

The Goddess, Kali

Kali is one of the more recognized deities in the Hindu pantheon. She is seen as both terrifying and beautiful by those who worship her. There are a number of different stories related to her origin and who she was, Siva's wife or his daughter. Kali means many different things to the people who worship her. Kali is worshipped in a variety of different ways. All of this goes together in order to form a number of different, all important, versions of this important Hindu goddess.

Kali is typically depicted as terrifying and powerful. In one common representation she is seen standing upon Siva's more impotent body. She is dominating him. Throughout depictions of Kali, Siva's appearance changes from looking peacefully asleep, unconscious or sexually aroused. Kali is shown as dark, with long wild, matted hair. She wears a necklace of human heads and a belt of severed human hands. Her earrings, two dangling infant corpses, complete her attire. Her tongue is most often depicted as lolling from her mouth. Her hands wield an array of weaponry. In other depictions her face appears more friendly, her hand up and facing us, a symbol of peace. In one particular drawing of Kali the cosmos are in her hair. These are the images most commonly seen by her followers (McDermott and Kripal 27, 81, 175, 176).

The tales of Kali's origins tend to differ from sect to sect. One story tells of a demon, Darika, who became powerful and conquered the three worlds (heaven, earth and the underworld). A Sage named Narada approached Siva in desperation about the events taking place. Siva, enraged, opened his third eye which was full of fire. Out of this fire Kali was born. After some difficulties she was able to overcome the demonic entity (Caldwell 19-20). Another story describes Kali as an alter ego of the goddess Parvati, representing Parvati's extreme rage and violent nature. In that story Kali is Siva's wife instead of Siva's daughter (McDermott and

Kripal 64). Following the theme of emergence from other goddesses, in the *Devi-Mahatmya* Kali was said to have emerged from Durga's angry brow as she rode onto the battlefield taking the physical form of Durga's anger (Caldwell 122). One more account tells of Durga turning into Kali in order to defeat the demon. After the demon was defeated Durga continued as the destructive Kali, to solve this problem the gods enlisted Siva to go and lie in Kali's path. When Kali stepped upon him she experienced *lajja* (being a civilized, moral being) (McDermott and Kripal 87-89). Inherent in this is that Kali could be both an *asura* (demonic) and a *deva* (divine), or perhaps neither. Worshippers tell that only an *asura* could defeat a demon as powerful as Darika but others say that she has to be a *deva* because she was born from Siva. An answer by some to this paradox is that Kali is both *deva* and *asura* (Caldwell 21). All of the origin stories of Kali share a common thread, that of a violent being who exists to do battle with demons on the behalf of the gods.

Along with the various accounts of her history there also exist different beliefs of what Kali actually represents. Some of her worshippers view her as a motherly figure. Mothers are usually portrayed as persons with an unflinching devotion towards their children and in turn children give the same devotion back to their mothers. At first glance Kali does not appear to be a goddess one would want to love as though she was a mother, having such a terrible appearance and seemingly destructive nature. These destructive natures of Kali can be symbolic of a mother's tough love. A mother has enough love to discipline a child when they begin to misbehave but will also never abandon them. It is said that to be Kali's child is to suffer and to be disappointed in worldly desires and pleasures. She is the cosmic mother who keeps the world moving and helps her creatures, and is wearied and miserable from the suffering of her children (Caldwell 160-162). On the other hand Kali is seen as the epitome of a demon's anger. Kali's

tongue represents her grotesque habit of ripping apart her victims and drinking their fresh blood. She is death and destruction (McDermott and Kerali 61). In addition to these contradicting views Kali is also seen to be putting *dharma* into perspective, by reminding her children that certain pieces of reality are unpredictable and unavoidable (McDermott and Kripal 34-35). The dichotomy of Kali is at times extreme.

There are a number of different rituals used in the worship of Kali and also a festival (Navaratra) in which she and the other goddesses are celebrated. A major dramatic possession ritual, called Mutiyettu, occurs in Kerala. This is a ritual in which male actors dress up as Kali as well as other deities and demons to act out the creation story involving the demon, Darika. The actors don incredibly elaborate costumes especially the actor playing Kali. He paints his body in black carbon grease and then decorates the black with white designs. The actor will wear a *muti* (an elaborate head piece) made of fresh coconut frond 'hair' where two live snakes are located. Red *cetti* flowers are tied around the actor's wrists. The dramatic ritual takes place upon a stage in the middle of the night with a small musical ensemble as accompaniment. When the ritual begins the actors act out the story of Kali's origins and during this ritual the actors claim to become possessed by Kali herself (Caldwell 81-87). Another form of worship is Hindu *brahmins* also taking care of idols representing Kali as though they were Kali herself (putting her to bed, feeding her, etc) and also performing *puja* as a form of worship to Kali (McDermott and Kerali 127). This great effort put into celebrating and caring for the goddess shows how important she is to her followers.

All these aspects of who and what Kali is to different people are important in gaining a solid knowledge of the deity. Her warlike representation shows how important violence is to her character. The different tales of her creation all share a central theme of showcasing her as the

violent defender of gods against demons. How her followers see her highlight this further. Lastly there is the dedication shown to her by her adherents in the festival and the treatment of her effigies, pointing out how important she is to these people. This all goes together to give a proper view of the important Hindu goddess, Kali.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

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Noteworthy Websites

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/index.shtml>

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

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kali>

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