

Goddess Durga: Origin, iconography and mythology

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ABSTRACT

The research paper is about Goddess Durga and deals with her iconography, various representations, and her origin. In this paper an attempt has been made to trace the conflict of Goddess Durga and the demon Mahishasura in which she had killed the buffalo demon Mahishasura. But there is huge controversy regarding her representation which links her imagery to Aryan dominance over indigenous people of India. The present study shall investigate all the stories that revolve round her origin.

Key Words : Hinduism, Shaktism, Goddess Durga, Markandya Purana, Mahishasura, Aryans, Adivasis

INTRODUCTION

Goddess Durga is one of the major goddesses of shaktism. Shaktism emerged in its present form during the early medieval period particularly around 5th and 6th centuries A.D. But this concept of shaktism has its roots in ancient times. It can be traced back to Indus Valley period when the cult of mother goddess was prevalent. Shaktism basically is an aspect of hindusm in which the female side of supreme being is considered as to be the ultimate power. Hinduism is a polymorphic religion and not a polytheistic one because it believes in one supreme god but accept him in various forms. Thus Hinduism is quite different from the pagan religions which believes in many gods. In Hinduism, trinity is composed of Brahma- the creator, Vishnu- the preserver and Shiva- the destroyer. All three of them have their female aspect in the form of their wives as Saraswati to brahma, Lakshmi to Vishnu and Parvati to Shiva. This shows that male and female both are required to complete this world. One is incomplete without the other. Shaktism also comes from such belief which believes that universe is working because of the presence of both male and female aspect. Now, this Shakti cult which has its roots in Indus valley civilization continue to grow during vedic period also. It is also believed that when Aryans invaded India they assimilated the mother goddess cult of indus valley people into their culture and the cult continue to evolve. Vedic period is dominated by male Gods but there were many famous goddesses too such as Saraswati, Usha, Prithvi and so on. During the age of epics, the cult continues to evolve and there is mention of a goddess in Mahabharata who is living in Vindhayas and is very much fond of meat and alcohol and this goddess has many strikingly similar features with Goddess Durga. Then during the age of puranas, this cult actually developed.

The puranic age gave shaktism its present mature form. There are many puranas where references to Godddesses are available such as Kurmapurana which summons mother goddess

with 1000 names , then there is Matsyapurana which has 108 names of Goddess. The kalikapurana is another important purana in this respect. It talks about vamamarga (left hand path), the tantric worship of goddess which involves alcohol, sex and meat. It also discusses about the dakshinabhava (right hand path), the tantric worship of goddess which involves animal and human sacrifices.

But the major information about shaktism and particularly about two major goddesses is from Markandypurana which was written by sage Markandeya, In it, there is a section names as Devi mahatmya which talks about the exploits of Goddess Durga and Goddess Kali. It talks about Durga as Mahishasura mardini and Kali as Slayer of Raktbija. This Markandypurana shapes the major aspect of present day shaktism and the way we look at our Goddesses.

The following seven verses are from the Devi Mahatmyam, an important 5th century scripture taken from the Markandeya Purana that invokes the power of Goddess in her form as the Great Goddess (Mahadevi) by chronicling Her triumph over evil. These verses, taken from various chapters, hold the essence of the entire scripture and may be recited together as a short hymn to the Goddess as a means of cultivating pure devotion.

jñāninām api cetāmsi bhagavatī hi sā |

balād ākṛṣya mohāya mahāmāyā prayacchati || 1 ||

durge smṛta harasi bhūtim aśeṣajantoḥ svastaiḥ smṛtā matim atīva śubhām dadāsi |

dāridryaduḥkhabhayahāriṇi kā tvad anyā sarvopakāraḥkaraṇāya sadārdracittā || 2 ||

sarvamaṅgalamāṅgalye śive sarvārthasādhike |

śaraṇye tryambake gaurī nārāyaṇī namo 'stu te || 3 ||

śaranāgatādīnārtaparitrāṇaparāyaṇe |

sarvasyārtihare devī nārāyaṇī namo 'stu te || 4 ||

sarvasvarūpe sarveṣe sarvaśaktisamanvite |

bhayaḥbhyastrāhi no devī durge devī namo 'stu te || 5 ||

rogān aśeṣān apakaṁsi tuṣṭā ruṣṭā tu kāmān sakalān abhīṣṭān |

tvāmāśritānām na vipannarāṇām tvām āśritā hyāśrayatām prayānti || 6 ||

sarvābādhāpraśamanām trailokyasyākḥileśvari |

evameva tvayā kāryamasmadvairivinaśanam || 7 ||

Translation :

She, the blessed Goddess Mahamaya, seizes the minds of even the wise and draws them into delusion.

Remembered in distress, you remove the fear from every creature. Remembered by the untroubled, you confer even greater serenity of mind. Dispeller of poverty, suffering, and fear, who other than you is ever intent on benevolence toward all?

I adore you, Narayani, who are the good of all good, the auspicious one, to you who accomplish every intent; to you, the refuge, the all-knowing, shining Gauri!

I adore you, Narayani, who are intent on rescuing the distressed and afflicted that take refuge in you; to you, O Devi, who remove the suffering of all.

O Devi, who exists in the form of all, who are the ruler of all, possessing all power, protect us from fears. O Devi Durga, I adore you!

When pleased you destroy all afflictions, but when displeased you thwart all aspirations. No calamity befalls those who have taken refuge in you, and they who resort to you become a refuge to others.

O ruler of all, may you allay all the miseries of the three worlds and so, too, annihilate our enemies.¹



Fig. 1 : Showing Goddess Durga killing Mahishasura

These verses shows how mother goddess is praised in Markandya Purana.

There are many sources which I had referred to get adequate information about goddess Durga in particular and shaktism in general. There are plenty of secondary sources such as there are some articles such as- The Dark Side of Durga Puja Bengalis don't Like to talk about-an article in "daily O" by Debdutta Bhattacharjee and JNU Row: Amish Tripathi shocked by misogynist attack On Goddess Durga- an Article by DNA web page. These two articles actually are related to the controversy related to goddess Durga in which her iconography is linked to Aryan invasion theory. Then there are some other books which mentions how kalikapurana, matsyapurana and kurmapurana had explained about shakrism. But I had used Markandya Purana as a primary source for my study on Goddess Durga, particularly the part known as Devi Mahatamyam. It talks

1. Verses from Devi Mahatamyam of Markandya Purana. Translation based on Devadatta Kali, In Praise of the Goddess: The Devi Mahatmyam and Its Meaning (Berwick, ME: Nicolas-Hays, 2003).

about Durga's fight with Mahishasura and also how she came into being. The Devi Mahatmyam of Markandya Purana is the major and most important source related to Goddess Durga and that's why I had used it as a primary source.

Goddess Durga :

The word Durga means solid or closed. It is related to word durg which means difficult to pass on, or achieve. The word durga appears in few vedic works such as in fourth veda Atharvaveda. There is mention of a goddess by the name of durgi in Taittiriya arayanka. But the vedic mention of durga is not as profound as we found in later works of Hinduism. During epic age, there is mention of a goddess in Mahabharata who is very fond of alcohol and meat and who is residing in vindhyas mountains and her features are very much similar to that of goddess durga. But the major development in this regard took place during the age of puranas. Markandya Purana is the major purana in this respect. It talks about how goddess durga came into being, has verses dedicated to her praise, has depiction of her war with buffalo demon, Mahishasura.

Slaying of Mahishasura in brief :

In Devi Mahatmyam of Markandya Purana, Sage Markandya says that under the leadership of Mahishasura, demons had defeated the Devas under the leadership of Indra. All the devas then went to Lord Brahma and all of them then went to Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. When devas told them their situation, they got angry. A beam of light comes from both of them and from Brahma and other devas too and led to the formation of supreme power Durga and she was presented with various weapons from various Goda and devas as-

1. Lord Vishnu gave her discus, Sudharshan Chakra.
2. The Sun God gave her the Sword.
3. The Himavan gave her the Lion.
4. Shiva gave her a trident.
5. Varuna, the sea God gave her the Conch.
6. Kubera, the god of wealth gave her the mace.
7. Vayu, the god of wind gave her the bow.
8. Agni, the god of fire gave her axe.

It is also interesting to note that she got her feet from Lord Brahma, her ten arms from Lord Vishnu, her face from Lord Shiva and so on.

After this, Durga went into battle field. She defeated all the generals of Mahishasura and finally when at end she got hold of Mahishasura and killed him and devas got their heaven back and began to sing songs in her praise.

There are some characteristic features of Goddess Durga which are as-

1. She has eight hands, each symbolizes each direction in which she protects her devotees.
2. She has three eyes which gives her the name Triyambake. These three eyes represents Chandra, Surya and Agni.
3. The conch reverberating the pranava mantra, the bow for strides of energy, solidness like a thunderbolt, the unfailable sudharshana chakram, the sharp sword for insight and to expel all tragedies, there is a trishulam.
4. On a superb mountain lion, Goddess Durga sits with brilliance. The lion symbolizes crude carnal characters, for example, greed, outrage and jealousy. Durga sitting on lion symbolizes that one must control such emotions and not be controlled by them.

5. The goddess holds the abhaya mudra which consoles the confidence of peace and health in every one of her lovers. In a world loaded with unforeseen tragedies the main thing that is consistent is any expectation of prosperity and satisfaction and that is the thing that the abhaya mudra connotes. This stance is broadly connected with Gautama Buddha. It can be rehearsed by anybody looking for valor and consolation.

Navratri :

There is a festival of nine days known as Navratri festival in her honour. The festival is celebrated in her honour and it symbolizes the nine days of her battle against Mahishasura and tenth day which is known as Vijaydashmi is the day when goddess Durga had finally killed Mahishasura. During these nine days her nine forms are being worshipped by her devotees- Āailaputri (Daughter of the Himalayas), Brahmacharini (One who observes the state of celibacy doing penance), Chandraghanta (One who bears the moon in her necklace), Kusmana (the creator of the universe), Skanda-Mata (The mother of Skanda, Karttikeya, born out of her powers), Katyayani (The daughter of sage Katyayana, who incarnated to help the Devas), Kalaratri (black as night), Mahagauri (the wife of Lord Shiva, doing great penance) and Siddhidatri (Provider of Siddhis, giver of mystic powers).

Controversy regarding her imagery :

There is huge debate going on in recent times that the imagery of Goddess Durga is not what it looks like. It is not actually showing the victory of good over evil but it is actually showing the dominance of invading Aryans over the indigenous population of India known by the name of adivasis. The theory goes like this that Durga being shown as fair skinned with sharp feature is actually representing the Aryan race and Mahishasura, who is depicted as dark skinned is actually an indigenous native. Some people believes that imagery of Goddess Durga killing Mahishasura shows the killing and dominance of Aryans of native inhabitants. Many adivasis still today believe themselves as Mahishasura descendent. Some people also believes that Vibhishan accepted Aryan king Lord Ram supremacy, Prahalad accepted Aryan god Vishnu and thus were able to get assimilated into mainstream culture with respect and dignity and didn't suffered from the destruction which other members of their kin had suffered.

Also there was a huge controversy which erupted in JNU during mahishasura martyrdom day when it is alleged that some people had made negative remarks about Durga. They had said that the story which says that Durga fought bravely against the evil Mahishasura is completely false. They said that when Aryans were not able to defeat the powerful adivasi king Mahishasura, then Aryans had hired a sex worker by the name of Durga and she killed Mahishasura after nine nights of honeymooning him on the tenth day which Aryans celebrate as vijaydashmi even today. So according to their version, this whole story is fabricated and it is nothing about victory of good over evil. It simply shows how Aryans tricked a powerful adivasi king by hiring a sex worker to kill him in sleep when they could not defeat Mahishasura in a battle. Many people had later said that they had never used such words for Durga. But one thing is clear that in this controversy the people had missed the real significance of her imagery which simply means the triumph of good over evil. If just because Mahishasura is dark skinned and is an adivasi, then how could Lord Ram, Lord Krishna, Goddess Kali can be gods for Aryans. Also one more important thing which people fails to understand is that there is no historical proof of the existence of Mahishasura or Goddess Durga. The story is the part of a purana known as Markandypurana and the word purana literally means

legend. So this a legendary story. It can be a true story who knows but there is no historical proof of such an event. So how could people say that Mahishasura is their ancestor and he is an adivasi and durga is an Aryan girl and all that. Such derogatory remarks against her according to me are simply misogynist in nature as Durga only represents the good forces and represents the true nature of shaktism as she can be calm in her nature and fierce also when needed. She is the true symbol of what a modern strong woman should be like.

Conclusion :

From the above discussion, we came to know about the origin of Shaktism and how it evolves over time. We also got to know about the origin of Goddess Durga like how she was mentioned in her crude form in vedic and epic texts of Hinduism and how Puranas were responsible for the proper development of mature and present legend and form of Goddess Durga. The most important thing that I had discussed in this research paper is the controversy related to her imagery. How people linked her imagery to Aryan supremacy over adivasis. Such people simply fails to understand some basic things as how they are claiming these legendary characters as historical and how just on the basis of skin colour, they are determining their races as there are plenty of dark skinned gods and goddesses which Aryans used to worship such as Lord Ram, Lord Krishna, Goddess Kali.

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