

# Reimagining Durga: A Call for Self-Reliance in Durga Puja Traditions

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As someone born into Hindu culture, I find myself often reflecting critically on certain traditions, particularly those associated with Bengali Hindu customs. One of the most prominent events in this community is the Durga Puja, a festival celebrating the goddess Durga's victory over the demon Mahishasura. However, while the festival is rooted in the idea of Durga as a warrior, the rituals and imagery often seem detached from this origin and instead present a version that might miss the deeper significance.

During the ten days of Durga Puja, large idols are crafted to depict Durga with ten arms, each holding a weapon, alongside her family, yet often without her consort, Shiva. She is typically shown riding a lion and slaying Mahishasura, who is portrayed as transforming from a buffalo into a human-like form, his severed buffalo head beneath her feet. The image, though iconic, raises some questions when looked at practically: a human with ten arms is, of course, impossible, as is taming a lion to ride or a demon transforming from buffalo to man. These are symbolic, of course, but they stand in contrast to what Durga might have represented in a more historical sense.

The celebration itself is elaborate: Bengalis raise funds, adorn themselves in new clothes, savor sweets, and participate in lavish feasts, music, and drum beats. They pray to Durga, invoking her strength and courage, while asking for protection from personal and communal difficulties. Yet, I sometimes feel that this form of worship veers away from self-reliance. The belief that prayer alone will alleviate hardships and challenges may detract from a more actionable approach to facing and overcoming adversity.

The Durga of historical lore, by contrast, was not a figure of soft beauty or mythical power. She was likely a human warrior, a woman with rigorous training, possessing mastery over weapons and physical endurance, possibly even skilled in strategic warfare. A more realistic Durga would have been an athletic, disciplined individual, embodying strength through personal mastery, not divine intervention. She likely fought Mahishasura as a human opponent, a common warrior, rather than a transforming demon, and her prowess would have been rooted in the same human capabilities available to any trained warrior of her time.

In my view, there is a missed opportunity in not embracing this interpretation of Durga—a warrior whose strength came from within, not from supernatural powers. The image of a disciplined, self-reliant Durga might inspire more people to cultivate resilience, strength, and self-discipline. Perhaps if we celebrated this Durga, we would foster a culture that values skill, perseverance, and the courage to face life's battles independently, rather than hoping for deliverance through ritual alone. This, to me, is the essence of what Durga could represent, and I believe it offers a meaningful alternative to the passive forms of worship that dominate today.