

DURGĀ THROUGH THE AGES: A Mytho-cultural Re-examination of her Origins and Figuration

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Abstract:

Goddess Durgā is considered as one of the principle deities in Hinduism, especially in its Śākta sectarian-system. Her modes of reverence combine the eternal Mother-goddess concept with other typological variants, chiefly those related to war, blood and other minimal aspects of mainstream Hinduism. However, even with her principal position within Śāktism, her origination and processes of genesis lie in obscurity. Moreover, her nonpareil iconographical conventions also defy neat uni-cultural classification, and share traits with other multicultural deity-figures, especially Nanā. In this paper, an attempt shall be made to delve deeper into the origins of Durgā, and link it with her intriguing figuration. Through this, a detailed account of her worship, from earliest of times to Early Medieval Period, shall be given and illustrated through relevant sources. At last, the politico-cultural factors involved in her sectarian resurgence during the latest temporal limit shall also be thoroughly examined.

Keywords: *Durgā, Nanā, Iṣṭar, Lion, Devī-māhātmyam, War Goddess, Sogdian, Gaṇeśa-janani.*

Introduction and Methodology:

Mythological narratives of Goddess in Hinduism provide immense diversity. Yokochi (2005: 19) typologically divided Goddess deity-figures in Hinduism into three broad categories, namely, *Consort Goddess*, whose primary function is to support, sustain and strengthen her husband's feats, in conformation to Śāstric norms; *Warrior Goddess* who provides strength and motivation to warriors, defies Śāstric injunctions; and *Supreme Goddess*, who is the Supreme Power, sustains all existence, mundane and sacred and subverts all conventions. Interestingly, the Śaivite Mother-goddess and her myriad manifestations fit into all moulds harmoniously, though their sojourn, from an all-potent independent cultic deity-form, during prehistoric stage to a structural component of the ever encompassing Śaivite world in the proto-historic and Historic phases of Indian History has been both tenacious and torting, and involve the subversion of Mother-goddess figure afore her more vigorous and popular Consort. However, exceptions in the form of normative subversions exist.

A mythological deity-figure that categorically defies this regularized mytho-cultural pattern and treads her own path is Goddess Durgā. From her appearance as a militant Goddess to her ferocious belligerent stance; from her associations with ritual liminality to her predominance in the socio-cultural milieu of Early Medieval Period; makes her an intriguing and interesting deity-figure. Durgā is often considered as a War Goddess, though her mythological narratives suggest atleast three further admixtures, such as, Blood-thirsty, Tribal and Protective Goddess (Bhattacharya 1964: 20ff.).

The chief obfuscation in charting her progressions across different epochs comes from her obscure and unorthodox origins, and her equally heterodox figurative aspects. While some streams of her genesis reflect autochthonous elements, her iconographical traits share definitive similarities with a Sogdian Goddess- Nanā.

In this paper, attempt will be made to induce analytical coherence in the bewildering variations observed in the sectarian structuration of Goddess Durgā, through the following steps-

1. *Firstly*, light shall be thrown on the various generative streams that together constitute, in one way or another, the formative context of emergence and mytho-cultic development of Durgā. Her relationship with tribal rituals, sanguine customs, feline creatures and with liminal aspects of Hinduism would also be given due consideration.
2. *Secondly*, attempt shall be made to sketch her iconographical and associated cultural developmental trajectory, wherein the role of Nanā in influencing figuration of Durgā, and further progressions during Gupta period would be explored in detail. Numismatics would act as the chief analytic instrument, with statuary as a close second.
3. *Thirdly*, the sectarian resurgence of Durgā as primary deity-figure within Śāktism would be elaborated, through relevant examples.
4. *Fourthly*, the final section would be discussion on the previous sections in order to provide a coherent comprehension of findings explicated in the conclusion of the paper.

Emergence of Durgā:

Examining myriad streams of her genesis

The prime endeavor of this paper is to examine the genesis of Durgā, and the emergence of multiple cults with Śākta supremacy under the beneficence of same Goddess, who is often proclaimed as the Goddess of Victory, and in some ways, can be held responsible for giving

new force to mythological narrative of the Goddess in Śaivite pantheon, and also for inverting expectant pattern of gendered-roles that gets commonly associated with Śaivite Mother-goddess. A new form of structural tension is apparent here. It not only elevated the mother-goddess in mythological significance, but also transformed the Śaivite worldview itself. First, some conventions regarding the origination of Durgā will be discussed, in order to better glean off her socio-historical and mythological characters. Then, comment shall be made upon the causal factors behind her rise in ritual importance; followed by a discussion on the context behind this inversion and influence of the same on gendered roles of the mother-goddess.

Out of all the manifestations of the Mother Goddess appearing in archaeological and historical evidences, the ferocious deity-form of Durgā finds significant patronage and pictographic rendition in Ancient Indian History, along with varied representation on coins belonging to Śakas, Guptas, Tribal-Republic coins etc. Interestingly, it is believed by many scholars that the iconographic demarcation of the meta-stature of the Goddess effected her artistic-sculptural depictions in sacred locations (Bhattacharya 1975: 235). Although a localized linkage can also be evinced in socio-historical annals, especially those pertaining to tribal origins of the figurative concept closely associated with the Goddess (Mazumdar 1906).

Vedic stream

The earliest literary reference of the Goddess, with surety of repose and without an iota of interpolation, lies in the Devī-māhātmyam, a part of Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa (Hazra 2025 [1940]: 90). While references to the Goddess with the name Durgā also finds somewhat slighting mentions in the Gāyatrī section of *Taittiriya Āraṇyaka*, which is unanimously assigned to 10th Century CE (Kinsley 1988: 135), in the *Virāṭa Parvam* of the Mahābhārata (ch. 25-38), where her description closely befits that of Vindhyaśinī, albeit enmeshed with complex and confounding narratives (Mazumdar 1906: 358). After the poetically supreme and narratively furious description of Devī-māhātmyam, a standard template is structured for the deity-figure, which finds reiteration in later textual references (Kinsley 1988: 140). While we are in the dark to assert with absolute certainty the point and source of the deity's genesis, some thematic processes may be postulated and presented herein to commence a movement from unknown to less known, and reduce the theoretical veil surrounding the Goddess.

While the absolutist reigns of certainty in conceptual derivation of the concept of Durgā from strands of Vedic corpus remain muffled, scholars have long hinted for the necessity of presence of a deity-figure equivalent in stature, function and narrative to Durgā to facilitate gradual and chronologically later conflation of many structural-functionally equal deities into one singular form of popular worship (Pattanaik 2000: 40). While some posit content in

finding a Vedic precursor of Durgā in the mythological description of Idā (the river), whose mighty whirling waters spread destruction and decimated the evil (*RV*-X.59), and also on accord of her grouping in the idyllic triad of three supreme goddesses- Sarasvatī, Pārvatī and Lakṣmī (referred to as Bhārati in *RV*), a figurative predecessor to the later Trinity of Goddesses of Purāṇic Hinduism (Srivastava 2019: 58), the contention becomes confabulated and confounding due to somewhat similar attestations to the river-Goddess Sarasvatī (Macdonell 2015 [1897]: 96). However, another possible presence of the Goddess-concept of Durgā can be found in the silver-art sculptures found in Bactria-Margiana-Archaeological-Complex, where recent excavations have unearthed some decorations with a female having one leg on a feline creature, possibly tiger (Potts 2001: 27). The archaeological-culture has been connected with pre-Vedic Āryan encampments in Eurasian region (Allen 2023: 256-258). Recently, it has been quite convincingly explicated by Rosati (2017: 137-55) that it is a failing venture to create explicit, rigid boundaries between Āryan and non-Āryan elements in Vedic mode of worship, for the absorptive machinations of Vedic ritualists often cornered tribal mores, and gleaned it from its proper context when it sufficiently matched the liturgical non-mainstream mythic culture-points in Rigvedic verses. The connection of Kāmākhyā worship in Brāhmaṇic socio-cultural order probably had its attractive ritual-culture propinquity in the Prajāpati- Uṣas incestual story, where all life sprung through a defiled, non-pious process of commencement (Rosati 2017: 154).

Dravidian Stream

The influence of Dravidian traditions and customs on Brāhmaṇical cults and sects is attested to by both Goyal (1986: 16) and Macdonell (2015 [1897], 20). The equivalence between Vedic and Tamil folk divinities, such as *Cheyon* (Kṛṣṇa), Korravai (Durgā) is well-known and attested by several sources (Srinivasan 1971: 55). The explication of Korravi in Cilappatikāram as the “Goddess who is bloodthirsty, ravaging, stands on lions, has a frightening gaze, to whom in frenzy, devotees surrender their heads”. Paripāṭal refers to her as goddess of *agriculture*, fertility, affection, care etc., but also highlight her worship by soldiers and warriors (Aganarru-IV.56). Her name is derived from Korram, meaning victory (Coburn 1991: 87). Legends connect her to buffalo-sacrifices, which were offered to quench the Goddess’s thirst for blood (Shastri 1997: 322). Harle (1974: 37-240) traces her influence on the development of Durgā, through an ethnographical examination of head-offering practices (called partial head-cutting) prevalent in South Indian temple-tradition, an important picturesque sculptural sight of Cholas-period temples (Srinivasan 1971: 168) and a practice also popular among Vindhyan tribes of Śābaras and Pulindas, making this region and its people, among those who firstly offered the characteristic concept of Goddess Durgā (Kinsley 1988: 156-157). Her mythological position

as the mother of Murukan enhances the possibility of her later conflation with Goddess Durgā. However, her influence on the process of genesis of Durgā stands on murkier propositions, and cannot be proved before 5th century CE (Clothey 1978: 138).

Tribal Stream

The study of Osna-Kumārī festival of indigenous people of Sambalpur led B.C. Mazumdar to derive derivative formulations from a core, un-orthodox tribal sacred concept (1906: 362), which he later contrasted with the much ambiguous and contorted narration of Virāṭa Parvam of Mahābhārata; he essentially contended that the scribes and compilers of Mahābhārata had garnered this sacred imagery from the tribal orbits of existence, adjunct to Āryandom, a fact also corroborated in later linguistic researches related to the Great War (Mehendale 2002). This section of the Epic described the Mother Goddess (also of victory) as- “*Ravishing with blood, brandishing swords of great destruction.... She lives in the Vindhya, a being of four arms, dark as darkness manifest, covered by foliated leaves, decorated with blood, she roams hitherto upon her vicious lions with ferocity unseen....a daughter of Nanda and Yaśodā, she runs with the cowherds*” (Mazumdar 1906: 364). While her linkage to Nanda and Yaśodā connects her quite potently with the Ābhīra-clan, regarded as foreigners in Ancient literature (Suryavanshi 1962: 21-26), the gradual intermingling of the recent arrivals, together with their conflation with native cowherds, and their second migration southwards (Suryavanshi 1962: 15) positions them well in the Vindhyan region, where the nearby Deogarh Daśavatāra Temple, where the couple are shown in foreign, rather Scythian garbs (Agrawala 1965: 258). The configuration of Durgā in this section is generally attested to 5th-6th century CE, a period till when the Ābhīra-clan underwent poignant and piquant Indianization (Suryavanshi 1962: 34).

Village Stream

Rahman (1965: 66) initially postulated that goddess Durgā had emerged from the innumerable village deities Grāma Devatā worshipped through the length and breadth of India. The proximity and continuity of the deity’s presence often and obviously multiplied the degree of intimacy between the revered and revering (Pattanaik 2000: 86). The sprinkling of vermillion of the aniconic stone representative of the deity was a mutated symbolic assertion of its textually verified and observationally sanctified precursor- blood. As Pattanaik (2016: 29) postulated, the figurative inclusions in the stone-figure of the deity, such as eyes, hands, and vermillion made its presence, preferably and generally on the demarcations of the village, impressive and lively.

The Lion of Durgā

The lion stands as the most characteristic representative of the eponymous Goddess (Nain 2023: 14). Besides, it is befittingly asserts the militant prowess and divine ferocity of the Durgā, while exhuming the singularity and ambiguity of her stance. The mythologically celebrated link, though found in Purāṇic literature, remains mysteriously elusive in Vedic and Later-Vedic literature as well (Mazumdar 1906: 359). However, scattered remnants maybe found hither-thither, but generally with the daunting lack of synchronous and simultaneous assortment of Goddess' Vāhana to its rider in Vedic legends. Diesel (2002: 81-94) establishes, albeit with some generalization, that the association of mighty feminine goddesses with feline creatures (lion, tiger, leopard etc.) symbolized their intelligence, cleverness, shape-shifting, non-dependence, thus reviving the analytical strands of Gimbutas (1974: 1991). Finkel (2021) posits that the lion in Assyrian relief carvings symbolized the 'Other', the Outer World, the ghastly realm, and thereby by showcasing the domination of the King/Priest over such calamity, it highlighted the submission of outer [un-civilized] realms under the magical-physical prowess of the King, and thence symbolized authority. Govindrajan (2017), in her ethnographical explorations in Kumauni Hills of Uttarakhand, described an example of inter-species kinship, where leopards act as intermediaries of the local Goddess. Mazumdar (1906: 360-61) narrates the connection of Vana-Durgā with lions, thereby also including Vindhyaśinī into consideration. The Śrī-Sukta hymn of Rig-Veda (V.6.19) sings of the lion-seat of the King who praises and reveres the Goddess of prosperity and royalty. The Sukanāsa of Hoysālā Temples show their legendary king Vīrabhadra combating a divine lion/tiger, after which he ascended the royal throne and brought the hinter regions and densely forested countryland under his sovereignty (Kaniseti 2023: 78). All such clearly proclaim the popularity and meaning of the lion-motif in Indian tradition.

The Figuration of Durgā:

Explicating the Sojourn from Kuṣāṇas to the Guptas

The gradual numismatic pronouncement and progression of Nanā as a Royal Goddess is observed in the much referred to Rabatak inscription, where the second paragraph reads as, "worthy of worship, who has obtained the kingship from Nana and from all the gods, who has inaugurated the year one." Here, Nanā is clearly regarded as of vital significance, since her mythical character has been employed to auspiciously inaugurate Year I of Kaṇiṣka Era (Falk 2015: 280). The flattering religious description finds footing in this tendency again in Lines 9-10- "*glorious Umma leads the *service here, (namely) the *lady nana and the.... Lady Umma, Aurmuzd, the gracious one, Sroshard, Narasa, (and) Mihr. [interlinear text: . .*

. and he is called Maaseno, and he is called Bizago] And he likewise.” The grammatical and syntactical structure of the description makes it permissible to believe that Nanā and Umā herein were considered as equivalents but not equals, since Kaṇiṣka espoused his cause on the basis of backing of Nanā, not Umā. Besides, Umā had been a Mother-Goddess in this region since long. Perhaps, Kaṇiṣka was trying to assimilate Sogdian Nanā in a manner that suited the palette of other subjects in his Empire. Umā (Ommo) had been a popular deity since the times of the Indo-Greeks. Moreover, barring martial-functions, characters of Nanā and Umā had much commonality with each other. The geo-cultural focus of Rabatak Inscription is vast, and includes Kuṣāṇa territorial holdings in both Northwestern India, and subcontinent proper. Equating Nanā with Umā perhaps allowed Kaṇiṣka to address his newly conquered Indian subjects, for whom Umā was a prominent Śākta goddess.

However, even with this multicultural perspective, Sogdian influence predominates in the image of Nanā sculpted in the vicinity of Rabatak Inscription, where the Goddess is seen sitting atop a lion in profile, an iconographical fact that has an important connotation for the reign of Huviṣka. During the reign of Huviṣka, Nanā was given, or rather shaped into a deity-form that has strongly influenced the iconographical convention of Durgā, as the former goddess is shown sitting atop an astride lion, in a manner strongly reminiscent of Sogdiana sculptures (Tanabe 1995: 45; Ghose 2006: 112, see Figure 01). This numismatic issue is significant, since this inspired the rendering of Nanā on later Kuṣāṇa coins, some of whom definitely inspired Gupta currency (Kumar 2024: 56; Altekar 1957: 12).

The figurative transformation of Nanā did not cease here. At Mat, we come across Nanā, firstly depicted in an Indian context. From Sikhri and Ambala, statuary has been discovered which exhibits *Indianization* of Nanā (see Figure 02), indicated by heavy anklets, use of traditional drapery (Chandra 1977: 45), infusion of mytho-cultural elements of Ambā (Mukherjee 1969: 25), and induction of Śālabhanjikā motif, which is strictly Indic in its socio-cultural milieu (Gupta 2002: 17). From Mathurā, it is possible that this iconographical innovation spread to other parts of India, as her statuary hails from Gandhāra to Chandraketugarh, Orissa (Ghose 2006: 191).

On the inaugural Chandragupta-Kumāradevī type gold-coins (see Figure 03), we come across a deity-figure seated atop a lion, who is considered as either Lakṣmī (Altekar 1957: 14; Srinivasan 2005: 132; Raven 1994: 35) or Durgā (Mukherjee 1993: 29; Ghose 2006: 23; Yokochi 2005: 336). However, this conundrum is easily solvable using a Terracotta seal discovered at Rajghat, which shows a Goddess atop a lion with the legend Durgāh (Mukherjee 1993: 21, see Figure 04). From this, one fact of significance becomes evident-Durgā was considered as a Royal Goddess, on par with Lakṣmī, and her numismatic figuration was clearly

derived from that of Nanā, her somewhat intercultural equivalent in Kuṣāṇa pantheon (Shrava 1985: 94). Her role, however, remains ambiguous, and can be variably connected with the Licchavis, whose patron-deity was Durgā, or with the commencement of a new era (if Durgā was indeed a functional equivalent of Nanā).

Simhavāhinī Goddess also appears on Lion-slayer coins of Chandragupta II (see Figure 05), though some scholars hesitate in labelling her as Durgā (Srinivasan 2005: 160; Raven 1994: 58). However, some facts must be closely scrutinized- the scene on obverse depicts Chandragupta II slaying a lion, who is shown to be crouching dangerously, but the slight deflection of his posterior body shows its inversion against continuing the attack, possibly due to the heroic stance of Chandragupta II, lending him the legend *Simhavikrama*. This may show an interesting play of words, for *Vikrama* is etymologically derived from *√vi*=work, and *krama*=stride, translating into One who has the stride of a Lion, a praise most deserving for no God/Goddess other than Durgā. On relational grounds, it can be furthered that *Vikramāditya* was the *Āditya* biruda (epithet) of Chandragupta II, which was used in a series of combinations, based on the deity on reverse (Altekar 1957: 124), exemplified by *Chakra-Vikrama* (with *Chakra-Puruṣa/ Viṣṇu*). This may show conquest of Saurāṣṭra in the realistic realm, and in the mythical realm, Chandragupta II receiving the ordination of Durgā, in a way the *Chakra-Vikrama* type shows his anointment as the Best Among Kings by none other than Viṣṇu, the sustainer of worlds, and an ideal of Kingship par excellence (Gonda 1954: 165).

Durgā in the Early Medieval Period:

Texts and Contexts

The concept of Durgā challenges previous Mythological narratives, where Śaivite Mother-Goddess was envisioned as a Consort Goddess, closely and intimately connected with the narratives and functions of her husband. But, Durgā inverts this narrational scheme in more than one way, such as the following.

1. She is shown adept in the practice and utilization of weapons and military tactics, which are often considered as in masculine domains.
2. She is not dependent on any God, and neither supports her male-half in any way. Rather, she draws energies from various gods, and creates innumerable horrendous forces of her own to combat Asura menace.
3. She challenges patriarchal thinking in her combative replies to the playful and dismissive offers of marriage; furthered to her time and again by her nemesis, chiefly Mahiṣāsura.

4. Her character challenges Śāstras, which contradicts that women, unprotected by men, are always helpless, and require masculine protection. Her stories depict that she does not bend to 'male gaze', and is fiercely independent.

The above description stands sufficient to underline the distinct nativity that Durgā enjoys with her 'vernacular/regional' divine manifestations, for her preliminary appearance in Durgā-Mahātmya is based on this very concept. Her sudden and abrupt appearance in a novel socio-mythology has enunciated plethora of suggestions, ranging from feminine empowerment (Kinsley 1988: 98) to mystical cultism (Mann 2012: 108). On a close reading of available evidence, however, this situational rise of a new martial feminine deity-figure could be considered as a consequence of four processes, which are as follows:

Rise of regional kingdoms

After the disintegration of Gupta Empire, political landscape witnessed rise of regional kingdoms, centered on a nuclear polity (Kulke 1993: 196). These emergent States expanded politico-economically through peasantization (subjecting earlier independent agrarian populace to control) and ritualization (inducing regularity in administrative practices and customs). In this expansionist process, they also attempted to incorporate cultic practices of conquered tribes, people into their own, while keeping native traditions at a slightly elevated level (Sharma 1983: 56). However, it is to be noticed that their own religious and cultural heritage were tribal, or rather peripheral to Brāhmaṇical ritual praxis. To gain political aggrandizement and legitimacy amongst Brāhmaṇa communities, collation of their (chiefly) native (Mother) Goddesses figures with highly standardized Brāhmaṇical pantheon became essential. This requirement met resolution through Purāṇic co-relation, a method that entailed either composition of a novel Purāṇa text, or addition of previously non-existing details in Mythological narrative of the Goddess, as evidences in the case of Kāmākhyā, a Mother-goddess deity-figure in Ancient Kāmarūpa, who was later adopted in mainstream Hinduism in two ways- a) conflation with Goddess Durgā, possibly to emphasize valorous traits of the Goddess and her sons, i.e. literally, the King, who officiated in many ceremonies in the capacity of Goddesses' son (Rosati 2017: 52), and b) independently as a unique and singular Mother Goddess, with sphere of influence particularly delimited to Kāmarūpa, as evidenced in the Kālikāpurāṇa (Hazra 1958: 262). Thus, as regional identity upsurged to gain a place of recognition in the discourse of politics, regional Goddesses too forayed forward with the patronage of her 'sons' and textual-mythological interpolations performed by colluding Brāhmaṇas.

Sublime expansionist consolidation

Another process that worked in tandem and in parallel with the first one was the imperial policy of deliberate settlement of Brāhmaṇas in hinterlands and deep forest areas where the Royal State had minimal presence, control and power. Absorption of traits of Goddess from herein was an earnest attempt to integrate these marginal tracts of land with central administration. As Stein (1985: 389) has highlighted, particularly in the case of Cholas, inscriptions and land-grants provide an interesting glimpse of the operational/practical aspects of the Tax-tribute-plunder spectrum, wherein some select Brāhmaṇa families and groups were made to migrate to sylvan sites, firstly in order to lay claim to still unclaimed lands, and ritual-culturally integrate tribal communities and forest-dwelling populace with ‘imagined community’ singularly commanded by the reigning Chola King. As Harle noted (1974: 205) some Durgā sculptures from Chola temples markedly exhibit tribal traditions, especially in case of head-hunting, blood-collection, etc.

Literary sources also tell an interesting tale. In Harṣacharita, Bāṇabhaṭṭa gives a vivifying description of Mother-goddess worshipped by tribes in the forests of Vindhya mentioning her terrifying traits, sanguine worship, dark complexion, distinctive nudity etc. While this goddess is not named, her typological traits led Bāṇabhaṭṭa to simply label her as a ‘Goddess of the Vindhyas’, an identification that gets further cemented in the Gauḍavāho, another text from Kannauj, which reverentially calls the goddess as Vindhyaśinī, one of three goddess-figures whose legends contributed to the divine supremacy of Durgā.

The Warrior Goddess of Martial Kings

Durgā is often labelled in texts and traditions as a warrior goddess, closely allied with ritual paraphernalia of King’s anointment. Yokochi (1999, 80) presented an intriguing parallel. During Abhiṣeka ceremony, a King was bestowed with the powers of Varuṇa, Mitra, Surya, Indra, Savitr, and other gods. In the Devī-māhātmyam section which details the genesis of Durgā, she is shown as born from the powers of Trimurti, and other Gods, who further their divine energies to get deliverance from Maḥiṣāsura. Structural similarities between the two phenomena probably supported the adoption of Durgā in royal and military milieu. Moreover, for aspirational regional monarchs, linking their Mother Goddess with a Warrior/Supreme Goddess acted in two directions. It somewhat altered the mytho-cultural shape of their own goddess deity-figure, in order to incline her legendarium to a more martially poised narration. Alternatively, such acts of linking brought them close to mainstream ritual milieu, which further afforded them to claim legitimization of both horizontal, that is, amongst equals within a common geo-cultural context; and external, that is amongst equals from differing spatio-dynastic context and kinds.

Rise of heterodox rituals

With the advent of Early Medieval period, in order to expand both its range and ritual landscape, Sanskritic tradition became more diversified, (Chattopadhyay 2011: 78). Inclusion and subsequent elevation of Durgā in Purāṇic discourse was considered essential, as this also brought two new features into attention. These are, 1) Liminality, a term that suggests practices, which find least iteration in standard mode of reverence, such as offering own flesh and blood to the goddess (*Devī-māhātmyam*, 5.18-3); head-cutting (5.06-10). 2) Inauspicious considerations, some of which got connected with Durgā due to the assimilation of multiple goddesses into her divine-complex. These include descriptions where Durgā is negatively connected with sleep (5.15), hunger (5.16), shadows (5.17) and thirst (5.19-1). These heterodox and offbeat features found complete efflorescence in Tantric practices (Kinsley 1988: 97). It was attempted to rectify, or rather re-orient this inauspiciousness via Vaiṣṇavite afflictions. This was done through re-interpretation of māyā (delusion), Śākti (power/consort) and prakṛti (earthiness). While all three are basal elements, they take up a relatively refined meaning, with more inclination towards philosophical precepts (Jaiswal 1967: 42).

The above considerations, at times quite lengthy, were necessary in order to account for the rapid disjunction between mythological narratives in the previous section and this one. They throw up an interesting challenge for studying the socio-mythological character of Durgā. In a meta-narrative context, it was the coalescence of a constellation of factors that produced the ultimate effect of transforming Durgā from a sidelight in the Śaivite worldview to a prominent cultic deity-figure herself.

Conclusion:

With the resurgence of reverence of Durgā, the suppressed cultic supremacy of Mother-goddess again experienced a return to form, with the establishment of Śākta sect, which received patronage by aspiring monarchs with regional visions and tribal affiliations. Her gender-role too shifted, from being a novice consort to a seasoned warrior, and her worshippers too asked for blessings in martial, but not in household or marital affairs. However, the period c. 9th to 11th Century CE saw a revolutionary rise of Śaivism, which even began to encapsulate Durgā, by explaining her mythological form as a deviant of Pārvatī and Umā (Sircar 1974: 32). Her domestication process was initiated by making changes in her character, such as, being less belligerent and playful in marital status; removal of certain epithets, especially those highlighting her unfavorable stance to marriage; iconographical innovation with addition of drapery, household items in added arms and ostentation; and occasions of worship, autumnal, the harvest festivals. Her absolute absorption within Sanskritic tradition left space for newer local Mother-Goddesses to occupy her position. As Sircar (2004: 52) further notes,

“It speaks of the crafty ingenuity of the local episcopacy that, by the simple device of eliminating the great Hindu triad from later Durgā -stelas, they ensured not only that the goddess’s hegemonic symbols were removed, but also that leaving her alone with just her two sons would gradually lead to the replacement of her war-like prowess with expected maternal ‘softness’.”

A direct impact of this theological development is seen on some coins of Bengal, which depict Durgā holding an infant Gaṇeśa in arms, a mythological motif colloquially called *Gaṇeśa-Janani Durgā* (see figure 6). While these actions brought about a certain change in her mode of reverence and patronage patterns (Majumdar 2021: 149), it definitely did not alter the primary mythological lair of power and piety in which Durgā was conceived, nor did it alter her sole supreme status in Śākta traditions; select Purāṇic discourses and especially in Tantra rituals (Urban 2009: 50), see Pala period statuary in figure 07. An interesting new discovery further confirms this. Singh (2021: 11) highlights a unique silver coin, bearing exact replication of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī pose (Figure 08). Its provenance has been traced to Prakash, North Maharashtra, and a region with which it shares typological familiarity (Fishman 2013: RA7-8). Additionally, the legend on the issue reads- *Kanaḍasthalīya*, meaning, of the Kanaḍa people), who possibly resided in the region during Rāṣṭrakūṭa times (Altekar 1937: 44; Kaniseti 2023: 218). Singh (2021: 12) also points the possibility that this coin was a temple-issue, probably to commemorate the mother-goddess figure around which their world mytho-culturally functioned (Eck 2015: 29).

Durgā has had many projections of mythological roles, propositions of piety and power, positions of differing significance in the Śaivite world; but even with bewildering variety in her modes of reverence through the ages, the principal cosmic and cultural connection between her ritual-cultural personality and her ardent propitiators has retained its core, fundamental and intimate essence, from prehistoric past to the times present.

Notes:

- i. The text of Devī-māhātmyam introduces the character of Durgā in mainstream Hindu Pantheon by highlighting her fierce, furious and ferocious fighting skills in front of the demonic forces (Asuras) even feared by the prominent Vedic Gods. Here, she is nowhere associated with Śiva. Secondly, she is transformed into a greater deity by the deliberate inflection of myriad deity-forms into a singular force to reckon with. She is then worshipped to not only grant riddance from enemies, but also to ensure victory against inveterate and indomitable antagonistic forces. Rahman (1965: 405) connects her numismatic depiction with swords, spears and shields with those of Athena-Pallas

- ii. The ritual-complex of propitiation of many regional, and even some of the Vedic divinities demands animal sacrifices to infuse potency and mirth into ritual functions. The Kādambarī of Bāṇabhaṭṭa (c. 7th century CE) narrates the horrific animal and human sacrifices that were proffered by the Śabarās to their Chief Goddess, called therein as Vindhyavāsini. Gait (1926: 36) describes the gory and riveting sacrificial tradition connected with Kāmākhyā. Goddess Kālī was also characteristically adored by animal sacrifices well up to the 19th Century CE. While the reason of such sacrifices remains elusive, it was a general belief among anthropologists that by offering blood and raw flesh, the (contended) would reward the community with bounteous and abundant harvest (Majumdar: 1957).
- iii. Bishop Whitehead (1916, 1928) made a detailed ethnographical survey of tribal communities in his vicinity, and noted the major and primary features of the deity-figures propitiated- I] they were mostly females, II] their names, titles were legions, whose meaning either reflected their function or sacred geography, or was unknown by the worshippers, III] they were concerned with small but effective natural forces of survival, such as harvest, plague, smallpox etc., IV] their functions were not clearly marked, V] their mode and method of worship varied considerably among different tribal groups, VI] their shrines significantly lacked the sanction, participation and ritual-service by Brāhmaṇas, who did not officiate as priests at such shrines, a job not seldom performed by the local tribal priests, or even the washer-man, VII] their shrines lacked any sculptural image, or uniform convention about the form of venerated deity-forms, and VIII] there was no ostensible uniformity in calendrical, ecclesiastical character or ritual chants, sacred festivities associated with the deity. Kinsley (1988), Sircar (1948) posit that the Brāhmaṇic absorption mode, as rendered in the Devī-māhātmyam, worked efficaciously to bring such local but popularly revered into mainstream Epic-Purāṇic Hinduism.
- iv. This form is specifically concerned with apotropaic function, and that too in special relation to children. The chief aim of such deities was to prevent the newborn infant from being engulfed by infections, congenital ailments, and other maladies. Sutta Nipata tells us of a demoness called Hariti, who consumed infants, but remodeled her diabolical behavior after meeting Gautam Buddha. The primary function of Śaṣṭhī was also to protect children against the malicious Mātṛkās of folklore, who were later transformed into benevolent

protective deities, with the inclusion of Kārttikeya in the Brāhmaṇic socio-cultural sphere.

- v. Kaṇiṣka I framed his coin with many newly inaugurated or framed deity-figures, a consequence of the immense iconographical syncretion resulting from extensive territorial and geo-political conquests under the famed Kuṣāṇa King. Jongeward (2020) and Cribb (2008) describe the coin as- **Rev:** Nanaia/Nana/Nanashao stands in three-quarter profile to right, head surrounded by a halo, crescent on top; hair held by diadem with two ribbons to left, bun at back; wears a sleeved, ankle-length loosely fitting robe; holds a wand with lion protome in right hand, bowl in left; Tamgha to right; dotted border and Inscription to left NANAIA /NANA /NANAṔAO.

*Figures and illustrations, with their corresponding serial numbers and captions, have been sequentially arranged on the next four pages.



Figure 1: Gold coin of Huviṣka with Nana on lion (Courtesy- British Museum acc.no. 1888,1208.555, reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. Gold coin, in the style of Vāsudeva; After Mukherjee 1969).



Figure 2: Clockwise from Northwest- a] Enthroned goddess seated on a lion, c. second century CE, Gandhāra, Schist, 23.2x12cm, Sherrier Collection, UK. (Source: Ghose 2006: 111); b] Goddess standing on a lion, c. second/third century CE, Mathurā, red Sandstone, H: 27.5cm, Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, Germany (MIK I 5894). (Photo courtesy: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin) (Source: Ghose 2006: 112); c] Durgā with trident seated on a lion. Terracotta Roundel from Śrāvastī, now in the State Museum Lucknow B.592. Photograph J.E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw. (Source: Raven 2020: 267).



Figure 3: Chandragupta-Kumāradevī type of coin, featuring (possibly) Goddess Durgā on reverse (Courtesy- The British Museum, 1894, 0506. 147).



Figure 4: Gupta-era terracotta high-relief seal-statuary with the legend Durgāh (Source- Wikimedia Commons).



Figure 5: Lion-slayer type coin of Chandragupta II (Courtesy- The British Museum, Reg. No. 1910, 0403.31).



Figure 6: Gaṇeśa-janani Durgā on coin of Deva-varmana of Bengal, Samatāṭa Mint (Last copy available in public domain (Courtesy- The Indian Museum, Kolkata, Reg. No. 18098, Mukherjee 1993, p. III, fig.5).

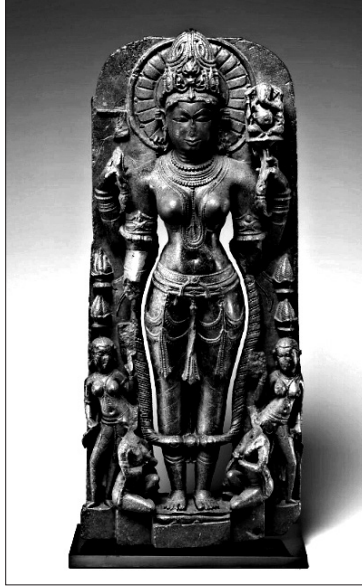


Figure 7: Godhikāvāhinī Durgā/Gaurī holding Gaṇeśa in Upper Left arm, Pala Period (Courtesy- The Metropolitan Museum, Reg. No. 2015, 519. Credit- The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Foundation Fund and Vijay K. Anand, M.D. Nanda Anand, Maya Anand, and Rohit Anand Gift, 2014).



Figure 8: Kanaḍasthaliya Silver Coin featuring Mahiṣāsūramardīnī on the obverse (Courtesy- Karan Singh, ONS Newsletter, Vol. 241, 2021).

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