

Eighteen

Thy Fierce Lotus-Feet: Danger and Benevolence in Mediaeval Sanskrit Poems to Maḥiṣāsuramardinī-Durgā

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*tataḥ kruddhā jagannmātā caṇḍikā pānam uttamam /
papau punaḥ punaś caiva jahāsāruṇalocanā || (Devīmāhātmya 3.33)*
*Then in rage the Mother of the Universe Caṇḍikā quaffed [that] excellent draught
again and again. And again and again she roared in laughter, her eyes red in intoxication.*

From at least the time of the composition of the *Devīmāhātmya*, Śākta theology, popular and scholastic, has embraced, indeed elevated, the idea of a transgressive goddess whose boisterous behaviour simultaneously rouses fear and devotion in the worshipper. However, in later times, the figure of the wild goddess increasingly receded into the background of cultural conceptions of Devī, or became identified exclusively with Kālī and Cāmuṇḍā. From the late mediaeval period (1400 CE onwards), many Śākta cults in India—such as those which had flourished in Tantricized and tribal contexts in Bengal, Orissa and Assam—began to conform to orthodox (brahminized) procedures of worship. As a consequence, the goddesses they venerated,

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lost many of the qualities viewed as threatening by mainstream Brahminism (Tantric attributes, cremation ground symbolism, occult powers, violence, love of sanguinary sacrifice and alcohol) and began to assume gentler forms. This toning down, even ‘taming’, of Śākta worship is exemplified by a number of benevolent goddesses associated with the home and harvest who became popular during the late-mediaeval period, such as Annapūrṇā in Bengal and the village Lakṣmī in Orissa.¹

With a few exceptions, modern goddess-worship throughout India (except where outside observers are barred because of the secretive nature of the worship) continues in the wake of this change. The demon-slaying goddess known in early literature as Caṇḍī/Caṇḍikā (Sanskrit, ‘The Fiery One’), but now more commonly known as Durgā (Sanskrit ‘She who delivers [men] in crisis’²) is a case in point. At present she is worshipped in central, western India and Bengal as a provider of nourishment and a champion of Dharma during her annual autumnal rite. On this occasion in Bengal, she is presented as the image of propriety: her torso is covered while she is surrounded by deities called her “children”: Kārttikeya, Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī and Gaṇeśa. This style of presentation is a relatively recent late-mediaeval development of one her most popular forms, Mahiṣāsura-mardini (‘The Slayer of the Buffalo-Demon’), reflecting her burgeoning association with motherhood. Caṇḍī’s ambiguous, dangerous aspect, which, as I shall argue has historical primacy, is now vestigially evoked only during the animal sacrifice during the Navarātra, a rite traditionally associated in this case with the placation of ferocious, bloodthirsty deities.

If we are to trace Durgā’s development through Mahiṣāsura-mardini, we find that this aspect is more fully preserved and elaborated on in earlier representations in literature. These portrayals sought to capture the meaning conveyed by the epithet[s] ‘Caṇḍī/Caṇḍikā’ and are consequently more

¹The cult of Lakṣmī gained widespread popularity in Orissa during the Sūryavaṃśī period (1435-1540 CE). This form of goddess-worship was centred in village households and eschewed Tantric practice. Its central deity Lakṣmī, consort of Viṣṇu, symbolized motherhood and fecundity (Brighenti 2001 p. 153; See also Sanderson 2007, p. 31 for the brahminization of Tantric ritual and deities in mediaeval Orissa). Annapūrṇā, the goddess who provides eternal victual, is well documented in the tradition of the Bengali *maṅgalkāvya*. See for instance *Annadāmaṅgal* by Bhāratcandra. She is regarded as a gentle form of Durgā and worshipped in Spring in the bright half of the month of Caitra.

²An ambiguous epithet. ‘Durga’ (lit. something difficult to pass) can mean both ‘crisis’ and ‘impenetrable’. My translation is based on a number of attestations where it is used to convey ‘a saviour in times of trouble’: *durgāt tārayase durge tat tvaṃ durgā smṛtā janaiḥ* / *Mahābhārata* 4.5.31d.40 (*Virāṭaparvan*); *durgāsi durgabhavasāgaranaur asaṅgā* / *Devīmāhātmya* (DM) 4.10c; *durge smṛtā harasi bhūtim aśeṣajantoḥ* / DM 4.19a; *durgāyai durgapārāyai* DM 5.10a; *durgā durgatināśinī* DM 9.29b

ferocious (*ugra*)—and in some ways more unorthodox— than late-mediaeval ones. The goddess in these poems is represented in an ambivalent way: un-Dharmic in many respects, chaotic, blood-thirsty, aligned with *yoginīs*, *bhūtas*, *pretas*, threatening, wrathful beings from the very edge of Brahmanism. The following discussion explores depictions of Durgā as an *ugra* deity with particular attention to examples in classical Sanskrit poetry (*kāvya*) from the seventh to the tenth centuries CE.

Danger and Benevolence: *Ugratā* and *Saumyatā*

In certain schools of thinking in early mediaeval and mediaeval India, particularly those connected with subversive ritual, the concept of benevolence in a deity was not so sharply distinguished from aspects which in modern conceptions, may be seen as threatening, or violent. *Ugratā* (Sanskrit, “ferocity”), the quality possessed by an *ugra* deity, was understood not to be demonic in nature, but rather an epiphany of his/her enormous gnostic and occult powers, that being uncontrollable, exuded forth as primordial, terrifying energy. Such deities were wrathful only in appearance, but unlike, for instance, inimical spirits in European belief, they were not negative forces. For mediaeval Indians believed they could be potentially benign, given the devotee behaved in the appropriate manner and followed a course of ritualized propitiation. During this course, the *ugra* deity was carefully coaxed over to the worshipper’s side and ritually gratified with various offerings, chief of which were flesh and liquor.³ A favourable outcome was held to be the bestowal of auspicious boons on the worshipper by the gratified deity and her⁴ protection from demons, crises, disease and inauspicious planetary influences, whom she was believed to control. In fact deities requiring propitiation were held to be an infinite source of gifts and desirable powers, although ostensibly horrific, difficult to please and crabbed of temperament. Durgā was just such a deity in the mediaeval view: ferocious, no doubt, but protective, empowering and boon-bestowing when won over with effort and discipline.

Modern scholarship on the figure/figures of Devī can tend to adopt a schismatic view of her/their *ugra* and *saumya* (benevolent) aspects, char-

³See for instance *Tantrāloka* 26.51cd-54ab where Abhinavagupta discusses the procedure for gratifying the *śākta* deities embodied in their mantras after they have been summoned, first with alcohol, meat and blood (*āsavaiḥ palai raktaiḥ prāk tarpaṇam*), and only thereafter with the usual *upacāras* (*paścāt puṣpadhūpādivistaraiḥ*)

⁴*Ugra* deities are also male, for instance Bhairava and Mahākāla, the fierce forms of śiva. But since I am concerned with Caṇḍī here, I shall restrict the application of this term to female deities.

acterizing one set of goddesses as “gentle”, the other as “wrathful”.⁵ Thus, such divinities as Pārvatī, Lakṣmī or Tripurasundarī are known to be gentle forms of śakti, whereas boisterous forms like Caṇḍī, Caṇḍikā, Vindhyavāsinī and Kālī are classified as wrathful. However, in literature we find that the situation is not so straightforward: gentle forms of the goddess can frequently tip over into wrath while wrathful forms can be gentle. In other words, both aspects, ferocity and equanimity, are finely shaded over in the character of such deities who can be bewilderingly kaleidoscopic in identity. Even extremely violent goddesses such as Kālī have subdued forms.

Such bipolar schematization, though useful in our understanding of contradictions that inevitably arise in religious phenomena, is unhelpful in providing a holistic conception of a wild goddess’s *ugratā*. For *ugra/ugratā* did not imply ‘not-benevolent/non-benevolence’. Rather the Śākta traditions believed that the benevolence of this special type of deity described as *ugra* was potentially contained within an outward garb of danger. The subsequent portrayals of Durgā in mediaeval poetic sources were based on this understanding of *ugratā* and show, therefore, a deity who united dangerous with benevolent qualities.

The Wrathful Amazon in Legend and Art

Let us turn to the earliest scriptural evidence containing her legends—which underlie the poems to Durgā—where we may find the seeds of a dangerous goddess already present. The most recent scholarship on the subject by Yokochi⁶ has demonstrated that the earliest traceable form of Durgā is the warrior-deity Kauśikī-Vindhyavāsinī in the *Skanda Purāṇa*. This work contains the earliest extant version of the myth, dateable to the sixth–seventh centuries CE, of the demon-slaying goddess. Kauśikī, called ‘Vindhyavāsinī’ as she is said to dwell in the forests of the Vindhya mountains, is unmarried, scornful of suitors and slays demons accompanied by her bloodthirsty *yoginī* retinue. She is dark but effulgent with the *tejas* that exemplary kings and heroes are imbued with in Sanskrit literature, she is merciless in battle, kills with evident relish and single-mindedness of purpose. The primary legend is an account of her slaying two demon-brothers called Śumbha and Niśumbha who have usurped heaven. The legend is as follows: Śiva teases

⁵See for instance Baldissera 1994.

⁶Yokochi 2004. This contains a critical edition of Chapters 34.1-61; 55-69 of the *Skanda Purāṇa* that recount the legend of Kauśikī. The edition is based on the earliest part of the text contained in a Nepalese manuscript of 810 CE, along with its later recensions, the *Revākhaṇḍa* and the *Ambikākhaṇḍa* (Yokochi 2004, p. 200). I shall refer to the *Skanda Purāṇa* from this particular edition.

Pārvatī about her dark complexion. The affronted Pārvatī decides to perform *tapas* to obtain a fair complexion and a powerful son. Since the power of her asceticism threatens the world with destruction, Brahmā appears and grants her her desires. In her happiness, Pārvatī sheds tears of joy that form a pool. Plunging into its waters, she emerges fair-skinned. Thereafter she is known as Gaurī, the “Fair Lady”. From the sloughed-off dark residue in the pond, a virginal goddess emerges, young and beautiful, girt for battle in cuirass, armlets, weapons, a bow and two quivers. She is named Kauśikī, assigned the Vindhya mountains as her home and appointed the protector of the gods against Śumbha and Niśumbha. In due course, Kauśikī confronts the demon brothers in war and slays them.

After the completion of this tale, the Mahiṣāsura myth is narrated as a separate story (68.10-23). Unlike the Śumbha-Niśumbha story and later interpretations, it is comparatively sparse in detail, indicating that it was either a later addition to the *Skanda Purāṇa*⁷ or represents an archaic kernel of the expanded myth. In this early version, there is no build-up to the main confrontation, nor is the famous moment of Durgā’s creation through the combined streams of *tejas* emitted by the gods described, only the action of the death-scene is dramatized. Invited to attend a sacrifice performed by the sage Śaradvat Gautama, the goddess is confronted by a buffalo-demon, described by the *Skanda Purāṇa* as the son of Sumbha.⁸ When she is attacked by him, she seizes his horn, hurls him to the earth and pinning his head to the ground with her foot, stabs him in the back with her trident. Having killed him, she returns to her abode. Further versions of the Durgā myths appear throughout Purāṇic literature⁹ with several variations as a cluster of discrete demon-slaying tales from possibly different sources. But the core-story as it is illustrated in the *Skanda Purāṇa* remains the same. All display likewise an essentially martial goddess engaged in combat. Battle-scenes throughout the corpus bristle with images of gory death, corpses and torrents of blood.

Next, let us consider the *locus classicus* of this legend, the *Devīmāhātmya*, a text from the eighth century advocating the idea of Durgā as an omnipotent ‘Goddess’ with numerous epithets who incorporates all other goddesses (mild and wild). Here an attempt is made to integrate the disparate legends of ‘warrior-goddesses’ (who may or may not be connected) into a single coherent narrative within a philosophical outlook that may be

⁷Yokochi 2004, p. 128.

⁸*sūnuḥ sumbhasya* 68.12. The Asura Sumbha in this legend is not to be confused with Śumbha.

⁹Some examples are: *Vāmana* 18.41-21.52-26, *Śaura* 49, *Kālikā* 60.57-163, *Devībhāgavata* 5.2-35, *Devī* 3-19.

broadly described as Vaiṣṇaivite. The expanded version of the older myth from the *Skanda Purāṇa* contains three demon-slaying stories: the slaying of Madhu and Kaiṭabha; a now more elaborate account of the slaying of Mahiṣa and the slaying of Śumbha and Niśumbha. These are couched within a frame story of a king called Suratha who has lost his kingdom, and receives edification from an ascetic Sumedhas regarding the true nature of the Goddess's powers, her ability in reviving political fortune and the form of her worship. Of these myths, the Śumbha-Niśumbha sequence is now relegated to the end of the ascetic's narration, thereby losing out in importance to the first two. The Mahiṣāsura legend on the other hand occupies the central position in the *Devīmāhātmya* and by this period is the more widely attested in art and literature, although it is by no means the most elaborate of the triad. It features prominently in later sources such as the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, an influential East Indian scripture, and is standardized in iconography from as early as the fifth century, in fact, even before the earliest narrative accounts available to us.¹⁰

This, the expanded form of the myth, can be summarized as follows: Mahiṣa, a buffalo-demon who can assume any form at will (*kāmarūpin*), takes over heaven and overthrows the cosmic order. The gods appeal to Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahmā who in their anger radiate streams of light that join to form the shape of a divine woman. She is ten-armed, beautiful and blazes with light like a mountain peak in the sun (*jvalantam iva parvatam*). The gods give her weapons and a lion for a mount and thus appointed as their champion, she confronts Mahiṣa. After a long and eventful battle, in which Mahiṣa morphs into several forms and is successively defeated in each, he is slain in his final form as the buffalo and order is restored to heaven. The battle-scenes form the central point of focus in the tale. As in the *Skanda Purāṇa*, here too the goddess is envisaged as a dangerous adversary of the demonic army, in the manner of the Asura-thrashing, Soma-drinking, rabble-rousing Vedic Indra. Often she acts alone; often accompanied by a retinue born from her hot breaths; she quaffs alcohol to increase her war-lust; her face is flushed by wine, her speech slurred; before slaying him, she recklessly challenges Mahiṣa with the quip: "Bellow, bellow, O Fool, for a moment while I drink this nectar! But when I slay you here in this battlefield, it is the gods who soon will bellow!".¹¹ Such is her ferocity that the earth, filled with the corpses of horses, snakes, chariots and Asuras, cannot be tread on (3.64). In fact she represents everything that convention

¹⁰Yokochi 2004, pp.133-141; Schmid 2002, p. 144.

¹¹*garja garja kṣaṇaṇ mūdha madhu yāvat pibāmy aham / mayā tvayi hate 'traiva garjiṣyanty āśu devatāḥ || 3.36*

(as articulated normatively in the Law Books of Manu or metonymically in paradigms such as Sītā) found uneasy in a woman: chaos, disorder, unbridled subversion.

Indeed, out of all the plot-elements in the myths it is Mahiṣa's death-scene, the magisterial culmination of Caṇḍī's violence, that holds the most emblematic force. In art, this very act is captured time and again in icons appearing from the Kuṣāṇa era onwards, and even today it is Caṇḍī's most popular depiction, demonstrating that the notion of her *ugratā* was the one most widely held to be her defining characteristic in mediaeval conceptions of the goddess. It is therefore important to dwell for a moment on this particularly exciting, and artistically resonant, moment in the narrative. In the *Skanda Purāṇa*, the death-scene is, in my view, human and inadvertent: the goddess appears to have had no inkling about the confrontation; she is suddenly accosted by the scheming buffalo, who had been plotting his attack from the beginning; he gets the first strike, brutalizing with his horn the necklace dangling on her breast (*abhyahānad vakṣasi lolahāre śṛṅgeṇa*), the ornament closest to her person (the suggestion of rape springs to mind); while she defends herself, she remains silent in her concentration (or her surprise); during the fight, she is alone; she has two hands just like any man, while the buffalo, like any other animal, does not have the magical ability to change shape. The method of her killing is dominated by the gesture of her lifting the tail of the buffalo (*udgrhya vāladhim*) with the arm that is free, the other pins the animal down with the familiar trident, while one fierce foot restrains his head firmly on the ground. This image, resonant of the proud hunter flaunting his kill as trophy, characterizes Kuṣāṇa and Gupta era iconography (first to seventh centuries CE) (see note 13). By the time of the *Devīmāhātmya* myth, the simplicity, in a manner of speaking, is gone, and the death-scene has now become a much more inflated, militarized and supernatural moment: the goddess is a more confident ten-armed Durgā (known as Kātyāyanī) aided by a lion (a new entrant to the myth), not the two-armed human-warrior of the *Skanda Purāṇa*; she engages with Mahiṣa in a planned encounter, unlike the surprise-skirmish of the old myth; the "rolling necklace" (*lolahāra*) agitated by the buffalo's horn is gone (never does Mahiṣa get so close in this story); unlike the silent deity in the former myth, she regularly addresses her opponents with taunts while the buffalo-demon, a magical being who changes shape, is, in the moment of being killed, neither man nor beast, but somewhere in-between. The slaughter is dramatized thus:

evam uktvā samutpatya sārūḍhā taṃ mahāsuram /
pādenākramya kaṇṭhe ca śūlenainam atādayat //

tataḥ so'pi padākrāntas tayā nījamukhāt tataḥ /
*ardhaniṣkrānta evāsīd devyā vīryeṇa saṁvṛtaḥ //*¹²
ardhaniṣkrānta evāsau yuddhyamāno mahāsuraḥ /
tayā mahāsinā devyāḥ śiraś chittvā nipātitaḥ // 3.37-39

Saying thus and leaping aloft, that mighty Asura she mounted and, crushing his throat with her foot, rained blows on him with her trident. Then, as for him, trampled by her foot, he was partially squeezed out from his mouth, and was fully hemmed in by the valour of the Empress. That great Asura, battling when he pushed forth half-way, was felled, after his head was chopped off by the goddess's mighty sword.

Just as the older statuary visually reflects the death-scene in the old myth in the *Skanda Purāṇa*, icons of Durgā produced during and soon after the eighth century CE match the description above quite closely.¹³ As in the above description, they show the goddess (arrayed in ornaments and many weapons) having just decapitated the buffalo, pierce the emergent body of a 'man' with her trident, while the head of the buffalo lies at the base of the image. In most examples, her torso is uncovered in contrast to late mediaeval statuary, as she unabashedly bares her breasts in joyful disregard of modesty, and remains unaccompanied by a family, though surrounded by *gaṇas*, *yoginīs* or devotees. Despite the variations that appeared in the Purāṇic scenes and their corresponding iconographic representations over time, the scriptural and pictorial images of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī remain unchanged in one fundamental respect. All embody, in the goddess killing

¹²The verse is problematic. The reading "evāsīd" is given in the Veṅkaṭeśvara Edition of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*; while one manuscript (NAK 1-1534; NS 518 = 1398 CE) reads "evāti". But "evāti" does not yield much sense in the context, so I have followed the former reading. The oldest available witness (NAK 1-1077; NS 229 = 1109 CE) reads *śulābhihato detyas tathā nījamukhāt tataḥ. arddhaviṣkrānta [12v] + + + devīvīryeṇa savṛtta* (ref. Yokochi).

¹³A symbiosis existed between the artistic and scriptural traditions of describing Mahiṣāsūramardīnī. Iconographic evidence demonstrates that the *Skanda Purāṇa* death-scene for instance closely parallels the Gupta iconic type represented by a two to four-armed Durgā holding a buffalo's tail with her left hand, the trident with her right and pressing down on his head with her right foot. See for instance: <http://huntington.wmc.ohio-state.edu/public/index.cfm?fuseaction=showThisDetail&ObjectID=6913&detail=large>. <http://huntington.wmc.ohio-state.edu/-public/index.cfm?fuseaction=showThisDetail&ObjectID=2892&detail=large>. The correlation between the *Skanda Purāṇa* description of the death-scene and Gupta statuary of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī has been demonstrated by Yokochi 2004, p. 141 (a useful evaluation of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī iconography from the Kuṣāṇa to the late-mediaeval types may also be found here).

the Asura, the idea of the dangerous yet benevolent warrior: one who can threaten and can slay horrifically, but for the greater good.

Dharma versus Adharma

The Purāṇic myths present the death-scene as Durgā's victory (*viṣaya*) over *adharma*, thereby quite obviously representing her as the champion of convention through her subjugation of Mahiṣa. Given such an interpretation of her *ugratā* in the Purāṇas, is the mediaeval Durgā actually 'dangerous'?

Along with her character as an agent of Dharma, literature, particularly the secular traditions between 700 CE-1100 CE, also substantially represents an un-Dharmic, infernal property of Durgā's character. This aspect is only ever hinted at (but not elaborated in great detail) in the Purāṇas through infrequent references to her drinking alcohol (as in the opening citation to this article), a substance generally condemned by the Law-Books of Manu as being impure. However, on the whole the Purāṇas are circumspect on the matter of Durgā's ambiguity. Glossed over for instance, is her constant and decidedly un-Dharmic hunger for human sacrifice, widely documented in such non-scriptural poetic sources as the tenth century *Kathāsaritsāgara* by the Kashmirian Somadeva, a repository of legends from older materials now lost. Several tales (15.1, 12.11.5-132, 12.13.7 ff. 7.8.53-225) discuss the practice of voluntary self-decapitation to please the goddess. The human head, freshly severed, was the body part the goddess greatly relished. Mediaeval ritual manuals such as the *Durgābhaktitarāṅgiṇī* (sixteenth century) prescribe rules for offering the head of a human victim (*naraśiraḥpradāna*) to Durgā during her autumnal *pūjā*, citing a scriptural passage boldly asserting that "Durgā is enormously gratified even up to a hundred thousand years when worshipped according to injunction with a human head".¹⁴

The efficacy of human blood in obtaining the goddess's favours is even described in the *Devīmāhātmya* 13.9ab where the two main characters of the frame-story, the king and the merchant, both of whom have lost their possessions, worship Durgā with *balis* moistened with blood from their bod-

¹⁴*naraśiraḥpradānasya / nāreṇa śirasā vira pūjitā vidhivan nṛpa / tṛptā bhaved bhṛ-śaṃ durgā varṣāṇāṃ lakṣam eva ca //* (p. 189). The passage continues: *adya lakṣavarṣāvacchinnātisāyitadurgāprītikāma idaṃ naraśiro viṣṇudaivatam bhagavatyai durgādevyai tubhyam ahaṃ dade* / [The Declaration of Intention made by the sacrificer before performing this rite is then stated]: "Today, I, desirous of Durgā's excessive pleasure for the duration of a hundred thousand years, offer this human head whose presiding deity is Viṣṇu to Bhagavatī-Durgā."

ies for the duration of three years.¹⁵ Thereafter, Durgā is pleased and grants them wonderful rewards. Human blood was viewed as a potent offering for pleasing hungry deities such as Kālī and Durgā. Regard this vivid description of Caṇḍikā's shrine in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* 5.3.143-152 which plays with the notion of her gargantuan appetite for human blood in imaginative ways:

*śaśvatkavalitānekaḥīvaṃ pravitatodaram /
khacadghaṇṭhāvalīdantamālaṃ mṛtyor ivānanam //*

It was a veritable maw of Death— Wide its entrance like a gaping mouth endlessly swallowing countless creatures and its strings of bells, rows of bared fangs.

In the story, the hero Śaktideva is to be sacrificed to Caṇḍikā (which of course by several twists in the tale that include a timely hymn of praise he escapes). Bound and gagged, he awaits his death in her shrine, no place of serenity in this tale, at the moment when this verse appears. Figurative devices are employed to enhance the horror. Note how the victim's anxiety about his execution is projected onto the temple. The 'mouth of death' (*mṛtyor... ānanam*) is a prolepsis of his potential beheading, for Caṇḍikā's 'terrifying abode' (*caṇḍikāgrham... bhayakṛt* 142d) is metonymic of the goddess herself; it is she who causes terror through the image of her shrine, the mouth of the temple could well be her own mouth wide-open in hunger. In addition to her blood-lust, the *Kathāsaritsāgara* also describes Durgā as being temperamental by nature and a leader of ghosts. For instance in 15.1, her mood put out of joint by King Naravāhanadatta's lack of propitiation, she unleashes her rage on his army accompanied by a tribe of *bhūtas*, *vetālas*, *ḍākinīs* and other occult characters.

A Coven of *Yoginīs*

Such characteristics align the early Durgā with the group of goddesses known as the *yoginīs*/*mātṛs*. This group of female deities rose to prominence from the Kuṣāṇa era (1st - 3rd centuries CE) and ample statuary from Mathurā, a rich centre of Kuṣāṇa art, testifies their popularity¹⁶ Royal patronage of their worship is known to have existed as early as the second half of the fourth century from Gupta period inscribed copper plates found in

¹⁵ *dadatus tau baliṃ caiva nījagātrāsrgukṣitam / evaṃ samārādhayatas tribhir varṣair yatātmanoḥ / parituṣṭā jagaddhātṛi pratyakṣaṃ prāha caṇḍikā /* 13.9-13.10ab

¹⁶ Hatley 2007, pp. 38-39. For further analyses Dehejia 1986.

Bagh (Madhya Pradesh).¹⁷ In Indic beliefs, they form one in a small group of deities who stand on the fringes of Vaidika order and pose a potential threat to it. They control the causes of crises, haunt cremation-grounds, cross-roads and inhospitable places, spread disease and threaten to contaminate a rite with their presence unless warded off, like wild animals, with offerings. Purāṇic legends betray Durgā's close relationship to these dangerous deities by casting her as the leader of an army of *yoginīs* that defeats the Asuras in the Śumbha-Niśumbha legend. In the earliest *Skanda Purāṇa* myth, it is this very association of the goddess with the *yoginī* army that is most manifest in lengthy and vivid descriptive passages, a fact that supports the historical primacy of Caṇḍī's threatening, untameable aspect. The lists of numbers and names of members vary. In the earlier or the more Tantric myths (*Skanda Purāṇa*; *Kālikā Purāṇa*) the army is formed of innumerable multitudes, unmanageable crores of wild women who fill the skies. However in later scripture, the hordes crystallize into a contained group, a development perhaps indicating careful regulation. The *Devīmāhātmya* comprises a group of nine deadly deities: Cāmuṇḍā, the jackal-headed Śivadūti, and the Seven Mothers (*sapta mātṛs*) namely Brahmāṇī, Māheśvarī, Aindrī, Kaumārī, Vārāhī, Nārāsimhī and Vaiṣṇavī. Accompanying Durgā into the battle-field, their appearance brings forth an eruption of menace in the myths: some are theriomorphic (*Skanda Purāṇa* 64.19-30, *Vāmana Purāṇa* 21.18-20), fantastically formed with heads of owls, tigers, wolves, elephants and peahens; some have distinct and elaborately described roles such as that of Cāmuṇḍā and her slaying Raktabīja, a gruesome account of the goddess's parasitic swallowing of Raktabīja's blood that occupies an entire chapter (*Devīmāhātmya* 8); some, such as Śivadūtī, a jackal-headed goddess, appear to have specific significance as cremation-ground deities; they wander the battlefield feasting on the carcasses of the dead and the dying, dancing in abandon at the end of the war aroused by alcohol and blood.¹⁸ The legend implies that Durgā is one of them. Towards the end of his battle in the *Devīmāhātmya*, Śumbha accuses Durgā of foul play since despite her promise of fighting alone, she employs the aid of warrior-women. In answer to this, Durgā absorbs all the *yoginīs* into her body: a metaphor of appropriation unambiguous in its presentation of her as the singular embodiment (*ekaiva*) of the "Supreme Yoginī", one who both transcends and incorporates the powers of individual *yoginīs* into her being (*Devīmāhātmya* 10.4). This holds true for the other myths which likewise imply that Durgā and the *yoginīs* are consanguineous: they either spring from her body or

¹⁷K.V. Ramesh and S.P. Tewari 1990, pp. 4-6; 21-23.

¹⁸*hate mātṛgaṇas tasmin nanartāsṛmadoddhataḥ* / *Devīmāhātmya* 8.62ab

(in the case of the *sapta mātṛs* who are *śaktis* of the gods) dissolve into her body when their task is complete. Indeed, the most elaborate expression of Durgā's association with the *yoginīs* is to be found in the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, where a substantial section (61.36-117) deals with the worship of different forms of Durgā surrounded in circuits of *yoginīs*, with their visualizations (passages containing the essential features of the icon employed in meditation), names and their mantras. It says at the end of that section "wherever the goddess should roam, [they] follow her... Caṇḍikā's *yoginīs* are renowned in this world as her friends (*sakhī*)."¹⁹ Weighty sections devoted to *yoginī* worship are also to be found in mediaeval Eastern *paddhatis* of Durgā's Navarātra where rituals on *aṣṭamī* (the Eighth *tithi* of the Durgā Pūjā) involve placating these wrathful deities with *balis*, vegetarian and sanguinary, a practice that remains preserved even in present day-custom.²⁰

In the early mediaeval period, the *yoginīs* spawned propitiatory cults where they were worshipped with alcohol and flesh offerings to assuage their hunger. Should a *yoginī* be displeased with a worshipper's lack of homage, she could become malignant, but were she properly worshipped, the belief was that she became 'tamed' and compliant to the worshipper's every demand. This principle also underlies Durgā-worship, captured in statements expressed in scripture warning that should one not worship the goddess in the proper way:

On him angry Bhagavatī will cast a most terrible curse!

and

O Bhairava, wrathful Bhagavatī-Durgā certainly destroys the desired goals of the man who does not worship her during [her] splendid festival because of ignorance, sloth, arrogance or hatred.²¹

¹⁹ *Kālikā Purāṇa* 61.115d-116.

²⁰ Raghunandana, *Durgāpūjātattva*, p. 61 for the worship of of the 64 *mātṛs* (*āvaraṇapūjā*). See also Vidyāpati, *Durgābhaktitarāṅgiṇī*, pp. 139-140 where a more extended *āvaraṇapūjā* is enjoined.

²¹ The first quotation is: *tasya ruṣṭā bhagavatī śāpaṃ dadyāt sudūruṇam* / It is from Raghunandana, *Durgāpūjātattva* p. 3, where the quotation is ascribed to the now lost *Nandikeśvara* or the *Bṛhannandikeśvara Purāṇa*. The curse is applied to the person who has failed to perform the Daśamī rites of the annual Navarātra. The second quotation is from the *Kālikā Purāṇa* 61.12c-13 (also cited in *Durgāpūjātattva*, p. 2) : *yo mohād atha vālasyaḍ devīṃ durgāṃ mahotsave || na pūjayati dambhād vā dveṣād vāpy atha bhairava / kruddhā bhagavatī tasya kāmān iṣṭān nihanti vai ||*

It appears that Durgā's benevolence was predicated on her lethal nature. In times of trouble, her protection was not guaranteed. She had to be won over like all highly powerful 'whimsical' spirits through ritual, hymns and deeds of heroism. Only then was she considered to act as a champion of the worshipper and an arbiter of Justice.

On account of their association with the occult, power-bestowing 'black magic' and antinomian rituals that subverted norms of purity, some learned orthodox views regarded *ugra* deities such as *yoginīs* with suspicion. As an example of this view which prevailed even outside Brahmanical circles, I cite Bhāviveka, the Buddhist Madhyamaka thinker [cca. 500-570 AD] who says on the worship of the terrifying *yoginī* Cāmuṇḍā:

[H]ow can there be any similarity between the [ritual] knowledge of, for instance, Cāmuṇḍā which is replete with coarse and unbearable affliction, teaching a mundane purpose, and that for instance, [the gentle] Tārā which is knowledge of absolute significance?²²

Orthodoxy outwardly preferred gentler deities for the obvious lack of risk involved in their worship. Given their suspicion of *ugratā*, it is perhaps understandable why the Purāṇic scriptures are generally silent about aspects in Caṇḍī that they must have been uncomfortable about. Caṇḍī for instance is never shown drinking blood herself in the Purāṇas, though the *yoginīs* do, nor indeed is she as terrifying in appearance as, say, a fanged and emaciated Kālī, or as volatile. For a Caṇḍī more true to a *yoginī* in character and appearance—more Cāmuṇḍā or Kālī-like—one must again turn to the secular literature of the period.

The *Caṇḍīstotra* in the *Haraviṇaya*

Many Sanskrit hymns to Durgā written during the mediaeval era celebrate the figure of the fickle, wild (yet mild) goddess as personifying transcendent omnipotence. The hymn has a special resonance in Durgā's case. For it was not just a mode of address but also a mode of worship. It was a well-established belief that in times of crisis Durgā's grace could be won simply by the performance of a hymn—the tale of the powerless hero with nothing but the force of his praise to move Durgā occurs frequently in literature²³—hence a cleverly-crafted and powerful rendition was as important for her

²²Translated by Kapstein 2001, p. 249 (ref. P. D. Szántó).

²³See for instance *Kathāsaritsāgara* 5.3.146-147 and the *Mahābhārata*, *Virāṭaparvan*, Appendix I, Poona Critical Edition, 1933-59, pp. 300-303.

placation as offering *upacāras*, animal-sacrifice and performing fire-rituals. It is thus important in keeping the idea of placation in mind while reading encomiums to Durgā, for it no doubt influenced the mediaeval author. The goddess's *ugratā* plays an important role in these compositions for it was that very side the hymn sought to ameliorate. Two beautifully crafted examples of this kind of propitiatory hymn offered in times of conflict or imminent danger spring to mind: one found in the *Haraviṣṭaya*, the other in the *Gaiḍavaho*. I shall start with the *Haraviṣṭaya*.²⁴ This work on the subject of Śiva's war with Andhaka composed by the Kashmirian poet Ratnākara for the entertainment of the boy-king Cippaṭa Jayāpīḍa/Bṛhaspati (826-838 CE) contains a highly sophisticated eulogy to Durgā in chapter 47.

A few opening remarks on the form. The structure of the chapter may be envisaged as a gradual progression from popular allusions to the goddess to more arcane depictions. It unfolds in *medias res* at a place familiar to most readers: the Purāṇic battle-field of the previous chapter where the goddess had just entered the fray with the seven *mātṛs* to aid Śiva. During the battle, she is sung a hymn of praise by the onlooking gods in heaven to placate her, which forms the bulk of the content. As the hymn proceeds, the poet leads his reader through a maze of densely figurative passages woven together into a singular vision of the divine by a thread of assonance stringing every verse with each other.

From the very outset, the goddess is presented as pure Chaos and, like the *yoginīs* and the *mātṛs*, relishes upheaval. She is 'surrounded by the corpses of a multitude of Titans, at the forefront of battle' (verse 1). Her thundering cry causes the circle of enemies to disperse, she carries a sword (verse 5), and a lofty sun-disc as a mirror on her stomach to blind enemy-archers (verse 6). Her very purpose is to 'violently destroy these countless enemy forces at the vanguard of battle' while her wrath and battle are as natural as the elements, as necessary as a candle's flame (*dīpaśikhā*) in a dark room— 'For never is the light of a lamp an occasion for astonishment when it shatters the darkness of night permeating a house', muse the on-looking gods (verse 2).

Several verses (47.12-29) are devoted to the figure of Kālarātri, with whom Caṇḍī is collocated, an eschatological goddess associated with the ultimate resorption of the universe (*pralaya*) at the end of each aeon (*kalpa*). Durgā's battle is a symbol of *pralaya*, and she herself is Kālarātri incarnate—both as dark as the Final Night and the Night herself :

āviṣṭapralayadurdharakālarātri-

²⁴For a study, see Smith 1985.

*mūrter udagravikaṭāvayavāntareṣu /
paryāptim eti tava saṃhṛtasaptaloka-
lokāsthisaṃbhṛtiśatair api maṇḍanaṃ kiṃ // 47.13*

Upon the hour of the Aeon's Death
when you are manifest as untamed Kālarātri,
Can your fearful limbs grown to giant scale
be ever fully decked with ornament,
even by countless heaps of human bones
from seven worlds that you annihilated?

These verses emphasise Kālarātri's immensity through a series of hyperboles (*atiśayokti*): such is her size that the wide disc of the world up to the limit of the sun's rays are her bracelets and her breaths are the waters of the ocean (verse 16); even the ashes produced from the kindling-sticks of the seven worlds burnt by the conflagration during the hour of *pralaya* are insufficient in forming the sectarian mark on her forehead (verse 17); she is stained with the blood from the universe she has desiccated at the end of the *kalpa*, that she has quaffed from the lip of a chalice fashioned from Rāhu's white and fleshless skull, her teeth clotted with large pieces of his pungent flesh (verse 14); resorting to a child's form she plays with the discs of the sun and moon as if they were jewelled balls, while they rise and set behind the Udaya and Asta mountains (verse 23)²⁵; she hurries hither and thither beating aloud on her *ḍamaru* and ringing her bell, carrying on her shoulders the enormous skeleton of Brahmā (verse 24), she playfully scoops up the seven seas in her fingernails (verse 27). Creation is simply a game: violently she crafts the Egg of Brahmā– the limited universe– into the water-chalice of her sports filled with the seven seas, moulding the upper half into a huge stem simply through volition (verse 20).

In poems to gods, such hyperbole functions in creating the impression that divine nature ultimately sublimates all reality. It dwarfs over the worlds as an awe-inspiring, dynamic and unfathomable entity. But at the same time that it frightens with sheer size, the Divine embodies a paradoxically concomitant aspect that is gentle: for the “demonic” Caṇḍī-Kālarātri is also described as mild Lakṣmī (Kamalākṣī) whose white and delicate feet both

²⁵The girl playing with the ball is a literary convention appearing for instance in the *Daśakumāracarita*, chapter 6. Also see Lienhard 1999 (ref. P.D. Szántó). Such a representation of the goddess is also to be found in the iconography of mediaeval Kashmir: Professor Sanderson kindly drew to my attention an interesting image of an eight armed Durgā holding the discs of the sun and the moon in her top left and right hands, seated on a lion-throne now kept in the Mrs George Bunting Collection, Kansas (image in Pal 1975, pp. 230-231).

surpass a lotus (verse 32) and mirror its perfumed petals in the form of rosy toes overflowing in fragrance (verse 33).

In the middle of this depiction, concealed in outward layers of Paurāṇika allusions – at the very heart one may say – Ratnākara’s true vision of the ‘Goddess’ unfolds:

*yogeśvarīruciracakraḥalanābhi-
baddhāsthābhairavahr̥daṅkagatām janas tvām /
dhyāyann asaṅkalitasamkṛtāśokaśaṅku-
śaṅkaḥ śaśāṅkamukhi śaṅkaratām upaiti || 47.28*

In the very nub of Bhairava’s heart
fixed in fierce orb of dazzling *yoginīs*,
a Man thus meditating upon you,
counting as nought his inhibitions pricked
into being by barbs of Grief from dangers,
transforms to Śaṅkara, O Moon-faced One.

The poet was writing for a select audience – one that was highly learned and most likely committed in practice and doctrine to the esoteric Śāktism of mediaeval Kashmir. Hence the eulogy presents – in subtle disguise as it were – a goddess antinomian in essence: outwardly Paurāṇika while inwardly Śākta as in the above verse, a notion of overlapping identities embodied in the structure of the poem itself, proceeding as it does from the general to the specialized.

The *Haraviṇaya*’s vision of an energetic and terrible goddess appears to have been common in Kashmir and may be found again for instance in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* 15.1.99-102. This is a short hymn sung by the King Naravāhanadatta to placate the goddess Caṇḍikā-Kālarātri who in her wrath has made his army lose consciousness. Like the *Haraviṇaya*, the hymn eulogises Kālarātri as an untamed goddess envisioned as Disorder: bearing a strong similarity to antinomian Śākta goddesses, fierce, independent (though she is described as *bhavapriya*, the Beloved of Śiva, she is depicted without a consort), who is fickle and easily angered. She is described as skilled in hurling discuses at the heads of enemies; she wields a trident dripping with the blood from Mahiṣa’s throat; she gives succour to the three-worlds as Durgā, or, to interpret further, in a form which is difficult [for enemies] to conquer (*āśvāsitatribhuvane durgārūpe*); she vanquishes enemies by means of her terrible dance as she wildly circles a skull bowl flowing with the blood of the Daitya Ruru and, though she is Kālarātri, the black night of

universal destruction, she blazes forth in her radiance as if with the sun and the moon.²⁶

Radiance this is, but counterpoised with the terrifying. So too in the *Haraviṇaya* the goddess's love for blood is often evoked thereby alluding to her ferocious nature:

*nistriṃśaghātavinikṛttapaśūpahāra
raktacchaṭāchūraṇaśobhi grhājiraṃ te /
dhatte harapraṇatiroṣagrhitāsandhyā-
bandīśātānvitam ivānīśam amba lakṣmīm //* 47.43

Mother–Beauteous bespattered in blood sprayed
from offered beasts broken by the sword's blow
the courtyard of your shrine held it appeared
by night and day a myriad dusks whom you
in rage debarred from Hara's attendance.

Essentially what we have here is an image of terror. However Sanskrit *kāvya* tends to refine, embellish and aestheticize violence and true to this spirit, the poet references a well-known literary topos—Śiva's salutation to the Saṃdhyās and Devī's consequent jealousy²⁷ thereby deftly transforming the image of gore into an image of light. Blood is also compared to the light of the Saṃdhyās in 47.26:

*raktacchaṭāśavalakuñjararājakṛtti-
saṃchāditastanataṭāmba vibhāsi kālī /
paurandarī dig iva bāladivākaraṃśu-
bhinnāntarālatimirasthagitodayādriḥ //*

Mother,
The Dark-Lady glisters as if she were the East
where the red rays of the new-born sun break
from the depths of Mount Dawn sheathed in sable,
the flanks of her breasts are sheathed in sable hide
from the King of Elephants shot with rays of blood.

²⁶ *āśiraścakrasaṃcāraturā praṇavākṛtiḥ / tvam prāṇaśaktir jantūnāṃ jīvanī tvām namāmy aham / sravanmaḥiṣakaṇṭhāsradhārābhis trīśikhāśribhiḥ / āśvāsītatribhuvane durgarūpe namo 'stu te / rururaktabhṛtabhrāntakarasthitakapālayā / nṛtyantyā trijagadrakṣāpātrayeṇa jītaṃ tvayā / ūrdhvākṣidīptidīpāgryakapālā kālārātry api / kapālahastā sārkendur iva bhāsi bhavapriye //*

²⁷ The idea of Devī being jealous of Śiva paying homage to the Saṃdhyās is well-known and also used for instance in Hāla's *Sattasāi* 1 and *Caṇḍīśataka* 49.

Besides the tropes of blood and light, red and white, note that Caṇḍī is being described as Kālī, a further example of the dualism latent in her character in this early strata of poetic literature.

The hymn to Vindhyaśinī in the *Gaiḍavaho*

Underlying a great quantity of such descriptions is the *Gaiḍavaho*, an earlier work which Ratnākara (consciously or unconsciously) echoes in several verses.²⁸ This Prakrit poem ascribed to Vākpatirāja/Bappaīrāja is about the defeat of the King of Gauḍa by Yaśovarman (725-752 CE), ruler of Kanauj and patron of the poet. On his expedition of conquest (*viḡayayātrā*), Yaśovarman passes through the Vindhya region and halts at the shrine of the buffalo-slaying goddess located on the slopes of the Vindhyas. Verses 285-338 contain his hymn to the goddess, sung to obtain her favour before imminent battle. These stanzas heighten the goddess's *ugratā* and make it her most memorable quality. They abound in charnel-ground imagery, portray Durgā mainly in her deadly manifestations as Kālārātri (The Queen of the Night) or as Nidrā (The Sleep of Death) and adopt, on the whole, a less loftier, more *bībhatsa* (horrific) tone than the *Haraviḡaya*. In fact Ratnākara's hymn, though reliant on the *Gaiḍavaho*, tones down the *bībhatsa* elements in the Prakrit poem. For instance the antecedent for *Haraviḡaya* 47.36 ab²⁹ is *Gaiḍavaho* 300:

pāuṇava uvahārāyaresu saī dhūvadhūmavaḍalāiṃ /
*uvvamasī bahularayaṇībhāvesu ṇirantaraṃ timiraṃ ||*³⁰

Having drunk as it were the clouds of incense-smoke on account of your fondness for offered gifts [such as incense, lamps, flowers etc.] you regurgitate perpetual darkness in each incarnation as Night.

When Ratnākara interprets this verse, the goddess is darkened through an internal- and invisible-transubstantiation (*pariṇāma...vaśād*) of incense-smoke into bodily darkness. But here the goddess vomits forth darkness

²⁸The existence of parallels with the *Gaiḍavaho* was first identified by Professor A. Sanderson. The parallels are as follows: *Haraviḡaya* (HV) 47.10: *Gaiḍavaho* (GV) 287; HV 47.35: GV 292; HV 47.43: GV 294; HV 47.13: GV 297; HV 47.42: GV 299; HV 47.36: GV 300; HV 47.38: GV 302; HV 47.39: GV 304; HV 47.40: GV 306; HV 47.9: GV 314; HV 47.41: GV 336.

²⁹*kālī vibhāsi bhagavatī upahārapīḍadhūpotṭhādūmapariṇāmavaśād iva tvam /*

³⁰*pīṭvevopahārādareṇa sadā dhūpadhūmapaṭalāni udvamasī bahularajanīrūpeṇa niraḡalaṃ timiraṃ*. All citations of the Sanskrit *chāyā* are by one Haripāla reproduced in the edition by S. Pandurang Parab.

(*uvvamasi... timiraṃ*), a far more overt and horrifying image than the one in the *Haravijaya*.

Further, the antecedent for *Haravijaya* 47.43 is *Gaiḍavaho* 294:

tuha dāraṃ thāmatthāmadinṇarohirovahāram ābhāi /
*harapaṇayaroṣavisasiyasamjjhāsayaalāvaiṇṇamva //*³¹

The doorway of your [shrine] is [red with] the offerings of blood scattered here and there as if it were daubed with fragments of the Saṃdhyās torn [by you] in rage because of Hara's fondness [for them].

And *Gaiḍavaho* 304 for *Haravijaya* 47.39³² :

mālūrapattamālākāṇṭayakayasoṇiavva āhāsi /
*taṃ sarasarattacandaṇaparisoṇathanāntarā devi //*³³

With the region between your breasts smeared red with an unguent of red sandalwood paste, O Goddess, you appear bloodied, as it were, with the thorn [like tips] of your garland of *bilva* leaves.

In Ratnākara's reworking of *Gaiḍavaho* 294, the goddess had held the Saṃdhyās captive (*bandī*). In the *Gaiḍavaho* 29 the Saṃdhyās are torn to pieces (*visasiya*). In another example, the *Haravijaya*'s version of *Gaiḍavaho* 304, the unguent of red sandalwood is compared to the redness of the Saṃdhyās enveloping Devī's skin (*upagūḍhasaṃdhyārāgeva*), while in the above verse Vākpati imagines them to be open wounds.

In contrast to the Sanskrit hymn, Vākpati heightens the sense of the grotesque playing with the *topoi* of blood, bones and carcasses, so that the overall presentation appears embedded in the context of Tantric worship. We can understand this from verse 319, where her devotees are described as women belonging to the Kula (*kaūlaṇārīo*).³⁴ It may well be for this very reason that the antinomianism gently hinted at in the *Haravijaya* is here

³¹ *tava dvāraṃ sthānasthānadattarudhiropahāram ābhāti harapaṇayaroṣaviśasitasam-*
dhyāśakalāvākīṇam iva /

³² *preṅkhajjapākusumakomalacandanāmbucarcāṇkapīnapariṇāhipayodharaśrīḥ / śo-*
bhām bibharṣi bhagavatī upagūḍhasaṃdhyārāgeva kṛṣṇarajanītvam upāgatā tvam //

³³ *bīlvapatramālākāṇṭakakṛtasoṇitevābhāsi svaṃ sarasarattacandana[pari]śoṇastanā-*
ntarā he devi /

³⁴ *visasijjantamahāpasudaṃsaṇasaṃbhamaparopparārūḍhā / gayapeccīya gandhaūḍiṇ-*
kuṇanti tuha kaūlaṇārīo //

on full display from beginning to end. Lamps inside the goddess's shrine burn dimly as if on account of the darkness caused by the hair of numerous heads offered to her (verse 318); Kaula women anxious to catch a glimpse of a human victim being slaughtered alive, climb on top of each other in a confused melee (verse 319);³⁵ when she shines forth in the form of Night, she holds a skull disguised as the moon while all the planets embellishing her seem to be human bones (verse 302); she walks about in her temple through a love for roaming in cremation-grounds, attracting flocks of geese who resemble skulls by the jingling of her anklet (verse 291); she uses a garland of swords from slain Daityas instead of water-lilies during worship (verse 303); when streaks of blood appear on the three prongs of her trident, they resemble her three eyes, bloodshot in anger and glittering with light, that seem to have been transferred on to the body of the buffalo (verse 305); the door of the arched gateway of her shrine is adorned with a garland of bells, as if they were removed from the throats of Mahiṣa's kin held captive by her (verse 285); even by day, her *sanctum sanctorum* is haunted by owls unafraid of the terrible beauty of unsheathed daggers shadowing the inner-spaces and offered to her by heroes (verse 306); reflections of red banners on the shrine fall on glossy slabs of stone and are lapped up by jackals mistaking them for streams of blood from plentiful sacrifices made to her (verse 310); before her fall the reflections of ghosts who appear satisfied with blood as if they had drunk the red-lac juice—the consecration fluid during worship—that had melted from her forehead (verse 311); on account of their waving banners dyed red and resembling streams, her temple appears to spew blood issuing forth from decapitated animals that she drinks everyday (verse 322); even at present she assumes a body bedecked with a long row of human heads dripping with blood, as if her own bones had grown slack while she flew into the air when Kāṁsa had dashed her against the rocks (verse 326); from the branches of trees hang the flesh of heroes dripping with blood sold by night in her cemeteries (verse 327); such is her greed for gnawing juicy bones, that her tongue licks the rows of her teeth (verse 328); Revatī (her emaciated attendant) goes before her as if she had lost weight on witnessing the frightful spectacle of the corpse always lying before the goddess (verse 329); trees worship her with red sap oozing from their limbs hacked off by

³⁵The Jaina commentator Haripāla understands *kaūlaṇārīo* to mean the goddesses painted on frescoes (*kaulanāryaś citranyastadevatāviśeṣāḥ*). He has more to say—Though I am not fully clear what he means, he seems to be saying that the poet imagines the *kaula* women to have huddled together in the picture as if in fear of the human-slaughter. On the other hand, the description of Kaula women eager to see human sacrifice appears elsewhere: see for instance the *Kādambarī* of Bāṇa: *siṃhībhir iva kauleyakakuṭumbinībhir anugamyamānam... mātaṅgakanāmānaṃ śabarasenāpatim* (pp. 30-31).

the blow of an axe in lieu of blood (verse 330); the blood-matted feathers of roosters fallen in cock-fights cake the doorway of her shrine (verse 331); even the pillars inside adorned with red flags strike terror as they seem to be adorned with pieces of raw flesh (verse 332); in every incarnation as the Night, she blazes forth in splendour accompanied by the Mothers, ruddy flame spewing from her face, resembling a crested banner dyed red that spreads devotion (verse 334).

Nevertheless, these gory images are interspersed with softer moments, so that grotesque elements are balanced by the poet's reflections on a gentle goddess, resulting in a richly varied hymn where soft and harsh notes create, as it were, a complete harmony: Mahiṣāsura is irradiated by the lustre from her toe-nails and appears surmounted by a mound of snow gifted by her father, the Himalayas (verse 286); only half of her body dwells in one part of moon-diademed Śiva, while the whole is manifested in his heart (verse 292); the garden round her temple is never abandoned by peacocks as if they were bound in affection to her son Kumāra's peacock (verse 299); her feet are compared to the Dusk: their glittering toe-nails are like digits of the moon, the red barley touching them—the pink evening sky, and the sweat mingling with the barley produced by the thrill of Hara's touch—the Ganges flowing through heaven (verse 309); she is like lightning present in a multitude of monsoon clouds as she prepares to fight Mahiṣa, tawny in her anger (verse 316); on the other hand, angry though she is, she is also a woman in love: how is she to master her breaths, asks the poet rhetorically, if they increase in her passion for Śiva (verse 313)? The hymn ends with the king's observation that 'in outward form alone she embodies the terrible sport of Kālarātri. As for her heart, it is tender with the nectar of compassion' (verse 337).

The “fierce lotus-foot” and the *Caṇḍīśataka*

One of the leitmotifs frequently employed by poets to describe Mahiṣāsuramardinī was the image of her foot under which lay supine the bloodied carcass of the Asura. For the idea was that Mahiṣa was so insignificant next to the power of Caṇḍī, that merely a tread of her foot was enough to destroy him, nothing more. The insignificance of demons next to the humblest physical appendage of the gods was an established view—it is reflected in the myth of Rāvaṇa shaking Mount Kailāsa, when Śiva stops him by trampling the mountain with his foot. The earliest poetic description of Durgā's foot allied with the slain Mahiṣa is an inscription by Anantavarman, the Maukhari king (first half of the 6th century CE, possibly earlier), recording the installation of the images of Kātyāyanī (Durgā) and Śiva in

the Lomaśa Ṛṣi cave in the Nāgārjunī hills and the dedication of a village to Bhavānī/Devī. The opening verse in *śārdūlavikrīḍita* supplies us with the image:

*unnidrasya saroruhasya sakalām ākṣipyā śobhāṃ rucā
sāvajñam mahiṣāsurasya śirasi nyastāḥ kvaṇannūpurāḥ /
devyā vaḥ sthirabhaktivādasadrśīm yuñjan phalenārthitām
diśyād acchanakhāmśujālaḥ pādaḥ padam sampadām //*

Throwing to shade with light
the light of full-blown lotuses,
while its tinkling anklet was placed
in disdain on Mahiṣa's head,
Devī's foot with nets of moonbeams
pouring forth from her toe-nails.—May they light
for you at every step Fortune
with right reward desired, equal to your steadfast prayer.

Though it is difficult to make precise statements regarding why and how artistic temperament is piqued, the image strikes me as suggesting several paradoxes. Firstly, it conveys both the beautiful and the repulsive: the anklet, a trope of coquetry (*śṛṅgāra*) in erotic poetry contrasts with the *bībhatsa* head, and, in the next verse, the tip of Mahiṣa's horn felled in battle; the blood of the slain contrasts with the spray of nectareous moonlight issuing from her toenails resulting in a juxtaposition between white (or is it silver?) and rich red, a favourite contrast, as we have seen, of hymns to Caṇḍī. For the Śākta poet, blood, though terrible, is an object of beauty, a device of adornment and a medium of worship. Only on the occasion of bloodshed was the goddess thought to manifest her full beauty arrayed in nothing other than the colour of her anger, the natural lustre of her toenails and the redness of blood. A Rāṣṭrakūṭa charter from Chinchani village (926 AD) describes Mahiṣa's blood as the lac embellishing Caṇḍī's foot:

*śūlabhinnasya vinyasto mahiṣasya balād gale /
durgāyāḥ pātu vaḥ pādas tadraktālaktakāṅkitāḥ //*

Besmeared in the scarlet lac of
his blood may the foot of Durgā
clamped on Mahiṣa's throat protect,
while trident-pierced the Asura.³⁶

³⁶See also *Caṇḍīśataka* 2:

Furthermore, the liquid of life that colours Durgā's feet permanently and counterfeits red lac is suggestive of animal sacrifice. In literature and ritual, *paśubali* is an inevitable price Durgā demands for all favours granted. The buffalo, as one may well recall from current practice, is the preferred animal of sacrifice during the autumnal rite— mediaeval Durgā *pūjāpaddhatis* are filled with injunctions enjoining innumerable buffalo sacrifices deemed particularly efficacious in transforming the sacrificer into a *mahābala* (a man of great powers).

Secondly, while the foot displayed the goddess's lethal nature, it also evoked her justness. Such a view had great impact on Indian kingship, for it resonated with the belief that the ideal Indian king was both dangerous in his anger and benevolent in his justness.³⁷ In the context of kingship, Durgā is a figure of Retribution and Protection. Such a depiction may be found for instance in the *Caṇḍīśataka* (A Hundred Verses to Caṇḍī) ascribed to Bāṇa. This work, written sometime during the rule of Harṣa (606-647 AD), uses as its central theme the glorification of Devī's left foot interpreted as a symbol of benevolent justice in a hundred and two benedictory verses (*āśīs*). As in the myth of Durgā in the Purāṇas, the concept of the just battle is central to the *Caṇḍīśataka*. In fact the *Caṇḍīśataka* closely allies itself to the Purāṇic myth of Durgā as its major point of reference, rather than following in the unknown and uncanny footsteps of the black-hued goddess of *pralaya* in the former poems so far discussed. Morality is schismatic for there are only two sides, the good and the bad. It is very clear who falls on which: Mahiṣa is the criminal on the loose: the enemy of the gods (*devadvit*), the one who for

*huṃkāre nyakkṛtodanvati mahati jite śiñjitair nūpurasya
śliṣyacchṛṅgakṣate 'pi kṣaradaśrjī nijālaktabhṛāntibhāji /
skandhe vindhyādribuddhyā nikaṣati mahiṣasyāhito 'sūn ahārṣīd
ajñānād eva yasyāś caraṇa iti śivam sā śivā vaḥ karotu //*

When the tinkling of the anklet
triumphed over his fearful cry
by which oceans had been humbled;
when the scratch from chafing horns
oozing blood had counterfeited
the redness of her own lac-dye;
her foot plundered Mahiṣa's life
placed on his scraping shoulder innocently
thinking it must be the Vindhya—
May that Śivā bless you with joy.

³⁷See for instance *Raghuvamśa* 1.16 where the ideal king is described as both forbidding and benevolent: *bhīmākāntair nṛpaḡṇaiḥ sa babhūvopajīvinām / adhṛṣyaś cābhigamyaś ca yādoratnair ivārṇavaḥ //*

long had been of corrupt heart (*dūraduṣṭāśayaḥ*). Thus her slaying Mahiṣa is not simply gratuitous, but believed necessary for the stability of Dharma and the salvation of the oppressed: it is described in the poem that the descent of her foot on Mahiṣa, was performed in courage (*dhairyāt*), that it was proper because it was free of coquettishness (*muktaḥilāsamucitapatana°*) (verse 10). Caṇḍī is the force that disciplines Chaos, though paradoxically her own affiliations to Chaos are glossed over—nowhere are there descriptions of her as the wild leader of ghosts or as being hungry for blood—whereas the poem emphasises her Paurāṇika association with Order.

The poem also plays with the notion of divine punishment as a reward—Durgā's *ugratā* rewards Mahiṣa with a noble death. In verse 6, he is said to have acquired a place in heaven (*nāke prāpat pratiṣṭhām*) when he fell at her feet despite his reprehensibility. And in verse 8 he is described as becoming *svastha* by the grace of the divine foot both in the sense of being 'restored' as if it were a cooling pond (*hradam iva*) and in the sense of a 'heaven-dweller'.³⁸ Thus, though certainly criminal, Mahiṣa also embodies in many ways the devotee who sacrifices himself to the deity thereby saving himself from his own 'demonic nature'. One can even detect a note of wry amusement in some of his descriptions (verse 51 for instance) where he certainly does not cut an awe-inspiring figure as in the Purāṇas. Indeed, his bumbling hell-raising and impish jibes are more of the irrepressible prankster than the demon. Here one discerns a departure from the Purāṇas where comical Mahiṣa is not. In the *Caṇḍīśataka*, he is always held as a point of contrast to the goddess whose sublimity the devotional nature of the poem attempts to enhance.

In contrast to the *Haraviṣaya*, the *Gaṇḍavaho* or even the *Kathāsarit-sāgara*, the *Caṇḍīśataka* eschews the *bībhatsarasa* dominant in the former works. Thus correlations between Caṇḍī and overtly dangerous goddesses are kept to a minimum. For in this poem she is more a figure of the court than an untamed chaotic presence threatening to cause upheaval. And though her portrayal is on the whole as an *ugra* slayer, it is a nuanced one. She is comparable to a Dharmic King superseding Indra and indeed taking over his role as the leader of the gods. Indra in the *Caṇḍīśataka* is a failure, an object of mirth. So are all the male gods (8, 14, 66): Brahmā is rendered powerless by the lassitude of his meditation (9); the Rudras run away (66); Śiva is a veritable post (*sthānu*: note that this is also one of his conventional epithets) where Mahiṣa removes his itch (88, 92, 100, 101); Mahiṣa devours the Sun's green horses as if they were tender green shoots; he searches for Viṣṇu like a quagmire to wallow in and Varuṇa a pool of

³⁸The commentary points out the pun: *mahiṣaḥ svastho nirvṛtaḥ svargasthaś cābhūt*.

cooling bath-water (8). Where the gods have failed, the poem implies the goddess succeeds. Caṇḍī's wrath is the wrath of the warrior-champion of the kingdom of heaven unjustly usurped by the foe. Her foot is a symbol of her protection: her toes are called the other guardians of the world (*lokapālāḥ*) when the usual pentad of custodians, Indra, Kuvera, Varuṇa and Fire fled from Mahiṣa in their terror (verse 9); it is exhorted to govern its subjects (or 'you' in the plural), its toenails fiery-white with light, a sign of its royalty, and comparable to her father, the Himalayas, in might; it is the fifth royal *upāya*, the policy of sovereignty dictating how enemies are to be controlled, and the only one which is effective when all the usual four *upāyas* practised by the gods have failed (verse 46). Indeed such is her kingly valour, that Śiva jests it is unsuitable for a woman (verse 14). The same idea is repeated in 47, where, appearing ashamed (*lajjiteva*), she describes her behavior as inappropriate for a woman (*na sadṛśam idaṃ*) acutely aware of her husband watching on and questions the battle she has undertaken. Then she slays Mahiṣa immediately, stabbing him out furtively (*savyāja*^o) with the edge of her left toe so that Śiva would not see her in that way. It is a beautifully unusual verse, in a poem that uniformly (and even monotonously) projects the godhead as confidently assertive of her violence, where conjugal politics rather than cosmic warfare, the deity's humanity over her divinity, hesitation over self-assurance are playfully emphasised.

Indeed, Bāṇa's tone throughout the poem is light, gamine and refined: he entreats the goddess like a gallant prostrate before his *caṇḍī* (fiery paramour) in the first verse to calm her anger. "Do not, O Brow, break your allure (*mā bhāṅkṣīr bhrūr vibhramam*)", entreats the poet in the opening verse, "O Lower-lip, what is this distress? (*adhara vidhuratā keyam*) O Mouth, let go of the redness [of anger] (*āsyasya rāgam*). O hand, this one [i.e. Mahiṣa] is not alive (*pāṇe prāṇy eva nāyam*). [Therefore] why do you brandish the trident through your conviction in [performing] battle (*kalayasi kalahaśraddhayā kiṃ triśūlam*)?" And when she hears this plea, the goddess causes her limbs, on which there were signs of rising anger (*udyatko-paketūn*), to resume their natural state (*prakṛtim avayavān prāpayantyeva*). The language of placating the goddess is thus cleverly blended with the amorous language of placating a woman.

The emphasis, as we see, is on restraint. Caṇḍī's ferocity is portrayed as controlled rather than unbridled: first she grows black (*kālī*) [in unmitigated fury] after having beheld the entire world agitated as it were by the hour of destruction; then red (*lohitā*) in passion when she sees Mahiṣa's horn encircling her foot, but in the last resort when she sees him lying crushed at her foot, her colour softens to white by virtue of her original nature (*prākṣvabhāvena gaurī*) (41). Verse 53 describes her as Kālarātri, the same

goddess we had encountered in the *Haraviṣaya* hymn to Caṇḍī. Here she is not the terrifying form we had seen before. This is a mild Kālarātri, her expression that of mercy:

*cakre cakrasya nāśryā na ca khalu paraśor na kṣuraprasya nāser
yad vakraṃ kaitavāviṣkṛtamahiṣatanau vidviṣaty ājibhāji /
protāt prāsena mūrdhnaḥ saghr̥ṇam abhimukhāyatayā kālarātryā
kalyāṇāny ānanābjam sṛjatu tad asṛjo dhārayā vakritaṃ vaḥ //*

Not for the line³⁹ of the discus
nor indeed for axe nor arrow
nor for sword did her face flinch
while the Foe in guile had conjured
up a buffalo's form as he made war;
But at the lines of streaming blood
rushing from his lance-riven head
before her eyes did it become
contorted in compassion—
May that lotus-face of Kālarātri
shower on you felicities.

I suspect that the poet deliberately wished to subvert expectations with this verse which reflects an understanding of Durgā, as tender even while embodying destruction. That the poet held a view of the goddess which balanced danger with benevolence appears also to be suggested in Caṇḍī's primary association in the poem—with the gentle Pārvatī. Śiva is frequently depicted teasing her in battle while lovingly acknowledging his subordination to her. Caṇḍī's left foot is called Pārvatī's in a number of verses—and it is not only *vāma* (hostile) for the buffalo in its *ugratā*, but also radiant as a lotus and light as a young girl's (*pādaś cāyaṃ sarojadyutir anātigurur yoṣitaḥ* 97). Thus the role of the wrathful warrior is tempered with that of the consort and the lover.

A Kaula hymn to Durgā

Much of the material known to us from the period suggests that Mahiṣāsuramardinī was mainly worshipped within the edifice of orthopraxy, i.e. via calendrically regulated Purāṇic rituals open to Brahmanical society at large. Some evidence is available indicating that her worship occurred outside the

³⁹I have translated both *aśrī* (lit. edge) and *dhārā* (stream/edge) as 'line' in order to emphasise the punning relation between the two words.

remit of Purāṇic *pūjā* in Tantric circles. This evidence is to be found in literature composed in the Śākta milieu that flourished in mediaeval Bengal, Orissa and Assam where Tantricised forms of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī and their special procedures of worship are frequently discussed. A few works by way of example are the *Bhadrakālīmantravidhiprakaraṇa*,⁴⁰ the *Kālīkā Purāṇa*,⁴¹ the *Kaulāvalī* ascribed to Jñānānanda Paramahansa, the eclectic *Tantrasāra* ascribed to Kṛṣṇānanda Bhaṭṭācārya and the *Kulacūḍāmaṇi Tantra*. A discussion of the Tantrification of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī is beyond the scope of this paper. At present, I am concerned with the last two works. They both contain a short and relatively unknown poem in fourteen stanzas in *śārdūlavikrīḍita* to Mahiṣāsūramardīnī.⁴² What sets the poem apart from the others is its inclusion of ritual instructions, namely an encoded mantra, description of Mahiṣāmardīnī's *yantra*, her visualization and benefits thereof. In the final verse, these are described as revealed to the poet in secret (*gūḍhopadiṣṭam*) and pertaining to the Practice of the Kula (*kulācāra*), non-dualistic ritual procedures within the more esoteric Śākta cults. Since esoteric Śāktism saw itself as a system transcending lay religion by providing higher revelation to its practitioners, Durgā in this poem is a more subversive figure than the Purāṇic Durgā.

The world of the poem is a hidden one, that of internal worship, of visions, of a form of the goddess enclosed from the outer world and known only to the poet, of risk leading to tranquil self-awareness. It opens with an impassioned plea to the goddess by the speaker urging her to remain in his heart:

*maccitte cara caṇḍi cūrṇitadurācārapracāṇḍāsure
svairam dāraya bhūridurdharadaradrohormimarmāpadaḥ /
tenāyam nīrupadruto nīrupamaśrīpādapadmāṭavi-
prāptānantarasārṇave mama manohaṃsaṃś ciraṃ nandatu // 1*

Dwell in my heart Fiery Empress,
The evil, the fierce Asura Thou didst crumble

⁴⁰Critical edition, translation and discussion in Sanderson 2007, pp. 61-101.

⁴¹*Kālīkā Purāṇa* 60.57-163, pp. 423-448.

⁴²*Kulacūḍāmaṇi Tantra*, 7.22-35, pp. 42-46 (The hymn was contained only in the versions of the *Kulacūḍāmaṇi Tantra* circulated in East India. A Kashmiri manuscript in *śāradā* script (Benares Hindu University, Catalogue No. 1028) is severely trimmed and does not cite the hymn). *Tantrasāra*, chapter 2, pp. 496-500. The verses of the poem are composed in a florid style that I have tried to render in an archaic register of English to fit the mood. While largely following the text of the *Kulacūḍāmaṇi Tantra*, I number the verses of the hymn as 1, 2 etc., so that readers may compare with the *Tantrasāra* version without difficulty.

Tear at will the immense waves, the stress
 Piercing 'pon my wound unbearable.
 May my Swan-Mind delight eternally
 Afflicted not, where the boundless Nectar-sea
 Bides by the lotus-blossoms of Your feet
 In matchless groves do they meet.

Befitting its emphasis on secrecy, it is not a literal war that the poem is concerned with but an interiorized one. The rhetoric of violence (*dāraya*, *cūrṇita*^o), amplified even more by the alliteration with the “ra”, is used in reference to personal suffering and bondage: the unliberated state of the speaker’s mind (*maccitta*) is envisioned as the battlefield deluged by piercing (*dara*) afflictions (*āpadaḥ*) which the goddess is exhorted to crush in her fury as if they were Asuras.

What we have here is a different view of *ugratā*. While in previous works it was treated as an awe-inspiring quality, here *ugratā* is a form of compassion: an extreme but ultimately therapeutic and liberating mode of action. And while it is viewed with trepidation by orthopraxy, for the speaker, envisioned as a Tantric practitioner, the goddess’s ferocity is a form of *gnosis*, heightened in meditative visualizations (*cintanavidhi*) which entail an abjuration of Brahmanical anxiety (*śaṅkā*) regarding the horrific, the impure and the contaminated for the attainment of knowledge superior to the Vedas and ultimate liberation.

In so doing, he risks infamy:

*mannindā yadi vāstu te kulapathācārād varam māstu vā
 kīrtiḥ keśavakauśikārcanacarī naivāstu matsaṇnidhiḥ /
 mātār brahmaharismarārihutabhugdaityārisevāspada-
 śrīmatpādapayojacintanavidhau cittam sadaivāstu naḥ || 4*

*nirdiṣṭo 'smi yadi tvadīyapadayukpūrvāparibhāvane
 nirdiṣṭasya tadā mamāpi viralaṁ kiṁ vāstu siddhāspadam /
 tasmād devi kṛpābhārāñcitatarāṁ śrīpādapadmadvayam
 maccitte 'kṣatasampadaṁ prasaratu kṣemaṅkari kṣamyatām || 5*

Better Calumny through Thy Kula way
 Or that Fame should ne'er attend me,
 But never him may I survey
 Who Keśava-Kauśika doth glorify.
 'Pon lotus-feet served by Fire, Hari,
 Brahmā, Indra, Love's-Enemy⁴³

⁴³I.e. Śiva.

Let Insight in deepest reverie
Gaze for all eternity.

If Thou commandeth me to serve Thy feet,
What state of accomplishment would be left
For even one as I, an ungained feat?
Thus grown more arched by Mercy's weight the cleft
Of Thy beautiful lotus-feet, Goddess,
May that pair spread upon my consciousness
Undiminished riches and may Thou,
Cause of Treasures, forgiveness on me bestow.

I take the phrase *keśavakauśīkārcanacarī* in the previous verse to mean a worshipper of the Vedic gods Viṣṇu and Indra, and the poet's wish never to collude with such a follower, as a sign of his contempt for the Vaidika order at large. Thus he welcomes the vision of the deity's *ugratā*, whatever the dangers, seeing in it the door to his liberation. Note the tone of intimacy created by the use of the first person pronoun. In striking contrast, the personal pronoun is hardly ever used in the poems I examined previously: the basic syntax of a verse (*anvaya*) generally articulated the more universal sense of 'May the goddess protect you' or 'May the 'Goddess' be victorious' while the deity celebrated by those poems was in general public (*paurāṇika/smārta*) and not Tantric as in this case. However in this poem, with the movement from the outward to the internal, the form of the personalized address is maintained throughout, thereby reflecting the private nature of the speaker's worship.

Like the *Caṇḍīśataka*, the central theme of the poem is Durgā's 'luminous foot'. Here it acquires a special significance. The play with dark and light is in this instance a play between bondage and liberation. Bondage is envisioned as a state of internal darkness (*svāntadhvānta*) (verse 8) and utter etiolation (*akhila...virasa*), filled with the murmurings of the ocean of Delusion which has no source (*anādimohajaladhivyāhāravidha*) (verse 7). As they appear in this landscape of the speaker's consciousness, the goddess's feet overflow with mead (*amṛta*), and the light pulsating from her toes, an image familiar to us from the *Caṇḍīśataka*, the *Gaṇḍavaho* and the *Haraviṣaya*, is the flash of enlightenment that permeates—indeed liberates—the dark cavity (*svāntadhvāntavisari*) of his bound soul. Thus he prays:

*yat pādasphuradamśujālaṭharāc caṇḍāmśukoṭīsphurat-
svāntadhvāntavisarinirmalacidānandatrayaṃ daivatam /*

*sargaṃ saṃsṛjati⁴⁴ sthitiṃ vitanute sṛṣṭiṃ punar lumpati
prodbhinnāñjananīlanīradamaś citte sadaivāstu naḥ || 8*

Long may that Splendour in our minds remain
Bright as the raincloud's dark effulgence
That resembles crushed antimony's stain.
Which is the Three-fold perfect Bliss of Consciousness
That in countless flashing moon beams cascades
From streams of light Your foot irradiates
The heart of our darkness Which dispells,
Creates, preserves and Being again kills.

How is he to visualize the goddess? The poem includes from verses 9 onwards the passage narrating the elements of her icon that will bestow on the practitioner his goal. He is to visualize the goddess Durgā, who 'removes fear, impediment and damnation' (*bhayadurgadurgatiharā*) and 'delights in victory' (*jayāhlādinī*) (verse 9) whirling about intoxicated by battle (*raṇamudā ghūrṇāyamānā*) (verse 11), 'in a splendid battlefield' (*cā-ruraṇāṅgane*) which 'is [like] an ocean where flutter the edges of yak-tail whisks and shields, [enveloped] by a large covering of whizzing discuses and such and [coloured] copper by a multitude of swift arrows effortlessly sent up by spreading soldiers, ablaze with the insatiable hunger and thirst of birds of prey who rend to pieces evil and arrogant Asuras whose heads are made to dance and roll about by the clamorous wind'.⁴⁵ He must dwell upon the mantra with the eight syllables drawn in the centre of eight petals in the place between Maḥiṣa's horns with the 'Vadhu' and the 'Mothers' (verse 11).⁴⁶ In her right and left hands, Śivā holds from top to bottom, a discus, a conch-shell, a chopper, a shield, a bow and arrow and a trident. She makes the Abhaya gesture, she is dark, her matted locks are piled high on her head like a black raincloud, her gaping mouth salivates at the convulsions of fallen warriors, she is terrifying with her awful laughter.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *saṃsṛjate* in the *Tantrasāra*.

⁴⁵ *nṛtyatkheṭakacāmarāñcalacalaccakrādyakharvāvarā-
sphāyatsainyaśīlīsukhocchaladanalpājihmatāmṛāmbudhau /
jhañjhāvātavisarpinartitaśiraḥsāṭopaduṣṭāsura-
trutyatkhaṇḍavikhaṇḍitākhiḥśakuntakṣutpipāsojjvale || 10*

⁴⁶ It is not entirely clear what this means, but I find Finn's reconstruction of the encoding plausible. See Finn 1986, p. 140, n. 273.

⁴⁷ *ūrdhvādhaḥkramasavyavāmakarayoś cakraṃ daraṃ karttṛkām
kheṭaṃ bāṇadhanuśtrīśūlabhayahṛnmudrāṃ dadhānām śivām /
śyāmām nīlaghanocakuntalacayapronnaddhajūtām skhalad-
virāsphālalasaṭkarālavadanām ghorāṭṭahāsodbhaṭām || 12*

What are the benefits of such meditation? ‘They who visualize [the goddess’s] faultless form in this manner, worshipped even by Śakra and other gods, accomplish [such deeds as] the trembling of the enemy’s citadel.’ Governance, victory over enemies, discernment regarding the correct value of objects, the nectar of poetry, invisibility, paralysis [of enemies], [their] expulsion and death [all] spontaneously arise in them. Furthermore, they who recite the hymn and visualize the goddess’s lotus-feet immediately obtain such benefits as good fortune (*śrī*), liberation (*mokṣa*) and sexual pleasure (*kāma*).⁴⁸ The poem thus posits a course of visionary worship at the end of which Maḥiṣamardinī’s benevolence is manifested through the bestowal of boons of power and liberation.

The *ugratā* of the goddess is conspicuously heightened in meditation: this amplification is crucial for the prescribed worship since it was believed that by plumbing the very depths of darkness the worshipper overcomes his fear, becomes self-aware and obtains power considered even greater than that obtained through external rites. The vision of this goddess appears to be a secret form of Maḥiṣamardinī, more Kaula in essence than mainstream *smārta*. For in the verses of visualization her form corresponds more closely to the wrathful, transgressive deities of the Kula than to conventional Maḥiṣamardinī iconography, while in the final verse the juncture of her foot with the demon is perceived to be the desired locus of the exemplary Kaula supplicant. Danger and benevolence are completely intertwined in such a goddess, who in a sense transcends – in accordance with Kaula philosophy – such dualistic conceptions, her form being ultimately immaterial. The paradox the poem ultimately succeeds in underlining is that the greater the danger and the risk in the worship, the greater the potential for benevolence and reward.

Conclusion

In sum, a variety of portrayals throughout Sanskrit literature celebrate Durgā as a ferocious (*ugra*) deity who can terrify with her lust for blood and her violence. In these poems, Durgā’s ferocity (*ugratā*) is not depicted

⁴⁸ *evaṃ ye tava devi mūrtim anaghāṃ dhyāyanti durgādibhiḥ*
śakrādyair api pūjitāṃ parapurakṣobhādikaṃ kurvate |
rājyaṃ śatrujayaḥ sadarthadhiṣaṇā kāvyāmṛtādarśana-
stambhoccāṭanamāraṇādi kṛtināṃ teṣāṃ svayaṃ jāyate ||
stotraṃ te caraṇāravindayugaladhyānāvadhānān mayā
mantroddhāra kulopacāra racitaṃ gūḍhopadiṣṭaṃ yadi |
ye śṛṇvanti paṭhanti devi tarasā śrīmokṣakāmādayas
teṣāṃ hastagatā bhavanti jagatāṃ mātaraṃ namas te jaya || 13-14

as a threatening quality but one which occasions ardent devotion. It is an expression of her power, dynamism and even of her beauty, summed up in the strange and wonderful image of her foot allied with the dead Asura. *Ugratā* takes other richly diverse expressions— it can be embodied in overtly aggressive forms such as Kālarātri in the *Haravijaya*, filtered through grotesque imagery in the *Gaṇḍavaho*, connote royal justice in the *Caṇḍīśataka* or ultimate non-dualism in the Kaula hymn. At the same time, what also becomes clear in the hymns is that the understanding of her ferocity in mediaeval India was never disjoined from her benevolent, auspicious, protective nature. In contrast, in post-mediaeval and modern conceptions, Dharmic respectability, maternal values (her ability to protect and grant fertility), her restitution of order and virtue overshadow her ancient penchant for ferocity. Thus associations with antinomianism—blood, cremation-grounds and dangerous deities— which, as we have seen, formed a vital part of her character in early depictions in *kāvya* are largely overlooked in modern representations. Nor are these aspects fully covered by the Brahmanical scriptures in their treatments of Durgā's myth since they represent aspects of religious practice viewed as threatening by mainstream Brahmanism. The mediaeval poems emphasise and celebrate these facets as essential features of the goddess. They show a different, essentially paradoxical, understanding of her being: benevolent while simultaneously embodying *ugratā*, for both mildness and wildness were for the mediaeval Śākta poet, like the Coleridgean “reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities”, two sides of the same coin.

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