

Origin myth of Durga 4th - 6th c. India

Culture and Location:

The myth of Durga is celebrated through out India though the primary location of the largest celebration is in Calcutta (West Bengal) India.

- The myth is believed to have originated in the Indus Valley now Pakistan.
- The culture of the time is as variable as the myth itself (particularly the number of Durga's arms) and numerous kingdoms came and went. 1st. century northern India (which is now Pakistan) was ruled by warring Indo-Partheon rulers, until the 3rd c. and the Gupta empire came into power, developing what was considered India's golden age.
- One version of the myth (and the one used here) was first written in the *Markandeya Purana*..and is the version most often used in public and private rituals. (*Stietencron p.120*)
- It was first written in Sanskrit .

Date of culture:

- Exact date of the origin of this myth is unknown - Clay images have been found of her dating the 2nd-1st b.c. and first written into the Puranas between 4th and 6th c.
- It has also been suggested, through found art work that current version was developed over time and possibly much later. (*Stietencron p.120*)
- Small terracotta icons have also been found from 1st c archaeological digs in Calcutta West Bengal as well.

Resources:

Durga has at her disposal the energy and the tools that the male gods have given up (sacrificed ?) for the defeat of the demon. The area of the Indus Valley was rich in resources and trade.

- Energy, wood, metals, beads, sacred waters, Sarasvati river (now gone due to earth changes) shells, flowers, jewels. wine, snakes and a lion (incorporated from Grecian artisans).

Subsistence:

Crops

- * Dates
- * Field peas
- * Mustard
- * Rice

Spring crops:

- * Wheat Spring crops
- * Barley Spring crops

Autumn crops:

- * Sesame
- * Cotton

Social structure:

- India continues to use the class system. Thought it has become more rigid in time.
- The class system was originally created from the dismemberment of the deity Purusha.
- The myth of Durga reinforces this class system of hierarchy with deities, as well as Brahmans, Kings and merchants. (Nicholas, 2003)
- It is also primarily celebrated by these castes.

Ideology:

- 80% of the Indian population practices Hinduism which consists of the worship of deities, god/goddesses. Through ritual practices of prayer, fasting and sacrifices or gifts of flowers, food, milk, butter.
- Puja's are structured rituals that are both public and private, given daily, monthly seasonally, yearly.
- Indian mythology is extremely complex.
- Originally oral then written in what is considered Spiritual text called the Puranas
- Bengali is an Indo-Aryan language.
- Temples throughout India are created to both male and female deities.
- Primary Mother Goddess
 - ☒ Devi Mahatma - Highest principle and source of all life. (*Stietencron p.120*)
- Primary male deities,

☒ Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Indra,

- Durga (the unknowable / unreachable one) Possibility considered a name for a state of being when dealing with the warlike nature of men and the need to a return to order.
- In Bengali she is Candi and has 10 arms and with her she has 4 daughters.
- She has a seemingly endless number of names. This is not a problem for the Indian culture. She is an enigma.

Structure and type:

- Origin myth - Goddess is called into being by the energy of (12+ approx.) male deities to overthrow a demon god - none of the male gods can defeat him.
- Myth of Durga is imbedded within a framing tale (Nicholas, 2003) of a disposed king and homeless merchant wandering the land looking for answers to their troubles. They meet along the way and decide they should talk to a monk. The monk tells them it all is the work of the great Goddess - creator of the universe. (ie just blame your mother) Mayadeva and tells them the stories of Durga. (knowledge over ignorance) The name of the goddess that embodies the essence of all goddesses. (This particular tale of the goddess is just one of them)

Metaphors & Symbols:

Demons / evil (Mahishasura) is vanquished through knowledge (Shiva's trident) (Stietencron p.120)

- Demons are representing mankind's ignorance, darker side, lower qualities. (Nicholas, 2003)
- The demon bull or water buffalo is thought of the stupidest of creatures and created by demons not the gods.

The story goes that the demons started creating a creature that was so ugly that the gods laughed at the site of it, the demons deeply offended never finished it. No milk or ghee from a water buffalo is used as offerings to the gods. (Stietencron p.120)

- Warrior goddess vs Demon god - good vs evil.
- Shields, spears, swords etc representing the attributes of the other gods powers.
- Shiva's trident (that finally kills the demon) represents the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and thus all Knowledge.
- Jewels, flowers - beauty and creation.

- Goodness and beauty prevails and is not lost due to ignorance.
- The Mother is all powerful - defeats demon - knowledge and light return to the earth.
- Lion or Tiger - symbolize the best in animal nature strong and regal or the worst. Durga who seems to be a composite of the ideal feminine (she also embodies all the goddesses) is riding the lion over walking beside. Implies a knowledge and natural control over all lower animalistic qualities.
- The lion icon is believed to have been introduced by the Greek style of art during the Kushan era and was later developed with more attributes during the Gupta era in the art work.

"Lion, the royal beast, her mount, represents the best in animal creation. It can also represent the greed for food, and hence the greed for other objects of enjoyment which inevitably leads to lust. To become divine (Devatva) one should keep one's animal instinct under complete control. Simhavahini (the rider of the lion)." (Harshananda)

Major Cultural values:

- Knowledge, good deeds, moral strength and spiritual practices are all cultural values,
- Embodying in the Mother/women greater than men - Durga Puja worship and practice in Bengal is matrilineal - passed on from Mother to daughter.
- Power of the Goddess is invincible and is the destroyer of enemies.
- The Mother and thus all women' have the ability to vanquish enemies of dharma.
- Reciting the 13-18 (depending on the book used) chapters of the battles of Durga is considered walking the path to a spiritual awakening.

Major cultural truth:

- Knowledge over ignorance
- Good deeds conquers evil
- Class or a hierarchal system is a divinely inspired system.
- Worship of the Goddess (gaining-Knowledge) frees one of the obstacles (ignorance - demons) in life.

Myth is in use:

- The worship of Durga is an evolving living religion and many Hindi's would consider it rude to call it a 'myth'. To them she is real and her deeds heroic.
- The Durga Puja is a highly complex spiritual practice, followed by both men and women.
- It's the time of year that the married daughters return home to their mothers. (Mitter, N.)
- A smaller version is held in the spring.
- It is primarily an autumn festival called Navarati (9 nights) held in October (based on the 1st day after the new moon) each day chapters of the story is told. On the tenth day the clay statues of Durga are unconsecrated, put in the river (a branch of the Ganges) and the daughters return to their homes.
- The Bengali calendar is based on Lunar months from sunrise to sunset - new moon to full moon and back = 28 days. An additional month is added every five years.