

“Evolution of Iconographic Features of Mahishasuramardini in Badami Chalukyan Art”- A Canonical study

Rekha HG

Assistant professor,
Department of History,
Government First Grade College,
Vijayanagar, Bangalore.

Abstract

Among the several religious cults in India, the cult of Mahishamardini is an ancient and popular one. Durga Mahishasuramardini is most popular of the Hindu pantheon. The image of this goddess represents her in both the terrific and the benign aspects are found all over the country. Present study focuses on the iconographic representation of Mahishasuramardini in Badami Chalukyan period found in both cave temples and structural temples at Badami, Aihole, Pattadakallu and Mahakuta. The myth is presented as monosemic or continuous narrative. Present study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Field study was made at Badami, Aihole, Pattadakallu and Mahakuta.

The iconological features of Mahishasuramardini are found in greater details in canonical texts i.e. Amsumadbhedagama, Purvakaranagama, Suprabedagama, and Shilparatna Pratimavijnana etc. Puranic texts Markandeyapurna Devimahatimya, Agnipurana, Bhavishatpurana, Kalikapurana. The evolution of the image of Mahishasuramardini was mainly due to the wide prevalence of Sakti. Mahishasuramardini became the supreme object of worship in the Sakti cult and had a number of names given to her in the Puranic texts. This cult became so popular in Gupta period, the advent of Markendya purana including Devimahatimya a work of fifth century added to the early specimens of the goddess and depicts her as having only two hands and demon in buffalo form. Chalukyas of Badami were first to create the art in South India. But with the passage of time the theme gained more and more popularity and it gradually became the cult of masses as a result goddess began to be represented in multiple arms with different attributes and postures and influence of worship of Mahishasuramardini was felt throughout the length and breadth of the country.

Key words: Badami, Durga, Mahishasuramardini, Shilparatna, Mahisha, Trident

Introduction

The beginning of the sixth century AD marks the dawn of the early Chalukyan activity at Badami, Aihole and Pattadakallu situated in the Malaprabha valley. These places were important centre of art activity, which resulted in the creation of the finest examples of early Chalukyan art. Early Chalukyan monuments are considered as the first among the Brahmanical monuments of the whole of South India. Rulers of Chalukyas of Badami up to Pulakeshi II were inclined to Vaishnavism though Shaivism was popular, but from the time

of Vikramaditya I embraced Shaivism and assumed the title Parama-Maheshwara. All the sculptures of Mahishasuramardini are noteworthy for their skill and technique of representation. Many of the mythical concepts of gods and goddess represented in Badami art land were totally unknown to the Karnataka artist and soil. They were first to try and spooked halo in the sculpture of Mahishasuramardini, the jewellery and garments are also depicted in a similar way, though the jewellery is not elaborate. The artist has taken at most care in carving of the minute carvings, even in the case of garments. Mahishasuramardini looks more rhythmic her hand gesture depicts a casual movement.

Data and Methodology

The data are collected from the primary and secondary sources. The primary data are obtained from visiting the sites, at Badami, Aihole, Mahakuta and Pattadakallu. Archaeological reports, Canonical texts. Secondary data are sources based upon the reviews and references, books, journals, periodicals and websites.

Antiquity

Veneration of goddesses goes back to remotest past, there are terracotta plaques showing her that belong to the Kushana period. The archaeological evidence points to the emergence of the cult by the dawn of the Christian era. The cult of this goddess appears to have become very popular during Gupta period. The slaughter of zoomorphic Mahisha by Goddess is seen earliest in Udayagiri and it has made the impact felt mostly over upper Deccan at Ellora caves and southern extension is at Badami. An image from early medieval period is reported from Talakadu, another temple at Kunjuru Puthur in south Canara depicts her standing in Pratyaldha posture placing her left foot over the head of the Mahisha. In a rock temple at Srirangam 620-728AD she is depicted with her right knee slightly bent over the severed head of the buffalo. The triumphatic form of the standing goddess over the severed head of buffalo was quite popular under the Cholas, who took it over from Pallavas. The outstanding example of this type is available from Brihadeshwara temple. Goddess with eight hands and in battle field is found at Pattadakallu and Mahabalipuram. At Halebidu she is richly adored and stands in Alidha pose. The concentration of Mahishasuramardini sculpture is mostly found at Aihole, Ellora, Alampur, Badami, Pattadakallu, Mahabalipuram, Mahakuta, Kanchi and Takkalom.

Iconography

According to Puranic accounts the goddess Durga Mahishasuramardini emerged out of the combined energies of Brahma, Vishnu, Siva and other gods for the sake of saving the gods from the wrath of Mahisha She is worshipped as a supreme deity under the name of *Sakti* and is also worshipped in association with Siva and Vishnu and has marked relationship with the cult of Siva-worship. As a consort of Siva have four arms, three eyes and wear on her head a *karandamukta* and is clad with silk garments. In two of her hands the *pasa* and the *ankusha* are carried, while the remaining two hands are held in *varadha* and *abhaya* poses. Iconographical features can be described in variety of forms while combating with *asura* she has terrible face. Goddess has been described as having dark complexion or resembling *atasi* flower. She is described as youthful appearance having strong and stout body and full breasts, with destructive weapons such as *trident*, *sword*, *conch*, a *chakra*,

a *disc* an *ankusha* a bow and arrow, a club, *asaktyaudha* or *Sakti* an axe a *ketaka*, a vajra, a staff, a *bhuusundi*-missile and *mudgara* and musical instruments comprised of a *damaru* and bell confirmed by great gods. When engaged in combat with *asuras* she is depicted as having *tribangha* posture.

Sometimes she is shown as seated on lion and sometimes standing over the head of Mahisha. She is also depicted in *Pratyalidha* and *alidhapada* pose. Her arms are many from two to thousands to forest of arms. Eminent scholar Hvon Stietencion identifies five types of sculptural representations of goddess Mahishamardini encounter. Goddess wrestling with a buffalo with its neck upturned under the pressure of the knee of goddess, Goddess raising the buffalo up from behind by pulling its tail with her front left hand by piercing its neck with her *trident* by her front right hand, Goddess fighting with the demon having human body and buffalo head, Goddess fighting with demon in human form issuing out of the carcass of decapitated buffalo, Goddess standing in a axial posture upon the severed head of the slain buffalo demon.

Emergence of goddess

Mahisha had waged war against the gods, and gods were defeated by Mahisha. A number of Sanskrit texts particularly in Markendya Purana provide detailed account of the emergence of the goddess out of the combined forces of Brahma Vishnu, Maheshwara other gods; these are stated to have been transformed into huge flame which was converted into a dazzling female. She was to relieve the gods of tyranny of the asuras and their unformidable armies. The texts also provide description to the various limbs of the goddess which she got from different gods. Siva was the face of goddess, Yama the back, and long hair, Vishnu the eighteen arms, Chandra the breasts, Indra the waist, Varuna the legs and thighs, Bhumi hips, Brahma the feet and toes, Surya the hands, Vasus fingers, Kubera the nose, Dakshaprajapati the teeth, Vayu the ears and Agni the tree eyes.

Siva presented the trident to the goddess, Vishnu discuss, Varuna the conch, Agni the Spear, Vayu the bow and quiver, Indra the vajra and bell that was tied to the neck of Airavatha his elephant. Yama the cudgel (*kala-danda*), Varuna the noose, Prajapathi the necklace, Brahma the water pot, Surya the dazzling brilliance *kala* (destroy the sword and shield), Vishwakarma the ornaments, (vest jewels crescent-moon) and weapons (axe, mace and armours, Himavan the lion for mount, , Ananta the serpent ornament Nagabarana this resulted in her depiction with multicplity of arms. Various texts provide different iconic types of her image, but the difference mainly is in the number of arms that are attributed to her arms from two to twenty are found in different dynasties' art.

Literary sources

Markandeyapurna-Devi Mahatmya the legend about the goddess has been retold with minor modification in number of Sanskrit texts but most vocal of them all can be considered to be Markandeyapurna, because it is in this purana precisely that the entire legend has been given the status of the glorification of the goddess. Killer of the Mahisha occurs in Devi Mahatmya section of Markendya purana. This text is in three divisions Prathama charitra, Madhyamacharitra and uttra charitra, the first deals with the killing by the goddess. The

division that deals with the killing of Mahisha begin with the narration of how Mahisha defeated the gods and became Indra himself. The gods led by Brahma approached Vishnu and Siva and detailed them of the situation. The anger emerging out of all the gods combined to take the shape of a terrible goddess who comprehended in herself all special powers of the gods bestowed upon her their own weapons

Shilparatna; the goddess Mahishamardini should have ten hands, which describes her further as having three eyes, she should wear on her head a jata makuta and on it there should be the *Chandra kala* or the digit of the moon, The colour of her body should be like that of the *atasi* flower and eyes should have blue lily she should have high breasts and a thin waist and there should be three bends in her body (of the *tribanga* variety). In her right hands she should carry the *trisula*, *khadga*, *chakra* and stringed bow; and in the left hands the *pasa ankusha ketaka parasu* and a bell. At her feet should lay a buffalo with its head cut off and with blood gushing from its neck. From within this neck should be visible the half emerged asura bound down by the naga pasa of goddess has already plunged her trisula into his neck and he is bleeding profusely. He should have terrific look with knitted eyebrows. The right leg of the Devi should be placed on the back of her lion and her left leg should touch the buffalo body.

Suprabheda and Purva Karna prescribe that this goddess must be *chaturbuja* carrying Conch, discuss, goad and noose in her hands. But more frequently met with are images with eight arms. *Sarada tilaka*, *prapanca* and *saratantra* specify that her eight hands must carry discuss, trident, dart, sword, gesture of warning, severed head, shield and bow or alternatively the first four details and rosary, *goad*, *axe* and serpent-noose (*nag pasha*), in early images she is not associated with lion.

Vishnu Dharmottara provides iconological features of Goddess, this canonical text provides details, that goddess with twenty arms, the arms on the right side carry spear, sword, *conch*, *discuss* *dart*, *Sakti*, *vajra*, the gestures of protection, hand drum on the left side she hold serpent –noose (*nagapasa*), shield, *axe*, *goad*, bow, *bell bana* (*dhvaja*) mace, mirror and she is according to this text is seated upon the back of the back of the lion.

Matsyapurana provides a detailed iconographic account of this goddess. The goddess has her matted hair tied into a top knot; the crescent moon is stuck into it. Her face is fair like lotus or moon and she has three eyes. She is youthful and decorated with all ornaments. She stands in a three-bend stance, she has ten hands, carrying *trident*, sword *discuss*, sharp dart and *Shakti* on the right side and shield drawn bow, noose, *goad* and severed head or axe on the left side.

The buffalo must be shown at her feet, with its head cut-off. At a point where the head is cut off, the demon Mahisha holding sword must be represented. His chest must be pierced by the goddess with her spear and his body must be covered with blood. He must also be shown as bound by the *nagapasa* of the *Devi* and his face must be terrible with knitted eye-brows. The goddess must be holding him by his hair. Lion must be shown with blood flowing out of its mouth at the side of the goddess, the right foot of the goddess must be placed firmly upon the lion and the big toe of the left foot slightly raised must be upon the buffalo's body.

Agnipurana this text describes the goddess as *Chandika*, she is to be represented as having twenty hands out of it ten hands on the right have a celestial *trident*, a sword a spear, a *chakra*, *pasa* (*noose*) a *ketaka ayudha*, *abhaya*, *damaru*, *Sakti* and remaining ten hands on the left should have a *nagapasa*, a *ketaka*, an axe, *ankusha*, a bow, a bell a banner a *gada*, a mirror.

Figure 1 Durga Mahishasuramardini cave 6 Udayagiri Gupta periods



This is one of the earliest representations of Durga Mahishasuramardini legend in a cave temple of Gupta period.

Mahishamardini in Chalukyan Art

Figure 2 Aihole Mahishasuramardini in Ravanaphadi



The south wall of the antarala of Siva cave in Ravanaphadi represents the theme of Mahishasuramardini. In the development of the early Chalukya Sculptural art at Aihole sculpture represented at Ravanaphadi rock cut shrine deserve to be considered first, because they are not only the earliest of their kind but also unique in their features. Rock cut shrine exhibits early depictions of sculptural art, which are carved on high relief Goddess is not associated with lion. Theme of Mahishasuramardini, goddess with eight hands is slaying Mahisha; goddess carries *Khadga*, *trident*, *prayogachakra*, *Sanka*, *Ketaka*, *dhanus*. Goddess is piercing trident on the back of Mahisha and her left leg has pressed on the neck of Mahisha and her *jata makuta* is well depicted.

Figure 2 Mahishasuramardini cave 1 Badami



The Markandeyapurna, Suprabedagama and Purvakaranagama describes her with four arms. Mahishasuramardini is in chaturbuj and holds tail of zoomorphic asura with her left lower hand, in Badami cave 1, in early images she is not associated with lion. Devi is attended by Skanda and Ganapathi. The presence of Ganapathi on scene is to remove the obstacles that the mother may come across while engaged in the arduous job. Devi Mahatyam version gives the information of where in Goddess is followed by her sons and also her husband Siva. The mode appears in Badami where goddess being the victor in the fight with asura. A devotee who worships her has to face the south where goddess faces north.

Figure 3 Mahishasuramardini, Durga temple, Aihole



At Aihole in Durga temple, goddess is eight armed and few arms are damaged and her head is shown thrown back in a heroic posture. The weapons that are recognisable are the trisula, chakra, ghantha and the Shakti. She is decked with ornaments; halo behind her makuta is visible. Goddess wears a gentle smile and has placed her left foot on the back of the demon and the right leg is placed on ground. The realistically rendered buffalo has its neck contorted in pain as the trident pierces it. Her vehicle lion is shown on the goddess right the headdress and halo were to be seen again at Ellora, while the jewellery was to be imitated by the Hoysalas. It is interesting to note that ghanta as attribute of Devi appears for the first time in Chalukyan sculptures. All the limbs thymically arranged as though dancing suggestion, the ease in which the demon is being killed. Her

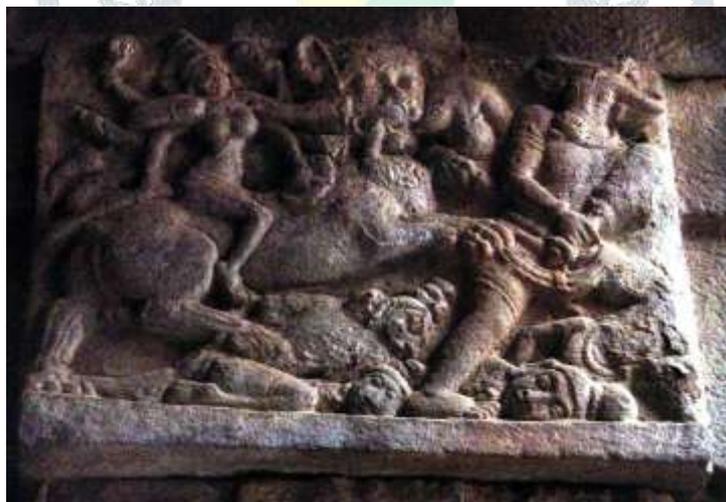
physiognomy is gracefully treated few arms of goddess to left are destroyed the realistically rendered buffalo is zoomorphic. Her vehicle lion is to her right side gazing at Mahisha.

Figure 4 Mahishasuramardini Virupaksha temple Pattadakallu



On the northern exterior wall of the Virupaksha temple represents the theme of Mahishasuramardini, the six-armed goddess slaying demon with her *khadga*. The lower right hand is *suchimudra*, while her left hand is pressing on the neck of the Mahisha who is zoomorphic, with *kapala* and *charka*, her vehicle lion is planted above an asura to right. Her left leg placed on the back of Mahisha. At right side below an asura is cutting of his head with a sword in order to offer his head to goddess. To the left above an mrga (deer) is planted, left below an asura is depicted whose hands are in *anjali* mudra, behind him a woman stands with her hand in *vismayamudra*, suggesting the victory of goddess.

Figure 5 Mahishasuramardini Mallikarjuna temple Pattadakallu



An interesting feature of the eight-armed Goddess is that she finds lively representations in some of the battle scenes, the earliest of which dating back to the eighth century AD, comes from Pattadakal. In a battle field in Mallikarjuna temple goddess is perched on lion's back with bow and arrow aiming with determination and chasing the fleeing anthropomorphic Mahisha, (human body with bison head) looking in askance. She holds in other hands a disc, bells. Demon holds a huge club retreating and looking back at her. The lion too is

fierceful with its tongue coming out, while one of its paws is striking the demon. The ground is littered with number of slain asuras. Panels from Mahabalipuram, Ellora and Darasuram have similar battle scene

Figure 6 Mahishasuramardini in Virupaksha temple



To the left of the subsidiary shrine of Virupaksha temple, the icon of Mahishasuramardini is attributed with eight hands is slaying the demon. Goddess stands behind *asura*, who is Anthropomorphic with the face of buffalo with human body. Demon's head is pressed down by the left foot of the goddess; the head of the *asura* is lying towards the ground. She is piercing *khadga* to the chest of the demon and piercing *trident* to the neck of the *asura*.

Observation

Evolution of Mahishasuramardini sculpture can be traced from Badami Cave one, where she is represented with four hands, based on Suprabedagama texts, and pulling the tail of zoomorphic demon Mahisha. And she is represented with her attributes. On the northern wall of Virupaksha temple at Pattadakallu her hand count is increased from four in Badami cave one to six hands, here Mahisha is still found in zoomorphic form. At Aihole Durga temple she is attributed with eight arms, but Mahisha is still found in zoomorphic. At Virupaksha temple in inner sanctum, she is found in eight hands furious battle with Mahisha and here the Mahisha has changed from zoomorphic to Anthropomorphic. At Mallikarjuna temple Pattadakallu she is seen mounted on the lion, combating with Anthropomorphic Mahisha.

Conclusion

To conclude it may be said that the Chalukyas were the forbears of South Indian sculptures traditions who have many acclaims to their credit. The rich art traditions that they founded become a good precedent for the later artist to create their art forms. They were the first to introduce the rock cut architecture tradition into Brahmanical art of South India. The Chalukyan artists were first in conceiving and creating plastic forms of Mahishasuramardini in South India art.

Reference

Encyclopaedias

1. Elements of Hindu Iconography vol TA Gopinath Rao vol I
2. Ibid Vol II
3. Encyclopaedia of Indian Iconography Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism by Prof S.K Ramachandra Rao Vol I,
4. Ibid Vol II
5. Encyclopaedia of Hindu Iconography Early Medieval Vol II- Sakti by Raju Kalidos
6. Encyclopaedia of Indian Architecture Hinduism, Jain and Islamic edited by BL Nagarch, KM Suresh, DP Sharma, Dalavi Qureshi

Bibliography

1. Carol Radcliff Bolan *Forms of Lajjagowri in Indian Art* New Delhi pg 12
2. Sibendu Manna *Mother Goddess Chandi its socio ritual impact in the folklore* Calcutta 1993 pg 13
3. Vanamali *Sri Devi Lila as found in Srimad Devi Bhagavatam and Sri Devi Mahatyam* New Delhi pg-87
4. Chitra Singh *Durga* New Delhi pg-39
5. Michael Lock wood *Pallava Art* 1982 Madras
6. Padigar SV, (ed)2010, *Inscriptions of Chalukyas of Badami* ICHR Bangalore 08
7. David Kinsley (1988). *Hindu Goddess: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. University of California Press. pp. 96–103.
8. Bhadouria GS *Women in Indian Art* Agam Kala Prakasham Delhi pp 29
9. Rajashekara S *Early Chalukya art at Aihole* Delhi 1985
10. Coburn Thomas *Devi Mahatmayam the crystallisation of the goddess* M Banarasidas Delhi
11. Sri MCP *Mother Goddess in Indian Art Architecture and Literature* Agam Kala Prakasham Delhi