Introduction

India, the land of widow burnings, dowry deaths, and female infanticide and suicide, is also one of very few modern nations to have had a woman as its Prime Minister, as well as an extraordinary number of women in top positions in a wide variety of fields. The plight of the lowly Indian daughter-in-law has its inverse reflection not only in her powerful mother-in-law, but also in the goddesses of Sanskrit literature and village shrines. A nation that has had female suffrage since before Independence, India still allows women agricultural laborers to be paid significantly less than men. In this volume and its companion, *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Society* (forthcoming), we investigate some of the images of women and femininity that underlie these seemingly contradictory facts. The images we focus on here are found in the traditions of the Marathi language region of India, Maharashtra.

In investigating *images* of women and of femininity, we are studying not only, or even primarily, the lot of women, but rather one important set of conditions that has influenced the women's lot. We have not attempted to list the "famous women of history;" rather, we have studied the ways that some men (and some of the few women whose thoughts have been recorded) have viewed femininity, and also the power, status, and potential of women. Thus, our emphasis is not so much on actual women as on ideas about women. Understanding ideas of this kind is a necessary first step toward understanding (and eventually, perhaps, affecting) the actualities of women's lives.

Some of the most prominent ideas about women and the feminine found throughout India are expressed in the classical literature of the Sanskrit tradition of all of India. Such are the

images of women in the Dharmaśāstras and the *Kāmasūtra*, and the images of goddesses in the Purāṇas and epics. Other prominent images are to be found in materials in English, the modern elite language of all of India. Important though images found in Sanskrit and English-language materials are for an understanding of Indian views of women and the feminine, this volume focuses on materials in a regional language, Marathi, and on local and regional levels of the tradition. The reason for this focus is that we want to discern "grassroots" views, views that are widespread in a social rather than a geographical sense. To do this in India, it is absolutely necessary to work with materials in the regional languages. Hence, our focus on Maharashtra, and on Marathi language materials. Any reliable generalizations about India, Asia, or the world must have their basis in regional studies.

In concentrating our efforts on Maharashtra, we have by no means covered an insignificant geographical area, a small number of people, or a brief span of history. As well as being an historical region of South Asia, Maharashtra is one of the twenty-two states of modern India. It lies on the western side of the subcontinent, at the northern edge of South India. The state of Maharashtra covers approximately 120,000 square miles—an area greater than the combined area of the American states of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maryland, Delaware, and Hawaii. Marathi, the language of Maharashtra, is the southernmost of the Indo-European languages of North India; it is spoken by over sixty million people—that is, more than the number of French speakers in France. The history of the Marathi language—written evidence of its use—extends over almost a thousand years, and there has been a significant body of Marathi literature since the century before Chaucer's. In the nineteenth century, Maharashtra was the home of such male reformers as Karve, and of relatively early movements for widow remarriage and women's education; at present Maharashtra is a center for a number of active women's organizations—a women's literary conference, for example, and a women's university with a program in Women's Studies.

Yet, until this time, there has not been a concerted scholarly effort to study Maharashtrians' understandings of women and the feminine. Scholars in the fields of religious studies and cultural

anthropology have done some work focusing on the all-India level, and some focusing on the Hindi language region to the north of Maharashtra or the Tamil region to the south. Much of the work that has been done in the Marathi language area is to be found in the bibliographies of authors of the articles in this volume and its companion.

The two volumes of papers began with a conference on "Images of Women and the Feminine in Maharashtra" that was held at Arizona State University in April 1991. This conference, the Fourth International Conference on Maharashtra: Culture and Society, was intended, like the other conferences in that series, to provide an opportunity for some prominent scholars of Maharashtra to search out new materials, to reinterpret old ones, and to develop fresh perspectives on Maharashtrian culture and society. The conference was interdisciplinary, with special emphasis on the fields of religion, literature, anthropology, sociology, and history. The present volume brings together works of scholars of literature (Engblom and Glushkova), religion (Laine, Sontheimer, Feldhaus, McGee, and Bhavalkar), anthropology (Apte), and history (Zelliot) who attended the conference, as well as of an historian (Kulkarni), a sociologist (Contursi), and two scholars of literature (Tulpule and Sellergren) who were unable to attend.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, "Images of Women in Contemporary Marathi Literature," consists of four articles. Two of them deal with poetry (Engblom and Zelliot), one with plays (Apte), and one with a novel (Contursi). Engblom's, Apte's, and Contursi's articles each treat the work of a single author, a male in each case, while Zelliot's article covers the work of a number of authors, all female. Already in this first part of the book we are presented with a wide range of images of women and a variety of standpoints from which to observe the images. Engblom examines some of the later work of the poet P. S. Rege in terms of Rege's background as a worshipper of personified female power, *śakti*, and in contrast to a "mother-whore dichotomy" found in the work of other poets and in Indian culture more generally. Apte finds a version of the mother-whore dichotomy in his analysis of the assumptions about middle-class women's social roles in the plays of a popular contemporary author, Jayavant Dalvi.

Contursi's paper also deals with a work of Dalvi's, but her interest is in the portrayal of lower-class women (and men)—slum dwellers—in his novel *Cakra*. For Contursi, *Cakra* serves as a case study of the effect of verbal and conceptual images on their subjects' social and political power; she examines this phenomenon also in the gender-based philosophical concepts *śakti* and *prakṛti*, and in two contrasting leadership styles in a slum in the city of Pune. Like Contursi's, Zelliot's paper is concerned with people at the lower end of society—Dalits, or former Untouchables, in Zelliot's case. But Zelliot's paper is the first one in this volume to present images expressly created *by* women. The women whose poems Zelliot and her colleagues have translated present some startling new images of women, men, and the struggle for social equality.

Part II, "Women and Goddesses in Maharashtrian Religion," consists of five articles, which among them cover a wide range of beings on the continuum between woman and goddess: folk goddesses (Sontheimer and Feldhaus), a figure of legend (Laine), deified heroic dead women (Kulkarni), and the heroines of traditional pious stories (McGee). The articles examine three of women's major roles in relation to men—mother (Laine), sister (Feldhaus), and wife (Sontheimer, McGee, and Kulkarni)—and make use of a variety of kinds of source material and a number of different ways of approaching the material.

Laine's paper examines the legends surrounding the mother of the Marāṭhā hero Śivājī; it analyzes these legends psychologically in order to illuminate, in a novel way, Maharashtrian cultural categories with respect to mothers, sons, and heroes. Sontheimer's paper is based on songs sung by folk performers devoted to the god Khaṇḍobā. By presenting a sequence of songs about the quarrels among some of the god's five wives, Sontheimer provides a lively example of the problems of the polygamous Indian god—or man. Sontheimer relates the quarrels between Khaṇḍobā's two principal wives to the fundamental contrast in Indian culture between the "inside" and the "outside," the *kṣetra* and the *vana*. Feldhaus's article describes the relationship between another Maharashtrian folk deity, Dhuḷobā, and his sister, Bhivāī, and finds that the brother-sister relationship is one characterized by contests rather than quarrels, and by practical help and fun rather than heavy emotionality.

McGee's and Kulkarni's papers examine two facets of the cultural ideal of the faithful wife. McGee's paper, based on interviews with women and on stories found in popular pamphlets, discusses the notions underlying women's performance of "vows" (*vratas*) for the welfare of their husbands and families; chief among these notions is that of *saubhāgya*, the auspicious condition of a married woman whose husband is alive. And Kulkarni's paper presents a study of the extreme case of the faithful wife, the woman who becomes *satī* in order to avoid losing her *saubhāgya*. Kulkarni examines this custom from a historical perspective, with a focus on eighteenth-century Maharashtra.

Part III, "Images of Women in Old Marathi Literature," brings together the other two parts of the book, as the articles in this last part all deal with religious literature. Tulpule's article presents evidence about the views—and treatment—of women on the part of Cakradhar, the founder of the Mahānubhāva sect. This sect, founded in the thirteenth century, is viewed with some suspicion in Maharashtra today, in large part because it allows women, as well as men, to become ascetic renouncers. Tulpule finds in the thirteenth-century biography of Cakradhar, the *Līḷācaritra*, hints that similar suspicions of sexual misconduct, though unfounded, go back to the time of Cakradhar himself. Sellergren's and Bhavalkar's articles join Zelliot's in presenting images of women and the world in the words of women themselves. Sellergren presents a careful analysis of the works and life stories of two women saints from the Vārkarī *bhakti* movement, while Bhavalkar cites works of and legends about these and several other saints in her exposition of the saints' image of the "wanton woman" as the model devotee. Bhavalkar's critique of the identification of the philosophical concepts *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* with human males and females, respectively, is another version, from within Maharashtrian culture, of Contursi's critique of this identification from without. And finally, in the contrast Glushkova finds between Tukaram's images of women as mothers and his images of them as sex objects, her article contains echoes of the mother-whore dichotomy with which Engblom's article, the first one in the book, begins.

From mother to whore to sister to faithful wife or shrew, this book provides a sampling of the images of women in

Maharashtrian culture from the thirteenth century to the end of the twentieth. As well as adding to the readers' knowledge about these images and the culture that produced them, the volume is intended to inspire further reflection and research on the relationship between such images and the realities of human lives.