

THE SISTERS KALI AND GANGA:
WATERS OF LIFE AND DEATH
TERJE OESTIGAARD

Abstract

There are two types of Mother Goddesses in Hindu Bangladesh—one gives life and the other takes life. Kali is traditionally seen as the Goddess of Death and destruction and Ganga as the almighty life-giving Mother of the World. The annual floods in Bangladesh are a re-occurring problem, incorporated into the low-religion of common people who consider water and death to be associated with the taking and creation of life. Each year the river kills people and destroys the land, but the river and floods are also pre-requisites for a successful harvest and further life. Kali statues in particular, but also statues of other gods and goddesses, are seen to “die” each year when the divine spirit leaves the statue. These statues are seen as dead bodies and given water burials in Ganga, thus uniting the micro- and macro cosmos, nature and culture.

Introduction

This is a contemporary material culture study of the relation between life and death of Kali, the river Ganges and Mother Ganga, and their devotees in Faridpur District and town in Bangladesh. Faridpur town is located a few kilometres southwest of Padma—the Bengali name for the mighty river Ganga. There are two types of Mother Goddesses—one gives life and the other takes life. Kali is traditionally seen as the Goddess of Death and destruction and Ganga as the almighty life-giving Mother of the World. Water and death are intricately interwoven. Without consumption of water humans die within a short time. Absence of water takes many forms, which includes droughts, but the presence of water may also take life. The annual floods in Bangladesh are a re-occurring problem, which is

incorporated into the low-religion of common people. Each year the river will kill people and destroy land, but the river and the floods are also pre-requisites for a successful harvest and further life. Too much water or too little water are wrong waters for life.

Although the Muslims dominate in Faridpur, the Hindu population comprises approximately 20 % of the town's population. The most popular deity in Faridpur is Kali. In Faridpur town-district it is estimated that there are some five hundred local temporary temples only for Kali. Each year Kali statues made of mud are offered to Ganga when new statues are replaced during annual rituals. Kali is the supreme goddess, the Mother of the World. Ganga is also a Mother, but Kali is always the most powerful of them. Kali and Ganga are often seen as sisters, and Ganga may even be seen as a daughter of Kali. Even though water is the substance of life, it is also the substance of death. The relation between water and death is well known in Hinduism. Cremations along holy rivers whereby the ashes are immersed into the water secure the departed souls a preferable reincarnation. The relation between water and death is not solely for humans but includes also gods and goddesses. Kali statues in particular, but also statues of other gods and goddesses, die each year and they are given water burials in Ganga.

Thus, the main aim of the article is to illuminate the importance of water as a life-giving process based on an analysis of the life and death of Kali statues, and some of the reasons why there are both nutritious and terrifying Mother Goddesses, and their relation to water in the same culture and religion. Kali and Ganga are uniting micro- and macro cosmos, nature and culture, and water is the medium which unites and bridges cosmological spheres.

Shashan Kali and Chinnamasta

Both Kali and Ganga are mothers—Kali Ma and Ganga Ma. Kali and Ganges are sisters, but Kali was firstborn and therefore Kali is the strongest and the supreme Goddess and Mother. All water is perceived as water from Ganga. Padma is the almighty river erasing the sins of humans. Kali is the supreme Mother who encompasses all the powers of the world (Fig. 16). Mother Ganga is perceived more as a personal goddess, who removes a person's sins if he or she prays to the river and takes holy baths, whereas Kali destructs sins and evils in the world on a cosmic level. Kali kills and destroys enemies of peace and humanity in the world, and she will protect the humble people who pray to her. Kali is the one nearest the

Godhead, and therefore she is the most efficient and sacred mediator to god.



Figure 16. Kali. Faridpur 2002. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

A sacrifice to Kali is the best, fastest and safest way to get immediately divine access, godly grace and wishes fulfilled. Despite her fearful imagery, Kali is worshipped and loved as a Mother, and she enlightens and creates rationality among humans so they can live peacefully together. The general opinion is that Kali is not taking life but giving life. Kali is justice, and she kills those who are harmful to herself, society in general, and the cosmic order.

The popularity of Kali conveys epitomes or embroiderings of some fundamental truths in Hindu tradition, and if it was not for her extraordinary popularity one would have characterised her as an “extreme case”, but she is not.¹ Kali is everything. Kali is the only goddess that has enough power to save the World from the evilness, the sins, the disaster and the calamities that constantly threaten and kill common people. She is a mother for her devotees. The most terrifying forms of Kali are Shashan (or Smashan) Kali and Chinnamasta. Kali prefers to live on the cremation

¹ Kinsley 1977: 82, 5.

ground. The cemetery marks the end of the bondage to material world and the entrance to liberation. Kali is the gateway to the final destination—release from *samsara*.²



Figure 17. Chinnamasta. Faridpur 2002. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

Chinnamasta is on the cremation ground standing on the copulating bodies of Kama and Rati – the god of sexual lust and his wife. Chinnamasta has decapitated her own head from which jets of blood spurt from the neck feeding two female attendants with blood but also her own severed head.³ Life, sex and death are inseparable.⁴ The Hindu and the Buddhist Chinnamasta is the same, and she represents *unconditioned reality*. She drinks her own blood, and the severing of her own head symbolises the destruction of the illusional belief in a permanent self.⁵ Chinnamasta's two attendants begged and prayed her for food; "We are overpowered with hunger, O Mother of the Universe! Give us food so we may be satisfied, O Merciful One, Bestower of Boons and Fulfiller of

² Kinsley 1977: 143-144.

³ Kinsley 1988: 162.

⁴ Kinsley 1988: 173.

⁵ Benard 1994: 96.

Desires.”⁶ The goddess smiled and severed her head with her fingernails. This is primal sacrifice and renewal of the creation. The goddess sacrifices herself and her blood feeds her attendants. Chinnamasta is the food and the feeder, she eats her self and is eaten by others (Fig. 17). The dichotomy of giver and receiver disappears—she is the sacrificer, the sacrificed and the receiver of the sacrifice.⁷ The head is the essential part of the body. Without the head, no being or identity. It is from the head or the mouth the “seeds of sound” as language comes from, emphasising spiritual qualities.⁸ Other vital and life-giving parts of the body may also be sacrificed. The goddess Pattini—a Kali type of goddess at Sri Lanka—mutilates and sacrifices one of her breasts.⁹ Sacrifices of the most vital forces are the most pro-creative and vital offerings. One’s own death may give life to others, but especially in mother-child relations the death of mothers might be lethal and at the same time vital. Life is death and death gives life, and in these sacrifices life and death forms a unity where death:life :: life:death.

Shashan Kali is the cemetery or cremation Kali, and this is another fearful manifestation of Kali. She lives only on cemeteries, and she has numerous followers, which includes ghosts and malignant spirits. Kali devotees are not only humans, but include everyone from ghosts to gods. A human body is not necessary for being a Kali devotee. The cemetery is therefore a dangerous place for humans. The ghosts depend on, and live in, skulls, and human skulls are therefore most often a part of the Shashan Kali temples. When humans offer food, fruits and incense to the skulls the ghosts are fed and pleased, and the human devotees pay homage to and respect the ghosts since they also are worshippers of Kali.

The Making of Kali

The gods are obviously invisible, but still visible. “Not only are they present in a particular community, but they may be present if invoked in other communities and shrines at the same time”, following Gananath Obeyesekere, “They must be in this place, and that, in the then and the now. Therefore, they obviously cannot be present *in person*; rather, they are there in *essence*.”¹⁰ A statue aims to solve this problem by combining the universal essence within a “body”—an imagery—regardless of the

⁶ Benard 1994: 7.

⁷ Benard 1994: 9.

⁸ Kinsley 1997: 153.

⁹ Obeyesekere 1984: 478.

¹⁰ Obeyesekere 1984: 51, original emphasis.

statue is made of clay, stone, copper or other metals. The process of making statues is therefore a modification and consecration of the divine into an imagery. From being omnipresent and invisible, the universal force becomes visible and particular. In Faridpur the statues are made of unburnt clay.

The Shashan Kali statue is one of the most dangerous statues to build. There are two ways of making the Shashan Kali statue depending upon whether the devotees will follow the *tantric* or the *vaishnava* path of worship. The tantric Shashan Kali rituals are making obedience to the violent and ferocious Kali whereas the *vaishnava* Shashan Kali rituals are making obedience to the peaceful Kali. The tantric Shashan Kali is another form of Kali called Chandalini, which is an uttermost dangerous and destructive form of Kali. Shashan Kali in general is one of the most almighty forms of Kali. If the Shashan Kali statue is built in accordance to either of the rules of devotional paths, the devotees have to observe the particular rituals for the prescribed path of worship. Thus, the devotees order the statues made in accordance to the rules they want to observe, or more correctly, if a temple has been initiated on a certain path of worship, the devotees have to follow the established tradition. The tantric rituals are more difficult and dangerous to observe than the *vaishnava* path, and therefore the latter path is the most common.

If the statue is built according to tantric rules the statue-maker has to use clay from the cemetery only, mix it with alcohol instead of water, and meagre the clay with ashes from cremations and hashish (*ganja*). The intoxicants are incorporated in the statue since Shiva was a regular consumer of drugs and wine, and Shashan Kali also drank alcohol. The statue-maker has to observe fasting while making the statue on the cemetery, and the statue should be completed within one day. The priest has to be naked while performing the worship, which has to take place immediately after the statue is completed. The *prasad*—rice and food distributed to the devotees after the ritual—should have been cooked on leftover wood from cremation pyres, and the priest has to eat meat. Making Chinnamasta is even more dangerous, and the statue maker has to be without children because they will die when the statue is built.

The *vaishnava* rules are less strict, and the Shashan Kali statue at Ambikapur Shashan Ghat in Faridpur is built by *vaishnava* rules. If the statue is made in the pot-makers home, clay from the cemetery and wine are not compulsory, but the statue is smeared with cemetery clay when placed in the temple. If the statue is made on the *ghat*, some symbolic alcohol and clay from the cemetery are mixed together with normal water, but ashes from cremations are not necessary, and fasting is not prescribed

while making the statue. There are, however, internal differences within the vaishnava rules for the making of the Shashan Kali. According to tradition, numerous devotees and potmakers have died because they failed to follow the rules, and once a Muslim broke one of Shashan Kali's hands, his village was attacked by cholera. There is no determined size for Shashan Kali statues, but it is a general rule that one shall never build a smaller statue than the one which is replaced, because a decreased size is a sign of disrespect and neglect of obedience.

The gods and goddesses in forms of statues are a part of humans, and vice-versa. Micro-and macro cosmos comprise a unity. Durga statues are made of clay from the prostitutes' quarter. While Shiva was married to Durga he spent most of the time together with the prostitutes indulged in non-family activities. Once he enjoyed non-social pleasures Durga came and picked him up, and she made it explicitly clear for him that this was not a place to stay for a husband. The prostitutes complained and cried in despair, and asked Shiva what would happen to them when he would leave and return to his wife. Shiva replied that they would always be a part of him, and hence the statue of Durga is built of clay from the prostitutes' quarter.



Figure 18. Statue maker during work. Faridpur 2002. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

Thus, Durga consists of ambivalent material combining two opposite types of women—the wife and the harlot—the pure and the impure (Fig. 18).

The statue maker does not initiate the statue, and the statue is “without” soul before the priest ritually gives “birth” to Kali at the cemetery. The Shashan Kali ritual is feared and only a few priests dare to perform this ritual. If anything fails they may have to pay with their lives. The priest has to drink alcohol and smoke hashish as a part of the ritual since Shiva used these intoxicants. Just before the spirit takes place in the Kali statue, the windows in the Shashan Kali temple are closed and a blanket covers the doorway. This is explained by an analogy to the birth of humans who cannot see anything in the mother’s womb from which life appears. Similarly, the birth of Ma Kali happens in the “womb” (i.e. the temple which is the sacred place) and the devotees cannot see the birth.

Cemetery of Statues—Water Burials of Goddesses



Figure 19. Cemetery of statues. Faridpur 2002. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

As indicated earlier, there are two types of temples—temporary and permanent temples—and there are some five hundred temporary Kali temples in Faridpur. When statues are replaced in temples the old ones are considered as dead, and each of these statues are immersed in Ganga annually. The statues in permanent temples are also given to the river annually irrespective of the type of god or goddess. Behind Binodpur Ronjit Shah's Kali temple in Rajbari District there is a cemetery of statues from temporary temples (Fig. 19). When the temples are de-sacralised the statues are brought to the permanent temple. When the cemetery is filled with statues they are brought to the river and immersed. In other permanent temples there are permanent cemeteries of Kali statues where the mud statues "die" and disappear by natural processes; or they return to the earth element similar to a burial. There are at least three alternative ways the statues may "die" or ways the divine spirit leaves the image. The lives of the statues might be removed ritually prior to the immersion of the image in the river,¹¹ but there are exceptions. Sometimes as with Shashan Kali, the soul leaves the imagery by itself. Finally, other Kali manifestations are still alive and the soul is within the statue when it is given to the river. The annual immersion of statues seems to be related to the natural cycle of life and death in the changing environment. The statues are either immersed just before the flood or after the river have redrawn. The cyclical character of immersion in relation to the flood emphasises the interdependency of the waters for life and death.

The Shashan Kali statue at the cemetery is also changed once a year, but this type of Kali is not immersed in the river. The Shashan Kali statue is taken out from the temple the day before the annual Shashan Kali ritual, which is the "birth" of the new Kali. The statue is placed behind the temple at the cemetery where there were also remnants of other Kali statues. The spirit of Kali disappears in the jungle, and the soul lives what is called the jungle life of Kali. The statue died "naturally" according to the astrological calendar, and no priests needed ritually to guard or protect the devotees at the time when Kali's spirit left the statue. After leaving the statue, the spirit is roaming around in the jungle, and the spirit without statue may harm and kill people on its way.

The Shama Kali statue used in the autumn ritual at the cemetery does not die naturally, and it is therefore immersed in the river. Only then is the statue dead when the spirit is united with Ganga since the soul is within the statue when it is given to the river. If this statue is placed at the cemetery or behind the temple together with other Shashan Kali statues, it

¹¹ Kinsley 1977: viii.

is harmful and dangerous for the people. *A statue with spirit is dangerous outside the temple, and the sacred space is not only for worshipping, but equally important, it protects the devotees from divine forces and ferocious powers.* The Shashan Kali statue is not dangerous since the soul has gone by itself. Kali statues in general are given to Ganga once a year. Water burials have an extraordinary capacity to control and demarcate the powers of divine spirits which no other burial forms has. The immersion normally takes place one day and the next day the new statue is replaced. In the words of Mircea Eliade;

Immersion in water symbolizes a return to the pre-formal, a total regeneration, a new birth, for immersion means a dissolution of forms, a reintegration into the formlessness of pre-existence; and emerging from the water is a repetition of the act of creation in which form was first experienced. Every contact with water implies regeneration: first because dissolution is succeeded by a “new birth”, and then because immersion fertilizes, increases the potential of life and creation.¹²

Death rituals are not performed for statues, and they cannot be buried or burnt. The lifespan of a statue is similar to humans; they are born from the womb and end in total dissolution in Ganga. “Each of the elements has its own type of dissolution, earth into dust, fire into smoke. Water dissolves more completely. It helps to die completely.”¹³ Ganga is a cemetery for both humans and gods, whether this is in the form of ashes, water burials of corpses or immersion of mud statues. Ma Ganga is the only cosmic force and goddess who can dissolve and control the powers of Kali. From this approach Ganga is even more powerful and almighty than Kali, although in daily life Kali is the mother of Ganga or the superior sister. But when Kali is dying the structure is reversed, and similar patterns are also found in Kali temples. The most important imagery of Kali consists of a pot with water, coconut and cloth. A temple needs this imagery to be a complete Kali temple whereas statues are not compulsory. In temples where there are statues, the imagery consisting of the pot with water, coconut and cloth is always in front of the statue. This makes the relation between Kali and Ganga even more intricate because Kali *consists* of Ganga in the pot. Kali dies in Ganga and it is from this water the “birth” of Kali reappears, hence

¹² Eliade 1993: 188.

¹³ Bachelard 1994: 91.

Both the sacrality of the waters and the structure of aquatic cosmogonies and apocalypses *can be completely revealed only through aquatic symbolism*, which is the only system capable of integrating all of the particular revelations of innumerable hierophanies.¹⁴

Rivers of Milk, Food and Blood

The rivers of India are “Mother Rivers” and the nurturing waters are compared to milk of cow-mothers.¹⁵ The river nourishes and fertilises the land through which it flows. Ganga’s maternal character is especially seen in her nourishing aspect, and her water is sometimes called milk or the drink of immortality. She nourishes her children with water as a mother feeds her infant with milk.¹⁶ Water has a maternal character and as feminine water it is associated with milk. The connection between water and milk appears as soon as water is extolled fervently, and as soon the feeling of adoration for the maternity of waters is passionate and sincere.¹⁷ Water and milk become identical since they are vital life-givers. Goddess Ganga is worshipped as a source of life and regeneration. She is also one with all life-giving waters or fluids in its many facets, including semen.¹⁸ The close association between mothers and birth leads to even further metaphorical elaborations of water. Kali is described in a Tantric text as

standing in a boat that floats upon an ocean of blood. The blood is lifeblood of the world of children that she is bringing forth, sustaining, and eating back. She stands there and sips the intoxicating warm blood-drink from a cranial bowl that she lifts to her insatiable lips.¹⁹

In the Chinnamasta goddess it is as the blood has been transformed into milk feeding the devotees.²⁰ In another context, Marie Bonaparte in her *Edgar Poe* writes that: “It is not difficult to recognize this water as blood...a body whose blood nourished us even before it was time for milk, that of the mother who sheltered us for nine months.”²¹ The feminine creative principle is “the world from her womb”.²² Kali subsists on blood

¹⁴ Eliade 1987: 131, original emphasis.

¹⁵ Eck 1983: 73-74.

¹⁶ Kinsley 1988: 194.

¹⁷ Bachelard 1994: 118.

¹⁸ Darian 1978: 81.

¹⁹ Zimmer 1962: 213.

²⁰ Kinsley 1997: 161.

²¹ Bachelard 1994: 59.

²² Mookerjee 1988: 23.

of her victims and the animals offered her, and she is the mad mistress of the universe.²³ Blood is a beneficial and vital fluid.²⁴ In this sense blood is more vital than water: it is intensified life giving water.

All pro-creative fluids whether it is milk, sperm or blood can be imagined, explained and understood from water metaphors. A river is a continuous flowing source for such metaphorical elaborations. As a river it is more than just physical water: it is spiritual water, nourishing water of the fields, feeding milk for children, and blood in the veins of the devotees. When Chinnamasta sacrifices her head and feeds her devotees with her own blood, it might be interpreted as an extreme type of motherhood. If a mother cannot feed her children with water or milk, she has only her own blood to give. "Normally" (in the sense that it is not normal to sacrifice oneself and feed one's children with blood), this is a destructive way of feeding: Immediately after she has feed her devotees with her own blood, she will die herself, and then her children will die since they are without Mother. However, Chinnamasta solves this problem by the cosmogonic act of sacrifice by which she also feeds herself with her own blood. Thus, this is one of the most ultimate and primordial forms of regeneration through sacrifice by extreme aquatic symbols and metaphors.

Mothers as Life- and Death-Givers

When a child eats the substance that comes from the interior of the earth, the child ingests the weight and quality of death. All that comes from the Earth Mother comes from the death that produces life. In this way, the life that is maintained at the cost of death has to be transformed into death. If a human eats corn, he is required to pay his debt to the earth by giving his body when he dies. Throughout life, the human being is sinning on the earth, is building up a debt to the earth. This debt is disequilibrium, which must be paid or set back.²⁵

In Hindu thought the whole universe is interlinked and in equilibrium combining microcosm to macrocosm. The earth is a maternal womb, which nourishes the seeds the humans will ripen. But since the Mother Earth controls life, she also controls death.²⁶ Kali is killing evil people and blessing good people. The poet Ramprasad Sen (1715-1780) wrote "When Kali is awake, then Ganga flows in your heart", in despair he cries "Afloat

²³ Olson 1990: 34.

²⁴ Benard 1994: 102.

²⁵ Carrasco 1999: 184.

²⁶ Khanna 1995: 109.

on the ocean of Samsara, I journey back and forth, back and forth”, but Kali is the saviour: “The Tara [sister of Kali] boat cast its anchor at the landing place. O my mind! Come running if you want to cross. Set sail by Tara’s grave and row it quickly, if you want to cross the sea of suffering.”²⁷

Water nourishes life and rain fertilises fields, and in erotic symbolism of the creation the sky embraces and fertilises the earth with rain.²⁸ The hydrological cycle includes both rivers and rain, especially since Ganga has its origin in heaven and she is a continuous liquid which links the two worlds. The river as a crossing point between the two worlds is best seen in death rituals. Charon is the mythological boatman ferrying the dead across the river to the other world. The ferryman is a symbol of crossing—from birth to the life beyond.²⁹ Ganga is a liquid *axis mundis*—the pathway that connects all spheres of realities. She is the mediator between this world and the divine. The river is one of the most holy *tirthas* in Hinduism. *Tirthas* are holy places from the first yuga—holy places which have not decreased its sacredness although the rest of the world has been de-sacralised. *Tirthas* are “crossing places”—a spiritual ford where heaven and earth meet—a place where it is possible to attain liberation. It is a place where the divinities appear on earth,³⁰ or a hierophany in Eliade’s terminology.³¹ It is therefore an auspicious and preferred place to die, and where the ashes should be immersed in water after cremation.

Ganga is the most holy river in Hinduism, and she stems mythological from Kailash.³² She is eternally pure and cleanses sins. The holiest river in Hinduism concentrates the sanctity of all rivers: “Not only is the Ganges said to be present in other rivers, but other rivers are present in her.”³³ Ganges is the “nectar of immortality” which brings life to the dead cremated on the banks of the River of Heaven.³⁴ “The Ganges is the liquid essence of the scriptures, the gods, and the wisdom of the Hindu tradition. She is the liquid essence, in sum, of Shakti—the energy and power of the Supreme, flowing in the life of the world.”³⁵ Water symbolises the whole

²⁷ Darian 1978: 148-149.

²⁸ Eliade 1993: 192.

²⁹ Terpening 1985: 243.

³⁰ Eck 1983: 34.

³¹ Eliade 1987.

³² Darian 1978: 1.

³³ Eck 1983: 214.

³⁴ Eck 1983: 215.

³⁵ Eck 1983: 219.

of potentiality as a source of possible existences.³⁶ Water will always exist, but never alone since water is germinative, and containing the potentiality of all forms or Mothers. Hence, in this sense there are no differences between Kali and Ganga.

Kali is Mother to her devotees not because she protects them from the way things really are but because she reveals to them their mortality and thus releases them to act fully and freely, releases them from the incredible, binding web of “adult” pretence, practicality, and rationality.³⁷

Humans makes divine imageries in their own minds—the gods might be eternal but their material appearance on earth (as statues for instance) are made by humans and understood by man. Similar with sacrifices, what is given to the god’s is not the god’s wishes, but the devotee’s own deep motivation.³⁸ “Though man usually makes his gods in his own image, they are unlike him as well as like him.”³⁹ The main question is then why have the sub-Indian people “chosen” goddesses like Kali and Chinnamasta? Why are these images “good to think with”, and why do they reveal truths which cannot be expressed equally forceful with other material manifestations, imageries and statues?

Goddesses as Life Experiences

The anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere asks the question “Why is it necessary to express ideas in terms of symbols whose meanings are not apparent, on the conscious level at least, to the participants in a culture?” and his answer is that “certain ideas simply cannot be presented except symbolically”.⁴⁰ Obeyesekere analyses cultures of goddess cult from a psychoanalytical perspective, and he seeks answers to the presumable paradox and dichotomy of two types of Mother goddesses in Hindu India: the cow (or river) as passively and unconditioned nurturant and the terrifying mother goddess which is vengeful and unpredictable. One Mother gives life and the other Mother takes life. These two extreme types of Mother Goddesses are, according to Obeyesekere, “products of cultural

³⁶ Eliade 1993: 188.

³⁷ Kinsley 1977: 146.

³⁸ Obeyesekere 1990: 4.

³⁹ MacCulloch 1911: 158.

⁴⁰ Obeyesekere 1984: 465.

transformations of the infantile experience with actual mothers in the Hindu joint family”.⁴¹

The imageries of goddesses such as Kali (or Pattini) and Ganga must in some or another way relate to life experiences of the devotees who worship these types of Mother Goddesses. The basis for mother-goddess phenomena lies in the implications of the Brahmanic values for the female role and mother-child relation, and these values are deeply rooted and experienced early in people’s lives. According to traditional norms the wife is supposed to perceive and treat her husband as a god. “The husband as god is based on the *model* of the man that the woman possesses in her own consciousness, and this is in turn based on her own perception of her own father.”⁴² However, it is most likely that a huge number of husbands cannot match their wives’ ideal. “Hence sensitive females must search elsewhere for loving surrogate male figures, which in Hindu society are the guru and the idealized god...toward whom a woman can direct her love, her *bhakti*, a combination of eroticism and devotionism.”⁴³ Child marriages have been the norm and the woman is transferred from her parents house to the husband’s household soon after puberty, and “she is a physically and psychologically immature girl who has hardly left her childhood behind”.⁴⁴ As a newly married young woman, the spouse attains a secondary role in the joint family as a daughter-in-law—totally under control and authority of her husband’s mother. These are traumatic experiences, and she has no possibilities for outlets for her rages. There are two main implications for the female role in Hindu society:

First, *the female’s need for love, solicitude, and succour cannot be satisfied in the situation that occurs soon after marriage in Indian joint family.* Second, *the female retrospectively sentimentalises the love and affection she received in her own family of orientation before her marriage and contrasts the nurturance of her own mother with the cruelty of her mother-in-law.*⁴⁵

When she gives birth to her child her starved affective needs are realised through her child. Thus, eroticism as a value scheme is highly significant in the Brahmanic cosmos since women are repressed sexually.

⁴¹ Obeyesekere 1984: 427.

⁴² Obeyesekere 1984: 434.

⁴³ Obeyesekere 1984: 434-435.

⁴⁴ Obeyesekere 1984: 439.

⁴⁵ Obeyesekere 1984: 435, original emphasis.

If she cannot be sexually fully satisfied with her husband, some of these feelings will be displaced towards the child.⁴⁶

The mother-goddess cult is a representation of human mothers. The mother-child relationship can be seen as responsible for three images of the mother projected in Hindu religion: 1) The sacred cow. The mother is the giver of milk and food sustaining and nurturing her child. This maternal image is worshipped all over India in the sacred cow. "It is the image of the mother as totally nondemanding, unambiguous, and nurturant and the child as the passive recipient of her love."⁴⁷ 2) The Parvati image. The Mother is generally benevolent and idealised in images such as Parvati, Laksmi and Sarasvati. On a cultural level this is the image of the mother as "father's wife". 3) The Kali image. This mother is the cruel, unpredictable and hysterical nature of women, basically based on the maternal rage as perceived by the infant.⁴⁸ As a river or cow the Mother goddesses feeds the child unconditionally, but one day the social *umbilical* cord is cut, represented by the Kali forces, which are perceived as dangerous and ferocious:

The mother goddess is all powerful, the male is crushed; he abnegates himself in surrender to the deity. He is, as it were, symbolically castrated. This reflects a dimension of the Hindu experience not recognized on the formal level—that is, the woman as wife, though socially inferior and subordinate to her husband, is on the psychological level a powerful person, as mother.⁴⁹

Obeyesekere distinguishes between *personal* and *cultural* symbols.⁵⁰ A symbol is both personal *and* cultural. Personal symbols are public symbols "that permit the expression of the unconscious thoughts of the individual; but since they make sense to others, they also permit communications with others in the language of everyday discourse".⁵¹ Personal symbols are cultural symbols that are related to the individual motivation and make sense only in relation to the life history of the individual and the larger institutional context in which they are embedded.⁵² The symbols are both enabling and constraining the possibility of cultural change. Not all forms of subjective imagery end up as culture because they have to be

⁴⁶ Obeyesekere 1984: 439.

⁴⁷ Obeyesekere 1984: 440.

⁴⁸ Obeyesekere 1984: 440.

⁴⁹ Obeyesekere 1984: 444.

⁵⁰ Obeyesekere 1990: 22.

⁵¹ Obeyesekere 1990: 22-23.

⁵² Obeyesekere 1990: 25.

legitimated by the group in terms of the larger culture.⁵³ The mother goddess cult and the different mother qualities have their counterparts in the characteristics of mothers in daily life, and vice versa.

These personal and cultural experiences are a part of the worldview they experience in the life-and death-giving environment. Life stretches “From the Womb to the Grave” as it is written in the Bible.⁵⁴ The annual floods are a re-occurring problem, which is incorporated into the low-religion of common people. Each year the river will kill people and destroy land. The Hindus pray to Ganga to save them. From a micro perspective, personal life experiences both as a child and mother create life worlds which are parts of the divine life-giving hydrological circle:

The waters symbolize the universal sum of virtualities; they are “spring and origin”, the reservoir of all possibilities and existences, they precede every form and *support* every creation...immersion in water signifies regression to the preformal, reincorporation into the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence. Emersion repeats the cosmogonic act of formal manifestation; immersion is equivalent to a dissolution of forms. This is why the symbolism of the waters implies both death and rebirth.⁵⁵

Conclusion

The Mother Goddesses both give and take life. Life and death are intricately connected to and dependent upon water. The uncertainty of the environment in Bangladesh is incorporated into the goddesses of life and death; too much water or too little water are seen as wrong waters for life. The imageries of the goddesses Kali and Ganga are related to life experiences of the devotees who worship them. Personal life experiences are culturally incorporated in the divine and changing water environment. Kali has to die in Ganga, and she has to be born from her. The relation between cemeteries and sex is a symbol of the living creation. Chinnamasta represents the truth that “life, sex and death are part of an interdependent, unified system...life feeds on death, is nourished by death, and necessitates death and the ultimate destiny of sex is to perpetuate more life, which in turn will decay and die in order to feed more life”.⁵⁶ The traditional vision of man is cosmocentric and the cosmic equilibrium is maintained both in nature and culture by water as the ultimate medium

⁵³ Obeyesekere 1981: 169.

⁵⁴ Job 10.19.

⁵⁵ Eliade 1987: 130.

⁵⁶ Kinsley 1997: 157.

linking all spheres into a cosmological unity. The personal life cycle and the hydrological life cycle are parallel processes that metaphorically are incorporated in culture and religion, and water is both linking and emphasising the mutual dependency and unity of life and death, sacred and profane, and culture and nature.

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