



Newsletter Archives

KALI: THE MOST POWERFUL COSMIC FEMALE

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KALI: THE MOST POWERFUL COSMIC FEMALE

Article of the Month – February 2009

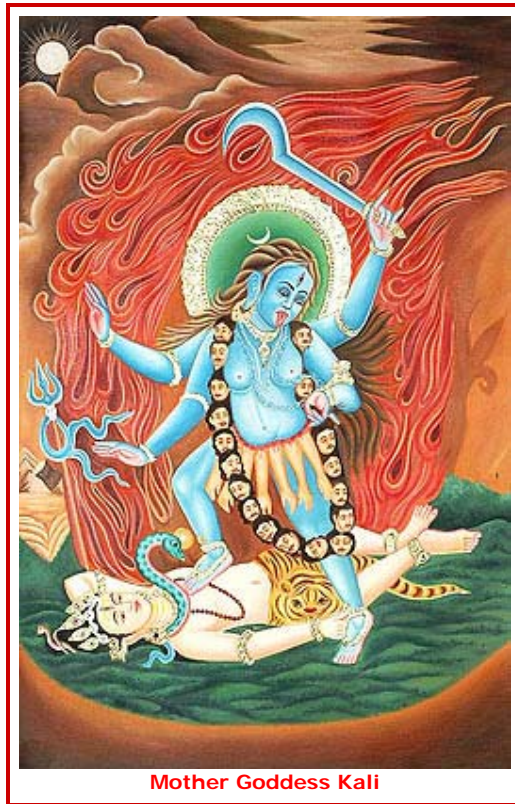
Kali, the embodiment of three-aspected cosmic act, which reveals in creation, preservation and annihilation, is the most mysterious divinity of Indian religious order, Vaishnava, Shaiva, Buddhist, Jain or any. She assures 'abhaya' – fearlessness, by her one hand and 'varada' – benevolence, by the other, both defining in perpetuity the ultimate disposition of her mind, but in contrast, the feeling that the goddess inspires by her appearance, plundering death with the naked sword carried in one of her other hands and feeding on blood gushing from the bodies of her kills, is of awe and terror. Instruments of destruction are her means of preservation, and from across the cremation ground, lit by burning pyres and echoing with shrieks of moaning jackals and goblins, and from over dismembered dead bodies – her chosen abode, routes her passage to life. The most sacred, Kali shares her habitation with vile wicked flesh-eating 'pishachas' – monsters, and rides a dead body. She is enamoured with Shiva but unites with Shiva's 'shava' – the passive, enactive dead body, herself being its active agent. She delights in destruction and laughs but only to shake with terror all four directions, and the earth and the sky. A woman, Kali seeks to adorn herself but her ornaments are a garland or necklace of severed human heads, girdle of severed human arms, ear-rings of infants' corpses, bracelets of snakes – all loathsome and horrible-looking. Such fusion of contradictions is the essence of Kali's being, a mysticism which no other divinity is endowed with. Vashishtha Ganapati Muni has rightly said of her:



"All here is a mystery of contraries,
Darkness, a magic of self-hidden light,
Suffering, some secret rapture's tragic
mask,
And death, an instrument of perpetual
life."

Fusion of contraries – not just as two co-existents but as two essential aspects of the same, is what defines Kali, as also the cosmos which she manifests. As from the womb – darker than the ocean's deepest recesses where even a ray of light does not reach, emerges life, so from the darkness is born the luminous light, and deeper the darkness, more lustrous the light. A realisation in contrast to suffering, delight is suffering's glowing face – her child born by contrast. The tree is born when the seed explodes and its form is destroyed, that is, the life is death's re-birth, and form, all its beauty and vigour, the deformation incarnate. This inter-related unity of contraries defines both, cosmos and Kali. The dark-hued Kali, who represents in her being darkness, suffering, death, deformation and ugly, is the most potent source of life, light, happiness and beauty – the positive aspect of the creation. She destroys to re-create, inflicts suffering so that the delight better reveals, and in her fearful form one has the means of overcoming all fears, not by escaping but by befriending them.

Light's invocation is common to all religious orders and all divinities; in Kali's invocation, the devotee stands face to face with darkness which aggregates death, destruction, suffering, fear and all negative aspects of the universe. Not its prey but a valiant warrior, the devotee seeks to overcome darkness and uncover all that it conceals – light, life, delight, even liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Kali assists him in his battle. She allows her devotee to win her grace and command thereby the total cosmic darkness – accessible or inaccessible, known or unknown, or unknowable, that she condenses into her being. Otherwise than thus condensed, the devotee could not apprehend and command its cosmic enormity. Kali is Tantrikas' supreme deity, for in her they discover the instrument which enables them command diverse cosmic forces in one stroke. Kali's ages-long popularity among ignorant primitive tribes is inspired, perhaps, by her power to reveal light out of darkness, something that they have within and without and in great abundance. Other way also, Kali assures light in perpetuity. Cyclically, a journey that takes off from the light terminates into darkness but that which takes off from the darkness is bound to land into the valleys of endless light.



Mother Goddess Kali



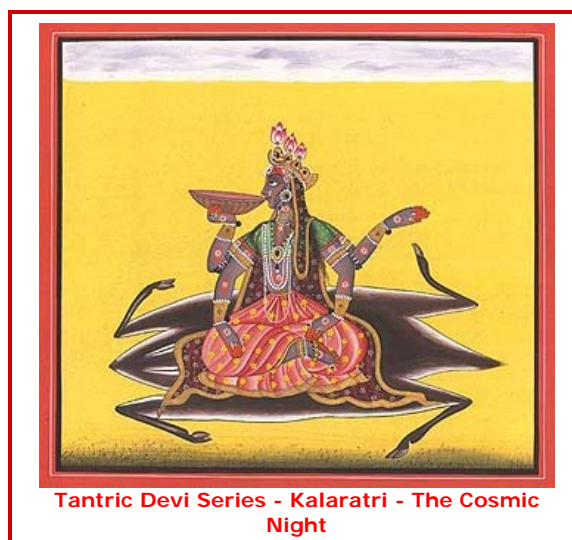
Wrathful Vajrapani with Wisdomfire Aureole

Invoking and befriending the awful – the negative aspect of the creation, and warding off thereby evils and their influence, is a primitive cult still prevalent in world's several ethnic groups and even classical traditions such as Buddhism that has a number of Kali-like awe-inspiring deities,

or Athenian tradition of Nemesis, the wrathful maidens inflicting retribution for a wrong and effecting purgation by way of wreaking ill-fate. Not with such cosmic width as has Kali, or for the attainment of such wide objectives as commanding cosmic elements, motifs like the Chinese dragon, memento mori, a skeleton form considered very auspicious by certain sections of Russian society, Islamic world's semurga, grotesque and dreaded animal forms, ghost-masks... venerated world-over, all reveal man's endeavour to befriend, or mitigate the influence of some or the other wrathful aspect of nature – the manifest cosmos.

ORIGIN OF KALI

Not merely her form, mysticism enshrouds Kali's origin also. Among lines on which her origin has been traced three are more significant, though she transcends even those. She is sometimes seen as a transformation, or a form developed out of some of the Vedic deities alluded to in Brahmins and Upanishadas, mainly Ratridevi, the goddess of dark night, also named Maha-ratri, the Transcendental Night,



Tantric Devi Series - Kalaratri - The Cosmic Night

and Nirtti, the cosmic dancer. Kali's darker aspect is claimed to have developed out of Ratridevi's darkness, and her dance, which she performed to destroy, to have its origin in the cosmic dance of Nirtti who too trampled over whatever fell under her feet. Mundaka Upanishada talks of seven tongues of Agni, the Fire-god, one of them operating in cremation ground and devouring the dead. Over-emphasising the factum of association of Kali and this tongue of Agni with cremation ground a few scholars have sought in Agni's tongue the origin of Kali's form.

Whatever variations in their versions, the Puranas perceive Kali as an aspect of Devi – Goddess, a divinity now almost completely merged with Durga. However, considering Kali's status as a goddess within her own right, as well as her wide-spread worship-cult prevalent amongst various tribes and ethnic groups scattered far and wide in remote rural areas Kali seems to be an indigenous, and perhaps, pre-Vedic divinity. As suggests the term Kali, she appears to be the feminine aspect of Kala – Time, that being invincible, immeasurable and endless has been venerated as Mahakala – the Transcendental Time, represented in Indian metaphysical and religious tradition by Shiva. In Hindu religious terminology Mahakala is Shiva's just another name. Like Shiva, some Indus terracotta icons seem to represent a ferocious female divinity that might be Kali or a form preceding her, and in all probabilities, Shiva's feminine counterpart. Buddhism, a thought that opposed Vedic perception in most matters, inducted into its pantheon Mahakala and a ferocious female divinity in her various manifest forms, as Mahakala's feminine counterpart. Obviously, Buddhism must have inducted her from a source other than the Vedic, as the Vedic it vehemently opposed. Invoked with great fervour on many occasions in the Mahabharata, more especially in Bhishma-Parva, just before Lord Krishna delivers his Gita sermon, Kali seems to be a well established divinity during the Epic days, that is, centuries before the Puranic era began. Though invoked as 'Arya', a term denotative of great reverence, Arjuna lauds her as tenebrous maiden garlanded with skulls, tawny, bronze-dark... and with epithets such as Mahakali, Bhadrakali, Chandi, Kapali ..., the features yet relevant in Kali's imagery. A number of literary texts : Kalidasa's Kumarasambhava, Subandhu's Vasavadatta, Banabhatta's Kadambari, Bhavabhuti's Malitimidhava, Somadeva's Yashatilaka..., of the period from 2nd to 9th century, also allude to Kali, a fact denotative of her great popularity in realms other than religion. This Kali essentially transcends Vedic Ratridevi, Maharatri, Nritti or one of Agni's seven tongues or a divine form grown out of any of them.



Devi's Victory

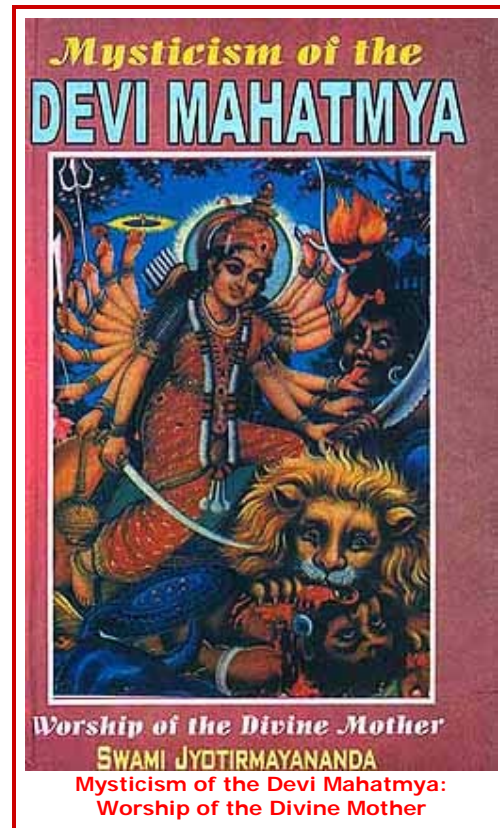
However, Kali cannot be attributed this or that mode of origin. Even if a goddess of indigenous origin and one of primitive tribes, she has far greater width and operativeness than the non-operative boon-giving primitive deities usually had. Unless her absolute 'at homeness' in the traditional Hindu line and her status in it are sacrificed she can not be treated as a mere tribal deity with indigenous origin. Alike, the tradition can not owe her as absolutely her own creation unless her status of being a goddess in her own right is compromised and she is reduced to what she is not. Whatever her origin, perhaps indigenous, Kali emerges in the tradition as its own with far greater thrust and reverence than it attributed to others. Not a mere epithet or aspect of another goddess, Kali has been conceived as the Shakti – Power of Kala - Time. Like Kala she pervades all things, manifest or unmanifest. Puranas perceive Kali as Durga's

personified wrath – her embodied fury, but in every case she is her real Shakti. Even her own fury, Durga summons Kali to accomplish what she herself fails to do. After Durga separates Kali from her being and Kali emerges with a form of her own – an independent being, she reigns supreme in entire Hindu pantheon as regards the power to destroy and defeat enemies.

Not merely Durga's Shakti, Kali has been conceived also as Lord Shiva's dynamic aspect. In a delightful equation, 'a', the main component of 'Shava' and 'Kala', negates what 'i', the main component of 'Shiva' and 'Kali', accomplishes. Shava is the lifeless body, whatever is left of the manifest universe when the Power of Time takes it under its control, and Kala is what reveals only in the manifest aspect of the universe, and thus, both are 'timed'. When 'i', symbolic of the feminine energy which manifests as Kali, unites into their beings transforming Shava into Shiva and Kala into Kali, both emerge as 'timeless'. In Shiva this universe is contained, and hence, in him, the transition from the 'timed' to the 'timeless' takes place. Kali, being the Power of Time, does not undergo this transition.

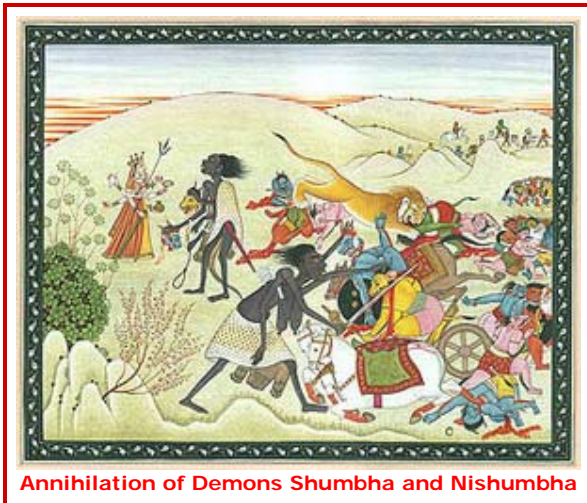
KALI IN PURANAS

Allusions to Kali occur in some early Puranas too, it is, however, the 5th-6th century Devi-Mahatmya, a part of the Markandeya Purana, which comes out with her more elaborate vision in regard to her origin, appearance, personality, power and exploits.



The Devi-Mahatmya comprises independent 'Dhyana' on Mahakali and uses Kali's names, such as Bhadrakali, Kalika, Chandika... as epithets of Devi in its different parts; these are, however, two episodes that give to her fuller exposure in regard to her origin, role and other things. One of them relates to Chanda and Munda, the ferocious demons she kills, and other, to Rakta-bija.

Defeated and thrown out of Devaloka – their abode, by demons Shumbha and Nishumbha, erstwhile generals of Mahisha, gods lauded Devi and invoked her to come to their rescue and free their abode from the notorious demons. Devi, bathing in river Ganga as Parvati, heard gods' laudation and asked herself who they were lauding, and when she so questioned, from her own being sprang up a female form – a bewitching beauty that had unique lustre, teemed in great youthfulness, and was richly bejeweled and brilliantly costumed. She replied that it was her they lauded. She then proceeded to the region which demons of Shumbha's army swarmed and sat under a tree all alone. Hearing of her from a messenger Shumbha intensely desired to marry her and sent to her his proposal. However, the divine maiden sent back his messenger with words that she would marry only such one who defeated her in a battle. Thinking that a young maiden with no arms in hands was hardly a challenge, Shumbha sent a small contingent to fight and capture her. The Goddess defeated and destroyed it and one after the other all contingents that followed. Finally, with a huge army of demons under the command of their generals Chanda and Munda Shumbha and Nishumbha themselves came to fight the Goddess. Seeing Chanda and Munda advancing towards her the Goddess blazed with fury. As the Devi-Mahatmya has it:



Annihilation of Demons Shumbha and Nishumbha

"From the knitted brows of her forehead's surface immediately came forth Kali, with her dreadful face, carrying sword and noose, she carried a strange skull-topped staff, and wore a garland of human heads, she was shrouded in a tiger skin, and looked utterly gruesome with her emaciated skin, her widely gaping mouth, terrifying with its lolling tongue, with sunken, reddened eyes and a mouth that filled the directions with roars."

The Goddess asked Kali to destroy demons' army, Chanda and Munda in particular, on which Kali inflicted great destruction all around, danced on the corpses, killed Chanda and Munda and as trophies of war brought to the Goddess their severed heads. The Goddess attributed to Kali the epithet of Chamunda – destroyer of Chanda and Munda. Deaths of Chanda and Munda greatly infuriated Shumbha and Nishumbha and with all demons at their command, which included the demon Rakta-bija and others of his



Matrikas and Mahavidyas Battling Against Demons

clan, they attacked the Goddess and surrounded her along Kali from all sides. To face their massive number the Goddess summoned Sapta-Matrikas – Seven Mothers, Brahmani, Maheshwari, Kumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Narsimhi and Aindri, the powers of all major gods, Brahma, Shiva, Skanda, Vishnu and Indra.



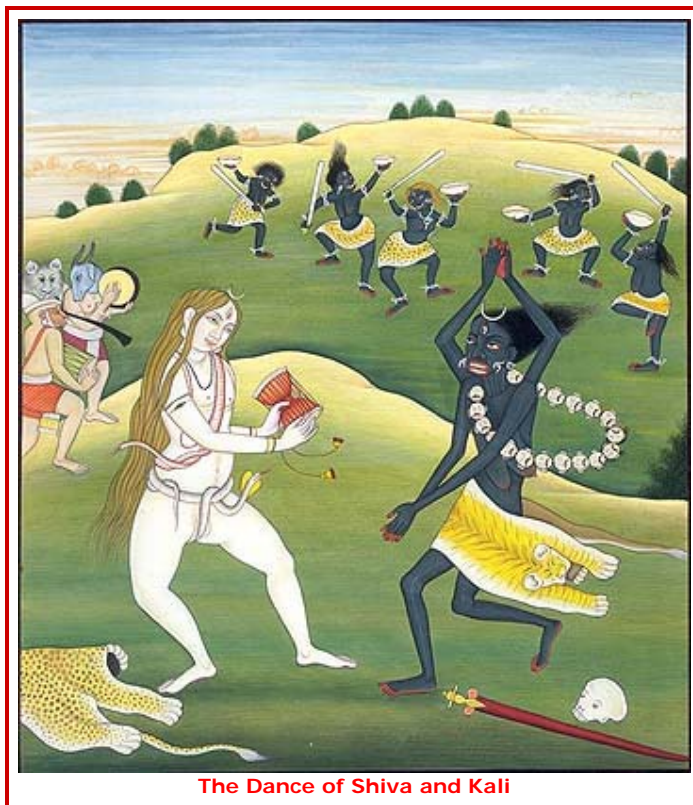
A fierce battle ensued but what upset the Goddess most was the multiplication of Rakta-bija who had a boon to the effect that a new Rakta-bija demon would rise from wherever a drop of his blood fell. Finally, the Goddess called Kali to drink the blood of Rakta-bija before it fell on the earth. With a gaped mouth devouring hosts of demons and a tongue extended into all directions and moving faster than did the demon Kali consumed every drop of blood oozing from the wounds of Rakta-bija.

Not Devi-Mahatmya alone, almost all Puranas, Agni and Garuda in particular, venerate Kali as the goddess who assures success in war and eliminates enemies. Skanda Purana links Kali's origin to Parvati. Initially Parvati had dark complexion for which Shiva used to tease her every now and then. One day on being addressed twice as Kali – black-complexioned, Parvati deserted Shiva. She said that she would not return unless she got rid of her black complexion. After Parvati left, Shiva felt very lonely. Taking advantage of her absence and Shiva's loneliness a demon named Adi, who was looking for an opportunity to kill Shiva and avenge his father's death, disguised as Parvati and managed to enter into Shiva's chamber. It took some time but Shiva identified the demon, and soon killed him. Meanwhile by rigorous penance and with Brahma's help Parvati was able to cast off her outer black sheath and from inside emerged her golden form. Now Gauri – golden-hued, she came back to Shiva. Gods, looking for a female form to kill Mahisha, transformed with their lustre this black sheath of Parvati into Kali and after she had accomplished gods' errand Parvati banished her to the region beyond Vindhya Mountain. Here she became known as Katyayani.

The Linga Purana contains yet another episode responsible for Kali's origin. A demon named Daruka had a boon that no other than a woman would kill him. In view of reports of his atrocities reaching him, Shiva one day asked Parvati to kill him. Thereupon Parvati entered into the body of Shiva and from the poison contained in his throat transformed herself and re-appeared as Kali. She gathered an army of flesh-eating Pishachas and with their help destroyed Daruka. The Skanda Purana further expands the legend. Kali did not stop destruction even after killing Daruka. Intoxicated by consuming poison and demon's blood Kali, uncontrollable as she was, went crazy and by her destructive activities endangered cosmic equilibrium. Finally, Shiva transformed himself as one of Kali's own forms and sucked from Kali's breasts all poison after which she became quiet.



Goddess Kali Suckling Lord Shiva



The Dance of Shiva and Kali

Though in a different context, an identical tradition prevails in South India. After defeating Shumbha and Nishumbha Kali retired to a forest with her retinue of fierce companions and began terrorizing surroundings and its inhabitants. A Shiva's devotee went to him with petition to get the forest free of Kali's terror. When Kali refused to oblige Shiva claiming that it was her domain, Shiva asked her to compete him in dance to which Kali agreed, though unable, or perhaps unwilling, to reach Shiva's energy level she got defeated and left.

Though insignificantly, Kali's origin has been linked also with Sati, Shiva's first consort, and Sita, consort of Lord Rama. Insulted by her father Daksha the infuriated Sati rubbed her nose in anger and there appeared Kali. After conquering Ravana Rama was returning to Ayodhya. On his way, it is said, he confronted a monster that so much terrified Rama that in fear his blood froze. Thereupon Sita transformed herself as Kali and defeated it.

KALI : APPEARANCE AND PERSONALITY

Numerous are Kali's manifestations; however, her external appearance, both in texts as well as art, basic nature and overall personality do not vary much. In her usual form the black-hued Kali is a terrible awe-inspiring divinity frightening all by her appearance. Except that some of her body parts are covered by her ornaments, she is invariably naked. An emaciated figure with long disheveled hair and gruesome face, Kali has been conceived with any number



The Annihilation of Rakta Bija

of arms from two to eighteen, and sometimes even twenty or more, though her more usual form being four-armed. The four arms are interpreted as symbolising her ability to operate into and command all four directions, that is, the cosmos in aggregate. She has long sharp fangs, alike long ugly nails, a fire-emitting third eye on her forehead, a lolling tongue and blood-smearred mouth, which, when expanded, not only swallows hordes of demons but its lower part extends to ocean's depth and upper, beyond the sky. When required to lick blood falling from a fleeing demon's body she extends her tongue to any length and turns it faster than the wind in whichever direction the blood falls.

In her more usual iconography Kali carries in one of her four hands an unsheathed sword – her instrument to overcome enemies and command evils, in another, a severed demon head, and other two are held in postures denotative of abhaya and varada – fearlessness and benevolence. Sometimes, the severed head is replaced with a skull-bowl filled with blood.



Abhaya is the essence of Kali's entire being. One of the permanent dispositions of her mind, 'abhaya' is her assurance against all fears which, embodied in her, are rendered inoperative or to operate only as commanded. Denotative of her boundless power to destroy, Kali's frightening aspect is her power to dispel evil and wicked, and in this the freedom from fear is re-assured. Kali's usual place is a battlefield where all around lay scattered pools of blood, headless torsos, severed heads, arms and other body-parts. When not in battlefield, Kali roams around cremation ground where reigns death's silence except when yelling winds, groans of wailing jackals or sound of fluttering wings of vultures tearing corpses lying around break it. Its abyssal darkness, which flames of pyres occasionally lit, is what suits Kali most. In battlefield or otherwise, she walks on foot. Except rarely when she borrows or forcibly takes Durga's lion or Shiva's Nandi, Kali does not use a mount, an animal or whatever, either to ride or to assist her in her battle. She dances to destroy and under her dancing feet lay the corpse of destruction. Standing

or seated, she has under her a sprawling ithyphallic corpse, not lotuses, the favourite seat of most other deities. She stands upon nonexistence – the corpse of the ruined universe, but which nonetheless contains the seed of new birth.

In her imagery while the corpse represents non-existence or ruined universe, Kali's figure engaged in union either with Shiva or his Shava symbolise continuum of creative process. The manifest universe is what veils Time but when Kali, the Power of Time, has destroyed the manifest universe, that veil is lifted and Time, and correspondingly Kali, the Power of Time, is rendered naked, a phenomenon that Kali's naked form denotes.

By nature, Kali is always hungry and never sated. She laughs so loud that all three worlds shake with terror. She dances madly not merely trampling upon corpses but also on the live cosmos reducing it to non-existence. She crushes, breaks, tramples upon and burns her enemies or those of her devotees. Kali is not only a deity of independent nature but is also indomitable, or rather all dominating. She is Shiva-like powerful, unconventional and more at home when dwelling on society's margins. Aspects of nobility or elite life-mode are not her style of life. She is Shiva's consort or companion but not Parvati-like meek and humble. Herself wild and destructive, she incites Shiva to resort to wild, dangerous and destructive behaviour threatening stability of cosmos. Every moment a warrior, Kali does not miss any opportunity of war; She is one of Shiva's warriors in his battle against Tripura.

KALI'S FORMS :

Far more than in texts, a huge body of Kali's mythology has evolved in Kali-related tradition. Apart that a rough-cut crude image of Kali painted in black, and the tongue, in blood-red, occupies a corner in every hamlet, even with a dozen hutments, it also abounds in tales of her mysterious powers, both inflicting damage and protecting from harm. More significant is her presence in Indian art where she underlines many important Hindu themes. What

sometimes occur in texts as mere epithets of Kali are in Indian arts her well established forms. Mahakali, Bhadrakali, Dakshina Kali, Guhyakali, Shmashana Kali, Bhairavi, Tripura-Bhairavi, Chamunda... are some of her more popular forms in texts as well as art.



Goddess Shri Bhairavi Devi



In her Mahakali form, an equivalent to Mahakala, the all-powerful aspect of Shiva, who devours time and effects dissolution, Kali is Mahakala's feminine transform. In her form as Mahakali she presides over the Great Dissolution which Shiva in the form of Shava symbolises.

In art, Kali invariably enshrines it. Initially, as Mahakali her role was confined to demon-slaying. In Puranas, while still representing dissolution, destruction, death and decay, she more emphatically personified in her being horror, awe and loathsomeness. She still slew demons but mostly when summoned and in

subordination. In her form as Chamunda – the slayer of Chanda and Munda, she was most ferocious multi-armed demon-killer. She carried in her hands most deadly weapons and in her eyes a lustre that burnt her enemies.

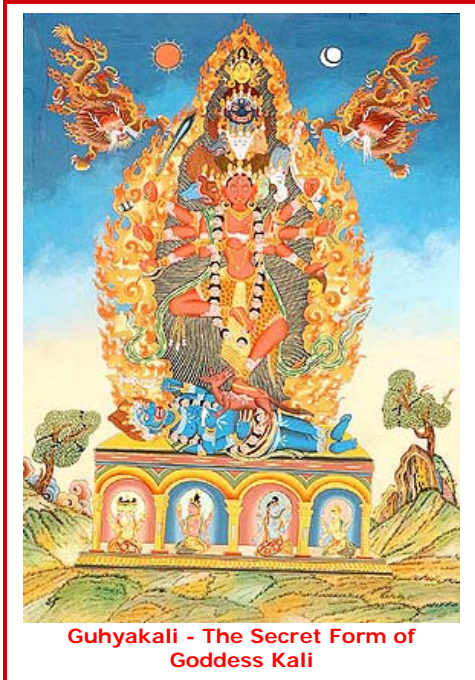
As Shmashana Kali, a form more popular in Tantrism, Kali haunts cremation ground amidst burning pyres – the interim domain in between this and the next world and where death and dissolution reign.



Kali, Mahakali or Shmashana-Kali

As Tripura-Bhairavi, consort of death, Kali is conceived with a form wearing a large necklace of human bodies, a shorter one of skulls, a girdle of severed hands, and ear-rings of the corpses of infants. Around her lie a greater number of corpses and feed on them wily jackals and vile vultures. Sometimes in loincloth, Tripura-Bhairavi is more often covered in elephant skin and carries other Shaivite attributes.

Elaborately jeweled Dakshina Kali also wears a long necklace of severed heads, a girdle of unusually small severed arms and a couple of corpses as ear-rings, but instead of being gruesome her figure comprises smooth perfectly proportioned fully exposed youthful limbs. She stands on the body of a supine ithyphallic Shiva stretched out on an already burning pyre in cremation ground where scavenging birds hover and jackals roam. Dakshina Kali carries in one of her hands a sword, in another, a human head, and other two are held in abhaya and varada. Bhadra Kali, the auspicious one, Kali's majestic, benign, benevolent and mild form, has been conceived with arms varying in number usually two to four. She often carries two bowls, one for wine and other for blood. Kali's form that gods, even Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma, worship is invariably her Bhadra Kali form. The delightful one, she joyously drinks, dances and sings.



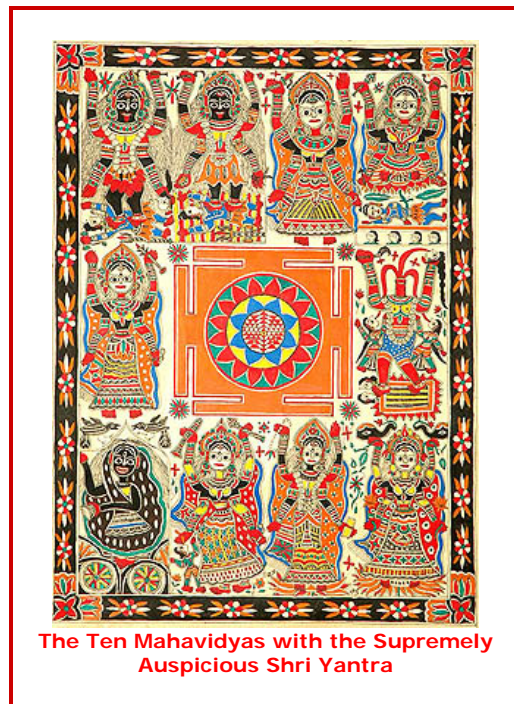
Guhyakali - The Secret Form of Goddess Kali

Guhyakali, literally meaning 'Secret Kali', is Kali's esoteric aspect, which only those well versed in the Kali tradition know.

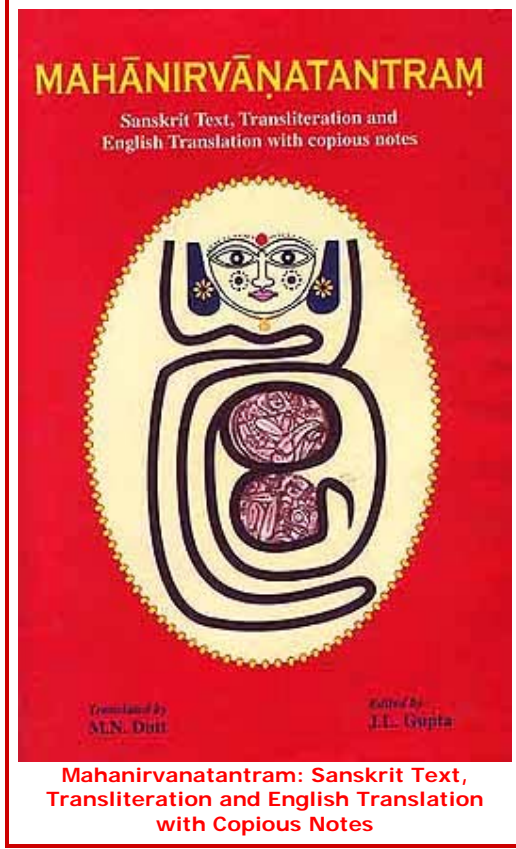
In the related 'Dhyana' – the form that reveals when meditating on her, snakes constitute a significant part of her attire and adornment. Her necklace, sacred thread, girdle, all are made of serpents, and the thousand hooded serpent Ananta makes her umbrella. Apart, her form assimilates other Shaivite attributes to include crescent on her forehead. In visual representation, instead of snakes' pre-eminence, Guhyakali is identified by the Kali-yantra invariably represented along with.

KALI IN YOGA AND TANTRA

Kali has quite significant place in Yoga and Tantra, though in Yoga her status is not that high as in Tantra. Kundalini-sadhana, kindling of Kundalini – dormant energy seen as black serpent that lies coiled and asleep in the inner body, is the prevalent practice in both but it is the very basis of Yoga. The Yoga perceives Kali as Kundalini Shakti. Kali is thus the basis of Yoga, though beyond such equation it does not involve Kali any further. Tantra seeks its accomplishment in Ten Mahavidyas – the Great Wisdoms, Kali, being the foremost among them, is the most significant deity of Tantra.



The Ten Mahavidyas with the Supremely Auspicious Shri Yantra



Kali's disruptive behaviour, unkempt appearance, confronting activities and involvement with death and defilement are what better suit Tantra, especially the Vamachara Tantrism. Kali's form that contains in an unclean or even unholy body-frame the highest spiritual sanctity helps Tantrika to overcome the conventional notion of clean and unclean, sacred and profane and other dualistic concepts that lead to incorrect nature of reality. Yogini-Tantra, Kamakhya Tantra and Nirvana-Tantra venerate Kali as the supreme divinity and Nirvana-Tantra perceives Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva as arising from Kali as arise bubbles from the sea.

To the Tantrika, Kali's black is symbolic of disintegration; as all colours disappear in black, so merge into her all names and forms. Density of blackness – massive, compact and unmixed, represents Pure Consciousness. Kali as Digambari, garbed in space – in her nakedness, free from all covering of illusion, defines to the Tantrika the journey from the unreal to the real. In full breasted Kali, symbolic of her ceaseless motherhood, the Tantrika discovers her power to preserve. Her disheveled hair – elokeshi, are symbolic of the curtain of death which surrounds life with mystery. In her garland of fifty-two human heads, each representing one of the fifty-two letters of Sanskrit alphabets, the Tantrika perceives repository of power and knowledge. The girdle of hands, the principal instrument to work, reveals her power with which the cosmos operates and in her three eyes, its three-aspected activity – creation, preservation and destruction. Both Kali and Tantra are epitome of unity of apparent dualism. As her terrifying image, the negative aspect of her being and thus of the cosmos, is the creative life-force, the source of creation, so in Tantra-sadhana, the journey takes off from the 'material' to the apex – the ultimate.

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This article by Dr. P. C. JAIN AND DR. DALJEET.

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