

The Great Goddess Durga

“I am the power that manifests everywhere

I am life, I am death,” says the Mother (Tewari 31)

The Great Goddess of the Hindu tradition is Durga. She is Sakti (cosmic energy), everything in all parts of the universe (Tewari 8). She is worshipped throughout India in various forms and known by an incredibly extensive list of names. These names and representations will be explored here, along with the myths which surround the Goddess. Associated with the gods of the Hindu pantheon she is an unstoppable force known for slaying demons and spurring the gods into action. There are early depictions of feminine figures from the Indus Valley Civilization of the first/second century BCE, but there is no concrete proof that these figurines and icons are goddesses comparable to Durga. Although the Vedas mention goddesses, there is no overwhelmingly powerful feminine figure which stands out as the Great Goddess (Chitgopekar 59).

Other Hindu texts such as the Puranas and the Epics are more instrumental in depicting the cult of the Goddess, which thrives among devotees in almost every village, town and city in India (Chitgopekar 4). Puranas such as the *Kalika Purana* and the *Skanda Purana* articulate the legends that give Durga dimension and an aura of strength. The *Mahabharata* is the earliest text that describes Durga as the slayer of Mahisha the buffalo-demon (Chitgopekar 62). Although Valmiki’s original *Ramayana* depicted Rama worshipping the Sun seeking aid in his quest against Ravana, Krttivasa’s Bengali version describes Rama worshipping Durga in the sun’s stead (Chitgopekar 61),_invoking the Great Goddess to aid him in his battle. The most authoritative text on Durga however is the *Devi Mahatmya*, a fifth or sixth century CE text from the *Markandeya Purana*. This compilation can be considered to be raising Durga’s position

within the Hindu sectarian traditions (Chitgopekar 70). These texts describe the origin of the Great Goddess Durga. This deity is similar to others in the Hindu pantheon with a great variety of physical representations, names and myths, which will be explored here.

Reading the Hindu texts in search of Durga's stories requires one to have a better knowledge of her names, so she can be recognized. The Goddess' names vary in origin and meaning and all lend us insight into such aspects as her role to her devotees, how she was created, what exploits she has undertaken, and her physical forms. The name Durga means "she who is difficult to go against" (Chitgopekar 76) [Chitgopekar notes that scholars translate her name differently, but all denote that she is an incredible, almost unimaginable force]. The name Durga can also be attributed to some of her exploits. As Chitgopekar explains, the *Skanda Purana* indicates that the name of Durga is given to the goddess Parvati, consort of Siva, when she kills the demon Durga. A myth from the *Devi Mahatmya*, however, states that the Goddess acquires this name when she slays the demon Durgama. Her qualities as a goddess are denoted by her names as well. Durga is often called "Mother of the Universe" or "Universal Mother" (Dutta 17). As Uma, Siva's consort, she is seen as a protector and a mother figure. The name Kali identifies the opposite, and is revered as a destructive force. Along with others of the same nature, these names indicate that "the Goddess Durga embodies within herself three forces: Creative, Preservative and Destructive. They are her three primal qualities: Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas" (Dutta 18).

One of Durga's most widely recognized roles is as a great demon killer, and has been given names appropriate to that role as well. She is known as Mahisasuramardini, the buffalo trampler, which Chitgopekar describes as her "most well-known epithet." (13) Her demon killing forms relate to the names she is given in various myths. Names such as Parvati and

Himavati, daughter of the mountain (Chitogopekar 79), introduce certain stories of her creation that are written in the Hindu texts. Alternatively, names such as Dasabhuja, ten armed one (Chitogopekar 79), or Trinayani Durga, three-eyed Durga (Dutta 16), provide us immediately with a mental image of the Goddess. The Goddess' multiple forces are also revealed in her imagery. At times called Gauri, the fair complexioned one, we think of her more compassionate side, whereas the names Kali and Shyama, the dark complexioned one, denote her terrifying destructive persona. The nomenclature of the Goddess indicates a rich, complex and detailed history. The legends and representations of the Goddess indicated by her names reveal the intensity and importance of her powers; it can be said with certainty that the role of the Goddess in the Hindu pantheon is not one to be overlooked.

Durga's iconic representations are also important tools for understanding her power. A popular image of Durga is that of her in her ten-armed form killing the buffalo demon Mahisa with one leg over her lion. The Goddess holds weapons from different male gods, linking their power to her. Chitogopekar and Dutta disagree on some of the weapons they list as being in her possession. Dutta's list includes Siva's trident, Agni's dart, Indra's thunderbolt, Varuna's conch-shell, Vayu's bow, Kubera's club, Yama's iron rod, Vasuki's snake and Surya's shield and sword (Dutta 12). Chitogopekar agrees with Siva, Agni, and Indra's contributions but adds that Durga held a string of beads and a water pot from Brahma, Visnu's discus, an axe from Visvakarman, a cup of wine from Kubera [The Great Goddess is depicted as drinking from this cup of wine regularly while in battle with Mahisa. (Chitogopekar 25)] and claims that Varuna's gift was not a shell but a noose instead. Surya's gift is also disputed; Chitogopekar asserts that the gift from this Sun God was instead the rays of the sun being on all pores of her skin (Chitogopekar 19). These gifts are an important part of Durga's story. By endowing her with their emblems the

gods of the Hindu tradition show that they place their faith in her to destroy the demon Mahisa who threatened them and whom they could not overcome. Part of Durga's physical representation is that she is beautiful beyond measure. This beauty is unparalleled (Dutta 12) and attracted some demons to their ultimate death. As discussed previously, the Goddess incarnates in different forms, including Kali, one of her most worshipped shapes. Kali is dark skinned, and has four arms. Two arms hold weapons to "frighten the demons and inflict punishments," while the other two offer blessings to her followers (Tewari 30). Kali's tongue is dripping with blood which indicates her role as the goddess of destruction. However, keeping with the theme that the Great Goddess encompasses all creation, preservation and destruction, we are reminded by Kali's tenderness, portrayed by her feminine form, that "destruction is the beginning of creation" (Tewari 30).

Durga fulfills a great many roles, the three most important being the Creator, the Preserver and the Destroyer of the universe. All other duties she has can be categorized within these three. Vaisno Devi is regarded by some as the ultimate form of this creative Sakti. She is the power that drives the Gods into action (Chitgopekar 49). She is linked to the three great Gods of the Hindu tradition and their great power. Named after the gods with whom she is associated, the Great Goddess can be referred to as the creative force Brahmani, the preserving force Vaisnavi, or the destructive force Rudrani (Dutta 18). Another important role of Durga is that of a protector for her worshippers. In the *Skanda Purana* the Goddess states that her followers would be spared from the torments of life by invoking or worshipping Her (Dutta 4). One major event dedicated to the worship of the Great Goddess is the Durga Puja. Also known as the Durgotsava or Dasahara, it is celebrated in the Bengal month of Asvina which correlates with the season of autumn. The celebration culminates with the victories of good over evil, principally the

triumph of Durga over Mahisa and Rama over Ravana, and signifies the defeat of internal enemies by the devotee (Chitgopekar 102). Durga's victory against Mahisa has been taken to signify not just the fight between gods and demons or good versus evil, but also the concepts of truth and mental illumination triumphing over falsehood and ignorance (Dutta 22). The Goddess thus has a role in aiding people in finding illumination, a goal in the Hindu tradition. Durga plays many other roles in the lives of her followers including bestowing divine wisdom and spiritual wealth (Dutta 21). Durga has great meaning to people of all castes because her multitude of roles allows her to deal not only with the expansive concepts such as the creation of the universe, but also deals with the internal struggle of all people.

Durga, the Great Goddess is incredibly popular because she has the ultimate power. Her forms and myths denote a deity that can be considered almost unparalleled in strength and thus deserves the respect and worship she is given throughout India. The study of Durga is so rich and detailed however that it requires to be researched with much more depth and dedication to have a complete understanding and respect for the Great Goddess.

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