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The Cult of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī in the Art of Mathurā

(With emphasis on new sculptural findings from Braj region)

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Mahiṣāsūramardīnī appears to be one of the most important and popular Goddesses in the region of Braj. In fact, she is Durgā in essence but her iconographic form of killing the demon Mahiṣa became more popular and she also came to be known as Mahiṣāsūramardīnī. It is a very important fact that in every village of the greater Braj region, there are three shrines dedicated to the female deities and these are called as Chamar *mātā*, Pathwari *mātā* and Ser *mātā*. At most of these religious spots, the images of Mahiṣāmardīnī were observed and even if image of this deity were not available, a modern image of Durgā is put there for worshipping. It can be easily presumed that one of these three shrines would have certainly belonged to the Goddess Mahiṣāmardīnī during the ancient past. D. M. Srinivasan tends to believe in a north-western origin of the cult of Mahiṣāmardīnī and prefers to call it as the Warrior Goddess in the lack of literary support for the name Mahiṣāmardīnī. Though, it is true that there are no images available of this Goddess prior to Śaka Kṣatrapa period and no references available prior to the *Virāṭa Parva* of *Mahābhārata*, there are not solid grounds to put its origin as being inspired from Greco-Bactrian art. In fact, a number of images of the Warrior Goddess from Mathura region (e.g. Berlin Museum No. MIK I 5894; Srinivasan 1997 : Pl. 20.1 and M. M. Nos. 592; 724 and 2028) depict her standing on her mount lion, holding a trident and spear in her left and right hand respectively. Another image from this region (M.M. No. 2317; Srinivasan 1997 : Pl. 20.2) depicts the Goddess with similar pose and attributes except for the animal Mahiṣa. Srinivasan has put both types of the images in the category of the Warrior Goddess.¹ So, here it is clear, the first image without the animal Mahiṣa is definitely a representation of the Goddess Durgā and the second image is just another form of the Goddess in the attitude of battling demon Mahiṣa. So, it is for sure that both are the variant forms of the greatest Indian Goddess—Durgā. References to Goddess Durgā are unquestionably found in the Vedic as well as Upaniṣadic literature. Hence, there can be no question of an outside origin of this most popular Indian Goddess as suggested by Srinivasan.

In sculptural art, Mahiṣāsūramardīnī images are categorized based on the number of her hands : four, six, eight or more. Usually, she has her upper two hands holding a wreath, possibly symbolizing her self-coronation after her victory over the demon. R. C. Agrawala considers the object to be an iguana (*godhā*) in stead of a wreath.² Two of her hands hold a spear/sword and a trident in her right and left hands respectively. Her natural hands are generally shown strangulating the animal demon Mahiṣa during the Kushan period. In the Gupta sculptures, some changes occur in her images and she no longer strangulates the animal with her hands. Now, she is shown trampling the animal under her feet and piercing the body of the animal with a trident held in her hand. During the later periods, human shaped figure comes out of the decapitated neck of the animal and the deity pierces the figure with a trident. Majority of the images, especially the early Kushan images are quite small in dimensions, while during the later periods including the Gupta period, the size of the sculptures is generally normal. There

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are about 40 Kushan sculptures of this Goddess known from Mathura and its nearby region. The four armed sculptures of Mahiṣāmardī are : National Museum No. U 91; Mathura Museum Nos. 881, 2317, 65.1, plus one unnumbered images from Mathura Museum; Berlin Museum (from Sonkh) Nos. SOI 226, 137, 143, 214; Munich Museum Nos. 199, 200 and Indian Museum Calcutta No. A 1121/4266. The Nagar terracotta plaque⁴ and terracotta plaques from Ahichchhatra described by V. S. Agrawala,⁵ though belonging to Gupta period might also be included in this category. The six armed images of Mahiṣāmardī are :⁶ M. M. Nos. 2715, 993, 889, 875, 2037, 2784, 61.8, SOI 166; National Museum Nos. 66.77, U 51; Lucknow Museum No. G 332; Ashmolean Museum No. O.S. 37; Berlin Museum No. SOI 222 and the terracotta from Level 21 at Sonkh; Los Angeles Country Museum No. M 84.153.1; Brooklyn Museum No. 83.172.1; one fragmentary image from Sanghel in district Gurgaon and an image in a private collection in Bombay. The other representations of the Goddess (eight armed) are : Berlin Museum No. I 5817 and an image in the possession of A.S.I., Agra Circle.⁷

New findings of Mahiṣāsūramardī in Braj region :

1. Image from a site near Ranhera, Mathura (Fig. 1) :

This small plaque depicting the deity was found from a mound outside village Ranhera in district Mathura. The deity is strangulating the animal shaped demon Mahiṣa with her usual hands while her upper two hands are in posture of applying wreath over her head, symbolizing the victory of the great Goddess over the fearful demon or she might just be holding anigūṇa (*godhā*) as identified by R. C. Agrawala in some sculptures. The deity possibly had only six hands. The Goddess is wearing heavy *kuṇḍalas* as well as a round torque. The image belongs to the earliest type of Mahiṣāmardī images and might be dated to early Śaka-Kushan period. The absence of the human shaped head of the demon in such sculptures is an early feature. Whether a lion was depicted at the base or not, can't be determined as the lower portion of this plaque is missing.

2. Terracotta Mahiṣāmardī image from site situated near Ranhera :

This terracotta sculpture was found from the same site in *tehsil* Chhata as was the above mentioned image. This terracotta plaque is quite similar to the above mentioned sculptural plaque. The upper two hands of the deity are in the posture of applying wreaths over the head; the coronation after the victory over Mahiṣa. The animal shaped demon is being strangulated by the Warrior Goddess with her normal hands. In this plaque too, the Goddess seems to have had at least six hands. This plaque also belongs to Śaka-Kushan period.

3. Mahiṣāmardī from Rarah, Bharatpur :

This sculpture was observed in worship at a local Goddess's shrine in village Rarah of district Bharatpur. This image is slightly more damaged than the above mentioned images but survives enough to declare its identity as Mahiṣāmardī and is in almost similar fashion as the above mentioned two images. This image should also belong to early Kushan period.

4. Mahiṣāmardī plaque from Lalpur, Mathura :

This red sandstone plaque of Mahiṣāmardī was found from village Lalpur situated near the road to Sonkh in district Mathura. This sculpture is slightly advanced in representation of the theme than the above mentioned images. In this plaque, the Goddess is trampling the animal shaped demon with her feet. The human shaped head of the demon has been shown coming out of the body of the demon after being trampled by the Goddess. This human shaped head of the demon Mahiṣa is being pierced by the

Warrior Goddess either with a trident or a spear. The mount of the Goddess Durgā, the couchant lion has been shown near the feet of the deity in a seated position but is not participating in the battle. Only two hands of the deity are visible as the portion above neck is missing. The trampling of the demon by the Goddess with her feet and the piercing of the body of the demon (coming out of decapitated trunk) with a spear or *triśūla* is not met with in early sculptures. In my opinion, this should be one of the early images so far known depicting a human form coming out of the decapitated trunk of the animal. It also matches in representation the account given of the Goddess in the *Devī Mahātmya* of *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. This plaque might be tentatively dated to Gupta period.

5. Mahiṣamardī from Jasauli, Mathura :

This small sculptural plaque was observed at a shrine in village Jasauli of district Mathura. The quite defaced plaque depicts the four handed Warrior Goddess strangulating the neck of the demon Mahiṣa who is shown only in the animal form. Stylistically, this image should belong to Kushan period.

6. Fragment of Mahiṣamardī image from Junhendi, Mathura :

This lower fragment of a Mahiṣamardī image was observed at a shrine in village Junhendi of district Mathura. The fragmentary plaque depicts the left facing demon in animal form, being trampled under her feet and being pierced with a trident by the Warrior Goddess. In most of the images the demon Mahiṣa faces towards the right but in this image, he is shown facing towards the left. This sculpture might belong to late Kushan or early Gupta period.

7. Lower fragment of Mahiṣamardī image from Radhakund, Mathura :

This lower fragment of a Mahiṣamardī image was observed at a shrine in village Radhakund of district Mathura. The fragment shows the animal shaped demon being trampled under the feet of the *devī* and also being pierced with a trident by the Goddess. The head of the *devī*'s lion has been shown in a pose of attacking the demon from behind. This piece might date to late Kushan-early Gupta period.

8. Lower fragment of Mahiṣamardī image from Patsal, Agra :

This lower fragment of a Mahiṣamardī image was observed at a shrine in village Pastal of district Agra. The animal shaped demon has been beautifully carved in the sculpture which looks like a *Mahiṣa* (buffalo). The lion of the Goddess is attacking the demon from behind. In the broken piece it is clear that the Goddess is trampling the demon under her feet and piercing the body of the demon with a trident. This fragment might be dated to Gupta period.

9. Mahiṣamardī relief from Karahla, Mathura :

This sculptural plaque was observed at a shrine in village Karahla of district Mathura. This sculpture is quite peculiar as it depicts the Goddess in a frontal posture trampling the animal shaped demon under her feet and piercing its body with a trident. The lion of the Goddess is attacking the animal shaped demon from behind. This sculpture might belong to late Kushan or early Gupta period.

10. Lower fragment of Mahiṣamardī from Patsal, Agra :

This lower fragment of Mahiṣamardī was found at the same shrine as the above mentioned image from Patsal in district Agra. The portion above the Goddess's waist is missing. The animal shaped demon is facing to the left and is represented in a quite interesting manner. Her head is being trampled under the feet of the Goddess. The deity is also piercing the body of the demon with a trident. This sculpture should date to Gupta period.

11. Mahiṣamardinī sculpture from Dirawali, Mathura (Fig. 2) :

This sculpture was found at a shrine in village Dirawali of district Mathura. The sculpture depicts the animal demon Mahiṣa being trampled under the feet of the Goddess. With her left hand, *devī* is holding the demon from his back with its tail. The Goddess is attacking the body of the demon with a trident. The interesting feature of this image is that the demon is facing to the left and the lion of the Goddess is attacking him from the front. There is no human shaped figure coming out of the animal shaped demon. This sculpture should belong to Gupta period.

12. Mahiṣamardinī sculpture from Umraya, Mathura :

This sculpture was observed at a shrine in village Umraya of district Mathura. The deity is shown trampling the demon under her feet and is piercing the human shaped body of the demon coming out of decapitated trunk. The demon faces towards right side and his animal form is being attacked by the deity's head. Pairs of flying *vidyādhara*s have been depicted at the top corners of the slab. At the lower corner as well, two quite mutilated figures are visible. This sculpture might date to about 7th - 8th century A.D.

13. Mahiṣamardinī sculpture from Ghata, Bharatpur (Fig. 3) :

This sculpture was observed lying over the scattered remains of a medieval temple situated near the Deeg-Kuman road outside village Ghata in district Bharatpur. The sculpture shows probably eight handed deity *asi* (sword), *dhāṭa* (shield), *triśūla* etc. visible in her hands) putting her right foot over the animal shaped body of the demon and attacking the demon's human shaped body with a trident. The human form of the demon is coming out of the decapitated trunk of the animal. The demon faces to the right and the lion of the deity is attacking the animal shaped demon from behind. A number of small figures like those of *vyālas*, females etc. are visible over the slab surrounding the deity as was the usual norm during medieval period (about 10th century A.D.) to which the sculpture should belong.

14. Mahiṣamardinī sculpture from Dhamri, Bharatpur (Fig. 4) :

This sculpture was observed in worship at an open shrine in village Dhamri of district Bharatpur. The sculpture depicts the eight armed deity trampling the animal Mahiṣa under her feet. Possibly two human shaped demons have come out from the body of the animal, one of them is held in the natural left hand of the Goddess. The animal Mahiṣa is facing to the right and is being attacked by the lion of the Goddess from behind. A beautiful lotus medallion decorates the sculpture behind the head of the deity which is unfortunately missing because of the destruction caused by the bigoted Muslim attackers. In the lower panel of the slab, various figures are shown playing on the musical instruments. The overall composition of the sculpture is quite complex and various deities along with *śārdūlas* have been carved on the slab. Seated figure of Gaṇeśais visible in the lower left part of the slab indicting the Śaiva connection of the Goddess Mahiṣamardinī. The sculpture should be datable to 10th-11th century A.D.

15. Image from Kamai, Mathura :

This image is quite important from understanding the important of the Goddess Mahiṣamardinī in the region of Bra. Some broken sculptural pieces would have been lying at an open shrine in the village Kamai near Barsana which were later on given the shape of a round pillar in which on one side, the artist gave them the shape of a Mahiṣamardinī sculpture. Artist in spite of being unaware about the cult of Mahiṣamardinī would have given this shape because he would have observed such images at some other shrines in the nearby villages. Though, it appears that most of the part is of the original image and only some new additions have been made by the artists, the presence of Mahiṣamardinī

sculpture in almost every village of the region raises some questions about the origin and the real significance of this cult.

Beside these sculptures, many other sculptures were observed during the exploration, majority of them belonging to medieval period. Some of these sculptures with no significant change from the above mentioned images are : Lower portion of Mahiṣāmardī image from village Akata, near Kaman in district Bharatpur belonging to about 7th-8th century ; image from Paigaon village in district Mathura (Fig. 5); image from Jawra village in district Mathura (Fig. 6); Lower half of Mahiṣāmardī image from village Lutsan in district Hathras; Lower half of image from village Nandola in district Bharatpur; Lower half of Mahiṣāmardī image from Pasta, Bharatpur (Fig. 7); Mahiṣāmardī image from Tyonga, Bharatpur; Lower half of a Mahiṣāmardī image from Sonsa, Mathura (Fig. 8); image from Santha, Agra; Lower half of a Mahiṣāmardī image from Badhiri, Bharatpur; Lower half of a Mahiṣāmardī image from Kirarai, Mathura; Broken Mahiṣāmardī image from Ral, Mathura and a small 12th century plaque depicting Mahiṣāmardī from village Nagla Khera, Mathura.

In the concluding remarks it can be said that the cult of Mahiṣāmardī was as important as the cult of any other deity or was even slightly more important. The total number of open shrines of this goddess situated in every village of Braj region would outnumber the number of shrines dedicated to any other deity (not considering the modern temples or the mode of household worship). Evidence of its cult in art is found since 1st century B. C. till modern times. Another point which may be highlighted here is that in the representations of this warrior goddess, except for three-four examples known previously,⁸ the goddess holds the mouth of demon Mahiṣa with her hands and in this way Mahiṣa faces towards right or upwards. But, in the recently found images four images show the exceptional style as the goddess holds Mahiṣa from his hind legs and in this way it faces towards left or downwards. So, whether it should be considered an exceptional type of representation or not, is open for debate. There is a certain evolution in the iconography of this goddess with the passage of time but it is for sure that the cult of this deity evolved in the surrounding area of Mathura (Braj region) and then spread to other parts of country and presently Bengal is the most prominent centre of this goddess's worship. The popularity of this goddess in the area of origin of its cult (at least in sculptural art) continued without any hindrance till medieval times and would continue to be so if the peculiar character of Braj culture without any hindrance till medieval times and would continue to be so if the peculiar character of Braj culture does not changes with modernization.

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Fig. 1 : Mahiṣāsūramardīnī from site near Ranhera, Mathura



Fig. 2 : Mahiṣāsūramardīnī from Dirawali, Mathura



Fig. 3 : Mahiṣāsūramardīnī from Ghata, Bharatpur



Fig. 4 : Mahiṣāsūramardīnī from Dhamri, Bharatpur



Fig. 5 : Mahiṣāsurmardīnī from Paigaon, Mathura.



Fig. 6 : Mahiṣāsurmardīnī from Jawra, Mathura



Fig. 7 : Mahiṣāsurmardīnī from Pasta,
Bharatpur



Fig. 8 : Mahiṣāsurmardīnī from Sonsa, Mathura