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#PERSPECTIVE

Why do we worship Durga but still judge women?

Every autumn, we dress the streets in lights, put on new clothes, stand before elaborately decorated idols and celebrate a woman who is powerful, fearless and almost impossible to defeat. We call her Durga.

She is worshipped as the embodiment of Shakti, the divine feminine power. She rides a lion, carries weapons, defeats demons and stands at the centre of one of the most important festivals of our culture. And then, after the puja lights go out, we return to our ordinary lives.

There is something almost poetic about the contradiction. We have no problem with a woman holding ten weapons in her ten hands, but a woman holding a leadership position can still make people uncomfortable.

The different forms of Durga represent different dimensions of feminine strength. The forms offer a remarkably broad understanding of womanhood. She can be nurturing and fierce. Intellectual and emotional. Powerful and compassionate. A protector, provider, creator, leader, or fighter.

Yet, society often wants women to choose only one acceptable version. It seems we are comfortable with the goddess having multiple identities. We just struggle when an actual woman does.

Consider women in sports, the military, policing, firefighting, construction or other physically demanding professions. A woman serving in a physically demanding job is often expected to prove herself twice: first through her performance and then through her femininity. The question is not always, "Can she do the job?" Sometimes it becomes, "But does she still look feminine?"

Interestingly, nobody asks Durga whether defeating a demon will ruin her manicure! We admire physical strength when it is represented through mythology, but can become strangely uncomfortable when a real woman develops that strength herself.

The same contradiction appears in leadership. A decisive man is often described as confident. A decisive woman can be called arrogant. A man who speaks firmly is "assertive"; a woman who does the same may be "difficult." The vocabulary changes, but the judgement remains.

There is a particular cultural irony here. Bengali society has long celebrated educated women, working women, and accomplished women. We proudly talk about daughters becoming doctors, engineers, journalists, athletes, entrepreneurs, and civil servants. That celebration, however, sometimes comes with invisible terms and conditions. Progress, yes. But not too much. Success, yes. But remember your responsibilities at home.

It is almost as if society has created an unofficial women's handbook titled: "You May Succeed, Provided Nobody Feels Threatened by Your Success."

And this is not uniquely a Hindu issue, or a Muslim issue, or a Christian issue. Misogyny does not usually check someone's religious identity before entering the room. Women across communities experience different versions of the same social policing: how they dress, whom they marry, how late they stay outside, whether they have children, whether they work after marriage, how they speak and how much authority they are allowed to exercise.

Perhaps nowhere is the contradiction more painful than in the conversation about women's safety. Women are repeatedly told to be careful. Do not come home late. Do not wear that. All of this may be practical advice in an unsafe environment. But when safety becomes a woman's responsibility primarily, society quietly moves the burden from the person causing harm to the person trying to avoid it.

Durga, meanwhile, is celebrated precisely because she confronts danger rather than being instructed to organise her life around avoiding it. Her weapons are not symbols of helplessness. They represent power, protection, courage and the ability to confront injustice. Perhaps that symbolism deserves more attention.

At the end of the day, the uncomfortable question is: What do we actually worship when we worship Durga? Do we admire female power only when it is divine, distant and safely contained within mythology? Or can we recognise that same strength in the woman sitting across from us at work?

If Durga represents Shakti, perhaps Shakti should not become acceptable only when accompanied by incense, drums and an idol. Maybe the real test of our respect for feminine power is not how enthusiastically we celebrate a goddess for five days. It is how we treat women for the entire year. Because it is easy to worship a woman when she is a goddess. The harder thing is to respect her when she is simply a woman. And perhaps that is the demon worth defeating.

By Farhana Faiza
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