



© *Kamla-Raj* 2004

PRINT: ISSN 0971-8923 ONLINE: 2456-6756

*J. Soc. Sci.*, 8(2): 87-92 (2004)

DOI: 10.31901/24566756.2004/08.02.02

## **Annapurna Ma, Priestess and Healer: Women's Agency in Folk Culture of Rural Orissa**

**Elinor W. Gadon**

*Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA*

*E-mail: elinorgadon2000@yahoo.com*

**KEYWORDS** Devi; possession; priestess; shaman; healer; agency

**ABSTRACT** My paper explores issues of female agency within the context of popular religion in the folk culture of Orissa through a case study of one woman's empowerment, evolving independence and evolving social role. The role of the holy woman allows her some freedom and self-determination. She has forged an independent spiritual life for herself following the commands of the goddess. Such women fall outside the categories usually ascribed for religious functionaries like priests, shamans, sadhus or yoginis. Socially they are marginal. They have no formal religious training, no gurus, no lineage. Their transmission of power comes directly from the goddess. Their supernatural powers are recognized by a culture in which the boundaries between human and divine are very loose. They act on their access to the Devi's wisdom. As Annapurna says, "It is not me who heals, but the goddess." What is remarkable about them in a society where women have little status or power is their agency. They too are called Ma or Mataji, and often venerated as a manifestation of the Mother Goddess, recognized as a living goddess.

---

[Home](#)

[Back](#)

---