



Newsletter Archives

**Durga - Narrative Art of an
'Independent' Warrior Goddess**

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Durga - Narrative Art of an 'Independent' Warrior Goddess

Article of the Month – April 2001



One of the most invoked forms of the Great Goddess is her manifestation as the youthful, multi-armed deity who successfully battles the mighty buffalo demon that symbolizes among other things, the elemental powers of brutish ignorance. In her this incarnation she is referred to as Durga, the 'unattainable'.

The Great Goddess Durga was born from the energies of the male divinities when the gods lost the long drawn-out battle with the asuras (demons). All the energies of the gods united and became supernova, throwing out flames in all directions. Then that unique light, pervading the Three Worlds with its luster, combined into one, and became a female form.





The Devi projected an overwhelming omnipotence. The awesome three-eyed Goddess was adorned with the crescent moon. Her multiple arms held auspicious weapons and emblems, jewels and ornaments, garments and utensils, garlands and rosaries of beads, all offered by the gods. With her golden body blazing with the splendor of a thousand suns, seated on her lion or tiger vehicle, Durga is one of the most spectacular of all personifications of Cosmic Energy.

The tremendous power of the Goddess was poised ready for the grim battle to wipe out demonic forces, the asuras whose exaggerated ego-sense was destroying the balance of the universe, and whose sole purpose was to dominate and control. It was the universal war between knowledge and ignorance, truth and falsehood, the oppressor and the oppressed.

The world shook and the seas trembled as the Goddess engaged the Great Demon Mahisasura and his hosts in fierce battle, creating her own female battalions from her sighs breathed during the fighting.



The Great Goddess first annihilated the army of the titan. Then she roped his own mighty buffalo-form with a noose. The demon escaped, however, emerging from the buffalo body in the form of a lion. Immediately, the Goddess beheaded the lion, whereupon Mahisa, by virtue of his Maya-energy of self-transformation, escaped again, now in the form of a hero with a sword.

Ruthlessly the Goddess riddled this new embodiment with a shower of arrows. But then the demon stood before her as an elephant, and with his trunk reached out and seized her. He dragged her towards him, but she severed the trunk with the stroke of a sword. The demon returned, now, to his favorite shape-that of the giant buffalo shaking the universe with the stamping of its hoofs. But the Goddess scornfully laughed, and again roared with a loud voice of laughter

at all his tricks and devices. Pausing a moment, in full wrath, she lifted to her lips, serenely, a bowl filled with the inebriating, invigorating, liquor of the divine-life force, and while she sipped the matchless drink, her eyes turned red. The buffalo-demon, uprooting mountains with his horns, was flinging them against her, shouting defiantly at her the while, but with her arrows she was shattering them to dust. She called out to the shouting monster: "Shout on! Go on shouting one moment more, you fool, while I sip my fill of this delicious brew. The gods soon will be crying out for joy, and you shall lie murdered at my feet.

Even while she spoke, the Goddess leapt into the air, and from above came down on the demon's neck. She dashed him to the earth and sent the trident through his neck. The adversary attempted once again to abandon the buffalo-body, issuing from its mouth in the shape of a hero with a sword; but he had only half emerged when he was caught. He was half inside the buffalo and half outside, when the Goddess, with a swift and terrific stroke, beheaded him, and he died.

The chief demon Mahisasura was thus dead, and the gods praised the Goddess, joyfully worshipping her with flowers, incense and fragrant paste:

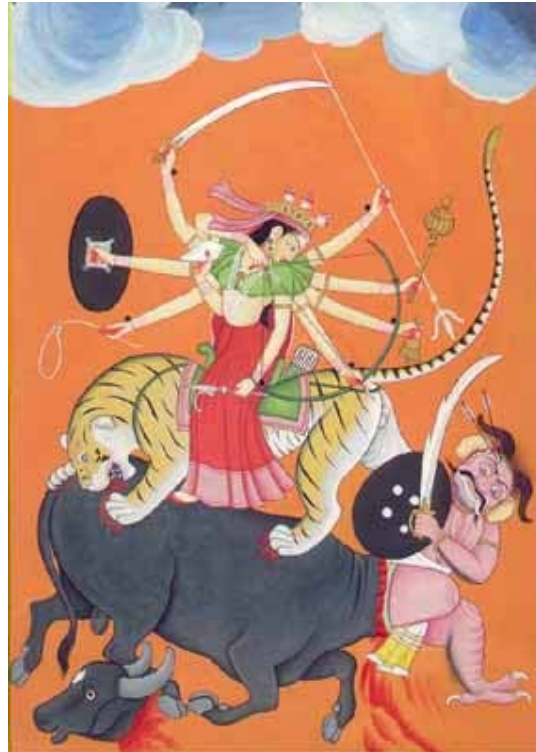
*Thou Ambika [a name of Durga] dost
overspread the universe with thy power.
The power of all divine beings is drawn
into Thy from.
Thou art Great Mother, worshipped by all
divine beings and Sages.
We bow ourselves in devotion to Thee.
Bless us with all that is good for us.*

*We bow before Thee, O Devi,
Thou who art the good fortune of the virtuous,
Ill-fortune in the house of the evil,
Intelligence in the minds of the learned,
Faiths in the hearts of the good,
The modesty of the high born.*

- Devi Mahatmya

The world was at peace again. The skies cleared, the rivers kept their courses, there was sweet singing and dancing. The winds blew softly, the sun shone brilliantly, the sacred fires burned steadily. Strange sounds that had arisen in the various quarters died away.

The departing Durga offered the gods a boon. She promised that as 'Sakambhari' she would nourish the world in time of need with the vegetation grown from her own body, and that in her 'terrible' form she would deliver her worshippers from their enemies, and bless them. Then she vanished from the very spot on which the gods were gazing.



Thus the reveries of Mahisa are exterminated. Into this wondrous male fantasy intrudes the Mother Goddess. She lures and entices him and, because she represents the power of the unconscious and the pull downward and backward into the protective womb, the demon unwittingly plunges into her dangerous orbit. In a throwback to reciprocal animal mating postures, they dance in mutual desire and dread. Mahisa is forced into sacred, single combat with the fascinating but enigmatic, dangerous creature. On the battle stage the disguise of each is penetrated; then the demon and the Goddess are reduced to their true nature; in the last analysis they are alike. Finally, like the ancient bull-kings who were themselves royal sacrifices, fecundators of the earth, bearers of vicarious guilt, hero is transformed into victim and, having lost his position in heaven, now Mahisa loses his very life. He is decapitated by the Mother Goddess, and on earth, paradise is restored, but only temporarily, for the demon inevitably returns to earth for the eternal cyclical repetition of the entire life process.

The myth is saturated with the potential for violence inherent in the male-female oppositions. As the story unfolds, the relationship between Mahisa and the goddess is manifested at many levels: psychologically both demon and goddess become what the other is, both behave like ferocious animals and one never knows what will happen in the next instant, as the constant alternations, which range from the bestial to the divine, are the only reality. Thus each of the antagonists can be symbolically interpreted as now the monster/dragon, now with feminine or with masculine attributes. Each can represent justice and power or evil and danger; and each contributes to the orgiastic disorder necessary for recreation. The myth thus transcends the male-female alternative, signifying psychic totality. The condition of the contemporary urban dweller who howls in fear in the dark as he confronts the bad animal of his nightmare differs little from the fright syndrome of the jungle dweller, forced into struggle with a live animal. Until the dreamer awakes, he is in the same situation as his prehistoric ancestors were. Pervading the deepest levels of the psyche, ready to spring at random, the residual animal, source of human energies, seeks recognition. The unfocused, floating primordial imagery, rooted in the biological heritage, is stabilized in culture. Externalized projections, first structured into dance, cultish animal rites, orgiastic fertility ceremonies and much later into literature, art, myth and ritual, provide the camouflage of human respectability and channel the anxiety into an acceptable form. Left to itself without organization, animal nature will surely erupt.

When left unrecognized and unattended, under stressful conditions, animal impulses break through in random fashion, and blind fury re-emerges in full force. As repository for the archaic residue, Mahisamardini, the Goddess who slays the buffalo, is a therapeutic symbol.

Durga's name literally means "Beyond Reach". This is an echo of the woman warrior's fierce, virginal autonomy. In fact many of the figures associated with her are officially virgin. This is not meant in the limiting sense understood by the patriarchal order, but rather in Esther Harding's sense: she is "one-in-herself", or as Nor Hall puts it, "Belonging-to-no-man". As Harding further observed of 'The Virgin Goddess': 'Her divine power does not depend on her relation to a husband-god, and thus her actions are not dependent on the need to conciliate such a one or to accord with his qualities and attitudes. For she bears her identity through her own right.'

The disappearance of Durga from the battlefield after the victory over aggression expressed one of the deepest truths of the episode, for the feminine action in the cosmic drama is without retentive, ego-seeking ambition.



Durga is linked also with some of the oldest known prayers for humankind's protection. In the Ramayana, Rama went to Lanka to rescue his abducted wife, Sita, from the grip of Ravana, the Emperor of Lanka. Before starting for his battle, Rama aspired for the blessings of Goddess Durga. He came to know that the Goddess would be pleased if offered one hundred blue lotuses. But after traversing the whole world, he could gather only ninety-nine. Rama finally decided to offer one of his own eyes, which resembled blue

lotuses. Durga, being pleased with the devotion of Rama, appeared before him, stopped him from committing this act and blessed him. In the fierce battle that followed, Rama was able to annihilate Ravana, thus again triumphed good over evil. To this day, this day is celebrated as Vijaydashmi (Day of Victory), and Goddess Durga worshipped all over India.

Indeed the Mother Goddess, it is believed, controls the fate of all. But even though she makes her appearance when the male deities conglomerate their respective energies, she is, in fact, not 'created' by them. All her incarnations are the result of her will to be in the world for the benefit of mankind; she chooses when and how to effect her lilas (play of the Goddess in the world). In this situation her sudden arrival spells doom for Mahisa, but only after a protracted interaction during which the confrontations between animal/demon and Goddess, male and female, son and mother, lover and beloved, equal combatants, victim and sacrificer, hero and deliverer, are given due attention as an exploratory venture into the dynamics of the laws of opposites. Their combat is, in the final analysis, an enactment of a many-aspected reality, reflecting a mode of thought which perceives seeming opposites as mere stages in a graduated spectrum of reality which has a minimum of definite boundaries.

This article by Nitin Goel.

We hope you have enjoyed reading the article. Any comments you may have will be greatly appreciated. Please send your feedback to feedback@exoticindia.com.

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