Rituals Redefined: Bhadrakāli Worship Through the Lens of Colonial and Post-colonial Interventions

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Introduction

This paper investigates the historical trajectory of Bhadrakālī worship in Kerala, with a particular focus on the impact of colonial and post-colonial interventions on its ritual practices and sociocultural perceptions. The study traces the evolution of Goddess worship within the region, examining the factors that contributed to the transformation of Bhadrakālī from a fierce, autonomous deity into a more standardized and institutionalized temple figure. It critically analyzes the role of colonial narratives and legal impositions in constricting the diversity of ritual practices, which were already undergoing a process of standardization. Through this exploration, the paper highlights how these external influences reshaped indigenous traditions, leading to the reconfiguration of Bhadrakālī's worship and its associated cultural meanings.

History of Goddess Portrayal

The worship of the Mother Goddess is one of the longest standing traditions in India (Śrīnivasan, 2021) . However, the female deities we worship today are not as they were portrayed in the Vedas. The female entities worshipped in the Vedas were personifications of natural forces (Śrīnivasan, 2021) such as Uṣas (dawn) and Pṛthivī (earth) which were personifications of nature. The worship of Goddesses as independent

deities came at a later stage, evidenced by mother figurines found in the Indus Valley Civilization (Prabhu, 2014).

There is also evidence of worship of female goddesses in Sangam Tamil literature notably in the Tolkappiyam. The text divides regions based on the type of terrain and each type of terrain is attributed to and guarded by an entity and one of them is guarded by a warrior Goddess known as Kottravai. In addition, there is also evidence of a motherly figure who is both a warrior goddess and the goddess of fertility. (Prabhu, 2014). This is the oldest evidence of a warrior Goddess and a goddess of fertility in the southern regions of India.

The form of the goddess that is explored in this paper will predominantly be Bhadrakālī, but the more familiar and famous Goddess across India is Kālī. When looking at the literary and iconographic sources, the current form of Kālī developed gradually over 2000 years, where initially she was probably a tribal goddess and by the time of the Puranas, she was absorbed into the Sanskritized tradition as a dangerous, blood-loving battle queen. (McDermott & Kripal, 2003, p. 04). The Kālī in the Puranas is usually portrayed as Pārvatī's wrath personified. She is the one who goes into battle and kills demons as a relentless and unstoppable personification of Lady Pārvatī's extreme anger. She is often portrayed as Śiva's consort as she is none other than Pārvatī herself. (Kinsley, 1986). Similarly, she appears as Goddess Durga's personified fury in the "Devī Māhātmyam". Thereafter, in Tantric ritual and philosophy, she is an ontological absolute entity and is associated with the dynamic ground of the universe. (McDermott & Kripal, 2003, p. 04) As time has progressed, many devotional traditions have claimed her as the loving Mother of all. Apart from this chronological evolution, there also exists immense regional variations, across states, where her form, name and character are viewed differently.

Kāvu and Bhadrakālī

The early worship of deities began from Kāvus or Sacred Groves in Kerala. Sacred groves are traditionally conserved patches of forests managed by local people and dedicated to a deity (Gadgil & Vartak, 1975) and in Kerala they are known as a Kāvu. The deities to

whom the Kāvus are dedicated are Bhagavatī, Ayyappan, Sarpa, Veṭṭaikkuṟumakan, Muthappan, Kālī etc (V 2022). Even though in a lot of instances, Bhagavatī and Bhadrakālī are used interchangeably, Bhadrakālī is very specific to the story of Dārika Vadham, which is the theme of multiple ritual art forms performed in Kerala. Bhadrakālī is also associated with Śiva not as his consort but as his daughter, who was born out of his third eye and once again a product of his rage.

“Despite the presence of similar motifs to Devī Māhātmyamm, Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Liṅga Purāṇa, the full Kerala form of Dārikavadham does not appear in any of the Sanskrit Puranas and appears to have its origin in oral tradition. Whatever its textual antecedents, the story is alive and well in oral transmission.” (Caldwell, 2012)

The story is a popular muse amongst almost all the ritual art performers related to Bhadrakālī, including Kalamezhuthu, Theyyam, Padayani, Muḍiyettu etc. This particular story relates this version of the deity Bhadrakālī, uniquely to Kerala and one can notice the warrior aspects of the deity. The Kerala martial art form of Kalaripayattu traditionally practised by the matrilineal Nair community had as its most important guardian deity, the fierce aspect of the goddess, Bhadrakālī. (Śrīnivasan,2021).

The status before colonization

As mentioned earlier, Kāvus or sacred groves were the place where deities were worshipped. In fact, it controlled the entire community of the village. (Maheen, 2020) In the ritual art form Kalamezhuthu Paatu, there are as many as 18 deities such as Bhadrakālī, Ayyappan, Tripurāntaka, Antimahākāla, who were venerated.(Kurup, 2021, p.79). These show the variety of deities that were worshipped in the Kāvus. These were managed by different communities across Kerala. As there were different communities, the methods of worship and management were also possibly different.

In the sixth and seventh centuries, there was a gradual historical transformation of Kerala’s social landscape. This led to the restructuring of religious practices with the elite

patronage formalizing the rituals and standardizing them. However, there were independent temples of the marginalized groups where they were the ones who completely managed it. (Kurien, 1984). When this was happening, Tantra texts such as Īśānaśivagurudevapaddhati were being written which is a work dealing with temple architecture and iconography. Thereafter came the Tantra Samuccaya that wrote about the worship of only seven Gods as opposed to the many local deities. This would have led to the traditional Kāvukal being transformed into Kshetras.

The Tantrasamuccaya also narrowed the earlier Sakta traditions in Kerala further. However, this was followed by Śeṣasamuccaya that brought the remaining Gods apart from those that were spoken about in the Tantrasamuccaya. The four Sakta Goddesses that came about were, Sarasvati, Śrī Pārvatī, Jyeṣṭhā and Bhadrakālī. Bhadrakālī, as stated earlier, is the fierce, potentially violent goddess, created by Śiva for the destruction of demons. She is the more prominent liturgical representative of the independent, martial offspring of Śiva (Freeman, 2015)

The origins of Shākta practices in Kerala can be traced to a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and religious transformations, deeply rooted in the evolution of Tantric traditions. The non-Siddhāntic Śaiva cult of Bhairava, eventually gave rise to Śākta Tantra traditions. In this framework, Śakti was conceptualized as an integral aspect of Śiva, reflecting the inseparability of the divine feminine and masculine energies.

By the 9th and 10th centuries, Śākta Tantra emerged as a distinct tradition, elevating Śakti to the status of an emanation of Śiva and evolving into a higher, esoteric practice. Tantra, as a technique for approaching the deity, emphasized direct and experiential methods of worship. One significant stream of Tantra originated in the Kāmākhyā Tantra tradition, which later developed into the Kaula Tantra. This tradition deviated from the Vedic template, incorporating practices such as the *Pañcamakāra Pūjā*, which involved the ritual use of *madya* (wine), *māṃsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudrā* (gestures), and *maithuna* (ritual union).

As Vedic *sādhakas* (practitioners) began to engage with Tantra, particularly through *Dakṣiṇāchāra*, they introduced adaptations such as *anukalpa*—substituting the *pañcamakāras* (wine, meat, fish, gestures, and ritual union) with symbolic alternatives like vegetables, ginger, and other items. This shift reflected a synthesis of Vedic and Tantric practices, making the esoteric traditions more accessible while retaining their transformative potential.

A key aspect of Tantra, particularly Śākta Tantra, is the importance of enunciation and the concept of *adhikāra* (qualification or eligibility). Unlike Vedic traditions, where *adhikāra* was often determined by birth, Tantra offered a more inclusive approach, allowing individuals to attain qualification through initiation and practice. contributed to the unique evolution of Śākta practices in Kerala, where they became deeply intertwined with local traditions such as *Kalamezhuthu*, *Theyyam*, and *Mudiyettu*. These practices not only preserved the esoteric dimensions of Śākta worship but also adapted them to the cultural and social fabric of the region.

The Tantric practices observed in Kerala predominantly align with the *Dakṣiṇāmārga*, a tradition that adheres closely to Vedic principles and is characterized by its *Sāttvika* (pure, harmonious) nature. Within the Śākta traditions, particularly in temples dedicated to the Goddess (*Devī*), the *Pañcatattva*—commonly referred to as the *Pañcamakāra*, comprising *madya* (wine), *māṃsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudrā* (gestures), and *maithuna* (ritual union)—are generally not observed, regardless of their symbolic or esoteric significance. However, *mudrā*, as one of the components of the *Pañcamakāra*, is widely practiced in these rituals.

While the *Dakṣiṇāmārga* represents the dominant mode of worship in Kerala, there are documented instances of *Vāmamārga* practices being followed in certain contexts (Unni, 2006).

This dual presence of *Dakṣiṇāmārga* and *Vāmamārga* reflects the nuanced and multifaceted nature of Tantric traditions in the region, even as the former remains the principal framework for ritual observance in the majority of temples.

One of the origins of blood offering is from a popular tribal belief that, blood if it falls on the ground, makes the ground fertile making seed to sprout. (Maheen, 2020). Blood is associated with fertility and motherhood, the menstrual cycle of women is also a symbol of fertility. (Prabhu, 2014). This also might be the reason why there is Rakthachandanam (red vermillion) offering to Bhadrakālī, red cloth and red flowers (ibid.) All this points to her being worshipped in order to reap good harvest as she is the Goddess of fertility.

Although, as previously noted, the *Vāmamārga* was not widely practiced in Kerala, there is evidence of rituals involving blood offerings and animal sacrifices in certain contexts. Interviews conducted with priests and oracles (*valichapads*) at various Bhadrakālī temples in the Thrissur district revealed that the sacrifice of cocks was a practice that persisted until the introduction of colonial laws. These sacrifices were not performed within the main *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple but rather in ancillary shrines, typically located on the western side of the temple complex. These shrines are often identified as *KizhKāvu* (literally translated as a *Kāvu* situated at a lower level), where the deity is sometimes regarded as the sister of the principal deity, or as shrines dedicated to the *Kāranavanmār* (the lineage of individuals who historically served as the custodians of the temple).

The precise rationale behind these sacrifices or blood offerings—whether they were rooted in Tantric practices involving the *Pañcamakāra* or derived from tribal beliefs—remains unclear. However, their historical continuity suggests that these rituals had been an integral part of the local religious tradition for an extended period. This practice highlight the complex interplay between indigenous traditions and external influences, highlighting the adaptive nature of ritual practices in the region.

Shift in Bhadrakālī portrayal

As previously discussed, the worship of the Goddess was initially closely associated with fertility, particularly in agrarian contexts, where it was believed that pleasing the deity with blood offerings would ensure bountiful harvests (Maheen, 2020). However, some

scholars argue that this perception shifted over time, with the Goddess's role transitioning from fertility to warfare (ibid.). Notably, references from the Sangam literature indicate that certain Goddesses were simultaneously associated with both war and land, embodying dual and ambivalent powers (Prabhu, 2014). These multifaceted attributes of the Goddess are often vividly expressed through ritual art forms such as *Theyyam*, which are performed predominantly by marginalized communities (Caldwell, 2003).

Theyyam, a ritual art form with origins in tribal traditions (Prasad, 2017), serves as a medium to enact and celebrate the complex, often contradictory, aspects of the divine feminine. Specific communities are entrusted with the performance of *Theyyam*, underlining the deep-rooted socio-religious dynamics that have shaped its practice and preservation over centuries. This ritual art form not only reflects the syncretic nature of Goddess worship but also highlights the enduring influence of tribal traditions on the cultural and religious fabric of the region.

Saktism as a cult and the practices associated which were part of mainstream spiritual practices started to be portrayed in a negative light by the colonial writers. Western scholars faced issues in interpreting Kālī because they relied on Indological studies of the 19th century, which were influenced by Christian theology, colonial ideologies and oriental biases which often always tried to establish the superiority of European culture. They portrayed her as a fearsome, chaotic deity. This reinforced the colonial narratives of Indian religions as uncivilized and that it needs to reform. They exaggerated reports of human sacrifice and the association of the Goddess with tribal groups further marginalized her away from the mainstream practices which further justifies the missionary efforts and colonial interventions. This misinterpretation finds its roots in the colonial objectives to assert European cultural superiority as mentioned earlier, and to invalidate indigenous religious traditions, ultimately distorting the perception of Kālī in academic and popular discourse. (Caldwell, 2003)

Worship was often done in order to legitimize and eliticize her image in the face of the Christian and Indian communities (Pasty-Abdul Wahid, 2020). This negative outlook of the deity by the western scholars might have influenced perceptions of the deity within

India itself. When the negative connotations might have been specifically emphasized repeatedly, they could have led to change in cultural attitudes, facilitating the acceptance of alternative religious ideologies, including those introduced through missionary efforts. The discontinuation of blood offerings, in particular, symbolizes a redefined and sanitized image of the Goddess, aligning her with a more socially acceptable and orthodox framework. This shift, as discussed earlier, is part of the religious and social reform which is due to the processes of purification and Sanskritization. This paved the way for reducing her ugra bhava too and the rituals associated with temples, further detailed in the next section.

Shift after colonization

The period after colonization, further narrowed the already regulated rituals with the advent of laws. There were acts such as the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, which also included animals and birds not to be used for religious purposes. “The High Court has prohibited the sacrifice of any animal or bird in any place of religious worship, adoration or precincts or any congregation or procession connected with religious worship.” (Sharma & Mitra, 2020). Subsequently, the Kerala Animals and Bird Sacrifices Prohibition Act, 1968, was enacted, which specifically prohibited the animal and bird sacrifices for any religious purposes in the temple precincts.(Ramavarman, 2022). This law further constricted the diversity in the rituals, which were already eroded due to standardization. Here, the play of laws can be noticed, which came about as a post-colonial impact. Therefore, it can be understood that westernization and the moral doctrines related to rituals obtained as a result of that went hand in hand both influencing each other. (Pereira & Komath, 2024).

As a response to these legal restrictions, rituals were adapted in a more socially acceptable form and substitutions of different rituals came about. In light of that, there is a different outlook on Bhadrakālī being a bloodthirsty queen, that it is not Goddess Bhadrakālī who is drinking the blood, but often the Bhūtas who accompany her in battle.(Pasty-Abdul Wahid, 2020). However, it cannot be precisely said if this also might

be part of the purification and mainstreaming process. Hence, an example of the ritual art form Muḍiyettu, the blood which is there on the sword is wiped on the tongues of the Bhūtas. Here the substitutes of blood sacrifice are often Guruthi, (lime mixed with turmeric gives a red that resembles the colour of blood, which is offered to Bhadrakālī). cutting a pumpkin or swinging a chicken around the oil lamp, thrice and then releasing it in the air. (ibid.) Another example is of Theyyam, where blood sacrifices are replaced by offerings of milk and oil, in the rites performed with toddy, this is replaced by tender coconut water: the substance of the rites is transformed into Vedic practices. The content of the mythical story of local deities/teyyams is replaced by Puranic characters. (Pereira & Komath, 2024) In the Tantric text, the Śeṣasamuccaya, there is a mention of meat, however at a later commentary, it said that, it should be a substitute, and a later Malayalam commentary, it is specifically said to be with steamed rice cakes (Freeman, 2003)

During the interviews conducted in various Bhadrakālī temples in Thrissur, they had said that there was cock sacrifice before the rule was passed. However, due to the rule it stands discontinued. Among the interviews which were conducted, four temples had a similar outlook on this that, till before the rule, there were sacrifices happening in them. This confirms that even though there were a lot of changes before colonization itself, almost the complete stop of these practices were brought about by colonization However, there are some news that in some temples, sacrifices still happen, and there have been cases as late as 2022, where in Kodungallur temple, two cocks were sacrificed by the Valichapadu. (Ramavarman, 2022)

Government Standardisation of the Temples:

Post-independence, an increasing number of temples in India, particularly in Kerala, have come under governmental oversight, with the Devaswom Board assuming responsibility for managing their income and expenditure. This shift has led to the integration of many *deshams* (localities) and family-owned temples into the centralized administrative framework of the Devaswom. However, a significant consequence of this standardization has been the erosion of the unique *itihāsa* (historical narratives) and ritual practices associated with specific deities. For instance, when priests were questioned about the

name and *chaitanya* (divine consciousness or essence) of the Goddess, many were unable to provide precise details, referring to her generically as *Bhadrakālī* or, in some cases, simply as *Bhagavatī*.

Furthermore, the *mūla-mantra* (root mantra), which traditionally varies according to the specific form and attributes of the deity, is increasingly being homogenized. This shift has implications for the *chaitanya* of the Goddess, which has undergone a transformation from the time of the temple's initial consecration to its present state. Such changes reflect the broader impact of institutionalization on the preservation of localized religious traditions and the spiritual identity of deities.

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Conclusion

The evolution of Bhadrakālī worship in Kerala portrays a complex interplay of indigenous traditions, colonial narratives, elite patronage, and post-colonial interventions. Historically, Bhadrakālī worship was characterized by its diversity, with various communities and cultures practicing distinct rituals, particularly in *Kāvus* (sacred groves). Over time, these practices transitioned into more formalized *Kshetrams* (temples), marking the beginning of a process of standardization. This shift was further accelerated during the colonial period, as colonial portrayals and standardisation of rituals began to reshape the perception and practices associated with the Goddess.

Post-independence, the process of standardization intensified, driven by legal restrictions and orientalist misrepresentations, which marginalized certain ritual expressions, particularly blood offerings and other practices emblematic of her *ugra bhāva* (fierce aspect). The integration of temples under governmental bodies, such as the Devaswom Board, led to the homogenization of rituals, including the *mūla-mantra* (root mantra) and the loss of localized *itihāsa* (historical narratives) associated with specific deities. This institutionalization redefined Bhadrakālī’s image, aligning her with more socially acceptable and orthodox frameworks.

As a result, the *chaitanya* (divine consciousness) of the Goddess has undergone significant transformation, reflecting the broader impact of colonial and post-colonial interventions on indigenous traditions. While this shift has facilitated the integration of Bhadrakālī worship into mainstream religious paradigms, it has also led to the erosion of the rich, diverse practices that once defined her worship, showing the tension between preservation and transformation in the context of Kerala's religious landscape.

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