

INTERPRETING KALI'S COMPLEXITIES

WHO IS KALI?

A complex and paradoxical Hindu goddess, Kali's name means both 'black' and 'time' in Sanskrit. Her iconography includes dark blue-black skin, and she is the destroyer of time. She is worshiped as mother, warrior, destroyer, and provider. She is most commonly understood to be a goddess who 'encompasses and transcends the complexities of life'. Texts and artwork depict her as terrible, with four arms brandishing weapons, disheveled hair, a garland of heads around her neck, a skirt of severed arms around her waist, but otherwise naked. Kali has deep blue or black skin, often with three red eyes and blood dripping down her face, and standing atop the Hindu god Shiva. Sometimes, as in this illustration from the 18th c. Northwest Indian *Devi Mahatmya* (6th c. CE), she is clad in animal skin, and adorned with corpses. She offers an unusual anti-feminine aesthetic, with many feminine features emphasized alongside her adornments.



Fig. 1: Kali Attacking Nisumbha c. 1740. India, Pahari, possibly Guler, 18th century. Via the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Kali is a goddess with a multilayered history, commonly worshiped in geographically peripheral areas of the Indian subcontinent. Kali and her mythology crystallized over 2,000 years. While her myths, rituals, and legends are varied, there are consistencies in her iconography and powers. The *Devi Mahatmya* (6th c. CE), the definitive Hindu scripture on Hindu goddesses, offers the first textual reference to Kali's origin as the slayer of demons. The texts of the *Devi Mahatmya* describe her as the *avtar* ("incarnation") of the rage of the warrior goddess Durga, herself being an *avtar* of the peaceful mother, Parvati. Kali was most likely originally a tribal goddess who was absorbed into mainstream Hinduism during the Puranic period (3rd-7th c. BCE.) In this tradition she was understood as a dangerous and bloodthirsty deity, a queen of battle.

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Fig. 2: Devi in the Form of Bhadrakali Adored by the Gods, folio from a dispersed Tantric Devi series. Via the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

KALI THROUGH TIME

When she was adopted into Tantric traditions (8th-16th c. CE), she was elevated to an ontological absolute, and identified with the dynamic ground of the universe. In the image of Kali as her benign form as Bhadrakali ("auspicious Kali") from the 18th c. CE Basohli Kingdom (Northwest India), Tantric influences can be seen in her devotees, yogini attendants, and other deities offering her blood and wine in skull caps. While considered impure in other forms of Hinduism, these offerings are sacralized in Tantra, as they exemplify fundamental realization of non-duality, which leads to enlightenment. Bhadrakali is adorned with a golden halo, silks, and lavish jewelry created using gold leaf and beetle wings to evoke emeralds, and an elaborate lotus crown.

From the 17th c. CE onwards, her devotees worship Kali as the both loving Mother and destroyer of all. Kali has evolved significantly over time, and the ways she is interpreted are impacted by the viewer and their understanding of her evolution, complexity, and sacrality. Kali underwent yet another transformation in the colonial period in which for some, she became entwined with revolution, an icon of resistance to colonialism. In the 18th century the British established Calcutta (now in the state of West Bengal) as their colonial capital in India. Kali has always enjoyed the most popularity in this region, and the name of Calcutta itself is believed to derive from the goddess. For some Indian nationalists during the colonial period, Kali is invested with new attributes to convey revolutionary sentiment. She remains most popular in the region of Bengal (now NW India/Bangladesh).

KALI AS A SYMBOL OF REVOLUTION

Her main temple, Kalighat - located in Calcutta - was a major center of anti-colonial activity. A popular school of painting emerged adjacent to the temple. The Kalighat artists' are best known for their mass produced, affordable, pilgrimage paintings of the sacred image of Kali worshiped within the temple. The Kalighat painters, as demonstrated by the album leaf from the Kalighat album, helped popularize this specific, iconic image of Kali. This emphasizes her lolling red tongue on which she bites down, her three eyes, and amorphous body. The red palms, a reference to Parvati and the makeup that married women wear on their hands, emphasize that Kali is an avtar of Parvati, the consort of the Hindu god Shiva.



Fig. 3: Kali Enshrined (verso), from a Kalighat album c. 1890. Via the Cleveland Museum of Art.

In colonial British writing, Kali is emblematic of all things dark, violent, and wrong. However, she also began to represent seduction and allure, as well as becoming a significant indicator of 'the Orient'. In this way, Kali has encapsulated, in the colonial imagination, all of the darkest and most frightening parts of India. Bengali artists responded to the negative colonial reception of Kali in two opposing ways.

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Fig. 4: Kali, 1910-20. Via the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

SHIFTING DEPICTIONS

As demonstrated in the lithograph of Kali [fig. 3], Kali underwent a 'sweetening'. Artists leaned into the goddess's maternal aspect, rendering her as benevolent, and conforming to contemporaneous feminine beauty standards. In this popular print from the early 1900's in which her blue skin has lightened, and her body has become more full and rounded, creating more of the ideal feminine physique of the day. As is typical of colonial depictions of Kali, the artist gives Shiva more prominence as an allusion to their marital status.

While Kali's iconography was codified in the *Devi Mahatmya* (6th c. CE), the style in which she is rendered shifts over time and space. Her skin color and physique,

costume and adornments change. At times, she is also politicized (and commercialized to sell products). As with renditions of other Hindu deities, she embodies ritual practices, aesthetic standards, and even aspirations of independence. As the ferocious mother, Kali is a particularly appropriate deity to visually convey the nationalists' rage, resistance, and desire to fight back. Kali remains a widely worshiped and much beloved (and feared) goddess in India today.

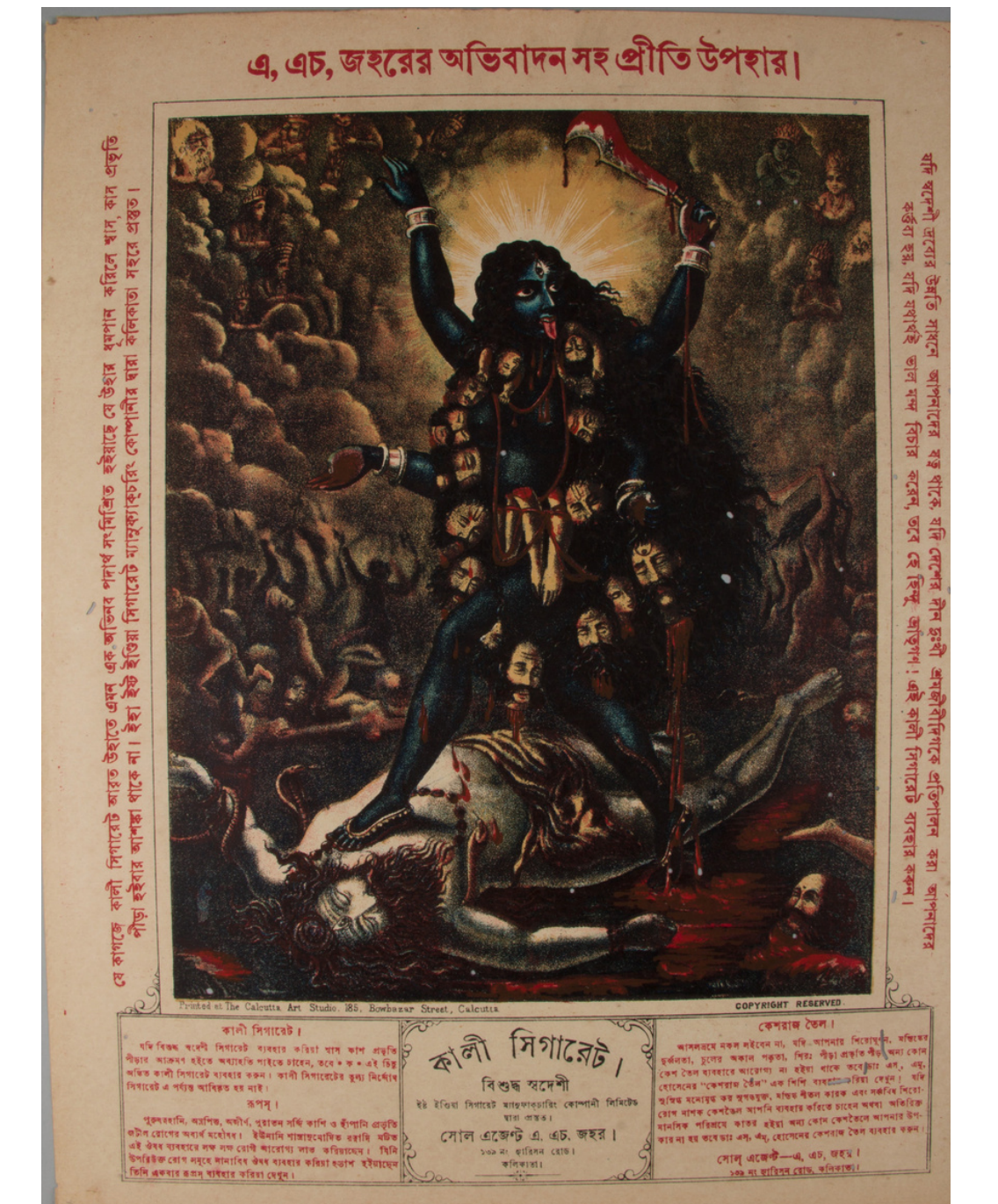


Fig. 5: Kali, India, 1885-95. Via the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

From her [Ambika's] broad forehead, clouded by frowning eyebrows, there sprang out at great speed Kali of ferocious face, brandishing her sword and noose and the strange skull-staff. A garland of severed heads ornamented her body. She wore a tiger hide, and her emaciated form looked terrifying. From her wide-open mouth protruded an awful, lolling tongue. Her eyes red and sunken, she emitted screams that filled up all directions." dev'i-ma 'ha'tmya" 7: 5-7.