

THE DOMESTICATION OF THE WARRIOR GODDESS, DURGA: AN ATTEMPTED 'RATIONALIST' DECONSTRUCTION

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Of the millions who stand reverentially before the thousands of Durga images in Bengal during the annual pujas, how many wonder as to why Kartikeya — the valiant general of the gods — looks away so apathetically, when his mother is locked in a mortal conflict with one of the most dangerous adversaries of the gods? Why do the daughters, Lakshmi and Saraswati look so benign and disinterested, when Durga's eyes puff and widen in rage and fury? And their pot-bellied elephant-headed sibling, Ganesha: what is his role?

Once questions penetrate the solemn circle of piety, more and more roll out. If Durga is engaged in such a deadly combat, why is she draped in such a gorgeous, but terribly constricting sari, resplendent with so much jewellery? Is she not too delicately balanced on the angry and frisky lion, for is she not bound to fall off, if the animal decides to swing or leap? Does the ideal daughter really need to drag that dying, bleeding Mahishasura all the way to her parents' place — which she visits only once a year, and that too, for so short a stay?

To find at least some answers, we need to look back at the curious twists of mythology and iconography that convert the belligerent warrior-goddess of India into the homely daughter of Bengal. And though men of history and religion take pains to highlight the antiquity of Durga worship (Taittiriya Aranyaka, two doubtful stutis in the Mahabharata, etc.), the evidence available reveals that the popular worship of Bengal's favourite daughter-goddess, in its present form, is a development that took place less than three centuries ago

— in the early modern period. Bengalis are quite clear in their minds about the roles they ascribe to each deity, and when it comes to Durga it is their 'vatsalya' (affection) that they shower upon 'this

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daughter of Bengal', as also on the boy-Krishna (Balagopal) — but when they stand before the 'bhayankari' Kali, it is with awe and trepidation — praying for her mercy and for strength. This does not imply that the two Shaktis are in watertight compartments, but no Bengali can deny the different feelings that he or she reserves for the two facets of the same goddess. The same goddess? This is where our trouble begins.

The Indian mind is so used to accept with ease the multiplicity of identities for the same god or goddess, that we hardly ever consider or discuss the possibility of these being absolutely divergent and often-conflicting divinities, with distinctly-different origins and independent previous existences. Students of the history of religion have actually to struggle much more in India than in any other country, to separate the different layers of history and myths that underlie the veritable mountains of legends, scriptures, literature and icons — for much of them are very organic parts of our present life and religion. On top of this, we have the additional problem of distinguishing between proper nouns and common nouns among Hindu names — for though a name is expected to be the former, in reality it is either the latter, or virtually like it. It is, therefore, quite natural that most major gods and goddesses are addressed by names that are either patronymic, like Haimavati (the daughter of the Himalayas), or signify either their gunas (attributes), like Gauri (the fair lady) and Krishna or Kali (the dark one) — or, better still, are simply 'generic' names, like the lord of the animals (Pashupati) and the goddess of vegetation (Shakambhari) . But what distinguishes a deity's name from a human's, even when numerous Hindus bear the names of divinities, is that these patronymic, attributional or generic names have been adroitly utilised — to bring every different local deity possible under these three religiously-sanctioned 'broad-bands', representing the Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta traditions.

This is best seen in the institutions of 'Ashtattora- sata- nama' and 'Sahasra-nama' (the hundred-and-eight names or the thousand synonyms) that are applied to the important gods or goddesses. This, in effect, meant that countless local gods could easily be 'appropriated' and identified with a mainstream-deity, inter alia, by adding its name to the many existing names of the subsuming god. We also may mention, in passing, other stratagems like the Dasha-avatara myths of Vishnu, the Tamil Sthala Puranas and the trans-Indian Jyotirlinga legends of

Siva, as also the Daksha Yagna tale that helped to 'network' fifty one distinct Shakta Pitha-s into the mother cult. The critical contribution of these major creative works of ecclesiastical genius in absorbing powerful pre-Hindu and non-Hindu cults into the 'great tradition' can hardly be understated. The stories of how totally-contradictory representations, like the dark, austic Kali, the fair hill-maiden Parvati or Uma, the emaciated, crone-like Chamunda and the radiant warrior- goddess Durga, were all ultimately 'assimilated' into one omnipotent Devi would take just too long to narrate.

For the present, we need to concentrate on only two divergent belief-systems that finally converged, through accident, effort and definite design, into the present-day Bengali Durga. The first relates to the tradition, which we may term as the war-like Rudra-forms — covering the entire range, from the Indo-European goddess on the lion, the Simha-vahini, and the meat-eating, wine-drinking tribal goddess, Vindhya-vasini, to the buffalo-slaying Mahishamardini of the Markandeya Purana. Though texts and sculptures in Bengal portraying different images of the goddess started appearing from the eighth century or thereabouts, it is only in the late medieval period that the resplendent icon of the victorious Dasabhuja (ten-armed Bellona) — riding her lion (Simha-vahani) and slaying the 'evil' Mahishasura, in a striking, dramatic finale — became imbedded in the minds of Bengalis. Needless to say, the image combined the separate traditions of the lion-goddess and the buffalo-slaying devi . Krittivasa's Bengali Ramayana of the 16th century weaved together into a clear, definitively Bengali iconic convention the disparate popular perceptions that existed of the warrior-goddess' form and prowess.

Equally significant is the fact that it introduced, authoritatively for the first time in Bengal, the 'akal bodhan' or untimely autumnal worship — utilising the legend of Rama's sudden pre- battle invocation to the great goddess, to justify and link it with the pan-Indian tradition. The timing of the Bengal's most important religious festival, the Durga puja was thus fixed according to specific dates on the Bengali lunar calendar in Ashwin-Kartik (September-October-November). It is perhaps quite deliberate that the puja happened to coincide with the ripening of the then-popular staple crop, the Aus paddy — just after the last threats to the standing mature plants, from the early-Ashwin floods and the dreaded Shara-sharir baan, had been successfully overcome. Examples like these display the characteristic ingenuity of the

priesthood, but more so its applicational flexibility: which permitted the combination of the dictates of the all-Indian Brahmanic tradition with the local requirements, constraints and realities of the 'parochial' 'little traditions'(Deshachar).

Art and culture have served for centuries as the most accomplished handmaidens of religion, and it can be expected to be no less in this province. The melodious hymns and awe-inspiring chants of Durga's balladic glory, the Chandi-paath, were lapped up by generations even before Birendrakrishna Bhadra's unforgettable recitals on the radio became a must, only a few decades ago. Every twist and turn of the battle is dramatised so effectively and vivid descriptions of every stage of the conflict portrayed with so much life and colour, that all listeners are relieved when the goddess finally slaughters the deadly 'Asura ' in a high-pitched, theatrical climax. But few Indians now ponder to consider the fact that the dark autochthones that the so-called Aryans branded so derogatorily — as the Asuras, the Danavas, the Rakshasas or Pisachas, were most probably their own ancestors — though only mass-scale scientific tests can probably establish if even a single one of us have 'escaped' these genes. If that be so, the blood that was spilled in this momentous victory of 'Aryandom' (however metaphorically) could have been the blood of our own ancestors.

But there is another aspect that has to be considered in all fairness: the buffalo, as the real 'demon' of the religious tale. The tribal-turned-peasant groups that swept down from the uplands and from the forests, colonising the river valleys and dewatering the wet swamps of medieval Bengal, had to fight and eliminate hordes of rogue '*Mahishas*' (buffaloes) all the way. In a state where land and water meet at very, very frequent intervals, depopulating or subjugating the numerous multitudes of the largest and most powerful amphibian creatures out of their natural habitat, must have required generations of incessant struggles. The nearest and most ready example or parallel that one can imagine, though not without rancour, is that of the new American farmer — as he pushed his way west across the vast 'Prairies', decimating the bison and the 'Red Indian' alike, with ruthless dexterity. How much the central motif of the *Mahishasura-vadha* story: the slaying of the buffalo-demon by the *Mahisha-mardini Durga* , influenced the *Sanskritisation* of this new

peasantry is difficult to quantify now. But it is highly likely that this icon must have had its special appeal and relevance among these emerging social formations in medieval Bengal, and continued to do so over the succeeding centuries, even as the people became more urban, educated or 'modern'.

There is little doubt that even in the belligerent 'aspects' of the *Durga* tradition, there has been a fusion of the different iconographic and textual streams of the lion-goddess (*Simha-vahini*), the buffalo-slayer (*Mahisha-mardini*) as also the four-armed *Chatur-bhuja*, the eight-armed *Ashta-bhuja*, the ten-armed *Dasha-bhuja Durga* imageries. The two major streams of the *Simha-vahini* and the *Mahisha-mardini* have coexisted as parallel motifs of religious sculpture for centuries, as proved by archaeological finds at different sites, dated between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. In several Bengal '*Durga*' images, however, a strange 'mount', the iguana (*godhika* or *gosap*) that looks like an oversized lizard, replaces the regal lion. What is worthy of note is that archaeologists feel that this image type clearly outnumbers the lion-mounted icons in this state. Indigenous, as this custom definitely is, it appears to have been completely obliterated by the more attractive 'sanskritised' image of the *Simha-vahini*, that is so much more 'respectable,' as also definitely in better tandem with the pan-Indian *Brahminic* thinking.

Let us now leave aside the '*Rudra*'-forms, for we shall find the second tradition of *Durga*-worship to be equally interesting. It is the *Haimavati-Uma-Parvati* tradition, which emphasized on love and affection — in this case, on the longing of parents and the entire family for their married daughter. Poets and ballad-writers of the region excelled each other in conveying the tender feelings on the daughter's homecoming and the pathos accompanying her departure. It is here that the Bengali character of *Durga puja* comes out, at its very best. *Sita's patigriha-yatra* (*Sita's* farewell as she left for her husband's home) and *Rama's vanavas-yatra* (as *Rama* leaves his palace for fourteen years, for the forests) cast palls of gloom over audiences in other parts of India, but it was *Durga's visarjan* (when

Durga takes leave of her parents on the fifth day) that was undoubtedly more effective in moving the common Bengali to tears. Even the departing warrior-goddess sometimes reciprocates by 'weeping' — with thin streams of *garjan*-oil seeping, from her eyes.

The 'taming' of the mighty female warrior was now almost complete, for she was not the veritable symbol of a disturbing, matri-dominated past but just one more sweet girl of the house, who pines for affection and can shower us with her love and care. The domineering femme, before whom the gods and demons trembled, was successfully transformed into a compliant creature of the reversed social order of Hinduism: the hegemony of patriarchy. To drive home the point, the *Markandeya Purana* mentions that the success of *Durga* was largely due to the weapons that were generously donated to her by the male gods. It may, of course, be futile to ask as to why these powerful deities had themselves failed to vanquish the buffalo-demon if their weapons had indeed been so potent.

As expected, the vigorous swing from the belligerent warrior to the domesticated daughter is not without its contradictions and problems. Poets have not missed out on this anomaly and Dasharathi Ray's *Menaka* exclaims to *Uma-Durga's* father, *Giri-raj*, when he escorts *Durga* to her mother:

"Oh, *Giri!* Where is my daughter, *Uma?*
Who have you brought into my courtyard?
Who is this ferocious female warrior?"

Rashikchandra Ray echoes *Menaka's* sentiment in almost identical language:

"*Giri*, who is this woman in my house?
She cannot be my darling *Uma*,
This terrifying ten-armed
woman! "Our *Uma* has such a sweet smile,
Not this loud terrible shrew,
Dressed all for battle,
Her hair dishevelled,
No, not her, never!"

Tenderness (*maadhurya*) and affection (*vatsalya*) are what the *kavis* now eulogise, and what patri-centric society demands — not the belligerent '*bhayankari rupa*' of the goddess. Shashibhusan Dasgupta felt that centuries of *Vaishnava* influence in Bengal had pacified and humbled even the great goddess of war. Ferocity was best left in Bengal to the *Tantrik Shaktis*, like *Kali*, and *Durga's* popularity in this province lay in playing the role of the lovable and loved daughter.

But the 'feminisation' of the once-proud symbol of matri-centric religious belief can hardly be completed with only the daughter of the family syndrome. Children have necessarily to be brought into the iconic presentation, irrespective of whether they assimilate into the scene or not — to remind the valiant '*Rana-rangini*' of her real role in Hindu social life: as a dutiful mother.

Rashikchandra Ray's *Durga-Mahamaya* can stand her mother's anguish no more and has thus no choice but to shed her war-like posture and return immediately to the 'daughter-mode', thus:

"Mahamaya now becomes a daughter,
Siva's wife, with children two,
Both nestling on her arms,
Radiant, in the placid moonlight."

So, enter *Kartikeya* and *Ganesha*, the two sons. In the twelfth century icon of *Durga* from Dakshin Muhammadpur in Comilla in eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh), these two appear — but only as a part of the subordination of the entire cosmic order to the goddess. In this image, as in several other medieval images, this pair of brothers is positioned on *Durga's* pedestal, along with the highest triad of Hinduism, *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Siva*. Earlier or later images of similar nature are found in the different *Mahisha-mardini* sculptures (Madhavapasa of Barisal, Chandina of Comilla, Betna of Dinajpur, et al) — though iconographic texts offer no explanation for the presence of these divinities. Was this because the patriarchal priesthood found

the position of *Durga* presiding over all the mighty gods too demeaning to accept gracefully?

It speaks of the crafty ingenuity of the local episcopacy that, by the simple device of eliminating the great Hindu triad from later *Durga*-stelae, they ensured not only that the goddess's hegemonic symbols were removed, but also that leaving her alone with just her two sons would gradually lead to the replacement of her war-like prowess with expected maternal 'softness'. This adept act thus reversed the whole situation where her paramount position over the gods is radically altered into a diametrically opposite position, which is a stern, definitive reminder to woman: that her motherly duties were equally important, if not more. Thus we find a number of '*Lalita*' sculptures of *Devi*, found all over Bengal. This interpolative stratagem of bringing in the children of the goddess into the iconic frame may partially explain why they were never really 'integrated' into the imagery.

Accommodating the 'daughters' was fraught with more problems, as they were established partners of *Vishnu* and *Brahma*. The detailed studies of Bengal's sculpture and iconography made by Rakhal Das Banerjee, N.K. Bhattasali, J.N. Banerjee, S.K. Saraswati, Enamul Haque and others reveal that there is not a single ancient image of the goddess with all her four 'offspring'. Bratindranath Mukherji has, of course, mentioned one rare exception found in Rajshahi Museum. Though the image of the mother with her entire brood (*Saparivara Durga*) became an important visual formula in a large number of eighteenth and nineteenth century Bengal temples — as also as a widely-accepted *Ishta-devi* in numerous households in the state, not a single religious text can be located to support the later interpolation of the children in *Durga's* iconic frame, and she is quite alone in almost all her images outside Bengal. The anomalies that appear in the iconography between the warrior-goddess and her four unconcerned 'children' may now become clearer. We may also note that each of the four 'children' are worshipped in Bengal again, at other times of the year — in their own right, on their own *puja*-days.

The 'approved' image combines not only what is considered the best of the traditions of the *Simha-vahini*, the *Mahisha-mardini* and the *Dasha-bhuja*, it succeeds in reinforcing mandatory 'maternal' obligations on the fearsome bellona, through the skilful positioning of her four unconcerned children. Whether by text or by context, the persistence of the patriarchy of Bengal ultimately paid off and resulted in the widespread prevalence of this '*Saparivara Durgā*' frame of the goddess in Bengal. This process reached its maturity with the steady but unmistakable rise of Hindu feudal '*Bhusvamis*' in late medieval Bengal and the subsequent Hindu zemindars and rajas, like Kamsa Narayan of Taherpur and Krishna Chandra of Nadia, who arrived as Muslim power gave way to the Colonial. With no possibility of any State interference in Hindu socio-religious issues, and with the 'settling down' of the medieval pro-Islamic wave among the masses of Bengal, the feudal-supported, rekindled *Brahminic* forces that were thus unleashed, actively reinforced the patriarchal campaign. It was then left to the *madhura padavalis* of Ramprasad and his companions in the 18th century, their numerous devotional songs in honour of the goddess, to orchestrate the final metamorphosis of the deity : from her primitive 'aggression' to her later 'domestication'. The 'untamed' warrior-goddess of India was finally converted into a typical '*gharer meye*' of Bengal, the beloved daughter of the family — thus ensuring *Durgā's* unchallenged primacy of position, in the hearts of the multitudes of this province.

Students of anthropology, gender and semiotics can now recapitulate in wonder, and examine in details, the entire gamut of the processual transformation that entailed the deliberate debilitation of an annoying reminder of the once-sovereign mother-goddess. They have ample time to marvel at the sheer craft and skill with which the ancient and veritable personification of womanly strength, valour and autonomy was 'contained'— symbol by symbol, attribute by attribute — through a bizarre array of sacred texts, 'popular' he-dominated traditions, male-sculpted figures and then topped up, with the irresistible cream of emotional poetry, lyric and song.

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