

## Sakti

*Sakti* has been described by many different terms such as a goddess, a presence, and an essence, but perhaps the most comprehensive definition, and most complex, is that *sakti* is power. *Sakti* is a distinctive power that controls the universe, often thought to be the animating force of the gods (Monaghan: 261-262). While the term is often used in the context of female power, *sakti* is by no means limited to that concept. Wadley suggests that *sakti* is strength and energy based on a spiritual force that can be possessed by both men and women (55).

*Sakti* has its origins rooted deep in the agricultural history of India. Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya (5-9) suggests that the beginnings of the formation of organized religion, the 'Mother-Goddess' or "Great Goddess" may have been the center of cultic image for the Indian people. This is assumed to have arisen from the general understanding that women were the creators of life, their bodies the centers of all human creation. Even though male figures began to be incorporated into religion once the role of the male was better understood, concerning procreation, the female dominant aspect remained strong due to ties to agriculture. With the rise of pastoral culture and an increase in the trade of goods, a male dominated society appeared to emerge, pushing female deities to a secondary place in religion, as well as making *sakti* a subordinate part of male gods, such as Visnu and Siva. As wars and conflict began to rise throughout the Middle East, the Mother-Goddess (*Sakti*) appeared to have been forgotten. It was not until the age of the Gupta Empire that the atmosphere began to change and cultures began to look again to goddesses for guidance (Bhattacharyya: 63-70). Art and literature were beginning to be explored more than at any other time in recorded history. This cultural increase seems to have set the stage for the revival of goddess worship. It was during this time that the religion of Saktism was born.

It is important to note that while *sakti* is first and foremost defined as a “power”, the term *sakti* can also be used when referring to the multiple names that represent not only goddess characteristics but also the individual goddesses that *sakti* is embodied within. Devi, Kali, Sati, and Durga are only a few of the forms that are often used as interchangeable terms for Sakti. Devi is perhaps the most frequently used term when referring to “the Goddess.” Devi represents a philosophical view of the universe; she is the embodiment of creation and order (Monaghan: 82-83). Wadley’s research (154-177) among the people of Karimpur reveals a number of ritual *pujas* (devotional worship by Hindus: Rodrigues: 559) done in honor of Devi. *Asarhi* is conducted between June and July; a *puja* is done in order to gain shelter and protection for the rainy season. *Pujas* are also dedicated to Devi for the purposes of protection in other sessions and for the prosperous marriages of young girls (Wadley: 164-174).

Kali is a direct representation of time, and the inevitability of death. Her images are frightening, often associated with bodies and blood. Ernest Payne quotes the *Yogini Tantra*, in his work ‘*The Saktas*’; wherein images of “skull-necklaces”, “lolling tongue”, “corpses as ear ornaments” and “streams of blood dripping from the corners of her mouth” are used to portray Kali (22). What must be understood is that this portrait of “the Goddess” is not only meant to inspire fear in her worshipers but also a sense of awe concerning her power (Payne: 109-119). An interesting story shared (and condensed) by Monaghan is that of the wild dance Kali shared with Siva; they danced so fiercely that they nearly destroyed the world itself (Monaghan: 164-166).

The story of Sati is the story of a devoted wife, one so concerned with her husband’s honor that she sacrifices herself. Upon the death and dishonor of her husband Rudra (also identified as Siva), Sati threw herself on the funeral fires of her husband (Kumar, 2003).

Widows' throwing themselves on the funeral fires of their husbands is a practice that has been outlawed in India for many years, but the practice still bears her name.

Durga is often looked upon as the goddess of the flame (Monaghan, 1981). The tale goes that in a great battle, as a last hope the gods combined their fiery breath and from it brought forth Durga, the first of the female goddesses. Monaghan suggests that Durga represents the powers of combat and the sphere of intelligence (88-89). An interesting ceremony performed by the Durga worshippers of Bengal has been suggested to possibly link present day "Shakti" worship to worshipping practices of the past (Onishi: 100). Specific plants are identified with specific goddesses in this ceremony and called by name: Brahmani, Kalika, Durga, Karttiki, Siva, Raktadantika, Sokarahita, Camunda and Laksmi, each goddess is also assigned a specific color i.e. yellow, red, black, pink, blue, gray, white and 'turmeric'-yellow. The figure that is made central in the ceremony is given the coordinating colors of fire, and the other figures are placed around it. Onishi believes that this ceremony may have been passed down from the Indus Valley Civilization tying the rite to the assumed original roots of Hinduism (7-9, 96-103). While little is truly known about the Indus Valley Civilization, the comparison shows how there could be a connection between present day practices and the past history of Saktism.

Small towns and villages throughout India often worship their own forms of the Great Goddess (Sakti), an example of this is the village of Vindhyachal, that is mentioned in Hawley & Wulff's text concerning the goddesses of India (Humes: 49). The local goddess of Vindhyachal is known by the name of Vindhyavasini. The most well known myth concerning Vindhyavasini involves the baby Krishna. Krishna's uncle (Kamsa) wishes to kill him as an infant but when Vindhyavasini discovers his plan she puts herself in the place of Krishna, in the form of an infant girl. When Kamsa attempts to kill her she transforms into her eight-armed form, threatens his

life, and sores off to the mountains of Vindhya (49-51). Humes suggest that Vindhyavasini may be a very early representation of the Great Goddess and may have been a completely independent goddess before she was incorporated into the Krishna myths (50-51). Vindhyavasini is a relevant example of the feminine *sakti*; due to the fact that her myths depict her as being independent, without a consort and her powers exceed that of many of the male deities (51). The *Mahabharata* and *Harivamsa* texts both mention Mahadevi who dwells in mountains of Vindhya, which coincides directly with the myths of Vindhyavasini. This can be taken as an example of how many of the goddess myths contained within Hindu texts can be interconnected and the names often interchangeable. Vindhyavasini, Durga, Sati, Kali and Devi are all examples of how individual goddesses can represent the Great Goddess. Individual texts describe each of these goddesses as having different forms of embodied powers, these descriptions are testaments to the different ways in which *sakti* can be expressed.

The most central text to many of the goddess cults, even in the present day, may be the *Devi-Mahatmya* (DM) (Tambs-Lyche: 17-19, 79, 118). Sankhya philosophy is found in this text, which breaks the world up into two main powers, *prakti* and *purusa*. *Purusa* is the 'male' aspect of the universe and forms what may be called consciousness and control, while *prakti* is the female universal manifestation, which centers on all mental and material processes. *Prakti* is the generating power that forms the cosmos according to these texts. *Sakti* is regarded as the *prakti* that all women are born with, according to the DM. The *Shakti Tantra Shastras* are the primary texts for Saktism, or those that worship Sakti as a form of the Mother Goddess (Kapoor, 2002). Kapoor states that the Upa-Puranas are the only texts actually written for the direct use of the Sakti cults.

Throughout this paper it has been suggested that there are possibly innumerable names and characteristics that can be attributed to *sakti*. However, one common theme prevails throughout the studies, *sakti* is power. Many authors may vary in the ways they prefer to portray *sakti*, whether it is the fearsome representation of Kali or Sati's embodiment of spousal devotion, every description conjures images of strength and power that may not be equaled by any other male deity. The Goddess is life and death, healing and pain, wrath and mercy. While a paper such as this cannot do true justice to the vast literature available, hopefully it has ignited a spark that will lead to a better understanding of *sakti* and the power that is available therein.

### **References and Related readings**

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