

The Story & History of Kali

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There are several tales about Kali's origin, the best known of which comes from the Devi Mahatmya. It says that when Durga was so enraged by demons that her anger burst from her forehead in the form of Kali. Once born, the dark goddess went on the rampage, killing demons and stringing their heads on a chain around her neck. Her dance of death and destruction was stopped only when Shiva lay on her path and she stepped on her husband's chest by accident. She was terribly embarrassed and finally calmed down. Kali is thus associated with war, death and cremation.

Another legend says that Shiva taunted Parvati who shed her dark skin which then became Kali. That is why one of her names is Kaushika (the Sheath), whilst Parvati emerged as Gauri, the Fair One. In yet a third version, men and gods were being terrorised by Daruka who could only be killed by a woman, and Parvati was asked by the gods to deal with the terrible demon. Since she came out of Shiva's poisoned throat, she became the dark, deadly Kali who eliminated Daruka.

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.

Sukumari Bhattacharya has observed that "The Goddess demanding bloody offerings resembles Bellona, the Roman goddess of war whose priests Rome even wounded their own arms and legs and Kali (is) an offshoot of the prima dea, the prime devi".

The gypsies of Europe have worshipped a dark Kali for centuries as the goddess of death, like our Smashan Kali. Ancient Finland also had a black goddess called Kalma who haunted tombs and this could be a variation of Kali Ma. The Romans too adored black mother earth.

Although the word Kālī appears as early as the Atharva Veda, the first use of it as a proper name is in the Kathaka Grhya Sutra. The mother goddess cults existed parallelly with Vedic and post Vedic culture but was not considered to be 'mainstream'.

The Devi was accepted partially as the Shakti of Shiva, and is closely associated with him in various Purans. Of the different incarnations of the Devi, the Tantras popularised Kali the most. The Mahabharata also described a dark goddess being worshipped by the Sabaras, Pulindas and 'barbaric tribes' whose rituals were associated with blood-offerings.

It was the influence of the Tantrik and the tribal goddess cults that brought Durga and Kali into the Hindu pantheon in the 7th century. This happened through the Markandeya Puran and its Devi Mahatmya. Later, other Purans and Upa Purans like the Linga, the Devi Bhagwat, the Kalika as well as the many Tantric texts, to enter mainstream Hinduism.

Once the mother goddess was given a pride of place, all the places associated with her worship that existed for centuries were linked to her. The legend of Daksha Yagna proved to be very helpful and each of the important ancient sites were sanctified through the episode where parts of Sati's body were scattered. Religion has its own ways of functioning.