Depiction of Various Forms of Mahishāsura and Mahishāsuramardini in Indian Art: Select Sculptures (11th–19th Centuries)

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Abstract

The present paper aims to study and analyze the various forms of *Mahishāsura* from tenth to nineteenth centuries from an art-historical perspective. It argues that the many forms of *Mahishāsura* in stone and bronze sculpture evolved significantly over time, influenced by stylistic considerations. For this research, sculptures of *Mahishāsura* were collected from the National Museum, New Delhi; the Allahabad Museum, Prayagraj; and the Indian Museum, Kolkata. *Mahishāsura*, a demon from Hindu mythology, is frequently depicted in a variety of styles and forms in Indian art. This study attempts to discuss the representation of *Mahishāsura* in five distinct forms in Indian sculpture: first, *Mahishāsura* is depicted in his entirety as a buffalo; second, as only a severed head; third, as a buffalo head with a human body; fourth, as emerging in human form from the body of a buffalo; and fifth, as solely a human figure. Scholars such as T.A. Gopinath Rao, J.N. Banarjee, and Shanti Lal Nagar have explored various aspects of *Mahishāsura* in Indian art. However, no substantial work has been done on the forms of *Mahishāsura* that flourished specifically from tenth to thirteenth centuries. This article seeks to address this gap through a case study of the different forms of *Mahishāsura* during this period. The paper will describe the evolution of *Mahishāsura's* forms and stylistic development using both bronze and stone mediums sculptures across different periods and regions.

Key Words: Stone & Bronze Sculpture, Religion, Iconography, Culture, Stylistic development

Introduction

Mahishāsura, a demon from Hindu mythology, is frequently depicted in a variety of styles and forms in Indian art. The present paper aims to study and analyze the various forms of *Mahishāsura*in stone and bronze sculpturesfrom the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries from an art-historical perspective. These sculptures have been thoroughly analyzed to study the stylistic features and aesthetics of the forms of *Mahishāsura*.

Sculptures of *Mahishāsura* from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries were collected from The National Museum, New Delhi; The Allahabad Museum, Prayagraj; and the Indian Museum, Kolkata for this research. These exquisite sculptures are intricately carved to embody the distinct styles of various states and regions across East India, North India, and South India. Each sculpture captures the essence of its origin, showcasing the rich cultural diversity of the subcontinent. The National Museum, New Delhi collection features two forms of *Mahishāsura* with one form in the Allahbad Museum, Prayagraj; and another two forms in the Indian Museum, Calcutta.

In Indian art, On behalf of the evidence the form of *Mahishāsura* has been described in five categories: **firstly,** the bull form of *Mahishāsura*:-The bull form of *Mahishāsura* sculpture represents *Mahishāsura* in the form of a buffalo. In terracotta plaque from the Kushan period discovered in Ahichchhatra, *Mahishāsuramardini* figure is depicted standing with two hands. She fiercely holds the upraised snout of a buffalo in her left hand and wields a trident piercing the back of the buffalo in her right hand. She commands attention with a fierce expression in her eyes and possibly possesses a third eye on her forehead (Nagar, 1988, 77). This form continued to be seen in the Gupta period, Ellora cave no 14, Laxman Temple Khajuraho and *Durgā* temple Aihole. In the Kushan period, *Mahishāsura* was depicted in a flat form, but after the Gupta period, the sculptures started showing bulges in the

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muscles of *Mahishāsura*. **Secondly,** *Mahishāsura* is depicted as the head of a buffalo and body in human forms**:-**In this type of sculpture, the demon *Mahishāsura*, had a human torso and the face of a buffalo, with horns and a snout carved on it. In a compelling battle scene from Pattadakal, an asura with a fabulous form, featuring a buffalo's head and a human body, brandishes a club in both hands. *Mahishāsuramardini* confronts the attack of a goddess perched on a lion, armed with her bow and arrow readied for battle (Nagar, 1988, 87). This type of sculpture can also be seen in *Mahishāsuramardini* Cave of Mamallapuram, Ellora Cave no 16, Gangaikonda Chidambaram Temple, Mukhalingeshwar Temple, and Baijnath Temple of Himachal Pradesh. **Thirdly,** the human form of the demon emerging from the severed buffalo head of *Mahishāsura*:**-**In this form, the buffalo form of the demon is shown dead at the base of the sculpture meanwhile; Goddess *Mahishāsuramardini* is depicted pulling the human form of the demon out from the buffalo form using her arms. This type of *Mahishāsura*, form is depicted in the various temples, such as the Somnath Temple of Mysore, Ambikā Temple Jagat, Someshwar Temple of Mukhalingam, and Hoyshaleshwar Temple of Halebidu. The fearsome goddess with eight arms is often portrayed locked in combat with the asura in human form. A bronze sculpture from 1000 A.D. at the Indian Museum Kolkata vividly depicts her triumphantly slaying the asura, standing in *pratyālidhmudrā*, with a demon's head in her left hand and piercing the asura's chest with a trident (Nagar, 1988, 87). **Fourthly,** Goddess *Mahishāsuramardini* standing on the severed head of *Mahishāsura*:- In such sculptures, only the severed head of demon *Mahishāsura* was depicted. The form of goddess is standing over the severed head of the buffalo has been quite popular in the south (Nagar, 1988, 86). The form of *Mahishāsura*, can be found at the Trimurti cave of Mahābalipuram, Shiva temple of Thakalam, Choleshwara temple in Malpadi, the Paramaswami temple in Ulagāpuram, the Kāmpareshwara temple in Thanjavur, and the Arakeshwara temple in Mysore. At the last, **Fifthly,** is anengraving of the only human form of *Mahishāsura*:-This form of *Mahishāsura* only depicts his human form. Unlike previous representations of *Mahishāsura*, this sculpture does not include his buffalo form. It's noticeable that the buffalo form is absent in this particular sculpture. This type of *Mahishāsura*, form sculpture can be seen in the collection of Government Museum, Chennai and Indian Museum, Kolkata.

Several distinguished scholars have explored the forms of *Mahishāsura*including Gopinath Rao's book "Elements of Hindu Iconography" (1968), Jitendra Nath Banerjee's book "The Development of Hindu Iconography" (1956), Karanam Sudhakar book "Mahish*āsurmardini in* the Temple Art of Andhra Pradesh" (2012), and Shanti Lal Nagar's "*Mahishāsurmardni* in Indian Art" (1988). Gopinath Rao aims to describe the iconography of all Hindu Gods and Goddesses based on ancient texts. He supports his interpretations with a wide range of ancient texts, inscriptions, and literary sources. Jitendra Nath Banerjee's objective is to trace the developments in iconography from the ancient period to the medieval period. Karanam Sudhakar has also discussed the iconography of goddesses. He concentrated on the concept of Goddess *Mahishāsuramardini* in specific sculptures from of the temple art of Andhra Pradesh. On the other hand, Shanti Lal Nagar has conducted an in-depth study of the iconography of many Hindu gods and goddesses. In his research, he mentioned the presence of Goddess *Mahishāsuramardini* in ancient texts and described her iconography.

This research has uniquely combined the methodologies of scholars and historians to produce a structure of the *Mahishāsura* sculptures from the National Museum in New Delhi, the Allahabad Museum, Prayagraj, and the Indian Museum in Kolkata. This approach represents a novel and previously unexplored method. In this paper, a comprehensive study of the five forms of *Mahishāsura* from the perspective of art history has been conducted. The study delved into the mythological texts and examined the precious sculptures collected in the selected Museum's. This in-depth analysis is a unique contribution to the field as it has not been undertaken before. As part of this research, comprehensive information about the stone and bronze sculptures representing five forms of *Mahishāsura* from selected museums has been provided from a rigorous art historical perspective. This article aims to address certain gaps by examining five different depictions of *Mahishāsura* that are prominent in Indian art. The description of *Mahishāsura* and the iconography of Goddess *Mahishāsuramardini* are detailed in various *Puranas,* including the *Varaha Purana, Agni Purana,* and *Śhilparatna.* The descriptions are as follows:

In the *VāmanaPurāna* (Gupta, 1968, 103-119). *Mahishāsura* tortured all the gods before they appealed *to Brahmā, Vishnu,* and *Maheśa,* in that order, for rescue. From the combined wrath of these three gods emerged the Effulgent Mountain, from which *Kātyāyni* was born. *Kātyāyni* possessed the radiant beauty of a hundred suns, three eyes, black hair, and eighteen arms. She was endowed with various divine weapons: *Śiva* gave her a *triśula, Vishnu* a *chakra, Varuṇa* a *sankha, Agni* a *bhāla,Yama* a *mudgara, Vāyu* a *dhanush, Surya* a *turīya, Indra* a *vajra, Kuberagadā, Brahmā* a *kamandalu* and a *mālā, Kāla* a *talwār*and *dhāla, Viśvakarmā*a *paraśu,* and *Himavāna* a lion as her mount. *Kātyāyni* then moved to *Vindya* Mountain to establish her residence. While meditating on *Maheśvara* there, an *asura* witnessed her radiant form and informed *Mahishāsura*of her unparalleled beauty. Enchanted, *Mahishāsura* proposed to make her his consort. The goddess refused and challenged him, declaring that if he could defeat her, she would be his forever. The battle ensued, and the goddess ultimately vanquished the demon. After *Mahishāsura*'s defeat, the goddess pardoned him when he recognized her true nature. She was thereafter known as *Vindhyavāsini*, as she resided in the *Vindhya* Mountains to defeat *Mahishāsura*.

According to *Agni Mahāpurāṇam* (Dutt, 2009, 179).the goddess*Caṇḍikā*is to be represented as having twenty hands, out of which the ten are situated on the right, holding and being armed with a celestial *trishula, talwār, bhāla, chakra, pāsa, kheṭaka, Āyudha, abhaya, damru,* and *śaktikā* and the following weapons are to be placed in the remaining ten hands on the left side, viz; *nāgapāsa, kheṭaka,* axe, *Aṅkuśa,* bow, bell, banner, *gadā, ḍarpan* and the *mudgara.* The buffalo should be represented below, with its head entirely severed and the *asura* should be sculptured as rushing out of that severed neck, foaming with rage and brandishing his sword in the air and vomiting blood; his hairs clotted with blood and blood streaming forth from his two eyes and dripping down round his breast like a garland. The goddess is to be represented in a standing posture, with her right foot resting on the back of the lion and her left on the shoulder of the demon, round whose neck is twisted the serpent noose of the goddess and who is pounced upon by her celestial lion biting at his arm.

According to the *Silparatna (Sastri, 1929, 138).* the deity should be depicted with three eyes, a *jatāmukuta* on her head, and a *candrakalā*[2]. Her body should have the complexion of an *atasi* flower, her eyes should resemble a *nīlotpala* (blue lotus), and her waist should be slender. She should be shown in a *tribhanga* (threefold bending) pose. In her right hand, she should hold a *trīśula, khadga, śaktāyayudha, chakra,* and *dhanuṣa.* In her left hand, she should hold *pāśa, aṅkuśa* (elephant goad), *kheṭikā, paraśu,* and *ghaṇṭā.* At her feet, there should be a headless buffalo with blood streaming from its neck. Emerging from this neck is a real *asura*, who is half-emerged and restrained by the goddess's *nāgapāśa.* The goddess has already stabbed her *trīśula*into the *asura's* neck, causing him to bleed profusely. Despite this, the *asura* should still be depicted holding a sword and shield. He should appear fearsome, with knit eyebrows. The goddess's right leg should be shown touching the body of the *Mahishāsura*which is lying on the back of her lion.

Table No 1: List of Sculptures Collected from Select Museums of India

S.No	Name of Museum	No of Sculptures of *Māhishāsurmardini*	Medium
1-	National Museum, New Delhi	03	03 Bronze
2-	Allahbad Museum, Prayagraj	01	01 Stone
3-	Indian Museum, Kolkata	02	01 Bronze 01 Stone

The eleventh century sculpture **(Fig 1)** of *Mahishāsurmardini* has been collected in the Allahabad Museum, in which the first form of *Mahishāsur* can be seen. An architectural sculpture showing the four-armed goddess *Mahishāsurmardini* in a niche, using her right hand's trident to vanquish the buffalo form of *Mahishāsur.* In this depiction, the goddess is shown standing in the *alidha* pose. Her left leg is placed on the back of the demon *Mahishāsura,* while her right leg rest on the architectural relief. She carries a sword and a shield in her upper arms. And among the remaining two hands, the left hand is hitting *Mahishāsura's*head with a trident and the right hand is holding *Mahishāsur*'s face upwards. Her *Vāhana* lion is also depicted assaulting to *Mahishāsur.* Instead of depicting the demon *Mahishāsu's* severed head, this sculpture shows the head being carried by the goddess and her striking the demon's head with a trident. The goddess *Mahishāsurmardini* is adorned with various ornaments, including a crown, earrings, garland of two pearls around her neck, and an ornate waistband. While the goddess's facial expressions are calm, her divine power is evident from her physical posture and the context of the scene. The sculpture is carved on a flat base. The lion, the goddess's *vāhana,* is shown attacking the back of *Mahishāsura.* This sculpture illustrates the buffalo form of *Mahishāsura,* showcasing his complete bull form as engraved by the artist. The same form of *Mahishāsura*can also be seen in Cave No. 1 of Badami, Durga Temple Aihole, and Laxman Temple Khajuraho.

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[2]Moon - shaped ornament.

Fig 1 *Mahishāsurmardini,* Accession No. AM-SCL-399, 11th century CE, Bhita, Uttar Pradesh, Stone, Allahabad Museum, Allahabad

A collection of the second form **(Fig 2)** of *Mahishāsura* can be seen in the Indian Museum, Calcutta. The stone sculpture depicts the eight-armed goddess *Mahishāsurmardini* slaying the demon. In this representation, the goddess holds various *āyudha* in her hands, including a *triśūla, cakra, śaṅkha, dhāla, and talwār.* With her right hand, she presses the face of *Mahishāsura,* while her left hand is in *abhayamudrā.* In this sculpture, the second form of the demon *Mahishāsura* can be seen in which the torso of the demon *Mahisha* is of a human and the face of a buffalo, on which horns and snout are engraved. The goddess is shown with her *vāhana*, a lion, and is adorned with a variety of ornaments. In this sculpture, *Mahishāsura* is depicted in a unique form. He has a human torso and a bull's face, complete with horns and a snout. The demon is shown kneeling, with his face turned towards the back, where it is pressed by the goddess. *Mahishāsura* is also adorned with various types of jewelry, similar to the goddess. The physical form of the goddess is rendered with great naturalism, displaying flexibility in her posture. She is carved in the *alidhābhangimā,* and her expression is calm rather than aggressive. While earlier sculptures depicted only the head form of *Mahishāsura*, this statue represents a different form where his face is that of a bull and his torso is human. This demonstrates the artistic skill and stylistic development of the twelfth century. The sculpture provides an example of another form of *Mahishāsura,* where the demon's face is bull-like and his torso human, showcasing the era's artistic achievements. In a sculpture from Dharamsala-cuttack dating back to the 10th century CE, the goddess deals with *asura* in fabulous form having a human body and the head of the buffalo (Nagar, 1988, 89).

Fig. 2 *Mahishāsurmardini,* Accession No. 6314/A25241, 12th century CE, Stone, Mukhed, Hyderabad, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, Indian Museum, Kolkata

This ten-armed sculpture**(Fig 3)** of the goddess *Mahishāsurmardini,*, carved in a square frame, dates back to eleventh-century Eastern India. In this sculpture of the goddess found in Eastern India, the goddess is depicted pulling out the human form of *Mahishāsura* by his hair with her lower left hand, in which the third form of the demon *Mahishāsura* can be seen. The sculpture demonstrates remarkable flexibility in the goddess's posture. She is depicted on a double pedestal adorned with small geometric patterns. The upper part of the pedestal features two flat lines, each carved with half-lotus petals. Inside this ornate frame, the goddess *Mahishāsurmardini* is shown standing in the *Pratyālidha* posture. In this stance, her left foot rests on the back of *Mahishāsura*, while her right foot is placed on her *vāhana.* The goddess holds various weapons in her ten hands. To the left of the goddess, the severed head of the demon *Mahishāsura* is depicted, with his human form emerging from the severed torso and facing the goddess. *Mahishāsura* is also shown holding a sword, indicating his readiness to fight. On the other side, the lion, the goddess's *vāhana,* is shown gripping *Mahishāsura*'s back with its mouth. The goddess *Mahishāsuramardini* is adorned with various ornaments, including a crown, earrings, a necklace, and wrist rings. The artist has skillfully rendered an aura of flames behind the goddess's head, highlighting their exceptional artistry.

Fig 3 *Mahishāsurmardini,* Accession No. 71.58, 11th century, East India, Bronze, National Museum, New Delhi

Another collection of sculpture **(Fig 4)** of the third form of *Mahishāsura* can be seen in the National Museum, New Delhi, which belongs to *Pahāri* region. In contrast to the sculpture from Eastern India, where the goddess is adorned with minimal jewelry, the sculpture found in the *Pahāri* region showcases the goddess in a highly artistic form. Notably, the goddess's hair is depicted in a braided style, which is unique and not seen in previous sculptures. In this sculpture, the goddess is also shown in the *Pratyālidhabhangimā,* similar to the earlier work. She holds various weapons, including a serpent *pāśa* in her lower left hand, poised to strike the demon *Mahishāsura*. The demon *Mahishāsura* is portrayed emerging from a bull form into a human form, holding a sword in his right hand. Meanwhile, the lion, the goddess's *vāhana,* grips *Mahishāsura*'s arm in its mouth. The lion in this sculpture is depicted with attributes resembling the Greek mythological griffin, including long wavy hair, large ears, a curved tail, a pearl necklace, and ornate clothing. The demon *Mahishāsura's* body and facial expressions are rendered with great detail, including his wide-open eyes, a pearl necklace, and anklets on his feet. The goddess is adorned with an array of ornaments: a triangular crown, earrings, a necklace of two pearls, and an ornate waistband embellished with pearls and lotus blossoms. She also wears an *antarīyā* with its ends hanging in the middle. In the eleventh-century sculpture from the Pahari region, *Mahishāsura* is depicted with considerable ornamentation, contrasting with the simpler depiction in earlier Eastern Indian sculptures. The powerful physical form of *Mahishāsura* is more pronounced in this sculpture. Additionally, the relief carving of the goddess *Mahishāsuramardini,* her lion *vāhana,* and *Mahishāsura* demonstrates a significant stylistic development compared to earlier Eastern Indian sculptures, highlighting the period's artistic evolution. In a sculpture from Bellary, she is shown as slaying the asura in human form. The symbolic representation of buffalo's head is available to the right (Nagar, 1988, 87).
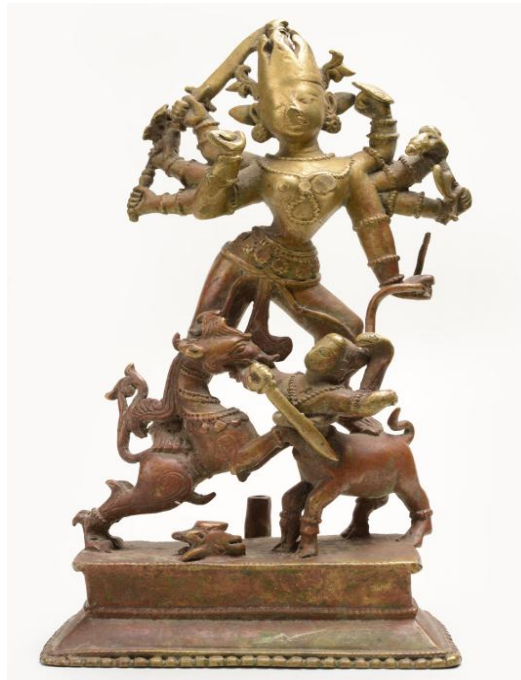

Fig 4 *Mahishāsurmardini,* Accession No. 68.49, 13th century, Pahari, Bronze, National Museum, New Delhi

Here, **(Fig 5)** the goddess stands over the severed head of the bull-form demon *Mahishāsura*, representing the fourth form of *Mahishāsura*. This sculpture of Goddess *Mahishāsurmardini* is distinct from the East Indian sculptures, where the goddess is typically shown standing in the *alidhābhangimā* with ten hands. In contrast, this sculpture depicts the goddess standing in the *Sambhangbhangimā*. In this sculpture, the goddess has four hands. The upper right hand holds a *chakra*, and the upper left-hand holds a *shankha*. The lower right hand is depicted in *abhayamudrā*, while the lower left hand is in *varadaMudrā*. The goddess is adorned with various ornaments. She wears a flowing *antarīyā* on the lower part of her body, decorated with curved lines. The goddess's facial expressions are carved with clarity, featuring small closed eyes, a pointed nose, thin lips, bulging breasts, and a slender waist, all rendered in a naturalistic style. The severed head of *Mahishāsura* is prominently visible in the sculpture. The sculpture is set on a square pedestal with three vertical lines engraved on it. Behind the goddess is a curved *prabhāvali*, with emanating flames depicted, and a *kirtimukha* carved in the center above. The *prabhāvali* also features small beads along the outer cover, though part of this cover is broken. This sculpture exemplifies the stylistic development of its period. It clearly shows the fourth form of *Mahishāsura*, with the severed head depicted beneath the goddess. In the Museum of fine Arts, Boston, there is an image of the Pallava period, depicting an eight armed Goddess standing over the severed head of the buffalo (Nagar, 1988, 86).

Fig 5 *Mahishāsurmardini,* Accession No. 62.500, 13th century, South-India, Bronze, National Museum, New Delhi

Another collection of sculpture of the last fifth form **(Fig 6)** of *Mahishāsura,* can be seen in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, which belongs to the nineteenth century. This bronze sculpture of*Mahishāsuramardini* with ten arms presents a remarkable evolution in artistic style from the nineteenth century. Unlike earlier, more stylistically rigid sculptures, this piece depicts the goddess in a dynamic and flexible manner previously unseen. The sculpture shows Goddess *Mahishāsuramardini* in a *Pratyālidha* posture, similar to previous depictions. In contrast to earlier representations, where the demon's severed head was displayed on the pedestal, this sculpture features a fully depiction of *Mahishāsura* in combat readiness, wielding a sword and shield. The goddess's ten hands hold various *āyudh.*Her *vāhana*lion companion attacks the demon as well, gripping his arm and using both paws to assail him. The lion, depicted with characteristics reminiscent of the Greek mythological griffin such as its wavy mane, large ears, curved tail, and ornate adornments including a pearl necklace adds a unique touch to the sculpture. The demon *Mahishāsura* is portrayed with meticulous detail, featuring expressive large eyes, a pearl necklace, and anklets. The goddess is adorned with various ornaments: a triangular crown, earrings, a double-strand pearl necklace, and an ornate waistband with lotus flower carvings. This sculpture, represents a significant advancement in artistic style and craftsmanship.

Fig 6 *Mahishāsurmardini,* Accession No. 97/4, 19th century CE, Mukhed, Allahabad, Bronze, Indian Museum, Kolkata

Conclusion and Significance

Through, the analysis of the text and the sculptures above, it is concluded that there have been many changes in the form of *Mahishāsura* and Goddess *Mahishāsurmardini*from the eleventh to the nineteenth century. It also concludes that the war between *Devi* and *Mahishāsura* has been described in *VāmanaPurāna*. In *Agni Mahāpuran*, Goddess *Mahishāsuramardini* has been addressed as Chandik*ā* and she has been described as having twenty hands and *Mahishāsura* has been described as emerging from a buffalo in human form. On the other hand, in *Shilparatna*, the ten arms of the Goddess and the same form of *Mahishāsura* have been described which is described in *Agni Purāna*.This evolution can be observed through iconography, stylistic changes, and physical appearance. All of the sculptures mentioned represent their respective provinces through their unique styles. Artists from different periods have skillfully illustrated various postures of *Mahishāsuramardini* in her battle against the buffalo demon. In the first category, the goddess is depicted combating a buffalo with its neck twisted under the pressure of her leg.In the second category, the goddess is shown fighting a demon with a human body and a buffalo head. The third category portrays the goddess in battle with a demon in human form emerging from the decapitated trunk of the buffalo. In the fourth category, the goddess is represented standing in an axial posture on the severed head of the buffalo.

In the eleventh-century sculpture, the Goddess *Mahishāsurmardini* is depicted calmly killing the demon *Mahishāsura*, while the first buffalo form of *Mahishāsura* can also be seen from the eleventh period. After the eleventh century, the sculptures from the twelfth and thirteen centuries depict the second, third and fourth forms of the demon *Mahishāsura*. Finally, after the thirteenth century, the fifth form of the demon *Mahishāsura*, representing the only human form of *Mahishāsura*, can be seen in the nineteenth-century iconography. In the nineteenth century, along with depictions of the goddess, artists also began creating decorated representations of the demon *Mahishāsura*. This means that not only was the goddess shown in a decorated form, but the demon *Mahishāsura* was also depicted in a decorated form, which can be observed in sculptures from that time. Over time, various changes and developments can be seen in these sculptures of Goddess *Mahishāsuramardini*. For instance, some sculptures show the goddess with four arms, while others depict her with eight and ten arms.

Through a closer analysis of sculptures, it is proposed that different artists worked together to add elements in the different time period sculpture to their expertise. Thus, after studying these sculptures, it becomes clear that the sculptures were created in different styles. Each sculpture expresses the unique identity of its respective province.

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