



THE HORSE - FACED LION AN ICONOGRAPHIC ENIGMA OF THE MEDIEVAL BENGAL TERRACOTTAS

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Abstract: *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*, popularly known as *Durgā* is undoubtedly the most celebrated devī in Bengal whose festival has been given the prestigious status of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) by UNESCO in 2021. From the ancient times in Bengal *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* and her *vāhana*, the mighty lion went through numerous iconographical transformations and still continuing. In several traditional idols of *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*, her *vāhana* the *siṃha* can be seen having a horse face which is a unique depiction of Bengal. Some scholars have provided their own theories regarding this particular phenomenon but no primary source-based historical research has been done concerning how the horse-faced lion came into her iconography. Therefore, this paper would be an attempt to unfold the enigma of the horse-faced lion of Bengal's *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* through the historical analysis of primary evidences.

Keywords: horse-faced lion, *ghorāmukhī-siṃha*, *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*, *Aparājitaprichchhā*, *vyāla*.

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One of the most popular *devīs* of the early medieval Bengal was *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*, whose iconography has a long history of evolution in this land. The earliest evidence of *Mahiṣāmardīnī* is dated c. first century CE in Bengal and she continued to transform throughout the early medieval and medieval period. In the early medieval period, the iconographical

development of *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* happened through the complete adoption of the *Purāṇas*, especially the *Devī Māhātmyam* setion (c. 601 – 700 CE) of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (Bhandarkar 1914: 23, 73-4), the *Agni Purāṇa* (Tarkaratna 2016; Ch. 260) and the *Matsya Purāṇa* (Tarkaratna 2015: Ch.50.1-5) whose iconographical descriptions were manifested

in the *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* sculptures of that time. The story of these *Purāṇas* supplemented the anthropomorphic *asura* (human form) and the *siṃha* to the iconography of the *devī* which gained immense popularity throughout the subcontinent during c. 701 – 1200 CE and Bengal was no exception to that. Under the patronage of the Pāla and the Sena rulers *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* sculptures went through various forms of standardization. In most of the cases, Rajmahal black basalt stone was used to make these standardized icons of the Bengal-*Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*. In this standardized image category of Bengal, the sculptural elements of this time frame resemble the model of the late “Gupta style”. But there was a fusion of the so-called “classical style” with the indigenous style of Bengal. The lively gestures and accurate linear composition of the *devī* sculptures reflect the ideas of beauty, physical charm and sensuousness. The delicately carved sculptures give the impression of soft textured flesh and skin. Almost all the standardized icons have been carved in high relief. The faces became sharp and pointed. The pointed stele which iconographically signifies the throne carriage of the *devī*, became overcrowded with a profusion of figures and elaborate decorations. The over emphasis on perfection, surface detailing, sharp clear-cut features and smooth glossy finishing of the figures altogether created a new genre of Bengal art which is unmatched by any other style of Indian sculpture (Fig.1).

However, In the medieval period the early medieval stone sculptures are mostly replaced by the terracottas in Bengal. From the 16th Century CE onwards there rose a profusion of terracotta temples in the south western and the eastern Bengal. Interestingly, in these medieval temples of Bengal, *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*'s *vāhana* the *siṃha* is portrayed in a different manner than its early medieval depiction (Fig.2). Mostly in the medieval Bengal, the *vāhana* of the *devī* was projected in a peculiar form of having a horse face or as a horse-like lion (*ghorāmukhī-siṃha*)

(Fig.2). Many people think that since these medieval terracotta temples of south-western Bengal were mostly *Vaiṣṇava* in nature and did not support violence, so they tried to avoid the fierceness of the lion by replacing it with a horse like head (*ghorāmukh*). Nevertheless, the question that arises here is, if the lion's face is avoided for the portrayal of violence, then why would the bloody beheaded neck of the buffalo and the impaling of the *Mahiṣāsūra* be portrayed on these temples, which were of course more violent in nature? There is another theory which states that as the lion is said to be *Viṣṇu* in the *Kālikā Purāṇa* (Tarkaratna: 2012, 58.66) therefore, the lion was given the horse head to represent *Hayagrīva*. Even so, *Viṣṇu* himself was projected on these temple reliefs as the ugra *Narasīṃha avatāra* where he brutally tore apart *Hiraṇyakaśipu* which is definitely ferocious in all ways. If this be the case, then why would the lion be avoided on these temple reliefs? Also, the horse does not have any connection with *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*. Then what is the justification of putting the head of a horse on the *vāhana* of the *devī*?

There is another claim which even states that it is because lions were fundamentally western Indian creatures, the Bengal artists having never actually seen a lion before 1886 CE, did not know how to sculpt a proper lion, therefore mistakenly portrayed the animal as horse-like. In this regard Jawhar Sircar thinks,

“The choice of the imperial lion for Durga was problematic in Bengal as no sculptor or artist had even seen one.... The result was that the ‘lion’ beneath the classic Bengali Durga actually turned out to be an animal that was a caricature between a horse and other quadrupeds, but certainly not a lion. It was only when the first lion arrived in the Calcutta Zoo in 1886 that the lion-looking lion first appeared.” (Sircar: 2018).

Nonetheless the archaeological remnants of Bengal clearly show that since the early medieval period itself the artists of Bengal knew very well how to sculpt a proper lion (Fig: 5). Thus, neither iconographically nor logically can these theoretical justifications be accepted. There must

have been some other reasons for the portrayal and popularity of the horse-faced lion *vāhana* of *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī* in the temples of medieval Bengal.

In the Indian temple architecture, there is a particular element called *vyāla* (also known as, *yāli*) icons which became very popular in the early medieval period. Essentially, the *vyāla* is a combination of multiple beasts into one. The *kīrttimukha* motif which can be seen over the doorway of the Brahmanical temples and over the sculptures is one of the best basic examples of *vyāla*. The main face structure of the *kīrttimukha* is made of a lion, with a forehead of an antelope, ears of a boar and horns of a ram. The addition of these multiple creatures gives a mythical identity to the *vyāla* image. There are several types of *vyālas* like, the *siṃha vyāla*, *sārdūla vyāla*, *aśva vyāla*, *gaja vyāla* (Fig.4), *gaṇḍaki vyāla*, *nara vyāla* and many others. Some of them even indeterminable creatures (Fig.3). The 11th Century CE iconographical texts like the *Śamarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra* (75.27-28) and the *Aparājītaprihchhā* (223.4-7) speak about mainly 16 types of *vyālas* and even more.

“*Vyālaḥ shoḍaśaḥ nirdṛishṭā hariṇo gṛidhrakaḥ
śukaḥ
kukkuṭaḥ siṃha sārḍūla vṛikhājā gaṇḍakī-gajāḥ
Kroḍ aśva-mahiṣa śvāno-markaṭa khara ityamī*”
(*Aparājītaprihchhā*, 223.4-7)

Since the early medieval period, the eastern Indian temples of Orissa adopted these *vyāla* icons into their temple architecture, which can be seen in the Mukteswar temple of Bhubaneswar (Fig. 3), the Sun temple of Konark (Fig. 4) and the Ananta Vāsudeva temple among others (Dhaky : 1965, 11-30).

The research finds out that in the medieval period, the artists of Bengal were heavily influenced by these Indian-*vyāla* icons and they started to incorporate them in the Bengal terracotta temples of the medieval period. This incorporation of the *vyāla* concept not only

happened to the western Bengal temples but also extended to the eastern Bengal as well. Various kind of *vyālas* can be seen in the medieval temples of Bengal, for instance, the *gaja vyāla*, a mixture of an elephant and a bird (Fig. 8), *nara vyāla*, combination of a human and a deer (Fig. 7), *sarpa vyāla*, a blend of a snake and a lion, *siṃha vyāla*, a fusion of a horse and a lion (Fig. 6) etc. Apart from these, the artists often used their own creativity and combined many other different creatures to form the *vyāla icons*, which makes them unique in nature. There are cases where the theriomorphic *vāhana* of a particular deity has been portrayed as a *vyāla*, for example, some of these medieval temples of Bengal show *devī Gaṅgā's vāhana* (crocodile) as *makar vyāla*, the combination of a crocodile and a fish (Fig. 10). In a similar manner *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī's vāhana* (lion) has also been portrayed as a *vyāla*, which was the *siṃha vyāla*, combination of a lion and a horse (Fig. 2).

In some terracotta temples of medieval Bengal show the coexistence of both the realistic lion icon (Fig. 9) and the mythical *siṃha vyāla* images (Fig. 2) side by side, which proves that the portrayal of the realistic lion was known to the medieval Bengal artists, but they gave preference to the *siṃha vyāla* instead most of the time. This *siṃha vyāla* image became so popular that before the late 19th century CE, almost all the Bengal temples only portrayed horse-faced lion or *siṃha vyāla* as *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī's vāhana* and still this legacy of the *vyāla vāhana* (*ghorāmukhī-siṃha*) continues in some of the traditional household *Durgā Pūjas* of Bengal. The addition of these *vyāla* images in the Medieval temples of Bengal signifies a fascinating process of sculptural and architectural development of that time. Therefore, in the light of the above archaeological and iconographical evidences it can be said that, these horse-faced lions (*ghorāmukhī-siṃha*) of the Bengal - medieval temples were a product of conscious art and not an outcome of any artistic mistake or ignorance.

Plates



Fig. 1: *Mahiṣāsuramardīnī* with Realistic Lion c. 1101 – 1200 CE, Stone, Mainamati Museum, Comilla, Bangladesh
Image Source: Author



Fig. 2: *Mahiṣāsuramardīnī* with *simha vyāla*, Mid - 18th Century CE, Terracotta, Char Bangla Temple, Murshidabad, West Bengal; Image Source: Author



Fig. 3: Indeterminable *Vyāla*, Mukteswar Temple, Bhubaneswar, Odisha; Image Source - VMIS

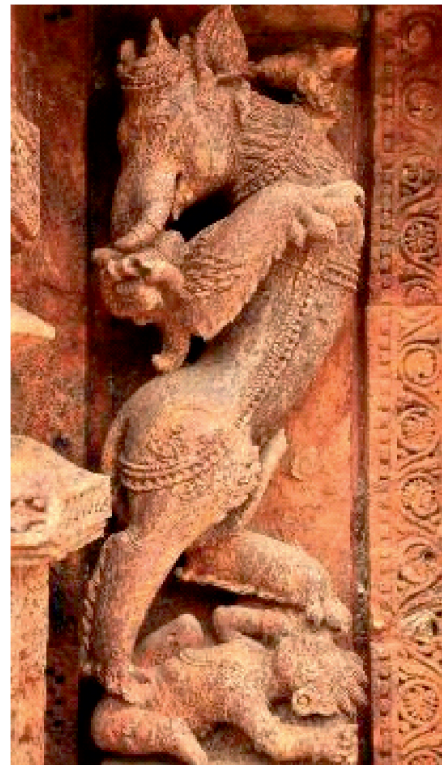


Fig. 4: *Gaja Vyāla*, Sun Temple, Konark, Odisha; Image Source - VMIS



Fig. 5: Lion of *Simhavāhini Durgā*, 12th Century CE, Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh;



Fig. 6: *Simha Vyāla* (Lion+ Horse), 18th Century CE, Terracotta, Śiva Temple, Galsi, Purba Bardhaman, WB



Fig. 7: *Nara Vyāla* (Human+ Deer), 18th Century CE, Terracotta, Ghoshpur Temple Paschim Medinipur, WB



Fig. 8: *Gaja Vyāla* (Elephant+ Bird), 1643 CE, Terracotta, Shyamrai Temple, Bishnupur, WB

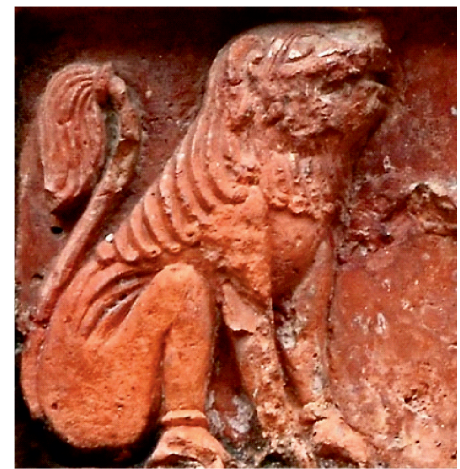


Fig. 9: A Realistic Lion, Mid - 18th Century CE, Terracotta, Char Bangla Temple, Murshidabad, West Bengal;



Fig. 10: *Makar Vyāla*, (Crocodile + Fish), 1760 CE, Terracotta, Char Bangla Temple, Murshidabad, WB;
Image Sources (Figs.5-10): Author

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