

Kali

The goddess Kali is often described as fierce, black or dark, she has a lolling tongue, fangs and her dancing can destroy the world. Her necklace, girdle and sacred thread are snakes, she is also known to lie on a bed of snakes (Kinsley 1975:81). She is often naked with long unkempt hair. She is adorned with corpses, as a girdle, necklace, or earrings. She has long sharp fangs and often has claw like hands with long nails and often has blood smeared on her face. On the battlefield she is known to get drunk on the blood of her combatants (Kinsley 1986:116). In many descriptions she has four arms, her two left holding a bloodied cleaver and a freshly severed head, her two right making the signs of 'fear not' and one who confers boons (Kinsley 1996: 77-8). Her descriptions are ferocious and somewhat terrifying yet throughout various aspects of the Hindu tradition she is looked upon with love and devotion. She represents for many the manner for witch to face their fears of death and the unknown. Her association with death and destruction is evident in her favorite abodes of the battlefield and the cremation grounds. Kali has long been a goddess on the periphery of society worshipped by the people who occupy the same status, the thieves and the lowest castes.

The story of Kali's birth, as it is described in the *Devi-mahatmya*, begins on the battlefield, with the goddess Durga. In two episodes of this text Kali represents Durga's anger personified. In this instance Kali springs forth from the blackened forehead of an extremely angry Durga and defeats the demon's Canda and Munda and later the demon Raktabija. The Kali that is worshiped in India today is defiantly the same as she who is presented in the *Devi-mahatmya* (Kinsley 1986:90-2). In relation to other goddesses Kali seems to represent their wrath and anger, a dimension of the divine feminine that is frightening and dangerous (Kinsley 1986:120).

A possible prototype for Kali is the demoness Nirrti, who is frequently mentioned in the Vedic literature. Nirrti seems to be the personification of death, destruction and sorrow, her mantra is intended to ward her off, she wears dark clothes and receives dark husks as her sacrificial offering she is also said to have a dark complexion. Nirrti is said to live in the south, the abode of death (Kinsley 1986:87). However, Kali is active in warfare and receives blood sacrifice while Nirrti does neither. About the time that Kali begins to be known in the tradition Nirrti begins to disappear, she is rarely mentioned in the epic-Puranic texts. Generally Kali represents certain realities that were previously conveyed by Nirrti (Kinsley 1986:87-8).

When Kali is coupled with a male god it is almost always Siva, she is his consort, his wife or his associate. However, she always is the one to incite his wild behaviour. The relationship that Kali has with Siva differs from that with Parvati in that Kali seems able to persuade Siva to partake in dangerous and destructive behaviour that ultimately threatens the stability of the cosmos (Kinsley 1986:116). In the relationship with Siva Kali's inclination to wildness and disorder continue, and while she is sometimes calmed by him many times it is she who encourages him to partake in similar actions. In fact there is a South Indian tradition that tells of a dance contest between the two which end with Siva as the victor forcing Kali to control her disruptive behaviour. However, there are very few other depictions of Kali as tame and docile, most images depict either or both in destructive ways and others with Kali in her glory dominating a motionless or sometimes dead Siva (Kinsley 1986:119). In iconographic representations of the two Kali is predominantly the dominant one, she is generally standing or dancing upon Siva's motionless body and when depicted having sexual intercourse she is always above him. This suggests that while Siva is said to have calmed Kali in the dance contest he has never successfully or continuously restrained her wild antics (Kinsley 1986:120) Kali's

association with Siva began as early as the eighth century CE, as is in Bhavabhuti's *Malatimadhava*. In the *Vamana-purana* the names of Kali and Parvati are used interchangeably in the depiction of Siva's wedding to Parvati (Kinsley 1986:102). Generally in relation to the goddess Parvati Kali is often mentioned in various situations, especially in Parvati's preparations for war, in these cases Kali appears as Parvati's alter ego.

Kali's status in the Hindu religion has always been as an outsider, she hangs out on the peripheries of society. This is shown in the location of her temples and her favorite known haunts the battlefield and the cremation grounds. In the cremation grounds she often sits upon a corpse and is surrounded by jackals, ghosts and snakes and unlike other deities she does not have an animal vehicle but rides a ghost (Kinsley 1996:77-8). In her early history Kali was a tribal goddess who was worshiped by thieves and hunters, and so Kali has a long standing association with criminals and has been linked to the murderous Thugs as their patron goddess (Kinsley 1996:78). In the *Mana-sara-silpa-sastra* it is said that Kali's Temples should be built far from villages and towns, near the cremation grounds and near the homes of Canadals. This represents her long standing association with the periphery's of Hindu society (Kinsley 1986:117-8).

In Tamilnad, goddesses very much like Kali were worshipped from very early on. In the Tamil epic *Silappadikaram* Kali is called the goddess of death and aids the bandits living the area by rewarding their blood sacrifices with victory in their pursuits. She appears in later Tamil literature as well and is widely known as a village goddess (Kinsley 1975:96-7). Kali is very popular in Bengal however she did not appear in the Bengali literature until quite late. The major festival for her worship in Bengal is Dipavali, it is during this festival, and throughout the year, that Kali receives blood sacrifice. It is in Bengal that Kali is approached as a caring and

protective mother (Kinsley 1986:116). Kali's Sakta devotion in Bengal is featured in the works of Bengal's famous religious figures, Ramprasad Sen and Ramakrishna. Ramprasad described Kali in a world relived of all its indifference and seemingly impulsive aspects (Kinsley 1975:116). For Ramprasad Kali is the embodiment of world order, especially the darker aspects of existence. In his poetry Kali is presented as the caring presence of Mother who looks over her stubborn wet helpless children (Kinsley 1975:117). Ramakrishna approached Kali in the same way as Ramprasad, as a child. He doted on her as her official temple servant, however he did not ignore her wild and fantastic nature. She was to Ramakrishna the Mistress of a dizzying and exhilarating creation. Kali continues to retain her fierce image, yet in many of her images Ramakrishna and his wife are sitting calmly with Kali behind them comforting her trusting children (Kinsley 1975:121-4). Other areas where Kali is widely know are Assam, Orissa and western India particularly Rajasthan (Kinsley 1975:100).

In the Tantric tradition, as early as the sixteenth century, Kali figures quite prominently especially in left-handed Tantrism and Bengali Sakta devotionism (Kinsley 1986:122). In many of the Tantric texts Kali's position is that of the supreme deity equivalent to Brahman. In fact in the *Nirvana-tantra* it is proclaimed that "the god's Brahma, Visnu and Siva are like the amount of water in a cow's hoofprint compared to the waters of the sea," in comparison to Kali (Kinsley 1975:110). Kali conveys the image of death, fear, destruction, terror and the all consuming aspects of reality. For the Tantric disciple these aspects of life are not to be feared or avoided, they are to be confronted boldly and thereby overcome and they also become a vehicle for salvation. It is also in this tradition that Kali is clearly the wife of Siva and they together in union create and destroy the universe (Kinsley 1975:112-3). She is no longer emancipated and ugly, in the *Karpuradi-stotra* she is described as young and beautiful and she is gently smiling.

She is no longer a shrew or the refinement of Durga's wrath, she has become the one who grants the benefit of salvation, she has become the symbol of the triumph over death (Kinsley 1975:114).

References and Further Recommended Reading

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<http://www.exoticindiaart.com/kali.htm>

http://www.sanatansociety.org/hindu_gods_and_goddesses/kali.htm

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