

Mahisamardini Durga - An Archaeological and Puranic Study

Anasuya Swain

The Supreme Goddess (Devi) is worshipped in many forms. She is variously named according to her imagined age; sometimes, she is named in recognition of her heroic achievements of having destroyed the Mahisasura.¹ According to Markendeya Purana the Devi is described as Durga and in this form Devi destroyed the Asura.²

Durga, one of the most eminent of the goddesses of Hindu Pantheon emerged as a formidable warrior deity to protect the universe from the destructive power of the demons. Her popularity as Mahadevi or Mahasuri (great goddess) never receded even after the lapse of thousands of years. In the course of her rise of to a pre-eminent position in the Hindu Pantheon, Durga multiplied her manifestations for specific purposes, thus earning on abiding popularity in the Hindu world. The abundant archaeological remains and loose sculptures of different periods spread through out the country, numerous myths highlighting her exploits and miraculous power, her profuse representation in the plastic art, her emergence from combined energies of the Hindu Gods (according to the

puranic accounts) bespeak her hoary antiquity and wide celebrity as the world mother.³ The origin of Durga is mysterious. Some scholars have traced her origin to the pre-Vedic period. According to scholars, in the primitive societies, the entire culture centered round the mother, who was the symbol of generation and actual producer of life.

In the social evolution, maternity was held in high esteem, the mother being the control figure of religion.⁴

In the view of J.Marshall who excavated the Indus valley sites, Sakti cult evolved in India out of the so-called mother. Goddess cult, closely associated with the cult of the so-called proto-Siva and Sakti, the dual deities, were the principal deities of the non-Aryan people of the Indus civilization. From the Vedic period onwards ample references are found about of



goddess Durga in various forms. The name Durga finds mentioned in the Taittiriya Aranyaka.⁵ In the Khilaratri Sukta Durga is stated to have three important manifestations. Mahakali, Mahalaxmi and Mahasaraswati.⁶

In the Upanishads the concept of Brahman is associated with that of Sakti the feminine personification of the universal life force.

It is believed that this cult gained pre-eminence in the Indian religions during the Gupta period.

The popularity of the legend can be assessed from the fact that it had its impact felt throughout the country, where she found represented profusely. In the Indian plastic art she became more lively and wide spread, with the Tantricism gaining popularity during the medieval times and there after, she came to be adorned as one of the principal Tantric deities and a number of Tantric rituals were added to her worship.

She embodied in her the integral character as mother goddess and was known by various names like Katyayani, Chandika, Kali, Chamunda, Kausiki, Satakshi, Sakambari, Bindhyabasini, Mahakali, Mahalaxmi, Mahagouri, Mahamaya, Maha Durga.

The story of Durga's combat with the asura Mahisa, resulting in latter's final annihilation was recorded in several texts, further popularizing this mythic event by giving a variety of names to the Mahadevi. The Matsya Purana, Baraha Purana, Devi Bhagavati Purana, Skanda Purana, Kalika Purana, Padma Purana etc. recorded the story by interpolating interesting anecdotes, thus further highlighting the greatness of Mahadevi. She was given numerous names by different Puranas so that, in course of time nomenclature of Durga became associated with one hundred eight or even thousand Pithas.⁹

The authors of the Devi Mahatmya by creating a powerful myth highlighted the might and supremacy of Durga. According to the description contained in Kenopanisad, the great goddess of non-Aryans manifested herself to the host of the Aryan gods providing her superiority to them.¹⁰

Sakta Upanisad enhanced the status of Devi in philosophical grab. The Devi Upanisad relates the personifications of Shakti Durga as Mahalaxmi, Saraswati and Vaishnavi as Brahma Swarupini. Durga is here depicted as a Mahavidya, Viswarupini refulgent like Morning Sun, relieving her devotees from the pains of worldly existence with all their desires. She is the goddess of nationality. She is the infinite, incomprehensible of the whole universe. She is Durga, beyond her there is nothing.

In the Mahabharat, the name Durga is mentioned alongwith the names of different goddesses in a hymn addressed by Arjuna in the form of a prayer to the goddess Kumari, Kali, Kapali, Bhadra Kali, Kandi, Kanda, Tarini, Katyayani, Durga etc. depicted as adorned with jewels and different weapons.

Yudhisthir's invocation to goddess Durga gives a clear picture of her as the war goddess, the killer of Mahisasura (the buffalo daemon). Here she is depicted as a four-faced, four-armed, and holding a noose, bow, arrow and disk in her hands.¹²

In the epics Durga is said to be worshipped by the Savaras, Barbers and Pulindas (the aboriginal tribes possibly belonging to the Austro-Asiatic ethnic stock, that inhabited middle India in ancient times).¹³

Durga was raised to the highest position in the Pantheon by the Puranas. The Devi Mahatmya Section of the Markandeya Purana (which is pantheistic and non-sectarian Purana) conceives Mahisamardini Durga as a full-fledged warrior goddess in the form of Candi and Chandika. Born out of the consolidated and refulgent, emerging from the gods, her countenance dazzling like thousands of suns, she pervaded the three worlds and seven seas forcing the gods themselves to bow down as a mark of respect to the all powerful goddess, fully equipped, engaged the demons and

their leaders in terrific battles, vanquished them and finally over powered the Asura Mahisa, piercing his body with the trident when the demon came out of the carcass of the buffalo. So goddess Durga became Mahisamardhini.

It is believed that this cult gained prominence in the Indian religious scene during the Gupta period. The archaeological evidence points to the emergence, the legend started influencing the priesthood, the monarchy in particular, and the masses general. The popularity of the legend can be assessed from the fact that it had impact felt throughout the country. We find representation profusely in the Indian Plastic art. During Gupta Period the cult become more and more popular and there after she came to be adorned as one of the principal Tantric deities and a number of Tantric rituals were added to the mode of her worship.

She embodied in her the integral character of mother goddess and was known by various names like Kalyani, Chandika, Kali, Chamunda, Kousiki, Satakshi, Sakambari, Mahisamardini, Vindhyavasini, Mahalaxmi, Mahakali, and MahaDurga.¹⁴

Different inscriptions from 5th - 6th century of the Christian era upto 13 century A.D. speak the prevalence of mother worship in different places of Orissa.¹⁵

Copper plates from Kanas and Olasing in Puri district reveal the existence of a popular mother cult in Tosali during 6th-7th century A.D. It is interesting to note that in both the copper plates one of the donees is a deity Maninagesavara Bhattaraka.¹⁶

From the above study it is concluded that Durga's importance never diminished and has ever been growing, ever since she came on the Indian religious scene while she declared that she would come for protection when ever there is an uprising of the Asuras. Thus -

*"Ittham yada yada badha danovathabhavishyati
Tada tado vatryaham karishami cerisan khayam"*

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Anasuya Swain is a Research Scholar, Utkal University, Vanivihar, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.