

The Worship of Durgā

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The idea of *shakti* is as old as man. Man is great to the extent that the *shakti* inherent in him is magnified, and his highest endeavour is to rouse and espouse this *shakti*. The Indian idea of godhead, including that of the great Brahman, rests on this and has employed it to a desirable extent. A *rishi* in the *Rig-Veda* speaks in a eulogizing tone of this aspect regarded as a female. It is She who keeps the gods in their position, makes a man virile, and makes a sage of a man. This *shakti* is generally *nigudā*, or hidden. Even the gods know it not, for not unoften they are puffed up with arrogance and conceit, characteristics which mark them out in early literature where they are characterized as *dhiroddhata*, brave but withal haughty. The association of *shakti* with Shiva is at the root of material and spiritual betterment. She is Nārāyani, an aspect, or rather the quintessence, of the great godhead, in the language of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Candi*. She is also Kalyāni, or grace and harmony. She is, above all, Aparājitā, or unvanquished and invincible, and is the Māyā of the Lord achieving the impossible. The human mind is rootless and is coloured by the tripartite functions of existence, *gunavritta*. She, however, is transcendent, all knowledge, *drishimātra*. Man in all ages has realized his fullest manifestation in Her through contemplation, and this is what is possible through worship.

The average mind cannot fathom Her depths, and stands aghast at the enveloping

gloom of distress and stupor. In the ritualism associated with the worship of the Divine Mother, She has to be roused up (*bodhana*) in a *bilva* tree, a primitive concrete form of Hers, which may suggest Her being conceived in the line of animism as a vegetation spirit. She is Navapatrikā, associated with nine flourishing evergreen plants. She is also Vindhyaśāsi, or residing in the Vindhya hills; Shākambhari, or herb-nourishing; and Kātyāyani, middle aged with red attire. Scholars have divined in Her exploits, related in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Candi*, especially in connection with the slaying of the demon Raktabija, traces of Her animal and bloody nature. She is, in a finer form, the representation of autumnal nature, Shāradyā, infusing Herself into plants, trees, and sky. Some have seen in Her (as mentioned in an article by Bankim Chandra Chatterji published posthumously) a manifestation of the working of the forces lying at the root of the seasonal changes. The orthodox scholar, basing his information on tradition, holds that this was an aspect of godhead celebrated in worship and festival from very early times. The seasonal *Indradhvaja* (the flagstaff of Indra) festival which was popular, but at the same time based on age-old associations, was a function lasting four days with the *visarjana*, or allowing the deity to take leave, on the fifth day, reminding one of its similar but later adumbration in the Durgā *pujā* of the later Purānas. Bankim Chandra Chatterji, in a vein of patriotic fervour, identifies Her

with the Motherland (*tvam hi Durgā dashapraharanadhārini*). To the average Hindu She is Pārvati, the daughter of the mountain, but She is Herself Dayāmayi, or tender. The idea of a reliever of distress and suffering found in the conception of Durgatītārini Tārā in the later Buddhist pantheon was very likely influenced by the Hindu idea. To the aspirant She is a force, ever striving to maintain order and harmony, Sarvamangalā, Jagatpratishthā, through Her routing of evil agencies like Mahishāsura, Raktabija, and Shumbha-Nishumbha.

The Mother's composite nature

She is an *avatāra*, descending on earth to establish the kingdom of justice and morality in the face of all-devouring disbelief and disorder. She is Nityā, eternal, though, like the great Vishnu, She has come down every now and then. Three aspects of the working of the machinery of *avatāra*-hood may be traced in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Candi* which is the one indispensable book preaching Her worship and unfolding Her essence. The first appears in the super-sensuous plane of rousing up the divine in man, as in the case of rousing up the divine, in the slaying of Madhukaitabha. The second, more well known, is the form of co-operation offered by the divine agencies, *devas*, in their own form and in their own right, as in the case of the routing of Mahishāsura. To the student of the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, this is the account of the part played by the gods in helping the supreme Deity. The third, and this is one peculiar to the *Mārkaṇḍeya Candi*, is Her projecting Herself into different forms and hallucinations, all in Herself, and withdrawing them to Herself again. Her *vibhūtis*, manifestations or emanations, as represented in the *Navadurgās*, are essentially different from Her

triguna aspects as Mahākālī, Mahālakshmi, and Mahāsarasvatī. She is something unique as represented in the *dhyāna*, or meditation, used during Her *pujā* which is an excellent piece of symbolic representation.

The elements in Her composite nature that have caught the popular imagination are not so much Her power and grandeur as Her *mādhurya*, or sweetness, beauty, or harmony, and Her *abhaya*, or protection.

The *Mārkaṇḍeya Candi* dilates on these two aspects very frequently. Her compassionate nature goes side by side with Her cruel, destructive force in war. She is the most beautiful woman imaginable; grace, harmony, serenity are Hers in pose, form, and conduct. She is the Great Mother dealing out affection and tenderness everywhere. A late hymn, in a Purāna-cum-Tantra work called *Shivarahasya*, which is recited by the family gathering at the close of the daily *pujās* in Bengal, regards Her as Shivā, or the benign, Shāntikari, or the peacemaker, Kalyāni, or the auspicious.

The Vedic, Paurānic, and Tāntric factors have synthetically combined in this conception of Her, a unity in the diversity of the semi-philosophical conception based on the three *gunas*, viz. the Mahākālī, the Mahālakshmi, and the Mahāsarasvatī. While the Vedic element lies embedded in hazy vagueness and is traceable in the procedure of the *pujā* only by the scholar, the Paurānic element is conspicuous *par excellence* by its determinative character. She is distinguished from Her terrible aspect of Kālī, and, in Her influence over family destiny, as well as over national betterment, betokening victory over the forces of evil and heralding the advent of a glorious era of peace and prosperity, She makes Her debut as the goddess that is all-comprehensive and all-embracing, Jagaddhātri, Sarvalokapranetri. The Tāntric element is not difficult to detect

in the code of worship followed in Bengal. While elsewhere these are made light of, the preliminaries of worship, such as *bhutashuddhi*, or the removal of the elemental impurities, and *prānapratishthā*, or the vivification, as much as the aspects of Cāmundā and Candī, the impetuous and the angry, in Her, have been utilized to make of Her a deity symbolizing mystic force and mystic energy.

The Mother in Bengal is equally the guardian angel and the reigning queen. Shyāma and Shyāmā, in the language of a great modern Bengali, are what constitute Bengal. We have it in our vernacular literature how Shyāma transforms Himself easily and gracefully into Shyāmā. The Durgā *pujā* in the Bengali *Rāmāyana* is the worship performed by the distressed Rāmacandra in a spirit of humble self-surrender and emotional abandon characteristic of the Bengali mind. Surpassing all this, She is the beloved daughter coming year after year to the house of her father, oppressed with the load of her worries and difficulties; and poets like Kamalākānta, Rāmprasād, and Dāsharathi have flown into ecstatic raptures over Her. It is not difficult to locate the root of this shunting of the devotional fervour in man. Our affections, like water, have a tendency to flow downward.

The Durgā Pujā

The *pujā* implications which relate to all gods and goddesses have found a fruitful soil in Her case, where everyone of them gets their due share of worship. The Durgā *pujā* is not the monopoly of the Shāktas. It is a non-sectarian, non-denominational *pujā*. The *upachāra*, or materials, of Her worship include such common items as *shishira*, or dew-drops, *durvā*-grass and a freshly grown *shyāmaka* plant, lotuses, and fresh fruits.

Japa constitutes Her meditational and functional characterization, and centres round a purely Paurānic formula: 'O, Mother Durgā, protect. Amen.' The *homa*, marking the end of the *pujā* on the ninth day of the moon, invests the worship with its Vedic soothing balm. The Bengali regards it as the *ashvamedha*, the horse-sacrifice of this iron age as efficacious as a hundred sacrifices. Crowning everything is the daily recitation of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Candī*, which is part and parcel of Her worship, for a month, for nine days, or for three days, or sometimes for one day as the case, or the *kalpa*, may be.

Now one important condition in all worship is the time element. It is better to have one offering in time than millions of offerings out of time, runs the maxim of the ritualists. In Bengal *devipaksha*, the fortnight of the Devi, is preceded by *pitripaksha*, the fortnight of the fathers; this again is preceded by *vratapaksha*, the fortnight of the vows. It is not mere symbolism, but practical common sense that is at the root of this. The Mother has to be roused up, they say, from Her sleep; for as deities, according to the Vaishnavite conception—and this conception, we must remember, is uppermost in the *Candī*—the gods sleep in the *uttarāyana*, or summer solstice, and a *pujā* in the *dakshināyana*, or winter solstice, is a form of penance. While this idea is not much worked upon, especially in other parts of India, the question of *tithis*, or special days, has been stressed everywhere. Each deity has a particular *tithi* earmarked to him or her, and in Durgā's case two *tithis* have earned this honour, the eighth and the ninth, though the ordinary *pujā* period begins a day earlier. The Bengali has shown his usual intellectual ingenuity by placing the pivotal *pujā*, the *sandhipujā*, in the *muhurta*, forty-eight minutes, when the eighth passes into the

ninth. The solemnity and silence that mark it show that the *pujā* is not merely feast, fast, or festival. The Tāntric element, holding that the best time for worship is in the dead of night, has posited another form of time at the moment at midnight when *ashtami*, the eighth lunar day, occurs. This is the *ardharātrapujā*, or midnight worship, prevalent amongst a section of Bengalis. The *lagna*, or auspicious moment of the entrance of the Navapatrikā into the *pujāmandapa*, or pavilion for worship, and that of Her invocation, installation, and leave-taking are marked with punctilious nicety; and just at the close of the *pujā* there is generally the *pujā* of the *aparājītā* plant, which has its own history. This sanctified plant, a wreath of which is wound round the arms, is regarded as an amulet.

Running all through the whole gamut of the *pujā* is the vein of austerity in manners, thought, and diet which have made the Durgā *pujā* of Bengal the *pujā* designated as *mahā*, great, an epithet which also characterizes the three *tithis* associated with Her, viz. the *saptami*, the *ashtami*, and the *navami*, the seventh, eighth, and ninth days of the moon. The *pujā* technique is an eclectic procedure with its elaborate *snāna*, or bathing, its *prānapratishthā*, and so on. The preliminary *adhivāsa*, or consecration, singles it out as an auspicious ceremony because of the manner in which it is gone through, similar to that in the *samskāras*, or sacraments. The *navarātra pujā*, continued for nine days, which is prevalent in other parts of India, especially in the South, is something less absorbing, less connected with daily life, and less appealing. In Orissa (Yajpur), Kanchi, Mysore, and Mithila the worship of Durgā is almost similar to that performed in Bengal, though the Bengali has given it an inimitable grace, combining activity and concentration. There was an attempt to

synthesize the three forms according to the three Purānas and, towards the close of the fourteenth century, the great Vidyāpati Thākur of Mithila gave us a digest which has served as a model for later procedure. The worshipper follows scriptural evidences, authority, and his *kulācāra*, or family tradition. In Bengal such details as the *pujā* of the *kumāri*, or virgin, and the *sadhavā*, married woman, are in consonance with the Tāntric current.

The modern community *pujā*

The family *pujā* of olden times—and Durgā *pujā* is an institution of about 700 years' standing—is becoming rarer and rarer nowadays. The economic depression, the democratic craze, the tendency to be self-sufficient and to avoid the responsibilities and troubles associated with such a huge endeavour have all combined to make it almost an affair of the past. The organization for good and for social service, the literary, cultural, and physical sequel to it, the amusements that made of music, vocal and instrumental, a divine mission and gave birth to literary masterpieces which in their turn provoked thought and tranquillity, all are now things of the past. The *sarvajanina-pujā*, or community *pujā*, has come to fill up the gap. Interesting achievements, especially the preparation of images and organizing exhibitions, which have made of the *pujā* a training-ground in social service, have appeared in the course of the last three decades. But there are certain dark spots in it which demand our immediate attention. We are to remember that this is primarily a *pujā*, a thing of the heart and the spirit, entailing purity of both body and mind. Amusements should never be allowed to drown the *pujā*. Young people should have a lesson, in the characteristic Indian fashion, in submission and surrender, and should be called upon to

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