

## **Iconographic Analysis of Goddess Durga (With Special Reference to Temple-Sculpture of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam)**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

An elaborate description of figure-imagination of God and Goddesses, sculptural features, iconometry (standard measurement) are found in the Puranas, Samhitas, Tantras, Agamas and Silpasastras. The term 'iconology' includes the study of figure-imagination, sculptural features like pedestal, postures (hand postures, foot posture and body language), vehicle, weapon and headgear of God and Goddess and canons of sculptural art. On the basis of iconographic characteristic and canons of sculptural art the ancient artist used to create the statue of God and Goddess. So, without profound knowledge of Iconography it is difficult to specify the identity of ancient temple sculpture. In this research paper we are trying to specify the Iconographic identity of Goddess Durga found in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam on the basis of canonical theory as described in ancient masterpieces such as Matsypurana, Agnipurana, Vrishnudharmottar, Vrihat Samhita, KaranAgama, Anshumadabhed Agama, Tantrashastra along with the Silpo Sastras (Samarangana Sutradhara, Aparajitapicha, Mansara, Silparatna.) Durga is primitive power. Agama and Tantra Sastra established Durga as Prakriti (mother-nature). She is very much unique among the other God and Goddesses. She declares her existence in Indian psychology with an independent divine self. A multiple identity of Goddess Durga is found in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. However, the temple architecture and temple sculpture found in Assam have different sculptural features.

**Keywords:** Figure-Imagination, Sculptural Features, Iconographic, Iconography, Silpasastra, Canon of Sculpture Making, Sculptural Art, Brahmaputra Valley, Temple Architecture, Temple Sculpture, Standard Measurement.

### **Introduction**

Goddess Durga is a famous mythical figure in Indian tradition. Goddess Durga indicates different symbolical meaning and philosophical thought. She also represents the supremacy of matriarchy. But Goddess Durga has different special identity regarding different regions. In Brhamaputra Valley of Assam also Durga has a significant identity which needs a detailed iconographic study. In Assam the range of study of iconography is very limited. As a consequence there are a lot of controversies regarding the concept of Devi Durga, some wrong ideas have also been formed. From that point of view the iconographic study of Goddess Durga is very important. Through iconographical study we can find out the unique existence of Durga of Brahmaputra valley without ignoring the Indian context.

There is a patriarchal concept that all Goddesses are inseparable from the Gods. So, they have no identity of their own without the existence of Gods. A Goddess is there because

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of a God, but a God is not there because of a Goddess. But Agama or Tantra Sastras have established a totally opposite concept through the image of Durga. According to this concept Goddess Durga is Prakriti without which creation is not possible. According to these sastras Durga is primitive power which creates a conflict with the traditional patriarchal concept and this conflict is analyzed in this paper.

## **Goddess Durga: A Classical Definition**

For the installation of the statue in Temple Architecture there is a detail analysis of the canons of sculpture making regarding stone and wood selection, carving method, iconology and iconometry (standard measurement) in the Purana, Samhita, Agama and Silpasastra. The skilled artist used to create statues of God and Goddess following these canons of sculptural art. Iconology is an important branch among the canons of sculptural art. It plays an important role in defining an iconographical identity of Goddess Durga.

In the above mentioned Sastras there are different figures and names of Goddess Durga such as Mahishardini, Jyestha, Sweta, Nanda, Roudri, Bhadra, Bhadrakali, Kali, Jaya-Bijoya, Mahakali, Kalabikarnika, Amba, Balbikarnika, Ghantakarni, Ambika, Balpromathini, Jayanti and so on.<sup>1</sup> Along with these names there is also reference to canons of sculptural features. These different images of Durga could be found in temple architecture from different parts of India specifically Mahavallipuram, Kanchibaram, museum of Madraj, Gangoikonda sholapuram, Ilora and almost in all the Shakta special Dol (Assamese temple) architecture of Assam. In this way we know about Nava Durga. But there is a lot of controversy regarding the different names of Nava Durga. For example Nava Durga as we find in Agamashastra are Neelakanthy, Kshyemankary, Harasiddhi, Rudransha-Durga, Ban-Durga, Agni-Durga, Joidurga, Vindhya vasini-Durga and Ripumardini. Nava Durga as mentioned in Puranas are Rudrachanda, Prachanda, Chandogra, Chandanayika, Chanda, Chandawati, Chandarupa, Atichandika and Ugrachandika. In Aporajita-Prichcha Silpasastra, Nava Durga is Mahalakshmi, Nanda, Kshyemankary, Sivadooti, Maharanda, Bhramari, Sarbamangala, Rewati and Harasiddhi. Thus, there seems to be an inequality in these ancient books regarding the name and definition of Nava Durga. However, Nava Durga is the nine images of Devi Durga mentioned in the Sastras and these statues had been carved in the temple architecture of India in different parts.

## **Goddess Durga: sculptural features regarding different definition**

Karanagam and Ansumadbhedagam are two specific notable works among the Agamasastra including sculptural features of Goddess Durga. In the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Karanagam there is a reference that Goddess Durga is Chaturbhuj, Dvinitra and Saumyabadana. The position of right hand is Abhaya mudra and left hand is Bara mudra. Moreover, there is a Chakra in the extra right hand and a Shankha in the left hand, Karanda head gear and Sasikhand (boat moon) on it, Makar-Kundala as earrings, and the statue should be standing on the head of Mahisha. According to Ansumadbhedagam, yellow cloth for the lower part and red cloth for the upper part of her body, snake fastens her breast. She has four hands—the upper two hands holding a Chakra and Shankha, the lower right hand is in Abhaya mudra and the left hand is Katyawatambita (position of holding the waist). The statue stands on a lotus flower and sometimes it can be carved as standing on a buffalo head. In 46<sup>th</sup> chapter of Suprabhedagam, Durga is depicted as Adishakti (primitive power) and sister of Vishnu. She has four or eight hands holding Shankha, Chakra, Bow, Arrow, Kharga, Khetak, Shool and Pasa. She sits on a lotus flower and sometimes it can also be carved in the position of mounting a lion.<sup>2</sup> According

to Vishnudharmottar Goddess is ten handed<sup>3</sup>. The additional two hands hold a severed head and Sakti. According to Kalikapurana also the goddess is ten handed or sixteen handed. Five hands from the right side holds Trishula, Kharga, Chakra, Vaan (arrow) and Sakti from the top respectively. And five hands from the left side holds Khetaka, Bow, Pasha, Ankush and Ghanta (Bell) from the top respectively. She is wearing Jatamukuta (matted hair) as head gear. According to Shri Tattvanidhi Goddess is 18 handed—holding from top of right side Sakti, Mudgar, Shool, Bajra, Sankha, Padma, Shalak, Gati and Chakra. Again holding from top of left hand Akshyasutra, Khetaka, Ghanta (Bell), Darpan, Dhanu (Bow), Flag, Dambura, Pasa and the last one is Tarjani Hasta (pointing the forefinger). Bhrigu Samhita says Durga as Vaisnavi Maya, Yoganidra, Prakriti and Trayee-Mayee (like three Vedas) and that she is four handed—the upper two hands holding Sankha and Chakra and the other two in Anjali-Hasta Mudra<sup>4</sup>.

A famous form of Devi Durga is Mahishamardini. According to the tale of Markandeya Purana, part Devi-Mahatmya, after the Gods had been defeated by Mahisha, in order to get rid of his tyranny, they went to Vishnu and Siva for suggestion with Brahma's leadership. As a consequence they took oath to create a terrible Goddess combining each one's anger. At last Goddess Durga, as it was the combination of different special power of the gods, defeated Mahisha—that is why she is famous Mahishamardini. This story is found in almost all the Puranas such as Devi-Mahatmya (81-93) of Markandeya Purana, Bamana Purana (19,1-21), Baraha Purana (62,1-95), Siva Purana (5,46,1-63), Skandha Purana (2,83), Devi Bhagawata (5,2-29) and Kalika Purana (61). Devi Bhagawat (5,8,62-74) and Devi Mahatma (81) says that in order to defeat Mahisha, Shiva gave mouth, Yama gave black and long hair, Vishnu gave eighteen arms, Chandra gave breast, Indra gave waist, Varun gave leg and thigh, Bhumi gave buttocks, Brahma gave foot and toes, Sun gave two hands, Vasu gave fingers, Kuber gave nose, Dakshya Prajapati gave teeth, Vayu gave ear and Fire gave eyes to create a terrible Goddess figure. According to Baman Purana Sandhya gave eyebrows and Aruna gave lips. As it is said in Markandeya Purana's 'Devi Mahatmya' (82 chapters) and in Devi Bhagavata (5,8,62-74) Lord Siva himself took seat on her Trishula, Vishnu on her Chakra, Varun on Shankha, Agni on Shoola, Vayu on Dhanu and Gati, Indra on Vajra and Ghanta, Yama on Kaldanda, Varun on Pasha, Projapati on Kanthamala, Brahma on Kamandalupatra, Sun on lighthing, Kaal on Kharga and Khetaka, Viswakarma on Parashu and Goda, Heembaan on Lion, Kuber on blood bowl and Anantangavarana.<sup>5</sup>

This image of Goddess Durga could be found in temple architecture from different parts of India. It is found in almost all the Shakta special temple architecture of Assam. A lot of statues of Mahishamardini Durga had been discovered in the history of Assam's stone sculpture from Pre-Ahom Kingdom.

Similarly it is found in the Shakta special dols of Ahom Dynasty such as, Siva Dol, Devi Dol, Jagadhatri Dol etc. although the embodiments are in a state of decay. The face of the statue of Mahishmardini, found in the Jagadhatri Dol of Kalugaon of Sivsagar, is totally ruined, while the remaining body part is a litter better. Its sculptural features are -ten handed: all the ayudhas (weapons) are ruined except the Trishula on the third one from the bottom of the right side; in the left side (from top to bottom) Khetak, Dhanu (Bow), the other two are invisible and the lowest one holding a snake. On the other hand, the sculptural features of the statue found in Devi Dol of Gaurisagar are- it is ten handed: the weapons on the left side of the embodiment are (from low to high)—Shool, Chakra, Gada, Kharga, Trishul; the weapons from the right side is totally decayed. Here the notable feature is the abnormal animal Devi mount on with head and body of a lion, neck of a horse and nails of an eagle. Mahisasur is in Pratyalidhasan with Khetak and Kharga; along with two maids seated on Padmachakra with fans (chamber) in their

hands. The statue, which is in an attacking mood, is wearing neck ornaments, garland hanging up to the waist, Kankan, Keyur balay, shining and heavily embroidered Katimekhela and adhovastra.

Regarding the sculptural features of ten handed Mahishamardini Shilparatna says that weapons on the right side are Trisula, Kharga, Sakti, chakra and Dhanu and on the left side are Pasha, Ankusha, Khetak, Parashu and (Bell) Ghonta. She is in Tribhangi position putting her right leg on the lion and left one on Manisha. The same direction is in the Matsyapurana. It is a very important position of Mahismardini to put her right leg on the lion and to put the big toe of left leg on Mahish's back with slightly Urdham(upward) posture.<sup>6</sup> As directed in the Sastras, the weapons of Goddess Durga are Trishul from Siva, Chakra from Krishna, Shankh and Pasha from Varun, Shool from Agni, Vajra from Indra, Danda from Yama, Kamandalu from Brahma, Kharga and Khetak from Surya, Dhanu and Vaan from Marotgan and Pradatta Naag from Sesj Naag. But in the sculptural plate of ten handed Mahishamardini found in Jagadhatri Dol only Trishul, Khetak, Dhanu, Sarpa, Shool, Chakra, Goda and Kharga are left. Along with other weapons the face of Goddess and Mahishasur is totally decayed. Again the statue of Mahishamardini in Jagadhatri and Devi dol does not follow the classical rule of putting her left big toe in urdham position on Mahisha's back. Although the other sculptural features are as directed in the Shastras, distribution of weapons is a bit different from that. The vehicle of Goddess Durga is not a lion, it is an abnormal animal with lion's body. Again the lower part of dress also does not follow canons. It is totally a new addition by the Ahoms.

The sculptural features of Mahishamardini is based on Matsya Purana, Agni Purana and Kalika Purana also, although generally we found it in the Brahamanda Purana and Markandeya Purans's 'Devi Mahatmya'. This stone sculptured form of Goddess Durga is found in different parts of Assam. It is found being carved on long stone. Archeologist considered it from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century A.C. Most of the statues of Goddess Durga found in the Brahmaputra Valley are of Mahisamardini, however, most of their hands, arms or weapons are ruined. Only a few numbers are being preserved. Among these many are ten handed. However some of them are eight handed and four handed. There is a beautiful statue of Mahishamardini in Chirajuli gaon nearby Dhekiyajuli. It is carved in the posture of Atibhanga. The right leg is mounting on the lion and the left leg is beside the severed head of Mahisha. The weapons of the ten handed statue are in clockwise direction—Shool, Tanka, Ban, Kharga, Kshyetraka, Dhanu, Parasu, Ankush and Demon's hair. Long Saree is carved as katibastra. The Shool on the upper right hand is piercing through the heart of the Demon. The lion is depicted in an aggressive way. The back of the statue is round without any decoration and on its top there had been carved a Kirtimukh(devil's face). This sculpture is absolutely from Pre-Ahom Period. Another small sized statue of Mahishamardini is in Hajo which is made of granite. Now it has been placed on Durga Mandir. Kritimukh has been carved. Its style seems to be from 11<sup>th</sup> century A.C. Another statue is found in Sidheswari Temple. The style of the later is same as the former one. A Kritimukh and two Vidyadharas are carved at the back. In the same way a four handed stone statue is found in the theatre stage of Kamakhya temple, a small Mahishamardini statue beside the Uma-Moheswar and Sivalinga nearby the way to Kamakhya Temple. There are two broken statues of Mahisha in the Assam state Museum. Every right leg of the statues is on the vehicle and left one is on Mahishasur. The difference between the statues of ten handed and four handed is that the weapons are not same. An eight handed Mahishamardini statue is found in Assam nearby the old water supply office of Guwahati.

A part of their statue is decayed as the stone quality is low. The right leg is on the lion and the left leg is on Mohisha. The upper right hand is holding a Kharga and the upper left hand is piercing through the heart of the Demon. The other left hand is holding Demon's hair.

The lion is biting Demon's right leg. The ornaments and clothing are as usual. The archeologists consider it to be from the era of 9<sup>th</sup> century A.C. from its style. The aggressive form of Devi Mahishamardini is Devi Durga. Both the aggressive and calm form of Durga is found in the Brahmaputra Valley. The calm form of Durga found in Deopani of Golaghat is a notable one. The weapons in clockwise direction are Baradmudra along with a lotus, Trishul, Chakra and Shankh along with Baradmudra. It is decorated with Karanda Mukut, Kundal, Har(necklace), Keyur, Sarpabojjaynti, Bala etc. and wearing Katibastra. This calm form of Devi is Trinetra and there is Prabhavali(fire) at the back of the head.

The fearsome form of Devi is Chamunda. Its sculptural features are found in Matsya Purana, Agnipurana, Vishnudharmottar, Purba-Karangam, Ausumadbhedagam etc. such as Sava Adhora(standing on a corpse) long tounge(Dirgha Jihba), wearing mundamala(garland of severed heads or skulls). According to Devatamurtiprakaran Chamunda mount on Pret(corpse), terrible smiling face, long tongue, thin body, deep eye sockets, four handed-- Musal(pestle) or Chakra and severed head on the right, Ankusha(hook) and Kharga on left.<sup>7</sup> Rupamandanam has the same description.<sup>8</sup> According to Vishnudharmottar, Chamunda has the form of Bheema, open face, matted flying hair, ten handed—Musal, Astra, Ban, Ankush and Kharga on the right side; Pasha, Dhanu, Khetak, Gada and Parashu on the left.<sup>9</sup> Purbakaranagam says Chamunda is four handed—Kapalapatra(skull-cup) filled with human flesh, Bahni, Shool and Shoolahi, Trinetra, tiger skin on body, Shankh Kundal as earrings. According to Vishnudharmottar, Ropmandamon and Mayamat, Chamunda's vehicle is a corpse (preta-Ga)<sup>10</sup>. The sculptural features of the statue of Chamunda found in Jaghdhati Dol are more similar to the canons of Purbakaranagam.

There is a statue of Chamunda seated on a corpse in the position of Maharajaleela style found near by a small temple of beneath the Kamakhya Temple. The weapons holded by the four hands of the statue are (in clockwise) Kapala, Kartrika, Trishula and Munda. Her Jata Mukuta is falling down on both side. The statue has long tongue, bare and slim belly, deep eye sockets, visible ribs and nerves and all of these are making the appearance more terrible. She is wearing Mundamala(garland of severed heads or skulls), Kundal, Har(necklace), Bala etc. Under her seat(Pretasana), there are small sized Pretas(corpse).

A kirtimukh (demon's face) and two statues of Vidyadhara is carved on the backside. The style says it to be coming from 10<sup>th</sup> century A.C. The same characteristics are notable in case of the other statues. Another statue with similar characteristics is found inside the theatre house of Kamkhya Temple. It is six handed with weapons (in clockwise) Karttarika, Kapala, Munda, Khatanga and Shool. Jata Mukuta of the statue is well decorated.

The statue of Chamunda is generally found in the temples from Ahom-dynasty. It is there on the north part of the outside wall of Jagadhatri Temple. Trinetra, long tongue and one head--are the characteristics of this statue. It is four handed-- lower right hand is holding a Kartrika and left one is Boiri Mastaka, the upper right hand is holding Kharga and the left one is holding Kapala filled with human flesh. It is wearing Jata Mukuta, Mundamala hanging up to naval point, Kankan, Keyurboloy, tiger skin and is mounting on a corpse.

## Conclusion

From the above discussion we can decide that Durga has a unique identity from the other Goddess which is on a higher level. Durga is enshrined to this position by the Agama and Tantrik Sastras. Durga is considered as Prakriti (mother nature) without which creation is impossible. We found this multiple form of Durga in Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. So we have the following findings.

1. Goddess Durga is the primitive power.
2. Goddess Durga is absolute and independent from any other Gods and Goddess.
3. Indian temple architecture and temple sculpture prove that Goddess Durga has different images at different regions. This multiple identity of Goddess Durga is found in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam also. However, the temple architecture and temple sculpture found in Assam have different sculptural features.
4. Different forms of Durga represent incredibility of sculptural art of Assam. It reflects too the social psychology of the Valley.

## Foot Notes

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