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Faithful Depictions of Mahadevi Durga: A Glimpse into the Miniature Painting Collection of Goddess Durga at Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad

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Abstract

India is a land of culture, faith, and religion and this land has always surprised its worshippers with miracles beyond explanation. Every tragedy has strengthened multiple narratives of belief systems and better ways of living. While the cultural consciousness has discovered a neutral source of energy to worship upon, not everyone can focus their energies on a fictitious fire of power. As humans, we tend to humanize that energy into the binaries we understand. While exploring these dichotomies, the energy representing the divine female draws us into its own web of complexities. Existentialism and origin are two strong words that can haunt us forever if not addressed; Who are we and what's our divine origin? Where does femininity originate from in India? How do we identify ourselves with a visual divine female? Thus, while addressing this existentialism, this paper explores the notions of femininity, the need for an icon, her presence, her history and tales of her belief.

Keywords: Durga, Miniature Painting, Salar Jung Museum, Devi, Mother Goddess, Devi Mahatmya, Shakti

Introduction

It's empowering how a female figure exists, gets worshipped, and thrives in a patriarchal society⁽¹⁾. In the world of male gods, this one goddess every now and then emerges stronger than them, saving them from the atrocities of the world. This paper explores this divine figure and also explores the medium in which she has been documented. As a result, it turns out that the medium of representing these visuals is equally important. While paintings have existed since prehistoric times, the emergence of miniature paintings allowed a widespread advertisement of ideologies and visuals. They gave people a form to meditate upon, a memory of a battle they never saw or witnessed but deeply believed in. The tales of karma, morals, ethics, good and evil were all tackled through these visuals. The paintings chosen are a devotional output of the artist's mindset and a representation of what was popularly manifested in the 18th - 19th centuries in India.

The world of Miniature paintings

The painting traditions in India have evolved from the wall murals documenting pre-historic lives in Ajanta caves to Indus Valley earthenware decorative paintings to fictional representations of Ramayana and Mahabharata episodes, educating the masses in general, to introducing paintings as an essential cultural activity in the holistic development of princes in traditional gurukuls⁽²⁾, and finally in the contemporary time.

Despite all the changes, religion and faith have always found their unique space in the hearts of Indians. Faithful depictions of God and goddesses align the mind to meditate on something visual.

Without a form, how can God be meditated upon? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself with, it will slip away from meditation as will slide in a state of slumber. Therefore, the wise must meditate on some form, remembering how the form is a superimposition and not a reality.
–Vishnu Samhita

The earliest Miniature paintings in India can be traced back to the 7th century AD, when they flourished under the patronage of the Palas of Bengal. Buddhist texts and scriptures were illustrated on 3-inch-wide palm leaf manuscripts, with images of Buddhist deities. Pala art was defined by subdued colours and sinuous lines, evocative of the murals in Ajanta.

Later in the early 9th and 10th century, religious texts started including illustrations and scenes from epics such as *Bhagwat Gita*, "Devi Mahatmya", "Arya Dharm" and many more.

'Devi Mahatmya' was a Hindu philosophical text describing the goddess as supreme being and power. This gained popularity in 13th-14 century.

While it was Buddhism in the east, it was Jainism that inspired the miniature artistic movement of the Western Indian school of miniature painting. This form prevailed in the regions of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Malwa, from the 12th-16th century AD. Jain manuscripts were illustrated using exaggerated physical traits, vigorous lines and bold colours. With the advent of Persian influences in the 15th century, paper replaced palm leaves, while hunting scenes and varied facial types started appearing along with the use of rich aquamarine blues and golds. The Mughal influence, proved fundamental in the growth of miniatures as illustrations came into being.

Origin of Durga and her worship

Worship of seven goddesses, i.e., Brahmi, Maheshwari, Kaumari, Indrani and Chamunda has been going on since time immemorial. Stories of the origin are incomplete without Matrika (seven goddesses) cult. Prime power of Indian philosophy is Shakti and this tradition of Shakti Pooja is prevailing in other countries as well such as China, Egypt, Tibet, South American countries ⁽³⁾.

Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, etc. centres of early Indian civilisations excavations have produced clay-made icons of women. These women images were of Matri Devi. Vedas mention worship of Ambika, Kali, Uma, and Durga, all forms related to Shakta Dharma. Durga is also mentioned in Sutra literature as the wife of Lord Rudra. Devi exists in Brahma as Satviki, in Vishnu as Rajasi and in Shiva as Tamasi, depicts Arthashastra. In the ancient age, 51 Shaktipithas, pilgrimage destinations were established from east to west and north to south to continue the tradition of 'Shakti Pooja'.

The references explain that Shakti is all and omnipresent. It is a form of soul that helps retain and maintain life; it is holy. Three main expressed forms of Shakti are Mahalaxmi, Mahasaraswati and Mahakali. Shakti in Rigveda is the Durga who kills Mahishasur and his other demons. Thus, three major parts or characters of Durga are Mahalaxmi, Mahasarwati and Mahakali. This is also mentioned in Durga Saptashati or Devi Mahatmya, the Hindu text. In these three forms, Durga is worshipped everywhere during auspicious celebrations. The appearance of Durgathe is suppression of devilish powers. Durga is thus boundless, unsuppressed and dynamic.

Durga through miniature paintings

India has always discovered herself worshipping the divine female. The Puranas perceived the divine female as Adi shakti who like shiva had always prevailed since the manifestation of the universe. This divine manifestation is said to eradicate all evil and indulge in acts of charity. Image of a divine female is a development in a devotional mind, a mix of both metaphysics and mythology.

Worship of a mother goddess has been prevalent since immortal times. It was with the blessings of goddess Durga; warriors would go to war and the tradition of worshipping her as mother converted to 'Shaktipooja'. Various sacred books such as the *Rigveda*, *Upanishad*, *Sahitya*, *Sutra*, *Markandeya Purana*, *Devi Puran*, *Agni Puran*, *Roop Mandan* etc. mention the existence of Durga in one form or another ⁽¹⁾.

Worshippers of Durga would inscribe various forms on temple walls with the help of local artists. This art tradition was spread throughout India through sculptures, miniature paintings, folk paintings ⁽⁴⁾.

While the earliest found sculpture rings can be traced back to Kushan Period depicting Durga with four hands killing the demon king Mahishasura, same can't be said about paintings. Paintings are perishable, most of the temple inscriptions were destroyed with the rule of Moghul Empire.

While emphasising miniature paintings of Durga, the most ancient illustrated manuscript on palm leaves belongs to 13th century, Nepal style is currently at Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi. This is the manuscript of Goddess Durga glory. Durga worships and traditions are quite prevalent in east as well where the goddess is treated like a family member. These forms such as Chandi Mangal, Annada Mangal etc. have been illustrated in manuscripts of Bengal like 'Anand Lahari' and 'Shankchar Nadh'. Paintings from Rajasthan situated at various museums confirm the customs of Shakti Upasana in Rajasthan.

Durga and the tales of Mahishasur

Durga slaying Mahishasura is a popular subject in Hindu art. One of the earliest representations is in a cave temple near Mallapuram dating to the 7th or 8th century CE and in the mid-8th century CE Kailasanatha temple at Ellora. In the latter relief sculpture, a four-armed Durga rides her prancing lion which stomps over Mahisa's followers while the goddess faces the Buffalo Demon brandishing her array of weapons. The earliest shrine dedicated specifically to Devi is found at Chidambaram and dates to the 12th century CE.

Goddess Durga collection at Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad



Figure 1: Image Courtesy – Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad. Illuminated manuscript leaf from Devi Mahatmya: Devi Annihilating demon. Miniature Painting. Watercolor on paper 1650, 24 x 33, Sirohi, Rajasthan.

Devi Mahatmya is probably the most popular text copied and illustrated in all parts of India for religious merit. It contains the myth of the destruction of all-powerful demon Mahisha by Goddess Durga, the embodiment of energies of all gods.

The text describes the annihilation of the demon Mahishasura by Durga from the episodes of Devi Mahatmya. In this folio, goddess Durga is painted with four arms equipped with different weapons bestowed upon her by the Gods as she combats the multi-armed demon by herself. Verses in Devanagari occupy half the page, narrating the incident. This belongs to Sirohi, Rajasthan, dating back to circa 1650, India.



Figure 2: Image Courtesy – Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, New Goddess and other Gods. Miniature Painting. Watercolor on paper, 19th Century, Jaipur, Rajasthan. 24.5 L x 33.5 W

The text *Devi Mahatmya* is presented in three sections. The second section has the goddess born from the strength and power of many gods. This section is unique because it describes the birth of a completely different goddess.

Mahisha conquers the gods and expels them from heaven to wander the earth. Hearing about this Lord Vishnu and Shiva became angry and from them emerged a fiery splendor known as Tejas, manifesting as the goddess. The goddess was created from different aspects of each god and given different weapons from all.

The color palette set for the painting is subtle. The artist has ingeniously ingrained symbolic elements such as the lion skinned saree of the goddess, cosmic halo behind Durga, Brahma, and Shiva, giving them importance. The floor is tiled in a nude color, adorned with some classic Mughal flowers on top of it. While this conversation between the goddess and other gods is being exchanged, the background depicts a serene landscape and weather.

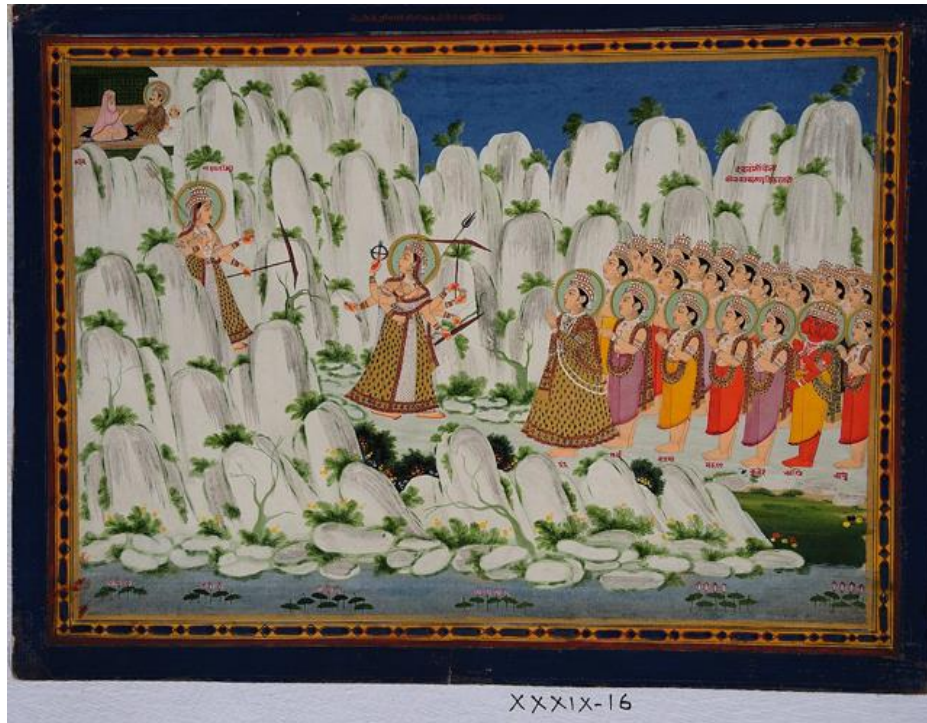


Figure 3: Image Courtesy – Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad. Durga with a group of Gods. Miniature Painting, Watercolor on Paper, 19th or 20th century, 24 l x 33 w, Jaipur, Rajasthan

The third section of Devi Mahatmya is the longest section and it contains the maximum number of episodes. The episode begins with gods going to Himalayas seeking refuge. Folded hands and hopeful facial expressions depict the call for help. Hindu inscriptions are written on top of all of them, identifying them as Indra, Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu. This exchange takes place on a mountain range as the gods seek refuge under multi-armed devi.



Figure 4: Image Courtesy – Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad. Goddess Durga being offered obeisance by the Gods. Miniature Painting. Watercolor on Paper. 19th or 20th century. 24 l x 33 w, Jaipur, Rajasthan

This section is important as Devi is being honored by gods and she roars loud and thunderously. In this painting, the goddess is surrounded by Gods as they bestowed her with their weapons. Shiva drew trishul for her, Vishnu bestowed a disc, Varuna gave a conch, Agni gave a spear, Vayu, the wind god presented a bow and two arrows, Indra gave her a bell from his elephant, Yama, the god of death gave her another staff of death, Brahma presented prayer beads and an ascetic's waterpot, Surya bestowed rays of sunlight on her skin, Kala, lord of time, presented a sword and a shield. The ocean of milk bestowed upon Devi, a necklace of flawless pearls, new clothes, crest-jewels, earrings and bangles, and a pair of shining anklets. Finally, Vishwakarma gave her a gleaming ax and an impenetrable armor.



Figure 5: Image Courtesy – Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad. Durga fighting demons. Miniature Painting. Watercolor on Paper. 19th Century, 24 l x 33 w, Jaipur, Rajasthan

This painting depicts a fierce battle scene where the multi armed Durga is fighting the demon army along with some gods by her side. The goddess is armed with weapons in all of her hands and is wearing a heavy metal armor. The asura army outnumber the devi and the gods but the wrath of the goddess is more vengeful and dangerous. Animal headed demons are all attacking together but the Devi sits firmly on her tiger shooting arrows and attacking them. The painting is framed in a yellow frame with geometrical borders.



Figure 6: Image Courtesy: Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, Durga Devi against Sumbha and Nisumbha, Miniature Painting, Watercolor on Paper, 19th Century, 24 l x 33 w, Jaipur, Rajasthan

In *Devi Mahatmya*, the demons Sumbha and Nisumbha hear of the great goddess Parvati and send two of their generals to abduct her and bring her to the Sumbha, in a proposal of marriage. But Parvati refuses. So in an attempt to abduct her, they send an army of demons which are gradually annihilated by Durga as Parvati transforms. Then both the demons emerge in the battlefield and devi eradicates them as well.

This section is important as it emphasises Devi as universal and powerful. This painting portrays Durga combating a demon in direct fight without any helpers. Presented here is an anonymous demon figure emphasizing on Durga's cosmic role against evil in general. Durga, riding a ferocious lion, confronts the demon riding a chariot driven by two horses. In her arms, she is carrying the weapons gods had given her and a ferocious battle takes place between the two. This painting belongs to Jaipur School of miniature painting dated 19th Century.



Figure 7: Image Courtesy: Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad. Durga fighting Mahishasura. Miniature Painting. Watercolor on Paper. 19th Century. 24 l x 33 w. Jaipur, Rajasthan

Devi Mahatmya narrates the famous tale of Durga killing buffalo shaped asura named Mahishasura. Mahishasura is a deceitful shape-shifting demon. His name is a Sanskrit word composed of 'Mahisha' meaning 'buffalo' and 'asura' meaning 'Demon'. He was given a boon by the gods that no man or animal would be able to kill her except a female. This painting depicts the final battle moments between Durga and the Mahishasura. The goddess is depicted riding her tiger and shooting arrows at the shape-shifting demon. After changing his form several times to deflect the attacks, the demon is finally stuck in his buffalo form and falls on the ground. It belongs to Jaipur school of miniatures dating 19th century.



Figure 8: Image Courtesy – Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad. Durga with Devotees. Miniature Painting. Watercolor on Paper. 19th Century. 27 x 34. Jaipur, Rajasthan

Om Katya Yanaya Vidmahe

Kanya Kumari Dhimahi

Tanno Durgih Prachodayat

'The Devi who took birth in the abode of Rishi Katya, we bow in reverence before you. May you bless us with illumination and inspiration and give us strength.'

Miniature painting of Goddess Durga with her devotees. Maa Durga is worshipped as a supreme deity bearing divine feminine energy. In this painting, the goddess is depicted as a beautiful gold-skinned woman with many arms each holding a weapon bestowed to her by a different God. While being seated on a golden throne, her hands in the centre are holding juxtaposed human and animal figures. Eight devotees on each side are seen holding a fly-whisk along with some angels showering flowers.

This painting belongs to Rajasthani School of miniature painting, dated mid-19th – 20th Century.

Conclusion

The above paintings are a glimpse that even in the legends, the society is still patriarchal, all the devas, and *asuras* are men, enchanted and in need of a female icon. This femineity had been an integral part of the cultural nation within India.

The realms of knowledge and interpretations when it comes to the Divine female or Goddess Durga are endless, various philosophies emerge every day and people find more reasons to believe. Important researches have had been done in exploration of the Goddess and her journey in India and other countries ⁽⁵⁾. Even in different parts of India, researchers have explored popular cultures associated with Durga like the nine days of worship during Navratri or specific representations like the Shyamakali at Puri ⁽⁶⁾.

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Pallavi Baheti is a young creative practitioner from the field of art and curation. An artist by passion holding a masters degree in Art Curation, she is dedicated towards learning and contributing to the world that encompasses art. She is an independent researcher and is currently working at the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad.