



Mother of Compassion, Mother of Wrath: Reflections of the Hindu Goddess in Mirrored *Māhātmyas*

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Abstract This article examines the goddess we find in the *Devī Māhātmya* (the debut of the Hindu great goddess within the Brāhmaṇic fold around fifth century CE) and that of the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* (a regional Kerala Purāṇa composed some thousand years later) to show that both texts present us with a vision of the Hindu goddess which transcends the breast-tooth binary characteristic of Western scholarship. Our analysis—resulting from a careful synchronic reading of the text of the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*—demonstrates the extent to which the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*, like its pan-Hindu forerunner the *Devī Māhātmya*, integrates the episodic wrathful aspect of the goddess within an ultimately compassionate stance. Moreover, we draw on fieldwork on the worship of Bhadrakālī in Kerala to demonstrate that this ethos well transcends the realm of text to inhabit the heart of the Devī's devotees.

Keywords Purāṇa · regional Purāṇa · Kerala · *māhātmya* · *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* · *Devī Māhātmya* · goddess · Kālī · Indian Goddess traditions

Introduction

In Kerala, when Goddess Bhadrakālī is welcomed into the realm of mortals, she is met in grand style: sounding drums and deafening firecrackers, elaborate drawings in colored powders, blazing fires and innumerable oil lamps, as well as intricately crafted ritual garments. All these elements mark the rich, textured ritual world

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crafted to receive the goddess. Several unique possession rituals are devoted to Goddess Bhadrakālī in the South Indian state. One among them is Muṭiyēttū, a ritual-theater enacting the victory of goddess over *asura* king Dārika.¹

During a Muṭiyēttū performance, the goddess, who has entered the body of a ritual actor, evokes a specific atmosphere among the devoted crowd. Her impressive headdress (*muṭi*) looms over the people, while they watch her black eyes and her pockmarked face taking measure of the temple grounds. Her sharp, sickle-shaped sword and fangs glitter piercingly in the light of the accompanying torches. And yet, her presence does not feel threatening. She is *pōrkattiḷamma* after all, or “mother of the battlefield,” as she is called in Keralite traditions (Achyuta Menon 1943, 1: 74). The epithet aptly signals her embodied integration of two seemingly opposed aspects of her being: compassion and wrath.

She brings together two facets that have long been upheld in Hindu Goddess scholarship as opposed poles: that of benign mother and of fierce warrior. These so-called “tooth” and “breast” goddess categorizations constitute a paradigm that has influenced the study of Hindu goddesses to a great extent. Yet, when looking at the ritual representations of Bhadrakālī in living, Keralite traditions, we see both glittering fangs and pronounced red bosom equally partaking in the construction of the goddess. Instead, their simultaneous presence is emphasized and experienced as wholly unambiguous by the community of devotees (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2020).

This study first advances and enriches the existent body of scholarly problematizations of the entrenched dichotomy between breast and tooth goddesses. It does so through a close synchronic reading of two Purāṇic Sanskrit texts: the regional Kerala Purāṇa called *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* and the more authoritative pan-Hindu *Devī Māhātmya*.² The Kerala Purāṇa will be at the center of the web we spin, from which we will branch out to the pan-Hindu *māhātmya* and to the lived religious experience in Kerala. Second, this study emphasizes the way in which the depiction of the goddess is mirrored in the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* and the *Devī Māhātmya*, both on the level of theme and structure. As such, it contributes to our understanding of the internal mechanics of the Purāṇic genre, especially the relationship between regional and transregional Purāṇas. Lastly, this study branches out further from these textual worlds into real-world lived religion. The regional *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* is positioned par excellence as a mediator between the textual, pan-Hindu traditions and the living, regional traditions to which it belongs. As will be evidenced by our examples taken from the realm of lived religion that surrounds the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*, this study demonstrates the pervasiveness of an integrated, nondualistic vision of the Hindu goddess.

¹ Throughout the article, different transliterations of “Kali” can be found. When used as the name of a goddess mentioned in pan-Indian Sanskrit texts, the name shall be noted as “Kālī.” When used as the name of a goddess in the Malayalam-speaking region, the name shall be noted as “Kālī” as per local custom. When used as the name of the regional goddess but in Sanskrit text, the name shall be noted as “Kālī”; hence, *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*.

² The authors of this article—Noor van Brussel and Raj Balkaran—collectively leverage their respective expertise on the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* and the *Devī Māhātmya* to bring these texts into fruitful conversation. This work is very much a product of mutual interest, insight, and effort on their behalf, in equal measure.

Categorizing the Goddess

The Hindu Goddess tradition has been an object of intrigue from the inception of Indological scholarship. The most prominent aspect of this scholarly allure is a polarization between the goddess' penchant for both tender compassion and violent wrath. Pioneered by Reverend Henry Whitehead, a protestant missionary posted in South India in the early twentieth century (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2016: 345), scholars of the Hindu Goddess traditions have focused on a dichotomy between the domestic, benevolent, married goddesses and the dangerous, malevolent unmarried variety (Babb 1975; Brubaker 1978; Wadley 1980). This dichotomy was crystalized by A. K. Ramanujan in whose assessment "consort Goddesses are the benevolent Breast Mothers; Kālī and her various allomorphs are the Tooth Mothers" (1986: 56). The following table, "Two Types of Indian Goddesses," reproduced from Ramanujan (1986: 58), summarizes the contrasts:

| Breast Mothers (Consort Goddesses) | Tooth Mothers (Virgin Goddesses, Amman) |
|---|---|
| Married; subordinate to the male consort. | Basically independent; if married, in-subordinate or fatal to consort; male could be consort, brother, servant or guardian. |
| Related to auspicious, life-cycle rituals: weddings, births, pregnancies; and good fortune. | Crisis-deities, invoked when life-cycles are disrupted; seen as inflicting as well as removing epidemics, famine, etc.; leaving one alone is part of their grace. |
| Household deities; temples within village. | Temples often outside village boundaries; goddess brought into village only on special occasions. |
| Well-sculpted faces and images. | Rough-hewn, often faceless images; often objects other than icons, like pots. |
| Not born of the earth; pure, chaste, with claims to universality. | Of the earth, earthy, often literally. Seen often as lustful, angry, coquettish. Associated, most often, only with a village after which she is named. |
| Benevolent, unless offended. Lakṣmī intercedes for mortals with the great god in Vaiṣṇava bhakti; Pārvatī, in folk-tales. | Ambivalent; dread an intimate part of the devotion. Possession a part of the ritual. |
| Vegetarian. | Blood sacrifices (or substitutes) demanded, offered. |
| Brahmin or Brahminized priests. | Mostly non-Brahmin, often Untouchable officiants. |

This bifurcation was then adopted and popularized by Wendy Doniger who famously asserts that “Indian goddesses can be divided into two distinct categories.”

The first group are goddesses of the tooth (or of the genitals—the two concepts being linked in the motif of the *vagina dentata*); they are worshiped in times of crisis, such as epidemics, and are ambivalent, dangerous and erotic figures. The second group are the goddesses of the breast, endemic and auspicious, bountiful and fertile, linked to the life-cycle (Doniger O’Flaherty 1980: 90–91).

This bifurcated scholarly stance knew its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. Most probably thanks to the incisive, unambivalent nature of its categorization, it gained much ground in academic research and has continued to exert influence. Yet the breast-tooth typology ultimately obscures—rather than focuses—Hindu visions of the feminine divine in whom both aspects are artfully intertwined.

In due course, this typology was nuanced and critiqued. For example, in her recent contribution to the volume of the *Oxford History of Hinduism* dedicated to the goddess (Bose 2018), Tracy Pitchman recapitulates the challenges to the breast-tooth dichotomy advanced by C. Mackenzie Brown (1990: 122–25) and Kathleen M. Erndl (1993)—who notes that Śērānvālī of Northwest India “straddles the fence on almost every characteristic” (156) of the breast-tooth binary—before reasserting her own corrective (Pitchman 1994: 204–5) that “an order-disorder dynamic might be more fundamental than a marriage control scheme: goddesses who promote cosmic and social order, *dharmā*, even when they must be destructive to do so, tend to be portrayed in a positive light” (2018: 25). Promoting such order on the cosmic level—analogue to and supportive of the royal duty to do so on the earthly level on behalf of Hindu kings—is precisely the purpose of the goddess’ manifestation in the *Devī Māhātmya*, the discharge of the very duty which requires her colossal wrath (Balkaran 2019a).

Part I: Textual Glimpses into the Hindu Goddess

The Goddess of the *Devī Māhātmya*

Although Doniger dubs the goddess of the *Devī Māhātmya* as the “paradigmatic tooth goddess in India” (2009: 391), upon closer examination in relation to Ramanujan’s typology, one notes that

she is *not* worshipped away from the domestic sphere, she is *not* portrayed as a faceless icon, *nor* is she of the earth, *nor* is she primarily invoked by non-*brāhmaṇa* officiants. Furthermore, Durgā’s anger is episodic, while her chastity, on the other hand, is a permanent state. Conversely, with respect to his criteria of “consort goddesses,” while the Goddess is most certainly unmarried, she, in many ways, supports his characterization of breast mothers. Not only does she possess a well-sculpted face, and is worshipped in the domestic sphere by *brāhmaṇa* priests, but she, like breast mothers, is not born of the earth, is chaste, and possesses claims to universality (Balkaran 2019a: 125–26; emphasis in the original).

The vision of the feminine divine in the *Devī Māhātmya* transcends the breast-tooth binary by folding these two poles into the totality of the Hindu goddess.

Let us examine, for example, the artful pair of verses (both rhetorical questions), framing the center of the “Śakrādi Stuti” (*Devī Māhātmya* 4.11–12),³ whereby Indra and the entourage of gods praise the goddess for defeating the demon Maḥiṣa:

4.11 Slightly smiling, your face is pleasing
As the splendor of the finest gold,
As spotless as the full moon’s orb.
How wondrous that Maḥiṣa suddenly struck it,
His anger aroused at first sight!

4.12 More wondrous, still, Devī, is that Maḥiṣa,
Beholding your wrathful face—
With knitted brow, red in hue like the rising moon—
Did not give up his life at once!
For who can live, having beheld the enraged face of Death?

If one were to focus on only the second verse in isolation, one sees only a dark and wrathful face, indeed the “enraged face of Death.” However, when one contextualizes the verse, one realizes it is an inextricable part of a greater whole. In the words of Brown, the *Devī Māhātmya*’s hymns

abound and delight in the paradoxical juxtaposition of her auspicious/gentle (*saumyā*) nature with her terrible/horrific (*ghorā, raudrī*) aspect. The hymns, however much they are meant to “pacify” the Goddess, are also joyous celebrations of Devī’s ultimacy, transcending yet encompassing all polarities including that of benign and horrific (1990: 123).

It is indeed in the hymns where the *māhātmya* of the Devī is most apparent and wherein she is indeed a being in whom coincide “heartfelt compassion and resolve in battle” (*Devī Māhātmya* 4.21). The Devī’s wrath is celebrated as wholesome throughout the *Devī Māhātmya* because it is subsumed by her motherly compassion: it is only the demons who incur her wrath, never the gods. Moreover, that wrath is ultimately construed as a blessing to the demons, serving as their route to heaven:

4.17 The world rejoices when its enemies are slain.
Though their misdeeds merit them a lengthy stay in hell,
You are sure to slay your enemies, Devī, with this sentiment in mind:
“Meeting death in battle, may you go straight to heaven.”

4.18 Why does your mere glance
Not at once reduce the *asuras* to ashes?
You hurl your weapons towards them thinking:
“May even my enemies attain heavenly realms, purified by my arms.”
So gracious is your intent, even towards adversaries.

³ All translations of the *Devī Māhātmya* in the article are by Raj Balkaran.

The *Devī Māhātmya* extols a goddess wherein devastating martial prowess coincides with compassionate care. While wrathful violence is quintessential to the Devī's capacity to safeguard the universe against the most virulent of demons, we must note that it is her heartfelt concern for worldly welfare that ironically occasions such wrath. Our goddess of the *Devī Māhātmya* is therefore described as "ever tender-minded" (4.16b). Why else would the Devī be depicted as ever composed, youthful, and amiable? The *Devī Māhātmya* simply does not paint the picture of a goddess who relishes bloodshed for its own sake. What's often lost in the emphasis on wrath is the goddess' notable predilection for empathy which energizes that wrath: her wrath is directed towards demonic forces who threaten those who she holds dear. While Western scholarship tends to focus on the former, Hindu tradition views the former as an aspect of the latter. How else could the Hindu goddess be most pervasively addressed as mother? While the goddess' wrathful and compassionate aspects often appear at odds with each other through the lens of Western scholarship, this is most certainly not the case among those who worship the Hindu goddess.

Marianne Pasty-Abdul Wahid's work (discussed in detail below) allows us to gain some insight into that worshiper's viewpoint. The focus of her research is on the contemporary worship of Goddess Bhadrakālī in Kerala, within the specific context of Muṭiyēttū performances in central Kerala.⁴ Her extended interviews exhibit the way the goddess is perceived by active worshipers with very different perspectives on, and relationships with, her. To her question about how the worshiper personally envisions the goddess, she obtained some of the following answers:

An elderly Brahmin: I see her with all these *raudra* costumes [the costume she wears in *muṭiyēttu*] but with a loving mind. She is frightening with her fangs (*damṣṭram*) and all, but I feel that she has a kind mind. Her eyes are also kind towards me. This *raudra* costume does not make me afraid.

A *muṭiyēttukar*: She is a huge sized (*anantamaya*) woman, with anger (*kōpam*) and with a big headgear (*valiya muṭi*) [part of her costume in *muṭiyēttu*]. She is quiet and her face is beautiful/charming (*saundarya*) and *raudra* at the same time. She is an angered woman. (...) Her hair is very black, her face shows a lot of power (*tējasu*). She doesn't smile, she has her tongue outside and a lot of anger (*kōpam*).

A middle-aged temple officiant: In my mind she is Mother Bhadrakālī (*'bhadrakālīyamma'*). When I pray she looks like a grandmother (*ammacci*). In my mind I like to see her that way. I imagine myself as a little boy and Kālī as my grandmother, but a *raudra* grandmother. Her hair is very black, she

⁴ We would like to emphasize that the work of Pasty-Abdul Wahid is strictly confined to the ritual setting of Muṭiyēttū in Kerala. There are many different, localized forms of Kālī which we did not include here, from different ritual, geographic, or philosophical backgrounds. The Kerala context is, for example, defined by a regionally tied form of right-hand Tantrism, as well as various mythological peculiarities, such as her role as a daughter to Śiva. This means that the obtained results do not necessarily apply to other settings and will be used tentatively.

wears a red sari and has fangs (*daṁṣṭram*). She has 4 hands like *kīḷkāvū' amma* (Bhadrakālī of the temple Chottanikkara), she has a gentle/mild (*śāntam*) face (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2020: 16–17).

Just as is the case with the ritual representations stated above, the simultaneous presence of the compassionate and angry *bhāvas* of the goddess are emphasized by the devotees. The combination of breast and tooth resurfaces, so to speak. Explicitly featured in two of the descriptions here are the fangs, or *daṁṣṭram*, in each instance being connected to the *raudra* state of the goddess. Yet in every instance, the epithet of mother too is explicitly engaged. As we demonstrate in the next section, this is also the case in the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*.

The Goddess of the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*

While the *Devī Māhātmya* succeeds in bringing a once regional Goddess tradition into the pan-Hindu Brāhmanical fold, the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* works in the opposite direction: it leverages the established Brāhmanical vision of the Hindu goddess (crystallized in the *Devī Māhātmya*) to exalt and memorialize a local Kerala goddess. The *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* is a regional Purāṇa,⁵ most probably dating to the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, that can be found in a region that roughly corresponds to the contemporary state of Kerala. It is written in Sanskrit as well as in Malayalam and renders the Dārikavadham myth, which is the basis for various ritual-performative traditions in the region, from a Purāṇic point of view. This Purāṇic self-definition finds explicit expression insofar as the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* presents itself as part of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, narrated by sage Mārkaṇḍeya, as does the *Devī Māhātmya* (Brussel 2021). Yet, the parallels between these texts go well beyond this.

The *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* presents us with the exploits of the supreme Bhadrakālī wherein regional and pan-Hindu mythic motifs are dovetailed. These pan-Hindu motifs serve to bridge “little” and “big” traditions, rendering the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*—a text featuring a local Kerala narrative—conversant with the larger Purāṇic fold. In doing so, the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* and the *Devī Māhātmya* become mirroring *māhātmyas*. They narrate with similar rhythm and theme, they move through the same pulse of compassion and wrath, nestled in a parallel structure. In what follows, we shed light on the way both texts artfully intertwine the goddess’ penchant for both compassion and wrath. The *Devī Māhātmya* systematically interweaves these two faces of the goddess in all of its hymns—for example, in the “Śakrādi Stuti” quoted above (Balkaran 2019b)—and so does the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*. This is most apparent in the sixth chapter of the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*. Deeply syncretic in nature, it is fully devoted to praise the goddess in her full, multivalent form. The hymn engages extensively with the

⁵ The name “*Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*” will be used here for a group of manuscripts written in Sanskrit and Malayalam which narrate the regional Dārikavadham myth in a Purāṇic setting. As far as we can tell, these versions are all very similar, pointing to a possible singular originating text. All translations of the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* in the article are by Noor van Brussel. For more information about the historical setting and regional development of this text, we refer you to Brussel 2016 and 2021.

richness of Śākta visual and narrative imagery, resonating with the *Devī Māhātmya* in innumerable ways, but especially mirroring its structural oscillation between *raudra* and *śānta bhāvas*.

In the first segment of the hymn (*Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* 6.5–37), the sages praise Bhadrakālī as bringer of happiness (6.7), supreme spirit (6.8), the adored mother of the world (6.12), of full breasts (6.18), shining like moon light (6.20), beautiful—indeed “a body pleasing completely from head to toe, the goddess who takes away the pain of the ones afflicted” (6.30). The hymn then takes an overt turn towards paying homage to the Devī’s wrathful face by declaring “this salutation is for Caṇḍikā” (6.38), reminiscent of Rudra (6.39), shaking the ground (6.40), impelled to “kill without delay the demon Dārūka, this major thorn to those who dwell in the three worlds” (6.41). The gods lament their displaced state and lost share of the sacrifice, asking the Devī “what should we do?” (6.42). They implore her to be gracious to them (6.43) and conquer their enemies, equating her with that goddess (of the *Devī Māhātmya*) who conquers Caṇḍa, Muṇḍa, Mahiṣa, Śumbha, and Niśumbha (6.45–46). The hymn then momentarily returns to her beneficent face as the creator of the universe—equating her with Lakṣmī (6.48) and Satī (6.52)—before issuing an eighteen-verse appeal (6.56–73) for her to kill the nefarious Dārūka, tormenting them and the sages at length. The hymns conclude with the celebrated emergence of the wrathful face of the Devī: “With the uproar of loud sounds being the cracking of the bow strings of the gigantic bows and with (the sounds of) the *duṇḍubhi* and *bherī* drums, Caṇḍikā appeared with an army that shook the worlds” (6.73).

Another striking detail is found at the end of each verse of praise. Here the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* affirms her as the central goddess by repeating the refrain “Bhadrakālī namo’stu te.” This is reminiscent of the “Nārāyaṇi namo’stu te” refrain found in hymn comprising *Devī Māhātmya*, chapter eleven “Nārāyaṇī Stuti.” The emphatic and repetitive affirmation of the goddess’ singular name endorses the vision of unity. Wrath and compassion are inseparable aspects of the multivalent goddess, aspects of an integrated whole.

Wrath and Compassion

Wrath is inextricable from Bhadrakālī’s emergence in the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*: it powers her very *raison d’être* in the narrative, that is, the wrathful destruction of her demonic foe. Chapter four of the text ends by telling us that “After listening to the best of *munis*, the three-eyed supreme Śiva rose from his seat within his hands his trident, a sword, a deer, and an axe, reddened by the anger that arose in him” (*Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* 4.57). This sets the scene for chapter five—the central chapter of the text both thematically and formally since it is the midpoint between chapters one and nine—wherein the goddess is created. The *Devī Māhātmya*, too, comprises a ring composition highlighting its central episode where the goddess conquers Mahīśāsura to restore the throne of heaven (Balkaran 2019a). The chapter begins with Śiva donning his destroyer form. With his body as tall as Mount Kailāśa, and laughing maniacally, his third eye becomes wildly ablaze, out of which Bhadrakālī emerges in all her wrathful glory. Her body is the hue of a storm cloud,

with thousands of faces, thousands of limbs, and a hundred thousand eyes. Her first act is to deafen the universe with her maniacal cackle. The mountains shake as she descends in wild terror, agitating the oceans and frightening all creatures with her terrible sound and cruelly gleaming eyes (*Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* 5.3–6). What happens next is telling: Pārvatī, trembling with fear, proceeds to pacify the goddess. Moreover, the mechanism whereby the goddess is pacified is striking: she is domesticated as the daughter of Śiva and Pārvatī.

The *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* exhibits an anxiety over violent wrath and goes out of its way to domesticate and pacify that wrath through familial relations and the experience of compassion. Pārvatī addresses Bhadrakālī as her daughter and as the daughter of Śiva, imploring her to “give up that form of yours that terrifies the world,” adding “you will become the foremost among the mothers—the seventh mother!” (*Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* 5.8). What immediately follows is most remarkable: Bhadrakālī’s eye brim with tears of compassion, and she immediately gives up her terrible form and bows in reverence before her mother, Pārvatī. The wrathful creation of Bhadrakālī is narrated in tandem with the immediate pacification of that wrath. Her pleasant form is described as having one face, three eyes, sixteen arms. She is bedecked with golden earrings, jewels on her head, a diadem, bracelets, arm rings, and a gemmed girdle. She yet possesses sixteen hands filled with weapons. Śiva summons her to sit in his lap. His first act is to proclaim that as his daughter, she will be known as “Kaṇṭhekālī” because of his own black throat and as “Bhairavī” because of her emergence from his own dark, ferocious wrath (5.10–13).

Bhadrakālī’s wrath is construed as resulting from a direct order from Śiva. Apparently cognizant that her creation is for the sake of accomplishing some important task, Bhadrakālī’s first words to Śiva inquire after her own “marching orders” as it were. His orders to her are as follows: “Slay this great demon king called Dārika! He induces fear in the three worlds and possesses the power of twelve thousand elephants. He is a sorcerer and a foe of the whole universe, terrorizing it with all sorts of weaponry. Destroy him completely, and then present yourself to me again” (*Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* 5.15). She then says “Father, please, may your power also be mine, just like my body resembles yours. Give me weapons, a vehicle, an army, the whole lot, so that I can kill our mortal enemy” (5.16). Śiva then grants her weapons, an army of millions, and a mount, Vetālī. This familial dynamic between Śiva and Bhadrakālī runs throughout the text. For example, she laments as follows in chapter eight, when Dārika successfully evades her:

Where has that fool gone? Where is he hiding? All my efforts have been in vain if I do not kill this enemy of the gods. I follow the orders of my father Śiva. What will I say when I return full of shame for not being able to kill Dārika? I was created in vain if I do not dig up this villain who is devoted to tormenting gods, seers, and Brāhmaṇas with his wicked face. What will I do? What unbecoming excuse will I give my father? (8.4–7).

The *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* thereby domesticates Bhadrakālī’s wrathful purpose by casting it as a social duty to do her father’s bidding.

As evidenced in her very first encounter with her mother Pārvatī, Bhadrakālī is capable of great compassion, and this runs well beyond her familial interactions alone.

She even experiences compassion towards Dārīka himself when the demon begs for his life. The text informs us that “Beholding him as such, the goddess, whose heart and mind were on fire, was nevertheless overcome with compassion and she instantly let go of her anger” (*Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* 8.19). What happens next is astonishing: the host of celestial beings—gods, seers, *gandharvas*, *siddhas*, *vidyādhars*—rebuke Bhadrakālī for her compassion. They rhetorically ask how could such a vile one as Dārīka be worthy of compassion (8.20–21), proceeding to cite the villain’s many sins, including his ruin of the three worlds, desecration of Brāhmanical rites, assault on the gods, and ridicule of Śiva (8.22–24). Their wrathful outrage is understandable and fully justified given Dārīka is the “enemy of *dharma*” and “personification of all grave sins” (8.23). Like the Kṣatriya, the goddess’ *dharma* is to protect the imperiled. Therefore, the gods proclaim: “He has driven us, whose sole refuge is you, from our homes after invading heaven and earth, obtaining complete sovereignty. He chased away the mothers, and how many times did he not attack you with his arrows?” (8.24). Protection against evildoers is the prime *dharma* of the goddess and the very purpose of her creation. The gods make this explicit connection, continuing:

Lord Śambhu created you in the pure fire of his own forehead with the aim of subjugating Dārīka, thinking “She, of loosely contained anger, may be able to curb this most evil and sinful one with her mind,” therefore our Lord Maheśvara could be angry (if you do not do so). This subjugation of Dārīka is a principal crisis for the gods, yet you have remained inactive so far and for what is yet to come. Oh, you have been led to a state of infamy by the great demoness called Compassion, who has sadly entered your heart. Oh, in such an instance what do we say? (8.25–27).

Literally demonizing compassion to legitimize violent wrath as necessary in the face of corrosive evil, the gods urge Bhadrakālī towards necessary, fully justified bloodshed. Their attempts prove successful in spurring Bhadrakālī into violent action:

After hearing their reprimand, she despised her own heart, that (now) had expanded again with extreme anger, even though it had been a little too gentle before. The terrifying one, born from Kālarudra, with [raging inside her] the flames of the fire of anger ignited a thousand-fold times, looked as if she was longing to burn not only Dārīka but the three worlds as well in the fire of her third eye. She raised her body, which was dreadful with its white fangs and claws, and then that daughter of Śambhu expanded to her true form: her round face terrifying because of her prominent eyebrows and sparks being emitted from her third eye, powerfully deafening the world with her loud and cruel laughter. After flinging the wicked *asura* Dārīka onto the earth, she, daughter of Śiva, cast the trident into his chest. Breaking it open like a wall of rocks, she caught the fresh, foaming blood that came oozing out of it in her skull-cup and drank it with much delight. She also tore out his heart like a lotus, as if she were the wife of a hunter pulling out a root. She roasted it in the fire of her third eye and consumed it at once. Around her neck, arms, wrists, and loins she tied a garland of entrails, deep-red like *bandhūka*-flowers, with drops of blood trickling down. Then she cut off his head with her sword, seized the

enormous thing and rose up furiously, roaring over and over like a lion. After seeing her, utterly terrible and casting her looks in all directions, appearing as if she were the formidable embodiment of anger, those gathered there, the seers, protectress Kūlī, Vetāla, and the *bhūtas*, all frightened living creatures combined, fled far away (*Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* 8.28–37).

The maniacal fury with which Bhadrakālī crushes Dārika is thereby ultimately rendered a necessary act of protection and compassion.

Just as the text needs to get Bhadrakālī worked up to perform her wrathful duty, it needs to pacify her once that duty is done. And it does so by eliciting her innate compassion—a compassion going well beyond pity for a desperate demon begging for his life. As you may recall, when Śiva charged Bhadrakālī with her task, he asked her to return to his presence upon its completion. So, upon her frenzied slaughter of Dārika, she heads for Śiva’s abode. Through his yogic perception, Śiva comes to know that Bhadrakālī had not yet let go of her anger. So great is her anger, Śiva himself is afraid he might be devoured. So he devises a telling tactic: he urges Gaṇeśa and Nandin to take the form of infants and lie in front of the gates. Bhadrakālī’s inflamed wrath is immediately pacified upon encountering the two helpless infants, whom she picks up and caresses, filled with tenderness. She gushes over them and nurses them, whereby half her anger dissipates (*Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* 8.55). Once she enters the gates, she is fully appeased by the praise of the gods:

Oh goddess, be appeased! One who put an end to the offspring of Danu, be appeased!

Oh Kālī, be appeased! One with the glorious body, be appeased!

Oh auspicious one, be appeased!

Oh one who is honored in the house, be appeased!

Oh illusory one, be appeased!

Oh most glorious one, be appeased!

The villain, that wretched *daitya* Dārika is finally slain. The one who tormented all living beings, snakes, men, and gods is gone. There is no longer an obstacle for the practice of *dharma*. Your anger is now pointless, oh one who has but one master!

Oh honorable Bhadrakālī, renounce your anger!

Oh wise one, why such strain now that the enemy has been vanquished? (9.1–2).

Now that her mission has been accomplished, her wrath serves no purpose. She is pacified in the text and presumably remains in that state to be petitioned by devotees, as their compassionate mother. Hence, Mārkaṇḍeya introduces her in benign form at the very outset of the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*:

O Brāhmaṇa, listen to me!

I will now tell you of the origin of Bhadrakālī
and her extraordinary deeds.

The great goddess Bhadrakālī was the chaste daughter of Śiva.

O Śivasarman glorious best of the twice born,

listen to these excellent, noble, and great deeds

the noble and eternal goddess performed for the worlds (1.1–3).

It is motherhood which is the intrinsic state of the goddess, and her role as surrogate mother and daughter of Pārvaṭī whereby her compassion flows forth. The *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* opens with Bhadrakālī emerging as the daughter of Rudra and closes with her soothing infant deities. Hence, it encodes an oscillation between wrathful and tranquil moods: *raudra* and *śānta bhāvas*. She is goddess of both tooth and breast, yet it is the latter mode which prevails. She is pacified by her parents, and her parenting of her parents' children. That motherhood is the ultimate face of Bhadrakālī in the hearts of her devotees is readily corroborated once again in the ethnographic findings of Pasty-Abdul Wahid.

Like us, Pasty-Abdul Wahid asserts that Bhadrakālī originates and develops within a context of wrath. Wrath is inextricably linked to her, an innate part of her, even her *raison d'être*: the wrath of the goddess' father leads to her conception, and her own wrath leads to the defeat of the *asura* king and, as such, to the restoration of order in the cosmos. Wrath can, therefore, be “the impulse that leads her to perform the acts by which her divinity is manifested” (Assayag 1992: 105, cited in Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2020: 20). As in the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*, it is by killing the *asura* that she earns her right to devotion, as granted by her father.

The generation of outrage is thus key to the whole narrative, yet it is the righteousness of it that imbues the goddess with power. The same motif is seen in the emergence of the goddess in the *Devī Māhātmya* from the collective outrage of the gods:

2.8 Having heard the news, the Slayer of Madhu (Viṣṇu) and Śiva, too,
Grew angry, their brows furrowed and their faces contorted in wrath.

2.9 Then from Viṣṇu's rage-filled face emerged a fiery splendor (*tejas*),
and from Brahmā's and Śiva's too,

2.10 And from the bodies of the heavenly gods, Indra and the rest,
Emerged in kind a great fiery splendor, converging in one place.

2.11 The gods beheld there a fiery mountainous mass
Rendering the firmament ablaze with flames.

2.12 That supreme splendor, born from the bodies of the gods
Unified and pervaded the triple world, a lustrous feminine form.

The text goes on to describe in glorious detail the formation of each part of the goddess' body from the energy of specific gods and their equipping her with all manner of weaponry and ornament for battle. Once she is created, she bellows menacingly, and yet this is welcome and revered by the gods and sages:

2.31 She bellowed aloud, laughing again and again,
Filling the sky with her dreadful din.

2.32 And from her boundless sound an echo arose
Shaking the oceans and quaking the earth.

2.33 As her din shook the earth and heaved entire mountains.
The gods, delighted, exclaimed “Victory!” to the lion-mount goddess.

2.34 And the sages sang her praise, their bodies in devotion bent.
Witnessing the triple world trembling, the enemies of the gods,

2.35 Readied their armies for battle, rising in action, their weapons upraised.

Moreover, at the end of the chapter, she is praised for her terrifying and gory destruction of the enemy army:

2.61 Others were cut in half by the goddess, having only a single arm, eye, and
leg remaining.

Some, though decapitated, fell and rose again

2.62 As headless bodies, still grasping their weapons, continuing to fight the
goddess,

And others danced in battle, in time with the sounding drums,

2.63 Headless bodies grasped at swords and spears.

Other great demons begged the goddess, “Stop! Stop!”

2.64 The earth became impassable with the fallen demons, chariots, elephants,
horses

Assembled there for the great battle to take place.

2.65 The torrents of bloods flowing forth from the demons and horses and
elephants

Formed great rivers, flowing amid the demon army.

2.66 Thus did Ambikā smite the great demon army,

Destroyed them as fire destroys a pile of grass and wood.

2.67 Her lion, tossing its mane and letting out a thunderous roar,

Prowled about the battlefield to finish off the half-living bodies of the enemies
of the gods.

2.68 And so did the goddess and her hosts wage war against the demon hordes.

The gods were pleased, showering down flowers from the heavens.

The theme of praiseworthy wrath is again echoed once the goddess and her forces succeed in felling the menacing Raktabīja at the end of chapter eight. It is significant that the ability of this specific demonic foe to procreate endlessly through his “blood-seeds” (*rakta-bīja*) is shared narratively with the Keralite *asura* king Dārika. He too poses a serious threat to the gods because of his endless duplication whenever a drop of his blood is shed and touches the earth. Thus, the mirroring of both texts takes on many forms:

8.59 The goddess—with spear, thunderbolt,
Arrows, swords, and lances—

8.60 Assailed the demon Raktabīja,

As his blood was by Cāmuṇḍā drunk.

Mortally wounded by that array of weapons,

The great demon Raktabīja

8.61 Fell to the earth, bereft of blood, O king!
The gods then attained immeasurable joy.

This idea is reflected in the conception of the devotees interviewed by Pasty-Abdul Wahid: they indicate that the goddess can be angry and cause misfortune, yet this only befalls people who have deserved it and is directed at showing them the right way. This resonates with David Dean Shulman's (1980: 317–46) idea about the “demon devotee” and its liberation from ignorance and evil through death at the hands of the goddess. The goddess answers evildoers with compassionate death. As such, she does not instil fear in her devotees: her wrath is only directed at those who deviate from the path, for the sake of restoring cosmic order.

Me: Are people afraid of Bhadrakālī during *muṭiyēttu*?

A *muṭiyēttukar*: No! They are not at all afraid! They run with Kālī! Only little kids are a little afraid because she looks frightening.

The wife of this *muṭiyēttukar*: *Dēvi* [generic word for goddess] fights against *asuras* and bad people, she protects us from them. She is *amma* (mother). Her anger (*kōpam*) is not for us but for these bad people. She is watching for our well-being (*sukham*), she gives us blessing (*anugraham*) and kills all *asuras* to protect us. So why should we have fear in front of her?

A young devotee: What? No one fears Bhadrakālī. Fear only arises from some type of wrong that someone has done. We have so much faith in this Bhadrakālī, so how can we be afraid of her? She has a lot of anger, but we believe in that anger and we respect it. If Bhadrakālī punishes us we will never think she does it out of badness, but we will think that the punishment is the result of our own deeds (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2020: 15–16).

These excerpts demonstrate that, while the goddess originates from wrath, it is her compassion that ultimately prevails in the religious imagination of the devotees. Her role as a mother is what primarily defines the *saṅkalpam* of the worshipers. To them, she is “*amma*” (mother), but never in an explicitly reproductive manner, only in her role as a caring, protective, and disciplining figure. She is literally called *pōrkkattiḷamma*, or the “mother of the battlefield,” in Keralite traditions (Achyuta Menon 1943, 1: 74, cited in Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2020: 18): an epithet that perfectly sums up her innate reconciliation of wrath and compassion. She is equally present as this mother of the battlefield in many of the ritual performances that constitute the living narrative tradition. Pasty-Abdul Wahid translates, for example, a piece of a *Pāna tōttam*, a ritual narrative song belonging to the Dārikavadham tradition, in which the two sides of the goddess are conflicted:

[Bhadrakālī to Nandimahākāḷan (Śiva's vehicle):] “It would not be right to kill this *asura*! One cannot kill those who are already defeated. One cannot kill those who have knowledge. One cannot kill those who have undergone penance for devotional purposes. I cannot kill those who have been wounded in battle.” Nandimahākāḷan replied: “You should not hesitate to act with such great an enemy, you must kill him with all your wrath!” (2020: 12, cited in Achyuta Menon 1943, 2: 38).

Based on this specific set of data, the contemporary ritual tradition thus seems to perfectly align with the message conveyed by the late medieval Purāṇic text from that same tradition, the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*, as well as with the fifth-century *Devī Māhātmya*. The goddess' wrathful conception is pacified through the expression of compassion and her role as a mother. Such conception is then translated into visualizations that fuse anger (*raudra*) with composed beauty (*saundarya*), something we notice in the *saṅkalpam* of these devotees, as well as in the ritual performances and in the Purāṇic texts. Instead of a one-dimensional warrior goddess, Bhadrakālī thus becomes a fully multi-dimensional persona in her own right, motivated by humane and recognizable incentives: regret, wrath, shame—and, ultimately, maternal compassion (Brussel 2021).

Part II: The Moods of the Mother in Lived Religion

Beyond merely critiquing this problematic dichotomy, the current study aims at positing a more integrated analysis of the goddess, one befitting the way in which she is imagined by devotees. For this we look at the work of Marianne Pasty-Abdul Wahid, an ethnologist working on the depiction of the goddess in Muṭiyēttū performances. She conducts research not only about the Keralite ritual performance itself, but frames it within the community of people that it is part of the performers, worshipers, temple officials and officiants, etc. As a researcher she makes space for the discursive imagination (*saṅkalpam*) of the goddess through the eyes of the devotee. From her experience with the devotee community, Pasty-Abdul Wahid proposes the use of *bhāva*, or “state/mood,” to describe the variability in the conduct and appearance of the goddess.

In her 2016 article, Pasty-Abdul Wahid describes how different temples devoted to Bhadrakālī house incarnations of the goddess that are defined by their varying *bhāvas*. Two temples situated in the southern Ernakulam district are taken as examples by her. Both places are home to Bhadrakālī, yet the goddess could not differ more in nature from place to place. The first example is a small sanctuary in the locality of Pangarapilly. The Bhadrakālī installed here is known for her utterly *raudra bhāva*. She is fierce, ferocious, angry and does not leave her shrine to interact with her devotees. The second example is the Bhadrakālī of Mattapiḷḷikāvū. Here the goddess takes on a completely different form as *bālabhadra*, serene and youthful. As *raudra* as the first example is, as *śāntam* is the second. She is calm, prefers offerings of flowers and *pāyasam* (kind of rice pudding) and enjoys benevolent interactions with her many devotees.

Moreover, in her interviews with Muṭiyēttū performers, Pasty-Abdul Wahid uncovers that the goddess is experienced differently when the troupes perform in different temple grounds. Sometimes she feels fierce, sometimes serene, yet she is consistently identified by the performers as the same goddess. She goes on to argue that such instances invite us to move away from a classification that assigns goddesses to certain contradicting essentialisms, reducing them into static, inflexible divinities. Instead, following Sax (1992, 1994), among others (Assayag 1993; Erndl 1993), she moves away from division to see unity:

Seeing the simultaneity of anger and serenity within a same entity as contradictory translates an exogenous mindset that ignores the fact that variety, malleability and multiplicity are intrinsic features of “the Hindu goddess theology—simultaneously one and several, undivided and divided” (Pasty-Abdul Wahid 2020: 4, citing Bouillier and Toffin 1993: 18).

Pasty-Abdul Wahid infers that although the fierce incarnations of the goddess are far more widespread, the presence of these nonviolent forms of Bhadrakālī demonstrates that the situation is far more complex than suggested by traditional, bifurcated classifications. Bhadrakālī does not fit the label of malevolent nor of ambivalent. After all, she is neither feared nor experienced as unreliable or unpredictable by her devotees. Instead, she is trusted. The daily relationship between goddess and devotee moves beyond the goddess’ narrative heroics and develops into a very personal connection in which compassion, trust, and motherhood go hand in hand. She is kind, righteous, protective, and disciplining if need be. Her anger and wrathful actions are seen as a display of her power, the same she uses to protect those who worship her: her devotee children. The depiction and interpretation of motherhood here is not bound to procreation. Instead, it centres around care and protection.

And thus, a vision of a *multivalent*—and ultimately benevolent—divine persona arises, comprising a fluid unity that is strongly context-dependent. Pasty-Abdul Wahid (2020)⁶ even sees this multivalent character of the goddess engrained structurally in the Dārikavadham myth performed in Keralite ritual traditions. According to her, different *bhāvas* are associated with the different mythic episodes of the Dārikavadham myth, as rendered during ritual performances for Bhadrakālī. And so, we come full circle, where ritual and text equally sustain a vision of the goddess that transcends any sense of dichotomy and instead proposes unity.

Concluding Remarks

This article started out with demonstrating how the breast-tooth goddess dichotomy ultimately loses significance in the face of an in-depth analysis of two mirroring *māhātmyas*, the *Devī Māhātmya* and the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*. Instead, corroborated by findings from the regional lived religious tradition to which the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* belongs, an integrated, nondualistic vision of the Hindu goddess emerges. As such, we chose to move beyond the binary and propose a framework based on the indigenous concept *bhāvas*, or moods, of the multivalent goddess. This concept allows for a comprehensive view on the variability in the conduct and appearance of the goddess, while supporting the integrated vision that lives within the Keralite community of devotees.

⁶ We would like to thank Marianne Pasty-Abdul Wahid for her clarifying input on the second part during the writing process. Her insight on the localized image of Goddess Bhadrakālī in a context of *Muṭiyēttū* has proven invaluable. We hope to have done justice to her work.

While the goddess originates from wrath, it is her compassion that ultimately prevails in the religious imagination of the devotees. Her role as a mother is what primarily defines the *saṅkalpam* of the worshipers. To them, she is “*amma*” (mother): never in the reproductive manner, but in her role as a caring, protective, and disciplining figure. She is literally called “*pōrkkattiḷamma*,” or the “mother of the battlefield,” in Keralite traditions: an epithet integrating compassion and wrath. So, while Western scholars have been obsessing over the goddess’ wrathful face, the goddess’ devotees delight in seeing it, knowing it is directed at their enemies, the enemies of *dharma*.

The pervasiveness of this nonduality becomes all the clearer when comparing the *Devī Māhātmya*, one of the most important Śākta texts in pan-Hindu traditions, with the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*, a regionally embedded Purāṇa celebrating goddess Bhadrakālī. Through comparison of these mirrored *māhātmyas* it becomes clear that the sixteenth-century *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* internalizes the vision of the divine feminine established in the *Devī Māhātmya* a millennium prior—a vision that integrates both “tooth” and “breast” aspects of the Hindu goddess. The structural oscillation between wrath and compassion in these texts is striking and allows us much insight into the interactions between pan-Hindu and regional Purāṇic texts.

Firstly, there is the aspect of chiasmic structure. Both texts engage with ring composition, thereby endowing meaning to the literally central emergence of the goddess. This importance of structure is strengthened by the frame story of the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*: Sage Mārkaṇḍeya, the namesake of the great Purāṇa of which the *Devī Māhātmya* is part, is also the narrator of the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya*. Each *adhyaīya* of the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* is furthermore ended with a verse stating that the *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* is an integral part of that same *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, thus positing itself on the same level as the famous *Devī Māhātmya*. These *māhātmyas* moreover mirror each other also in terms of content. Both texts feature, for example, an *asura* king who multiplies through bloodshed: Raktabīja and Dārika. Both texts also feature ornate hymns, praising profusely the *raudra* and *śānta bhāvas* of the goddess. Yet the intricate ties of these mirroring *māhātmyas* move beyond the level of the obvious.

Throughout the article, we have demonstrated the extent to which both texts exhibit an ingrained impulse of wrath and compassion. The combination of these two, however paradoxical it might seem, is presented as wholly integrated. Wrath is the originating impetus of the goddess. It is linked to her, an innate part of her, even her *raison d’être*. Her wrath leads to the defeat of ignorant demonic foes and restoration of order in the cosmos. The generation of outrage is thus key to the whole narrative, yet it is the righteousness of it that imbues the goddess with power. While wrath is key to the construction of the goddess, so too is compassion. The *Bhadrakālī Māhātmya* narrates of pacification through the feeding of her surrogate babies as well as through her role as a daughter to Śiva and Pārvatī. The same goes for the goddess of the *Devī Māhātmya*. Wrathful violence is quintessential to the Devī’s capacity to safeguard the universe against the most virulent of demons, yet it is her heartfelt concern for worldly welfare that ironically occasions such wrath. Where certain Western scholars once saw division, the texts and ritual tradition

clearly posit unity. The breast and tooth are equally present in the image of the goddess: they are both hallmarks of her fiercely beneficent motherhood.

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