

Mahisamardhini in Indian Art

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Figure 1. Modern Durga Image in Kolkata

Abstract

This paper considers the evolving iconography of the Devi in Mahisamardhini form, especially in Bengal where the annual Durga Puja is increasingly marked by experimentation in artistic forms of both the idol and her surrounding ornamentation. This recent evolution is placed in the context of historical origins and evolution of the deity and her iconography is traced since her 5th century origins.

Introduction

The Devi stands astride her simha (lion) vahana and holds a spear to slay Mahisasura, who has just emerged from his buffalo disguise. In her other hands she holds the various astras (weapons) that the gods have lent her to fight the asuras (demons). This is perhaps the most popular and enduring of the various forms of Devi, the Great Goddess of Hindus.

Durga as Mahisamardhini (slayer of Mahisasura) is an ancient deity. An important 5th century Sanskrit text, the Devimahatmya, contains the story of Durga in great detail including her various forms, exploits, and her iconography. By the 8th century, the Mahisamardhini cult was known throughout the subcontinent as evidenced by architectural remains from Afghanistan to Tamil Nadu. Today, she is still popular throughout India but particularly loved and revered in Bengal in an annual four-day autumn festival, the Durga Puja. Here, Durga while retaining her war-like iconography, is depicted in a more benign form, and seen by worshippers as a daughter visiting her parents for a few days. Thus, she is surrounded by her children, Ganesa, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Karthik, who have joined her on their own vahanas, in this final moment of triumph over the asura. This change is partly due to a 16th century religious movement that transformed fierce and distant post-Vedic deities (Krishna, Durga, and even the terrifying Kali) to personal gods who were the objects of affection rather than reverence.

Durga Puja in Kolkata

Durga Puja became popular in Bengal in the 17th-18th century when Bengali zamindars, enriched by trade with Europe, sponsored lavish annual Durga Puja celebrations in their family rajbaris (palaces). The family Durga Puja is rare now, although some zamindar and merchant families continue to celebrate pujas in the old palaces of Kolkata and surrounding villages. The more recent (early 20th century) and more successful format has been the Sarbojanin or community celebration of the festival which is sponsored and organized by the para or neighbourhood.

After several years of fairly standard Durga images in the Bengali festival, recent years have seen tremendous experimentations by artisans in Kolkata both in the format of the idols (**Figure 1**) and of the pandal (canopied bamboo structure) in which the idols are housed. The artistic achievements of the craftsmen are staggering as any visitor to Kolkata during the Pujas will appreciate. Pandals have been decorated in the most astonishing ways, with old LP records, biscuits, coke bottles, matchboxes, sea-shells, and terracotta bricks. They have been built to look like ancient temples, forts, ships, igloos and even the White House!

Origins and spread of Mahismardhini images

The deity Durga in Mahisamardhini form came to be widespread throughout India from the Gupta age. The surprising geographical spread of the image in ancient and medieval Indian temples indicates that she was firmly in the religious and artistic vocabulary of the Hindu culture all over the sub-continent from the 5th century onwards. She is depicted in the early century Gupta temples of north India and the 7th century early Chalukya temples of the northern Deccan and the Pallava cave temples at Mahabalipuram. During the great age of Indian temple building (9th to 13th centuries), she was depicted in the temples of Orissa, the great Kailasa and other temples of Ellora, the central Indian Chandela temples of Khajuraho, and in the ornate Hoysala and Kakatiya temple of the Deccan. Indian artisans seem to have reveled in the individual expression allowed by the complexity of the Mahisamardhini scene, and have depicted the characters in an amazing variety of positions, expressions, postures, and movements.



Figure 2. Early Chalukya, Alampur

Evolution of Durga Iconography

Mahisamardhini iconography evolved and changed with time and geography. With the passage of time, the orientation and movement of the images changed, and the asura gradually attained a human form. In the earliest images the asura was represented in the form of a buffalo. Such images are found in the temples of the Pratiharas (Rajasthan), Pallavas (Mahabalipuram), and Chalukyas (Alampur). A Chalukya image from the ASI site museum at Alampur (**Figure 2**) is an excellent example. Durga holds down the buffalo with one leg, bending its head to thrust a spear down its neck, while her simha attacks it

from behind. Amidst this ferocious scene, her face is calm, and Mahisasura seems to submit without resistance.

A second depiction that is found in slightly later temples, shows Mahishasura with



Figure 3. Vaital Deul Temple, Orissa

a human body with a buffalo head. Such images are found in the temples of the early Chalukyas (Aihole), Rashtrakutas (Ellora) and in Orissan temples. One of the early temples in Bhubaneswar, the Baital Deul, has an example of this form (*Figure 3*). The half-human Mahisasura seems to kneel in front of Durga as she pushes him down and slays him with her trisula. Her outstretched arms holds swords, snakes, and a shield, all in a swirl of motion but her face is compassionate. Although constrained by a narrow rectangular frame the Orissan artist has produced an image of stunning beauty and vitality, with not a single element of either Durga or the

the asura disproportionate or out of place.

In the next stage of evolution, found in late Chalukya and Hoysala temples (such as at Somnathpura) the compositions show a human Mahisasura being slain by Durga. The example shown in *Figure 4* is a late Chalukya example from Alampur. Here an eight-armed Durga is shown thrusting her trisula into a miniature Mahisasura as he emerges from the buffalo. Although aesthetically less pleasing than the earlier Chalukya example, this sculpture is more active. The lifeless buffalo collapses as Mahisasura emerges ready to strike. Durga gently holds the asura's head as she kills him, while her other hands brandish weapons, a drawn sword, an arrow being taken out of its quiver, a bell being rung.



Figure 4. Late Chalukya, Alampur

A fifth type, much more recent than the others mentioned so far, is found on terracotta temples of Bengal, particularly those in the Hugli and Howrah region. The standardized Bengali group of deities is shown here: Durga slaying Mahisasura in the centre and her children surrounding her. In temples with triple-arched entrances, the



Figure 5. Radhagovinda Temple, Medinipur

images are positioned on the heavy octagonal columns in the porch. But in other temples, particularly those in Medinipur, the image can also be found among Rama and Krishna iconography in the panels above the entrance arches (*Figure 5*).

Conclusion

The Mahisamardhini form of the Devi has been worshipped for fifteen centuries across various regions of the Indian subcontinent and beyond (images have been found in Angkor and in Java). Her story and iconography is one of the most versatile in Indian mythology, allowing artisans to experiment with modeling, form and style. Depiction of Mahisamardhini continues to evolve as she remains an important part of our modern lives, particularly in Bengal where she is loved, revered and worshipped every year in innovative new artistic forms and interpretations.

Ya devi sarva bhooteshu matru roopena samsthita namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaha.

(Devi, who is manifest in all existence as mother, I worship thee, over and over and over again.)

Bibliography

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