



The Lion : Mount of Goddess Durga

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Shaktism, the cult of Mother Goddess and Shakti, the female divinity in Indian religion symbolises form, energy or manifestation of the human spirit in all its rich and exuberant variety. Shakti, in scientific terms energy or power, is the one without which no leaf can stir in the world, no work can be done without it.¹ The Goddess has been worshipped in India from prehistoric times, for strong evidence of a cult of the mother has been unearthed at the pre-vedic civilization of the Indus valley. According to John Marshall² Shakti Cult in India was originated out of the Mother Goddess and was closely associated with the cult of Siva. Saivism and Shaktism were the official religions of the Indus people who practised various facets of Tantra. Siva and Shakti, the dual deities were the principal deities of the non-Aryans of the Indus Civilization.³ The Mother Goddess assimilation into the Hindu Pantheon, however, took place long after Siva and Visnu had been accepted in two distinct phases; i.e. first the Indo-Aryan male gods were given wives, and then, under the influence of Tantric and Shakti movements, which had been gaining momentum outside orthodox Hinduism for many centuries, these shadowy female figures emerged as supreme powers in their own right and emerged into the great Goddess.⁴

Due to the wide prevalence of the worship of Shakti or the female energy in India from a

very early period among almost all the different ethnological elements comprising the vast mass of Indian population, Goddess Durga gradually became the supreme object of adoration among the followers of Shaktism.⁵ Studies on various aspects of her character in our mythology, religion, etc., grew in bulk and her visual representation is well depicted in our art and sculpture. It is interesting to note that the very origin of her such incarnation (as Durga) is mainly due to her celestial mount (vehicle or *vahana*) lion. This lion is usually assorted with her in our literature, art sculpture, etc. But it is unfortunate that in our earlier works the lion could not get his rightful place as he deserved.

In the Hindu Pantheon all the deities are associated in mythology and art with an animal as its specific *vahana*, conceived both on the figurative and the metaphysical plane. An animal acting as *vahana* owns some magical characteristics, in that each single example of its species, either living or carved in sculptural form, bears the implicit presence of the deity associated with it. In the realm of Indian sculpture art the *vahana* of a deity is generally depicted below the latter's pedestal.⁶ According to H. Zimmer, the *vahana* meant as an animate divine symbol supporting the anthropomorphic figure of a god or goddess, is an iconic representation of the



power and character of the concerned divinity, or an incarnation of the same at an inferior stage and under a different aspect. The depiction of the *vahana* below the pedestal of the deity dissipates any possible ambiguousness as to the latter's identity. Such treatment of the carved images of divinities may have originated in Mesopotamia in the course of the second millennium B.C.; from thence, through the medium of trade, it may have reached in Indian sub-continent in the subsequent epochs.⁷

In consideration of the mount lion associated with her in the myths or in sculptural art, goddess Durga can be alternatively conceived as Mahisamardini or as Simhavahini. The lion came to prominence in the Hindu pantheon with the origin of the goddess Durga, which was narrated beautifully in the *Markandeya Purana*.⁸ According to this text, after being completely defeated by Mahisasura, the gods, headed by Brahma, approached Visnu and prayed for the destruction of the demon. Thereupon all the gods including Brahma, Visnu and Siva emitted flames of anger which solidified into the effulgent form of a goddess (Durga) with three eyes and ten arms, each of which bore a weapon given by the mighty gods. During this time the Himavat offered a white lion to goddess Durga as her *vahana*.

The golden skinned hairy lion is an archetypal symbol for the golden rayed sun, the lord of the day, whose appearance kills the god of the night. Night, terminating the day in the evening, is equally well represented by the bull, whose horns connect it with the crescent of the moon. It seems possible that the lion and the bull also simultaneously personified other antithetic cosmic forces, such as heat and cold, fire and water, light and darkness, life and death.⁹

The lion has always been important in mythology, not only in India, but also in some other

countries. In Mesopotamia, Ishtar the goddess of war, has always been associated with the lion. The car of the Phrygian goddess Cybele, whose cult spread all over the Roman empire is dragged by lions. Goddess Cybele is popularly known as Mother of the mountain in ancient Rome, like the same in the Indian context, Durga and Parvati similarly associated with lion and in the different manifestations, they are also known as the goddess of the Mountain.¹⁰ The Egyptian goddess Sekmet has a leonine head, while the most archaic statues of the Greek goddess Aphrodite depict the deity as accompanied by a lion. Sculptural examples of a goddess associated with lion and paired with a god associated with bull have been recovered from Anotolia.¹¹

Durga, the beautiful goddess of dawn, life and victory, riding a lion, defeats the buffalo-demon Mahisasura. In all her exploits the lion is her mount, ferocious in look and action. The lion also symbolised in all ancient civilizations as the solar, igneous and luminous principle of life and knowledge.¹² The lion is well represented in our religious digests and others, adoration to him along with the goddess is enjoyed with reference to this point the *Vaikrtika Rahasya* appended to the Saptasasti states that after worshipping the Goddess, the devotee has to attend to the demon, whose body lies in the left side of the Goddess with severed head and then to the lion, the carrier of the Goddess in her right side.¹³

Vamabhage grato devyas chinnsirsam mahasuram //29
Pujayen mahisam yena Praptam Sayujyam isaya /
daksine paratah simham samagram dharmam isvaram//30

As the symbol of the divine energies embodied by the great Goddess, who is stated to have been born out of the *tejas* of all the gods in order to slaughter the buffalo-demon, the lion express the heroism and prowess necessary to defeat the *asurik* forces contrasting with the Hindu



dharama. Furthermore, the lion can be even taken to represent the heroism and strength required from the *sadhaka* to enter the dangerous path of Shakta-Tantric religious practices, full of pitfalls for the uninitiated.¹⁴ In Indian context the lion is considered to be an animal full of Shakti(power) with a devaic and *sattvik* being of rhythmic movement. As far as Shakta iconography is concerned, the lion almost invariably accompanies the images of Parvati, Mahisamardini and Simhavahini Durga and is also represented in the most part of the composite Saiva-Shakta images, such as Ardhanarisvara and Umamahesvara, as the symbolic animal lion associated with the feminine side of the sculpture. Of course, from an orthodox Brahmanical point of view, it was only the lion, that acted in all ages as the celestial vehicle of the Mahadevi.¹⁵ It represents lordly power in general and lordly power of wild beasts in particular. The image of this animal, expressing a sense of rhythm, is thought to be made up *Prakriti maya-shakti*. Therefore, the lion partakas in the divine essence of the great Goddess, the transforming energy of the universe.¹⁶

In the Brahmanical pantheon the lion not only has relation with the Goddess, but also with Siva and Visnu. A lion sculpture placed on its *Vahana-Stambha* faces the main portal of most of the Shakta Shrines. A Shakta *pitha* is always guarded by a image of lion facing its main entrance, just like a Nandi image in a Saivite Shrine and a Garuda image in a Vaisnavite Shrine. The decorative sculptural element of Orissan temples called *gajasimha*, formed by an lion trampling on a crouching elephant marked the victory of divine light over *asurik* darkness.¹⁷ The Saiva tradition, as attested in the *Varaha Purana*, knows a leonine form of Siva which the god assumed in his Virabhadra incarnation to kill the elephant demon Nila.¹⁸ The lion's association with Visnu appears more consistent due to his incarnation as Narasimha.

Lion, the royal beast, the mount of Goddess Durga, represents the best in animal creation. It can also represent the greed for food and hence the greed for other objects of enjoyment, which invariably leads to lust. Goddess Durga in Simhavahini form is a lesson for the control of animal instincts in human beings.

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