

Sculptures of the Goddess *MAHIṢĀSURAMARDINĪ* of early North Bengal: An Iconographic Survey

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Abstract: *The images of various sculptures of the goddess Mahiṣāsūramardīnī as terrible aspects of the mother goddess (as icons of Śakti) have been discovered from various parts of North Bengal during the early medieval period. Different types of sculptural forms of the goddess Mahiṣāsūramardīnī are generally seen in ālīḍha and pratyālīḍha pose. The goddess is always adorned, three-eyed, wearing the jaṭāmukūṭa (crown) and she is described as a handsome youthful woman. She has pretty eyes; well-developed bosoms and her complexion are like that of Atasi flower. She shows a great pleasure of defeating the enemy of the gods. Images of the goddess Mahiṣāsūramardīnī generally seen with two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve and eighteen even thirty two hands, killing the demon buffalo in ardhaniṣkranta form or zoomorphic form or sometimes in human form. The artists of Bengal skillfully represent the images of the goddess Mahiṣāsūramardīnī or Mahiṣamardīnī as śakti cult. These artistic activities are considered as valuable resources in Bengal as well as in the entire world.*

Keywords: *ālīḍha pose, demon, Mahiṣāsūra, Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, pratyālīḍha pose, śakti cult.*

I. Introduction

There are various opinions regarding the area of North Bengal or *Uttarbanga* as it is called *Greater Uttarbanga*, *Abibhakta Uttarbanga* and *Bibhakta Uttarbanga*. In general, the northern region of the state of West Bengal is known as North Bengal which politically consists of eight districts- Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Coochbehar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda. The region is separated by the river Ganges from the western part of West Bengal which is generally referred to as South Bengal. In ancient period, Bengal was divided

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into many geographical units such as *Puṇḍravardhana*, *Vaṅga*, *Samatāṭa*, *Rār̥h*, *Harikela*, *Gauḍa*, *Varendra* or *Varendrī*, *Tāmrālipta*, *Dandabhukti* etc.¹ Modern North Bengal or ancient Northern part of Bengal was consisted of *Puṇḍravardhana*, *Gauḍa*, *Varendra* or *Varendrī*, etc.

North Bengal is a rich cultural and heritage centre of Bengal. Huge numbers of artifacts, images, temples, terracotta etc. have been discovered from North Bengal. Lot of images of different religions such as Brāhmanical, Buddhist and Jaina images have been found from different districts of North Bengal. Sculptures of the Buddhist goddesses which have been found in different parts of North Bengal have special significance in Bengal as well as in entire eastern India and are considered to be valuable resource of art. The art and sculptures were well developed over a period of four hundred years and more in eastern India under the Pāla and Sena rulers. During these four centuries under the Pāla and Senas. Gods and goddesses, whether Buddhist or Brāhmanical or Jaina, have well established iconographic types of different images during this four centuries.²

In this present study, titled ‘Sculptures of the Goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* of Early North Bengal: An Iconographic Survey’ the author wants to focus on the sculptural art of the goddesses *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* of North Bengal during the early medieval period. The study deals with critical studies of iconographic and epigraphic features of the images of the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* of Brāhmanical Hinduism found from different parts of North Bengal.

II. Mythology

Among the different varieties of *Dūrgā* images, *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* or *Mahiṣamardīnī* type is the most popular goddess in India and Bengal in particular, from the ancient past. The images of the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* show the goddess as the slayer the demon *Mahiṣāsura* i.e. the buffalo-demon and these are numerous images among her ‘*ugra*’ or terrific representations in Bengal. The goddess is popularly known as *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*, *Mahiṣamardīnī*, *Kātyāyanī*, *Caṇḍī*, *Caṇḍīka* and above all, *Dūrgā*. The *Devīmāhātmya* section of the *Mārkeṇḍeya purāna* (chapter-91) contains the most important elements of the *Śākta* cult and describes the various

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forms of the goddess. It is important to note that the goddess is mentioned twenty-nine (29) times as *Caṇḍīka*, twenty-six (26) times as *Ambikā* and eight (8) times as *Dūrgā*, but never cited as *Mahiṣāsuramardinī*.

The earliest reference to the goddess *Dūrgā* occurs in the *Taittiriya Arnyaka*³ in which two other names of the goddess i.e. *Kātyāyanī* and *Kanyā-Kumārī* have been added.

The original *Rāmāyana* does not refer to the worship of the goddess by lord *Rāma* to kill *Rāvana*, the king of Lankā. It is only in the *Rāmāyana* by *Kṛttivāsa* that the worship of the Sun is noticed instead of the worship of *Dūrgā*.⁴

We may mention here that the *Dūrgāstotras* in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Āryasattva* in its supplement⁵ contain the various continuant elements of the developed *śākta*-cult in the later period. It is interesting to note that the *Mahābhārata* represents *Kārtikeya* and as also *Śiva* as the destroyer of *Mahisa*. The *Āryasattva* mentions that she was well worshipped by the *Savaras*, *Barbaras*, and the *Pulindas*.⁶

T. A. Gopinath Rao, based on the *Agamas* has collected a large number of names of the different forms of the goddess and their iconographic descriptions in detail. She is represented with 2, 4, 6, 8, 12 hands, also 16, 18, 20 and even 32 hands.⁷ The *Mahiṣāsuramardinī* aspect of the goddess is one of her earliest and most important form described in the *Devīmāhātmya*. A large number of eight or ten-handed images of *Mahiṣāsuramardinī* have been discovered in Bengal as well as in eastern India. The worship of eight and ten-armed goddess, however, appears to have been most popular.⁸

We have been able to identify 9 (Nine) images including the fragments of *Mahiṣāsuramardinī* or *Mahiṣamardinī* throughout early North Bengal preserved in a different museums and in private collections.

III. Iconographic Features of the Images of *Mahiṣāsuramardinī* found from North Bengal

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Some of the images show the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* in *ālīḍha* and *pratyālīḍha* pose. The iconographic texts in the *Matsya-Purāna* (260.59), *Śilparatna*⁹, and *Rupamaṇḍana*¹⁰ describe ten-handed goddess in *tribhangisthānāsamāsthānāma* and sometimes the goddess just placing her right foot on the lion and the left foot on the buffalo (*Mahiṣa*).¹¹ It is very important to note that the goddess sometimes keep her one foot is on the carcass of the buffalo, the other on the ground such as the image of the goddess *Mahiṣamardīnī*, from Sarai of Hooghly district, West Bengal now in the Asutosh Museum, Kolkata (*hereinafter* AMK),¹² and a in a particular type of eight-handed *Mahiṣamardīnī* from south-eastern Bengal, the right leg is firmly planted on the pedestal while her left leg is retracted, and placed on the several heads of the animals, the image of the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* from Sonargaon (Dhaka), now in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi (*hereinafter* VRMR) is the best instances.¹³

The goddess is always adorned, three-eyed, wearing the *jaṭāmukuṭa* (crown) and she is described as a handsome youthful woman. She has pretty eyes; well-developed bosoms and her complexion are like that of *Atasi* flower. She shows a great pleasure of defeating the enemy of the gods.¹⁴

We shall consider the images in different groups and types, according to their number of hands and the attributes held by them and various other important iconographic features.

An interesting and rare six-armed inscribed image (Fig.1) of the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* belonging to the c.7th century CE has been found from Gangarampur (Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal) and now it is preserved in the VRMR.¹⁵ The upper portion of the grey stone image is damaged and the image is shown depicted in a *pratyālīḍha* pose with her left foot placed on the back of the buffalo. The demon issues out of the back of the animal's head in *ardhaniṣkrānta* form i.e. half-issued out of the beheaded body of the animal. The goddess pierces the demon with the *śula* (trident) in her right hand and holding tuft of hair by her left hand while she holds a *dhanu* (bow) and a *sarā* (lid) on the lower left hand and right hand, respectively.

Fig.1. *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*, Gangarampur, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB (Source: Muklesur Rahman, *Sculptures in the Varendra Research Museum: A Descriptive Catalogue*, p.650, pl.191)

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The other pair of hand and the head of the image are missing.

It is very interesting to note that the lion, the *vāhana* (vehicle) of the main deity is not engraved on the pedestal but a single line inscription of Sanskrit language by *siddhamātrkā* script¹⁵ is inscribed at the bottom of the pedestal. The text is ‘*raja-putra Śri Tikku-kah/Bhattara...*’¹⁷ and the other reading of the text is slightly differentiated from the first reading of the text and the second reading of the text is ‘*rāja-putra Śri Tikku-kah/Bhattara....*’¹⁸ This type of six-handed goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* is a rare sculpture of Bengal art as well as in India and it seems to have been fewer in number than other varieties and to have lost her popularity to the later eight (8) or ten (10) armed varieties.¹⁹ This sculpture is a unique and interesting specimen of the Pre-Pāla period of Bengal.

Another graceful eight-handed black stone middle size (size: 61.5 cm × 39.5 cm) image of the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* (Fig.2) found from a big tank of Goshpukur village of Darjeeling district, now the preserved specimen of Akshaya Kumar Maitreya Museum (*hereinafter* AKMM) is shown fighting vigorously with the demon in *ālīḍha* pose with her right and left legs firmly planted on the buffalo and pedestal, respectively. On the other hand, the head of the lion is seen to the right throbbing on as the back portion of the buffalo. The goddess carries in her eight hands clockwise-discuss, trident, arrow, sword, *tarjani mudrā* (one type of gesture), the tuft hair of the demon, shield and bow, respectively. The face and the left portion of the *prabhāvalī* are broken and no *krittikumha* is engraved at the apex of the *prabhāvalī*. The simplicity of the whole composition and elegance of its carving mark of the deity represents her as an extremely graceful specimen of the early Pala art. From the iconographic point of view, it may be assumed that the image belongs to the c.9th century CE.

Fig.2.

Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, Goshpukur, Darjeeling district, WB (Courtesy: AKMM)

Another unique inscribed very big size (size: 96 cm × 47 cm) image representing the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* (Fig.3) with eight hands, found from English Bazar, now the preserved specimen of Malda Museum, Malda (*hereinafter* MMM), is seen standing in *ālīḍha*

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pose with one foot on the pedestal and the other foot is placed on the body of the buffalo. The severed head of the buffalo lies on the pedestal. In this sculpture, the goddess *Mahiṣamardinī* is seen fighting vigorously with the demon buffalo with her all attributes in hands and she is seen piercing the demon. It is interesting to note that the goddess holds a snake for use as *nāgapāśa* in her third left hand and a beautiful inscription engraved on the left side at the back-plate.

Fig.3. *Mahiṣāsuramardinī*, English Bazar, Malda district, WB (Courtesy: MMM)

The author assumes that the reading of the text is ‘*Siddham (symbol) ma...ca. śrīḥ*’ and the author is unable to find out the meaning and translate the text. Further investigation should be done for this beautiful inscribed image. The epigraphic record and stylistic features of the image suggest the date is c.12th century CE.²⁰

A ten-handed black stone big size (size:72.5 cm × 33.5 cm) image of the goddess *Mahiṣāsuramardinī* (Fig.4) found from Ghoshpukur of Darjeeling district, now it is safely preserved in AKMM, is seen fighting vigorously with demon buffalo in *pratyālīḍha* pose with right and left leg placed on the decapitated buffalo and lion respectively. The goddess carries in her ten hands clockwise-*trisula, hand is broken, arrow, cakra, khadga, nagapasa, shield, dhanu, parasu, ankusa*, respectively. The two-armed *Mahiṣāsura* is seen looking helplessly at the goddess on being struck at the chest by her trident. Two companions of the demon with weapons in their hands show attacking the goddess from either side.

Fig.4. *Mahiṣāsuramardinī*, Goshpukur, Darjeeling district, WB (Courtesy: AKMM)

The goddess is well decorated halo of flames surrounding her. The *Kīrttimukha* is seen at the apex of the upper back slab with flying two *vidyādhara*s on either side. The entire panel is placed on a double petalled lotus on a *navaratha* pedestal. This interesting image may be assigned to the late c.12th century CE.

The State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata (*hereinafter* SAMK) specimen (Fig.5) from Tungisahar (Malda), belonging to the c.11th-12th century CE, made of black basalt, shows the

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goddess standing in *ālīḍha* pose firmly resting her left leg on a full-blown lotus placed on a *pañcaratha* pedestal. The rectangular pedestal is adorned with a male figure with folded hands, other attendants and floral motifs. The right leg of the deity is placed on the back of the decapitated buffalo and the buffalo demon is in his *ardhaniṣkrānta* form and the detached head of the buffalo is seen lying down.

The demon buffalo holds a sword by his both hands to fight against the goddess. The goddess pierces the demon with her *trisūla* (trident) by her right hand while she holds locks of hair of the demon by her main left hand. Other hands of the goddess carry clockwise unidentified weapons (probably *śakti*), discus, arrow, sword, *khetaka*, *dhanusa*, *paraśu*, and *aṅkuśa*. The face of the image is very much damaged and the crown of the goddess is also broken. The goddess is adorned with usual ornaments. *Vidyādharas* on either side of *kīrtimukha* is engraved on the upper back slab.²¹

Fig.5. *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*, Tungisahar, Malda district, WB (Source: Gautam Senguta and Sharmila Saha, Vibrant Rock, p.144)

Most elegant black stone sculpture representing the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* with ten hands, found from unspecified place of Coochbehar district, West Bengal, preserved specimen (Fig.6) of Cooch Behar Royal Palace Museum, Coochbehar (*hereinafter* CRPMC) is seen fighting with Mahisasura in *pratyālīḍha* pose placed her right and left leg on the buffalo and pedestal respectively. The whole panel of the image is placed on a plain *panca-ratha* pedestal along with two miniature male figure to the left side and few symbols to the right side of the pedestal. The goddess is well bejeweled with valuable ornaments and wears a coronet with full of well designed. The left portion of the image is partially broken. Upper back slab of the image is very simple and no miniature figure is engraved. The simplicity of the whole panel of the stela

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represents the image of the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* as an extremely graceful, slender and symbol of beautification of Bengal art. From its iconographic features it may be conjectured that the big size (size: 96 cm × 47 cm) unpublished image belongs to the c.11th century CE.

Fig.6. *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*, Unspecified place of Cooch Behar district, WB (Courtesy: CRPMC)

Another fragment unpublished image of the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* (Fig.7) with ten hands found from Sivbari village of Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal and now, the image is safely preserved in under personal collection of Asok Nandi of the same village. The upper and lower portion of the black stone image is fully broken; only ten hands with attributes are visible. The image may be assigned to the c.11th century CE.

Fig.7. *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*, Sivbari village, Dakshin Dinajpur district, WB (Courtesy: Asok Nandi)

Only one image of thirty-armed *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* of black stone was discovered from Betna village under Harirampur Police Station of Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal. The unique and rare goddess is seen standing in *pratyālīḍha* gesture and fighting a multitude of pot-bellied demon instead of *Mahiṣāsūra*; with her lion between her feet.²² The main pair of hands hold a *saṅkha* (conch), a *triśula* in the abdomen of the demon, while the third pair of the arms holds a *maśāla*. The other hands carry the *varada*, *sarpa* (snake), *damaru*, *śakti*, *karri*, *tarjani*, *dhanu*, *vāna*, *asi*, *khetaka*, *cakra*, *pāśa*, *utpala*, *daṇḍa*, *paraśu*, *gadā*, *ghantā*, *abhaya*, *vajra*, *darpana*, etc. A female attendant on the proper right side holds a *chatra* (umbrella) over the head of the goddess and *Brahmā*, *Viṣṇu*, *Śiva*, *Sūrya*, and *Ganeśa* are observed on the upper part of the *prabhāvalī*. On the pedestal, besides the donor couple, an ascetic is seen seated in a *dhyānamudrā* pose. This is a unique and rare sculptural art of Bengal, and throughout India.²³

List of the images of *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* found from North Bengal are as follows:

Sl. No	Name of the Images	Find-Spot	Present Location	Dated
1.	<i>Mahiṣāsūramardīnī</i> (Fig.1)	Gangarampur, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	VRMR	c.7 th century CE
2.	<i>Mahiṣāsūramardīnī</i>	Ghoshpukur,	AKMM	c.9 th century CE

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	(Fig.2)	Darjeeling, WB		
3.	<i>Mahiṣāsūramardinī</i> (Fig.3)	Englishbazar, Malda, WB	MMM	c.12 th century CE
4.	<i>Mahiṣāsūramardinī</i> (Fig.4)	Ghoshpukur, Darjeeling, WB	AKMM	c.12 th century CE
5.	<i>Mahiṣāsūramardinī</i> (Fig.5)	Tungisahar, Malda, WB	SAMK, Acc. No. 05.282	c.11 th -12 th century CE
6.	<i>Mahiṣāsūramardinī</i> (Fig.6)	Unspecified palce of Coochbehar District, WB	CRPMC	c.11 th century CE
7.	<i>Mahiṣāsūramardinī</i> (Fig.7)	Sivbari village near Bangarh, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	In personal collection under Asok Nandi	c.12 th century CE
8.	<i>Mahiṣāsūramardinī</i> ²⁴	Raignaj, Uttar Dinajpur, WB	Uttar Dinajpur District Museum, Raiganj	c.11 th century CE
9.	<i>Mahiṣāsūramardinī</i>	Betna village under Harirampur Police Station, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	In a local temple of the same village	c.12 th century CE

IV. Conclusion

Almost all the images of the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardinī* of Pre- Pāla and Pāla-Sena period are made of black basalt found from different parts of North Bengal. All the earliest images are engraved on the stele but gradually it tended to be neutral to the stela. The human form and feelings were expressed in the image of the goddesses *Mahiṣāsūramardinī* so that there was a good combination in between spiritual and unspiritual feelings. The artists presented femininity in these images and they followed the ancient traditions and textual references to execute these sculptures. Well-developed bosoms and a bulky heap of the goddess indicate the combination of sensuality and spirituality, already known in Bengal art. The desires for enjoyment and pleasure are reflected in these female figurines. Transparent and thin cloths and different types of gesture and poses were shown so that the inside soft body could be easily seen.

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The study on the iconographic survey of the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* of early North Bengal indicates the antiquity of this deity is very primitive and the goddess gained more acceptability and as well as popularity from ancient past in this region. The worship of this cult became much popular and largely influenced the life of the people of North Bengal. From our iconographic records and the find spots of the images, it may be assumed that the cult of the goddess *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* has occupied a predominant position and worshipped in the socio-economic and cultural life of the common people all over North Bengal as well as entire Bengal as the destroyer of all evil powers.

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