

Durga Puja : Myth, Lore & Rites

An Article for My Young Friends

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Durga Puja, known colloquially as *DurgaPujo* or sometimes just *Puja*, literally means “the worship of *Durga*”. *Durga* is the name of a goddess (*Debee*) in the Hindu religion. *Durga* is a Sanskrit word which means “she who protects from misfortune”. *Durga Puja* is a typically Bengali Hindu religious festival, the most popular community festival in West Bengal and wherever there is a sizable Bengali Hindu community. This festival has become so much an integral part of the Bengali Hindu way of life that we find ways to celebrate it even here in the US, continents away from our homeland, amidst a majority culture which is poles apart, and in spite of the many difficulties in logistics. Like most religious events, the *Durga Puja* festival can be viewed from a diversity of perspectives, such as social, mythological, folkloric, ritualistic and theological. I like to give my young Bengali-American friends a quick glimpse of what the first four of these are. I have inserted original Sanskrit words in places in italics using a phonetic spelling but indicated its English equivalent as well.

The Social Aspects

The social and community aspects of *Durga Puja* are much like Christmas in this country, with one not-so-major difference. Unlike Christmas, which is primarily a family affair, with the community aspect being deemed secondary, *Durga Puja* is primarily a community affair with the family playing an important, but smaller role. Although there are instances of Hindu families performing *Durga Puja* as a private family affair, *Durga Puja* is mostly a community celebration where a specific *Durga Puja* festival may be sponsored and financed by the people of an entire village or of a neighborhood or perhaps of a city block. This is a remnant from the old rural agrarian days of the Hindu society. The feudal landlord of a village would sponsor and pay for the festival in those days with all the subjects of the landlord joining in the ceremony and possibly contributing in kind. Other aspects of the festival are quite similar to Christmas -- gift giving to loved ones, remembering our service people through special gifts, new clothes, shops and stores set out especially for the holiday season, school vacations, special foods and treats and so on. There is even something equivalent to Christmas carols. These are called *agomonee* songs, songs that announce the Coming of the Goddess. *Agomonee* songs would be set to folk melodies and sung by roving folk-singers. Unfortunately they are not much in vogue these days. The custom of sending cards is not that widespread. However, after the *Durga Puja* festival ends on its fourth day, we have the custom of visiting our elders to give our respects in person, failing which we may send a card.

The Myth:
Origin of the
Debee

The myth associated with the origin of *Debee Durga* sends us back quite far in time when gods and demons (and humans as well) used to freely roam the newly created universe. For the most part, the gods lived in heaven in reasonable peace and prosperity, whereas the demons used to live on earth or down under, not under the best of circumstances as one may guess. Every once in a while, they would become jealous of the gods, become ambitious, restless and downright nasty. The demons were quite powerful entities in themselves, but in addition they would amass huge armies, harass the gods and on rare occasions, even defeat the gods and throw them out of heaven. *Mahishaasur*, the buffalo demon (*mahish* = buffalo, *asur* = demon) was such a monster, who was born of a demon princess and the curse of a sage turned him later into a buffalo. After battles that lasted one hundred years, he defeated the gods and threw them out of their habitat. The humiliated and angry gods went to the Hindu Trinity (the great Lords *Brahma*, *Bishnu* and *Shib*), related their tales of misery and sought reprisal. This whole affair angered the Trinity and their anger radiated out as pure energy much as a piece of metal becomes radiant if heated sufficiently. The radiance congealed to give form to *Debee Durga*. The gods present to witness this miracle clothed, decorated and armed her with special weapons and finery. Her lion, for example, was a gift from *Himalaya*, the king of all mountains. Thus armed and attired, she marched to fight and destroy *Mahishaasur*. She had ten arms so that she could protect herself from attack coming from any of the ten directions -- the four cardinal and the four secondary points of the compass as well as from above or below.

The Myth:
Battling the
Demon

A battle of celestial magnitude ensued. Millions of charioteers, cavaliers, elephant-borne soldiers and infantrymen (*ratha*, *ashwa*, *gaja* and *padaatik* -- the four divisions or *chatruranga* of an Indian army) were destroyed by the *Debee*. Thousands of soldiers sprang from the angry breath of the *Debee* and helped her defeat all of the lesser and eventually the top generals of *Mahishaasur*. Finally, out of desperation, *Mahishaasur* himself jumped into a duel with the *Debee*, at first in his buffalo form but reemerging many times in other forms as well -- rhino, boar, lion, elephant, armored soldier. The *Debee* saw through his tricks every time and, in the final engagement, jumped on the back of the buffalo and beheaded him. As *Mahishaasur* started emerging from the severed neck of the buffalo, the *Debee* finished him off by driving her spear through his heart. This is the moment that is usually captured in the image we worship. Peace was restored and the gods, along with *Debee Durga* went back to the heavens until a later time, when she was called upon to slay other demons.

The Myth:
Source &
Message

These myths about the *Debee* are collected in a holy book written in Sanskrit and titled *Shree Shree Chandee*, . This scripture, besides embodying some deep religious concepts, also contains some beautiful poetry and is read and recited from as a part of the rituals associated with *Durga Puja*. Volumes of very learned text have been written on the theological aspects of the myth of the *Debee*, but I

believe that the following simple message can be derived from it. The forces of evil will, once in a while, temporarily overcome the good, the true and the righteous. But there will come a time when the virtuous will unite in their anger and indignation and their combined energy will uproot the evil, perhaps after a long battle requiring many sacrifices. *Debee Durga* is the symbol of the totality of the energy and endeavor of the virtuous, directed against all that is evil -- not just in the days of the myth, but at all times, in all places.

The Folklore

The myth, no matter how deep or exalted, is too absolute and metaphorical for common people like us to understand and identify within the context of our everyday human experiences. So, over the next several thousands of years following the origin of the myth, folklore started to surround and soften the myth and made it accessible to common people. In the case of *Debee Durga*, the folk-tale says that she was born *Parbati*, daughter of *Himalay*, the king of mountains and his wife *Menaka*. She was given in marriage to Lord *Shib* when she left her father's home in the rich plains and the foothills to live with her husband in the remote *Kailas* mountains. Lord *Shib* and Lady *Parbatee*, a.k.a *Durga* had four children. The first is *Kaartik*, who rides a peacock and is the general of the armies of the gods. The second is the elephant-headed *Ganesh*; he rides a mouse and we pray to him for success in our ventures. Their two daughters are *Lakshmi* (pronounced Lok-khi in Bengali) who sits on a lotus with an owl companion and *Saraswati*, (pronounced Sarash-shoti) who rides a swan. *Lakshmi* is the goddess of wealth and prosperity and *Saraswati* is the goddess of learning and the fine arts. The folk-tales say that this *Puja* is really meant to celebrate the annual homecoming of the *Debee* with her children to visit her parents. The worshippers here play dual roles; one is, of course, that of devotees, children of the Celestial Mother. The other is that of the parents of a beloved daughter who is missed ever so much in the home where she was born and raised and whose visit every year is a tremendously joyous occasion.

The Image

The traditional image that we worship combines aspects of both the myth and the folklore I described above. On one hand, the image of *Debee Durga* herself is decked out in royal grandeur as the Queen of the Universe, the Queen of all the kings, with the image capturing her glory in her full regalia at the moment of her victory over the evil demon. On the other, she is also a mother with children who is visiting us mortals with messages of joy, peace and harmony in a familial context. The superimposition of the two views into one image is not so outlandish if you think of the works of the cubist painters like Picasso, et al. This duality of view is the kind of effect they sought to accomplish when they combined different perspectives of a subject, say the front and a side view of the same face, on to one flat canvas. One point about the folklore is worth noting here which reflects a characteristic of Hinduism in general and the Bengali Hindus in particular. This is the characteristic of our creativity that somehow finds ways, often poetical, lyrical and mystical, to blur the boundaries between the sublime and the familiar, the Lord and the loved, the worshipped and the adored. We will hear more about this in the next paragraphs.

Coming to the rites associated with the *Puja* ceremony, they are molded to a theme common to almost all Vedic Hindu rituals (The *Vedas*, in four volumes, is the source book of the Hindu Religion). In this theme, material and spiritual offerings are presented to please the deity being worshipped and blessings towards the material and spiritual prosperity of the worshipper are solicited. Hinduism, at least as it has been practiced over thousands of years, is an anthropomorphic religion, which means that deities are thought of and described as having human forms or attributes. As such, the rites are based on a concept of viewing the deity as a very honored extra-special guest in our household. We invite the deity, make the deity "physically" comfortable, chant hymns in praise of the deity, offer food and gifts and the like -- just as we would do with a respected human guest. Remember how we bridge the sublime to the familiar as I said above! Finally we pray to the deity to bless us and ours.

The Rites:
General

Given this thematic background, let us look a little closer on what actually goes on during the *Puja* ritual. First and foremost, the place of worship, all the implements of worship and all the worshippers, especially the priest and his helpers need to be impeccable in terms of cleanliness in body and purity in mind. Even to this day, the Hindu priests, formally ordained or not, come from the *Brahmin* caste -- the caste designated by the scriptures to perform the religious rites and rituals on behalf of the community. In return for this high honor, members of this caste are required to follow a strict regimen of fasting, prescribed diet, worship, meditation and study such that they become and stay physically, morally and spiritually fit for priesthood. Not all brahmins follow the regimen nowadays but back in India one can find professional priests who do attempt to maintain the discipline to the best of their abilities.

The rites of worship of any major deity again follow a basic pattern. First, of course, is the regimen of cleansing and purification. On the day of the ceremony, the priest and his assistants will have performed their prescribed routine of daily ablutions, possibly enhanced by special requirements related to the forthcoming ceremony. Water from the river Ganges is deemed holy and pure always. The implements of worship are purified by sprinkling this holy water. The rites require that, regardless of which major deity is being worshipped, a certain group of deities be worshipped and presented with offerings before any specific offerings can be made. These deities are the elephant-headed god *Ganesh*, *Surya* (the Sun-god), *Bishnu* (the Protector in the Hindu Trinity of Lords *Brahma*, the Creator, *Bishnu* and *Shib*, the Destroyer), *Durga* herself and *Shib*, although the list may vary depending upon the major deity and the particular edicts of the religious sect of the worshippers. Following the standard process, each deity is invited, praised by chanting the appropriate hymns, offerings given and blessings sought to make sure that the entire *Puja* process goes well. Hinduism of the *Vedas* became pantheistic as it evolved through the centuries and grew by absorbing many of the indigenous pagan rites, which means that the rites embraced worship of many gods and, at least took cognizance of even demons representing the destructive forces of nature. Traces of that will be found when, at the

The
Rites:
Major Deity

initiation of a *puja* ceremony, the priest calls upon the evil forces of Nature (spirits, demons, malevolent animals etc.), makes offerings to them and recites chants that mean something like: “please accept these offerings and allow us to go about with the real ceremony in peace” !

Now we are ready to start worshipping the major deity, which again follows a basic pattern. Usually there is a clay image of the major deity, and the first order of business is to instill into it the power of sight and life -- in other words, the image is temporarily transformed into the deity. This is followed by a formal invitation to the deity. Offerings, which may consist of five, ten, sixteen or eighteen items, the sixteen-item ritual being the most common, are then presented to the deity. A typical sixteen-item offering (*shoroashopachaar*) will consist of: seat usually made of silver (*rajataasan*), welcome chants (*sbaagata*), water to wash feet after a long journey from the heavens to this abode (*paadya*), a special offering made of selected flowers, fruits, leaves and grains in holy water (*arghya*), holy water to rinse hands (*aachamoneeya*), a special drink made by mixing milk, honey, yogurt and sugar (*madhuparka*), holy water to rinse hands again (*punaraachamoneeya*), bath paraphernalia (*snaaneeya*), change of clothes (*bason*), vanity items such as jewelry, garlands etc. (*aabhoran*), perfume (*gandho*), flower bouquets (*pushpo*), incense (*dhoop*), lit lamp, similar to special candles used in Christian rites (*deep*), food, both uncooked such as fruits and cooked (*noibedy*) and finally a personal prayer and obeisance (*bandonaa*). In a separate and special ritual, five items -- five lit lamps (*panchoprodeep*), conch shell filled with holy water (*sajol shankho*), piece of laundered cloth (*dhouto bastro*), flower bouquet (*pushpo-pallab*) and special obeisance (*pronipaaf*) --are presented in the evening with music and fanfare. This special ritual is known as *aroti*.

Durga Puja, as practiced by Bengali Hindus, is a four-day affair. Hindus follow a lunar calendar and *Durga Puja* starts on the seventh day (*saptamee*) in a special fortnight in the Bengali month of *aashwin* when the moon is in its waxing phase. Since the lunar calendar is not well synchronized with the solar calendar now in universal use, the corresponding day in the solar year will vary from year to year, falling somewhere between September and October. Some preparatory work will be done on the day before, the sixth day (*shasthee*) into the fortnight. After some preliminaries on the *saptamee* day, the ritual proper will start by giving *Debee Durga* a very elaborate ceremonial bath, followed by the ritual of instilling sight and spirit into the images. This will be followed by formally inviting *Debee Durga* and her entourage to the place of worship and by the regimen of major deity worship rituals above. Depending upon the particular sect of the worshipper or the worshipping community, animal sacrifices may be involved. This topic is quite controversial and we have neither the space nor the training to engage in any detailed discussion here about that rite. The special ritual of *aroti* will follow and the deities, our special and revered guests, will be lulled to sleep after that. The next day, which is the eighth day (*ashtamee*), is considered to be the peak of the entire process, so in addition to the regular rites, all manifestations of *Durga*, along with other gods are specially invoked and worshipped. Rites on the ninth

The Rites:
Debee Durga

day (*nabami*) of the fortnight are specially dedicated to the memory of Lord *Raam* as he worshipped *Debee Durga* on the eve of his epic battle with *Raabon*, the ten-headed demon lord of Sri Lanka, which is the basis of the famous Indian epic *Raamaayan*. The tenth day (*dashamee*, or *bijayaa dashamee*) sees the close of the ceremonies when farewell is bade to *Debee Durga* and her entourage and the image is immersed in the Ganges or the nearby river.

I have oversimplified the description of a highly complex and elaborate set of rituals that has roots thousands of years old and has evolved through many forms as it was passed down from generation to generation and spread over many lands, people and customs. Almost all the hymns, chants and prayers (*mantras*) are in Sanskrit, an old language, incomprehensible this day to people without painstakingly undergoing special training. The priest and his associates perform the rites on behalf of the worshipping community. Now where do common devotees like us get involved? Usually twice -- once during the regular ceremony each day when we take some flower offering and the priest leads us into a prayer to the Goddess. This ritual is known as the flower-offering or *push-paanjali*, *anjali*, for short. The other time is during the special *aroti* ritual where we witness and participate in the somewhat colorful ceremony and join the priest in a prayer as well.

The basic theme behind *Durga Puja* is the same as in any other deity worship. We give Her thanks for all She has provided for us, we offer her the best we have, especially our devotion and seek her blessing for wealth, happiness and freedom. As written in the *Chondee* scriptures, we say: "*roopang dehi, jayang dehi, yasho dehi, dbisho jah*" -- give us beauty, give us victory, give us fame and destroy our enemies !

May *Debee Durga* protect you against all evils!