



Opinion

The Evolution of Durga: Tracing Her Multifaceted Origin Across Continents and Ages

By *Jawhar Sircar* October 22, 2023 1



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Durga in her present form incorporates different streams, like Simha Vahini (the goddess who rides the lion), the Mahishasura Mardini (one who slays the Buffalo-Demon) and the Dashabhuj or ten-armed goddess. They evolved in different stages and ages.

The Simha-Vahini form was well known for several millennia in the Middle East and the Mediterranean region. She was worshipped as Ishtar in Mesopotamia, Astarte in Greece and Cybele in Troy. Cybele of Turkey was, in fact, so powerful and in demand that she was taken away to Rome in 204 BC. The Roman emperors worshipped her as the “great mother of the gods”, Magna Mater Deum. Till the 4th century, her temple was located where the holy Vatican stands now.

It is quite interesting to note that her worship was known as “baptism in the blood of the sacred bull”, which reminds us of Durga spilling the blood of the buffalo. She was also referred to as the “goddess of caves” which reminds us of Durga’s origins from the words “inaccessible” or Durgam.

The Devi or the mother goddess was also quite visible in Europe and Africa since times immemorial. We see her image in plenty in the Indus Valley. But she appears less in the Vedic period, from which we get no figurines or material evidence.

The Satapatha and Taittiriya Upanishads, however, refer to “Ambika” but it is only in the Sutras of Boudhayana and Sankhayana that the name ‘Durga’ appears, for the first time. The Epics have stray references to Devi, Sakti, among others, but the ten-armed warrior goddess was not their focus area.

The Bhishma Parva mentions Arjuna worshipping Durga and there are references to Skanda-Kartikeya killing Mahishasura. A few Puranas mention Durga, but it was only when the “Devi Mahatmya” section of the “Markandeya Purana” glorified Durga’s victory over Mahishasura that she was legitimately inducted into the Hindu pantheon.

Soon, the old Vedic triad of “Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar” gave way to “Vishnu, Siva and Devi” and Brahma was retired to Pushkar.

Though Brahmanical literature took a long time to accept and glorify the goddess who killed the demonic buffalo, sculptures depicting this Devi appear centuries before the “Devi Mahatmya”. These are, however, not in the

present Dasha-bhuja or Ashta-Bhuja forms, with 10 or 8 arms. The earliest image we get is a terracotta one from the 1st century found at Nagar in Rajasthan. It has the Mahisha, so this Durga is Mahisha-Mardini, but as there is no Asura, this form is not yet our Mahishasura-Mardini. We see the lion and the trishul, but Durga has only four hands.

Another set of six Kushana period statues in the Mathura Museum has the trishul and the buffalo, but no lion. J N Banerjea has described in detail the mature images of Mahishasura-Mardini of the Gupta period but the first major text on Durga came only after the Gupta period.

This means while powerful forces may have worshipped her for centuries, Brahmanism **accepted** her (through the Puranic route) only in the late 6th or 7th century.

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