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DURGĀ IN THE ROYAL EPIGRAPHS OF EARLY MEDIEVAL BENGAL

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Abstract: Epigraphic evidence mostly in the form of copper plate inscriptions of early medieval Bengal are an extremely important source for reconstructing the history of undivided Bengal. These epigraphs help us to understand the political and economic scenario, genealogy, identification of different geo-political units besides providing pivotal information about the religious and cultural life of Bengal. Generally, royal inscriptions mostly record important information regarding administrative aspects, donations etc. Mention of Durgā in various copper plate inscriptions by different rulers of Bengal clearly indicates the socio-political significance of the deity. In royal epigraphs repeated appearance of the Devī with numerous epithets and related stories suggests her popularity in early medieval Bengal. On the other hand, these epigraphs are also historically significant in order to understand the evolution of Mahiṣamardinī in Bengal.

Keywords: Early Medieval Bengal, Royal Epigraphs, Copper Plate Inscriptions, Mahiṣamardinī, Śivapriyā, Umā, Durgā, Transformation.

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The iconic form of Durgā has a long antecedence and a large number of such images have been reported from diverse archaeological contexts in undivided Bengal. Images showing the Devī as the slayer of Mahiṣāsura, the buffalo-demon, are by far the most numerous among her *ugra* or terrifying representations in Early Medieval

Bengal. In this role, the Devī is popularly known as Mahiṣamardinī, Mahiṣāsoramardinī, and above all, Durgā. According to archaeological evidence, the iconography of the deity in Bengal dates back to c. 400-500 CE (Haque: 1992: 525). Initially, Śiva, Lakshmī, Saraswatī, Kārttika and Gaṇeśa were not associated with Durgā; she was depicted

and venerated in her solo form (Mahiṣamardinī). But gradually through time, her iconography evolved. Royal epigraphic sources of Early Medieval Bengal provide numerous epithets and tales of Durgā which are historically significant in order to understand the evolution of the concept of Mahiṣamardinī in Bengal.

The name Durgā appears in verse ten of the Jagajjibanpur copper-plate inscription of Mahendrapala (c. 847-862 CE) (Bhattacharya: 2005-06: 74) and describes her as the daughter of Himalaya (*Durggāyās - ca Himālay = ācala-bhuvah*). Here the king was associated with Śiva, who collected taxes from his kingdoms in the Himalaya region, obtaining the hands of Durgā, the daughter of Himalaya. In the Mainamati copper-plate inscription (Bhattacharya: 1933: 282) of Harikaladeva Ranavankamalla (c. 1204-1230 CE) a unique name called Durgottārā can be found in verse six. The record states that land was granted for the small monastery (*vihārī*) dedicated to the deity Durgottārā, which is most probably associated with Durgā.

The Nalanda copper-plate inscription (Fig. 3.1) of Devapala (c. 810-847 CE), (Sastri: 1923-24: 310) in verse 31 mentions the name *Umās* the mother of Kārttikeya. Verse ten of the Bādāl Garuḍa pillar inscription of the time of Narayanapala (c. 876-930 CE), (Maitreya: 2004: 75) states that Śiva accepted the hand of Śivā as his spouse. Verse 17 of the Mirjapur copper-plate inscription (Sircar: 1975: 131), issued in the third regnal year of Surapala I (c. 862-875 CE) also makes the same statement.

Verse five of the Khalimpur copper-plate inscription of Dharmapala (Keilhorn: 1896-97: 243) (c. 775-810 CE) refers to the deity as Sarvāṇī, wife of Śiva (*Sarvāṇīva Śivasya*). The wife of king Gopala Queen Deddadevī is compared with Sarvāṇī. Verse six of the Rampal copper-plate inscription of Sri Chandra (c. 925-975 CE) (Basak: 1915-16: 136) compares his queen Śrīkāñchanā, with Gauri of Hara (Śiva). In the Chittagong copper-plate inscription (Fig.3.2) of Kantideva (c. 800-825 CE.) (Majumdar: 1941-

42: 313) of Harikela, we find several titles of Durgā. Verse four of the inscription describes Vinduratī, the wife of Śrī-Dhanadatta, as fair in complexion (*gaurī*), daughter of a great king (*mahābhūbhṛtsutā*), praised by the learned and the elderly persons (*budhaguru-stutā*) and a favourite of Śiva (*Śivapriyā*). According to R. C. Majumdar (1941-42: 318) all the epithets that are given to Vinduratī can also be applied to Durgā, who was Gaurī - by name, *mahābhūbhṛtsutā* - the daughter of the Himalaya, *budhaguru-stutā* - praised by the preceptor of gods and *Śivapriyā* - beloved spouse of Siva.

Apart from *mahābhūbhṛtsutā* Durgā is also mentioned as *giriḥā* in Verse 15 of the Idilpur copper-plate inscription of Suryasena (c. 1210-1215 CE.) (Majumdar: 1929: 121) and as *Girisūtā* in Verse 17 of the Mainamati grants of Ladahacandra (c. 1000-1025 CE); *Śailasūtā* in line 58 of the Nalanda copper-plate inscription (Sastri: 1923-24: 310) of Devapaladeva (c. 810-847 CE.); *Girirāja-Putrikā* in verse five of the Kṛṣṇa-Dvārikā temple inscription of Nayapala (c.1037-1043 CE.) (Sircar: 1967-68: 86), and as *Himāśailajā* in verse eight of the Irdā copper-plate inscription (Majumdar: 1933-34: 158) of Nayapala (c.1030-1055CE.). Here Bhagyadevi, the wife of Rajyapala was compared with the daughter of Himavat (*devīvahimāśailajā*).

The Pascimbhag copper-plate inscription (Sircar: 1965-66: 289) of Sricandra (c. 925-975 CE) refers to Bhavānī as the wife of Bhava (Śiva) (*Bhavānīva Bhavasya*). Verse 27 of the Bangarh Prasasti of *Murttisiva* (Sircar: 1973-74: 135) states that Śiva was so mesmerised at the sight of the Bhavānī temple that it reminded him of his own marriage-venue (*bhavānamidamvetyāsann aŚambhurbhavānyāhsmaratunija-vivāhāgāra*). The name Rudrāṇī is found in verse nine of the Mainamati copper-plate inscription (Basak: 1915-16: 136) of Ladahacandra (c.1000-1020 CE) where the mother of Kārttikeya was mentioned as Rudrāṇī.

Epigraphic evidence, mostly the copper plate inscriptions of Bengal, thus, are an extremely

important source for reconstructing the history of the region in the early medieval period. These epigraphs help us to understand the political and economic scenario, genealogy, identify different geo-political units and also provide pivotal information about the religious and cultural life. Generally, royal inscriptions mostly record important information regarding administrative aspects, donations etc. The mention of the deity in various copper plate inscriptions by different rulers of Bengal clearly reflects the socio-political significance of the deity. In epigraphs repeated appearance of the Devī with numerous epithets and related stories, no doubt suggests her popularity in Early Medieval Bengal.

Similarly, through these epigraphic sources, it can be clearly analysed as to how her persona

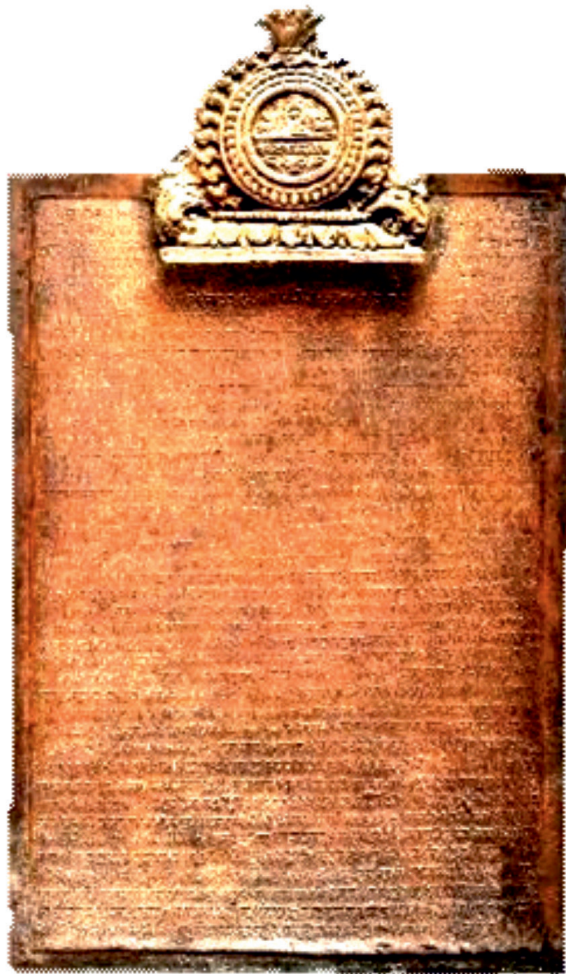


Fig. 3.1: Nālanda copper-plate inscription of Devapāla

Source: National Museum, New Delhi



Fig. 3.2: Chittagong copper-plate inscription of Kantideva

Source: Shariful Islam, 2016

was linked through various Brahmanical aspects as well as household and maternal features. In these sources, the *ugrarupa* or terrifying aspect of the Devī was often referred to as the daughter of the Himalayas, beloved spouse of Śiva or as the mother of Kārttikeya, which suggests the Brahmanisation process of the deity in early medieval Bengal. From the early medieval to the modern period the evolution of Durgā in Bengal occurs in many layers. From a ferocious buffalo demon slaying deity (c.500-600CE) to Abanindranath Tagore’s Bharat Mata (1905 CE) she has gone through a tremendous transformation in Bengal, a process that still continues. This epigraphic analysis is a partial effort that has been made to understand the evolution of the deity in early medieval times.

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