



THE EPIC QUALITY OF ART, CULTURE, AND MUSIC IN MAHISHASURA MARDINI: A LITERARY STUDY OF DURGA SAPTASHATI

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ABSTRACT **Objective:** The purpose of this study is to elevate the Durga Saptashati from a religious liturgy to a significant literary and cultural epic. The paper seeks to analyse how the text's narrative structure, phonetic musicality, and iconographic descriptions have collectively shaped the aesthetic landscape of the Indian subcontinent.

KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION:

The Eternal Resonance of the Devi

Every year, as the autumn sky clears and the Kash flowers sway in the breeze, a specific vibration takes over the Indian subconscious. It is the vibration of the Durga Saptashati. While often viewed through the prism of religious ritual, the Saptashati (literally "Seven Hundred Verses") is a monumental literary achievement. It represents a paradigm shift in Indian epic literature, where the masculine-centric heroics of the earlier Vedic period gave way to a powerful, all-encompassing feminine divinity.

The "epic quality" of this text is not just in its scale, but in its ability to synthesize diverse elements of Indian philosophy, iconography, and music into a singular, cohesive narrative that has survived and thrived for over 1,500 years.

Key Arguments:

- **Narrative Revolution:** The article argues that the Saptashati represents a "paradigm shift" in Indian literature, moving away from patriarchal Vedic tropes to establish an omnipotent, independent feminine hero.
- **Aesthetic Synergy:** It explores the symbiosis between the written word and visual art, demonstrating how the text provided a technical manual for sculptors (from Mahabalipuram to the Hoysalas) and painters (the Bengal Pata Chitra).
- **The Sonic Experience:** The study evaluates the "Living Epic" quality through the lens of music, specifically analysing the 1931 radio broadcast Mahishasura Mardini as a modern technological extension of ancient oral traditions.
- **Allegorical Depth:** Finally, the synopsis highlights the psychological aspect of the epic, interpreting the battle as a literary metaphor for the destruction of the ego (Tamas and Rajas guna).
- **Empowerment and gender equality:** today Mahishasur Mardini is often invoked in discourses about women's empowerment, Courage and leadership-expanding her relevance beyond a religious myth into a contemporary socio-cultural consciousness.

I. Literary Architecture: The Three Acts of Cosmic Balance

The Durga Saptashati, a part of the Markandeya Purana, is structured with the precision of a classical drama. It is divided into three Charitras (episodes), each serving a distinct philosophical and narrative purpose.

1. The First Episode: The Awakening of Consciousness

The text begins with the story of a merchant and a king, both of whom have lost everything. This sets the stage for a "frame narrative"—a common literary device in Indian epics. The goddess appears as Mahakali, the power of Time and Sleep (Yoganidra). Literarily, this section represents the removal of ignorance. The goddess isn't just a warrior here; she is the cosmic force that rouses Vishnu to slay the demons Madhu and Kaitabha.

2. The Second Episode: The Manifestation of Collective Power

This is the core of the "Mahishasura Mardini" legend. The literary brilliance lies in the description of the goddess's birth. She is not "born" in the traditional sense; she emerges from the combined Tejas (radiance) of all the gods.

- "The light of Indra, the fire of Agni, the strength of Vishnu... all merged into a single flaming mountain of light that took the form of a woman."
- This passage is a masterpiece of epic imagery, symbolizing the unification of fragmented powers against a singular, chaotic evil.

3. The Third Episode: The Final Purge

The final act involves the destruction of Shumbha and Nishumbha. Here, the goddess manifests as Mahasaraswati. This section introduces the Matrikas (the Mother Goddesses) and the terrifying figure of Kali (Chamunda). The literary tone shifts from the heroic to the Bibhatsa (revolting) and Bhayanaka (terrifying) rasas, showcasing the goddess's role in the absolute destruction of the ego.

II. The Aesthetic Blueprint: From Verse to Visual Art

The Durga Saptashati is perhaps the most influential text in the history of Indian iconography. Its vivid, verse-by-verse descriptions of the goddess's appearance served as a "manual" for artists.

1. The Sculpture of Resistance

In the 6th-century caves of Mahabalipuram and the later Hoysala temples, the influence of the Saptashati is evident. The "Alidha" posture—the goddess with one foot on her lion and the other on the buffalo demon—is a direct visual translation of the text's description of her crushing Mahishasura's neck.

2. The Bengal School and the Pata Chitra

In Eastern India, the text gave rise to the Pata Chitra (scroll painting) tradition. These artists would recite the verses of the Saptashati while unrolling paintings that depicted the battle. This created a multi-sensory experience where literature and visual art became inseparable.

III. The Sonic Epic: The Music of the Chandi

The musicality of the Mahishasura Mardini is what makes it a "living" epic. The text is meant to be chanted, and its phonetic structure is designed to evoke specific emotional states.

1. The Stotram and the Power of Sanskrit

The Mahishasura Mardini Stotram, though a later addition to the tradition, captures the epic's essence through its "Jhampa" tala (rhythm). The alliterative quality of the Sanskrit—using harsh "t," "d," and "bh" sounds—mimics the clashing of swords and the beating of drums on a battlefield.

2. The Mahalaya Broadcast: A Modern Epic

In 1931, the literary tradition met the technological age. The radio program Mahishasura Mardini became an annual cultural phenomenon. Birendra Krishna Bhadra's recitation of the Chandipath (the Saptashati verses) is iconic because it captures the Karuna (pathos) of the gods' plea and the Vira (heroic) energy of the goddess's response. This broadcast transformed a 5th-century Sanskrit text into a modern musical epic accessible to the masses.

IV. Cultural and Sociological Impact

The Durga Saptashati did something revolutionary: it placed the woman at the center of the universe.

- **Social Synthesis:** The text absorbed various local tribal goddesses into the fold of "Mahadevi," acting as a cultural glue that unified diverse communities under a single narrative.
- **The Concept of Shakti:** Culturally, the text moved the focus from Deiva (fate) to Shakti (agency). It taught that when the world is in chaos, the solution lies in the manifestation of collective energy.
- **Nationalist Symbolism:** During the 19th-century Indian struggle for independence, the "Mahishasura Mardini" motif was used by writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to represent the motherland fighting against colonial oppression.

V. Philosophical Underpinnings: The War Within

The true epic quality of the Saptashati is its psychological depth. Mahishasura is not just a buffalo-headed demon; he represents the Tamasic (dull/ignorant) and Rajasic (agitated) qualities of the human mind. The "battle" described in the text is an allegory for the internal struggle to overcome the ego.

The goddess, as Mahamaya, is both the one who deludes us and the one who sets us free. This duality is the hallmark of great literature—where the protagonist is not just a hero fighting a villain, but a representation of the ultimate truth interacting with the world of appearances.

CONCLUSION:

A Legacy of Light

The Mahishasura Mardini tradition, rooted in the Durga Saptashati, is a testament to the enduring power of Indian literature. It has provided a canvas for artists, a rhythm for musicians, and a philosophy for seekers. As we analyze its epic quality today, we see a text that is as relevant in a college seminar as it is in a village courtyard. It is a story of resilience, the power of unity, and the ultimate triumph of consciousness over chaos.

The Devi Mahatmya concludes with the goddess promising to return whenever she is needed. In the realms of art, culture, and music, she has never truly left; she remains the heartbeat of a civilization that continues to find beauty in the battle for righteousness.

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