

Resonant Deity: Performing Durga, Gender, and Ritual In The Sonic Canon of Twentieth-Century Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Mahishasurmardini, the devotional broadcast annually on Mahalaya since 1931, is a performative reworking of the myth of Durga–Mahishasura through the confluence of Sanskrit scripture, Bengali poetry, and Hindustani classical music. In colonial Bengal, and composed by Bani Kumar with music by Pankaj Mullick and narration by Birendra Krishna Bhadra, the program mythologises ritual through acoustic dramaturgy. An interdisciplinary analysis, drawing on ethnomusicology, gender theory, and philosophical exegesis, examines how the sonic architecture, specifically the employment of Raga Malkauns and Bhairavi, produces *rasa*, verifies divine temporality, and mediates sacred presence. Durga is aurally imagined as a cosmic warrior and maternal guardian, turning feminine passivity and masculine violence binaries on their head. Canon formation, diaspora reception, and counter-readings by Dalit and Adivasi scholars make it both a cultural scripture and an ideological apparatus. Issues include its aesthetic development from oral liturgy to broadcast performance, its role in Bengali ethnocultural identity, and its capacity to absorb, yet repress, alternative mythic genealogies. Placed in the performative and literary circuits of postcolonial India, *Mahishasurmardini* is a site where repetition is ritual authorship and sacred sound is a shared yet contested national memory.

Keywords: *Ethnomusicology, Bengal, Mythology, Popular Literature, Religion, Hinduism*

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Rezonans Tanrısı: Yirminci Yüzyıl Bengal'inin Ses Kanonunda Durga, Cinsiyet ve Ritüelin Gerçekleştirilmesi

ÖZ

Mahishasurmardini, 1931'den beri her yıl Mahalaya'da yayınlanan dini bir programdır. Sanskrit kutsal metinleri, Bengalce şiirleri ve Hindustani klasik müziğinin birleşimiyle Durga-Mahishasura mitini performatif bir şekilde yeniden yorumlamaktadır. Sömürge dönemi Bengal'inde Bani Kumar tarafından bestelenen, Pankaj Mullick'in müziği ve Birendra Krishna Bhadra'nın anlatımıyla hazırlanan program, akustik dramaturji yoluyla ritüeli mitolojikleştirir. Etnomüzikoloji, cinsiyet teorisi ve felsefi tefsirden yararlanan disiplinlerarası bir analiz, ses mimarisinin, özellikle Raga Malkauns ve Bhairavi'nin kullanımının nasıl rasa ürettiğini, ilahi zamansallığı doğruladığını ve kutsal varlığı aracılık ettiğini inceler. Durga, kozmik bir savaşçı ve ana koruyucu olarak işitsel olarak hayal edilir ve kadınsı pasiflik ile erkeksi şiddet ikilemini tersine çevirir. Kanon oluşumu, diaspora alımı ve Dalit ve Adivasi akademisyenlerin karşı okumaları, onu hem kültürel bir kutsal metin hem de ideolojik bir araç haline getirir. Konular arasında, sözlü litürjiden yayın performansına estetik gelişimi, Bengal etnokültürel kimliğinde rolü ve alternatif mitik soyağacını özümseme, ancak bastırma kapasitesi yer almaktadır. Sömürge sonrası Hindistan'ın performatif ve edebi çevrelerinde yer alan Mahishasurmardini, tekrarlama ritüel yazarlık ve kutsal sesin paylaşılan ancak tartışmalı bir ulusal hafıza olduğu bir yerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Etnomüzikoloji, Bengal, Mitoloji, Popüler Edebiyat, Din, Hinduizm*

Introduction

The conclusion of ‘Pitru Paksha’, sixteen days devoted to the ritualistic offering of ‘tarpan’, signifying homage to deceased ancestors, initiates the muhurta marking the onset of ‘Devi Paksha’, colloquially recognised as ‘Mahalaya’. Celebrated predominantly by the Bengali community in both India and Bangladesh, this day heralds the commencement of Durga Puja. Diverse customary observances, reflecting ethnic traditions, are intertwined with this event. The entirety of this worshipful festival holds profound significance within the Bengali cultural and economic milieu, representing a confluence of sanctity and jubilation. Noteworthy is the harmonic engagement of individuals from diverse religious affiliations who, while refraining from active participation in the religious rituals, find relish in the occasion. Within the broader spectrum of rituals associated with ‘Mahalaya’, the evolution of myth into mediated performance in twentieth-century Bengal is illustrated in the example of *Mahishasurmardini*, a devotional radio montage first aired in 1931 and since re-performed every year on Mahalaya morning through All India Radio. This composition, written by Bani Kumar and composed by Pankaj Kumar Mullick, is narrated in the distinctive oratory style of Birendra Krishna Bhadra. It harmoniously blends Sanskrit couplets from the Devi Mahatmya with Bengali devotional poetry and a raga-based, advanced musical structure. Far from a mere devotional broadcast, *Mahishasurmardini* has become a canonical sound ritual deeply embedded in the cultural consciousness of Bengalis across different geographic locations and generations. The broadcast, spanning nearly two hours, remains a contemporary favourite among the adherents of Hinduism. In the year 2023, a news report indicates that it attained the highest viewership among OTT shows in the subcontinent on the day of ‘Mahalaya’ (Asianet 2023). Despite its figurative nature, this cultural piece has yet to find a niche within academic discourse. As a performative narration of the Durga–Mahishasura legend, the broadcast combines classical beauty and spiritual pathos to generate what can only be called a mythic sonology, where the sense of the tale is extracted from tonal, rhythmic, and linguistic choreography. Its structure of sound, particularly marked by the all-pervasive use of Raga Malkauns, structures the experience of divine apparition and cosmic conflict through modal simplicity and metaphysical depth.

S. Radhakrishnan explains about the need for this cultural *Bhasya* is important in the preface to his translation and commentary on *The Principal Upanishads*, “We are living in a world of freer cultural intercourse and wider world sympathies. No one can ignore his neighbour who is also groping in this world of sense for the world unseen. The task set to our generation is to reconcile the varying ideals of the converging cultural patterns and help one another. By this process, they are transformed from within, and the forms that separate them will lose their exclusivist meaning and signify only that unity with their origins and inspirations” (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 9). Despite its deep cultural roots, the performance remains under-theorised in scholarship. Most existing work is either about the program’s history of broadcasting or individual memories, thereby neglecting

to explore how the program operates as a contemporary, broadcast-mediated ritual performance. Its deployment of raga-inspired musical themes, gendered mythology, and the Sanskrit and Bengali text dualities is a type of performative literature addressing the evolved role of myth in twentieth-century Indian media. The figure of Chamunda-Durga is necessarily entangled in matters of gendered violence and martial aesthetics, wherein the goddess signifies both devastation and regenerative fertility. Durga Bandana, an antecedent of the genre typified by a restricted textual and musical scope, developed into the highly formalised *Mahishasurmardini* with elaborate dramaturgical elements and aesthetic repetitions. This analytic framework enables the question to probe the interstices of sound, gender, and performance in the construction of meaning in contemporary myth. Moreover, it poses questions regarding how such performances, as rooted in textual tradition, become ratified rituals of listening in postcolonial sound culture. By placing the analysis in the context of Indian cultural modernity in the twentieth century, it is argued here that *Mahishasurmardini* holds a special place in the cartography of India's performative literary tradition. It shows the transfer of divine myth into a mobile event when conveyed through raga, broadcast, and oration, a re-staged myth whose ongoing cultural currency has less to do with belief, and much to do with form, repetition, and aesthetic recall.

Shakti Worship: A History of Durga in Bengal

"Ikshiti na Shabdāt", or "there is no vision without words", underscores the importance of description in conceptualising the visual representation of an intangible artefact, as per Shruti. Our subject, *Mahishasurmardini*, provides a comprehensive portrayal of Devi Durga's triumph over malevolent forces, thereby garnering worship and celebration from devotees. The cultural milieu must acknowledge the evolution of the present vis-à-vis the past. Dr. Janakiballav Bhattacharya argues that not everything is to be discussed regarding finding the cultural roots of Durga Vandana in Bengal; "To find the roots of lotus one shall indulge himself into mud" (J. Bhattacharya, 2014, p. 30). The establishment of this framework is imperative for comprehending the cultural discourse surrounding identity, thereby providing a contextual backdrop for Bani Kumar's oeuvre. Abanindranath Tagore's interpretation of Durga as a non-Aryan deity both aligns with and contradicts the notion of Durga as the deity 'Ambika' from the Samhita period. Ambika is referenced in the *Shukla Yajurveda* as Rudra's sister, thereby representing the 'shaktirupa', or feminine manifestation, of Rudra. Bhattacharya suggests that Ambika came to be worshipped during autumn out of apprehension regarding a perceived plague, which was interpreted as the deity's wrath (*krodha*). To mitigate this perceived curse, worshippers began venerating Ambika, referring to her as "maa" (mother) out of fear (Ibid). This discourse of assigning a feminine attribute to a male deity is not an uncommon practice within the Vedantic milieu. The core concept lies in the description of 'Brahman' given by Varuna to his son Bhrgu as stated in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*.

"... he explained to him thus: matter, life, sight, hearing, mind, speech. ... That, verily, from which these beings are born, that, by which, when born, they live, that

into which, when departing, they enter. Those seek to know. That is Brahman” (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 553).

This monistic ideology finds resonance in the *Mandukya Upanishad*, which portrays ‘Turiya’ as the ultimate reality, albeit with variations in terminology. The consensus drawn from these interpretations of ‘Brahman’ is its nature as a monistic deity. While various philosophical schools may diverge on this matter, Advaita Vedantists assert that Brahman pervades the entirety of the physical world with no other existence beyond it (see: *Bṛhad-aranyaka Upanishad* I.2.1-4); Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, founded by Ramanuja in the 11th century CE, accepts the physical existence within Brahman as a separate yet monistic concept; and Dvaita Vedanta, propagated by Madhavacharya in the 13th century CE, views the physical world as distinct from Brahman, thus stressing religious rituals to bridge the human soul with the universal ‘Atman’, the fundamental notion of a pantheistic deity intrinsically linked with its creation remains unchanged.. Bani Kumar puts this ideology by the invocation of devi as a complete manifestation of this Brahman’s ‘shaktirupa’ by mentioning the *Argala Stotram* (shloka 2) two times (once after ‘devi prakash’ and once after ‘devi dhyanam’):

Jayanti mangala kali bhrakali kripalini. Durga shiva kshma dhatri svaha svdha namostute.

Translation. (O Devi) You are victorious, bestower of auspiciousness, beyond time, controller of life and death, wearing a garland of skulls. (Oh, you) Who is Durga, ever auspicious and one with Shiva, an embodiment of forbearance, supporter of all beings, final receiver of all sacrificial oblations to gods and manes, salutations to you. (*Argala Stotram*)

In his essay titled “Mahishmardini Durga”, Dineshchandra Sarkar contends that the initial comprehensive reference to Durga as the vanquisher of the buffalo demon “Mahishasur” appears in the *Markandeya Purana*, likely composed during the 3rd century CE (Sarkar, 2014). Devi, the ultimate embodiment of Devi Chandi, is described as ‘Brahmarupa’ and ‘Brahmashakti,’ intervening during crises by traversing Brahma’s forehead to restore order. This depiction likely originates from a chapter, probably composed in the 6th century CE and added to the *Markandeya Purana*. This chapter, known as *Devimahatya* or *Sri Sri Chandi*, recounts Devi Chandi’s valour through her three identities or ‘charitas.’ The first charita portrays her as Maha Kali, the vanquisher of the demon named ‘Madhukaitabh’; the middle charita depicts her as Maha Laxmi, who slays Mahishasur; and the final charita presents her as Maha Saraswati, who conquers ‘Shumbha-Nishumbha’. Nabakumar Bhattacharya’s statement “who possesses anger is Chandi” (N. Bhattacharya, 2014, p. 91) can be arguably related to the manifestation of Devi Ambika, the sister of Rudra. It is likely that by the conclusion of the Samhita period, the heroic ethos of both Aryans and non-Aryans found expression in these deities. Janakiballav posits that Devi Ambika assumed the guise of Chandi, meaning ‘the slayer’, in response to Aryan aggressions against non-Aryans. He suggests that non-Aryans may have revered a buffalo deity, seen

as a symbol of barbarity by Aryans, thus leading to its depiction as a demon slain by Chandi (J. Bhattacharya, 2014, pp. 31-33). The *Krittivas Ramayana* records Rama's worship of Devi Durga before his confrontation with Ravana, a detail absent in the *Valmiki Ramayana*. Janakiballav's assertion appears credible, considering the Aryan tradition of venerating deities associated with warfare or demon-slaying before battle. However, it is imperative to question whether the buffalo symbol was appropriated from a non-Aryan deity to depict non-Aryans as inferior and apostates to Aryans. Such attitudes extend beyond the subcontinent, evidenced by the transformation of the Canaanite god Baal-zebub of Ekron into a demon in *Old Testament* narratives (*The Bible*, 2 Kings 1: 2-3). Whatever the reason would have been in choosing the type of demon to be slayed in Durga vandana, the ultimate symbol is to slay the evil to restore order in the creation. The first charita of Chandi, Maha Kali, is a manifestation of timelessness and consists of 'tamasa', i.e., darkness. This darkness is of which the *Subala Upanishad* mentions as the basis of all elements in this universe,

...tasmai sa hovaca, na san nasan na sad asad iti, tasmad tamah samjayate, tamaso bhutadih, bhutadeh akasam, akasad vayuh, vayor agnih, agner apah, adbhyah prithvi;

Translation. "... to him (Subala) he (Brahma) said: It was not existent, not non-existent, neither existent and non-existent. From that emerged darkness, from darkness the subtle elements, from the subtle elements ether, from ether air, from air fire, from fire water, from water earth;" (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 863).

Considering this, the musical composition for the initial invocation to Devi in the broadcast script, titled *Sri Sri Chandikadhyan*, specifically shloka 3, is set in the malkauns raga. Within Dhrupadi traditions, this raga signifies the midnight hour, evoking sentiments of reconciliation or invoking the night's essence. The choir renders the mantra as if at the universe's dawn, amidst darkness, invoking Maha Kali in her attribute of darkness ('tama'). While Maha Kali is central in this invocation as Chandi, the other three charitas, portraying Devi's attributes of passion ('rajah') and harmony ('satvi'), are also invoked. However, the primary purpose of employing malkauns as the initial raga is to symbolise the darkness preceding the dawn. This tradition has persisted since the program's inaugural broadcast, often played during the 'brahma-muhurta' or the hour of creation, signifying dawn. The shloka concludes with a prayer to Durga to sustain life on Earth, a duty traditionally ascribed to Vishnu, symbolising Durga as the supreme shakti, the feminine essence of all manifestations. Janakiballav's interpretation of Durga being embraced by Vaishnavites as 'Narayani,' the consort of Narayan or Vishnu, holds historical and plausible significance (J. Bhattacharya, 2014, p. 36). This description of Durga as an over-arching 'shakti' is expressed in the *Devi Suktam of Rig Veda*, which Bani Kumar puts just after the event of Durga's creation from Vishnu's naval as a 'Brahma-Shakti', and other gods, being expelled from heaven, took refuge under her.

“I move along with Rudras, the Vasus, the Adityas, also with the Vishvadevas. I hold both Mitra and Varuna, both Indra and Agni, and both the Asvin brothers. I bear the pressed out Soma, also Tvashtri, Pushan and Bhaga. I grant wealth to the possessor of oblation, to the mindful institutor of sacrifice and the performer of Soma sacrifice.....” (*Rig Veda Samhita*).

The whole suktam is performed in Mishra Durga raga by the choir. The transformation of Chandi into Uma is equally intriguing. Bhadra’s emotionally charged recitation mirrors the evolution of Durgotsav in Bengal itself. The name Uma appears first in the *Kena Upanishad*, where she is depicted as Brahman and the daughter of Himavat (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 589). S. Radhakrishnan suggests that Uma originated from Parvati’s mother, who called her Uma in exasperation for not practising austerities. In other contexts, the word signifies “wisdom personified” or “beautiful” in Sanskrit. Chinta Haran Chakravarty, in his essay “Durgapuja”, observes that in Bengal, it was initially known as ‘Shoborotsov’ (Chakravarty, 2014, p. 25), a festival of the Shobor community, followers of a folk religion that later underwent Aryanization. Their deity was Durga, the daughter of a Shobor, whom they worshipped twice yearly, in spring and autumn. While the spring festivities shifted to Saraswati worship, Uma Vandana remained a part of Mahadevi Vandana in Bengal. This period of Durga Vandana was more akin to a bacchic ritual than today’s maternal worship. Chakravarty notes, “people used to indulge in revelry during Dashami, or else the mother wouldn’t be pleased” (Ibid). Eventually, this ‘Shobori Devi’ came to be addressed as ‘Jagammata Duggamau,’ meaning mother of the world, Durga ma, fostering an emotional bond between mother and children over time. Authors such as Shrinath Acharya Churamani, Bachaspati Mishra, and earlier Jimutvahan in his 12th-century CE work *Kalvivek* mentioned this ‘Shoborotsav.’ Thus, the transition from the profane-loving Durga to the revered mother occurred in recent history, serving to differentiate the emotions of the Bengali ethno-group from the broader Aryan demographic. Bengalis opted for softer and mood-evoking tones in their daily worship mantras. Bhadra was almost moved to tears while reciting the *Narayanistuti* (praise of Narayani), hence his recitation felt “bewitching”.

From Durga Bandana to Mahishasurmardini: Canon Formation and the Broadcast Turn

Before the official establishment of *Mahishasurmardini* in 1931, the sonic devotional context of Bengal was dominated by more literal recitals that privileged liturgical Sanskrit recitation at the cost of musical or theatrical ornamentation. Its transmission lacked the narrative flow, emotional sophistication, or the formal composition of ragas characteristic of its replacement. Therefore, though it preserved scriptural fidelity, it failed to construct an integrated performative context capable of generating popular or ritualistic participation. The transformation into *Mahishasurmardini* was paralleled by more significant shifts in the character of religious performance in India in the twentieth century, specifically the increasing overlap between the oral traditions and broadcast media. As public pujas added music, theatrical performances, and processions to their ritual character, religious

performance became ever more aestheticised and hence subject to translation into modern media like radio. “Birendra Krishna Bhadra, the late radio broadcaster, playwright, actor, narrator, and theatre actor from Kolkata”, writes Joydeep Bose in his article in *Hindustan Times*, “is undoubtedly still the star of the show. His legacy – the Sanskrit ‘Chandi Path’ recitation – has been described as “bewitching”, and without it, the occasion of Mahalaya remains incomplete for many Bengalis. They wait for the riveting chant to begin at the onset of the day, eyeing the arrival of Durga Puja with as much enthusiasm” (Bose, 2021). Birendra Krishna Bhadra’s captivating recitation likely stems more from his regional style than from conventionality. Bhadra departs from the Aryan tradition of employing Sanskrit’s three ‘*swara*’ pitches (high, middle, and low), instead favouring a nuanced and emotive delivery that resonates with the text’s meaning, thereby forging a connection with the Uma worshippers of Bengal.

The Broadcast is an expression of this religio-cultural syncretism. The script borrowed basic elements of Durga Bandana but adopted a new narrative pattern: beginning with a cosmic invocation, proceeding through divine empowerment, and ending in the battle and triumph of the goddess. More importantly, it placed this script within an aural setting defined by classical ragas and intentionally framed musical transitions. Pankaj Mullick’s role in the design of this musical structure was crucial. Drawing on his studies in Hindustani classical music, the 4:00 a.m. broadcast time slot during the Brahma Muhurta period also linked the program to conventional Vedic norms, thus accrediting it with ritual legitimacy and placing it within the domain of daily listening habits. The already established value of the program was confirmed in 1976, when All India Radio attempted to replace Bhadra’s voice with that of Uttam Kumar in a modern reinterpretation called *Durga Durgatiharini*. This attempt was fruitless. The public outcry forced AIR to reinstate the original performance, highlighting the performance’s semiotic constancy. Roman Jakobson’s markedness theory comes to mind particularly here: Bhadra’s voice, the ragas, and their very temporal location had been marked features, generating meaning not just through content, but through ritual repetition. Taking them away was felt as an aesthetic change and a sheer ontological break (Andrews, 1990, p. 201).

Raga, Rasa, and Ritual: The Musical Grammar of Mahishasurmardini

The programme begins with Raga Malkauns, a pentatonic raga which in classical practice is associated with the midnight till dawn hours, an overlapping time zone of the Brahma Muhurta period of the broadcast. Austerely austere, richly profound in tone, and contemplative in nature, Malkauns creates what can only be described as an ambient metaphysical landscape. In the Indian classical aesthetic tradition, the raga creates a *shanta* rasa imbued with *veera* and *bhayanaka* sentiments, feelings of peace, valour, and sheer terror. Its association with Goddess Kali in local devotional cults further adds to its emotive appropriateness. In this sense, Malkauns sonically represents the state of primordial tonal dissolution from which Durga has to emerge. After invoking Malkauns, the broadcast then proceeds with

a judiciously selected sequence of ragas, such as Bhairavi, Basant Bahar, Desi Todi, Durga, and Bibhas, each of which serves as a narrative and affective signifier. As an example, the devotional songs “Jago Durga” and “Omol Kirone Tribhubon Monohorini” are composed in Bhairavi and Basant Bahar, respectively, ragas for their expressiveness and devotional flexibility. Bhairavi, particularly in its thumri version, is a mediator between classical seriousness and vernacular affectivity, and thus an apt choice for the evocation of maternal invocation and intimacy. The employment of Raga Durga in war scenes thematically positions the sonic identity as narrative meaning and thereby transmutes the raga into a performative symbol of the goddess.

This correspondence of raga and rasa also finds common cause in Bharata’s *Natyashastra*, where the success of a performance is its capability to evoke *rasanubhava*, the aesthetic-emotional experience of unification between performer and receiver. For each raga in *Mahishasurmardini*, there is utilisation not just for aesthetic diversity but for the generation of rasa: *shanta* in the cosmic invocation, *veera* in the armouring of Durga, *karuna* in the supplicatory songs of the gods, and *raudra* in the battle scenes. The broadcast, therefore, is a full-cycle aesthetic experience, leading the listener through a ritual dramaturgy of transformation. The rhythmic structure of the performance is also suitably attuned. Conch shells and percussion instruments replicate the temple atmosphere, and sudden shifts of tempo between song and chant replicate the tempo shifts typical of ritual performances. All these produce a sound iconography that is consonant with the visual syntax of Bengali *sarbojanin pujas*, i.e., “puja organised by public donations,” their use of light, sound, and rhythmic excess to underscore the divine presence. One of the important features of Mullick’s orchestration is the use of folk motifs in a classical framework. Melodies written in Mishra ragas, like Mishra Durga and Sindhu Bhairavi, are made to enable musical inclusivity without sacrificing formal coherence. Convergence creates the broadcast, both intelligible and effectively meaningful to audiences of both classical and popular music. The program, in this manner, acts as an aesthetic bridge between elite and popular devotional traditions. Secondly, the musical progression throughout the course of the program can be interpreted as allegorical of philosophical non-duality. The harmonic synthesis of diverse ragas into a concluding resolution represents the Upanishadic transition from multiplicity to unity. As Radhakrishnan observes in his explication of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, Brahman is that to which all forms and modalities finally reduce (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 587).

The first bhakti kirtan in the script, “Bajlo Tomar Alor Benu”, sung by Shrimati Supriti Ghosh in the latest edition, is set in raga Bhairavi. This raga signifies the typical bhakti kirtan of Vaishnavites performed early in the morning. The song’s lyrics symbolically represent the devi’s ‘agomoni’ as a harbinger of morning light, referencing the Maha Laxmi charita of Chandi and ending with the depiction of birds singing the devi’s vandana at dawn. Similar to the previous use of ‘tamasa,’ here both relative and physical time and space are considered. Below is a list

of songs along with their respective ragas, composed to evoke varied moods in listeners while venerating the devi:

Table 1. Songs and their corresponding ragas in the broadcast, *Mahisasurmardini*.

Sl no.	Raga	Song
1.	Malkauns	“Ya Chandi”
2.	Bhairavi	“Singhastha Shashishekharā”
3.	Bhairavi	“Bajlo Tomar Alor Benu”
4.	Sindha Bhairavi	“Jago Durga Doshoprohorondharini”
5.	Malkauns	“Ogo Amar Agomoni Alo”
6.	Bibhas	“Tobo Ochinto Rupo-Chorito-Mohima”
7.	Mishra Durga	“Ahang Rudrevirbosuvishchora”
8.	Desi Todi	“Akhilo Bimane Tobo Joy Gaane”
9.	Mishra Jaunpuri	“Jayanti Mangala Kaali”
10.	Bhairavi	“Shubhro Shonkho Robe”
11.	Bhairavi	“Jatajutasamayukta Mardhendukrita Shekharam”
12.	Durga	“Namo Chandi”
13.	Desi	“Mago Tobo Bine Songeet”
14.	not based in a particular raaga	“Bimane Bimane Aloker Gaane”
15.	Bhairavi	“Joyo Joyo Jopyojoye”
16.	Puriya	“He Chinmoyi”
17.	Basant Bahar	“Omol Kirone Trivubono Monoharini”
18.	Bhairavi	“Jayanti Mangala Kali”
19.	Bhairavi	“Shanti Dile Bhorī”

Following (4), the raga transitions once more to malkauns to align with the final attribute of Devi invoked, “vishnu nidrarupa”. Then, in (6), the tone shifts to praising the Devi, employing the Bhivas raaga. Overall, the program is a cohesive artefact. The sound of a conch after Devi’s self-introduction and during the portrayal of heroism on the battlefield adds another evocative element to the audio medium. A war drum is sounded after Devi acquires the ten weapons from the gods to combat Mahishasur. The *Durgadhyan* of *Bohonnandikesvar Puran* (11) is sung in vairavi, serving as a bhakti root of “*Ikshti na Shabdāt*”. It’s worth noting that while the physical appearance of Durga is vividly depicted in the program, there is no mention of Ganesha, Kartike, Saraswati, and Laxmi as individuals alongside Durga in the shlokas. This absence is consistent with earlier texts. “In Kalivilas tantra, there is a reference to Ganesha and Kartike, but its composition date remains unknown” (Chakravarty, 2014, p. 28). Although not explicitly mentioned in early texts about Durga, it is a common belief in Bengal that the

mother shall come with her children to visit her homeland. Uma is regarded both as the mother and daughter of Bengal. This cultural sentiment connects the Bengali ethnogroup with its ‘national festival’, as termed by Chinta Haran Chakravarty. Nayar mentions that “a sophisticated analysis of cultural artefact requires a close examination of five basic elements, which together constitute what Paul du Gay [et al] have called ‘the circuit of culture’ (1997). These elements are: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation” (Nayar, 2016, p. 16). In terms of representation, the *Mahishasurmardini* broadcast achieves two objective aims and one subjective aim. As discussed earlier, the Upanishadic cultural traditions are deeply intertwined in a Bengali’s life and sentiment. Whether it’s the Bengalification of an Aryan devi like Ambika or the Aryanization of the bacchic folk devi of *Shoborotsav*, the program effectively bridges the past with the present. Bani Kumar’s work provides the sequence that every devotee of Durga would expect, offering ‘a conceptualisation of the sole expeditions of Durga’. While *Sri Sri Chandi* discusses the various manifestations of Chandi, Bani Kumar places Durga at the forefront as the manifestation of Chandi, portrayed as a mother who slays Mahishasur but spares his descendants. The *Brahmarupa* stays ‘adi’, i.e., from the beginning, and ‘nitya’, i.e., eternal. Janakiballav mentions that “Durga has to spare the product of evil in order take birth again and slay it again, completeing the cyclic nature, hence being eternally active and living” (J. Bhattacharya, 2014, p. 35). This cyclicism is attributed to ‘Hiranya- Garbha’ (*Brahman* in *Tamasa*) in Samkara’s commentary on *Bṛhad Aranyaka Upanishad* I.2.4, “*Reto bijami jnana-karma-rupam janmantara-krtam*, i.e., life is the result of previous knowledge and conduct” (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 152), This imparts to Bengali children the notion of residing within the eternal protective embrace of their mother. Towards the script’s conclusion, the singer-narrator expresses a desire to depart while under the eternal blessings of the mother. This sense of connection imbues Durgotsav with immense significance, making it the most celebrated festival among the Bengali ethnic group. The subjective aspect lies in terms of entertainment, primarily catering to the spiritual needs of the Hindu population, yet it manages to resonate with non-Hindu demographics as well, fulfilling academic needs to some extent.

Textual Myth, Embodied Violence, and Gendered Cosmology

The recontextualization of the feminine divine through violence and victory is within a gendered cosmology marked by affirmation and subversion. In a particular reading of the goddess, she is the collective will of the weakened gods, who pour their energies into her bodily self to defeat an enemy that they cannot eliminate individually. This structure can be read as empowering, placing Durga in the position of paradigm authority figure, or as instrumentalising: representing the goddess as the vehicle through which patriarchal systems self-renew. The performance thus oscillates between empowerment and containment, ritual agency and narrative function. Durga’s portrayal throughout the broadcast epitomises the courageous mother of Bengal, nurturing her children. Though this sense of identity is rooted in a specific religious sentiment, most Bengalis agree

that Uma's homeland is Bengal. This secondary aspect of the festivity fosters a sympathetic identification with this cultural artefact. Kaliprasanna Simha satirises the emotions of non-worshippers regarding Durga as the daughter of Bengal, even depicting them shedding tears as she returns to the cosmos in his essay "Durgotsav", published nearly a century ago. The production itself aims to evoke the unified sentiments of Bengalis as one family under matriarchal heroism. The invocation of *Argala Stotram*, sung in raag Bhairavi towards the end, serves as a call for devotion to the mother and a prayer for acquiring beauty, victory, fame, and purity. The primary buyers of this concept are devotees.

The recitation by Bhadra reinforces this ambivalence. His grave yet prophetic voice recites lines like "Ya Devi Sarvabhuteshu Shakti Rupena Samsthita" in a rhythm that resists neutrality and passivity. The goddess is not merely called upon, but asserted. This stylistic presentation emphasises her immediacy and salience, converting a textual invocative into a presence that strikes both sound and symbol. Additionally, the musical crescendo that accompanies the declaration of her ten-armed form reinforces the majesty of divine embodiment. Her weapons, trident, discus, sword, and bow, are depicted as mythical weapons by the use of sonic motifs, emphasised by war drums and rapid melodic transitions. This dramatisation holds immense significance in the context of gendered performance within Indian religious texts. The female protagonist, usually figured as submissively or sacrificially acting within Hindu epics, here takes on narrative and cosmic agency. She is not a consort but the embodiment of sovereignty; not an intercessor but the supreme authority. Her fight against Mahishasura is a symbolic inversion of gendered roles, as well as, at the same time, inscribing the force of violence upon the divine feminine. Even as the goddess is celebrated as *dharma-vrddhi*, her destructive power is no less divine. This twoness makes oppositions between martial masculinity and nurturant femininity difficult. In the case of *Mahishasurmardini*, this paradox is not merely maintained but heightened through the vehicle of performance. Music, rhythm, and recitation together write the Devi's mythos into a contemporary, gendered acoustic space. The shapeshifting imagery of Mahishasura on the stage heightens the dramatic tension. His transformation from buffalo to lion to elephant is a symbol of adaptive disorder in itself. The goddess has not only to destroy but also to understand these transformations. Therefore, her ultimate act of triumph is not a mere act of simple victory but a mythological response to diversity by a single feminine power. This way, the performance represents a cosmology that is neither patriarchal nor anarchic, but a cyclical process of regeneration through the return of the Devi.

Ritual Reception, Secularisation, and Contestation of Culture

Another facet of this performance as a whole is Durgotsav in its entirety. The festival encompasses creativity, economy, and devotion. According to the British Council's report

"Mapping the Creative Economy around Durga Puja 2019 research report looks

at 10 creative industries that drive Durga Puja, possibly the world's largest public arts festival. The report estimates the economic worth of the creative industries around Durga Puja in West Bengal at Rs 32,377 crore (GBP 3.29 billion, USD 4.53 billion), which is the size of the economy of many smaller countries across the world. Durga Puja accounts for 2.58% of the state's GDP and is just a weeklong festival" (Queen Mary University of London & IIT Kharagpur, 2019).

The transformation of Durga Puja from a folk festival known as 'Shoborotsov' to an economically significant and grandiose event called 'Saradosov' is a remarkable chapter interwoven in Bengali history. The shift from 'okalbodhon' to 'shubhagomon' reflects the cultural imperatives of the Bengali demographic. However, critically interpreting this evolution as a discourse may not fully convey the sentiments of one group to their neighbours. Yet, as S. Radhakrishnan suggests, understanding the roots of this evolution is essential: "students of Christian religion and theology, especially those who wish to make Indian Christian thought not merely 'geographically' but 'organically' Indian, should understand their great heritage..." (Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 9). This extends to the Christian and the Muslim communities. Such an academic perspective can open new avenues for interpreting culture liberally, fostering academic harmony. It also affirms that sublimity persists within the 'marked' realm of cultural interpretation.

The performance has been relocated to diasporic spaces, with Bengali communities situated outside the homeland hosting listening parties around *Mahishasurmardini* during Durga Puja celebrations. These examples of sonic reproduction in urban locations like London, Toronto, and New York demonstrate the ability of the broadcast to act as a memory object of the diaspora, reinstalling ritual forms in transnational space. In these cases, the performance acquires a new function, to commemorate Mahalaya and to act as an effective bridge to cultural roots and continuity of identity. The performance, nonetheless, has not gone unchallenged. Over the last decade or so, there has been a critical revisionist debate among Dalit and Adivasi scholars, as a matter of fact, questioning the ideological underpinnings of the Durga–Mahishasura myth itself. The Mahishasura Martyrdom movement, which emerged within Jharkhand tribal culture and then spread within scholarship and activism, both, presents Mahishasura not as a demon but as a native ruler unjustly demonised by Aryan myth. This counternarrative reinterprets Durga not as a liberator but as a cruel tool of Brahmanical domination. This hermeneutic tension raises some serious questions regarding the canonical status of *Mahishasurmardini*, positing that its cultural and sonic durability simultaneously may be representative of hegemonic paradigms. For those who identify with these counter-histories, the broadcast is not read as an inclusive cultural event but as a continued negation of subaltern histories. Such arguments require a reinterpretation of the broadcast, not as ritualised spectacle but as the site of ideological reproduction. Although its form has durability, being able to provide cultural stabilisation to many, it may simultaneously hide epistemic violence against historically subordinated groups.

Conclusion

The transmission of *Mahishasurmardini* holds a central place where sacred scripture intersects with modern media and performance iconography. In its reworking of the Devi Mahatmya in sound, it transcends its initial function as religious practice to take on the role of a foundational text of twentieth-century Indian cultural production. This study underscores the cultural, religious, and economic dimensions of the event while highlighting its enduring popularity and impact on diverse audiences. The application of raga cycles to express emotional transformation, the deliberate toggling between Sanskrit and Bengali language modes, and the sound realisation of the goddess's powers all conjoin to turn the broadcast into a ritual theatre of memory. In doing so, it makes visible the performative nature of literature: not merely to retell mythology, but to actualise it in the particular cultural and historical terms. Accordingly, the broadcast occupies an in-between space between sacred texts and improvisational invention, ritual practice and aesthetic evolution, and mythology and popular audience involvement. At the same time, the broadcast's uniform character, stabilised through its extensive repetition, provokes cultural solidarity and political commentary. While it is a ritual site of identification for many Bengali viewers, both in India and in the diaspora, it is also a site of discussion under the umbrella of alternative interpretative paradigms. Additionally, the transformation of Durga Puja from a folk festival to an economically significant event is evident in the British Council's report, which estimates its economic worth. However, it raises questions about the comprehensive understanding of this evolution and its implications, especially in terms of cultural interpretation and academic discourse. Furthermore, the study delves into the cultural and religious dimensions of Durga's portrayal, touching upon historical, mythological, and philosophical aspects. Overall, the emphasis is on the need for a nuanced and interdisciplinary approach to studying cultural artefacts like the *Mahishasurmardini* broadcast and Durga Puja, considering their socio-cultural, religious, and economic significance. As India's performance and literary cultures continue to blur over with digital media and political awareness, there is one case study: how the sacred sound becomes national memory, how gendered myth becomes artistic grammar, and how repetition through performance becomes ritual authorship. Its two lives as ritual reaffirming and myth open to dispute place it as a central artefact of India's ongoing struggles with tradition and reform, the sacred and the secular, and centrality and dissidence. Its ability to both inspire devotion and discomfort at the same time places it as the perfect site for examining how readings of myth today both reaffirm and subvert cultural power. Its position in the discursive field of modern Indian ethno-mythographic performance literature is thus not residual, but exemplary.

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