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Kali Puja is Different from Diwali

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Patachitra depicting goddess Kali

Bengalis have to be different. On Diwali, for instance, while much of India prays to the fair goddess Lakshmi with millions of dazzling lights, to seek wealth and prosperity, the Bengali Hindus pray to their dark goddess on the darkest night of the year, to seek some much required strength. After all, they have completed their tryst with Lakshmi several weeks before, right

after Durga Puja. When other Indians observe strict vegetarian and Vaishnava rituals during Diwali, *Shakta* (worshippers of *Shakti*) Bengalis sacrifice animals at the altar of goddess Kali and worship her with blood and blood-red hibiscus. It is not just a simple 'Aryan versus 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 up thousands of giants equal in power to him. 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.

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Bengal's Kali Puja lasts just one day and night whereas Diwali in most parts of India 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 Kali on this Amavasya, the dark moonless night. The way Kali Puja is now celebrated, with lamps and crackers were tagged to Kali much later, when copying each other's customs became a national pastime in modern India.



goddess kali

Harvests determine the festivals in Ashwin-Kartik and the all-India celebration of Lakshmi during this period appears quite logical. Sanskrit scholar and Indologist Sukumari Bhattacharya observed that “Lakshmi has a synonym, Sri, derived from the same root from which the Latin Ceres, the corn-goddess” and Linguist Suniti Kumar 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 holding 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 other important people 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. Dhanteras mandates the purchase of ornaments and utensils and Diwali is the season of gifting— so that artisans and traders get a share of the harvest income. It is said that even gambling is permissible and many North Indians make full use of this provision ~~for Diwali traditions~~ either blue or black in colour.

It is not that Bengalis ignore Lakshmi but this particular period is dedicated to Kali and other deities take a backseat. There are hardly any similarities between the rituals and practices of Diwali to the Bengali Kali Puja. Bengal’s cult of the ‘terrifying mother’ has fascinated foreign scholars like Rachel Fell McDermott, Wendy Doniger, Barbara Walker and numerous others, as well as countless Indian academics and analysts of the *Shakta* tradition. Like the corn-goddess, the powerful cult of the mother goddess, representing power, protection, blood and victory, was equally evident in ancient civilisations like Greece. According to Jozef Maarten Vermaseren Kali’s counterpart, Kybele (Cybele) of Asia Minor had her own city called Kallipolis that later became the first World War’s immortal Gallipoli. It is recorded in the “Book of Hebrews” (9:22) in the Bible 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 *Smashan Kali* (Kali worshipped at cremation ghats). Ancient Finland also had a black goddess called Kalma who haunted tombs and ate the dead. The Romans too adored the black mother earth.

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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 Upapuranas 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 in Rome even wounded their own arms and legs" said Sukumari 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 forever. Kali and Lakshmi thus coexist in peace during Diwali in a typically Indian manner.

Notes:

Sukumari Bhattacharji- Indian scholar specialising in Sanskrit texts

Suniti Kumar Chatterji- Indian linguist

Amavasya- Lunar phase of the new moon (moonless night)

Shakta- Worshippers of the Shakti cult/tradition

Ashwin-Kartik- Indian calendar months coinciding with October-November

Yaksha- Characters from Hindu mythology

Rachel Fell McDermott- Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures

Wendy Doniger- American Indologist

Barbara Walker- Tarot specialist

Jozef Maarten Vermaseren- Author specialising in Greek mythology



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