



Fig.7.6 :
Kali trampling
demons,
northern wall,
Kali Temple,
early 19th century,
Chakia,
Photo-courtesy :
author

Great Goddess in Combat : Painted Interior of Raja Udit Narayan Singh's Kali Temple at Chakia

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In the town of Chakia, about 40 km away and across the Ganga from the city of Banaras, stands a simple domed temple dedicated to the goddess Kali (Fig.7.1). Located afar from the celebrated riverfront of Banaras, the Kali Temple and its attached tank seldom receive out-of-town visitors today. It may be surprising, therefore, to enter the temple and find its interior completely covered with wall paintings of Kali and her attendants in battle with the demon army (Fig.7.2). Despite their poor preservation, the paintings still mesmerize the viewer as countless heads and limbs entangle in a dizzying chaos. A lithographed portrait hanging above the main doorway (Fig.7.3) identifies the temple's patron as Udit Narayan Singh (r. 1795-1835), the Raja of Banaras.

The Kali Temple at Chakia reminds us that the sacred and cultural landscape of Banaras extend far beyond the western bank of the Ganga. When Banaras received extensive architectural patronage during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, spacious temple compounds boasting stepped tanks and leafy gardens were added to the outskirts by both local and distant patrons. These suburban temples present another type of temple building without the spatial restrictions in the densely packed urban core. As a temple sponsored by the local Banaras dynasty, the Kali Temple also underscores the role of local and regional participants in the shaping of Banaras, often overshadowed in the celebration of the city as a trans-regional pilgrimage centre. In this essay, I briefly examine the significance of the temple's location, architecture, and murals, with the hope that this preliminary study will lead to a more in-depth exploration in the future.¹

Although the remote location of Chakia may seem like an odd choice, it in fact held considerable political and military significance for the patron. As emergent local rulers, the Rajas of Banaras had to first establish their authority at local and regional levels. Starting out as tax collectors for the Nawab of Awadh, who controlled the Banaras region until the mid-eighteenth century, this family of landowners eventually acquired the title of Raja from the Mughal Emperor and established a royal lineage beginning with Raja Balwant Singh (r. 1739-1770). The power of the new dynasty therefore rested on the support of local landholders, clan members, and merchants. The Rajas' building projects were accordingly aimed at strengthening their political and territorial claims in the eyes of local audience, often in areas outside the urban centre.²

Surrounded by dense jungles and forests rich in game, Chakia was an ideal location for both military and leisurely pursuits. In the early days of Balwant Singh's military operation against the Nawab's army, the mountainous terrain near Chakia provided a strategic location for withdrawing troops. During more peaceful periods, the jungles and forests were maintained as hunting preserves by the royal family. By the time of Udit Narayan Singh's reign, Chakia was one of the few domains that



Fig.7.1 : Kali Temple,
early 19th century, Chakia,
Photo-courtesy : author

▶ Fig.7.2 : Interior of the Kali Temple,
early 19th century, Chakia,
Photo-courtesy : author





Fig.7.3 : Portrait of Udit Narayan Singh above the main entrance, southern wall, Kali Temple early 19th century, Chakia, *Photo-courtesy* : author

remained under the authority of the Rajas after the East India Company began to control the Banaras region in 1781.³ Chakia, therefore, was a rare site where the Raja could not only exercise full sovereign power, but also engage in a royal pastime long associated with military prowess.

The martial imagery of Kali in battle would have closely resonated with Chakia, the hunting ground and former military stronghold of the Rajas. The Kali Temple is part of a larger complex used as the royal hunting retreat. The temple and stepped tank, which are open to the public, are aligned along a north-south axis with a private Mughal style *char-bagh* garden residence.⁴ Such combination of temple, tank, and garden seems to have been particularly popular with the Rajas of Banaras: the Shiva Temple at Bhaironath and the Sumeru Devi Temple at Ramnagar, Raja's capital, follow a similar plan.⁵ This unique layout had a multifaceted appeal. The tank added a public space for ritual and daily bathing; the gentle sound of running water and perfumed greenery in the garden would have evoked the pools, groves, and flowering trees of heavenly abodes described in Sanskrit literature and provided a welcome respite from the congested city.⁶ Furthermore, the axial juxtaposition of temple and garden residence could create a powerful visual alignment between the authority of the Raja in the worldly realm and the divine.

The architecture of the Kali Temple adds another layer of meaning to the plan. Standing on a raised plinth with arched colonnades, the cubical temple has a square ground plan and arched



Fig.7.4 : Southern wall, Kali Temple, early 19th century, Chakia, *Photo-courtesy* : author

doorways on four sides. A bulbous dome, set on an octagonal base, crowns the temple. Except for the crouched figure of Shiva's bull Nandi in the domed porch, the temple strongly resembles a Mughal tomb.⁷ The adjacent *char-bagh* garden further evokes Mughal tomb gardens, whose form and symbolism of dynastic continuity and power had spread beyond geographical and religious boundaries by this time.⁸ The temple's ornamental details, such as cusped arches with a blooming flower at the center, baluster columns supporting curved *bangla* roofs, and geometric *jalis* also follow the Mughal architectural language and establish the Rajas of Banaras as participants in the elite courtly culture shared across northern India.

The juxtaposition of the courtly and divine worlds continues in the interior of the temple. The aforementioned portrait of Udit Narayan Singh on the southern wall directly faces the image of Kali enshrined in a niche on the northern wall. A Shiva *linga* is installed at the centre of the square sanctum, effectively aligning the Raja with both Kali and Shiva. Although most of the paintings have faded away, the southern wall has a distinctively regal theme. Instead of twisted limbs and snarling faces in combat, we see neatly arranged female figures in stately attire with their bodies slightly turned towards the Raja's portrait (Fig.7.4); a seated assembly of male courtiers is painted above.

Much of the mural program, however, are dedicated to monumental forms of Kali and her attendants in a blood-thirsty battle drawn from the *Devi Mahatmya*.⁹ In the final episode of the Sanskrit text, the fierce form of Kali emerges from the forehead of the Great Goddess to slay the army of *asuras*. When the demon generals Chanda and Munda charge against her, Kali decapitates them with her sword and earns the epithet “Chamunda.”¹⁰ Three monumental figures of Kali rise over the temple space, each occupying the right arched panel on the upper level of the northern, southern, and western walls. They stand in triumph, turning towards the left as if circumambulating the temple space. A garland of human heads and a tiger-skin skirt adorn Kali's dark blue body. Her four arms are outstretched, holding a sword in one hand and a severed head of a demon in another. The background details and the action of each figure differ slightly. On the western wall, for example, Kali stands regally atop a rocky mountain (Fig.7.5); on the best-preserved northern wall, the goddess tramples upon advancing demons (Fig.7.6).

In contrast to the iconic stature of the goddess in the upper level, the red and blue bodies of the demons and Kali's attendants violently clash and entwine in the surrounding battle scenes. While Kali's attendants share similar dress and adornments with the goddess, their smaller scale and lack of multiple arms establish a clear hierarchy between the army and the rising figure of Kali above. Yet they are just as fearsome, sinking their sharp teeth into the heads of attacking demons (Fig.7.7). Unlike Kali's army, who are all depicted in profile, the demons are usually in frontal or three-quarter view, painted in red or green colours that sharply contrast with the dark blue skin of their opponents.¹¹ Because the decorative borders and floral patterns also follow the same colour palette of red, blue, and green, the battle scenes seem to expand beyond the architectural frame in a chaotic swirl.

The sense of drama in the murals is further heightened by the distinctive representation of Kali and her army. While the depiction of Kali generally follows the conventional iconography, her profile face is unusually zoomorphic. A protruding nose and jaws form an elongated muzzle-like mouth, wide open to expose a set of sharp teeth and a lolling tongue. Her attendants in battle also share zoomorphic facial features, depicted with a hooked nose and projecting jaws. The half-human, half-animal forms of Kali and her attendants emphasize the superhuman nature of the goddess, effectively turning the temple space into a site of divine battle removed from the mundane world.

A similar representation of Kali with a muzzle-like face is found in the murals at the Kali Temple inside the Ramnagar Fort, also sponsored by Udit Narayan Singh (Fig.7.8).¹² The two temples' shared patronage and distinctive iconography indicate a broader artistic network beyond the urban and courtly centres of Banaras. In other contemporaneous examples from Banaras, including the murals at the Mahamaya Temple (c. 1825), Kali has a fully anthropomorphic face.¹³ The varied representations of Kali within Banaras also highlight the burgeoning developments in paintings. Scholars have noted the influx of artists trained in different schools of painting from the late eighteenth century onwards, beginning with the arrival of Delhi painters accompanying the exiled Mughal prince Jawan Bakht;¹⁴ by the first quarter of the nineteenth century, painters from Patna and Awadh, Jaipur and Datia were also active in Banaras.¹⁵ As a large-scale project that would have required the collaboration of multiple painters, the murals present an opportunity to explore the interaction between various regional and local painting traditions.

The Kali Temple at Chakia, then, provides us with multiple points of departure for studying the dynamic artistic production at Banaras in the opening decade of the nineteenth-century, from new developments in temple architecture and planning to the intermingling of multiple painting styles and iconography facilitated by emergent patrons and mobile artists. The temple's location may be peripheral, but its contribution to future studies will be central.



Fig.7.5 : Kali standing on a mountain, western wall, Kali Temple, early 19th century, Chakia, *Photo-courtesy* : author



Fig.7.7 : Battle scene, Kali Temple, early 19th century, Chakia
Photo-courtesy : author



Fig.7.8 : Kali in battle with the demon army, Kali Temple
early 19th century, Ramnagar Fort, Ramnagar
Photo-courtesy : author

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4. *Ibid.*, pp.60-161.
5. *Ibid.*, pp.54-157.
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11. Prem Shanker Dwivedi makes an interesting observation that the costume of the demons resembles those in the *Ramlila* performance, which was also expanded under Udit Narayan Singh. Dwivedi, Prem Shanker. 1990. *Wall Paintings of Mahamaya Temple in Varanasi*. Varanasi: Kala Prakashan. p.96.
12. For a description of the murals at Ramnagar, see Dwivedi, Prem Shanker. 1993. *Durga Theme in Varanasi Wall Paintings*. Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers. pp.51-53.
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15. *Ibid.*, 247-248. The *Ramcharitmanas* manuscript (1808), commissioned by Udit Narayan Singh, was illustrated by such artists in their characteristic styles, each one standing out prominently.