

TWO VISIONS OF ŚAKTI: THE DIVINE FEMININE IN THE MARKANDEYA PURANA AND THE DEVI BHAGAVATA PURANA

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Abstract: This study explores the representation of the Divine Feminine through a comparative examination of the Markandeya Purana and the Devi Bhagavata Purana, two important texts within the Purāṇic and Śākta traditions of Hindu thought. While both works celebrate the power and supremacy of the Goddess, they present distinct theological and narrative perspectives that together enrich the understanding of Śakti in Hindu philosophy and religious practice.

The Markandeya Purana presents the Goddess primarily as a cosmic protector who intervenes to restore balance when moral and cosmic order are threatened. Through narratives such as the Devi Mahātmya, the text emphasizes the role of divine power in maintaining dharma, social stability, and universal harmony. In contrast, the Devi Bhagavata Purana develops a more systematic and philosophical vision, presenting the Goddess as the supreme reality from whom creation emerges and into whom it ultimately dissolves. Through teachings such as the Devi Gītā, the text integrates devotion, knowledge, and action into a unified spiritual path.

By examining structure, transmission of knowledge, thematic content, philosophical depth, and associated sub-texts, this study highlights how both Puranas contribute uniquely yet complementarily to the evolution of Śākta theology. The analysis also reflects on the symbolic and metaphysical dimensions of myth, showing how Purāṇic narratives function as expressions of cosmic order, moral responsibility, and spiritual aspiration.

Ultimately, this comparative study demonstrates that the two texts do not present competing visions, but rather offer interconnected understandings of the Divine Feminine—one emphasizing her role in sustaining cosmic balance, and the other revealing her as the ultimate ground of existence and liberation.

Keywords- Śakti, Divine Feminine, Markandeya Purana, Devi Bhagavata Purana, Śākta Tradition, Devi Mahātmya, Durga Saptashati, Devi Gītā, Purāṇic Literature, Hindu Philosophy, Goddess Theology, Bhakti, Dharma, Moksha, Myth and Symbolism

INTRODUCTION

Within the vast ocean of Purāṇic literature, the Devi Bhagavata Purana and the Markandeya Purana stand out as two luminous texts that articulate the glory of the Divine Feminine. Emerging from different textual traditions and historical contexts, both works reflect a significant cultural and spiritual development in which Śakti—the feminine principle of cosmic power—came to be recognized not merely as an auxiliary force, but as an independent and sovereign reality.

Both Puranas present an explicit articulation of Śākta philosophy, wherein the Goddess occupies the highest metaphysical position and is understood as central to the functioning of the cosmos and spiritual life.

TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE: WHO TEACHES WHOM

In the Markandeya Purana, sacred knowledge is transmitted through a dialogue between Rishi Markandeya and Sage Jaimini. Jaimini approaches the enlightened Markandeya with questions concerning dharma, cosmic order, and the nature of reality. The Purana unfolds through Markandeya's reflective responses, rooted in spiritual insight and lived wisdom, highlighting the traditional guru–disciple mode of instruction based on inquiry and realization.

In the Devi Bhagavata Purana, Veda Vyasa narrates the divine teachings of the Supreme Goddess (Devi/Bhuvaneshvari) to King Janamejaya, the grandson of Arjuna. Vyasa functions as the intermediary

through whom divine knowledge is conveyed, presenting the Goddess as the ultimate source of wisdom. This mode of transmission emphasizes the descent of sacred knowledge from the divine to humanity through realized sages.

STRUCTURAL COMPOSITION AND ORGANIZATION

Structurally, the two Puranas differ considerably in scale and organization. The Markandeya Purana is relatively concise, traditionally comprising around 9,000 verses, and is arranged into nine sections, often referred to as skandhas or parvas. Its compact structure supports a narrative-driven and non-sectarian approach, allowing for a broad exploration of themes within a limited framework.

The Devi Bhagavata Purana, by contrast, is more expansive and systematic. It consists of approximately 18,000 verses divided into twelve skandhas. This elaborate structure provides space for detailed theological exposition, philosophical discussions, devotional teachings, and sustained glorification of the Supreme Goddess.

THEMATIC CONTENT AND SCOPE OF THE MARKANDEYA PURANA AND THE DEVI BHAGAVATA PURANA

The Markandeya Purana and the Devi Bhagavata Purana represent two distinct yet interconnected expressions of Purāṇic thought. While both acknowledge the power and significance of the Divine Feminine, they differ in thematic emphasis, narrative style, philosophical depth, and overall spiritual vision. A closer examination of their contents reveals how each Purana fulfills a unique role within the broader Hindu religious and cultural tradition.

CONTENTS OF THE MARKANDEYA PURANA

The Markandeya Purana is characterized by its wide thematic range and inclusive outlook. Rather than centering on a single deity or theological system, it presents a comprehensive vision of the universe governed by dharma, moral order, and cosmic balance. The text opens with discussions on cosmology, describing the structure of the universe, cycles of time, and the recurring processes of creation, preservation, and dissolution. These cosmological ideas are closely linked to ethical and spiritual principles, suggesting that cosmic stability depends upon righteous conduct.

A significant portion of the Purana is devoted to genealogies and historical traditions, tracing the lineages of Manus, sages, gods, and kings. These genealogies serve an important cultural purpose by connecting cosmic history with human civilization and reinforcing the idea that human society participates in a larger divine order. Through these narratives, the text emphasizes continuity, duty, and responsibility across generations.

The Markandeya Purana also offers extensive guidance on social and moral conduct. It discusses duties appropriate to different stages of life, the importance of discipline, charity, truthfulness, and restraint, and the consequences of actions driven by greed, pride, and ignorance. Rather than presenting ethical teachings in abstract terms, the Purana embeds them within stories and symbolic events, making moral principles accessible and meaningful.

Within this broad framework emerges the vision of the Goddess. Her role is not constant but decisive and transformative. She manifests when cosmic imbalance reaches its peak and destructive forces threaten the moral fabric of the universe. Her appearance symbolizes the awakening of divine intelligence that restores harmony. In this Purana, the Goddess functions as a protector of cosmic law, embodying strength, compassion, and righteous power.

Overall, the Markandeya Purana functions as a moral and cosmological guide, blending mythology, ethics, social instruction, and spiritual reflection. Its central concern is the maintenance of balance within the universe, society, and individual life through adherence to dharma.

CONTENTS OF THE DEVI BHAGAVATA PURANA

In contrast, the Devi Bhagavata Purana presents a unified and thoroughly Goddess-centered vision of reality. Every major theme, narrative, and philosophical discussion is oriented toward establishing the Supreme Goddess as the source, sustainer, and ultimate goal of existence. Rather than portraying the Goddess as a responder to cosmic crises, this Purana presents her as the very foundation upon which the cosmos rests.

The text offers a detailed account of cosmic creation, describing the universe as an expression of the Goddess's conscious will and dynamic energy. Creation is not depicted as an impersonal process but as a purposeful manifestation arising from divine intelligence. Preservation and dissolution are likewise understood as expressions of her power, emphasizing her complete sovereignty over time, space, and causation. All deities, forces, and forms emerge from her and ultimately return to her.

Philosophically, the Devi Bhagavata Purana engages deeply with metaphysical inquiry. It explores the nature of consciousness, the relationship between the individual soul and supreme reality, and the role of ignorance and knowledge in bondage and liberation. The Goddess is presented as both transcendent and immanent—beyond all forms yet present within every aspect of existence. Liberation is described not as withdrawal from the world, but as the realization of the Goddess's presence within oneself and the universe. Alongside philosophy, the Purana devotes significant attention to devotional and ritual practices. It describes the Goddess's manifestations, sacred abodes, and modes of worship, emphasizing devotion, surrender, and inner purity. Rituals, vows, festivals, and devotional acts are portrayed as transformative spiritual disciplines rather than mere external observances.

The Devi Bhagavata Purana also integrates the paths of bhakti, jñāna, and karma, presenting them as complementary paths leading toward the same realization. Through devotion, understanding, and righteous action, the seeker comes to recognize the Goddess as both cosmic power and inner self. As a whole, the text functions as a theological and spiritual treatise, presenting a complete Śākta worldview.

PHILOSOPHICAL NUANCE, SYMBOLISM AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY:

This writing consciously engages with the deeper philosophical, symbolic, and metaphysical dimensions of Hindu mythology, treating myth not merely as a story but as a layered medium for spiritual, ethical, and cultural expression. Every character, event, and cosmic occurrence is presented with an awareness of its allegorical significance, reflecting key principles such as cosmic order (*rta*), moral duty (*dharma*), causality (*karma*), devotion (*bhakti*), and liberation (*moksha*), without ever descending into explicit sermonizing.

The language and structure remain fully original, while maintaining continuity with traditional thought systems, ritual practice, and cultural memory. Regional variations and interpretive plurality are acknowledged, respecting the diversity of Hindu intellectual and devotional traditions. Care is taken to avoid oversimplification that diminishes sacred complexity, as well as modern reinterpretations that might distort theological intent.

Through careful attention to emotional tone, narrative pacing, and descriptive restraint, the work seeks to preserve reverence and authenticity. It aims to resonate as a meaningful, intellectually grounded contribution to Hindu mythological literature—a reflective and thoughtful engagement with the Goddess, rather than a mere retelling or stylistic imitation.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Viewed together, the two Puranas reveal their complementary roles within Hindu tradition. The Markandeya Purana emphasizes moral order, social harmony, and divine intervention in worldly affairs, addressing collective life and ethical responsibility. The Devi Bhagavata Purana, by contrast, directs attention inward and upward, presenting a vision of reality in which the Goddess is both the origin of the universe and the ultimate goal of spiritual realization.

While the Markandeya Purana explains how the world is sustained through righteousness and divine balance, the Devi Bhagavata Purana explains why the world exists at all—revealing the Goddess as the eternal ground of being, consciousness, and bliss.

EXACT POSITION OF THE DEVI MAHĀTMYA IN BOTH PURĀNAS

In the Markandeya Purana, the Devi Mahātmya forms a clearly defined and authoritative textual unit, occupying chapters 81 to 93. These chapters constitute a continuous narrative devoted exclusively to the glory and cosmic function of the Goddess. Due to its coherence and depth, this section came to be revered independently as the Durga Saptashati or Chandi Patha, widely recited during Śākta festivals and rituals.

In the Devi Bhagavata Purana, the Devi Mahātmya does not appear as a single, bounded section. Instead, its spirit and theology are spread across multiple skandhas. The glorification of the Goddess begins in the first skandha and continues uninterrupted until the twelfth, effectively transforming the entire Purana into a sustained Mahātmya of Devi.

Although the Devi Bhagavata Purana contains important Goddess-centered sections—most notably the Devi Gītā in Skandha 7 (chapters 31–40)—these function as philosophical discourses rather than narrative equivalents of the Devi Mahātmya found in the Markandeya Purana.

ASSOCIATED SUB-TEXTS: DURGA SAPTASHATI AND DEVI GĪTĀ

Both Puranas gave rise to influential sub-texts that acquired independent religious significance. From the Markandeya Purana emerged the Durga Saptashati, drawn directly from the Devi Mahātmya (chapters 81–93). This text emphasizes the heroic manifestations of the Goddess and her triumph over destructive forces, becoming central to ritual recitation and festival worship, particularly during Navarātri.

Similarly, the Devi Bhagavata Purana gave rise to the Devi Gītā, located in its seventh skandha. Unlike the narrative-driven Durga Saptashati, the Devi Gītā presents a profound philosophical dialogue in which the Goddess explains her nature, the structure of reality, and the path to liberation. Together, these sub-texts express two complementary dimensions of Śakti—dynamic cosmic power and ultimate metaphysical truth.

CONCLUSION

The Markandeya Purana and the Devi Bhagavata Purana together offer a rich and layered understanding of the Divine Feminine within the Purāṇic tradition. While both exalt Devi, they approach her reality from distinct yet harmonious perspectives. The Markandeya Purana situates the Goddess within a moral and cosmic framework, emphasizing her role as the protector of dharma and restorer of balance. Its narrative style and ethical focus have made it deeply influential in collective worship and cultural life.

The Devi Bhagavata Purana, by contrast, presents a more systematic and philosophical vision, portraying the Goddess as the supreme source of existence, consciousness, and liberation. Through its expansive structure and the teachings of the Devi Gītā, it articulates a complete Śākta worldview in which devotion, knowledge, and spiritual realization converge.

Together, these two Puranas stand not in opposition but in dialogue—one revealing the Goddess as guardian of cosmic order, the other as the ultimate reality underlying all existence. Their combined contribution affirms the central place of Śakti in Hindu thought, portraying her as both the sustaining power of the universe and the eternal truth guiding the seeker toward liberation.

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