

KALI PUJA : CELEBRATING LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Jawhar Sircar

Ananda Bazar Patrika, 30th October 2016
(English Version)

The distinct genes of Bengalis become evident not only when one sees them extracting countless fish bones from their furiously active mouths while arguing during meals, but it comes out also when they choose their gods and governments that are so radically different from those in Delhi or India. On Diwali, for instance, while others pray to the fair Lakshmi with millions of dazzling lights, to seek wealth and prosperity, the Bengalis pray to their black goddess on this darkest night of the year, for some much required strength. When other Indians observe strict vegetarian and Vaishnava rituals during Diwali, Shakta Bengalis slaughter animals and worship with blood and blood-red hibiscus. It is not just a simple 'Aryan vs Austric' issue, because differences lie even in their root legends. Most Indians celebrate Diwali as Krishna's victory over the terrible demon Narak- asura, while Bengalis believe in the Skanda Purana version that on this occasion, the warrior goddess Chandi fought the fearsome danava called Rakta-vija, from whose drops of blood sprang thousands of giants equal in power to him in power. It was only when Chandi took the form of the Bhayankari Kali and started drinking every drop of the ogre's blood, could the asura be overpowered and vanquished.

Gokhale had observed that Bengalis are always ahead and to prove it, they decided to observe pitri-paksha on Mahalaya, while most Indians honour their ancestors during Diwali. They complete their Lakshmi Puja quietly a week after Dashami, instead of doing it in grand style a fortnight later, during Diwali. Even the craftsmen of Bengal worship their tools on Vishwakarma Puja Day in mid-September, while others do so during Dussera or Diwali. Bengal's Kali Puja lasts just one day and night, but India's Diwali is celebrated over four to five days, with

Dhanteras, Chhoti Diwali, Main Diwali, Govardhan Puja and ends with Bhai Dooj or Phota. We get many fascinating historical accounts about how the Diwali illuminations offered "most picturesque and enchanting scenes", but no one is clear when exactly Diwali became the 'Festival of Lights'. The original Ramayana does not speak of the people of Ayodhya lighting up lamps to celebrate Ram's victorious return, but the later romanticised versions insist on it. We get the first real mention of all houses being decorated with tiny earthen lamps in the 3rd century AD text of Vatysayana, the Kamasutra, but it was then called 'Yakshas' night'. Centuries later, Acharya Hemchandra also described the night of the Yakshas when countless diyas were lit. Like many other non-Aryan customs, Brahmanical Hinduism must have assimilated this colourful ritual and tagged it to the worship of Lakshmi, though as we have seen, Bengal voted for a dark night for Kali. The present cocktail of lamps, crackers and Kali emerged only when copying each other's customs became a national pastime in modern India.

Harvests determine the festivals in Ashwin-Kartik and the all-India celebration of Lakshmi appears quite logical. Sukumari Bhattacharya observed that "Lakshmi has a synonym, Sri, derived from the same root from which the Latin Ceres, the corn-goddess" and Suniti Chatterjee has written about the Indo-Chinese and Indonesian parallels of Sri, called Dewi Siri. She also mentioned how this harvest-goddess was worshipped in many ancient civilisations with "figures corresponding to Lakshmi hold a sheaf of corn, or the Greek cornucopia in her hand."

Diwali is also an occasion for economic transactions, which included mandatory payments of grain and gifts to Brahmins and others like kings and landlords. Religion endorses this, to ensure that merchants, farmers and householders remember to pay their dues to god and government. New ledgers and annual accounts are also started by businessmen during this auspicious period. Purchasing ornaments and utensils are mandatory, on Dhanteras and Diwali, so that artisans and traders get a share of the harvest income and this is the season for gifts.

It is said that even gambling is permissible and many North Indians make full use of this provision for several days and nights.

It is not that Lakshmi is ignored by Bengalis, though she may ignore them at times. But the fact is that period is reserved for Kali and other deities take a backseat. Everything that Bengal does has to be ahead of others, so the accounting year starts on Poila Baishakh, gifts are given during Durga Puja. The point here is that almost none of practices of Diwali are associated with Bengal's Kali, which follows the other tradition of the other great goddess.

This cult of the 'terrifying mother' has fascinated foreign scholars like Rachel McDermott, Wendy Donniger, Barbara Walker and numerous others, as also countless Indian academics and analysts of the Shakta tradition. Like the corn-goddess, the powerful cult of mother goddess, representing power, protection, blood and victory, was equally evident in ancient civilisations like Greece. Yosef Vermaseren, who specialised in this subject, stated that Kali's counterpart, Kybele of Asia Minor had her own city called Kalli-polis that later became the first World War's immortal Gallipoli. Even the Bible recorded in its "Book of Hebrews" (9:22) that blood was a part of this Kali's worship. The gypsies of Europe have worshipped her for centuries as the goddess of death, like our Sashaan Kali. Ancient Finland also had a black goddess called Kalma who haunted tombs and ate the dead and this could be a variation of Kali Ma. The Romans too adored black mother earth. In India, the Mahabharata described a dark goddess being worshipped by the Sabaras, Pulindas and 'barbarians' whose rituals were associated with blood-offerings. This is the tradition that would travel via the Puranas like Markendeya and its Devi Mahatmya; other Puranas and Upa Puranas like the Linga, the Brahmananda, the Kalika as well as the many Tantric texts, to enter mainstream Hinduism. "The Goddess demanding bloody offerings resembles Bellona, the Roman goddess of war whose priests Rome even wounded their own arms and legs" said Bhattacharya "and Kali (is) an offshoot of the prima dea, the prime devi".

We see, therefore, that both traditions of the benign goddesses of prosperity and the fearsome mother of blood and destruction ran parallel to each other. It is apparent that most Indians chose the first, while Bengalis opted for the second, but after centuries of cohabitation and Brahmanical theorisation, both distinct festivals have become intertwined for ever. Kali during Diwali is just one good example.