

DEVĪ AND HER ASPECTS

Preface

Sri Ramakrishna says that there can be as many spiritual paths as there are spiritual aspirants. Extending this further, we can accept as its corollary that there can be as many gods as there are devotees. As long as the central fact, viz., that these gods are the doorways leading to the one Godhead, is not forgotten, polytheism, pantheism, henotheism or 'any-theism' is acceptable. The bewildering variety of the Hindu gods should be viewed from this angle.

An unbiased, if not reverent, study of the Hindu gods and goddesses can convince anyone of the rich symbology they represent. Contemplating on them with a proper understanding of their symbolical significance will help us to be raised to more profound levels of spiritual experience.

In this booklet a humble attempt has been made to unravel the symbolism of Devī and her various aspects. We earnestly hope that it will provide the readers with a basic knowledge of these deities and rouse their curiosity to know about the other deities of the Hindu pantheon also.

Readers who may be interested in a more comprehensive study of the deities of the Hindu pantheon are advised to go through my book, Hindu Gods and Goddesses, published by the Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai.

Swami Harshananda

Contents

Page Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation

1. Introduction
2. Sarasvatī
3. Lakṣ mī
4. Samudramathana (Churning of the Ocean)
5. Aspects of Lakṣ mī
6. Eight Ś aktis of Viṣ ṇ u
7. Alakṣ mī
8. Pā rvatī
9. Aspects of Pā rvatī
 - Sapta-Mā trī kā s
 - Daś amahā vidyā s
 - Durgā
 - Kā lī
 - Lalitā
10. Other Aspects of Pā rvatī

Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation

sounds like

अ, a-o in son,	ठ ṭ h-th in ant-hill
आ , ā -a in master,	ड ḍ -d in den
इ i-i in if,	ढ ḍ h-dh in godhood
ई ī -ee in feel,	ण ṇ -n in under
उ u-u in full,	त t-t in French
ऊ ū -oo in boot,	थ th-th in thumb
ऋ ṛ -somewhat between r and ri,	द d-th in then
	ध dh-the in breathe
ए e-ay in May,	न n-n in not
ऐ ai-y in my,	प p-p in pen
ओ o-o in oh,	फ ph-ph in loop-hole
औ au-ow in now,	ब b-b in bag
क k-k in keen,	भ bh-bh in abhor
ख kh-ckh in blockhead,	म m-m in mother
ग g-g (hard) in go,	य y-y in yard
घ gh-gh in log-hut,	र r-r in run
ङ ṅ -ng in singer,	ल l-l in luck
च c-ch in chain,	व v-v in avert
छ ch-chh in catch him,	श ś -sh in reich (German)
ज j-j in judge,	ष ṣ -sh in show
झ jh-dgeh in hedgehog,	स s-in sun
ञ ñ-n (somewhat) as in French,,	ह h-in hot
ट ṭ -t in ten,	
◦ ṁ -m in sum,	:ḥ -h in half

INTRODUCTION

The universe that we see and experience is a bundle of energy, both packed and unpacked. This is the discovery of modern science, which incidentally, has demolished the distinction between matter and energy. According to it, there is one basic energy behind all forms of matter and energy. However, it seems to be still far off from discovering the relationship between matter on the one hand, and, mind and life on the other. Are they also, though apparently poles apart, manifestations of the same basic energy? Could it be that the same energy or matter, at one level of vibration is called 'matter,' at another, 'mind,' and yet another, 'life'? Modern science or the modern scientists, devoting most of their attention to the manifest material universe may not even be prepared to concede this possibility! Hindu philosophy, based on the Vedānta, and, a group of works based on the Vedānta and more commonly known as the tantras* postulates exactly this! The source and sustenance of all creation, whether at the level of matter or life or mind, is one and one only. It is Śakti (= energy). Brahman (the Absolute) of the Vedānta and Śakti or Devī of the tantras are identical. When that 'energy' is in a static condition, with neither evolution nor involution, when the universe to be created is not even in a seed-form as it were, it is called Brahman. When it starts evolving into this creation, sustains it and withdraws it back into itself, it is called Śakti. If Brahman is the coiled serpent in sleep, Śakti is the same serpent in motion. If Brahman is likened to the word, Śakti is its meaning. If Brahman is like fire, Śakti is its burning power. The two are inseparable: one in two and two in one.

In the Hindu mythological literature, as also in the tantras, this energy is always pictured as a female deity, the Devī, as the consort of its counterpart male deity. Each member of the Trinity has his Śakti or Devī as his consort: Sarasvatī of Brahmā, Lakṣmī of Viṣṇu and Pārvatī of Śiva. However, the mother-cult that has evolved over the last few centuries, is predominantly centred round Pārvatī, the consort of Śiva.

Mother-worship and mother-cult are not alien to the Vedic religion as some

suggest. The concept of Aditi, the mother of gods, personification of nature and the Ambhṛ ṇ ī -sū kta as also the Rā trī sū kta of the Ṛ gveda clearly contain the origins of Mother-worship.

SARASVATĪ

Sarasvatī is the Ś akti, the power and the consort of Brahmā the creator. Hence she is the procreatrix, the mother, of the entire creation.

Literally, Sarsvatī means 'the flowing one'. In the Ṛ gveda she represents a river and the deity presiding over it. Hence, she is connected with fertility and purification. Here are some of the names used to describe her: Sā radā (giver of essence), Vā gī ś varī (mistress of speech), Brā hmī (wife of Brahmā), Mahā vidyā (knowledge supreme) and so on. It is obvious that the concept of Sarasvatī , developed by the later mythological literature is already here. The 'flowing one' can represent speech also if taken in an allegorical sense. Perfect speech presupposes power and intelligence from which organized creation proceeds.

She is considered as the personification of all knowledge-arts, sciences, crafts and skills. Knowledge is the antithesis of the darkness of ignorance. Hence she is depicted as pure white in colour. Since she is the representation of all sciences, arts, crafts and skills she has to be extraordinarily beautiful and graceful. Clad in a spotless white apparel and seated on a lotus seat, she holds in her four hands a vī ṇ ā (lute), akṣ amā lā (rosary) and pustaka (book). Though these are most common, there are several variations. Some of the other objects shown are: pā ś a (noose), añ kuś a (goad), padma (lotus), triś ū la (trident), ś añ kha (conch), cakra (discus) and so on. Occasionally she is shown with five faces or with eight hands. Even three eyes or blue neck are not uncommon. In this case she is the Mahā sarasvatī aspect of Durgā or Pā rvatī .

Though no separate carrier vehicle is mentioned, haṁ sa or swan, the vehicle of

Brahmā , her spouse, is usually associated with her also. In popular mythological literature and pictures, a peacock is also shown as her mount.

Coming to the symbology: Being the consort of Brahmā the creator, she represents his power and intelligence, without which organized creation is impossible. To show that this intelligent power is stupendous and absolutely pure, she is pictured as white and dazzling.

Her four arms show her unimpeded power in all directions or her all-pervasiveness.

Being the goddess of learning, it is but proper that Sarasvatī is shown holding a book in her left hand. The book represents all areas of secular sciences. Mere intellectual learning, without a heart tempered by higher feelings, sentiments and emotions, is as dry as saw-dust. So she holds a vī ṇ ā (lute) on which she actually plays, to show the need for the cultivation of fine-arts. Then there is the akṣ amā lā (rosary) held in the right hand. This symbolises all spiritual sciences or yoga including tapas (austerities) meditation and japa (repetition of the divine name). By holding the book in the left hand and the rosary in the right hand she is obviously teaching us that spiritual sciences are more important than secular sciences.

The peacock with its beautiful plumage stands for this world in all its glory. Since the attractions of the world lead the spiritual aspirant astray, the peacock can actually symbolise avidyā (ignorance or nescience). On the other hand the swan, which is supposed to possess the peculiar power of separating milk from water, stands for viveka (wisdom, discrimination) and hence for vidyā (knowledge). Though it is true that vidyā or parā vidyā (spiritual illumination) alone can give us mokṣ a (beatitude), avidyā signifying secular knowledge-the sciences and arts of the world-need not be and should not be neglected. As the Ī ś ā vā sya Upaniṣ ad (11) puts it,* we transcend hunger and thirst through the secular sciences and then alone can obtain immortality through the spiritual sciences. It is to teach this great truth to us that Mother Sarsvatī has chosen the two mounts, the swan and the peacock.

LAKṢ MĪ

For obvious reasons, Lakṣ mī , the goddess of fortune, is more sought after than Sarasvatī , the goddess of learning. Being the power and consort of Viṣ ṇ u, the preserver, she is represented as the power of multiplicity and the goddess of fortune, both of which are equally necessary in the process of preservation.

`Ś rī ' or `Lakṣ mī ', as depicted in the Vedas, is the goddess of wealth and fortune, power and beauty. Though there is scope for the supposition that Ś rī and Lakṣ mī are two separate deities, the descriptions of them are so identical, that we are tempted to conclude that they represent one and the same deity. Some scholars opine that `Ś rī ' was a pre-Vedic deity connected with fertility, water and agriculture. She was later fused with Lakṣ mī , the Vedic goddess of beauty.

In her first incarnation, according to the purā ṇ as, she was the daughter of the sage Bhṛ gu and his wife Khyā ti. She was later born out of the ocean of milk at the time of its churning. She being the consort of Viṣ ṇ u, is born as his spouse whenever he incarnates. When he appeared as Vā mana, Paraś urā ma, Rā ma and Kṛ ṣ ṇ a, she appeared as Padmā (or Kamalā), Dharaṇ ī , Sī tā and Rukmiṇ ī . She is inseparable from Viṣ ṇ u as speech from meaning or knowledge from intellect, or good deeds from righteousness. He represents all that is masculine, and she, all that is feminine.

Lakṣ mī is usually described as enchantingly beautiful and standing on a lotus, and holding lotuses in each of her two hands. It is because of this, perhaps, that she is named as Padmā or Kamalā . She is also adorned with a lotus garland. Very often elephants are shown on either side, emptying pitchers of water over her, the pitchers being presented by celestial maidens. Her colour is variously described as dark, pink, golden-yellow or white. While in the company of Viṣ ṇ u, she is shown with two hands only. When worshipped in a temple-separate temples for Lakṣ mī are rather rare-she

is shown seated on a lotus throne, with four hands holding padma, ś aṅ kha, amṛ takalaś a (pot of ambrosia) and bilva fruit. Sometimes, another kind of fruit, the mahā liṅ ga (a citron) is shown instead of bilva. When shown with eight hands, bow and arrow, mace and discus are added. This is actually the Mahā lakṣ mī , an aspect of Durgā .

We can now attempt an explanation that is behind this highly symbolical picture. If Lakṣ mī is pictured as dark in complexion, it is to show that she is the consort of Viṣ ṇ u, the dark-god. If golden-yellow, that shows her as the source of all wealth. If white, she represents the purest form of prakṛ ti (nature) from which the universe has developed. The pinkish complexion, which is more common, reflects her compassion for creatures, since she is the mother of all.

Her four hands signify her power to grant the four puruṣ ā rthas (ends of human life), dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kā ma (pleasures of flesh), and mokṣ a (beatitude).

The lotuses, in various stages of blooming, represent the worlds and beings in various stages of evolution.

The fruit stands for the fruits of our labours. However much we may toil and labour, unless the Mother is gracious enough to grant the fruits of our labour, nothing will be of any avail. If the fruit is a coconut-with its shell, kernel and water-it means that from her originate the three levels of creation, the gross, the subtle and the extremely subtle. If it is a pomegranate or a citron, it signifies that the various created worlds are under her control and that she transcends them all. If it is a bilva fruit-which, incidentally, is not very tasty or attractive, but is extremely good for health-it stands for mokṣ a, the highest fruit of spiritual life.

Amṛ takalaś a also signifies the same thing, viz., that she can give us the bliss of immortality.

In some of the sculptural depictions of Lakṣmī, the owl is shown as her mount. It looks rather odd and strange that the goddess of fortune and beauty should have an ugly bird, the very sight of which is considered inauspicious, as her carrier! Once the symbolical significance of this oddity is unravelled, we will be in a better position to appreciate the poor bird and its compassionate mistress!

The word in Sanskrit for the owl is ulūka. Ulūka is also one of the names of Indra, the king of gods! Hence Lakṣmī being the goddess of fortune could not have found a better person to ride on, than the king of gods, who personifies all the wealth, power and glory that a living being can aspire for in life. At the same time, here is a warning administered to the seekers of secular wealth, instead of spiritual wealth, by comparing even the glory of Indra to the ugliness of an inelegant and partially blind bird.

Based on the beautiful description given in the Bhagavadgītā (2.69) we can be generous enough to compare our owl to the sthitaprajña, the man of steady wisdom. Then, the symbol would mean that Mother Lakṣmī is the mistress of spiritual wisdom. If we are not so generous, then, we can learn a lesson from it in another way, viz., 'Do not shut out your eyes to the light of wisdom coming from the sun of knowledge!' Out of consideration for mankind, the all-compassionate Mother has kept this personification of ignorance under her control.

SAMUDRAMATHANA (Churning of the Ocean)

It may be interesting and even instructive to digress a little and deal with the story of Samudramathana (churning of the ocean of milk). Indra, the king of gods, lost his all to the demons, due to the disrespect shown, out of pride, to a great sage Durvāsas. Lord Viṣṇu advised him to make up with his enemies (the demons) and with their help, to churn the ocean of milk, out of which amṛta (ambrosia) could be got. By drinking it the gods could become immortal and regain their lost sovereignty. Accordingly, the gods and the demons started churning the ocean, making the Mandara mountain as the churning rod and Vāsuki, the great serpent, as the rope. Viṣṇu took

the form of a gigantic tortoise (Kū rma) to support the mountain Mandara from sinking. The first product of this joint venture and adventure was Hā lā hala, the most deadly poison! Ś iva the auspicious one, swallowed this, thus saving the worlds from sure destruction. Then were produced Kā ma-dhenu (the wishyielding cow), Uccai-ś ravas (the white horse), Airā vata (the elephant), Kaustubhamaṇ i (the matchless jewel), Kalpa-vṛ kṣ a (the wish-fulfilling tree), Lakṣ mī (the goddess of fortune), Surā or Vā ruṇ ī (the goddess of wine) and Dhanvantari (the physician of the gods) bearing the vessel of Amṛ ta (the ambrosia) in his hands. The Ṛ ṣ is took away the cow Kā madhenu, Bali (the king of demons) cast his eye on the horse Uccaiś ravas, Indra (the king of gods) accepted the elephant Airā vata and got the tree Kalpavṛ kṣ a planted in his garden in heaven. Viṣ ṇ u chose to wear the jewel Kaustubha on his chest whereas Lakṣ mī chose Viṣ ṇ u's chest as her abode. The gods chose Surā who had been, strangely enough, rejected by the demons. Contravening the original agreement that the Amṛ ta should be shared by both the groups equally, the demons forcibly snatched away the pot from Dhanvantari's hands to appropriate the entire quantity for themselves. Selfishness and greed, however, led to disagreement, discontent and conflict even among themselves. Taking this opportunity Viṣ ṇ u took the form of Mohinī , the enchantress, lured the vessel of ambrosia into his hands and cleverly managed to distribute its contents among the gods only. Then the inevitable happened. Being intoxicated by the new strength gained thus, the gods fell upon the demons, vanquished them and regained their lost sovereignty.

This myth has great lessons for us. In order to get the greatest good of the greatest number, the saner elements of the society should influence the masses to bury their hatchet, sink all their petty differences and make a coordinated and co-operative effort to achieve it. Since the task is stupendous, the effort will have to be equally stupendous. The early results of all such joint ventures need not always be good or pleasant. Due to conflict of personalities and clash of interests which naturally arise in the field of joint ventures, it is Hā lā hala that appears first and not Amṛ ta! This deadly poison starts destroying all the parties involved in the conflicts irrespective of who is right or who is wrong! Hence out of sheer necessity, the entire society should unite and

appeal to the leaders to save it. Any true leader of the society, worth the name, will, like Śiva the auspicious one, voluntarily and willingly come forward risking his life to assimilate this poison and save the society from sure destruction. Once these conflicts are resolved and the efforts are redoubled, Lakṣmī signifying abhyudaya (well-being, fortune) and Amṛta signifying niśśreyaśa (moral and spiritual elevation ultimately leading to beatitude) are bound to arise from the firmament of their joint adventure. But, again, contrary to the covenant, if the selfish and belligerent groups of the society try to appropriate to themselves all the fruits of the common labours, God, the law-giver and justice personified, will thwart their efforts. The good shall and will vanquish the evil.

This story can be interpreted at the subjective level also. Anyone who is tired of the vicissitudes of life and is hankering for peace and bliss should seek it only in the highest spiritual enlightenment. Amṛta signifies just this enlightenment. To get this, an all-out effort will have to be made. The sense-organs which usually pull the mind down and create confusion, conflicts and heart-burns, should be tactfully mobilised in this effort even as the demons were used by the gods. Spiritual life is a long struggle. Meditation is actually mind-churning. Hence, this process will inevitably throw up the deadly poison hidden in the recesses of the mind as passions and prejudices, which try to destroy the every process of sādhanā (spiritual efforts). An intense and earnest prayer to God the Śiva, will save the situation by getting it sublimated. The conquest of Māra by the Buddha or Satan by Christ, can be understood in this light. Once the worst is over, the spiritual aspirant will gradually start reaping the benefits of his efforts in the form of siddhis (powers), psychic or otherwise. Kāmadhenus and Kalpavṛkṣas can mean such powers. This will be crowned with success when he gets a vision of the all-pervading cosmic energy (Lakṣmī) resulting in immortal bliss (Amṛta).

ASPECTS OF LAKṢMĪ

Eight forms of Lakṣmī, known as Aṣṭamahālakṣmīs, are recognized in iconographical works. Out of these, Gajalakṣmī is the most popular. She is usually figured on the lintels of door-frames. She is seated on an eight-petalled lotus, has four

hands and is carrying a lotus, a pot of nectar, a bilva fruit and a conch. Behind her, two elephants are shown pouring water over her from pots held in their trunks.

When the same goddess has two hands, she is called Sā mā nyalakṣ mī , or Indralakṣ mī .

If she is depicted with two lotuses in two hands, and the other two hands display the abhaya and varada mudrā s, she is designated as Varalakṣ mī .

The other forms are not so common.

EIGHT Ś AKTIS OF VIṢ Ṇ U

The protecting power of Viṣ ṇ u has eight aspects and each of these is pictured as a goddess.

Ś rī devī is the goddess of wealth and fortune. Bhū devī , representing the earth, and often with Ś rī devī , as the junior consort of Viṣ ṇ u, stands for sovereignty over the earth. Sarasvatī sigifies learning. Prī ti is love personified. Kī rti and Ś ā nti give fame and peace whereas Tuṣ ṭ i and Puṣ ṭ i grant pleasure and strength.

ALAKṢ MĪ

Alakṣ mī is the opposite number of Lakṣ mī . She is misfortune personified. She was also born during the churning of the ocean. Since she appeared earlier than Lakṣ mī and hence elder, she is also called Jyeṣ ṭ hā (the elder one). A sage, Dussaha (= the unbearable) by name, married her. According to another version, it was the sage Kapila. Adharma (unrighteousness) is her son. She is pictured as an old hag riding an ass. She has a broom in her hand. A crow adorns her banner. Her image finds a place in some temples. When propitiated, she can dispel evil and grant prosperity!

Sometimes Jyeṣṭhā devī is identified with Lakṣmī herself.

Since the created world is a mixture of opposites and things happen in cyclic order, both fortune and misfortune are the two sides of the same coin. Being a part and parcel of this creation and hence of our life, misfortune is no less divinely ordained than fortune. It is perhaps to teach us this great fact of life that even misfortune has been deified.

PĀ RVATĪ

Pārvatī is the power and consort of Śiva, the god of disintegration and destruction. An overwhelming majority of the goddesses of Hinduism are aspects and variations of Pārvatī. The names by which she is known or worshipped are too numerous to mention. If some of the names like Pārvatī, Haimavatī, Girijā and Dākṣāyaṇī indicate her origin from the Himālayas or Dakṣa (one of the forefathers of mankind), other names like Śivā, Mr̥ḍānī, Rudrāṇī and Śarvāṇī stress her aspect as the spouse of Śiva. Still others like Aparṇā and Umā have specific references to certain stories in the purāṇic literature.

One of the earliest references to this deity is found in the Kenopaniṣad (3.12) where she is mentioned as 'Umā Haimavatī' enlightening Indra, the king of gods, about Brahman, the Absolute or God. This reference is enough to conclude that the worship of this goddess is very ancient.

According to the purāṇic accounts, in her 'first' incarnation, she was Dākṣāyaṇī, the daughter of Dakṣa and Prasūti, and married to Lord Śiva. Unable to understand Lord Śiva's greatness, Dakṣa once reviled him and started harbouring hatred towards him. When he undertook the performance of a great sacrifice, the notable exception among the dignitaries invited was Śiva himself. Much against the advice of her spouse, Dākṣāyaṇī went to the sacrifice uninvited and

being slighted, ended her life by burning herself in the fire generated by yoga. Hence she came to be known as Satī , the chaste one. She was next reborn as Pārvatī , the daughter of Himavān and Menā . After performing intense austerities she succeeded in pleasing Śiva and making him accept her again as his consort.

During the performance of these severe austerities, she refused to eat even dry leaves to sustain herself and hence got the appellation 'Aparṇā'. Her mother Menā unable to see her dear daughter languishing by austerities, tried to dissuade her by the words, 'Uḥmā' (= My dear, don't do like this!) which became her another name (Umā). Being the daughter of the Himālayas (the abode of snow) she has to be Gaurī (the white one). As the mother of the universe she is Ambā and Ambikā , both the words meaning 'mother'.

Like her consort Śiva, she also has two aspects: the mild and the terrible. As Pārvatī or Umā she represents the mild aspect. In this aspect she is usually shown with Śiva. Then she has only two hands, the right one holding a blue lotus and the left hanging loosely by the side. The image is richly decorated. When represented independently she is shown with four hands, two hands holding red and blue lotuses and the other two exhibiting the varada and abhaya mudrās.

Though all the female deities are called Śaktis of their male counterparts, the words 'Śakti' and 'Devī' are more particularly-or even exclusively-used to denote the Śakti of Śiva, the innumerable aspects of Pārvatī . Considering Śiva as Mahādeva, the Supreme God, Pārvatī represents his power by which the universe is created, sustained and destroyed.

The Himālayas represent the ākāśa or ether, the first fundamental substance. Menā stands for intelligence. Hence Pārvatī , their offspring, represents the conscious substance of the universe. That is why she is also called Umā (= light, the bright one).

At the subjective level, Umā -haimavatī represents brahmavidyā or spiritual wisdom, by which union with Ś iva or God, is attained.

Being the consort of Ś iva, who is Rudra, the terrible, she also has her terrible aspects which need a separate study.

It is interesting to note that the Vaiṣ ṇ ava symbols-ś aṅ kha and cakra-are often shown in her hands also. Though the purā ṇ as describe her as the sister of Viṣ ṇ u it is possible that Viṣ ṇ u is considered as the active power of Ś iva and hence these symbols in the hands of the Devī . This surmise is strengthened by the fact that in the Haryardha-mū rti of Ś iva, the left half is Viṣ ṇ u and in the Ardhanā rī ś vara form, Devī forms the left half.

ASPECTS OF PĀ RVATĪ

Sapta-Mā ṭṛ kā s

According to the Durgā saptaś atī , one of the basic texts on the Mother-cult, when Kauś ikī Durgā was fighting the demon Raktabī ja-whose blood, if spilled, could produce demons similar to him-she manifested out of herself seven emanations. These are usually called the `Saptamā ṭṛ kā s' or the `Seven little Mothers'. They are: Brā hmī (or Brahmā ṇ ī), Mā heś varī , Kaumā rī , Vaiṣ ṇ avī , Vā rā hī , Nā rasimhī and Aindrī (or Indrā ṇ ī). As their very names indicate, they are the Ś aktis of Brahmā , Ī ś vara, Kumā ra (Skanda), Viṣ ṇ u, Varā ha, Narasimha and Indra. Hence they have the same forms, weapons and mounts as their lords. Since the Devī , according to the same work, was formed out of the combined energies of all the gods, this theory of the Saptamā ṭṛ kas becomes intelligible to us.

Sometimes, Nā rasimhī is substituted by Cā muṇ ḍ ā (or Cā muṇ ḍ ī). Along with the original deity-called Durgā Mahā lakṣ mī -they are counted as eight.

Sometimes, an esoteric interpretation is given by the followers of tantraś ā stra, with regard to these seven Mā trī kā s. Brā hmī , according to them, represents the primordial nā da, the energy in which even the first throb has not yet appeared. This is the unmanifest sound (Logos), the origin of all creation. It is the same as the substance or energy represented by the praṇ ava (Om). When Brā hmī creates the universe, the power of Vaiṣ ṇ avī , gives it a definite shape. The symmetry, beauty, organisation and order in the universe are the work of Vaiṣ ṇ avī . Mā heś varī stands for the power that gives individuality to the created beings. She resides in the hearts of all and makes them play, like the dolls mounted on a machine. Kaumā rī , the ever youthful deity, represents the ever-present force of aspiration of the evolving soul. She is 'Guruguhā ' (Guruguha being one of the names of Kumā ra or Skanda whose energy she is), the 'guru' (guide, teacher) in the 'guhā ' (the cave of the heart, the intellect). Vā rā hī is the all-consuming power of assimilation and enjoyment. Because of her, the living beings get their food and all physical enjoyments. Aindrī or Indrā ṇ ī symbolises the terrible power that destroys all that opposes the cosmic law. Cā muṇ ḍ ā is the force of concentrated awareness, the power of spiritual awakening in the heart that devours the ceaseless activity of the immature mind and uplifts it to the highest level. Raktabī jā sura is actually the mind, each wave of which gives rise to other waves. Killing of this Raktabī ja by Cā muṇ ḍ ā means the destruction of the mental modifications by the awakening of spiritual consciousness.

These deities are generally represented as red in colour and with two hands, holding a skull and a lotus. However, since they are Ś aktis of the above-mentioned gods, they are shown more often as female replicas of the male deities.

Sometimes each deity is assigned a tree as specially sacred to it. For instance: Udumbara (fig tree) for Kaumā rī , Aś vattha (peepal tree) for Vaiṣ ṇ avī and the Karañja (Indian beech) for Vā rā hī .

They are usually grouped together with Gaṇ eś a and Vī rabhadra flanking on either side and shown on panels in the Ś iva temples. Occasionally they have a

separate shrine built for them. The order or arrangement varies according to the effect desired. If the safety of the village is desired Brā hmī is installed in the centre. If increase in the population is the goal, Cā muṇ ḍ ā occupies the central place.

Daś amahā vidyā s

Ten aspects of Ś akti are sometimes described in tā ntric works. They are termed `Daś amahā vidyā 's. These are the representations of transcendent knowledge and power, the sources of all that is to be known.

The first is Kā lī , the goddess of time, that destroys everything. Tā rā , the second, is the power of the golden embryo (Hiraṇ ya- garbha) from which the universe evolves. She also stands for void or the boundless space. The third is Ṣ oḍ asī . The word literally means `one who is sixteen years old.' She is the personification of fulness, of perfection. Bhuva-neś varī , the fourth Vidyā , represents the forces of the material world, whereas Bhairavī the fifth, stands for desires and temptations leading to destruction and death. Then comes Chinnamastā , the naked deity holding her own severed head in hand and drinking her own blood! She simply represents the continued state of self-sustenance of the created world in which are seen continuous self-destruction and self-renewal, in a cyclic order. Dhū mā vatī , the seventh, personifies the destruction of the world by fire, when only smoke (dhū ma) from its ashes remains. She is sometimes identified with Alakṣ mī or Jyeṣ ṭ hā devī . The eighth Vidyā , Bagalā , is a crane-headed goddess, and represents the ugly side of living creatures like jealousy, hatred and cruelty. Mā taṅ gī , the ninth, is the embodiment of the power of domination. The tenth and the last, Kamalā , is the pure consciousness of the self, bestowing boons and allaying the fears of the supplicants. She is identified with Lakṣ mī , the goddess of fortune.

Durgā

Durgā is, perhaps, the most widely worshipped aspect of Śakti. An entire purāṇa, the Devī bhāgavatam, has been dedicated to her. Another work, more wellknown than the Devī bhāgavatam, but containing practically the same material in a concise form, is the Devī māhātmyam. It is also known as the Durgā saptaśatī or Caṇḍī , and forms a part of another wellknown purāṇa, the Mārkaṇḍeya-purāṇa. This work is so highly venerated that every verse of it is considered to be a mantra (sacred formula) of the Devī and its repetition is believed to confer whatever boons the votary prays for.

Literally 'Durgā' means one who is difficult to approach, or, difficult to know. Being the personification of the totality of the powers of the gods, she is naturally difficult to approach or to know. However, being the Mother of the universe, she is the personification of tender love, when supplicated.

Out of the several aspects of the Śakti put forward by this work, Yoganidrā ('meditation-sleep') comes first. She is the power of sleep, taking recourse to which, Viṣṇu rests between two cycles of creation. She is praised as responsible for the creation, sustenance and withdrawal of the universe. She is the mysterious power, the very personification of knowledge, wisdom and memory. She is pleasant and beautiful. At the same time she is terrible also. This combination of the opposite qualities is possible only for her. She is described as wielding several weapons like the bow, arrow, sword, discus and trident.

The next is Mahiṣāsuramardinī, the deity who took shape as a result of the pooling together of the powers of all the gods who had been oppressed by the demon Mahiṣāsura. Viṣṇu, Śiva and Brahmā were incensed by hearing the accounts of the misdeeds of Mahiṣāsura and the Devī was born out of their wrath, followed by the wrath of the lesser divinities. The powers of these gods formed her limbs and the exact duplicates of their weapons formed her arsenal. Armed with these formidable

weapons and riding on a fierce lion, she challenged Mahiṣ ā sura and destroyed him along with his army.

This story is followed by an exquisite hymn which combines in itself both poetic excellence as also devotional fervour and insight.

She is the power inscrutable, by which the whole universe is permeated and energised. She is the personification of all wealth, power, beauty, as also virtues. She is the embodiment of yajña (sacrifice), parā vidyā (the highest knowledge concerning the spirit) as well as aparā vidyā (knowledge of the secular sciences). It is she who bestows wealth-both material and spiritual-dispels difficulties, and annihilates the evil ones. Her beauty as well as her valour, is incomparable.

The gods could not enjoy their freedom for long. Very soon, they were overpowered by the demons Ś umbha and Niś umbha. So they had to run to the Himā layas and supplicate the Devī again. This hymn, wellknown as the Aparā jitā stotra, praises her as the 'unconquered.' Her immanence in all the living beings is the main theme of this hymn. The powers and activities of all beings are manifestations of only her power.

In response to this prayer, she manifested herself as Kauś ikī Durgā , emanating from the body of Pā rvatī , who herself became Kā lī the dark one, after this manifestation.

The world-bewitching beauty of Durgā attracted the attention of Ś umbha and Niś umbha who sent proposals of marriage through a serf. Unfortunately for them, in a moment of 'weakness and foolishness' she had vowed to marry only him who would vanquish her in battle! All attempts at dragging her away ended in disaster for the demons. Heads rolled, the intervention of giants like Dhū mralocana, Caṇ ḍ a, Muṇ ḍ a and Raktabī ja notwithstanding. Kā lī , the fierce black goddess who emerged from the Devī 's forehead, beheaded Caṇ ḍ a and Muṇ ḍ a and thus won

the name Cā muṇ ḍ ā for herself. Only the battle with Raktabī ja was longdrawn needing some special efforts by the Devī since he had the mysterious power to multiply himself through the drops of blood spilled in the battle. Even the Saptamā trī kā s who came out of her body to battle, seemed helpless. It was Kā lī who managed to spread her extensive tongue and drink away all the blood gushing out of Raktabī ja, thus preventing the emergence of more demons and enabling Durgā to exterminate him. The rest was easy. Niś umbha was easily put to death after a mockery of fight. Ś umbha being exasperated by now, accused her of taking the help of `others'! Laughing derisively, the Devī withdrew all her emanations and manifestations into herself, showing that she was always the One without a second. In the ensuing battle, Ś umbha the lord of the demons, was easily killed, thus ridding the worlds of a great terror.

This is followed by another piece of prayer, an enchanting poetical hymn, which is as simple as it is elegant. Known as the Nā rā yaṇ ī stuti it starts with fervent appeals to the Mother by the grateful gods to be benign and gracious. The hymn describes her as the mistress and the mother of the whole creation. She is the physical universe. She is the mysterious power of Viṣ ṇ u (Vaiṣ ṇ avī ś akti) the original cause, as also the power that deludes beings. It is only by pleasing her that one can hope to get spiritual emancipation. All arts and sciences as also womankind, are her manifestations. She is residing as the intellect in the hearts of human beings. She is the all-devouring time. She is the very personification of all that is good and auspicious. She is ever engaged in protecting her children. The Saptamā trī kā s are really her aspects. Kā lī , the terrible, with a garland of human skulls round her neck, is also another of her aspects. When pleased, she can remedy all diseases. If displeased, she can destroy all that we love and like to possess. Her votaries are always free from troubles. She is the Supreme Truth described in all the scriptural works.

The work also describes her other manifestations like Vindhyavā sinī (one who lives in the Vindhyas), Raktadantā (of red teeth), Ś atā kṣ ī (of hundred eyes), Ś ā kambharī (sustainer of vegetables), Durgā (slayer of demon Durgama) Bhī mā

(the terrible) and Bhrā marī or Bhramarā mbā (having the form of bees).

The Devī as depicted in this work has three major manifestations: Mahā kā lī , Mahā lakṣ mī and Mahā sarasvatī . These aspects should not be confused with the paurā ṇ ic deities, Pā rvaṭī , Lakṣ mī and Sarasvatī . They are actually the three major manifestations of the one Supreme Power Maheś varī , according to the three guṇ as (tamas, rajas and sattva).

The first, Mahā kaḷī , has ten faces and ten feet. She is deep blue in colour, like the gem nī lamaṇ i. She is bedecked with ornaments and wields in her ten hands, the following weapons and objects: sword, discus, mace, arrow, bow, iron club, lance, sling, human head and conch. Being the personification of the tā masic aspect of the Devī , she is also the Yoganidrā , who has put Lord Viṣ ṇ u to sleep. It is to her that Brahmā prayed, requesting her to leave Viṣ ṇ u so that the latter could destroy the demons Madhu and Kaiṭ abha.

She is the personification of mā yā , the mysterious power of Lord Viṣ ṇ u. Unless she is pleased and voluntarily withdraws, the Lord in us will not awake and destroy the powers of evil which are trying to destroy us. This seems to be the import of the story of Brahmā , Madhu and Kaiṭ abha.

Mahā lakṣ mī , the second, the rā jasic aspect of the Devī is described as red in colour like the coral. She holds in her eighteen hands the rosary, battle-axe, mace, arrow, thunderbolt, lotus, bow, water-pot, cudgel, lance, sword, shield, conch, bell, wine-cup, trident, noose and the discus Sudarś ana. Being 'born' out of the combined wraths and powers of all the gods, she is the personification not only of the powers but also of the will to fight the evil forces. That is why she is shown as red in colour, the colour of blood, the colour of war. It is she who destroyed Mahiṣ ā sura.

The story of Mahiṣ ā sura has several implications. Mahiṣ ā sura, the he-buffalo, represents the jungle law that might is right. He is the ruthless brute force that

does not brook any opposition where selfish ends are concerned. And he succeeded even against the gods; but only when they were divided. But he fell before their combined powers and the will to fight, which is exactly what the Devī , Mahiṣ ā suramardinī , represents. The lesson of this story at the social level is too obvious to need an explanation. Nor can we ignore its social implications. At the subjective level, Mahiṣ ā sura stands for ignorance and stubborn egoism. Its subjugation and conquest are possible only when the sā dhaka (spiritual aspirant) pools all his energies together and fights it with a tenacious will. Since God helps him who helps himself, the intervention of the divine power in his favour is always there.

Mahā sarasvatī is the third deity representing the sā ttvic aspect of the Devī . She is bright like the autumn moon and has eight hands in which she holds the bell, trident, ploughshare, conch, pestle, discus, bow and arrow. It is she who manifests out of the physical sheath of Pā rvatī and hence known as Kauś ikī Durgā . She is the very personification of physical perfection and beauty. She is the power of work, order and organization.

The section dealing with her exploits is the longest. Dhū mralocana, Caṇ ḍ a, Muṇ ḍ a, Raktabī ja, Niś umbha and Ś umbha are the chief demons destroyed by her. All these demons known as asuras, are archetypes of highly egoistic people who revel in a life of the pleasures of the body and the sense-organs. Symbolically, they represent various stages and states of egoism. If Dhū mralocana, ('the smoky-eyed') stands for the grossest state of ignorance and egoism, Raktabī ja represents a more subtle state which multiplies itself and our troubles! While Muṇ ḍ a is the low profile of our egoism (muṇ ḍ a = the low), Caṇ ḍ a is the more horrible side of it (caṇ ḍ a = fierce). Ś umbha and Niś umbha signify more enlightened aspects of egoism (ś umbh = to shine).

Dhū mralocana was destroyed by a huṁkā ra, by a mere frown! Caṇ ḍ a and Muṇ ḍ a were too mean to be handled by the Devī directly. Hence Kā lī , the horrible, finished them at her behest. Raktabī ja required more skilful handling. The source of his strength was destroyed first before destroying him. As for Niś umbha and

Śumbha, the Devi was obliged to give them a straight fight.

Lower states of ignorance and egoism as typified by Dhūmalocana, Caṇḍā and Muṇḍā, should be destroyed by sudden bursts of energy and rough handling. More crafty states which result in endless multiplication of desires-that is what Raktabīja signifies-should be tactfully handled by going to the root, by suppressing them as soon as they arise. 'Enlightened egoism,' if one can use such an expression, which is egoism all the same, needs a straight fight. It may be a long drawn fight and Devī's grace is absolutely necessary for success.

Aspects of Durgā mentioned in the purāṇas and āgamas are legion. For instance: Śailaputrī, Kūṣmāṇḍā, Kātyāyanī, Kṣemaṅkarī, Harasidhiḥ, Vanadurgā, Vindhyavāsini, Jayadurgā and so on. They are of greater interest in iconography and to the supplicants who can get different types of desires fulfilled by worshipping the different aspects.

Images of Durgā can have four or eight or ten or eighteen or even twenty hands. The eyes are usually three. The hair is dressed up as a crown (called karaṇḍamukūṭa). She is gorgeously dressed with red cloth and several ornaments. Among the objects held in hand, the more common ones are-conch, discus, trident, bow, arrow, sword, dagger, shield, rosary, wine-cup and bell. She may be shown as standing on a lotus or on a buffalo's head or as riding a lion.

Lion, the royal beast, her mount, represents the best in animal creation. It can also represent the greed for food, and hence the greed for other objects of enjoyment which inevitably leads to lust. To become divine (deva) one should keep one's animal instincts under complete control. This seems to be the lesson we can draw from the picture of the Simhavāhinī (the rider of lion.)

Kā lī

Of all the forms of the Hindu pantheon, that of Kā lī is perhaps the most enigmatic to the modern mind. Who will not recoil in horror and disgust from the form of a dark nude woman wearing an apron of human hands and a garland of human heads, especially if she is also holding a freshly severed human head and the chopper used in the slaughter, dripping with blood? Throughout its history, mankind has been baffled by profound symbo-logy. More so when it does not conform to its own 'sweet and refined' standards. Even when one particular group or cult successfully assimi- lates it and starts revering it, other groups or cults continue to abhor it. It is natural for one group to abhor the symbols of all others, forgetting conveniently that the 'other groups' are doing the same! The picture of the 'Slain Lamb' or the cultus of the 'Sacred Heart' are just two illustrations to show this. On the other hand, a closer look at such symbols will not only dispel our ignorance about them but can also produce positive admiration. Is not the water of the sea, which appears as dark blue or green from a distance, really colourless and transparent when examined at close quarters?

The word 'Kā lī ' comes from the wellknown word kā la, time. She is the power of time. Time, as we are all well aware, is all-destroying, all-devouring. That is why the Lord says in the Gī tā (11.32) that he is time which has grown to infinite proportions and is destroying the worlds. A power that destroys has got to be depicted in terms of awe-inspiring terror.

Let us now turn to the Kā lī imagery as normally found in the scriptures, pictures and icons. The background is a cremation ground or a burial ground or a warfield, showing the dead bodies including the mutilated ones. She herself is standing in a challenging posture, on a 'dead' body, which is her own spouse, Ś iva himself. If Ś iva is pure white, she is deep blue in colour bordering on blackness. She is completely naked, except for an apron of human hands. She is wearing a garland of fifty human heads or skulls. Her luxuriant hair is completely dishevelled. She has three eyes and four hands. In her upper hands she is holding a freshly severed and bleeding

human head, as also the sword (or chopper) used in the carnage. The two lower hands are in the abhaya and varada mudrā s. Her face is red and the tongue protruding.

The background or the setting is in complete harmony with the theme. The severed head and the sword are graphic representations of destruction that has just taken place.

God is said to have created this universe and then entered into it (Tāi ttiī yopaniṣ ad 2.6). So the universe becomes a veil, a cloak for the divinity. When that is destroyed, the divinity remains unveiled. This is the meaning of Kā lī being naked. She is hence termed 'Digam̄barā ' ('clad in space'), having the vast limitless space itself as her only vesture.

Being the embodiment of tamas, the aspect of energy responsible for dispersion ad infinitum producing limitless void, a void that has swallowed up everything, she is black. She represents the state where time, space and causation have disappeared without any trace as it were. Hence she is black.

The hand represents the capacity for work. Hence the apron of severed hands can signify that she is so pleased with the offerings of our works and the fruits thereof that she wears them on her body.

The hand can also stand for kinetic energy. Therefore, severed hands can stand for potential energy, the energy that has stopped all outward manifestation, and yet is tremendously powerful, ready to manifest itself when desired.

The dishevelled hair, for which she is called 'Muktakesī ', bespeaks her untrammelled freedom.

And then, the garland of skulls or heads which number fifty. They represent the fifty letters of the alphabet, the manifest state of sound, or sound (ś abda) in general,

from which the entire creation has proceeded. To show that the manifest creation has been with-drawn, she is wearing the garland on her body. The skulls or severed heads indicate the state of destruction.

Since she is the supreme energy responsible for the dissolution of the created universe, her form as depicted here naturally strikes awe and fear. But then she is the creatrix, the Mother also. Hence she is reassuring her fearstricken children through the abhayamudrā saying, 'Don't be afraid! I am your own dear Mother!' Simultaneously she is also exhibiting her desire to grant boons through the varadamudrā .

So far, so good! But what about Ś iva Mahā deva being 'trampled' under her feet? According to one of the mythological accounts, Kā lī once destroyed all the demons in a battle and then started a terrific dance out of the sheer joy of victory. All the worlds began to tremble and give way under its impact. At the request of all the gods Ś iva himself asked her to desist from it. She was too intoxicated to listen. Hence Ś iva lay like a corpse among the corpses on which she was dancing in order to absorb its shock into himself. When she stepped upon him she suddenly realised her mistake and put out her tongue in shame!

Ś iva Mahā deva is Brahman, the Absolute which is beyond all names, forms and activities. Hence he is shown lying prostrate like a ś iva, corpse. Kā lī represents his ś akti or energy. The energy however can never exist apart from its source or act independently of it. It can manifest itself and act only when it is based firmly on the source. It is exactly this that is meant while showing Kā lī standing on the chest of Ś iva.

From all this, one should not jump to the conclusion that Kā lī represents only the destructive aspect of God's power. What exists when time is transcended, the eternal night, of limitless peace and joy, is also Kā lī (Mahā -rā trī). Again it is she who prods Ś iva Mahā - deva into the next cycle of creation. In short, she is the power of God in all his aspects.

Lalitā

Another aspect of the Devī which is more widely worshipped in South India is Lalitā Tripurasundarī . Repetition of the wellknown Lalitā sahasranā ma and Triś atī *, as also the worship of her emblem, the Ś rī cakra are extremely popular. The initiation into her powerful mantra, the Pañcadaś ā kṣ arī (mantra of 15 letters) is an esoteric rite. Regular worship of the Ś rī cakra is said to yield any result the devotee desires.

If Durgā and Kā lī represent the aspects of power of the Goddess, Lalitā represents the aspect of beauty. Hence her form is depicted as extremely beautiful and her worship more refined.

* Thousand names and three hundred names, respectively of Lalitā Devī .

According to the Lalitopā khyā na of the Brahmā ṇ ḍ a Purā ṇ a, Lalitā Devī manifested herself in the midst of a disc of extreme brilliance, that arose from the sacrificial pit when Indra was performing a sacrifice in honour of her. At the behest of the gods assembled there, she chose to wed Kā meś vara (Lord Ś iva). She destroyed the demon Bhaṇ ḍ ā sura and annihilated his city, the Ś oṇ itapura. Viś vakarmā , the engineer of the gods, built a gorgeous city `Ś rī pura' on the mountain Meru, for her sake, where, along with her spouse Ś iva Kā meś vara, she is residing eternally. The Ś rī cakra actually repre-sents the Devī in this Ś rī pura.

Bhaṇ ḍ ā sura, the shameless demon, living in the Ś oṇ itapura, the city of blood and flesh, is actually the ego which makes the soul identify itself with the body and estrange itself from all the divine forces. When the Devī , who is the embodiment of God's power and grace, `kills' it, she is actually liberating it from its stifling limitations.

Lalitā is usually depicted as slightly redin colour (as that of the dawn) and

extraordinarily beautiful. In her four hands she is holding a bow of sugarcane, arrows, the goad (añ kuś a) and the noose (pā ś a). Sometimes she is shown holding a wine-cup made of diamond. One of her feet, usually the left, is shown resting on a pedestal, also of diamond.

The bow made of sugarcane actually represents the mind. It is through the mind that we experience all joy. Hence it is described as made of sugarcane. The bow is the instrument for discharging the arrows. The mind is the instrument by which the sense organs are 'shot' towards the sense-objects. Hence it is described as a bow. The arrows are the pañca-tanmā tras, the five subtle elements of ā kā ś a (ether), vā yu (air), agni (fire), ā pas (water), pṛ thivī (earth). The sense-organs like the eye and the ear, are products of these subtle elements and are discharged like arrows, through the mind, towards the sense-objects. Hence the subtle elements are described as the arrows in her hand. She is the power that energises and controls our minds and sense-organs. This is the underlying idea. The pā ś a (noose) is actually rā ga (attachment) which binds. The añ kuś a (goad) is krodha (anger, aversion) which hurts. The power that animates our attachments and aversions is also hers. If we forget her, she can bind us with rā gapā ś a, and pierce us with the krodhā ñ kuś a. If we take refuge in her, she can withdraw them into her hands and thereby free us from their torment.

An account of Lalitā cannot be complete without a few words of description of the Ś rī cakra. The Ś rī cakra is essentially a yantra,* the form and pattern of the deity. It is a rather complicated geometrical figure of forty three triangles formed by the intersection of nine triangles, of which five have their apexes downward and the other four upward. This is surrounded by concentric circles with eight and then sixteen lotus petals. The whole figure is skirted by a square of three lines with openings in the middle of each side. There is a dot in the centre of the entire diagram.

This dot represents the combination of Ś iva and Ś akti, as also the first throb, which gradually gathers momentum and gets concentrated into a polarisation of Ś iva and Ś akti, but continuing to keep the original Ś iva-Ś akti combination also. The

process repeats continuously resulting in various levels of creation, which are depicted by the different triangles and the lotus petals.

The Śrī cakra can be used for permanent worship either in the form of a yantra (two dimensional engraved figure) or in the form of a meru (three dimensional embossed figure).

OTHER ASPECTS OF PĀ RVATĪ

As already mentioned, the number of aspects, both major and minor, of Devī or Śakti (i.e., Pārvatī) is too numerous to deal with in a small book like this. Apart from the three major ones dealt with so far, a few others which are more commonly known will now be dealt with very briefly.

Annapūṣṇā : 'The possessor and giver of food.' Pārvatī got this name since she served food to Śiva when he was roaming about as a mendicant. She is shown serving food from a vessel of ruby. Her worship ensures that the household will never lack food. Her temple at Kāśī is very famous.

Aparājitā : 'The Invincible.' It is actually one of the names of Durgā and the wellknown series of verses in the Caṇḍī ending with the words 'namas tasyai' are called Aparājitā-stotra.

Bālā : 'The Child.' Considered to be the daughter of Lalitā and always nine years old, she is said to have destroyed the thirty sons of Bhaṇḍāsura.

Bhadrakālī : She is one of the several aspects of Mahākālī. She is said to have sprung up from Umā's wrath when Dakṣa insulted Śiva and fought along with Vīrabhadra to destroy Dakṣa's sacrifice.

Bhūtamātā : 'The Mother of goblins.' She resides under the aśvattha (pipal) tree and

has a host of demons, goblins and demigods as her retinue.

Cā muṇ ḍ ā : She is the same as Kā lī . She got this name since she killed Caṇ ḍ a and Muṇ ḍ a in the battle against Ś umbha and Niś umbha. She is sometimes included under the Saptamā ṭṛ kās.

Gā yatrī , Sā vitrī and Sarasvatī : These three goddesses represent the presiding deities of the famous Gā yatrī Mantra chanted three times a day. Gā yatrī is the presiding deity of the morning prayer, rules over the Ṛ gveda and the Gā rhatya fire.* She has four faces, four or ten arms and rides on a swan. Sā vitrī presides over the noon prayer, rules over the Yajurveda and the Dakṣ iṇ ā fire. She has four faces, twelve eyes, four arms and rides on a bull. Sarasvatī is the deity presiding over the evening prayer, rules over the Sā maveda and the ā havanī ya fire. She has one face and four arms, and rides over Garuḍ a.

Indrā kṣ ī : "One whose eyes are similar to Indra's." She is the aspect of Devī specially worshipped by Indra as also the apsara women (heavenly damsels). She is richly decorated and holds the Vajrā yudha. If she is pleased by hymns, she can cure even incurable diseases.

Jagad-dhā trī : "One who sustains the world." She is another aspect of the Devī which is more common in Bengal. She has four arms carrying the conch, discus, bow and arrow and rides on a lion.

Kā meś varī : "The Mistress of desire." Since Lord Ś iva destroyed Kā ma, the god of lust, he is known as Kā meś vara, "One who is the lord of lust or desire". The Devī being his consort, is known as Kā meś varī . This is actually one of the names of Lalitā . She can fulfil any of our desires for which we supplicate her.

Kā tyā yanī : Since the Devī was once born as the daughter of a sage Kata by name, she is known as Kā tyā yanī . She is the totality of the powers of the Hindu Trinity. Her

description practically tallies with that of Durgā as Mahiṣāsuramardīnī .

Manonmanī : 'One who lifts the mind up to the highest state of yoga.' She is the Śakti established in the psychic centre in the top of the head, just below the Brahmaṇḍa. She is pictured as blue or black in complexion and carries a skull-cup as also a sword. When she is pleased by the devoted prayers of her votaries, she can grant wealth and terrify their enemies.

Rājājeśvarī : 'One who rules over even the king of kings.' The Devī is the mistress of even Brahmā , Viṣṇu and Mahēśvara as also Kubera (the lord of wealth), each of whom is known as 'king of kings'. She is an aspect of Lalitā .

Śivadūtī : In her battle against Śumbha and Niśumbha, the Devī once sent her spouse Śiva himself as a messenger (dūta) to them. Hence she came to be known as 'Śivadūtī', 'one who has Śiva himself as her messenger'. Iconographically she is sometimes shown like Kālī and sometimes like Durgā .