

## Chapter 1

# Durgā, Warrior Goddess and Cosmic Queen



Hundreds of demons were slain by the shower of weapons unleashed by the Goddess. Others were thrown to the ground, stupefied by the ringing of her bell. She bound some of her enemies and dragged them on the ground with her noose. With her sword, she split demons in half and bashed others with her mace. The onslaught of the Goddess caused terrible bloodshed among the demons and resulted in a scene of gruesome carnage. Mortally wounded victims vomited blood, while some looked like porcupines having been wounded with so many arrows. Severed arms, legs, and heads littered the battlefield. Her victims jerked in the throes of death and appeared to be performing a macabre dance of death. The battlefield was so strewn with the wreckage of the demon army, and so flooded with blood, that it was nearly impassable. As a raging fire consumes fields and forests, so the Goddess devastated the ranks of the demon army.<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

The goddess Durgā is one of the most formidable and popular deities of the Hindu pantheon. Her primary mythological function is to combat demons who threaten the stability of the cosmos. In this role, she is depicted as a great battle queen with many arms, each of which wields a weapon. She rides a fierce lion and is described as irresistible in battle. The demon she is most famous for defeating is Mahiṣa, the buffalo demon. Her most popular epithet is Mahiṣamardīnī, the slayer of Mahiṣa, and her most common iconographic representation shows her defeating him.

At a certain point in her history, Durgā becomes associated with the god Śiva as his wife. In this role, Durgā assumes domestic characteristics and is often identified with the goddess Pārvatī. She also takes on the role of mother in her later history. At her most important festival, Durgā Pūjā, she is shown

flanked by four deities identified as her children: the gods Kārttikeya and Ga-neśa and the goddesses Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī.

It also seems clear that Durgā has, or at least had at some point in her history, a close connection with the crops or with the fertility of vegetation. During her festival, which is held at harvest time, she is associated with plants, and she also receives blood offerings, which may suggest the renourishment of her powers of fertility.

### *The Warrior Goddess*

Although several Vedic deities play central roles as demon slayers and warriors, no goddesses are cast in this function in Vedic literature. Although the name *Durgā* is mentioned in Vedic literature,<sup>2</sup> no goddess resembling the warrior goddess of later Hinduism is found in these early texts.

Around the fourth century, images of Durgā slaying a buffalo begin to become common throughout India.<sup>3</sup> By the medieval period (after the sixth century) Durgā has become a very well-known and popularly worshiped deity. Her mythological deeds come to be told in many texts, and descriptions of and injunctions to undertake her autumnal worship are common in several late texts.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, Durgā's origin seems to be among the indigenous, non-Āryan cultures of India. In addition to there being no similar goddesses among the deities of the Vedic tradition, many early references to Durgā associate her with peripheral areas such as the Vindhya Mountains, tribal peoples such as the Śabarās, and non-Āryan habits such as drinking liquor and blood and eating meat.<sup>5</sup> Although she becomes an establishment goddess in medieval Hinduism, protecting the cosmos from the threat of demons and guarding civilization like a female version of Viṣṇu, her roots seem to be among the tribal and peasant cultures of India that eventually leavened the male-dominated Vedic pantheon with several goddesses associated with power, blood, and battle.

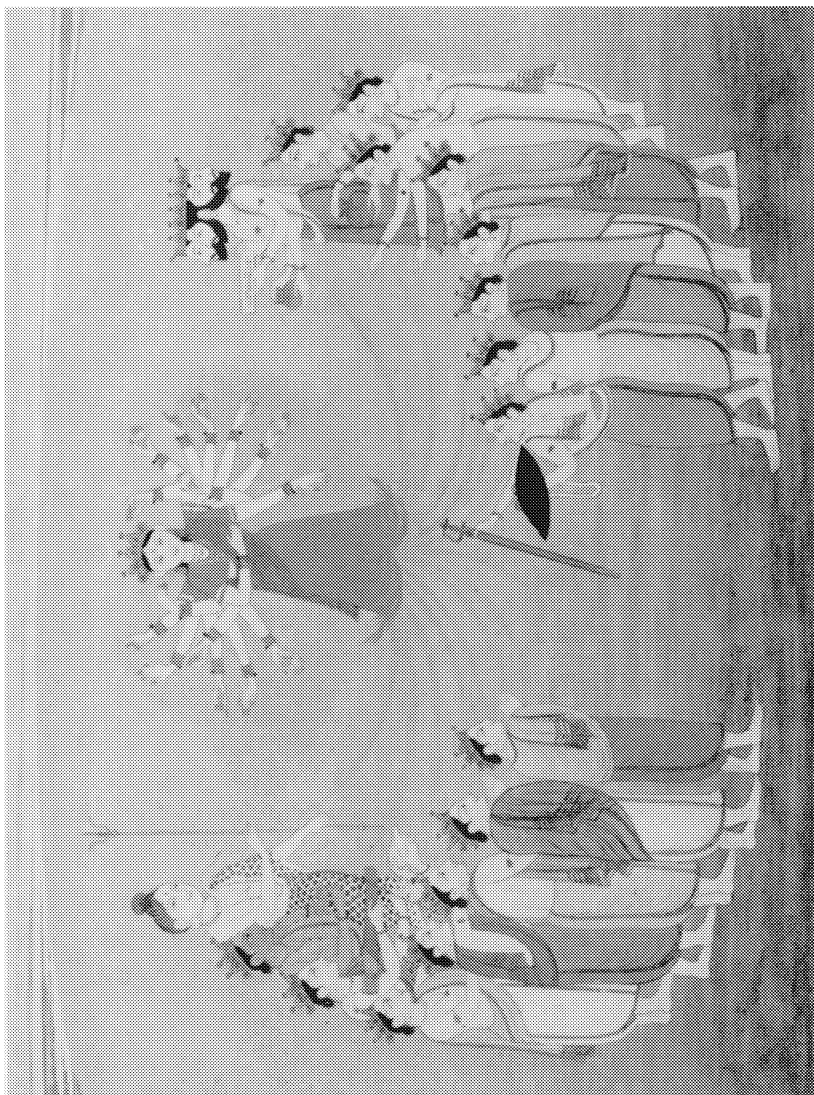
Several accounts of Durgā's origin are found in Hindu mythology. She is sometimes said to arise from Viṣṇu as the power that makes him sleep or as his magical, creative power. In the *Viṣṇu-purāna*, Viṣṇu enlists her aid to help delude a demon king who is threatening the infant Kṛṣṇa (5.1.93). In the *Devī-māhātmya*, she comes to the aid of the god Brahmā and ultimately of Viṣṇu himself when Brahmā invokes her to leave the slumbering Viṣṇu so that he will awaken and fight the demons Madhu and Kaitabha (chapter 1). The *Skanda-purāna* says that once upon a time a demon named Durga threatened the world. Śiva requested Pārvatī to slay the demon. Pārvatī then assumed the form of a warrior goddess and defeated the demon, who took the form of a buffalo. Thereafter, Pārvatī was known by the name Durgā (2.83).<sup>6</sup> A similar account of her origin is found in myths relating her defeat of the demons Śumbha

and Niśumbha. Durgā emerges from Pārvatī in these accounts when Pārvatī sheds her outer sheath, which takes on an identity of its own as a warrior goddess.<sup>7</sup>

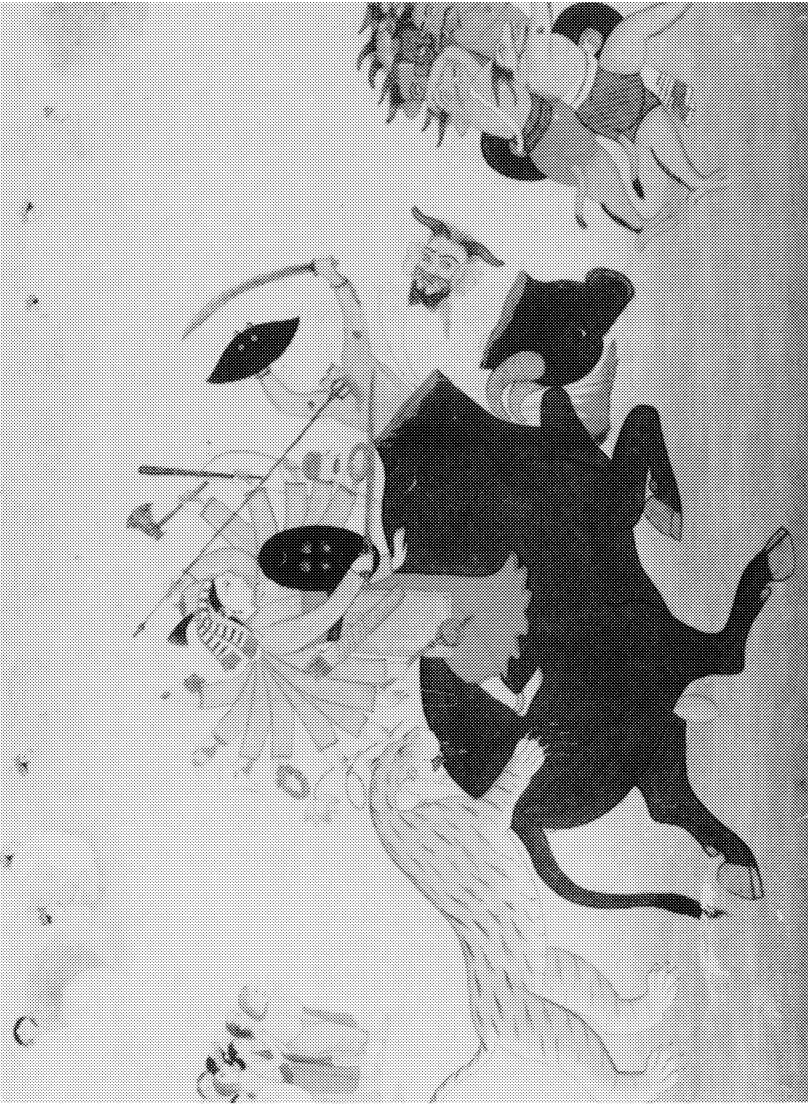
The best-known account of Durgā's origin, however, is told in connection with her defeat of the demon Maḥiṣa. After performing heroic austerities, Maḥiṣa was granted the boon that he would be invincible to all opponents except a woman. He subsequently defeated the gods in battle and usurped their positions. The gods then assembled and, becoming angry at the thought of Maḥiṣa's triumph and their apparent inability to do anything about it, emitted their fiery energies. This great mass of light and strength congealed into the body of a beautiful woman, whose splendor spread throughout the universe. The parts of her body were formed from the male gods. Her face was formed from Śiva, her hair from Yama, her arms from Viṣṇu, and so on. Similarly, each of the male deities from whom she had been created gave her a weapon. Śiva gave her his trident; Viṣṇu, his discus; Vayu, his bow and arrows; and so on. Equipped by the gods and supplied by the god Himalaya with a lion as her vehicle, Durgā, the embodied strength of the gods, then roared mightily, causing the earth to shake.<sup>8</sup>

The creation of the goddess Durgā, then, takes place in the context of a cosmic crisis of one kind or another, which has been precipitated by a demon whom the male gods are unable to subdue. She is created because the situation calls for a woman, or a superior warrior, or a peculiar power that she possesses with which the demon may be deluded, or a combination of all three. Invariably, Durgā defeats the demon handily, demonstrating both superior martial ability and superior power. On the battlefield she often creates female helpers from herself. The most famous of these are the goddess Kālī and a group of ferocious deities known as the Mātṛakās (Mothers), who usually number seven.<sup>9</sup> These goddesses seem to embody Durgā's fury and are wild, blood-thirsty, and particularly fierce.<sup>10</sup> Durgā does not create male helpers, and, to my knowledge, she does not fight with male allies. Although she is created by the male gods and does their bidding, and although she is observed and applauded by them, she (along with her female helpers and attendants) fights without direct male support against male demons, and she always wins.

Durgā's distinctive nature, and to a great extent probably her appeal, comes from the combination of world-supportive qualities and liminal characteristics that associate her with the periphery of civilized order.<sup>11</sup> In many respects, Durgā violates the model of the Hindu woman. She is not submissive, she is not subordinated to a male deity, she does not perform household duties, and she excels at what is traditionally a male function—fighting in battle. As an independent warrior who can hold her own against any male on the battlefield, she reverses the normal role for females and therefore stands outside normal society. Unlike the normal female, Durgā does not lend her power or *śakti*



The creation of Durgā by the gods. From C. L. Bharany collection, reproduced from *Ritual Art of India* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985), pl. 88, courtesy of Ajit Mookerjee.



Durgā slays the buffalo demon. From C. L. Bharany collection, reproduced from *Ritual Art of India* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985), pl. 91, courtesy of Ajit Mookerjee.

to a male consort but rather *takes* power from the male gods in order to perform her own heroic exploits.<sup>12</sup> They give up their inner strength, fire, and heat to create her and in doing so surrender their potency to her.

Many renditions of Durgā's mythological exploits highlight her role reversal by portraying her male antagonists as enamored of her and wanting to marry her. They have no wish to fight her at all, assume that she will be no match for them in battle, and proceed to make offers of marriage to her.<sup>13</sup> In some variants of the myth, Durgā explains to her antagonist and would-be suitor that her family has imposed a condition on her marriage, namely, that her husband must first defeat her in battle. The suitor is unable to do this, of course, and is annihilated in his attempt. In some forms of the myth, the goddess rejects the offer of marriage with fierce, combative language, foretelling how she will tear her would-be suitor to pieces in battle. The antagonist, however, insists upon interpreting this language as a metaphor for love play and blindly insists upon trying to overcome the goddess in battle.<sup>14</sup> In the Mahiṣa myth as told in the *Devī-bhāgavata-purāṇa*, for example, a long dialogue takes place between Durgā and the demon in which Mahiṣa insists that as a woman the goddess is too delicate to fight, too beautiful for anything but love play, and must come under the protection and guidance of a man in order to fulfill her proper proclivities (5.16.46–65).

Because she is unprotected by a male deity, Mahiṣa assumes that Durgā is helpless (5.12.14–30), which is the way that women are portrayed in the Hindu law books.<sup>15</sup> In the law books, women are said to be incapable of handling their own affairs and to be socially inconsequential without relationships with men. They are significant primarily as sisters, daughters, and mothers of males, and as wives. In nearly all forms of her mythical exploits, Durgā is portrayed as independent from male support and relationships, yet irresistibly powerful. She is beautiful and seductive in appearance, but her beauty does not serve its normal function, which is to attract a husband. It serves to entice her victims into fatal battle.

In short, as a beautiful young woman who slays demons seeking to be her lovers and who exists independent of male protection or guidance, Durgā represents a vision of the feminine that challenges the stereotyped view of women found in traditional Hindu law books. She perhaps suggests the extraordinary power that is repressed in women who are forced into submissive and socially demeaning roles. In her role reversal, she exists outside normal structures and provides a version of reality that potentially, at least, may be refreshing and socially invigorating.<sup>16</sup>

Durgā's liminal nature is also evident in her favorite habitats and in some of her favorite habits. In nearly all of her myths, Durgā is associated with mountains, usually the Himalayas or the Vindhyas. One of her common epithets is Vindhyaśinī, She Who Dwells in the Vindhya Mountains. These



Durgā kills the buffalo demon, contemporary lithograph.

mountain regions are areas considered geographically peripheral to civilized society and inaccessible except through heroic efforts. The Vindhyas, in particular, are also regarded as dangerous because of the violent and hostile tribal peoples who dwell there. Indeed, Durgā is said to be worshiped by tribal groups such as the Śābaras. In this worship, furthermore, she is said to receive (and to enjoy) meat and blood, both of which are regarded by civilized Āryan society as highly polluting. In the *Devī-māhātmya*, Durgā is also described as quaffing wine during battle in her fight with Mahiṣa (3.33) and as laughing and glaring with reddened eyes under its influence. In the concluding scene of the *Devī-māhātmya*, her devotees are instructed to propitiate her with offerings of their own flesh and blood (13.8). Durgā's preference for inaccessible dwelling places, her worship by tribal peoples, her taste for intoxicating drink, meat, and blood, her ferocious behavior on the battlefield, and her preference for the flesh and blood of her devotees portray a goddess who stands outside the civilized order, whose presence is to be found only after stepping out of the orderly world into the liminal space of the mountainous regions where she dwells.

Reinforcing Durgā's tendencies to the antistructural or liminal are certain associations with negative, or at least inauspicious, qualities or powers such as sleep, hunger, and *māyā* (in the sense of delusion). In the Mahiṣa episode of the *Devī-māhātmya* she is called She Whose Form Is Sleep (5.15), She Whose Form Is Hunger (5.16), She Whose Form Is Shadow (5.17), and She Whose Form Is Thirst (5.19).

These associations are particularly emphasized in versions of the myth that tell of Durgā's aid to Brahmā and Viṣṇu against the demons Madhu and Kaitabha. In this myth, as told in the *Devī-māhātmya*, Madhu and Kaitabha are born from Viṣṇu's ear wax. They threaten to kill the god Brahmā, who in turn has been born from a lotus sprung from Viṣṇu's navel. Brahmā appeals to the goddess in the form of sleep to come forth from Viṣṇu so that he will awaken and slay the demons. Throughout the episode, the goddess is called Mahāmāyā, the power that throws people into the bondage of delusion and attachment (1.40). Indeed, Viṣṇu is successful in slaying Madhu and Kaitabha only because the goddess deludes them into offering Viṣṇu a boon; he accepts and asks that they permit him to slay them (1.73-74). She is also called Great Delusion (Mahāmohā) (1.58); Great Demoness (Mahāsūrī) (1.58); Black Night, Great Night, Night of Delusion (1.59); Darkness (Tāmasī) (1.68); Force That Seizes Those of Knowledge and Leads Them to Delusion (1.42); and Cause of Bondage in the World (1.44). The entire Madhu-Kaitabha episode as told in the *Devī-māhātmya* hinges on the fact that Viṣṇu is helpless as long as he is pervaded by the goddess, whose primary effect upon him is to keep him unconscious. In this episode, then, even though she is called by many positive terms, the goddess has numbing, deluding, dark qualities. Again, her role vis-à-vis Viṣṇu seems exactly the opposite of the normal role of a goddess as a male de-



ity's *śakti*, the power that enables the god to act in the world. In this myth, Viṣṇu is only enabled to act when the goddess *leaves* him. She does not empower, enliven, or strengthen Viṣṇu; she puts him to sleep, reducing him to powerlessness.

Counterbalancing Durgā's liminal, peripheral nature, which at times seems to threaten the world's stability and to inhibit the quest for spiritual liberation, is her role as protectress of the cosmos. Her role as the destroyer of demons who have usurped the position of the gods dominates her mythology. As a great warrior she is created by the gods and acts on their behalf. While she is often said to transcend the male gods who create her and to excel them on the battlefield, she acts for their welfare. In doing this, she acts to maintain or restore cosmic harmony and balance.

The theology underlying Durgā's appearances and exploits is clear in the *Devī-māhātmya*, the most famous text extolling her deeds. Durgā is said to underlie and pervade the cosmos; to create, maintain, and periodically destroy it according to the rhythmic sequences of Hindu cosmology (12.33–35); and to assume different forms from time to time when cosmic balance is threatened by enemies of the lesser gods (11.38–51). The *Devī-māhātmya* puts the matter succinctly: "Though she is eternal, the goddess becomes manifest over and over again to protect the world" (12.32).

The *Devī-māhātmya* itself relates three of Durgā's cosmic interventions on behalf of the gods: the battle with Madhu and Kaitabha; the battle with Mahiṣa and his army; and the battle with Śumbha and Niśumbha and their generals, Caṇḍa, Muṇḍa, and Raktabīja. The text also refers specifically to five other appearances of the goddess (11.38–51) and implies that she incarnates in many more forms (12.32). The myths that are told in detail in the *Devī-māhātmya* conform to a structure that underlines Durgā's role as the upholder of cosmic order. By being cast in traditional structure, the myths also make the point that Durgā transcends the great male gods of the Hindu pantheon, who in other texts usually have the central role in these myths.

The structure to which the demon-slaying myths of Durgā conform is found throughout Hindu mythological texts and persists despite the specific deity who is featured in the myth. In basic outline, the structure is as follows: (1) a demon gains great power through doing austerities and, being granted a boon as a reward, is made nearly invincible; (2) the demon defeats the gods and takes over their positions; (3) the gods prepare their revenge by creating a special being who can defeat the demon despite the boon, or else the lesser gods petition one of the great deities (Śiva, Viṣṇu, or a great goddess) to intervene on their behalf; (4) the battle takes place and often includes the creation of helpers by the hero or heroine; (5) the demon is defeated—either slain or made subservient to the gods; (6) the demon slayer is praised by the gods.<sup>17</sup> In the Madhu and Kaitabha myth and the myth of Śumbha and Niśumbha, Durgā is

petitioned to help the gods, while in the Mahiṣa and Śumbha and Niśumbha myths the goddess takes a direct, active part in the battle itself, demonstrating her superior martial skills against her opponents. In the Śumbha and Niśumbha myth, she also creates helpers in the form of ferocious goddesses. In all three episodes, Durgā is collectively praised by the gods at some point in the battle or after defeating the demons.

The theology underlying Durgā's cosmic interventions, then, and the structure of the demon-slaying myths conform to well-known Hindu ideas and forms. The idea that a deity descends to the world from time to time in various forms to maintain the balance of cosmic order is a central Vaiṣṇavite theme. Ever since the time of the *Bhāgavad-gītā* (circa 200 B.C.E.), the idea that Viṣṇu descends to the world in different forms to combat disorder has been well known in the Hindu tradition. Durgā, in the *Devī-māhātmya*, is heir to this theology. In fact, in many ways Durgā is a female version of Viṣṇu. She, like him, creates, maintains, and destroys the world; intervenes on a cosmic scale whenever disorder threatens to disrupt the world in the form of certain demons; and is approached by the other gods as their savior in times of distress. This conformity to a well-known type of theology of course does not detract from Durgā's appeal, power, or prestige. On the contrary, by creating her in this familiar role, and by telling her myths according to a familiar structure, the author of the *Devī-māhātmya* underlines Durgā's supremacy and might.<sup>18</sup>

Durgā's role as cosmic queen is complemented by her role as a personal comforter who intervenes on behalf of her devotees. Near the end of the *Devī-māhātmya*, after the world has been restored to order, Durgā herself says that she is quick to hearken to the pleas of her devotees and that she may be called upon in times of distress to help those who worship her. She mentions specifically forest fires, wild animals, robbers, imprisonment, execution, and battle as some threats from which she will save her devotees (12.24–28). At the end of the *Devī-māhātmya*, after two of her devotees petition her, she appears before them and grants their desires. To one she returns his wealth and kingdom, and to the other she grants ultimate liberation (13.11–15). Durgā, then, is not just a powerful, transcendent force whose sole concern is maintaining the cosmic rhythms, who is moved to action only when the world itself is threatened. She is attentive to the needs of her devotees and intervenes on their behalf if asked to do so. She is a personal savior as well as a great battle queen who fights to defeat the enemies of the gods.

Durgā's distinctive nature also has to do with her identification with certain important Hindu philosophical ideas. The *Devī-māhātmya* and other texts that extol Durgā state that she is identical with or associated with *śakti*, *māyā*, and *prakṛti*. In some way, Durgā represents a dramatic illustration of these ideas, or these ideas can be discerned in her nature. *Śakti* is almost always understood to be the underlying power of the divine, the aspect of the divine that permits and provokes creative activity. *Śakti*, furthermore, is almost al-

ways understood to be a positive force. When viewed in concrete form, *śakti* is usually personified as a goddess. A common belief is that without his *śakti*, without his female counterpart, a male deity is ineffective, weak, and immobilized. Durgā's creation by the assembled male deities in the Mahiṣa episode dramatically depicts the goddess as *śakti*. Although the energy and heat that the deities contribute to her formation is called *tejas*, not *śakti*, it is clear that the male gods are contributing their strength and vigor to the goddess, who epitomizes power, action, and strength in the battle with the demon.<sup>19</sup> Durgā, particularly in her role as battle queen, is action and power personified and, as such, is a fitting representation of the idea of *śakti*.

Durgā as a personification of *māyā* is most clearly seen in the Madhu and Kaitabha episode, in which she deludes the demons so that Viṣṇu can slay them and in which she is repeatedly referred to as Mahāmāyā and as Viṣṇu's *māyā*. *Māyā* has negative connotations in Hindu philosophy and mythology, as does Durgā, particularly in this episode, as we noted above. *Māyā* is that which deludes individuals into thinking themselves to be the center of the world, the power that prevents individuals from seeing things as they really are. *Māyā* is that which impells individuals into self-centered, egotistical actions. *Māyā* is the sense of ego, personal identity, and individuality that clouds the underlying unity of reality and masks one's essential identity with *brahman* or some exalted being such as Viṣṇu, Śiva, or Durgā. *Māyā*, however, also may be understood as a positive, creative force not dissimilar from *śakti*. *Māyā* may be understood as the power that enables a deity to display or embody himself or herself and, therefore, the power that enables a deity to act.

When Durgā is called *Māyā*, or equated or associated with it, both connotations, delusion and creation, are suggested. Like Viṣṇu, Durgā creates the world through her extraordinary power but then bewitches the creatures she has created. Underlying this apparently incomprehensible "game" is the idea of divine *līlā* (sport, play, or dalliance), according to which the gods never act out of necessity, but only out of a sense of play.<sup>20</sup> Unlike mere mortals, the gods (in this case Durgā) act, not from pragmatic motives, but only to amuse themselves or to display themselves. The way in which Durgā's defeat of Mahiṣa is often depicted in Indian art suggests this theme. Typically, she is shown bringing a blizzard of weapons to bear on the hapless demon, who is half-emerging in his human form from the carcass of his former buffalo form. Her many arms are all in motion, and she is a perfect vision of power in action. Her face, however, is calm and shows no sign of strain. For her, this is mere sport and requires no undue exertion. It is a game for her, it is *līlā*.<sup>21</sup> She enters into the cosmic struggle between the lesser gods and the demons because it pleases her, not out of any sense of compulsion.

Durgā's identification with *prakṛti*, and with the earth itself, makes another theological point. *Prakṛti* is the physical world as well as the inherent rhythms within this world that impel nature to gratify and produce itself in its

manifold species. *Prakṛti* is both the primordial matter from which all material things come and the living instincts and patterns that imbue the material world with its proclivities to sustain and recreate itself in individual beings. As *prakṛti*, then, Durgā is inextricably associated with the physical world, the world she creates, sustains, and protects in her various forms. Durgā's identification with the world is unambiguous. The *Devī-māhātmya* makes a point at several places to say that she *is* the world, she *is* all this (11.2–3, 5–6). As the earth itself, she conveys cosmic stability. She is the foundation of all creatures and that which nourishes all creatures. As the embodiment of the earth, she supports, protects, and mothers all beings. As Śākambharī, she provides the world with food from her own body (11.45). In her role as cosmic queen, as warrior goddess and demon slayer, Durgā protects herself, as it were, in her aspect as the earth itself. As immanent in the world, Durgā is said to be the earth itself. As transcendent, she is the heavenly queen who descends from time to time to maintain harmony on earth.

Durgā's association or identification with *śakti*, *māyā*, and *prakṛti*, then, lends to the great demon-slaying goddess an immediate, tangible dimension. As an expression of these ideas, she is identified with the creation itself. Her presence is affirmed to pervade and underlie the actual world in which people live, and her power and strength are affirmed to imbue all creatures with the will to prosper and multiply.

### *The Worship of Durgā*

One of the most important festivals in North India is Durgā Pūjā, which is celebrated in the autumn during the month of Āśvin. The festival takes place over a period of nine days and is often called the Navarātra festival. The central image of the festival is Durgā slaying Mahiṣa. The iconographical details of the images are usually faithful to the scene as described in the *Devī-māhātmya* and other scriptures. Durgā has many arms, each of which bears a weapon; she stands on her lion vehicle; and she is thrusting her trident into the chest of Mahiṣa, who is in human form, half-emerged from the carcass of a slain buffalo. During the festival, it is customary to recite the *Devī-māhātmya* in its entirety several times.<sup>22</sup> The Durgā Pūjā festival, then asserts Durgā's central role as a battle queen and regulator of the cosmos. In part, at least, the festivities celebrate Durgā's defeat of Mahiṣa and the restoration of cosmic order.

This festival, in which Durgā is worshiped in the form of a mighty warrior goddess, seems to be, or to have been until recently, part of a pattern of worship undertaken by rulers for success in battle. The festival of Dasarā, which immediately follows Durgā Pūjā in many parts of India, was primarily an occasion on which to celebrate military might and royal power and to petition for military success in the coming year. Worship of weapons was also a part of the festival in many cases.



Durgā battling a demon, contemporary folk painting from Orissa.

Writing in the early nineteenth century, when the festival of Dasarā was still widely undertaken, the Abbé Dubois wrote of the celebrations in Mysore:

The *Dasarā* is likewise the soldiers' feast. Princes and soldiers offer the most solemn sacrifices to the arms which are made use of in battle. Collecting all their weapons together, they call a Brahmin *purohita*, who sprinkles them with *tirtham* (holy water) and converts them into so many divinities by virtue of his *mantrams*. He then makes *puja* to them and retires. Thereupon, amidst the beat of drums, the blare of trumpets and other instruments, a ram is brought in with much pomp and sacrificed in honour of the various weapons of destruction. This ceremony is observed with the greatest solemnity throughout the whole peninsula. . . . It is known by the special name of *ayuda-puja* (sacrifice to arms), and is entirely military.<sup>23</sup>

Alexander Forbes, who wrote in the second half of the nineteenth century, described Dasarā among the Rajputs: "The Rajpoot chiefs, on the evening of Dussera, worship also the *Fort-Protectress*, the goddess Gudeychee. On their return from the Shumee worship into the city, they join together in bands, brandishing their spears, galloping their horses, and enacting in other ways the part of an army taking the field."<sup>24</sup>

Although the worship of a goddess is not always part of Dasarā celebrations, there are many indications in ritual and mythological texts that the annual (usually autumnal) worship of a warrior goddess, often specified to be Durgā, was part of festivals associated with military success. Mantras to be uttered by kings on the occasion of Dasarā, for example, sometimes invoke a goddess. In the *Dharmasindhu*, the king is to speak this prayer: "May Aparājitā [the unconquerable one] wearing a striking necklace and resplendent golden girdle and fond of doing good bestow victory on me."<sup>25</sup>

In the *Nirnayasindhu*, this prayer is to be said at the time of blessing weapons: "O goddess, ruling over gods! may my army divided into four sections (elephants, chariots, horsemen, and foot-soldiers) attain to the position of having no enemy left in this world and may victory come to me everywhere through your favour."<sup>26</sup>

An eleventh- to twelfth-century Jain text, the *Yaśatilaka* of Somadeva, mentions the worship of Aparājitā, who is also called Ambikā. She is said to give victory in war and to be present in the king's weapons.<sup>27</sup> The text also says that she is worshiped on the last day of Durgā Pūjā. In some *Purāṇas*, furthermore, the worship of weapons is said to be held on that day.<sup>28</sup> In the drama *Gaudavaho*, King Yaśovarman undertakes a military campaign in the autumn. Shortly after beginning his march, he reaches the Vindhya Mountains and there undertakes the worship of the goddess Vindhyaśiṅi (She Who Dwells in the Vindhya), an epithet of Durgā in some texts.<sup>29</sup>

The worship of Durgā also came to be associated with the military success of the Pāṇḍava brothers in the *Mahābhārata* and of Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Although the heroes' worship of her was not part of either epic tradition initially (the incidents are not found in the critical editions of either epic), a tradition has developed that insists that the worship of Durgā was necessary to the success of the heroes in both epics. Durgā is worshiped twice in the *Mahābhārata*: in Virātā-parva 6 by Yudhiṣṭhira and in Bhīṣma-parva 23 by Arjuna. In the latter case, the occasion of Durgā's praise is clear. The setting is just before the great battle that is the high point of the entire epic. Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna as follows: "O one having great arms, standing in the face of battle, say a hymn to Durgā for the purpose of defeating your enemies" (4.6.2). The hymn that Arjuna then offers is full of references to Durgā's military might and prowess. The goddess appears to Arjuna and promises him victory, after which the text says that anyone who hears or recites the hymn will be victorious in battle.

The placement of the second hymn to Durgā in the Virāṭa-parva is more difficult to understand. The Pāṇḍava brothers have just emerged from twelve years of exile in the forest and are about to begin a year of life in the world during which they must remain in disguise lest their enemies discover them. Before entering the city of Virāṭa and taking up their disguises, they hide their

weapons in a *śami* tree near a cremation ground. Yudhiṣṭhira asks Durgā for protection from being discovered during the coming year and for later success against their enemies. She appears at the end of the hymn and grants his wishes. It seems that the hymn was placed at this point in the text because the worship of a *śami* tree on the outskirts of a town is often a part of Dasarā festivals. The author or editor of the hymn probably thought this seemed an appropriate place to insert a hymn to Durgā for military success.

The association of Durgā with Rāma's success in battle over Rāvaṇa in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, although not part of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, has become a well-known part of the Rāma story throughout India. In the *Kālikā-purāṇa* we are told:

In former times, the great Goddess was waked up by Brahmā when it was still night, in order to favour Rāma and to obtain the death of Rāvaṇa.

On the first day of the bright half of the month of Āśvina, she gave up her sleep and went to the city of Laṅkā, where Raghu's son formerly lived.

When she came there, the great goddess caused Rāma and Rāvaṇa to be engaged in battle, but Ambikā herself remained hidden. . . .

Afterwards, when the seventh night had gone by, Mahāmāyā, in whom the worlds are contained, caused Rāvaṇa to be killed by Rāma on the ninth day. . . .

After the hero Rāvaṇa had been killed on the ninth day, the Grandfather of the worlds (Brahmā) together with all the gods held a special worship for Durgā.

Afterwards the Goddess was dismissed with *śabara*-festivals, on the tenth day; Indra on his part held a lustration of the army of the gods for the appeasement of the armies of the gods and for the sake of prosperity of the kingdom of the gods. . . .

All the gods will worship her and will, on their part, lustrate the army; and in the same way all men should perform worship according to the rules.

A king should hold a lustration of the army in order to strengthen his army; a performance must be made with charming women adorned with celestial ornaments; . . .

After one has made a puppet of flour for Skanda and Viśākha, one should worship it in order to annihilate one's foes and for the sake of enjoying Durgā.<sup>30</sup>

In the *Devī-bhāgavata-purāṇa*, Rāma is despondent at the problems of reaching Laṅka, defeating Rāvaṇa, and getting back his beloved Sītā. The sage Nārada, however, advises him to call upon Durgā for help. Rāma asks how she should be worshiped, and Nārada instructs him concerning the performance of Durgā Pūjā or Navarātra. The festival, which Nārada assures Rāma will result in military success, is said to have been performed in previous ages by Indra for killing Vṛtra, by Śiva for killing the demons of the three cities, and by Viṣṇu for killing Madhu and Kaitabha (3.30.25–26). Rāma duly performs Durgā's worship, and she appears to him mounted on her lion. She asks what he wishes, and when he requests victory over Rāvaṇa she promises he will be successful (3.30). The tradition that Rāma inaugurated Durgā Pūjā to defeat Rāvaṇa is

also found in the *Bṛhadḍharma-purāṇa* (1.21–22) and the Bengali version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by Kṛttivāsa (fifteenth century).<sup>31</sup> Bengali villagers tell of a tradition in which it was customary to worship Durgā during the spring. Rāma, however, needed the goddess's help in the autumn when he was about to invade Lāṅka. So it was that he worshiped her in the month of Āśvin and inaugurated autumnal worship, which has become her most popular festival. "When Rāma . . . came into conflict with Rāvan, . . . Rāma performed the pūjā when he was in trouble, without waiting for the proper time of the annual pūjā. He did the pūjā in the autumn, and later this pūjā became the most popular ritual of the goddess."<sup>32</sup>

Durgā's association with military prowess and her worship for military success undoubtedly led to her being associated with the military success of both sets of epic heroes sometime in the medieval period. Her association with these great heroes, in turn, probably tended to further promote her worship by kings for success and prosperity.

Durgā's association with military might is probably also part of a tradition, most evident in recent centuries, of goddesses giving swords to certain rulers and of swords being named for goddesses. In the *Devī-purāṇa*, it is said that the goddess may be worshiped in the form of a sword (chapter 98). Śivaji, the seventeenth-century Marathi military leader, is said to have received his sword from his family deity, the goddess Bhavānī. One account of the way Śivaji obtained his sword is phrased as if Śivaji himself were speaking:

I received that famous sword very early in my career as a token of a compact with the Chief Gowalker Sawant. It had been suggested to me on my way to the place where it was being kept that I should take it by force, but remembering that tremendous storms are sometimes raised by unnecessary trifles, I thought it better to leave it to its owner. . . . In the end the wise chief brought the sword to me as a sign of amity even when he knew that its purchase-price was not to be measured in blood. From that day onward the sword, which I reverently named after my tutelary deity *Bhavānī*, always accompanied me, its resting place when not in use generally being the altar of the goddess, to be received back from her as a visible favour from heaven, always on the *Dasara* day when starting out my campaigns.<sup>33</sup>

In other legends concerning Śivaji's sword, the goddess Bhavānī speaks directly to Śivaji, identifies herself with his sword, and is described as entering his sword before battle or before urging Śivaji to undertake the task of murdering his enemy, Afzalkhan.<sup>34</sup>

The Paṇḍyan prince Kumāra Kampaṇa (fourteenth century), before going to battle against the Muslims in the Madura area, is said to have been addressed by a goddess who appeared before him and gave him a sword. "A goddess appeared before him and after describing to him the disastrous consequences of the Musselmen invasions of the South and sad plight of the South-



ern country and its temples exhorted him to extirpate the invaders and restore the country to its ancient glory, presenting him at the same time with a divine sword."<sup>35</sup>

A sacred sword also belonged to the Rajput kingdom of Mewar. The sword was handed down from generation to generation and was placed on the altar of the goddess during Navarātra.<sup>36</sup> According to legend, the founder of the dynasty, Bappa, undertook austerities in the woods. Near the end of his ascetic efforts, a goddess riding a lion appeared to him. "From her hand he received the panoply of celestial fabrication, the work of Viswacarma. . . . The lance, bow, quiver, and arrows; a shield and sword . . . which the goddess girded on him with her own hand."<sup>37</sup>

The autumnal worship of Durgā, then, in which she is shown in full military array slaying the demon Mahiṣa in order to restore order to the cosmos, seems to have been part of a widespread cult that centered around obtaining military success. The central festival of this cult took place on Dasarā day, immediately following the Navarātra festival, and included the worship of weapons by rulers and soldiers. The worship of a goddess for military success, although not always a part of the Dasarā festival, was associated with the festival. Indeed, the two festivals, Navarātra and Dasarā, probably were often understood to be one continuous festival in which the worship of Durgā and the hope of military success were inseparably linked.

Although the military overtones of Durgā Pūjā are apparent, other themes are also important during this great festival, and other facets of Durgā's character are brought out by the festival. Durgā Pūjā coincides with the autumn harvest in North India, and in certain respects it is clear that Durgā Pūjā is a harvest festival in which Durgā is propitiated as the power of plant fertility. Although Durgā Pūjā lacks clear agricultural themes as celebrated today in large cities such as Calcutta, or as celebrated by those with only tenuous ties to agriculture, enough indications remain in the festival, even in its citified versions, to discern its importance to the business of agriculture.

A central object of worship during the festival, for example, is a bundle of nine different plants, the *navapatirikā*, which is identified with Durgā herself.<sup>38</sup> Although the nine plants in question are not all agricultural plants, paddy and plantain are included and suggest that Durgā is associated with the crops.<sup>39</sup> Her association with the other plants probably is meant to generalize her identification with the power underlying all plant life. Durgā, that is, is not merely the power inherent in the growth of crops but the power inherent in all vegetation. During her worship in this form, the priest anoints Durgā with water from auspicious sources, such as the major holy rivers of India. He also anoints her with agricultural products, such as sugarcane juice<sup>40</sup> and sesame oil,<sup>41</sup> and offers to her soils that are associated with fertility, such as earth dug up by the horns of a wild boar, earth dug up by the horns of a bull, and earth

from the doors of prostitutes.<sup>42</sup> It seems clear that one theme of the worship of Durgā is to promote the fertility of the plants incorporated into the sacred bundle and to promote the fertility of crops in general.

At another point in the ceremonies, a pot is identified with Durgā and worshiped by the priest. Edible fruit and different plants from those making up the *navapattrikā* are placed in the pot.<sup>43</sup> The pot, which has a rounded bottom, is then firmly set upon moist dough. On this dough are scattered five grains: rice, wheat, barley, "mas (*Phaseolus Roxburghii*, Wight)," and sesame.<sup>44</sup> As each grain is scattered on the dough, a priest recites the following invocation: "Om you are rice [wheat, barley, etc.], om you are life, you are the life of the gods, you are our life, you are our internal life, you are long life, you give life, om the Sun with his rays gives you the milk of life and Varuna nourishes you with water."<sup>45</sup> The pot, which contains Ganges water in addition to the plants, is then identified in a prayer by the priest with the source of the nectar of immortality, which the gods churned from the ocean of milk.

Durgā, then, in the form of the pot, is invoked both as the power promoting the growth of the agricultural grains and as the source of the power of life with which the gods achieved immortality. In the forms of the *navapattrikā* and the pot Durgā reveals a dimension of herself that primarily has to do with the fertility of the crops and vegetation and with the power that underlies life generally. In addition to granting freedom from troubles and bestowing wealth on those who perform worship, Durgā is also affirmed to grant agricultural produce;<sup>46</sup> at one point in the festival, she is addressed as She Who Appeases the Hunger of the World.<sup>47</sup>

Durgā's beneficial influence on crops is also suggested at the very beginning of the festival when her image is being set up. The image is placed on a low platform or table about eighteen inches high. The platform is set on damp clay, and the five above-mentioned grains are sprinkled in the clay. Although not specifically stated, the presence of the goddess appears to promote the growth of these seeds.<sup>48</sup> On the eighth day of the festival, furthermore, the priest worships several groups of deities while circumambulating the image of Durgā. Among these are the deities who preside over cultivated fields.<sup>49</sup>

Two other distinctive features of Durgā Pūjā suggest its importance as a festival affecting the fertility of the crops: the animal sacrifices and the ribald behavior that is specifically mentioned in certain religious texts as pleasing to the goddess. It is certainly the case that the sacrifice of an animal, particularly when the animal is a buffalo, suggests the reiteration of the slaying of Mahiṣa by Durgā. However, the custom of offering other animals, such as goats and sheep, and the injunctions of offering several victims during the festival suggest that other meanings are intended too. These blood sacrifices occupy a central role in Durgā Pūjā. Durgā's thirst for blood is established in various texts,<sup>50</sup> and this thirst is not limited to the battlefield. Her devotees are said to please



Image of Durgā at Durgā Pūjā flanked by Ganeśa, Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, and Kārttikeya. Contemporary painted and adorned clay image, Varanasi. Author's photograph.

her with their own blood,<sup>51</sup> and she is said to receive blood from tribal groups who worship her.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, other goddesses with whom Durgā is closely affiliated, such as Kālī, receive blood offerings in their temples daily with no reference at all to heroic deeds in battle. Blood offerings to Durgā, that is, seem to contain a logic that is quite apart from the battlefield, or at least quite apart from the myth of the goddess's slaying Mahiṣa on behalf of cosmic stability.

My suggestion is that, underlying blood sacrifices to Durgā, is the perception, perhaps only unconscious, that this great goddess who nourishes the crops and is identified with the power underlying all life needs to be reinvigorated from time to time. The perception exists that, despite her great powers, she is capable of being exhausted through continuous birth and giving of nourishment. To replenish her powers, to reinvigorate her, she is given back life in the form of animal sacrifices. The blood resupplies her, as it were, so that she may continue to give life in return. Having harvested the crops, having literally reaped the life-giving benefits of Durgā's potency, it is appropriate (perhaps necessary) to return strength and power to her in the form of the blood of sacrificial victims. This logic, and the association of blood sacrifices with harvest, is not at all uncommon in the world's religions. It is a typical ceremonial scenario in many cultures, and it seems likely that at one time, at any rate, it was important in the celebration of Durgā Pūjā.<sup>53</sup>

Promoting the fertility of the crops by stimulating Durgā's powers of fecundity also seems to underlie the practice during Durgā Pūjā of publicly making obscene gestures and comments. Various scriptures say that Durgā is pleased by such behavior at the autumn festival;<sup>54</sup> wild, boisterous activities also accompany the disposal of Durgā's image in a river or pool.<sup>55</sup> The close association, even the interdependence, between human sexuality and the growth of crops is clear in many cultures;<sup>56</sup> it is held to be auspicious and even vital to the growth of crops to have couples copulate in the fields, particularly at planting and harvest time. Again, the logic seems to be that this is a means of giving back vital powers to the spirit underlying the crops. Like blood, the sexual fluids are held to have great fertilizing powers, so to copulate in the fields is to renourish the divine beings that promote the growth of the crops. While such outright sexual activity is not part of Durgā Pūjā, the sexual license enjoined in some scriptures is certainly suggestive of this well-known theme.

Another facet of Durgā's character that emerges in Durgā Pūjā but is not stressed in the texts that cast her in the role of battle queen is her domestic role as the wife of Śiva and mother of several divine children. In North India, which is primarily patrilocal and patriarchal in matters of marriage, girls are customarily married at an early age and leave their parents' home when quite young. This is traumatic for both the girl and her family. In Bengal, at least, it is customary for daughters to return to their home villages during Durgā Pūjā. The



Brahmin priest performing worship of Durgā during Durgā Pūjā in Varanasi. Author's photograph.

arrival home of the daughters is cause for great happiness and rejoicing, while their departure after the festival is over is the occasion for painful scenes of departure. Durgā herself is cast in the role of a returning daughter during her great festival, and many devotional songs are written to welcome her home or to bid her farewell. In these songs, no mention is made whatsoever of her roles as battle queen or cosmic savior. She is identified with Pārvatī, who is the wife of Śiva and the daughter of Himalaya and his wife, Mena. In this role, Durgā is said to be the mother of four divine children: Ganeśa, Kārttikeya, Sarasvatī, and Lakṣmī.

The dominant theme in these songs of welcome and farewell seems to be the difficult life that the goddess/daughter has in her husband's home in contrast to the warm, tender treatment that she receives from her parents when she visits them. This theme undoubtedly reflects the actual situation of many Bengali girls, for whom life in their husband's village can be difficult in the extreme, particularly in the early years of their marriage when they have no seniority or children to give them respect and status in the eyes of their in-laws. Śiva is described as inattentive to his wife and unable to take care of him-

self because of his habit of smoking hemp and his habitual disregard for social convention.<sup>57</sup> The songs contrast the poverty that Durgā must endure in her husband's care with the way that she is spoiled by her parents. From the devotee's point of view, then, Durgā is seen as a returning daughter who lives a difficult life far from home. She is welcomed warmly and provided every comfort. The days of the festival are ones of intimacy between the devotee and the goddess, who is understood to have made a long journey to dwell at home with those who worship her. The clay image worshiped during Durgā Pūjā may show a mighty, many-armed goddess triumphing over a powerful demon, but many devotees cherish her as a tender daughter who has returned home on her annual visit for family succor, sympathy, and the most elaborate hospitality. This theme, then, places the devotee in the position of a family member who honors Durgā with every sort of personal attendance in order to distract her from her normal life with her mad husband, Śiva. At the end of Durgā Pūjā, when the image of the goddess is removed from its place of worship and placed on a truck or some other conveyance to be carried away for immersion, many women gather about the image to bid it farewell, and it is a common sight to see them actually weeping as the goddess, their daughter, leaves to return to her husband's home far away.

The sacrifice of a buffalo to Durgā is practiced in South India too. While agricultural fertility and her cosmic victory on behalf of divine order are themes in this ceremony, a quite different aspect of her character is emphasized in Tamil myths and rituals. In the *Purānas*, and in North Indian traditions, an implied sexual tension exists between Durgā and Mahiṣa, her victim. In the South, this sexual tension is heightened and becomes one of the central themes of Durgā's defeat of Mahiṣa. In the South, most myths about Durgā identify Mahiṣa as her suitor, her would-be husband. In the independence of her unmarried state, Durgā is portrayed as possessing untamed sexual energy that is dangerous, indeed, deadly, to any male who dares to approach her.<sup>58</sup> Her violent, combative nature needs to be tamed for the welfare of the world. Mahiṣa is unsuccessful in subduing her and is lured to his doom by her great beauty. A central point of the South Indian myths about Durgā and Mahiṣa is that any sexual association with the goddess is dangerous and that before her sexuality can be rendered safe she must be dominated by, made subservient to, defeated by, or humiliated by a male.<sup>59</sup> In most myths she eventually is tamed by Śiva.<sup>60</sup>

In contrast to the North Indian tradition of Durgā Pūjā, which stresses Durgā's character as a gentle wife and daughter in need of family tenderness, is the South Indian tradition of Durgā as a dangerous, indeed, murderous, bride, who poses a fatal threat to those who approach her sexually. This role suggests again the liminal aspect of the goddess. Unlike the weak, submissive, blushing maiden of the Hindu law books, Durgā presents a picture of determined, fierce independence, which her suitors challenge only at a great risk.