
A Comparative Iconographic Study of Mahishamardini Durga of Early Assam and Bengal

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Abstract: *Iconography can be a window to our past and plays important role in deciphering meaning, significance and sense of an image. It can be used to chronicle one of the most prevalent activities of humans – the religious practices. Among the various icons of eastern India, war-goddess Mahishamardini was unique because of her independence from male shadow. Her icons were widespread in Bengal and Assam since very early period and both these regions were under the strong influence of Shakti cult. This paper attempts a historical comparative discussion of the icons of Mahishamardini in Assam and Bengal.*

Keywords: Iconography, Religious Practice, War Goddess, Shakti, Mahishamardini, Assam, Bengal

Introduction

The etymology of the word Icon can be traced to Greek *eikon* – which mean a devotional image, a figure representing a deity or a saint, in painting, sculpture terracotta etc. Thus, icons are meant for worship or in some way or other associated with rituals (Banerjea 1985:1). The study of the icons (*iconography*) helps us in identifying images, understand meaning and significance, dating the works of art etc. It actually deals with the sense behind the image and can prove to be very important thread in history. Therefore, *iconography* facilitates one to be conversant with and understand, possibly one of the most important aspects of the history of different races of mankind – the religious life.

In Indian context, icons constitute a major part of artistic creations over the entire period of known history. Indian art exhibited an all-Indian character up to seventh century C.E. when regional tendencies developed and found expression in eighth century C.E (Majumdar 1971:532). According to Majumdar, this have a political connection, as during the same period regional rulers began to assert their independent identity and that regional spirit was reflected in art. In Bengal, a new local art form evolved under the Pala rulers developing its own characteristic features which came to be known as *Eastern Indian School of Medieval Art (EISMA)*. The Pala ruler had, at times, also exercised suzerainty over Assam and EISMA also influenced the art of Assam in areas under their rule.

Indian philosophy of religion is dominated by male gods who is almost always accompanied by his female consort (benevolent Sakti) (Ganesh 1990:59). This has its reflections in iconography too. But, it is interesting to note that iconographically Mahishamardini form of Goddess Durga is portrayed independently. She is created from the combined energy of gods. But she wields the weapons and without any male support slays the buffalo demon Mahisha. David Kinley in his book *Hindu Goddesses* holds the view that:

She exists independent from male protection or guidance, represents a vision of the feminine that challenges the stereo-typed view of women found in traditional Hindu law books. Such a characterization perhaps suggests the extraordinary power that is repressed in women who are forced into submissive and socially demeaning roles. In her role reversal Durga exist outside normal structures and provides a version of reality that potentially, at least, may be refreshing and socially invigorating (Kinslay 1986:99).

The Mahishamardini (slayer of the demon Mahisha) is one of the earliest and important aspects of Durga which was described in the Devimahatmya section of the Markandeya Purana. The Sarvani image that was found in Deulbari proves that war goddess was known in Bengal since the seventh century C.E. On the other hand, most of the Mahishamardini images of Assam belong to ninth to eleventh century C.E. Sakta Upa-Puranas written in Bengal also gave prominence to the female divinities in belligerent mood (war-goddess). The extensive distribution of the Mahishamardini images in Assam and Bengal makes it evident that the war goddess attained popularity since very early period. Sculptures of Mahishamardini Durga exceeded other orders in Assam and this may be attributed to the great impact of Pala art style of Bengal.

Objective

This paper intends to discuss the iconography of the war-goddess Mahishamardini during early period in Assam and Bengal following a historical comparative method.

Discussion

Brahmanda Purana, Markandeya Purana, Matsya Purana Agni Purana etc beautifully discussed the iconography of Mahishamardini form of the goddess (Choudhury 1985:82). T.A.Gopinath Rao has collected a large number of names of the different forms of the goddess and their iconographic descriptions. The Goddess is represented with two, four, eight, twelve, sixteen, eighteen, twenty, and even thirty-two hands (Rao 1997:341). A large number of eight and ten-handed images of the war goddess Mahishamardini have been discovered in Assam and Bengal. Worship of the ten-armed Goddess however, appears to have been most popular in Eastern India (Bhattacharya 1983:30).

The art of Assam till ninth century was simple and direct and it was not done on a large scale. Most of the sculptures of Mahishamardini found in Assam belonged to ninth to eleventh century C.E. During that period Pala School of Eastern India inspired

the local art of Assam. Later sculptures were highly refined and ornamented which exhibited many characteristic features of Pala style of Bengal. With the influence of the Pala rule of Bengal, evolutionary growth of the stele, with upper end somewhat pointed or rounded, can be noticed. In later period ornamented steles were occupied by the *kirtimukhas* and flanked by *vidyadhara*s on either side.

The independent war goddess Mahishamardini is the *ugra* form of Durga. This form is described as the most important and earliest by the literary texts. The *Devimahatmya* gives the description of this goddess in great detail. The large number of sculptures of this goddess, rock-cut as well as carved on stone slabs, are found in Assam. Goddess Mahishamardini had different names according to the number of hands. In *Matsya Purana* and *Agni Purana*, the ten-handed image is mentioned as Katyayani and eighteen handed image is termed Ugrachanda (Barpujari 1990:368).

A sculpture of Mahishamardini, carved on a stone slab is to be found at sirajuli in Sonitpur district (Choudhury 1992:31). The ten handed goddess placed her right leg on the back of the lion (her vehicle). Her left leg is on the back of the beheaded Mahisha. She stands in tribhanga posture (A standing posture with the body bent at the neck, waist and the knee). The weapons in her hands are *trisula*, *cakra*, *tanka*, *arrow*, *khadga*, *shield*, *bow*, battle axe, *ankusha* and *keshabandha* (hair-lock) of the demon. The goddess is depicted as piercing the chest of the demon Mahishasura. The demon, who comes out of the beheaded neck of buffalo, hold the sword with both of his hands in such a way which suggest that he is fighting with the goddess. This image displays magnificent proportion in execution and is a beautiful work of art. According to R.D. Choudhury the sculpture belonged to pre-Ahom period (Choudhury 1985:83).

An image of Mahishamardini with eighteen-hands, is carved on a rock in Uzanbazar area of Guwahati. However, only the sword in the right topmost hand, a *trisula* in the lowest right hand and a bow in the third left hand are distinct. The image correlates to the *dhyanas* of *Agni purana* (Ch. 50, v 7-10). An eighteen handed Mahishamardini in her form of Ugrachanda is very rare in Assam. Therefore, the image is of high iconographic significance.

One sixteen handed Mahisamardini image is found from Ambari (Guwahati) site. The image is made of clay stone. Her right leg is placed on her vehicle (*vahana*), the lion while the left leg is placed on Mahisasura aiming to push him down forcefully (Sonowal 1992:44). She is standing in *alidha* posture where her right leg is outstretched while the left leg is slightly bent. The pedestal bears an inscription where the goddess is identified as 'Candanayika'. The *Kalika Purana* describes Candanayika as one of the eight Saktis of the great goddess. Goddess Candanayika is also mentioned in *Agni Purana* and the *Bhavisya Purana*. Here, she is described under the collective designation of Nava-Durga. The forms of Nava-Durgas are Rudracanda, Pracanda, Candanayika, Canda, Candavati, Candarupa, Aticandika and Ugracanda (Rao 1997:357). It is confusing that the attributes (*ayudhas*) of Candanayika prescribed in the *Agni Purana*

and *Kalika Purana* do not conform to that of the Candanayika found at Ambari. However, inscribed goddess image is rare in Assam and for that matter the image has great significance. Pointed stela, *kirtimukha* and two flying Vidyadharas who are holding *malas* are depicted. It is interesting that here the influence of the Pala art of Bengal is clearly visible.

A unique bronze image of the war goddess Mahishamardini (Figure 1) is found from Narakasur hill (Guwahati, Assam). A circular medallion depicts the face of the goddess in bold relief. Her neck rests on the buffalo demon. R.D.Choudhry is of opinion that his subdued eyes and small size of head signifies his subjugation. This type of image is not seen in Bengal.



Figure 1: Mahishamardini (Courtesy: Assam State Museum, Guwahati)

An interesting image of Mahishamardini is found in Bhoi Parvat (Nowgong district, Assam) which is cut on a piece of granite boulder. The image is quite big and measures 201 cm. in height and 162 cm in width. Her right leg is upon the back of the decapitated buffalo and the left leg on the lion. The position of the buffalo shown here is different

from other Mahishamardini images and placed to goddess's right while the lion is to her left at the bottom. This arrangement is not seen anywhere in any other composition of Mahishamardini Durga (Bhattacharya 1983:25). In that matter this image has great iconographic significance.



Figure 2: Mahishamardini (Phukan 2020)

Six miniature sculptures of ten-handed Mahishamardini Durga (Figure 2), made of grey sandstone, are collected from Ambari ruins now preserved in the Assam State Museum at Guwahati. All the images carry similar weapons in hands. The goddess is shown with her right leg placed on the lion and the left leg upon the buffalo. The

images possess plain stele which is pointed at the top. The use of *kirtimukha* which is an important feature of East India School of Mediaeval Art is not present in the small images. The roughness of the small images of Mahishamardini of Ambari site is in no way comparable to the polished image of the Pala period of Bengal.

A small image of ten- handed Mahishamardini is found at Hajo in Kamrup district of Assam which is carved on a block of basalt. The goddess is depicted as *sthanaka* attitude. The weapons in the hands of the goddess are *trisula*, *vana*, *ankusha*, *gada*, *mudgara*, *sankha*, *chakra*, *mushala*, *dhanu* and *nagapasha*. She is ornamented with *karanda mukuta*, *hara*, *valayas*, *kundalas*, *nupuras* etc. The goddess holds a trident (*trisula*) in her right hand. The trisula is pushed into the chest of Mahishasura. Stylistically the image can be assigned to eleventh/ twelfth century C.E (Choudhury 1985:82-83). Similar type of sculptures of Mahishamardini are found at Ulubari and Siddheswari temple in Sualkuchi (Kamrup District, Assam).

The ten-armed sculptures of Mahishamardini Durga are also found in the ruins of Singari, Charduwar and Bamuni Pahar area (Sonitpur district in Assam). All the images depict almost the same characteristics. One bronze image of the war goddess Mahishamardini collected from Hedayetpur, Guwahati, now preserved in the Assam State Museum. This eight-handed image is very small and is difficult to identify. The vehicle of the goddess is not shown, and this is the only icon of Mahishamardini so far found in Assam belonging to the pre-Ahom period, where the vehicle of the goddess is missing.

So far as the iconography of Mahishamardini in Bengal is concerned, the archaeological finding of the Sarvani image of Deulbari, Tippera appears that in Bengal war-goddess became popular from seventh century C.E. The stiff image Sarvani can be termed as a forerunner of the Pala School. On the basis of this image it can be accepted that the Puranic concept of war-goddess was introduced in eastern India as early as seventh century C.E. However, so far as the concept of Mahishamardini Durga is concerned, Pargiter opines that traditional concept of demon slayer goddess was in vogue for a long time before the composition of *Devimahatmya*.

A unique image, depicts Nava-Durga motif, is recovered from a village of Dinajpur district of North Bengal (Banerjea 1985:500). The eighteen-handed goddess Mahishamardini is the central figure. Other sixteen-handed miniature replicas are grouped around the central figure. Same theme was re-oriented by another unique image which is found from the Dinajpur district. The goddess has thirty-two arms, riding on a lion and in demon slaying mood. Miniature figures of Ganesha, Siva, Vishnu and Brahma are shown on the top of the pravawali. This is a rare image where sakta cult being indicated by the main image. This type of image is not found in Assam.

One ninth century eight-handed Mahishamardini image is found from a village of Darjeeling. It shows her fighting aspect in a graceful manner (Banerjea 1985:30-31). P.

K. Bhattacharya in his book *Iconography of Sculptures* refers that the image is in low profile and sparingly decorated, without traces of *Kirttimukha* or the flying *gandharvas* (Bhattacharya 1987:31). The exceptional simplicity of this composition mark it as an exceptionally graceful example of the early Pala art.



Figure 3: Mahishamardini (Courtesy: Indian Museum, Kolkata)

One stone image (Figure 3), recovered from Dulmi in Manbhum district of Bengal, represents the ten-armed goddess slaying the demon, Mahisha. The goddess is in 'pratyahidha' pose where the left leg is outstretched, and the right leg is slightly bent. This tenth century image carries trisula (piercing the neck of the demon), *khetaka*, *tanka*, *sara*, *khadga*, *dhanu*, *parasu*, *ankusa*, *nagapasa* and *suchimudra* (Sarkar 2001:163). One granite sculpture of ten-handed Mahishamardini Durga is found from Sundarban in West Bengal. A large number of images of Mahishamardini are collected from different places of Bankura and preserved in the Vangiya Sahitya Parisat Museum. A number of Mahishamardini sculptures belonged to Pala-Sena period are found from the villages of Dacca, Faridpur, Tipperah and Backargang as family or village deities (Bhattachali 1929:195-198).

A Mahishamardini image in black stone found from a village of Dacca. The image has ten hands. The pedestal bears inscription 'Sri-Masika-Candi'. Stylistically date of this image can be assigned to twelfth century C.E (Bhattachali 1929:198).

Mahishamardini form of Goddess Durga was, however, much more popular in Bengal than in Assam. The extensive distribution of the Mahishamardini images from Darjeeling in the north to Sundarban in the south and Manbhum in the southwest to Samatata in the east, makes it evident that the war goddess Mahishamardini earned widest popularity since an early period. This is probably the reason why in Mediaeval Bengal she was recognized as the national deity.

Conclusion

The abundance of Mahisamardini images in Bengal, presents a stark contrast to Assam. Perhaps an explanation to this could be the fact that the Bengal underwent a lot more of crisis and battles from ninth to the twelfth century compared to Assam. After the death of Harsavardhan of Kanauj, the whole of North India became a field of tripartite struggle for power among Palas of Bengal, Gurjara-Pratiharas and the Rastrakutas. The Hindu doctrine of the demon-slaying saviour and the actual course of history mirrored each other. Probably depiction of the war-goddess Mahishamardini in the art of Assam was rather because of the influence of the Bengal art then the actual political backdrop of the time.

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