EVOLUTION OF THE GODDESS ICON IN EASTERN INDIA

(6th - 13th centuries A.D.)

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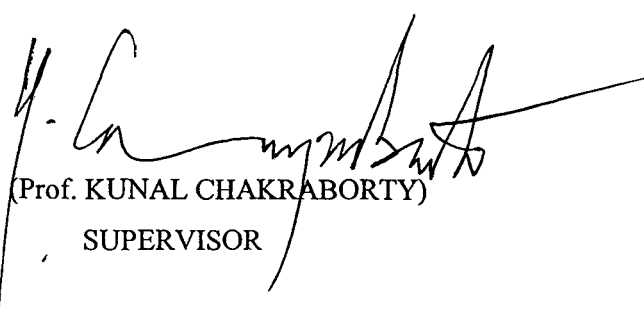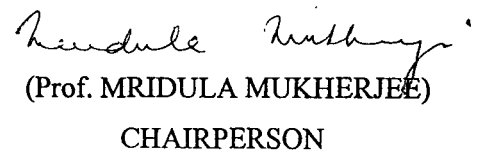New Delhi-110067, India

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This is to certify that this dissertation "**EVOLUTION OF THE GODDESS ICON IN EASTERN INDIA (6th – 13th centuries A.D.)**" submitted by **SALILA** in partial fulfillment of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** is entirely her own work and has not been considered for the award of any degree either at this or any other University.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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The entire responsibility for the mistakes in this work is mine and I am alone responsible for it.

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Historians and the Goddess have for long been engaged in an ongoing dialogue. Historians have been attempting to capture the essence of the Goddess. The Goddess, however, seems to have cast a veil upon the vision of the historian, through her *māyā*, which prevents him from realising it. How should the historian approach the Goddess? How should one invest chronology, historicity, evolutionary direction and many other features of the historian's craft that she cuts through in her many layered presence, in ritual, cult, iconography, art, text and philosophy? The charisma of the Goddess seems to have incited a passion for many: historians, artists, feminists, devotees and even various combinations of any of these. What does the Goddess mean to different people?

Goddesses abound in Hinduism in multiple images, varied and sometimes contradictory. There are those who are consorts, while others who are fiercely independent. They are sometimes bedecked with jewellery and at other times adorn themselves with human skulls. At times they are wild with anger while at other times epitomise feminine beauty and grace. While they can reside in homes as auspiciousness, they also dance frenziedly in cremation grounds. They are universal mothers, ideal wives and even the bravest warriors. They seem to be present almost everywhere.

The Goddess is now almost inextricably linked with the Brahmanical pantheon. She pervades at all levels in the pantheon and even outside it: as an overarching Great Goddess or as manifestations of this Goddess, as a high caste Brahmanical divinity or as

an-iconic village deity, as consort, warrior, energy, auspiciousness, colour, geometry and in myriad other forms. The concept of the Goddess underlines the polytheism associated with Hinduism. The Goddess not just pervades in the pantheon in a multitude of forms but also accommodates within her larger image, the identities of other minor deities.

Whatever be her nature and form, her ancestry, and lineage are more or less defined. Scholars almost universally proclaim that the Goddess was originally a non-Brahmanical, non–Sanskritic, indigenous deity, who was gradually incorporated into the Brahmanical pantheon. Though temporarily eclipsed in the Vedas, the Goddess resurfaced in the *Purāṇas* and became a symbol of coalescing of counter traditions. The Goddess is believed to have been dwelling on hilly tracts, coastal regions, forests and other 'peripheral' areas (Bengal, Assam, coastal plains, and the southern peninsula, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and the foothills of the Himalayas) before coming into the Brahmanical plains or the *Madhyadeśa,* seen as the heartland of Brahmanism.[1]

The earliest evidence of goddess worship comes from the Indus Valley culture. The Indus valley people depicted their goddess semi-nude, with exaggerated breasts and hips. In other depictions the goddess also had a sapling coming out of her womb or surrounded with plants and animals. This indicates the "ritual organisation of the Harappan religion as derived from the basic concept of the archetypal mother who controlled biological regeneration.[2]

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[1] Brockington, J.L., *The Sacred Thread,* OUP, Delhi, 1992, p. 113.

[2] Atre, Shubhangna in Chakraborty, Kunal, *Religious Processes: The Puraṇas and the Making of a Regional Tradition,* OUP, New Delhi, 2001, p. 166.

The conception of the female divinity was not fully articulated in the Vedic literature but the foundation for this was certainly laid. The figure of the Goddess was eclipsed in the Vedic literature, which had an evidently male dominant pantheon. The Goddess occurred as secondary deities mainly as consorts and mothers of powerful male deities. Six principal female divinities have been identified in the Vedic texts, but there seems to be little personal identity to any of these.[3] There is no systematically articulated theology of a 'Great Goddess' in the Vedic corpus. The goddesses were frequently associated with the creative processes operative in the universe. Daniel Ignalls wrote: "The earliest literature of India tells us nothing of the goddess as the singular embodiment, and the few references of the goddess that we meet in ancient Sanskrit texts are decorative rather than .essential."[4] Sometime around the 6th century A.D. this creative potency was linked with the Sāmkhya philosophy and the Goddess came to be described as śakti, prakṛti and māyā, all at once.

The period starting from around the 5th century A.D. witnessed a substantial decline in Brahmanism in the Gangetic plain, seen as the Brahmanical heartland. There was an urgent need to revitalise and spread the Brahmanical religion. Moreover at a time when the peripheral areas were asserting their autonomy from the centre, Brahmanism became a political instrument to tie in peripheral areas with the political centre. While a religious motive was certainly current, political ambitions also lay hidden under the mantle of

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[3] Pintchman, Tracy, *The Rise of the Goddess in Hindu Religious Tradition,* Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1997. Pintchman identifies these six goddesses as: waters (āp), earth, aditī, virāj, vāc and śācī. Pintchman divides the goddesses into two groups. The first three are seen as the creative material and the last three as the creative energy.

[4] Ignalls, Daniel, in Chakraborty, Kunal, *Religious Processes,* p. 166.

religious enthusiasm. This was followed by large-scale Brahmanical migration to the east, west and southwest from the *Madhyadeśa* to bring in more people under the veil of Brahmanical religion. Between 5th to 7th centuries A.D., large-scale land grants were made to the *Brāhmanas* in the peripheral areas such as Assam, Bengal, Orissa, Gujarat, Deccan, Himalayas and even in Nepal. [5] Land was granted not only to bring a larger area under cultivation but also to facilitate cultural interactions with the indigenous population of the newly settled areas. Religion became the most effective tool in this process of 'cultural colonisation.' This further led to the conversion of tribals into *śudrās* to be accommodated within the Brahmanical *varṇa* order. Conversion in fact became both an economic and a cultural weapon. The *śudrās* acted as the much-needed labour in agriculture in the newly conquered lands. Secondly, they also acted as the bridge for cultural and religious interactions between the *Brāhmanas* and the tribals. The newly converted *śudrās* could however not be permanently employed as labours in their own lands. There was a need for granting them some rights over the land. "They naturally came to have rights and interests in the land in which the *Brāhmanas* and other beneficiaries came to enjoy superior rights."[6] This was however in contrast to the traditional ritual status assigned to the *śudrās* in the *Madhyadeśa*. The *Brāhmanas* could not maintain strict caste monopolies in the newly Brahminised areas. There was the need to evolve a religious system through which the folk people could be smoothly brought into the existing caste mechanism where each unit in the hierarchy was given a pre-defined place.

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[5] Sharma, R. S., *Material Milieu of Tantricism*, in Sharma, R.S. (ed.) *Indian Society: Historical Probings, In Memory of D.D. Kosambi*, ICHR, 1974, p. 178.

[6] Ibid. p. 180.

The Brahmanical religion was far too rigid, rigorous and cumbersome to be adopted and practised by the common man. Moreover the *Brāhmānas* while attracting new people to their faith could not completely sideline the beliefs and traditions of the local masses. Hence it became crucial to pack the Brahmanical religious traditions in a new cover. This involved a series of legitimisation of local beliefs and practices already in vogue and a reiteration of the fundamental principles of Brahmanism.[7] One of the crucial elements of the indigenous religion was the cult of a mother goddess. N.N. Bhattachraya believes that in primitive cosmogony woman as the mother of the race is considered to be the life giver.[8] Worship of her organs and attributes are hence symbolic of prosperity and the perpetuation of life.

N.N. Bhattacharya hence sees the cause and popularity of *sakta* traditions as "evidently connected with the changing social pattern arising out of the new economic conditions."[9] The higher religion in order to gain popularity with the masses had to compromise with the existing cults and beliefs. Through this process female divinities of the lower strata of society broke into the strongholds of the male dominated cults. The tribal people who were unable to maintain themselves by their traditional modes of production had come in contact with the 'advanced' peoples in exchange of their labour and adopted the new religious values. The new religion hence became the fundamental instrument of social reconciliation and integration.

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[7] Chakraborty, Kunal, *Religious Processes,* p. 23.

[8] Bhattacharya, N.N., *History of Tantric Religion,* New Delhi, 1982, Preface, p. 7.

[9] Ibid. p. 209.

The *Purāṇic* form of Hinduism, which is more or less the present form of Hinduism, crystallised around the 6th century A.D. *Purāṇic* Hinduism adopted the practices of the existing diverse religious traditions, specially the rites and rituals of autochthonous cults. It also tried to bring the various deities popular in the Vedas and in the non-Brahmanical religions within the framework of a single pantheon. There was a definite emphasis on delineating the nature and actions of different deities and an attempt to elevate the status of the 'mother goddess.' There was also a systematic attempt to establish the identity of the *Mahādevī* who was believed to be the single female divinity and individual goddesses became partial manifestation of this *Mahādevī*.

This process of the conceptualisation of the Great Goddess began with the composition of the *Devī Māhātmya* sometimes between the 5th and 7th centuries A.D. The goddesses who originally inhabited hills and forests were brought into the Brahmanical corpus. The *Purāṇas* written subsequently to the *Devī Māhātmya* attest to the growing popularity of *śaktism*. The later day *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* (8th –13th centuries A.D.) is seen as the most complete articulation of the goddess tradition. The *Devī* was now visualised as the absolute source of the cosmos. She usurped power of the gods and made it her own. The Goddess, in some of her manifestations, was now no longer subject to the authority of the male gods, but emerged as distinctly superior to them.

The image of the Goddess as portrayed in the *Devī Māhātmya* underwent considerable changes by the time of the composition of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*. While the *Devī Māhātmya* introduced the myths and the idea related to the Goddess, the *Devī Bhāgvata*

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Purāṇa significantly revised these myths and new motifs and attributes were now associated with the Goddess. While the Goddess of the *Devī Māhātmya* was essentially a warrior, by the time of the composition of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* she also became the consort par excellence, personifying the ideals of feminine beauty and grace and most importantly the World Mother. The inspirational seed for the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* was definitely the *Devī Māhātmya* but the grand image of the Goddess that emerged in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* was absent in the *Devī Māhātmya.*

The following study focuses on the transformations in the images of the Goddess, as represented in the two texts. The aim is to analyse the changes in the manner in which the Goddess was depicted and perceived, the many roles and attributes she was attached with, and the space, which she occupied in both the divine and the human realms. Further, transformations can also be read in terms of the simultaneous coalescing of multiple traditions, particularly Brahmanical, folk, Tantric and to a large extent Buddhist that resulted in dynamic interactions producing the body of the Goddess. At another level the changing imagery of the goddess can also be understood in terms of the multiple levels at which she interacted with various strata of population: the royalty, the priestly communities, the artists and the indigenous people and how each of these groups grappled with her idiom.

The 6ᵗʰ century A.D. has been taken as the starting point of this study since it is generally accepted as the approximate date of the inception of the Goddess in the Brahmanical traditions through the composition of the *Devī Māhātmya*. The *Devī Māhātmya* is

believed to be the earliest Sanskrit exposition of the glories of the Goddess outlining her 'history' as also an account of her worship. Again the 12th to 13th centuries A.D. has been taken to be the approximate date for the composition of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*, which marks more or less the final culmination of the identity of the goddess.

The focus of this research is eastern India, popularly known as *Prācya* in ancient Indian texts. Eastern India here is taken to mean the region comprising of the modern day states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Bangladesh. Language, religion, art and political authority are just a few of the many reasons that defined this area as a distinct cultural entity. Eastern India has been taken as the case study not merely because of its present day engagement with the cult of the Goddess but also on the basis of past associations.

Goddess worship was probably prevalent in Bengal during the 7th- 8th centuries A.D. as derived from the evidence in the *'Devī Purāṇa'* where the practice of goddess worship in the mode of left hand worship is frequently mentioned.[10] The *Purāṇa* itself seems to have been composed in the eastern regions if seen in the light of frequent mention of such places like Kāmarupa, Vanga, Rādha, Varendra, and Saṃtāta. The *Devī Māhātmya* mentions its place of origin as the tracts of river Narmada, in the country of Ujjain. Rama Chatterjee however contends and claims Bengal as its original place of residence.[11] She does this on the basis of the mention of the grove of Medha that is identified as located on the eastern frontiers of Bengal. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* however seems to be more Bengal-centric. The common belief is that this later *Purāṇa* was probably composed by a

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[10] Chatterjee, Rama, *Religion in Bengal*, Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1985, p. 177.
[11] Ibid. p. 193.

group of scholars originally form Bengal but who at a later date might have migrated to Benaras. This hypothesis is based on account of certain linguistic and cultural evidence.

Bengal was essentially divided into four major regions.[12] The small region of Samtāta, corresponding to Comilla and Noahkhali Districts, remained an important cultural entity throughout the period. The northern area of Bangladesh was known as Pundaravardhan or Varendra and corresponds largely to Bogra, Rangpur, Dinajpur and Rajshahi districts. Lying in the V-shaped valley between the Ganga and the Jamuna rivers, this was another area of cultural significance. The territory between the Bhagirathi and the Ganga, comprising large parts of Murshidabad, Jessore and Nadia districts, was known as Gauḍa. Finally Vanga, less important during the period of this study but of much political consideration, lay southeast of Gauḍa and covered the regions of Faridpur, and Dacca.

Geographical locations play their own distinctive role in the shaping of history. The impact of geography on history is particularly significant in understanding the location of settlements, the movement of people and the creation of states.[13]

Tracing the Footsteps of the Goddess:

This study attempts to analyse the evolution of the Goddess and the subsequent transformations in her image. Before embarking on this track, the major historical trends regarding the study of the *Devī* cult have been briefly surveyed.

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[12] Asher, Frederick, M., *The Art of Eastern India: 300-800 A.D.*, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1980, p.6.

[13] Thapar, Romila, *Early India, From the Origins to A.D. 1300*, Penguin India, New Delhi, 2002, p. xxi.

Thomas Coburn in his study of the *Devī Māhātmya* traces the gradual Brahmanisation of the Goddess.[14] He outlines a pre-Vedic, non-Sanskrit origin of the Goddess, her gradual absorption in the Brahmanical pantheon and traces her position in relation to her male colleagues. Coburn points out that the core of the text contains the three important salvific myths of the Goddess, which define her identity and highlight the idea that the ultimate reality in the universe is feminine, giving her the image of a goddess.

Tracy Pintchman formulates an early history of the Goddess emphasising her status as a symbolic complex to show that the Goddess is actually a combination of various minor goddesses.[15] She echoes Coburn's argument that goddess worship was initially a non-Brahmanic, autochthonous cult, which found a niche for itself in the Vedas and re-emerged in the *Purāṇas*. She believes that the *sāmkhya* category was attached to the goddess to locate her role within the various creation myths.

Mackenzie Brown in her study of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* recounts the final assertion of the Goddess tradition and describes it as the "triumph of the goddess."[16] Brown believes that the authors of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* consciously endeavoured to demonstrate the superiority of the *Devī* over competing masculine deities and to articulate in new ways the manifold nature of the Goddess and her transcendence.

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[14] Coburn, Thomas, *Devi Mahatmya: Crystallisation of the Goddess Tradition*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1988.

[15] Pintchman, Tracy, *The Rise of the Goddess in Hindu Tradition*.

[16] Brown, Mackenzie, *Triumph of the Goddess*, Sri Satguru Publications, New Delhi, 1992.

The second sets of writings explore the various approaches to understanding the Goddess. Hawley and Wulff survey a fascinating variety of source materials (religious texts, drama, poetry, folklores and miniature paintings) to understand the divine consort.[17] This co-edited volume succeeds in understanding the transformations in the identity, status and roles of the Goddess when she is placed as a consort, with a consort and without one.

Carmel Berkson interweaves psychology, ethnography and aesthetics to understand the dynamics behind the *Mahiṣāsurmardini* motif.[18] Berkson sees this myth as a larger socio-cultural symbol emerging out of deep-rooted contradictions in the human psyche. The study also uses sculptural relief to understand the many levels at which the relationship between the *Devī* and the demon king occurs.

David Kinsley makes a survey of the various images of the divine feminine and the evolution of elaborate mythological structures around them.[19] He places the multitude of Brahmanical Goddesses within the larger ambit of Hindu traditions and understands individual goddesses as independent deities and not as partial manifestations of a larger phenomenon (perceived as the *Mahādevī*).

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[17] Hawley and Wulff, *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1984.

[18] Berkson, Carmel, *The Divine and the Demonic: Mahisa's Historical Struggle with Durga*, OUP, New Delhi, 1995.

[19] Kinsley, David, *Hindu Goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in Hindu Religious Traditions*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1987.

Given her competition for status with the male deities, an issue central to the study of the Goddess is whether the 'Goddess is a feminist?' Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl address this question of the empowerment of goddesses in South East Asian religious traditions.[20] They particularly take the issue of Buddhist and Hindu goddesses to analyse how far they stand as representative models of western feminism. Through careful study of scriptures, rituals and ethnographic data they further pose the question whether the feminist rhetoric of the goddess remains confined to the divine realm or transcends and shapes the lives of ordinary Hindu women.

Vidya Dehejiya unfurls the multiple identities of the *Purāṇic* goddesses at many levels and in the numerous cultures.[21] Dehejiya further emphasises on the significance of the visual imagery of the goddess not merely as a mark of her physical beauty but also as playing a pivotal role in the *darśhan* to the devotees. Dehejiya hence makes effective use of the variety of ways in which the goddesses are represented in paintings, iconography, calendar prints and even an-iconic forms, all cautiously examined against the wide prevalence of a textual tradition.

The idea of motherhood is almost synonymous with the goddesses. Kamala Ganesh in her "search for the Great Indian Goddess" argues that the goddess represents not so much the

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[20] Hiltebeitel and Erndl, *Is the Goddess a Feminist: The Politics of South Asian Goddes*ses, OUP, New Delhi, 2000.

[21] Dehejiya, Vidya, *Devi: The Great Goddess, Female Divinity in South Asian Art*, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., 1999.

idea of physical motherhood as the creative powers of feminity.[22] For Ganesh, the Goddess is more of a concept representing various sets of linkages and hierarchies. Nilima Chitgopekar also disagrees with the identity of the goddess only as a mother.[23] She feels that the idea of motherhood is tied in with goddesses to demarcate roles on the basis of gender.

The above survey of literature throws useful light on the general trends in history writing on the Goddess tradition. It also reveals the immense variety of sources available for her study. Scriptural texts beginning with the *Ŗg Veda* to the *Brahmaņas*, *Upanishads*, the two epics, the *Rāmāyaņa* and the *Mahābhārata* and at a later date the *Purāņas*, all contain references to the goddess. A rich corpus of archaeological data in the form of inscriptions, coins, sculptures, terracotta, miniature paintings and frescos are also available to explore the evolution of goddess worship.

However historians studying the goddess cults often display a textual bias. While texts can form the theoretical base for such studies, it is essential to cross check with the material remains. Textual data gives an idealised picture of how things should be rather than presenting the actual picture of how things were. A careful study of archaeological data and their arrangement into ordered groups is hence essential to understand the particularities of each stage of evolution. Moreover one not only needs to apply new tools

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[22] Ganesh, Kamala, *Mother Who is Not a Mother: In Search of the Great Indian Goddess*, in *The Political and Economic Weekly*, October 20-27, 1990. ·

[23] Chitgopekar, Nilima, *Indian Goddesses: Preserving Antinomian Presences*, in Chitgopekar (ed.) *Invoking Goddesses: Gender Politics in Indian Religion*, Shakthi Books, Har Anand Publication, New Delhi, 2002.

to the trade, but more importantly, combine them with diverse approaches to discover fresh insights.

Anila Verghese adopts a similar novel approach to study the religious traditions and cults in the city of Vijayanagara. Her source material is primarily archaeological, comprising of evidence from monuments, sculptures and the inscriptions found on them.[24] Textual accounts and other literary works have been taken only as a secondary source material.

Richard Davis similarly trudges on a fresh track in his remarkable study of the lives of Indian images.[25] Davis attempts to explore the different worlds of beliefs that Indian images have come to inhabit over time. His study is based on the presupposition that Indian sculptures are alive, have many lives and identities and hence play numerous roles. Images and icons hence bring with them different agendas resulting in events and practices of social, political and historical consequence.

The thrust of this study is to take a multi-dimensional, inter-disciplinary approach. For this purpose a combination of texts, images and inscriptions have been used. It proposes to analyse texts in relation to visual objects and ground level practices. The focus is not merely on trying to see texts as the keystone for the development of religious traditions, but also to look at textual prescriptions and the growth of religious icons as parallel traditions. It is important to remember that sculptures are not necessarily prescribed

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[24] Verghese, Anila, *Religious Traditions at Vijaynagara as Revealed Through its Monuments*, Manohar and the American Institute of Indian Studies, New Delhi, 1995.

[25] Davis, Richard, *Lives of Indian Images*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1999.

adjuncts to texts. Sculptures do not always directly represent textual motifs. Where archaeological sources do not corroborate with texts, they should be taken as an additional source of information providing an alternative point of view.[26] At the same time the study of religion cannot be expected to simply give up texts. In Brahmanical religion, texts provide the original context in which to view the images.[27]

Sculptures should hence be seen as a parallel development, interrelated but not necessarily dependent on the texts and more in tune with the views and perceptions of the devotees. One should also allow space, for artistic expression. Sculpture is in fact the most important source to analyse how the Goddess was perceived and in what roles, attributes and relationships was she envisaged. Sculptures have an inherent power to transcend cultural, geographical and historical contexts.[28]

Inscriptions provide additional source material for this study. Inscriptions also should not be taken as statements confirming sculptural and textual depictions. Inscriptions speak the language of the elite and the royalty and should hence be read in this context.

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[26] Thapar, Romila, *Early India,* p. xxi.

[27] Kinnard, Jacob, *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism,* Curzon Press, Richmond, 1999, p. 20.

[28] Ibid. p. 21.

Sources Leading to the Image of the Goddess:

Textual:

"The Sanskrit tradition is not a monolithic entity but involves a symbiotic interplay with myriad local traditions, so that Sanskritisation is a very complex, two directional process, drawing from as well as feeding into, non- Sanskritic culture."[29]

It becomes the work of the Sanskrit texts to create a space for the functioning of local traditions within the Brahmanised sphere. For this purpose, either new texts are composed to accommodate new cultural processes or older texts are re-interpreted, to find new roots for various new systems in the already prevalent older traditions. One such textual tradition in the Brahmanical sphere was the *Purāṇas*. Having an originally conservative nature, the *Purāṇas* nevertheless also had an assimilative tendency. In fact the conservative aspect added on to make the newly assimilated traditions also look conservative. The *Purāṇas* by definition deal with matters of origin, with initial events of the universe and with early happenings in the human world. At the same time they also retell old stories and provide new and startling interpretations. On a still more innovative front, the *Purāṇas* also introduce subject matters. New myths, rituals and devotional practices may find their way into the texts as they record the transformations within the Brahmanical society.

It was in fact very much the *Purāṇas*, which worked towards making the worship of the goddess traditional. Regarding the goddess tradition Rocher adds: "*Sakti* worship appears, though rather infrequently in some of the *Mahāpurāṇas*, it is far more prevalent

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[29] Srinivasan, M.N. in Coburn, Thomas, *Devī Māhātmya*, p. 11.

in the *Upapurāṇas*. In some of them they have been so prevalent that they have been labelled as *śakta Upapurāṇas.*"[30] The *Upāpurāṇas* specially the *śakta Upapurāṇas* are believed to have been composed in Bengal and the adjoining areas of Assam, Orissa and Bihar, sometimes between 8th and 13th centuries A.D. Once the Brahmanical order was established in the region, the cultural interactions between other local traditions had to be homogenised and legitimised through the *Upapurāṇas*. Hence the success of Brahmanical hegemony depended on the composition and the propagation of a set of texts prescribing a certain set of values, to be internalised into the culture of the local people.

"Through the codification of these *Purāṇas*, the *Brāhmanas* attempted to construct an ideological system which eventually became coextensive with the regional tradition."[31] The *Brāhmanas* attempted to superimpose an ideology, a Brahmanical ideology. The obvious motive was to tie in the various loose ends of the society and quell the potentially disruptive elements. By such an imposition the indigenous population was being admitted into the folds of the Brahmanical religious order. Yet the *Brāhmanas* were able to preserve their social monopolies and prerogatives by codifying their superior position by being the upholders of the social order. As a result, as per the rules of the Brahmanical society, when the indigenous population was accommodated within the *varṇa* framework, they were assimilated only at the bottom of the hierarchy, as *śudras,* meant for serving the upper castes, specially the *Brāhmanas*.

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[30] Rocher in Brown, Mackenzie, *Triumph of the Goddess*, p. 13.

[31] Chakraborty, Kunal, *Religious Processes,* p. 8.

Nevertheless the *Brāhmanas* could not superimpose their ideology very rigidly in a new area, for fear of their outright rejection. The *Purāṇas* allowed a semblance of freedom and personal choice, unheard of in earlier Brahmanical texts. Likewise, the *Purāṇas* widened the scope of Brahmanical traditions like the offerings of wine and blood to deities otherwise considered a taboo. The *Purāṇas* hence aced as a unique agent, which joined the local popular custom with the Vedic authority. The *Purāṇas* themselves assert that in order to keep pace with social change, periodic revisions are required.[32]

The *Devī Māhātmya:*

The *Devī Māhātmya* forms a part (13 chapters) of the *Mārkaṇdeya Purāṇa.* Composed somewhere between the 5th and 7th centuries A.D., the *Devī Māhātmya* constitutes the earliest comprehensive statement in Sanskrit on the significance of the goddess, outlining her independent status, as also a detailed account of her worship. There begins to emerge the picture of a single 'Great Goddess' who seems to be an overarching manifestation of minor individual goddesses. The text extols this 'Great Goddess' as being eternal and the source of all creation. The Goddess is now also placed in the realms of sā*mkhya* and *vedānta* categories of *prakṛti*, and *māyā.*

The *Devī Māhātmya* essentially recounts the three most important myths related to the *Devī,* which describe her salvific activities. The first is the myth of the *Devī's* encounter with two demons, *Madhu* and *Kaitabh,* which delineates her cosmic status as *Mahāmāya.* The *Devī* as *Māyā* sets one free but also deludes one from true knowledge and keeps him

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[32] Ibid. 45.

in bondage. The second myth describes the *Devī*'s association with *Mahiṣā*. This myth emphasises how the *Devī* emanates from male deities and in her earthly career restores cosmic order. The *Devī* thus ascertains that the effective agent on earth is not masculine but feminine. The final myth features the *Devī*'s association with *Śumbha* and *Niśumbha*. This myth visualises the *Devī* as emerging from seven gods and how each god has a consort called *śakti*. Yet, *śakti* is not just a consort but his very identity and power.

The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*:

The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* continues with the vision of the *Devī Māhātmya* placing the goddess in a new perspective as the absolute source of the cosmos. Written in between the 8th to 13th centuries A.D. the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* seems to be a logical culmination of the process initiated by the *Devī Māhātmya*.

The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* recounts the 'final assertion' of the goddess tradition seen as the "triumph of the Goddess."[33] Brown describes the 'triumph' in relation to her three adversaries: a) the demonic forces; b) the godly forces "who falsely arrogate to themselves the victories of the Goddess against the forces of chaos" and c) those prejudices which limit or bind her nature.[34]

In the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* one notices a conscious endeavour to demonstrate the superiority of the *Devi* over competing masculine deities, and to articulate in new ways,

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[33] Brown, Mackenzie, *Triumph of the Goddess*, p. 9.
[34] Ibid.

the manifold nature of the Goddess and her transcendence.[35] To pursue these goals the author(s) employed two strategies: a) ancient themes, motifs and myths from older 'masculine' theologies were incorporated within a 'feminised' framework. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* substitutes the Goddess in place of prominent male deities particularly in place of Vishnu. b) It develops an alternative *Devī* tradition on the framework of earlier masculine canonical authorities. Hence similar to the *'Bhagvata Gitā,'* a *'Devī Gita'* was composed. It introduces ambiguities in the *Devī's* character: a new erotic aspect is added to her image as a subdued consort; she becomes a loving mother even while continuing to be a horrific warrior, and along with her destructive nature, she comes to possess a salvific role. Most interestingly, apart from her feminine attributes, she also comes to acquire a masculine dimension and appears androgynous in nature. The underlying message is that the Goddess is the supreme force at the cosmic level and overcomes her *Prakṛti* to become a *Puruśa*. This is probably the ultimate triumph of the Goddess, where she is able to transcend her gender in her effort to act as a world saviour.

Archaeological Sources:

Sculptures:

"In the art of India, every form is the symbol of a clear and conscious thought and of consciously directed feeling. Nothing is arbitrary or peculiar, nothing is vague or mysterious, for the very reason d' etre of all the imagery is to present concrete ideas in comprehensible and easily apprehended forms."[36]

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[35] Ibid. p. 11.

[36] Coomarswamy, Anand in Pal, Pratapaditya, *Indian Sculptures, Vol I*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Association with University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1988, *p. 39*.

The attempt of this study shall be to understand the images and symbols associated with the goddess as a kind of commentary and a preview of the mythological doctrines that stand crystallised and unfolded in figures and patterns. Symbolic meaning can be read as encapsulated in each detail of an image, including the various emblems and symbols, whether attributes or gestures. Every symbol is multivalent and every myth is recounted with minor variations in several texts in various redactions.

Sculptures represent the book of the illiterate and the eyes of the masses.[37] Sculptures here are not seen as isolated images but as complete entities by themselves, playing their own dynamic role in historical evolution. They are the visual representations of the spiritual and ritual beliefs of the devotees. They represent an institution, acting as a bridge between mythology and life.[38] Zimmer believed that sculptures are very closely integrated with the idea of goddesses since they reflect *Māyā* in graphic style. "It represents the apparitions of living forms out of formless primal substance; it represents the phenomenal mirage like character of all existence, earthly and divine."[39]

This study would take into purview stone and metal images from Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Bangladesh dating between the 6th and 13th centuries A.D. The period up to the 8th century A.D. however, is almost devoid of goddess sculptures in this region. The period subsequent to the 8th century A.D. is marked by a profusion of icons. This plethora

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[37] Kinnard, Jacob, *Imaging Wisdom*, p. 17.

[38] Thapar, Romila, *Early India*, p.xxix.

[39] Zimmer, Heinrich, edited by Campbell, Joseph, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1990, 53.

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in the number of icons is also accompanied by a remarkable variety of ways in which goddesses were represented. Terracotta, wood and stone made their appearance earlier than the metal figurines, which materialise only with the coming of Pala rule. These sculptures served two primary functions: as icons meant for worship inside the temple and as didactic elements embellishing exterior temple walls.

The Goddess is represented in her diverse incarnations, some very popular, some obscure. Some sculptures maintain the traditional, tribal association of the goddess, while some others show her as developing new ties with other contemporary religious traditions such as Buddhism, Tantricism etcetera.

Inscriptions:

The inscriptional data taken into consideration in this survey begins with the late Gupta period inscriptions like the Gunaighar copper plate inscription and continues up till the 13th century A.D. to the Sena kings and the dynasties that followed.[40] The records are in most cases donative, describing in great detail the grant of land. A few inscriptions however are also in the form of proclamations by the kings or his officials. The inscriptions include those found within the present day borders of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bangladesh and the bordering areas. Most inscriptions were isolated and discovered in fields, abandoned tanks etc. There are others that were found on temple walls or in other inhabited localities. A few of the inscriptions were also found inscribed

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[40] Mukherjee and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions: Bearing on History and Civilisation of Bengal,* Firma K.L.Mukhopadhya, Calcutta, 1967, p. 65. Gunaighar Copper Plate Inscription of Vanya Gupta, dated to 507 A.D.

on the pedestals and footstools of images. There are references to erection of temples, consecration of images and on rare occasions, also a descriptive account of icons being consecrated. The inscriptions give detailed references to male deities. However, references to goddesses are few and mostly in their capacity as consorts. The earliest descriptive reference to the image of the goddess is found as late as 1100 A.D. in the Deopara inscription.[41] There are also a couple of exceptional captions describing the surrounding locales or mentioning certain well-known temples.

Taking into account the literary and archaeological sources listed above this study shall now set forth on its main agenda: to explore the myriad images and roles in which the Goddess in her various manifestations begins to appear in the *Devī Māhātmya* and subsequently in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*. The first chapter attempts to analyse the different *rupas* in which the *Devī* appears in the two texts, her roles and functions, her physical attributes and her struggle for power with the *Devas*. The second chapter looks beyond texts into the material remains available from the region, primarily inscriptions and stone and metal images. This chapter first surveys the corpus of inscriptions to see the earliest date at which goddesses find a mention in the inscriptions, the roles in which they appear, and the extent of popularity and prevalence of the goddess cult among the royalty. The chapter further goes on to read sculptural data available from the region. Due to the large hoard of goddess sculptures available here, select examples have been picked up, representing broad trends in the variety of ways in which the goddesses were being depicted, the various attributes that they were ascribed with and the many new motifs that

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[41] Ibid. p. 244.

they gradually came to acquire. This review, shall further unfold how Brahmanical idioms comprised just one of the many elements which went into shaping the image of the goddess. The third chapter shall examine the many unusual roles, which the icons of goddesses play when placed in different social and political circumstances. Goddess sculptures then cease to be mere ritual objects and become social beings, playing active roles closely integrated with historical and cultural evolution.

Chapter 2:

IMAGING THE GODDESS: TEXTUAL REPRESENTATIONS

Chapter 2: IMAGING THE GODDESS: TEXTUAL

REPRESENTATIONS

Study of the *Devī Māhātmya* and the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*:

The aim of the following study is to compare and contrast the *Devī Māhātmya* and the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* in order to trace the process of gradual evolution of the image of the Goddess during the period between the compositions of these two texts with special reference to Eastern India. The first major articulation of the Goddess in Sanskrit occurs in the *Devī Māhātmya*, which may be said to have reached its fullest elaboration in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*. While the purpose of the *Devī Māhātmya* was to introduce the myths regarding the *Devī* the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* significantly revises these myths and introduces new motifs and attributes to the image of the Goddess.

The *Devī Māhātmya* constitutes the earliest comprehensive statement in a Brahmanical text on the significance of the Goddess, outlining her independent status. Central to the text is the presumption that the "ultimate reality" is feminine. There appears to emerge the picture of a single "Great Goddess" who is supposedly an overarching manifestation of many individual goddesses. The text extols this Great Goddess as being eternal and the source of all creation.

The *Devī Māhātmya* essentially recounts three important myths of the *Devī*, which shapes her independent identity, emphasises her salvific qualities and establishes her relation to the male deities. The first is the myth of Madhu and Kaitabha, delineates the cosmic

status of the *Devī* as *Mahāmāyā.*[1] The *Devī's* identity as *māyā* sets one free but also deludes one from true knowledge and keeps him bound.

The second myth elaborates upon the *Devī's* most famous feat that determines her future identity and her most famous nomenclature as Mahisāsuramardini.[2] The myth establishes the martial achievements of the *Devī* and ascertains her image as the warrior par excellence. She is the one who pursued Mahisā on heaven and on Earth and dealt with him in his demon, buffalo and human forms. The *Devī* is thus associated with valour that was till then an exclusively "male" function in the Hindu mythology. She transgressed the boundaries of prescribed "female" norms. The myth prescribes how she emanated from male deities and yet cannot be identified with any particular god. In fact it even suggests a certain kind of superiority to her in relation to her male colleagues. She goes on to restore cosmic balance on heaven and Earth. The *Devī* hence establishes that the effective agent of action is not masculine but feminine.

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[1] As the myth goes: Once upon a time, while Visnu (the upkeeper and protector of the cosmic order) was sleeping, two demons Madhu and Kaitabha began to assault Brahmā. Brahmā tried to wake up Visnu but was unsuccessful. The *Devī Māhātmya* now states that Visnu had entered *yoganidrā*. This state is caused by the māyā of the Goddess who herself personifies *yoganidrā*. Brahmā hence begins to meditate upon the *Devī*. The *Devī* being pleased withdraws from Visnu's limbs. Visnu awakens and dispatches the asuras. Hence it is ultimately the *Devī* who determines the action of all beings, even the gods. The *Devī* as *Mahāmāyā* deludes one from consciousness but also sets one into motion. It is primarily the will of the *Devī* that determined Visnu's actions. Here the Goddess is being projected as being superior to Visnu by being identified as his yogic sleep.

[2] Mahisā was a buffalo demon who had been granted the boon of being killed only by a woman. He ultimately goes on to conquer all the three worlds by defeating even the *Devas*. The gods in desperation united and by their combined '*tejas*' (luminosity), a woman is produced. This beautiful lady is the *Devī* who is the *sakti* or power of the gods. She is invested with their valour and weapons. Yet this *sakti* cannot be identified with any one god. She has an independent identity. The myth then recounts the martial feat of the Goddess, culminating in the slaying of Mahisā.

The third myth describes the *Devī*'s struggle with the two demons Sumbha and Niśumbha.[3] The *Devī* combines within herself the *śakti* of seven gods. She hence becomes the *Mahādevī* or the Great Goddess who assimilates the identities of many individual goddesses. The *Devī* as *Mahādevī* is the leading icon within whose body resides all the goddesses. The minor goddesses are claimed as manifestations of the *Mahādevī*. The *Devī* thus asserts "I alone exist here in this world; what second other than I is there? O wicked one behold these my manifestations of power entering back into me!"[4] The body of the *Devī* thus becomes the "resting place" of the other goddesses and she is called as "Ambikā."[5] The *Devī* is in complete control of her manifestations: "When I was established here in my many forms, it was by means of my extraordinary power that has been withdrawn by me I stand utterly alone."[6] The myth provides the first glimpse of the *Devī*'s cosmic manifestations, which would proliferate within a couple of centuries.

Both the Mahiṣā myth and the tale of Sumbha and Niśumbha recount how each god has a female counterpart, who is his active energy and is described as *śakti*. Yet *śakti* need not necessarily be his consort, nor is the *Devī* associated with any god in particular. For

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[3] This myth revolves around the slaying of the two demons Sumbha and Niśumbha by the *Devī*. To help the *Devī* accomplish this task, seven goddesses emerge from the body of the *Devī* (and later also merge back into her body). These seven goddesses are believed to be the *śaktis* of seven different gods who now become aides of the *Devī*.

[4] Coburn, Thomas, *Encountering the Goddess: Translation of the Devī Māhātmya*, Sri Satguru Publications, New Delhi, 1992, p. 63.

[5] Ibid. 8. 8.

[6] Ibid. 10.5.

instance the *Devī* is frequently associated with Śiva, but in the *Devī Māhātmya* she is also closely connected with Viṣṇu. The overarching identity of the *Mahādevī* in fact subsumes within herself the female counterparts of many other gods such as Brahmā, Indra and Varuṇa. Coburn in his study of the history and lineage of the *Devī*, in the *Devī Māhātmya* traces her close association with Agni, Kṛṣṇa and Skanda as well as her presence in the Vedic and Epic literature.[7] The underlying theme is that the *Devī* can be seen as *śakti*, yet *śakti* is not always a consort.[8]

The *Devī Māhātmya* began to associate the Goddess with the *Sāmkhya* and *Vedānta* categories of *prakṛti* and *māyā*. The *Devī Māhātmya* being assimilative in character identified "mythic elements with philosophical constructs, such that the categories borrowed from *Sāmkhya* are recast within a theological framework."[9] The Goddess as *māyā* becomes the power of delusion. It creates desire and bondage, which prevents one form realising one's true nature. But the *Devī* herself is also manifest as the truth and knowledge.[10] It is hence her divine play as *māyā*, which deludes and then leads one to knowledge and final liberation.

The *Devī* as *śakti* is also full of paradoxes. *Sakti* symbolises both the power to create and creation itself. However *śakti* as power also holds within herself the seamless ability to

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[7] Coburn, Thomas, *Devī Māhātmya*, p. 306.

[8] Coburn, Thomas, '*Sakti of All, Consort of None,*' in Hawley and Wulff (ed.), *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India,* Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1984.

[9] Pintchman, Tracy, *The Rise of the Goddess in Hindu Tradition*, p. 128.

[10] Coburn, Thomas, *Encountering the Goddess*, "She is the supreme, eternal knowledge that becomes the cause of release," 1. 34.

cause destruction. *Sakti* also becomes the creative potency of the male deities. Being the creative impulse the *Devī* becomes the axis, which sets the world in motion.

The association with creation defines the *Devī* as *prakṛti*.[11] *Prakṛti* is seen as both the material of creation as well as the impulse behind creation. "Ultimate reality is immanent, operative both as the material world and in the material world."[12] The *Devī* in the *Devī Māhātmya*, as *prakṛti* is assigned creative functions, which were hitherto associated with Brahmā in *Purāṇic* mythology. The three concepts of *śakti, prakṛti* and *māyā* defined the identity of the Goddess in terms of her cosmological functions at different levels while also relocated her relation with the various male divinities of the pantheon.

Creation, however, is just one of the many functions that the *Devī* performs in the *Devī Māhātmya*. The *Devī* of the *Devī Māhātmya* is a *'viryā,'* a warrior, who is the protector and upholder of the cosmic order. A cursory glance at the epithets used for the *Devī* in the *Devī Māhātmya* reveals her heroic aspects.[13] The *Devī Māhātmya* mentions the myriad forms in which the goddess becomes immanent in the universe, such as Candikā,[14] Ambikā,[15] Lakṣmi,[16] Brahmaṇi,[17] Pārvati[18] and so on. When the hostile forces threaten to

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[11] Ibid "You are the primordial material (*prakṛti*) of everything, manifesting the triad of constituent strands," 1. 59.

[12] Coburn, Thomas, *Devī Māhātmya*, p. 62.

[13] Ibid. p. 331.

[14] Coburn, Thomas, *Encountering the Goddess*, 7. 22, 8. 22-23.

[15] Ibid. 5. 40.

[16] Ibid. 5. 26.

[17] Ibid. 10. 4.

[18] Ibid. 5. 39.

disturb the cosmic order, she swings into action. Hence the *Devī* appears in the *Devī Māhātmya* twenty nine times as Candikā, twenty five times as Ambikā, fifteen times as Nārāyaṇī and fourteen times as Kālī.[19] In comparison she is mentioned only thrice as Pārvati, four times as Lakṣmi and twice as Kṣānti.

The *Devī Māhātmya* is also the first Sanskrit text to associate the Goddess with certain abstract notions such as *Nidrā,*[20] *Medhā,*[21] *Buddhi*[22] etcetera. The motive behind such characterisation seems to be the projection of the Goddess as the all-pervasive ultimate reality. Moreover the Goddess is eternal and transcendent who is both a series of concrete images as also possessing intangible qualities. The Goddess emerges as a syncretic complex that combines within herself mutually exclusive ideas and functions such as *Mahāmāyā* and *Mahāvidyā*, creation and destruction, beautiful and grotesque, warrior and mother. The *Devī*, who is thus a repository of so many seemingly incompatible roles, is a symbolic complex.[23] She is actually a combination of different goddesses just as the individual goddesses are incarnations of the Great Goddess. The *Devī Māhātmya* recounts the three myths that become the three defining moments in the Devī's career. The myths identify her with pre-existing motifs, describe her as the ultimate reality and imply that the ultimate reality can assume many forms.

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[19] Coburn, Thomas, *Devī Māhātmya*, p. 331.

[20] Coburn, Thomas, *Encountering the Goddess*, 1. 64.

[21] Ibid. 1. 58.

[22] Ibid. 4. 4.

[23] Pintchman, Tracy, *The Rise of the Goddess in Hindu Tradition*, p. 4.

The *Devī Māhātmya* attempts to assimilate the numerous stories and attributes of a variety of goddesses who might have been in existence over a long period of time and in the process creates an over-arching feminine form who subsumes within herself the identities of various minor and local goddesses. Through this process of integration of myths from diverse backgrounds a new narrative emerges. "The marriage of mythological and philosophical motifs provides a context for pairing of divinities with principles and a Great Goddess is born."[24]

The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*, the most voluminous and significant among the *Sakta Purāṇas*, continues with the vision of the *Devī Māhātmya* in projecting the goddess as the absolute source of the cosmos. The *Devī* of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* decisively retrieves the female principle (*śakti*) from the male authority and makes it her own. The Goddess is no longer subject to the authority of the gods but emerges as distinctly superior to them. From the *śakta* point of view, the contest of power between the male and the female divinities has already been resolved in favour of the goddess who has emerged as the source of all authority in the universe.

The figure of the Goddess has also become far more comprehensive and varied. The Goddess in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* has been described as having eighteen to a thousand arms.[25] This is another evidence of her assumptions of the identity and

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[24] Ibid. p. 184.

[25] Swami Vijnananda (transl.), *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam*, Published by Oriental Reprint, Distributed by Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, Third edition, 1986, V. 8 (33-46).

functions of a variety of goddesses; while her eighteen arms are manifest, the thousand arms are invisible and potentially ready for action.

The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* reinterprets the three myths from the *Devī Māhātmya*, which reflects the stages of transformations in the character of the *Devī*. The *Devī Māhātmya* introduced the Goddess to the Brahmanical tradition, while the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* justified and elaborated upon it. The myths in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* become longer and more descriptive. Stories that were outlined in the *Devī Māhātmya* were now filled in with details. The portrayal of the *Devī* became more concrete. The ambiguities in the *Devī Māhātmya* with regard to the limits of tentative power and authority were now unquestionably settled for the Goddess.

The *Devī* also acquired an erotic overtone, which was superimposed, on her usually martial image. She became a loving mother even while continuing to be a fierce warrior. Along with her destructive potential, she also acquired a salvific role. Her association with a variety of abstract concepts such as jñāna, mokṣa etcetera were reiterated.[26] The myth of the Goddess in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* provided important linkages between the activities of the Goddess on the cosmic plane and in the mundane realm of ordinary human affairs.

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[26] Ibid. "The Great *Devī* is the intelligence, sleep, hunger thirst, shadow, drowsiness, fatigue, kindness, memory, caste, forbearance, errors, peace, beauty and consciousness, contentment, nourishment, prosperity and fortitude." IX. 1 (19-40).

The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* represents the "final assertion" of the Goddess within the Brahmanical tradition.[27] Brown describes this as the "triumph" of the Goddess in terms of three adversaries: a) against demonic forces, b) against godly forces "who falsely arrogate to themselves the victories of the Goddess against forces of chaos"[28] c) and against those prejudices (biases against womankind in general) which limit or bind her nature.

Seen in its historical context, the descriptions of the Goddess in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* seem to fall into place. The re-emergence of the divine feminine in the *Devī Māhātmya* was the result of the Brahmanical recognition of a very long tradition of goddess worship in India as also the beginning of the transformation of the goddess through her incorporation into the Brahmanical pantheon. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* is far more studied and premeditated in its deliberations of the nature of the goddess. The *Devī Māhātmya* sowed the seeds of *śakta* ideas in the 6th century A.D. This process of assimilation of the goddess though continuous and open ended, reached an identifiable stage of culmination by the 10th-11th centuries A.D. in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*.

In the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* one notices a conscious endeavour to demonstrate beyond doubt the superiority of the *Devī* over competing male deities and to articulate in new ways the manifold nature of the goddess and her transcendental power.[29] To pursue these goals the authors of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* employed two well-conceived strategies: a) ancient themes, motifs and myths from older "masculine theologies were incorporated within a feminised framework. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* usurped the powers and

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[27] Brown, C. Mackenzie, *The Triumph of the Goddess*, p. 9.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid. p. 11.

functions of prominent male deities, particularly that of Viṣṇu for the goddess. b) The text also developed an alternative *Devī* tradition on the framework of the earlier masculine canonical authorities. Hence the title *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* is borrowed from the *'Bhāgvata Purāṇa,'* the most sacred text of the *Vaiṣṇavas,* and the emergence of the *'Devī Gītā'* as parallel to the *'Bhāgvata Gītā.'*

Physical Representations:

> *"Slightly smiling, spotless like the orb of the full moon,*
>
> *As pleasing as the lustre of the finest gold (is your face)"[30]*

Quoted above is an extract from the *Devī Māhātmya* describing the face of the Goddess. The *Devī Māhātmya* however does not indulge much in describing the physical appearance of the Goddess. It rather concentrates on outlining the martial image of the Goddess. There are just a few scattered and passing references to the fact that the goddess is beautiful and pleasing to look at.[31] The Goddess of the *Devī Māhātmya* is essentially a *'viryā,'* heroic and martial to the core. Therefore when the *Devī Māhātmya* describes the goddess, it tends to emphasise her weapons and other attributes of a warrior. However such references are also occasional and scattered.[32]

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[30] Coburn, Thomas, *Encountering the Goddess*, 4. 11.

[31] Ibid. "Gentle, more gentle than other gentle ones, exceedingly beautiful, You are superior to the high and low, the supreme queen." 1. 62.

[32] Ibid. "The Sun put his own rays into all the pores of her skin and Kāla gave her a sword and spotless shield. The sea of milk gave a flawless necklace and two unaging garments, A heavenly crest jewel, two earrings and bracelets, A heavenly half moon ornament, armlets on all her arms, Two spotless anklets, likewise a neck ornament without parallel, And bejeweled rings on all her fingers. Viśvakarmā gave her an utterly flawless axe, Likewise weapons of various forms, and unbreakable armor, A garland of unwithering lotuses on her head, and another on her breasts." 2. 23-27.

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The most elaborate description of the Goddess can be found in the episode when she is being produced form the combined *tejas* of the gods, each one giving her a weapon and some aspect of his own nature. "Kṛṣṇa gave her a discus............And Varuṇa gave her a conch, Agni a spear and Vāyu a bow and two quivers full of arrows."[33] Such descriptions establish the valour of the Goddess and show the extent of Her power, which is the physical manifestation of the combined energies of the most powerful gods. The choice of the lion as the mount of the Goddess also serves the same purpose.[34] The Goddess is described as having three eyes[35] and one thousand arms,[36] while most male deities of the *Purāṇic* pantheon are endowed with only two or four arms. The strength and dexterity of the Goddess in the battle is attested by statements such as the arrows and the weapons of the demons are destroyed by the goddess with such ease that she appeared to be merely playing with them.[37] Even in the middle of the most fierce battles the Goddess never seems to lose control and stands "calm and unruffled."[38] The Goddess in the *Devī Māhātmya* is also associated with certain traits that are atypical of the traditional conception of women; a roaring voice,[39] and the consumption of alcohol.[40]

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[33] Ibid. 2. 19.

[34] Ibid. "The Himalaya gave a lion as her mount, and various jewels." 2. 28.

[35] Ibid. "Her three eyes came from the splendour of Agni." 2. 16.

[36] Ibid. "Standing there filling all the directions with her thousand arms, here began a battle between the Goddess and the enemies of the Gods." 2. 38.

[37] Ibid. "They (demons) attacked the Goddess in order to slay her with blows from their clubs, These weapons and arms the Goddess Candikā Broke as if in Play, showering down her own weapons and arms, The Goddess being praised by gods and seers, appeared unruffled." 2. 48-49.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid. "She bellowed aloud with laughter again and again, The entire atmosphere was filled with her terrible noise." 2. 31.

[40] Ibid. "Kubera gave her a drinking cup filled with wine." 2. 29.

The form of the *Mahādevī*, which emerges from the *Devī Māhātmya*, is that of a beautiful woman at the same time one who is of a fierce temperament and epitomises aggressive behaviour. Brief and scanty references are also found of the individual goddesses who derive from and merge into the *Mahādevī*. The descriptions of the individual goddesses seem to be the initial Brahmanical attempt at delineating the distinctive features of certain goddesses which later came to define their identity. For instance Gauri is the one with three eyes, Brahmani is mounted upon a chariot yoked to swans, Kaumāri is associated with peacocks and Vaiṣṇavi with conch and discus.[41] Such references also mark the association of each of these goddesses with particular gods of the Brahmanical pantheon.

The limited and minimal descriptions of the Goddess in the *Devī Māhātmya* reveal that the Goddess was not much more than an 'idea' or a 'concept' which was still blurred and not decisively established. By the time of the composition of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*, this haze seems to have cleared up. The *Devi* had now fully asserted her identity and form in all her glory and paraphernalia. In fact the recurrent description of the *Devī* in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* seems like an over enthusiastic attempt to popularise the image of the *Devī*.

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[41] Ibid. " O you who are mounted on a chariot and yoked to swans, having the form of Brahmani......O you who carry a trident, moon and snake, having as your mount a massive bull, Having the form of Maheśvari......O you who are surrounded by peacocks and cocks, faultless, and carrying an enormous spear, Kaumāri......O you have taken up the best of weapons, conch and discus, club and bow, be gracious, O one with Vaiṣṇavi's form." 11. 12- 15.

To quote a very typical example of the *Devī* as she appears in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa:*

"The highest light is manifold in the form of an exceedingly beautiful Divine Woman. Her youth was just blooming and her rising breast, plump and prominent, vying as it were, with a lotus bud, added to the beauty all around. Bracelets were on her hands; armlets on her four arms; necklaces on her neck; and the garland made of invaluable gems and jewels spread very bright lustre around. The hairs of her head, flowing, between her ears and cheek sparkled brightly like the large black leaves shining on the flower leaves of the blooming *ketaki* flowers............ Her loins were nicely shaped and exquisitely lovely and the hairs on her naval gave additional beauty. Her exquisitely lovely lotus mouth............ on her forehead theirs was the crescent moon; her eye brows were extended..."[42]

The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* is replete with such statements describing the physical characteristics, facial expressions, costume, jewellery, *vāhana* and *śastras* of not only the *Mahādevī* but also the other individual goddesses whom the *Mahādevī* embodies. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* had very well sorted out the nature, temperament and character ascribed to each of the goddesses. Each of the individual goddess has a certain way of dressing, a mount, distinctive weapons and jewellery.[43] The feminine members of the pantheon seem to have finally formally taken shape.

At the same time the *Devī* seems to have overcome the fierce and destructive countenance assigned to her in the *Devī Māhātmya*. The '*virāt rupa*' of the Goddess is

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[42] Swami Vijnananda (transl), *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam,* VII. 31 (3-43).
[43] Ibid. IX. 1.

revealed in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāna,* which clearly demarcates her terrible and beautiful images.[44] The Goddess continues to retain her ambiguity of embodying contradictory forms. This helps to sustain the diverse roles bestowed on her, such as those of the protector, consort, mother etcetera that will be subsequently discussed. The *Virāt Rupa* of the Goddess reaffirms her role as the absolute source of the cosmos. Her body is believed to be the repository of the entire universe, the Sun and the moon, the Earth, the three *lokas,* air, water, trees, animals and even the gods themselves.[45] The idea is not merely to describe the appearance of the Goddess, but the phenomena she embodies, the concepts she stands for and her crucial role in the creation of the cosmos.

Just as the universe has a bright and dark side to it the Goddess also is not always pleasing to look at. She is not merely the benevolent creator and protector; she can also be terrible and destructive: "Thousand of fiery rays emitted from her form; she began to lick the whole universe with her lips; the two rows of teeth began to make horrible sounds; fires came out of Her eyes; various weapons were seen in Her hands; and the Brāhmanas and the Ksatriyas became food of that awful deity."[46]

Seeing this image of the *Devī,* the *Devas* and the sages became terrified. The *Devī* then revealed her beautiful image, pleasing to the whole world: " Her body became soft and gentle. In one hand she held the noose, and in another She held the goad. The two other

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[44] Ibid. VII. 33.

[45] Ibid. "They saw her highest *virāt* form. The *Satyaloka* is situated on the topmost part and is her head, the Sun and the Moon are her eyes.....Indra and the Devas and the *Svarloka* is her arms.....day and night are like her two wings....water is Her palate....the horses and other animals are her loins." VII. 33 (21-41).

[46] Ibid. VII. 33 (21-41).

hands made sings to dispel fear and ready to grant them boons. Her eyes emitted rays of kindness; Her face was adorned with a beautiful smile."[47]

The image of the *Devī* in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa'* displays sensual and reproductive qualities. She is seen as a symbol of fertility, procreation and motherhood. There does not seem to be much difference in this regard between the *Devī* and other feminine forms such as mortal women. The body of the Goddess carries all the features of child bearing, such as broad hips and full breasts. The generative aspects of the Goddess are extended to other areas of reproduction as well. The Goddess has been credited with adding fertility to the soil, ensuring rich harvests, luscious vegetation and abundant food. "The auspicious one gave them the vegetables, delicious fruits and roots to them that were on Her Hand, for their eating. After She was prayed, She gave men sufficient quantities of various articles of juicy fruits and to the beasts, grass etcetera"[48]

In the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa,* the beauty and the grace of the Goddess have received precedence over her martial image. The *Devī* no longer needs to assert her power by displaying the war-like qualities as in the *Devī Māhātmya.* Her potency and strength have already been established. She can now afford to put aside her aggression and weapons and adopt the delicate charm of a beautiful woman. Her voice, though still robust has acquired a soft, girlish tinkle.[49] Even after her creation by the combined *tejas* of the gods,

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[47] Ibid. VII. 33 (54- 56).

[48] Ibid. VII. 28 (46-68).

[49] Ibid. "Thus from the various *Tejas* contributed by the *Devas*, that heavenly lady came out. Her body and the several parts there of were beautiful; Her form was incomparably graceful and the voice was exquisitely sonorous and lovely." V. 8 (73-74).

in contrast to the *Devī Māhātmya*, the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāna* describes the Goddess as embodying all the stereotypical features of feminine beauty: "White lotus like face, glossy black beautiful hair hanging to the knees..............black eyes.................two eyebrows curved like the light of *Sandhyā*.........nose like *til* flower.................lower lip was deep red..........."[50]

At the same time a new erotic tag is now attached to the image of the Goddess. The body of women (even that of the Goddess) is depicted as meant for male sexual enjoyment. The physical form of woman is described in explicitly erotic terms and the Goddess is no exception. Women seem to be either luring the male species through their 'amorous gestures' or acting as chaste wives who produce fine sons. Mahiṣā probably could not overcome this male mindset when he sent a marriage proposal to the Goddess in the battlefield.[51] He portrays the body and even the war cry of the Goddess in unambiguously sexist terms: "I consider women with beautiful hips as passionate For that woman of broad hips has expressed a desire to bring you under control by making you fearful; the mistress proud of their beauty generally use such words when they become passionate........of attracting dear persons unto them...........that woman has said "I will pierce you and kill you by arrows, face to face, in the battlefield.......You can easily see that the handsome woman have no other arrows with them, their side glances are their arrows."[52] In fact Mahiṣā and his ministers are convinced that a soft delicate woman such as the Goddess needs a "big and virile" body like that of Mahiṣā.[53] They understand the

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[50] Ibid. V. 9 (62-69).

[51] Ibid. V. 10 (17-28).

[52] Ibid. V. 11 (17-30).

[53] Ibid. V. 10 (17-28).

assertion of the Goddess that she would lay Mahiṣā down in battle as suggesting "inverted sexual intercourse, where the woman lies above the man."[54] Her utterance: "I will take away the vitality (life) of your Lord (Mahiṣā)" has been interpreted as the depletion of his virility (semen).[55]

This erotic and procreative image is not exclusive of the Mahādevī alone. Even the individual goddesses, who are supposed to be manifestations of the Mahādevī, are also endowed with similar qualities. Rādhā is known for her erotic and sensual love play with Kṛṣṇa.[56] Pārvati is the consort par excellence with a healthy desire for sexual union with Her Lord Śiva.[57] She is also portrayed as the mother, with Kārtik and Gaṇeṣa seated on her lap. Kālī is said to possess an unfathomable and uncontrolled sexuality.[58] Lakṣmi the ideal consort guarantees auspiciousness.[59] Similarly the Goddesses Earth and Gangā

[54] Ibid. V. 11 (17-30).

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid. Devī Rādhikā is "dearer than life even to Sri Kṛṣṇa....She is the Presiding Devī of the Rasa Lilā of Sri Kṛṣṇa. From her sprung the Rasa Mandalam and she is the Grace and Ornament of the Rasa Mandalam." IX. 1 (41-47).

[57] Ibid. "I am his will power; I therefore create all these World. I am his Śiva (auspicious), Prakṛti (Nature); That universal soul is seeing me. It is owing to his proximity that I am appearing as the eternal consciousness, manifesting itself as this cosmos. As irons move owing to the proximity of magnets, I, too though inert, owing to his proximity work consciously. I do not desire to enjoy the ordinary pleasures (sexual union with other men.) V. 16 (35-45).

[58] Ibid. V. 23 (1-7).

[59] Ibid. " This very beautiful Lakṣmi Devī is the complete Master of the senses; She is of a very peaceful temper, of good mood and of all auspiciousness. She is free from greed, delusion, lust, anger, vanity and egoism. She is devoted to Her Husband and to her Bhaktas; Her words are very sweet and She is very dear to her husband indeed, the Life and Soul of Him. She is residing in Vaikuntha as Mahālakṣmi, chaste and always in the service of her Husband." IX. 1 (19-40).

symbolise the life giving qualities of soil and water.[60] The goddess as Sakhambari and Annapurnā are the generous bestower of vegetation and food.[61]

Clearly the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* emphasises the procreative role of women in general and that of the Goddess in particular. The *Devī Māhātmya* stressed the martial image of the Goddess. The superiority of the Goddess or at least her parity with the male gods was established by presenting her as a brave warrior who outshines and protects the *Devas* in the battlefield. The Goddess was shown as a woman successful in an exclusively male domain. But in the process the Goddess lost some of her feminity.

On the contrary, in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa,* the author(s) seem to overplay an image and role that comes naturally to women, that of the creator and progenitor. Hence both the sexual imagery and the maternal aspect of the Goddess have been emphasised. In fact the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* explicitly points out that the "Mother is superior to the Father."[62] Her procreative and maternal functions combined to her martial prowess led to the ultimate empowerment of the Goddess, which helped her score over her male colleagues while retaining her feminine attributes. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* also

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[60] Ibid. " Gangā has sprung from the lotus feet of Visṇu; Her form is fluidlike; She is eternal. And she is the veritable burning fire to burn away the sins of the sinners. She is sweet to touch in taking baths and in drinking; She gives final liberation to the *Jivas*. She is the holiest among the places of pilgrimages and is the first of the running rivers. She shines like the full moon, is white like white lotus and like milk." IX. 1 (48-70).

[61] Ibid. " The Auspicious One gave them vegetables, delicious fruits and roots to them that were on her hands, for their eating. After She was prayed, She gave to men sufficient quantity of various articles of juicy food and to the beasts, grass etc. until new crops came out. From that day she became famous by the name of Sakambhari." VII. 28 (46-68).

[62] Ibid. IX. 38 (1-7).

challenged the traditional assumption that the "Men's bodies are locus of heroism and women's bodies of eroticism."[63] The Goddess seems to refashion both these conceptions in her identity. She is both the supreme destroyer of her enemies, and the mother to her devotees.[64] The grand form of the Goddess culminated in her image as the cosmic queen, "a beautiful woman, in regal attire surrounded by thousands of attendants and seated on a throne in the highest heaven."[65]

Roles assigned to the Goddess:

The Goddess of the *Devī Māhātmya* is a warrior entrusted with the task of protecting and upholding the cosmic order. She is a martial figure who assumes various forms, and yet remains one.[66]

The Goddess in the *Devī Bhāgvāta Purāṇa* however is multi-layered and nuanced. She continues to retain the warrior image and also acquires new personas. Her various images and physical representations are in congruence with the many roles that she plays. She can be a beautiful, docile wife[67] while fiercely asserting her status and independent

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[63] Humes, Cynthia, *'Is the Devi Mahatmya a Feminist Scripture,'* in Hiltebeitel and Erndl (ed.), *Is the Goddess a Feminist: The Politics of South Asian Goddesses,* Oxford University press, New Delhi, 2000, p. 138.

[64] Ibid. p. 139.

[65] Kinsley, David, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in Hindu Religious Tradition,* Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1987, p. 137.

[66] Coburn, Thomas, *Devi Mahatmya,* p. 309.

[67] The Goddess appears as Lakṣmi who complements the powers of Viṣṇu and acts as his obedient wife. *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam,* IX. 2 (27-61).

identity.[68] The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* describes the *Devī* by many names as it delineates her multiple functions. She is said to be the mother of all,[69] the support of all,[70] the life force of all beings,[71] the only cause of the universe,[72] "the root of the tree, which is the universe"[73] and the source of supreme knowledge.[74] In her various forms she pervades the three worlds.[75] The unity of all goddesses is asserted by projecting the existence of one transcendent Great Goddess who possesses the characteristics of the Brahmanical conception of the ultimate reality. All particular goddesses are given a name and assigned a function but they are all her partial manifestations in various degrees.[76]

However the name of the goddess that occurs most prominently in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* is that of the Mother who creates and nurtures the universe. The *Devī* is now invoked and worshipped for being supremely compassionate and benign.[77] She becomes

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[68] As Rādhā, the Goddess is fiercely conscious of her prime position in Kṛṣṇa's life. She expresses her disapproval in no uncertain terms when she suspects that Kṛṣṇa is being disloyal to her. Hence, Rādhā emerges almost at par with Kṛṣṇa. *Srimad Devi Bahagvatam*, IX. 46.

[69] Ibid. "Thou art the Mother, we salute again and again to thee." V. 9 (23-29).

[70] Ibid. "This world cannot appear without a substratum and that substratum is my existence." VII. 33 (1-19).

[71] Ibid. "Unless I enter as Breath, how can this birth and death and leaving and retaking bodies after bodies be accounted for?"

[72] Ibid. "That Highest *Devī* is eternal and She is always the Cause of all Causes." V. 34 (55-66).

[73] Ibid. III. 10. 15.

[74] Ibid. VII. 35.

[75] Ibid. "O Thou the Mother of the three *Lokas*." IX. 50 (46-100).

[76] Kinsley, D., *Hindu Goddesses*, p. 132.

[77] Swami Vijnananda (transl), *Srimad Devi Bhāgvatam*, " Thy mercy is known amongst the gods; what more, Thy mercy is known, since very ancient times and is narrated in the Vedas. What wonder is there that a mother nourishes gladly her own sons and preserves them carefully!" V. 22 (25-42).

the primordial feminine from whom emerge other divine and human beings.[78] She is the

mulaprakrti: who is both, the agent of cosmic creation as also the very material for

creation.[79] She is the very cause of the world.[80] Rādhā a major form of the Goddess is a

good example of this process of transformation. From being the beautiful and seductive

playmate of Krsna she becomes the creator. She is described as sharing half of Krsna's

body[81] claiming an equal or on occasions even a superior status to Krsna.[82] Rādhā

becomes the bearer of the "golden egg" which gave birth to the universe.[83]

The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāna* is a more serious attempt at ascribing a history, chronology

and lineage to the Goddess. In this capacity also the Goddess is ascribed with various

new roles and perceptions. In the *Devī Māhātmya,* the only association of the Goddess is

that she is an emanation of the combined *"tejas"* of the Gods. In the *Devī Bhāgvata*

Purāna, the *Devī* in her myriad *rupas* came to be associated with different gods in

different capacities. The *Devī* is said to be "embodying the Vedas."[84] The *Devī Bhāgvata*

Purāna gives an elaborate description of how different Goddesses are born from the body

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[78] Ibid. "The Goddess, the *Devi,* who is most excellent in the work of creation is known as the *Devī* Prakrti." IX. 1 (4-18).

[79] Ibid. The *Devī* says, "What substance is there in this *Samsara* which is separate from me." III.7.

[80] Ibid. The *Devī* is said to be the one who provokes the gods into creation. The *Devī* speaks to Brahmā, "You will be endowed with my *śakti* and you will be able to create this Universe."

[81] Ibid. "The Lord (Sri Krsna) who is All Will, willed and divided Himself into two parts, His left part becoming female and his right part becoming male." IX. 2. (27-61).

[82] Ibid. "She (Rādhā) is not in anyway inferior to Him, either in quality or in his *Tejas* or in any other thing. She is Higher than the Highest; the Essence of all, Infinitely Superior, the First of all, Eternal, of the Nature of the Highest Bliss, fortunate, highly respected, and worshipped by all." IX. 1 (41-47).

[83] Ibid. " That Beautiful One (Rādhā) gave birth to a golden egg. That egg was the repository of the whole Universe." IX. 2 (27-61).

[84] Ibid. The *Devī* says, "These Vedas are the excellent parts of my body." VII. 28 (69-73).

of the *Mahādevī* in the form of five *prakṛtis* and each of these five forms is given as a

consort to a God: Kamalā to Nārāyaṇa,[85] Durgā to Viṣṇu[86] and so on. As Rādhā she

becomes a part of Kṛṣṇa's body, his *mulaprakṛti*,[87] as Lakṣmi she becomes the *Srīvatsa*

jewel on Viṣṇu's breast,[88] as Pārvati she becomes Śiva's paramour[89] and as *Devī* she

becomes Viṣṇu's mother.[90]

The Goddess is also visible in her various abstract manifestations. The *Devī Māhātmya*

was the initial moment of her association with various philosophical idioms, especially

with the *Sāmkhya* and *Vedānta* categories and as *śakti, prakṛti* and *māyā*. The *Devī*

Bhāgvata Purāṇa gives an elaborate delineation of each of these categories while also

affiliating the Goddess with other novel concepts. The presence of the *Devī* overshadows

throughout the text in her manifestations as *"sapt śakti"* and the "five *mulaprakṛtis.*"[91]

The *Devī* as *śakti* embodies power, the power underlying ultimate reality itself.[92] The

Goddess as representing *śakti* becomes the supreme cosmic power from whom all

creation emerges and by whom it is sustained. She is not aloof from the world but

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[85] Ibid. IX. 2 (27-61).

[86] Ibid. IX. 2 (62-88).

[87] Ibid. IX. 2 (27-61).

[88] Ibid. IX. 1 (19-40).

[89] Ibid. V. 12 (2-13).

[90] Ibid. Viṣṇu says, "In former days, when I was sleeping on a cot made of immovable fixed leaves of a banyan tree and licking my toe, making it enter within my mouth and playing like an ordinary baby, this Lady (the *Devī*) rocked my gentle body to and fro on the banyan leaves, singing songs like a mother." III. 4 (35-67).

[91] Ibid. "The Highest *Prakṛti* is recognised as five fold. When she is engaged in the work of creation, She appears as Durgā the Mother of Ganeṣa, Rādhā, Lakṣmi, Sarasvati and Sāvitri." IX. 1. 1.

[92] Kinsley, David, *Hindu Goddesses*. p. 135.

attentive to the cosmic rhythms and the needs of her devotees. As *māyā* the Goddess is manifest and unmanifest, positive and negative, delusion and liberation,[93] *vidyā* and *avidyā*.[94] The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* gives an elaborate discourse on the *Devī* as *māyā* at various junctures in the text. To be equated with *māyā* is to be of phenomenal and infinite existence: "Who is there in this world that is not deluded by this *Māyā?*"[95] *Māyā* united with *Chaitanya* (intelligence) is the efficient cause of this universe, while when she is reduced to and united with five elements is the material cause of the Universe.[96] She is identified with existence itself. *Mahādevi* is this entire world, she is all this creation, and she is one with her creatures and creation.[97]

The *Devī* is also associated with a host of other abstract identities: she is consciousness,[98] reality, truth,[99] sleep,[100] morality,[101] and *jñāna*.[102] Her role as granter of wisdom, learning and liberation has been greatly emphasised in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*. She emerges as Sarasvati, the granter of wisdom and learning.[103] She is associated with practical knowledge, arts, civilisation and culture. True knowledge or *jñāna*, liberates one from

[93] Swami Vijnananda (transl), *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam*, IV. 25. 28.

[94] Ibid. V. 19. (2-23).

[95] Ibid. IV. 25.6.

[96] Ibid. VII. 32. (1-50).

[97] Kinsley, David, *Hindu Goddesses*, p. 136.

[98] Swami Vijnananda (transl), *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam*, III.6.

[99] Ibid. I.7.

[100] Ibid. IX. 1 (96-143).

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid. VII. 35.

[103] Humes, Cynthia, '*Is the Devi Mahatmya a Feminist Scripture,*' p. 127.

suffering as well as grants material prosperity.[104] The *Devī* also becomes the triumph of

good over evil. The underlying idea is that the Goddess is eternal, all embracing and the

chief cause of all that happens in the universe. The *Devī* has an overwhelming presence

that overflows itself, spilling forth into creation, suffusing the world with vitality, energy

and power.

The prime significance of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* lies in its final assertion of the

identity and power of the Goddess. She emerges as all-powerful and eternal who wrests

power from the male deities. She now acquires a form that embraces all by herself the

creation, preservation and destruction of the universe (a function so far assigned to the

trinity). The text at various points makes it clear that the male divinities act only

according to the *Devī*'s will and only at her command.[105] Some myths make the point that

even these divine males are entirely dependent on the *Devī* for their strength and power

and that if she withdraws her power, they become impotent and helpless.[106] The *Devas*

are infact believed to have been born from the very *guṇas* of the *Devī*.[107] The Goddess

[104] Swami Vijnananda (transl), *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam*, III. 6 (28-48).

[105] Ibid. "Though the *Deva, Dānavas* and men and all the *Lokas* know that You are the creator, I (Viṣṇu) am the preserver and Rudra is the Destroyer, yet it is to be known that the saints versed in the Vedas, have come to this conclusion with inference from the Vedas. It is *Sakti* which is the all-in-all. When these *Saktis* become absent, you become inert and incapable to create, I to preserve and Rudra to destroy." I. 4. (44-50).

[106] Ibid. "A very weak man is declared to be without any strength; he is not said to be without Rudra, or without Viṣṇu, no body says like this, everyone says he is without strength, without *śakti*. So the creation that you perform, know *Sakti*, power to be the cause thereof. When you will be endowed with this *śakti* you will be able to create this whole Universe. *Devas* all are able to do their *karmas*, when they are united respectively with their *śaktis*." III. 4 (11-27).

[107] Ibid. "You Brahmā and Śiva are my three *Devas*, born of my guṇas. You three will undoubtedly be respected and worshipped by the world." III. 6. (49-63).

emerges at the top of the trinity and the heavenly abodes of these divinities are far below and inferior to the *Devī*. In a particularly humbling scene for the male deities, the *Devī* is described in heaven as seated upon a couch, its legs consisting of the great male deities of the Hindu pantheon.[108]

The gender relations are still not at parity because now the Goddess emerges as the superior element in the pantheon. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* constantly reverberates how the *Devī* is worshipped even by the *Devas* of the pantheon, asking for her protection and benevolence.[109] The Goddess does not just protect and preserve the universe but also the helpless *Devas* themselves.[110]

At this point it would be interesting to discuss the concept of the *Devī* as she emerges in the non- *śakta Purāṇas*.[111] The *Śaiva* Puranas *(Skanda, Śiva, Kurmā and Linga)* provide ample material regarding *śakti*. Yet these *Purāṇas* do not give an independent status to *śakti*. They describe *śakti* as the independent power of Siva, giving her the status of a consort not separate from him. The *Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas* also contain speculations on the concept of *śakti*. *Sakti* is related to Viṣṇu as his inherent manifestation in one or other of his *avatāric* forms. *Sakti* emerges in different relations to Viṣṇu (as his sister, aide in war and as consort) but never as having an independent status.

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[108] Ibid. V. 19 (2-33).

[109] Ibid. "She was first worshipped in Vaikuṇtha by Nārāyana. Next she was worshipped by Brahmā and then by Ṣankara with devotion." IX. 30 (4-33).

[110] Ibid. " When the *Devas* will be frightened by the *Daityas*, then Varāhi, Vaiṣṇavi, Gauri, Narasimhi, Sachi, Ṣivā and my other *śaktis* will take excellent bodies and destroy your fears." III. 6 (28-48).

[111] Kumar, Pushpendra, *Sakti Cult in Ancient India*, Bhartiya Publishing House Varanasi, 1974, p. 69.

The *Devī* in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāna* infact emerges in direct competition with Viṣnu. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāna* also appears as a contending tradition against the already extant *'Bhāgvata Purāna.'* It uses deliberate strategies to supersede the authority of the *Vaiṣnava Purāna.* Mackenzie Brown believes that the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāna* plays around a little with received traditions to develop a feminine insight.[112] The fundamental aspect of *lilā, māyā* and *avatārs* in the two *Purānas* is essentially the same just the perceptions and the cultural settings of the respective deities appear different.

The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāna* reinterprets *Vaiṣnava* myths with a definite attempt to embarrass Viṣnu by taking over as the preserver of the world. At the same time Viṣnu is presented in rather poor light: as an infant floating on the cosmic ocean on a fig leaf, sucking his toe,[113] the Goddess appearing as his mother,[114] beheading of Viṣnu in his horse headed form[115] and the deceitful slaying of the demon Vṛtra by Viṣnu.[116]

The purpose behind these myths might have been to prove the legitimacy of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāna*. The more obvious motive however seems to be the obvious abasement of Viṣnu and glorify the universal power of the Goddess. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāna* has attempted to wrest not just ultimate power from the male divinity, but the final authority

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[112] Brown, C. Mackenzie, *Triumph of the Goddess*, p. 24.

[113] Swami Vijnananda, *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam*, III. 4 (35-67).

[114] Ibid.

[115] Ibid. IV. 35.

[116] Ibid. VI. 4 (35-68).

as well.[117] *Sakti* had for long been associated with the feminine side of the mascu

divinity and under control of the later. With the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa,* numer

goddess figure merge as the dominant Goddess and she comes to wield both power

authority.

The *Devī Māhātmya* divided into the three deeds or *caritas* of the *Devī* was the first to

out and prove her cosmic transcendence. The three stories further together appear

represent an integration of myths form three competing religious milieu: Vaiṣṇa

Śaivite and tribal.[118] Nonetheless the *Devī Māhātmya* provides no explicit overarch

structure that binds the three *caritas* together as a symbolic or metaphysical unit

themselves. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* through its second retelling of the three my

places a self conscious, cosmological and theological interpretation upon the in

relationship between the three great mythic deeds. The *Devī* now appears as

overarching symbol with the three cosmic manifestations: Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmi :

Mahāsarasvati.[119]

The goddesses of the three *caritas* were transformed into cosmic manifestations of

Devī, and were conceived as largely benevolent aspects of the one Supreme Motl

These *avatāric* motifs of the Goddess reinscribe her as the penultimate, all pervad

entity. The *Devī* though *nirguṇa* in her ultimate essence, assumes for her pleasure a gr

variety of forms in order to maintain cosmic order. As the Cosmic Queen, with her abi

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[117] Brown, C. Mackenzie, *Triumph of the Goddess,* p. 77.

[118] Ibid. p. 132.

[119] Swami Vijnananda (transl), *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam,* IX. 1.

to assume different forms emerges in direct competition with Viṣṇu as the preserver and protector of the Universe.

The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* also constructs a *'Devī Gītā'* that serves as a philosophical and theological consumption of the text.[120] The *'Devī Gītā'* is closely modelled on the *'Bhāgvata Gītā'* in scheme, form and substance. The *'Devī Gītā'* reaffirms the idea how the Goddess was competing with Viṣṇu. The Goddess is shown as the cause of the universe, the giver of *jñāna* and reveals her highest form that combines *prakṛti, puruṣa* and even transcends gender identity.[121] In the *'Devī Gītā'* the Goddess emerges to teach to the Gods the deepest truth of the *Vedānta*. Brown sees the *'Devī Gītā'* as a logically organised text, which not merely substitutes the *Devī* for Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu but reappears in her own *śakta* setting. The *Devī* also reveals her *virāṭ rupa* or cosmic status, to emphasise upon her androgynous nature at both the mythological and philosophical levels.[122] Humes describes the Goddess as having a lustrous "feminismo" which gives her a kind of male virility, yet retains her creative potential.[123] This links the idea of virility with motherhood. The *Devī* is not merely the womb or a combination of masculine and feminine powers but the *Devī* is beyond routinely constructed gender roles.

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[120] Ibid. VII. 32.

[121] Ibid. "I am the virtuous High souled person and I am the female, male and hermaphrodite. There is no doubt in this. Whenever there is anything seen or heard I always exist there, within and without. There is nothing moving or unmoving without me." VII. 33 (1-19).

[122] Ibid. "Did you think a little beforehand the meaning of your words when you told me of my feminine nature? Though I am not apparently a man, yet my nature is that of the Highest Purusa. I shew myself simply in a feminine form." V. 10 (29-45)

[123] Humes, Cynthia, *'Is the Devi Mahatmya a Feminist Scripture,'* p. 137.

This perhaps marks the ultimate triumph of the Goddess. The *Devī* has the ability to transcend gender identities, something, which even the Gods had not succeeded in doing. The Goddess represents that the ultimate reality in the universe is neither male nor female but beyond gender ascriptions. The *Devī* in the battlefield loses her weak and delicate nature and assumes masculine behaviour. Both *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* fuse in the higher nature of the *Devī* and she combines the ideals of dispassionate witness and compassionate mother.

Another theme that finds wide exposition in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* is that of *Bhakti* or devotion for the *Devī*. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* reveals the splendours of the Goddess, underlying the emphasis on the *ārādhana* of the Great Goddess.[124] Worship of the Goddess is shown as granting both *bhukti* and *mukti*. One need not renounce his life as a householder in order to unite with the Goddess. Worship of the Goddess is prescribed as a part of one's day-to-day routine.[125] The attempt was now to closely associate the Goddess with human society. Brown emphasises that the Goddess was now placed in competition with Viṣṇu and the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* becomes one of the devices by which the *Devī* tries to assert her identity and win over devotees.[126] In her attempt to win over devotees, the Goddess also becomes the intermediary between the humans and the divine. She is ascribed with human traits to show her affinity with her devotees. The devotee was hence to reach to the Goddess in order to reach to the God.

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[124] Ibid. VII. 37.

[125] Ibid. "The Monday vow is very agreeable to Me; the worship of the *Devī* should be done and then in the night one must take one's food." VII. 38 (35-40).

[126] Brown, C. Mackenzie, *Triumph of the Goddess*, p. 156.

"One goes to the Mother before approaching the Father."[127] The Goddess is more approachable and the *ārādhana* of the Goddess is shown as yielding more benefits.[128]

If one views the idea of *Bhakti* historically, it would be interesting to note how the *Purāṇas* acted as the agents of its dissemination. The *Bhakti* movement is taken to have had its genesis in the outlying areas, referred to as the *Dravidian* lands.[129] The *Bhakti* ideology was effectively used by Brāhmana colonisers to instil the idea of the deity and the devotee, master and the servant, *guru* and the *Bhakta*. It reverberated the ideas of devotion and self-surrender to the masters (read as the Brāhmanas). *Bhakti* also became a means of social control. In such a situation when the Goddess demanded *Bhakti*, it meant an unquestionable devotion to her as prescribed in the texts as also an equal measure of devotion to the leaders of the trend, the Brāhmanas.

In the 10th century A.D., the *śakta* movement might also have been overshadowed by the rising tide of other Hindu theistic schools, specially the *Vaiṣṇavas*. Hence the *Devī* now speaks through the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* to show down Viṣṇu and attract more devotees precisely by the very same tools used by the *Vaiṣṇavas* to gain *Bhaktas*. At the third level, the Brahmanical society at this time also faced with growing threats to its social order both from within through internal corruption and from outside from the growing threats of Muslim invasions. At this point, the authors envisaged the *Devī* who would

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[127] Swami Vijnananda, *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam*, IX. 30 (41-60).

[128] Ibid. "It is only the Mother that bears the thousand offences of the son; we therefore cannot say why men knowing this, do not worship the Mother of the Universe." V. 19 (36-42).

[129] Nath, Vijay, *Puranas and Acculturation*, p. 175.

come and relieve them from their hardships. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* glorifies the nature of the *Devī*, her powers and the efficacy of her worship. It also however focuses on the consequences of her neglect and that nothing should be taken for granted.

The amalgamation of non-Brahmanic concepts within the domain of Brahmanical practices lead to the crystallisation of a complex, which is perceived of as the Goddess. This goddess is not merely a goddess but the Goddess known as the *Mahādevī*. The Goddess became a very stretchable and flexible concept, which could accommodate within itself multiple personalities and conflicting identities. In fact two distinct forms of the *Devī* now emerged. The first category included those who are consorts with wifely attributes and lacking powers separate from the husband. The second category includes those who are celestial deities, "as mistresses of the universe," at par with the male deities.[130] The Goddess tradition came to accommodate a "non-Brahmanical devotional impulse, while maintaining and upholding the religious authority of the Brahmanical traditions."[131] A "*sakta*" theology was now evolved in order to assimilate the Goddess who now became the *sakti*.

The *Devī Māhātmya* was the first formal conceptualisation of this goddess structure. The *Devī Māhātmya* sketched the basic traits to the individuality of the Goddess. It brought together the diverse mythic, cultic and theological elements relating to diverse female

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[130] Fuller, C.J, *The Camphor Flame*, Viking, 1992.

[131] Chitgopekar, Nilima, *'Indian Goddesses: Preserving Antinomian Presence,'* in Chitgopekar (ed.), *Invoking Goddesses: Gender Politics in Indian Religions*, Sakthi Books, Har Anand Publications, New Delhi 2002.

divinities, attached them to the Goddess and accommodated her within the Brahmanical pantheon. It expounded upon the philosophy of *śakti, prakṛti* and *māyā* coupled the Goddess with the above philosophical idioms and associated her with the creative energies active in the universe. These circumstances made feasible a historical reconstruction of various mythic themes and motifs that culminated in the grand vision of the Goddess as appearing in the *Devī Māhātmya.*

The *Devī Bhāgvata Puraṇa* presents the final picture of the Goddess where her multi-dimensional identity and ultimate triumph are asserted. The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* nurtures the seeds sown by the *Devī Māhātmya* and delineates the variety of images, personalities and ambivalences that the Goddess exhibits.

Chapter 3:
TEXTS, INSCRIPTIONS AND SCULPTURES: CONTINUITIES AND INNOVATIONS

Chapter 3: <u>TEXTS, INSCRIPTIONS AND SCULPTURES:</u>

<u>CONTINUITIES AND INNOVATIONS</u>

READING INSCRIPTIONS:

The central focus of the following section is the eastern Indian inscriptions between the 6th and 13th centuries A.D. The attempt will be to map the continuities and disjunctions between textual and inscriptional data with regard to the images of the goddesses. Religious texts are more in the form of prescriptions outlining ideals about how things should be rather than how they actually were. Inscriptions, on the other hand present a glimpse of how textual prescriptions were put into practise. One can get an idea of how people perceived their gods and goddesses and invoked them. Inscriptions being official and formal charters, enjoy greater historical legitimacy. Hence textual information needs to be matched with the inscriptions for authenticity. At the same time, it is important to remember that inscriptions carry limited information on our subject. They also reflect the perceptions and activities of the elite sections of the society and exaggerate the virtues of the royal patrons. While studying inscriptional data, one must also keep in view the deep nexus and the mutual sharing of authority and legitimacy between the Brāhmanas and the ruling classes. The king might have commissioned certain inscriptions and made donations to appease certain religious sects, Brahmanical schools or cult centres. Hence the popularity of a religious centre cannot merely be gauged by its frequent reference in inscriptions. Neither can it be said that the religious leanings of the ruler was the religion of the masses.

Keeping these qualifications in mind, we will attempt to reconstruct the prevalence of goddess tradition among the ruling classes, as recorded in select inscriptions. The first section deals with furnishing general details about the inscriptions in terms of their date, find spot, language, purpose and content. The second will analyse the religious traditions, in particular those of the goddess that can be derived from them.

Defining the Inscriptions:

This study takes into account thirty-eight inscriptions from Bihar and Bengal, covering a span of approximately six centuries beginning from the 6th century A.D. We address the same question as before: how was the goddess perceived in the inscriptions between the six centuries when the texts were making adjustments to concretise the images and myriad roles for her.

The Gunaighar copper plate dated 507 A.D. has been taken as the starting point of reference and the Chittagong plate of Damodar dated 1243 A.D. marks the end of our period. The inscriptions are distributed unevenly through the centuries with five inscriptions dated to 6th century A.D, one to 7th century A.D, one to 8th century A.D., four to 9th century A.D., six to 10th century A.D., seven to 11th century A.D., thirteen to 12th century A.D. and one to 13th century A.D. *(Table 1)*

The region chosen for this study is not based on any political delineation of present day state borders, language units or any other formal demarcations. Eastern India is taken here to mean the present day states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and the adjoining

regions of Bangladesh. To identify the region merely as Bengal would not do justice. While parts of Bengal did interact politically with one another, the northern part of Bengal was however more closely connected with Bihar than with the rest of Bengal. Northern Bengal specifically was part of the territorial domain of dynasties that controlled Bihar during some part of the 5th -6th centuries and in the 11th -13th centuries A.D.[1]

Most inscriptions taken into consideration are donative in nature. Such donations either pertain to transfer of property-bestowing pieces of land for maintenance of religious institutions, or as fees for priests. There are also quite a few inscriptions that are commemorative in nature- marking the installation of an image, construction of temples and monasteries or renovation of old temples. *(Table2)* The land holding practices and the governmental organisation as reflected in the inscriptions can be placed in a larger cultural and religious context. Even as documents recording the transfer of property, the plates carry us into the heart of an action.

An examination of the social and political position of the donors, the nature of property transfers and the character of recipients reveals variations, closely correlated with the typology, based upon appearance and forms of the inscriptions.[2] Over half the plates carry a royal seal located at the centre of the shorter edge of the plates. While some seals are riveted to the plates, others are engraved into it. A third kind is a ring with a motif

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[1] Morrison, Barrie, *Political Centres and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal,* The University of Arizona Press, Arizona, Preface, p. X

[2] Ibid. p. 148.

that binds a number of plates together.[3] There are a variety of symbols inscribed on the seals. *(Table 4)* The earliest symbol is a trident that appears on the Damodarpur plates.[4] The trident could be the symbol of both the *Śaivites* and the *Vajrayāna* Buddhists. The other *Śaivite* symbols appear to be the ten-armed *Sadāśiva* (found on ten plates) or a bull representing *Nandi*, the vehicle of Śiva. The Buddhists seem to have used the *Dharmachakra* symbol flanked by two deer. The *Vaiṣṇavites* use, Viṣṇu's vehicle *Garuda* and his Kṛṣṇa *avatāra* form as the most popular motifs. There are a few examples (two) of the *Gajalakṣmi* motif that shows the goddess Lakṣmi flanked by two elephants pouring water on her from two pitchers.

The seals may not always have specific religious or sectarian connotations. However they do give an idea of the popularity of different religious groups and the association of varied mythological motifs with different deities. The Sena rulers were definitely *Vaisnavites*, but their plates carried the *Sadāṣiva* seal. In the Vainyagupta plate the *Nandi* bull appears on the seal, while the inscription records a grant to a Buddhist monastery.[5] The same seal could also have been used by different rulers, either to show dynastic descent from a particular line of kings or to derive legitimacy from an earlier influential line of kings. Whatever be the form and appearance of the seal, the main purpose was to authenticate the plate as an official document.

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[3] The Bhaskarvarman plates are one such example. The inscription runs through a series of plates that are put together with a large ring. The centre of the ring contains a Ganesa seal.

[4] Mukherjee and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, p. 70. Damodarpur Copper Plate Inscription of Damodargupta, dated to 544 A.D.

[5] Ibid. p. 65. Gunaighar Copper Plate Inscription of Vanya Gupta, dated to 507 A.D.

For the purpose of this study, seals are a crucial evidence, which exhibit the physical image of the goddess in all her paraphernalia as envisioned by her devotees. It reveals the inception and popularity of the goddesses who were closely associated with and recognised by the royalty. We will see that this inscribed image of the goddess in the seal bears close similarity with her descriptions in the texts.

Religion Information in the Inscriptions:

Inscriptions serve as important storehouse of data for the study of religion. Many of these inform us about the specificities of the religious cults, record the erection of shrines and the consecration of the images of the divinities to be installed in them.[6] On rare occasions they even contain rough descriptions of the iconographic features of the deities, the erection of whose shrines are recorded in them. The plates also reveal information about the religious life of the rulers and the extent of royal support extended to the followers of different deities.

In this section, the epigraphs are read with a view to trace the inception, growth and popularity of the cult of the goddess in Eastern India between 6th to 13th centuries AD. For this purpose, the contents of the inscriptions and the royal insignia in the form of seals will be examined. The primary purpose of this study is to analyse the changes in the physical imagery of the goddesses.

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[6] Banerjea, J.N., *Development of Hindu Iconography*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, Third Edition, 1974, p. 10.

Most inscriptions follow a general pattern of opening, where the first line is a wish for success or good fortune, called the benediction.[7]. This often takes the form of a symbol as *siddham* or *om* that are forms of salutation to the divine beings. This is followed by an invocation to a deity or in some cases to more than one deity. This invocation is usually only one verse in length and carries a much deeper significance. At the first glimpse it gives the religious affiliations of the donor. Most inscriptions of the region under study invoke the Buddha, Śiva or Viṣṇu and at a much later date the goddesses. The invocation is usually in the form of an eulogy asking for favours and benevolence of the deity. In some instances it also dwells upon certain physical characteristics or mythological motifs associated with the deity.

In this entire period, there are only two inscriptions that invoke the goddess. The first was found inscribed on the pedestal of an image. Dated to as late as 12th century A.D., the inscription invokes the goddess Çandī. It records the installation of an image of Çandī by an officer in the reign of Laksmanasena.[8] The other inscription, is the Chittagong copper plate, of 1243 A.D., which invokes the "morning goddess."[9]The corpus of inscriptions abounds with invocations to the Buddha, Śiva and Viṣṇu in different forms. *(Table 3)* But there are only two references to the goddess.

[7] Morrison, Barrie, *Political Centres and Cultural Regions*, p. 69.

[8] Majumdar, N.G., *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol. 3, The Varendra Research Society, Rajshahi, 1929, p. 116. Dacca Inscription on the image of Çandī, from the reign of Laksmanasena, dated to century 12 A.D.

[9] Ibid. p. 158. Chittagong Copper Plate of Damodar: "Oh! Goddess know it to be morning..."

Such disregard for and lack of acknowledgement of the goddess however should not discourage us, for the goddess does appear in the text of the inscription. The earliest of our inscriptions invokes Mahādeva and the Buddha. The earliest reference to a goddess appears only in 8th century A.D. in the Khalimpur inscription of Dharamapala.[10] Subsequent to this, references to the goddess become more frequent. She begins to appear in a majority of inscriptions in one or the other of her multiple forms.

The Khalimpur inscription refers to quite a few goddesses: the Goddess of Fortune, Rohiṇi, Sācī, Svāhā, Sārvaṇi, Bhadrā and Lakṣmi[11]. They all appear as consorts, being a "source of comfort for their husbands."[12] It also contains a rare reference to a temple for the "goddess of learning."[13] The Goddess of Fortune referred to as Śri appears in almost one-third of the epigraphs. Lakṣmi and Pārvati in their different forms are frequently referred to, usually as a point of comparison with the chief queens of the rulers.[14] The queens appear as ideal consorts and benevolent mothers, the two epithets that are commonly associated with the two goddesses. The goddess of speech, as Sarasvati also appears once in a while, usually in connection with the learning, intellect and cultural

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[10] Mukherjee and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, p. 95. Khalimpur inscription of Dharampala, dated to 700 A.D.

[11] Ibid. p. 103. "Like Rohiṇi to the moon, Svāhā to the fire, the repository of luster, Sārvani to Lord Śiva, Bhadrā the daughter of King Bhadra to Kuvera, Sācī to Indra and Lakṣmi to Viṣṇu...."

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid. p. 107. "Its (the donated piece of land) boundary (is set forth below); to its west his perched rivulet, to north a temple of the Goddess of learning and a date-palm, to north- east the embankment constructed by prince Devata...."

[14] Ibid. p. 157. "Like Śiva, accepting the hand of Sārvani and Hari of Lakṣmi, he, desirous of entering into the life of a householder accepted duly in marriage the hand of Ralladevi, a lady worthy of him." Garuda Pillar Inscription of 9 century A.D.

accomplishments of the rulers.[15] The Earth goddess and Gaṅgā also seem to have been popular with the royalty.[16] All the goddesses referred to above are seen as mild and benevolent and find a mentioned only in relation to their male counterparts.

This trend continues till the 12th century A.D. and even subsequently. But in the Sunderban copper plate of 1180 A.D. for the first time we come across a reference to a non-consort goddess.[17] This plate refers to the immensely destructive potential of Kālī.[18] Another independent, warrior goddess, Çandī, appears a century later.[19]

References to goddesses are pretty frequent in the inscriptions, as is evident from the above descriptions. Yet there are little details regarding the physical imagery of the goddesses in the inscriptions. The most frequent association of the goddesses is with mothers, wives and consorts. Her roles are defined in relation to the males of the pantheon. As Gauri, she is "born from the Himalayas;"[20] as the Matṛkās she is the "nourisher of Kārtikeya;"[21] as Lakṣmi she "originates from Viṣṇu"[22] and she is the ideal

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[15] Ibid. p. 333. "Forming her abode in the face of this King (Kesavasena), Sarasvati attained the appellation "resident of the lotus." Edilpur Grant of Kesavasena, late 12 century A.D.

[16] Ibid. Monhyr Copper plate, Madhainagar Copper plate, Edilpur Grant.

[17] Ibid. p. 290. Sunderban Copper plate of Laksmanasena, dated to 1180 A.D.

[18] Ibid. "From him was born Vallalasena, an obstruction to destruction, which is a fortune of Kālī."

[19] Majumdar, N.G., *Inscriptions of Bengal,* p. 116. Dacca Inscription on the image of Çandī, from the reign of Laksmanasena, dated to 12 century A.D.

[20] Mukherjee and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions,* Garuda Pillar Inscription, (century 9 A.D.), Barrackpur Copper Plate (12 century A.D.)

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid. p. 163. Bhagalpur Copper Plate, dated to 9 century A.D.

consort.[23] Lakṣmi and Sarasvati are also mentioned as the two wives of Viṣṇu.[24] Sarasvati's association with Brahmā is never mentioned in the inscriptions. This is a theme, which however is frequently mentioned in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*. [25] Pārvati is also called as the "wife of Śiva"[26] and "mother of Kārtikeya."[27] Her forms as Bhavāni[28], Ardhanareṣvara[29], Gauri[30] and Tripurāsundari[31] also begin to appear.

There are occasional references to the physical image of the goddesses. Pārvati and Bhavāni are mentioned for their beauty.[32] Pārvati is referred to in rather sensual terms as the lover of Śiva in the Deopara inscription of 12th century A.D.[33]The image of Gauri as perched on Śiva's lap appears in the Madhainagar inscription[34]. The lotus is described as

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[23] Ibid. p. 361. The goddess as the ideal consort is mentioned in her *rupa* as Padmā, Ramganj Inscription, 10 century A.D.

[24] Ibid. p. Gaya Stone Inscription

[25] Swami Vijnananda (transl), *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam*, III. 6 (28-48).

[26] Mukherjee and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, Deopara Inscription (12 century A.D.) and Barrackpur Inscription.

[27] Ibid. p. 302. Madanpada Inscription of Visvarupasena, 1206-20 A.D.

[28] Ibid. p. 361. Ramganj Inscription

[29] Ibid. p. 258. Nainhati Inscription dated to 12 century A.D.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Majumdar, N. G., *Inscriptions of Bengal*, p. 158. Chittagong Inscription dated to 12433 A.D.

[32] Mukherjee and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, p. 361.Ramganj Inscription, "Like Padmā, the spouse of Viṣṇu, he had a consort named Sadbhava by name; a second Pārvati/ Bhavāni in appearance, she was as devoted to her husband as Sitā."

[33] Ibid. p. "May the rays of the light of the 'pleasure chamber' that are put to shame by the brilliance of wreath placed on the head of Parvati, that is drawn by her for fear of removal of her breast garment, and the faces of Shambhu, that smile seeing in moonlight the bashful moon face of Parvati be victorious," Deopara Inscription of Vijaysena.

[34] Ibid. p. " May the five faced Lord Siva, who holds on his lap the consort Gauri, resembling a flash of lightening on a piece of autumnal cloud." Madhainagar Copper Plate of Laksmanasena.

the seat of Lakṣmi and Sarasvati.[35] One also comes across references of *Purāṇic* motifs being associated with the goddesses by 9th century A.D. The Earth goddess "resides in the Eastern sea,"[36] Lakṣmi is associated with wealth,[37] and also by her fickle nature.[38] The myth of Lakṣmi's origin from the ocean has also been mentioned.[39] Yet the likes of elaborate descriptions mentioned of the male deities in the inscriptions are certainly not available for the goddesses. The elaborations on the physical attributes of the gods are in accordance with the *Purāṇic* injunctions. *Purāṇic* motifs were certainly adopted for the female deities as well, but they lack details.

The only idea that one gets of the physical attributes of the goddesses are those obtained from the *Gajalakṣmi* seals. These seals are fairly common from 5th century A.D.[40] They present goddess Lakṣmi as seated on a lotus, with water being poured over her from pitchers held by two flanking elephants. They remind one of the strong association of the goddess with fertility and abundance. Her frequent representation on inscriptions projects her as the paramour of the royalty.

It is evident that the goddess made a late entry in the Brahmanical pantheon. In the inscriptions of Eastern India she begins to appear only from the 8th century A.D. Even

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[35] Ibid. p. "Forming her abode in the face of the King, Saraswati attained the appellation 'resident of lotus,' which was attained so long by Laksmi alone," Edilpur Copper Plate of Kesavsena.

[36] Ibid. p. 114. Monghyr Copper Plate Inscription

[37] Ibid. p. 244. Deopara Inscription.

[38] Ibid. p. 150. Garuda Pillar Inscription

[39] Ibid. p. 163. Bhagalpur Inscription

[40] Faridpur plate (#1) of Dharmaditya, Faridpur plate (#2) of Dhrmaditya and Tippera plate of Lokanātha, just to name a few of these plates.

then, her presence is not pervasive. There is only one inscription of a much later date (12th century A.D.) that invokes her for her benefaction. The goddesses were presented as wife, mother, consort, daughter and even lover. There is hardly any reference to the goddesses being evoked as independent deities. The nearest one comes to an independent identity being assigned to a goddess is that of Sri. Described, as the goddess of fortune and prosperity, the goddess appears to be very closely associated with the royalty.

The political condition in eastern India during a large part of the period under study was turbulent and marred by warfare. Emergence of local kingdoms after the fall of the Guptas, numerous wars of succession, inter-dynastic rivalry marked this period. Yet no appeal or donation was made to the warrior goddesses such as Candī, Durgā and Kālī. That this terrific warrior-like image of the goddess was well known by this period is attested by her repeated mention in the *Devi Māhātmya*. Were the kings (powerful, virile men) not ready to acknowledge a warrior goddess? Or was a female figure not projected in the stereotypical roles of mother, daughter or wife not acceptable?

Another question, which presents itself is the absence of Rādhā. *Vaisnavism* was a popular religion in Bengal by the 10th –11th centuries A.D. The inscriptions do mention Visnu in his Krsna *avātara*. Rādhā also appears in the Paharpur panels dated to 7th-8th centuries A.D. She had become the world mother and the consort par excellence of Krsna by the time of the compositions of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāna* just a few centuries later. Even Krsna's mothers Devaki and Yasoda find a mention in the Garuda pillar of century

9th A.D. along with his friend Arjun.[41] Then why was Rādhā neglected in the inscriptions? Our data cannot answer this question.

The inscriptions moreover refer to only the *Purāṇic* goddesses. There is no mention of the goddesses who continued to exist as extremely popular local deities. This however can be explained by the fact that royal patronage was extended primarily to Brahmanism, which did not permit mention of goddesses not already acknowledged in the *Purāṇas*.

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[41] Ibid. p. 150. Garuda Pillar Inscription

RE- LIVING SCULPTURES:

From the large amount of sculptural representations of the goddesses in eastern India, the following survey has picked up sculptures that are representative of broad trends in terms of themes and styles of representation. The attempt is not to make a one to one correlation of sculptures with textual prescription but to explore the varieties of representations of the goddess icon. Textual prescriptions were important but there were also other dynamic influences.

It will be subsequently examined how local and regional trends emerged as the most crucial factor in influencing the styles of representations of the goddesses. The goddesses acquired newer motifs, companions, *vāhanas*, postures and even identities in keeping with the regional fashion during our contemporary period. Many such regional motifs and expressions were adopted and assimilated to the *Purāṇic* goddesses from the folk cults. This kind of adjustments and flexibility within the *Purāṇic* tradition resulted in transformations in the nature and roles prescribed to the *Purāṇic* goddesses. This cultural blend found tangible expression in art forms. One must also leave space for preferences of the patrons who commissioned these works of art and religion and the creative expressions of a multitude of artists who executed the sculptures.

Images considered here are mostly independent statues, found on temple walls, private collections or even museums. The goddesses found in eastern India, taken here, are primarily the representations of the five *mulaprakṛtis* or *rupas* of the Great Goddess

mentioned in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*.[42] The *Devī* might appear before her devotees in one of these five forms. The five *mulaprakṛtis* are: Lakṣmi, Pārvati, Durgā, Sarasvati and Rādhā. This study, for the sake of convenience, has picked up sculptural representations of mainly these five cosmic manifestations of the *Devī*. The goddesses have further been categorised into four primary groups. The first group includes Lakṣmi and Pārvati, who are consorts par excellence. The second group includes the warrior goddesses, Durgā, Mahiṣāsurmardini and Cāmundā representing the most famous manifestations of the *Mahādevī*, as remarkable warriors. Sarasvati and Manasā, the independent goddesses having few male relatives, have been included in the third category. The fourth group includes various folk goddesses worshipped not merely for gaining boons but also for propitiating them so that their evil propensity could be warded off. These goddesses have been chosen because of the immense variety of ways in which they have been depicted. Their popularity is also evident from the large number of their icons discovered in this region.

Before commencing with this study, one must keep in mind certain traits that are common to most goddesses. The facial features of the goddess sculptures are in obvious conformity with the roles and characters attributed to them. The benevolent motherly goddesses radiate a warm and smiling countenance to grant relief to the devotees. The goddess in her warrior image can assume the most terrifying and awesome expression, guaranteed to ward off the worst of evils, the most destructive demons and to reassure her

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[42] Swami Vijnananda (transl), *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam*, IX. 1.

children of her protective care. The *Devī,* when in the company of her Lord, looks totally enchanted, basking in the glory of her lover.

The body of most goddesses, even in her most horrifying form assumes the characteristic attributes of motherhood: full, round breasts and bulging hips. Kramrisch characterises such representation as almost "palaeolithic," "abstract and unnatural in their exaggeration."[43] She points out that such a depiction has its roots in the oldest artistic traditions arising out of an "erotic nature.[44] The destructive and malevolent goddesses however appear as emaciated, skeletal and covered by a net of veins. Çamundā and Kālī are ideal examples of this type.

Most goddesses are depicted as heavily bedecked with jewellery of various kinds. A rich diadem on the forehead, elaborate necklaces that descend to her large breasts, chains and girdles on narrow waist and a number of wristlets and armlets exemplify her wealth-bestowing nature. Jewellery shows bounty as also the element of *srngāra* and feminine grace, closely associated with the goddesses. Even when the goddess descends in the battlefield and assumes masculine armours, she does not cast off the various pieces of her jewellery.[45] Kālī and Çāmundā, the most terrible and destructive of the goddesses, are

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[43] Miller, Barbara Stoller (ed.), *Exploring India's Sacred Art, Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch,* IGNCA and Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1994, p. 218.

[44] Ibid. pp. 218-219.

[45] Coburn, Thomas, *Encountering the Goddess,* "A sea of milk gave a flawless necklace and two unaging garments, A heavenly crest-jewel, two earrings and bracelets, A heavenly half-moon ornament, armlets on her arms, Two spotless anklets, likewise a neck ornament without parallel." 2. 24-25.

also adorned with jewellery, though of a very different kind: necklaces of human skull, corpses of children as earrings and amputed hands as the waist girdle.

The relationship of the deity with an animal figure is common in Indian iconography. Zimmer interprets this animal mount as "a representation of the energy and character of the god."[46] The *vāhana,* like the *Devī* herself, could originally have been a folk or tribal cult icon, a part of nature worship and animistic beliefs, which was later incorporated within the Brahmanical pantheon, but only as a vehicle. "Such associations point to the survivals of early forms of animism and nature cults, and some gods may have been represented theriomorphically before they were depicted anthromorphically."[47] Each goddess was assigned her specific *vāhana. (Table 5).* The *vāhana* came to occupy an important space in the texts and some *vāhanas* like Durgā's lion, even play an important part in slaying the demon Mahiṣāsura. As per regional influences, goddesses have been associated with certain unusual motifs such as a ram with Sarasvati instead of her usual swan, an elephant with Manasā and iguana with Pārvati. Such symbols however do not have any textual sanction.

Water and water pots are common motifs associated with the goddess icons. According to Vedic conception, the water is believed to have been feminine. It is supposed to be the maternal and procreative side of the Absolute.[48] Therefore water is linked with the goddess to emphasise her procreative aspect. Water is also believed to be the harbinger of

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[46] Zimmer, Heinrich, *Myth and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation,* p. 53

[47] Pal, Pratapaditya, *Indian Sculptures,* Vol. 1, p. 29.

[48] Zimmer, Heinrich, *Myth and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation,* p. 90

auspiciousness and redeemer of sin, an idiom also related with the goddesses. The pot

holding the water symbolises the source of life and hence represents the womb of the

goddess.

The lotus is associated with moisture and Earth and therefore stands for regeneration and

progeny. The goddess is depicted holding a lotus or seated on a lotus to emphasise her as

generating life. Lakṣmi in fact came to be associated with the lotus in every possible way.

Among her many other forms she is known as being born of the lotus (padmasambhava),

standing on lotus (padmesthita) and abounding in lotuses (padmini).[49] (Plates 9, 13) A

leaf or a plant stalk is another emblem that the goddesses frequently hold in their hands.

The leaf symbolises vegetation and fertility. In the Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa, the goddess in

one of her many forms, is known as Sakhambari, the lady of the plants and vegetation.[50]

The many hands of the goddesses represent her multi-dexterity and the responsibility of

maintaining world order that is bestowed on her. Her most common depiction with four

arms represents her command and control over the four cosmic directions. She is shown

as holding various weapons, utensils and ornaments all containing the particularised

energies and characteristics of the respective goddesses. The goddesses can be

differentiated from each other by their names, which suggest the attributes that they

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[49] Zimmer, Heinrich, Myth and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation, p. 91

[50] Swami Vijnananda (transl), Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam, VII. 28 (40-68).

carry.[51] *(Table 5)* T.A.G.Gopinathrao shows how different kinds of Durgās, are classified according to the number of hands they have and the kinds of function that they perform.[52]

As seen in the earlier section, the *Devī Māhātmya* composed in the 6th-7th centuries is the first attempt to articulate the goddess tradition in Sanskrit. This image was further elaborated in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāna,* the composition of which came about a couple of centuries later. Even an initial reading of the two texts gives a definite picture of the changes in the image and identity of the goddesses within the time period of a couple of hundred of years. The two *Purāṇas* delineate the picture of the Great Goddess or the *Mahādevī* and describe how all goddesses are partial manifestations of this *Mahādevī.* A reading of inscriptions of the same period also reveals that the goddess evolved over a time period. In the initial period, she was invoked more as a consort and a mother. Only at a much later date does one find vivid descriptions of her imagery, where she came to assume a variety of roles and characters. The following section will explore whether changes in the imagery of the goddesses as outlined in the texts and inscriptions actually found expression in sculptures. Do the changing textual traditions actually affect ground level practises as well?

The *Purāṇic* and the non-*Purāṇic*:

The *Purāṇas* helped to assimilate various autochthonous groups within the Brahmanical culture by bringing some of their religious beliefs and practices within the Brahmanical

[51] Miller, Barbara, Stoller, *Exploring India's Sacred Art,* p. 210.

[52] Rao, T.A.G., Elements *of Hindu Iconography,* Vol.1, Part2, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, Second edition, 1993, p.342.

orbit. However, this process of absorption and integration actually became a two-way process. While local and folk cultures were clearly subsumed within the Brahmanical religion, the great Brahmanical traditions also came to be localised and regionalised. This exchange of ideas and practises found clear expression in art. There were many forces, apart from the *Purāṇic*, which were simultaneously active and moulded the religious and artistic expressions of the people. Moreover, the folk divinities continued to thrive alongside the *Purāṇic* pantheon, though not completely untarnished. *Purāṇic* religious injuncts did have their own ways of influencing the folk religions.

Sculptural depictions of the goddesses, in eastern India during the period of this study do not fully conform to the *Purāṇic* passages, except in general terms. The *Purāṇic* *Mahādevī* is an all-powerful, warrior goddess and at the same time a benevolent mother. Hence she seems to have subsumed numerous identities within herself. As a result she is depicted with a number of hands that assist her in performing multiple functions. However the *Mahadevi* is not assigned with a fixed number of hands. The Goddess might have anywhere between four and thirty-two hands. There seems to be no consistency even within the *Purāṇas* on the number of hands that the Goddess should possess. However, each object and *mudrā* symbolises a certain *Purāṇic* scheme.

A relief of Navadurgā from Dinajpur is a very apt example.[53] This rare piece of sculpture illustrates a group of nine, sixteen handed Mahiṣāsuramardini figures, encircling a central eighteen handed goddess. The central deity bears all the attributes of a warrior goddess.

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[53] Chatterjee, Rama, *Religion in Bengal*, p. 181.

She holds a trident, goad, thunderbolt, discus, bow and arrow, kettle drum, mirror, bell etcetera as described in the *Devī Māhātmya*[54] and again with much greater detail and elaboration in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*.[55] The attributes and *mudrās* of the goddesses seem to be in perfect harmony with those described in the two texts. However the sequence of events depicted in this relief has no *Purāṇic* sanctity.

Similarly a sculpture of Çandikā found in a dilapidated temple in the Rajshahi district of Bangladesh, enacts a scene that places the Goddess in an unfamiliar context.[56] This shows a standing image of Çandikā, engaged in battle with a group of pot-bellied *asuras*, while a lion prances between her feet. The goddess is portrayed with all her paraphernalia, including a female attendant and an umbrella. Other *Purāṇic* deities like Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Ganeṣa and Surya have also been sculptured on the stele. The narrative attitude of the relief reaffirms the *Purāṇic* account of Çandikā slaying the demons but the lion and the pot-bellied *asuras* are not associated with her in the texts.

Subsequent to the introduction of *Purāṇic* themes in the religious beliefs and practices of the autochthonous groups Purāṇic motifs combined with the various non-*Purāṇic*, folk idioms to produce a very curious admixture of forms and symbols. The iguana is a motif, which frequently accompanies the goddess, especially in her form as Gauri or Pārvati. It might have been an animal of the animistic folk religion, gradually absorbed into Brahmanism.

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[54] Coburn, Thomas, *Encountering the Goddess*, 2. (9-30).

[55] Swami Vijnananda (transl), *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam*, V. 1.

[56] Chatterjee, Rama, *Religion in Bengal*, p. 182.

A particularly interesting group of sculptures from Bihar and Bengal underscores this strange relationship between the *Devī* and her reptile companion. In most images of this kind, the *Devī* is four armed,[57] standing on a lotus pedestal, sometimes accompanied by Gaṇeṣa and Kārtikeya. The presence of these two gods clearly shows that the *Devī* is Pārvati but the presence of an iguana alongside instead of a lion, tends to confuse her identity.[58] The goddess has been variously identified as Siddhā, Lalitā, Gauri and even as Śri.[59] At times the iguana appears alone,[60] and occasionally with a lion or even with a pair of antelopes.[61] These animals might have been locally worshipped and in course of time came to be associated with the goddess, the goddess being the major vehicle for the absorption of local cults. (*Plates 1, 3, 5, 6, 8*)

Alternatively the *Devī* might have been a local goddess accompanied by her iguana attendant who was gradually incorporated into the Brahmanical pantheon as an associate of Śiva. As a result, she came to be linked with the lion (7th century A.D.)[62] and by the

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[57] Bhattacharya, Gauriswar, *Essays on Buddhist, Hindu, Jain Iconography and Epigraphy*, Vol.1, from Haque, Enamul (ed.), *Studies in Bengal Art Series*, International Centre for Studies in Bengal Art, Dhaka, 2000, p. 181. Gauriswar Bhattacharya divides the goddesses in two categories, based on the attributes that she holds in her hands. In her ascetic *rupa* the hands of the goddess depict *varadamudra, akshamala, tridanda* and *kamandala*. When the goddess is shown as holding a fruit, cosmetic stick, mirror and the fourth hand as placed on the head of Kartik or Ganesa, she is described to be of the bridal type.

[58] Ibid. 181

[59] Ibid.

[60] As in two metal images of the Devi, now in Dacca museum, dated to centuries 10th- 11th A.D.

[61] Bronze figure of the Devi from Nalanda, dated to century 8th A.D., now in the National Museum, New Delhi. Also in stone in Dacca Museum, dated to century 12th A.D.

[62] Found on a figure of a Devi depicted on a *panchāyatana linga* from South Bihar, dated to century 7th A.D., now stored in the Indian Museum, Calcutta.

11th century with Ganeṣa and Kārtik.[63] She sometimes is even depicted with a *lingum* on her pedestal[64] and in rare instances with the third eye of Śiva.[65]

Cross blending of religious traditions:

Among the numerous sculptures found in eastern India, one motif that occurs uniformly across all geographical pockets is the figure of the snake goddess Manasā. Though absent from the *Devī Māhātmya,* Manasā finds numerous references in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa.*[66] There was no tradition of worshipping a snake goddess within the Brahmanism. However, by the time of composition of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa,* and with increased interaction of Brahmanism with folk and tribal religions, the cult of the snake goddess was adopted within the Brahmanical religion. Manasā however does not appear to be the outcome of the influence of tribal religions only. The worship of a snake goddess by the name of Jānguli is also known within Buddhist tradition. The goddess Jānguli with a beautiful face sits in *lalitāsana* on a lotus pedestal covered by a snake hood. She usually has four hands holding a fruit *(phala)*, a sword *(khadga)*, a battle-axe *(parasu)* and a noose *(pasa)*. She wears various pieces of jewellery.

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[63] A stone figure carrying an inscription, found near Nalanda. The stele relief of the Devi figure shows a Siva- lings over her *jatā mukuta*. While on both sides of the Devi appear Kartikkeya and Ganesa. This figure can be dated to century 10th A.D.

[64] As on a beautiful bronze figure, from north Bengal, dated to century 10th A.D., now stored in Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

[65] It is difficult to distinguish whether it is a *tilaka* or a third eye. This is seen on two stone images of the Devi. The first is now in the Dacca Museum, was originally from Paikpada, dated to century 10th A.D. The second image is one of the most elaborate one, from North Bengal, now in the British Museum. Dated to the century 12th A.D., this shows the Devi with Ganesa, Kartikkeya, the *godha* and now also two attendants.

[66] Swami Vijnananda (transl), *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam,* IX. 1 (71-95).

A number of images of Manasā have been found in North Bengal which are dated between the 8th and 13th centuries A.D. *(Plates 10-12)* Manasā appears in the same pose as Jānguli. She has a charming face, sits in the same *lalitāsana* pose, and is adorned with various types of rich jewelleries. She sits on a throne under a five, seven, nine or ten hooded snake canopy. The number of snakeheads on the canopy probably signifies her importance as an authoritative figure. "She is not the wife of *Nāgaraja* but an independent goddess."[67] Where she differs from Jānguli is that, Manasā usually has two hands and carries a snake child on her lap.[68] Sometimes she also sports a third eye on her forehead. Gauriswar Bhattacharya points to the existence of a snake goddess cult by the name of *Mane Manci* or *Mane Mancamma* in Karnataka.[69] He speculates that the Sena rulers, who originally came from Karnataka, might have had introduced this cult in the Bihar-Bengal region, where it became localised as *Manasā Devī*. However the Manasā images predate the Sena rulers in Bengal.

In a 9th century image of Manasā, found from Kurkihar in south Bihar a Ganeṣa figure appears on the *prabhāmandala* of the icon.[70] There could have been two reasons for placing Ganesa alongside Manasā. It was either to provide legitimacy to this as yet obscure goddess, or like Ganesa, Manasā was also probably being projected as the remover of all obstacles (*vighna-vināṣana*).

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[67] Bhattacharya, Gauriswar, *Essays in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain*, p. 253.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid 216
[70] Ibid 219

Another recurrent motif associated with the Manasā images is the third eye on her forehead.[71] The third eye does reveal a strong Saivite association. Like the clubbing of Ganeṣa icon with Manasā, her association with Śiva also might have been an attempt to confer legitimacy on her, especially when the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* describes her as the disciple of Śiva.[72]

Regional variations:

The elephant is a motif, which is traditionally associated with Lakṣmi. Lakṣmi as *Gajalakṣmi*, flanked by an elephant on each side, showering water on her from pitchers held in their trunks, is a symbol of fertility, bounty and auspiciousness, frequently mentioned in inscriptions, depicted on coins, seals, artefacts and sculptures. *(Plate 4)* Elephants also show an association with royalty and prosperity. It was not within the means of everyone to possess an elephant. At the same time an elephant despite its bulk and weight, symbolises grace and rhythm, two qualities that characterise beautiful and sensuous women.

In Bihar and Bengal the elephant as an attendant or a *vāhana* came to be associated with a number of goddesses. This seems to be a regional preference not affirmed by any *Purāṇic* text. The Dacca image of Çandī, carrying an inscription dated to the reign of

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[71] Ibid.

[72] Swami Vijnananda (transl), *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam*, IX. 47.45.

Laksmanasena, is one such example.[73] Çandī a warrior goddess, in this image has been represented in an unusual form, which closely resembles Lakṣmi. The four-armed Çandī has a springing lion as her vehicle and on her either side she has a female attendant with a flywhisk. Two elephants, with water from upturned pitchers are bathing her from above. Had the image not carried an inscription describing her as "*Çandīdevī*" she might very easily have been confused with Laksmi. N.K. Bhattasali identifies this image as that of Bhuvanesvarī.[74]

Similarly, there is a unique image of a snake goddess mounted on an elephant. This image dated to the 11th century A.D. was found at Kurkihar in South Bihar and is now placed in the Linden Museum.[75] She is depicted as a typical snake goddess, complete with her snake child and a grand nine-hooded snake canopy. What is unusual is that the goddess, sitting in *lalitasana* on a lotus pedestal, has one leg folded and the other resting on a small elephant.

The occurrence of elephants in both these images is rather unusual and difficult to explain in *Purāṇic* iconographic terms. The only plausible explanation seems to be that it was a region specific trend. There are similar other unusual trends found in certain unique icons. One such icon is that of Çāmundā now kept in the Dacca museum. According to the *Purāṇic* traditions, Çāmundā first made her appearance in the third *carita* of the *Devī*

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[73] Majumdar, N.G., *Inscriptions of Bengal*, p. 116. Dacca Inscription on the image of Caṇdī, from the reign of Lakśmanasena, dated to century 12 A.D.

[74] Bhattasali, N.K, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Indological Book House, Delhi, 1972, p. 202.

[75] Bhattacharya, Gauriswar, *Essays in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain* p. 253.

Māhātmya[76] to defeat the demons Çandā and Mundā. Çāmundā is a terrible goddess who is represented with a fierce face and skeletal body. She usually has two or four arms, though there are images of Çāmundā with as many as twelve arms.[77] She has a corpse as her mount. What is unusual in certain images of the goddess from Bihar and Bengal is that she is portrayed as with a fat boy. The boy serves as her *vāhana,*[78] and in some cases he is perched on her lap. This seems to probably be an attempt to impart a benevolent and motherly image to Çāmundā, which is rather surprising for this grotesque figure. *(Plates 14-16)*

There is yet another surprising goddess sculpture in the Dacca Museum. This rare icon depicts Sarasvati with a ram as a *vāhana*. Sarasvati is the goddess of knowledge, arts and wisdom who is depicted in the texts and in the majority of sculptural representations in her pristine white form with a swan as her *vāhana*. No text associates her with a ram. The reasons for doing so for this sculpture from Varendra are not clear. N.K.Bhattasali attempts to link it with a passage from the *Satapatha Brahmana,* which prescribes the sacrifice of a ram for Sarasvati.[79] However the *Purānas* do not recommend blood sacrifice for Sarasvati.

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[76] Coburn, Thomas, *Encountering the Goddess,* 7. 25.

[77] Bhattasali, N.K., *Iconography of Buddhist,* p.211.

[78] ibid

[79] Bhattasali, N.K., *Iconography of Buddhist,* p. 186.

Mother and child:

Motherhood is naturally attributed to most goddesses. Their most frequent invocations are as bountiful and benevolent mothers who readily respond to the demands of their children. In the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa,* motherhood becomes a means of empowering the Goddess. Surprisingly none of the actual physical descriptions of the Goddess in the text show her as bearing children or even depict her with children. It is the creative potential of the Goddess and not the idea of actual motherhood, which invests her with power, autonomy and primacy in the widest sense of the term. [80]

Pārvati is one exception from this general trend. Pārvati is an unusual goddess who epitomises of domesticity and motherhood, and at the same time is a fiercely independent warrior. She is often portrayed as placed next to her husband Śiva, with her two sons Gaṇeṣa and Kārtika on her lap. *(Plates 22, 28)* A number of such images of Śiva's show its members in blissful harmony with each other. However, neither of the two *Purāṇas* makes any reference to Pārvati carrying children on her lap.

Manasā images with her snake child are again a strong reminder of this image of ideal motherhood. *(Plate 10)* The motive behind such a depiction might have been to project fertility and protection as inextricable corollaries of the goddess.

A group of unusual figurines, known as Sadyojatā has no textual endorsement but are found in large numbers, in south Bihar and northern Bengal. *(Plate 29)* These panels

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[80] Ganesh, Kamala, *'Mother Who Is Not a Mother: In Search of the Great Indian Goddess.'*

depict a two- armed goddess gracefully reclining, with one arm resting under her head on a pillow while the other holds a lotus stalk. She is beautifully dressed in jewellery and an elaborate coiffure is piled on top of her head. The legs of the goddess are shown as resting one upon another while a maid cleans them. To the left of this goddess lies a baby whose feet rest on a lotus. The stele of the relief shows more maids with flywhisks and fans, comforting her. Above the couch on the wall, are almost invariably placed the images of Ganeṣa, Kārtikeya, a *Linga* and the *Navagraha*. There seem to be no known textual sanction for this image.

The presence of Ganesa, Kārtikeya and the *Linga* indicate that the panel is closely associated with Siva's family. It is possible that it was another attempt to incorporate a local mother goddess within the Brahmanical pantheon where her association with Şiva and his sons would accord this goddess an easy entry in the already established pantheon.

Patronage and Artist's Impression:

A large number of sculptural remains available to us reveal fascinating evidence of the personal religious beliefs of the patrons as well as the artists' perceptions of the divinity. Sculptures of certain goddesses like Pārvati, Durgā, Lakṣmi and Manasā, are available in large numbers and clearly seem to overshadow over the other goddesses both in terms of numbers as well as the varieties of their images available. Certain other goddesses who seem to be of prime significance in the texts are however conspicuously absent in actual physical representations. Rādhā is one such conspicuous figure. Others like Mahālakṣmi and Mahāmāyā described as the two cosmic incarnations of the Goddess, frequently

referred to in both the *Devī Māhātmya* and the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*, are rarely find sculptural representation.

A four handed representation of Mahāmāyā is found from Vikrampura. This depicts the goddess as emerging from a *lingam*. The upper half shows her with folded hands, against her breasts, in *dhyāna mudrā* while in her other two hands she holds rosary beads and a manuscript. The Goddess in this form is believed to be a consort of Siva, as described in the *Kalikā Purāṇa.*[81]

There is similarly only one known instance of the goddess as Mahālakṣmi. A beautiful image of her is available form Rajshahi, seated on a double lotus resting on the back of a lion. Mahalaksmi is believed to have been the supreme form of the Goddess from whom other minor incarnations emerged. In this representation the Goddess is shown as having twenty hands, instead of the usual eighteen. A miniature *Siva-Linga* is shown embedded in her matted hair.

An interesting depiction of Lakṣmi- Nārāyaṇa is found from near Dacca. In this unusual form, Lakṣmi and Nārāyan.a are depicted in the same pose as Umā-Maheṣvara. Nārāyaṇa is shown seated on a lotus with the right leg pendant. He has four hands holding clockwise, *śankha, padmā, gadā and chakra*. The left hand, which holds the *chakra*, also encircles the body of Lakṣmi. Lakṣmi sits on the left thigh of Viṣṇu. Her right hand is placed around the neck of her Lord and in the left hand she holds a lotus by its stalk. Her

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[81] Bhattasali, N.K., *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical, p. 193.*

right leg is folded over the thigh of Visnu while the left leg is pendant. The kneeling *Garuda* is depicted below as if supporting the lotus seat on which the pair is sitting.

The occurrence of the goddesses in unusual forms and poses seem to indicate personal preferences of the patrons as also the perceptions of the artists. The patron might have had a rare icon specially crafted to represent his idea of his favourite goddess to which the artist might have added his own style and vision. One also must give due significance to various currents of pilgrimage and migrations in the contemporary period which also might have also resulted in the blending diverse regional traditions.

Chronology:

Time also played a decisive role in determining certain motifs and forms associated with the Goddess.

The representation of a goddess with an iguana (discussed in an earlier section) is one case to the point. The earlier variety of this goddess depicts her as a four- armed ascetic deity, holding a *akshmala* (rosary), *tridnada* (rod with three prongs), *kamandalu* (water pot) and *varadamudra*.[82] The second variety consists of a bridal goddess, again four armed, holding a *phala* (fruit), *darpan* (mirror), *shalaka* (cosmetic stick) and the fourth hand is placed on the head of Kartikeya.[83] The first type has been identified as Siddhā, who was popular in the eastern regions, that is the Dacca- Faridpur region. She begins to occur as early as the century 7th A.D. The second kind, more popular in the north Bengal

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[82] Bhattacharya, Gauriswar, *Essay on Buddhist, Hindu and Jain*, p. 181.

[83] Ibid.

has been called as Lalitā and appears at a much later date, beginning from the century

11th A.D. It seems that the Lalitā form of Gauri developed out of her form as Siddhā

popular in the earlier period. [84] Along with the time period, the geographical regions in

which the two goddesses appeared are also different.

Carmel Berkson has carried out a similar study of the evolution of the image of the *Devī*

slaying Mahiṣāsura; the four-armed Durgā being gradually replaced by the more

elaborate Mahisāasuramardini icons.[85] Berkson in her remarkable study of pan-Indian

patterns dating from 1st century A.D. up to present times, records how the dynamics of

the relationship between the *Devī* and Mahiṣā change as also the manner in which they

are represented. Prior to the composition of the *Devī Māhātmya*, Berkson identifies the

Devī as a simple warrior Goddess who acquires new attributes subsequent to the

delineation of a textual tradition.

One can read a similar evolution of the Mahiṣāuramardini motif from a simple to a more

complex one within Bihar-Bengal also. One of the earliest examples of Durgā slaying a

demon is available from Bihar, dated to century 7th A.D. In this lucid representation, a

two-armed *Devī* is shown slaying a demon. The only weapon the *Devī* might have been

carrying was a trident (now missing). Even the *Devī*'s lion is not shown on the relief.

By the 9th –10th centuries A.D., icons become more intricate. Mahiṣāusramardini appears

in her full glory, ready to slay not just Mahiṣāsura but also a host of other demons,

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[84] Ibid. p. 185.

[85] Berkson, Carmel, *The Divine and the Demonic.*

depicted on the panel. The *Devī* acquires eight, ten or even eighteen arms holding a variety of weapons. The lion becomes a prominent part of the myth and the relief. Mahiṣā is shown in a half-demon, half-man, half-buffalo state. Other figures also come to occupy the stele: *Navagrahas*, other *Devas*, demi-gods and *apsaras* and even a *lingam*. *(Plates 7,31)*

Folk deities:

Subsequent to the introduction of *Purāṇic* gods and goddesses folk deities however did not cease to exist. While some of them were assimilated into the mainstream Brahmanical religion, other continued to flourish, to meet the fundamental needs of individuals for sustenance, and protect the families against diseases, accidents and evil influences. One finds numerous examples of the folk deities existing simultaneously with the *Purāṇic* deities. One can gauge the importance of such gods and specially goddesses from the surviving stone sculptures, intended for domestic shrines, local shrines in villages, thrown in rivers and tanks or even buried under the earth to increase the fertility of the land.[86]

A seated image of a local goddess from Valgudar in Bengal shows a goddess probably identified as a mother, depicted as carrying a child on her lap. The inscription on the pedestal identifies her as goddess Gausava.[87] Similar images are found in large numbers especially from south Bihar and east Bengal which were forest belts largely inhabited by the tribals, among whom the worship of a mother goddess was popular.

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[86] Pal, Pratapaditya, *Indian Sculptures*, Vol. 1, p. 29.

[87] Chatterjee, Rama, *Religion in Bengal*, The inscription reads, "Let there be success// the goddess Gausava is installed in the city of Krimila; this is the meritorious gift of Nrikatta," p. 195.

Local deities merging with great deities is just one way of looking at things. Sometimes the reverse also might happen. Great deities also may come to adopt local symbols. The select examples described above show precisely this idea where certain motifs probably popular in a particular geographical region become recurrent motifs in the images of different goddesses. Meanwhile artists also express the processes and responses playing within him as also around him. Hence while ritual and iconographic texts determined the broad trends and styles there could be no absolute limit to the influence of time, geography, space and certainly not to human expressions. The *Purāṇic* pantheon hence, did not prove to be as subsuming as it was planned to be.

Chapter 4:

THE GODDESS AND HER DEVOTEEES: VARIETIES OF REPRESENTATIONS

Chapter 4: THE GODDESS AND HER DEVOTEEES: VARIETIES OF REPRESENTATIONS

Hindus believe that the divine images they worship in temples and in their home shrines are notionally alive and visually and symbolically embody the presence of the deities that they represent. The following chapter explores this idea. The chapter looks beyond the traditional ascription of images as cult icons and ritual ingredients, as also beyond aesthetics which perceives sculptures merely as objects d' art. The focus is to see how images have a life of their own and how they enact unusual roles when placed in different contexts.

Religious icons bring with them various political agendas, economic motives and social dynamics. Images in Indian history have served diverse functions: as icons of sovereignty, as adjudicators of disputes, as symbolic landlords, as objects of donation and as collectors' items. Consequently there have been different human responses to religious icons. The patron who got the image crafted might have had a particular religious or political motive in having commissioned the work. The sculptor who crafted it might have had followed the prescriptions of the iconographic texts, but would also have added his own perceptions while moulding the divine image. Those who worshipped these icons or viewed them might have had interacted with the images in a third way. Over the many centuries that the images have survived, they have been revered, stolen, destroyed, disfigured, transported to new settings, bought and sold, labelled, exhibited to newer audiences and even studied by students of history and of art. The identities of religious

icons are rarely fixed and permanent. Hence divine images enter into a host of personal, material and spiritual relationships with humans who attend to them and interact with them.[1] There are numerous ways in which goddess icons interact with their devotees, religion being only one of them.

This chapter proposes to follow the "cultural biographical" method for studying sculptures of goddesses from Eastern India, as set down by Richard Davis.[2] Davis treats Indian images as "fundamentally social beings whose identities are not fixed once and for all at the moment of fabrication, but are repeatedly made and remade through interactions with humans."[3] He combines the cultural biographies of images with the idea of "interpretative communities."[4] He believes that there is no single or correct way of reading an image. The relative importance of setting and presentation of both the viewer and the object under consideration are of crucial significance. The interpretation that the viewer makes of a particular image can be largely determined by his cultural and social mindset. Newer meanings emerge in course of the relationship of the image with the viewer who brings along his community's response towards the cosmos, towards divinity, or even towards a particular icon. Different constructions may also emerge from the need of reading an image: is it academic, spiritual, artistic or any other.

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[1] Davis, Richard, *Lives of Indian Images,* Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 1999, p. 261.

[2] Ibid. p. 7. This method was first proposed by Igor Kopytoff who envisioned that "A culturally informed biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constructed categories."

[3] Ibid. pp. 7-8

[4] Ibid. p. 8

At the same time Davis believes that the location of an object under consideration plays a constructive role in the act of looking and interpreting. "Appropriation, relocation and display of an object can dramatically alter its significance for new audiences."[5] A particular piece of sculpture, when placed in a temple, in a personal shrine, in a museum or as an ornament of a living room may share different sets of relationships with its viewers. While the icon in a temple may evoke awe and devotion, that in the personal shrine is the recipient of personal faith or *bhakti*. In a museum the same piece of sculpture can be a testimony of history and of the artistic achievement of a civilisation, while in a living room it might be a collector's item, a souvenir or a gift.

Let us go back to the period and region of our study. This chapter analyses the role of the goddess sculptures in virtually every aspect of the lives of her devotees. How did people relate to the goddess icon? What needs, apart from religious and spiritual ones do such icons fill in their lives? How did people relate to a female deity in their daily lives? When did such a process begin? How did goddess temples emerge and how did they fit into the larger socio-cultural setting? The *Purāṇic* goddesses are believed to have been a much later phenomenon, how did icons speak of this process of religious change in Eastern India? How did different groups of devotees invoke the goddess and interact with her sculptures? These are some of the questions that this chapter will attempt to answer.

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[5] Ibid. p. 9

As Cult Icons:

The goddess means different things to different people. She has many roles to play and many functions to perform. For the lay devotee the goddess is a guardian, a protector and a benefactor.[6] The most common function of religious figurines is as cult icons. Images stand as a collective metonymy for the human society and religious culture of ancient and medieval India.[7] For devotees images and sculptures of the goddess are tangible manifestations of the divine mother who makes herself visible to her children in ever-new forms. They are visible symbols of the religious beliefs and philosophical insights of men and women. The question of presence or absence of the divine in the icon is a very old one. Do religious icons embody the divinity they represent or are icons merely a symbol or a signifier of the divine beings?[8]

Images are the tangible medium for humans to interact with gods and goddesses. Images offer the material form in which the goddess can be seen and touched. Icons form an important point of entry of a divinity into the human world, much as a soul enters and enlivens a human body.[9] An image can encompass the abstract characterisations of a divinity as well as his/ her specific forms. Let us take for instance a *Umā-Maheṣvara* figurine. *(Plates 32, 34, 35, 37, 38)* At a first glance, it shows Śiva, the husband, in close embrace with his wife Pārvati. This classic theme of the god and the goddess in perfect union appears again and again in the region of our study, in stone and metal. Also known

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[6] Preston, James J., *Cult of the Goddess: Social and Religious Change in a Hindu Temple,* Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1980, p. 13.

[7] Ibid. p. 25

[8] Kinnard, Jacob N., *Imaging Wisdom,* p. 1.

[9] Davis, Richard, *Lives of Indian Images,* p. 31.

as the *Umālinganamurti*, the figure is a familiar one in the whole of north India but is especially widespread in the east. The goddess is shown as seated on Śiva's left thigh. One leg each of both the god and the goddess is folded while the other is dangling down. Some images show the *vāhanas* of both the divinities, Śiva's Nandi bull and Umā's lion while in others the *vāhanas* are absent. Śiva with his left hand embraces Pārvati, while his right hand either fondles her breasts (as in most sculptures from Bihar and Bengal. This feature is exclusive to this region and is not seen in icons even from the neighbouring areas like Orissa.) or touches her chin or is in *abhayamudra*. The goddess meanwhile looks totally enamoured with her Lord and shyly responds to him.

Despite minor variations, most *Umā-Maheṣvara* figures at their face value reveal this blissful union of the *Devī* with her husband and lover. On further reading of the image, the same figure can be shown as representing the union of the primordial male with the female, marking the point of cosmic creation. Both the divinities are seated on a lotus throne, which further symbolises the divine creative energy. It also marks the union of the 'yin' and the 'yang,' the two opposite forces, simultaneously active in the universe. Though apparently opposite, they are a co-operative pair and in essence one, both being emanations of the one Absolute, and are represented here in a symbol.[10] Stella Kramrisch believes that the *Umā-Maheṣvara* figures do not actually represent the god and the goddess, but that it is a manifestation of the god himself in his form as *Umā-Maheṣvara*.[11] "Uma in this conception has no existence of her own; she is a part of the

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[10] Zimmer, Heinrich, *Myth and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation*, p. 137.
[11] Miller, Barbara Stoller (ed.), *Exploring India's Sacred Art*, p. 210.

god in his unfolded appearance."[12] Images hence form merely a part of the whole

picture. Yet if seen with a devotional eye, one can see the wholeness of it all.

Images can be narrative and help the devotees to catch a brief glimpse of a moment from

mythology. The *Mahiṣāsurmardini* motif represents just a moment in the *Devī*'s career,

but it also speaks the entire story. The *Devī,* shown in all her glory, complete with her ten

arms, each with its respective weapons represents an event in history and mythology. The

weapons held by the *Devī* remind the viewer that she is an emanation from the collective

energies of the *Devas*. However the *Devī*'s facial expression, her body rhythm, and her

gesture, speak of her own prowess and energies. The dying demon lying at her feet

narrates the sequence of events: how the *Devī* emerged, pursued the demon, how the

demon changed forms from a buffalo to man to demon and how the *Devī* ultimately

slayed him. Most significantly, the motif defines a moment: the moment of victory of the

Devī against the *Dānavas,* and still more importantly the victory of the *Devī* against all

her rivals, the *Devas* and the *Dānavas. (Plates 7, 31)*

Similarly the *Kalyāṇasundara* image, another recurrent theme in the region, found as

early as 7th century A.D., depicts the wedding ceremony of Śiva and Pārvati. *(Plate 36)* It

marks the moment in mythology when Pārvati 'won' over Śiva through her penance. The

wedding procession includes a host of gods and demigods. Pārvati in most images is

represented as a full grown maiden but much smaller in height than Śiva as she stands in

front of her husband. The panel refers to the wedding ritual of *saptapadi*, still prevalent in

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[12] Ibid.

Eastern India, where the bridegroom stands behind the bride and leads her ahead seven steps.

The identity and value of an icon does not lie merely in its physical material or in its form, but in the divine presence that is invoked into it through ritual procedures.[13] The devotee thus does not see the image as it exists; his vision of the goddess originates from his knowledge of the divine presence.[14] According to theological belief, a live icon is a localised and particularised manifestation or incarnation of the transcendent divinity.

The *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa,* describes the goddess as residing at the highest state of existence, which is beyond physical form and perception.[15] Yet the same text also declares that though the goddess is beyond form, she is endowed with physical appearance, which makes her easily approachable to her devotees in a multiplicity of *rupas*. She hence came to inhabit a variety of immanent physical embodiments in which her worship is prescribed.[16] The goddess is believed to reside in a number of concrete and abstract forms: in beautiful sculptures, in circular diagrams, in triangular pieces of stone, in pots, in water, in books, in weapons and even in humans. "The *māyā* of the gods

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[13] *The Devī Māhātmya* is devoid of such procedures to invoke and worship the Goddess. On the other hand, the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa,* which prescribes *bhakti* and devotion for the Goddess, describes elaborate ritual procedures by which to invoke the Goddess and to worship her. Similarly it also gives the ritual formulae by which to invite the Goddess in not merely her icons but also in other inanimate objects, especially in "diagrams and water pots.

[14] Miller, Barbara Stoller (ed.), p. 217.

[15] Swami Vijnananda (transl.), The *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam,* V. 8 (57). "She is constant, She is always existent; though She is one, yet She assumes different forms for the fulfillment for the *Deva's* ends, whenever their positions become serious."

[16] Ibid. V. 34 (2-12).

(and goddesses) is to assume diverse shapes by displaying at will various aspects of their subtle essence." [17] The immanence of the goddess makes her approachable and accessible to her human devotees in contrast to the male divinities who are believed to be difficult to please and access. "One goes to the Mother, before approaching the Father," observes the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa.*[18] Moreover, the idea of the goddess being transcendent and immanent at the same time further emphasised her status as the all powerful, supreme divinity.

An icon helps a devotee to see what his personal goddess looks like. At the same time, in a trance of devotion, icons also help the devotee to look beyond iconic manifestations of the goddess and realise her true form. Sculptural images are external symbols of deities, which aid a deeper experience of the supernatural, which takes place inside the devotee.[19] At the experiential level, sacred images become focussing devices, which awaken the element of concentration and meditation. They help the devotee to focus on the image of the divine that is stored in their hearts.

Thus sculptures help us to understand how goddesses were perceived and the complex layers of thoughts and practices that preceded the concretisation of such images. The depiction of deities in sculptures involves an interaction with the many layers of interpretation of the texts. The use of certain symbols, attributes, *mudrās* of hands, facial expressions and bodily movements represent different philosophical tenets and textual narratives. As the *yantra* or the instrument (of concentration), the image suggests the

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[17] Zimmer, Heinrich, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation,* p. 24

[18] Swami Vijnananda, *Srimad Devī Bhāgvatam* IX. 30 (41-60).

[19] Preston, James, *Cult of the Goddess,* p. 73.

divine being in the totality of her presence, endowed with all her attributes and accompanied by all her attendants. [20]

Icons of politics and power play:

While reading beyond what is being represented, images aid in looking beyond the iconic form at the political processes of the contemporary period. The goddess figures function as active participants in the contemporary political setting where such icons symbolise sovereignty and authority.

Images are often closely tied to the contemporary political order. The link between kingship and icons is sometimes so strong that particularly potent images tend to exercise direct earthly sovereignty. In Hinduism divine overlordship is an acceptable form of political authority. Hence manifestations of the divine in temple icons, patronised by the royalty, easily assumes political significance, giving it an authority to rule. In such situations human rulers become subordinate functionaries of the ruling deity. However no such evidence is available for the goddess in Bihar and Bengal. The inscriptions record a number of land donations to Buddhist monasteries and temples of Visnu and Siva.[21] No such donation however was made for goddess temples despite the growing popularity of

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[20] Saraswati, S.K., *A Survey of Indian Sculptures*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1975, p. 183.

[21] The Gunaighar Copper Plate (507 A.D.) records the construction and maintenance of Buddhist shrines and memorials. Similarly, the Damodarpur Copper Plate (6 century A.D.), Khalimpur Copper Plate (8 century A.D.) and the Gaya Stone Inscription (10 century A.D.) all record the dedication and construction of shrines for Visnu. References to temples of Siva are still more frequent in inscriptions from this region: Mahabodhi Inscription (8 century A.D.), Bhagalpur Copper Plate (9 century A.D.) and Deopara Inscription (12 century A.D.). There is however just one stray reference, the Dacca image inscription of the reign of Laksmanasena (12 century A.D.), found on the pedestal of an image of Candī from Dacca which records the construction and dedication of a temple to goddess Candi.

goddess worship during this period. Temples of *Purāṇic* goddess do not even find mention in such votive inscriptions.

Though the royalty did not acknowledge the goddess as a ruling deity, for them she became the protecting mother and more importantly the very symbol of royal prestige and paraphernalia. The manner in which the goddess was depicted came to closely associate her with the royalty. Most goddesses are represented as heavily bedecked with various kinds of jewellery. Elaborate necklaces, numerous armlets, wristlets and girdles proclaim her bounty as well as her riches, symbolic of the royalty. Goddesses are shown with umbrellas, tiaras, diadems on their foreheads, and flywhisks, all of which were usually the prerogative of the monarchs. The numerous weapons that the goddesses hold in their hands show her prowess as a warrior as she overcomes evil forces in battles, which were preeminently the preoccupation of the kings.

The Goddess of Fortune was specially looked upon as a symbol of prosperity and good luck. She almost became a paramour of the monarchs. The Kedarpur inscription mentions Sricandra as being blessed with "the Goddess of Fortune, in spirit as in name."[22] A large number of successful kings of Bengal, besides being married to their chief queen and other consorts, are described as being married to Sri Lakṣmi, who became their kingly fortune and good luck incarnate. "When this kingly fortune or *rāja Lakṣmi* forsakes them, under the ordinance of fate, the king is doomed to lose his realm."[23]The royal association

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[22] Mukherjee and Maity- *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, p. 233. The Kedarpur inscription of Sricandra, dated to 10th century A.D.

[23] Zimmer, Heinrich, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation*, p. 92

with the Goddess of Fortune was not limited to consortship alone. Rulers like Trilokyacandra are mentioned as having the Goddess of Fortune as the royal umbrella over them, the umbrella being an insignia of kingship.[24]

Kings regularly seized valuable objects from one another in wars. It was a part of a larger political rhetoric by which rulers claimed their victory over enemies. Thus the looting of valuable objects was as much symbolic as it was economic. The icons of the Goddess of Fortune mentioned as Śri were often carried away during wars. Various inscriptions like the Anulia Copper Plate of Laksmanasena (12th century A.D.), Madnapada inscription of Visvarupasena (12th century A.D.) and the Edilpur Copper plate of Kesavsena (12th century A.D.) mention this carrying away of the Goddess of Fortune. Being the ruling deity, she became the most coveted trophy of victory. It is impossible to say with certainty whether the sculptures were physically carried away or these were mere poetical analogies, in such statements as: "The act of forcible seizure of the Goddess of Fortune, belonging to the lord of Garuda, was his (Laksmanasena) boyish prank."[25] Even if the sculptures were not removed, the idea did imply defeat, loss of prestige, fortune, sovereignty, and the legitimacy to rule.

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[24] Majumdar, N.G., *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol.3, p. 7. The Rampal Copper Plate of Sricandra dated to the 10th century A.D. mentions the father of Sricandra as Trilokyachandra. The inscription records: "He who was like Dilipa became king in the *dvipa* to which is joined the word *Candra* and had the support of Fortune Goddess the umbrella which is the royal insignia of king."

[25] Mukherjee and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, p. 285. Madhainagar Copper Plate Inscription of Laksmanasena, dated to 12th century A.D.

The capture of the icons of the Goddess of Fortune was the most obvious symbol of humiliation as also a social stigma for the vanquished. The possession of the goddess was not merely a trophy of victory but it also represented certain concepts at the secondary level, in this case victory.

Icons as Pious Gifts:

The brief analysis of epigraphical data, in the previous chapter, reveals that a vast majority of inscriptions were essentially official charters recording the dedication and donation of land to individuals and religious institutions. Members of royal families, court officials and rich merchants, mainly granted these as a way to show unstinting religious faith. At times while only a plot of land would be donated,[26] at other times whole villages would be given away[27] or an entire village would be exempted from paying taxes. There were still other occasions when the construction and renovation of temples, *vihāras* and other religious monuments were commissioned[28] as a mark of

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[26] Ibid. p. 222. Rampala Copper Plate of Sricandra, 11 century A.D., records the "grant of one pataka of land in the village of Nehakashthi in the Navyamandala of Pundrabhukti by Sricandradeva, King of Harikela, i.e. Eastern Bengal, including Candradvipa, to Santivarika Pitavasaguptasarman, great grandson of Makkadagupta, grandson of Varahagupta, and son of Sumangalagupta, belonging to Sandilya gotra and the Pravara of the three Rsis."

[27] Ibid. p. 268. Naihati Copper Plate of Vallalasena, 12 century A.D., records the giving of the village of Vallahita, "along with forests and branches, pits and barren tracts, land and water, betelnut and coconut trees, with revenue yielding from fines imposed on perpetrators of ten crimes, exempt from all oppression along with grass, puti plants and pasture grounds; not to be entered by Chattas nad Bhatttas, free from all sorts of dues and taxes," to a Brahmin on the occasion of a solar eclipse on the banks of Ganges.

[28] Ibid. p. 108. Khalimpur Copper Plate of Dharampala, dated to 8 century A.D. records the donation of a village in Pundervardhan bhukti for the construction and maintenance of a temple for Narayana.

obeisance to one's personal deity. Similarly the gifting of icons became another practice to prove one's respect and devotion to a religious faith.

In the 9th century A.D., under the Pāla dynasty, the number of images being dedicated was apparently so large that its fame spread beyond India. Taranath a Tibetan historian of the 16th century A.D. mentions it with praise in his writings.[29] Miller believes that there are almost more than two-dozen surviving reliefs and fragments of reliefs carrying dedicatory inscriptions of the Pāla times alone.[30] However there are no surviving inscriptions on images of the Pāla rulers themselves.

There are several examples of devotion visibly surviving as inscriptions, on icons. It is not possible to read all such inscriptions because of their existence in very large numbers and also because of problems of deciphering their scripts. This survey hence merely selects those inscriptions that are found on sculptures mentioned in the previous chapter. To cite just a few examples, Sārvani from Chuddagram, Vageswari from Nalanda, Umā Mahesvara from Nalanda, Dacca Image of Çandī, a snake goddess sitting on elephant, a Pārvati sculpture from Bihar, Mahalaksmi from Rajshahi and Guseva from Valgudar. *(Table 6)*

One notices certain broad patterns in the style in which the inscriptions are incised. In most cases the inscription occurs in one or two lines, at the back of statues or on their pedestals. Sometimes to explicitly demonstrate donation and devotion, the devotees are also represented in the sculptures as kneeling with folded hands in front of the deities on

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[29] Miller, Barbara Stoller, *Exploring India's Sacred Art*, p.207.

[30] Ibid. p. 208.

the pedestal. In some cases while only the donor is shown, in other cases the donor is also depicted with his/ her spouse and children.

The goddess was practically neglected in the earliest inscriptions. There were no donations being made in her name and she was not invoked as the principle deity in any of the inscriptions even till the 12th century A.D. On reading *Table 6*, one can see certain broad trends emerging. Though no donations were made for goddess temples, the tradition of donating icons for the goddess started as early as 7th century A.D.[31] Moreover most inscriptions invoked the goddesses primarily as mothers and consorts. The early inscriptions did not acknowledge the goddess in her manifestations as warriors and protectoress. However the icons of the goddesses being donated depict her in a variety of roles and images: as Sārvani, a warrior goddess and a form of Durgā; as a consort par excellence in her union as Umā-Maheṣvara; as Mahalakṣmi; as Manasā and even as a folk deity under the name of Guseva.

The other interesting facet that becomes obvious is that a large number of women seemed to be closely associated with religious donations. These women though find no space for reference in the royal charters must have had sufficient authority and resources to commission these works of art and religion.

Practically all kinds of goddess icons were being donated. The most common medium was stone and bronze. But there were also others in gold, silver and *aṣṭhadhātu,* an octo-

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[31] Sculpture of goddess Sārvani from Chuddagram.

alloy.[32] The choice of medium would have largely depended upon the financial standing of the donor. While the most obvious purpose of donating icons was surely an act of personal devotion and a demonstration of faith, there were also occasion when donations were made to thank the divinity for his/ her benevolence. At other occasions dedications were also commemorative in nature, to mark certain events or achievements.

Icons as Cursors of the Socio-Political Structure:

The following section uses texts, inscriptions and sculptures to reconstruct the contemporary socio- political practices and the role of the goddess images in locating these practices. Texts and inscriptions give a broad overview of the contemporary political and economic order. With the help of inscriptions and sculptures, it is possible to read beyond the texts to see what was actually happening at the ground level, away from the core political centres.

A preliminary mapping and tabulation of sculptures and inscriptions can reveal the relative importance of certain geographical areas. For this study inscriptions have been plotted on geographical maps on four basic indices: a) find spots of inscriptions, b) place of issue, c) location of donated piece of land, d) areas lying in proximity to the donated land or mention of geographical features like rivers, mountains, canals etc. However in many plates reading the place names is also difficult since scripts are corroded, local names of places might be mentioned and even names of places have changed over the long period of time.

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[32] Ibid.

As it has been pointed out in the previous chapter, the concentration of inscriptions in certain geographical regions indicates their significance as political and administrative centres. The data derived from inscriptions *(Table 1)* reveal that during 5th to 7th centuries A.D. and from the 12th century onwards, the heart of activity lay in the Deltaic region of Bengal (now Bangladesh.) Kotivarsa, Devaparvata and Vikrampura were the most important centres from where the inscriptions were issued. However, from the 8th to 12th centuries A.D., inscriptions were mostly from areas around the actual Delta: Pundarvardhan, Samtata, Burdawan and Varendra. A large number of inscriptions were issued from Vikrampura and Pataliputra, the latter lying almost 175 miles to the west of the Delta.

A similar mapping and tabulation of the sculptural data can also reveal patterns of shifting religious centres. It can further developed to deduce whether the shifts in political centres corresponded with shifting religious centres. There is however a very large number of sculptures available from this area. Constraints of time and space do not permit one to take into account all sculptural data.

As a representative model, this survey takes only the inscribed sculptures that have appear elsewhere in this study *(Table 6)*. There are at least eight such sculptures. Their organisation into specific chronological and geographical categories does reveal certain patterns of donation. The earliest evidence comes from Chuddagram, which is located in the heart of the Bengal delta. For the period between 10th–11th centuries, a large number of donation of images of goddesses were made, mostly to temples in Bihar. From the 12th

century the scene of activity once again shifts to the Deltaic regions of Bengal. This trend to broadly agrees with the patterns of shifts in the political centres. Hence the rise of new religious centres might have been determined by its proximity to administrative centres.

This brief survey has tried to trace the many roles that the icons of goddesses served: as cult objects, as trophies of victory, as items of sacred gifts etcetera. This reaffirms Davis' theory of the many lives which religious icons embody and the many roles, which they play when placed in different spatial and temporal locations. Such icons also become useful tools of the historians' craft, closely integrated with the process of historical evolution. The study has not been able to make optimum use of this source due to insufficient data. However, if skilfully employed, images can become significant indices of the contemporary systems and institutions: of the political machinery, of gender relations and of the almost symbiotic relation between pious donations and the evolution of religious centres.

Chapter 5:

CONCLUSION

Chapter 5: CONCLUSION

It is almost universally believed that the goddess cult existed in India before the advent of the Great *Purāṇic* Goddess known as the *Mahādevī*. With the spread of Brahmanism in all directions from the Gangetic Plain, there occurred an inter-mingling of life styles, languages, cultures and religious traditions. The religious sphere perhaps saw the most vibrant interaction, resulting in fusion and co-existence of diverse religious traditions. *Purāṇic* deities came to absorb indigenous motifs, beliefs and rituals of worship. The creation of an independent goddess cult in the form of *śakti* worship within the *Purāṇic* pantheon was the most tangible result of this fusion of religions. The Great Brahmanical Goddess became the most effective instrument for the integration of various folk, indigenous and tribal goddesses. In this process, local deities merged with the Great Goddess and the Great Goddess split up into countless small manifestations to become localised forms.

As this process of integration intensified, there arose an emergent need for textual sanctity that would smoothly incorporate the Goddess in the Brahmanical pantheon. The composition of the *Devī Māhātmya*, the first theoretical statement in Sanskrit describing the image of the Goddess and her worship, was a logical culmination of this process. The idea of an independent goddess within the *Purāṇic* pantheon first emerged in the *Devī Māhātmya*. The *Devī Māhātmya* did not assert in so many words that the Devi is

supreme; in its dynamic narration of the three stories about her three great feats, it simply assumed her supremacy.[1]

There was now no turning back for the divine feminine. She was further embellished with a history, chronology and mythology and an elaborate pantheon of goddesses with an overarching vision of the Great Goddess emerged in the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*. This is believed to be the most elaborate formulation of the Goddess, which took about six centuries subsequent to the *Devī Māhātmya* to crystallise. The Goddesses of the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* came to adopt new motifs, roles and images, inspired by the local goddesses and indigenous idioms. In between the composition of the *Devī Māhātmya* and the *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa* a number of other texts were composed in Eastern India, incorporating other aspects of the *Devī* worship. The *Devī Purāṇa* is one such text. However, these two texts remain a landmark in the evolution of the Brahmanical Goddess.

In this study we have attempted to historicise this evolutionary process both in terms of spatial and temporal contexts. Eastern India has been chosen taken as the case study as it had long been an important centre for worship of the Goddess. The aim of this study has been to trace the gradual evolution of the image of the Goddess with the unfolding of the two texts within the period of our study. Further, the texts have been placed against the backdrop of inscriptions and sculptures to see if the vision of the Goddess as described in the texts tallies with the tangible remains from the corresponding period and with the ground level practises of different groups of people.

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[1] Dehejiya, Vidya, *Devi: The Great Goddess,* p. 21.

The inscriptions of Eastern India admitted the goddess only around the 7th century A.D. The earliest inscriptions of this study limit the role of the goddesses as consorts, wives and mothers. They seem to have totally ignored the vision of the warrior goddess dominant in the *Devī Māhātmya*. Within the purview of inscriptions the goddess as a warrior was envisioned and invoked at a much later date, only by the 12th century A.D. Moreover the inscriptions contain little detail of the physical image of the goddesses.

Sculptural representations of the *Purāṇic* goddesses also began to appear from around the 6th century A.D. Sculptures are far more liberal, in comparison to inscriptions, in depicting the goddesses in myriad roles and images. The image of the goddess as mother did remain firmly established. But one also finds very early sculptural reliefs portraying the goddess in her warrior form. An image of Durgā slaying a demon, is available from Bihar, dated to as early as the 7th century A.D. With the passing of time, the goddesses came to be depicted with greater finesse, in larger numbers and in a great many variety of roles.

Purāṇic doctrines were however not completely subsuming. Local cults continued to flourish with equal fervour and maintained their own domain, alongside the Brahmanical practices. The large number of sculptural remains of the goddesses from Eastern India clearly reveal the strong cross currents that existed between the diverse religious cults, resulting in a curious admixture of themes, motifs and forms.

Consequently, the goddess has been perceived and represented in a variety of ways by her devotees: as mother, protector, auspicoiusness, harbinger of prosperity and fertility, closely related to all aspects of her devotees' lives. The goddesses we know today were the creation of this historical process.

APPENDICES

CATALOGUE OF INSCRIPTIONS

The corpus of inscriptions of eastern India used in this study is listed below. It covers the region of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Bangladesh. N.G. Majumdar first undertook the compilation of Bengal inscriptions in 1928. The region and time period was further researched, expanded and published by R. Mukherji and S.K. Maity, in 1967. In 1970, Barrie Morrison came out with his landmark study, which not only compiled and catalogued these inscriptions but also gave detailed analysis of the inscriptions keeping in view the broad geographical and historical backdrop.

This study has used all these three sources to gather the necessary information. There is however a discrepancy in the number of inscriptions referred to, mainly due to differences in time period and region covered under each of these studies.

1. **Gunaighar**

    Issued by Vainyagupta, from Vikrampura, in 508 A.D. Found at Gunaighar village, Comilla. Grants eleven pataka of land in the village of Kantedadaka to a congregation of monks in the Asrama Vihara dedicated to Arya Avalokitesvara.

    Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

2. **Mallasarul**

    Issued by Vijaysena in his 3rd regnal year (century 6), possibly form Vardhamana (not definite). Found at Mallasarul, Burdawan. Maharaja Vijaysena purchased land situated in Vettragartta village and donated it to a Brahmana Vatsasvamin of Kaundinya gotra for performance of five daily sacrifices.

    Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

3. **Faridpur**

    Issued in the 18th year of the reign of Gopacandra (525-40) from an unknown place. Found in Faridpur district. Varsapalaswamin (name uncertain) purchased land near village Dhruvilati and donated it to Bhatta Gomidattasvamin.

    Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

4. **Faridpur# 1**

    Issued in the 3rd regnal year of Dharmaditya (540-60) from Varakamandala district office. Found in Faridpur district. An officer of the governor of the Varakamandala purchased cultivated land in Dhruvilati, Varakamandala, and then donated it to Brahmin Candrasvamin.

    Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

5. **Faridpur# 2**

> Issued of time of Dharmaditya (540-60) from an unknown place. Found in Faridpur district. Brahmana Vasudevasvamin purchased land and donated it to Brahmana Somasvamin.
>
> Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

6. **Damodarpur**

> Issued during the time of Damodaragupta, in 544 A.D., from Kotivarsha. Found in Damodarpur, Dinajpur district. The kulputraka Amrtadeva purchased wasteland to be dedicated to maintaining the shrine of Bhagvan Svetavarahasvamin.
>
> Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

7. **Khalimpur**

> Issued by Dharampala, in his 32 and regnal year (802 A.D.) from Pataliputra. Found at Khalimpur village in Malda district. Request of mahasamantadhipati Narayanavarman for donation of four villages in Mahantaprakasa vishya of Pundravardhan bhukti to the temple of Nanna Narayana.
>
> Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

8. **Mahabodhi**

> Dated to the time of Dharmapala, the inscriber is not known. Found on a stone slab to the south of the Mahabodhi temple at Bodh Gaya in Bihar. Records the consecration of a temple dedicated to Siva at Bodh Gaya.
>
> Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

9. **Monghyr**

> Issued by Devapala (815- 850) from Mudgagiri. Found in Monghyr, Bihar. Devapala granted the village of Mesika, situated in Srinagara Bhukti (identified as Patna) to a Brahmana named Bihekaratamisra.
>
> Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

10. **Ghosaravana Rock Inscription**

> Dated to the time of Devapala. Found in village Ghosaravana of Gaya district, Bihar. It embodies a eulogy in favour of a Buddhist monk named Viradeva.
>
> Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

11. **Garuda Pillar Inscription**

> Dated to the reign of Narayanapaladeva. Found in Dinajpur district. Contains an eulogy comprised of twenty-eight verses, inscribed in twenty-eight lines.
>
> Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

12. **Bhagalpur**

> Issued by Narayanapaladeva sometime around the 10th century A.D., from Mudgagiri. Found in Bhagalpur Bihar. Narayanapaladeva granted a village

named Makutika in Tirabhukti (also in Bihar) for the construction and maintenance of a Siva temple in the village of Kalasapota.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

13. Stone slab inscription of Bodh Gaya

Dated to the time of Gopaladeva II (940-960 A.D.) Found on a stone slab in Mahabodhi complex. Records the consecration of a golden image of Buddha, in Bodh Gaya, by Sri Dharmabhima, belonging to the land of Sindhus.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

14. Stone slab inscription at Nalanda

Dated to the 1st year of the reign of Gopaladeva II (940-960 A.D.) Found in Nalanda, Bihar, on a stone slab, which probably served as a footstool of an image of Goddess Vageswari. Records that Gopaladeva endowed the idol of the Goddess Vageswari with golden vessels, in the first year of his reign.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*

15. Sakrasena stone slab inscription

Dated to the time of Gopaladeva. Found on a stone slab serving as the footstool of an image of Lord Buddha as Bodh Gaya, Bihar. Records the framing of an image of Buddha by Sakrasena, more commonly known as Sri Dharmabhima.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

16. Vageswari Stone Inscription

Dated to the 1st year of the reign of Gopaladeva. Found on a slab of stone, which served as footstool of an image of Goddess Vageswari, in Nalanda Vihara, Nalanda, Bihar. Records that Gopaladeva decorated the image of Goddess Vageswari with golden vessels in the first year of his reign.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

17. Amagchi

Issued by Vigrahpala III, in his 12th regnal year (11 century) from Hardhama/ Vilaspur. Found in Amagchi, Dinajpur. Vigrahpala donated villages of Vishamapura and Dandatrahesvara in Vra (bra) hmani- grama, Kotivarsha vishya, Pundravardhan bhukti to Brahmana Khoduladevasarman of Sandilya gotra.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

18. Gaya stone Inscription

Dated to the reign of Narayanpaladeva (1038- 1055). Found on the wall of a temple called Krsnadvarika, at Gaya, Bihar. The inscription contains a eulogy composed by Sahadeva, who was the veterinary physician at the time of

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Nayapaladeva. The purpose of the inscription was to mark the completion of this Visnu temple by Visvaditya.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

19. **Banagarh**

Issued by Mahipala in his 5th regnal year (988-1036) from Vilaspur. Found in some ruins called Ban Raja's Garh or Bangarh, in Dinajpur district. Mahipala granted most of Kurata-pallika village in Kotivarsha vishya of Pudravardhan bhukti to Brahmana Krshnadityasarman.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

20. **Nalanda stone slab Inscription**

Issued during the reign of Mahipaladeva by Sri Baladitya. Found in Nalanda, Bihar. The inscription records the renovation of a temple by Sri Baladitya after it was destroyed by fire.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

21. **Manahali**

Issued by Madanapaladeva in his 8th regnal year (first half of century12), from Ramavati. Found in Manahali in Dinajpur district. Madanapaladeva granted part of village Kashthagiri in Kotivarsha vishya in Pudravardhan bhukti to Brahmana Vatesvarasvamisarman of Kautsa gotra, for reading of Mahabharata to queen.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

22. **Rampala**

Issued by Sricandra (date unknown) from Vikrampura. Found in Rampala in Vikrampura area. Sricandra donated land in Yolamandalam in Pundrabhukti to Brahmana Sukradeva.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

23. **Kedarpur**

Issued by Sricandra (date unknown) from Vikrampura. Found in Kedarpur in Faridpur district. Charter is incomplete containing only the introduction.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

24. **Ramganj**

Issued by Isvaraghosha, in his 35th regnal year (century 11) from Dhekkari. Found near Ramganj, Dinajpur. Mahamandalika Isvaraghosha donated village of Digghasodike, within Piyallamandala to Bhatta Nibbokasarman of Bhargava gotra.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

25. Belava

Issued by Bhojavarman in his 5th regnal year, century 12th, from Vikrampura. Found in Belava village of Dacca district. Bhojavarman granted land in the village of Upyalika in Adhahpattana mandala of Pundra bhukti, to Ramadevasarman in charge of room where propitiatory ceremonies were held.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

26. Deopara

Issued by Vijayasena, sometime in century 11 A.D. Found in village of Deopara of Rajshahi district. This inscription is in the form of a eulogy to King Vijayasena, composed by poet Umapatidhara and inscribed by Sulapani who is described as an artist from Varendra. The inscription records the erection of the Siva temple at Pradyumeshvara on the bank of a tank called Pradumshar. The inscription was also found in the ruins of this temple.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

27. Naihati

Issued by Vallasena in his 11th regnal year (12 century) from, Vikrampura. Found near village Naihati in Burdawan district. Vallalasena donated a village of Uttar Radha mandala of Vardhaman bhukti to Ovasudevasarman for performance of Hemasvamahadana.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

28. Govindapur

Issued in the 2nd regnal year of Laksmanasena (1180), from Vikrampura. Found in Govindapur, Twenty-four Parganas. Laksmanasena granted a land in Varhdamanbhukti to the upadhyaya Vyasadevasarman of Vataya gotra, on occasion of coronation ceremony.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

29. Madhainagar

Issued by Laksmanasena (date unknown), from Dharyagrama. Found in Madhainagar village of Pabna district. Laksmanasena granted a village near Varendri within Pundravardhanabhukti to Govindadevasarman in charge of propitiatory rights.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

30. **Sundarban**

Issued by Laksmanasena in his 2nd regnal year (1180), from Vikrampura. The exact find spot is unknown, but somewhere near the Diamond Harbour in the Twenty-four Parganas. Laksmanasena granted land in Mandlagram of Pundravardhan bhukti to Santyagariks Krshnadharadevasarman of Gargya gotra.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

31. **Tarpanadighi**

Issued by Laksmanasena in his 2nd regnal year (1180), from Vikrampura. Found in Tarpanadighi, largest tank in Dinajpur district. Laksmanasena donated a village Belahasti in Pudravardhana bhukti to Isvaradevasarman as fee for service in dana.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

32. **Anulia**

Issued by Laksmanasena in his 3rd regnal year (1181), from Vikrampura. Found near Anulia village, Nadia district. Laksmanasena granted a field in Pundravardhanabhukti to pandita Raghudevasarman of Kausika gotra.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

33. **Madanapada**

Issued by Visvarupasena in 14th regnal year (1206-20), from Phasphagram. Found in Madanapada in Faridpur district. Visvarupasena granted land in village Pinjari and Narandapa to Brahmana Visvarupadevasarman of Vatsa gotra.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

34. **Calcutta Sahitya Parishad**

Issued by Visvarupasena, sometime at the end of 12th century A.D. Found in Dacca town. Visvarupasena granted a piece of land in Navya region of Pudravardhanabhukti, to pandita Halayudhasarman of Vatsya gotra on the occasion of lunar eclipse observed by the Queen Mother.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions.*

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

35. **Edilpur**

Issued by Kesavasena in 3rd regnal year (1225-28) from Phasphagrama. Found in Edilpur pargana of Faridpur district. Kesavasena granted village of

Talapadapataka in Vikrampura to Brahmana Isvaradevasarman of Vatsya gotra for long life of king.

Source: Mukherji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*.

N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

36. Barrackpur

Issued by Vijayasena in his 62nd regnal year (century 12), from Vikrampura. Found in a village near Barrackpur. Vijaysena donated land in khadi vishya of Pundravardhana bhukti to Udayakaradevasarman of Vatsa gotra. The grant was made as fee for performance of homa during Kanaka-tulapurusha mahadana ceremony.

Source: N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

37. Dacca Image inscription

Issued in the reign of Laksmanasena, (in his 3rd regnal year) sometime in 12th century A.D. by Narayana, brother of an officer named Damodara, son of Maladei. The inscription is recorded on the pedestal of an image of Chandi found at Dal Bazaar in the town of Dacca. The inscription records the installation of this image of Chandi.

Source: N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

38. Chittagong

Issued by Damodardeva in 6th regnal year (1236), from an unknown location. Found in Nasirabad village near Chittagong. Damodaradeva granted land in village of Kamanapindyaka and Ketangapala in Dambaradama to Yajurvedic Brahmana Prithvidharsarman.

Source: N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. 3.*

CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

Eastern India, comprising of the modern day states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and the separate country of Bangladesh is the micro-region taken for this study. However geographically, culturally and chronologically this is a very large sub-region. It is not possible to study all the goddess sculptures available from this region. This study has hence taken a very selected number of sculptures of goddesses: those representing broad trends or interesting variations. Given below is a compilation of the sculptures referred to in this study, outlining the broad depiction, approximate date and find spots. All the sculptures are dated between the 6th and 13th centuries A.D., which is the time period of this study.

1. **Navadurga**

    Dinajpur, West Bengal. This stone relief depicts a group of nine, sixteen-handed Mahisasuramardini figures, encircling a central eight-handed goddess.

2. **Çandika**

    Rajshahi, Bangladesh. This stone stele shows a standing female figure fighting a host of pot-bellied demons. There is a prancing lion in between the Devi's legs.

3. **Devī**

    Bhabua, Bihar, century 6 A.D. This is one of the earliest representations of the goddess available from this region. It shows a standing, four-armed goddess, holding a staff and a shield in two hands; the third hand is in *abhayamudra* and in the fourth hand is an indistinct object. Made of buff sand stone, it is now in the Patna Museum. (Plate 2)

4. **'Bridal' Gauri**

    Kaimur, Bihar, century 6 A.D. This is a standing goddess figure in buff sand stone, displayed in the Patna Museum. It shows a fourhanded goddess holding a plant stalk (?), water vessel, rosary beads and the fourth hand in *varadamudra*. On the right of the *Devi* is a lion; while on her left is a banana plant with a pair of antelopes in front. (Plate 3)

5. **'Ascetic' *Devī* with iguana**

    Nalanda, Bihar, century 8 A.D. This depicts a fourhanded, standing goddess in bronze. Her lower right hand in *varadamudra,* the other three hold rosary beads, plant stalk and water vessel. The goddess is elaborately draped and wears a mukuta and waist girdle. On either side of the *Devi* is a banana plant, while an iguana prances at her feet. On her right is a broken human figure, probably of a kneeling devotee. Now in Patna Museum (Plate 1)

6. **Gauri with Gaṇeṣa and iguana**

> Nalanda, Bihar, century 9-10 A.D. This fourhanded, goddess in bronze, stands a lotus pedestal. Her lower right hand is broken. The other three carry rosary beads, plant stalk and water vessel. At her right is now a Ganesa. The stele also shows an iguana in the centre, a human devotee to her right the elaborate stele carries other images, which are not clear, but probably one is an antelope. Now in Nalanda Museum. (Plate 8)

7. **'Bridal' Gauri with iguana**

> Nalanda, Bihar, century 10-11 A.D. A fourhanded, standing, bronze *Devi*. Her lower right hand is in *varadamudra,* while the other three hold a mirror, a plant stalk and a fruit. There are banana plants on both her sides and an iguana in the centre of the pedestal. Now in Nalanda Museum. (Plate 5)

8. **'Ascetic'** *Devī* **with lion and antelope**

> Bihar, century 11 A.D. A standing four-armed Devi in grey stone. Two of her arms are broken. The other two are in *varadamudra* and holding rosary beads. There is a banana plant to her right with an antelope and a lion on her left. A *linga* is placed on the back of the relief. Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 6)

9. **Siddha (?)**

> Sonarang, Bangladesh, century 10-11 A.D. Metal figure in which *Devi* is placed on a *panchratha* pedestal. She holds the same attributes. But she now has neither the lion nor the antelope but just the *godhika*. Now in the Dacca Museum.

10. **Siddha**

> Nalanda, Bihar, century 8 A.D. This bronze Devi stands on a pedestal. Her right arms are now missing. In her upper left hand she has a *tridanda* and lower left a *kamandalu*. She is three-eyed and wears no jewellery except for ear-studs and is draped in a black deerskin. A crescent moon and sun shine on her halo. A lion, an antelope and the iguana are present. Now in National Museum, New Delhi.

11. *Devī* **on** *panchāyatana liṇga*

> South Bihar, century 7-8 A.D. This representation in stone shows the Devi standing in *samapada* position on a pedestal and holds *varadamudra,* rosary beads, *tridanda* and *kamandala*. She wears no jewellery but ear studs of an ascetic. A pair of banana plants stands on both her sides, a lion on her left and a flaming vessel on her right. Now in Indian Museum, Calcutta.

12. *Devī*

> Nalanda, Bihar, century 10 A.D. This stone figure also carries an inscription. The *Devi* stands on a lotus pedestal wearing various items of jewellery and now wears earrings instead of ear studs and wears a bejeweled *upavita*. She holds

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hand. She also wears a crescent moon on her head and a *Sivalinga* appears above her *jata mukutas*. Kartikkeya with his peacock stands at her right and Ganesa at her left minus his rat. The banana plants, lion, antelope and *godha* are present on the pedestal.

13. Devī

North Bengal, century 10- 11 A.D. A bronze figure that shows a *Devi* standing on a lotus placed on a pedestal. Her hands are in *abyhayamudra, tridanda, kamandalu* and holding a fruit. She has a third eye. There are banana plants on her sides, a lion and an antelope. In front of these animals is a flaming vessel. The *godha* rests in the front. On the back of the pedestal appears a *Siva Linga* and Ganesa. Now in Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

14. Manasā with snake

Dinajpur, West Bengal, century 9-10 A.D. Stone Manasa, with a seven hooded snake canopy. She holds a snake in her left hand while the right hand is placed on her knee. Her left leg folded, while the right one is pendant. A *kalasa* (?) lies at her feet. Now in Burdawan University Museum. (Plate 12)

15. Manasā

Nalanda, Bihar, century 9-10 A.D. A fourhanded Manasa, in basalt stone. She carries a fruit, a sword, a battle-axe and the fourth hand carries a long snake. Her left leg is folded while the right leg is pendent and rests on a lotus. The *Devi* wears various pieces of jewellery and has a five-hooded snake canopy. Now in Nalanda Museum. (Plate 11)

16. Manasā with snake child and third eye

Bengal, century 10-11 A.D. A bronze two-armed Manasa, sitting on a three-tiered throne. Her right hand is in *abhayamudra* and in the left hand she holds a snake child. Her left leg is folded and right leg pendent, probably resting on a lotus. (now missing) The Devi has a five-hooded snake canopy and a third eye on her forehead. There are also plant stalks on her both sides. Now in Indian Museum, Calcutta. (Plate 10)

17. Lakṣmi

Bihar, century 9 A.D. A two-armed, stone Laksmi. One hand in *abhayamudra*, other holding a full- bloomed lotus. Both her legs are folded. Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 9)

18. Gajalakṣmi

Nalanda, Bihar, century 9 A.D. A badly broken, basalt stone relief of Gajalaksmi. The existing right arm of the goddess is in *varadamudra*. A lotus blooms on her

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left. An elephant is visible at the top, left of the stele. Her one leg is folded while the other rests on a lotus. Now in Nalanda Museum. (Plate 4)

19. Kamalāsana Lakṣmī

Bihar, century 9 A.D. She sits with both legs folded on a lotus throne. Her right hand is in *varadamudra*. Blooming lotuses appear on both sides of the goddess. A pair of elephants bathing her are shown on top of the stele. This relief on stone was a part of a larger architecture, probably of a *Visnupata*. Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 13)

20. Aparajitā

Bengal, century 10-11 A.D. This is a stone relief of perhaps a Buddhist (?) warrior goddess. The goddess is depicted as slaying a demon with a trident (now missing.) There is also something resembling a stupa depicted on the relief panel along with a companion for the goddess. Notice the close resemblance of this goddess with Durga slaying Mahisasura. It shows interesting mixing and borrowing of different religious traditions. Now in Narendra Singh Singhi Collection. (Plate 20)

21. Bhṛkutī

Nalanda, century 9 A.D. A standing, bronze image of a four-armed Buddhist goddess. Her lower right hand is in *abhayamudra*, the upper two hands carry rosary and plant stalk. The fourth hand is now missing. The goddess has an elaborate halo with a crescent moon and a sun. Notice the exceedingly close similarity between this figure and *Figure number 10* of Siddha, also from Nalanda. It also reminds of very similar Parvati figures available from this region. Now in Indian Museum Calcutta. (Plate 18)

22. Hariti

Bihar. Two armed relief of a goddess in stone. One hand of the goddess folded while the other holds a child. One leg folded while the other pendent. She is believed to be originally an ogress in Buddhist mythology, popular in the Nalanda- Rajgir area of South Bihar. *'Hariti,'* literally meaning the one who steals, used to feed on small children. The people hence appealed to the Buddha who taught the ogress a lesson. But in return he also advised the people to worship her and offer her eatables so that she does not feed on children. This panel also depicts her attendants, *apsaras* and *kinnaras*. Now in the Patna Museum. (Plate 19)

23. Marīçi

Bihar, century 9 A.D. Inscribed relief, in black basalt, from Pala period, showing a eight-armed goddess, equipped with weapons and a pose similar to

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Mahisasuramardini. She has three faces, two human, and one animal. Each face has three eyes. She also has a number of monkey attendants. She has a *ratha* driven by six pigs. (Plate 17)

24. **Çãmunda with corpse**

Gaya, Bihar, century 6 A.D. Very early representation, in black basalt, of this two-armed goddess. Both her arms are broken; one leg is folded while the other is pendent. In front of her lies a corpse. Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 16)

25. **Çãmunda with corpse**

Monghyr, Bihar, century10 A.D. Unlike the earlier figure where the goddess was fleshy, the goddess in this intricate black basalt relief is almost skeletal. She sits on a lotus throne and is shown as having eight arms. In one of her hands she carries a severed head. A corpse lies at her feet. Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 15)

26. **Çãmunda with child and owl**

Singhbhum, Bihar, century 10 A.D. The goddess is again skeletal in this grey stone sculpture. She has four arms. Her lower left arm carries a child on her lap, while the upper left a severed head. The two right hands carry a staff and a rosary bead. Now at her feet an owl is placed. Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 14)

27. **Sarasvati with attendants**

Nalanda, Bihar, century 8 A.D. This is a unique Sarasvati figure, which shows a two-armed goddess with four attendants. One hand is in *varadamudra;* the other is broken. Neither her *veena* nor swan *vahana* are visible. Instead a snakehead appears below her lotus throne. The stocky and manly figure of this goddess nowhere shows her as being remotely similar to Sarasvati. Now in Nalanda Museum. (Plate 24)

28. **Sarasvati with veena**

Nalanda, Bihar, century 9 A.D. This very unusual figure in bronze shows a standing, two-armed Sarasvati, carrying a *veena*. This seems like an icon for personal worship. Now in Nalanda Museum. (Plate 23)

29. **Sarasvati with Ram**

Bangladesh. An unusual Sarasvati image in stone with a ram as her vehicle. Now in Museum of Varendra Research Society, Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

30. **Parvati with Kartikeya**

Bihar, century 9 A.D. A fourhanded Parvati icon in sandstone. The lower right hand is in *varadamudra,* upper right carries a sword, upper left carries a shield and lower left holds Kartik on her lap. The *Devi* is shown as sitting on her lion.

While her left leg is folded, her right leg rests on a lotus. Now in Indian Museum, Calcutta. (Plate 22)

31. Parvati

Bihar, late century 9 A.D. A badly damaged schist icon of Parvati. The *Devi* is eight handed. She holds a sword, an arrow, a shield and a fruit in four of her arms, her other four arms are broke. Her face is also defaced. She sits in *lalitasana* on a lotus throne. Below her throne is a pair of lions and two female attendants/ devotees. Now in Indian Museum, Calcutta. (Plate 21)

32. Parvati with Ganeşa and Kārtikeya

Dinajpur, West Bengal, century 10 A.D. A four-armed standing Parvati figure in stone. In her two upper hands the Devi carries a mirror and (?). Her lower two arms are placed on the heads of Ganesa and Kartik. Below her lotus throne is a devotee and probably a *godhika*. Now in Burdawan University Museum. (Plate 28)

33. Parvati

Bengal, century 12 A.D. A standing two-armed Parvati on a lotus throne. This black basalt icon has a heavily carved back relief depicting Ganesa, Kartik, the trinity, a host of musicians, *apsaras, kinnaras* and horse riders. The *Devi* holds two long-stemmed lotuses in both her hands. She has an elaborate *jatamukuta* and a third eye. Her dress and ornaments are also richly carved. Now in Indian Museum, Calcutta. (Plate 27)

34. Parvati

Bihar, Century 9 A.D. A brass figure of a seated *Devi* carrying an inscription. This fourhanded *Devi* is in *arddhaparyanaka* attitude on a lotus. She holds in her hands a sword, a shield, an *ankusa* and her fourth hand is around Kartikkeya, placed on her lap.

35. Sadyojatā

Bengal, century 12 A.D. A horizontal, black basalt panel shows a reclining two-armed goddess. One arm is below her head while the other carries a lotus. This heavily jeweled, richly draped lady has a maid shampooing her feet. A child lies next to her on her left. The panel also shows a *lignum,* Ganesa, Kartikkeya, *Navagrahas* and two attendants. Now in Indian Museum, Calcutta. (Plate 29)

36. Mahālakşmi

Rajshahi, Bangladesh; century 10 A.D. The Devi sits on a lotus pedestal resting on the back of a lion. The right leg of the Devi dangling down and placed on another lotus. The goddess has twenty hands. A *Siva linga* appears on her matted hair. This image is inscribed and is now in the Dacca Museum.

37. **Mahalakṣmi**

Bihar, century 10 A.D. An eight-armed sitting goddess in basalt stone. One foot of the goddess is folded while the other rests on a lotus. Unlike her common benign image, here she is shown as carrying weapons while a lion crouches at her feet. Now in Burdawan University Museum. (Plate 26)

38. **Mahāmāyā**

Vikrampur, Bangladesh. Depiction in stone of a goddess appearing from the upper half of a lingam. Two of her hands are folded in deep meditation against her breasts. The other two hold a rosary and a manuscript.

39. **Chaturmukhaliṇga Pārvati**

Bihar, century 10 A.D. Four-armed, standing Parvati, on a four faced stone (black basalt) *linga*. Both her upper arms broken. The lower right arm is in *varadamudra,* and lower left carries an indistinct object, probably a *kamandala.* A lion stands at her left while a flaming vessel at her right. Now in Indian Museum Calcutta. (Plate 25)

40. **Mahiṣāsuramardini**

West Bengal, century 10 A.D. An elaborate figure of a ten armed, standing goddess in black basalt. She sports a third eye on her forehead and wears an elaborate *mukuta.* She slays a demon who is half human, half buffalo, while her lion feeds on him. The goddess carries the usual weapons attributed to her: trident, noose, *pasa,* sword, bow and arrow, battle-axe *vajra* etc. She is heavily bedecked in jewels and robes and wears a smile. Other figures accompany her panel: *apsaras, kinnaras* and two attendants. Now in Indian Museum, Calcutta. (Plate 31)

41. **Mahiṣāsuramardini**

Rajshahi, Bangladesh, century 10-11 A.D. A badly disfigured, bronze icon of the goddess. She stands on a lotus pedestal, slaying the demon. Her lion is however missing. Both her face and the form of the demon are illegible. Now in S.K.Saraswati Collection. (Plate 7)

42. **Umā Maheṣvara**

Gaya, Bihar, century 7 A.D. Early sandstone relief, showing goddess Parvati sitting on her husband, Siva's left thigh. The left legs of both the god and the goddess are folded while the right ones are pendent. Siva is shown as having four hands: the lower left hand encircles Parvati, lower right touches her chin. Upper left holds a flat disc-like object and upper right holds a trident. Parvati has two hands: the right one is draped around Siva's neck while the left one carries a mirror. Both the god and the goddess are bedecked with ornaments. The back of

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the throne carries lotus motifs. Below the throne of the divine couple, Siva's Nandi bull and the *Devi's* lion and a devotee are shown. Now in Patna Museum (Plate 35)

43. **Back of inscribed Umā Maheṣvara figure**

Kurkihar, Bihar, 948 A.D. This bronze icon carries an inscription at its back. It reads, "Gifted by Mulaka, wife of Gopala Mahiaru anno 32 of Rajyapala/ A.D. 948." Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 34)

44. **Umā Maheṣvara**

Bihar, century 11 A.D. Relief in black stone similar to **Figure number 33**. But now, instead of the mirror, the Devi holds an indistinct object in her left hand (lotus, fruit?) the couple now sit on a lotus throne but there are no lotuses on the back panel of the throne. The lion and bull are still there but the devotee is gone. Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 32)

45. **Umā Maheṣvara**

Bihar, century 11 A.D. Very detailed and heavily ornamented relief of the divine couple sitting on a lotus throne, placed in a niches. The god has four arms: the upper two carry a trident and disc. The lower right still touches Parvati's chin but the lower left now clasps her breasts. The goddess is two-armed: with one she holds a mirror while the other encircles Siva. Siva's foot rests on Nandi. While the Devi's on the stomach of her lion since the lion now lies on a very unusual pose, on his back. The god and the goddess now wear elaborate *mukutas*. The niche also shows pillars and *kalasa*. Now in Indian Museum, Calcutta. (Plate 37)

46. **Umā Maheṣvara**

Kurkihar, Bihar, century 11 A.D. This bronze icon shows the divine couple sitting on a lotus throne. Parvati wraps her right hand around Siva's neck, while in her left hand she holds a mirror. Both of Siva's arms fondle Parvati's breasts. While Siva wears a crown, the Devi does not. On top of their beautiful lotus- backed throne is a *kirtimukha*. Below the throne are the bull, the lion and a devotee. Siva's trident lies almost neglected on his right side while his right foot probably rests on a snake. (?) Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 38)

47. **Kalyāṇasundaramurti**

Gaya, Bihar, century 10 A.D. Stone panel depicting Parvati and Siva's wedding scene. Parvati stands on the left of Siva and both hold each other's right hands. Siva's left hand is raised to Parvati's head with a flat, circular object in palm. In his other hand he holds a trident. The panel also depicts Visnu, Indra, Brahma with a flaming *homa* fire, Parvati's lion, *Navagrahas*, musicians and dancers. Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 36)

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48. Sārvaṇi

Chuddagram, Bangladesh; century 7 A.D. Image in octo-alloy depicting an eight-handed goddess; endowed with: arrow, discus, conch shell, trident, bell, shield, and bow. Evidence of being covered with golden leaf. Inscribed. Shows two attendants on the pedestal below. Image now lost, only exists in photographs.

49. Durgā

Bihar, century 8 A.D. Four armed Durga in stone. She sits on a lotus throne under which lies her lion. Her lower right hand is in *varadamudra*, while in her other three she holds: sword, shield and a trident She wears elaborate necklaces and headgear. She sits in *lalitasana* and her right foot rests on a lotus. She also sports a third eye on her forehead. Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 39)

50. Durgā

Bihar, century 9 A.D. Similar to Figure 39. But now in her lower left arm she holds a child. Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 38)

51. Durgā

Bihar, century 9 A.D. Same as Figure 40. But the figure of the child is very blurred, The *Devi's* throne becomes more elaborate with a richly carved back panel. Now in Patna Museum. (Plate 39)

52. Durgā

Bihar, century 7 A.D. Standing Durga relief in stone, slaying Mahisasura. The goddess is two-armed carrying a trident (now missing.) her left foot is placed on the body of the buffalo demon while the right one lies firmly on the ground. An attendant accompanies her on her right but her lion is absent. Now in Indian Museum, Calcutta.

53. Çandī

Dacca, Bangladesh; century 12 A.D. Inscribed icon, showing a four handed goddess standing on a lotus. In her hands she carries: lotus, water pot, battle-axe and *varadamudra*. Two female attendants holding flywhisks accompany her. A pair of elephants bathes her from upturned pitchers and the lion appears below her pedestal. Now in Dacca Museum.

54. Gauseva

Valgudar, Bangladesh This inscribed image shows a mother sitting with a child on her lap.

55. Lakṣmi- Nārayaṇa

In this unusual form Laksmi and Narayana are depicted in the same pose as Uma-Mahesvara, The god Narayana is seated on a lotus with the right leg pendant. He has four hands holding clockwise, *sankha, padma, gada, and*

chakra. The normal left hand, which holds the *chakra*, also encircles the body of Laksmi. Laksmi is sitting on the left thigh of Visnu. Her right hand is placed around the neck of her Lord. With the left hand she holds a lotus by its stalk. Her right leg is folded over the thigh of Visnu. The left leg is pendant. The kneeling *Garuda* is depicted below as if supporting the lotus seat on which the pair is sitting.

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MAP No. 1: INSCRIPTIONS OF BENGAL : 500 TO 800 A.D.
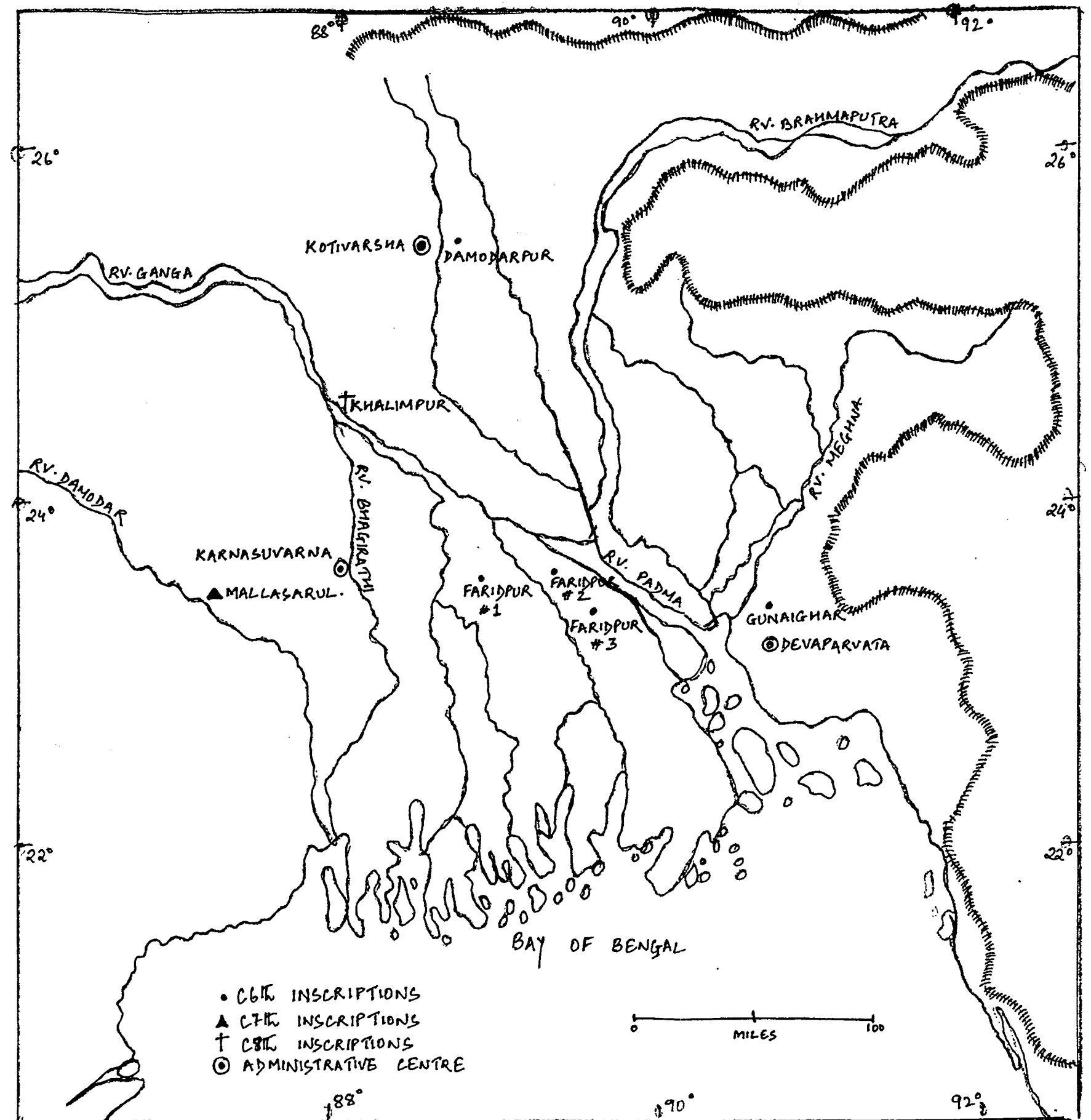
MAP No. 2: INSCRIPTIONS OF BENGAL : 800 TO 1100 A.D.

88° 90° 92°

RV. BRAHMAPUTRA

26° 26°

PATALIPUTRA
MONGHYR
BHAGALPUR
NALANDA GHOSRAVANA
GAYA
BODH GAYA

DINAJPUR
BANGARH
MANHALI
AMAGCHI

RV. GANGA

RV. MEGHNA

24° 24°

RV. DAMODAR

RV. PADMA
VIKRAMPUR
RAMPALA
KEDARPUR

22° 22°

BAY OF BENGAL

• C9TH INSCRIPTIONS
▲ C10TH INSCRIPTIONS
† C11TH INSCRIPTIONS
◉ ADMINISTRATIVE CENTRE

0   MILES   100

88° 90° 92°
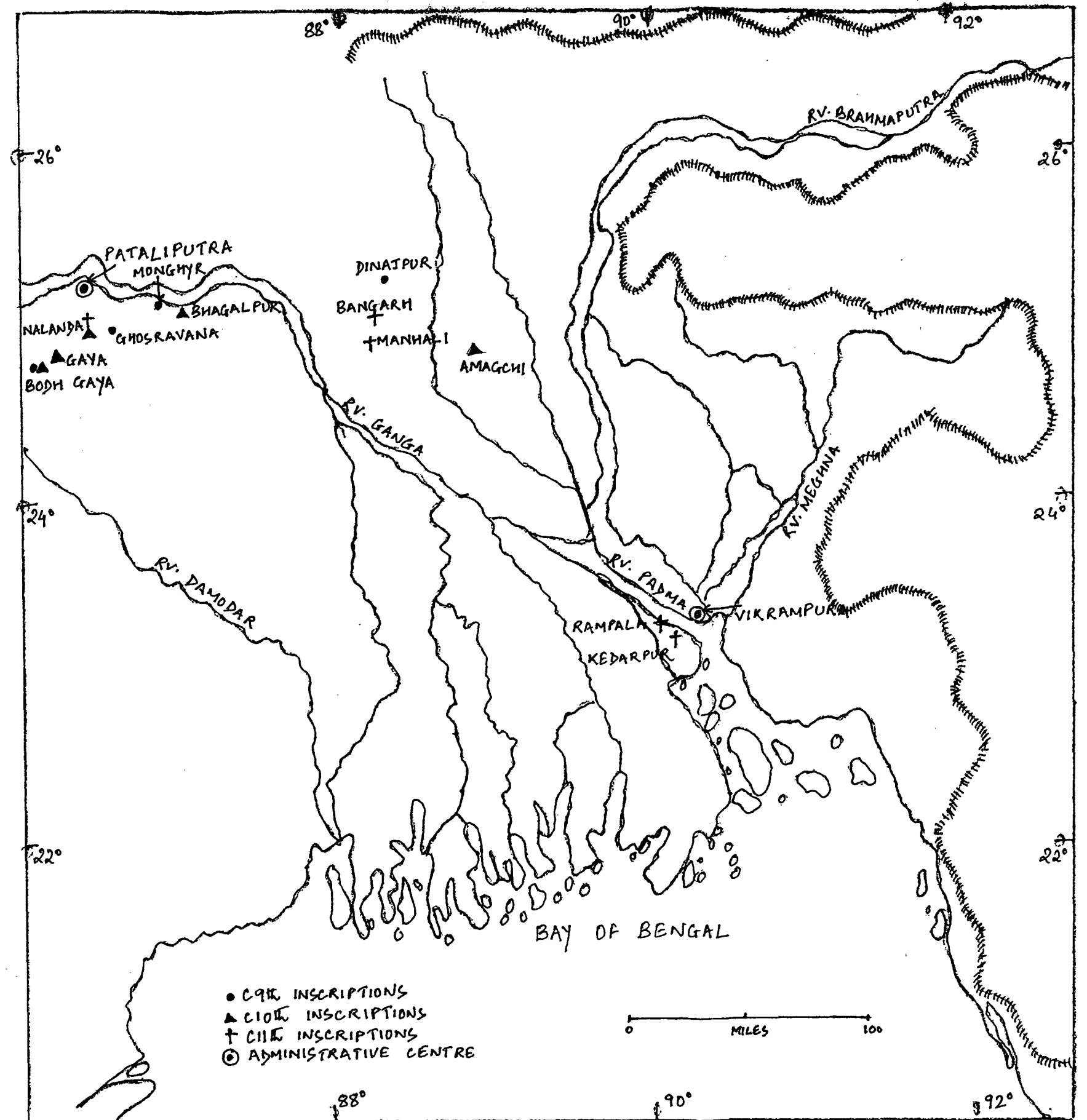
MAP NO. 3: INSCRIPTIONS OF BENGAL: 1100 TO 1300 A.D.
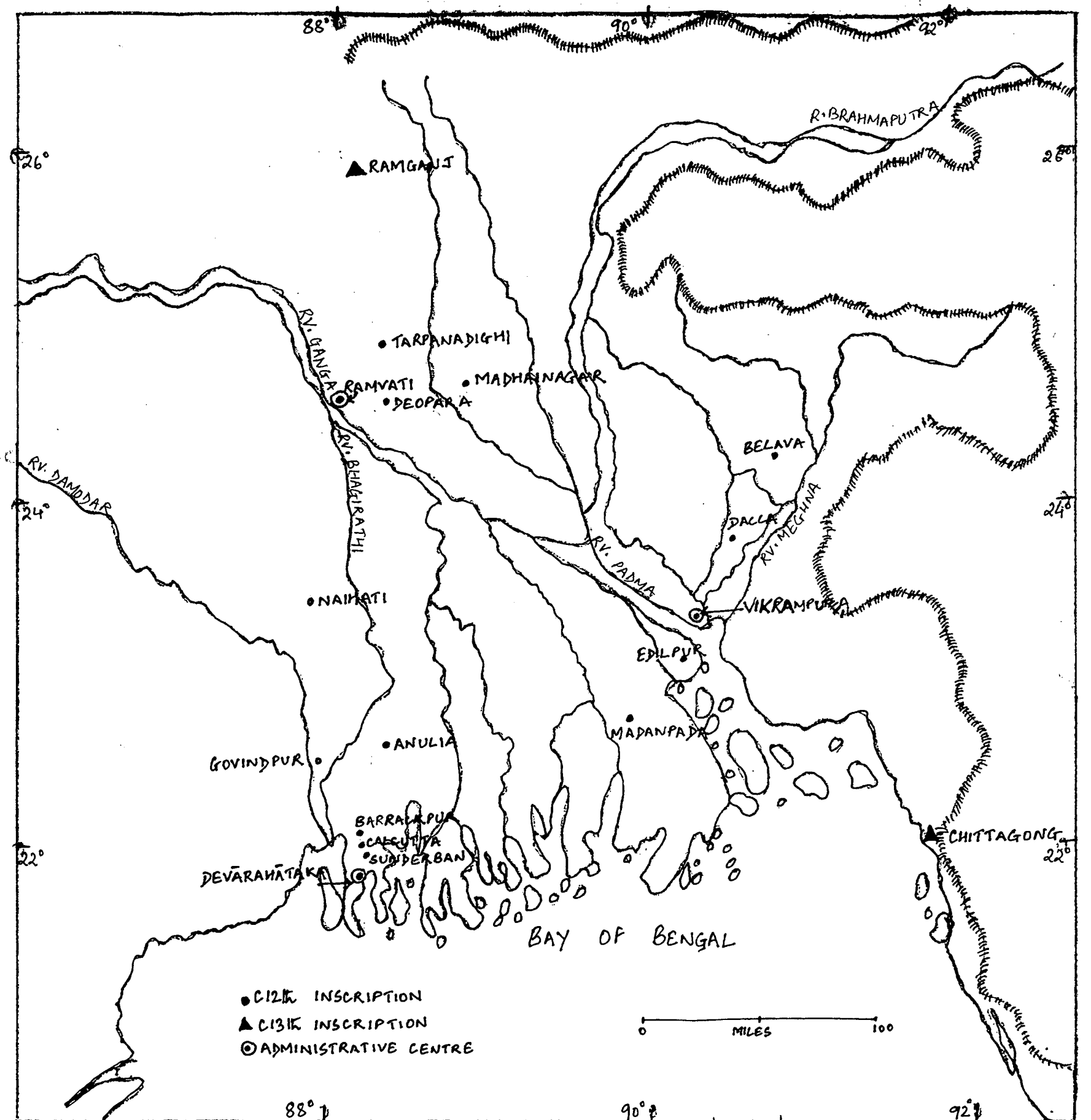
TABLE NUMBER: 1 GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF INSCRIPTIONS

Date	Number of Inscriptions	Names	Location
500-600	5	Gunaighar, Damodarpur Copper Plates, Faridpur Plates No. 1, 2,3	Central & south Delta: Faridpur &Samtata. (Karnasuvarna, Kotivarsa, Devparvata.)
600-700	1	Mallasarul Plate	Periphery of the Delta. (Tavira, Karnasuvarna, Midnapur, Ashrafpur.)
700-800	1	Khalimpur	Patliputra, Varendra &Pundarvardhan
800-900	4	Mahabodhi, Inscriptions Monghyr, Ghosaravana & Garuda Pillar Inscription	Patliputra, Samatata & Burdwan
900-1000	6	Bhagalpur Plate, Stone slab at Bodhgaya, Stone slab at Nalanda, Sakrasena slab & Vageswari Inscription	West of the Delta, Patliputra area
1000-1100	7	Amagchi, Gaya, Banagada, Nalanda, Manahali, Rampala, Kedarpur & Ramganj Inscriptions	Patliputra, Varendra & Vikrampura
1100-1200	13	Belava, Deopara, Naihati, Govindpur, Madhainagar, Sunderban, Tarpanadighi, Anulia, Madanpada, Calcutta Sahitya Parishad Plates, Edilpur, Barrackpur & Dacca Image Inscription	East of the Delta & mouth of the Delta. Vikrampura was the most important center of issuing inscriptions.
1200-1300	1	Chittagong	East of the Delta

TABLE NUMBER: 2 PURPOSE OF DONATIVE INSCRIPTIONS

Categories	Numbers	Religious Affiliation			
		Buddhist	Vaisnava	Saiva	Sakta
Donation to Brahmanas	19				
Maintenance of religious institution	2	1	1		
Construction of religious monument	6		3	3	
Renovation of religious monuments	1		1		
Installation of images	4	3			1

TABLE NUMBER 3: CENTURY-WISE BREAK UP OF INVOCATIONS

Century	Number of Inscriptions	Religious Affiliation			
		Buddha	Siva	Visnu	Sakti
500-600	5	–	1	–	–
600-700	1	1	–	–	–
700-800	1	1	–	–	–
800-900	4	2	–	–	–
900-1000	6	3	–	–	–
1000-1100	7	4	–	1	–
1100-1200	13	–	4	9	1
1200-1300	1	-	–	–	1

TABLE NUMBER: 4   DETAILED OUTLINE OF INSCRIPTIONS

Date (A.D.)	Name of Inscription	Purpose of the inscription	Deity being Invoked	Reference to goddesses	Which goddess	Imagery of the goddess	Other deities being mentioned	Seal	Mention of geographical features
500-600	Gunaighar Copper plate (507)	Maintenance of a Buddhist monastery	Mahadeva	–	–	–	–	Recumbent bull, facing right.	–
	Damodarpur Copper plate	Purchase of land for worship of Visnu in temple at Himaviccikhara	–	–	–	–	–	Trident	–
	Faridpur Copper Plate	Donative	–	–	–	–	–	Seal obliterated	–
	Faridpur Copper Plate	Donative	–	–	–	–	–	Gajalaksmi	–
	Faridpur Copper Plate	Donative	–	–	–	–	–	Gajalaksmi	–
	Malasarul Copper Plate	–	Sri Loknatha	–	–	–	Sri Lokanatha	Two armed deity with wheel in background.	–
700-800	Khalimpur Copper Plate	Construction and maintenance of temple for Narayana	Buddha	Yes	'Goddess of Fortune,' Rohini, Svaha, Sarvani, Bhadra, Saci Laksmi, 'Goddess of Learning.'	All goddesses as consorts and a "source of comfort for their husbands."		Deer Park	Mentions the "temple of a goddess of learning." Issued from Pataliputra. Land donated in Pundavardhana.
800-900	Mahabodhi Inscription	Temple for Siva and excavation of a tank.	–	–	–	–	4 faced Siva; Visnu, Surya and Bhairava.	–	–

	Monghyr Copper Plate	Donative	Buddha as Siddhartha	Yes	'Goddess of Fortune' and Earth.	'Goddess of Fortune as residing in the Eastern Sea. Earth as co-wife.	Varuna, Rama, Visnu, Bali Parsurama, Karna.	–	–
	Ghosaravana Rock Inscription	Eulogy in favour of Buddhist monk Viradeva	Buddha as Lord and protector of universe	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Garuda Pillar Inscription	-	–	Yes	Gauri: Shivani & Laksmi: 6 Matrakas: Laksmi: Sati: Goddess of speech & fortune: Devaki & Yasoda.	Born from the Himalayas. As consorts. Nourisher of Kartik. Fickle. Issueless. Hostile to each other. Mother of Visnu.	Visnu, Indra, Siva Kartik, Arjun. (Pillar in the shape of Garuda.)	–	–
900-1000	Bhagalpur Copper Plate	Dedication of land and construction of temple for Siva	Buddha	Yes	Goddess of Fortune: Laksmi:	As originating from Ocean. Originating from Visnu.	Buddha, Visnu, Indra, Laksmana, Rama, Rudra.	–	Mudagiri Kalaspota: Place where this temple was located.
	Stone Slab Inscription at Bodhgaya.	–	Buddha	–	–	–	–	–	–

	Stone Slab Inscription at Nalanda	Donation to Vagiswari, the Goddess of Learning	–	Yes	Vagiswari	(This slab was the footstool of the image.)	-	–	–
	Sakrasena Stone Slab	Framing of and image of Buddha	Buddha	-	–	–	(Slab served as the footstool of the image.)	–	–
	Vagiswari Stone inscription	Vagiswari decorated with golden vessel	–	Yes	Vagiswari	(Slab was footstool of image of Goddess.)	–	–	–
1000-1100	Amagchi Copper Plate	Donative	–	–	–	–	–	Deer Park	–
	Gaya Stone Inscription	To mark the completion of a Visnu temple by Visvaditya	Visnu	Yes	Laksmi & Saraswati	As wives of Visnu	Visnu & Siva	–	Inscription found on temple called Krsnadvarika Temple, in Gaya.
	Banagada Copper Plate	–	Buddha	–	–	–	–	Deer Park	–
	Nalanda Stone Slab Inscription	Renovation of temple of Baladitya	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Manahali Copper Plate	Donative	Buddha	–	–	–	Siva, Indra, Kartik	Deer Park	-
	Rampala Coper Plate	Donative	Buddha	Yes	Goddess of Fortune, Saci, Gauri and Laksmi	All as consorts	Visnu, Siva and Indra	Deer Park	Issued from Vikramapura. Land donated in Nehakashthi of Pundarvardhana.
	Kedarpur Copper Plate	–	Buddha	Yes	Goddess of Fortune	–	–	Deer Park	Issued from Vikrampura.
	Ramganj Copper Plate	Donative	–	Yes	Padma: Parvati & Bhavani: Sita	Ideal consort. Beautiful. Devoted.	Visnu, Sankara-Bhattaraka	Seal missing	–

1100-1200	Belava Copper Plate	Donative	–	–	–	–	Visnu appearing as Krsna.	Visnu	–
	Deopara Inscription	Records erection of Siva temple at Pradyumnesvara. (For the first time the goddess is mentioned as being represented in art form.)	Siva	Yes	Parvati: Laksmi:	As wife of Siva, in sensual terms. Wife & lover of Visnu, as Goddess of wealth.	Siva, Visnu, Rama, Indra, Trinity	–	Mentions a village called Vijaypur, which might be a village, called Vijaynagar, now situated in Deopara.
	Naihati Copper Plate	–	Ardhnaresvara, Moon, Visnu, Indra Brahma	Yes	Parvati: Laksmi: Gauri: Ganga:	As part of Ardhnaresvara. Consort. Wife of Siva. Consort of Siva.	–	Sadasiva	Issued from Vikrampura. Village of Vallahita being donated.
	Govindpur Copper Plate	Donative	Narayana	–	–	–	Visnu	Sadasiva	–
	Madhainagar Copper Plate	Donative	Narayana	Yes	Gauri: Earth: Goddess of Fortune, Devaki.	Perched on Siva's lap. As beautiful as Kastubha jewel.	Siva, Moon. Visnu as: half of Siva's body, his dwarf incarnation, Narasimha, Krsna, Vasudeva.	Sadasiva	Issued from Dharyyagram. Donation of village in Varendra.
	Sunderban Copper Plate	Donative	Narayana	Yes	Kali	As destructive	Narasimha, Narayana, Indra	Sadasiva	Issued from Vikrampura.

	Tarpanadighi Copper Plate	Donative	Narayana	Yes	Kali	As destructive	Narayana	Sadasiva	Refers to a Buddhist vihara. Donation of land in Varendra.
	Anulia Copper Plate	Donative	Narayana, Siva, Moon, Indra	Yes	Kali: Fortune Goddess	As destructive.	Visnu, Siva, Moon, Indra	Sadasiva	Issued from Vikrampura.
	Madanpada Copper Plate	Donative	Narayana	Yes	Parvati: Fortune Goddess:	As mother of Kartik. Being carried away.	Siva, Kartik and Vinsu in his dwarf form.	Sadasiva	Donated a village Pinjari (?) in Vikrampura.
	Calcutta Sahitya Parishad Plate	–	Narayana	–	–	–	–	Sadasiva	–
	Edilpur Copper Plate	Donative	Narayana	Yes	Fortune Goddess: Parvati: Sarasvati: Laksmi: Ganga & Earth.	Carried away. Mother of Kartik. Goddess of speech & abode in lotus. Abode in lotus.	Siva, Rudra, Visnu as dwarf, Balarama, Jagannatha, Asi, Varuna, Indra, Kartik	Sadasiva	Issued from Phlgugrama. Donation in Pundarvardhana.
	Barrackpur Copper Plate	Donative	Siva	Yes	Laksmi: Parvati:	Wife of Visnu. Daughter of Mountain and wife of Siva.	Siva, Indra, Kartik, Ganesa, Moon, Mahesvara	Sadasiva	Issued from Vikrampura. Land donated in Khadivisya in Pundarvardhanbhukti.
	Dacca Image Inscription	Installation of an image of Candi	Candi	Yes	Candi	–	–	–	–
1200-1300	Chittagong Copper Plate (1243)	Donative	–	Yes	Laksmi: Tripurasundari :	As lover of Visnu. Wife of Siva	Siva, Madana	Sun, moon & Visnu on Garuda	–

TABLE 5: ATTRIBUTES OF THE GODDESSES

Goddess	Number of Hands	Attributes in Hands	Facial Expression	Vahana	Other motifs
Durga	4	Varadmudra, mirror, abhayamudra, fruit, rosary, trident, shield, sword, battle-axe.	Calm	Lion, iguana	Linga, Ganesa, Kartikkeya.
Parvati	2- 4	Abhayamudra, lotus, rosary, child, plant stalk, sword, shield.	Calm	Lion, iguana	Linga, Ganesh, Kartikkeya.
Mahisasuramardini	8- 10	Discus, trident, arrow, sword, head of a demon, conch shell, mirror, bell, buckler, battle axe, elephant goad, lotus, javelin, noose, shield, staff, thunderbolt, rosary, water pot, mace.	Terrifying or smiling.	Lion	Lion, Mahisasura, also other demons, kirtimukha at the top.
Ascetic Gauri	4	Varadamudra, rosary, tridanda, water-jug.	Calm	Iguana, lion	Antelopes, banana plants, flaming vessels.
Bridal Gauri	4	Varadamudra, fruit, cosmetic stick, mirror.	Calm or smiling	Iguana, lion	Ganesa, Kartik, Linga, antelope, banana plants, flaming vessel. Sometimes also has a third eye.

Manasa	2- 4	Snake- head, snake-child, child, lotus, fruit, sword, battle-axe, noose, plant stalk.	Calm	In a few instances an elephant.	Sometimes has a third eye on forehead. Has a 5,7 or 9-hooded snake canopy. Sits on a lotus throne.
Laksmi	2- 4	Abhayamudra, varadamudra, lotus,			
Camunda	4- 12	Javelin, knife, skull, varadmudra, abhayamudra, fire, snake, lasso, sword, kettledrum, bell, mace, shield, bone.	Laughing horribly with tongue and teeth prominent.	Corpse, ass or owl	Should be skeletal in appearance, wearing a necklace of skull and bones, blue, black or red in colour.
Saraswati	4	Varadamudra, rosary, abhayamudra, book, pen, lotus, veena, pitcher.	Pleasant and smiling	Swan	Also appears two armed. Sometimes also carries a skull.

TABLE NO. 6: INSCRIPTIONS ON SCULPTURES

| Sculpture	Date	Place	Material	Donated by	Inscription
Sarvani	Century 7 A.D.	Chauddagram, Tippera.	Octo-alloy	Queen Prabhavati.	Queen Prabhavati, of Devakhadga dynasty
Vagiswari	Century 10 A.D.	Nalanda, Bihar	Stone		"At Nalanda, on this eighth day of bright moon of the month of Asvina, in the first year of the kingdom of His Highness paramount monarch Lord Gopala; the revered Goddess of Learning has been decorated with Golden Vessel."
Candi	Century 12 A.D.	Dacca		Narayana	"(The image of) Chandidevi, begunby the officer Damodara, son of Maladei (Malladevi) is installed by his younger brother Narayana."
Uma Mahesvara	948 A.D.	Kurkihar, Bihar	Bronze	Muluka	"Gifted by Muluka, wife of Gopala Mahiaru anno 32 of Rajyapala/ A.D. 948."
Snake goddess on elephant	Century 11 A.D.	Kurkihar, Bihar	Bronze	Mahata	Siddham Sriman Mahipaladeva Raja Chatgra (ma) Svamgai bhattarakih// Mahat (sya)
Parvati	Century 9 A.D.	Bihar	Brass	Some *Thakura*	"Om Deyadharmoyam Sri Narayanapaladeva Rajye Samnat 45 Sri Udandapura Vastavya Ranaka Uchchha Putra Thakurasya."
Mahalaksmi		Simla, Rajshahi	Stone	Sunaka or Sutaka	"Deyadharamma (rmmo) Ya (yam) Suna (ta) Kasya."
Guseva	Century 8-9 A.D.	Valgudar	Stone	Nrikatta	"Siddham// krimiladhishthane Gau (Sa) Va (Nri) Katasya (de) Dharmmoyam"
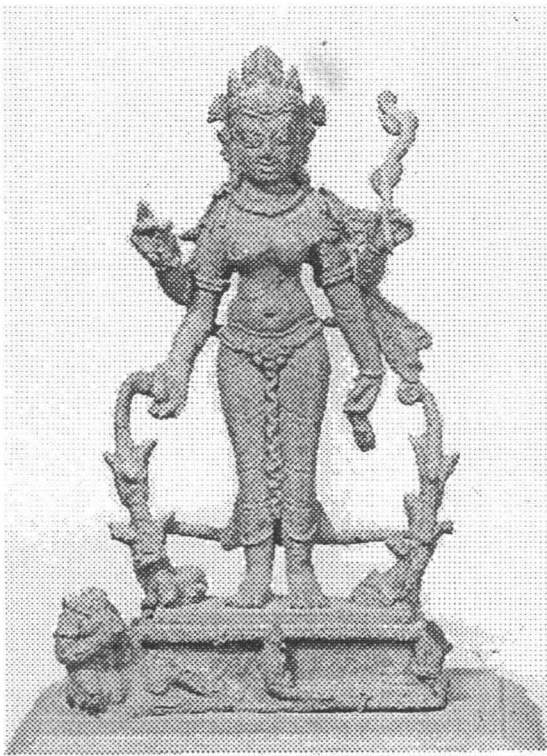
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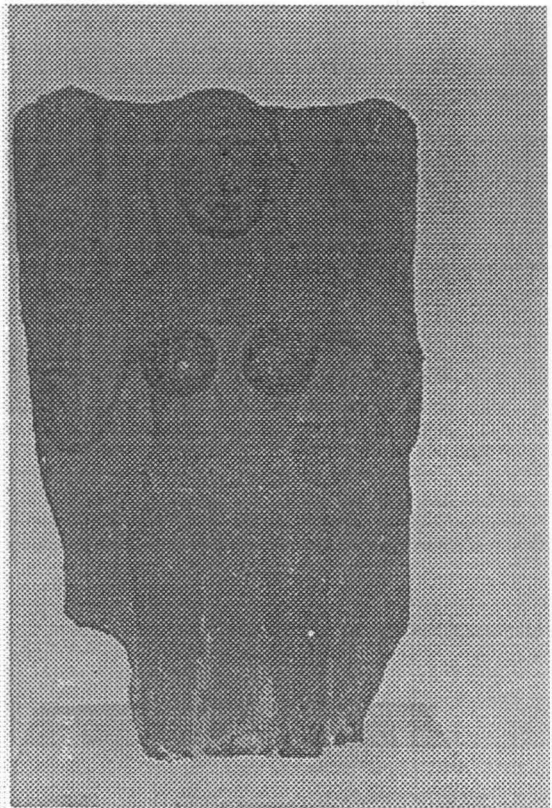
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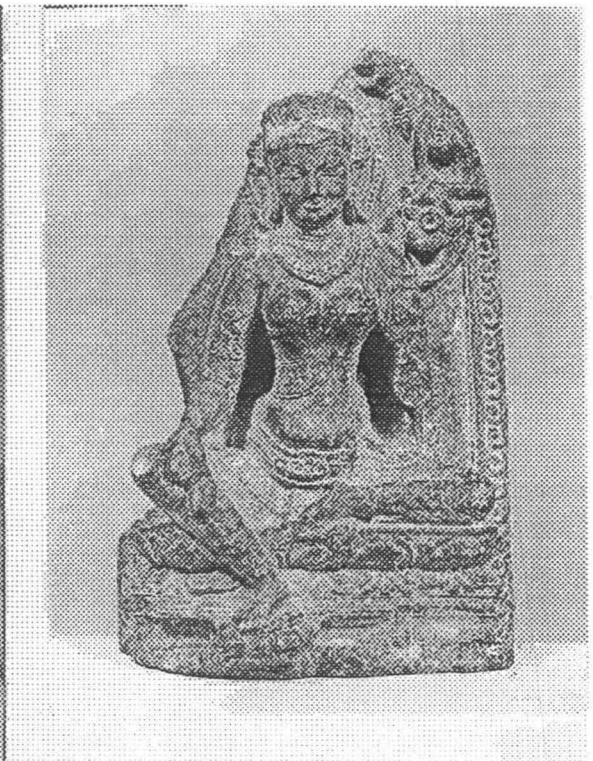
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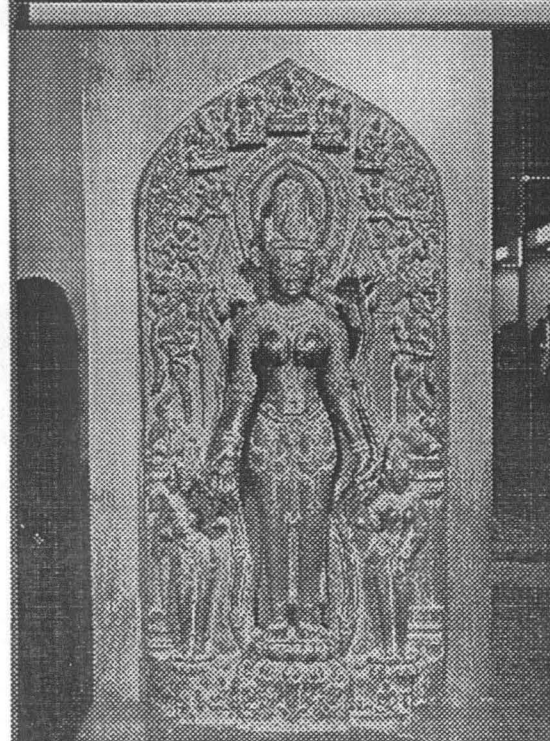
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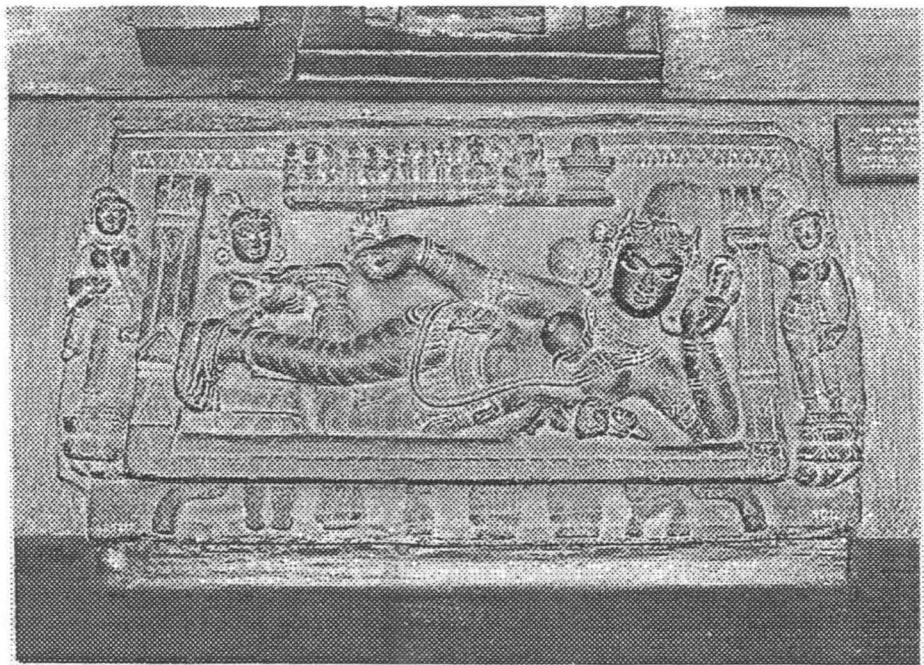
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PLATE 30   PLATE 31

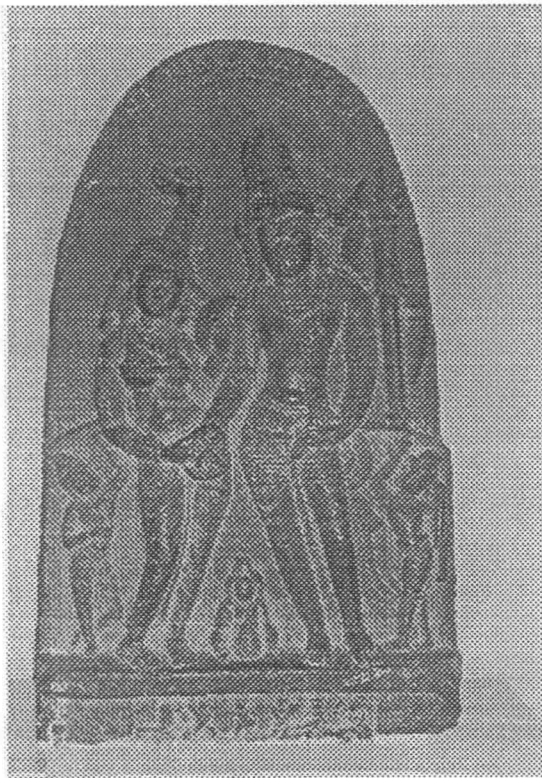PLATE 32   PLATE 33

PLATE 34   PLATE 35

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PLATE 39