

CURIOUS ANOMALIES IN BENGAL'S DURGA WORSHIP

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The annual festive worship of Durga is so comfortably settled in the Bengali imagination that her apparent anomalies and contradictions are hardly examined. The first issue is that popular demand in Bengal mandates that she has to be seen with her four 'children' — which is most unlike other parts of India. The second is derived from this as these four 'children' appear quite disinterested in Durga's ferocious battle with Mahishasura, nor do they play any role in it. The third anomaly lies in the fact that Durga in Bengal appears resplendent in her best dress with a lot of jewellery, even as she is engaged in a mortal combat. There are others, like the lion in old traditional images that hardly looked like a lion. In fact, the warrior goddess who is worshipped in other parts of India during the autumnal *Navaratri* is seated on a tiger, the Royal Bengal one, but Bengal insists on the lion which is quite 'foreign' to these parts. But, as we get down to examining these characteristics, we begin to understand more clearly the social contract of the Bengali Hindus with pan-Indian Brahmanism.

The oldest iconographic representation of Durga or *Mahishasuramardini*, we find is a terracotta image from the 1st century CE discovered at Nagaur in Rajasthan. It has the buffalo, the lion and the *trishul* but this Durga has just four hands, not ten as prescribed. The six Kushana period sculptures of the 2nd century in the Mathura Museum also have the Devi with the *trishul* and the buffalo, but no lion, as is the case with the 4th century image found Bhumara in Madhya Pradesh. We see a 5th century ten-armed Dashabhuj fighting a buffalo in Udayagiri, without the lion as her vahana and JN Banerjea has described in detail the evolved images of *Mahishasuramardini* of the Gupta period. We will also touch upon the Bengal sculptures a little later. What is interesting is that while stray references to this deity appear in the middle of the first millennium BCE, the first major and complete text on Durga arrived only at the close of the Gupta period. We refer to the *Devi Mahatmya* or *Durga Saptashti*, that is the first puranic text dedicated to the Devi that would determine or influence her subsequent iconography. It is a section of the *Markandeya Purana*, which is usually assigned to the sixth or seventh century, though certain parts appear more archaic. The treatise describes the Devi in different battle attire and essentially as *Dasha-bhuj*. We may note that this first proper narrative outlining her form and the story of her battles appeared well after her early icons or representations had already been sculpted.

This may indicate that Brahmanism took its own time to grant formal recognition through scriptural compositions. It is my submission that the epics and *puranas* were quite like project-funded university schools and were collective efforts of groups of

scholars, located in specific broad regions, to expound upon and promote specific deities. Different assertions made in each *purana* were most probably debated threadbare within the school in true academic tradition before being added. Unresolved issues, compromises reached and later interpolations may explain the disjointed nature of sectional arrangement. As experts have bracketed each *purana* in different bands of centuries, it may be fair to assume that individual ‘projects’ lasted for a few centuries, depending on patronage. Though the *maha-puranas* dwelt on male deities, a deject few also tackled (quite secondarily) female divinities as well. The fact that Durga materialised in so many strikingly-different forms appears to have facilitated the absorption of a wide range of goddesses into Hindu sacred literature and the pantheon. Similarly, Radha appears to have been legitimised in the *Bhagwat Purana* of the 9th century.

When discussing Durga’s mention in literature, let us proceed along the incorrigible tradition of going back to the Vedas for everything. Scholars have referred to hymns like 4.28, 5.34, 8.27 and some others in the *Rig Veda*, but any close reading of them will reveal their ambiguity. The *Devi Sukta* (10.125) is oft repeated to establish her in the *Rig Veda*, but this does not mention her name or her appellations, and it does not bear any of her signature motifs or talk of her battle with *asuras*. In fact, scholars like Ralph TH Griffith have translated it as a veneration directed to *Vak* or ‘speech personified’. We get the same amorphous feeling in the couple of hymns attributed to Durga that are located in the *Atharva Veda*. Monier-Williams mentions a deity named Durgi in 10.1.7 of the *Taittiriya Aranyaka* but this is not our standard *Mahishasuramardini*.

However, the very fact that both Yaksha and Panini mention the term ‘Durga’ leads one to speculate that the kernel of her legend was probably floating around in northern India by the 4th and 5th centuries BCE. The epics, that assumed their final form in the 2nd or 3rd century of the Current Era, also mention her name — though not as a central or even secondary part of their themes. The *Bhisma Parva* describes how Arjuna worshipped Durga while there are references to the slaying of Mahishasura, but it is by Skanda-Kartikeya. These pithy side references and some wisps in the early *puranas* do not, however, elaborate on the gripping story of the ten-armed warrior goddess that the *Markandeya Purana* school narrated in dramatic detail in its *Devi Mahatmya* section. Though occasional references kept surfacing for hundreds of years, it was this 6th/7th *purana* that really comprehensively expanded on the concept. This is really the first occasion when the text finally caught up with the context or narrative that had been appearing in images. Within a century or two, we come across the magnificent sculptures of *Mahishasuramardini* in Aihole, Ellora and Mamallapuram.

But neither text nor context in India emphasised on Durga being accompanied by her four family members, that Bengal insists upon. A 12th century image from Dakshin Muhammadpur in erstwhile Comilla shows Ganesha and Kartikeya next to Durga, but the ‘daughters’ are not there. In fact, the sons are mentioned in the

puranas, but not these daughters. Lakshmi is a form of the Devi but also the wife of Vishnu, just as Durga is married to Shiva. Saraswati is always associated with Brahma. According to the *Padma Purana*, it is Ashokasundari who is the daughter of Shiva and Parvati. We do not find any ancient image of Durga with all her four ‘children’ even after ploughing through the icons mentioned in the works of RD Bandyopadhyay, NK Bhattasali, JN Banerjea, S K Saraswati and Enamul Haque. It emerges, therefore, that *SaparibareDurga* (Devi with her family) is a very Bengali invention and seems to have risen from folk tradition, articulated in a *ChandiMangal Kavyain* medieval Bengal, in the 16th century or so.

We may recall that this very indigenous genre of *Mangal Kavyas* valorised autochthonous deities who invariably defeated imported Puranic gods and goddesses like Durga and Shiva. But, when Shiva left his regal splendour of Kailash and joined the impoverished peasantry of Bengal as one of them in the *Sivayan* ballads, he became instantly popular. Durga also went through this plebeianisation and the great Devi was transformed into essentially a commoner’s daughter who dutifully visited her parents once every year. It was then that the masses of Bengal showered her with tender *Vatsalya*. On the other hand, Bengalis viewed Kali as their fiercely protective mother who endowed her children with strength. This is why Durga appears in her *Vijaya rupa* in deference to puranic tradition, but is also dressed rather gorgeously, as she is headed for her parents’ abode, with children in tow. The Navaratri tradition of fasting and its restrained vegetarian diet is vigorously rejected in Bengal where the best of meat and fish dishes are consumed in honour of the visiting daughter. It is interesting that Bengal ‘domesticated’ the fierce warrior goddess with sheer love. Brahmanical patriarchy may, however, have found its perfect solution as it could remind the belligerent female that her maternal obligations were more important. Yet, since the children are obviously later insertions, without adequate scriptural or iconographic sanction, they could not be harmonised with the central plot and look rather disinterested.

A problem appeared in depicting the lion as Bengalis had hardly ever seen this animal of western India. As a result, the early images installed by zamindars depicted a very peculiar ‘lion’ who looks more like a horse or a donkey, and this visualisation is often still continued by their descendants. It was only after a zoo was established in Kolkata and real lions arrived in the 1880s, that the local clay sculptors learnt to craft a lion that looked like one.

The warrior goddess, Durga of pan-Indian Brahmanical tradition was thus adopted with local interpretations by a new class of wealthy Hindu zamindars, almost a millennium after *Devi Mahatmya*. This group popularised the worship of Shakti in Bengal in the late Mughal period and during the reign of the Nawabs. To it, Durga’s power and grandeur were extensions of its own pomp and glory to overwhelm the peasants. The masses were quite dazzled by this remarkable and unprecedented display of a Hindu festival in Muslim-ruled Bengal. The composite image of this region appears, therefore, to represent a compromise between elements drawn from

the traditional Hindu ethos of north India and the overwhelming cultural demands of the Bengali folk.