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She Who Slays the Buffalo-Demon Divinity, Identity, and Authority in Iconography of Mahisasuramardini

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SHE WHO SLAYS THE BUFFALO-DEMON
DIVINITY, IDENTITY, AND AUTHORITY IN ICONOGRAPHY
OF MAHIŚĀSURAMARDINĪ

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Dedicated to

~Mama and Daddy~
for all of the sacrifices that you have made for me throughout the years.
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ABSTRACT

In this study, I will examine the iconography of Mahiṣāsuramardinī, the slayer of the buffalo demon. The imagery emerges from a narrative tradition in which the goddess wages war with the demon. I will evaluate representations of Mahiṣāsuramardinī throughout its history within the contexts produced. The interpretations of divinity and its relationship with humanity within the periods of production will illuminate the theological understanding of the deity within its era.

The iconography will be explored in three distinct contexts. The first context will be from within the religious tradition with which it is most commonly associated – Brahminical Hinduism. I will show how the image emerged from a mundane representation and was elaborated to fit the mold of the celestial Brahminical pantheon. Next, I will evaluate depictions of the goddess in traditions with which the deity is not typically associated. I will discuss the iconography of the Jain yakṣī Jvālāmālinī to display the appropriation of Mahiṣāsuramardinī, a martial deity in to a religion that emphasizes non-violence. I will also discuss the appropriation of the image into Javanese ancestor traditions and other traditions. Lastly, the imagery will be discussed in the modern context as the depictions become categorized as ‘art.’ I will show the modern categorization to alter the perception and usage of the image. I will demonstrate how the image ceases to have the same ritual life as in antiquity but becomes a symbol of cultural identity.
INTRODUCTION

38 ‘Roar, roar this moment, O fool, while I drink this wine. The gods will soon greatly roar at this very spot, while you are slain by me!’ 39 Having spoken thus, she, leaping up, mounted the great demon, and placing her foot upon his neck pierced him with her spear. 40 Then, he, even subdued by her foot, issued forth from his own mouth. Half gone out, he was restrained by the power of the Goddess. 41 Then, the great demon being half emerged was engaged in battle. His head was cut off by the sword of the Goddess and fell to the ground. 42 Thus, the demon named Mahiṣa¹ was slain by the Goddess along with his army and friends after having deluded the three worlds. 43 After he was slain, all creatures in the three worlds, including the gods, demons, and men, shouted with exuberance, ‘Victory to the Goddess!’

 DeVī Māhātmyam 3.38-44²
Mārkandeya Purāṇa³

This passage describes the birth of an icon—Mahiṣāsura-mardini.⁴ Due to such vivid narrative imagery, many have been inspired to create representations of this epic scene. From antiquity to the present the imagery and iconography of the image has permeated the South Asian subcontinent and beyond. The image has not only surpassed geographical bounds but it has also transcended religious bounds. The image can be found in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist temples. The image has also been a source of inspiration for groups with political and social agendas that have heralded the ancient image as a banner for their causes. More recently, however, many of the ancient images have become celebrated pieces of art. The works of art including the literary work have inspired a new generation of artists to portray the narrative expressing the image through their own understanding of the epic. In this study, I will be will look closely at the production of these variations of the image of Mahiṣāsura-mardini in order to explain how that image has been able to transcend cultural and religious boundaries. I will examine a wide variety of images in many different surroundings showing the evolution of the myth into form and how they each construct understanding of the other.

¹ Mahiṣa literally means “buffalo.”
² The verses forty-three and forty-four are an addition found only within the Bombay edition of the DeVī Māhātmyam.
³ Author’s translation of verses. Verse 3.39 reads “The Rṣi said,” and has been omitted from this translation.
⁴ ‘She who crushes the buffalo demon.’
Special attention will be paid to the appropriations of the image into traditions or groups that change not only the iconography but also the interpretation behind the image. I have chosen to use the term ‘appropriation’ instead of the other alternatives that are enumerated below as it would be used in the scholarly work in the field of Art History. According to this usage, a work (here a crafted image) is incorporated by the craftsman and used in the creation of a new image. This term is contrasted with ‘cultural appropriation’ which entails a negative connotation implying theft of another group’s or people’s ideas and proclaiming them to be preexistent with one’s own heritage. I have also chosen not to use the term ‘acculturation’ which connotes the previous owners of the image and its traditions forcing it upon the outsider. The last term that I chose not to use is ‘assimilation.’ To assimilate a group would take the image and bring it into conformity to their views, but assimilation would also mean amalgamation to the point in which the group’s ideas are melded with belief systems intertwining. This is certainly not the case. Each institution has its own developed theology at the moment of introduction of the image, and instead changes the image into something new and distinct separate from the original yet intimately connected.

Though the emphasis of the study will be on the imagery of Mahiśāsuramardini, it is imperative to look at the mythological background, both textual and oral, from which the imagery flowers. Mahiśāsura, the buffalo demon, first appears in mythological accounts in the massive epic (itihāsa) Mahābhārata. In the first reference to the asura, he is a member of Tārakāsura’s army that is waging war against the gods (devas) and is represented anthropomorphically. In this narrative the army of demons was attacking the celestial army led by Skanda. As the battle raged on Mahiśa having obtained a boon of invincibility from Brahmā advanced toward the deities. Mahiśa, full power and pride, slew much of the army of the devas by hurling rocks onto the celestial soldiers. Many of the deities retreated at this moment, but Rudra was grasped by Mahiśa and immediately overpowered due to the boon. Skanda seeing Rudra in peril released his spear (śatki) in the direction of the great demon. The spear cut off his head thus ending his life. Another shorter account of this narrative within the Mahābhārata discusses Mahiśāsura independent of Tāraka. Similar accounts of Skanda-Kārttikeya slaying the buffalo-demon exist in the Vāmanama Purāṇa and the Matsya Purāṇa; however in the end of

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5 Mahābhārata 3.22.52 ff.
6 Mahābhārata 9.45 ff.
their battle in these Pūrāṇas, Mahiśa is not slain, but asked to retreat by Viṣṇu whom had heard that the demon’s boon obtained from Brahmā destined him to be slain by a woman. This sets the stage for another appearance of Mahiśa later in the Pūrāṇas.

In the second account of Mahiśa in the Vāmana and Matsya Pūrāṇas, Durgā is relied on by the gods to dispel the demon. In this account, Mahiśa is represented in anthrotheriomorphic form of a buffalo-human hybrid. Following this account, the narrative of Durgā slaying the buffalo demon becomes the prevalent form of the myth retold in the Mārkaṇḍeya, Varāha, Devībhāgavata, Skanda, and Śiva Pūrāṇas. The emergence of this form of the myth displays an amalgamation of folk narrative with the larger Sanskrit corpus. As will be discussed in Chapter II, the imagery of Durgā engaged in battle with the demon predated any Purāṇic reference to her as the one who slays the buffalo demon (Mahiśāsuramardini). The representation of Mahiśa also suggests the merger of divergent myths. In the imagery found as early as the 1st century CE, Durgā is slaying the buffalo in its animal form. The encounter is displayed using mundane personages, a woman slaying an animal. But as the myths converge, the imagery blends the anthropomorphic demon of the Skanda myth and the buffalo demon of the Durgā imagery forming a hybridized depiction that became the predominate form of representation.

The most religiously important and popular retelling of Mahiśāsuramardini’s conquest over Mahiśa is contained in the Devī Māhātmyam contained in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa. The Devī Māhātmyam is also commonly referred to as Caṇḍī, and Durgāsaptaśati. The narrative of the Mahiśa myth is the middle of three divisions of the text each of which contains a myth of the Goddess coming to the aid of the gods. The Purāṇa established the need for the Goddess’s divine intervention by describing Mahiśa’s subjugation of the heavenly band of deities. After a period of 100 years of warfare, Mahiśa, lord of the asura army, had taken control of the devas’ abode and established himself as the Lord (Indra). The deities, frightened of having to traverse the earth as mere mortals, beseeched the help of Śiva and Viṣṇu, who began to issue forth their internal energies (tejas). The narrative thus contains the vivid tale of manifestation of the Goddess. The Goddess in the account emanates from the gods as an incarnation of the divine power (sakti) that empowers the devas. Upon her manifestation, the deities bestowed upon her gifts consisting of each of their primary weapons and asked for her protection from Mahiśāsura.

7 Caṇḍī is another epithet of the Goddess with the myth derived from her slaying of the demon Caṇḍa.
8 ‘The 700 verses of Durgā’
After systematically making her way through the foot soldiers and various generals of Mahiṣa’s army, the Goddess eventually makes her way to Mahiṣa. As the two engage in battle, Mahiṣa begins shape-shifting. As the Goddess went to sever his head, he shifted from his buffalo-form into the form of a lion. Next, enduring an onslaught of Durgā’s arrows, he transformed into an elephant. But as the Goddess attempted to cut off his trunk, he again converted into a buffalo. Enraged, the Goddess drank from her divine flask and proclaimed that the battle would soon be at an end. Then, Durgā leapt onto Mahiṣa and as he was emerging from that form into another she quickly severed his head. Thus, the Goddess slew the mighty Mahiṣāsūra. It is this narrative’s particular ambivalence in regards to the depiction of the Goddess and the form in which Mahiṣa was slain that lends to the various iconographical interpretations of the myth. However, there are many other influences upon both the mythological narrative and imagery.

The history between the Western/European understanding of ‘art’ and South Asian imagery and iconography is an issue that changes the understanding, interpretation, and production of Mahiṣāsūramardini’s imagery. The creation of images of deities in the Hindu tradition from which Mahiṣāsūramardini comes has a very strict and rigorous mode of production. As Diana Eck explained in her now classic work Darśan, each image (mūrti) is made by a ritual specialist, a śilpin, would follow the śāstric guidelines to properly create a new image. These guidebooks, the śilpaśāstras, mandated the exact iconic form in which the deity could reside. The utmost precautions by the śilpin were paid to every detail for the image was believed not to be only a representation of the deity, but the very abode of the deity. The śilpin upon reading the accepted iconic guidelines of the image would formulate within his mind’s eye the image he was about to create. The śilpin would meditate upon that mentally constructed image as he used his craftsmanship to construct the mūrti. The beauty of the image was judged on its adherence to the scriptural prescriptions. If the concentration of the śilpin wavered or he took ‘artistic’ liberties the image would be useless. Thus, creation is an elaborate ritual that serves as a practice of yoga for the creator.

After the image was created the image would begin its religious life. The image after creation would then be ritually consecrated. Prayers and incantations would prepare the medium from which the image had been made into a pure resting place that could adequately house divinity. Then the deity could enter into the image. The images were thus believed to be

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enlivened by the divine. Once enlivened the image would find its abode. Whether it was in a temple, a small home shrine, or a cave did not matter for the image was now ready for the devotee. The image would serve as the primary recipient of the worship (pujā). Also the image would facilitate the ritual of darśan or “seeing the divine.” Through this practice the devotee could see past the rock, metal, or canvas of the physical image to the eye of the divinity. The spiritual eye would be opened as the devotee and deity are locked into one another’s loving eyes. The relationship is one of reciprocity in which the devotee is blessed by the auspiciousness of seeing the divine and the deity receives the oblation of love necessary for its survival. The image must then be looked after and doted upon as a devotee would do if in the presence of a physical incarnation (avatāra) of the deity.

But the images were not simply anthropomorphic representations of the divine; they were ‘fantastical’ forms. They each had superhuman abilities that were symbolized by the addition of extra limbs and eyes. The representations were intended to evoke most rudimentary emotions (bhāva) of fear, bliss, love, etc. above that which humans can induce in one another. They existed on a transcendent plane though manifested in the imagination through this ritual construction. Thus, the image became an escape into a world of deities and demons, a mythological playground where good always triumphs evil for each devotee who would gaze upon it. The images are viewed as localized Eliadean axis mundi of the divine realm in the human realm steeped in religious rite and ritual.

However, with the introduction of European colonial powers this understanding of the images would be altered by the Post-Renaissance desire to reclaim classical fine arts from cultured antiquity. As quickly as the Europeans infiltrated the subcontinent, the images of the South Asian deities were ushered into museums and galleries under the auspices of ‘fine art.’ Certainly, South Asia iconographical image had an aesthetic ideal, but the idea of a separate distinction of it as ‘art’ from useable object was completely foreign. The ancient images were bound and shipped to the West to show the exotic artistic creation of the empires crown jewel. Richard Davis in Lives of Indian Images portrays the new categorization of the images as one

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10 Eck, Darśan, 38.
12 With the possible exception being the Muslim courts who had religious ‘art’ that was not part of ritual, but differed completely from the new European ideal of high art because of the emotional responses that each elicited. For more see Chapter IV.
among many changes that the ancient images would have to make in their lives. The new lives of the images remove them from the ritual — from their consecrated position of devotion in the gaze of the devotee into the critical world of observation beheld by the foreign eye of prejudice, scrutiny, and awe.

The impact of the European understanding of art also refashioned the devotees understanding of the image. With the introduction of ‘art’ the malleability of the image is curtailed. Representations of Mahiśāsuramardinī went through a period in which the image remained concrete permeating the whole subcontinent between late 19th century with the emergence of the Realism of the Ravi Varma Fine Art Press to the 1970s and the emergence of the goddess as a popular image in modern art. During this period, the image goes through a quasi-canonization whereby the it becomes mass-produced and is proliferated to a great extent. The magically real image from this period became the Pan-Indian iconographical language of Mahiśāsuramardinī. ‘Art’ became more real. The many images produced appeared more real, more human straying from śilpaśāstric regulations. The deities were then portrayed within earthly landscapes acting within the natural world, not on another plane of existence. Mahiśāsuramardinī is removed from the ritual of creation and from the world of the divine in a by the combination of mass reproduction and European techniques of Realism or Naturalism in which she and her demon adversary are painted out of the mythological plane and placed in natural scenery of fields and trees. The mystical hybridity that previously had pervaded the imagery of Mahiṣa now was removed with the goddess engaging the demon beside a fallen buffalo. Out of this shift, the deities began to serve as models for worldly action of conquest, power, and religious life of devotees in very particular and conscious campaigns.

This model eventually played an integral role in the development of India as an independent nation, as the deity became allegory for both women and India. The topic of the use of images of the various manifestations of the Goddess as India incarnate has been a popular topic amongst modern art historians. Geeti Sen has shown how the image of India as a goddess emerged within the nationalist movement. She correctly address the conscious effort on the part of Indian patriots to form a mythical and cultural symbol from which Indians (albeit Hindu

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Indians) could draw a new identity that speaks allegorically concerning India’s rights to be an independent nation. However, she neglects the importance of the shifting view of the divine and mundane within a continuum formed through a bridge constructed by the adoption of Realist’s natural imagery that situated the deities within a quasi-historical cultural golden age that had recently been created in the Hindu imaginary. The connection of divine in the world becoming the model for life was further developed to incorporate the nation into the spectrum becoming a divine-women-nation (discussed further in Chapter IV).

The changes that occur due to innovative technologies leading to mass reproductions of images have been greatly critiqued by certain art historians. One of the most vocal was Ananda K. Coomaraswamy writing in 1950s. He critiqued the loss of intimacy in the production of commoditized art in South Asia. In *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, Coomaraswamy argues that with mass production the artist is removed from the art. Thus, the artist is no longer taking inspiration from the divine realm and consequentially ceases to be an artist.\(^{15}\) For Coomaraswamy the ‘realness’ lay not in the outward appearance of things but how it displayed the transcendent truth. His view is very heavily influenced by the contemplative process in which the images had traditionally been created. For him, production by hand was vital for the spiritual process by which all art by its very nature must be made. Reproduction in his mind not only invalidates his productions, but also deludes the whole of society by polluting the cultural heritage. When machines are used, “[Art] craft is for him destroyed as a means of culture, and the community lost one man’s intelligence, for it is obviously futile to build up by evening classes and free libraries, what the whole of a man’s work is forever breaking down.”\(^{16}\) Coomaraswamy adds that this technique is linked to the Realism promoted by European art of his era. To him the Post-Enlightenment agenda of demystification that had attached itself parasitically to the Post-Renaissance resurgence of fine arts of antiquity fueled the loss of divine inspiration and tradition. Both the labor of reproduction and technique of Realism were rubbish when compared to the ritual and imagination of the past.

Others, however, saw the possibility of mass reproduction as a liberating innovation. Walter Benjamin took up this topic in regards to mechanical reproductions of art, photography,


\(^{16}\) Coomaraswamy, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, ix.
and film in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.\(^{17}\) Benjamin, writing, from a Marxist standpoint, argued that mass production took art from the hands of the elite religious leaders and into the hands of the proletariat. The image when reproduced loses its ritualistic authenticity; it regains the ritual of the ‘cult of beauty’ and a new value and authenticity is formed. He argues that through mechanical reproduction art can be ‘emancipated’ from the confines of ritualistic creation. Benjamin acknowledges that the ‘aura’ that incorporates authenticity and context becomes vulnerable through reproduction but that this is a small byproduct of the entire process. The proliferation of the image through inexpensive reproductions brings the image closer not only spatially but humanly. This effect certainly takes places during the creation of the ‘magical real’ form of Mahiṣāsuramardinī discussed above and at some length in Chapter IV.

The reproduction of the image leads to many people world wide being inspired in both Coomaraswamy and Benjamin’s definition of inspiration by the image of Durgā slaying the buffalo demon. From the 1970s beginning with the renowned and award-winning Maqbool F. Husain onward, Durgā, depicted as Mahiṣāsuramardinī, has become a recurring theme in modern art. (See Figures 4.11-4.13) These images much like those of the previous period served to support social and political agendas and to stimulate the aesthetic world. Images of the goddess ranged from oil-painted canvas to images selling hard liquors. (Figure 1.1) Benjamin’s theory about the emancipation of the image from the hands of few into the hands of many illustrates the radical change that takes place in the conception image in South Asia. The image of Mahiṣāsuramardinī which had previously been used by a variety of religious traditions now became the property of the masses, namely the Hindu masses.

Hindu Right Wing nationalists, under the auspices as protectors of Hindutva or Hindu-ness, united as out-raged protesters, have claimed the images are degrading and hurt Hindu religious sentiments. Even the image of Durgā astride her lion on a box of incense (Figure 1.2) that mirrors a common practice in India of using Hindu deities to market a variety of goods has been claimed as denigrating when used by a Dutch fragrance company. The controversy stems from the issue over the source of authenticity for legitimate usage of the image. Clearly, the traditional *śilpaśastras* lost this monopoly long ago. But now the image is claimed to not be a

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cultural component of South Asia, but a property of Hindus. Only Hindus should have the right to create, reproduce, and use the image as they see fit. A major problem thus arises. Who speaks for Hinduism? A tradition that has so many diverse belief systems and practices does not have a unified voice. Can a Vaishnava from Delhi speak as authoritatively about the image as a Śaka from Mysore whose city is named from the Epic and landscape is permeated with the narrative? Does practice at all justify the devotee as authoritative? Clearly the question is complex, but I hope to illustrate that the image of Mahišāsuramardini has historically evolved given the religious and social landscape of those who appropriated the image into their worldview.

In Chapter II, I begin with the most ancient representations of the image as it is represented in South Asia in temples that are typically categorized as Hindu. Starting with the images such as those found in Ahichchhatra and Bhita both from the 1st to 2nd century CE, Mahiśāsuramardini has portrayed with very mundane human aspects having only two arms and no supernatural presence. Mahiśa is also solely represented by a buffalo. Then, the image undergoes major iconographical changes after the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa was composed ca. 5th century CE. Mahiśāsuramardini, then, underwent a long process of evolution growing in iconographic and artistic complexity throughout the centuries. The progression will be discussed through images at Aihole and Ellora from the 7th and 9th centuries respectively. As the commentaries of the text emerge along with new tales of the power of the goddess, her supernatural abilities become further accentuated and elaborated in Mahabalipuram, Bhubaneshwar and Nepal. The image is eventually made into an overtly cosmic being with up to twenty arms surrounded by deities. Examples of this stage of Mahiśāsuramardinī are taken from Chidambaram and Patan.

Next, the image of Mahiśāsuramardinī will be discussed as it is represented in traditions other than Hinduism that appropriate the image into their ritual iconographic landscape. The first of these is the Jain goddess, Jvālāmālinī, attendant of the eighth Tīrthankara, Candraprabha. The transformation of Mahiśāsuramardinī into Jvālāmālinī through the Jain tenet of ahiṃsā will show how the image previously popular in the southern region of South Asia, particularly Aihole was modified to fit the Jain ideology. Her representation in East Java will also show that the image remained very similar to the South Asian iconography, yet the victorious goddess came to be a reflection of the Javanese Singhsari Queen-Mother. Buddhist representations of similar
deities, particularly the Vajrāyāṇa Vajrāvārāhī in the Markula Devī temple in Udaipur, Himachal Pradesh, who is in the form of Mahiṣāsuramardini, will be explored. The remainder of Chapter III will discuss the implications of these modifications and their impact on the larger context of Mahiṣāsuramardini iconography.

Chapter IV deals with the image after European influence up to the present. The European style called ‘Realism’ and the technological advent of lithography alters the creative and ritual context of the image. The major foci of this chapter center on the Ravi Varma Fine Arts Press representation of the ‘natural’ in the image and how this image permeates the iconographic landscape of the image. Modern appropriations of the image in the Independence movement as well as an assortment of social issues will also be discussed. The category of ‘art’ once again arises in this chapter as a result of the images popularity in contemporary art and legitimate representations of the image. Recent debates over usage are explained as a product of the category of ‘art.’ With ‘art’ the image becomes the ‘intellectual property’ of the majority who claim the image as their own.

Together the chapters show the image to be historically mutable and appropriable only changing as the concept of the image is moved from the ritual religious setting into that of culture and art. The iconography of Mahiṣāsauramardini provides an ideal image by which to situate this phenomenon. As will be illustrated, it has and is a popularly represented image throughout South Asia and is one of the most moving images of any culture making it an ideal case study for the ownership effects of the deritualization of religious art in modernity.
DEVELOPMENT OF THE IMAGE WITHIN THE BRAHMINICAL TRADITION

Imagery of Mahiṣāsuramardinī has been a popular image in the Brahminical tradition throughout history. The image is among some of the oldest iconographically represented deities in the South Asian subcontinent. Portrayals of the goddess have over the course of time permeated all regions of India forming a vital role in understanding the relationship between divinity and humanity. Archeological evidence supports the theory that image was first produced in the Kuśāna Empire portrayed very mundanely and was slowly disseminated through the relationship with the ever popularized narrative. As the image was incorporated and produced in different regions and styles and new techniques were discovered in which iconography became more ornamented, Mahiṣāsuramardinī evolved with these changes. Her imagery became less human and more divine as understanding of her divinity became more transcendent. Her iconography illustrates the theological understanding during the time of production and the tendency for those understandings to grow increasingly more transcendent, ever widening the gulf between divinity and humanity. The evolution of the image takes place over four distinct periods: Formation in the 1st and 2nd centuries, Brahminization through the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa in the 4th through 6th centuries, liminal period during the 7th through 9th centuries in which the interpretation of Mahiṣa would be negotiated, and a period of elaboration in the 10th through 20th centuries with a peak in the 12th century. This chapter will discuss the mutations of the image within the dominant religious tradition, Brahminical Hinduism, from which it came. Discussion of the images in this ritual and textual context will illustrate the theological shifts that influenced shifts in the iconographical representations in its dominant mode of production.

The iconography of Mahiṣāsuramardini first emerged in the Northern and Western regions of the South Asian subcontinent around the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. This era is known as the Kuśāna period and is most commonly known for the flourishing production of Gandharan Buddhist art. As Vasudeva S. Agrawala has demonstrated in his extensive catalogues and essays written concerning art from this era, Brahminical art also began to flourish under the Kuśāna Śaivite rulers. There are five collections of images of Mahiṣāsuramardinī that are produced during this first period of production. Two images were located in Ahichchhatra and a group
eight was found in a well in Palekhera complex in Mathura both in the modern state of Uttar Pradesh in India. The other three collections were more widely spread — one in Nagar, Rajasthan, in Ramgarth Hill in Udaigiri, Madhya Pradesh, and the other in Bhita in modern day Bangladesh both lying on the edges of the Kuśāna Empire. These early representations are all strikingly similar in style and portrayal. They display the goddess and her buffalo adversary in very mundane terms with mundane features and characteristics. The representations clearly indicate the elementary forms of Mahiṣāsuramardinī’s iconography.

The elementary forms of the image are best displayed by the images from Ahichchhatra in which the goddess is portrayed in human form. (Figures 2.1a- 2.1b) These reliefs, which possibly represent to most ancient representations of Mahiṣāsuramardinī, cast a mundane interpretation upon the image. The image exhibits the goddess anthropomorphically having only two or four arms and two legs. I will argue that distinction of arms is one among many stylistic characteristics that correlate to the perceived distance of interaction between the deity and the devotee with the greater number of arms the more cosmic and transcendent the deity. In all of the earliest representations she is also characterized as a symbol of fertility. Her breast are exposed, swollen large and round, and her hips are wide suggesting fertility, much like the famous figurines of the Indus Valley civilization. The depiction even displays an acute attention to the detail of the breast sculpting large erect nipples which suggest the lactating goddess’s role in the feeding of and provision for her children. The artists’ emphasis on the breast of the deity display the emphasis on the goddess’s nurturing aspect. The image from Bhita (Figure 2.3) even displays the goddess with a swollen belly which appears to be pregnant. This image suggests that the Mahiṣāsuramardinī is a mother goddess and a goddess of fertility in the early conception. This early representation seems quite disjointed with the Brahminical understanding of women at the time of its creation in which the dharmaśāstras had already declared the female as a weaker sex in need of guard. She displays the virtue of hero[ine]ism (vīrya) overcoming the beast, yet she is able to keep intact her quite distinct femininity. The relief, in which the face has not eroded away, illustrates the feminine beauty of the goddess. In this depiction, the deity is shown having large eyes that have remained undamaged even after hundreds of years. Large eyes are a traditional mark of beauty in Indian culture along with large breasts and large hips. This suggests that these early images are non-Sanskritized representations that stem from either indigenous or rural devotional practices. This hypothesis is aided by the shifts in the image after
the incorporation of the myth into the Brahminical tradition in the Devī Māhātmyam of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa.

In each of the images from each of these sites, the goddess is engaging Mahiṣa in the same manner. The goddess has grasped the buffalo demon with her right hand holding the animal’s back down while the left clutches the throat of the asura. The depiction probably depicts an early form of sacrifice to the goddess. This sacrificial form was probably extremely intimate in which the sacrificer would use his/her hands to take the life of a choice calf. The intimate forms of sacrifice could still be found in very rural settings during folk productions. It is important to note that not only is the goddess depicted embodied in a mundane creature but so is the demon. Mahiṣa is depicted in the form of a physical buffalo with its tongue issuing forth from its mouth as the goddess crushes its spine by bending its head back. This representation suggests a very literal reading of the name Mahiṣāsuramardini, not as “she who slays the buffalo-demon” but “she who crushes the buffalo-demon.” In both images, the battle is shown in this very ‘real’ and mundane form of a woman engaged in hand to hand combat with a buffalo.

The eight images from the well in the Palekhera complex in Mathurā also depict the image deity and buffalo in similar forms. The description of each of the reliefs is quite difficult to ascertain given the years of erosion which the images suffered hidden away in a well. This has lead to discrepancies in the noted description of the image. In his 1949 catalog of Mathurā Brahminical Images, V.S. Agrawala describes the image as, “Statuette, ht. 9 inches, of six-armed Mahiṣāsuramardini…Kushāna period. The goddess supports a bowl on her head with two upraised hands. There is no lion in the Kushāna group of this goddess. From Palkhera well II.” In a study by Odette Viennot of the same images, the relief was described as the following:

Like the seven others in the same group, this piece is a slab carved in high relief, not a statuette carved in the round. The goddess stands firmly, with weight about equally distributed on both legs, her body turned slightly toward the left. The buffalo lurches forward and upward in a diagonal from the proper right of the slab, as if his onrush had been suddenly halted. His head, which is level with the goddess’s shoulder, is forced so far backward that his horns press downward along his spine; his tongue sticks out from his half-opened mouth; and his forelegs are bent double. With two of her six arms the goddess holds him motionless, her lower left arm passing around his neck and her lower right arm pushing downward so heavily on his loins that he forced to arch his back. Of the middle pair of hands, the right is broken off, while the left holds an object that is too indistinct to identify. Of the upper pair, again, the right is broken off, so that there is no way of knowing whether it was held in symmetry with the left, which is holding horizontally over her head something that might be a sword. This is the attribute Dr. Agrawala

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18 For an excellent example see Lady of the Gingee (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1988)
identified as a bowl. But it is hard to imagine so warlike a goddess carrying a bowl while
overcoming her adversary; and the texts concerning her, while admittedly later that the sculpture,
give no hint of any such function.  

While she does not agree with Agrawala given the implement in the upper left hand, other
scholars have disagreed with the number of appendages altogether. Shanti Lal Nagar has
described the images as a two-armed goddess and Upendra Nath Dhal depicts the image with
four arms. The photographs of the image that I have viewed are unclear in regards to the arms
or implements. What is clear, however, is that the images represent a mundane image much like
that from Ahichchhatra (especially Fig 2.1b), Bhita, and Nagar. The image ought to be viewed
in the context of the images that depict the same scene and not against other productions of the
time. It is quite possible that the figure had multiple arms, but given the other images of
Mahiśāsuramardinī from the period the interpretations of the image with two or four arms is the
more likely interpretation. It is highly unlikely that an image that is so strikingly similar to other
images of the same deity in the neighboring regions would have been altered in so great a
manner. Since many coins and other images produced in the Kuśāna period depicted deities that
were in the Brahminical pantheon shown wielding several appendages, it is more likely that
Agrawala and Viennot, upon examining a much eroded artifact, of which the distinction between
statuette and relief is hard to decipher, read into the image the characteristics of Brahminical
productions from the area all the while being quite sure that the image was to be included into
the Braminical tradition during this period neglecting the other available resources of the same
image, like those of the nearby Ahichchhatra.

Regardless of the number of arms, the characteristics of the image at Mathura remain
distinctly mundane. The importance lies within the depiction of the buffalo. It is imperative to
point out that in the early representations of the battle, the goddess’s adversary is named Mahiśa
which simply means ‘a buffalo.’ With the addition of the asura to the end of his name he takes
on a connection to the mythological enemies of the gods (deva), and by this time the mythology
of the demons was quite plentiful through the tales of demons in the Vedas, Māhabhārata, and
the Rāmāyana. Coinage from the era also depicts the demons (asuras) in anthropomorphic
incarnations; however, the demon of these early images remains depicted very literally. The oral
nature of the legend probably led to a literal rendering of the battle in iconography. This

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suggests a very immanent interpretation of the myth in which the deity has descended to earth in a form that is much humanized (with or without extra appendages) and wages war with a theriomorphic demon. The representations suggest a theological understanding of the deity that diverges greatly from the courtly depictions of deities and demons in which they are all super-anthropomorphized into humanized beings with divine attributes and abilities signified by superhuman physical attributes found on royal coins.

The last image to be explored from the formative period in the production of Mahiśāsuramardini iconography, from Nagar in Rajasthan, shows a greater attention to detail than the others (with the possible exception of Fig. 2.1a), but introduces two elements of the myth that is absent or eroded in all the other depictions of this era. (Figure 2.4) In this relief, the goddess is shown with a clearly depicted Śaivite trident. (Fig 2.4a) It is clear that in this representation the goddess has been associated with Śiva as his consort, Pārvatī. R.C. Agrawala has claimed that another of the eight Mathura reliefs also has evidence of the trident which would indicate that the association with Śiva was fairly common. The link further shows that the Mahiśāsuramardini was at best a periphery member of the Brahmnical pantheon in the beginning if not an incorporation of an indigenous deity as many scholars have suggested of Śiva. This association is further evidenced by the addition of Mahiśāsuramardini’s lion vehicle (vāhana). (Figure 2.4b) The lion, which is clearly depicted in the bottom of the relief to the goddess’s left, is the traditional vehicle of Pārvatī’s father, Himavat. Though this image has highly detailed craftsmanship and the introduction of Brahminical features, which might suggest a later date of production that is argued for by Viennot, the relief must be placed in this first era of Mahiśāsuramardini iconography because of the representation of the goddess grasping the buffalo within her arms. After the composition of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, the imagery of battle would change into a more fluid representation in regards to the depiction of the goddess; however, her interaction with Mahiṣa would be altered more permanently.

After the first period of production, the image goes through a period in which no historical evidence of the image is available; however, in the 4th to 6th centuries, the image reemerged with a renewed sense of devotion, and production of the iconography flourished. The revival of Mahiśāsuramardinī iconography coincides with the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa that contains the hymn to the Great Goddess (devī), the Devī Māhātmyam. During this re-emergence of the

22 She dates the image to the late Kuṣāna to Early Gupta 4th -5th centuries CE.
image, the iconography takes on the traits of the Puranic myth and becomes fully Sanskritized. The goddess is depicted in these images carrying not only the trident of Śiva, but the weapons given to her by the members of the Brahminical pantheon upon her emanation from the deities as the embodiment of their divine energies (śakti) that is narrated in the Markaṇḍeya Purāṇa. In order to hold the array of battle implements, the addition of arms begins to proliferate in this period. Within a century or two of the Markaṇḍeya Purāṇa, the iconography developed from the two and four-armed representations seen in the early period to such elaborate representations as the twelve-armed Mahiṣāsuramardinī at Udaigiri.

The most striking distinction between the early works and those which come after the Markaṇḍeya Purāṇa, is the relationship between the goddess and the buffalo. In the early representations, the goddess wrestles with the buffalo in a personal manner that illustrates the intimacy of the act. In many of the early images the goddess cradles the buffalo as she crushes his spine. The images that emerged in the 4th through 6th centuries show the goddess standing over the demon, crushing him with her right foot. The image depicts the scene narrated in the third chapter of the Devī Māhātmyam. The image becomes a snapshot of the fortieth verse, “Having spoken thus, she, leaping up, mounted the great demon, and placing her foot upon his neck pierced him with her spear.” Through this interpretation of the scene, the goddess is removed from the natural role of previous images in which she is an active member of nature and is placed within the androcentric Brahminical hierarchy of divinity. Wendy Doniger in Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts discusses the masculinization of Mahiṣāsuramardinī within the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa at some length. She argues, through taking on the masculine traits of the Sanskritic deities as the emanation of the masculine gods, the goddess is transformed into a male. She argues further that Mahiṣa undergoes a similar sexual mutation into the feminine role through his beheading which symbolizes a physical castration rendering Mahiṣa a eunuch. While Doniger relates several interesting psychoanalytic observations, this reading of the imagery, in narrative or visual format, is misleading especially given the iconographies of the battle that were produced in the same period. In the first images that are produced during this time period, the emphasis is not on the “symbolic castration” that emerges several centuries later.

23 Devī Māhātmyam 2.9-2.38.
24 See Figure 2.6 and following.
but on the subjugation of the demon. The images contemporary to the insertion of the Devī Māhātmyam into the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa display the head of the buffalo in animal form still intact focusing on verse forty of the narrative in which the goddess places the demon underfoot and not the subsequent verse in which the animal is beheaded. Given the interpretations of the myth through iconography that were contemporary with the text, the images’ emphasis on subjugation rather than the beheading that did become the motif in subsequent centuries warrants further exploration.

The iconography from this period shifted the emphasis of the image from the goddess interacting with the buffalo to showing her dominance over it. The transition is clearly displayed by two images from Ramgarth Hill in Udaigiri from the 3rd and 5th centuries. (Figures 2.5-2.6) The treatment of the buffalo, which in Sanskritic lore can be read as a symbol for nature that is wild and untamable, shows a reinterpretation of the relationship between the divine and nature. The goddess is no longer represented as a being in nature dealing with a mundane enemy, but as a superior deity that holds the physical harms at bay with only her foot. This is part of the transition away from the deities’ association with physical phenomenon that had taken place beginning in the tenth and final chapter of the Rg Veda where the deities that formerly were the embodiment of natural phenomenon such as fire, wind, and lightening began to be conceived and portrayed as cosmic beings with human attributes and characteristics. This process began to form a continuum between the divine and humanity in which the deities were ‘like’ us. As this process continued, the emphasis on the divine link to the unconquerable unknowable elements faded away. This interpretation is a major component of the Brahminization of the Vedic deities which is so heavily reliant on epic narrative. Thus, Mahiṣāsuramardinī ceases to be a mundane deity when she displays her cosmic superiority and places the uncontrollable beast underfoot. As her iconography continues to transform the deity becomes more transcendent and cosmic and the images ceases to be based in natural occurrences but is later displaced into the cosmic realm in which the demon also becomes more cosmic and magical.

The idea of gender role that is brought up in Doniger’s discussion of the myth should also be examined through the iconography produced during the period of the Purāṇa. The over analysis made by Doniger relies on her textual biases in determining the role of the narrative in the subconscious of the author/culture. In antiquity, the transformation from the ‘feminine’ to the ‘masculinized’ warrior is a common motif in legend and mythology. The theme occurs cross-
culturally throughout the Near East and Syria whose similarities with Sanskrit regarding mythology is indubitable. In these stories, such as the Ugaritic stories of Aqhat in which Paghat must avenge the death of her brother, however, there is a transformation in which the hero/heroine undergoes an alteration to become the other gender. In this myth, the protagonist, Paghat, undergoes a ritualized role reversal by using dye to stain her skin dark to resemble the culturally constructed ideal of masculinity and shed her feminine clothing and dressed as a male. She did this in order to engage her brother’s murderer, the demon Yatpan, whom is also a shape-shifting demon like Mahiśa in the Mārkandeya Purāṇa and had taken the divine treasure, a bow, which Aqhat had received as a boon. After the task is completed the conventional gender traits once again apply. These ritual transformations were temporary resolutions for problems in which no males warriors were available. In the narrative of the Mārkandeya Purāṇa, the male warriors were available however ineffective. It would be naïve to assume from this quite novel presentation of feminine virility that the author of the narrative was arguing for equal rights. Rather the author relied on the oral tale and amalgamated the Sanskritic type in which the protagonist is not only mighty but virile producing a hybrid that remains entirely feminine with emphasis on the nurturing aspects of the goddess with large breasts and wide hips, yet a ‘masculine’ warrior wielding weapons in her strong arms. Images produced in later periods along with the emergence of retellings of the narrative in texts, such as the Devī Bhāgavatam Purāṇa, do not emphasize the impermanence of transformation, but Mahiśāsuramardini is always depicted with very feminine attributes. Therefore, when the narrative is read along within the cultural context along with contemporary iconographical representations, Mahiśāsuramardini is not the hyper-masculinzed deity that Doniger presents, but a deity that is in a liminal space between the commonly attributed cultural gender role — still a woman yet acting masculinely. After the task of vanquishing demons for the inept pantheon, the goddess transforms once again into the culturally accepted ‘feminine’ role either as Pārvatī in the Himalayas or as the cosmic Mother of all.

As the iconography progresses throughout time, the images become more ornate and cosmic; however, the evolution is a gradual process that slowly changed the image as the

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26 The similarities of the story abound. Paghat before engaging Yatpan in battle serves him wine as he roars and brags about his might. However, the portrayal of the end of this legend in which, I assume, Paghat is victorious over Yatpan is missing from the tablet and is more than likely lost forever.

27 See Devī Māhātmyam Chapters 5 and 13
tradition’s understanding of the divine nature of the goddess and of the battle developed. The motifs that arose during the 4th and 5th centuries during the composition of the Mārkaṇḍeeya Purāṇa continued to proliferate northern South Asia and began emerging in the southern regions of the subcontinent during the 7th-9th centuries. This period is one in which the interpretation of the narrative and subsequently the artistic productions of the battle is in a liminal state negotiating the divinity and the humanity of the deity. The earliest images continue to portray the goddess with four arms and Mahiṣa in buffalo form, but by the end of the period the images more frequently depicted the goddess with eight arms and the buffalo in anthrotheriomorphic form with either the head of a buffalo and body of a human or most commonly in human form emerging from the beheaded corpse of the buffalo. After this period, the iconography of Mahiṣa was produced with the demon in at least part human form.

Excellent artifacts from Aihole and Ellora display an amalgamation of the earliest images from 1st and 2nd centuries and those that were produced in 4th to 6th. In the image from Aihole, Mahiṣāsura-mārdinī is depicted similarly to the image at both Ramgarth Hill in Udaigiri. She is depicted with four arms holding various weapons. With her upraised right arm, she plunges her trident into the neck of the buffalo that remains depicted in its animal form. In this relief, the deity is shown with her left foot on the demons throat subduing the enemy, yet the goddess is grasping the snout of her adversary. Again like the earliest images the goddess is physically engaged with the buffalo. This, coupled with the natural landscape of a tree that is on the left side of the image, shows the natural element of the epic battle. She is attacking in the natural world not above it. The goddess is represented in the world of phenomenal existence though her depiction is one of superiority. This image transports the transcendent deity into an immanent protector for the devotee. The Elloran image from the same period is remarkably similar to the image from Aihole, yet with several stylistic alterations. In this cave carving, the goddess is shown with four arms as in Aihole, but the trident from the narrative is absent. Instead the deity holds in her hand a sword as the weapon of execution. The image foreshadows what will become a common motif in centuries to come where the beheading of the buffalo is the integral component of the narrative to be captured in iconography. Mahiṣāsura-mārdinī’s right foot is placed on the buffalo’s hind hips pushing the demon in animal form down to the ground. With one of her left hand’s she holds a conch and with the other she holds the buffalo’s snout bending its head back as in previous examples. The grip of the goddess on the snout is, however,
different from that of the Aihole depiction. At Ellora, the goddess does not hold the head of a buffalo trying to escape or fight back. The buffalo is clearly already defeated and the goddess is lifting his head in order to chop off its head with her upraised sword. The divine superiority of the deity is in fine display as the goddess looks not at her prey but into the gaze of the audience with her head lifted high again displaying her dominance over the natural world. Though these images are very close in depiction and proximity, they illustrate the ambiguity concerning the interpretation of the myth during this period.

During the 8th and 9th centuries the nature of the demon Mahiṣa was depicted in a wide variety of beings. Several of the images produced followed the same motif with the demon cast in animal form as a buffalo as in the earlier images, but as the goddess became more cosmic the buffalo also became reinterpreted as a supernatural being. The ambiguity in the narrative details of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa concerning the actual form that the asura whom is named Mahiṣa embodied led to a grey area in which iconographer (śilpin) must interpret the images. As early as the 7th century, the images of Mahiṣāsuramardini begin depicting the latter portions of the narrative focusing on the beheading of the demon. These images portray the demon as he issues forth from body of the beheaded buffalo-demon in human form. The śilpins navigated between the earlier iconography of Mahiṣa in animal form and the emerging supernatural interpretation of the goddess. The images of the 7th and 8th century that display the demon in human form continued the subjugation of the natural that was seen in the earlier works. The goddess is depicted in these images with both four arms as in the previous forms and with eight arms illustrating the cosmic power of the deity.

During this period several images were produced that display supernaturalization of the deity and her adversary. These images were preserved at Ellora in the 8th century and Pattadakal, and Mahabalipuram in the 9th. In these images the depiction of the battle scene illustrates the beginning of combat while Mahiṣāsuramardini is in pursuit of the demon. In these three images Mahiṣa is shown in anttheriomorphic form having the body of a human and the head of a buffalo. The goddess is seated on the back of her lion mount possessing eight arms each wielding a divine weapon. The onlooking members of Mahiṣa’s falling army watch the goddess’s pursuit of their general. Together the scene unfolds beautifully, but the image is devoid of any natural or mundane qualities. The battlefield is not to be confused with this plane of existence with buffaloes or vegetation. It is on a different divine plane in each of these
representations. Of these images, the depiction of the battle between Mahiṣāsuramardinī and Mahiṣa at Mahabalipuram is the most renowned. (Figure 2.7) Therefore, it will be discussed in fuller detail.

The image at Mahabalipuram, like the others that depict Mahiṣa in anthrotheriomorphic form, depict the battle scene very differently than the other image which had been produced previously. Unlike the previous icons, the scene in this representation unfolds displaying the movement of the characters. The goddess who is seated on the lion is shown shooting an arrow in the direction of Mahiṣa. The lion is carved to appear lunging toward the mythical beast. The demon himself is portrayed with his weight shifted onto his left leg as he maneuvers away from the onslaught of the goddess. Around the main figures, the epic battle wages on as the minions of Mahiṣa assail the goddess to no avail. The cave sculpture is novel because the carvings resemble a still of the actions as they unfolded. Previously, the images that had been produced acknowledged the audience as a participant with the goddess as she slew the demon, but this representation acknowledges no one except the actors. The importance of acknowledgement of the beholder is crucial to the understanding of the images role with the religious lives of the devotee. The images that had been produced from the 1\textsuperscript{st} century onward depicted the deity and the demon placed in a ritualized setting in which the slaughter took place as if it were the ritual sacrifice conducted in a temple. The submissive buffalo was placed on an elevated stage along with the sacrificer, the goddess, who ritually raised her weapon. The scene is depicted in this manner to place the beholder in active participation in sacrificial ritual. In many cases the goddess, acknowledges the audience by looking outward not at her victim and the sacrifice. By looking at the viewer, the goddess incorporates her by giving \textit{darśan} or ritual gazing. The beholder is made an active participant as she views the divine ritual. In the images, such as the one at Mahabalipuram, the context of the image is not one of active participation. The beholder looks on as the narrative takes place on another plane in another time and is, therefore, removed farther from the divine battle. So the panoramic portrayal of the battle not only constructs the mythological actors in extremely transcendent magical forms, but the style of production further separates the mythological from the mundane and divinity from humanity.

While the anthrotheriomorphic imagery is the most removed from the phenomenal world, the images that portray the demon in anthropomorphic form become the dominant motif after the liminal period. The production of iconography that depicts the demon, whom is in the image of
humanity, further illustrates the widening gap between the divine nature of the goddess and of the earthly devotees. While the depictions of the demon are humanized, the demon continued to be portrayed as a submissive adversary and Mahiśāsūramardinī standing over him completely superior to him. By casting humanity as the demon, the artists displayed the power of the divine over and beyond that of humanity. Moreover, from the 8th through 15th centuries, the anthropomorphic demon is most often characterized as a dwarf accentuating the infinitesimalism of the demon and subsequently humanity compared to the majesty of the goddess. The demon within these images is also shown emerging from the buffalo form. This not only enacted the narrative found in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa but also connected the demon with the natural world. From the 10th until the 15th century, the dominant motif in iconography of Mahiśāsūramardinī represented the demon in anthropomorphic form emerging from the beheaded buffalo demonstrating the humanity of the conquered, yet the goddess became continually more transcendent.

In the 12th century a great number of images depicting Mahiśāsūramardinī proliferated the South Asian subcontinent. The images from this period show great elaborations of the deity that suggest the cosmic power of the goddess. The images also are produced in an increasing number of statuettes (mūrtis) that were to be used in ritualized temple worship (pūja). The increase of production of images that were able to be transported and established in a devotional setting suggest an increase in the devotional practices associated with the goddess of the buffalo slaying narrative. It is no coincidence that in this same period the Devībhāgavata Purāṇa was composed. Before discussing the individual icons, it is necessary to examine the period in which they are produced particularly in regard to the Devībhāgavata Purāṇa. The Devībhāgavata Purāṇa, comprised of 18,000 verses in exaltation of the Great Goddess, like the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa retold the myth of Mahiśāsūramardinī, but in many respects was a reinterpretation of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, a collection of myths concerning the incarnations of the god Viṣṇu. There has been scholarly debate concerning the date of the ‘canonized’ version of each of the māhapurāṇas. R.C. Hazra dates the final version of the Devībhāgavata Purāṇa to 950-1200 CE, and C. Mackenzie Brown argues that the final version of the text did not appear until the 16th century.28 The final ‘canonized’ version is of little relevance to the discussion at hand, but the

importance lies in the period in which the majority of the text was composed. Both Hazra and Brown agree that the compilation of the Devībhāgavata Purāṇa began almost immediately after the composition of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa in 950 CE. This leads Hazra to argue that by between 950 and 1200 CE the Devībhāgavata Purāṇa was in the basic form. Brown challenges Hazra’s dates based on a latter addition to the Bhāgavata Purāṇa that makes its way into the final version of the Devībhāgavata Purāṇa in Book IX. Though this addition would have changed the final version of the text it does not deny that the Devībhāgavata Purāṇa was influential during these early years of composition. When these dates are viewed in conjunction with the archeological evidence of artistic production during the 12th century, Hazra’s postulation seems to hold up quite nicely. Together, the text and iconography show a steep rise in institutionalized devotion to the goddess.

Also with the introduction of a new text that is equally ambiguous concerning the description of the characters, the creators of Mahiṣāsura-mardini’s iconography again elaborate given the various components of the narrative. In the 12th century, the most ornate and cosmic creations of Mahiṣāsura-mardini were produced. This reflects the growing divinization of the goddess as she becomes more powerful and more transcendent. The proliferation of iconography Mahiṣāsura-mardini and its sudden increase in appendages show the vitality of the image and narrative through the 12th century.

The Lahore Museum in Pakistan houses an example of the scene as it unfolds from this period from Rohtak in the modern state of Harayana, India. (Figure 2.8) The bronze statuette embodies many of the major motifs of the period. The goddess stands with her right foot on the back of the defeated buffalo as she displays her divine regalia and weapons in the hands of 10 of her twelve arms. With her other two arms, she engages the demon that has emerged out of the buffalo as an anthropomorphized dwarf. The goddess has taken hold of the demon by the hair of his head and plunges her trident into his chest. All the while, the goddess’s lion feeds on the flesh of the buffalo corpse. The scene is set in a cosmic realm in which the pantheon of deities, which had beseeched her aid, looks on at their victorious advocate. Two small figures either dākinīs or female attendants to the goddess guard the sacrificial ritual. Also two small figures, which become prominent figures in iconography of the scene in the following centuries, are also

present. The duo later becomes equated to the demonic brothers Madhu and Kaitabha from both the Devī Māhāmyam and the Devībhāgavata Purāṇa, but in this image they appear to be either male attendants to the goddess or more likely yaksas. The setting is cast further into the realm of the gods and away from the reality of humanity developing continuously more complex.

The statuette was clearly created in order to be installed into a temple for ritual purposes. The image is small enough to be transported from the creator’s workshop in the ritual procession, eventually arriving in the temple to be the axis mundi from the divine realm in which the events had transpired into the natural realm. The precision of craftsmanship shows the financial backing of a well patronized institution only through which such an ornate creation of metal working could be commissioned. However, the face of Mahiṣāsurasamardinī is unusual for such an image. The goddess is not depicted looking at her enemy, but neither is she looking at the viewer. Her head is lifted from the action with her eyes closed. The artist portrayed the deity in the most serene state though engaged in a fierce battle. The relationship with the devotee is indistinct because the viewer is denied the reciprocity of darśan. However, the two ‘natural’ eyes are not the ones necessary for the act. The emphasis is on the spiritually awakened third eye that presumably would have been placed on the forehead of the goddess as a bindi or tilak.

Another statuette sculpted in high relief from the same period but from the middle of the subcontinent in Jabalpur demonstrates the attention given to the ritual of darśan in the iconographical renderings. The image like the above example demonstrates the elaborate productions that existed during the 12th century. This depiction of Mahiṣāsurasamardinī displays the supranatural abilities of the goddess representing her with 20 arms. (Figure 2.9) Though most of the arms have been lost over time and the secret of the implements that they once held forever lost, the remaining elements warrant a closer look at the creation. The background of the battlefield once again depicts the episode transpiring in the divine realm. The backdrop of the relief is jumbled with representations of small figures most of which are portrayed in anthropomorphic form. Each of these characters is shown on their hands and knees in submission to the goddess who triumphantly stands on the back of the decapitated buffalo. The two male figures that were found in the image from 12th century Rohtak are also present in this carving. They like the others surrounding the goddess prostrate themselves in supplication to Mahiṣāsurasamardinī. The demon is missing from the image but presumably would have been in anthropomorphic form with the lower left arm reaching out to grasp him by the hair as one of her
right arms, most likely the fourth from the bottom given the angle of the stub, thrust her trident into his chest. The image like those discussed above continues to show the goddess’s superiority over the small human-like beings and the mundane theriomorphic prior-form of the demon. The focus of the image is not the fabulous combat between the goddess and the demon, but it is on the face of Mahiṣāsuramardinī. The goddess looks out to the audience with a slight peaceful smile. Her eyes are wide open for the devotee to gaze into and receive the blessing that is believed to come from look the divinity in the eyes. Of course, the spiritual eye would also be considered engaged in this viewing, but the experience would be aided by the natural interlocking stare.

A bronze statuette from the 13th century illustrates the images permeation of the subcontinent and the translation of the image into Nepalese style, yet incorporating all the theological understanding of the image throughout rest of South Asia. (Figure 2.10) The Nepalese Eastern Asian influence on the image is undeniable, yet the representation of the scene is remarkable unchanged. The slaying of the demon takes places on an elevated altar within the image. The goddess is shown with 18 arms lifting the anthropomorphized demon from the carcass of the buffalo that she had recently decapitated. The goddess keeping with the motif of subjugation places one foot on the back of the buffalo, but the other is placed on the back of her lion. The interpretation of this depiction is unclear. It is possible that the artist wished to keep the stylistic qualities of Buddhist iconography that can be seen in the posture and positioning of the deity, yet felt it imperative to show the lion as her vehicle as contained within the narrative. However, the image reflects the dominant position of Mahiṣāsuramardinī even over her own companion. The two male figures are also displayed in this sculpture and appear at the base of the figurine as vested onlookers. It can clearly be seen in the statuette that the goddess’s position in the image is much higher and larger than any other beings displaying her supremacy.

Many other images like these abound throughout South Asia during the 12th and into the 13th century. The proliferation is evidence that the worship and devotion to the Great Goddess in the form of Mahiṣāsuramardinī was in a period of growth. The popularity of the image and narrative led to re-interpretation of the image in which the deity was imagined more transcendent and divine. After this explosion of devotion, the image slowly regressed into the four and eight armed variations from the previous centuries. The image continued to undergo small stylistic
changes but would not be re-imagined until the painting became the major medium by which the
depictions of deities were produced in the 16th century.

There are many portrayals of the epic battle between the Great Goddess and Mahiša as
told in the Devī Māhātmāmyam and other texts. The paintings tend to be contained in manuscripts
that illustrate the events as they unfold in the text. One such image comes from the Rajput
School and was painted in 1750 at Bikaner, Rajasthan. (Figure 2.11) The painting depicts the
battle between Mahiša and the goddess in a very natural setting. The image includes many of the
European ideals that were brought to South Asia during colonization such as naturalism that
includes earthly landscapes that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter IV, but it remains a
distinctly Indian production in technique and style. The goddess is shown in the painting
attacking out her portion of the narrative that is written on the other side of the manuscript. The
goddess is mounted on her lion staring at her approaching enemy. She is represented having four
arms in which are a sword, discus, dagger, and a snake. The snake was a latter addition to the
image that results from the influence of iconography of Kālī in the understanding of the militant
Mahiśāsuramardinī. Her skin is a golden white that makes her appear human except for the
addition of the two extra arms. Her human-like depiction along with the landscape suggests that
by this period the image had begun a theological shift back toward the goddess as an extension
of humanity instead of a divine force that is superior to it. The influence of ‘Western’
philosophy perhaps had aided in this shifting process.29

While the imagery of the goddess had taken a shift toward the mundane, the portrayal of
Mahiša became much more celestial. The demon was painted with eight arms on an otherwise
anthropomorphic body with the head of a buffalo. The buffalo head was painted in the common
Rajput style that had incorporated the demon stylization of Persian iconography. The demon has
a long mustache and straggly beard. Fangs protrude from its villainous face as long pointed ears
flank the sides of his head. This stylization of the demonic reverses the role that humanity had
previously played in the interpretation of the myth. Now humanity is associated with the
goddess and the demon is seen as something quite ‘other.’ Mahiša is illustrated with several
other aspects that are novel to his iconography. The magical demon is no longer depicted
submissive to the goddess. He is shown riding atop a horse that bows its head in submission to

29 For an in depth discussion of the influence of the theological perception of mythological character see the section
on Colonial Influence in Chapter IV
Mahiṣāsuramardini’s lion, but he sits erect on the horse’s back with his head held high in defiance of the goddess’s divinity. Mahiṣa was painted aiming a rifle in the direction of the goddess. The rifle, a product of ‘Western’ modernity, illustrates the influence that outsiders had on the interpretation of the myth. Another interesting observation is that the rifle was held by the demonic and not the divine. This suggests an association of the demonic with those whom had brought the weapon and the divine connected with the traditional *modus operandi* of warfare.

Another such image comes from Bengal in the 19th century. (Figure 2.12) It depicts the scene of the 15th century Bengali Krittivasa *Rāmāyaṇa*\(^3\) The image contained within a Vaiṣṇava text shows ability of Mahiṣāsuramardini’s iconography, as well as narrative, to transcend sectarian bounds. This wide appeal of the image is especially important and will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapter III. The painting is incorporated into a two-piece scroll that depicts all of the major events in the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa*. The battle between Durgā and Mahiṣa takes place immediately before and making possible Rāma’s defeat of the ten-headed demon Rāvana whom had captured Rāma’s beloved wife Sītā. The Bengali infatuation with the practice of *Durgā Pūja* heavily influenced the composition of the text and image. In the painting, the goddess is illustrated in a golden orange hue with ten arms each of which has its hand formed into a fist prepared to fight the demon except for her lower left in which is a snake that has struck Mahiṣa’s neck. The demon is shown in full anthropomorphic form with the buffalo nowhere to be found. The goddess’s only contact with the demon is her left foot that is firmly crushing his throat. Her right foot holds her position on the back of the lion like the 13th century Nepalese sculpture. The goddess is surrounded by sages that look on as she defeats the evildoer. The painting like those previous representations depicts the scene in a transcendent cosmic plane to which only the deities and the perfected sages have access.

The image has also been appropriated into the Vaiṣṇava tradition in other regions show the Pan-Indic importance of the image. The tradition of Orissan Puri painting of Mahiṣāsuramardinī is quite extensive, but the scene of the goddess and the demon is traditionally depicted on its own. A mid-20th century Orissan Puri artist depicted a scene of Mahiṣāsuramardinī along with Jaganath as Madhava. (Figure 2.13) The image over time has become a popular depiction, but it was originally the melding of two very different marshal

deities. In this 20th century image Jaganath look out to the viewer in the traditional representation with large rounded eyes on his round blackish green face holding his bow and arrow at his side. He is the protagonist of the painting. However, to his left the golden goddess looks in his direction while her snake and lion attack the anthropomorphic demon that kneels next to the fallen buffalo. The goddess’s feet are in the same position as the Bengali painting but the image has been reversed with her right foot on the buffalo and the left on the lion. The artist has clearly purposefully depicted Jaganath as the focus of the image and shown that while Mahiṣāsuramardinī is superior to the buffalo, demon, lion, and as I have argued humanity, she is subordinated to Jaganath.

The iconography of Mahiṣāsuramardinī has never been a stagnate image within the traditional Brahminical renderings. The image began as a rural image that portrayed a mundane sacrificial ritual. The connection between humanity and the divine was an immanent relationship in which the natural realm was pre- eminent. However, through a period of Sanskritization with the composition of the Devī Māhātmyam in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, the image began a process in which the goddess migrated farther from humanity into a transcendent plane in which the gods and goddesses dwelt placing the natural in the subordinate position under her feet. The process gradually placed the entire scene into the abode of the gods in the 7th through 9th centuries as Mahiṣa lost his association with the natural buffalo and became a magical character. Eventually, in the period of increasing elaboration of the cosmic power of the deity the identity of Mahiṣa was conceived as an apparition of humanity. Thus, humanity was portrayed as the antithesis of the goddess’s divine nature. The divinity of Mahiṣāsuramardinī grew continually as the devotional practice centered on her developed. The elaboration of her theology reached an apex in the 12th century during the composition of the Devibhāgavata Purāṇa. During this period, many representations of the goddess portrayed her divine abilities by adding to her torso a considerable number of arms in several cases up to as many as eighteen or twenty. After the 12th century the image remained in a constant state of alteration between the dominant forms that had arisen from the 7th century. By the 18th century the ‘Western’ influence through colonization had already begun to influence the artistic productions of the myth, and the myth had been completely incorporated into the various sects under the umbrella of Brahminical Hinduism. The last two elements set the stage for both of the following chapters as the image is appropriated into different religious systems and geographical locales with the greatest of ease and is
influenced by ‘Western’ philosophical ideals of the Enlightenment in each case changing as dictated by the new environment.

The iconography of Mahiśāsuramardini in the Brahminical tradition in South Asia demonstrates the broader relationship between the divine and the human. The reinterpretation of the myth portrays the struggle for the devotees in construction of their own identity. As the devotional aspects increase the deity becomes elevated onto a high plane of existence and loses all her connections with the natural realm. As the deity is elevated, humanity is debased. Humanity becomes not only lower than the divine, but is recreated as the opposing pole. Thus, the goddess becomes the primary mode of salvation. She alone is conceived as powerful enough to lift humanity, if even by the hair, into the divine realm freeing them from phenomenal existence. This interpretation, as discussed in Chapter IV, will be heavily attacked by the British colonizers for its implications against the supremacy of the individual.
III

APPROPRIATIONS OF THE IMAGE OUTSIDE OF THE BRAHMINICAL TRADITION

While the image of Mahiśāsuramardinī underwent a series of changes based on theological shifts in Brahminical Hinduism, the dominant tradition in South Asia during this period, the iconography was also appropriated into outside traditions in South Asia and indigenous religious arena in areas outside of the subcontinent to which Hinduism had spread. Due to the popularity of the imagery, the traditions that were in a position of minority adopted Mahiśāsuramardinī into popular ritual and devotion. This chapter will examine the emergence of the iconography of Mahiśāsuramardinī in religious traditions other than what is now understood as Hindu. The easy transference of the image illustrates the fluidity of religious and theological constructions amongst different religions and regions. It also demonstrates the mutability of the image as it and its interpretation shift as it is assimilated into new modes of religious thought.

Three main forms of the goddess will be examined in their cultural and religious context to show how the phenomenon took place. The first will be the development of the imagery of the Jain yakṣī, Jvālāmālinī, who exhibits the Jain religious doctrine lain over the medieval martial deity. Next, the emphasis will be shifted to Java with the Singhasari dynasty in the 13th century. In this context, the iconography is shown to validate the indigenous Javanese religious practice of ancestor worship, thereby legitimating the royal families right to rule. The last image discussed will be the Buddhist deity Vajrāvāraḥī in Markulā in Himachal Pradesh. The icon appropriates the iconography Mahiśāsuramardinī but reinterprets her cakra, or discus, as the Buddhist wheel of Dharma (dharmacakra). In all, the images will show the iconography of the buffalo slayer to be easily mutable into different religious traditions and for expedient political legitimization.

As the image of Durgā slaying the buffalo-demon spread throughout the South Asian subcontinent in the Brahminical tradition, regions in which the popularity burgeoned produced new expressions of the icon in different traditions. The first tradition outside of Hinduism that incorporated the imagery was the Jain tradition in the form of a goddess named Jvālāmālinī. Jvālāmālinī is one of the most important female deities within both major sects of Jainism. Devotional practices involving Jvālāmālinī were among the most practiced rituals in popular Jain religion in medieval South Asia, especially the southern regions where Jainism was the strongest.
A closer look into the history of this goddess will show how she develops within the Jain tradition from her original context.

Jvālāmālinī first appears in a Jain text in the 6th century CE as Mahājvalā or Jvālavatī by the Śvetambara philosopher Saṅghadāsa.\(^{31}\) In this text the author describes the deity called ‘She who is the great fire’ or ‘She who is encompassed by fire’ as a vidyādevī. Within Jain cosmology, goddesses exist on three different planes, the upper world (ūrdhvakoka), the oblique world (tiryagloka), and the lower world (adholoka).\(^{32}\) The upper world consists of two cosmic abstract deities, Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī both of whom are clearly gleaned from the Vedic traditions and date very far back into the Jain tradition. They are of great importance within the canonical text of Jainism, but not figure greatly into popular practice. The oblique realm is home to the vidyādevīs. The vidyādevīs were originally magical powers similar to siddhas that were attained through meditation. The cultivation of these powers was to be avoided by devout Jains; however, as the popular practice continued the magical practices of the vidyās became personified into feminine beings. In the 6th century text, Vasudevahaṇḍī, the transformation from magical power to deity had come to full fruition. Thus, in this context the vidyadevī, Mahājvalā, originated from a mystical force into a goddess much like the personification of the feminine power (śakti) into the deity Śaktī. The number of vidyadevīs varied between text and sect, but was eventually solidified to sixteen within both the Śvetambara and the Digambara sects, though both vary the identity of the sixteen.

During the same period in the 6th century, the lower realm of goddess began to emerge in Jain texts. The lower realm deities were called yakṣīs and acted as attendants to the 24 tīrthaṇkaras, the traditional leaders of the Jain religion. The yakṣīs were often depicted as small figures that were peripheral to the overall image. It is important to note the context from which both of the lower realms of Jain goddesses develop. This is the same period in which the iconography of Mahiṣāsuramardinī had reappeared on the devotional religious landscape with the composition of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa. It is from the South Asian context at this time in which devotional practices to feminine deities within the Brahminical tradition were increasing that the devotion to the feminine beings in the Jain iconography of the tīrthaṇkaras began to flourish. By the 9th century, devotion to the yakṣīs had risen to make up a large segment of

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religious practice in lay Jainism. As the devotion to yakṣīs grew, goddesses were subsumed under the title. Many of the newly incorporated deities were regional deities appropriated into Jainism. One such example is the kuladevī Saccikā of Osvāl Jains from Rajasthan. The iconography, which in no way deviates from the regional depictions of the Durgā slaying Mahiṣa, demonstrates an appropriation of the Rajasthani Mahiṣāsramardinī. The narrative of Saccikā shows how the popular image of Mahiṣāsramardinī was incorporated into the Jain tradition through the conversion of a caste that still engaged in their traditional devotional practices. The story of Saccikā’s incorporation into the Jaina deity, told in the Upakeśagitattālī, clearly displays the cultural personal ties that converts have to former deities. After the Osvāls converted to Jainism, they continued worship their caste devata Cāmuṇḍā. The sage (ācārya) Ratnaprabhasūri admonished the people for their devotion to a deity that acts against the tenets of the Jain tradition. Because his reprimands had fallen on deaf ears, the sage redirected his efforts on the vicious Hindu goddess. After hearing the Jain doctrine from Ratnaprabhasūri, the goddess adopted the tenets of Jainism gave up her consumption of flesh and became vegetarian. After this “conversion,” she was incorporated into the Jain pantheon.

Others yakṣīs that emerged in 9th century were formerly from the middle realm of vidyadevīs that were incorporated into personal cults as the personal attendants to the 24 tīrthankaras. Mahāvālā, who had by this time become known as Jvālāmālinī, was one vidyadevī that was thus redefined into the lower realm. Jvālāmālinī became associated with the 8th tīrthankara Chandraprabha. Over time the Jvālāmālinī’s popularity led to a cult surfacing in which she was the main deity. The earliest example of an independent shrine to Jvālāmālinī is in the form of a sculpted image (mūrti) in the Chandraprabha temple in Candragiri from the 9th century during the period of burgeoning goddess worship in Jainism and the emergence of distinct yakṣīs. However, it was not until the 10th century that the Jvālāmālinī Kalpa composed by the Digambara philosopher Indranandī formalized the deities place in the pantheon of independent yakṣīs gaining the status of primary deity within a cult of her own. The Jvālāmālinī Kalpa was composed around the time that the Bhāgavata Purāṇa was formed into its final version and during the time in which the Devībhāgavata Purāṇa had begun to take its first form

as discussed in the previous chapter. This text depicts the narrative by which Jvālāmālinī became independently worshipped as a yakṣī. In the text, the monk Helācārya (also Elācārya) the leader of a Digambara monastic lineage sought to rid a female disciple of a demon (rakṣasa) that had possessed her.\(^\text{36}\) He took the top of a mountain named Nilagiri Hill. There the two were met by Vahnhidevi, the ‘Fire Goddess,’ who upon giving the ācārya a mantra to vanquish the demon, instructed Helācārya to have his disciples worship her in the form of Jvālāmālinī, ‘She who is garlanded with fire.’ Therefore, the yakṣī became a deity that proliferated the Jain religious landscape with temples that housed her as their main deity.

The iconography of Jvālāmālinī displays how the philosophical criteria of Jain doctrine would change the imagery of Mahiṣāsuramardinī appropriating the popular image into their tradition. The goddess who was characterized as engulfed within a garland of fire slowly merged with the iconography of Mahiṣāsuramardinī. The original form of Jvālā as a vidyadevi, the personification of a magical power in association with her name meaning ‘fire,’ suggests that she was the personification of the power of tejas or inner fiery brilliance that was believed to be cultivated through prolonged austere meditative practice in the ancient South Asian religious experience. In earlier iconographical representations, Jvālāmālinī was sculpted alongside Chandraprabha and was depicted much smaller in relation to the tīrthankara. She was shown as a fierce attendant surrounded by an aura of flames. Her iconographical implements and regalia varied greatly depending on the image, but were later solidified in the 10\textsuperscript{th} century in the Jvālāmālinī Kalpa. It was during the period following the composition of this text that devotion to the yakṣī matured into an independent cult and the iconography was altered.

By the 11\textsuperscript{th} and 12\textsuperscript{th} centuries, temples erected for the sole purpose of worshipping Jvālāmālinī were established along the southern regions of South Asia. Also in the 12\textsuperscript{th} century the proliferation of images of Mahiṣāsuramardinī had reached an apex. As I have argued in the previous chapter, this period experienced a growth of devotion to feminine deities of which Mahiṣāsuramardinī was the most popular. In this period, the Devībhāgavatam had been composed with the exception of a few later additions. As the narrative of the deeds of the Great Goddess became a dominant myth in the region, the several of the motifs spread into Jainism. The association of Jvālāmālinī with the magical power (vidya) of inner fire (tejas) led devotees to connected her with the story if the incarnation of Great Goddess of the Devībhāgavatam and

\(^{36}\) Cort, “Medieval Jaina Goddess Tradition.” 246.
the Devī Māhātmyam found within the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa who emanates from the devas in the form of their accumulated tejas. Since, both deities are composed of the same source material, fire, it is evident how their identities became connected. During this period because of the vast popularity of the narrative and iconography of Mahiṣāsuramardinī, Jains appropriated her imagery in order to recreate the iconography of Jvālāmālinī meeting the popular demand.

The use of the imagery of Mahiṣāsuramardinī in the case of Jvālāmālinī is very different from that of Saccikā by the Osvāl Jains. The Osvāl Jains converted the fierce flesh-eating Cāmuṇḍā to a vegetarian goddess, but her iconography remained identical to its previous form. For Saccikā, the narrative was altered, but the image was simply transferred. For, Jvālāmālinī, however, Jains appropriated the image and altered it in order for the martial deity focused on the violent act of slaying the buffalo demon to adhere to the Jain doctrine. Non-violence (ahiṃsā) is one of the core tenets of Jainism. Because of this belief, Jains, both monastics and the laity, take particular care not to injure, much less kill, any living being. Jain monks (sadhus) and nuns (sadhvīs) must sweep their beds before rolling over during the night for fear that they might accidentally kill an insect. Devout lay Jains would even abstain from eating any root vegetable because it would result in the unnatural death of the plant. Acts of violence, such as those described above, would lead to the accumulation of negative karmic seed that must be eradicated before any spiritual advancement could be made. Therefore, as a divine being within the cosmology of Jainism, the yakṣī is an idealized version of the proper disciple of the tīrthankaras; so she is obliged to not only adhere to the same strict tenet of non-violence, but to be an example of its proper practice. Consequentially, in the iconographical representations of Jvālāmālinī, the buffalo is not slain, but he is subdued under the feet of the goddess and incorporated into her imagery as her vehicle (vāhana). Through the iconography, the subtle narrative of compassion pervades the encounter of the yakṣī with Mahiṣa. Instead of slaying her adversary after she subordinated him, she rehabilitated the evil one bringing him into the Jain fold. By shifting the emphasis from the ritualized killing, the rejection of animal sacrifice that was a rudimentary belief of the āraṇa movements from which Jainism developed was upheld by the deity. The shift also exemplifies the role of conversion within the mythological realm and by extension the physical realm.

In the 10th century Jvālāmālinī Kalpa, the buffalo is mentioned as the vehicle of the yakṣī, and she is said to have eight arms, which was the dominant motif of the imagery of
Mahišāsuramardinī during the period, but any further details of her iconography is quite ambiguous. However, in 1189, Aggaḷa, a Jain poet from Kannada, composed the *Candraprabha Pūrṇa* that further elaborates the intricacies of her imagery. In the text, the author describes in vivid detail the divine implements carried in her eight arms as weapons similar to Mahišāsuramardinī. The text also establishes the buffalo as the *yakṣī Jvālāmālinī’s* vehicle. This textual description becomes the dominant form of iconographical representation of Jvālāmālinī with slight difference to one or two weapons that are altered in later descriptions of the goddess.

The sculpture of Jvālāmālinī in the Virūpākṣa temple at Aihole provides an excellent example of the Jain appropriation of the imagery of Mahišāsuramardinī. (Figure 3.1) The image, formidable at over four feet tall, is no longer shown in connection to Candraprabha, the *tīrthankara* on whom she had attended upon her transformation to a *yakṣī*. She instead takes up the center position of devotion with the conqueror (*jina*) Candraprabha only represented by a face at the center of Jvālāmālinī’s diadem. The independence of the deity is not affected by the presence of the *tīrthankara*. It simply reflects of the historical role of the goddess in previous texts and images.

The popular tradition of devotion to Jvālāmālinī became an independent form of devotion because of her ability to directly aid her Jain devotees, actions in which the *tīrthankaras* do not engage. The iconography of Jvālāmālinī represented in the sculpture at Aihole shows the implicit recognition of her role as *yakṣī*. The goddess is seated on a raised platform with her right leg placed upon the subdued buffalo’s head and the other upon the back of the beast. In the previous chapter, I have discussed the theological implications of the transcendent deity subduing the naturally depicted buffalo in greater length, but it is important to reevaluate the connotations within the Jain tradition. Within Jainism, much of the daily ritual of the four-fold community (*caturvidhasangha*) of monastics and laity is centered on the disciplined control of one own’s physicality. The imagery of Jvālāmālinī exhibits the sublimation of the physical that is so important. The *yakṣī* who is venerated for the attainment of desires in the physical world is believed to have the ability to intercede from the celestial realm in which they attend to the *tīrthankaras*, a role that only they and the male form of the same being, *yakṣa*, are able to fulfill. Thus, the images show the power of the *yakṣī* to overcome the obstacles that would inhibit the faithful practice of a Jain or that would encumber them in any way from physical prosperity.

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The goddess is portrayed very serenely with her face gazing directly at her beholder. She, like the images of Mahiśāsuramardinī, is shown with large full breasts, narrow waist, and wide hips, all distinguishing her femininity. The *yakṣī* holds within the hands of her eight arms the various weapons as describes by Aggaṇa in the *Candraprabha Purāṇa*. In her dominant right hand that emerges from the background of appendages she holds her sword upright. Unlike the images of Mahiśāsuramardinī from the Brahminical tradition the sword is not raised in an offensive manner. Rather, it is held as if being presented to the beholder of the image in a neutral action showing the devotee the power that she wields and her control over that power. The flames, which once dominated Jvālāmālinī’s iconography, are in this image displayed only as the material of which her crown was composed. The fire’s shift from outwardly expressed by the aura of flames to the small intimate display represents the shift to an inward possession of the power, as well as an allusion to the meaning of the *yakṣī*’s name. It displays a reinterpretation of the embodiment of the fire or *tejas* expressed in terms more similar to the iconography from Brahminical tradition of the period.

During this same period of extreme popularity of the devotional practices of feminine deities associated with Mahiśāsuramardinī, the image is imported into the Indonesia by the Javanese Hindus. The religious landscape of Java during the East Javanese period from the 10th through the 15th centuries was permeated with statuettes of Mahiśāsuramardinī. Between 1980-1985 alone seventy-three complete statuettes of the goddess had been discovered along with a larger number of fragmentary images.38 In the earliest images, the goddess was worshipped by kings, such as the 10th century ruler Erlangga after being usurped from power, as a means to attain victory over an adversary.39 As the image is further translated into the Javanese culture the interpretation of the deity is altered as well. The veneration of Durgā in the form of Mahiśāsuramardinī, like many of the other deities imported from India to East Java, was incorporated into the indigenous religious schemata reaffirming the practice of ancestor worship by the Singhasari Dynasty.

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The ancient practice of ancestor worship in East Java established a divine hierarchy, which occupied three levels of divinity. 40  The highest level of the divine hierarchy was inhabited by the Lord of the Mountain. This deity was considered to be the omnipotent creator of the world under which all other beings were subordinate. Occupying the next level were the ultimate embodiments of spiritual truth the Buddha and Śiva (Śiwa). Both the Buddha and Śiva are indistinguishable in capacity and in many iconographical forms. The lowest realm of deities act as divinity incarnate in the form of the royal ancestors. The deities, typically Hindu, are established in order to venerate the progenitors of the royal lineage. As Nancy Dowling has argued quite well, the image of Mahiśāsuramardini at Candi Singhasari fulfills this vital component of indigenous religious practice. (Figure 3.2)

The traditional ritual of ancestor worship was centered on the process of deification of the ancestors and their establishment in a temple around which the people would circumambulate paying homage to the founders of the royal lineage. This practice is still carried out today in the form of the Karo festival by the Tengger Hindus in Java. 41  The images of the ancestors were set up to from West to East in order to be navigated counterclockwise following the nocturnal path of the sun, which connotes the realm of the ancestors. As Willem F. Stutterheim notes concerning this process of deification of the Javanese royal lineage that “we must assume that there was some connection between the personality and qualities of a king or queen and the deity chosen for their deification.” 42  However, the use of particular images is more likely used based on the popularity of the image and the legacy in which the next generation wished to portray the ancestral heritage. There is textual evidence that installation of deities within temples during this period were used as a means of appropriating Hindu deities and for the purpose of deifying royalty within the Singhasari Dynasty. In the 14th century text Nagarakṛttagama, a Buddhist monk named Prapanca recounts the deification of Kertanagara, the last Singhasari king, using an image of Ardhanariśvari, as well as that of a jina and a Śiva-Buddha. 43  The images were established at the Candī Singhasari temple in order to be venerated. The text describes the events that surrounded the deification of Kertanagara and the process in which the procession

43 Dowling, “Javanization of Indian Art,” 120.
was to take place. The appropriation of the imagery of Durgā within the Candī Singhasari temple is strikingly similar. Dowling has argued that the statue of Mahiṣāsuramardinī is the deification of the Queen Mother of the Singhasari Dynasty. An inscription that recounts that the last king of the dynasty, Kertanāgara, while attempting to solidify his legitimacy of the throne, ordered the worship of the Candī Singhasari image of Mahiṣāsuramardinī upholds this theory. The ordered worship of the female progenitor of the lineage would serve as an act to ground his own authority as the divinely ordained king and legitimize his rule. As a means to undermine the legitimacy of the Singhasari Dynasty after the death of Kertanāgara, under the Majapahit royal family, Mahiṣāsuramardinī becomes equated to a demon.

The image at Candī Singhasari has only minor alterations and is not that dissimilar to images of Mahiṣāsuramardinī from South Asia during the 13th century. Mahiṣāsuramardinī in the sculpture at Candī Singhasari is shown with six arms standing upon the corpse of the buffalo. In her lower left hand, she grasps the human-dwarf form of the demon that has emerged from the slain buffalo on which Durgā stands. In her middle left arm, as well as her middle right, she holds her royal cape so that it will not inhibit her motion as she swings her sword that is upraised in her upper right arm. Her upper left arm holds a large shield protecting her from any advances made by the demon. The tail of the deceased buffalo is pulled upward by the remaining arm as if she is using it for stability as she lunges toward the demon. Durgā is dressed in the royal attire of East Java during this period with a distinctly Southeast Asian crown adorning her head. In this image, the deity’s body has been formed to display the prosperity of the royal lineage. Durgā is shown with proportionally smaller breast that are covered by her royal garb, but her belly appears larger than the South Asian representations. The large belly in medieval Asian cultures would symbolize the wealth and prosperity of an individual and if that individual were the king or queen it would demonstrate the kingdom’s opulence.

Despite the slight regional changes to the iconography of Mahiṣāsuramardinī during the 13th century in the East Javanese Singhasari dynasty, the theology surrounding the image re-interpreted the goddess as the divinization of the royal lineage. This theological appropriation of the image demonstrates a reconnection of the transcendent deity with the natural realm. The connection between divinity and humanity is unclear since the theological conception of the rulers while they are alive is ambiguous. What is clear is that the schism between the

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transcendent realm of divinity and the realm of the natural was breached during 13th century Javanese usage of the iconography of Mahiṣāsuramardinī.

It is also necessary to explore interpretation of the goddess during the Majapahit period from the 13th through 15th centuries in which Mahiṣāsuramardinī becomes associated with demonic forces and black magic. During the Majapahit Dynasty, a text named the Calon Arang was composed. The text told a tale of the first ruler in the Singhasari dynasty, Erlangga. The story goes on the tell of a sorceress named Calon Arang who has a beautiful daughter, but due to the Calon Arang’s notoriety as a witch she can find no one to marry her daughter. To avenge the disrespect to her and her daughter, Calon Arang orders her followers to worship the demonic Mahiṣāsuramardinī in order to spread disease throughout the kingdom. In this text, the disease ravages the kingdom displacing Erlangga, only to be stopped by the ascetic practices of Mpu Bharadah, Erlangga’s adversary. This Majapahit manuscript is interesting because it alters the previous conception of Erlangga as the supreme ascetic king of the Singhasari Dynasty that was venerated alongside the Queen Mother of the Singhasari, deified as the Javanese ideal ascetic, Agastya. The Calon Arang is clearly a political text that seeks to establish the legitimacy of the Majapahit Dynasty over that of the Singhasari. However, the theological effect on the devotion and iconography of Mahiṣāsuramardinī is considerable.

The practice of devotion to Durgā during this time becomes associated with black magic and the left-handed Tantric practices. Statues of Mahiṣāsuramardinī during the Majapahit period were portrayed with bulging eyes and long protruding fangs and Durgā became the deity who presided over graveyards. By the end of the Majapahit period, Durgā had been completely reinterpreted and un-divinized into the form of an evil demon (rākṣasī) that brought disease and death as she thirsted for blood. (Figure 3.3) As the political situation of East Java changed, the narrative of devotion to Mahiṣāsuramardinī was re-invented to portray the previous rulers in a negative light. Thus, the iconography of Durgā becomes altered to reflect these shifting narratives.

The iconography of Mahiṣāsuramardinī has even entered into Buddhist practice. It is clear that the Buddhist pantheon has several figures that closely resemble Hindu goddesses. The Buddhist deity Cundā (also Candī) even shares her name with an epithet of the Great Goddess of

the *Devī Māhātmyam*. But there is no immediate connection amongst any of these deities and the slaying of a buffalo. However, there is one particular depiction of Mahiśāsuramardinī that has been incorporated into the Buddhist devotional practice. In the village of Udaipur in the Lahul District of Himachal Pradesh, there is a Vajrāvārāhī temple that depicts the slaying of the buffalo demon. The image has eight arms in which she holds a trident, wheel/discus, conch, mace, a thunderbolt or vajra, and a noose from which she hangs the dwarf demon that had emerged from the buffalo. With her remaining two hands she grasps the tail of the buffalo, a common motif in the imagery of Mahiśāsuramardinī, and forms the boon-giving gesture (*varadāmudra*).\(^{47}\) Many scholars agree that the mūrti was once a village deity that had connections to Brahminical Hinduism.\(^{48}\) The representation of Mahiśāsuramardinī, called Markulā Devī from which the village had received its original name Markulā, however, has several distinct features that can be reinterpreted to show an association with Buddhism. The existence a wheel, a typical implement for Mahiśāsuramardinī, might have been interpreted as a Buddhist symbol and display an amalgamation of religious traditions. The wheel has very strong associations with Buddhist iconography. Within the imagery of Buddhist, the wheel symbolizes the teachings (*dharma*) of the Buddha and is amongst the most widely portrayed images in the tradition. The creator of the image must have been aware of the religious connotations of the wheel when it was added to the image. The representation of the goddess displays undeniable Tibet stylistic features on the image.\(^{49}\) The regional proximity of the village of Udaipur to the Tibetan region could have influenced the use of Buddhist imagery in the production of the mūrti. Therefore, it can reasonably be concluded that this particular image of Mahiśāsuramardinī is an image that merged the beliefs of Tibetan Buddhists with Indian Hindus and produced an image with a hybrid identity. Then, that image was fully incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon because of its similarities to the deity Vajrāvārāhī.

The three distinct images discussed within this chapter display the ease with which the iconography of Mahiśāsuramardinī could be appropriated for various purposes and altered for various beliefs. The popularity of the image during the period of composition of the *Devībhāgavatam Purāṇam* led to the proliferation of the images throughout the subcontinent and

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\(^{47}\) Nagar, *Mahishasuramardinī*, 132.


even into Java. Much like in the Jain *Upadeśagaccha Patṭāvalī*, the traditions Jain, Buddhist, and the Indigenous Javanese ancestor tradition appropriated the image to connect with the overwhelming devotion to the goddess depicted as Mahiṣāsuramardinī.
IV
MAHIṢĀSURAMARDINĪ IN MODERNITY

This chapter will explore the production of the images of Mahiṣāsuramardinī through the period of colonization and into the period of independent India, and for the purpose of this work will be called the Modern period. The images and artist discussed throughout this period will show a quasi-canonization that takes place through the proliferation of calendar and bazaar art. Based on the culturally permeated image, other images that move away from the static bazaar productions are proclaimed unorthodox or even blasphemous. Those outside the fold of Hinduism are attacked much more strongly for their representations that stray from the bazaar type. This static imagery becomes the accepted or āstika form of the deity. Durgā’s posture, her array of battle implements, even her lion vāhana became frozen with each new generation. However, with the ever-emerging globalization of commerce and interaction new forms of Mahiṣāsuramardinī have developed. Artists in India, both Hindu and not, have used the classic myth as inspiration for abstract reconstruction of the image. Due to the immense popularity and vivid description and representation of feminine strength in the narrative, the image has also been used by various groups outside the region, namely the Europe and the United States, to prescribe new conceptions of strength and power. These images have come under an immense amount of scrutiny from the Hindu right wing movement known collectively as Hindutva. Ultimately, the images from the modern period will illustrate a shift from images about Mahiṣāsuramardinī to images about humanity’s relationship to the divine.

1. Colonial Influence

With the introduction of imperial rule the landscape of art would forever change. Part of the mission of the European powers was to bring culture or culture as they saw it to the natives. So colonial art institutions were constructed and taught the artistic techniques of Realism that had become the base of aesthetics during the Renaissance. Many these schools promoted painting the natural landscapes of the subcontinent and the peoples and due to their religious bent

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50 Use of the term “Modern” of course has certain connotations. In this thesis it refers to the introduction of modern Western artistic techniques that were developed during the Renaissance.

51 Hindutva literally means the essence of Hinduism or “Hindu-ness.”

52 Also called by some art historians “Naturalism.” I have chosen to use the term “Realism” because of the colonial agenda use art to demystify Indians through fine art.
de-emphasized the portrayal of deities or famous mythological narratives as aesthetic ideals. However at this very time an artistic underbelly began to emerge in the bazaars and marketplaces of the masses. With new innovations of printing and reproduction the image of Mahiṣāsuramardini like most images of deities at this time cease to be fluid representations that change with the interpretation of the myths of their existence, but become concrete static images that are proliferated throughout the subcontinent.

We must first begin with the introduction of the new Western aesthetic ideals that were introduced into India through various forms during colonization. New artistic techniques had emerged during the Renaissance that had evolved how images of all sorts were to be represented. The new aesthetic ideal was one of non-theatrics. In this mode, the artist should create an image that would absorb the beholder into the image but remaining only mentally engaged in the scene. This conception of high or privileged art was promoted by Denis Diderot based on Kantian philosophy of aesthetics in which the pleasure you derive from the object is a disinterested pleasure. The beauty of ‘art’ is not logical. It is called beautiful because it allows the beholder to enter into a new world of imagination. The major genre targeted by Diderot was religious iconography. Diderot critiqued religious imagery because it used crude motifs to evoke stock emotions through personal devotion. According to his critique the iconography was not evoking the aesthetic pleasure, but it was only representing something that did evoke emotions. Iconography acknowledged the beholder and interacted with it on a very corporeal realm. It would be experienced not in the Cartesian mind world but in the physiological realm. It was not enjoyed because of imagination but through religious invocation. This new aesthetic theory was accepted by the European Enlightenment philosophers and thus permeated the higher echelons of European society.

This disinterested view of aesthetics was brought to India with the colonizers. The first Western-style art school founded by Charles Malet in the city of Pune in 1798 imported this theory into the subcontinent. This and other schools like it that arose promoted ‘drawing’ natural landscapes and scenes in which the subjects being painted and sculpted did not interact with the audience. While the students of such schools were lauded by Westerners for their grasp of the universal language of art,53 but the productions were not meeting the demands of the masses that sought intimate portrayal of deities. The promotion of the aesthetic ideal was integrally linked

with the intellectual movement from which it came. The rhetoric of demystification that was the cornerstone of the Enlightenment was embedded with the new instruction of artistic technique that taught depth and geometric movement. The goal was to make Indian art more ‘real.’ The new techniques would represent things as they were seen not as they appeared in the Hegelian dream state. They believed that through art they would teach the natives to think scientifically through observation of the phenomenal world. In the words of Richard Temple who wrote in England after retiring from the Bengali Presidency in 1880, “[Art Schools] will teach them one thing, which through all the preceding ages they have never learnt, namely drawing objects correctly, whether figures, landscape or architecture. Such drawing tends to rectify some of their mental faults, to intensify their powers of observation, and to make them understand analytically those glories of nature which they love so well.” An education in artistic production was intended to also educate the Indians out of their mystified construction of life in which the gods and goddesses interacted with the natural phenomenon of the world into the ‘enlightened’ age where the gods and goddesses were to be enjoyed only as an aesthetic.

The images were also under attack by missionaries who saw the abundance of iconography of Indian deities as a major obstacle in the prosylization process. They also sought to de mystify the natives so that along with the ‘higher’ art ‘higher’ religion could also be taught. Christopher Pinney, in his study of printed images of Colonial and Post-Independence India Photos of the Gods, shows the hybrid concerns for the demystification and the prosylization. “Perceiving the great mass of Indians as inhabiting an ‘era before art’ and to be interested in images only as idols, colonial art-educators sought to transform the intimate and interested engagement of the devotee into the disinterested and rationalized response of colonial political subjects to the image as ‘art.’”

Realism, non-theatric European style of imagery took hold in the later part of the 19th century. Its emergence coincided with the rise of the style in Calcutta from the Calcutta School of Art and the Calcutta Art Studio formed by students of the prior. The school used the European techniques blended with Indian sentiments to produce an Indo-realism that depicted deities that

54 Based on Hegelian understanding the goal of representing the phenomenal world would be to show the finite capabilities of our mental conceptions. These were baser than the infinite that was unable to be understood much less represented. The Indian imagery was a step below the finite. It was a world of make believe finity that could only distort and distract from the finite and moreover the infinite. Spurr, David. The Rhetoric of Empire. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 142 ff.
no longer looked into the eyes of the beholder, thus denying the devotee the *darśan* to which she was normally accustomed. The Calcutta school promoted their productions primarily to pilgrims that came to visit Kalighat. The Calcutta Art Studio had incorporated new lithographic technology and where able to produce higher quality more affordable prints than the traditional Kalighat *patta* wood block prints;\(^{57}\) so their images became quite popular with the pilgrims. The pilgrims played an important historical role in the development of this style of art because they would return home with the image, and lithographic Realism was then introduced to a variety of regions.

Realism reproduced through lithograph was soon nearly monopolized by an artist from Bombay, Ravi Varma (1848-1906). Varma had become an accomplished Realist artist during the 1870s. His works were displayed both in India and in Europe. However in 1894, he founded the Ravi Varma Fine Art Press and began reproducing his works. His prints became renowned for their precision and beauty. An important characteristic of work is the use realistic colors and movement while depicting mythological scenes. He also kept with the European aesthetic ideal in which the scene was free of interaction with the audience and the deities kept their gaze within the scene. Balendranath Tagore, Varma’s contemporary and famous art critique of late 19th century India, praised the naturalism of Varma in regards to anatomy and landscape over that of the Kalighat and Calcutta Art Studio especially his mastery over the emotion or *bhava* that illustrated the same aesthetic ideal of the Diderotian disinterest but in an intrinsically Indian way. Due to the vast popularity of Varma’s works and their permeation into the society and culture, accepted by both European and Indian classicists, many of his representations became the standard form of iconographical representation.

His image of Mahiṣāsuramardini is no different. His representation of Durgā’s epic battle with Mahiṣa is portrayed in *Ashtabhuja Devi*. (Figure 4.1) Durgā is clad in royal regalia: a bejeweled crown sits majestically on hear head, adorned with pearl necklace and rings received from Prajāpati, each of her eight arms have three bangles. She sits upon her lion vehicle (*vahana*) in whose mouth the fallen Mahiṣa lies holding the *vajra* of Indra, *triśūla* of Śiva, *cakra* of Viṣṇu, and *khadga* of Kāla\(^{58}\) on her right side with the sword held high ready to strike the subdued demon. Her left hands are holding another demon whose fate is surely met. The

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\(^{57}\) Ibid. 26.

\(^{58}\) Scepter, trident, discus, and sword respectively, all given by the deities in the narrative of her incarnation in the *Devī Mahātmya* 2.8-34.
mudrās that had once been a vital portion of the image when used in ritual settings are now absent. The portrayal of Mahiṣa is very mundane. The demon is represented in human form. Lying beside him is a buffalo whose head has been severed from its body. Mahiṣa’s gaze is fixed upon the goddess with an expression of pure horror. The entire scene could be confused with a representation of an historical event but for the eight arms of Durgā. The scene truly captures the ‘real’ aesthetic of the era.

The line of sight of each of the characters requires further discussion. The protagonist of the image and her lion both fix their gaze on a point outside the scene. They both look away from the demons not giving them the auspicious ritual of darśan, but also not engaging the audience. Their eyes move the beholder away from their faces toward the action. Yet there gaze is not on the action. It is fixed on some abstract point that has a transcendental referent but is extremely humanizing in contrast to the other forms iconography and imagery that is intended for use in the ritual setting in which the deities gaze at the beholder compliments the super-real supernatural setting. The demons, however, are looking directly at their slayer in awe of her. The demon within the clutches of her left hands resembles a supplicant devotee seeking mercy from the goddess. Their line of sight moves the beholder back to the deity. The image like those of Western aesthetic ideals leads the viewer around the image, not locking them into an experience with it.

The mass-production of lithography and chromolithography that permeated the subcontinent during this era both from the Varma Press and others who reduplicated his works made her iconography concrete throughout the whole region where devotees all had access to a standardized version of the mythological event. The production of non-theatric representation of the deity through Realism declined after reaching its apex in the early 20th century with the popularity of the Ravi Varma Fine Arts Press. But the images produced by this juggernaut of Realist imagery have had a lasting influence on the iconographical representation of Mahiṣāsuramardinī in bazaar and calendar art in India. A near exact replica of the Ravi Varma Press Ashtabhuja Devi image of Mahiṣāsuramardinī again resurfaced in Kanpur as a popular bazaar print in 1940 reproductions of Rup Kishor Kapur and Kalicharan’s Mahamaya Shakti. (Figure 4.2) The image was altered slightly and is discussed below in regards to the

independence movement. Mass reproduced images from this era became a Pan-Indian language that is able to unite the subcontinent with a sense of iconographic canon of legitimacy of Pan-Hinduism.\textsuperscript{60}

The technical innovations of Realism, however, did not have the desired results of demystifying the Hindu imaginary. As the techniques changed to make the deities less intimate and more ‘real,’ so too did the interpretation of the deities. The deities were swept away from the mythological realm and could now be seen in very ‘real’ forms. The techniques were able to give the devotee an observable truly anthropomorphic deity. As Pinney shows the increasingly allegorical nature of mythological art did not translate into Indian society. Instead, it translated into what he calls ‘magical realism.’\textsuperscript{61} Magical realism produces characters that perform supernatural actions yet exist in a very natural world. It incorporates all the geometric movement and symbols but it surpasses the symbolism to become a reality for the audience. For Pinney, the slippage of realism into magical realism is comes from the instable power by which the colonized Indians based their authority. The power of the Europeans was ‘nature,’ but by forcing these European techniques onto the Indians the power was mitigated and rested in the Colonial middleman. Thus, the art “no longer signifies ‘nature’ in the same direct way but comes, instead, to signify the genre of picture-making to which it refers. It becomes a sign of itself.” Pinney calls this phenomenon where something loses its basis and signifies only itself ‘xeno-real.’

The resultant form of imagery is type of ‘bazaar art’ and ‘calendar art’ that incorporates the techniques that present the deities amongst the natural landscape and with lines and that invoke the ‘realness’ of the divine. The Post-Enlightenment ideals of demystification and the pre-colonial devotional images are mixing into the brushstrokes producing a hybrid vernacular of imagery. Kajri Jain states, “[Bazaar art] highlights the tensions between traditions of secular and devotional reason: between the ocularcentric treatment of images as vehicles of linguistic ideation and the “blindness” of faith or the power of facticity.”

This hybridized form becomes the basis for much of the bazaar imagery of Mahiśāsuramardini. Many of these are still based on the image of Ashtabhuja Devī originally produced by the Ravi Varma Press. In the can be seen in popular bazaar paintings in the late 20\textsuperscript{th}

\textsuperscript{60} Jain, \textit{Gods in the Bazaar}, 80

century ranging from batik style painting of Mahiṣāsuramardinī by S.M. Krishna (Figure 4.3) and a widely circulated calendar images. (Figure 4.4) The techniques of production both vary greatly from the Varma Print, but the image remains true to the Realist original.

The batik technique of waxing and dying fabric produces a less natural image, but the lines of movement are the same. The eyes of the viewer are moved down the image following the diagonal of the trident culminating in the countermovement into the eyes of the deity. The eyes of the Durgā and her lion though have been shifted. They now look directly at the asura. This simple shift of gaze alters the emotions of the image. No longer does the image abstract stare invoke the transcendent but engages her adversary completely as she pierces him with her trident. Durgā is dressed in the same red sari and blouse in which Ravi Varma had dressed the goddess over three quarters of a century earlier (Figure 4.1), but the goddess has two additional arms which have been adorned with more of the weapons bestowed upon by the devas in the narrative of her incarnation in the Devī Mahātmya. The image has also been updated to appeal to the modern consumer. Both Durgā and Mahiṣa have hairstyles that are more reminiscent of 1970s Bollywood than of classical mythos. By updating the actors in the image, they are presented as natural humanized beings. As in the Ashtabhuja Devī and Mahamaya Shakti, the buffalo lies beside but physically unconnected to Mahiṣa as two separate entities.

The calendar form of the image is in many ways more similar to the original image. Mahiṣāsuramardinī holds one demon by the hair as her lion bites into the flesh of Mahiṣa. Her eyes are fixed on the abstract transcendental referent, but the lion stares at the flesh of the demon he is consuming (exactly opposite Mahamaya Shakti). This image illustrates ‘magical realism’ wonderfully. Though, Durgā is though he is portrayed naturally (as naturally as one with multiple arms can be) she still rests in the divine, casting her auspicious gaze beyond the scope of the real-ness of the surrounding landscape covered with vegetation or the terrible demons. The lion is made ‘real’ through his interaction not with an abstract referent or the viewer but by on-looking as he engages Mahiṣa. Durgā, as in the batik, has additional arms, 18 in all, holding additional weapons from the devas. This shows a progression of complexity of image that develops with the concept of the deity, just as it did in the classical representations of Mahiṣāsuramardinī. As the deity becomes more divinized and moved further into the ‘magical real’ understanding the image shifts to incorporate the interpretation.
The Renaissance inspired Realism that was imported into India with its Post-Enlightenment agenda served to forever shift the image of Mahiṣāsuramardinī and a new type emerged as the centrifugal component of her iconographical representation during the Modern period. The image was transformed through the European interaction was not demystified and sweep into the annals of classical Indian culture. Rather the contact with European techniques formed a new reality of the image that was both natural and divine. She was much more immanent than previously. The immanence of Mahiṣāsuramardinī’s imagery was poised to impact the not only the religious sphere but also the socio-political arena. The interpretation of the goddess herself would soon undergo a very similar transformation in the hands of Indians that would use the ‘real’ aspect of her new identity to incite emotions of Indian and nation.

2. Political Appropriations

New European art techniques and aesthetic ideals also brought along with it a political ideology of independence and revolution. This ideology that was inherent in the individuality of the artistic creation worked in conjunction with the recent visualization of the traditional culture represented in image as an Indian history. Realism had merged the mythical image into the new Indian self-identity. The art that was produced reconciled the modern individual with the mythical past forming a continuum of identity. Thus, iconography became a palette from which exemplary models of independent Indians could be formed. Mahiṣāsuramardinī’s iconography represents not only the model for Indians but also the ideal of the nation. Forming a dual identity in which the divine, individual, and state exists in a theoretical continuum in which each represents the fate and fortune of the other.

The earliest form of the modern political usages comes not in visual iconography but in the form of literary account. The widely read and acclaimed Indian author Bankimchandra Chatterji represents the image in Ṇandamath. Ṇandamath was published in 1882 and quickly became a classic. The novel portrays a monastery in which a group of revolutionaries have joined forces to overthrow the Muslim rulers that controlled Bengal during the 1770 famine. The novel is filled with nationalist sentiments and contains the hymn Vande Mataram that eventually became the national anthem of independent India. The text in its time was a pseudo-historical account of the sanyāsanas’ rebellion, but it also acts as a prescriptive model for the expulsion of the British Raj. The portrayal of the triple modes of identity formation is evident within the
story. The image has a pivotal role in the formation of identity of nation for the protagonist Mahendra and prototype for the character Shanti’s transformation of self-identity into a female monk warrior in the second part of the novel.

The identity of the world as goddess, Bhumī Māta, is a common theme throughout mythological tales; however, the beginning with Chatterji, India is portrayed in iconographic form. The original conception of India as deity, as described by Chatterji, was a muteable image that would take different forms given her relationship with her people. The image was portrayed on two levels the cosmic level, where the deity remained steadfast not dependent on mortals for her quality of life and the manifested form that was represented in three stages.

At first Mahendra was unable to see what was a massive four-armed statue bearing a conch shell, discus, mace, and lotus, respectively, in each hand, with the Kaustubha gem adorning its breast, and discus Sudarshan seeming to whirl around in front. Two great, headless forms, painted as if bathed in blood, representing the demons Madhu and Kaitabha, stood in front of the image. On its left stood a terrified-looking Lakshmi, flowed hair disheveled, and adorned with a garland of lotuses. On the right stood Sarasvati, surrounded by books, musical instruments, the various musical modes personified, and other objects. At the very top above Vishnu’s head, on a raised dais studded with many jewels sat an enchanting image more beautiful and glorious than Lakshmi and Sarasvati.  

The monk then goes on to explain that that image of the goddess is of whom they were all born. This is the cosmic manifestation of the deity flanked on each side Lakṣmi and Sarasvatī. The representation of the three cosmic devīs normally represents Kalī as the third of the transcendent set. Here, the cosmic goddess has been interpreted to be not the wild uncontrollable manifestation of Kalī, but as the slayer of the demons, Madhu and Kaitabha. The two brother demons are well known in Hindu mythology as those that attempt to disrupt Brahma as he creates the cosmos. The demons are typically represented as having been slain by the cosmic deity Viṣṇu; however, within the Devī Māhātmyam in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, the story is reinterpreted to include the Goddess of Sleep, Yoganidrā, as the true source of destruction of the demons. This narrative is situated just before the narrative of Mahiṣa in the Devī Māhātmyam and leads to iconographical and narrative confusion, as in the painting Ashtabhuja Devi by Ravi Varma, where the goddess who slays the buffalo demon is simultaneously slaying the demons, Madhu and Kaitabha and in a popular Oriyan narrative it is due to embarrassment caused by the

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devas that Durgā upon slaying Mahiṣa transformed into Kali destroying everything in her path. Thus, the image portrayed by Chatterji is a version of the goddess, Mahiṣāsuramardinī, subduing the enemy demons.

The melding of iconographical images of the mother continues as the monk explains that the former manifestation of the goddess is the goddess as bearer of the earth. “She who subdued the wild beast and set up on her lotus throne in their dwelling place. She was happy and beautiful, adorned with every ornament, radiant as the risen sun and full of majesty.” As the monk continues his explanation of the life of the deity, Mahendra was taken to the next image that represented the goddess as she then existed, Kali, “Blackened and shrouded in darkness. She has been robbed of everything; that is why she is naked. And because the whole land is a burning-ground, she is garlanded with skulls. And she’s crushing her own gracious Lord underfoot.” Lastly, Mahendra was lead to the final image the one that represented the future glory of the goddess. “And this is the Mother-as-she-will-be. Her ten arms reach out in ten directions, adorned with various powers in the form of the different weapons she holds, the enemy crushed at her feet, while the mighty lion who has taken refuge there is engaged in destroying the foe.” This image is obviously a representation of Mahiṣāsuramardinī astride her lion vanquishing the demon Mahiṣa. All of the images above, are allegories for India in stages of her history. Docile and serene yet majestic, Bharatā Mā represents the newly formed concept of the historical golden age of Hinduism that began aeons ago and continued until the Muslim invaders had overtaken the land. The image of Kali, as is so eloquently described, shows India in a state of degradation having been plundered by the outsiders. Lastly, Chatterji, through the voice of the monk Satyananda, prescribes a free unrestrained India that vanquishes the imperial enemy, be it Muslim or English, to regain the glories of the past in the form of Mahiṣāsuramardinī. In another Chatterji novel, Ghare Baire, the character Bimala states explicitly that if she were to envision the India as a goddess, she believed Durgā would represent the majesty and glory, along with the strength that the personification ought to embody.

European revolutionary art like Delacroix’s “La France” in Liberty Leading the People to

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64 Chatterji, Anandamath, 150.
65 Chatterji, Anandamath, 150
66 Chatterji, Anandamath, 150.
Victory (Figure 4.5) presumably played an important role in his representation of the mighty goddess waging war over the former oppressor.

Chatterji also portrays the image as it comes to life in the character of Shanti. Shanti is the wife of one of the warrior monks that has taken up in the Anandamaññ to fight against the Muslims. After being alone for some time, Shanti left home in order to find her husband. Upon which her husband, Jibananda, equates her to the country, “On one side there is duty, wealth, pleasure, salvation, the concerns of this world, my vow and its religious rites. All this on one side- and on the other, there’s you- you alone! And I can never work out which is weightier! Shanti, you are my country.”  This leads to a transformation of Shanti from a woman destitute and deshevelled to one who is trained in the arts of weaponry and Sanskrit following the same path as the images from the first part of the novel. Chatterji uses this character to bridge the gap of divine and human intersecting it through the nation-goddess. He melds his conception of the modern Indian woman that was influenced by social movements, namely the Brahmo Samaj into the divine prescribing an active role for women in the battle for an independent India.

Bankim Chatterji, through his fictional and political writings, also heavily influenced an emerging school of Indian art in the international artistic world that would coincide with the rise of Victorian Realism to prominence in the spiritual marketplace. Chatterji’s iconographical form of the goddess was heavily influenced by the Kalighat representations of Mahiśāsuramardini. He wrote from his Bengali home near the Kalighat temple in which the folk technique of painting was still very much the preferred mode and produced a large amount of Mahiśāsuramardini for saktas (devotees of the goddess). His equation of the image of the buffalo slayer in return inspired a political leader, Radindranath Tagore, and his artist nephew, Abanindranath creator of the original Bharata Ma. The Tagore family, whom were also from Bengal, were also strong proponents of independence. Rabindranath was a philosopher who wrote on a variety of topic including a theory of Indian aesthetics. It was important to Tagore that Indians were able to draw from of their own past casting off the European influence. He denounced the Realist school that followed the style that Ravi Varma had popularized through acclaim and lithographic reproduction as imperialized Victorian imitations. Rabindranath Tagore also lamented the static state of iconography arguing that in the past the images were mutable:

68 Chatterji, Anandamath, 166.
If it is a fact that some standard of invariable formalism has for ages been following the course of the arts in India, making it possible for them to be classified as specially Indian, then it must be confessed that the creative mind which inevitably breaks out in individual variations has lain dead or dormant for those centuries. All traditional structures of art must have sufficient degree of elasticity to allow it to respond to varied impulses of life....This tragedy whose outrage we realize in the latter-day Sanskrit literature and in the conventional arts and crafts of India, where the mind is helplessly driven by a blind ghost of the past.  

The latter Sanskrit texts which he refers to must have been the formalizing of image creation contained in the śīlpaśāstras which I have argued was then transferred to formalization through mass production.

Abanindranath built off of his uncle’s theory and began a school of Indian art that promoted subaltern paintings promoting the use of raw emotion in the production of images. Using indigenous techniques, that included Kalighat, Rajput, and Mughal techniques, Abanindranath Tagore moved away from the European style to produce something that was inherently Indian. Amongst these were many images of India as a nation-goddess. The Tagore school centered in Calcutta would eventually become the more prized than the Realist school in the international artistic community because of the kitsch emotion was incorporated into the magico-real mythological scenes and because the attitude that the Realist images of India were simply imitations of a European technique became widely accepted amongst the independence movement. Modern painters like Tyeb Mehta and Maqbool Fida Husain are descendents of this school’s ability to capture Indian emotion.

The Realist school was also producing images of the nation represented by Mahiṣāsuramardini. One of these was Rup Kishor Kapur and Kalicharan’s Mahamaya Shakti (Figure 4.2). Mahamaya Shakti is a reproduction and repainting of Ravi Varma’s earlier painting Ashtabhuja Devi that was mass-produced and distributed widely across India. Due to its immense popularity, the two artists reworked and reintroduced the image to gain fuel for the liberation of India. In order to understand the importance of the image in the political sphere it is necessary to briefly summarize some previous works by Rup Kishor Kapur and Kalicharan. Rup Kishor Kapur (1893-1978) had become a political artist several years before the 1940’s Mahamaya Shakti. He had been inspired by the execution of Bhagat Singh the founder of the Hindustan Socialist Republic who had been executed by firing squad following demonstrations against the British. Thus inspired, Kapur began painting images of Bhagat Singh. One of which,

Sardar Bhagat Singh’s Wonderful Presentation, portrays the martyr presenting his head to Bharata Mata like the legendary devotee Dhyau Bhagat had done to the Goddess in mythic lore. However, as the British began to curtail the production of anti-colonial art, the production of images translated the frustration and rage into allegory. It was during this transitional period that Kalicharan came to study under Kapur. Kalicharan was from the former princely state of Jhansi. Jhansi had been home to one of the Indian leaders that had most heavily resisted British Rule. The state was eventually led into battle by the queen (ranī). The Ranī of Jhansi had become an icon of Indian Independence and a model for national strength. The Kapur’s longing for revenge for fallen Bhagat Singh and Kalicharan’s image of the Ranī converged to produce from the former Varma print an allegorical Bharatā Māta slaying the British Raj. The image was reproduced and plastered around India encouraging the expulsion of the British.

Post Independence, the image of Mahiṣāsuramardini continued to be used in the political realm. Usually the comparison between politicians and deities is reserved to spoken associations, but as early as 1966 when Indira Gandhi was elected as the Prime Minister of Indian by the Congress Party women political leaders have been depicted in connection with Mahiṣāsuramardini. As a symbol of strong national power artists depicted Indira Gandhi as Durgā astride her lion vanquishing her foes. Indira Gandhi viewed the allegory to be representative of the task of being both woman and Prime Minister. “I am riding on the back of a tiger…I do not mind the tiger killing me, but I do not know how to get off its back.”70 After declaring 1975 State of Emergency, this depiction was used by artist Maqbool Husain to demonstrate her level of corruption seated upon her tiger spreading destruction and blood all over the nation. The construction of her identity through that of the mythological past places her within the divine-mundane continuum associating her with the golden age of Hinduism just as the creation of Bhāratā Mātā did for the nation. Indira Gandhi was also displayed in the form of the geography of the nation which redefines the axis of the relationship within the context of a secular democracy with the woman as the centrifugal figure connecting divinity to humanity and humanity to the nation. The image helped to legitimate her as a feminine ruler amongst the Hindu constituency; however, as the Husain painting portrays it was alienating to many non-Hindus.

In 1998 during India’s national parliamentary election and 25th anniversary of her party Jayalalitha Jayaram, the former Chief minister of Tamil Nadu, was portrayed as Mahiṣāsuramardinī triumphant over the then Chief Minister M.K. Karunanidhi from the opposition (Figure 4.6). In the image, Jayalalitha is portrayed as a hybrid between Kali and Mahiṣāsuramardinī continuing the confusion that was present in Bankim Chatterji’s representation of the two. She is pictured again triumphant over the enemy with her trident piercing Karunanidhi whom she crushes beneath her feet as her lion watches on roaring to the on-looking crowd. Garlanded with a necklace of plethora severed heads that resemble Karunanidhi and adorned with a skirt made of arms, Jayalalitha stares off in to the landscape reminiscent of the abstract gaze of Ravi Varma’s and subsequent representation of Mahiṣāsuramardinī. This example more so than many others displays quite explicitly the bridge that was constructed as a result of the continuum of nation-goddess-woman. Jayalalitha has taken on the divine attributes of the deity representing the power of India against those (as Jayalalitha views it) that would oppress her.

Jayalalitha, a sannyāsinī and former Bollywood star seems comfortable with the correlation with divinity. Her image as Kalī/Mahiṣāsuramardinī is not the only time that Jayalalitha has been represented as a sacred icon. After becoming Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 1991, the former film star was depicted as Ānapūrṇā, Draupādī, and Kṛṣṇa. But it was the depiction of her as the Virgin Mary on Christmas 1994 in Madras that is most important to the present discussion. This incident that was subsequently protested by Indian Christians pushes into the limelight the rights of outsiders to appropriate images that do not ‘belong’ to their group. The question of ownership of the image is indubitably reflected in the demands from the Christians that Jayalalitha’s usage was inappropriate.

In 2007, Sonia Gandhi a political leader in the Congress Party in India, the major voice of opposition against the Right Wing Hindu political campaigns, was portrayed as Mahiṣāsuramardinī in campaign posters across the Moradabad District in Uttar Pradesh. (Figure 4.7) This representation was created using a very traditional realist portrayal of the deity with the politicians face superimposed onto the body of the goddess. The depiction itself was much more traditional than the usage of Jayalalitha’s campaign. However, Gandhi’s usage came under

an immense amount of scrutiny culminating on June 24, 2007 when a suit was filed in the court of Chief Judicial Magistrate D. P. Singh’s court by Sudhir Ojha claiming that Sonia Gandhi and her managers violated Indian Penal Codes sections 295.A. (deliberate and malicious act intended to outrage the religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs), 298 (utterance with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings) and 120.B. (criminal conspiracy).

The Congress party refused to issue an apology claiming that the posters were works of art and were forced to fire their Moradabad District Chief Ajay Saraswat Soni after several posters were found in their headquarters. This incident highlights the claims to rightful use of the image. The Hindu Right filed this lawsuit based on penal codes aimed at protecting one religious group from another, but Sonia Gandhi is a Hindu. The grounds for the suit are not a religious debate but a political one. The image of the goddess as it has become a cultural symbol has become a political commodity. The suit against Gandhi and not Jayalalitha displays that religious affiliation is no longer the litmus test of who can or cannot use the representation rather it is the affiliation with the construct of the righteous Hindu kingdom of the past that the image and ones like it have come to represent. If the image is incorporated by groups that seek to use it as a symbol of pan-Indic culture this immediately excludes them from proper usage by the far Right.

The image of Mahiṣāsuramardinī has made an impact on Nepalese politics as well. The Kingdom of Nepal is currently the only Hindu nation and has had a constant lineage of monarchs since the British period. Through several coups and revolutions the position of the king has always remained even if only as a figure head. The position of the king is reconfirmed every year during the celebration of Durgā Pūja (Dasain). Durgā is the main deity of the Tantric Hinduism that is practiced in Kathmandu. She is associated with her most fierce form, slaying the buffalo demon. On the tenth and final day of Durgā Pūja, which celebrates Durgā’s victory over Mahiṣa, Mahiṣāsuramardinī, represented by only a sword, is brought to confer power over the monarch. She is viewed as his śakti giving him strength by vanquishing his foe. During this ceremony of conference, a prepubescent girl representing the other important manifestation of the Goddess, Kumarī places a red mark (tika) on the king symbolizing Durgā’s protection over the kingdom. This ritual mark is the exclusive right of the king and divinely legitimizes his rule.

The image of Mahiṣāsuramardinī, whether appropriated into the Independence movement as Mother India, by a politician in her own form, or by a monarch represented by only a sword, has been mined for usage like no other image in modern Indian and Nepalese politics. The modern usage of the image in the political sphere is quite similar to the appropriation made by the Hindu Javanese discussed in Chapter III, using the power and popularity of the image to authorize and legitimate a ruler or dynasty within the locus of power; however, the formation of the new Indian identity shifts the axis to the divine and the democratic establishment changes the connection. These appropriations take place in, and sometimes, despite the static system of imagery that has permeated the marketplace economy. It demonstrates the resonance of the ‘real’ in the image that can easily shift into the mundane world through anyone. In Java and Nepal, the kings’ rule is legitimized through association with the deity, established in a divine hierarchy to the mythological ancestors that is totemic in nature. The royal dynasty is established to a mythological lineage much like the religions described by sociologist Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The new Indian continuum places the Enlightenment theories, partially acquired through European art, of individual and democracy into the equation making it possible for every individual to rise to power and be connected to the divine lineage.

### 3. Social Appropriations

Even social causes have sought to appropriate the Mahiṣāsuramardinī image to their cause. These causes have ranged considerably but the majority has been in support of women’s right/feminism. The appropriation of the image is used in and outside of India by Hindus and Non-Hindus alike. This section will focus on the organizations and the causes that have incorporated the image into their understanding of their issue and how it had transformed within the group. The usages of images of Durgā for social purposes, as well as other Hindu deities, have undergone a large extent of scrutiny from Hindus. The scrutiny of the image is seems to be directly linked to the history of the images incorporation by the ‘West’ that emerged in the marketplace setting and has been proliferated in the globalized setting. In the early 20th century European companies made wide use of sacred Hindu images to market their wares in the Indian marketplaces and bazaars. Products subsequently emerged from Indian origin that did much the

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same. Today, it is commonplace to enter an Indian bazaar or market in Indian or abroad and see products ranging from incense to *dal* with the images of deities plastered in the background or as the brand name. However, there is a push by groups such as the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (The Organization for the Awakening of Hindus) to limit the usage of such images by non-Hindus. Followers of such movements have even gone as far as calling for the VHP to patent Hindu religious icons. In many cases the usages of images is not all that unlike the usage of the symbols and icons by many Hindus. The discrepancy concerning the acceptability of usage arises from the Hindu constructed identity built out of the colonial and Islamic periods of subordination. The ‘outsiders’ use of the image for any purpose let alone one that potentially mines profit from Indians by use of an Indian symbol or icon conjures into the collective sentiments colonial oppression. Previously, the ‘outsiders’ took the natural and physical resources that India had to offer and exported them to accumulate mass amounts of wealth while India and Indians were left without. In modernity, with colonial empires being relegated to history books, the mining of resources shifted to intellectual properties that could be used to promote various agendas and ideology neglecting the tradition and proper usage of the idea or image. Western appropriations of these images, whether for monetary or ideological profit, continue the tradition of pillaging Indian resources. As with physical colonization, there is both good and bad that arise from the appropriation of such images. For our purposes the discussion will be slanted toward the uses such as by feminist organizations were the profit is non-monetary but ideological and psychological. The Bengali Women’s Support Group due to its complexity of inter-identities provides a good case study of this issue.

The first of organization to be discussed is the Bengali Women’s Support Group, which was established in 1986 in Sheffield, England by Debjani Chatterjee and Safuran Ara “as a self-help group for local Bangladeshi women suffering isolation and disadvantage. The organization aims to train women from Bangladesh to live within the English community as independent individuals forming there own identity and “self-worth.” They are all taught vital skills such as the English language, health care, and parenting skills. The group is established as a religiously plural community that seeks to aid women of all beliefs. The group helps many

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75 See the Defamations link on the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti’s Website for several examples. [http://www.hindujagruti.org/denigrations/](http://www.hindujagruti.org/denigrations/)
76 Dates and much of the organizational information was taken from the Bengali Women’s Group Website. [http://www.intro.org.uk/BengaliWomensGroup](http://www.intro.org.uk/BengaliWomensGroup)
different Bengali women of various religious traditions many of whom are Muslim. The group promotes the religious festivals of all religious affiliation; yet they draw from the imagery and narrative of Mahiṣāṣuramardinī to help establish the ability and strength of women. “Alongside our Eid and Christmas festivities, our Group also celebrates Durgā Puja — the most important festival in the Bengali Hindu calendar and a potent reminder of the presence of shakti in our lives. Mother Durgā herself, with her combination of grace and power, is an abiding symbol of Bengali feminism. Riding on a lion and slaying the buffalo-demon, Mahishasura, Durgā inspires us to harness our own shakti and discover its unlimited potential.”

Durgā is viewed through the lens of sakti, the divine feminine power, which is said in text like the Devī Māhātmyam to abide in all women. To Chatterjee the symbol of Mahiṣāṣuramardinī is an indigenous form of Indian, particularly Bengali, feminism. The claim of Indian identity in this situation is enough for the Bengali Women’s Support Group to legitimately use the image. To Chatterjee the symbol is not only a religious symbol used only in conjunction with the Hindu belief system, but transcends that distinction as a cultural symbol that can equally inspire a Muslim women of Bengali descent. The association to the cultural past is able to overcome the religious boundary of the image and construct an uncontested usage of the image by Muslim women living in England.

Others agree that Durgā as Mahiṣāṣuramardinī is a rich resource for all women to use to show an ancient tradition of feminine divinity that has remained a living tradition. Many ethnographers have undertaken the task trying to examine the impact of living goddess traditions in the lives of the women in the tradition. As the Bengali Women’s Group shows the image of Mahiṣāṣuramardinī can have an uplifting message of strength and independence to women who are familiar with the narrative. But there is also evidence that images and conceptions of goddesses have no direct impact on the female devotees. There seems to be no conclusive evidence for either side of the argument. Much of the discourse concerns women who are in the tradition within India. Images of Hindu goddesses have also been introduced in Western societies as symbols of women’s power and adopted by feminist organizations with little

attention paid to their effectiveness. The efficacy of Western appropriations of the goddess was amongst the topics explored within a collection of scholarly essays titled, *Is the Goddess a Feminist?* that explored the possibilities of goddesses from the South Asian subcontinent and their applicability to women universally as an ancient symbol of womanhood. Cynthia A. Humes discusses within her essay “Is the *Devi Mahatmya* a Feminist Scripture?” the likelihood of the goddesses from the *Devī Māhātmyam* affecting the lives of women both from South Asia and abroad. She concludes, rightfully so, that these goddesses including Mahiṣāsuramardinī can be useful to feminists that seek to excavate the text for potential, but that the text is not inherently feminist. Brenda Dobia in the same collection sees the text slightly differently. In “Seeking Ma, Seeking Me,” Dobia states, “It seems to me that a good heroine story such as is presented in the *Devi Mahatmya* cannot help but influence our perspective on power relations between the genders, and this at the very least.” The postulations of both Dobia and Humes are applicable to the use of Mahiṣāsuramardinī. The image is not an inherently feminist icon, but contains the raw potentiality to be transformed by any feminist into a symbol of universal feminine power.

Perhaps the earliest such appropriation of an image of a Hindu goddess by a Western feminist group was in the Premiere issue of *Ms. Magazine* that featured a modern interpretation of Durgā, who was explained within the magazine as the goddess that slays the buffalo demon making it a representation of Mahiṣāsuramardinī. (Figure 4.8) *Ms. Magazine* was first conceived by Gloria Steinem (b. 1934) who at the time was writing for *New York Magazine.* When the Spring 1972 premiere issue of *Ms.* was first published in December of 1971 as a sample insert in *New York Magazine,* it became the first major publication that sought to address women’s issue that were outside of marital life and fashion. Since the magazine has upheld its views writing for women, about women, and on issues that concern them. Gloria Steinem after graduating from Smith College in 1956 won a fellowship to spend two years studying in India and even writing an Indian travel guide *A Thousand Indias* (1958) commissioned by the Delhi government. Her experience in India greatly influenced her usage of Hindu imagery and rhetoric. The particular representation that was featured on the cover of the magazine depicted an eight-armed goddess holding the ‘implements’ of American women: an iron, steering wheel,

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80 By ‘Western,’ I refer to European and American appropriations not as an all inclusive term that only excludes the Orient.
81 Dates and much of the organizational information is taken from Ms. Magazine’s Website http://msmagazine.com
mirror, telephone, watch, feather duster, frying pan, and typewriter. She is adorned with the regalia of the time, a wine colored summer dress and red high-heeled shoes. The goddess displays those weapons that have been given to her. The image shows the female accomplishing many tasks at once displaying her ability to multitask. In the womb of the goddess, there is a child illuminated by a brilliant halo of gold and amber rays. Durgā is standing alongside her vehicle the lion, but the lion is transformed into the companion of the American women, the domesticated cat. The image portrayed in a folk style bursts with emotion as the azure deity weeps softly as she carries out her work contrasted to the bright and passionate red background. The icon is depicted in a mythological setting devoid of the ‘natural’ elements that were displayed in the Victorian Realist iconography. Though truly existing in the transcendent realm the deity is encumbered by the weight of her menial tasks prohibiting her to reach her divine potential. The title of the article adds to the sense of frustration with the task calling for the “Housewife’s Moment of Truth.” This image led Rachel Lehmann-Haupt to dub Mahiṣāsuramardinī ‘Feminism’s first supermodel.’

A much more recent and nuanced usage of the imagery of Mahiṣāsuramardinī is in the film Vanaja. The film was written and directed by Rajnesh Domalpalli as his MFA thesis at Columbia University. It tells of a young low caste girl, Vanaja, who undergoes trials and struggles at every turn. The girl, played by Mamatha Bhukya, cultivates her inner discipline while practicing Kuchipudi dance from a former great. Kuchipudi, named after the Brahmin jāti that traditionally performed it, is a classical Andhra Pradesh dance style that shares many characteristics with bharatnatyam. The very instruction that Vanaja receives leads to the struggle- a low caste girl learning a Brahmin art form. As various struggles emerge including Vanaja being raped by the much older son of her instructor, Vanaja is able to overcome them all with a resilience that at points seems superhuman if not supernatural. In the last scene, Vanaja performs her dance, seated in front of one of her tormentors she performs the Kuchipudi dance to the Mahiṣāsuramardinī Stotram played in Carnatic style. The symbolism of the dance invoked by Domalpalli demonstrates the potentiality for the image. The clear swift motions of the dance with Vanaja physically depicting the movements of Mahiṣāsuramardinī as she engages the demon reflect the emotions and struggle which Vanaja endured at the hands of her own demons.

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She, as the Goddess in the narrative, overcomes those obstacles with the decisive pierce of the trišula. (Figure 4.9) Domalpalli taps into the bridge between the religious and mundane realms and displays the ability of Goddess-like qualities that Vanaja possesses. Though written by a student of Indian descent and performed in Tegulu, the film is produced and marketed for a Western, primarily American, audience. Domalpalli’s representation of Mahišāsuramardinī is one that is moving and contains a strength that transcends religious, regional, and linguistic restrictions. In an interview with Passion For Cinema.com, Domalpalli explains that he wanted the film to be piece that influenced the lives of the audience to affect their daily lives and their actions against injustices, such as rape. It is clear that the imagery of Mahišāsuramardinī is being evoked as a source of feminine power to which Vanaja was connected.

However, not all interpretations deem the image as an empowering image for women. Madhu Khanna has argued that the image of Mahišāsuramardinī is a production of the patriarchal and Brahmanical myth that masculinized the deity. She argues that Mahišāsuramardinī has actually high-jacked an indigenous gynocentric ritual of Durgā Pūja. She discusses the modern celebration of Nāvaratrī, in which Durgā is worshipped as the preserver of the universe, especially in her form as Mahišāsuramardinī. Madhu Khanna argues that an ecological framework can be recovered from the ancient ritual could affect the declining ecological situation of India. This essay is quite informative about the practices that take place throughout the nine nights of Nāvaratrī and into the tenth. She illustrates how many of the practices and mantras recited show the earth’s association with the feminine based on the goddesses association with various plants and fruits. However, as she aptly points out, much of this association has been wiped out by the emergence and emphasis of Durgā as the buffalo slayer during the festival. Modern Bengali multiplicity of the image in various forms with prizes for the most creative exemplifies this shift She states that the acceptance of this image shifted the ritual from an indigenous culture that was more concerned with the fertility of the land and placed a higher priority on the traditionally viewed feminine roles of nurturing and the production of life to a warrior-based culture concerned more with power and virility. This will leads her to the conclusion that the more Brahminical regal Durgā Pūja takes away from the

environmental ethos more than it adds to it.

As in many ancient cultures the pre-Aryan influenced India seems to have had a heavy reliance on the earth and her fertility to provide for the civilizations. Evidence of this is the proliferation of ceramic female figures that pervade the Indus Valley civilization. The fact that the inhabitants of this civilizations lived in fertile river valleys in fortified cities with large granaries also suggest they where non-nomadic agricultural people. Also, the possibility of indigenous elements of herbal remedies that found a home in the *Atharvaveda* shows a deep connection with nature as the cure. It is also somewhat widely accepted that goddesses that reside in trees and stones are most likely remnants of this agriculturally based culture.

However, the stories that popularize Durgā as Mahiṣāsuramardinī, both the *Devī Māhātmyam* and the other Puranic tales, seek to firmly establish Durgā within the brahminical pantheon. Within this pantheon, the deities take on the attributes that a warrior civilization holds dear. Thus, Durgā is appropriated to this ideal and becomes a warrior that is concerned with not preservation of the earth as environmental entity but the preservation of the deities’ dharmic role. The concern moves from the ‘this-worldly’ concerns of food and life to the transcendent ‘other-worldly’ concerns of devas and asuras. Despite this postulation that the performance of Durgā Pūja was a remnant of a very ecologically reliant society, the image of Mahiṣāsuramardinī, as is discussed in Chapter II, is clearly a narrative and image that emerged early with very mundane concerns of protection and fertility. It has lost many of the aspects of this concern to where as seen in modern representations of Durgā seated next the film characters such as E.T. or Harry Potter that to most people the connection may never be made explicitly. Durgā as Mahiṣāsuramardinī while uplifting and useful in many arenas is not the best place to search for an environmental ethic, but this does not detract from her ‘this-worldly’ influence or feminine identity. It rather suggests a marketplace shift in which materialism takes precedence over munificence and luxury over sustenance and the commoditization of products can be extended into the realm of the deities.

Images of Durgā have also been used to show the violence that is bred by religious symbols that depict mythological violence. Arpita Singh’s painting *Durgā* displays the modern interpretation and use the symbol as a means of protest. (Figure 4.10) Singh’s goddess is not depicted engaged with the buffalo demon, but is nonetheless important to the discussion of social appropriations of Durgā’s iconography. Singh’s *Durgā* depicts a four-armed goddess dressed in
a white robe of a sannyasin holding a conch, flower, and pistol in three of her hands with the fourth displaying the abhaya mudra that means ‘fear not.’ She is stands on a lifeless man in the same manner that Kālī stands on the corpse of Śiva. The two figures both dressed in white are placed against a bold red background. The striking contrast induces the response of passionate and wrathful emotions against the pure figures. The goddess is surrounded by chaotic scenes of prayer and violent attacks. This image and numerous others like it using a variety of deities recast the common imagery of the divine to accentuate the violent deeds that are perpetrated in the name of the goddesses and gods. Just as early artists removed the deities from the mythological magical realm and situated them more immanently in the course of human existence on Earth, artist like Arpita Singh bring the image closer to our own reality situating them in the present milieu of violent affairs. This closeness, however, becomes too close and makes the viewer uncomfortable with the immanence of the divine. This discomfort makes the work a protest piece conjuring uneasiness in the beholder.

All of the images that use representations of Mahiṣāsuramardinī to expedite social change rely on the image to be an inspiring force to those it seeks to motivate. Thus in all cases the goddess must be very immanently understood, not only able to act in the person’s life but to be very similar to the person’s life. The mode of motivation is fueled by the same appropriation that the European corporations used to market their products to Indians. The same sentiments also arise from those whom the symbol has been taken. Europeans using the images that lay at the foundation of the new understanding of what Indian or Hindu meant or had been is perceived as thievery of an inherently Indian/Hindu resource and symbol. This makes all social appropriations by outsiders subject to large amounts of scrutiny.

4. The Image in Modern Art

Developing on a divergent artistic plane from the social, political, and religious usages of the image, productions of Mahiṣāsuramardinī have had a great impact on the world of fine arts for Indians and non-Indians. There have been innumerable creations that have portrayed or been inspired by the myth of Durgā slaying Mahiṣāsura ranging from very natural portrayals with both modern and ancient interpretations to the abstract with each new production the image and the narrative of the image changes. Within the sphere of artistic interpretation the image examined and construed in the critical apparatus of allegory and metaphor, it is even further removed from
its origin ritual setting. Productions of the image in this context lead to an entirely new evaluative rhetoric by which religious devotees must seek to determine meaning and legitimacy. Similar to the protests of Christian fundamentalists in regards to allegorical interpretations of Biblical passage, Hindu fundamentalist find umbrage with many of the interpretations produced in this fashion. In this section, the images discussed are those that have had the most impact on the understanding and acceptance and the newly flourishing market of Indian artists’ work – Maqbool Fida Husain, Bikash Bhattacharya, and Tyeb Mehta. For each artist a brief biographic sketch will illuminate their interpretations of the myth and accentuate the rationale behind either their controversy or their acceptance within both the art communities and India. It is also necessary to discuss artists whom have emerged within the past 20 years that have produced images of Mahiśāsuramardini, Arjun, Roberto Custodio, Vinod Dave, and Shekhar Kapur. These new artist use new techniques to produce images that further push the boundaries of the divine mundane continuum.

Maqbool Fida Husain (b. 1916) is arguably the most famous of all contemporary Indian artist. He currently holds the record for the highest-selling work of art by an Indian artist for his painting *Ganga-Yamuna* that was auctioned at Christie’s Auction House in New York for $1.6 million. Husain started from quite humble beginnings. He was born into the family of a low-level civil servant in Pandhapur, Maharashtra. After a stint in a madrasa, where he began learning the geometric bases of Arabic calligraphy that would become a major aspect of his geometric interpretations of the world through his art, Husain moved to Indore, a princely state. Here, under the rule of a religiously tolerant Raj that patronized Hindus and Muslims equally, Husain was incorporated into an amalgamated religious culture. As an adolescent he had a natural gift for art and could without formal training produce beautiful pieces. Noticing his abilities his father encouraged him to go to the local college in the evening to develop his skill. Eventually, his abilities won him jobs producing artwork for Bollywood productions. Bollywood during this time was producing many films that were based on Hindu mythological themes and gave Husain an opportunity to develop an intimacy with the images. Husain’s earliest images were of Indian village life, but inspired by folk reenactments of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, he began creating paintings that depicted Hindu deities. His deities were enlivened by the actors that recreated the actions and thus have a much humanized aspect to their

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representation. Husain also incorporated Islam into the images using the sharp geometric angles that he developed while studying calligraphy earlier in life in the madrasa. Husain was always conscious, however, of the strict Muslim prohibition against the creation of its religious icons that would be break the Quranic injunction against idolatry and has therefore never created any image in which a sacred character of Islam was portrayed. Bhāratnātyam also played an important role in his development of movement within his paintings. The twisted torsos and subtle gestures (mūdras) of his deities are based on the dancers who retell the epics through their own rhythmic movements.

Art historian Geeta Kapur has argued that since Husain’s images of deities were inspired by folk reenactments of the narratives that “it is difficult to deny that Husain has just skimmed Hindu mythology for the purpose of extracting a quick image whereas it ought to have been so churned that the gods and demons might be thrown up in new shapes and relationships.” 86 She goes on to explain, “A mythic character having lost its original significance, has to serve an allegoric purpose, and allegory presupposes that the artist has some deliberate and specific intention, or a driving emotion which sees new meanings for mythology.” 87 It seems, however, that Husain has deliberately re-mythologized the deities. Husain places the transcendent within the milieu of the folk. Casting off the shroud of stern monolithic mental formations of the divine to which he was accustomed, Husain creates a new whimsical mythology in which the deities are reenacting the narrative along with the actors. It is not a depiction of the origin event but the deities’ depiction of the depiction. The emotive response of whimsy that Husain’s work invokes is a reproduction of the playfulness in the non-erudite folk performances thoroughly humanizing his portrayal of the deities, while simultaneously maintaining their existence on a non-human divine plane.

This re-mythologizing can be seen within Husain’s images of Durgā. She is an intriguing case concerning Husain’s use of Hindu mythological characters within his paintings. Husain typically portrays the goddess with her lion vāhana. This portrayal does not distinguish Durgā necessarily as Mahiṣāsuramardinī, but the movement of the image with her trident upheld suggesting imminent thrusting of the weapon and given his predilection for accumulating inspiration from folk performance, it is fair to presume that the popular bhāratnātyam

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87 Kapur, Geeta, Contemporary Indian Artists, 129-130.
choreography to the *Mahiṣāsuramardinī Stotram* in which the actor strikes a similar pose inspired his imagination.\(^8\) Husain has produced several images of Durgā including an entire series by that name which will be discussed to display his interpretation of divinity and the goddess in the Indian imaginary.\(^9\)

Husain’s *Durgā [with Two-headed Lion]* is a geometrically harsh depiction. (Figure 4.11) Husain uses a juxtaposition of folk curvature and admonishing straight lines. This image incorporates her nature as fearsome and benevolent transcendent yet humanized. The goddess is shown nude astride the two-headed lion. Her image has three heads all looking in the direction opposite the lion. Two of these heads are female with the male in the middle, implying the universality of the image. The hair of each of the females’ heads is composed of arrows that extend to the left and upward toward the heavens. In her only hand she clutches two arrows that form the lion’s tail with a third ready for propulsion. The goddess’s grasp of the tail of the lion indicates her supremacy over the creatures or created beings. Three large breasts protrude from the chest of *Durgā [THL]*. There are several possible interpretations of the third breast. It could be based on the myth of Minakṣī in which the goddess, a manifestation of Pārvatī, whom Durgā is also a manifestation, has a third breast that can be interpreted as a phallic symbol is the object of ridicule and masculinization of the goddess. In the myth, once she meets Siva her third breast falls off and she is effeminized and ready to be wed. Husain could have been inspired by this story and created the image; however, the breasts in *Durgā [THL]* are soft and supple and have an effeminizing effect on the otherwise harsh character. The third breast in *Durgā [THL]* suggests a hyper-feminity with the third breasts displaying the nurturing aspect of the goddess above and beyond the normal capacity of women. Yet other aspects suggest the humanity of the image. Husain has inserted a navel into the image suggesting human birth. Her lion also portrayed having supra-mundane abilities displayed with multiple heads shows his subordinance having become her mount and being branded with her name in the Devanāgari script.

The next image is *Durgā [Blue]* in which Durgā is mounted on her vehicle engaging the demon. (Figure 4.12) In this painting, Husain uses geometric shapes, but much less sharply. The shapes now suggest movement. The deity straddling her vehicle, a lion-tiger hybrid, flows on the canvas with the ease of an unencumbered *bhāratnātyam* performer. Husain uses an array

\(^8\) See the discussion of *Vanaja* above and Figure *

\(^9\) All of Husain’s depictions of the goddess are either entitled *Durgā* or untitled; so for the sake of clarification, I have labeled them descriptively.
of bright and antithetical colors in this representation. The landscape burns with the emotion of fire red contrasted with the fair blue skin of Mahiṣāsuramardini’s body. In her face and hair, innocence and purity are symbolized through the use of stark white contrasted with the black of her gloved right hand by which she holds the lion and her skirt on which she is seated on the lion. The black-gloved hand and black skirt displays her defilement as contacts the phenomenal world depicted as the lion. On her forehead her spiritual eyes is illuminated with her vermillion brilliance (tejas). She has two spears one of white the other black perpetuating the harmony within the image. As with some many of Ravi Varma’s painting Husain has chosen to give Mahiṣāsuramardini a gaze fixed on an abstract reference outside of the scene. The gaze for Husain’s image though distracts the viewer’s engagement with the lion and demons altercation not gazing over the exchange but away from it. Only a yellow disk subdued under the paw of the lion symbolizes the demon Mahiṣa interpreting the demon as an allegorical enemy.

Another of Husain’s paintings depicting the goddess renders a very different image. In Durgā [Standing Beside the Tiger], (Figure 4.13) Durgā is represented alongside, not mounted on, her vehicle with is now wholly a tiger amongst the bright burning red background like that of Durgā [Blue]. Durgā being removed from the tiger and no longer having control it by grasping its tail, is rendered powerless. Husain demonstrates the vulnerability of the goddess portraying her with no arms. Instead, it is the tiger that dominates the canvas, large and muscular engaging the demon. Durgā’s breasts are also smaller suggesting her power to supply for and protect her devotees has diminished. The deity, however, still has her transcendent nature displayed by her three heads. Husain also depicts the goddess looking into the action in this painting engrossed into the one-sided affair. This image caused a large controversy during an exhibition titled “M.F. Husain: Early Masterpieces 1950s-70s” in Asia House Gallery in London, England in 2006. Under continued protest the gallery stopped the exhibit. Eventually, the gallery re-opened only to have to close its doors once again after Hindu protesters entered the gallery and vandalized Durgā [SBT] and another titled Draupadi spraying them with black paint on 22 May 2006. This incident marked the third time Husain’s work had been vandalized by Hindu protesters. In 1996, members of the Bajrang Dal, the youth branch of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) destroyed over 50 paintings and tapestries created by the artist. In January 2004, The Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) entered the Garden Art Gallery of Art and Textiles in Surat City in the District of Gujarat burning a canvas from the 1970s.
From the 1950s through the early 1980s, Husain continued to produce images of the deities. It was not until the emergence of the Hindu Right Wing into national mainstream politics that his images underwent a superfluity of public scorn. The Durgā [THL] has come under an extreme amount of criticism by the Hindu Right Wing. The Hindu Jagruti Samiti has labeled the image as a denigration of Hindu sentiments stating that Husain depicts Durgā in the act of copulation with the lion. ⁹⁰ They contrast his images with images of Ravi Varma that show the natural qualities of the deities that were to be perceived as natural events with no allegorical symbolism. This example accentuates the emerging problem of allegorical interpretation to devotees within the traditions that seek to maintain the images as a glimpse into the cultural past. The rhetorical implications of Realism in which the deities are anthropomorphized into the annals of history place strictures of mundane on the divine imaginary. It is fully necessary, however, to the formation of the Hindu identity through the cultural past. The Jagruti sees the portrayal of Mahiśāsuramardinī as an ancient hero. There sentiments are not hurt because the deity is copulating with the lion, which she is clearly not, but because of Husain, a Muslim, interpreting the deity as a mythological being that transcends the limitations of the Hindu past.

Durgā [THL] is also accused of denigration because Durgā is illustrated in the nude. Numerous blogs and Right Wing websites have barraged the Internet with petitions and diatribes concerning Husain’s blatant insensitivity to Hindu moral and religious sentiments that place a woman’s modesty on a pedestal. Husain has agreed in several interviews that he was inspired by ancient sculptures at the Hindu temple in Khajuraho. He explains that his images display the deity in the nude representing purity and innocence, not naked that would have erotic and lustful overtones. Khajuraho has an overtly erotic tone that does not translate as well into his images. His representations of Mahiśāsuramardinī are not out of place, however, within the corpus of her images. Throughout the history of the image she has typically been pictured with her breasts exposed. It is only in much more modern representations that the goddess began wearing a sari, finally taking the canonical form through the mass dissemination of lithographs throughout the 20th century. Much can be said about the apparent fear of the woman’s body and the patriarchal control that such complaints harbor; but this protest has a very different driving force.

⁹⁰ Hindu Janajagruti Samiti website. “M. F. Hussain Campaign.”
One common theme within these criticisms is that Husain is a Muslim. Meghnad Desai, emeritus professor of economics at the London School of Economics and Labour posited in May 2006 that umbrage was only taken because the Hindu protesters thought that as a Muslim he had no right to artistic license over the image.\textsuperscript{91} This is an unfortunate consequence of the historicizing that occurred as the deities descended down to the human realm building a Hindu cultural identity. The images that formed the corpus of Mahiśāsuramardini’s iconography certainly suggest that there was no such sentiment of illegitimate usage in the image’s past. Other images of Durgā, Sītā, and Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā in intimate embrace, all of which are not antithetical to traditional representations but created by non-Hindus, have come under similar criticisms and protests. However, the Hindu Right that has established itself as the proprietors of Hindu culture now polices such images. It is an attempt to form an identity that promotes the supremacy their religious concerns based on modern constructions of humanized deities. These same groups have also protested images depicting deities that they deem inappropriate that are produced by Hindus. Those of the most nationalist branches of Hinduism narrow diverse religious tradition into the hands of hands of very few. The implications are new religious elites that focus not on birth or caste, but of political and social charisma. The next three artists, both Muslim and Hindu, re-imagine the mythic images allegorically and humanize them into the lives of modernity.

Bikash Bhattacharjee (1940-2006) displays the other side of the spectrum. Bhattacharjee’s paintings broke the mold of contemporary Indian art and continued to use the European Realist technique focusing on the detail of natural texture and tone. Orphaned in early childhood in Calcutta, he developed his skills through the generosity of a club for children named Sab Peyechhir Ashor. There he was taught the precision of the technique and a respect for the art. After graduating from the Indian College of Art and Draftsmanship, he returned as an instructor in 1968 to the College. During the following years, he would create some of his most beloved images in the Doll series. Later roused by the emotions of Durgā Pūja, he began working on a series on the goddess Durgā. His portrayal of the deity was took major artistic license portraying the goddess in as variety of common women of Calcutta. The representations include a housewife, street woman, and even a prostitute. (Figure 4.14) Bhattacharjee focuses on the raw beauty of each of these women. There is a divine essence in the eyes of the women.

conjuring the emotive forces behind the association with Durgā. One might think that the portrayal of Durgā as a prostitute or street woman might hurt the same religious sentiment that were offended at the sight of her exposed breasts in M. F. Husain’s Durgā [THL]. The two even had a great deal of respect for the others interpretations of the image with Husain even writing a foreword to pictorial biography of Bhattacharjee’s life Close to Events: Works by Bikash Bhattacharjee that was released shortly before his death in 2006. But, there have been no protests regarding Bhattacharjee’s images.

In a 2003 edition of The Telegraph, a Calcutta based newspaper, Bhattacharjee quashes any potential critics of his interpretations. He begins his article by saying “We Hindus believe that the Goddess Durgā vanquishes evil and delivers us from disasters.” He thus establishes from the beginning that he is one of the group and that he is part of the ‘orthodox’ that believes in the divinity of the goddess. He goes on to explain thought that the common use of the image of Durgā on the lion is of Assyrian descent. He thus argues based on the idea that Durgā is a Hindu and that the lion representation is not truly Indian or Hindu. He separates the martial representation to the ‘other’ in the form of Persians. He situates himself within not only as a legitimate user of the image, but as the proponent of the Indian and truly Hindu representation of the goddess. He goes on to explain the power of the goddess as Mother, the true nature of the image. This, he says is the true nature of his inspiration. “During my lifetime, several mother figures have taken care of me. My own mother and others too. I am over 60, and even now they have kept me going. From this insight, as an artist I have visualised Durgā in varied forms. They have a third or inner eye. …These mother figures have ruled and nurtured their households and families with ten arms that cannot be seen.” The natural style of the Realist technique that has aided in the bridge of theological interpretations is clearly illustrated in Bhattacharjee’s Durgā series. The goddess has fully been transformed from the mythic transcendent realm and now lives and moves amongst men incarnated in those that uphold the motherly ideal.

Acclaimed artist Tyeb Mehta’s images of Mahiṣāsuramardinī are the most internationally acclaimed of all contemporary Indian Art. He paints these images using an Impressionist style that remains extremely traditional in interpretation. Mehta was born into a Shiite family in rural Gujarat, but while very small child his family moved to Mumbai (formerly Bombay). He was

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raised in the Crawford Market district of the city and came into contact with many of the bazaar lithographs discussed above and even worked in the film industry for a short while before joining the Progressive Artists Group of which M.F. Husain was one of the founding members. Many of Mehta’s paintings are inspired by residual emotions from the days of Partition in 1947. He witnessed many people from his Muslim community being slaughtered during the inter-communal riots that surrounded the Partition. The image of Mahiṣāṣuramardini became a symbol of the emotions that were brought to life at that time. In an interview in The New York Times Mehta explained the importance of the buffalo in his paintings, “I was looking for an image which would not narrate, but suggest something which was deep within me, the violence that I witnessed during Partition. Have you seen a bull running? This tremendous energy being slaughtered for nothing.”

The mythic Mahiṣa becomes the subject of violence in many of his painting. (Figure 4.15)

Though Mehta lives very simply and is regarded as one of India’s least commercial artists, Mehta’s works have recently earmarked the flourishment of contemporary Indian artists in the international market. In 2001, Celebration, a 40 foot triptych of rural Indian women, fetched over $300,000 at public auction. But his apex was on 21 September 2005 when Mahisasura was auctioned at Christie’s of New York for $1.58 million. (Figure 4.16) Mahisasura became the first painting by an Indian artist to sale for over one million dollars and was the highest selling price by an Indian artist until March 2008 when surpassed by Husain’s Ganga-Yamuna.

His work displays conflict in the form of the mutilated buffalo and much like Bhattacharjee, though in a quite different style, makes the myth a narrative of the modern. The mythic demon is reinterpreted as the tortured victims of violent crimes. In Mahisasura, the passion and energy that is symbolized by the buffalo bursts forth from the image in the blood red of the buffalo form as it embraces the divine Mahiṣāṣuramardini. Mehta re-mythologizes the narrative making the goddess that slays the buffalo hold the contorted and pain-stricken victim. Mehta interprets Mahiṣāṣuramardini encompassing the nurturing nature of mother similarly to Bhattacharjee representing her in vermillion invoking sentiments of tenderness.

Mehta’s works have not only been widely popular amongst Westerners but have been accepted within India. His simple lifestyle and positive interpretation of the image makes him a

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favorite amongst Hindus from all political affiliations. The abstract and ‘other-worldly’ portrayal of the mythic battle has not proven to hamper the acceptance of the image.

Another generation of artists has been captivated by the image of Mahišāsuramardinī. These new artists are producing images that further blur the lines of divine and mundane. Using innovative techniques such as mixed media and serigraphy, the artists are formulating new interpretations of how the divine image fits into the everyday lives of the audience. In these new productions of Mahišāsuramardinī, the divine is transplanted amongst the mundane in a way that removes all transcendence from the image.

Vinod Dave is one such artist. He was formally educated in the arts and received a BFA and MFA from Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda.94 After completing his degrees in Baroda, he moved to the U.S. to work on an MA from the University of South Carolina. In 1984, Dave earned his MA in Mixed Media and moved to New York to pursue a career producing art. Early on in his career Dave was injured as one of his own paintings fell rendering him blind in one eye. This disability inspired Dave to begin producing art that would reflect his way of seeing the world and images. He uses the different media to create special depth that can be viewed even without the use of both eyes. Dave began producing many images focused around Indian religious symbols and mythological characters. Amongst these is the recurring image of Mahišāsuramardinī. The images of Mahišāsuramardinī, in several forms and various titles, play a large role in the themes of his exhibits.

The imagery of Durgā as the slayer of the buffalo also has a personal depth to it. He uses his image of Mahišāsuramardinī, Mother Victory, on his biographical page to show his own personal triumph over the obstacles that would have prevented his success. (Figure 4.17) Dave uses his skills in mixed media to produce depictions of the goddess that intermingle various textures and styles culminating in a very tangible deity. In Mother Victory, Dave has used a classical manuscript of the Devi Mahatmyam as the centerpiece for the image set upon a background of morose earth tones. It is image of the manuscript is engulfed by smaller images of a pistol and a bomb. Another large image of the naked torso of Pārvatī looms inconspicuously to the left of the manuscript. Dave’s mixing of the old and new is reminiscent of Arpita Singh’s Durgā that holds the pistol. Singh’s influence is also felt in several other images, especially and untitled piece in which the deity holds a pistol identical to that of Singh’s Durgā. Dave’s image,

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94 All biographical information comes from Vinod Dave’s Website http://evinod.4t.com
however, places the focus not on the deity but on the deity’s tradition by representing the manuscript instead of solely iconography. The deity is removed from a time immemorial to a temporal realm of textual creation. But as with Singh’s *Durgā*, the focus of the image is the violence that ensues from such formations.

In *Mahisasur Mardini*, Dave again depicts a traditional form of the goddess in combat with the buffalo demon. (Figure 4.18) The mixed media genre of art is expertly employed and mixes traditional with new and magical with real. The image of Mahiśāsuramardinī is a traditional Indian representation of the goddess. She is placed alongside a shadowy image of a buffalo. The image of the buffalo slowly transforms into a photograph of a raw piece of beef. At the bottom of the buffalo image is another photograph. This time it is of the head of a bull representing the severed buffalo head from iconographical representations. From the goddess’s uplifted head an arc sweeps down the image to the head of the buffalo moving the viewer’s eyes in the same motion as would the swoop of the Devi’s sword cutting off the head of her adversary. Similar arcs reverberate across the painting. The epic battle takes place amongst a landscape of lotuses on a pure white background. Other hazy apparitions of the goddess fill voids in the image displaying the omnipresent aspect of the goddess.

The image like many traditional paintings places the scene on a mythological plane removed the world of phenomenal existence; however, by the use of this worldly materials like steak and a bull, the representation ushers the deity into a very ‘real’ setting. The use of the photographic medium gives concreteness to the battle that even exceeds images that place it within an earthly landscape of lush vegetation. In *Photos of the Gods*, Christopher Pinney shows in the examples of iconographical depictions of the sati of Rup Kanwar in 1987 as fire and goddess Satī were painted onto a photograph of the young girl smiling long before the death of her husband. He argues that by mixing media of photography and painting the mystical can become perceivable and many people would even believe that the lens of the camera, despite the fire’s comic book depiction, captured the entire episode. Much like the images of Rup Kanwar, the use of photograph makes the image more ‘real.’ The viewer can see the texture of the flesh of the demon that has been torn apart by the goddess and her lion. The buffalo’s severed head glistens from the light of the camera’s flash like Mahiśa’s would under the bright midday sun. The detail of photography captures a realness that realism can never achieve.

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The photographic transfers are commonly used in Vinod Dave’s art. The photographic inserts used by Dave are typically used to show the humanity of the mythological characters like Mahiśa in *Mahisasur Mardini*. However, as he extends his mode of production to the goddess, the interpretative mode changes. In *Supreme Mistress* and *The Goddess’ Feet*, Dave continues with the motif of Mahiṣāsuramardī. (Figures 4.19- 4.20) *Supreme Mistress* depicts the scene of Mahiṣāsuramardinī as she battles the army of Mahiśa represented by a charging herd of bulls. *The Goddess’ Feet* illustrates the scene immediately following the slaying of the army as the goddess seated in the lotus āsana meditates on her victory. In both these images the artist has replaced the head of the painted deity with a photograph of a ‘real’ woman. The superimposition of the ‘real’ onto a very magical scene of misty blues and purples surrounded by Sanskrit soubriquets of the Mahiṣāsuramardī, re-envisions the relationship between the mythological and mundane. Unlike the early works that placed the magical in the human realm, Dave’s images place the mundane in the mythological. The ‘real’ woman is elevated to the plane of the transcendent. The placement of the woman in the mythological realm is a very innovative interpretation.

Within in modern mixed media presentations of the goddess the insertion of photography does not always suggest the upward mobility of humanity into the realm of the sacred. In the work of Brazilian mixed media artist Roberto Custodio, he blends the iconography of deities with many ‘real’ elements including the arms, and bodies of the deities. He has produced images of Hanuman, Lakṣmī, and Durgā. In his piece *Durgā*, the goddess stands next to her lion giving *darśan* composed of the body of a model wearing a flowing saffron gown and high-heeled shoes. (Figure 4.21) Illustrations of a head and six arms holding the traditional weapons and have been inserted onto the body. Custodio’s work that represents the deity with an illustrated head surrounded by ‘real’ elements captured by photography envisions like the earlier paintings that humanized the image. The deity is taken from the transcendent mythological realm by making the image appear to be more ‘real.’ The technique of using photographic inserts achieves the same end as placing the mythological scene in a natural landscape. Using this mode of production, the image does not have to be removed from the ritual of *darśan* but can still interact with the devotee. By preserving this reciprocal interaction, Custodio achieves magical realism of the image.
Though using quite similar techniques, the mixed media pieces Vinod Dave’s *Supreme Mistress* and *The Goddess’ Feet* and Robert Custodio’s *Durgā* yield very different representations of the goddess. Within each of these images the use of photography contrast the use painting or computer graphics to accentuate the reality of the image captured versus the image created. By manipulating the use of photograph within the image, the identity of the image can be greatly altered. If the deity is to remain in a divine character it must be depicted by imaginative creation, but if the deity is to be interpreted as human the captured reality of photography must be used to accentuate her tangibility. These images focus on the face as the seat of identity. Dave has sacralized the human and Custodio like many previous artists has humanized the sacred. By using a photograph of a woman’s head, the image is rendered a human woman despite her various other mythological appendages that have been added. Likewise, Custodio represents a non-tanglible protagonist by illustrating the face of the deity. The interweaving of reality and imagination makes mixed media an important innovation in production of iconography and opens the realms of artistic interpretation of mythological narratives. The influence of such images on theological interpretations of the nature of the divine and interaction of the mythological and mundane is yet to be seen, but will become more influential as use of the medium becomes more mainstream.

Serigraphy is another mode of artistic production that has risen in recent years in popular culture and is transitioning into the levels of fine art. Serigraphy, also called silk-screening, is a process by with an image is created as a stencil and can be reproduced in various colors and arrangements. The process has long been used in the clothing industry, but it grew to an art form through the works of Andy Warhol, but emerged as a major trend in underground art as graffiti artists began honing their creative skills on sidewalks and walls throughout large urban areas. As the techniques developed, so did the appreciation for the variety of images that one stencil could produce. Serigraphy and graffiti art have become an appreciate category as a result of artist such as England’s Robert “Banksy” Banks whose graffiti art has been housed in some of the world’s finest art museums. The artist simply known as Arjuna has created as series of serigraphs titled *The Mega Laxmi*. In his collection, Arjuna mixes stencils from photography and paintings with bold geometric backgrounds. He uses popular images of Bollywood actress to depict the face of the deities similar to Vinod Dave, and like Roberto Custodio mixes in reality in the surroundings, yet the image does not display the reality that either of artists discussed above portrayed.
One of the images within Arjuna’s collection, *Maha Kali Slays the Wall Street Bull, Making Way for Mega Laxmi’s Reincarnation in India* depicts Kāli as Mahisasuramardini engaged in battle with the *Walls Street Bull* from New York’s Bowling Green Park. (Figure 4.22) The image of Kāli is an amalgamation of a distorted stencil of the face of a Bollywood actress placed upon a grotesque form of Kāli performing her dance of destruction. The actress’s mouth is agape and bright red blood flows from her unto the bull. The stencil of the bull is derived from a photograph of the bull statue of Bowling Green Park. A photograph of a man has been superimposed between the statue’s head and another bull head that is twisting and writhing in agony. The image is clearly depicting the rise of the Indian market over the American market that has been the dominating global market for many years through metaphor use of iconography. Before the wealth ushered in by the return of Lakṣmī the goddess of wealth and prosperity, the age of the bull of Wall Street that in financial jargon is used to symbolize an optimistic financial market must be ended by Kāli’s destruction. In Arjuna’s images the interpretation of the image itself is not as important as the mode of production. In serigraphy, unlike lithography, the production of each image is unique. The process of color schemes and geometric designs is new with each reproduction of the original. This process provides a space between the individual creations of the śilpins and artists that are constructed through rigorous introspection and the mass productions of lithographs. Serigraphy provides a means of dissemination of the imagery of the deity that has a unique birth, yet has the ability to be widely distributed. It can accentuate the personal and meet the demands of the collective.

The last modern artist to be discussed in this chapter is Shekhar Kapur. Kapur is a world-renowned filmmaker and short story author. In January 2006, Kapur joined Sir Richard Burton of Virgin Comics and self-help guru Deepak Chopra to begin working on a collection of graphic novels with South Asian themes called the *Shakti* series. This collection contains a variety of subject matter including the graphic novel *Devi*. (Figure 4.23) In *Devi*, the text gives brief mythological account to situate the heroine in the larger framework of the South Asian context. “It was the second century of mankind’s arrival on earth when the Gods of Light took up arms against one of their own. Bala, a fallen God, Has rejected the old ways of the Pantheon and sought to impose his dominion over man. Feeding off the forced worship of men, Bala had grown too powerful for the pantheon to take him on alone. So the pure Gods each sacrificed a
part of themselves to create a powerful entity. She is Devi.”

This account is an amalgamation of the goddess who is the heroine of the *Devi Mahatamayam* and the Vedic myth of Saraswati slaying the demon, Bāla or Vratra. As the story progresses the goddess is removed from this mythological setting and over the next three volumes ceases to be the protector of the gods but establishes herself as the protector of humans. Devi operates like a superhero working in the mundane world vanquishing its evildoers. This representation, along with Bhattacharjee’s, is the most comprehensive of the realist images. The Goddess lives and operates in the phenomenal world is composed anthropomorphically, yet retains the power of the divine. She is not only ‘real’ but she is also active within the lives of humanity. She retains her *dharma* to aid those that need her help. The theological implications are striking. The masterminds of Kapur, Burton, and Chopra have tapped into the magical world of superhumans and incorporated the suprahuman. The intermingling of reality, magic, and divine creates a new continuum of power inserting the suprahuman alongside the superhuman or mutant human between the magical real deities and humans. By blending the best of humans with the divine the interpretation ultimately leads to the divinization of certain sections of humanity.

**Conclusion**

The image of Mahiṣāsura-mardī has undergone a wide array of changes with the era since European colonization of the subcontinent. What has developed along with the new technologies and techniques is a new mode of interpretation of person identity with that of the sacred. The use of art has helped redefine the way we as humans construct our relationship with the mythological. As representations have become more realistic, the reality of ourselves evolve. The gap between the mundane and divine closes with each innovation. An image that traditionally considered as the enlivened dwelling place of the deity is transformed to reflect the nature of humanity. Whether the image is a portion of the historic past as with Realism or Magical Realism or a conception of our own divinity in the mixed media production of Vinod Dave or even that the divine is simply the next step for humanity that is suggested in the graphic novel *Devi*, modern images of Mahiṣāsura-mardī are no longer about the deity. They are about humanity.

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V

Conclusion

While the images were produced to display divinity to the world, they give us an intricate glimpse into humanity. The creator of deities in stone or on a canvas projects the ideals and theological concerns of a generation into that creation preserving an undercurrent of religious thought with every stylistic choice. The iconography of Mahiṣāsuramardinī, despite its distinct history, illustrates broader phenomena that have taken place in South Asia since antiquity. By tracing the changes in the representations of Mahiṣāsuramardinī, the relationship between humanity and divinity as constructed by her devotees can be illuminated. Another phenomenon developed out of the negotiation of humanity’s role in the cosmos and into conflict. Through contact with external critics the concept of religious imagery was altered. Hence, in the modern era, controversy over religious imagery occurs frequently. The reconstruction of the historical past of the iconographical representations of Mahiṣāsuramardinī shows the concept of ‘art’ as a category removes the image from the religious sphere in which it was initially incorporated -- through meaningful construction and production and with interaction between the image and the devotee. Consequentially, as the image becomes ‘art,’ it is transferred into a new theoretical sphere and becomes property. ‘Art’ becomes steeped with rhetoric of culture and authority.

The image of Mahiṣāsuramardinī itself predates the Purānic references to her epic battle. The narrative steeped in ancient folklore of the uncontrollable buffalo and its domestication was undoubtedly an oral tradition that dates as far back as the Indus Valley Civilization. It served as the inspiration for the emergence of the image in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE in Ahichchatra in North India and Bhita in the West. Each of these images portrayed a mundane representation of Mahiṣāsuramardinī. In each of the portrayals the goddess had two arms and two legs holding only a trident in her right hand and the buffalo by the neck in her left illustrating the original meaning her name, literally crushing or bruising the buffalo. The theoretical space between a human sacrificer of a buffalo and the goddess vanquishing a demon was virtually non-existent. Divinity was centered in the human existence for the devotee.

After a brief period with no evidence of production, the image again emerged in the late 4th and 5th centuries CE. This period coincided with the writing of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa. The creation of this vivid retelling of the ancient myth emerges with a new zeal for production of the
image and a reinterpretation of her identity. The image was incorporated into the Brahminical tradition. The goddess had begun a process in which she was to be removed from the nature realm and placed into the realm of the Brahminical pantheon. The natural world became symbolized as the adversary of the divine heroine as her embrace of the sacrificial animal was altered to a subordination of the beast. Through the 4th through 7th centuries the evolution of her power had also begun. In many of the representations from this period, Mahiṣāsuramardinī was displayed with multiple arms that suggest she was more cosmic and transcendent than her earlier forms. From this point onward, the images continue to be represented in an increasingly ornate and complex manner. With each addition, she becomes further removed from humanity.

Over the next eleven centuries images that depict the battle between the great demon and the goddess emerged all over the landscape of South Asia in Hindu temples and holy sites. As the narratives became more detailed and the number of devotees increased, the theology of the goddess also expanded and in which she became more transcendent. The imagery of Mahiṣāsuramardinī captures these sentiments. To illustrate the power of the goddess and to incorporate the implements she had been given in the narrative, more appendages were added over time. The addition of arms, weapons, and regalia also illustrate the advance in techniques of artistic production. Working with metal and oil mediums the creator (śilpin) of the image could create the divine image that he had formed mentally in the meditative process described in the śilpaśastras. The influence of other cosmic deities surely informed the increasing elaboration within the production as devotees sought to solidify their deity as the preeminent cosmic being.

Modifications to the depictions of Mahiṣa also demonstrate the theological shifts throughout the image’s history. The great demon is anthropomorphized into a human incarnation pushing the schism between the divine and nature into a confrontation between the deity and humanity that was represented as the incarnation of evil. First, Mahiṣa was depicted issuing forth out of the mouth of the buffalo much like in the scene from the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa. He was also portrayed as an anthrtheriomorphic demon with a human body and the head of a buffalo. Mahiṣa’s transformation into a magical beast illustrates the interpretation of the scene transpiring in the supernatural realm. The imagery and the narrative develop hand in hand as the once mundane narrative begins to inhabit the dream world that exists on another plane.
During the same period of development the image is appropriated into other cultural and ritual traditions. The first of these was the Jain tradition. In the tenth century, Jvālāmālinī is first mentioned in regards to Jainism in the 5th century CE by Saṅghadāsa Gaṇi, a Śvetāmbara writer as a vīdyādevī. She is described as having enough power to uproot rivals and possessing the terrific nature of the goddess. Later, within the Jvālāmālinī Kalpa of Indranadi a detailed description of the deity is given while re-interpreting the goddess as a yakṣī, an attendant of the eighth Tīrthāṅkara, Candraprabha. The reformation of Jvālāmālinī’s identity de-divinized the deity from a middle realm goddess to a lower level making her much closer to humanity and more immanent and involved in daily life. However, as her devotional tradition grew her cosmic nature expanded simultaneously. The description of Jvālāmālinī became extremely similar to Mahiśāsuramardini in both iconographical representations and narrative. The only difference is that Jvālāmālinī does not slay the buffalo. She subdues the asura and tames it using him as her vehicle. The shift though seemingly minor has large ramifications when considering Jain philosophy. The Jain ideal of non-violent behavior forms the basis of much of the daily Jain ritual. As manifestations of idyllic creatures in the ideal plane of existence the deities must adhere to the same regulations. The appropriation of Mahiśāsuramardini into the Jain tradition is completed once she shows compassion and does not harm the buffalo but domesticates it. The appropriation of the image displays the availability of the goddess to outside traditions and artistic/religious freedom to re-envision the deity and her attributes that in modernity becomes the center of controversy and debate.

The image also moved into Java with diasporic Hindus and Buddhists in the 8th century CE. Durgā, as Mahiśāsuramardini, was one of the most popular images produced during the Hindu period until the 15th century. After going through a series of cultural changes melding into the iconographic landscape of East Asia, the image of Mahiśāsuramardini along with other Hindu deities, became the deified ancestors of the Singhasari Dynasty during the 13th century. Through invoking Mahiśāsuramardini as the Queen Mother of the dynasty, the images were appropriated to affirm the ancient Javanese practice of ancestor worship. This appropriation demonstrates the conscious effort to form a continuum between divinity and humanity. Deification of the Queen Mother placed humanity, in this instance the royal lineage, in a relationship in which humanity was upwardly mobile. Able to become gods themselves, the lineage created a direct link between themselves and the divine.
With the introduction of Colonialism in South Asia the nature of image changed. Two very different but ultimately intimately related phenomena resulted. First, the image due to mass reproduction found a static accepted form that for the first time permeated all of India. The Post-Enlightenment surge for demystification permeated the landscape in regards to works of artistic expression. Indian artists were encouraged to develop their art of deities using the technique of Realism to show the depictions of mythological beings as a cultural manifestation rather than a religious one. New images of Mahiṣāsuramardinī emerged shown engaging in battle the demon in full human form surrounded by lush natural landscapes bring the transcendent form back down to the mundane through the artwork of Ravi Varma. The reworking of the imagery started the process of celestial elaboration once more, but the interpretations would be altered given the search for identity by the British ruled and influenced Hindus. The natural imagery was minutely altered over time and modified the mundane into an amalgamation of supernatural and imminent. This representation, a hybrid of the previous magical world of divinity and the natural world of physical manifestation, called ‘magical realism,’ became the quasi-canonized representation of the goddess throughout the subcontinent. The ‘real’ aspect served to inspire devotees to use Mahiṣāsuramardinī as an image applicable to personal and social problems, and the ‘magical’ component gave inspiration to the oppressed. The ‘new’ version of the goddess became a model for triumphant Mother India to throw out the British. This representation was solidified in Rup Kishor Kapur and Kalicharan’s *Mahamaya Shakti* painting for political posters in the 1940s and in *Ānandamath*, the classic 1882 Bankimchandra Chatterji novel that promoted Indian self-rule. Soon though, the image was used to sell goods and serve as inspiration for non-Indian issues.

The second result of European influence is one of categorization. The images of Mahiṣāsuramardinī became ‘art,’ a role far removed from their religious heritage. As the image was being mass-produced throughout South Asia, ancient images were removed from temples and caves and placed into museums and art galleries. Indigenous productions, such as Kalighat and Punjab Hills paintings, were decried as crude forms that inspired no high aesthetic emotion of appreciation, but only base emotions connected with religious sentiment. As the image entered the forum of high art, the nature of it changed. The accepted ‘Westernized’ paintings began to be mass-produced in lithographs. And the image remained static in this stage of lithographic prints and plasters cast from molds for quite sometime.
With the distinction of ‘art,’ the image was ushered into the realm of cultural heritage. Europeans equated the ancient stone sculptures of the South Asian deities to the Western heritage contained in the productions of Greece and Rome. The implication for the iconography is that the image ceased to be considered ritually enlivened by the deity residing in the religious realm. Each representation was no longer important to its geographical locale, but was an expression of a collective Pan-Indian heritage. With the rise of fundamentalism in India as a result of Independence and imminent Partition, the collective heritage of ancient India began to be separated by religious tradition. ‘Art’ is then separated into ‘Hindu art,’ ‘Muslim art,’ ‘Buddhist art,’ etcetera. This phenomenon was occurring simultaneously with what I have called the quasi-canonization of the imagery of Mahiṣāsuramardini. Though the image historically had been appropriated into various cultures and traditions, it became the ‘property’ of the group that was producing it at the time -- Hindus. What resulted was the classification of Mahiṣāsuramardini, a formerly quite fluid image, into a solely ‘Hindu image.’

Though this phenomenon was taking place as far back as the late 19th century, it was not until the Nationalist Hindu right wing, collectively known as Hindutva, became a legitimate political power in the late 1980s that it began to make headlines. The right wing leaders and adherents use the cultural implications of art to construct an identity of Hindus. The modern Hindu is placed within in a direct lineage of the mythological characters that have been reinterpreted on the basis of their natural portrays. An ancient golden age of righteous Hindu emperors such as Rama and queens such as Durgā is constructed and used to form a distinct a priori argument for Hindu possession of the subcontinent. Thus, the members of the movement are steadily observing any portrayal that harms the cultural and religious construction. One of the recurring portrayals that often come under ridicule from the Hindu right is imagery of Durgā, embodied as Mahiṣāsuramardini.

The most famous example is the controversy over M. F. Husain. After gaining wide recognition from the government of India and various organizations around the country, his works of gods and goddesses came under immense scrutiny by the Hindu Right. While on display in Surat, in the state of Gujarat M.F. Husain’s oil painting titled Durgā (Figure *) was vandalized by the Bajrang Dal, a local faction of the broader movement. Again in 2006, while on display in London’s Asia House Gallery, another painting titled Durgā was vandalized. The leaders within the movement argue that Husain’s works “hurt the Hindu religious sentiment”
because the goddess is portrayed with exposed breasts. The claim seems preposterous in light that most images created of Mahiṣāsuramardinī in antiquity chose this same representation. However, within the modern context, Hindutva members, claiming to speak for the whole of Hindus, as ‘owner’s’ of the image deemed his usage as offensive and unacceptable.

The controversy over M. F. Husain’s portrayal is repeated at every turn concerning any image that strays from the new ideal. But the controversy is only possible after the incorporation of the image into the category of ‘art.’ With this distinction, the image ceases to be important on the micro-scale as an individuallycrafted and ritually enlivened image, but important on the macro-scale representing an ancient religious tradition. Once this shift takes place it ‘becomes’ the ancient intellectual property of that tradition and is then subject to broad religious sentiments.

In conclusion, the image of Mahiṣāsuramardinī showcases much larger phenomena of religious image and concepts of divinity, identity, and authority. Ownership of a religious image is solely a product of modernity in which the role of iconography is no longer to aid in reciprocal ritual with the deity but to construct an identity for humanity. A divine mundane continuum is constructed that places humans in the divine lineage of mythological characters. When an image threatens to challenge the identity that has been formulated in the construction of a quasi-historical mythological age, it becomes an attack against the group for whom the identity has been constructed.
Appendix A
Images of Mahiṣāsuramardinī

Figure 1.1- Balon Oriental Disco Bar- Athens, Greece
Mural, 2006

Figure 1.2- Jai Ambe Dhoop Sticks- Netherlands
Packaging, 2007
Figure 2.1a- Mahiṣāsuramardini, Ahichatra, Terracotta, 1st Century CE

Figure 2.1b- Mahiṣāsuramardini, Ahichatra, Terracotta, 1st Century CE
Figure 2.2- *Mahiśāsuramārdini*, Mathurā, Sandstone, 1st-2nd Century CE
Fig 2.3- *Mahisāsuramardini*, Bhita,
Sandstone, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Century CE

Image from Nagar, *Mahishasuramardini*
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Figure 2.4a - Detail of Trident Nagar, 2\(^{nd}\) Century CE

Figure 2.4b - Detail of Lion Nagar, 2\(^{nd}\) Century CE
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Stone, 2nd - 3rd Centuries CE
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Stone, 4th – 5th Centuries CE

Image from Berkson, Some New Finds at Ramgarth Hill
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Stone, 8th Century CE
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Bronze, 12th Century CE
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Water-based Pigments on Newspaper, 20\(^{th}\) Century CE
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Stone, 13\textsuperscript{th} Century
Figure 3.2- Candi Singhasari Durgā, Singhasari, Java
Rock, 13th Century
Figure 3.3- Durgā Ranini, Tegawangi, Java
Stone, 15th Century CE
Image from Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*

Figure 4.1- *Ashtabhuja Devi*

Ravi Varma, Ravi Varma Fine Art Press, Lithograph of Oil on Canvas
Figure 4.2- Mahāmāyā Śakti
Rup Kishor Kapur and Kalicharan, Lithograph of Oil on Canvas
Figure 4.3- Mahiṣašuramardinī
S.M. Krishna, Batik (Dye on wool)
Figure 4.4- Untitled widely distributed bazaar reproduction
Artist Unknown, Illustration
Figure 4.5- *Liberty Leading the People*
Eugène Delacroix, 1798, Oil on Canvas
Figure 4.6- Jayalalitha
George Francis, 1998, Photograph
Figure 4.7- Untitled campaign poster
Artist Unknown, Mixed Media
Image courtesy of Ms. Magazine

Figure 4.8- Cover of Spring 1972 edition of Ms. Magazine

Image from vanajathefilm.com

Figure 4.9- Still image from the film Vanaja
Rajnesh Domalpalli
Figure 4.10- *Durgā*
Arpita Singh, Acrylic on Canvas
Figure 4.11- Durgā [With Two-Headed Lion]
Maqbol Fida Husain, Illustration
Figure 4.12- Durgā [Blue]
Maqbol Fida Husain, Acrylic on Canvas

Figure 4.13- Durgā [Standing Beside Lion] shown with the Curator of Asia House Gallery
Maqbol Fida Husain, Acrylic on Canvas
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Bikash Bhattacharjee, Oil on Canvas
Figure 4.15- *Mahisasur (1996)*
Tyeb Metha, Oil on Canvas
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Tyeb Metha, Oil on Canvas
Figure 4.17- *Mother Victory*
Vinod Dave, Mixed Media
Figure 4.18- *Mahisasur Mardini*
Vinod Dave, Mixed Media
Figure 4.19- *Supreme Mistress*
Vinod Dave, Mixed Media
Figure 4.20 - *The Goddess’ Feet*
Vinod Dave, Mixed Media
Figure 4.21- *Durgā*
Roberto Custodio, Mixed Media
Figure 4.22- *Maha Kali Slays the Wall Street Bull, Making Way for Mega Laxmi’s Reincarnation in India*  
Arjuna, Serigraphy
Figure 4.23- Cover of Devi
Greg Horn, Illustration
### Table B.1 Table of Iconography from the Brahminical Tradition

<table>
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<th>Century</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Arms</th>
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<th>Goddess</th>
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**Legend**

- **Mundane Form**
- **Liminal Form**
- **Cosmic Form**


------- *The Heritage of Indian Art*. (Bombay: Publications Division, 1964).


Shulman, David Dean. Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition.


Vinod Dave’s Website http://evinod.4t.com.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Caleb Simmons received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Religious Studies from Missouri State University (formerly Southwest Missouri State University) in 2005. His academic interests include the Great Goddess tradition in Hinduism, Indian religious iconography, and modern Indian art. Caleb has enjoyed teaching several courses in the Religion Department at Florida State and looks forward to a career as a teacher and researcher. He is the proud father of two cats Chairman Meow and Bagira Simmons.