CHAPTER TWO

EVOLUTION OF ŚAKTI CULT: FROM MOTHER GODDESS TO MAHISHAMARDINĪ - THE CONCEPT OF MAHISHAMARDINĪ: ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT, MYTHOLOGY AND ICONOGRAPHY
CHAPTER TWO

I

EVOLUTION OF ŚAKTI CULT:
FROM MOTHER GODDESS TO MAHISHAMARDINI

The worship of a supreme deity as Śakti symbolising the Female Creative Principle in various iconic and aniconic forms, one of which is Durgā Mahishamardini or Mahishāsuramardini of relatively late origin, has continued in India through the ages. Durgā-Sapta Satī identifies Śakti as an inherent power in everybody¹ which is nothing but the manifestation of a Para-Śakti, the supreme goddess, in all different phenomenon of life itself. The Śāktas recognise the great goddess as the highest reality. To them She, being the personification of primordial energy and source of all divine and cosmic evolution, is the inspirator and regulator of all the forces of the world. In the concept of Śakti, harmonization of two elements, one empirical and the other speculative, has been visualized². The former element is related to the notion of cosmogony whereby it is assumed that every creation is the product of the union of the two, male and female, leading to the speculative element, i.e. the ideas of the Primordial Father and Primordial Mother in the primitive stage of the human society in which the

1. yā devī sarvabhūteshu śaktirūpena saṁsthitā.
2. Kumar, Pushpendra, Dr., The Principle of Śakti, p.1.

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The worship of a female divinity representing Śakti in various aspects, especially in that of the Universal Mother, existed in India from a very early time. While the iconic representation of this Mother-Goddess can be discerned in the female statuettes discovered at the pre-Harappan and Harappan sites, the aniconic emblems of Her can be made out of the ring-stones unearthed at the similar sites. On the basis of the evidence furnished by these proto-historic relics it is generally assumed that Śakti Cult was an important element of the religious beliefs of the Harappan and also probably of the pre-Harappan epochs. However, it should be noted here that the Mother Goddess did not dominate the Indus religion.

In the earlier stages of development of Śakti cult, the Mother Goddess seemed to be a composite deity. Beside being the symbol of generation (as the real producer of life), she was also identified with Earth who served the purpose of the womb in which seeds were sown for harvesting. Again, as harvesting is related to the idea of fertility and reproduction, the Mother Goddess as symbol of

3. Ibid., p.3.

4. It is to be noted here that at least from the Harappan time, in India, Śakti was represented by Yoni (the female genital organ) in the form of ring stones and Śiva by the liṅga (phallus) symbols in the form of some conical objects, suggesting female and male energies respectively.

fertility and nourishment became conceptually the protectress of children which conspicuously associated her further with diseases and other calamities as an effective antidote.\textsuperscript{6}

In the course of evolution of the Śakti Cult, many other attributes representing the basic facts of human life were adjunced to the original conception of Mother Goddess and with the development of conceptual thought, these attributes and their functions were differentiated and personalized so as to facilitate concrete representations of the supreme goddess in her various iconographic forms.\textsuperscript{7}

Having concerned with patriarchy, the Vedic tribes of India were worshippers of father-gods. But when they came in contact with pre-vedic conception of Mother Earth, the belief was so strong and deep rooted in Indian mind at that stage of culture that they could not simply do away with it; and a place for goddess Pritihivī was assigned in the Vedic Pantheon. The attributes and functions of Mother Earth as discerned from a sealing unearthed at the great city of the same designation may also be explained in this context in terms of Vedic and later Indian mythologies. The relevant sealing from Harappa depicts the figure of a nude female shown upside down with legs wide apart, and a plant issuing from her womb. Undoubtedly

\textsuperscript{6} Kumar, Pushpendra, \textit{op.cit.}, p.2.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
this nude female figure represents the Mother Earth from whose body grow the life sustaining vegetables. Similar attribute of the Earth Goddess is mentioned in a passage of Markendeya Purâṇa where the goddess proclaims that she would support the whole world with those life-sustaining vegetables grown out of her body during a period of heavy rains and would obtain fame on earth as Sākambhari. Thus the goddess depicted in the Harappan sealing may be regarded as the prototype of the goddess Sākambhari of the Purāṇas. The only difference between these two concepts probably lies in the fact that the goddess in the Harappan sealing by herself as an independent goddess of antiquity, while Purāṇas considered her only as a form of the great goddess, the supreme being of the Śāktas, into whom she was absorbed. The earth also figures as an object of veneration in some of the vedic and post-vedic literature including the Epics and Purāṇas. In the Rig Veda Dyaus, the Sky Father, and Prithivīthe Earth Mother, are described as universal parents, though the Earth Mother has been assigned a less glorious position in contrast to her male consort. The Atharvaveda contains a delightful hymn consecrated to Mother Earth. In the Mahābhārata, the Mother Earth, for the first time, is brought in relation to Vishnu.

8. Marshall, John, Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization, Pl.XII, fig.12.
10. Kumar, Dr. Pushpendra, op.cit., p.4.
11. Ibid.
12. XII.1.
13. III.141.
as his consort, while in Brahma Purāṇa she has been identified with Goddess Kāli.

According to the Śākta scheme of cosmogonical evaluation the unrevealed Prakṛti, who alone existed before creation, desirously created Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva out of her own body after assuming the form of the Great Mother and in the later phase of such evolution this Female Creative Principle or Śakti assumed the form of Jagadambā or jagatmātā, the mother of the universe, and created the gods in association with the Purusha, the Male Principle. In course of further evolution Śakti assumed her highest position as Mahādevī, the consort of Śiva, and sometimes she is even regarded as the creator of Śiva.

Several aspects of transformation of the Śakti Cult at this stage of development are worthy to note. By the end of the Vedic period some of the goddesses gained supremacy in the Vedic pantheon. The feminine energy (Śakti) as the consort of god becomes more common and as a result of this process, names of a number of goddesses appear in different texts of Later Vedic period. Moreover, it appears that the prominence of Śakti Cult in the post-
Vedic times may be accounted for the fusion of prehistoric tradition of Mother Goddess with the Vedic goddess tradition relating to Vāk and Sarasvatī during the closing eras of the Vedic age. Besides all these, the identification of Rudra and Agni, the two Vedic gods, as one in Śīva initiated the process of fusion 'Śakti' and 'Śiva' (Rudra) cults. It had a far-reaching effect on the evolution of Śakti Cult in later phases. As a result of this fusion, Śīva became associated with the seven fierce goddesses such as Kāli, Karāli, Bhīmā, Chandī, Chāmundā etc., identified with the seven tongues of Agni (these goddesses are differently named in Māndūkapaniṣad, who represented destructive, fierce and wrathful aspects of the goddess energetic female or Śakti. On the other hand the peaceful benevolent aspects of Śakti was inaugurated through the identification of Mother Goddess with the Vedic Vāk and Sarasvatī representing the power of wisdom. In her fertility aspect the prehistoric Mother Goddess assumed the form of goddess Śrī and became popular as the goddess of opulence and prosperity, representing the generous aspect of Śakti.

In the epic period and vedic gods receded from their pristine glory and eminence and Saktism became more and more

19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
prominent. In the Mahābhārata Aditi having figured at the top list of goddesses like Ṣrī, Śrī etc., is considered not only as the mother of Ādityas but also those of Vasus and Rudras. She is also identified with Durgā and Earth in the Harivaṃsa. In both the Epics the non-sectarian goddess Vāk, by now identified with Sarasvatī, is regarded as the consort of Brahmā. In the Mahābhārata the same goddess is often recognized as Umā or Durgā and described as the Mother of the Vedas. In this period Indrāṇī, the consort of Indra, and Rudrāṇī, the consort of Śiva, received greater importance and are destined to play eminent role in Saktism.

The emergence of the goddess Durgā and Kāli as significant and powerful deities of the Śakti cult probably dates from this period. Much interesting light is thrown on the Śākta sects of the epic period by the account of these two goddesses, especially that of the goddess Durgā, in the Mahābhārata. There are two Durgāstotras, one by Arjuna in the Bhīmaparva and the other by Yudhisṭhira in the Virataparva that reveal many aspects of the great goddess to be revealed in later Tantric texts. In one of the stotras the great goddess is described as 'having her perpetual abode on the Vindhya, and delighting is spirituous liquor, flesh and sacrificial victims'. In view of this association of the goddess

24. Chapter LVIII.
with the Vindhya region and also her relation with the Śabarās and
the Pulindas of the same range mentioned elsewhere, it may be
assumed that a Mother Goddess of the Proto-Austroloid tribes during
this period merged with the great Aryan Mother Goddess and the
Śāktas were absorbing un-Aryan habits. In the Durgāstotra by
Arjuna the warlike attitude of the goddess has been emphasised and
she is described as born in the family of Nanda, the foster-father
of Vāsudeva whose sister she is supposed to be, in order to
emphasize her special relationship with the Vaishnava Cult.
Moreover the mention of the goddess as Kokāmukhā or consort of
Kokamukha (i.e. Viṣṇu) indicates that the Śākta sect became so
important in the epic period as to inspire the Vaishnavas to associate
the goddess with Viṣṇu. But as Śiva absorbed more popular elements
than Viṣṇu, the Śaivas evidently succeeded in their rivalry against
the Vaishnavas in making the popular female deity the consort of
their own lord Śiva which led to the emergence of Śiva-Śakti
Cult. The gradual absorption of some elements from the religion of
Śākyamuni by Saktism is also attested by another Epic stotra
where the association of the great goddess with the Buddhist
Chaityas has been referred to. It may be inferred in this context

26. Chattopadhyay, Sudhakar, The Evolution of Theistic Sects in
27. "....atta śūla - praharaṇe Khadga - Khetaka - dhārini,
gopendra - sānuje jyesthe Nandagopa - Kulodbhave.
Mahīṣārk priye nityām Kauśiki pītavāśī, 
attahāsa Kokāmukhē namstestu rāṇā-priye." 
29. "Jambu - kataka - caityeṣu nityām sannihitalaye Tvam Brahma
vidyanam mahānidrā ca dehinaṃ". See Muir, J., op.cit., IV.,
p.368.
that at that time Mahāyāna form of Buddhism was spreading its influence over the Śāktas which resulted in the fusion of the Tantric Cults of both Buddhist and Brahmanical inspirations leading to the identification of the Buddhist goddess Tārā with Śakti of the Śāktas. Another noticeable aspect of the transformation of Śakti already achieved during the early Christian eras was that Śaktism not only absorbed Buddhist influences but also mother goddess like Ishtar of foreign origin. In a coin of the Kushāṇa king Huvishka appears a female deity identified by a monogram as Nanā, who is identical with the Sumero-Babylonian goddess Ishtar. In another coin of the same king, a female figure is depicted with the inscription Om or UmA who is equated with Durga in the Durgā-stotras of the Mahābhārata, a deity who in the later period absorbed many of the traits, like lion seat etc., of the goddess Ishtar-Nanā, suggesting the merger of the Babylonian goddess in the Indian Mother Goddess or Śakti.

The glory of the Śakti goddess reached its apex in the Purāṇas, where the deity manifested herself as independent goddess like Durgā, Kātyāyanī, Mahishamardini and is identified with the supreme reality, viz. Brāhmaṇa, as the source of creation, maintenance and development of the world. In the earlier Purāṇas

32. For Ishtar, see Hastings, J., ed. Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Edinburg, 1958.
(viz. the Vāyu, Brahmāṇḍa and Matsya Purāṇas) and in some of the later Purāṇas (viz. Kurma, Garuḍa, Brahma Purāṇas etc.) the demon-slaying concept of the goddess and her terrible forms are not stressed upon. In these Puranic texts Umā is notably calm and homely being figured as the daughter of Himavat, consort of Śiva and mother of Kumāra. But elsewhere in some other Purāṇas, like Mārkaṇḍeya, Varāha, Devī (Śākta) Purāṇas etc. the demon slaying concept and terrible forms of the goddess are well represented through the iconographic portrayal of goddesses like Chandika, Kauśikī, Kālī and Mahākālī.

The Devī Māhātmya33 section of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa composed primarily conceived the Devī as the war-goddess who brings victory and success to her devotees in the battle-arena and sometimes even engages herself in war against the demons to relieve the world from the oppression of the same. Of all her fightings against the demons, the most popular and challenging was her combat with Mahishāsura, a fact which is proved by the discoveries of numerous Mahishamardinī sculptures from all parts of India, and even from some places beyond the geographical confines of this country. The episode connected with the slaying of the demon

33. It is generally assumed that the oldest portions of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa were compiled during the third century A.D. or earlier while the Devī Māhātmya, which may justly be regarded as the gospel of Śākta philosophy, is said to have been added to the text by the sixth century A.D. (see Winternitz, A History of Indian Literature, Vol.II, p.550, 555).
Mahishāsura is also indirectly mentioned in the Matsya, Brahmanda and other Purāṇas. The episode narrating the fight of the Devī with Mahisha as found in the Devībhāgavata, Skanda Purāṇa, Vāmana Purāṇa and other texts appears to have been borrowed with some minor alterations from the Mārkandeya Purāṇa at a later date.

The episode of slaying the demon Mahisha by the Devī suggests in itself a sublime outline of the Śākta conception of Devi as the embodiment of an all pervading power, born out of conglomeration of energy of all the deities, being adorned with various ornaments and weapons of various gods. Thus the concept of harnessing the collective power and energy of the gods for the protection, prosperity and pleasance of devotees grew up in Śaktism.

With the rejuvenation of Brahmanical Hinduism in the age of the Imperial Guptas, the Śakti Cult gradually tended towards Tantricism. The Gaṅgādhar Stone Inscription of the year 480 Vikrama era (=423-4 A.D.) records the erection of a temple of the divine mothers, along with a Vishnu temple, which has been a terrible abode filled full of female ghouls of the divine Mothers who utter loud and tremendous shouts in jay and stir up the very oceans with

34. 152.17.24.
35. IV.29, 75 and 78.
36. Kumar, Dr. Pushpendra, op.cit., p.40.
the mighty winds rising from magic rites of their religion. The relevant portion of the narrative of this epigraph undoubtedly proves the existence of more than one divine mothers attended by female ghouls or dākinis and that this mother worship was associated with magic rites. The divine Mothers are also mentioned in the Bihar Pillar Inscription of Skanda Gupta. The association of the goddess with dākinis and sākinis and reference to magic practices in the Gaṅgādhar record implies that the Tantric rites had already entered into the practices of Brahmanical Śakti Cult. A passage from the Harshacharita of Bāṇa narrating the attempts made by different sets of people to make the king Prabhākaravardhana cured of his ailment by worshipping Chāṇḍī along with Śiva and Mahākāla through magic practices prove that in the post-Gupta era the Tantric rites became more prominent in the Śākta religious practices. That even erudite person like Bāṇa was a devotee of the Goddess worshipped after Tantric fashion is proved by his composition Chandīśataka written on the basis of the Chandimāhātmya of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa. There are evidences to prove that in the century of Bāṇa horrible Tantrik practices profoundly influenced

38. Ibid., p.47. There are some oft-quoted passages stating the number of such divine Mothers as seven: 'Brāhma-Māheśvari-Caiva Kaumārī Vaiśnavī tathā, Māhendrī Caiva Vārāhī Cāmūndā saptah - mātaraḥ'. See - Chattopadhyay, Sudhakar., op.cit., p.160.
39. Ibid., p.47.
41. Chattopadhyay, Sudhakar., op.cit., p.163.
the course of Śaktism. It is known from Si-yu-ki that when the famous Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang left Ayodhya in a boat along with a party and proceeded east down the Ganges towards Ayamukha, a group of bandits attacked and robbed them of their belongings and decided to sacrifice the Chinese pilgrim of uncommonly fine looking to the altar of their cruel deity Durgā; but a providential hurricane put the wicked bandits in fear who ultimately released their doomed victim and treated him with awe and reverence.\(^{42}\)

In the next few centuries Tantric ideas radically changed the views and practices of different religious sects of India, including those of the Śāktas. The Tantras gradually came to be regarded as the basis of Śaktism, which in its latest form is essentially a medieval religion with greater emphasis upon the mantras, bijas, mudrās, yantras, and Nyāsas which help the devotee to realize the universe within himself and become one with the goddess.\(^{43}\)


\(^{43}\) Kumar, Dr. Pushpendra, op. cit., p. 12.
II
THE CONCEPT OF MAHISHAMARDINI:
ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT, MYTHOLOGY AND ICONOGRAPHY

i. ORIGIN OF MAHISHAMARDINI

Hindu philosophy and theology perceive God as saguna and nirguna, i.e. with or without attributes. In His saguna form when God is viewed as Male principle He is worshipped as Viṣṇu and Śiva, while those who consider the Supreme deity as Female principle worship Her as Śakti. Following the above formalization of God, the division of Hindu votaries into Vaishnava, Śaiva and Śākta is not, however, inflexible. Though the Vaishnavas and Śaivas adore the male Deva of their respective sect as the Supreme principle, they also worship the Devī in the form of Lakṣmi and Pārvatī as consorts of Viṣṇu and Śiva respectively, assigning each of them a position only next to their male Deva. On the other hand, the Śāktas consider Devī as the Supreme deity, the source of all divine as well as cosmic evolution.

As an independent deity the goddess Devī is worshipped in her numerous forms, the most prominent of which being designated

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45. Ibid., p. 328.
as Durgā. Sometimes she is also designated in recognition of one or other of her heroic achievements⁴⁶. Thus Devī Durgā assumed the name of Mahishāsuramardini after having destroyed the Mahishāsura in a fearful combat. Thus the origin of the concept of Mahishāsuramardini is to be sought in the source and development of its generic form, i.e. Durgā, the emergence of which is still to be definitely ascertained.

To enquire into the origin of Durgā some scholars preferred to go back to the pre-Aryan matriarchal culture of the Harappan and referred to the Mother Goddess worship of the same as the source of the concept of Durgā which the Aryans subsequently borrowed from, while a more potential source of the concept is searched out by others in the Devī Sūkta of Rig Veda where the goddess herself claims to have given birth to the space⁴⁷. In the subsequent vedic literature such as the Yajurveda, Kenopanishad⁴⁸ or TaittiriyaĀranyaka etc. where Durgā or Devī occurs as Umā, Haimavatī or Ambikā in few places only, well still metaphoric and obscure. The Durgā conception, however, began to descend from its abstruseness to a level of general understanding in the Durgā stotras of the Mahābhārata where the goddess is said to be born to Yaśodā of the Gopas, a loving consort of Nārāyaṇa, a sister to Vasudeva and slayer of Kāmasura. The earlier

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⁴⁶. Ibid., p.333.
⁴⁸. Kenopanishad, 4.2.
Purānas, like the Viṣṇu or Mārkandeya, also corroborate such identifications of the goddess. The conceptual descent of the deity seems to be more concrete are recognizable through the Śakti Cult, a new religious dogma which sprouted from the harmonious blending of the non-Aryan and Aryan creeds.49

Connected distinctly with the allusion of Mahishāsura, Devī Durgā first seemed to appear as Mahishāsuramardini in the early centuries of the Christian era in the Purānas. But such a conjecture was a derivation from some of general analogy and more suggestive or later adjunction as in the Mahābhārata, Kārttikeya has been figured as the destroyer of Mahīṣa and his fight with that of demon is narrated in some details in the Vana-Parvan.50 Among the various names given to Kārttikeya in this epic, Mahishardana51 figures some what prominently. Of the two Durgāstotras preserved in the Mahābhārata, the former one, which is absent in the southern recension of the epic, describes the goddess as Mahishāsuranāśinī. Depending on this difference between the southern and northern versions of the epic, it has been suggested that the myth of Durgā’s slaying of Mahīṣa was brought from the Kārttikeya legend at a somewhat later time.53 It should also be noted here that the same epic once depicts Śīva54 as the destroyer of Mahīṣa. Thus it appears that the destruction of Mahīṣa was attributed to three different divine sources, namely Śīva, Kārttikeya and Durgā, by different compilers in different regions of

49. Rakshit, Indu., op.cit.
50. Ch.231.
51. III.232.3.
52. IV.6; VI.23.
54. Śīva is called Mahishāghna. See Soeresen, Index to the Mahābhārata, p.458.
this vast country. While the latest section of the Mahābhārata are supposed to have been composed about the fourth century A.D., the representation of Durgā as Mahishamardini in art is traceable from about the first century B.C. or the beginning of the first Christian century. Thus it is difficult to accept that Mahishamardini aspect of Durgā is later than the conception of Kārttikeya as the annihilator of Mahisha, even though the Mahābhārata attributes the slaying of Mahisha more often to Kārttikeya than to Śiva and Durgā.

The Devimāhātmya, a section of the Markandeya Purāṇa is considered to be the most important authority for the study of exploits of Mahishāsuramardini. The goddess as the slayer of asuras has been elaborately depicted here, which appears to be an amplification of the concept of the Devī Sūkta of Rig Veda. In the Devimāhātmya the Devī is described as divinely youthful damsel, whose lusture of beauty tempted the two asuras, Śumbha and Niśumbha to possess her. Another form of the Devī mentioned in the same Purāṇa is designated as Chāmunda, the most terrible as emanating from her in her war with asura. All the qualities of the terrible Vedic Rudra seemed to be present so much in this form of the Devī, as to be identified as Rudrāṇī. Moreover Rudrāṇī Mahishāsuramardini had also her subsequent identification with the loving consort of Śiva, Śivāṇī.
In the subsequent stages of development of the concept of Mahishāsuramardini, folk beliefs and local usages gradually mixed up in the process of amalgamations sometimes creating much confusions and anamoly, though ultimately it had added some newer aspects to the earlier concept. Thus from the minor Purāṇas down to the late medieval Mahāgala Kāvya or Bratakathās of Bengal, the Mahishamardinī and Pārvatī Śivāṇī had various such gradual and incongruous transformation.

ii. MAHISHĀSURAMARDINI IN MYTHOLOGY

The legend narrating the combat between Mahishāsuramardinī and the demon Mahishāsura and the consequent slaying of the latter is interesting and finds much favour with the Purāṇas and Devīmāhātya. Although in furnishing various accounts of the combat these ancient texts agree in broader aspects of the episode, they differ in some minute details in unfolding the story. Keeping in view such differences, the mythical representation of the combat between the goddess and the demon may be reviewed as follows: the origin of Mahishāsura, the circumstances leading to the combat, the decoration of the goddess with armour and weapons, the way of killing the demon by the goddess and its aftermath.

The origin of the Mahishāsura is narrated beautifully in the Varāha Purāṇa through an episode. According to it, when the rishi Sindhudvīpa was practising penance in Māhishmatī, a damsel named Māhishamati came to the Mandāra-parvata on a delightful trip with her friends and in order to occupy a beautiful abode of a rishi threatened the tāpas who was engaged in performing penance after taking the form of she-buffaloes. By his meditative power the rishi perceived the truth of the situation and cursed the girls involved to become real mahishis or she-buffaloes. After the girls became repentant of their offences, the rishi promised that they would acquire their original form as soon as a buffalo-son was born to Māhishmatī. After some years while grazing on the banks of the river Narmadā, Māhishmatī swallowed the seed of rishi Sindhudvīpa, which fell in that river due to his temptation to a celestial nymph named Indumati, while drinking water from the river. This seed grew in the womb of Māhishmatī, who later on gave birth to Mahishāsura. Interestingly enough the Skanda Purāṇa gives a different version of the ancestry and transformation of the demon into such animal form. According to this text Mahishāsura was the son of Hiranyaksha and his transformation into the form of a buffalo was due to the curse of the sage Durvāsā. Mahishāsura was also depicted as a devotee of Śiva in the Arunachal Māhātmya, a Śaivaite myth, of Skanda Purāṇa.

The story of the battle between Mahishāsuramardini, the goddess, and Mahishāsura, the demon, and the circumstances leading to

57. Nagara Khanda, Ch.121.
it have been narrated in various ways by the different Purāṇas. In
their descriptions the Varāha and Padma Purāṇas call the goddess
Vaishnavī, while the Vāmana Purāṇa designated her as Katyayana. The
Varāha Purāṇa in its course of description narrates the circumstances
leading to the combat between the goddess and the demon. According
to this description, while the goddess was performing penance
surrounded by the various Śakti attendants, the passer-by Nārada,
finding the form of the goddess mighty enough to destroy the
refractory Mahishāsura who had defeated the gods, approached the
demon and after describing the exquisite beauty of the goddess
indulged his appetitite to possess her, which ultimately led to the
combat.

The Vāmana Purāṇa, of course, relates a different version of
the circumstances leading to the combat\(^5^8\). According to this text,
after being completely defeated by Mahishāsura, the gods, headed by
Brahmā, approached Vishṇu and prayed for the destruction of the
demon. Thereupon all the gods including Brahmā, Vishṇu and Śiva
emitted flames of anger which solidified into the effulgent form a
goddess with three eyes and eighteen arms, each of which bore a
weapon afforded by the mighty gods\(^5^9\). The goddess, thus created, now
proceeded to seek battle with Mahishāsura. The demon being lusted

\(^5^8\) Rao,Gopinath T.A., op.cit., p.350-353.

\(^5^9\) The Markandeya Purāṇa also gives similar description of the
creation of the goddess and mentions that the deity got different segments of her body from different gods, as such,
face from Śiva, hair from Yama, shoulder from Viṣṇu, waist
from Indra etc. See Misra, Vijayakanta., Mahishāsuramardini,
p.15.
after her beauty sent a messenger to her with a proposal of marriage. The goddess in order to bring the demon to a combat asked the messenger to inform his master that according to certain tradition of her family anyone desirous of marrying her must win her in a battle before pressing his claims to nuptial. The demon immediately responded and the battle ensued ultimately bringing death to Mahishasura.

The Kālikā Purāṇa, a later Śākta work, recorded altogether a different Mahishasura myth in this respect. It lays down that while in sleep one night Mahishasura saw a horrifying dream, where Mahamayā Bhadrakāli parted as under his head and drank his blood. Being frightened, the demon began to worship the goddess after he woke up. The goddess appeared before the demon who informed her that he was cursed by the rishi Kātyayana to be killed by a woman as he had diverted the attention of one of his pupil with an image of a woman, and because of the curse he would be killed by the three forms of the Devī (Ugrachandī, Bhadrakāli and Durgā) in his three consecutive births. The goddess being much pleased with Mahishasura favoured him with two boons: the demon would enjoy a share in the sacrifice and to be worshipped in all the sacrifices, and when killed by the goddess in the combat he would remain under her feet for ever and would be worshipped always with her.

60. Kālikā Purāṇa, 68.85f. see Dhal, Dr. Upendra Nath, Mahishasura in Art and Thought, p.55.
With regard to the form of slaying the demon the Purāṇas also differ with each other in some minor details. The story in the Devīmāhātmya relates that the goddess bound the demon by her noose and the latter then converted himself into the form of a lion whose head the goddess cut off. The demon then appeared in human form with scimitar and shield in hands and was pierced by arrows thrown by the goddess. Next he took the shape of an elephant and tugged the Devī's lion with his trunk; but the goddess cleft off the elephant's trunk with her sword. Mahishāsura then assumed the buffalo form once again. The Devī now leaped upwards, sat herself on the great demon, pressed him on the neck with her foot and struck him with spear.

In the Devībhāgavata, the goddess is stated to have struck the chest of the demon by her trisula (trident) so that he had fainting fit; but when again attacked by the great asura the goddess killed him by her discus of thousand spokes. In the same text elsewhere it has been mentioned that the goddess killed the demon by khadga (scimitar).

The Skanda Purāṇa while narrating the same episode refers to different mode of killing the demon by the goddess in different places. In one place, the Purāṇa mentions that Devī killed Mahishāsura

61. The Mārkandeya Purāṇa, XI.55.
62. V.20.59.
63. V.20.62 and 64.
64. X.12.33.
by her spear and then cut off his head by her scimitar, while in another the description of Mahisha's slaying resembles the same in the Märkandeya Purāna. In another place of the Skanda Purāna an interesting description of the encounter is given. It narrates that in course of the dual, the goddess crouched on the back of the demon, but was carried away on the sky where the Devī struck the demon at his back resulting in momentous bleeding. The lion now attacked the demon at his back and he became unfit to move.

Interestingly enough, in the Chhoti Sadri inscription found in Udaipur District of Rajasthan, dated in 491 A.D., Durgā is described as killing the āsura with a śūla. The inscription also refer to goddess as riding a chariot drawn by one or more lions.

Similar stories of the annihilation of Mahishāsura by the Devī, with some variations in minute details, are available in some other works also. The Padma Purāna considers the destruction of Mahishāsura as allegorical. It relates that Mahishāsura was killed by Vaishnavión the Mandāragiri in Svayāmbhava-manvantara, that in the Vaivasvata-manvantara he was once again annihilated by Nanda on the Vindhya mountain, and that thus personified ignorance was ultimately destroyed by personified wisdom which is equated with Jñānaśakti. According to some scholars the whole episode is

65. V.20.59.
66. EI, Vol.XXX, p.120ff.
allegorical in another respect also, as it indicated the replacement of
the buffalo-totem worship prevailed among certain early primitive
tribes in this country by a form of goddess-worship.

### iii. ICONOGRAPHY OF MAHISHAMARDINI

Durgā, the genus of a group of goddess inclusive of
Mahishāsuramardini, is one who is said to be beyond the reach and
who destroys difficulty and affliction. She has been given various
designations, such as Durgā, Kātyāyanī, Mahishamardini or
Mahishāsuramardini, Chaṇḍī or Chaṇḍikā etc., after accomplishment of
particular heroic deeds resulting in the destruction of different demons
who were causing much harm to gods from time to time, and the
goddess had to put on different attributes, postures and mounts during
the battles with the demons. As Mahishamardinī - Durgā, the deity
had also multiple number of hands, postures, garments, ornaments and
attributes in her hands. The iconographical features of this goddess
thus can be described in variety of her forms, available in different
texts and convenience such discussion may be spread up precisely as
follows:

**Hands and attributes**

The various texts dwelling upon the iconography of the
goddess concerned differ mainly with regard to the number of hands

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68. Ibid.
69. Devī Upanishad, 19.
70. Devīmāhātmya, V.10.
the deity should have and different kinds of weapons she should be wielding. The textual references to Mahishāsurasamardini with two hands are almost rare, though the Suprabhedagama, Purvakarmagama and Uttarkarmagama described the goddess with such number of hands. In case of a two-armed deity, generally there should be a trident in her hands. The former two texts mentioned above, along with the Markandeya Purāṇa, also describe the goddess with four arms carrying in general a conch, a chakra, a noose and an āṅkuśa with some variations. Mahishamardini-Durgā having six hands has been mentioned in the Prapañcchasāratantra and Prapañcchasārasarasamgraha, though references to the goddess of such variety are almost absent in other texts. In this form she is described as holding a wheel, a conch, a sword, a trident, a bow and an arrow by her different hands.

Mahishamardini having eight hands, with a noose, a conch, a trident, a sword, a bow, an arrow, a chakra and a club also figures in a number of Sanskrit texts. Again, while texts like the Abhilasitarthachintamani, the Matsya Purāṇa, the Silparaṅgta and the Rūpamaṇḍana assign her only ten hands, the Matsya Purāṇa assigns her only ten hands, the Matsya Purāṇa.

71. Nagar, Santilal; Mahishāsurasamardini, ch.5 and 12.
72. Ibid., p.78.
73. Ibid., p.81.
74. Purvakarmagama, ch.12; Devimāhāvyā, ch.5 and 12.
75. 3.1.803.
76. Ch.260.55.
78. Ch.17.
describes the goddess having twelve hands with various attributes. When the deity is ten-handed she holds the attributes of a trident, a sword, a chakra, a sāktyaudha, an arrow, a bow, a śūla, a vajra, an aṅkuśa and a bell. Textual references to Mahishamardini-Durgā with sixteen hands are quite scanty. As represented by some specimens of sculptural art the goddess with sixteen hands usually display in her hands a pot, a cup, a battle axe, a snake, a noose, a trident, a bell, a bow, an arrow, a sword, a conch, a śūla, a rod, a chakra and sometimes a lotus. The Vāyu Purāṇa, Devībhāgavata Purāṇa and Agni Purāṇa depict the goddess as having eighteen arms, while the Vishnudharmottara, the Varāha Purāṇa, the Chaṇḍī Kalpa and the Viśvakarma-Śilpaśāstra give her as many as twenty hands. The textual reference to the goddess with thirty two hands are almost rare and its sculptural representation is very scanty. Besides these varieties of form the goddess is called thousand-armed in the Devimāhātya and Bana's Chaṇḍīśataka refers to her bhujavanam.

Apart from the various weapons usually display by the goddess in her hands as attributes, the different 'mudrās' and 'hasta' assumed by the goddess form a part of her attributes. So far

80. Nagar, Santilal., op.cit., p.90.
81. Vāyu Purāṇa, 19.6; Devībhāgavata Purāṇa, Book Ch.9, vs.45-46; Agni Purāṇa, 56.16.
82. Rao, Gopinath, T.A., op.cit., I.ii,p.346; Varāha Purāṇa, Ch.95.41; Chaṇḍī Kalpa (Śrītattva-nidhi, p.3).
83. Nagar, Santilal, op.cit., p.93.
84. Markuptjeya Purāṇa, 19.6
85. Stanzas 39, 64.
the iconography of Mahishāsuramardini and its sculptural representation are concerned the goddess generally displays abhaya, tarjānī and varada murdrās as well as katyābalaṁbita or katīsaṁsthitā-hasta pose.  

Facial features and head-gears

The facial features and expressions of Mahishāsuramardini, according to some texts on iconography, vary as the goddess appears on the scene under different circumstances. When she appears in the midst of gods who have reverence for her, she assumes a peaceful appearance; but in times of combat with demons she presents herself in a terrific appearance. Sometimes she is attributed with a face like full moon with beautiful teeth or a smiling face. Her terrible expression of face is described in the Vishnudharmottara Purāṇa, while the Kālikā Purāṇa prescribes for her a face having the grace of a full moon. Another important aspect of the facial features of the goddess is concerned with her eyes. In general the texts prescribe her with three eyes with overpowering brightness or resembling the Nilotpala or blue lilies. In some other texts she is depicted as having eyes wavering in anger or as burning like flames. In some

86. Nagar, Santilal, op.cit., p.113
88. Ibid.
89. Devi Mahtmya – Mārkandeya Purāṇa, Ch.2, Dhyāna.
90. Nagar, Santilal, op.cit., p.106.
91. Ch.61, Verse 12.
93. Ibid.
texts she is described as a deity with a pair of eyes\textsuperscript{94}, while in other texts such number goes up to hundred (s\textit{at\tilde{a}kshi})\textsuperscript{95} or even up to thousand\textsuperscript{96}.

Some texts also prescribe a crown or \textit{mukuta} for the goddess Mahish\text acute{s}uramardini. The \textit{Devibh\acute{a}gavata Pur\acute{a}pa}, the M\textipa{rka\textacute{n}eya Pur\acute{a}pa}, the Matsya Pur\acute{a}pa and some other texts depict her wearing a \textipa{ka\text{ra\textacute{n}da}-mukuta\textipa{ bedecked with crescent\textsuperscript{97}}. In the Matsya Pur\acute{a}pa and the K\textipa{lik\acute{a}} Pur\acute{a}pa the goddess is decorated with a \textit{k\textipa{ri\text{t}a}-mukuta} or a \textit{ja\textipa{t\acute{a}}-mukuta\textipa{\textsuperscript{98}}.}

\textbf{Costumes and Ornaments}

Though the visual representations of the goddess through the medium of sculptural art and painting shows her decorated with a large variety of ornaments and considerable types of costumes, textual references to such items are comparatively few in number. The Matsya Pur\acute{a}pa, the K\textipa{lik\acute{a}} Pur\acute{a}pa and some other texts narrate how the goddess was adorned with varieties of ornaments and jewels, after her emergence from the combined energies released by different gods as a female form possessed of stern beauty. The Pur\acute{a}\textipa{n}as like the

\textsuperscript{94} Matsya Pur\acute{a}pa, Ch.260, 57-58. 
\textsuperscript{95} M\textipa{rka\textacute{n}eya Pur\acute{a}pa (Dev\textipa{m\acute{a}h\acute{a}tmya}), 11.45. 
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 11.18. 
\textsuperscript{97} Devibh\acute{a}gavata Pur\acute{a}pa, Book 5, Ch.28, verse 1-7; M\textipa{rka\textacute{n}eya Pur\acute{a}pa, canto LXXXII; Matsya Pur\acute{a}pa, Ch.260, 57-58. 
\textsuperscript{98} Matsya Pur\acute{a}pa, 260. 57-58; K\textipa{lik\acute{a}} Pur\acute{a}pa, 61.12.
Devībhāgavata	extsuperscript{99}, the Mārkaṇḍeya	extsuperscript{100} and the Matsya	extsuperscript{101} mention that after her emergence the goddess was adorned with koṅjalkini, chūḍāmani crescent, kundalas, biju, kaptha, keyūra, nupura etc., besides a garland of serpents. The Kālikā Purāṇa	extsuperscript{102} also corroborates this.

As regards textual references to the costumes of the goddess, the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa simply states that the Ocean presented the goddess a pair of everlasting garments and the Vāyu Purāṇa	extsuperscript{103} describes her as having pīta-vastra or yellow garments.

Postures

Bhāṅga, i.e., flexure of the body in standing or sitting postures, is also regarded by different texts as an attractive aspect of the iconography of Mahiśāsuramardini. Of the various postures of the goddess mentioned in these texts, tribhāṅga seems to the most popular among the composers, though they also speak of the deity having assumed samabhāṅga and abhaṅga postures. The Suprabhedāgama states that when engaged in battle with the demons the goddess is

\textsuperscript{99} Book 5, Ch.20, 1.7.
\textsuperscript{100} Canto LXXXII.
\textsuperscript{101} 260, 57-54.
\textsuperscript{102} 61. 13.
\textsuperscript{103} 19.8.
depicted as standing in tribhanga posture\textsuperscript{104}. Texts like the Kālikā Purāṇa, the Matsya Purāṇa and others mention the deity appearing not only in tribhanga posture, but also in samabhanga and occasionally in dvibhanga postures\textsuperscript{105}. In samabhanga the goddess usually appears in her saumyamūrti. In her sitting postures Mahishāsuraṃardinī is depicted as being seated on her vāhana, the lion\textsuperscript{106}, while in pratyalidha posture she is shown as sitting with her right foot perched over the back of her vāhana, and the upraised left foot over the body of Mahishāsura\textsuperscript{107}. Occasionally the goddess also appears as standing over the head of a Mahisha\textsuperscript{108} or exclusively over the back of it.

**Vehicle and Mahishāsura**

Lion, the usual vāhana or vehicle of Mahisasuramardini serves the purpose of a mount of the goddess as well as her vigorous companion in the combat. In the Śilparatna and also in the Rūpamandana the goddess is shown as seated on the lion and in some places she is depicted as having her right foot placed on his back. In the Pratimā Vijnāna and the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa describes the lion engaged in combat against the demons\textsuperscript{109}.

\textsuperscript{104} Suprabhedāgama, 40.
\textsuperscript{105} Kālikā Purāṇa, 61.14; Matsya Purāṇa 260. 57-58.
\textsuperscript{106} Pūrvakarmāgama, Ch.12.
\textsuperscript{107} Banerjee,J.N., Development of Hindu Iconography, p.266.
\textsuperscript{108} Matsya Purāṇa,260.59-64; Sukla,D.N., Pratimā Vijnāna,p.226.
The iconography of Mahishāsura is inseparably related to that of Mahishāsuramardini as the goddess derives her own name from the slaying of the demon. Different texts describe the representation of Mahishāsura in its various forms and position while in combat with the goddess. Sometimes Mahishāsura is represented only by its severed head upon which the goddess is standing\textsuperscript{110}. In his another form of representation\textsuperscript{111}, the demon in Mahisha form lies close to the feet of the goddess with its head severed from the body and blood is gushing out from the wound, while the asura in its human form is seen half-emerged (ardhaniškrānta) from the severed neck being bounded by nāgapāśa of the goddess. The demon carries a sword and a shield in its hands. In sculptural and other visual representations sometimes Mahishāsura appears as completely separated (pūrṇaniškrānta) from the severed body of the mahisha and in some cases its hair is tightly hold by a hand of the goddess, while the deity is piercing the chest of the demon by a trident by another of her hands. In few cases the demon also appears in human body but with a buffalo-head.

\textsuperscript{110} Nagar, Santilal, op.cit., p.123-124.

\textsuperscript{111} Matsya Purāṇa, 260, 59-64; Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, 37-41; Kālikā Purāṇa, 61. 12-21.