

The Goddess Sati

The goddess Sati may be recognized by her relationship with the great god Siva as she is his first and second wife. Sati is more than this, however; she is known by many names and is worshiped as her reincarnation Parvati. Her whole being may in fact be summed up to lure Siva into marriage so that he may be incorporated into more of the world, such as to keep creation enlivened and to enter the householder role in order to release his stored energies in a positive fashion (Kinsley 1986:35).

The origins of Sati are unknown, she is not a Vedic goddess but there are references to the wife of Siva in some Vedic literature by the name of Ambika. This name, however, is later used to represent other goddesses. Another name used for Siva's wife is Rudrani. It is not certain whether these goddesses are in fact Sati, and therefore, whether or not Sati's origins are in Vedic literature. Later Sati goes by one of her modern and more common names, Uma Haimavati in the *Kena-upanishad*, although her role is not as Siva's wife. Just as suddenly as she appears in this text she disappears, and though this may seem untrustworthy other texts reference this as proof of her origins in past Hindu tradition (Kinsley 1986:36). One of the earliest references using the name Sati is in the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata* where she is described as living with Siva in the Himalayas (Rodrigues 298). In addition to the textual evidence, there is some archaeological evidence for her origins and history, including coins that have an image of a goddess that is linked with a Siva symbol (Kinsley 1986:37).

The main myth of Sati is also important in her history as it provides insight into her characteristics and life. She was the beautiful daughter of the god Daksa, considered the male Vedic creative deity. Sati desires the god Siva, the destroyer, and through her devotion and ascetic practices she finally attracts Siva's attention and becomes his first wife. Her motives for wanting to be his wife are not clear, and in some texts it is Brahma who sets up their marriage as he wants Siva to feel sexual desire. In the *Siva-purana*, specifically the

Rudra-samhita, Brahma says that if Siva does not involve himself in the created world then creation cannot continue. When Siva starts noticing Sati he develops *kama* (desire), which he has not felt before and the couple are married. After their union the couple retreat to the mountains for love-play (Kinsley 1986: 37-38). Siva and Sati are very much in love as told in the *Kalika Purana*, Siva painting Sati's feet, gathering flowers to make her garlands and he becomes invisible to surprise her with embraces (McDaniel 40). The couple stay there for many years, but the marriage is not a happy occasion for everyone. Daksa does not approve of Siva due to his messy appearance and different habits. In order to disgrace Siva, Daksa plans a *yajna*, or sacrifice, but does not invite either Siva or Sati. Sati is very insulted by this and shows up at the event only to be snubbed again by her father (Rodrigues 298). This frustrates her even further and in her rage she commits suicide by closing the nine doors of her body and while sitting in an *asana*, or yoga position, sends her spirit out her tenth door, or the top of her head (McDaniel 40). When Siva hears of Sati's death he becomes furious and creates terrible beings that kill Daksa, the divine hosts, and destroy the sacrifice. He then takes Sati's body and travels the universe, grieving. This upsets the cosmic balance of the world and Visnu is called upon to end the turmoil. While Siva is traveling Visnu follows him and cuts off pieces of Sati's body, which fall to earth and become holy places or *pithas*. When Siva realizes that Sati's body is gone he returns to the mountains and continues his normal practices (Kinsley 1986: 38).

This myth contains many underlying themes in the Hindu tradition such as a wife's loyalty, the cosmic balance and Siva's role in the universe. Before Sati, Siva lived in the mountains to practice austerities and was disinterested in the world around him. Nonetheless, when he is married he engages himself in the world and develops a householder role. His awakening desire is important for the universe because with the release of his seed creation is enriched and enlivened (Kinsley 1986:38). There are also some tensions in this myth,

between deities and even references to unease between religious and caste groups. For example in the early period of Hindu history the Saivites, at the time considered a non-Vedic unorthodox group, have disagreements with the orthodox Brahma worshipers, who follow the Vedic tradition. These groups are paralleled in the myth, Siva representing the Saivites with his ascetic practices and dissociation with Vedic sacrificial rituals, whereas the orthodox group is represented by Daksa, the son of Brahma. In the myth this conflict is mediated by Sati, as she brings Siva into the householder role. Although Siva demonstrates his power and his dislike of *yajnas* when he destroys Daksa's ceremony, in the restoration myth he is incorporated into the orthodox tradition and returned to order when the *yajna* is reenacted (Rodrigues 299). Another theme in this myth is the connection between Sati and Siva, as their union may represent many things. For example, the traditional union between a deity of the earth and a deity of the sky is expressed by the relationship between Sati, who represents the sky and Siva who represents the Himalayas. Historically this union creates and sustains life as the marriage between Sati and Siva allows creation to continue (Kinsley 1986:40). In a simpler association Sati represents the *yoni* while Siva represents the *linga*, and in one version of the myth when Sati falls and creates *pithas* Siva follows and embeds himself in her *yoni*, keeping him on earth (Kinsley 1986:39).

Sati's name and suicide may be paralleled with the act of *sati* or widow immolation, where a widow, showing undying loyalty to her husband, will burn herself alive on his funeral pyre (Rodrigues 563). This act was widely accepted in the medieval period and the word *sati* means "faithful wife", so there is an association between the act and Sati's suicide as a devoted wife. This correlation is obscure at best though, because the purpose of *sati* is for the wife to follow the dead husband, whereas in this myth Siva is not dead, and Sati's death causes him great sadness and finishes their relationship rather than continuing it (Kinsley 1986:40-41).

After her death, Sati is reincarnated as Parvati, “she who dwells in the mountains” or “she who is of the mountain”. Parvati's life is essentially the continuation of the life of Sati, and in some myths she agrees to be reborn with the goal of luring Siva into desire and marriage. In other myths she says that she is rewarding Mena, Parvati's mother, with her birth, as Mena was very devoted to Sati. In other versions Sati and Parvati are both seen as embodiments of the great goddess Mahadevi to retain the balance between *dharma* and *adharma* (Kinsley 1986:42).

Parvati is the daughter of Himavat, the deity of the Himalayas and his wife Mena, and she is described as being very beautiful but dark-skinned being given the nickname Kali “the dark-one”. A sage comes to her home he looks at the markings on her body he predicts that she will marry a naked *yogi*, or Siva. Unlike Sati's parents, Himavat and Mena are honored to have Siva as their son-in-law and the god Kama is sent to stir lust in Siva so that he will notice Parvati. This does not work as planned, as Siva is annoyed by Kama's attempts and kills him with fire from his third eye. Parvati is not deterred by this and she begins austerities to create *tapas*. *Tapas* has many functions; in this case it is an extreme heat produced by praying that makes the gods uncomfortable so that they grant the ascetic wish, thus preventing the world and themselves from being burned. Through her persistence Siva finally notices Parvati and falls in love with her and they are soon married (Kinsley 1986:42-43). The couple then retreat to Mount Kailasa for love-play and they engage in love-making that shakes the cosmos. During their passion they are interrupted by the gods who are afraid of the quakes, and Siva accidentally spills his seed outside of Parvati which passes to the Ganges where it is incubated and becomes the child Karttikeya. Their child makes his way back to his parents where Parvati then welcomes him as her own son (Kinsley 1986:43). Parvati also conceives her own son, Ganesa. As the tale goes, while Siva was away Parvati yearns for her own child and creates a boy out of her own body, who she then he asks to guard the entrance of her

home to prevent anyone from entering and disturbing her. When Siva arrives home Ganesa blocks his path, angering Siva who cuts off the boy's head. This greatly distresses Parvati and she orders Siva to bring Ganesa back to life. Siva complies and while looking for a new head for the boy encounters an elephant, whose head he takes and places on Ganesa's body, reviving him in the process (Rodrigues 302). In this way Sati fulfills her role as a maiden, then as a wife and even later a mother.

Sati also has an alter ego that is named Kali. In the *Vamana Purana* it is written that Parvati receives this name as she is dark-skinned, but when Siva uses this name in teasing Parvati, she becomes irritated and performs austerities to become the "golden one", or Gauri. Her dark sheath is left over however, and it transforms into Kausiki the ferocious battle queen who in turn creates the goddess Kali (Hawley and Wulff 79). In the *Mahabhagavata-purana* Siva forbids Sati to disrupt her father's *yajna* and in doing so he makes her very angry. In her wrath she transforms into a fearful woman who is plainly unlike the graceful Sati. She loses her composure, her hair messy and her temperament fiery; she develops four arms and her wagging tongue lolls out of her mouth. She is also garbed in a garland of human heads and a half-moon crown. This terrifying form of Sati is known as Kali. Siva is so afraid by this he tries to flee but to prevent his escape Sati blocks his way with her ten different forms, the Mahavidyas or wisdom goddesses. Siva is so shocked and terrified by this that he finally allows Sati to go to the sacrifice (Kinsley 1997: 23-25).

Worship of Sati varies because when pieces of Sati's body fall to earth they create *pithas*, or holy sites where it is believed the goddess shows her powers. Even in modern times these sites are visited by pilgrims and are worshiped. (McDaniel 3). The number of *sati pithas* varies between accounts, as little as four to as many as one hundred and ten sites are recorded (Kinsley 1986; 186). These *pithas* may be stones or statues, but some believe in a variation of the Sati myth where the earth was created from her dismembered body, and the

separate pieces of her body each have different levels of power. The pieces with the most power are recognized as sacred stones called *thakurs*. A temple built where there is a stone may be revealed and then recognized as a *sati pitha*, and new sites have been preserved throughout history, even in the present day (McDaniel 31-32). The most documented and well known site is Kamarupa in Assam, and some of the newest sites from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are Adyapitha and Tarapitha in West Bengal (Kinsley 1996;186)(McDaniel 33).

References and Related Readings:

Dallapiccola, Anne L. (1944) *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*. New York: Thames and Hudson Press

Hawley, J.S., and D.M. Wulff. (1996) *Devi: Goddesses of India*.

Kinsley, David R. (1986) *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: the Ten Mahavidyas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kinsley, David R. (1996) *Devi: Goddesses of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press

McDaniel, June. (2004) *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rodrigues, Hillary. (2006) *Hinduism- The Ebook*. Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Books

Related Research Topics:

Sati
Mahadevi
Kali
Parvati
Sati pithas
Siva
Uma
Kamarupa

Related Websites:

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

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uma_%28goddess%29

<http://www.bhagavadgitausa.com/SIVA%27S%20FURY-DAKSHA.htm>

<http://www.vedarahasya.net/docs/Shakti.pdf>

Article written by: Briana Smith (April 2010) who is solely responsible for its contents.