

The Origin of Kali

Hindu mythology is among the most colourful, sensational, and extraordinary expressed. Hindu scriptures, such as the Puranas, contain stories about different gods and goddesses. The gods and goddesses of the Hindu scripture are still strongly worshiped in India at their designated temples. Of the many deities worshiped, the goddess Kali is quite different from the others. This goddess is described as having unruly black hair, a girdle of severed hands, a necklace of human heads, a lolling tongue dripping of blood, and is often depicted naked standing over her consort, Siva. Kali is worshiped as a symbol of destruction through time and also as a symbol of motherhood.

To understand this goddess's role in Hindu worship it is necessary to examine the origin of Kali. In *KALI: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar*, the author, Elizabeth U. Harding explains the emergence of Kali. Harding explains that while the gods were resting, the demon king Mahisasura created an army and tried to proclaim himself as the ruler of Heaven. When Visnu, Siva, Brahma, and other powerful Gods heard of this they became angry and each shot forth a ray of light from their foreheads, which intensified and took the shape of a female form. "The light of Siva formed her face, Yama gave her hair and Visnu her arms. From the light of Candra, the moon God, her two breasts where formed. Indra modelled her waist and Varuna her thighs. Earth gave her hips and Brahma feet. The light from the fire God, Agni, fashioned her three eyes. Thus, all Gods contributed their power to manifest the auspicious Devi, the [Great] Mother Goddess" (ix). Each of the gods then adorned her with their weapons and sent her to battle King Mahisasura and his army.

It is in *The Devi Mahatyma* that Devi, in the form of Kali, fiercely destroyed the army of demons with little struggle except for the demon Raktabija. Raktabija was nearly impossible to

defeat because each drop of blood that touched the ground produced a replica of the demon. Kali raised Raktabija high into the air, lapped up his drops of falling blood, and swallowed him entirely. This is just one example of Kali's great conquests. Kali appears for a second time in the *The Devi Mahatyma* during the battle between the demons Canda and Munda and Durga (i.e. Devi). When Durga sees the two demons approaching her with weapons, she becomes angry and Kali springs from her dark face. Kali decapitates the two demons and is victorious with just one swing of her sword.

Wangu expresses another example of her conquests from the appendix to the *Mahabharata*, the *Harivamsa*. In this myth, the God Visnu incarnates himself as Krsna in order to kill the demon Kamsa. Kali, Krsna's sister, is asked to incarnate herself so the two of them can be exchanged at birth in order to fool Kamsa. Kali sacrifices herself to save Krsna and in return is given a conch and discus (two symbols of Visnu) and is promised blood worship. Kali also appears in the *Ramayana* when Rama is threatened by a horrible monster and is immobilized with fear. Sita takes the form of Kali and slaughters the monster single handedly (see Kinsley73).

Harding describes that the name Kali is derived from the word "kala," meaning time. Both Kali and her consort Siva represent a link to destruction and thrive off of the existence of each other. While Siva is closely linked to creation, Kali acts as his counterpart in maintaining destruction, and so their physical appearances are very opposite from each other. Siva is depicted as a fair skinned male and whose hair is done in a topknot. Kali on the other hand has black skinned female, with unruly matted hair, and is dominating Siva in almost all depictions of her. Kinsley also explains that because Kali is the fierce form of Durga, she is rarely depicted as a submissive wife. Kali's strong traits have set the characteristics for the group of Mahavidyas. The Mahavidyas are a group of tantric goddesses, who symbolize women characters that have

complete independence. Of the Mahavidyas, Kali is a great exemplar of that independence. Kali dominates Siva, literally, by standing on top of his body, and often assuming the male's position in tantric depictions (79).

Kali is also considered the ideal Mahavidya because of her relation to the "ultimate truth" (see Kinsley 84-86). Worshipers of Kali are devoted to the Black Goddess because of her relation with the end of events. The entire Hindu religion is based on the hopes of achieving liberation, and Kali is a direct symbol of that liberation. Kinsley describes the devotion of Kali as the devotion to achieving Brahman. In *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahavidyas*, Kinsley calls her "She Who is Knowledge of the Self, She Who is Knowledge of Brahman, She Whose Form Is the Highest Brahman, and Mistress of the Mahavidyas." (86). Devotees of Kali desire this knowledge of Brahman and dedicate their worship to the goddess of motherhood.

In *Freedom from Death in the Worship of Kali*, Kinsley explains that devotees of Kali can be found making blood sacrifices to the goddess throughout temples in India. The goddess is largely worshiped in Bengal and is a popular icon of worship because of her association with Siva, her relation to Vamacara tantra, and her promotion through devoted poet-saints of Bengali (188-189). The dark goddess was not accepted as a widely worshiped deity until quite some time after the *Devi-mahatmya* was written. Before Kali became a widely worshiped deity she was mostly adored by thieves or outcast cults of Hindu society. It was not until Kali became recognized as the consort of Siva and his incarnations that she gained a growing population of devotees. She is depicted as the fiercest form of Durga, a symbol of feminism and true knowledge in which Hindus praise in hopes of obtaining moksa.

Works Cited

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Written by Sarah French (Spring 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.