

From Ghost to Goddess: The Reimagining of Cuḍel Mā in Contemporary Gujarat

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In Gujarati, the noun *cuḍel* refers to a “witch” or a female ghost (*bhūt*), usually the spirit of a woman who died prematurely or during childbirth. Haunting cremation grounds and roadsides, *cuḍels* are imagined as grotesque but also seductive entities, and Gujarati folktales commonly tell of *cuḍels* enticing men or kidnapping children. For those unfortunate enough to interact with them, *cuḍels* are said to bring about any number of hardships, including possession-like trances requiring exorcism. Like other malevolent spirits in North Indian folklore, *cuḍels* demand reverence, and for this reason small shrines of rocks or bricks would form at roadsides, trees and other sites to acknowledge their presence. Given the *cuḍel*’s fearsome reputation, it is perhaps surprising that a singular Cuḍel Mā has become the patron deity of an increasingly popular pilgrimage site in the Patan region of Gujarat, the so-called High Court of Kungher.

In gaining this rapidly elevated status and fame, Cuḍel Mā follows other Gujarati maternal goddesses bearing the title *mā* or *mātā* (meaning “exalted mother”). Village *mātās*, such as Melāḍī, Bahucarā and Khoḍīyār, have become as ubiquitous in the urban middle-class milieu as they have traditionally been in the rural setting. Now these goddesses feature in public billboards, DVD movies and music videos, their *bhajans* disseminated for the technologically proficient on social media sites like YouTube and Facebook.¹ Capacious *mātā* temples and shrines now appear with great frequency in and around Ahmedabad and other metropolitan areas. With this shift from tiny village shrines (or *derīs*) to temples, *mātā* worship has transformed as well, with ecstatic elements like animal sacrifice, possession, and alcohol oblations having been replaced by purely sattvic practices amenable to upper caste and upper class tastes. While many of these goddesses have

¹ Cuḍel Mā is herself no stranger to pop culture media. At least two feature-length Gujarati-language films have been released with the *cuḍel* as the central theme.

been depicted in the village setting with minimal or aniconic representations such as *trisūls* (tridents) and stones smeared with red lead, they now have taken on distinctive iconographies patterned after lithographs of Sanskritic goddesses like Lakṣmi or Sarasvatī—agreeable-looking young women with easily identifiable animal vehicles (or *vāhanas*). Now Melaḍī rides the goat, Bahucarā the rooster, and Khoḍīyār the crocodile.²

In terms of iconography, Cuḍel Mā contrasts with other Gujarati goddesses, for her main icon at the High Court of Kungher is simply a flame in an oil lamp. The flame is ubiquitous at Gujarati goddess temples, but for Cuḍel Mā and her devotees, this minimalistic symbol takes on maximal theological effect. Indeed, at Kungher, Cuḍel is figured as neither a ghost nor a witch but instead as the supreme goddess, the flame embodying the totality of Śakti. Drawing on colonial-era writings and ethnographic data from both physical and virtual sites, this paper will attempt to trace Cuḍel Mā’s movement beyond her familiar haunts to become a singular, universalized mother goddess amenable to upwardly mobile, middle-class sensibilities of Gujarati devotees.

² Gujarati goddesses have not been widely studied. For a discussion of Bahucarā Mata, see Samira Sheikh’s “The Lives of Bahuchara Mata,” in *The Idea of Gujarat: History, Ethnography and Text*, ed. Edward Simpson and Aparna Kapadia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 84–99. Sheikh has described how the wealthy Bahucarā temple at Becharji in Gujarat’s Mehsana District has become popular among a growing variety of pilgrims, and how the goddess has been somewhat domesticated in the process, with animal sacrifice, among other potentially “unseemly” aspects of her worship, having been replaced with symbolic substitutes (96). For a discussion of Khoḍīyār Mātā, see Neelima Shukla-Bhatt’s “Leap of the Limping Goddess,” in *Inventing and Reinventing the Goddess: Contemporary Iterations of Hindu Deities on the Move*, ed. Sree Padma (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 177–97. Shukla-Bhatt links the rise of Khoḍīyār Mā’s profile with a simultaneous Sanskritization and “vernacularization” undertaken by her *leuva* Patel followers. That is, Khoḍīyār worship has adopted Sanskritic, upper-caste practices, rendering her as an omnipresent great goddess while at the same time including popular vernacular forms of religious expression. The expansion of Khoḍīyār’s glory, then, parallels the rise of her *leuva* Patel followers up the social ladder. Shukla-Bhatt’s article builds upon earlier work by Harald Tambs-Lyche identifying Khoḍīyār’s mythology as an expression of resistance by her upwardly mobile followers against established social hierarchies. See Harald Tambs-Lyche, *Power, Profit and Poetry: Traditional Society in Kathiawar, Western India* (Delhi: Manohar, 1997).

Middle-Class Religion in Contemporary India

Several scholars have taken up the topic of religious transformations and innovations brought about by the rising Indian middle-class after the liberalization of India's economy in the early 1990s. In South India, dramatic changes have taken place for Māriyamman, a popular smallpox goddess well-known in villages for her capricious character and appetite for blood sacrifices. Joanne Waghorne has termed Māriyamman's reworking as a "gentrification of the goddess."³ In contrast to her simple village shrines, Māriyamman's urban temples now feature elaborate *mandapas* and *gōpuras*, hallmarks of "proper" South Indian Brahmanic temple construction.⁴ The scope of this gentrification goes beyond architecture to encompass a "cleaning up and ordering all elements of religious life"⁵ so that they correspond with middle-class sensibilities such as orderliness, tidiness, prosperity, and community involvement, among others. Related sensibilities also seem to inform modifications in the worship of Māriyamman, which has come to incorporate more and more conservative and Brahmanical components, such as the increased use of Sanskrit in proportion to the traditional vernacular Tamil.⁶ Accordingly, many village aspects are "now set in a very proper temple context."⁷ Ecstatic trances, for instance—a staple of village worship—are often downplayed in these urban temples.⁸

William Harman has observed much the same at Māriyamman temples in the area surrounding Chennai.⁹ At Māriyamman's Samayapuram temple, worship "has developed an increasingly respectable, high-caste, Sanskritic character."¹⁰ Here, Māriyamman is still offered goats and chickens, but these animals are no longer sacrificed, instead being resold as consecrated livestock.¹¹ Māriyamman, meanwhile, is reimaged as benign and generous,

³ See Joanne Punzo Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 129–70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 166–68.

⁹ See William Harman, "Taming the Fever Goddess: Transforming a Tradition in Southern India," *Manushi: a Journal of Women's Studies* 140 (2004): 2–16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

a goddess “concerned profoundly with the health and welfare of those devoted to her.”¹² As such, middle-class devotees come to Samayapuram with this munificence in mind, depositing offerings quickly and efficiently in hopes of fulfilling very specific requests.¹³ Harman attributes these changes to aspiring members of the middle-class attempting to re-establish connections with “traditional sources of security” as they relocate from the village to the city.¹⁴

In the North Indian context, Philip Lutgendorf has implicated middle-class values in the increasing popularity of Hanumān devotion and the proliferation of cheaply printed tantric manuals related thereto.¹⁵ For a minimal expense, these texts provide the literate with easy access to Hanumān’s veritable transformative power without need of an intermediary.¹⁶ In this way, Hanumān devotion is pragmatic and efficient, meeting a demand for “quick-fix” solutions in a hectic modern world.¹⁷ Consumption of such texts is no way undignified, however, as Hanumān very obviously participates in “Vaishnavization,” a preference for the pan-Indic, Sanskritic and Brahmanic over the local, vernacular and folk, which carries with it respectable associations of dignity, self-limitation, and vegetarianism.¹⁸ These values also fit comfortably with those of the middle-class.

As in South India, North Indian goddesses have likewise evolved according to middle class tastes. Fabrizio Ferrari has also drawn on the terminology of gentrification in characterizing major changes in the worship Śītālā Mātā, a goddess distinguishable by way of her donkey *vāhana* and, like Māriyamman, associated with smallpox.¹⁹ Practices such as *bhar*; a

¹² Ibid, 6.

¹³ Ibid, 7.

¹⁴ Ibid, 12.

¹⁵ See Philip Lutgendorf, “Five Heads and No Tale: Hanuman and the Popularization of Tantra,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 5 (2001): 269–96.

¹⁶ Ibid, 284.

¹⁷ Ibid, 287.

¹⁸ Lutgendorf, 286, 288. See also John Stratton Hawley’s introduction, “Modern India and the Question of Middle Class Religion,” in the same volume (219). For more discussion of Vaishnavization, see Peter van der Veer, *Gods on earth: The management of religious experiences and identity in a North Indian pilgrimage center* (London: Athlone Press, 1988) and Charlotte Vaudeville, “Braj: Lost and found,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 18 (1976): 195–213.

¹⁹ See Fabrizio M. Ferrari, *Religion, Devotion and Medicine in North India: The Healing Power of Sitala* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2015).

form of Śītalā possession, are now generally regarded by Bengalis from educated, urban social classes as fanaticism or superstition of working class people, particularly women.²⁰ Meanwhile, a sanitized imagining of the goddess continues to soar in mainstream popularity, shaping Śītalā's ritual, iconography and narratives.²¹ As Ferrari phrases it, the gentrifying Śītalā “is no longer the naked lady on the ass associated with Indian peasantry, but a richly decorated bourgeois young woman who acts as the bearer of the morality of twenty-first-century Indian middle class mothers.”²²

Similarly, Cynthia Humes has traced the development of the goddess Vindhyavāsinī from a tribal deity worshipped by the liquor- and sacrifice-offering peoples of the Vindhya mountain range into a singular, transcendent *Ādiśakti*—the “first goddess” from which other goddesses manifest.²³ Evidently, devotees and affiliates of her popular pilgrimage site at Vindhyachal came to believe that “the most authentic interpretation of Vindhyavāsinī was as a Vedicized, vegetarian, and universalist goddess, a view pleasing to her increasingly ‘sophisticated’ pilgrim clientele.”²⁴ Humes labels this process of “Sanskritizing” and “sanitizing” as a “universalization.”²⁵ At the same time, Humes anticipates the work of Harman and Waghorne when she identifies a proclivity towards universalized understandings of the goddess among Vindhyachal's more educated and more urbanized pilgrims, intimating that cosmopolitan, upwardly mobile values are at least partially responsible for the universalized image of Vindhyavāsinī.²⁶

Comparable Gujarati examples have been less widely documented, this in spite of Gujarat's powerful middle-class which has burgeoned on account of the state's flourishing economy.²⁷ Countless *mātā* temples

²⁰ Ibid, 98.

²¹ Ibid, 160.

²² Ibid, 99.

²³ See Cynthia Humes, “Vindhyavasini: Local Goddess yet Great Goddess,” in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, eds. Donna Marie Wulff and John Stratton Hawley (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 49–78.

²⁴ Ibid, 73.

²⁵ Ibid, 51.

²⁶ Ibid, 74.

²⁷ The rapid development of Gujarat's economy is frequently attributed to the neo-liberal economic policies and the subsequent crystallization of a “neo-middle-class” realized under Narendra Modi, who served as chief minister of the state from 2001 to 2014. See Christophe

throughout the state exemplify this spirit of reinterpretation and innovation, and Cuḍel Mā would seem to have undergone one of the most pronounced transformations. Gentrification, universalization and a concern for the Sanskritic and Brahmanical not unlike Vaishnavization have all contributed in some measure to the recent reimagining of Cuḍel's folkloric character.

The *Cuḍels* of Gujarati Folklore

Because so many of the details pertaining to *cuḍels* circulated through oral folklore, colonial-era materials provide some of the few written sources recording traditional imaginings of these entities. *The Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* lists the *cuḍel* as one among many names for female spirits, including goddess appellations like Śīkotar, Jogaṇī, and even Melaḍī, as well as Jhāmpḍī, another ghost goddess closely connected to some *cuḍel* sites.²⁸ The *Gazetteer* associates these capricious goddesses with “low caste Hindus who avert their evil influence by offerings.”²⁹ These spirits are connected with the sacrifice of goats, fowl and even more transgressive nourishments.³⁰ Reports the *Gazetteer*:

All these spirits live on phlegm, food-leavings, human excrement, urine, and human entrails and brains. Their favorite haunts are empty and tumbledown houses, cesspools, burning grounds, *pipal* or *babul* trees, wells, and other places for drawing water, the crossing of four roads, the roofs and thresholds of houses, and hills. They enter the bodies of those who annoy them by visiting their haunts with their hair hanging loose; by committing a nuisance in or otherwise defiling their abodes; by uprooting or otherwise destroying a *pipal* tree; by swearing falsely in their name; by leaping over a circle within which offerings are laid for them at the crossing of four roads, and by working with an exorcist for their discomfort or ruin.³¹

Jaffrelot, “Gujarati Elections: the Sub-text of Modi’s ‘Hatrick’ – High Tech Populism and the ‘Neo-middle Class,” *Studies in Indian Politics* 1 (2013): 79–95.

²⁸ *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Vol. 9 pt. 1: Gujarat Population, Hindus.* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1901), 417.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 417.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 416–17.

³¹ *Ibid*, 417.

Lower caste exorcists, also known as *bhūvos* (or, alternatively, *bhuvās*), are summoned to cast out these spirits.³² *Bhūvos* are believed to have gained the favour of one or more of the local goddesses, such as Khoḍiyār, Bahucarā or Melaḍī. Before a *bhūvo* engages in his “spirit-scaring performance,” as the *Gazetteer* phrases it, he consults his patron goddess by throwing dice or counting grain seeds to determine whether the sickness is truly a possession.³³ In the most serious cases, exorcism involves the *bhūvo* entering into a trembling, trancelike state assisted by alcohol and rhythmic drumming performed by a member of the Vaghri caste. In this state, the *bhūvo* initiates a dialogue with the spirit that has taken hold of the afflicted person, interrogating it in regard to its demands. The *bhūvo* sometimes even beats himself with iron chains or burns himself with boiling oil, all in an effort to display his power to the possessing entity.³⁴ Once the spirit has been scared away, the exorcist sometimes captures it in a bottle or a lemon, which is then buried in the earth.³⁵ Variations of these practices are still undertaken by *bhūvos* in rural and even urban areas of Gujarat today, especially during the Navaratri festival, or in the wake of untimely deaths. After a successful exorcism, the *Gazetteer* reports, offerings such as boiled rice, sweets, iron nails, and copper coins are made in order to satisfy the banished spirit’s requests, as well as, “among blood offering Hindus, flesh and wine.”³⁶

In his 1914 monograph, *Folklore of Gujarat*, R.E. Enthoven, working from materials compiled by British Indologist Arthur Mason Tippetts Jackson (1866–1909), deals with *cuḍels* in greater depth, positing three classes of the female spirit. Listed first are *pośi*, women who died unfulfilled and use their afterlife to “fondle children and render good service to their widower husbands.”³⁷ *Tośis*, women who bore strong attachment to their husbands in life, do much the same after their deaths.³⁸ More unnerving

³² The *Gazetteer* lists exorcists as coming mostly from the Barwad, Vaghri, Bhil, Bhoi, Khatri, Hajam, Savaria, Ghamta, and Dharala castes, though it also includes Brahmans among these (418).

³³ *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, 418.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 422.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, 424.

³⁷ R.E. Enthoven. *Folk Lore Notes, vol. 1: Folklore of Gujarat* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1989 [1914]), 116.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 116–17.

are the *sośi*, women who were “persecuted beyond endurance” by family members before their deaths. In their spirit form, they create difficulties for their surviving kin, and are even capable of drying up men’s blood.³⁹

Cuḍels were for the most part seen as malevolent. Enthoven characterizes a *cuḍel* as a bewitching yet deformed creature, her tell-tale marking being her lack of shoulders. *Cuḍels* are notorious for asking male passersby to take them home. If an unwitting man agrees to their proposition, the *cuḍel* “spends the night in his company, and brings his life to a speedy end.”⁴⁰ Enthoven also documents a number of folk customs for evading *cuḍels*. In order to prevent such a spirit from escaping the cremation ground, mustard seeds or loose cotton wool were to be scattered along the road behind a dead woman’s funeral procession, as it was thought that the *cuḍel* would become distracted gathering up the leavings.⁴¹ Similarly, some people drew an iron nail into the end of the street after a woman’s corpse had been carried past the village boundary, as this was also believed to prevent the *cuḍel*’s return.⁴²

Because of their ability to enter drum-induced trance states and thereafter remove the threat of malicious *cuḍels*, among other spirits, *bhūvos* have enjoyed elevated status among villagers.⁴³ According to Enthoven, the *bhūvo* sees spirits not visible to ordinary eyes, and in this way becomes a medium between human beings and deities. While acknowledging that the practices of the *bhūvos* may seem dubious to some, Enthoven speaks mostly admirably of their role:

[A]lthough there may be some *bhuvvas* who profit by imposing upon the credulity of the villagers, there are many *bhuvvas* who do not work with the expectation of any reward, and are only actuated by benevolent motives. Many of them honestly believe that at the time when they are thrown into a state of trance, the *matas* or deities actually enter their bodies and speak their wishes through them as a medium.⁴⁴

³⁹ Ibid, 116.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 117.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 83.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 84.

Beyond these British interpretations, Indian colonial-era commentators also frame the *cudēl* as a nuisance or terror. In his prize-winning 1849 essay for the Guzerat Vernacular Society entitled *Bhut Nibandh*, Dalpatram Daya (1820-98),⁴⁵ famed Gujarati litterateur, reformer and educated Swaminarayan⁴⁶ convert, decries the irrationality and falsehood of popular beliefs in Gujarat related to demons, spirits and possessions thereby.⁴⁷ In doing so, he provides several examples involving the *cudēl*, which he defines as a “female *bhūt*” named for its marriage armlet, a *cūdo*.⁴⁸ So goes the account of one man terrified by a *cudēl*, as recorded by Daya:

Once upon a time, late at night, I went out for a necessary purpose. I saw two Chudels wearing golden armlets and covered with ornaments. They said only ‘shall we come?’ I made no answer but ran into my house and barred the door.⁴⁹

Daya attributes this sighting to the trickery of shadow and moonlight.⁵⁰ In another case, a well in the city of Marwar was thought to be haunted by a *cudēl*, who was seen coming and going from the site.⁵¹ Many were allegedly possessed by this *cudēl* and, thus, offerings were frequently made to the well. A much respected Brahman even reported seeing the *cudēl* vomiting fire out of her mouth. Unconvinced, the Brahman enlisted the help of five soldiers with the local raja’s permission and returned to the well at night.⁵² Here he spotted the *cudēl* and chased her into the well, at which point:

The Chudel clapped her hands and cried “Hum! Hum!” to frighten him, and also cast stones at him and ejected fire from her mouth. However, the Bramin [sic], with the Sipahis [soldiers], followed, and dragged her out by the hair of her head, and began to beat her. She then cried that she was neither Bhut nor Pret but a

⁴⁵ For more on Dalpatram Daya, see Mansukhlal Jhaveri’s *History of Gujarati Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1978), 72–76.

⁴⁶ For more on the Swaminarayan movement, a Vaishnava sect that took shape in Gujarat in the early 19th century, see Raymond Williams, *Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴⁷ Dalpatram Daya (trans. Alexander Kinloch Forbes), *Bhut Nibandh: an essay, descriptive of the demonology and other popular superstitions of Guzerat: being the prize essay of the Guzerat vernacular society for the year 1849* (Bombay: Bombay Gazette Press, 1849).

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 14 ff.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 31.

⁵² *Ibid*, 32.

woman, and they she should die if they beat her in that way. She went on to say that she was the wife of such and such a Bramin [sic], and that she came thither to keep assignation with another man. Whenever any one saw her coming or going, she, for the purpose of frightening him, blew into a roll of paper containing a lighted composition, as to make fire appear.⁵³

Although these accounts have been furnished with rational explanations, they nonetheless attest to the strength of traditional Gujarati folk beliefs regarding *cuḍels*. *Cuḍels* appear to present themselves more often in these stories in their *soṣī* form as the malevolent, sexually unrestrained woman warranting patriarchal persecution. Daya's dismissal notwithstanding, belief in such spirits was evidently commonplace in the everyday lives of Gujaratis.

While connected with other spirit-turned-goddesses like Melāḍī, colonial era print sources suggest the term *cuḍel* signified more of a ghost or "witch" than a deity. A *cuḍel* clearly seems to have been imagined as more nefarious than helpful, and far removed from sattvic, Sanskritic sensibilities. These associations bear out in more recent ethnographic accounts. D.F Pocock, for instance, drawing on fieldwork among the Patidar caste in central Gujarat, had the *cuḍel* described to him as a seductively beautiful woman whom a man might encounter by chance in the fields.⁵⁴ *Cuḍels* could only be identified from their backwards-pointing feet, which easily went unnoticed given the long saris they wore. Men who engage in intercourse with *Cuḍels* were said to suffer impotence for the remainder of their lives. Not all *cuḍels*, however, are so vile—in fact, Pocock reports that some haunted sites had become permanent, and the female ghost associated therewith established as a *mātā*,⁵⁵ a phenomenon we will take up in our next section.

Contemporary *Cuḍel* Shrines

Throughout rural Gujarat, it is not unusual to find shrines dedicated to *Cuḍel Mā*. These are often identifiable by way of colourful cloths and garments draped in the trees lining roadsides or footpaths, which may represent a continuation of the Gujarati folk custom of attaching rags or

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ David F Pocock, *Mind, Body, Wealth: a Study of Belief and Practice in and Indian Village*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), 34.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 36.

worn-out clothes to trees in which spirits were thought to reside.⁵⁶ These sites blend aspects of Cuḍel's folk identity as ghost with those of her more recently developed iteration as goddess.

I found one such shrine on a shady, tree-enshrouded road south of Ahmedabad on the way to Cambay. The spot jumps out on account of the hundreds—perhaps thousands—of saris in a variety of colours and styles intertwined with the trees for several dozen yards before the actual turnoff into the shrine (see **fig. 1**). Over the ten year life span of the temple, these garments, all donations given by devotees, have gradually stretched down the highway. Even more saris canopy the path leading to the little *derī*. Cuḍel Mā's is the leftmost among three conjoined niches, the others belonging to Jhāmpḍī Mā and Melāḍī. I observed this specific trio of divinities within family shrines and other roadside spots several times during my fieldwork. This particular set of niches sits very low to the ground, and the devotee has to kneel in order to glimpse the deities housed inside.

The Cuḍel shrine is affixed with women's cosmetic accoutrements such as kumkum, bangles, and mirrors. Numerous bottles of nail polish had been placed around the central oil lamp representing the goddess. The representative of the shrine to whom I spoke, a member of the Thakkor caste who functioned in the role of priest, explained to me that these accessories correspond with the sixteen *śṛṅgāras* or adornments of traditional bridal beautification. Like the saris, all of these items had been gifted to the shrine by devotees, as they are thought to be pleasing to a deceased woman. Makeup and saris are the only items that may be offered, the priest explained, as monetary donations are not accepted at this shrine. The offerings are generally not to be consumed as *prasād* by women who frequent the temple, nor can they be sold or given away, as they are intended for the goddesses. This is especially true of the offerings to Cuḍel and Jhāmpḍī. While the *prasād* of these two goddesses could in principle be consumed by elderly married women, it was forbidden for unmarried girls to attempt as much

⁵⁶ Enthoven writes that “Some believe that both male and female spirits reside in the Khijado, Baval and Kerado trees, and throw rags over them with the object of preventing passers by [sic] from cutting or removing the trees. Some pile stones round their stems and draw tridents over them with red lead and oil” (1914, 85). Additionally, “holy trees that receive offerings of rags from travellers, are the abodes of gods or evil spirits, and are distinguished from other trees of the same species by the epithet of *chithario*. Some people hoist flags on such trees instead of offering rags” (86).

due to the risks involved. If they did so, Cuḍel could attach herself to them, creating major problems later on in married life.

Thus, this roadside Cuḍel Mā still bears some of the precarious, ambivalent power that the term *cuḍel* connoted in Gujarati folklore. However, the scope of her influence seems to have expanded. While the priest of this shrine characterized Cuḍel as a *bhūtrupi* or “ghost form” *mātā*, he also described her as a “power goddess,” not to be taken lightly. She is the final power of justice, he concluded, not unlike the Cuḍel of Kungher whom we will soon meet. In addition, the ritual related to this roadside *cuḍel* diverges from that described in the aforementioned colonial accounts. While the priest accepts the title of *bhūvo* and performs some divining by way of a rosary, he told me he does not enter into trancelike possession states, a phenomenon referred to as “getting *pavan*” (or “wind”) of the goddess. He lives a very strict, sattvic lifestyle, steering clear of meat and liquor, among other tamasic, or impure, habits. This being the case, getting *pavan* does not fit with his religious outlook. In his words, “There is no *pavan*, just good feeling for eight to ten years.” By promoting transcendent, sattvic qualities of the goddess and her worship while still acknowledging her ghostly, capricious form, this tiny roadside *derī* marks both a contrast and continuity with the traditional, folk conceptualization of the *cuḍel*.

The High Court of Kungher

Located approximately ten kilometers from Patan City, the first and only major Cuḍel Mā temple in Gujarat is the “High Court” in the village of Kungher, which has earned its legalistic label on account of the exacting brand of justice offered to its pilgrims by its eponymous goddess. The temple’s reputation has spread largely through word of mouth, as well as a Facebook page and a sleek website in both Gujarati and English—for many tech-savvy middle-class devotees the first line of contact with a temple. In 2008, the *Times of India* even covered the site, playing off the curious nature of Cuḍel’s backstory with the title “Witch Temple is ‘high court.’”⁵⁷ While the press may not have taken the temple particularly seriously, many among the Gujarati glitterati—and even out-of-state *hoi polloi*—certainly have. The temple has attracted Bollywood actresses and numerous politicians,

⁵⁷ Ashish Vashi. “Witch Temple is ‘high court,’” *Times of India* August 13, 2008.

including Sonia Gandhi. Some say a trip to the High Court of Kungher guarantees success for election candidates. With this in mind, former Gujarat Chief minister Anandiben Patel is said to have made a wish at Kungher before taking over leadership from Narendra Modi in 2014.

The temple is at present the core of the village, bustling not just on Tuesdays and Sundays as is customary for goddess sites, but all seven days of the week. The temple complex, with its large guest house (*dharmasālā*), garden, mess hall, and aviary, sprawls throughout the town. Approaching the temple proper, one first encounters a large religious market, selling commodities such as goddess photos, coconuts, sweets, toys, CDs and DVDs of *bhajans*, and cheaply produced Gujarati-language publications providing guidelines for *vrats*, *ārthī*, *cālīsā*, and *stutis*. At this market devotees can also purchase small pieces of red and yellow cloth called *cūndḍī* as gifts for the goddess. The main temple area, an unenclosed rectangular hall, is festooned with thousands of these identical *cūndḍī*, which sway lazily in the breeze (see **fig. 2**). The central *mūrti* itself, a single oil lamp, sits in a small but opulent niche decorated in elegant gold. Women in their finest saris and men in western clothes move about the main area carrying plastic bags of fruit and sweets as *prasād* to the *mūrti*. They have come from all over northern and western India, having heard of the temple's renown.

All this—the fame, the following, and the architectural elaboration—has developed in the past decade, temple trustees informed me, due in part to the financial support provided by a prominent jaggery merchant supplying to North Gujarat. The heavy Patel involvement with the site, both currently and historically, may also factor into its expansion. Patels, who form almost 20 percent of Gujarat's population, have climbed steadily to social and economic prominence throughout the state, the country, and abroad due to their agricultural and entrepreneurial acumen.⁵⁸ The Patel community is well represented among the temple management at Kungher,⁵⁹ and their continued prosperity likely plays a role in the temple's recent gain in eminence as well. The site itself, however, has had some degree of repute, at least in folklore, for more than 250 years.

⁵⁸ Shukla-Bhatt, "Leap of the Limping Goddess," 190.

⁵⁹ http://www.highcourtofkuhner.org/management_high_court_of_kungher.html

At this time, the origin story goes, a young man named Sri Raichand Das Patel was returning home to Kungher along with his new bride.⁶⁰ At the entrance of the village was a lake with a tamarind tree and a well, and Raichand stopped his bullock car here to rest. Years before, a young girl had attempted to climb the tamarind tree to eat its fruits, only to fall into the well, wherein she drowned. Her spirit took up residence in the tamarind tree from that point on. When Raichand's new bride ventured toward the lake, the atman of the *cudēl* entered into her body. Upon returning home, "whenever the husband entered his bedroom instead of his wife he felt he saw a devine [sic] power,"⁶¹ which left him petrified and caused understandable marital strife. When informed by their son of his aversion to his new wife, Raichand's parents confronted their new daughter-in-law, only to receive a reply from the entity possessing her: "I am a Spirit called Chudel." Hearing the word *cudēl*, Raichand's parents joined in their son's terror. However, the *cudēl* assured them that she had come not to frighten but rather to help—seeing the beauty of the bride, she had entered into her body to assuage her ongoing loneliness. All this *cudēl* sought was the company of people, and so she promised to exit the body of the bride on the condition that Raichand's family would build her a simple shrine of five bricks underneath a *varakhadi* tree⁶²—a tree in which benevolent spirits are thought to dwell—on the outskirts of the village and light a small flame within it. Once this shrine was constructed, the *cudēl* vowed to thereafter "fulfill the wish of one and all."⁶³ Raichand's parents did as they were asked and, once the flame was lit, sat their possessed daughter-in-law in front of it. The spirit immediately departed her body and entered into the flame. "From then on," the Kungher website explains emphatically, "she was called The Chudel Maa!" In the years that followed, Cuḍel Mā recurrently showed her presence by finding lost or stolen articles, consistently providing justice to the people of the village. Faith in the goddess began to grow, and soon

⁶⁰ This story can be found at http://www.highcourtofkungher.org/chudel_mataji_kungher.html

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² The *varakhadi* tree is considered by some to be the *vāhana* of Cuḍel Mā. Because it can grow in all terrain and bears leaves all year round, the *varakhadi* symbolizes the unconditional nature of the blessing of the goddess, which also lasts throughout the year and can be bestowed upon anyone. Further, the life tenure of *varakhadi* tree is 500–700 years, reiterating again for her followers the endurance of Cuḍel Mā.

⁶³ http://www.highcourtofkungher.org/chudel_mataji_kungher.html

enough Cuḍel Mā's fame moved outside the village limits. This origin story, then, is layered with mythemes about the *cuḍel*, including her ghostly past, the unfulfilled sexual tension with which she is persistently related, and also the typical trappings of the roadside ghost, such as the shrine of bricks or stones and the connection with trees. But the story also serves to solidify her character at this site as generous, benign and compassionate.

While temple trustees acknowledge that at one point in previous decades the small shrine “was considered evil and people were frightened to come near it,”⁶⁴ Cuḍel Mā of the High Court is no longer an object of dread. The *Cuḍelmānum Vrat*, one of the Gujarati-language booklets for sale at the temple market, dismisses any lingering trepidations: “Hearing the word *cuḍel* sends fear throughout the body, but it is not this way with Cuḍel Mā. Cuḍel Mā is not this kind of *devī*, but rather one pure *ātmā*.”⁶⁵ People's reservations swiftly disappear, the author explains, once their requests are fulfilled.⁶⁶ The temple website provides further praise for Cuḍel's effectiveness in fulfilling wishes, promising every devotee solutions for all problems personal, professional, financial or health-related.⁶⁷ The trustees informed me that these difficulties involve legal matters, social injustices, and also issues of fertility, a common concern of *mātā* temples. I was told how one middle-aged woman, in the aftermath of her son's death, made a wish upon Cuḍel Mā and eventually had twin sons at the age of 55. Such miracles are not uncommon at Kungher, and a promotional pamphlet entitled *Jay Cuḍel Mā* produced by the temple dedicates several pages to recounting the stories of individuals spanning various caste groups like Patels, Thakkors, and Sonis, all of whom have experienced cures for the incurable, all of which they attribute to Cuḍel's grace.⁶⁸ Cuḍel Mā's power is benign, the trustees explained, in that she is both kindly and sattvic. If someone forgets their vow, she does not invoke her wrath, but rather provides devotees with a gentle reminder of their promise to her. In this caring capacity, her honorific of “Mā” seems well earned. The goddess's power is not just unanimously positive—it is also eminently accessible.

⁶⁴ Vashi, “Witch Temple,” August 13, 2008.

⁶⁵ Srimati Kokilabahen Patel, *Cuḍelmānum Vrat*, (Ahmedabad: Rashmi Prakashan, n.d.), 2.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 4.

⁶⁷ <http://www.highcourtofkungher.org/index.html>

⁶⁸ See *Jay Cuḍel Mā*, (Kungher: Sri Chudel Mataji Mandir Vikas Trust, n.d.), 6–8.

I was told that the goddess is always ready to listen to difficulties of the devotee without, as one trustee put it, “a lunch break or a siesta.” Moreover, Cuḍel Mā works quickly—the truly devoted are said to get benefits from visiting the temple after just one visit. Together, the efficacy, accessibility and benevolence of the goddess’s power attest to her status as much more than just a roadside ghost.

At Kungher, Cuḍel Mā is framed as nothing less than the highest goddess, and the temple trust moves towards a decidedly neo-Vedantic vocabulary in order to convey this. Cuḍel Mā is frequently referred to in the affiliated pamphlets and online as “Ādyaśakti” —again, the “first” or “original” goddess. As the temple website’s homepage proclaims: “In Kungher, [Cuḍel Mā] is known as Adyashakti of today’s Kaliyug and is the first Shakti/Mahashakti, vast and majestic in a form of live Flame (Jyoti).”⁶⁹ The flame, then, is the goddess’ singular form for this dark cosmic age. Trustees emphasized that the most unique feature of this temple is the absence of an icon or picture of the goddess. The central image is *not* an image, they explained, because there is no shape to the atman, and so too there can be no shape for the goddess. This way, the goddess was not the product of—and therefore limited by—a particular imagining, be it of a specific individual or a group. Rather, the simplicity and singularity of the flame, continuously burning since its installation by village elders in 1991,⁷⁰ connotes Cuḍel Mā’s universality more strongly than any iconographical rendering.

Cuḍel Mā’s universal benevolence is further underscored by the fact that everyone is welcome to share in her power. As the temple website explains: “The Shrine of Shree Chudel Maa is oozing with celestial love for all beings, irrespective of caste, creed, colour, race or religion.”⁷¹ Accordingly, trustees shared stories of Jains, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs, among others, who came to the temple to satisfy wishes or complaints, particularly if they felt they had suffered an injustice. Cuḍel Mā’s power, then, transcends religious barriers, further accentuating the fair and democratic nature of the justice she provides.

⁶⁹ <http://www.highcourtofkuhner.org/index.html>

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

But this emphasis on instant, egalitarian access for all goes beyond the goddess's benevolent, universal power; it is just as much based in spurning religious activity mediated by the *bhūvo*. Numerous signs appear throughout the temple, as do graphics throughout the temple's website and Facebook page, to the effect of "no one is *bhūvo* at the place of the *mātāji*, only the *jyot* (flame) is the *mātā*." The website elaborates: "There is no place for blind faith in respect of this pious shrine, as there is no exorcist (Bhuva) in between. Nobody has to guide you for anything like, do this do that. Tell [Cuḍel Mā] what you want and decide what you will do for her, not a word informed or spoken."⁷² The *Jay Cuḍel Mā* pamphlet chooses even stronger wording in the vernacular Gujarati: "There is no deceit of the bhuva here; there is no giving to such an idiotic person."⁷³ *Bhūvos* who doubt Cuḍel Mā's power, meanwhile, are put in their place. A trustee shared with me a story of a *bhūvo* from the Rabari caste who came to Kungher to take *darśan* and make a challenge with the goddess: "if you are a real goddess," he said, "show me your power." The little flame instantaneously quadrupled in size, and the Rabari was left with no choice but to apologize to the goddess, needing no more proof of her power. This disdain for *bhūvo*-based religion, the temple trustees explained, had to do with their community's commitment to preventing cheating in the name of the goddess. Thus, they ensure that no agent comes between the devotee and the divine power—rather, contact with the goddess is direct, and apparently more efficacious on account of it. The website boasts that even "judgements [that] failed at government/human courts are said to be given justice at the spiritual High Court of Kungher." Naturally, Cuḍel Mā outperforms the *bhūvo* when she is equal to or greater than the chief justices themselves.⁷⁴

The pervasive anti-*bhūvo* sentiments are just one means by which the Kungher temple attempts to distance Cuḍel Mā from the ecstatic elements of her village roots. The website assures (prospective) visitors that "Shree Chudel Maa doesn't like any addiction including Liquor, Smoking, and

⁷² http://www.highcourtofkuhner.org/chudel_mataji_kungher.html

⁷³ *Jay Cuḍel Mā*, 1.

⁷⁴ Another compelling miracle story I was told involved a district judge from Mehsana who came to the Kungher temple, anxious over work that had gone unfinished even after six years of effort. He made a wish at the *Cuḍel* shrine with a time limit of five weeks, and as a result his work was wrapped up in ten days.

Tobacco etc. [These] are strictly prohibited in the precincts.”⁷⁵ To this the *Jay Cuḍel Mā* pamphlet adds: “In this place of the auspicious Mata, wine and, in the same way, meat, have been prohibited.”⁷⁶ This all gives the impression that a Brahman or Vaishnava sensitivity informs the Kungher temple’s ritual grammar. It may or may not be significant to note that the current acting priest at the temple is a Brahman.

This cultivation of sattvic sensibilities dovetails amiably with—and quite possibly contributes to—the middle-class-friendly atmosphere of the High Court of Kungher. The page titled “Facilities” on the temple website promises visitors the tidiest of environs, praising the “cleanliness, hygiene and smiling faces of volunteers,” as well as the “clean vegetarian dining hall, guest rooms, Rest-huts, parks and gardens as well as water fountains” in addition to “clean toilet blocks & a vast parking area for the benefits of the devotees and visitors.”⁷⁷ On a closely related note, the temple assures its potential visitors of its orderly, tranquil confines: “Visitors pray without uttering a word in the quiet mode of there [sic] mind/heart/soul to Goddess Chudel Maa who listens and gives her Justice responding to the prayers which the concerned person only recognizes.”⁷⁸ It was with orderliness in mind that an elaborate queue-control barrier system was installed at the temple entrance. Before this, a trustee explained to me, up to 100,000 devotees would queue in a line that stretched a kilometer long. Now, with the supervised barricade system in place, the website assures guests that “Visitors start pouring in at the temple every week from the midnight of Saturday through Sunday forming a disciplined queue. Villagers offer their free services as volunteers to the visiting men women [sic] and children guiding [them] through separate barricades.”⁷⁹ This orderliness and tidiness has for the most part been realized, in my estimation—while the temple has a steady stream of pilgrims drifting through, it is also relatively laid-back, its ritual space and outbuildings comparatively pristine and uncluttered vis-à-vis the majority of other goddess sites I visited.

⁷⁵ <http://www.highcourtofkuhner.org/index.html>

⁷⁶ *Jay Cuḍel Mā*, 2.

⁷⁷ http://www.highcourtofkuhner.org/facilities_high_court_of_kuhner.html

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

The middle-class, upwardly mobile sensibilities are also apparent in the ever-present signifiers of the Kungher temple's overall largess as well as its charitable involvement, which are themselves intertwined. For instance, an elaborate *prasād* comprised of dal, rice, vegetable *sabjī*, and *ladḍu* sweets, is offered to the goddess on an ornate tray of silver. In addition, temple trustees estimate that pilgrims offer 600–700 liters of milk to the goddess every Sunday. Free tea and meals are provided for all visitors and virtually no one in the proximity of the temple, human or animal, goes unfed. Hundreds of rotis are cooked and fed to dogs in Kungher and surrounding villages. The aviary ensures that pigeons and crows are similarly sustained. Ten kilos of food are even provided periodically by the temple for the ants dwelling on the grounds. The trustees tell me that they are presently developing a gaushala for disabled cows who cannot feed. The temple trust evidently has the wealth necessary to expand their charitable enterprises, as they are also planning the construction of a library as well as a home for senior citizens.⁸⁰

Thus, at Kungher we see not only a vast architectural elaboration of the worship space, but also a shift towards values amenable to middle-class tastes, cultivating an atmosphere of comfort and tidiness alongside prosperity, equality, and charity. This shift in values also involves an affirmation of the sattvic and the Brahmanic, and a concomitant eschewal of the *bhūvo*, as well as liquor and non-vegetarian offerings. With this comes a theological reorientation of the patron goddess Cuḍel, who moves beyond her station as a relatively minor spirit to become synonymous with Śakti. This affords her seemingly limitless, transcendent power, to which devotees are offered quick access, receiving prompt solutions for their problems in an economic world more and more demanding of their time. As such, for a prosperous Patel community in Kungher and the ever-burgeoning constituency of devotees visiting the site, Cuḍel Mā is no longer just a ghost or a witch, but the Great Goddess herself.

Conclusions

In the post-liberalization Gujarat of the twenty-first century, Cuḍel finds herself with something of a split identity. While she maintains elements of the ghost spirit of folklore with powers of a minor goddess in many site-

⁸⁰ Ibid.

specific contexts, she has also been sweetened and supercharged at Kungher to the extent she has assumed the station of the supreme, Sanskritic goddess in the form of the single flame rather than a predictable lithograph print. How can we account for this dramatic transformation in her divine personality, not to mention her movement from the roadside *derī* to the temple?

Many theoretical apparatuses present themselves. These include “gentrification” akin to that presented by Waghorne and Harman in the context of Tamil Nadu, “Vaishnavization” as suggested by Lutgendorf, and “Universalization” as described by Humes. Gentrification would seem applicable in this Gujarati context, as it accounts in part for the expansion and reorganization of Cuḍel Mā’s worship space at Kungher, as well as the middle-class friendly atmosphere therein. This occurs alongside the dismissal of animal flesh, alcohol, and the *bhūvo*, which we have observed at both Kungher and at a roadside shrine, ritual reconsiderations consonant with the cultivation of dignity and self-limitation that mark Vaishnavization, or at least a conscious move toward the Brahmanic. (We might even be tempted to draw upon M.N. Srinivas’ famous but antiquated theorizations and suggest a “Sanskritization of the goddess” here.⁸¹) Gone is the ghostly seductress personifying threatening aspects of femininity, a benevolent, all-powerful goddess emerging in her place. Cuḍel’s amplification and ascendancy to the status of Ādyaśakti—the very same title given to Vindhyavāsinī at Vindhyachal—would appear, quite convincingly, to mark a universalization.

While all these theoretical approaches are helpful in elucidating the recent reimagining of Cuḍel Mā, not to mention that of other goddesses in Gujarat, no one of them proves entirely adequate in providing a complete explanation. In actuality, all of these processes interweave and inform one another. We are left to conclude, then, that Cuḍel’s reinvention is multifaceted, involving a marked change in spaces of worship, ritual practices and theological understandings based on caste and class sensibilities amenable to the upwardly mobile. In Gujarat, as in much of the rest of post-liberalization India, spiritual and economic transformation go hand-in-hand, not only for devotees but for divinities as well, and goddesses like Cuḍel Mā write this process large.

⁸¹ For more on Sanskritization, the process by which lower caste groups adopt the customs and beliefs of upper-caste groups such as Brahmans, see M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

Fig. 1. Saris at the roadside shrine south of Ahmedabad (photo by author)



Fig. 2. *Cūndḍi* at the Kungher temple (photo by author)



