

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70 Ibid., 83.
71 Ibid., 84. See figure 6.
Worship of Lakṣmī in conjunction with Kubera, and other yakṣas and yakṣīs, has been practiced since before the Common Era, and exists in the present day.\(^{72}\) Relief sculptures dating from 200-50 BCE have been found in the Mathura area, depicting Lakṣmī with Kubera, and alternately the Yakṣī Hāritī; Hāritī is occasionally shown holding a child.\(^{73}\) One particular period carving shows Gaja-Lakṣmī (Lakṣmī depicted with elephants) in association with Ardhanārīśvara-Śiva, Viṣṇu, and Kubera.\(^{74}\) The goddess’ identity as provider of wealth and opulence is functionally much the same as that of Kubera. However, Kubera being a yakṣa, holds little importance in the Vaiṣṇava pantheon proper, which Lakṣmī is most commonly associated with. Within popular Hinduism, the connection between Lakṣmī and Kubera

\(^{72}\) See figure 4, pg. 20.  
\(^{73}\) Singh, “Cults and Shrines in Early Historical Mathura (c. 200 BC-AD 200)”, 390.  
\(^{74}\) Ibid.
has remained for at least 2,000 years. This shows the fluidity of the nature
of the goddess, having both Vedic and non-Vedic roots.

The goddess Durgā, like Lakṣmī, is also worshipped in plant form, a
practice that, like Tulasī worship, is extant today. The plant representations
of Durgā, known as Navapatrikā, or nine leaves, are worshipped during the
Navaratri festival of the goddess. Madhu Kanna describes this form of the
goddesses as having tribal or agrarian roots, citing Sarat Chandra Mitra’s
work on the survival of Van (or forest) Durgā (also known as Bana Devī)
cults in areas of Bangladesh and West Bengal. The oldest references,
however, go back to the Mahābhārata, which states “the goddess dwells on
the peaks of mountains, by rivers, and in caves, forests and groves and is
worshipped by the forest community of Shavaras and Pulindas.” The
worship of Van Durgā, as practiced by tribal communities, was done at the
base of trees, without a temple or representation other than the nine
varieties of vegetation. The modern version witnessed by Khanna consists
of many additional vegetal substances. Although the likely agrarian roots of
this practice may not exactly correspond with the origins of Tulasī worship, it
is significant that leaves, roots, and fruits are considered, within ritual
context, as worshipable manifestations of the goddess.

An interesting overlap in the theology of Lakṣmī and Durgā occurs in
the Devī Māhātmya of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa. Kathleen Erndl cites various
sections of the story that connect the goddess with Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa, Kṛṣṇa,

76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
and Skanda. The Māhātmya divides itself into three episodes each corresponding with one of the forms of the goddess: the first: Mahākāli; the second Mahālakṣmī, and the third Mahāsarasvatī. Each goddess is associated with one of the guṇas, or qualities. Within the Rahasya Traya, an appendix to the text of an unknown date, a special distinction is given to Mahālakṣmī who is described as possessing the other two forms of the goddess and all guṇas. In this conception Mahālakṣmī is more akin to the all-pervasive, all-powerful Śrī-Tripurasundari of the Śrī Vidyā sect discussed below. Thomas Coburn cautions us “not to confuse familiar goddesses Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, and Kāli with Mahāsarasvatī, Mahālakṣmī, and Mahākāli”. The former are known in their manifest forms as responsible for creation, maintenance and destruction of the universe, and the latter forms being unmanifest or “transcendent, elements of the Goddess-head”. In this conception the goddess is of course not a consort of a male deity, but the supreme principle, independent and unmanifest. Thus we can say, in this context, though appearing as many goddesses, she is in the most transcendent sense One; all other goddesses are her energies and expansions.

Śrī-Lakṣmī in the Śrī Vaiṣṇava Sampradāya and Śrī Vidyā Traditions

The grandfather of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava lineage, and predecessor to Rāmānuja, was a Tamil saint named Nāṭhamuni (9th or 10th cent. CE). According to followers he was the last of the great sages accomplished in

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81 Ibid., 114.
the system of Yoga, and ushered in the devotional movement of self-surrender to Viṣṇu. He is said to have also compiled the various devotional hymns of the south Indian Vaiṣṇavava saints, known as the Ālvārs. While Nāṭhamuni was the essentially the founder of the line, its most famous and influential theologian was Rāmānuja, less than 200 years later.

Although Rāmānuja salutes goddess Śrī as consort of Viṣṇu in the invocation of several of his important works, he does not write of her directly until his Vedārthasaṅgraha, and these references were few. According to John Carman, in the aforementioned text Rāmānuja is “defending more than the possibility of the Supreme Person’s having a divine consort. He is trying to establish the fact that the Divine Person has that particular Consort who is pleasing to him and in accordance with His nature”.

There seems to be some lack of consensus as to Śrī’s role in the tradition after Rāmānuja. According to Carman “there is a distinct difference, at least in emphasis, between Rāmānuja’s concept of Śrī and that of his followers”. There is also a lack of agreement between the two main sects of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism, the Vaḍagalai and the Tengalai. The Vaḍagalais maintain that Śrī is infinite, like Viṣṇu; the Tengalai consider her to be the foremost of created, finite entities. Whatever the theological differences, it seems Śrī has the role within the tradition as being a sort of an intercessor between the soul and Viṣṇu; Viṣṇu being the actual goal in worship. K.C. Varadachari says:

In the yoga of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism in general, there is no place for dionysiac worship of Kāli in the pure power aspect. Śrī Vaiṣṇavas make the Mother the agent of our transformation on Sātvik lines.

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83 Ibid., 243.
84 Ibid., 238.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
as Mahā-Lakṣmī or Śrī who ever resided in the supreme Puruṣa, Puruṣottama, Nārāyaṇa or Viṣṇu, the omnipervader. God is the means (upāya) and the goal (upeya) and Mother is the agent, the puruṣakāra.\textsuperscript{87}

It is clear that although the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas maintain Śrī as the namesake of their tradition she remains, theologically speaking, less important than Viṣṇu. Rāmānuja was generally conservative in his approach to the Purāṇas, relying more on Śruti texts, accepting the relatively old Viṣṇu Purāṇa to be most authoritative and generally the only one he commented upon.\textsuperscript{88} The Tulasī story does not appear in this Purāṇa, and it is possible that the story did not make it into the respective Purāṇas until after the time of Rāmānuja.

An interesting modern development concerning worship of Lakṣmī in the Śrī tradition to note in this connection is Aṣṭa (eight) Lakṣmī worship.\textsuperscript{89} According to Vasudha Narayanan, the rise in popularity of such worship is likely due to to the publication of the Aṣṭa Lakṣmī Stotram in the 1970's.\textsuperscript{90} Written by a Śrī Vaiṣṇava theologian named Śrī U. Ve. Vidvan Mukkur Srinivasavaradacariyar, the publication was very influential in the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community; several temples have been constructed to facilitate the worship of these eight forms of Lakṣmī, and at least one in the United States.\textsuperscript{91} Thus we see the worship of Śrī-Lakṣmī is very much a living, and changing, tradition.

\textsuperscript{87} K.C. Varadachari, Ālvārs of South India (Bhavan’s book University, vol. 143, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidyā Bhavan, 1966), 127.
\textsuperscript{88} Carman, The Theology of Rāmānuja, 165.
\textsuperscript{89} The eight names of the goddesses are: Ādi Lakṣmī, Dhana Lakṣmī, Dhanya Lakṣmī, Gaja Lakṣmī, Santana Lakṣmī, Vīra Lakṣmī, Vijaya Lakṣmī, Vidya Lakṣmī, Aiśvarya Lakṣmī, Saubhagya Lakṣmī, Rājya Lakṣmī, and Vara Lakṣmī.
\textsuperscript{91} The temple in the U.S. is located in Houston, Texas.
Unlike the Śrī Vaiṣṇava sect, the Śrī Vidyā sect worships a ‘right-hand’ Tantric version of Śrī known as Lalitā Tripurasundari.\(^92\) In this tradition rather than Śrī being the wife of Viṣṇu, she is seen as both the transcendent and immanent principle of all existence. The goddess, who has multiple manifestations, is worshipped primarily in the form of the Śrī Yantra, a two or three dimensional mystic diagram which symbolically maps the all-pervasive goddess' presence.\(^93\) The term Śrī Vidyā also refers to the fifteen syllable mantra used by practitioners in worship to help lead them to both material prosperity and liberation. Priests and teachers in this lineage come primarily from the Brahmin community. Although considered Tantric due to the importance of initiation, yantra and mantra (and secrecy according to some), this line does not utilize the ‘forbidden’ items such as meat and wine in worship, perhaps due to its roots with the line of Śankarācārya and South Indian Brahminism.\(^94\) Śrī Vidyā theology differs significantly from that of the South Indian Śrī Vaiṣṇava sect, also largely associated with the Brahmin community in that Śrī-Lakṣmī is seen as the supreme controlling deity rather than a consort of the primary deity Viṣṇu.


\(^{93}\) Ibid.

Outside of Purāṇic sources, direct references to Tulasī of any antiquity are rare. As mentioned before she seems to be a goddess born of the Purāṇas. Many sources of information, ranging from popular to academic, cite various Purāṇic, and even Vedic, references to Tulasī, but few are verifiable. Different versions of the story may vary in different recensions. For example, Asoke Chaterjee writes that the Uttara Khaṇḍa of the Padma Purāṇa, wherein the Jālāṇdhara-Vṛndā episode takes place, is much shorter in the Bengali manuscript he was using as opposed to the Devanāgarī version.\textsuperscript{95} Most, but not all, references come from the Purāṇas, and most of them are of two types regardless of source: narrative or of ritualistic concern. The narrative in the Purāṇas has to do with the Jālāṇdhara/Saṅkhacūḍa episode involving Viṣṇu and Śiva, and later narratives, particularly from Gauḍiya sources, treat Vṛndā as a forest goddess, a vandevi, which will be discussed below. Ritualistic use of Tulasī is also found in scattered verses of the Purāṇas, as well as some Pāñcarātra texts. Ritual use has to do with the benefits of circumambulating, watering, and worshipping the plant with flowers, and lamps, as well as wearing the wood in the form of beads.

The oldest reference available is one of ritualistic use of Tulasī in the Āsuri-Kalpa supplement to the Atharva Veda (circa 900 BCE). The Āsuri-Kalpa deals mainly with practices of witchcraft, with many verses detailing the use of particular types of plants for rites. Rudra is invoked within the work, but the Āsuri-Kalpa is mainly concerned with rites invoking the power

\textsuperscript{95} Asoke Chatterjee, \textit{Padma-puraṇa; a study} (Calcutta, Sanskrit College, 1967), 84.
of goddesses, including Durgā and Lakṣmī. H.W. Magoun mentions there is reason to believe the name Āsuri refers to “probably both plant and divinity” in the text, the divinity being Durgā.\(^\text{96}\) The name Tulasī, referring to the plant, occurs twice in the text in verse 23, and in the meditation section, second verse. The first mention seems to either mean Tulasī in a cūma or powder (made from the plant), or Tulasī the goddess infusing the cūma (cūrnaspṛṣṭas) or magical preparation consisting likely of herbs.\(^\text{97}\) The second mention, in the meditation section, has to do with a goddess being adorned or decorated with a garland of Tulasī (tulasīlāmaṇḍitām).\(^\text{98}\) This leads one to believe the first reference has to do with the plant form of Tulasī as well. It is interesting that the earliest reference of the plant is in the context of goddess centered magic and worship.

The only other significant mention of Tulasī, in approximate chronological order from the Vedas, occurs in the Vaiṣṇava Āgamas, although these may date just prior to, or concurrent with, the Purāṇic accounts.\(^\text{99}\) The mention of Tulasī in these Vaiṣṇava Āgamas, also known as Pāṇcarātras, is of ritual use. The Pāṇcarātra texts of the early Bhāgavata cult, the predecessors of later Vaiṣṇavism, are thought to be influential in the development of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism, whose founders preserved some of the Viṣṇu-centered ritual and philosophy of these works in their own system.\(^\text{100}\)

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\(^\text{97}\) “tulasī bhūmadā devī cūrnaspṛṣṭas ‘tathā vaśī, rājabhaye sureśvari mājanād dhāraṇāt tathā’.” Verse 23. Ibid., 179.

\(^\text{98}\) Ibid., 185.

\(^\text{99}\) The majority of the Āgamic literature of all types, Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva and Śakta, has yet to be translated from Sanskrit or dates assigned. There is possibly further information about Tulasī in these sources.

Founders of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava lineage also cite the Pāṇcarātras as authoritative references on Tulasī, and Gauḍīya worship, or pūjā, in general. Gopal Bhatta, who compiled the ritual manual for the Gauḍīya sect titled the Hari Bhakti Vilas (HBV), draws from the Āgastya Sarīhitā (HBV 9.111, 151), as well as the Prahlāda Sarīhitā, and the Viṣṇudarmottara (HBV 9.191-198), as well as several Purāṇas, to compile a lengthy section glorifying Tulasī. The verses drawn from these sources glorify the purifying power of the Tulasī plant by virtue of her (the deity) as well of as the beloved consort of Viṣṇu. The Āgastya Sarīhitā states also that sin can be destroyed by the circumambulation of the Tulasī plant. The Āgastya text further describes Tulasī leaves as pure ritual objects and as such offerings to Viṣṇu and the benefits of rosaries made from the wood of the plant (HBV 9.199). It is impossible to say whether the Sarīhitā texts pre-date the Purānic citations; Gopal Bhatta cites both side by side as equally authoritative. References in both types of texts relate the same attributes of Tulasī and its modes of worship. The Nārada-Pāṇcarātra is a quite late text, clearly Kṛṣṇite in nature, that mentions also the ritual use of Tulasī, and was very influential in the Gauḍīya School. According to H.P. Chatterji this text, also known as the Jñānāmṛtasāra Sarīhitā, is perhaps as late as the early 16th century. In general, the Āgamic texts seem to be regarded with as much authenticity and relevance by the traditions as the Purāṇas, some sects paying special attention to particular texts, and less attention to others.

Āyurvedic texts discuss the medicinal uses of Tulasī. Tulasī leaves are prescribed in several Āyurvedic texts ranging from approximately 500 BCE

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101 For example: “viṣṇos trailokyā nāthasya rāmasya janakātmajā priya tathaiva tulasī sarva lokaika pavanī” - Agastya Sarīhitā (as found in HBV 9.151)
102 “pradaksinam bhramitva ye namaskurvanti nityasah na tesam duritam kincid aksinam avasisyate” – Agastya Sarīhitā (as found in HBV 9.111)
103 H.P. Chatterji, Śrī Nārada Pāṇcarātram (Prayag: The Painini Office, 1921), ii.
to the 12th century CE to treat a variety of ailments from hiccups to poisoning. In these references there seems to be no mention of Tulasī’s religious sanctity, but rather of the medicinal properties of the leaves of the plant. Some of these texts were likely composed in the Purānic period, though they could be Sanskrit descriptions of herbal medicine already in popular use at the time. It is also possible that the medicinal use of Tulasī pre-dated the ritual use of Tulasī as an offering to Viṣṇu, and as a goddess in her own right, but these possible developments are now all but lost to antiquity.

In the Purāṇas, the longest, and arguably the most important account (in Vaiṣṇava terms), is the narrative of the life of Tulasī found in the Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa (BVP). This, however, is also likely one of the more recent versions of the story as the BVP is often considered to be perhaps even the last of the major Purāṇas. R.C. Hazra assigns a probable beginning date for this Purāṇa around the eighth century CE, with some evidence suggesting revision until as late as the 16th century. There is evidence that this text, judging not only by the name, was originally a composition dedicated to the god Brahmā, and was later subtracted from and added to until an essentially Vaiṣṇava text remained. Although more ink is devoted to topics directly related to Kṛṣṇa (the Kṛṣṇa Khaṇḍa is about half of the entire text), the BVP is unique in its concern with Vaiṣṇava forms of Śakti. The Prakṛti Khaṇḍa discusses the stories of numerous goddesses,

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105 Some verses mentioned by Singh and Hoette (Ibid.) in this regard: Caraka Saṁhitā 27.164; Suśruta Saṁhitā 46.164.
mostly connected with the Vaiṣṇava pantheon in some way. Chapters 15-22 deal with the story of goddess Tulasī and her husband Śaṅkhacūḍa in great detail, which will be examined more thoroughly in the next chapter. The BVP bears some indications that it was associated with Bengali Vaiṣṇavism, though the text shows contributions from many sects.\textsuperscript{109} It is in the BVP the identity of the goddess Rādhā as Kṛṣṇa’s primary consort was fully developed. This Purāṇa is an important text in general in the ontology of popular medieval period Vaiṣṇava goddesses. The Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa (DBP) also deals with the Tulasī-Śaṅkhacūḍa episode, and is most similar to the BVP version. According to P.G. Lalye, Śiva is treated with some derision in text, and the likely reason for inclusion of the story was to expound the glories of Vedavatī, as well as those of Sitā and Draupadī; all said in the DBP to be prior births of Tulasī.\textsuperscript{110} From this account the DBP sounds more similar to the BVP version being mainly concerned with Śakti in general, and includes Tulasī as an example of the often manifesting goddess.

The general story of Tulasī-Śaṅkhacūḍa is related with some differences in several other Purāṇas, wherein the heroine goddess is called Vṛndā and her demoniac yet devoted spouse is named Jālaṇḍhara. The Padma Purāṇa (PP), also a late Purāṇa, is a 55,000 verse behemoth that devotes much discussion to both the ritual use of Tulasī, as well as to the Vṛndā-Jālaṇḍhara story. The PP includes a “Jālaṇḍharopākhyāna”, (the episode of Jālaṇḍhara), in the Uttara Khaṇḍa, chapters three, nineteen, and 98-106.\textsuperscript{111} Although claimed as a Vaiṣṇava text, as seems common with late Purāṇas, the PP bears the mark of many sects, and is compendium of holy places, practices, and philosophies of the later Purānic age (appx. 12th-

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{111} Chatterjee, \textit{Padma-Purāṇa: a study}, 85.
15th centuries CE). The Śiva Purāṇa (SP) includes the Jālaṅdhara episode as well (2.3.4.31-40), in a version that makes Śiva more of a hero in the story than Viṣṇu, showing the sectarian leanings of the Purāṇa. Shorter versions occur in the Matsya and Vāyu Purāṇas. The Skanda Purāṇa (SkP) contains many verses on the sanctity and ritual use of Tulasī, and is often cited by Gopal Bhatta in the HBV. Similar, though fewer verses on ritual effectiveness are found in the Garuḍa Purāṇa. The above is by no means a complete list of every reference to Tulasī in the Purāṇic corpus, but it does cover the major and more influential sources.

Tulasī’s appearance or birth is described variously in the Purāṇas. According to the Kāṛttika Māhātmya of the Skanda Purāṇa, Tulasī is born from the teardrops of Dhanvantari, who is considered in the Purāṇas as a partial incarnation of Viṣṇu. After the oft repeated episode of the churning of the milk ocean, Dhanvantari emerges from the ocean bearing a nectar pot. When he looks inside the pot, he is moved to tears, which drop into the pot and forming the Tulasī, whom the gods then give to Viṣṇu. The PP describes Tulasī to be born from the sweat of Vṛndā. The BVP, on the other hand, gives Tulasī a more conventional birth on Earth in a powerful dynasty. Though the Purāṇas seem to allow some creativity in relating the birth of the goddess, the fact that she is in essence Lakṣmī is a point that remains constant.

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112 Ibid.
113 Matsya P. 154.332; Vayu P. 69.144-5, as referenced in O’Flaherty, *Mysticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Shiva*, 179, and 185-6.
114 Garuḍa Purāṇa Ch. 9, 6-9 for example. As found in Wood and Subrahmanyam’s translation of the text (Allahabad: The Pāṇini Office, 1911).
116 PP 6.16.45; in Ibid., 213, n31.
117 BVP Pr. Kh., ch. 13.
Later references to Tulasī occur with some frequency in sectarian Vaiṣṇava compositions from the 16th through 19th centuries. These compositions are almost certainly inspired by the earlier Purāṇic stories, and in some cases were elaborated upon. Perhaps one of the earliest however occurs in the Āryasaptaśatī of Govardhana dated late 12th century. Barbara Stoler Miller writes Govardhana was praised by Gīta Govinda author Jayadeva; yet despite the belief of some that Jayadeva himself mentions Tulasī in his famous work, he does not. Govardhana’s verse portrays Tulasī as a competitor (as well as fragrant plant?) with Rādhā for the attention of Kṛṣṇa: “Friend, Tulasī, garland on the head of demon Rādhā’s foe, Why compare yourself in vain with Rādhā? All the outpouring of your fragrance is just to perfume her feet.” Tulasī and Rādhā both emerge from the late Purāṇas as consorts of Kṛṣṇa, although Tulasī is also associated with Viṣṇu, unlike Rādhā. Both goddesses emerged during the late Purānic period, and as Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa became subject of numerous poetic accounts, Tulasī was occasionally included as well.

Rūpa Gosvāmin (1489-1564 CE), a foremost follower of the Bengali mystic Kṛṣṇa-Caitanya (1486-1533 CE) was to give Tulasī, or rather Vṛndā, a completely new role than her previous Purānic identity. Rūpa’s dramas such as the Vidagdhamādhava, cast Vṛndā in the role of a forest goddess whose main duty was to enhance the forest by causing flowers to bloom, and the seasonal weather to remain favorable for the romantic pleasure of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. Donna Wulff believes that Vṛndā, in the dramatic sense,

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118 Barbara Stoler Miller “Radha: Consort of Kṛṣṇa’s Vernal Passion” Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 95, No. 4. (Oct. - Dec., 1975): 667. Compelled by the possibility of reference to Tulasī in such an influential text as the GG itself, I digitally searched two versions of the text, with no occurrences of the word Tulasī.

119 Ibid., 667.
is a character that “communicates Rūpa’s religious views and emotions to the audience or reader”. The pilgrimage town of Vṛndāvana in the Mathurā district closely associated with the Kṛṣṇa legend bears the goddess’ name as well. Few temples to Vṛndā exist in the area, and the goddess is a relatively minor one in the region in the modern day. Rūpa’s Vṛndā has very little resemblance, if any to the heroine of the Purāṇic myths. She is a friend of the divine couple, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and member of their entourage. If anything the Vṛndā of Rūpa’s dramas acts more like a yakṣī or vandevi who possesses control of the natural environment, including fertility (of plants in this case) and dominion over the animals therein. Vṛndā in this context is often depicted with parrots, over which she has control; another feature associated with yakṣīs and forest goddesses, as well as south Indian goddesses such as Minākṣī.

Rūpa and his followers were highly influential in the north Indian Vraja region, and are associated, along with Vallabha-cārya (1479-1531 CE) and followers of the Puṣṭimarg sect of Vaiṣṇavism, as the main influences of the medieval revival of Kṛṣṇite Vaiṣṇavism in north India. While the Tulasī plant has a place of reverence in all forms of Vaiṣṇavism, goddess Vṛndā seems to be mainly a concern of the Gauḍīya sect, which remains influential in north India today. Later Gauḍīya leader and author Viśvanātha Cakravarti (mid 17th century to 1708 CE) wrote a prayer to Vṛndā named the Vṛndādevi Aṣṭakam, in which she is glorified in a way consistent with the role of the

121 Modern worship of Vṛndā in the region will be discussed in chapter 4.
122 The Vraja region today is associated primarily with the life of Kṛṣṇa but was also an important center of Buddhism, see F.S Growse, Mathurā: A District Memoir (Oudh: Oudh Government Press, 1883), 104-8.
goddess in the dramas of his predecessor Rūpa. In verse seven however Viśvanātha makes the connection between Vṛndā and the Tulasī plant; the earliest (and only) direct reference the plant and Vṛndā being related that I could locate in my research. Other Gauḍīya poets have written of the glories of Tulasī, all much in the same vein as Rūpa. The works of Rūpa and other Gauḍīyas were very influential in keeping the popularity of Tulasī alive into modernity.

Devotional poets of the south were also composing hymns to Tulasī in the same era. One reference to Tulasī is found in the famous, and lengthy, Sanskrit devotional poem, the Nārāyanīya, composed by Melputhur Narayana Bhattadri (1560 CE- mid 16th cent.) of Kerala. Here the Tulasī plant is mentioned in context with other sanctified objects for Vaiṣṇavas such as the Bhagavad Gitā, and gopi-candam, ritually pure clay used for sectarian forehead markings. The later influential Tamil-born poet and musician, Tyāgarāja (1767-1847CE) also composed several songs glorifying the Tulasī plant. Devotional glorification in verse of Tulasī seemed to reach its pan-Indian peak from the 16th to 19th centuries.

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123 See appendix A for a transliteration and translation of this text.
124 The works of the Gauḍīya authors are voluminous, yet works of both Rūpa and Viśvanātha are particularly influential in the tradition.
125 Nārāyaṇīya 11.92.9: “gaṅgā gītā ca gāyatrī api ca tulasī kā gopīcandanaṁ tat”.
Chapter 3- The Episode of Tulasī/Vṛṇḍā and Śaṅkhacūḍa/Jālaṇdhara

This chapter focuses on the above mentioned Purāṇic myths, analyze nuances in the different versions of the story, and ends with a brief discussion of the ontology of the āsura and daitya within Vedic and Purāṇic literature. I have chosen to use the Brahmavaivarta Purṇa version for the template. The reasons for this are: Tulasī is the name given to the heroine rather than Vṛṇḍā, (which is more important for understanding how the plant became identified with the goddess); this is also likely the latest version to appear in the Purāṇic canon and would show the progression (in some senses) of the myth; and finally, this version clearly has a Vaiṣṇava slant, and Tulasī as a plant and deity, is most important to Vaiṣṇavas. This version seems to most accurately represent the way the plant is honored among Hindus in general in the modern day.

Tulasī-Śaṅkhacūḍa of the Brahmavaivarta Purṇa

The story begins by tracing the lineage of Tulasī back approximately seven generations.126 Interestingly, the head of the lineage mentioned is a manu, a being in a succession of mythical progenators, named Dakṣasāvarṇi, who was devoted to Viṣṇu.127 The male descendents of Dakṣasāvarṇi remained Vaiṣṇavas for four more generations until the appearance of Vṛṣadhvaja, who according to the BVP, was a staunch Śaiva, greatly blessed by the god.128 Even though Vṛṣadvaja had, according to the text, abandoned the worship of Mahālakṣmi and Sarasvatī, the other gods, apparently irate over this, could not curse him, due to Vṛṣadvaja being

126 BVP., Pr. Kh. Ch. 13.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid., 13.11.
protected by Śiva, until Sūrya managed to utter a curse. Sūrya and Brahmā were sufficiently terrified by the possible wrath of Śiva incurred by the curse to flee to Vaikuṇṭha to seek the protection of Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu), Śiva following them. After placating Śiva, Nārāyaṇa (using a trope familiar in other Purāṇas) informs Śiva than in the short time Śiva has been in Vaikuṇṭha, thousands of years have passed in the rest of the universe and Vṛṣadhvaja, as well as his son Haṅsadvaja and the two sons of Haṅsadvaja, have all died, ostensibly all by the curse of Sūrya, the Sun god. However, before the deaths of the sons of Haṅsadvaja, Dharmadvaja and Kuśadvaja, the two had sons and riches, as well as having a daughters that were each partial incarnations of Lakṣmī. The daughter of Kuśadvaja was known as the goddess Vedavatī, who is identified in the text as being the goddess who would later become the wife of Rāma, Sitā (and after that incarnation she would become Draupadi, the wife of the Paṇḍavas in the Mahābhārata). The divine daughter of Dharmadvaja was the goddess Tulasī.

Tulasī, the daughter of Dhamadvaja and Mādhavī, was initially named Padminī. After several verses describing the beauty of Padminī, the text relates the penance (tapas) the goddess undertook to attain Nārāyaṇa, which eventually gains her audience with Brahmā. At this point Tulasī narrates to Brahmā the unfortunate event that led her to being born in a “human” family. Tulasī, (her previous name as a goddess also) was cursed by Rādhā (for dancing with Kṛṣṇa) to be born in Bhārata (India). Kṛṣṇa then tells Tulasī after her birth in Bhārata she could perform

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129 Ibid., 13.14, 15.
130 BVP 14. 1-11.
131 Ibid.
austerities to attain Nārāyaṇa as her husband. Brahmā then informs Padmini/Tulasi that he knows of a cowherd friend of Kṛṣṇa, who was also cursed by Rādhā for an offence to be born as a demon (danava) on Earth known as Śaṅkhacūḍa.¹³³ Brahmā says further that if Tulasi marries Śaṅkhacūḍa, she will later win Narāyaṇa as her husband. Tulasi, in keeping with the strongly Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa oriented themes of the BVP, then tells Brahmā that that is fine, except she does not really like Nārāyaṇa as much as Kṛṣṇa, and it was actually Kṛṣṇa’s suggestion she marry Nārāyaṇa. At this point, Brahmā then initiates Tulasi with a mantra for worshipping Rādhā, by which Tulasi will attain a position similar to that of Rādhā as a lover of Kṛṣṇa.

Tulasi then meets an apparently very handsome Śaṅkhacūḍa, at which point the text elaborately describes the couple’s attractive appearances in great length. Tulasi then begins a 20 verse speech delineating the bad qualities of young damsels, such as selfishness and dishonesty.¹³⁴ Śaṅkhacūḍa then curiously replies that “…whatever you said is not totally untrue…some of it is truthful and some of it is untruthful…” and then goes on to give a discourse on the glories of various goddesses and different qualities of women in general.¹³⁵ Tulasi afterwards tells Śaṅkhacūḍa that she was actually only testing him to check his level of education prior to accepting him as her husband.¹³⁶ A while later, Brahmā appears and instructs Śaṅkhacūḍa to marry Tulasi in the Gandharva style. They do so, after which the text assures us that the couple performed all of the 64 types

¹³³ Ibid., 15.31.
¹³⁴ Ibid., 16. 40-61.
¹³⁵ Ibid., 16. 62.
¹³⁶ Ibid., 16. 92.
of conjugal pleasures enjoined in the Kāmaśāstras, some of which are discussed in more detail in the narration, in a quite racy fashion.

After much enjoyment with Tulasī, Śaṅkhacūḍā somehow manages to usurp the gods’ wealth and power, which led the gods, including Śiva, to again appeal to Viṣṇu for protection. Viṣṇu then speaks of the previous life curses of Tulasī and Śaṅkhacūḍā in more detail for several verses. After this, Viṣṇu gives Śiva his trident and tells Śiva to kill Śaṅkhacūḍā with it further explaining that Śaṅkhacūḍā’s great power comes from a kavaca (mantra shield) given to him by Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu himself will try to beg the kavaca from Śaṅkhacūḍā, disguised as an ascetic. After which, Viṣṇu will have sex with Tulasī, thus breaking her chastity and, at the same moment, Śaṅkhacūḍā will be killed by Śiva using Viṣṇu’s trident.\(^{137}\)

Śaṅkhacūḍā is then warned by a messenger sent by Śiva of the trouble looming on the horizon, without going into much detail; thus the armies on both sides begin to assemble. Tulasī expresses her fear of losing Śaṅkhacūḍā in battle, to which Śaṅkhacūḍā replies very philosophically, and then assures her that they will both attain the planet of Kṛṣṇa, called Goloka, at any rate, so there is really no cause for alarm, after which they make love again. At this point, in chapter eighteen of the story, a conversation between Nārada and Śiva is inserted to bring up various points of dharma and devotion, typical of the Purāṇas. Then in chapter nineteen the battle begins, which is as spectacular and horrific as any. Goddess Kālī appears with various helpers, wreaking general havoc, then the goddess engages in one on one battle with Śaṅkhacūḍā, until Viṣṇu eventually tells her Śaṅkhacūḍā cannot be killed due to the kavaca.

\(^{137}\) Ibid., 16. 202-07.
Viṣṇu, then disguised as an elderly Brahmin, begs alms from Śaṅkacūḍa and asks him for the *kavaca*, which Śaṅkacūḍa gives. Immediately after this, Viṣṇu appears to Tulasī disguised as Śaṅkacūḍa, who then have sex, at which moment Śiva then kills Śaṅkacūḍa with the lustrous trident. Śaṅkacūḍa then appears in his cowherd-boy form and mounts a divine airplane for Goloka. Śiva then drops the bones of Śaṅkacūḍa into the ocean, whereupon they become the śaṅka, or conch shell which is thus sanctified for use in *pūjā* rituals thenceforth.

Afterwards Viṣṇu again goes to Tulasī, still disguised as Śaṅkacūḍa, and makes love with her again, only this time Tulasī begins to wonder why she is feeling more pleasure than usual.138 Tulasī now inquires to his real identity at which Viṣṇu takes his original form, only to be soundly cursed by Tulasī to take the form of a stone on Earth, since according to her, he is stone-hearted. Tulasī, losing her composure, is comforted by Viṣṇu who tells her that he is now taking her back to Goloka. He says further that Tulasī’s body will take the form of the Gaṇḍakī River, and her hair will become “trees (*vṛkṣā*)”, and will be known as Tulasī.139 After this, Viṣṇu narrates the general glories of the Tulasī plant and the merits of using its leaves in *pūja* to himself for several verses. After glorifying the Tulasī plant Viṣṇu describes the merits of worshipping the Śālagrāma stone, his representation found in the Gaṇḍakī River. The following chapter (22) includes a Tulasī stotra explained by Nārada, as well as instructions by Nārada for offering *pūjā* to the plant.

The BVP narration is interesting for several reasons. Here, Viṣṇu takes a morally dubious role by seducing Tulasī, the wife of another. This is

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138 Ibid. Ch. 21
139 Ibid. 21.29-36.
understood within the story as being somewhat justified as such events are understood before the backdrop of the Goloka incidents, and that Tulasī and Śaṅkhacūḍa were both destined to return there after the Earthly incidents unfolded. This narration, keeping in the general theme of the BVP is strongly goddess centered. While the Kṛṣṇa Khaṇḍa of the BVP is the lengthiest section of the text, the Prakṛti Khaṇḍa deals with dozens of goddesses of various types. In the above myth, Tulasī comes out looking better than anyone; the entire story was framed around her life. Viṣṇu's activities appear a bit questionable; Śiva seems generally a passive presence; and Kṛṣṇa only appears briefly to tell Tulasī to take birth and perform penance, and then disappears. Goddess Kālī, however, takes a very proactive role in fighting Śaṅkhacūḍa, even though she was apparently uninformed by the male gods about Śaṅkhacūḍa's kavaca until she exhausted her weaponry. Thus while Kṛṣṇa is the ultimate desire of Tulasī, he is basically absent from the story, the main emphasis being on the character and beauty of goddess Tulasī.

**Tulasī/Vṛndā in other Purāṇas**

The Padma Purāṇa in particular as mentioned before abounds in references to the Tulasī plant in context of ritual use, yet also features a version of the above story in its Uttara Khaṇḍa. This version features the couple being Vṛndā and Jālaṅdhara rather than Tulasī and Śaṅkhacūḍa. This version, also known in the PP as the Jālaṅharopākhyaṇa, occurs in chapters 98-106 of the Uttara Khaṇḍa. Here, Jālaṅdhara was born from fire that emerged from the forehead of Śiva, after Śiva threw this fire into the ocean, hence the name Jālaṅdhara, or water holder/ water held. Jālaṅdhara

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140 Chatterjee mentions that parts of the Uttara Khaṇḍa may be more recent the other sections of the PP. The following synopsis of the story is gleaned from Chatterjee, *Padma-Purāṇa: a study*, 85-90.
is later taught the science of weaponry and the scriptures by Brahmā, who then confers upon him the status of a king. Jālaṅdhara, classified as a daitya-demon here, then marries Vṛndā who was the daughter of an āsura named Kalameni. After an inevitable battle with the gods, Jālaṅdhara is killed and then revived by the priest of the daityas, Śukrācārya. Brhaspati, the priest of the gods, began to revive their dead with the help of herbs from a mountain top, until the now alive Jālaṅdhara throws the mountaintop into the sea. With no chance of the gods’ revival, Jālaṅdhara proceedes to usurp the throne of Indra. Viṣṇu then is approached by the gods for help, and agrees to fight Jālaṅdhara but is defeated. Lakṣmī then intervenes and pleads with Jālaṅdhara, who by now is now enticed by Nārada’s description of the beauty of Pārvatī and now desires her, which leads to war with Śiva. During the battle however, reminiscent of the BVP myth, Jālaṅdhara assumed the form of Śiva by dint of mystic power, and unsuccessfully attempts to seduce Pārvatī. Viṣṇu then assumes the form of Jālaṅdhara and successfully unites with Vṛndā, after which Jālaṅdhara is killed in battle by Śiva with a cakra, or disc weapon. Vṛndā is then said to live on Earth thereafter as the Tulasī plant. Jālaṅdhara is said in the PP and Śiva Purāṇa versions to have merged into the body of Śiva at the time of his death. The SP, showing a clearly Śaiva version of the story, has Vṛndā merge into the body of Parvati. The story appears with slightly different details within the PP and the Śiva Purāṇa; significantly, or perhaps not, Jālaṅdhara is called Śankhacūḍa in the SP, yet the above is the capsule of the narrative.

141 O’Flaherty, Mysticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Shiva, 182.
142 O’ Flaherty primarily uses the name Jālaṅdhara in her work, and treats Jālaṅdhara and Śaṅkhacūḍa as essentially the same individual, although some minute differences will be discussed below.
Asoke Chatterjee opines the above essence of the PP story is likely of Śaiva influence, while a shorter version in the Uttara Khāṇḍa in the same text is likely of Vaiśṇava influence, due to the addition of a variations of the story of Kīrtimukha, which paints Śiva in a bad light. Kīrtimukha was said to be born from the matted locks of Śiva, and of insatiable appetite. Śiva allowed him to eat the corpses off the battlefield, but when there was no war, Kīrtimukha tried to eat Brahmā, who was saved by Śiva. Kīrtimukha then begins to devour his own body, but Śiva forbids him. In the variation thought by Chatterjee to be Vaiśṇava, Kīrtimukha began to eat Rāhu, the messenger of Jālaṅdhara. Śiva then saves Rāhu by ordering Kīrtimukha to eat his own body. I do not see this necessarily as evidence of Vaiśṇava influence, as the entire story at least in the PP and SP renditions seems to showcase the power of Śiva over that of Viṣṇu overall.

Śiva is the source of Jālaṅdhara and therefore the source of his strength in both the PP and SP. These two versions describe the fire emerging from the forehead of Śiva (which was to be born as Jālaṅdhara), was manifest from the anger of Śiva towards Indra, after Indra hurls a thunderbolt at the naked Śiva while he is meditating on Mount Kailaśa. Viṣṇu is cast as a deceiver in all the narratives who uses trickery to seduce the wife of Jālaṅdhara, and is even defeated by him in battle. Śiva has the power to kill Jālaṅdhara, yet he requires the cunning of Viṣṇu, who is usually seen as inscrutable and fully divine within Vaiśṇava literature proper. Throughout the Vedic/Purānic literature Śiva often skirts the limits of dharmic boundaries, yet his power attained through yoga remains the

144 Chatterjee, *Padma-Purāṇa: a study*, 87.
145 Quoted from O’Flaherty, *Mysticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Shiva*, 290; (SP 2.5.141; PP 6.98.5-19).
constant. In the BVP Śiva kills Śaṅkhacūḍa with a trident, usually associated with him, though in this case given by Viṣṇu. In the PP and SP Śiva kills Jālaṅdhara with a disc weapon, usually associated with Viṣṇu. In all instances Śiva kills the demon, and Viṣṇu seduces the demon-king’s wife.

It is possible that none of these stories were of Vaiṣṇava origin. Tulasī (as also named in the SP) is clearly the focus in the relatively late BVP, but the goddess is in a less prominent position in the other stories. Her grandfather in the BVP version is a Śaiva, who has deviated from his family’s traditional Vaiṣṇava leanings, and for that reason was cursed by Sūrya, perhaps implying the gods were Vaiṣṇavas. The BVP is curiously silent on the Earthly dynasty of Śaṅkhacūḍa, though does mention him being initiated with a mantra of Kṛṣṇa after meeting with Tulasī.¹⁴⁶ In this account Śaṅkhacūḍa has no apparent relation with Śiva; the only connection with Śiva was the grandfather of Tulasī, Dharmadvaja who was Śaiva.

The BVP version seems Vaiṣṇava in intent, though even at that, many more archaic elements of the story remain, such as Viṣṇu’s deception of the demon-king’s wife. Viṣṇu in this context seems more akin to earlier, even Vedic representations of the usually transcendent lord, who is the friend of Indra and of the suras, yet has not been more idealized by later devotional influences. The root Tulasī story is no doubt quite ancient, yet the BVP version, as well as other narratives within the BVP show later influences of Tantra, such as much emphasis on mantra and erotic themes, as well as sectarian devotional thought, which were perhaps not beginning to be articulated in a systematic way until around the 6th century CE.

It is not clear whether the verses in the PP and elsewhere that deal with the ritual use of the Tulasī plant, including its leaves, are contemporaneous to the Śaṅkhacūḍa/Jālaṅḍhara episode or not. It is possible the leaves were already being used as medicine and ritual offerings, and the story of Vṛṇḍā/Tulasī was already being circulated, and the two were connected at some point; the story therefore justifying the sanctity of the plant by relating it to a goddess/consort of Viṣṇu.

Tulasī and Śaṅkhacūḍa may have been yakṣas or devas of some sort, perhaps worshipped regionally. Tulasī obviously has connection with vegetation, as well as with a river, in the BVP; both traditional dwelling places of yakṣis. Jālaṅḍhara is born from the ocean; similar to the Vedic god of the waters Varuṇa, who is also classified as a yakṣa in early sources.147 Śaṅkhacūḍa’s origins are unknown, yet his bones were dropped in the ocean and became conch shells, an item associated with Kubera, Varuṇa and others, from some of the earliest depictions of yakṣas in sculpture; statuary that likely predates the composition of the Purāṇas.148 Whatever the origins of these myths, it is quite clear that by the time of the composition of the BVP, Tulasī and Vṛṇḍā both were solidly established as Vaiṣṇava goddesses. The fact that they have two different names could indicate they were different goddesses at some point, and via Purāṇic narration, became amalgamated into the same person. Later developments as mentioned above such as the dramas of Rūpa Gosvāmin develop yet another facet of the goddess Vṛṇḍā’s character, one solely connected with not only Krṣṇa, but with a particular erotic aspect of Krṣṇa in his dalliances

147 See Coomaraswamy, Yakṣas: Essays in the Water Cosmology, chapter 13, on Varuṇa.
148 See Ibid., 122.
with Rādhā in the Vṛndāvana forest. Thus the identities of these goddesses were evolving well into the 16th and 17th centuries CE.

The characters of Śaṅkhacūḍa and Jālaṅdhara seem to change very little over the centuries. In their respective narrations they are said to be of dānava and daitya descent, thus seemingly natural enemies of Viṣṇu. This is not always the case however. As we see in the BVP version, Śaṅkhacūḍa is initiated into the worship of Kṛṣṇa, and Jālaṅdhara is born of Śiva in the PP episode. Dānavas are described in the MhB to be the children of Kasyapa and Danu, and the daityas the children of Diti.\footnote{Monier Williams, \textit{A Sanskrit-English Dictionary}, 474,497.} The terms seem to be used almost interchangeable with āsura.\footnote{Ibid.,160.} Tracing back to the older sections of the RV, W. E. Hale argues for a translation of āsura as “lord”, and argues further that the term did not refer to any specific groups of gods, or that devas and āsuras were mutually exclusive groups.\footnote{Edward Wash Hale, \textit{Āsura- in Early Vedic Religion} (Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 1986), 52, 179. O’Flaherty, \textit{Mysticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Shiva}, 213. And PP 6.11.45-7.} For the purposes of understanding Śaṅkhacūḍa’s role in the myth, this does not help, however. Śaṅkhacūḍa is portrayed as generally pious, aside from the fact he took universal control from the devas. Being the incarnation of a celestial associate of Kṛṣṇa within the story may also account for Śaṅkhacūḍa’s more genteel disposition. Jālaṅdhara on the other hand seems to be more of a multi-dimensional character than Śaṅkhacūḍa. In the PP Jālaṅdhara gets the upper hand in the battle with Viṣṇu; and prior to that climactic battle, Jālaṅdhara attempts to win Pārvatī from Śiva taunting “How can you live on alms and yet keep the beautiful Pārvatī? Give her to me, and wander from house to house with your alms bowl...you should give your wife to someone who will appreciate her more than you do”\footnote{O’Flaherty, \textit{Mysticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Shiva}, 213. And PP 6.11.45-7.}.
Jālaṅdhara appears to carry a higher status as a vanquished enemy of Śiva than does Śaṅkacūḍa. There is a form of Śiva listed in the Liṅga Purāṇa (LP) named Jālaṅdharaṇtaka (meaning literally "ender of Jālaṅdhara"); a version the story is also found in the LP. Śiva's killing of Śaṅkacūḍa does not seem to warrant an epithet.

Neither Śaṅkacūḍa nor Jālaṅdhara seem to be very important in the later progression of the Tulasī myth. Kṛṣṇa, however, also kills an individual named Śaṅkacūḍa in the Bhāgavat Purāṇa. This Śaṅkacūḍa is said to be a servant of Dhanada, or Kubera, and a guhyaka (a type of yakṣa). In this story Śaṅkacūḍa attempts to abduct the cowherd girls Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma are cavorting with in the forest at night. He is later beheaded by a blow from Kṛṣṇa's fist, who presents Śaṅkacūḍa's conch-shaped diadem to Balarāma.

It is clear there was much borrowing between the various Purāṇas. Certain motifs seem to arise from major to minor themes. There is at the center the goddess. Around the goddess is the powerful demon husband, the powerless gods, the sexually deceptive acts of Viṣṇu, a great battle in which the demon-husband is killed, and, most important for understanding Tulasī in popular Hinduism, the goddess becoming a tree. An important element of the story, which will become more apparent when looking at modern Tulasī adoration, is that of Tulasī's pativrata, or impeccable chastity to her husband. It is due to her chastity that her transgressive husband's life is maintained, and only by the trickery of Viṣṇu can her chastity be broken. Other elements of the story include symbols such as the conch, (at

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154 Ibid., 65. And LP I.97.
155 BhP 10.34.25, 28.
156 Ibid. 10.34.31-32
least in the case of Śaṅkhacūḍa) and the Śālagrāma Śilā, which are important ritual items in themselves, yet also very much associated with the Tulasī plant and leaves. It is not clear what the sources of these stories are. They could be oral narrations that gradually expanded to include different gods, and different elements, and evolved differently and were finally recorded in the late Purāṇic age. The narration of the life of Tulasī and Vṛndā, as well as the sanctity of the Tulasī plant and leaf seem to be firmly rooted in the different Purāṇic versions of the myth.
Chapter 4- The Tulasī Cult in Practice

The modern practice of Tulasī worship includes both ritualistic elements, as well as beliefs derived from the narrative story, as described by various Purāṇas. The worship of the plant goes on daily in temples and homes, and there are seasonal festivals to Tulasī observed with slight differences according to regional tradition. As stressed before, these practices seem to be exclusively Purānic in source, and world wide in practice, although variations abound. Many beliefs and practices are inspired by the Kārttika Māhātmyas of the PP and SkP, particularly the yearly festival of the marriage of Viṣṇu (or Krṣṇa) with Tulasī during the Hindu month of Kārttika (or Kartik). The practices of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, and members of ISKCON (popularly known as the ‘Hare Krishnas’) which will be discussed, are theologically influenced by the writings of Rūpa Gosvāmin and other Gauḍīya authors, yet the Purāṇas are clearly the backbone of the Tulasī cult. This chapter will examine three examples of modern Tulasī worship: that of the residents and pilgrims of Varanasi, India as occurs during the month of Kārttika (October-November); the folk marriage of Tulasī as observed by women in Himachal Pradesh, India; and finally the daily worship of Tulasī in ISKCON temples, which has been one vehicle for Tulasī worship to move beyond the borders of India.¹⁵⁸ From the pages of the Purāṇas comes a living cult of the plant-goddess that crosses Hindu sectarian lines.

The Tulasī plant can often be seen in both Hindu temples and in the homes of Hindus. In traditional North Indian style homes with a courtyard

¹⁵⁸ I have chosen to use ISKCON, and the field work of Pintchman and Narayan as the primary examples of modern Tulasī worship because these were the most detailed sources of information. There are undoubtedly many regional Tulasī worship variations.
the plant often sits in an elevated pillar-like planter, in a prominent place.\textsuperscript{159} The risen planter serves the dual purposes of maintaining the sanctity of the plant by raising it off the ground as well as providing room for the devout to circumambulate the plant to take full advantage of its sin-destroying powers as related in the Purāṇas. The leaves of the plant and its small seasonal flowers are gathered to place on offerings to Viṣṇu, and his various incarnations, as well as to be strung into garlands to wreath the deities. Such garlands seem especially robust in south Indian temples, perhaps due to a more favorable horticultural climate for the plant. The wood of the Tulasī plant is used to make necklaces and rosaries used by Vaiṣṇavas and others; the use of which is said to be auspicious in the Purāṇas.\textsuperscript{160} The plant is worshiped with traditional articles of pūjā, such as lamp, incense, and flowers, either daily or on special occasions. Thus the plant, its leaves and wood are used in ritual daily, in several ways.

\textsuperscript{159} See figure 7.
\textsuperscript{160} As discussed in chapter 2.
The Wedding of Tulasī and Viṣṇu

Perhaps the single most important festival for Tulasī in the Hindu year is the observance of Tulasī and Viṣṇu’s wedding during the month of Kārttika, or Tulasī Vivāha, which is the source of many local traditions on this theme. The Kārttika month in general is considered very auspicious in the Purāṇas and many different vratas, or occasions for taking religious vows, and festivals fall in this month, as described in the Kārttika Māhātmyas of the PP and SkP. 161 One of the most significant days within the entire month is that of the Prabhodana (or Uṭṭhana) Ekadaši. Ekadaši

161 For more on Kārttika in Varanasi in general, see Pintchman, Guests at God’s Wedding.
denotes the eleventh lunar day in either the bright or dark half of the lunar month. Prabodhana as the name implies, is the day that Viṣṇu is thought to ‘wake up’ from his four month slumber during the *caturmasa*, or rainy season. The *caturmasa* itself is generally held to be an inauspicious period of time; therefore the waking of Viṣṇu is considered to be very auspicious. In the practice of the devout of Varanasi this is also the day in which the marriage of Viṣṇu and Tulasī is said to take place. The festival is discussed in the Kārttika Māhātmya of the SkP, yet is interestingly not mentioned in the PP.¹⁶²

This festival seems to not be of such importance to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, although the Kārttika month itself is held in high esteem; many of the month’s festivals are related to the worship of Kṛṣṇa. Gauḍīya worship tends to be a regular daily affair throughout the year as we will see when examining ISKCON. The theme of the marriage between Tulasī and Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa, and modern Tulasī worship in general, is variously interpreted and expressed among worshippers, and varies somewhat from region to region.

According to the ethnographic field work of Tracy Pintchman and Kirin Narayan the marriage of Tulasī, as well as the overall focus on Tulasī worship during the entire month of Kārttika, is mainly celebrated by women of middle and upper class families.¹⁶³ Pintchman says further, according to A.K. Ramanujan’s distinction between “Sanskritic ‘classical’ narratives and ‘women’s tales’”, these variations of the Tulasī myth narrated during Kārttika

¹⁶² Pintchman, *Guests at God’s Wedding*, 78.
fall into the category of women’s tales. These tales are not found in the “classical”, or in this case Purānic corpus, but have grown from the Purānic narratives, and in other cases the stories are totally unique.

Arguably such variations to the myth are not exclusive to women’s folk interpretations, as the Vṛndā of Rūpa Gosvāmin is also a goddess whose likeness is not found within the Purāṇas; although the dramas of Rūpa are composed in Sanskrit rather than local dialects of the “women’s tales”. Other medieval followers of Rūpa, such as Narottam Das composed songs dedicated to Tulasī following Rūpa’s lead, but wrote in simple Bengali. The difference between the Gauḍīya and women’s variations, in addition to the latter tradition being oral, is that the women’s stories of Tulasī and Kṛṣṇa are reflective of a “deep social resonance for Hindu women, whose lives revolve to a great extent around their roles as brides, wives, and mothers”. This observation of Pintchman seems to hold true for the women of Kangra, Himachal Pradesh as well, in reference to both the content of the tales, as well as the social status of the participating women.

Tulasī as worshipped during Kārttika by women Varanasi

In Varanasi Tulasī and her worship is one of the constants of the entire holy month, culminating in her marriage to Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu on the Prabodhana Ekadaśī. Some women see the food restrictions undertaken in the month as similar to those taken by Tulasī for the boon of gaining Kṛṣṇa as her husband. There is no special significance given to Kārttika within the actual narration of the Tulasī-Śaṅkhacūḍa story, but such

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167 The Devī-bhāgavat Purāṇa has Tulasī wed to Kṛṣṇa rather than to Viṣṇu.
168 Pintchman, *Guests at God’s Wedding*, 94.
connections have been made in the Kārttika Māhātmyas of the Padma and Skanda Purāṇas and further developed by folk stories.

The daily worship, or Kārttika pūjā, practiced by groups of women during the month is not exclusively devoted to Tulasī, but she certainly holds a special status. Groups of women meet as early as three o’clock in the morning, to bathe on the ghats of the Gaṅgā prior to the worship. After bathing, mud is brought from the Gaṅgā, as observed by Pintchman, to make icons of “Suyra, Chandrama, Shiva, the Ganges, (and) Ganesha; a sprig of Tulasi stuck in a mound of mud being that of Tulasi”. Other icons present occasionally include protector or family deities. Flames and flowers are then offered, and devotional songs are sung. Although different deities are present for worship, the majority of the songs, as translated by Pintchman, seem to be mainly focused on Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā; Tulasī to a lesser extent. Pintchman mentions in this connection that some songs seem to describe Tulasī as a competitor with Rādhā for Kṛṣṇa. At least one song is totally dedicated to Tulasī, sometimes called Tulsa here. Stories of various gods are then narrated after the pūjā. Worship in the above fashion is practiced every morning of the Kārttika month.

A special ceremony for celebrating the marriage of Tulasī and Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa is then observed in Varanasi on the Prabodhana Ekādaśi as mentioned earlier. According to Pintchman:

Many women perform Tulasī’s marriage in their homes, constructing a marriage pavilion in the house or courtyard and decorating it with flowers and stalks of sugar cane, symbolic of the

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169 Ibid., 102.
170 Ibid., 104.
171 Ibid.
172 Ibid., 113.
173 Ibid., 115.
174 Ibid., 117.
Earth’s fecundity. The bride and groom are adorned and placed in the middle of the marriage pavilion. Popular vrat manuals suggest that one use a Shaligram stone groom, but in Benares women tend to use a small brass image of Vishnu or Krishna.\textsuperscript{175}

Pintchman suggests that Tulasī adoration among the women of Varanasi carries particular themes that resonate in the lives of the women themselves. Tulasī, as per the myth, was a woman (and a goddess) who undertook penance to obtain a husband, then ultimately lost her Earthly husband, and chastity, due to the deception of another man. Pintchman observes: “Kartik pūjā provides a forum for sacralizing women’s values, roles and experiences as potential or actual brides, wives and mothers. The tradition as a whole helps render these values, roles and experiences especially significant by enacting them on a sacred stage, relating them to a transcendent model”.\textsuperscript{176} The Tulasī myth seems especially relevant to middle and upper class women in this regard. Not only does the Purānic narrative itself hold meaning within the context of the women’s lives, but the plant form of the goddess is easily accessible and eminent. The plant goddess is also seems symbolic of fertility, and life; similar to the archaic worship of gods and goddesses of the forest or water. Such practices are extant within modern Hindu worship.

**Tulasī Worship Among the Women of Kangra, Himachal Pradesh**

As with the women of Varansasi the worship of Tulasī, or Sailī as she is called in the region, is most important during the Kārttika month.\textsuperscript{177} In Kangra it is thought that worship performed by women in the final five days of the Kārttika month, Prabodhana Ekadāśi until the full moon five days later, is sufficiently efficacious in producing enough pious merit to last

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 78.

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 186.

\textsuperscript{177} Narayan, *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon*, 39.
participants the entire year. The traditional Kangra vrat, or religious observance, is quite difficult and requires women to fast the entire five days and keep five oil lamps burning continuously day and night, although Narayan’s informant said that few households observe to that extent. The ceremonies in Kangra are performed within the house instead of on the banks of a river such as in Varanasi. The worship here is also performed in the late afternoon or evenings, and consists of a much more simple ceremony. Women gather later in the day around the five burning lamps and the Tulasī plant, accompanied by a brass statue of Kṛṣṇa. Fruits and berries are laid out as an offering to the Tulasī-Kṛṣṇa couple, as songs are sung, and stories told.

The recited stories themselves are even less along Purāṇic themes than those of the Varanasi women. The majority seem to be narrations of non-divine people who achieve some boon or benediction by following the observance of the five day festival. Such instructive stories are very much a part of the regional tradition, as related by Narayan, and are not reserved for the Kārttika time worship of Tulasī, but they are certainly an important feature of the five day worship. As Narayan observes, “Throughout India, observant Hindu women are thought to sustain familial well-being through their rituals...The stories (vrat kathā) that are told as part of the rituals usually make reflexive mention of the ritual and its rewards”.

In the context of the worship of the women of Varanasi and Kangra, Tulasī seems to have the identity of a particularly benign and understanding goddess. Her somewhat unique situation as being a co-wife of Rādhā or

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178 Ibid.
179 Ibid., 46.
180 Ibid., 47.
181 Ibid., 17.
Lakṣmī to Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu respectively, seems to resonate with women, as such a status is seen traditionally as less desirable, and likely reflective of the sometimes precarious social and marital situations middle and upper class Hindu women find themselves. Tulasī was pious and performed great penance, another theme reflected in the practice of women Kārītika pūjā observers, who seek blessings for themselves and their families.

The region of Kangra itself also has connections with the mythical daitya Jālaṅdhara, which curiously doesn’t seem to be a significant point in the local practice of Tulasī worship. According to Kathleen Erndl, Jālaṅdhara Pīṭha is listed within the Piṭhanirṇaya, a Tantric text dealing with the Tantric Śakti-Pīṭha tradition, as the place where the breast of the goddess Satī fell to Earth, in the Kangra region. The myth of the falling body parts of the goddess is related variously, but in short, the spot where each part fell is said to be a great center of Śakti within Tantric traditions; powerful places to perform Tantric practices. Jālaṅdhara Pīṭha is also supposed to have been a center of the Śaiva Kāpālika cult as well as that of Tantric Buddhism. Agehananda Bharati found reference to the spot in a Vajrayāna Buddhist text, the Hevajra Tantra (ca 690 CE), which is perhaps the oldest reference to the Pīṭha, which he suggests is in the east Punjab region, around the city that still bears the name Jalandhar. Erndl indicates the site of the temple of goddess Vaješvarī or Braješvarī, in the town of Nagarkot in the Kangra region, a short distance to the east of Jalandhar, is likely the actual spot of the Jālaṅdhara Pīṭha of early Tantric

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182 One informant told Pintchman that in addition to co-wives, there is a current (perhaps long standing) practice of wealthy men maintaining lovers or “kept women”. See Pintchman, Guests at God’s Wedding, 171.
183 See Erndl, Victory to the Mother, 32-36, for more on the Śakti Pīṭha tradition.
184 Erndl, Victory to the Mother, 35.
The connection between Jālaṅdhara, Śiva and goddess based Tantric traditions are indeed interesting, and perhaps there is, or was, more background to the relationship than the extant Purāṇas and Tantras indicate.

Figure 8 Decorated Tulasī planter, the inscription means “victory to Mother Tulasī”; Himachal Pradesh. (Photo courtesy of Kathleen Erndl)

Tulasī Worship in ISKCON

ISKCON (International Society of Kṛṣṇa Consciousness) is a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava offshoot, legally established in New York City in 1965 by an elderly Bengali Sannyāsin named A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Bhaktivedanta Swami sought to transplant the Gauḍīya culture around the

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186 Erndl, Victory to the Mother, 48.
world, establishing a monastic order, temples, farm communities, and publishing several volumes of translations of Gauḍīya texts, as well as those of the Bhagavad Gitā, and the Bhāgavat Purāṇa with his own commentaries. The organization traces itself back to the medieval Bengali saint Caitanya, the actual ideological founder of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, though he himself left very little in writing to establish the cult. Today there are ISKCON temples on every continent, and many smaller centers.

ISKCON temples often feature deities installed by loosely Pāñcarātric rituals, usually of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, Caitanya, and occasionally other gods of the Vaiṣṇava pantheon. Temple altars also include photos or icons of Bhaktivedanta and other members of the guru lineage, and almost always the Tulasī plant. Bhaktivedanta also began a system offering initiation to confer Brahmin status to (international) members, both male and female, to thus ensure the temple worship be performed up to traditional Hindu standards of Brahmins performing temple worship. Many temples adhere to the standard performance of many Hindu temples in India of several food offerings and ārati ceremonies throughout the day and evening.

As established by Bhaktivedanta, pūjā to Tulasī is performed in the morning; the ārati may be performed by members without Brahmin initiation. The ārati is performed with the potted Tulasī plant placed on a raised pedestal. Participants surround the plant and sing a song in Bengali by

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189 Ibid.
191 Pañcarātra Pradīpa, 36.
Narottama Das praising Tulasī as having the ability to grant worshippers entrance to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa’s heaven. Following the ārati, participants circumambulate the plant while reciting a Sanskrit verse extolling the sin-destroying virtues of such circumambulation. The worship process and hymns are standardized and performed the same way at all ISKCON temples and centers that have the Tulasī plant.

The conception of the goddess in the Gauḍīya tradition is consistent with Purāṇic ritualistic conception as well as later embellishments by Rūpa Gosvāmin and other medieval Gauḍīya writers. In the ritualistic sense, devotees wear obligatory necklaces of Tulasī wood, perform ritual watering and circumambulation of the plant, and most perform japa, the murmuring of the Hare-Kṛṣṇa mantra on larger Tulasī beads; practices that are also performed by other Vaiśṇava sects. Transcendent conceptions of Tulasī as goddess differ somewhat from non-Gauḍīya sects. In general, the plant is believed to be a vegetal incarnation of the goddess Tulasī (or Vṛndā), who also exists simultaneously on another plane in the heaven of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, Goloka Vṛndāvana. How this conception fits within the context of Purāṇic narrations is not entirely clear. Rūpa does not seem to bother with the possible conceptual differences between the goddesses, and focuses on Vṛndā as being essentially a vandevi friend of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. Later writers such as Narottama and Viśvanātha clearly conflate the plant with both goddesses.

In 1989 a temple to goddess Vṛndā, at a place called Vṛndā Kuṇḍa, in the Kāmyavan region of Mathura, India, was given to ISKCON by a Bengali

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192 See appendix B.
193 Pāñcarātra Pradīpa, 45.
194 See appendix.
ascetic. The antiquity of the site and the original deity, a very old and weathered relief sculpture, is professed by ISKCON to be 5000 years old. The ascetic who gave ISKCON the temple established an icon of Vṛndā at the site in the early 1980’s, the older icon being too weathered to reveal anything but two non-descript human-like figures. Another temple to Vṛndā exists in the same region, the icon a woman figure of reddish hue, body completely covered by folds of cloth thus covering any possible identifying features. The existence of possibly two icons of Vṛndā in Kāmyavana is compelling, but shed no light to the possible existence of a earlier cult of Vṛndā worship in the area. The site acquired by ISKCON was, until the 1980’s, a couple of dilapidated ponds, and a non-descript ancient icon, similar to hundreds of others in the region. It is possible the association of the site with Vṛndā goes back only to medieval times, as well as the other locally managed Vṛndā temple in Kāmyavana. From as far back as the Hari-vaṁśa appendix to the Mahābhārata, the childhood home of Kṛṣṇa is said to be Vṛndāvana, or forest of Vṛndā, yet the way the forests have been divided over time, the village of Vṛndāvana is quite some distance away. Currently, as far as I can gather, Vṛndāvana itself has no Vṛndā temple of any antiquity. Thus the existence of both the ISKCON, and the locally managed temple of Vṛndā in Kāmyavana, remain somewhat of an enigma in understanding the possibly more archaic identity of the goddess in the region.

196 Ibid.
197 Unfortunately I could not find any information on the history of this temple and deity.
The iconography of the ISKCON Vṛṇḍā of Vṛṇḍā Kuṇḍa shows the goddess of light complexion with two hands, the right holding a lotus, and the left in the abhaya, or ‘fear not’ hand gesture. The smaller processional icon of Vṛṇḍā the right hand of the goddess supports a parrot. While the green (Indian ringneck) parrot is often associated with south Indian goddesses such as Mīnākṣī, it is also associated with the goddess in the Vraja region, likely due to Rūpa’s influence, as in his dramas she is a controller of various aspects of the forest, including animals. This contrasts
with the PP’s version of Tulasī given in the Tulasī Māhātmya. According to Gopinath Rao’s translation:

Tulasīdevī is of dark complexion, with eyes resembling the petals of the lotus flower, and having four arms; of the four hands two are in the abhaya and varada poses and the other ones keep in them a lotus and nilotpala (blue lotus). She is to be adorned with kīrīṭa (tiara), hāra (string of pearls), keyūra (upper-arm bracelet), kuṇḍalas (earrings) and other ornaments, clothed in white garments and seated on a padmāsana (or on a lotus).¹⁹⁸

In my research I could not find any reference to an actual icon made to the above characteristics; the ISKCON icons of Vṛndā Kuṇḍa vary greatly from the above description. Tulasī is generally worshipped in the form of the actual plant as we see with the worship of the women of north India. Within ISKCON as well, statue forms of Tulasī-Vṛndā are very rare, the primary example being that of the Vṛndā Kuṇḍa icon.

The goddesses Tulasī and Vṛndā are worshiped variously by Hindus. The above is by no means an exhaustive list of ritual, or regional and sectarian conceptions of the deity. It seems, however, the origin of the goddess is found in Purānic mythology, thus establishing her authenticity within the overarching Hindu tradition. The goddess is further interpreted and approached according to the desires of her worshippers. I have chosen
the above examples as groups in the modern day who place a high degree of emphasis on the worship of Tulasī specifically, in both plant and iconic forms.
Conclusion

In this work I have attempted to examine the Tulasī plant in relation to aspects of Vaiṣṇava goddess conception. Goddess, and plant worship, is not unique to India, yet seems to have developed in such a way within Indian traditions that have maintained relevance for worshippers up until modern times. The religious practices of the earliest inhabitants of the subcontinent are not fully understood even though modern practices likely have ancient sources. Modern scholarship is forced to make use of whatever written literature is extant, as well as relatively scant archeological information to provide a glimpse into the origins of what is now known as Hinduism. I suggest the worship of Tulasī as both plant and goddess, was enabled by the ancient worship of yakṣas and yakṣī’s (as well as other nature divinities), which were themselves variously cast as beings that were both aspects of nature, (i.e. plants, rivers, natural formations), as well as supernatural beings represented by these things.

Kṛṣṇa rather than Viṣṇu, is the primary male deity associated with Tulasī in the modern day, which is also an interesting development and fairly easy to map out. If anything, Hinduism can be said to be a religion of absorption rather than domination; minor divinities and practices were likely absorbed into the more dominant religious trends of the particular period. How this absorption was accomplished in respect to Tulasī is not entirely clear. There is some evidence that Śrī and Lakṣmī both possess some yakṣī-like features, and the two goddesses seem to be the basis for Tulasī’s sanctity within the Purāṇic paradigm. It is possible that plant itself was held esteem due to medicinal or purificatory properties from very ancient times, and the goddess herself popular as folk deity, thus enabling an easy
transition from esteemed plant to goddess, whose adoration continues into the modern day.
APPENDIX A

Śrī Vṛṇḍā-devī-aṣṭakam

By Viśvanātha Cakravartī

Translation by Dasarath-suta Dasa*

1) gāṅgeya-cāmpeya-ṭaḍid-vinindi
rocīḥ-pravāha-snapitātma-vṛndeḥ
bandhuka-bandhu-dhyuti-divya-vāso
vṛnde numaste caraṇaravindam

Oh Vṛndā, You are adorned with an extremely billiant translucent dress that is as red as a banduka flower. By your own beautiful bodily luster, you put to shame the combined effulgence of pure gold, champaka flowers, and lightening bolts, and by that luster bathing your associates. We offer obeisance to your lotus-feet.

2) bimbādharoditvara-manda-hasya
nāsāgra-muktā-dyuti-dipīṣye
vicitra-ratnā-bharaṇāśriyāḍhye
vṛnde numaste caraṇaravindam

Oh Vṛndā, the countenance of your face is especially radiant, being decorated by your gentile sweet smile (which has sprouted from your reddish lips resembling bimba fruits), as well as being embellished by your pearl nose ornament. You are also endowed with loveliness by your body decorated with multifularious jeweled ornaments. We offer obeisance to your lotus feet.

3) samasta-vaikuṇṭha-śīrmanau-śrī

Oh Vṛndā, the supremely pure abode of Kṛṣṇa known as Vṛndāvana, which is the crest jewel of all planets in the spiritual sky, is presided over by the charming daughter of King Vṛṣabhānu, Rādhā. But she has awarded you with the power and authority to maintain this divine realm as your service to her. We offer obeisance to your lotus-feet.

4) tvadājñayā pallava-puṣpa-bhṛṅga
   mṛgādibhir mādhava-keli-kuñjaḥ
   madhvādibhir bhānti vibhūṣyamānā
   vṛnde numaste caraṇaravindam

Oh Vṛndā, all the multitudes of Mādhava’s love-sporting bowers become supremely beautified by being decorated under your direction with fresh leaves, sprouts, flowers, bees, deer, peacocks, talking parrots, all types of animals and birds, as well as with wonderful seasons headed by Spring. We offer our obeisance to your lotus feet.

5) tvadiya-dūtyena nikuṇja-yūno
   ratyutkayoh keli-vilāsa-siddhiḥ
   tvat-saubhagam kena nirucyat āṁ tad
   vṛnde numaste caraṇaravindam

Oh Vṛndā, by your expertly intelligent service as a messenger for the amorous couple of the bower, their transcendental love-sports become successful. Who in this world can speak to your great fortune? We offer obeisance to your lotus-feet.

6) rāsābhilāso vasatiṣ ca vṛndā-
   vane tvadiśāṅghri-saroja-sevā
   labhyā ca puṁsām kṛpayā tavaiva
   vṛnde numaste caraṇaravindam

Oh Vṛndā, devotees who have the desire to participate in the rāsa-dance, who long to live eternally in Vṛndāvana, and who seek service to the lotus feet of your lords, easily attain ever lasting fulfillment of all their desires by your mercy. We offer obeisance to your lotus-feet.
7) tvam kirttyase sātvata-tantra-vidbhir
   lilābhidhānā kila kṛṣṇa-śaktiḥ
tavaiva mūrtis tulasī nṛ-loke
   vṛnde numaste caraṇaravindam

Oh Vṛndā, Highly qualified sages who are well-versed in the sātvata-tantras
have praised your as the energy of kṛṣṇa known as lilā-śakti. You are also very
famous in the world of men for your appearance in the form of a tree, known as
Tulasī. We offer obeisance at your lotus feet.

8) bhaktyā vihīnā aparādha-lakṣaiḥ
   kṣipitāś ca kāmādi-taraṅga-madhye
   kṛpā-mayi tvāṁ śaraṇam prapannā
caraṇaravindam
   vṛnde numaste caraṇaravindam

Oh Vṛnda we are bereft of devotion, due to committing much offence we
have been cast deeply into the ocean of desires. We are being tossed about on
waves of lust and so fourth. Surrendered to you we pray. We offer obeisance to
your lotus-feet.

9) vṛndāṣṭakaṁ yah śrīmāt pathed vā
   vṛndāvanādhiśa-padābja-bhṛṅgaḥ
   sa prāpya vṛndāvana-nitya-vāsaṁ
tat-prema-sevāṁ labhate kṛtaṁ
   kṛtārthaḥ

Whoever hears or recites these eight prayers in glorification of Vṛndā-devī
becoming just like a bumble bee that is always anxious to taste the sweet lotus
feet of the lord of Vṛndāvana, such a person attains eternal residence there.
Having achieved that loving service one remains situated.
Śrī-Tulasī-Kīrtana

By Narottama Dasa

Translation and transliteration from Bengali by Acyutananda Dasa

1) namo namaḥ tulasī kṛṣṇapreyasi namo namaḥ rādhā-kṛṣṇa seva pābo ei abhilāṣi

2) ye tomāra śaraṇa loy, tāra vāñchā pūrṇa hoy kṛpākori koro tāre vṛḍāvana-vāsi

3) mora ei abhilāṣa, vilāsa kuñje dio vāsa nayane heribo sadā yugala-rūpa-rāśi

4) ei nivedana dhara, sakhīra anugata koro sevā-adhikāra-diye koro dāsi

5) dīna kṛṣṇa-dāse hoy, ei yena mora hoy śrī-rādhā-govinda-preme sadā yena bhāsi

1) Oh Tulasī, beloved of Kṛṣṇa, I bow before you. The only desire I have is to serve Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

2) Whoever takes shelter of you has his wishes fulfilled. Bestowing your mercy on him, you make him a resident of Vṛndāvana.

3) My desire is that you will also grant me a residence in the pleasure groves of Sri Vṛndāvana-dhāma. Thus, within my vision I will always behold the beautiful pastimes of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

4) I beg you to make me a follower of the cowherd damsels of Vraja. Please give me the privilege of devotional service and make me your own maidservant.

5) This very fallen and lowly servant of Kṛṣṇa prays, "May I always swim in the love of Śrī Rādhā and Govinda".
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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