



Shakti Worship in the Land of Orissa - An Overview

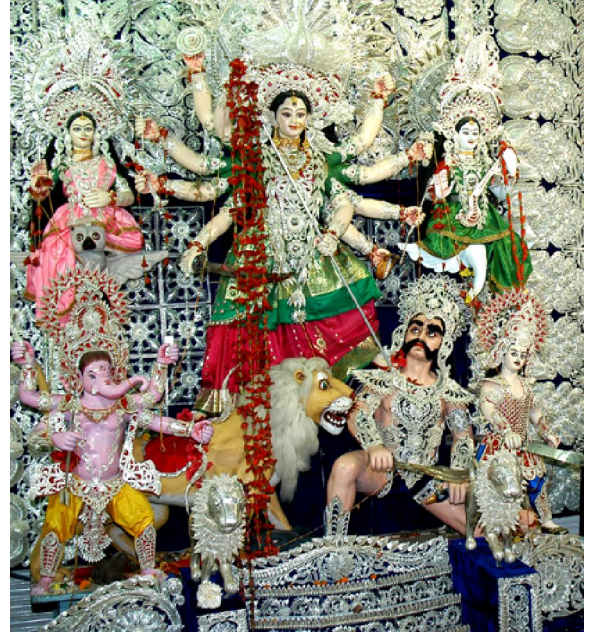
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Orissa has a long tradition of Shakti worship. Shakti worship in Orissa dates back to the Pre-Christian era and is being celebrated since the Vedic period. Like the Hindus elsewhere in India, the Oriyas believed that Shakti or Goddess Durga is the embodiment of all power and energy. She is adored by all the gods and goddesses of the Hindu Trinity. Brahma, Vishnu and Siva worship her because without her They can wield no power.

*Shibah Shaktiyayukto Yadi bhavati Shaktih Prabhabitum.
Nacheddevan devo na khalu kushalah spanditumapi.*

(Ananda Lahari)

Devisukta of the *Rig Veda* is the primary source of Shakti cult. In the *Rig Veda*, there is the description of a goddess named Aditi. She is depicted not only as mother Goddess, she is also an emblem of the divine spirit. For the Vedic sages, she was the sky, the mother, the father, the suns, the gods, the goddesses, the gandharvas, the manes and the demons. Whatever is born and would be born is also Aditi (*Rig Veda*- 1/819/10). Thus Aditi was equated with the entire universe. In the *Kathopanishad*, Aditi typifies all the gods and goddesses (2/1/7). She is the omnipotent Divine Spirit. She is all light, lustrous and invincible (*Rig Veda*, 1/136/3). She devours all during the Pralaya at the end of the world. (*Aditi and other Deities in the Veda Sri*



Aurovindo, P.6.f.n.D.) In the *Yajurveda* and *Atharva Veda* she has been invoked as the goddess who gives protection and bliss.

Shakti has other names as well. She is called Ambika in *Yajurveda*. She is depicted as the consort of Rudra in *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, "*Ambika Pataye Uma Pataye, Pashupataye namonamah'* (10/18/1). In this *Aranyaka*, the name Durga is also mentioned. Her colour is that of fire, she is extremely bright and worshipped by all.



In the *Puranas*, Durga has been described as Vana Durga, Mahishamardini Durga, Jaya Durga, Sulini Durga, Bindhya Vasini Durga, Maha Durga and Anala Durga etc. In her different images, the number of her hands varies. She is portrayed and shown as having two, four, eight, ten, twelve, sixteen, eighteen, and thousand hands. In Orissa, three types of images of goddess Durga are seen.

1. Durga in the state of killing a he-buffalo. The he-buffalo stands for the demon Mahisasura who was the very incarnation of evil. Goddess Viraja worshipped at Jaipur depicts this image. She has two hands. The spear in her right hand has pierced the body of the he-buffalo while her left hand pulls its tail. Bhadrakali worshipped at Bhadrak has a similar iconography.
2. Durga killing the demon Mahisasura, having the head of a he-buffalo and the body of a man. Goddess Sarala worshipped at Jhankada has eight hands instead of two.
3. Durga killing Mahisasura, half-emerged from the body of a he-buffalo. Such an image is seen at Narayanikhola of Ganjam district. This goddess has ten hands.

There are eight main shrines in Orissa where Shakti is worshipped. The eight deities are collectively called *Ashtakila* or *Ashta Chandika*. Their temples were built by kings and *Shodasha Upachar Puja* (Worship with 16 ingredients) is performed in these temples. These deities are worshipped as Bimala at Puri. Samalai at Sambalpur, Bhagavati at Banapur, Charchika at Banki, Gouri at Bhubaneswar, Ramachandi at Konark, Mangala at Kakatpur and Viraja at

Jajpur. Apart from these deities there are many others like Sarala at Jhankada, Chandi at Cuttack, Barunei at Khurda, Taratarini in Ganjam and Taradei at Bhusandapur etc.

In most of the Shakti shrines of Orissa Durga is worshipped with special offerings on the days of Mahasaptami, Mahastami and Mahanavami in the month of Aswina. The Puja offered on the day of Mahastami is most significant. It is said that if one worships goddess Durga on the day with due process and devotion, he will certainly get a place in the divine abode of Lord Vishnu.

In a few Shakti shrines in Orissa, animal sacrifice is still in vogue. There are many others where no such practice is prevailing. These shrines are called 'Parama Vaishnavi' shrines. Gouri at Bhubaneswar is worshipped as Vaishnavi. Animal sacrifice at Shakti shrines is a later day practice. This was perhaps a result of the influence of Tantra cult on Shakti cult. Durga, being the mother of the world can never thirst for the blood of innocent animals.

Goddess Durga is merciful. She descends on the earth in order to kill the demons, to save religion and redeem the virtuous people. We pray and worship her. May she fill our world with truth, justice, piety, kindness, love and tolerance. May she kill the demon in us and bestow us with divine qualities.

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