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## **Two Faces of the Hindu Great Goddess: Lakṣmī and Kālī<sup>1</sup>**

### **1 Goddess from the margins of conventional spiritual horizons and the edges of society**

The pantheon of almost innumerable deities in Hinduism is built up not only by gods but also by goddesses, whose cults are much less explored than Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, in their many varieties the two dominant religious strands in rich spiritual landscape of India. The worship of goddesses, however, probably dates back to the Indus Valley civilization (c. 3000–1750 BCE) which sprung up around two cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, in the area of present-day Pakistan. In fact, during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, archaeologists excavated a number of stone sculptures of women, and although their significance is unknown due to the absence of textual sources during this period, some researchers have suggested that the individual statuettes testify to the existence of an ancient cult of the goddess (Marshall, 1931, 57–63), in particular the sculpture of a woman with full breasts, which is said to symbolize fertility and thus the goddess's role as mother of the universe.<sup>2</sup> It has also been suggested that the origins of goddess worship are pre-Vedic or pre-Aryan in origin, for which there is no solid evidence.

In the Vedic period (c. 1500–500 BCE), as is evident from the rich corpus of sacred texts of the Vedas, goddesses did not play a significant role in sacred ritual performances. Most of the hymns recited by the priests during ritual activities were dedicated to male deities, yet references to a number of goddesses, such as Lakṣmī (goddess of material prosperity), Pṛthivī (goddess of the Earth), Uṣas (goddess of the dawn), Sarasvatī (river revered as a goddess), Nirṛti (goddess of destruction),

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2 Some statuettes may have served as talismans in rituals, the nature of which is unknown, or they may have been merely decorative objects. There are many more female statuettes than male, and several examples of stone female and male genitalia. Based on the greater abundance of female sculptures, some researchers have inferred the existence of a matriarchal community at this time, although there is no firm evidence due to the absence of textual sources (Clark, 2003, 322).



and Vāc (goddess of language)<sup>3</sup> are attested. Some of those have survived into the subsequent formation of new forms of religion. Sarasvatī,<sup>4</sup> the goddess of knowledge and music, wife of the god Brahmā, the creator, and Pṛthivī (also Bhū), the goddess of the Earth and the second wife of Viṣṇu, the god of preservation, have thus assumed the role of companions of male deities, while the Vedic goddess of destruction, Nirṛti, is considered to be the prototype of the independent goddess Kālī, one of the most important female deities of the divine pantheon in contemporary Hinduism. The identity of the Tantric goddess Kālī reflects many of the qualities of Nirṛti, who is described in the Ṛgvedic poems (e.g. *Ṛgveda* X.59) as a dark goddess who comes from the south, i.e. the abodes of death, and is asked by humans to interfere as little as possible in their lives.

The subsequent period of the Indian epics and the *Purāṇas* (between 400 BCE and 400 CE) is particularly important for the detailed formation of the identities of particular goddesses, culminating in a multifaceted and dynamic tradition of *śākta* goddess worship during the rise of Tantric philosophical-religious systems. The great epics the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* contain some descriptions of dangerous and destructive goddesses; in the *Mahābhārata*, for example, there is the mention of a group of dark and dangerous female deities known as “seven mothers” (*saptamātṛka*), who lived on the fringes of the community and brought woe and misfortune, and from whom children in particular had to be protected from their evil intentions. Kālī, who is described as a dark and furious goddess, also appears in several sections in the epic. However, there are some epic references to various individual goddesses, while in the period of the *Purāṇas* we trace the idea of one goddess as the Supreme Reality, Mahādevī, who unites in herself all other deities subordinate to her, and her dynamic and multifaceted manifestations are discussed in detail in the Tantric texts, which were composed mainly between 400 and 700 CE.

## 2 The rise of the Great Goddess: the myth of Devī

The goddesses in Hinduism that constitute pantheon of Tantric Śāktism are considered to be manifestations of one Supreme Goddess, Mahādevī (the Great Goddess), also known as Devī, who is venerated in the *Devīmāhātmya* (c. 550 CE),<sup>5</sup> a section of the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* (chapters 81–93), which major part was composed

3 Among these female deities, Vāc, the goddess of language, was particularly important, as she was considered to be the creative power that inspires seers (*ṛṣi*) and the path that leads to the highest philosophical insight through language, namely Sanskrit, which still enjoys the status of a sacred language in Hinduism.

4 The figure of the goddess Vāc merged with the identity of the goddess Sarasvatī in the post-Vedic period.

5 The text is very popular also in contemporary Hinduism – it is recited in temples dedicated to Durgā and also during the autumn festival Durgāpūja.

around 250 CE. The central myth of the Mahādevī cult, which forms the basis for the formation of the tradition of Hindu goddesses, is that of its first manifestation, the goddess-warrior Durgā,<sup>6</sup> who defeated the buffalo demon Maḥiṣāsura. One version of the story of the evil demon defeated by the goddess goes like this: Maḥiṣāsura was given a pledge by the god Brahmā that no male deity would be able to defeat him, so the demon boldly set about conquering the universe, including heavens, with the god Indra at its head. Indra asked the gods Brahmā, Śiva and Viṣṇu for help, whereupon, out of the anger of all three deities, immense energy arose and condensed into the form of beautiful Great Goddess, Mahādevī. The gods made replicas of their weapons and presented them to the Goddess with the request to defeat the malicious demon. She received a tiger, named Ambikā, from Himavat, the god of the Himalayas,<sup>7</sup> and a cup of wine from the pan-Indian god of wealth Kubera.<sup>8</sup> When the newly created goddess filled the universe with a wicked and terrifying laugh, joined by the shrieks of other gods, the demon pricked up his ears and sent his troops to see what was causing the unusual noise. When the demon's warriors returned to their leader, they told him about what they had seen – a beautiful unmarried goddess endowed with the opposites of love, grace, heroism, fear and terror. The demon was impressed by the description of such beauty, so he approached Mahādevī and asked for her hand in marriage. She thunderously refused; demon wanted to charm her so he took on a beautiful human form, but the goddess explained that she was created to uphold justice and urged him to confront her in battle or go to hell. Enraged by her refusal and the provocative challenge, the demon furiously attacked the goddess, transforming himself into the forms of various animals, and Devī drank a cup of wine, swung herself on top of a tiger and began to chase demon relentlessly. When the goddess finally caught him, she killed him mercilessly: she crushed him with her own feet, pierced demon's chest with a trident and beheaded him with a discus, all the while maintaining an attitude of serenity and grace. One seeing this the troops of demons fled to hell, and after Devī's glorious victory, the gods sang praises to the Goddess and expressed dedication to her. For her part, Devī promised to come to their aid whenever needed.

6 The name Mahādevī, also Devī, often refers to Durgā herself, but it also encompasses the entire pantheon of Hindu goddesses. Mahādevī is “the unity underlying all female deities” (Pintchman, 2001, 3).

7 In some versions of the story he provided her with a lion.

8 Due to this myth, alcoholic beverages, in addition to blood or animals, are still important offerings made by worshippers to the goddesses, especially to Kālī.



Durgā slaying Mahiṣāsura  
(c. 1700–1710, Nurpur school, Pahari Hills, India;  
source: Cleveland Museum of Arts; copyright: public domain)

The figure of the goddess in this myth and its many variants represents a distinct counterpart to the role model of a woman described in the *Dharmaśāstras*, where her nature (*strīsvabhāva*) was defined as passive and submissive, and her roles, defined by male authorities, were limited to wife and mother. In the *Devīmāhātmya*, however, there is a crucial reversal – in the goddess a woman becomes a warrior, and, moreover, evil, in this case in the form of the demon Mahiṣāsura, was not able to be vanquished by a god, by a man, but by a woman. Her immense energy, *śakti*, surpassed all the powers of the gods, and in her energy the strength of resistance to the prescribed female duties is reflected. The demon's first thought on hearing of the gorgeous goddess was to marry her, as this would subjugate her as a companion of a male figure and bring her into the rigid confines of the roles of wife and mother, which the goddess clearly rejects, which also reflects her independence. The latter is also present in the act of slaying the demon itself, as the goddess did not need the direct help of male deities. Instead their diverse powers merged in her, which defines the Great Goddess as the Ultimate Reality that unites all the gods and their aspects within herself, while at the same time transcending them entirely. Thus, for the first time in the spiritual history of India a goddess was enthroned as the Supreme Principle that creates, sustains and destroys, roles otherwise ascribed to

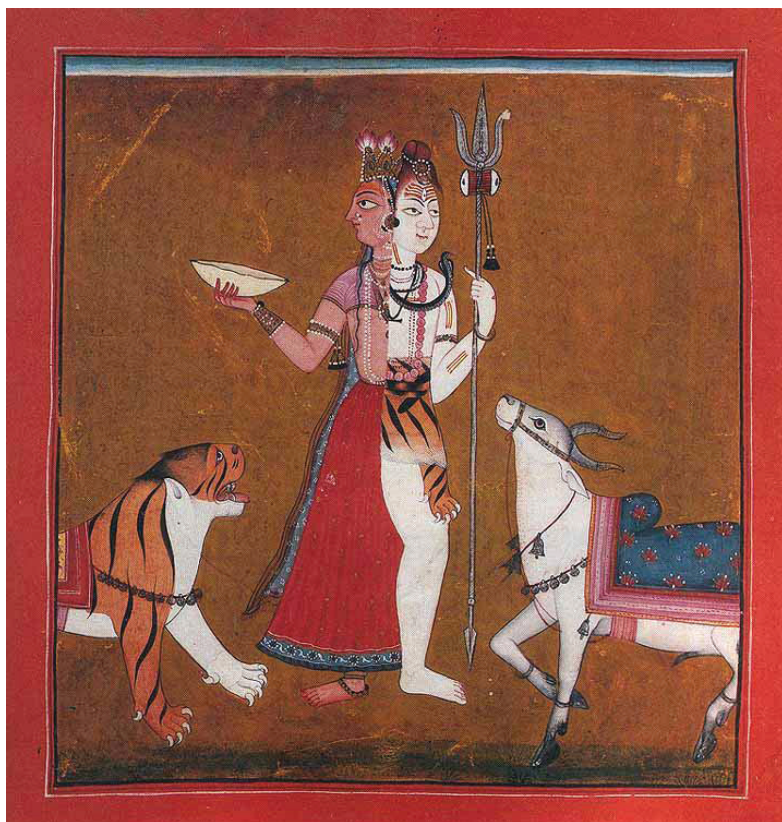
the gods Brahmā (creator), Viṣṇu (sustainer) and Śiva (destroyer). As the creator, she is also the origin of the great illusion (*mahāmāyā*) that surrounds beings with ignorance and confines them to the mechanism of *saṃsāra*, the constant alternation of rebirth and death, but she is also the one who bestows grace and liberation.

The goddess, who had previously moved on the fringes of the Brahmanical social and spiritual world, thus became an integral part of the religious landscape of India, especially due to the influence of ideas in the *Purāṇas* and the new Tantric system of thought that dominated Vedic ideas between 300 and 600 CE. Tantric ideas also challenged the ideational frameworks of philosophical schools that emerged from the Vedic culture, and in the context of the present paper it is worth mentioning the metaphysical system of the *Sāṃkhya* school in particular. Its philosophy is based on the doctrine that there are two supreme principles which interact and thus cause the world to arise: the supreme soul, consciousness *Puruṣa*, defined as the masculine metaphysical principle, and the supreme nature *Prakṛti*, matter, defined as the feminine metaphysical principle. The difference between these otherwise equal poles, both of which contribute to the origin of creation, also dictated the distinctiveness of one and the other – *Puruṣa*, the masculine element, is designated by the active intellect, and *Prakṛti*, the feminine element, by the dull matter, which is devoid of reason and it cannot become active on its own. This characterization of the two principles and their dualistic relationship at the level of metaphysics, which also dictates the difference between the genders, was reflected in the very structure of society, characterized by a series of dichotomies in the hierarchical relations between the male and female. The roles of women as wives and mothers, as defined by the laws of the *strīdharma*, excluded them from active participation in the wider social context; in this sense, a woman was conceived of as a passive force, “an impermanent and impure matter”, charged with the task of ensuring births, while at the same time being defined as the bearer of *saṃsāra* and death. The male, on the other hand, was conceived of as an active intellect, intimately involved in external social affairs and at the same time bound up with spiritual matters, as opposed to the female, who was included only in the empirical world.

With the emergence of non-dualistic metaphysics in Tantric systems, however, a fundamental change takes place, rooted in a different conceptions of matter as the feminine principle. This is because the new Tantric ideational framework, based on the concept of the divinized character of matter and the body (Flood, 2005, 27, 184), transformed the dualism of *Sāṃkhya* into a bipolar vision of reality (Sherma, 1998, 107), where matter is not conceived of as inert and inferior to consciousness, but an entity which possesses the consciousness in itself. This kind of revaluation of the character of matter, however, slowly entered into the orthodox spiritual horizons, and the figure of the goddess as an immense power (*śakti*), characterized by both spiritual and material aspects, has played an important role in this process. As the nature of the relationship



between the two poles is reinterpreted at the level of metaphysics, a questioning of established patriarchal social relations also emerges. The “marginal” – matter, body, woman, goddess – begins to speak out from its edges and entered into the philosophical discourse and mundane realities. The binary dictated by dualistic metaphysics and male social domination was thus confronted with new philosophical horizons. The unified vision of the two principles and transformed conception of their relation is evident especially in Śaivism with a feminized image of the male deity, as reflected in the figure of Ardhanārīśvara (“the Lord who is half woman”), the union of opposites, which “reunites or transcends dualistic and oppositional pairs” (Goldberg, 2002, 115). Ardhanārīśvara is the absolute who unites both spirit and matter in a dynamic union, and material element, in contrast to the views of the *Sāṃkhya* school, and possesses both intellect and activity. Those ideas established an egalitarian archetypal model of the god(dess), consisting of different but at the same time equal poles.



Ardhanārīśvara (“The Lord Who is Half Woman”)  
(c. 1710–1720, Western Punjab Hills;  
source: Wikimedia Commons; copyright: public domain)

The interrogation of stereotypical relations can also be seen in the unconventional roles of the divine couple Śiva and Parvatī. The goddess Parvatī rejects her husband to bear him a child, and thus becomes a symbol of the reversal of Brahmanical values and normative social roles. With the transformation of dualistic metaphysics into non-dual metaphysics within Tantric systems and with the formation of the figure of the independent goddess, the *śākta* tradition gradually took shape, based on the figure of Mahādevī, who unites all the diversities in harmonious union. Thus goddesses continue to be not only a significant part of Hindu religion today, but also role models of women's striving for freedom and personal autonomy in many areas of their lives in patriarchal communities.



Śiva bearing aloft the body of his Sati  
(c. 1890, Kalighat, Kolkata, Bengal, India;  
source: Cleveland Museum of Arts; copyright: public domain)

A significant expression of resistance to male authority is also depicted in a story from *Śivapurāṇa* (*Rudrasaṃhitā*, *Satīkhaṇḍa*, ch. 43), namely that of the ascetic Satī, Śiva's other wife. Her father Dakṣa was dissatisfied with his daughter's choice of husband, and once when he arranged a great ritual ceremony he invited all the gods except Śiva. Despite his daughter's request that he accept her beloved, her father did not relent, and Satī, with her inner strength (*tapas*) arising from her devotional practice of austerity, self-immolated before him. Deeply sorrowful and angry, Śiva broke up the ritual, chased away the gods and then danced around the universe with the remains of Satī's body. After the wild dance he performed his own ritual on the ruins of the old one. Satī's unconventional, rebellious act of defying her father's will, which is considered almost unthinkable in the frame of the hierarchy of social relations, remains the thundering voice of women's freedom in Hinduism today.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, she also reflects the identity of the independent woman who, because of her act of virtue, was reborn as the goddess Parvatī, who, as noted earlier, also resisted the prescribed rigid duties of women.

### 3 Goddesses of tooth and goddess of breast

As is already evident from the story of Durgā and other goddesses, the fusion of diverse qualities in one Supreme Goddess forms the multifaceted and dynamic identity of Mahādevī, which has led some scholars to define her as a contradictory and ambivalent figure (e.g. Flood, 2018, 174). On the one hand, she plays the role of a benevolent mother who grants life and is gracious to her worshippers, while on the other hand she assumes horrific forms in her wrath, demands blood offerings and alcohol, reveals herself in a wild dance, a premonition of impending death, and destroys what is created. I understand this aspect of Mahādevī's nature not as a series of ambivalences, but as a demonstration of the totality of the identity of the Supreme Divine, which in its all-embracingness merges all opposites in a complex Unity.

However, the various "portraits" of the goddess and their multiple perspectives, which are expressions of a single Eternal Goddess (Pintchman, 2001, 4), culminated in the development of the *śākta* tradition and its distinct cults of worship that can be more generally distinguished geographically, according to the place of origin – namely northern and southern Śāktism. Northern Śāktism is associated with fierce, dark, independent goddesses, and southern Śāktism with the kind and gentle feminine divine. Both traditions derive from two groups of Tantric texts, *Śrīkula* ("the family of the

9 This myth was taken up by more orthodox Hindu views as the basis for the formation of the image of the woman as utterly subordinate to her husband, which is also reflected in the well-known, though now forbidden, practice of ritual suicide, *sati* (named after a virtuous female ascetic), in which the widow, regarded as an imperfect being without a husband, throws herself alive onto the burning pyre where the flames are devouring her husband's lifeless body. In the context of Śaivism and Śāktism, the myth is understood as a symbol of the independent identity of both a woman and goddess.



benevolent goddess”) and *Kālīkula* (“the family of the black goddess”). The worship of benevolent and graceful goddesses, which derives from the *Śrīkula* textual tradition, is associated with the Śrīvidyā and Śrīvaiṣṇava religious systems and the goddesses Lalitā Tripurasundarī, Bhuvaneśvarī and Lakṣmī. Those religions belong to the so-called right-hand path of Tantra (*dakṣiṇācāra Tantra*), which accepts the values of Brahmanical society, and are therefore conditioned by the conception of women as good wives and goddesses as inherent powers of male deities. These roles were also assumed by the goddesses Sarasvatī, Kṛṣṇa’s wife Rādhā, Rāma’s wife Sītā, and to some extent, but with crucial deviations from expected patterns of normative roles, by Pārvatī. The tradition based on the *Kālīkula* Tantric text corpus, however, is associated with the left-hand Tantric path (*vāmācāra Tantra*), as distinguished by the rejection of social and religious norms and the practice of rituals and psycho-physical techniques that were not approved by the wider orthodox community. The most representative goddess of this branch of Śāktism is Kālī, and besides her, for example, Cāmuṇḍā, born from the forehead folds of the goddess Durgā, as revealed in the *Devīmāhātmya*, and the group of the seven mothers (*saptamātārkā*),<sup>10</sup> also a terrifying manifestation of Devī.



Kālī and Lakṣmī

(c. 1660–1670, Basohli, Punjab Hills, India;

source: Brooklyn Museum; copyright: public domain)

10 According to the story in the *Devīmāhātmya*, seven mothers attacked the demon, but every drop of the demon’s blood that fell on the earth created a new replica of the demon, whose blood, when it came into contact with the earth, again created a bunch of new wicked beings. This process was stopped by Cāmuṇḍā, who solved this situation by drinking the drops of demon blood before they reached the ground.

Based on this division, Doniger (1982, 91) places the various manifestations of goddesses who possess the aforementioned qualities into two categories: goddesses of breast and goddesses of tooth. The goddesses of breast are maternal, benevolent and gracious, and represent a kind of role model for a Hindu woman who embodies kindness, care, compassion, devotion and submission to her husband, while the fierce and dangerous goddesses of tooth are dominant, erotic and entirely independent of the male deities. The two fundamental expressions of Mahādevī identity, representative of right-hand and left-hand path Tantra and of southern and northern Śāktism, are the goddess of breast Lakṣmī and the goddess of tooth Kālī.

### Śrīlakṣmī: benevolent goddess and merciful mother of creation

The first references to Śrīlakṣmī (more commonly referred to as Śrī, but also Lakṣmī) appear in the Vedic literature, for example in the Ṛgvedic hymn *Śrīsūkta*,<sup>11</sup> in which she is described as a benevolent goddess seated on a lotus flower, bestowing prosperity and bliss. She is also identified as the wife of the god Viṣṇu, and the idea of a close relationship with a male deity underlies the theology of the Śrīvaiṣṇava religious tradition, which took shape in southern India in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The name of the tradition is significant in this respect, as it clearly indicates that its adherents worship not only Viṣṇu but also Śrī, distinguishing it from other streams of Vaiṣṇavaism that worship Viṣṇu only as the Supreme God, who is independent and self-sufficient. In particular, the inseparability of Śrī and Viṣṇu, and their mutual love from which the whole of creation is born, is extolled in many poems by the teachers of the school, such as Kurattalvan and Paraśara Bhattar. Viṣṇu alone cannot create the world, but only in the presence of Śrī, who is the fuel for his will to create and the pleasure he feels in performing his divine play (*līlā*). Śrī is thus the fundamental inspiration for Viṣṇu's creative performance, as he reveals all his powers before her and calls the world into being; in several poems of the tradition he is compared with a peacock displaying his feathers before a female, and Śrī, enchanted, watches the gradual unfolding of the invisible into the visible beauty of the created. The universe is thus the result of Viṣṇu's majesty, which he enacts for the sake of Śrī alone, with the goddess playing the key role of mediator in creation itself, but the power of creation nevertheless belongs to Viṣṇu alone. Especially in the poetry of the Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers, the process of the creation of the world is depicted as a romantic form of play between Viṣṇu and Śrī, which in some texts also takes on erotic dimensions.<sup>12</sup>

11 The hymn is included in the *Khilāni* collection, which is considered a later addition to the *Rgveda*.

12 The erotic element is not often emphasized in the case of the goddesses of breast, whose identity is confined to the confines of the Brahmanic culture, while the goddesses of tooth transcend all socially accepted conventional patterns. However, there are exceptions to this division, especially as far as the independence of the goddesses is concerned, for example in the case of the goddess Tripurasundarī,

The idea of their eternal union and inseparable relation (*aprthaksiddhi*) is also indicated in representations of Viṣṇu in many forms of art, where Śrī is depicted on his chest as a sign of *śrivatsa* (“beloved of Śrī”).<sup>13</sup> Even if Viṣṇu alone is the primordial cause of the universe, he and Śrī are an inseparable Unity (*eka*), in which both maintain their own identity, but despite their equality the subordination of Śrī to her husband due to her role of as a divine wife who serves as a kind of support pillar for her husband, and who has no capacity to create the world herself, is clearly evident.



Bronze sculpture of Viṣṇu with the sign of *śrivatsa*  
(National Museum, New Delhi, India;  
source: Wikimedia Commons; copyright: public domain)

In addition to being a devoted, ever-present wife, Śrī also plays the role of a mother which she takes on after the process of creation is completed. She becomes a kind of intermediary between the sinful devotee and Viṣṇu (Kinsley, 1988, 32), assuming the conventional qualities of a benevolent mother who is gracious and ever-forgiving. When devotees stray from the right path, Śrī, as the loving Mother, intercedes between the angry Father, the god Viṣṇu, and their children, the sinful devotees. Although there is a strong emphasis on Viṣṇu’s mercy in the different streams of Vaiṣṇavism,

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who is beautiful, gentle and benevolent deity, and, although attributed to the group of goddesses who are wives and mothers, without any element of fierceness, is at the same time independent.

13 Some priests of the school cover their chests with a shawl as a sign of their reverence for Śrī, the silent and subtle power of Viṣṇu.

it is of a more universal nature. Viṣṇu, as the guardian of *dharma*, the social and cosmic order, intervenes in his creation at the time of fateful events and directs it to the right path, especially in the way that he incarnates himself in the world as *avatāra*, whereas Śrī's grace is much more intimate, attuned to each individual being, and the goddess provides a warm shelter and thus represents the supreme refuge for her devotees. Viṣṇu, starting from the vision of the universal law of *dharma*, draws a sharp line between good and evil, and is sympathetic to the virtuous and merciless towards the vile, whereas Śrī's grace is quite different. She is incapable of punishment, since she is not rigidly bound by the law (Petek, 2021, 276), but forgives unconditionally, believing that anyone who has strayed from the virtuous way of life deserves grace. Śrī thus forgives but cannot redeem, and in her unconditional love she asks the strict Father of the universe for forgiveness, who absolves creatures from the unpleasant consequences of sins. In this sense Śrī is the mediator between Viṣṇu and the human soul, and even if she herself has no direct power of salvation, her supportive role in the process is certainly crucial. The 13<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and poet Vedānta Deśika pointed out that those who seek the Lord's proximity must firstly seek refuge in Śrī, for the goddess is that aspect of his existence which forgives regardless of everything – she cools the heat of Viṣṇu's anger (Vedānta Deśika, in: Narayanan, 1982, 226) and makes him willing to forgive.

The supportive but essential role of Śrī in the process of creation is also indicated in the myth of Viṣṇu, who, after the dissolution of the universe, sleeps on the boundless serpent Ananta, floating on the cosmic ocean. The subtle power of the potential of re-creation is illustrated by the symbol of the lotus with its long stalk growing like an umbilical cord from Viṣṇu's navel. At the centre of the lotus flower sits the god Brahmā, the creative aspect of Viṣṇu, who assists in the process of creation by re-revealing the Vedas, while at his feet Śrī devotedly contemplates, waiting for God to awaken and, on seeing her visage, to be inspired to re-create the world.

Before the process of creation, it is Śrī who mediates in Viṣṇu's creative play, and in the life of creation itself she subtly mediates in evoking the power of forgiveness of her spouse, which is also reflected in the symbol of *śrivatsa*. An even more representative iconographic representation is of the goddess seated on a lotus flower, which dates back to the Vedic period and particularly to the *Purāṇas*, reflecting Śrī's identity as an independent goddess, not subordinate to the male deity, which represents a shift from a purely supportive role as a male companion. The lotus<sup>14</sup> on which Śrī reigns is a symbol of her benevolence, which helps one to complete one's endeavours in life, and also a symbol of her autonomous identity. This image of Śrī is particularly

14 In various depictions Lakṣmī, seated on a lotus, is often surrounded by elephants (hence the name Gajalakṣmī, "Elephant Lakṣmī") sprinkling her with water from their trunks, which is a reminiscence of the act of royal consecration.



represented in Tantric texts such as the *Lakṣmītantra*, where she is worshipped as the Supreme Principle, possessing immense power and responsibility for all three processes: she is the one who creates the world, sustains it and ultimately brings it to its end. She is the Supreme Goddess who has power not only to ensure sensual and material well-being, but also knowledge, justice and salvation, as the etymology of her name suggests – namely “she is the one who leads to one’s goal” – which encompasses all four fundamental goals of human existence, *artha* (material prosperity), *kāma* (sensual pleasure), *dharma* (moral values and righteousness) and *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation). The goddess is therefore not only a mediator and does not only provide the worldly goals (*artha*, *kāma*, *dharma*), but also leads to liberation (*mokṣa*), the supreme state beyond repeated rebirths and redeaths.



Viṣṇu on Ananta, the Endless Serpent  
(c. 1700, Pahari Kingdom of Chamba, Himachal Pradesh, India;  
source: Cleveland Museum of Arts; copyright: public domain)





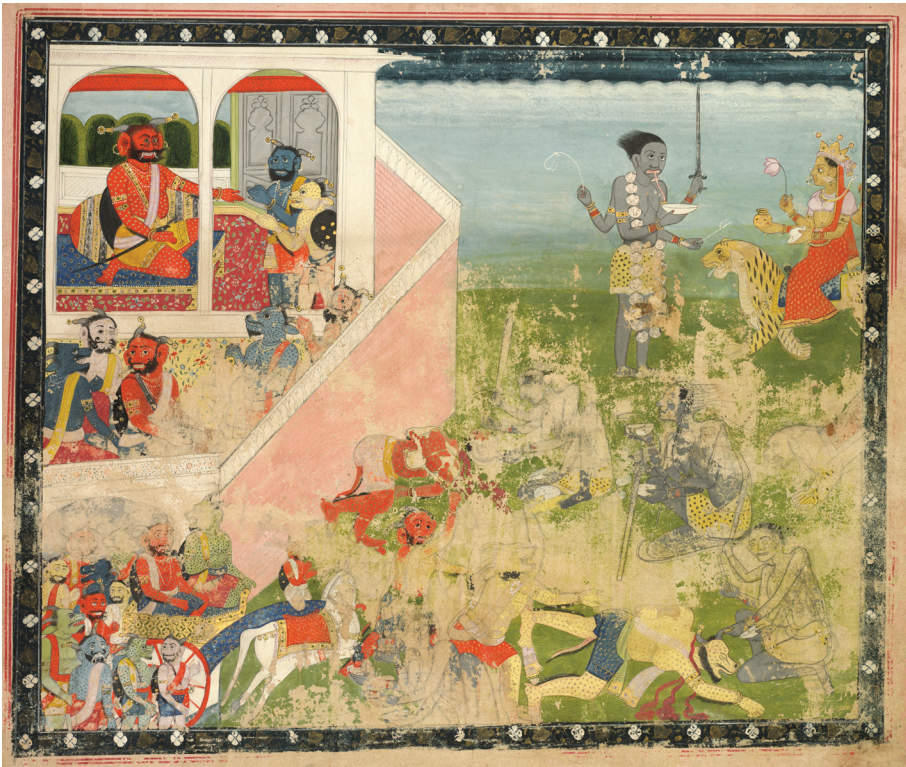
Gajalakṣmī: Lakṣmī with Elephants  
(c. 1890, Kalighat, Kolkata, Bengal, Eastern India;  
source: Cleveland Museum of Arts; copyright: public domain)

In general, however, the tradition of worshipping Śrī and Viṣṇu is more concerned with the goddess as the inseparable and most important attribute of the Supreme God, to whom she is to some extent always subordinate, despite having her own identity. In contrast, the group of goddesses of tooth, the main representative of which is the goddess Kālī, is entirely free from subordination of any kind.

### Kālī: the wrath and rebellion of the independent goddess

Although Kālī, with her fierce and irrepressible identity, has always hovered on the fringes of social and spiritual horizons, she is one of the most popular female deities in contemporary Hinduism, especially in Bengal, where there are famous temples (e.g. Kalighat in Calcutta) dedicated to her. The formation of Kālī's identity is already attested in the Vedas, but the detailed iconography was formed in the Tantric texts of

the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, which are based on the story of the emergence of the goddess born out of the wrath of Durgā, vividly narrated in the *Devīmāhātmya*. The gods once promised the demons that the goddess could only slay them if she appeared naked before them. The unsuspecting Devī went to the battlefield, where she was disgraced when she learned of the gods' promise. In a terrible wrath, she took the form of Kālī and went on a monstrous rampage, slaying everything what crossed her path. This myth is crucial to understanding the identity of the goddess Kālī: Durgā, the warrior-goddess, destroys only evil in order that the good may be restored, while Kālī, in her unbridled rage, which stems from her humiliation and desecration of the dignity of the goddess, destroys everything – even the good. With immense anger she rebels against all norms and male dominance, hence the identity of Kālī as the destroyer, a goddess who submits to no one.



Kālī and Devī attack: a page from the *Devīmāhātmya*  
(c. 1840, Kangra school, India;  
source: Cleveland Museum of Arts; copyright: public domain)

But Kālī is also revered as the mother, which may seem a little unusual at first glance, and Śiva plays a key part in the goddess's assumption of this role. As Kālī goes on her cruel march to destroy the world, all this is observed by Śiva, who realizes that he must somehow stop the goddess and prevent the destruction of the universe. So he lies down in front of her and when she steps on him she stops and looks at what lies beneath her feet. When she sees Śiva, a benevolent smile (*lajjā*) is drawn on her otherwise furious face, and she immediately remembers her other role, that of the mother of the universe. Then follows a moment of self-control, but not triggered by Śiva's external control (Menon, 2001, 46). He thus did not directly order Kālī to stop, but did so in an indirect, subtle way, with an act of passivity. If she wished, Kālī "could have trampled him and gone on. That she chose to recognize him and contain her power for destruction rather than let it spill out is interpreted as an act of voluntarily exercised self-control, an autonomous act of self-restraint" (*Ibid.*). He reminded the goddess of her role as a mother, but she herself, independently and without being persuaded, chose to become merciful to her creation. In this act her autonomy is reflected, but – like Śrī in the case of Viṣṇu – Śiva plays a supportive and very important role.



Kālī on Śiva, from a Tantric Devī series  
(c. 1810, Pahari Kingdom of Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, India;  
source: Cleveland Museum of Arts; copyright: public domain)



The nature of the relation between Kālī and Śiva is also reflected on the level of metaphysics. In the text *Jayadrathayāmalatantra*, Kālī is described as the Supreme Absolute that encompasses all aspects of reality, from which the world manifests and to which it returns. This Absolute with the nature of Kālī is, however, essentially dynamic, in its unmanifest state, before creation, and also in its manifest form. She is an immense force, an energy, a pure potential, which, however, needs a structure, a method, a limitation, in order to create a world, rationally arranged in the various segments of being. This structure is represented by the god Śiva, who frames the immeasurable creative force of Kālī, culminating in the creation of the world, and so the transition from the unmanifest to the manifest takes place. Kālī thus needs Śiva to confine her immense power: she is the dancer and he is her dancehall. As the Supreme Absolute, Kālī is named Kālī-Brahman or Ādyā Kālī, the primordial Kālī, the Ultimate Reality, which is the primal energy that creates, sustains, and destroys. She is often also referred to as *yonī*, the womb from which the unmanifest passes into the manifest which flows back into it. It is the transcendent energy and force immanent to becoming.

The myth of Kālī and the identification of the goddess as the Supreme Absolute therefore reflects her connection with life and death and with dynamics of their constant exchange. Her close relationship with death is also reflected in the way the goddess is worshipped. Animal sacrifice began to move to a symbolic level as the Vedic period faded out around 500 BCE, especially under the influence of Buddhism, which began to establish the ideal of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), while at the same time the offerings in temples became less elaborate – animals were replaced with flowers, for example, and on a symbolic level the sacrificial animal became a demon, conceived as man's ever-insatiable self and its pernicious passions. Animal sacrifices have been preserved, partly locally, in some Indian villages, but also in the tradition of worshipping the goddess Kālī, right up to the present day. Since the goddess is constantly giving life, she must be "renewed" by the fluid of life, blood, as this is the only way to continue her activity of creation. This kind of offering is done in public, in temples, while more intimate ways of contacting Kālī take place at sites that are remote, uncomfortable and inconvenient, such as at crossroads, byways and in dense and dark forests. The *Kālikula* texts describe night rituals, performed on cremation grounds, where jackals, who personify the goddess herself, wander. Cremation grounds, as also in Buddhist Tantric tradition, are considered the most appropriate place for performing psycho-physical techniques and attaining the divine. They are a place of death, where the worshipper meets Kālī and thus most directly confronts death and their fear of it, but also transcends it and builds a different attitude towards life. An element that is ever-present on cremation grounds is the fire that embodies Kālī herself – the fire that gives life and takes it, the fire which has a power to transform and destroy the evil. Kālī thus resides in the bodies of the devotees as an ever-present fiery force that simultaneously annihilates and transforms.

The rituals that take place on the cremation grounds, as well as the goddess herself – as the meaning of her name, “dark goddess”, suggests – are therefore linked to darkness, as they are mostly carried out at night. The spiritual path, “moving into the dark” (Aditi Devi, 2015, 20), indicates approaching hidden wisdom and human’s deeper potential. The darkness brings the worshippers close to Kālī and to union with her, to the unmanifest aspect of reality, to Kālī as the primordial darkness marked by boundless openness, to the formless source from which light emanates. The darkness is a symbol of the highest spiritual path, because it leads to that which cannot be approached in the light of day. Light makes it possible to see only the mundane, the transient, while the most important things remain shrouded in a cloak of primordial darkness. At the same time, this path through darkness to the Darkness is not always comfortable; for the devotees are confronted with the darkness within themselves, i.e. with their own ignorance and fears, which arise mostly from the fear of death. The true path that leads to awakening, entry into the womb of Kālī, is the right one only if it encompasses all aspects of experience, even the least pleasant. But when she awakens the darkness within she also nullifies it; her darkness has the power to awaken and nullify all fear, which is reflected in her identity – she is terrifying, which is the personification of human fears, and benevolent, as seen in the appeasement that follows their nullification. Approaching Kālī through darkness is therefore a way of transcending the transient self. Through devotion to the goddess the devotee becomes reconciled to death and achieves an acceptance of the way things are, and serenity remains unperturbed in her presence. Therefore she is not only the symbol of death but the symbol of triumph over death (Kinsley, 1988, 125, 127). Kālī is a special embodiment of *śakti*, which radically transcends inertia, a purely active force that destroys and re-creates and a symbol of majestic and thunderous affirmation of life in all its forms.

## Conclusion: a multifaceted totality of the Oneness

The benevolent bright and wild dark goddesses thus form a multilayered totality not only of the character of the Great Hindu Goddess, but also reflect the nature of life itself as a complex totality of diverse experiences of being. The dynamic feminine union of Śāktism, as indicated in this paper, is not only embedded in a tiny religious segment of goddess worshippers, but also indicates the diverse expressions of Hinduism itself, and stretches beyond narrow religious contexts. It reflects the nature of social reality, critically examines it and encourages us to surpass normative patterns, which is a fundamental condition for freedom, both social and spiritual. Thus the intriguing identity of the Supreme Goddess enriches philosophical discourses of Hindu schools as well as diverse religious expressions of contemporary Hinduism, while at the same time her boisterous laughter as an indicator of her rebellion in the pursuit of



goodness and justice continues to resonate today on the ground of India's complex social reality, and also of the world at large.

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## Two Faces of the Hindu Great Goddess: Lakṣmī and Kālī

**Keywords:** Hindu goddesses, Tantric metaphysics, Śāktism, Lakṣmī, Kālī

The paper presents the multifaceted identity of the Hindu goddess Mahādevī, the dynamic feminine absolute of the religious tradition Śāktism, whose philosophical foundations have shaken several assumptions of established religious and social norms. Śāktism remains an integral part of the philosophical-religious landscape of the complex totality of Hinduism, while also stretching beyond narrow religious contexts and critically examines normative patterns of patriarchal social reality. In the first chapter, the paper outlines the origins of the formation of the goddess cult, from the earliest period of Indian civilization to the *Purāṇas*, and then introduces the key ideas of the goddess myth in the *Devīmāhātmya*, where, for the first time in the spiritual history of India, a goddess is defined as the Supreme Reality, who reconciles all opposites within herself. The interpretation of the most significant segments of the goddess myth is built on the basis of an analysis of the changes in metaphysics, specifically the transition from the pre-Tantric dualistic metaphysical system to the non-dualistic one in Tantra. This is followed by an outline of the two branches of Śāktism that were formed out of the two seemingly incompatible poles of the identity of the Supreme Goddess: on the one hand, as a benevolent mother and obedient wife, and on the other as a fierce, ruthless and independent female, which is discussed in more detail in the last chapter through a case study of two goddesses, Lakṣmī and Kālī.

## Dva obraza hindujske Vélike Boginje: Lakṣmī in Kālī

**Ključne besede:** hindujske boginje, tantrična metafizika, šaktizem, Lakṣmī, Kālī

Članek predstavi večplastno identiteto hindujske boginje Mahādevī, dinamičnega ženskega absoluta religijske tradicije šaktizma, filozofski temelji katere so omajali številne predpostavke uveljavljenih religijskih in družbenih norm. Šaktizem je vse do danes ostal integralni del filozofsko-religijske krajine kompleksne totalitete hinduizma, hkrati pa sega tudi onkraj ožjih religijskih kontekstov in kritično preizprašuje normativne vzorce patriarhalne družbene stvarnosti. V prvem poglavju članek oriše začetke oblikovanja kulta boginje od najzgodnejšega obdobja indijske civilizacije do *purāṇ*, nato pa oriše ključne ideje mita o boginji, kot je predstavljen v delu *Devīmāhātmya*, v katerem je boginja prvič v duhovni zgodovini Indije opredeljena kot Vrhovna Resničnost, ki v sebi spaja vsa nasprotja. Interpretacija najpomembnejših segmentov mita o boginji je osnovana na proučitvi sprememb v metafiziki, zlasti

prehoda iz predtantričnega dualističnega metafizičnega sistema v nedualnega v tantri. Temu sledi oris dveh vej šaktizma, ki sta se oblikovali iz dveh na videz nezdržljivih polov identitete vrhovne boginje, in sicer na eni strani kot dobrohotne matere in poslušne žene, na drugi pa kot divje, neusmiljene in neodvisne ženske, kar je v zadnjem poglavju podrobneje prikazano na primeru dveh boginj, Lakṣmī in Kālī.

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