

# HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF DURGA WORSHIP IN BENGAL

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the historical roots of the worship of Durga and the changing iconography of the Devi in the form of Mahishāmardhini, especially in Bengal, where the annual Durga Puja is increasingly marked by experimentation with both the idol and its surrounding enhancement in artistic forms. This recent development is situated in the sense of the deity's historical origins and evolution and its iconography has been traced since the 5th century CE. The aim of this article is to trace the history of modern Durga worship as practiced in Bengal and its socio-cultural influence on contemporary society. Durga as Mahishāmardhini (slayer of Mahishāsura) is an ancient deity. The 5<sup>th</sup> century CE Sanskrit text, *Dēvi Mahātmyā*, contains the story of Durga, briefly including her various forms, exploits, as well as her iconography. By the 8th century CE, the Mahishāmardhini cult was known throughout the Indian subcontinent as evidenced by architectural remains from Afghanistan to Tamil Nadu. Today, she is still popular throughout India but particularly loved and revered in Bengal as an annual four-day autumn festival, the Durga Puja.

**Keyword:** Mahishāmardhini, Mahishāsura, Dēvi Mahātmyā, Shaktism

## Introduction

Shaktism is a Hindu denomination that focuses on *Shakti* or *Devi* in worship. The Sakti cult had its origins in the fertility cult, concept of a mother goddess, and yoni worship all of which developed afterwards as the Great Goddess *Sakti*. She has been worshipped in different forms in different places and in different times as Durga, Kali, Kamakhya etc. From very ancient times worship of Sakti has occupied a prominent position in the religious arena of Assam, Odisha and Bengal. Worshipers of Sakti formed a new religious sect known as the Sakta sect. Many *Sakti pithas* came into existence all over Assam, Odisha and Bengal initially established by devotees as a small shrine and then under royal patronage in the form of a stone structure. These *Sakti pithas* attracted the attention of the devotees of the Sakti cult and other followers. The *Sruti* and *Smriti* texts like the *Dharmashastras* are the most important framework of the Shakta tradition (Banerjee: 2004:125-137). The texts of *Dēvi Mahātmyā*, *Devi-Bhagavata Purana*, and *Shakta Upanishads* (*Devi Upanishad*) are also relevant. In Shaktism, the text of *Dēvi Mahātmyā* is considered as important as the *Bhagavad Gita*. Shaktism can be traced back to the literature of the Vedic Age, after which it further developed during the formative phase of the two Great Epics. It fully blossomed during the Gupta Age (300-700CE), and then continued to grow and evolve (Dutta: 2003: 150). Shaktism is still popular in most of the part of India in different forms – Durga in Bengal, Odisha and Assam, Jagadhatri in North India, Amba Ma in Gujarat and Chamba in the Himalayan region etc.

In Bengal, Assam, Odisha, Durga Puja is also called Akālbhodon (“untimely awakening of Durga”), Sharadiya Pujo (“autumnal worship”), Sharodotsab (“festival of autumn”), Mahā Pujo (“great puja”), Māyer Pujo (“worship of the Mother”) or merely as Puja or Pujo. Durga Puja is also celebrated as Bhāgabati Puja in Bangladesh. In West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Odisha, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh also Shakti worship takes the form of Durga Puja. Devi worship is recognized as Navaratri Puja in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Kerala and Maharashtra; and Kulu Dussehra in Kulu Valley, Himachal Pradesh.

## Objectives

This paper aims to understand the evolution of iconography of the *Devi* in her *Mahishāmardhini* form, with special reference to Bengal. The annual Durga Puja is at present marked by increasing experimentation in artistic forms of both the idol and its surrounding ornamentation. This recent development is proposed to be examined in the context of the historical origins and evolution of the deity and her iconography since her 5th century CE.

The socio-cultural impact of this grand festival on contemporary society will also be examined.

## Mythological Roots

Goddesses have a strong presence in mythology, but not as major deities in early times. Usually, goddesses were portrayed as consorts of the gods, goddesses as supreme beings were legitimized and absorbed into the Brahmannical traditions much later. The concept of Shakti occurs in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. Yet there is little evidence to suggest the Vedic origins of the Shakti cult. But the period of the epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (400BCE to 400CE) are one of transition in the integration of Goddesses into the Brahmannical pantheon (Singh: 2015: 45-47). It is during the period of the *Puranas* (400CE) that goddesses as individual deities and the concept of goddess became prominent in Sanskrit literature. Between 400BCE-800CE, the cult of mother goddesses was popularised in India.

The *Dēvi Mahātmā* (6<sup>th</sup> century CE) remains one of the most important Sanskrit sources central to the worship of different forms of Shakti today. The most important text of Shaktism, the *Dēvi Mahātmā* - sometimes referred to as the “Shakta Bible” - is the first religious text to define the supreme reality as a female principle. The *Dēvi Mahātmā* contains thirteen chapters and these are organized into three episodes or *Charitas* suggesting that *Dēvi* is the true cause of the triumph of good over evil (Singh: 2015: 48-52).

V.S. Agrawala analyses the *Dēvi Mahātmā* section of the *Markandeya Purana* and divides it into three parts: (i) *Purvā Chāritā*, the divine conflict against Madhu and Kaitabhā; (ii) *Madhyāmā Chāritā*, the battle against the demon Mahisa; (iii) *Uttarā Chāritā* - having three constituents: battle against Chanda and Munda, battle against Raktabija and battle against Shumbha and Nishumbha (Singh: 2015: 70-74). The tale of her battle with *Mahishāsura* became the most famous among all the major achievements of the *Devi*, as has been shown by numerous *Mahishāmardhini* sculptures.

The *Mahishāsura* episode of the *Dēvi Mahātmā* delineates an outline of the Shakta conception of the *Devi* as the embodiment of an all-pervading power. Goddess Durga arose from the combined energy of all Gods as an embodiment of Shakti or the divine feminine power, according to Hindu mythology. She was born to destroy the demon *Mahishāsura*, who was blessed not to be defeated by any man or God. The name *Durgā* in Sanskrit means ‘the impenetrable’; she exists in a state of self-sufficiency and in ultimate power (Coburn: 1991: 19-23). In Kolkata, this powerful form of Mother Goddess is highly respected, which is why her return is celebrated with great pomp and ceremony every year. In the Hindu month of Ashwin (September-October), Durga Puja is celebrated to commemorate the invocation of the goddess by Prince Rama before going to war with the demon king Ravan (Guha: 2011: 25-26). This autumn ritual was distinct from the original *Durga Puja*, which is generally celebrated in spring. So, this Puja is also known as ‘akāl-bodhan’ or out-of-season (‘akal’) worship (‘bodhan’). Thus, the story of Lord Rama, who at this time of the year first worshipped the ‘*Mahishāsura mardini*’ or the buffalo-slayer, demon by offering 108 blue lotuses and lighting 108 lamps.

## Historical Roots

The deity Durga in her *Mahishāsura mardini* form became popular throughout India from the Gupta period onwards. The extensive geographical spread of *Mahishāsura mardini* sculptures in ancient and medieval Indian temples indicates that she had been firmly established in the religious and artistic vocabulary of the Indian sub-continent from the fifth century CE onwards. She is depicted in the early Gupta temples of North India and early Chalukya temples of the Northern Deccan in the seventh century CE as well as in a Pallava cave temple (*mandapa*) in Mahabalipuram. She is represented in the rock-cut Kailasanatha Temple and other shrines of Ellora. She is also depicted in the Central Indian Chandella temples of Khajuraho, and also in the ornate Hoysala and Kakatiya temples of the Deccan during the great age of Indian temple construction.

The earliest representation of the Goddess *Mahishāsūrmardani* is in terracotta plaques discovered at Nagar near Uniyana in Tonk district, Rajasthan. One of these has been dated to the first century BCE to first century CE. Another plaque found in period IV levels of Sonkh (Mathura) also represents the deity. The widespread distribution of the *Mahishāsūrmardani* sculptures, the popularity of the concept of goddesses slaying the demons, must have social significance. The Devi's fight with the demons, symbolising the ultimate triumph of good over evil, must have provided the toiling masses with the illusion of a cherished reality, when the existing reality went against their hopes and aspirations (Blurton: 1992: 67-70).

*Durga Mahishāsūrmardani* form is depicted on the gold coins of Gupta king where the royal couple Chandragupta-Kumradevi types is found on the obverse while on the reverse, the goddess is shown seated on a lion (Fig. 8.1), holding a lotus in her hand (Singh:2015:77). But this identification is doubtful as the deity also holds a cornucopia or horn of plenty; hence, it may also be Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune who is also sometimes depicted on a lion mount.

## Evolution of *Mahishāmardhini* Iconography

*Mahishāmardhini* iconography evolved and changed with time and geography. With the passage of time, the orientation and movement of the images changed, and the *asura* gradually attained a human form. In the earliest images the *asura* was represented in the form of a buffalo. Such images are found in the temples of the Pratihara (Rajasthan), Pallavas (Mahabalipuram), and Chalukyas (Alampur). A Chalukya image (Fig. 8.2) from the ASI site museum at Alampur is an excellent example. With one leg, *Durga* holds the buffalo down, bending her head to drive a spear down her neck as her *simha* assaults it from behind. Amidst this ferocious scene, her face is calm, and *Mahishāsura* seems to submit without resistance. A second depiction that is found in slightly later temples shows *Mahishāsura* with a human body with a buffalo head. Such images are found in the temples of the early Chalukyas (Aihole) (Fig. 8.3), Rashtrakutas (Ellora) (Figure 8.4) and in Odishan temples (Guha: 2011: 30-37).

One of the early temples in Bhubaneswar, the Baital Deul, has an example of this form. The half-human *Mahishāsura* seems to kneel in front of *Durga* as she pushes him down and slays him with her *trisula* (trident). Her outstretched arms hold swords, snakes, and a shield, all in a swirl of motion but her face is compassionate.

In the next stage of evolution, found in late Chalukya and Hoysala temples (such as at Somnathapura) the compositions show a human *Mahishāsura* being slayed by *Durga*. The example shown is a late Chalukya example from Alampur. Here an eight-armed *Durga* is shown thrusting her *trisula* into a miniature *Mahishāsura* as he emerges from the buffalo. Although aesthetically less pleasing than the earlier Chalukya example, this sculpture is more dynamic. The lifeless buffalo collapses as *Mahishāsura* emerges ready to strike. *Durga* gently holds the *asura*'s head as she kills him, while her other hands brandish weapons, a drawn sword, an arrow being taken out of its quiver, a bell being rung (Dutta:2003:66-68).

A fifth type, much more recent than the others mentioned so far, is found on terracotta temples of Bengal (15<sup>th</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> century CE) particularly those in the Hugli and Howrah region. The standardized Bengali group of deities is shown here: *Durga* slaying *Mahishāsura* in the centre and her children surrounding her. In temples with triple-arched entrances, the images are positioned on the heavy octagonal columns in the porch. Among the Rama and Krishna iconography, the image can also be found in the panels above the entrance arches like other temples in Medinipur.

## Socio-cultural impact of Durgā Pujā on Society

One of Bengal's most important festivals is *Durga Puja* - the annual worship of the Mother Goddess. It is also an occasion for socialising and rejuvenation, a celebration of traditional culture and customs. The rituals include ten days of fasting, feasting and worshipping the ten-armed goddess who is riding the lion with great passion and devotion. The last four days - *Saptami*, *Ashtami*, *Navami* and *Dashami* - have been celebrated in India and abroad with great joy and grandeur, especially in Bengal.

It is the most important festival in Bengal, and Bengalis, both devout Hindus and secular persons celebrate the event with new clothes, jewelry and other gifts, which are worn on the evenings when the family goes out to see the '*pandals*' (Fig. 8.10). Everyone, irrespective of social strata, participates in the festivities. This is a time



of social gatherings, courtship, matchmaking and flaunting expensive new purchases like jewelry and electronic gadgets.

Durga Puja is a big business at present. The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) had estimated in 2016 that in West Bengal, the industry associated with Durga Puja is worth Rs. 40,000 crores. On the basis of a survey and market research, “West Bengal Cashing in on *Durga* Puja celebrations”, the ASSOCHAM has said that the cost of organizing the *Durga* puja in Bengal has grown as much as over 30% compared to last year due to the steep rise in the materials used. In earlier days, it was accepted as ‘Parar Puja’ (community/neighbourhood worship), after that it became ‘Club Puja’ and now it is acknowledged as a ‘Sponsors’ Puja’ in West Bengal.

In Kolkata in 2015 the world’s tallest Durga idol was made during the autumn festival at Deshapriya Park (Fig. 8.11). The Puja Committee was funded by an Indian cement producer, and it employed craftsman Mintu Pal to create an 88-foot tall idol. It attracted devotees and revellers not only from West Bengal, but also other states of India. People from the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and Nepal also came to visit this gigantic idol. It was reported in the press that over one million people tried to view the spectacle on ‘chothurthi’ and ‘panchami’, causing a standstill in traffic for a radius of ten kilometers. Four persons lost their lives in the resultant stampede while eleven persons sustained injuries. Following this, the Kolkata Police stopped the Puja in this location for the next four days.

## Conclusions

The story of Devi is quite unselfconsciously woven into the very fabric of the social order in India. Other than the mythological and theological aspects, there are two more aspects of Devi worship, i.e., as an anthropological and psychological phenomena. Recent anthropological studies have demonstrated that the text-based ideas about the Devi is interwoven into popular practice in complex, non-linear ways. Akos Oster discovers a striking and close correspondence between the categories Bengali use to understand their everyday experience, particularly during the great annual *Durga* Puja festival, and the categories employed in the popular understanding of *Dēvi Mahātmā*.

Durga Puja is the greatest Bengali Hindu festival in which the Divine is adored as a Mother. In Bengal Saktism is highly popular and the Devi in her different forms such as Durga, Kali, Laxmi, Saraswathi etc. is worshipped by every household on a regular basis.

Today *Durga* is identified with Bengali nationalism. Given the popularity of her worship, as well as nationalist feelings that developed in Bengal amongst the Bengali *Bhadra Lok* or elite class, it was almost natural that the Goddess Durga would act as an icon for this new type of imagined community. Durga, the Mother Goddess is the symbol of all the auspicious and true qualities which define the Supreme Being and over the years her popularity reigns supreme in Bengal.



Figure 8.3: Late Chaulakya, Alampur

(Source: Guha 2011: 30)



**Figure 8.4: Mahishāmardhini, Ellora, cave no 16, 8th Century CE**



**Figure 8.1: Goddess seated on a lion, Gupta coin.**

(Source: Singh 2015: 77)



**Figure 8.2: Durga at Aihole Bijapur, Chalukya period, sixth seventh CE.**

(Source: Guha 2011: 27)

(Source: Author)



Figure 8.5: Temple from Khamarpara, Hooghly, 15th Century CE

(Source: Author)



Figure 8. 6: Damodar Temple, Kendur, Bardhaman, 15th – 16th Century CE

(Source: Author)



Figure 8.9: Nrsinghadev Temple, Gokarna, Murshidabad, 1540 CE





**Figure 8.7: Temple of Roy Family, Ghosh Para, West Medinipur**

(Source: Author)

(Source: Author)



**Figure 8.8: Ramchandra Temple, Guptipara, Hooghly**

(Source: Author)



**Figure 8.10: Gorgeous pandal (venue)**

(Source: Author)



**Figure 8.11: The world's tallest Durga Puja, DeshapriyaPark, Kolkata**

(Source: Author)

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