CHAPTER FOUR

A COMPARATIVE APPROACH
The representations of Mahishāsuramardinī in her various forms, in both sculptural and pictorial art of Bengal, have their counterparts or similar forms of representations in the art of other regions outside the geographical as well as cultural confines of Bengal. These specimens of art with comparative similarity hail from the Indian regions of Assam, Orissa, South India, Rajasthan and extra Indian territories like Nepal etc. When juxtaposed with the relevant images of Bengal art, these obviously invite a comparative study among themselves, which can be done from two different view points:

I. The extent of influence that Bengal absorbed from or emanated to other regions outside Bengal.

II. The evaluation of the similarities between relevant specimens of Bengal art and their counterparts of the repertoire of the neighbouring countries which once came under influence of Bengal, and broadly speaking under influence of India.

The relevant materials from in and outside India which are to be called in for comparison belong to different periods of historical and artistic developments and the period covered by such a comparative study begins with the date of earliest specimen of
Mahishāsuramardini of Bengal art, i.e. c. third-fourth century and continued up to the threshold of the present century.

Speaking generally, the idea of the attributes of the Indian imagery of the divinities is largely based on textual prescriptions and as such there is an underlying common source of inspiration of the formal representation of different gods and goddesses in their concrete shapes through different art-media, in different regions of this vast country, and the representation of Mahishāsuramardini in the sculptural and pictorial art repertoires of different regions of India is no exception to this general rule. However, as the idea of the attributes of the gods and goddess is influenced by regional traditions and fancies of the artists of different regions, including the technique and composition of the representation, variations in these aspects of artistic production are natural consequences to follow. Later on these transformed ideas about the images of gods and goddesses of different regions influenced each other and hence made room for a comparative assessment.

Bengal’s immediate Indian neighbours are Bihar, Orissa and Assam. Some Mahishāmardini images from these three Indian regions show some acceptable similarity with some of those of identical description from Bengal art repertoire. Some images of Mahishāsuramardini from Assam represent some distinct iconographic
traits which are to be found in some of the images of Mahishāsurasamardini in Bengal art. A sixteen-armed Mahishāsurasamardini from Ambari, Assam, and now preserved in the Assam State Museum, Guwahati (PLATE XI.c) represents an elephant on the left side of the goddess. This sort of representation of an elephant is a rare feature in the imagery of Mahishāsurasamardini. The appearance of elephant recalls an episode in the Devimāhātmya, which relates that 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 and was pierced by arrows thrown by the goddess. Next the demon took the shape of an elephant and tugged the Devī's lion with his trunk. This Puranic episode might have swept the imagination of the sculptor of this particular art in stone of Assam, and hence the representation of the elephant in the image of the goddess under review. A similar representation of an elephant is noticed in an image of Mahishāsurasamardini hailing from the village of Hiranmoypur in the district of South 24 Parganas (PLATE IV.b). So far as artistic excellence is concerned the image from Assam is by far better than that came from Bengal; but from conceptual point of view, in composition they are identical. Another stone Mahishāsurasamardini image from Ambari (PLATE II.d). Assam, now preserved in the Assam state Museum, shows some similarities in fashioning the head gear and composition of killing the demon with certain images of Bengal of the same deity. The image from Ambari wears a Kīrtamukuta, which is very much similar to that worn by the goddess from Mahespur, South 24 Parganas district (PLATE II.c).
Again the posture of killing the demon as represented by this image from Ambari is almost identical with similar posture of the deity as represented by the image from Hiranmoypur, South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal (PLATE IV.c).

Some images of Mahishāsura-mardini from Bihar also exhibit some strong similarities with some wood carved images of Bengal of later centuries. One of such important examples from Bihar is the stone image of Mahishāsura-mardini from Siddha Ki Gumpha, Deoghar, Bihar (PLATE V.c). The crown worn by this deity, her drapery specially that of the upper portion and garland around her neck rolling down below her waist are very much similar to those of same description depicted in the wood carved image of Mahishamārdini of Chaṇḍi-mañḍapa, Sripur, Hooghly district (PLATE VI.c).

Some images of Mahishāsura-mardini from Orissa also recall their comparative similarities with some of those hailing from Bengal. An image of Mahishāsura-mardini depicted in the panel of the outer walls of Vaital Deul on Bhuvanesvara depicting a dynamic posture of the deity in killing the demon, whose body is that of a human being and head that of a buffalo, by pressing his head downwards by one of her left hand shows almost vivid similarity in posture and action that is found in a nineteenth century sketch of the deity from Bengal (PLATE XI.c). In this sketch also the deity is pressing the head of

the asura with a body of a human being but with the head of a buffalo by one of her left hands in a similar dynamic pasture.

Instances of similarity are also available from the art repertoire of Rajasthan. An image of Mahishāsuramardini-Durgā carved in ivory from Jaipur, Rajasthan, of the nineteenth century, now preserved in the gallery of the Indian Museum, shows the goddess in a compact assemblage of her sons and daughters (Ganapati, Kārttikeya, Lakshmi and Sarasvatī) along with her Vāhana lion and the ardhanishkrānta demon in human form. This is exactly the form in which Mahishāsuramardinī-Durgā is now worshipped in Bengal. This type of iconographic composition of the deity is represented in Bengal art through its different mediums of art expression. In paintings (PLATE XVIII.b), in ivory carving (PLATE XVII.a) etc. of the same time as that of the Rajasthan specimen, such representations of the goddess are found in abundant number in Bengal art.

A red stone image of Mahishāsuramardinī depicted in the niche of an architectural fragment from Banaras in Uttar Pradesh, now preserved in the Indian Museum, shows stricking similarity in posture and action of killing the demon in its zoomorphic form (PLATE XX.b) with some of the depictions of the deity in Bengal sculptural as well as pictorial art. In the specimen of Banaras the goddess is seen pressing the mouth of the demon by one of her left arms. This posture and action of the deity in killing the demon is very much identical with the image of Mahishāsuramardinī hailing from
Mahespur, South 24 Parganas of West Bengal (PLATE II.c) and with a nineteenth century sketch of the same goddess (PLATE XI.c) from the pictorial art reportoire of Bengal.

Similarities also existed with some of the images of Mahishamardini coming from South India. The scene depicted in the Mahisha Manḍapa of Mamallapuram shows the Titan Buffalo in human body but with the head of a buffalo. This physical composition of the demon is well illustrated in some of the images of Mahishāsuramardini in Bengal art (PLATES XX.b and II.c).

The representation of Mahishāsuramardini in the east wall of North Chapel in Elura Cave XXI, exhibits close resemblance with the terracotta image of Mahishāsuramardini from Sarsabaz in the Bogra district of Bangladesh (PLATE V.a). In both the cases the goddess is pressing the head of the buffalo demon with the front left hand, one of the legs being placed on the body of the demon in zoomorphic kill form, and about to the demon with an weapon kept in the right upper hand.

The terracotta plaque of Mahishamardinī from Nagar, Jaipur, Rajasthan, now in the Amberi Museum (PLATE II.a), also to a great extent betrays similarity with a stone image of Mahishamardinī from Bogra, Bangladesh, now preserved in the Mahasthan Museum. There

3. BS., PI.526
are other similarities visible between the images of Mahishāsuramardini of Bengal and other images of the same deity from different parts of India. Some of the depictions of the goddess in Bengal sculptural art show the deity lifting the demon in zoomorphic form by its tail. Sculpture of approximately the same time, depicting a similar mode of killing the demon in buffalo have been discovered from Bhumara, Bhita and central India.4

II

Images of Devi in her Mahishamardini form are rarely found in the surrounding countries outside the boundaries of India. Of the few images discovered from this neighbouring countries very few of them have some similarity with some of the images of the goddess from Bengal. However, two images of Mahishamardini and Mahishamardini-Durgā from Nepal show some similarity with the concept of the goddess prevailed among the sculptors of Bengal of bygone days.

A seventeenth-eighteenth century relief in grey limestone from Nepal, now preserved in the Bhaktapur Museum of the same country shows Mahishamardini-Durgā along with Gaṇapati, Kārttikeya, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī. The demon Mahishāsura in anthropomorphic form is lying before the deity in the ground being pierced in the chest by a

4. Ibid., p.242.
trident hold by the deity in one of his right hands. This sort of iconographic composition of the deity with her sons and daughters are very common in Bengal art in the post-medieval period. Even the goddess is worshipped in Bengal with similar composition.

A wood carving specimen of Nepal, now preserved in the same museum as above, of the seventeenth century shows the goddess with eight arms lifting the buffalo by its tail, the human form of the demon is seen in *ardhanishkrānta* position. The eight-armed Mahishāsuramardini is found in good number in the sculptural art repertoire of Bengal. The *ardhanishkrānta* position of the demon in human form and lifting of the buffalo by its tail by the goddess are well depicted in some of the images of the deity from Bengal.

5. Waldschmidt, Ernst and Rose Leonre., tr. by Wilson, David., *Nepal Art Treasures from the Himalaya*, p.25, Pl.18.

6. Ibid., Pl.54