

Reasons for devotion to hindu goddesses

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Hinduism portrays feminine divinity in a more exalted way than most other religions do. Though Hindu goddesses are usually depicted as consorts, wives or companions to a Hindu god, cases exist in which they are worshipped independently; Tantrism for example, where it is believed that women possess more spiritual power than men, thus men can achieve divinity through union with a woman ("Tantrism").

Most villages reinforce the mother aspect of goddesses and worship them individually as their protector, regarding them as having originated in the area and thus being tied to the health and prosperity of the village (Caldwell). Others who may devote themselves to a goddess might be in order to conquer or flourish in a particular area, like how someone who wishes to achieve higher wisdom would praise Sarasvati, goddess associated with learning. Many scholars question the origins of goddess worship, and it is argued that they most probably emerged in the Indus Valley civilization (2500-1500 B. C. E). The civilization, relying mainly on agriculture, likely worshipped female earth deities that represented fertility, regeneration, life and death, to aid in their harvests (Erndl 19). Scenes depicted in their seals also pointed to the fact that the Indus Valley people were perhaps "goddess-revering" (McDermott 3608). Some people have raised the point of feminism as a notion of commitment to a Hindu goddess, as goddesses that appear strong and independent exist in Hinduism, which is virtually unseen in other prominent religions. A popular question is then raised, "Is the Goddess a Feminist?" Rita Gross acknowledges the difficulty of a concrete answer to the question, and responds with an 'It depends'. She proposes that the answer lies in the definition of feminist that the person might have,

and how the Goddess's devotees are. The idea is simple enough; if the believer is feminist, then they will worship their goddess as if they were feminist as well. If the believer is not feminist, then they will worship their goddess as if they were not feminist. She states that “. . . gods and goddesses are created by devotees . . . ” (104).

Gross's statement rings true, especially when we examine much of the confusion shrouding Kali. Kali is almost always depicted as having black skin, a near naked body, long, disheveled hair and a long, lolling tongue. She wears ghastly adornments like a necklace made from human heads, and her fangs are long and usually dripping with blood. Her illustrations are mainly intimidating, making her appear wild and uncontrollable nearly perpetually. She is, however, a popular deity to worship in Tantrism, and is revered as the highest deity, above Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

Millions regard her as Mother, and aspire to overcome the fear of death through confrontation. Kali's origins are believed to have their roots in South Asia, where she was apparently worshipped through rituals and blood sacrifices. O'Flaherty distinguishes a figure, a demoness, in early Sanskrit literature called Long-Tongue, who he points to conceivably being a more ancient form of Kali. The first time the name Kali appears in texts is in Mundaka Upanisad, however, not as a goddess but as a tonguelike flame of sacrificial fire.

The first mention of a goddess with the same name is in the Mahabharata, who appears in the dreams of warriors to give them a warning of death. However, it is through her later appearances in the Devimahatmya that Kali is brought closer into Hindu religion (Kripal 156). She is said to have sprouted

when Durga, angered by the asuras who pointed their weapons at her, turned into an inky black color on her forehead and summons Kali. Kali then proceeds to kill all the asuras in a frenzied manner, later offering the heads of their leaders Chanda and Munda to Durga.

Her second appearance is in the follow chapter, where she battles Raktabija, and assures success by sucking all of his blood so he could not reproduce anymore, per Durga's command, while she slayed him (" Devimahatmya" ch. 7-8). Another myth ties Kali with Parvati, telling of an army of demons that threatens the safety of the world. Men cannot slay them, and so Shiva calls for his wife to aid them in battle. Parvati accepts the responsibility, swallowing the poison stored in Shiva's throat and morphing into Kali.

However, she becomes too drunk with the poison and, after defeating all the demons, threatens to destroy the world herself with her berserk dance. In an attempt to subdue his wife, Shiva then lays on the floor in front of Kali, who in her delirious state does not notice his presence and steps on him. Shamed that she had showed such disgraceful behavior, she bites her tongue in humiliation. The last scene of the above tale is illustrated in a lot of imagery, and while the tale itself has a lot of variations, many Hindus will arrive at the same resolution.

It is in this perception that many contradictions lie. Another question rises, " What does Kali's tongue-biting really mean? " Most Hindus will claim that it is to show shame, which is what the action means in Bengaliculture, however the meaning behind the action might seem unlikely since Kali, who was previously interpreted as always being wild and threatening, that is, sporting

qualities that an ' ideal wife' should not possess, was suddenly showing a submissive nature, ashamed of having disrespected her husband.

From a Tantric view, Kali is mentioned to be standing on Shiva because she is engaging in reversed sexual intercourse with him, and " delighting in the waves of passion and arousal that flow from such an act. " It is evident that the feeling of shame is rather unreasonable given the situation mentioned. Furthermore, a reading from Mishra of the Tantric reading suggests that, as Kali dances around madly, Shiva sleeps on the floor in front of her in an attempt to calm her and, in her blinded anger she did not see him and stepped on his chest.

At that moment Shiva's penis became erect and entered Kali. At that instant Kali recognized her husband and pulled out her tongue in ecstasy and her anger disappeared. (Kripal 161) The above poses a wholly different view on the widely-known myth, and while it might not surely accept or reject any view, it inspires doubt on the real occurrence of the tale. Having explained the confusion around Kali's popular myth and notorious tongue, a common misconception is brought to light which may or may not be the product of ' believers believing what they want to believe'.

Hinduism, having been shaped by a patriarchal society, might have sparked the want to dilute the image of the powerful and popular goddess Kali into one more acceptable for its community. An additional myth, telling of how Shiva defeats Kali in a dance match and succeeds in subduing her, resulting in her being more docile and calmer, doesn't add up to the rest of the story around them as Kali is more often than not depicted as a wife that constantly

provokes and encourages disruptive behavior from her husband (Kinsley 122).

However, bringing up another point by Gross, she mentions, But, in the long run, if the goddesses' devotees are feminists, then the goddesses will either come to be seen as feminists or will be abandoned by their feminist devotees. (104) It is plausible to arrive to the conclusion from the above stated that, if the religion a person follows does not satisfy or reflect their personal beliefs as well, they will abandon it; it is common sense.

It should be mentioned as well that Hinduism is, rather than a single religion, a family of religions that are closely related to each other. Therefore, it should be plausible to assume that perhaps, the previously mentioned contradictory myths might be a result of this; that is, an effort to try to infuse one's own beliefs into their religion to make it more acceptable to themselves. Looking and inspecting the gaps and problems in the religion can tell a lot about its believers' culture and thinking.

Having covered Kali's disorder of facts, one can infer that Hindus probably place great importance in correct conduct of their wives, and the goddesses in their religion serve as a model for Hindu women to follow if they wish to be wed. Examples such as Parvati and Sarasvati can be mentioned, both portrayed as ideal, submissive wives to their partners, serving as counterbalances. Hindu gods and goddesses are sometimes portrayed as equals, and rather than husband and wife, they are shown to be male and female counterparts of the same being.

The goddesses are by no means weak and disrespected; they are strong and revered, but their personalities inspire different, subtle ideas into their people. However, the idea of whether or not something is 'correct' or 'erroneous' is highly subjective, and while Western feminists might argue on the essentials that a woman must possess in order to be well off, it is not the same for Hindu women who are the target of the religion, and for them the Hindu goddesses provide them a positive model to follow, and with it, psychological comfort which is important (Gross 106).