

## The Worship of Kali & Women's Roles in the East & West

There are different views of the Hindu religion and the symbolism of Kali in the east and west. Women in the west often feel desolate in a world of patriarchy and some have sought empowerment through interpreting the eastern goddess (Kali) in ways that apply to their circumstances. In the east, Hindu women and men have also done this but in different ways.

Kali is known as an “unconventional mother” who “destroys as well as creates” and “takes as well as gives life” (Sugirtharajah par. 15). She plays a significant role in feminist views as a *devi* worshipped in the east and west. *Devi* can be defined as “the ultimate source and holder of active power (*sakti*) in this world; the creator and sustainer of all” (Waterstone par. 4). In the sixth century *Devi-Mahatmya* Kali is referred to as the mistress of the universe and is finally equated with other goddesses (McDermott 297). Kali embodies characteristics of the different stages in a woman's life such as “the Virgin, the Mother and the Crone” associated with “purity, maternity and wisdom” (McDermott 286). She has been compared to other religious figures who “preside over love and war, or who are paradoxical, or who have dangerous character” (McDermott 284). She is also worshipped as the “holy-mother” (Waterstone par. 11), though she has also been depicted as “slaying demons on the battlefield” (Waterstone par. 8). These different depictions confirm Kali as a union of opposite concepts. Thus, she resembles power, freedom and equality for many women in both eastern and western societies.

Kali's polar and conflicting attributes have been especially captivating to females in western society and religions. Maya Waterstone argues that women need “a new means of empowerment and feminine role models that break the mould” (par. 3). Rachel McDermott suggests that westerners see their lack of goddess worship as caused by patriarchal groups (283). The symbols that Kali exemplifies (those of sexuality and the various opposing concepts) are weak in western

religious imagery (McDermott 285) and Hindu goddesses in the west are seen as “symbols of and models for women’s empowerment” (McDermott 283). The repressed characteristics of Kali (her potent, sexual, dark sides) can be liberating for women (McDermott 288). She seems to provide them an outlet for the release of anger and her entire principle brings “healing in a male-dominated world” (McDermott 291). Women in the west have made use of her imagery (depicted standing atop Siva’s chest, crushing him) to liberate themselves from patriarchy (McDermott 295).

Conversely, McDermott argues that westerners have misused textual material to believe what they desire about Kali. Westerners believe that she was “degraded from a paradoxical, all-encompassing deity ... to a fragmented, dark and dangerous goddess” at the hands of patriarchy (McDermott 299); while historical accounts prove that she has progressed from “a minor, bloodthirsty goddess toward a universally compassionate mother” (McDermott 299). Westerners have changed their view of Kali to focus mostly on her demonized form instead of her current domesticated depiction in Hinduism. In the east images of Kali have been “beautified” by adding ornaments and dress showing this historical progression. Kali changed from a tantric icon to a domestic one who is now used to “uphold Hindu family values, especially those encouraging self-control and self-restraint” (Menon 81).

By contrast, in the east, goddesses are worshipped by both Hindu men and women. Sugirtharajah’s research reveals that the feminist ideals in the west are not completely “applicable in Indian context” (par. 3). Hinduism is a hierarchy of different social groups with further divisions within those groups. Women in Hindu society also have differing roles, one of which is to serve their husband. This has to do with “dharma” (generally translated as ones “duty”). A woman is expected to follow her *dharma* which has more to do with her duties as a

grandmother, mother, and wife and less to do with her actual rights (Sugirtharajah par. 11).

Although some argue that this oppresses women in Hindu society, others recognize that women play other important roles. Females in Hindu society have the “divine feminine power” of *sakti* (sacred force, power or energy) and without this power gods like Siva (the masculine) are powerless (Sugirtharajah par 14).

Sugirtharajah’s research reveals that different Hindu texts are contradictory concerning women.

How women are to be treated is outlined in the *Dharma Sastras* and the *Laws of Manu*; which are patriarchal treatises (Sugirtharajah par. 10). Though these patriarchal standards are challenged in some popular epics where women like Sita (in the *Ramayana*) and Draupadi (in the *Mahabharata*) are depicted as devoted wives to their husbands, yet their actions challenge the patriarchal definitions of “wifely behavior” (Sugirtharajah par. 9).

According to Sugirtharajah the “oppression” that westerners believe Hindu women face can also be challenged by the political goals both males and females accomplished over time. Men fought for the rights of women against rituals such as *sati* (self-immolation of the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband) and child marriage. They also fought against the “negative colonial and missionary representation of Hindu women” (Sugirtharajah par. 13). Women and men alike worked to bring an end to colonial rule of India during Mahatma-Gandhi’s influence. Goddesses like Kali played an inspiring role in this as the “British rulers feared her wrath” (Sugirtharajah par. 15) and a feminist publishing house was set up in Delhi and used the name “Kali” (Sugirtharajah par. 16). Hindus (men and women) used feminine worship as a means of comfort while they were under the British rule because they were empowered by the female *sakti*. The British viewed this feminine worship as “weak and vulnerable” of the Hindu men (Sugirtharajah par. 16). By contrast, although the British viewed Kali as masculine, Hindus do

not “assign rigid gender controls” (Waterstone par. 10) and thus would not see the worship of a female *devi* as “weak” or “vulnerable” (Sugirtharajah par. 16).

Although the east and west have differing opinions of the Hindu tradition and the goddess Kali, true understanding of the cultural practices surrounding these differences must be considered. Between the eastern and western societies Kali plays substantially different roles. She empowers and motivates women in the west and is a sense of hope and an iconic mother figure for Hindu men and women in the east.

## REFERENCES

- Waterstone, Maya (2006) "Could the Indian Goddess empower Western women? Stereotypes about the role of women prevail in all religions. Here, Maya Waterstone tackles the way in which these could be reversed dramatically by the Indian Goddess. (Indian Goddess Devi)." *Religious Studies Review* 2.2 (Jan): 20(4).
- Sugirtharajah, Sharada (2002) "Hinduism and feminism: some concerns." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18.2: 97(8).
- McDermott, Rachel Fell (1996) "The Western Kali." In *Devi: Goddesses of India*. John S. Harley and D. M Wulff (eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Menon, Usha and Richard A. Shweder (2003) "Dominating Kali" In *Encountering Kali In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*. Rachel Fell McDermott and J. J Kripal (eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

### Further Recommended Reading

- Hiltebeitel, Alf and Kathleen M. Erndl (eds.) (2002) *Is the Goddess a Feminist? : The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*. New Delhi, OUP.
- McDermott, Rachel Fell and Jeffrey J. Kripal (eds.) (2003) *Encountering Kali in the Margins, at the Center, in the West*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

## **Related Topics for Further Investigation**

Kali  
Feminism (in the East & West)  
Ramayana  
Mahabharata  
Mahatma-Ghandi  
Sakti  
Dharma  
Devi  
British Colonial Rule in India

## **Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kali>  
[http://www.sanatansociety.org/hindu\\_gods\\_and\\_goddesses/kali.htm](http://www.sanatansociety.org/hindu_gods_and_goddesses/kali.htm)  
<http://www.kalimandir.org> (a temple in Laguna Beach, CA devoted to Kali)  
<http://www.goddess.ws/kali.html>  
<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1995/11/1995-11-04.shtml>

**This article is written by Brittany Bannerman (Spring 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.**