

# ***THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES***

## **A Critical Study on the Nine Forms of the Goddess Durga and Their Mythological Narratives in the *Markandeya Purana***

**Garima Kaushik**

M. Phil. Scholar, Department of Modern Indian Languages & Literary Studies,  
University of Delhi, Arts Faculty, Delhi, India

**Abstract:**

*This paper will focus on the nine forms of the Goddess Durga ( also called Shakti) and their mythological narratives in the 'Markandeya Purana' that describes the battle between the Goddess Durga and the demons in its subsection titled- "Devimahatmya." In the battle, the Goddess vanquished all the evil forces in the universe, which were personified as the demons (the asuras). This led to the celebration of 'Navratri,' a religious-ritualistic festival in India, every year to mark the victory of the good over the evil. The word Navaratri is a compound word, made up of Nava meaning nine and Ratri meaning night in Sanskrit. This festival of nine nights comes twice a year, once in spring and another time in autumn. The autumn Navratri marks the occasion when the 9 forms of the Goddess Durga slew the various demons in the Hindu mythology, who had oppressed the Gods in the heaven. The male Gods who were ousted from their kingdom in the heaven united their powers to create a female deity called Shakti. She is the personification of their divine powers. She is identified as the Goddess Parvati, the wife of Lord Shiva and the mother of Lord Ganesha and Lord Kartikeya. 'Markandeya Purana' provides the cause of the origin of the Shakti. The Vedic text describes the source of Durga's powers; her forms and her actions. Each of the nine forms of the Goddess Durga symbolises the life cycle of a female from childhood, matrimony to motherhood. The nine forms of the Durga are Shailputri, Brahmacharini, Chandraghanta, Kushmanda, Skandamata, Katyayani, Kaalratri, Gauri, and Siddhidatri. Each of the Navratri day is devoted to a Goddess in the above given sequence. Each form of Durga has a distinct origin, name, physical attributes, colour of garments, a different animal on which she mounts, identity, power and functions. Each form of the Goddess bestows a unique blessing on her devotee. The method and time of worshipping differs for each of the Nav-Shaktis. There are different set of Sanskrit chants addressed to each of the Goddesses. Even the flowers and the food (bhog) to be offered differ for each of the Shaktis. The paper will describe the ritualistic practices for worshipping each of the nine forms of the Goddess Durga. The paper will interpret the cultural and the symbolic connotations of these ritualistic practices. It will also trace the origin of worshipping a single, supreme mother deity, and the unification of the indigenous deities with an Aryan- Vedic deity for the purpose of building a Vedic canon of Gods and Goddesses to mark the superiority of the Aryan culture over the other marginalized cultures of India.*

**Keywords:** Aryans, Navratri, Shakti, Markandeya Purana, Devimahatmya

### **1. Introduction**

Hinduism preaches the philosophy of karma. It emphasizes doing things as a way of living. Its religious scriptures provide an exhaustive series of rituals to be performed routinely for leading a life of a true Hindu. Unlike Christianity and Islam that practise conversion into their faith either one is born a Hindu or not. In the ancient past, the Aryans prescribed a code of practices to be observed routinely. Gradually, these mandatory religious rituals evolved into a system. These rituals are religious activities comprising a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order. The Aryans were Sun worshippers and evolved many rituals involving the use of fire, an element which they considered to have purifying powers. The rituals functioned as tools of social integration. The rituals were theorized into myths in order to narrativise and validate them. Myths conferred a religious sanction on the rituals, and bestowed on them the quality of being necessary to perform for the Hindu society to sustain its religion and itself. James Frazer's theorized that myths arise from rituals in the process of the evolution of a religion. Bronislaw Malinowski in *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926) argued that myths are fictional accounts of the origin of rituals. A myth provides reasons for why a ritual is observed. I would argue that myths are the stories associated with a ritual in order to legitimize its origin, existence and importance. Historically, myths sustain a ritual which may lose its relevance without a narrative to remind us of its importance, and why it must not be abandoned. I would like to suggest that myths are the lifeline of a ritual. Thus, the co-existence of rituals and their supporting myths, as observed in Hinduism are an evidence of their immunity against any societal change and the waves of modernism. I would like to propose that rituals are an anchor of permanence in the ever changing society.

## 2. The Vedic Text

The mythological narrative of the Navshakti is well-developed in the *Markandeya Purana*. *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism* defines the *Markandeya Purana* as a part of the ancient eighteen Puranas, "the sectarian compendia of mythic stories and sacred lore" that inform the modern Hinduism. Markandeya was an ancient sage, whose mythological narratives of existence were associated with Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. It is believed that he was a devout devotee of Lord Shiva in his early years. He was destined to die at the age of sixteen. However at this age, he clutched the idol of the Lord Shiva. When Yama, the lord of Death threw his snares around the boy, accidentally it engulfed the idol of Lord Shiva, who killed Yama for his insolence. Later, Yama was restored to life. In another myth involving Sage Markandeya, it is believed that during pralaya- catastrophe, the sage found an infant under a banyan tree. The sage discovered the entire universe inside the infant, who was Lord Vishnu. The sage was allowed to wander inside the infant until he was expelled from the infant's mouth. The *Markandeya Purana* differs from the rest of the theological scriptures which either affiliate with Shaivism and Vaishnavism. The Purana is popular for its subsection, the *Devimahatmya* which establishes that the female as the source of all power in the cosmos. The *Devimahatmya* is the most ancient and the most valuable document on the mythology related to Goddess Durga.

## 3. First Manifestation

The first manifestation of the mother-Goddess is "Shailputri"- the daughter of Himalaya, the king of the mountains. She performed great penance to get married to Lord Shiva who was her husband in her previous birth as "Sati," the daughter of the wicked king-Daksha, who tried to humiliate Lord Shiva by not inviting him to a great sacrifice to which all the other Gods were invited. Sati couldn't bear this insult on her husband and immolated herself in the sacrificial pyre. In her subsequent birth, Sati was born as Goddess Shailputri or Goddess Parvati. She carries the trident and lotus in her hand. The Goddess mounts a bullock. She is worshipped on the first day of the Navratri festival. Shailputri's earlier incarnation as Sati is worshipped all over the Indian Subcontinent. Parts of her body and ornaments are believed to be found throughout the subcontinent, and are recognised as Shakti Peethas, the seats of strength. It is believed that when Sati immolated herself, a furious Lord Shiva picked Sati's corpse and began to perform the Tandava, the dance of destruction. To abate Lord Shiva's fury, Lord Vishnu's used his revolving weapon- the *Sudarshan Chakra* to cut into Sati's corpse and dispersed it into 51 pieces on various parts of the Subcontinent. These Shakti Peethas also have a form of Lord Shiva called Lord Bhairava present. These are sacred sites of worship for all the Hindus. Her stuti is *Ya Devi Sarva Bhuteshu Maa Shailputri Rupen Sansthita. Namastasye Namastasye Namastasye Namamah.*

## 4. Second Manifestation

Goddess Brahmacharini is the second form of the Goddess Durga. *Brahm* stands for penance and celibacy; *acharan* stands for conduct and *ni* implies a female. Brahmacharini is a female who observes penance and a high moral conduct. Shailputri was guided by the Sage Narada to observe penance to obtain Lord Shiva as her husband. Thus, the Goddess began her great tapa for several thousands of years, and is hence known as Brahmacharini. She is associated with knowledge and wisdom. She is the unmarried form of the Goddess Durga. Her garments are white which symbolizes purity. She is the calmest manifestation of the Goddess Durga. She holds a rosary in her right hand and a Kamandal in her left hand. She walks barefeet. In Nepal and Uttarakhand, at the second day of Navratri, Brahmacharini is offered white flowers and kheer. She is worshipped late till 11 o'clock at night. Her stuti is *Ya Devi Sarva Bhuteshu, Maa Brahmacharini Rupen Sansthita. Namastasye Namastasye Namastasye Namamah.* It implies that the devotee bows before the mother-goddess.

## 5. Third Manifestation

Goddess Chandraghanta is the third form of the Goddess Durga. She is worshipped on the third day of the Navratri. Her name literally means the moon-bell. The conch is blown in the temples to drive away the negative forces around us. Even at homes, the sound of the hand-held bell is played while praying to drive away the evil energies around us. Goddess Chandraghanta is believed to have adorned herself with the moon. *Chandra* symbolises moon which is beautiful, and *ghanta* symbolises a bell whose sound bestows knowledge. Thus, the goddess is the giver of beauty and knowledge. She is the married form of the Goddess Parvati. She is mounted on a tigress. She is also considered as the symbol of justice. She has 10 arms that carry various weapons like a quiver of arrows, a lotus flower, a rosary and *Yoga-mudra* (*Varada Mudra* which symbolises compassion, charity and boon granting; *Abhaya Mudra* which symbolises reassurance and safety. The *mudra* dispels fear in the minds of her devotees. *Abhaya* stands for the absence of fear). She is also a peaceful manifestation of the Goddess Durga. However, she seems ready for battle against the evil. The sound of the *Ghanta* dispels all the evil spirits around her devotees. To invoke her, the devotees chant this mantra - *Ya Devi Sarva Bhuteshu, Maa Chandraghanta Rupen Sansthita. Namastasye Namastasye Namastasye Namamah.*

## 6. Fourth Manifestation

Goddess Kushmanda is the fourth manifestation of the Goddess Durga. She is worshipped on the fourth day of the Navratri. Her name Kushmanda can be broken into two parts- *kush* which may stand for Kushal, that is, auspicious; *Manda* may stand for mandal, the universe. It is believed that she created the universe from a void. She directs the rays of the sun to bring light and warmth to Earth. She resides in the core of the earth, and therefore causes the earth to be fertile and bear fruit to the world. She is the mother-Goddess who signifies the beginning of the universe. Earlier, the mother-Goddess was understood as a powerful force who was a cause of all origin. She was believed to be a powerful and martial entity. She was associated with war and violence. Later, the Vedic texts portrayed the forms of Shakti as household Goddesses, associated with marriage and childbirth. Goddess Kushmanda mounts a lioness. She has eight arms. She carries a rosary in her right hand and various weapons in her seven hands.

Her stuti is *Ya Devi Sarva Bhuteshu, Maa Kushmanda Rupen Sansthita. Namastasye Namastasye Namastasye Namoh Namah.*

### 7. Fifth Manifestation

Goddess Skandamata is the fifth form of the Goddess Durga. She is worshipped on the fifth day of the Navratri. *Skanda* refers to Lord Kartikeya. Hence, Skandamata is Lord Kartikeya's mother. She is Goddess Parvati, once she obtains motherhood of Lord Kartikeya. Kartikeya is also known by names of Muruga, Subramanya, Shanmughan, Shanmukha. He is the Hindu god of war and victory. He is the divine martial commander similar to Mars in the Roman mythology. By referring the Goddess to her son's name, it is believed that she provides the boon of giving birth to sons. She has three eyes and four hands. She carries a lotus in her two upper hands, baby Kartikeya on her right hand, and she makes an *Abhaya Mudra* by her other hand. She mounts a ferocious lion. The chant used to invoke the Goddess is *Ya Devi Sarva Bhuteshu, Maa Skandamata Rupen Sansthita. Namastasye Namastasye Namastasye Namoh Namah.* It is believed that by worshipping the Goddess, Lord Kartikeya is pleased and bestows his blessings on the devotee.

### 8. Sixth Manifestation

The sixth form of the Goddess Durga is known as Goddess Katyayani. She was the daughter of the sage Katyayan who performed great penance to obtain the Goddess as his daughter. She is considered to be a ferocious form of Durga. The Goddess mounts a battle-hungry lion. She has four arms. She holds a lotus, a sword, exhibits the *Abhaya Mudra* and *Varada Mudra*. In the *Markandeya Purana*, she is also known as *Mahishasura-Mardini* who slayed the demon king, Mahishasur whom Lord Brahma had blessed with a boon of invincibility from any man. The demon could also transform into a bull at his wish. In the Purana, it is mentioned that the demon sent his emissaries Chand and Mund to propose to the Goddess on his behalf. The Goddess rejected their indecent proposal; she refused to accompany them, and challenged the demons to win her by defeating her in a battle. The demons were outraged at her pride and daring. They foolishly agreed to fight against her and were slayed by the Goddess. Goddess Chamunda, Chandika and Kali emerged from the form of the Shakti while slaying the demons. Goddess Chandika slayed the demons- Dhomralochan, Shumbh and Nishumbh; Goddess Chamunda slayed the brothers, Shumbh and Nishumbh, thus gaining the title of Chamunda; while Goddess Kali slayed Raktabeej who was blessed with the boon of multiplying with every drop of blood spilled in a battle. The Goddess Kali licked his blood before it could spill on the ground. She crushed the multiplying army of Raktabeej with her teeth and swallowed his blood. In essence, the Goddesses Chamunda, Chandika, Kali are one. They are the forms of the Shakti. While fighting, Mahishasur is baffled by the many forms of the Goddess and asks her not to take help of the other entities. The Goddess mocks at the ignorance of the demon who fails to recognise that all the forms belong to one Goddess and they are one in essence.

### 9. Seventh Manifestation

Goddess Kalratri is the seventh manifestation of the *Shakti*. She is worshipped on all the nine days, and especially on the seventh day of the Navratri. *Kaal* stands for the cycle of time and death. *Ratri* means night. The Aryanization of the scriptures causes the dark colour to be associated with ignorance and evil. Goddess Kalratri is dark in complexion, as she is believed to be destroying the sins of the universe, similar to Lord Shiva who is blue in complexion up to his throat because he drinks the poison which sprang out of the sea-churning (*samundra-manthan*) between the demons and the Gods. Goddess Kalratri's body is very thin with her ribs protruding. Her hair is heavy and loose. She is the most formidable form of the *Shakti*. She is the destroyer of the forces of darkness, ignorance and evil. She has four arms. Her right hands are in *Abhaya* and *Varada Mudra*, while she carries a sword and a deadly iron hook in her left hands. While fighting the demons, the weapons in her various arms simultaneously hit her foes similar to the continuous firing of several cannon-balls in the modern warfare. She gives bounteous blessings to her devotees and protects them from the forces of evil. She is one of the most beloved and revered forms of the Shakti. Her idol is not kept inside a temple but outside. We find that the idols of Lord Shani and Vishwakarma are all dark, and kept outside the temples. This is because these Gods guard the temples and our homes. They are stationed outside like body-guards. They are martial Gods and Goddesses and we keep them outside to protect our shelter from intruders. The Brahmins of Nepal and Uttarakhand worship Goddess Kalratri by 7 o'clock in the evening by reading the *Durga Saptashati* in the *Markandeya Purana*.

### 10. Eighth Manifestation

The eighth manifestation of the Goddess Durga is Mahagauri. *Maha* implies very; *Gauri* means a fair complexioned woman. Because the Puranas are Aryan texts, we find an attempt to establish the supremacy of the fair colour over the dark. Hence, the colour white signifies purity, light and peace. There are many narratives related to her name. One narrative suggests that on being called Kali (dark) by Lord Shiva, the Goddess became furious. She did great penance in the forest, and thus obtained her fair complexion. Another narrative describes that Goddess Shailputri became dark while observing penance for thousands of years to obtain Lord Shiva as her husband. The God then washed her with the water of the river Ganga, and her complexion turned into sparkling white. This narrative suggests that the Goddess also washes away the sins of her devotees and makes them pure. She grants the boon of

beauty, being the most beautiful herself. She is mounted on a bull. Her garments are white. She has four arms. She carries a trident and holds the gesture of *Abhaya Mudra* with her right hands; on her left hand, she carries a *dumro*- a musical instrument associated with the worship of Lord Shiva, and holds the *Varada Mudra*. She is offered white flowers and items of *sringara*, for instance, kohl, *sindoor*, a pair of combs, bangles, and a new dress and a red chunni (a stole). She is worshipped on the eighth day of the *Navratri*. The day is also called *Ashtami*. The Hindus hold *Devi-puja* on this day. They invite nine pre-pubescent girls to their homes. They offer them food like deeply fried cakes (*puri*), chana, dessert (*halwa*), items of *sringara*, money in the

series of 1, 11, 21, 51, 101 and so on. The young girls are identified with the 9 *Shaktis* of the Goddess Durga. Their feet are washed, and a *tilak* is put on their foreheads. They are seated on a clean mat on the floor. Each girl is believed to offer a particular boon. For example, a young girl of the Vaishya caste gives the boon of wealth because traditionally, according to the *Varna* system, the *Vaishyas* were traders and businessmen. *Devi Puja* is a remarkable ritual since it identifies the pre-pubescent girl-child as a manifestation of the Goddess who is worshipped and considered auspicious.

### 11. Ninth Manifestation

The ninth and the final manifestation of Goddess Durga is Siddhidatri. *Siddhi* implies perfection while *datri* implies a bestower. The Goddess is the bestower of the worldly and spiritual gifts to her devotees. She is a calm manifestation of the *Shakti*. She has four arms, and she holds a lotus, a conch, a mace and a *chakra* in each hand. She sits on a lotus and mounts a lion. Markandeya Purana enumerates 18 forms of Siddhis. I am enlisting ten forms of these Siddhis with the implication of their names. Anima implies the ability of bodily compression into a minute atomic form; Mahima implies the ability of bodily expansion, Garima implies the ability of exerting infinite heaviness; Laghima is the power to become very light; Praptika implies omnipresent; Prakama implies the ability

to achieve anything, as Kama stands for desire while Pra stands for everything; Isitva implies possessing authority, and Vasitva is the ability to conquer. It is believed that Lord Shiva retains all the Siddhis in his being. He is thus called Ardhanarishwar, that is, a God possessing the power and form of the female Shakti in his one-half. The Goddess is worshipped by humans, the divinity, the demons, beasts and the demi-Gods (*Yakshas*). She fulfills all the desires of her devotees. She is a material Goddess. Her worship increases the material prosperity and the worldly ambitions of the devotees. In some households, *devi-puja* occurs on the ninth day of the Navratri. The same ritual of inviting pre-pubescent girls and feeding them is followed. Her worship marks the culmination of the Navratri celebrations.

### 12. Argument

In the descriptions of the nine forms of the Goddess, we observe that the first five forms describe the process of development of the Goddess: her maidenhood (Shailputri); her becoming a great Yogini (Brahmacharini); her dashing marital form (Chandraghanta); her attaining the stature of mother-Goddess (Kushmanda); her motherhood (Skandamata), and in a reversal of her earlier peaceful manifestations, her sixth form is of a young girl (Katyayani) who mesmerises the demons with her enchanting beauty, but is born to violently destroy all the demons. In her seventh form as Kalratri, she slays the demons. She stands for superb female power. She is the warrior Goddess like the Greek Goddess Athena. The cult of Amazons is also associated with brave and physically strong women. They tore their breasts which interfered with their hunting expeditions. These Goddesses and women are solely associated with warfare. It is the other forms of *Shakti* who are associated with the domestic sphere of child-rearing and blessing their devotees. Thus, the eighth and the ninth forms of *Shakti* conform to the conventional female ideal of beauty and welfare. Historically, there was a movement from matriarchy to patriarchy where women who were once the warriors and the masters themselves were relegated to the sphere of a householder while their sons became warriors like Lord Skanda or Murugan who is the God of war while Parvati is Skandamata who bore him.

All these *Shaktis* are recognised as the Goddess Parvati. Even the regional Goddesses are called manifestations of the Goddess Parvati. This can be understood as an attempt to include the regional deities in the Puranic canon of classical Gods and Goddesses. For example, Shailputri belongs to the Himalayan region. She is the daughter of the Himalayan king, Shaila Raja. The Vaishno Devi temple in the North of Jammu in India has a rock idol of the Goddess. There are idols of Goddess Kali, Goddess Saraswati and Goddess Lakshmi. The Goddesses are collectively worshipped as Goddess Durga. Chamunda Devi is an indigenous Goddess who is worshipped in the Vindhya range of central India. She is associated with the tribal worship. She is the fierce form of the divinity. In her assimilation into the Aryan Purana, the Goddess became famous in Northern India as a form of Goddess Parvati. There is a famous temple devoted to her at Kangra district in Himachal Pradesh in Northern India. Goddess Katyayani is the daughter of the sage Katyayan who belongs to the Jat Kshatriya clan. Later the surname Katyayan changed into Kadyan which is a Jat community belonging to Haryana. Goddess Kali is worshipped in South India. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica "Kali's origins can also be traced to the deities of the village, tribal, and mountain cultures of South Asia who were gradually appropriated and transformed, if never quite tamed, by the Sanskrit traditions. She makes her first major appearance in Sanskrit culture in the *Devi-mahatmya* ("The Glorifications of the Goddess," c. 6th century ce), where she springs from the anger of the goddess Durga to slay the demon Raktabija ("Blood-Seed"). During the struggle a new demon emerges from each drop of Raktabija's blood as it hits the ground; to prevent this, Kali laps up the blood before it can reach the ground. She is also said to have been born when the goddess Parvati shed her dark skin; the sheath became Kali—who is also called Kaushika, "The Sheath"—leaving Parvati in the form of Gauri ("The Fair One")." The Goddess is revered all over India, chiefly in Kashmir, Bengal, Assam, Kerala and South India. There is a Kalka Devi temple near Nehru Place in Delhi. It is believed that the Pandavas offered prayers to the Goddess there. It is known for its Tantric aarti in the evening. Goddess Durga is mainly worshipped in West Bengal. She is depicted in three forms— the Goddess Kali, Goddess Saraswati and Goddess Lakshmi. During the Navratri in Northern India, the people of Bengal celebrate Durga Puja. An idol of Goddess Durga is brought into the house, and on the tenth day, the idol is immersed in the river. This ritual is supported by the narrative that the Goddess had visited her mother's household for nine days, and she is now returning to her husband's household.

### 13. Conclusion

The major temples of the Goddesses in India are an evidence of how the indigenous Goddesses are identified as Goddess Parvati, and hence assimilated into the mainstream Aryan-Vedic scriptures. The 51 Shakti Peethas, the

sites preserving the parts of Sati's body, are an evidence of the dominant Vedic worship of Goddess Parvati. Thus, we gain an insight into how the Vedic Puranas transformed the original violent nature of the mother-goddess to suit a more patriarchal Aryan society where the female Goddess took the form of a benign householder, a wife and a mother. Even the indigenous, often tribal Goddesses were assimilated into the main fold of Vedic worship and were identified as Goddess Parvati. The *Markandeya Purana* describes the forms and rituals of worshipping the *Nav-Durga*. In this paper, I have analyzed these nine forms, their myths of origin, their regions, the rituals associated with them and the myths that are related each of the Goddesses.

#### 14. References

1. Lochtefeld, James G. (2001). *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. United States: Rosen Publishing.
2. Wortham, B. Hale. (2010). *Markandeya Purana*. London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
3. Beniwal, Apurva. (2012). Web.<http://theindianmythology.wordpress.com/tag/skanda-mata>: 2 January 2014.
4. Drik Panchang. (2010). Bangalore, India: Adarsh Mobile Applications LLP
5. Anonymous. (2013). Navratri. Web. Experience Hinduism.. <http://experiencehinduism.com>: 4 January 2014.
6. Anonymous. (2013). Devi Mahatmya. Web. Encyclopædia Britannica. <http://www.britannica.com>: 4 January 2014.