



IMAGES OF DURGA- MAHISAMARDINI IN NORTH BENGAL: A HISTORICAL AND ICONOGRAPHICAL STUDY

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Abstract: Saktism is quite popular in the region of Bengal in eastern India where the Devi is worshipped in her different manifestations and known by different names. In this context, mention may be made about one of the major and popular manifestations of the Devi known as Durga-Mahisamardini, particularly in North Bengal. Various black basalt and sand stone images of Mahisamardini have been recovered from different parts of undivided Bengal and are now preserved in different museums of North Bengal. The present study is an attempt to understand the historical and iconographical context of these Mahisamardini images. These icons have been classified according to various parameters, such as find spot, time period, material used, and stylistic type so as to examine spatial and temporal similarities and variations.

Keywords: Sculpture, Samapādashānaka, Tribhanga, stelae, Lalitāsana, icon, Padma Khadga, Triśūla, Mukuta.

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Saktism, along with Saivism and Vaisnavism is one of the popular sects of Hinduism in India. Sakti stands for the female principle. The term Sakti is derived from the root word “Sak” which refers to the capacity to do and to have power. It, therefore, stands for both activity and capacity. In other words, Sakti denotes both “power” in general, as well as power in a particular form. It is proposed to first examine the origin of Mahisamardini Durga as found in the *Puranas*

before proceeding to discuss the historical significance and iconography of her images from North Bengal. The Great Goddess, known in India as Devi, has many forms. She is *Ma*, the gentle and approachable mother, as Mother of the Universe, she assumes cosmic proportions, destroying evil and addressing herself to the creation and dissolution of the worlds. Devi occupies a very important place in the Brahmanical tradition. She is worshipped in one of her many manifestations.

For some she is the primary deity while for others she is a part of a greater pantheon. In some forms, she is benign and gentle, while in other forms, she is dynamic and ferocious - though in all forms she is venerated by her devotees (Basu:2009:1). The mother-principle, at first an abstraction creating an image in the sub-conscious, projected itself as a visual image emphasising fertility in many ancient civilizations. In India this idea touched and influenced almost all religious and sects, apart from its development in the form of a powerful independent sect. Marshall suggests that, the pre-Aryan cult of the Indian Mother Goddess originated in a matriarchal stage of society (Goyal: 1986:282).

The relation of Sakti images with the fertility cult is well-known and in Bengal Sakti in her myriad forms dominates the socio-religious life of the people (Bhattacharya: 2013:19). Fertility is related to production of natural vegetation and crops. It is also said to be the pre-condition for the growth of human species as well as animals. Women, being the mother of children have been closely linked with fertility all over the world. Thus, fertility and motherhood were regarded as equivalent in ancient religious beliefs. It was but natural for ancient cultures to invoke the spirit of fertility through the image of the mother. The mother was thus exalted to the position of a goddess. The study of the prehistory and proto-history of Eastern India reveals that the people inhabiting there witnessed the stages of general evolution of mankind. It was, therefore, natural for the Eastern Indian people to develop the cult of Mother-goddess at the stage of the beginning of agriculture (Sarkar: 2001:1-2).

An iconographic study of the image of the female divinities, made of metal or stone, found from different regions of Bengal is important (Sarkar: 2001:150). Until the Gupta period, the cults of the female divinities were not much popular with the people of the upper strata of the society (Basu: 1954:311). Most of the iconic representations of the mother goddesses, found in Varendri or other sub-regions of Eastern

India, are assignable to the Pala-Sena period (Roy: 2015:516). Text like the *Devipurana*, datable to the seventh-eighth century CE mention the prevalence of Devi worship in Varendri, Radha, Kamārūpa, Kamakhya and Bhottadesa (Bhattacharya:2002:45). The cult of the Mother Goddess had received universal recognition among almost all religious sects and cults, both Brahmanical and heterodox, in India. The later Vedic texts, in Brahmanical religion, Epics and the Puranas propagated the ideas of 'Sakti' denoting the female energy of the divinities. In the *Devi Mahamatmya* section of the *Markendeya Purana*, the significance of the concept of Sakti is explained. The *Devi Mahamatya* draws an outline of the sculptures and image of the great goddess intending to give plastic form to the goddess which more or less followed the Pauranic description. In her various manifestations, her iconographic features in respect of benevolent or benign form and terrifying forms varied, so far as her gestures, posture and attributes are concerned (Basu: 2009:51).

The Goddess is known by a multitude of names in accordance with her origins, functions and relationships with other gods. The diversity of names, however, underlines the basic tenet of the existence of one and only supreme authority encompassing the many distinct forms. The generic name Devi however has an abstract quality, not suggestive of an immediate identification. The Devi manifests herself in a number of forms - one important aspect of which includes her being represented as a cosmic force. In these forms, she creates, annihilates and recreates the universe - sometimes in an awesome form she often destroys the demonic forces that threaten the world equilibrium, wielding weapons in multiple arms, which bear testimony to her ability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. In this form, she is Durga-Mahishamardini, slayer of the buffalo demon, the dark-skinned Kali, the emaciated Chamunda and the Devi herself (Sarkar: 2001:151).

In Eastern India, the legend of the destruction of Mahisasura by Devi has been very popular

from the early medieval period (Bhattacharya: 2002:46). The Mahisamardini aspect of the Goddess Durga, portrays her as the Goddess of victory - the saviour - and is considered to be very ancient and important as is evident from various textual references (Dasgupta:2005:422). The account of the origin of the Goddess Durga-Mahisamardini and the importance of her worship in this form is mentioned in great detail in the *Devi Mahatmya*. The second chapter of the *Devi Mahatmya* explains the original birth of the goddess –highlighting this myth as the central one so that she may kill the demon Mahisa who has usurped Indra’s power (Banerjea: 1974:491). Here the text draws reference to the defeat of the gods in a great battle in the hands of the *asuras* and Indra, the lord of gods. As a result, Mahisa took over the reins of Heaven from Indra himself. Then Prajapati Brahma went to Siva and Vishnu imploring them to deal with Mahisha who had occupied the land of Gods. Then a great lustre issued from the mouths of an angry Brahma, Vishnu and Sankara (Siva), and from the bodies of Indra and others, and obtained oneness. That unparalleled energy born of the bodies of all gods, which pervaded the three worlds with its light, gathering into one, became female. By Siva’s energy her face was developed, and by Yama’s energy grew her hair, and her arms by Visnu’s energy, by the Moon’s energy her twin breasts, and her waist came into being by Indra’s energy, and by Varuna’s her legs and thighs, by the Earth’s energy her hips, by Brahma’s energy her feet, her toes by Sun’s energy, and by the Vayu’s energy her hands and fingers, and by Kuvera’s her nose; and her teeth grew up by Prajapati’s energy, and three eyes were developed by Agni’s energy; and her eyebrows were the energy of the two twilights, and her ears Vishnu’s energy; and the coming into being of the energies of the other gods became the auspicious goddess (Achyutananda:2015:3) which took the form of a beautiful goddess named Mahalaksmi (Bhattacharya:2002:46).

The gods decorated her with their respective weapons after giving the full shape of a “Female”.

According to the *Markendeya Purana* - Sankara gave his trident, Varuna his conch, Agni his spear, Visnu his discus, Maruta his bow and quiver filled with arrows, Indra his thunderbolt, Yama his *pāśa*, Brahma his earthen-pot (*kamandalu*), Prajapati his necklace of beads, Surya provided his rays on all part of her skin and Kala his sword and spotless shield (Achyutananda:2015:4). The ocean gave her a spotless necklace of pearls and a pair of undecaying garments, garland of fadeless flowers, Visvakarma provided her with a celestial crest jewel, a pair of earrings, bracelets, a brilliant half-moon ornament and armlets, a pair of bright anklets, a necklace of finest make, rings and gems on all the fingers together with a brightly polished axe, besides weapons of many shapes (Basu: 2009:52-3).

From the gods Durga also received her dress and ornaments. The great mountain Himalaya gave her a lion to ride on and valuable gems of various types, the serpent –necklace was presented by the king of the serpents Sesha. Kuvera gave her a drinking cup full of wine (Sarkar: 2001:75). The whole incident had made all the gods absolutely furious and their fury produced a great radiance which took the form of a beautiful goddess named Mahalaksmi (Bhattacharyya: 2002:46-7). Thus the mighty warrior goddess represented all Pauranic divinities in an all-out war against the demons (*asuras*) who had acquired their suzerainty over the three worlds, *Svarga*, *Marttya* and *Patala* (Sarkar: 2001:75).

The autumnal Durgā Pūjā, the ten-lunar-day worship of the goddess Durgā, also known as *Candī* or *Candīkā*, is one of the most important festivals in East India and Nepal. Throughout villages and cities in Bengal, Orissa, Assam and the Kathmandu Valley the occasion is marked by pomp and celebrations. In Bengal especially, this worship is a reflection of a culture that has given goddesses a privileged position over male deities from at least the time of the Palas (Sarkar: 2012:325). Mahismardini or Durga, as she is more generally known, is still the most popular goddess in Eastern India, especially in Bengal, where her

worship is almost a national festival amongst the Hindus (Bhattachali: 1972:194). This goddess has two types of character - one is benevolent and one is terrifying, though both aspects are a part of the one Mother Goddess. And one of the most terrifying aspect of the goddess is Durga, especially the form of Mahisamardini which is most popular in Bengal. It is said that in the *Puranas* - Uma, Parvati, Bharati, Ambika, Kali, Chandi, Maheswari, Barahi, Kaumari, Bhagawati, Gouri, Brahmani, Katyayani, Chamunda etc. are but different names and forms for the one great goddess (Sarkar:2001:74). The *Amarakosa*, (a text on lexicography) regards her as a form of Parvati. In the *Mahabharata* and the *Harivamsa*, she is referred to as the sister of Krishna and the daughter of Yashoda (Gupta: 1980:55).

Now we shall examine the chronology and iconographic features of the Mahisamardini form of Durga which are preserved in various Museums of North Bengal. Many of these images are not in an intact form due to the vagaries of time. These images are made in Black stone as well as in sand stone. These different varieties of stone were transported to the different ateliers in Bengal via the river from the Rajmahal Hills, where the Ganges River enters Bengal. The large number of images discovered in Bengal would testify to the flourishing trade in Rajmahal stone (Bhattacharyya: 2013:2). In the different parts of the country, one such centre has been noticed in West Dinajpur. Earlier, another such centre was noticed by Bhattachali in the vicinity of Dacca (Bhattachali: 1972:17-19).

The first image of Mahisamardini is of black basalt. It was recovered from a big tank known as Ghoshpukur, Darjeeling (Fig.2.1). It is now preserved in Akshay Kumar Maitra Heritage Museum (Bhattacharyya: 1983:30-1). The upper right portion of the *prabhavali* is broken and the face of the goddess is mutilated. The goddess is shown fighting vigorously with the demon partially issuing out of the decapitated trunk of a buffalo. She is in *ālīdha* pose, with her right and left legs planted firmly on the buffalo and the

pedestal respectively, while the head of the lion is shown to the right pouncing upon the hind portion of the buffalo. The goddess carries in her eight arms a *chakra* (discus), *trisula* (trident), *bana* (arrow), *khadga* (sword), *kesa* (tuft of hair of the demon), *khetaka* (shield), *dhanusa* (bow) and one arm is in *tarjani mudra* (pointing with the index-finger). *The Agni Purana*, however enjoins that the goddess should hold the demon by the hair in one of her hands.

The low profile of the image is profusely decorated, without traces of *Krittikumha* or the flying *vidyadharas*. There are two marks on the body of the buffalo. The simplicity of the whole composition and elegance of its carving mark it out as an extremely graceful specimen of early Pala art.

The second image of Mahisamardini is in black stone, of unknown provenance is now preserved at Rajbari Palace (Fig. 2.2). The goddess is ten armed. The upper portion of the stele is broken and is simply decorated. Her right leg is planted firmly on the lion, and the left leg on the back of the buffalo. The right leg of the demon is thrown at the mouth of the pouncing lion, while the other leg is within the trunk of the buffalo. The goddess is in *ālīdha* pose holding in clockwise direction trident, discus, shield, arrow, one hand is broken, bow, *Ankuśa* (elephant goad) axe, snake. The two-armed *asura* who is about to open the sword from the case, is looking helplessly at the goddess on being struck at the belly by her trident. Lower part of the main figure constitutes an image of the donor couple seated with folded hands on one side and the other side has an offering.

The third image of Mahisamardini in black stone has been found from English Bazar, Malda, now preserved in Malda Museum (Fig.2.3). The goddess is eight armed. The stele is almost pointed at the top and has no *krittikumha* design and is simply decorated. The two sides of the stele have flying *vidyadharas*. They are considered *upaveda* or demi-gods. The right leg of Mahisamardini is planted firmly on the buffalo, and the left leg on the head of the lion. The left leg of the demon

is thrown at the mouth of the pouncing dragon shaped lion, while the other leg is within the trunk of the buffalo. The goddess is in *ālīdha* pose holding the following *ayudhas* clockwise, from the left side a shield, bow, a snake, the tuft of hair of the demon, trident, discus, sword and arrow. The *Agni Purana* enjoins that the goddess should hold the demon by hair in one hand. The two-armed *asura* who is about to open the sword from the case, is looking helplessly at the goddess on being struck at the right side of the waist by her trident. One attendant is there like the previous figure. In the pedestal and below the lower part of the main figure, there are two devotees seen sitting with folded hands.

The fourth image of Mahishamardini is from Tungisahar, Gazole, Malda and now preserved in State Archeological Museum (Fig.2.4). The top of the stele is rounded with the *Krttimukha* at the apex, flanked by two flying *gandharvas*. The image is *dashabhujā* and she holds from left side upper portion a shield, *dhanus*, snake, *khadga*, tuft of hair of the demon, *trisula*, axe, *cakra*, sword and arrow. This ten-armed image of the goddess is shown as fighting vigorously with the demon in *ālīdha* pose with the left and right legs placed on the decapitated buffalo and the lion respectively. Durga's *trisula* pierces the waist of the *Asura*. The right leg of the *asura* is on the buffalo and in the lower portion, two devotees are there on a double petalled lotus.

Two images of Mahisamardini image are preserved in Akshaya Kumar Maitreya Heritage Museum, University of North Bengal (Figs. 2.5 and 2.6). The first one is from Ghoshpukur, Darjeeling while the image of Mahisamardini, in black stone, was collected from Siliguri division. The two images are *dashabhujā* with elaborate *jatāmukuta*. The deity is shown as fighting vigorously with the demon in *pratyālīdha* pose with the left and right legs placed on the decapitated buffalo and the lion respectively. The booted right leg of the demon is thrown at the mouth of the pouncing dragon shaped lion, while the other leg is within the trunk of the buffalo. The

two-armed *asura* who is about to open the sword from the case, is looking helplessly at the goddess on being struck at the chest by her trident. But it is seen that in second image the right hands have been broken. The half part of demon and Devi's *vahana* lion is broken (Bhattacharyya: 1983:32).

In the first image, the *ayūdhas* in the arms are: *trisula*, *sara*, *chakra*, *khadga*, *nagpasa*, *khadga*, *dhanu*, *parasu*, *ankusa* and *bana*. The second image of Devi is also ten handed but the hands on the right side is broken, only some arms are shown carrying the following *ayūdhas*: *nagpasa*, *shield*, *dhanu*, and *parasu*, and *ankusa*, arrow (from the left side): Two miniature attendant figures are shown with weapons in their hands. The goddess is shown elaborately decorated with halo of flames surrounding her. The *krttimukha* with the usual flying *vidhyadhara* on either side is shown at the pointed end of the stele. The entire panel is placed on a double petalled lotus on a *pancha-ratha* pedestal. The middle tier of the pedestal is profusely decorated. Two devotees are shown in the first image and in the second one a devotee is seated with folded hand.

Two images of Mahisamardini in black basalt have been found, one from Gangarampur and the other one was recovered from Bangsihari Thana, Dakshin Dinajpur. Both are now preserved in Balurghat Museum (Figs. 2.7 & 2.8). The image of Gangarampur is carved on a stele which is conical in shape and two *vidyadharas* are there seen playing *bigala*. This ten armed image of the goddess is shown as fighting vigorously with the demon in *pratyālīdha* pose with the left and right legs placed on the decapitated buffalo and the lion respectively.

The other figure of Mahisamardini is similar and the goddess struck the trident at the chest of *asura*. The arms of the goddess carries clockwise from left side upper portion a shield, *dhanus*, *paraśu* (axe) *ashi*, the tuft of hair of the demon and also holds a snake, trident, *khadga* discus, sword and an arrow.

Although the features of the two images are similar, some differences can be noted. In one

image two attendants are there on the two sides of main figure but in the other image attendants are absent. The halo of flames can be seen in one image while in the other image, halo of flames is absent. Moreover, the *kirttimukha* is there in one image but other image instead of *krittimukha*, a flower is there but *vidyadharas* are there both two images. The entire panel is placed on a double petalled lotus on a *saptaratha* pedestal. The middle tier of the pedestal is profusely decorated. In one image one devotee is seen but in the other image two devotees are seated with folded hand.

The next image of Mahisasuramardini in black basalt is from English Bazar, Malda and preserved in Malda museum (Bhattacharyya: 1982:31). This ten-armed image of the goddess is shown as fighting vigorously with demon in *pratyaldha* pose, the *asura* is struck at the chest by her trident and the arms of goddess carry (clockwise): From left side upper portion a broken hand, a *dhanus*, *parasu* (axe) shield, the tuft of hair of the demon, trident, discus, *khadga*, sword and *Sankha* (conch). The stele is profusely decorated and pointed at the top (Fig. 2.9).

From the above discussion, it can be seen that most of the images of Mahisamardini which are preserved in various museums of North Bengal even South Bengal are found from Dinajpur District. The images of ninth century CE are marked by fleshliness, and even in more or less abstract types a relative softness is attained. Completeness of modelling is one of the general tendencies of this period and this completeness becomes somewhat stiff and glacial. During this period, calmness is seen on the face and the fleshly body reveals a sensual object. During this time, the shape of the top of the stele is generally rounded though occasionally the stele is pointed out at the end. The knee of the deity is modelled very carefully and gives an impression of flexibility when the images are erect and upright. The ornaments are very simple but of a very heavy type. The figures sometime show a flexible attitude but they are always balanced and firm. In the back slab, i.e. stele, there is absence of decoration. So it

can be said that the back slab was comparatively free from decoration in comparison to the next centuries (Majumdar: 1943:541).

In the tenth century, images were shaped with a disciplined vigour and show a conscious strength. This vigour transformed the softness of the fleshly form into mighty majestic roundness. Other features also can be seen which is different from ninth century because in the tenth century there is an increase in carving, i.e. decoration. The outlines of the main figure were also more prominently carved by the artist. The figures also became slim in comparison to the previous century. The shape of the stele remains unchanged but the flame designs emerge which is shown at the back side of main figure. With respect to the legs of the goddess, in the tenth century, the legs gradually become stiff and lose elasticity. Some changes can also be noted in garments and jewellery. In the ninth century CE jewellery is simple and heavy but in the next century CE jewellery is elaborately worked out and the garments have fluttering scarves which consists of folds as well as wavy undulations.

In the 11th century CE many changes are introduced in the domain of sculptural art, i.e. in earlier figures a fleshliness and sensuousness is visible, but in this period vigour and strength of bodily form transformed into one of gracefulness and elegant mannerism and these specimens follow next three or four generations. From the tenth century CE the slender bodily type becomes more evident. With respect to the knee, the modelling of the knee is not like ninth century CE, earlier being perfectly carved and face of the main figure is shown with a blissful happy expression. In the lower part of the body also change is visible in comparison to the earlier centuries. In this century the lower part is very striking. Other accessories like attendants, flying *gandharvas* are incorporated with the main figure. In the tenth century CE, figures became more ornamented and more independent from the stele. This was different from the earlier century as earlier most of the part of main figure was a part of the stele



Fig. 2.1



Fig. 2.2



Fig. 2.3



Fig. 2.4

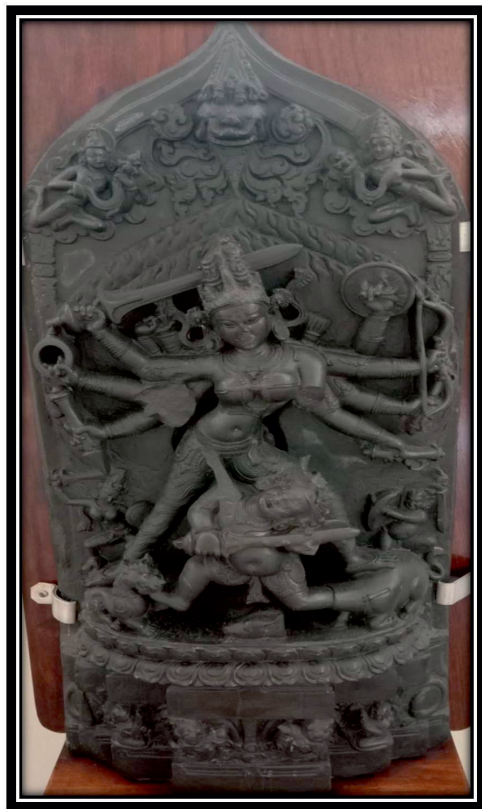


Fig. 2.5



Fig. 2.6



Fig. 2.7

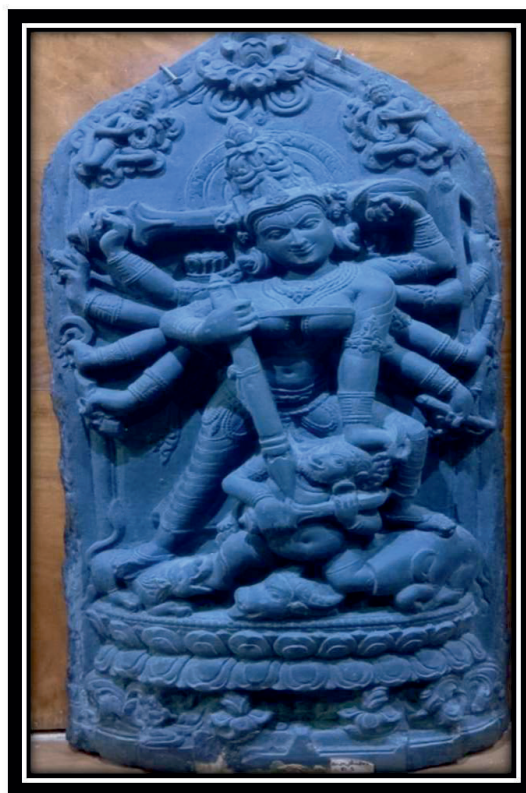


Fig. 2.8



Fig. 2.9

but now, they have all an equal share in the general effect of the stele. The artist introduced a sort of liveliness which is still kept in balance and because of the addition of miniature figures the main figure is shown as very rich. The facial type is almost like the earlier century but it also has an expression of sensitiveness. In the ninth century CE the face is generally rounded and in the tenth century CE, the face is sometimes a bit longish. But in the 11th century, various shapes of the face is visible such as downward stroke of the chin, full round lips and heavily-laden eyes and in the case of garments, the robe is modelled with tenderness and wavy curves. In some figures, the eye-brows have double curves. Most of the stele is pointed at the top though the rounded top is also there. Thus, these are the main features of 11th century CE.

In the images of the 12th century CE, the slender bodily type of the preceding century are retained and the face is very sensitive with fleshiness

but now it is replaced by a serious heaviness. Knees are also decorated and legs have become almost column-like without any elasticity, the eye brows are modelled but only for decoration. In this century plastic form is gradually lost and the modelling becomes petrified. Ornaments also become very sumptuous. The flexion of the body becomes extended to their utmost limit and the garments are bordered by small waves. Scarves flutter in wavy undulations so as to accentuate the playful movements which are in consonance with the spirit of the entire stele. Because of the postures of some figures like *gandharvas* and some of the attendant divinities, and also the decorated garments, jewellery fashion of wearing the hair this display of spontaneous playful movement is evident. If we observe the facial feature very carefully, in the 12th century, we can see that the goddess has full curly lips and double carved eye-brows and also a smiling expression. In the earlier centuries, the face of goddess is blissfully happy with glowing expression of meditation but now it is laden with a moist expression of heavy enjoyment of deep pleasure of a past moment.

So, the profusion, variety and the diverse setting in which the images of Mahishamardini occur all vouch for the dominance of the goddess over other themes - few others in the early iconic pantheon have stimulated a more prolific or dynamic artistic response. Although Durga, the great Goddess, embodies all levels of divine function, as an ascetic, as Mother Goddess, as a terrible agency of destruction, it is the Mahisamardini form which projects better than any other her unique ambivalence, bringing her close to Visnu as well as to Siva.

To conclude in the words of Majumder, "A spontaneous power of modelling in a completely round form inspire a tough and vigorous artistic form in some rare specimens, and in spite of sumptuousness of ornaments and a precise outline it reveals a conscious dignity and strength, a freshness of elementary experience that could yet save the art from final stagnation." (Majumdar: 1942: 543-5). However, that was not to be and may

be the art could have found out new experiences and new channels but all chances were demolished by the rapid rush of Islamic invasion resulting in loss of patronage.

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