

Original Article

ICONOGRAPHIC CONSTRUCTION OF DURGA IN LITERARY SOURCES

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ABSTRACT

Durga holds a central position in Shakta literary traditions, where her identity is formed through narrative as well as visual prescription. While her iconography is often approached through sculpture and temple imagery, the way her form is shaped within texts receives less sustained attention. This paper examines Puranic and Agamic descriptions that define Durga's posture, weapons, gestures, ornaments, and vehicle. These accounts do not function as incidental detail. They organize how authority, protection, and responsibility are placed onto the body of the goddess. Drawing on sources such as the Devi Mahatmya, Shiva Purana, Kalika Purana, Agamic manuals, and classical iconographic writings, the study follows how Durga's image is written before it enters visual or ritual space. Attention is given to arm numbers, ayudhas, vahana, stance, and naming practices across traditions. Although descriptions differ from text to text, a stable logic appears. Durga is shaped as a figure prepared for confrontation and control. She is addressed as mother, yet her image is marked by command rather than reliance. Even when weapons are said to be offered by other gods, narrative action remains with her. The study supports reading Durga as a construction of power that takes form in literature before it appears in material representation.

Keywords: Durga, Iconography, Shakta, Devi

INTRODUCTION

Within the religious and literary traditions of India, the Great Goddess is described through a wide range of names and manifestations. Although her essence is understood as eternal and uncreated, literary sources speak of her "birth" at moments when she chooses to reveal herself within the manifest world. As noted in the [Markandeya Purana. \(n.d.\)](#), her appearance marks a conscious self-disclosure rather than a literal origin. She is feminine in form, but she does not conform to ordinary gender roles. Literary narratives present her as acting on her own will, without dependence on gods or humans. In many accounts, her presence is linked directly to creation itself. Some texts even describe her as the source from which the cosmos comes forth. Whatever form she takes, she is acknowledged as the Great Goddess, vested with full authority and power. [Kramrisch \(1975\)](#).

Durga is regarded as one of the most widely worshipped forms of the Devi, and occupies a central position in Shakta literary traditions. The Devi Mahatmya positions Durga, together with her manifestation as Kali, within the larger identity of the Great Goddess. In this text, she appears as the concentrated power of the gods, brought into being to confront forces they are unable to overcome. She is described as a radiant, ten-armed warrior goddess, marked by beauty as well as formidable strength. While she is

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often approached as compassionate, the text also retains references to her acceptance of blood offerings, reflecting practices that stand apart from Vedic ritual norms [Foulston and Abbott \(2012\)](#).

Durga's importance is further affirmed through Navaratri, the principal festival associated with Sakta worship. This nine-night observance is dedicated to the Nava-Durgas, the nine manifested forms of Durga. Each form is linked to the destruction of a powerful demon, as narrated in the Devi Mahatmya, and together they articulate the goddess's role as the active force that restores order and protects the cosmic balance.

Textual narratives present her as both virginal and supreme, a force of nature that resists subjugation and restores cosmic order. [Pattanaik \(2000\)](#) characterises her as the most resplendent expression of Devi, one who triumphs not through alliance but through inherent power. Despite her lack of association with a male consort or offspring, Durga is consistently addressed as Mother. This maternal identity does not diminish her autonomy; instead, it reinforces her role as protector, guardian, and cosmic authority.

Literary descriptions of Durga do more than recount mythic events. They provide structured portrayals of her form, weapons, vehicle, and physical presence, all of which contribute to a recognisable iconographic framework. These descriptions, preserved across Puranic and allied texts, form the basis for understanding how Durga's image was conceptualised within the textual imagination. The present paper examines these iconographic attributes in detail, focusing on how literature conveys her form, weapons, and associated symbols. Through close reading of textual sources, the study highlights the clarity and coherence with which Durga's identity and power are articulated.

WHO IS DURGA: LITERARY OVERVIEW

DURGA AS A MANIFESTATION OF THE SUPREME FEMININE PRINCIPLE

Goddess Durga is a prominent figure in Indian literary and religious traditions, representing cosmic authority and power. Her name, often interpreted as "one who is difficult to approach," reflects her formidable nature [Jones and Ryan \(2006\)](#). Literary sources describe her as a guardian of the cosmos who intervenes to defeat demons threatening its stability. She is commonly portrayed with multiple arms, each holding a weapon given by the gods, and rides a lion, her chosen vehicle. Her most famous victory is over the buffalo demon Mahisha, earning her the epithet Mahishasuramardini, the slayer of Mahisha. Texts emphasize her independence, strength, and martial skill. She acts without reliance on other gods, demonstrating supreme authority [Kinsley \(1998\)](#).

Durga is associated with inaccessible places and primal powers. Her character carries connections to fertility and vegetation, suggesting that she was revered not only as a warrior but also as a life-giving force. She is linked with Shiva and identified with Parvati in certain narratives, retaining her power while also assuming aspects of motherhood [Mani \(2015\)](#). Literary descriptions present her as a figure who combines independence, combat skill, and protective care. Her multifaceted character provides the foundation for understanding her iconography in textual traditions.

NARRATIVE CONTEXT OF DURGA'S EMERGENCE IN MAJOR TEXTS

Hindu texts such as the Puranas and the Epics play a central role in shaping the cult of the Goddess, a tradition that continues across India in villages, towns, and cities [Chitgopekar \(2003\)](#). The Kalika Purana and the Skanda Purana establish Durga's strength and authority through narrative episodes that give her form within the literary tradition. The Mahabharata offers the earliest reference to Durga as the slayer of Mahisha, the buffalo demon. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Rama worships the Sun before his battle with Ravana in order to seek divine support. Krittivasa's Bengali Ramayana presents a different episode, in which Rama worships Durga instead, directly invoking the Goddess for victory in warfare. The Devi Mahatmya, dated to the fifth or sixth century CE and included in the Markandeya Purana, is the most authoritative text on Durga and establishes her independent status within Hindu traditions. Together, these texts describe her emergence through multiple names, forms, and narratives, shaping a layered literary identity. Reading these sources requires attention to the names through which Durga is recognized. Her names differ in origin and meaning, and each reflects aspects of her nature, her actions, and her physical form. The name Durga itself is understood as "she who is difficult to go against," a meaning that aligns with her portrayal as an unconquerable force in literary tradition.

Durga is identified in Shaiva literature as another name of Shiva, the feminine counterpart of Shiva, who is described as manifesting first as Sati and later as Parvati. The Shiva purana [Shastri \(1950\)](#) recounts that Shiva, understood as possessing three natures, assumed the form of Sati and was married to Shiva. Following the destruction of her body at her father's sacrifice, she returned to her own realm. At the request of the Devas, she later incarnated as Parvati. Through severe penance, she attained union with Shiva once again. The text states that Shiva came to be known by many names, including Durga, and that these names grant worldly benefits and liberation according to action and disposition. Among these, the name Parvati is noted as being widely used.

The name Durga is also employed as an epithet of the goddess Uma in the Shiva Purana [Shastri \(1950\)](#). In a passage describing the praise offered by the gods, Uma is addressed as the mother of the universe, the resident of Shivaloka, and the beloved of Shiva. She is invoked as Maheshvari and Durga, and is revered as the supreme energy that is pure, tranquil, and sustaining, identified with both the manifest and unmanifest principles of existence.

In another context, the term Durga appears with a different meaning. It is used to denote a fortified city or stronghold. In the description of Tripura in the Shiva Purana [Shastri \(1950\)](#), Brahma instructs Maya to construct three fortified cities for the sons of Taraka. These cities, made of gold, silver, and steel, are described as excellent fort-like structures situated in heaven, the sky, and the earth. The term Durga here signifies strength, protection, and inaccessibility, reflecting a conceptual parallel to the name of the goddess.

The name Durga is also linked to the goddess's actions and exploits. The Skanda Purana [Tagare \(1994\)](#) explains that Parvati, the consort of Siva, receives the name Durga after she kills the demon named Durga. A different account appears in the Devi Mahatmya (as cited by [Rao \(1914\)](#)), where the Goddess is said to acquire this name after slaying the demon, Durgama. These narratives connect the name directly to acts of protection and victory over hostile forces.

The meanings attached to Durga's names also reflect her qualities as a goddess. She is frequently addressed as the "Mother of the Universe" or the "Universal Mother," titles that emphasize her nurturing and protective role [Dutta \(2003\)](#). When identified as Uma, the consort of Siva, she appears as a maternal and safeguarding presence. In contrast, the name Kali points to a destructive aspect and is associated with dissolution and force. Taken together, these names suggest that Durga embodies three fundamental forces within herself. As [Dutta \(2003\)](#) observes, she represents the creative, preservative, and destructive powers, corresponding to the three primal qualities of sattva, rajas, and tamas.

KEY ROLES ATTRIBUTED TO DURGA

One of the most prominent roles attributed to Durga in literary tradition is that of the slayer of demonic forces and the protector of cosmic order. She is most commonly identified as Mahisasuramardini, the destroyer of the buffalo demon Mahisa, an epithet described by [Chitgopekar \(2003\)](#) as her most widely recognized title. The narrative of Mahisa's defeat positions Durga as the central agent responsible for restoring balance when the cosmic order is threatened and the gods are rendered powerless. This act is not depicted as an isolated episode of violence but as a deliberate intervention undertaken to re-establish moral and cosmic stability. Literary accounts consistently emphasize that while the gods acknowledge the crisis, the responsibility of resolution rests with Durga alone, reinforcing her authority as an independent force capable of preserving dharma.

The autonomy and authority of Durga are further articulated through the names and titles attributed to her in literary sources. Appellations such as Parvati and Himavati locate her within narratives of origin and manifestation, while other epithets foreground her power and capacity for decisive action [Chitgopekar \(2003\)](#). Her role as a demon-slayer does not derive legitimacy from male deities, even when their involvement is acknowledged, as the texts underline their reliance on her strength and judgement. Alongside this authoritative role, Durga is also consistently represented as a motherly guardian. She is addressed as the mother of the Universe, a title that conveys protection, care, and responsibility toward all beings. As Uma, she is portrayed as attentive to the suffering of her devotees, offering assurance of protection to those who invoke her in times of distress. Together, these representations construct Durga as a deity who embodies both command and compassion, maintaining cosmic order through decisive action while simultaneously functioning as a guardian figure deeply invested in the welfare of the world [Dutta \(2003\)](#).

ICONOGRAPHIC BASICS OF DURGA IN LITERATURE

The term iconography refers to the systematic language of image-making and may be understood as the detailed description and identification of icons [Gupta and Asthana \(2007\)](#). In art historical discourse, it denotes the representation of ideas through visual and symbolic forms, particularly in religious and cultural contexts. Closely related to this is iconology, which extends beyond the identification of visual elements to examine the meanings embedded within images. While iconography focuses on recognizing figures through attributes, postures, and compositional features, iconology considers the broader cultural and textual associations that shape interpretation. The distinction between the two is often established through "marks of cognizance," such as hairstyles, bodily marks, vehicles (vahanas), and weapons (ayudhas), which enable the identification of specific deities or figures [Sokhi \(2023\)](#).

Iconography functions as a visual extension of textual description, closely linked to literary sources. Texts such as Puranas, stotras, and epics provide detailed accounts of divine forms, attributes, actions, and symbolic meanings, particularly in relation to Durga. These descriptions establish a framework for visual representation, guiding the selection of attributes, postures, and symbolic elements. In the case of Durga, sources such as the Devi Mahatmya, and related hymns present her form, actions, and qualities with precision, emphasizing her role as the slayer of demonic forces and protector of cosmic order. Literary narratives assert her autonomy and authority, portraying her as self-manifested and supreme, independent of male deities. Iconography translates these textual accounts into visual form, reinforcing the theological and symbolic meanings described in the texts while ensuring that the representation remains consistent with literary authority. Through this relationship, images both reflect and shape how textual narratives are understood and transmitted within religious and cultural traditions.

CORE ATTRIBUTES CONSISTENTLY MENTIONED IN TEXTS:

Literary sources consistently highlight attributes that define Durga's power, authority, and presence. She is described as radiant and formidable, with a strong and attractive physique, three eyes, and a dark complexion. Texts such as the Suprabhedagama specify her bodily proportions, ornaments, and attire, including yellow garments, a red bodice, and bound breasts, while her head is adorned with a Karanda Makuta [Rao \(1914\)](#). These details reinforce her commanding presence and divine beauty, which is said to attract attention even from demons [Dutta \(2003\)](#).

Durga is often depicted with multiple arms, usually four or eight, though texts note that she may have more. Each arm carries a weapon or emblem bestowed by the gods, including the trishula of Shiva, the chakra of Vishnu, Agni's shalaka, Indra's vajra, and the Dhanu of Vayu, among others [Dutta \(2003\)](#), [Chitgopekar \(2003\)](#), [Rao \(1914\)](#). These gifts signify that her power is both inherent and divinely sanctioned, allowing her to confront multiple adversaries simultaneously. The lion (vahana) serves as her mount, symbolizing courage, dominance, and mobility, while in some descriptions she is depicted standing on a buffalo, emphasizing her triumph over demonic forces [Rao \(1914\)](#).

These attributes function collectively within the narrative framework. Her radiant appearance establishes her authority and inspires devotion. Multiple arms and divine weapons allow her to defeat demons such as Mahisa, maintaining cosmic order and protecting the universe. Her mount reinforces her control over hostile forces, while her ornaments, gestures, and stance communicate both maternal protection and martial prowess. By presenting Durga with these features, texts consistently link her physical and symbolic form to her narrative role, showing how each attribute conveys her autonomy, power, and responsibility as the supreme guardian of the cosmos [Dutta \(2003\)](#), [Chitgopekar \(2003\)](#), [Rao \(1914\)](#).

FORMS OF DURGA IN LITERARY DESCRIPTION

Purva Karana Agama (As cited by [Rao \(1991\)](#)) describes Durga as four-armed and two-eyed, with a calm and composed expression. Her lower right hand displays the abhaya hasta, while the lower left hand displays Varada hasta. The upper hands carry chakra and shankha. This combination of attributes closely aligns her with Vishnu and identifies her as Vaishnavi Shakti or Narayani. She wears the karanda makuta, adorned with a crescent moon, and her ears are ornamented with makara kundala. In this form, she is shown standing upon the head of the buffalo demon Mahisha.

According to the Kalika Purana [Pratap \(2008\)](#), Durga is sixteen armed and her complexion is compared to that of the Atasi flower. She is depicted wearing a jata-makuta. She is depicted holding shula, pasha, agni, vajra, shara, khadga, chakra, loha-tomara, kapala, ankusha, gadha, shakti, Parashu, Dhanu, khetaka and shankha. The Kalika Purana also describes a ten-armed manifestation. In this form, the five right hands carry trishula, khadga, chakra, bana, and shakti. The five left hands hold khetaka, Dhanu, pasha, ankusha, and either a ghanta or a Parashu.

The Suprabhedagama (As cited by [Rao \(1991\)](#)) describes Durga as having either four arms or eight arms. In the eight-armed form, she holds shankha, chakra, Dhanu, bana, khadga, khetaka, shula and pasha. She is either shown standing on padma-asana or on the head of a Mahisha. The text also notes her depiction as riding a lion.

The Shri-Tattva-Nidhi describes a form of Durga with eighteen arms. In her right hands she holds shakti, mudgara, shakti, vajra, shankha, padma, shalaka, shara, and chakra. The left hands carry a japamala, khetaka, ghanta, darpana, bana, dwaja, damaru, pasha and Tarjani hasta. (Shri Tattva Nidhi Venkateshwar Press: Yogendra Sharma: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive, 2019)

The Amsumadbhedha distinct description of Durga (As cited by [Rao \(1991\)](#)). Here, Durga is depicted with three eyes, dark in complexion, wearing a red bodice, while a serpent binds her breasts. She has four-hands, with the upper hands holding shankha and chakra. The lower right hand is in abhaya hasta, while the lower left rests on the hip in katyavalambita. She may be shown standing evenly on a lotus pedestal or upon the head of a buffalo.

The Vishnudharmottara, cited in several Agamic sources (As cited by [Rao \(1991\)](#)), prescribes a ten-armed form of Durga. In this configuration, two additional hands are added to the eight-armed type, holding kapala and shakti.

ICONOGRAPHY OF NAVA-DURGA

According to [Rao \(1914\)](#) and [Gupte \(1972\)](#), no less than nine forms of Durga or Nava Durgas are mentioned in various Agamic sources. They are: Nilakanthi, Kshemankari, Harsiddhi, Rudramsha-Durga, Vana-Durga, Agni-Durga, Jaya-Durga, Vindhyavasi-Durga and Ripumari-Durga.

Nilakanthi is the bestower of wealth and happiness. She is four armed and holds Varada hasta, trishula, khetaka and a drinking vessel. Kshemankari is the goddess of good health. She is four armed and is shown carrying trishula, lotus, drinking vessel and Varada hasta. Harsiddhi the four-armed goddess bestows desired ends. She is shown holding a damaru, Kamandalu, sword and vessel. Rudramsha-Durga has two eyes and a dark-coloured body. She is depicted wearing red garments, gold ornaments set with rubies and kirita-makuta. She is surrounded by the sun and the moon on both sides and rides a lion. She holds Shula, khadga, shankha and chakra in her four hands. Vana-Durga is eight armed and has a complexion of grass green colour. She is shown holding shankha,

chakra, khadga, khetaka, bana, Dhanu shula and Tarjani hasta. Agni-Durga has three eyes and her complexion is as brilliant as the lighting. She rides a lion and wears a crown with Crecent moon. In her eight hands she carries chakra, khadga, khetaka, bana, pasha, ankusha, Varada hasta and Tarjani hasta. and surrounded by two dancing damsels on either side carrying sword and shield. Jaya-Durga has a black complexion and three eyes. She wears a crescent moon crown and rides a lion. Her four hands hold shankha, chakra, khadga and trishula. Vindhyavasi-Durga is three eyed and has a bright complexion. She sits on a golden lotus and is surrounded by Indra and other gods praising her. Her vahana lion is shown standing near her. In her four hands she holds shankha, chakra, abhaya hasta and Varada hasta. Ripumari-Durga has a red complexion and is known to destroy enemies. She has two arms and holds Tarjani mudra and trishula.

The text devata Murti Prakaranam [Mandana \(1999\)](#) provides a different list of Nava-Durgas. They are: Mahalakshmi, Nanda, Kshemankari, Sarvati, Maharanda, Bhramani, Sarvamangala, Rewati and Harsiddhi.

Mahalakshmi is four-armed and holds Varada hasta, trishula, khetaka and panapatra. She wears a snake around her blue throat. Nanda is bestower of happiness and bliss. She holds japamala, khadga, khetaka and panapatra in her four hands. Kshemankari is the goddess of good health and well-being. She holds Varada hasta, trishula, lotus and a panapatra. Sarvati is the goddess of accomplishments and perfection. She holds kamandalu, chakra, khetaka and panapatra. Maharanda is venerated by the gods themselves. She holds a khadga, trishula, ghanta and panapatra. Bhramani is a goddess who confounds, deludes and confuses the wicked. She holds a khadga, damaru, khetaka and pasha. Sarvamangala is the goddess of good fortune and remover of obstacles. She holds a japamala, vajra, ghanta and panapatra. Rewati is the bestower of peace and she holds danda, trishula, khatvanga and panapatra. Harsiddhi is worshipped for the attainment of siddhis. She holds a kamandalu, khadga, damaru and panapatra [Mandana \(1999\)](#).

ICONOGRAPHY OF MAHISHASURAMARDINI

The iconographic details of Mahishasuramardini are mentioned in various Puranic sources. These figures are depicted variously with their arms ranging from two to thirty-two. With two, four and six handed images being the most common ones.

[Durga Saptashati. \(n.d.\)](#) gives a detailed description of the origin and creation of Mahishasuramardini. According to this text the goddess is eighteen armed and resides on a padma peetam or lotus pedestal. She wears a lotus garland has a bright and beautiful appearance. She is decked in various ornaments gifted to her by various gods. She carries ayudhas such as Trishula, chakra, shankha, shakti, Dhanush, bana, vajra, ghanta, danda, pasha, mala, kamandalu, khadga, khetaka and panapatra.

The [Devi Bhagavata. \(n.d.\)](#) Purana also mentions eighteen armed Mahishasuramardini with lion as her vahana. She is depicted holding at trishula, chakra, shankha, Dhanu, bana, shakti, vajra, danda, panapatra, ghanta, japamala, khetaka, kamandalu, Parashu, khadga, padma and gadha.

Goddess Mahishasuramardini is named as Ugra-Chanda, Bhadrakali and Katyayini in the Kalika Purana [Pratap \(2008\)](#). She is depicted as having matted hair, complexion of als flower and lion as her vahana. She wears a gold crown adorned with a crescent moon. She holds trishula, chakra, khadga, shankha, bana, shakti, vajra, danda, khetaka, dhala, Dhanu, pasha, ankusha, ghanta, Parashu and musala.

The interpretation of Devi-Mahatmya of the Markandeya Purana is also found in the [Vamana Purana \(n.d.\)](#). This Purana describes Mahishasuramardini as having three eyes and eighteen arms and names her Katyayani. She is depicted holding trishula, chakra, shankha, shara, danda, Dhanu, bana, vajra, ishudhi, gadha, akshamala, kamandalu, khadga, khetaka and Parashu.

The Lalita Rahasya of Brahmanda Puran [Shastri and Tagare \(2000\)](#) mentions the form of Narayani Durga who emerged to kill asuras. She is depicted holding trishula, shankha, chakra. Shakti, Dhanu, bana, vajra, panapatra, danda, pasha, kamandalu, ghanta, khadga and khetaka.

According to Varaha purana [Shastri and Tagare \(2000\)](#), Mahishasuramardini is addressed as Vaishnavi. She is twenty armed and depicted riding a lion. She holds various ayudhas in her hands such as; Dhanu, khadga, shakti. Shara, trishula, gadha, musala, chakra, bhindiyata, danda, pasha, dwaja, padma.

[Agni Puran. \(n.d.\)](#) gives a very detailed description of the image of Durga. In this text, Durga is addressed as Chandi. Four ways of depicting the same goddess are mentioned in Agni Puran. The first form has twenty hands and carries trishula, khadga, shakti, chakra, pasha, kheta, ayudhas, abhaya hasta, damaru and shakti in her right hands. Naga-pasha, khetaka, kuthar, ankusha, pasha, ghanta, ayudhas, gadha, Darpana and mudgara in left hands. Another form mentioned is a ten-armed Chandi standing on/next to the severed head of Mahishasura. She has three eyes, holds a trishula and various other weapon and has a noose wrapped around the neck of Mahishasura. The same text also mentions an eighteen-armed Durga. She holds munda, khetaka, Darpana, Tarjani, Dhanu, dwaja, damaru, dhala and pasha in her right hands and shakti, mudgara, shula, vajra, khadga, ankusha, bana, chakra and shalaka in her left hands. The sixteen-armed Durga has all the same weapons as the eighteen armed one except damaru and Tarjani.

CONCLUSION

Durga is one of the most widely recognized and depicted extensively in literature. Her form is constructed through ayudhas, mudras and vahanas across various puranic and agamic sources. These elements are added not merely for decoration but they serve a deeper purpose. The repeated focus on multiple arms, ayudhas and controlled stance frames her as capable of confronting disorder while remaining stable and composed in appearance. They represent her authority and martial nature.

The study shows that textual iconography relies on both consistency and variation. Texts differ in arm numbers, emblems, and modes of presentation, yet they follow a shared logic. Durga must appear protective and severe at the same time. She is addressed as mother, but her image carries judicial force. Even when weapons are said to come from other gods, narrative control stays with her. Her form is written as autonomous. Through description, the goddess's body becomes a place where cosmic order is made visible.

Looking at literary prescription on its own helps clarify how Durga's image is formed before it enters temples, art, or performance. These texts do not only repeat images already in circulation. They produce the rules that later visual and ritual traditions follow. Studying Durga through literature allows us to see how meaning, form, and authority are arranged at the textual level. This approach moves the discussion away from simple cataloguing and toward understanding how description itself shapes the way divine presence is imagined and sustained across time.

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