Divine Mother Durga : Plurality of Her Names

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From time immemorial Mother Goddess was a popular deity in ancient world. The conception of Motherhood of the Supreme being that manifested in Female form is perhaps the finest expression in Hinduism. It is the ascendance of the maternal principle over the male Gods who yielded their major symbols, weapons and power so the whole might be amalgamated into an omnipotent totalisation of cosmic forces.

In India the worship of Mother Goddess or Shakti has been in vogue since the Indus valley civilization. There are many evidences that are found from this civilization. Archaeologists have found a number of terracotta figures from the Indus sites which they consider to be representations of the Mother Goddess. John Marshall has stated that the foremost among the Indus Pantheon was the Mother Goddess. It also appears from the inscriptions on the stone and wood found in Harappa that during the period of Indus valley civilization Shakti cult was associated with that of Shiva. In the Vedic era the Mother Goddess appears in the form of "Prithvi" or universe and later on she was called Aditi, Gauri, Prakriti, Shitala, Ugratara, Kali, Bhawani, Chamunda, Kalaratri, Durga and so on. From the following verse it is indicated that the Mother Goddess was known as "Durga" because she had killed the dreadful demon Durga.

"Tadeiba Cha Badhishyami
Durga Makhyam Mahasuram
Durga Debiti Bikhyatam
Tasmei Nama Bhabishyati"

However the literary meaning of the word "Durga" is understood as the presiding deity of an unexplorable region or the savior from the crisis. Devi Durga is the progenitor of all the minutest and biggest things in the universe, animate and inanimate. This universe is begotten of her free will. Goddess Durga is the Mother and the Maid-the Prakriti and Adya Shakti. She is simultaneously the producer and the produced. She is the Creator and also the Destructor. She is formless in her true character but she assumes various forms to create, protect and destroy as and when necessary.
Goddess Durga was the Supreme object of adoration in Saktism and a number of names had given to her in Indian classical literature. "Devi-Mahatmya" of Markandeya Purana indicates that many are the occasions when in response to the prayers of Her devotees, the Mother Goddess assumes special forms to incarnate on the earth and thereby She is known under different names.

The Durga Gayatri mentions three of Her names 'Katyayani', 'Kanyakumari' and 'Durga'. In the Vedas She is mentioned as "Aranyani" (the goddess of the forest). In Taittoriya Aranyaka and Upanishad She is known as 'Haimavati'. In Bhagabata, Durga is known as 'Ekansha' and the Sister of 'Krishna'. In Bhishmaparba of Mahabharata Arjun has worshipped Durga as the Shakti of Shiva. Many names of Durga are mentioned in Mahabharata in a hymn of Arjuna. They are Siddha Senani, Krishnapingala, Kali, Kapila, Mahakali, Bhadrakali, Chandi, Chanda, Tarini, Kalyani, Karali, Vijaya, Jaya, Uma etc. In the Haribamsha She is known as Mahishamardini. It is said in the Ramayana that Sri Ramachandra also worshipped Mother Durga with one hundred and eight lotuses to seek Her blessings to kill his great enemy-Ravana. There is mention of innumerable Mother Goddesses in Mahabharata who accompanied Kartikeya, the Commander of the Gods in the battle with the demons. Eight names of those goddesses are Brahmi, Maheshvari, Andri, Varahi, Vaishnavi, Kumari, Chamunda and Chandrika. Kautilya in his Arthashastra mentioned Devi Durga as 'Sprit of Vegetables'. There is also a popular ritual of the Navapatrika in Durga Puja that indicates the worship of the goddess of vegetation or fertility. It is also found in the Markandeya Purana where Devi says "Oh Gods, I shall nourish the whole world with the life sustaining vegetables which shall grow out of my own body during the period of heavy rains in monsoon. I shall gain fame on earth then as Shakambari".

According to Markandeya Purana, the ten incarnations of the goddess are: Durga (the goddess was destined to kill the two demons, Shumbha & Nishumbha); Dashabhuja (the ten-armed goddess); Singhavahini (seated on a lion); Mahishamardini (destroyer of the buffalo demon); Jagaddhatri (the mother of the universe who over came the army of the demons); Kali (the dark-complexioned goddess) Muktakeshi (with flowing hair); Tara (the Savior who slew Shumbha in his proper shape; Chhinnamasta (the headless goddess who killed Nishumbha); Jagatgouri (the golden complexioned goddess adored by the gods and all the inhabitants of the three worlds).

Devi Durga is worshipped in a variety of forms and each form of Durga's image has its own importance. Many are the hymns that are sung in Her praise. Many are the names by which She is hailed by Her devotees. In Kashmir She is worshipped as 'Amba', in West India as 'Navapatrika', in Gujarat as 'Hingala' or "Rudrani" in Kanauj as "Kalyani" and in Bengal as "Durga".

Durga is called 'Mahavidya' as she possesses supreme knowledge of Brahman. Some of Her other names are Pratyangira (the well proportioned one); Kamakshya (the goddess of Kama or Passion); Sarva Bishwa Janani (the mother of the whole universe) etc. She is also addressed as Purani, Parashakti, Rajarajeswari. She is also named as Brahmani (the creative force), Vaishnavi (the preserving force), and Rudrani (the destructive force). She is called Mahayogini who maintains the links of creation, preservation and destruction.
The divine mother is worshipped as Adya, because she is the beginning of all. She is Mahashakti who remains as the neutral zone of all manifestations in life. As Uma, She is firm in her devotion, as Parvati she is loving and benevolent, as Durga she protects and rescues the oppressed. She is called Aparna, as she took nothing, not even a leaf while practising the severe austerities for winning the heart Shiva and getting Him as Her husband. She is Nitya, as she is eternal and never limited by space, time and causality. She is called Narayani, the goddess who is the real nature of the material world. She is called Aparajita, the goddess who is worshipped on the Vijaya Dashami day. Sundari is also the name of Durga and some other names are Shailaputri, Brahmacharini, Chandragrantha, Siddhidatri and so on.

She is called Kausiki because She became angry at the joke of Shiva calling Her "Kali" and She practises austerities by which Her body turned into a very fair-complexioned woman-Gouri by the grace of Brahma. She is popularly known for Her ten forms of Mahavidya. They are: Kali, Tara, Sodashi, Bhuvaneshwari, Dhumavati, Bagala, Bhairavi, Chhinnamasta, Matangi and Kamala. Durga, the great goddess assumes all these forms and absorbs them in Her at the time of universal destruction.

Every year in the beginning of autumn season the appearance of clear sunshine in the blue sky, a golden sheen on the leaves of the trees, mild cold breeze in the pleasant weather and the green fields reminds of the great festival-Durga Puja, that symbolizes the eternal truth of the victory of divinity over the evil. The fundamental symbolism of the different forms of Durga, came from Her principle embodying the aspects of life-fertility and thereby the creativity, continuity, destruction and regeneration that are bound to happen in a cyclic order by the rules of nature. So She is given the generic name 'Devi' in her worship.

References:

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