

Bhairava

Bhairava, the fierce form of Siva, has many monikers. He is Siva's form of terror and transcendence (Kramrisch 471). He is Siva in his entirety, yet displays ugly characteristics unbecoming of an all-powerful god. Bhairava is known to have eight names and representations: Kala Bhairava (that which time is afraid of), Kalaraja (lord of time and death) Kapaline (skull carrier), Asitanga (one with black limbs), Sahara (destruction), Ruru (storm) Unmatta (raging) the Supreme Beggar, and Rudra (Knappert 49) [literature consistently discusses his 8 names, but rarely does one source list them all]. His name is derived from the Hindu word *bhiru*, meaning timid or fearful. Bhairava's physical description is controversial at best, for there is not one stock image of what he should look like – no single image can truly personify the fearful mystery that is Bhairava. Some say he is emaciated and ghoulish looking, others believe he is stern and bloated, with long, black matted hair, occasionally surrounded by flames, and as black as Kala, with a coy smile on his face (Kramrisch 297). Still other sources indicate he has flaming hair with a necklace of skulls and a viper coiled around his neck (Knappert 49). The differing arsenal of physical traits of Bhairava is a testament to his enigmatic, mysterious presence. Some similarities between literary descriptions of Bhairava are his general lack of clothing, be it nakedness or filthy rags emphasizing his nakedness, and fangs that glint whenever he smiles (Kramrisch 297). He is armed with a *pasha* (noose), *trishula* (trident), *damaru* (drum) and a skull in his left hand (Knappert 49). It seems bizarre that a holy deity such as Siva could have such a dark side. The myth explaining the creation

of Bhairava will untangle the complexities and seeming idiosyncrasies of this mystery.

Prajapati and Brahma are the successive names of The Creator in Hindu mythology, each name representing the same entity in a different eon (Kramrisch 251). Prajapati, in the form of an antelope, lusted after his daughter and was shot by Rudra-Siva in disgusted anger. The head of the dead antelope flew into the sky and became a constellation. In a gesture of compassion, Prajapati-Brahma was revived and given four heads, one for each cardinal direction (Kramrisch 252). Four heads did not prove enough though. Once again overcome with lust for his daughter, the lust from which his four heads had been created, Brahma sprouted a fifth head to gaze at her as she ascended towards heaven.

Brahma refused to accept the testimony of the Vedas, which declared Siva the Ultimate Truth of the Universe, and scolded Siva for his sexual activities: "How could the Brahman [i.e.; Siva], free of all attachment, lustily sport with his wife in the company of his troops of deformed churn goblins?" (Visuvalingam 160). In a rage, Siva appeared as an infinite column of fire. Not heeding this warning, Brahma lied, saying he had gone and seen the top of the fire-*linga*, further inciting Siva's wrath. Brahma then reminded Siva that he was, in fact, created from the forehead of Brahma, and patronized him further by calling him 'son' and offering him protection.

Out of Siva's rage Bhairava was then created, in a human form. Bhairava, or Kala-Bhairava, is called the 'Lord of Time-Death' and was created of the most terrible, horrifying features, inconceivable to even the most imaginative dreamer. Time itself is afraid of Bhairava. With a subtle movement, Bhairava decapitated

Brahma's fifth head with the fingernail of his left thumb, or, in other versions of the origin myth, with the nails of the fingers of his left hand, or after a great battle (Kramrisch 261). The skull instantly became melded with Bhairava's left hand, and could not be dislodged. In penance for his crimes, Siva ordered Bhairava to wander the earth as a renouncer with the skull as his begging bowl (Visuvalingam 161). The Brahmanicide would be absolved once Bhairava reached the holy city of Kasi.

Bhairava, through his wanderings, eventually came upon the Deodar forest. Here he stumbled upon a group of sages (*rsis*) and their seven wives. His stark, naked, erotic presence and kingly aura attracted the women and infuriated the seers (Kramrisch 288). Bhairava was castrated after sleeping with the wives of the *rsis* who were helplessly attracted to his god-aura. His severed *linga* created a momentous event as it fell to the earth, erupting into a fiery pillar without beginning or end that traversed the universe, much like the pillar from which he was created (Kramrisch 288). The sages fell and worshipped the *linga*, and Siva vanished. It was during this incident in the Deodar forest where Bhairava became known as the Supreme Beggar (Kramrisch 288). After wandering further, Bhairava came upon the house of Visnu to find the entrance blocked by the doorkeeper, Visvaksena. Bhairava impaled him on his trident and walked into Visnu's abode with the guard dangling limply from the weapon. Unphased, Visnu attempted to fill the skull with blood from a vein on his forehead, but it was unquenched and would not fill, not even after one thousand years [other sources merely cite 'eons'] of Visnu's pouring blood (Kramrisch 293). Visnu agreed that Bhairava must proceed to Varanasi [referred to as Kasi or Banaras in other literature], the holy city. Upon finally reaching Kasi, Bhairava must have

been a sight to behold, a naked wanderer with a skull in his left hand and an impaled body on his trident. Once within the limits of the holy city, Bhairava sank into the ground, the skull falling from his left hand. He had been freed from his Brahmanicide. The holy ground upon which he is said to have sunk into is known as *Kapalamocana* (Visuvalingam 161).

The origin myth is an extremely detailed, rich story recalling the creation and journey of Bhairava as he attempts to absolve himself of the most unholy of sins, Brahmanicide. As with all things Hindu, symbolism and meaning abound in Bhairava's myth. In this section, I will delve into some of the major motifs and symbols used in the origin myth and explain their significance as it relates to modern Hinduism.

The origin myth is permeated throughout by transgressions from different gods, in many different situations. The origin of transgression derives from the creation of Brahma's fifth head. The fifth head is often described as having the long hair and unkempt appearance of an ascetic. Representing an outgrowth of uncontrolled desire, the fifth head is used as a symbol for transgression across India (Kramrisch 255). The head was said to have brayed like an ass, proposed incest to Brahma's daughter, directed evil sounds towards Siva and even to lie (Visuvalingam 170). It is the fifth head of Brahma that led to his beheading by Siva. Just as Prajapati in past eons had singled himself out for Rudra's arrow by consorting with his daughter, Brahma's fifth head likewise displayed an unnecessary lust, and once again provoked Siva; indeed, only Siva of all the gods had five heads, and Brahma's fifth head of transgression negated all that which Siva's fifth head had symbolized

(Kramrisch 255). Bhairava's theme of transgression is obvious, due to the nature of his very creation, and continues with his naked appearance and erotic persona. Bhairava is often shown with a dog or as a dog, the dog being one of Hinduism's least auspicious animals (Knappert 49). The murder of Visvaksena, Visnu's doorkeeper, further increases his deviance. The use of his *left* fingernail to decapitate Brahma, an inauspicious side, further stresses his negativity (Visuvalingam 165). On the human side, even the *rsis*, whose wives Siva lures into his clutches, commit a heinous sin by castrating Bhairava.

Yet, in modern Hinduism, there is celebration, worship, and even festivals of Bhairava [to be explained further in the reading]. How did such a 'bad' god and transgressive myth become associated with joyous festivities? The key is that all of these transgressions are eventually appeased – Brahma is punished with decapitation, Siva is forced to make Bhairava wander to Kasi for absolution, and even the seers are repentant after Siva exposes himself as a fire-*linga* to them. It is in this pursuit of 'forgiveness' from their transgressions that the characters become holy and sanctified, and from this pursuit comes the empathy of Bhairava's worshippers. The condemnation of Bhairava as a heretic for the decapitation is simultaneously accompanied by his worship for truly valourizing Brahma by serving out his punishment in due course (Visuvalingam 166). Had he not cut off Brahma's fifth head, he would not have achieved his infamy nor his fame. Through his act of transgression he achieved Brahman. From night came day, and from fire came water. The origin myth is sacred and good because even throughout the inauspiciousness, it preserves the dharma inherent in the universe.

It is interesting to note that there is no force stronger than Siva that could oblige him to comply with the Brahmanical law, in other words, no 'deity police', *per se*, which could punish Siva for his Brahmanicide. It seems as though Siva makes Bhairava comply with the Brahmanical laws only out of due respect for Brahma; in a sense, trying to seem apologetic for his deeds. "Visnu venerated him as the Supreme Being, untainted by sins like Brahmanicide, and acknowledged that [Bhairava's] degradation and dependence were a mere fancy." (Visuvalingam 161). This quote, from a conversation between Bhairava and Visnu in his forested home, indicates that even Visnu realizes that there is nothing keeping Bhairava on earth to continue his plight other than goodwill from Siva. This realization that Siva-Bhairava is adhering to Brahmanical law and striving for auspiciousness further reinforces the positivity and worship associated with Bhairava in modern Hinduism, and has also earned him the name of Sin-Eater (Visuvalingam 169).

The first and most important temple dedicated to Kala Bhairava was located on the banks of the Kapalamocana Tirtha river, where the Sin-Eater waited permanently to devour the past wrongdoings of pilgrims and devotees (Visuvalingam 163).

Bhairavastami [alternatively called Bhairav Ashtrami], the festival of Bhairava, is a temple festival derived from the Brahmanicide myth. It is held on the eight night of the waning moon in the month of Margasirsa (Visuvalingam 159). The transgressions of Bhairava can be seen symbolized in the inauspicious setting of the festival. Those who fast all day and stay awake all night during Bhairavastami are freed from great sins (Visuvalingam 161). If one performs ablutions at

Kapalamocana (the holy site where the skull fell from Bhairava's hand) they become absolved of Brahmanicide. During Bhairavastami, various large vegetables such as pumpkins, jackfruit, watermelons or coconuts are used as sacrificial human heads and placed at a stake within the temple. Some sources state it is likely that in much earlier times real human sacrifices were made (Visuvalingam 169).

Bhairava is also honoured during the cosmogonic New Year festival in Bhaktapur (Nepal). He is symbolized in *linga* form as two large poles crossing over each other, with the earthen holes holding them in place being the *yoni*. Bhairava is said to come and witness/supervise the ritual death of two snakes during this festival (Visuvalingam 184).

It is not surprising that, being the Time-Death god, Bhairava is associated with Hindu funeral procedure. His occasional moniker 'Lord of Ghosts' illustrates the extent to which he is associated with death (Visuvalingam 178). Pilgrims on their way to Gaya to pay respects to their deceased ancestors (*pitr*) and can give offering to Bhairava enroute (Visuvalingam 178).

Certain sects of Hinduism worship Bhairava at a higher level than the average Hindu. The Kaulas, or Kapalika-Bhairava, are an offshoot of Hinduism which advocate impurities such as transgressive sexual union, excessive consumption of meat and wine and other inauspiciousness. (Visuvalingam 196). They have adopted Bhairava as "a symbol of reality more ultimate than even the Brahman of Sankara" (Visuvalingam 159). Kapalikas are also known to take up a skull and staff of a Brahman in order to do a pilgrimage in Bhairava's footsteps (Visuvalingam 164). Bhairava is held so closely to them because his transgressions, impurity and

eroticism match up very well with the beliefs of Kashmir Saivism. The Kapalikas will also participate in human blood sacrifice in order to please Siva-Bhairava and truly display their dedication to the impure god (Visuvalingam 164).

On a less extreme level, Bhairavic worship is still very common in modern day Hinduism. On special days of worship the Brahman priests will offer patrons meat, wine and fish, and occasionally devotees will perform an animal sacrifice on special days (Visuvalingam 206). The Kala-Bhairava temple is still the most popular temple to the deviant god, offering regular goat sacrifices and 'head' sacrifices (pieces of fruits as explained above) to please Bhairava. In Nepal, Bhairava is honoured by the royal community (the Newars) in their entirety at the Bhairavi Rath Jatra festival. It culminates in the sacrifice of multiple buffaloes and goats, whose outpouring of blood symbolically feeds the eternally empty skull-begging bowl (Visuvalingam 208). Criminals in Nepal testify in front of the police-magistrate of Kasi (Bhairava) are swear an oath while touching the foot of Bhairava. It is said that any liars will be killed on the spot (Visuvalingam 210).

Bhairava has permeated throughout Hindu religious practices in many convoluted ways. Much of the lore concerning him has been lost over generations, but the central theme of his transgressions and their absolution has remained as a reminder as to just how important he is. Bhairava is a great example of the ways in which Hindu mythology contains ethical transgressions, such as decapitation of a god, and uses these issues to explain the universal truths with realistic emphasis. Elizabeth Visuvalingam states this concisely at the end of her chapter:

“Although much of the symbolism surrounding Bhairava is no longer understood even by his most ardent devotees and the cult itself is being rapidly effaced, one only has to replace those symbols in their original context to recognize the transgressive mode of sacrality that inspires them.” (210)

References

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Related Readings

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Topics for Further Investigation

Kasi/Banaras

Kapalamocana

Bhima

Bhairavastami

Animal vehicles – the dog, the donkey

Kala

Visnu

Brahma

Linga – religious importance

Blood sacrifice

Transgression in Hinduism

Noteworthy Websites Related to Bhairava

<http://www.svabhinava.org/TSHT-old/index.php>

http://www.philhine.org.uk/writings/tt_wrathful.html

<http://www.shivashakti.com/bhairava.htm>

<http://www.experiencefestival.com/bhairava>

<http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Bhairava>

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