

## Blood Sacrifice in Hinduism

The concept of sacrifice (*yajna*) in the form of offerings to the gods (Klostermaier 316) is one of the main tenets of Hinduism. The nature of offerings made to the gods tends to vary based on the function associated with the deity and the caste hierarchy of individuals. For the sake of ease, the various offerings given to the gods can be categorized by nature or type. The *Baudhayana Srauta Sutras* provides five types of “oblatory matter: plants (*ausadha*), milk (*payas*), animal victims (*pasu*), soma, and clarified butter (*ajya* or *ghrta*).” The *Yajna Paribhasa Sutras*, on the other hand, distinguish between two groups, namely, “vegetal oblations [... and] animal oblations,” which includes blood or *lohita* (Malamoud 37). The Vedic term *yajna* often “conjures up the image of the offering of animals [but] contemporary *homa* rites [offerings into the fire] rarely involve offerings of flesh and blood” (Rodrigues 28). This review aims to discuss some deities that receive blood sacrifices, the reasons for these sacrifices, and the intricacies of the deity-devotee relationship.

The term *bali* refers to blood offerings and/or animal sacrifice (Fuller 84). These offerings are often designated for inferior or non-Sanskritic gods (Harper 227). Generally, within a village’s pantheon of gods, rural lower gods are given the names of Sanskritic gods but their functions do not become merged with the higher Sanskritic gods. This does not mean that there are no (superior) Sanskritic gods who receive blood and flesh sacrifices. Usually when blood sacrifice is mentioned it refers to the blood of an animal, as suggested by the term *bali* (that is, offerings of flesh and blood). In urban Bengal, *atmabali* meaning ‘self-offering’ is amongst the rarest forms of *bali* that requires that an individual offer the god blood from his/her chest. *Atmabali* is performed during times of intense personal crisis and its purpose is to carry the individual through a difficult time (Samanta 783-784).

In order to comprehend the division of gods within the various levels and classification of Hinduism it is important to note that there is an “order and classification of supernaturals” (Harper 227). In the case of the village Totagadde in South India, the members of different castes venerate different deities in the Hindu pantheon. For example, in Totagadde there are thirty different local deities and spirits, which can be classified according to categories. The members of this village use a three-tier system that also correlates to the various castes. These classes of gods are: *devaru* (receive vegetarian offerings), *devate* (local deities who are known as meat-eating), and *devva* (those who are referred to as ‘blood demanding’). The first and second class of gods are those that are usually not represented iconographically. Harper, in his discussion of village deities, explains that these non-Sanskritic supernatural beings are often named after Sanskrit gods (2).

Among these village deities, the class that concerns the inhabitants of Totagadde are the local deities known as *devates*, as they believe it is crucial to abide by the desires of these deities in order to avoid ill-fated events. The gods demanding blood sacrifice are most commonly described as “fierce, violent and ‘hot’” (Fuller 85). The gods who fall under this category are dark forms such as Durga, Kali, and village goddesses, such as Sitala Mata, Mariyamman, Bhairava and Narasimha. Some lower level gods are named after major deities such as Siva, Visnu, Kali and Durga (85). Mariamman, a goddess of disease in South India [also known as or equated with Shitala Devi in some areas], is the goddess of “smallpox, cholera, and plague” (Harper 230). She is the only goddess who is worshipped by all the residents of Totagadde and to whom they ascribe a lot of power especially because she is the only deity who is believed to have the power to keep epidemics diseases at bay (230-1). The goddess of disease can choose to either

protect people from illness or cause illness. For this reason, she is given blood offerings “periodically at an elaborate festival (*habba*)” (230).

The devotees regard the village goddesses, like Durga and Kali, as human mothers and as such, in some areas they are called *Amman* meaning “mother, mistress, or lady” (Kinsley 198). The village is considered to have been created by the goddess. Thus, it also belongs to the goddess. The relationship between the two is unique because it is comprehended as a “marriage-like arrangement is the village itself rather than a male deity. The two, the goddess and the village, are tied to each other, dependent on each other; in short, they are married to each other and nourish each other” (199). The devotees worship her and in return, she “ensures good crops, timely rain, fertility, and protection from demons, diseases, and untimely death” (200). There is a correlation between the “relationship of an epidemic or a disaster to the invasion of the village by hostile demons from outside” (205). Disasters or epidemics symbolize demons attempting to invade the village. Thus, during festivals, the goddess “confronts and overcomes the demons, and in this struggle she is helped by the villagers. While the villagers are struck down and overcome by the demons and suffer fever and sometimes death, the goddess too is said to become possessed, afflicted, or somehow invaded by the demons.” This points to a duality in the festival and the offering of blood sacrifice, which is “perhaps, the central dramatic event of village-goddess festivals” and so the “sacrifice may also be understood from two points of view.” That is, either the sacrifice is a gift that can represent the defeat of the demons or as something, which diffuses the goddess’ anger. Either way, what is clear is that the blood presented to the goddess either works to “appease her wrath or to invigorate her in contest with demons” (205).

Durga, a Sakti goddess [a superior Sanskrit goddess], is believed to be replenished with blood (Harper 785). In addition, although it is rare but the greater gods such as Ganesha, Skanda are also offered *bali* (Fuller 85). A *bali* sacrifice is claimed to hold the ability to calm an angry deity or calm those who simply crave blood. The blood, for a blood-craving god, serves the purpose of alleviating their anger and provides relief from the threat of the onset of an illness or worse (Fuller 85 and Harper 230). In North India, during the harvest season, Durga Puja is conducted as part of the festival called Navratra. The Durga Puja not only emphasizes the dual role of the goddess as a battle queen but also reinforces and celebrates her position as a divinity that restores the cosmic order. Additional themes embedded in Durga Puja are highlighted in the puja are her role as a harvest goddess. She is propitiated as the “power of plant fertility” (Kinsley 111). For these reasons, she is “invoked both as the power promoting the growth of agriculture grains and as the source of the power of life with which the gods achieved immortality.” She is addressed as “she who appeases the hunger of the world” (112). For these reasons, it becomes clear why the blood offerings are favoured by the goddess [“the animal sacrifices and the ribald behaviour that is specifically mentioned in certain religious texts as pleasing to the goddess” (112)]. Moreover, other forms of Durga, like Kali, also receive blood offerings in their temples.

The power and emotion attached to these goddesses is easy to understand when their true understanding is grasped. The Mahavidyas, for example, are a group of ten goddesses. The most significant aspect of this group of goddesses is “Devi’s tendency to display or manifest herself in a great variety of forms” and these appear “from time to time to maintain the order of dharma” as well as the “creator and maintainer of cosmic order” (Kinsley 161). The ten Mahavidyas are Kali, Tara, Cinnamasta, Bhuvanesvari, Bagala, Dhumavati, Kamala, Matangi, Sodasi, and Bhairava (162). Their descriptions relate that “they are meant to be fearsome deities” (Kinsley

163). It is true that this mythological definition deals primarily with the fearsome and destructive nature but at the same time it is crucial to note that this is “related to the context in which they are propitiated “especially in Tantrism” (164). Consider Cinnamasta, a goddess whose representation symbolizes and highlights the relationship between “life, sex, and death” (173) and so “sacrificing oneself to her is a way of acknowledging that one is obliged to give life back to her because one has received life from her. These images convey the truth that the goddess is ever hungry and demands blood in order to remain satisfied.” Although the goddess is never depicted feeding on the blood of another but her own, her mythology conveys the same realities as Kali and Durga (175).

The Tantric cult of Candi, which is very prominent in Bengal, involves blood sacrifice to the goddess (Fuller 86; see also Samanta 1994). Candi, who is a form of Durga and/or Kali [See Fuller (86) and Kinsley (117)] is a bloodthirsty goddess who represents fierceness but also embodies motherly characteristics. She is venerated and offered blood by Sabras, among others, who are a tribe of primitive hunters (Kinsley 117). If her thirst is quenched and she is provided the offerings that she craves, then the rewards of her *puja* can be great. In Calcutta, in addition to the dark side of Kali, she is also understood to be the “ideal and protective mother” (Samanta 780). Worshipping Kali, for the residents of Calcutta, means pleasing a goddess that can offer protection against all sorts of evil and ill-luck. A successful sacrifice is “critical to the wellbeing (*mangal*) of the sacrifice” whereas a failed ritual can have catastrophic effects because the failure to conduct a proper and successful ritual could mean death, disease, poverty or any other forms of great ill-fortune (783-4). Kalighat temple is another place of worship where Kali is regarded as a mother figure. The devotees come to her with a variety of problems and desires ranging from domestic issues to prosperity (McDermott and Kripal 60-62). At this temple in Kalighat,

other goddesses are also integrated into the temple worship of Kali. These include, Sasthi, the protector of children, Shitala and Manasi the snake goddess (64-65). In *Nigama-Kalaputra*, *Picchila-*, *Yogni-*, *Kamakhya-*, and *Nirattra-tantra* she is regarded as the greatest of the manifestations (*vidyas*) of the Mahadevi (Kinsley 122). The holistic understanding of Kali in Tantrism is that of a goddess who presides over death and destruction (124). For example, in the *Karpuradi-Stotra* she “makes gestures with her two right hands that dispel fear and offer boons...she grants the boons of salvation...she is here not only the symbol of death but the symbol of triumph over death” (125-126).

In Hindu belief, simply performing the act of giving blood to a divinity will not always appease the god and guarantee protection. The ritual or sacrifice requires the incorporation of honour and devotion toward the particular deity. Another significant fact is that the sacrificer symbolically identifies with the god as well as the sacrifice that is offered (Fuller 85). Samanta’s (1994) discussion of *balidan* offered to Kali (789-9) is helpful in explaining this point. The sacrificer is offering to the goddess his/her own demonic or animal-like characteristic. Just as Kali as the powerful goddess mythically kills demons and offers them to Durga, the sacrifice offers to the divinity the malevolent characteristics within the sacrificer’s own self. Thereby, the sacrifice purifies or rid themselves of those characteristics. This places an increased emphasis on the values of “inner purity and selflessness” (Samanta 799).

Many sociological functions are embedded in the act of offering sacrifice to gods. *Bali* is one form of the many types of gifts given to the gods. Blood sacrifice can appease major deities such as Kali, but is also offered to minor deities whose purpose sometimes appears only to be as disturbers of peace. This highlights the fact that deities are often upholders of extreme polarities. Consider Sitala and Mariyamman, as the two are “remind people that their tightly ordered worlds

may be reduced to chaos at any moment. To pay attention to such goddesses, however, is to make one's view of reality less fragile, less prone to being shattered by sudden death" (Kinsley 211). Both major and minor deities point to the cyclical, unpredictable, and short-lived nature of the material world. The worships, festivals and the reliance of devotees on the gods indicate this aspect of human life. In addition, the types of sacrifices such as the vegetal and animal offerings to gods who are, for some, associated distinctly with vegetarian and/or non-vegetarian devotees (and their respective gods) show the need for a society to engage in rituals that permit entering into non-normative practices. According to Victor Turner, a festival held for a goddess and the ritual, such as offering of blood, delves the "dimension of reality, the dimension that remains outside social norms and expectations but that is capable of enlivening and nourishing the realm of social order and normality" (Kinsley 207). It is clear that blood sacrifice, in Hinduism, is an offering of utmost significance as it symbolizes life and all of its dynamic aspects such as the taking of life or death. It also shows that the divine have the power to do as they choose, rightfully so, for they are the creators and upholders of order, hence, the necessity on the part of devotee to be humble and grateful in his/her worship of the god(s).

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