

Kalighat and Its Goddess Kali

The Kalighat Temple is a shrine to honour the Goddess Kali. Kali throughout her history has always been linked to death and destruction. Her appearance alone represents mayhem. Her hair is dishevelled, she has four arms, she is dark and blood is often depicted being smeared on her lips. In her hands she holds a cleaver and a severed head, and with her other two hands she signals peace (Kinsley 77-78). Almost all stories about Kali speak exclusively of her killing someone if not many people. Kali is said to have a tendency to become blood thirsty and even lose control. Kali represents many ideas but over them all she is considered to portray the concept of pain and sorrow, always showing that nothing can escape death but that death, to those who have released themselves from “reality”, is not the end. (Kinsley 142-145).

Kali is associated with the god Siva. Conflict between Kali and Siva is a recurrent theme in many Kali related myths. Both are said to haunt the wilderness, causing destruction or trouble in different ways. Kali in some myths is sent to slay great warriors on the battlefield. This is claimed to protect the world and others from destruction, but at times it seems like Kali is the one who is the destroyer. In one myth, the *Vamana-purana*, her name is interchanged with Parvati's [Siva's wife]. Parvati however does not like having Siva comparing her to Kali, due to her dark complexion, and rids herself of any dark attributes (Kinsley 101-108). In other stories Kali is tied to Siva not so much directly but through Parvati herself. In the *Siva-Purana*, it is said that all goddesses come from one goddess, Uma-Sati-Parvati. This goddess again is also claimed as Siva's wife. Kali does not get mentioned in the same manner but later on in a retelling of a story, she is said to come from Siva's hair (Kinsley 104).

An infamous depiction has Kali dancing on top of Siva who is laying on the ground. The story behind this is while Kali was on the battlefield she becomes so overwhelmed with killing and tasting blood she breaks into a dance that shakes the earth. Siva upon seeing this, lays down at her feet and when she notices him there she then ceases her war dance (Kinsley 108). This is the most popular story regarding Kali's dominance and blood-thirsty tendencies. With Kali always being portrayed as being disruptive it shows that she is one that goes against stability and what others perceive as order. Kali gets sent to battle warriors and demons but often is shown at the end representing that which she is trying to destroy. When associated with Siva, Kali is the opposite of his other spouse Parvati. Parvati is shown to calm Siva, balancing with his tendencies of destruction. Kali however seems to always bring out Siva's antisocial and destructive side. To further counter-act each other, Parvati is the one who calms Siva. However it is Siva who is said to try to tame Kali. The disruptive nature of Kali, when being compared with other goddesses, embodies an idea of the anger and intensity that is brought out when forced on the battlefield or to war (Kinsley 80).

Being associated with such violence and often frowned upon behaviour, she thrusts upon an individual the darker aspects of society that many try to ignore or not think about. The Hindu culture was that of people looking for freeing themselves of false reality and obtaining one pure mind. Having such vile aspects of society brought out to the fore front, Kali allows one to see the many faces dharma can take. This brings to life the idea that some call her the Mother Goddess. She is portrayed as a Mother Goddess because she is claimed to bring her devotees a broad world-view (Kinsley 84). Some follow strict dharmic ways and to those and view Kali as too harsh. To others she is viewed as a revealer of the world in its true self, its violent reality. From either position Kali represents that harshness which so many try to avoid. To all, Kali is the part

of life that is the hardest to face, that which is inevitable. Kali represents the world as it really is and not just the positive that people have a tendency to focus on. Followers of Kali view her as a way to see the full world and use it to further step away from all illusions (Kinsley 136-137).

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Article written by: Phil Austin who is solely responsible for its content.