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## **Mahishasur: A People's Hero**

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► **To cite this version:**

| Pramod Ranjan (Dir.). Mahishasur: A People's Hero. 2017, 9788193258446. hal-03834426

**HAL Id: hal-03834426**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03834426>**

Submitted on 6 Dec 2022

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“People say that such a book will divide the country. If they say so believing what the book says is true but it is not the right time to say it, then I would say that their conscience is sullied and their mind weak. There is no auspicious time for revealing the truth. Whenever truth is revealed is auspicious. One who does not want to hear the truth is a sinner. One who believes that truth can divide, smothers justice ... When this book is published, the selfish oppressors, who have been making merry for hundreds, thousands of years by looting the Hindu community, will rant and rave and driven by rage, may try to inflict grief on the author. They may also harm the publisher and editor ... The author and publisher, etc, of this book are ready to welcome all those calamities.”

– Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu in his preface to Bhikku Bodhanand's *Mul Bharatvasi Aur Arya* (1930)

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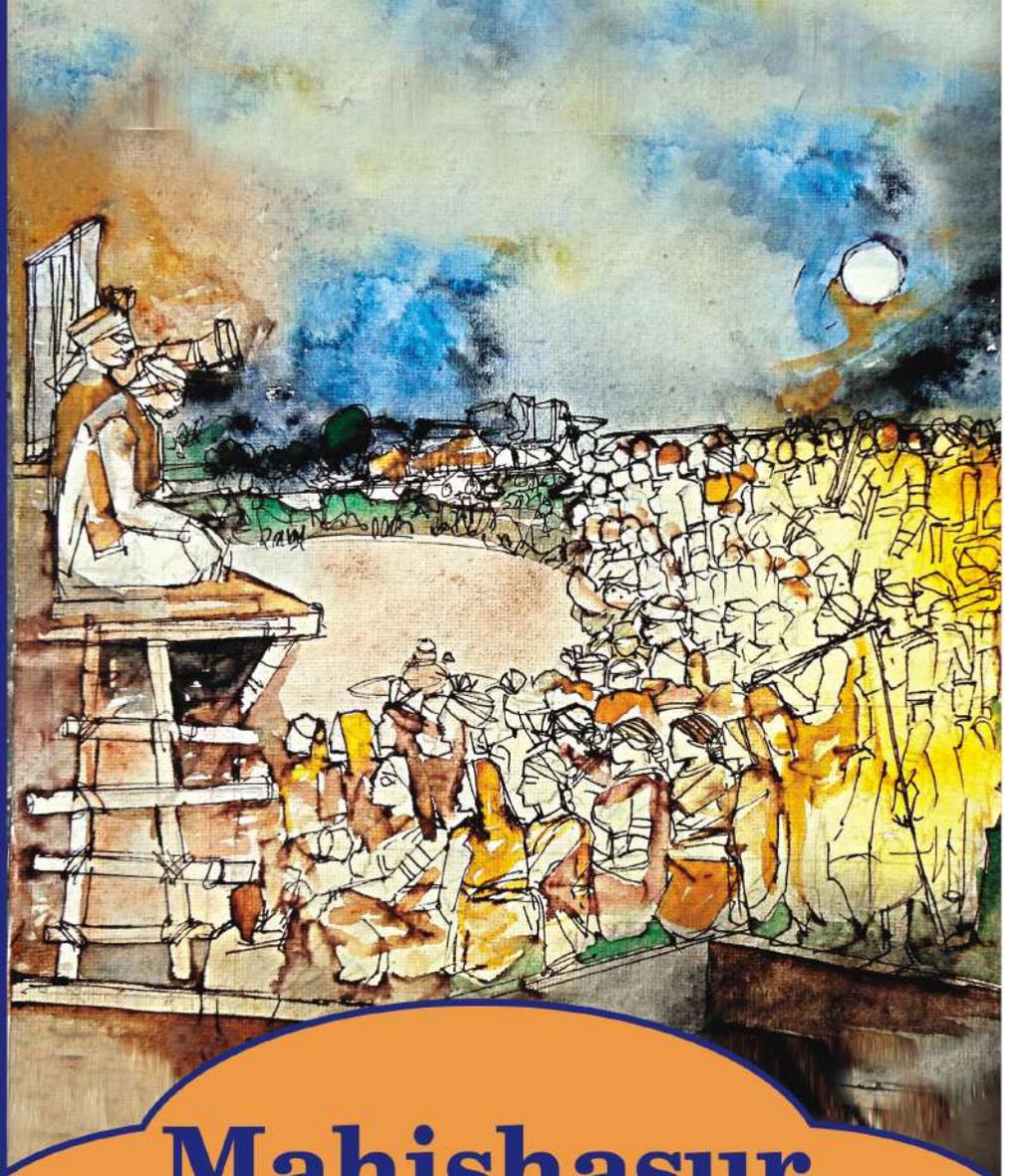
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Mahishasur: A people's hero

Edited by PRAMOD RANJAN



# Mahishasur A people's hero

Edited by PRAMOD RANJAN

*To*  
*Mahasthivar Bhikku Bodhanand,*  
*who laid the ideological foundation of the*  
*Bahujan cultural movement*



# Mahishasur

## A people's hero

EDITOR  
PRAMOD RANJAN

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The Marginlised Publication

**Publisher: The Marginalised,**

IGNOU Road, New Delhi - 110068

Registered Office: Sanewadi, Wardha,  
Maharashtra - 442001

Email: themarginalised@gmail.com

Phone: +91-9968527911, 8130284314

© Forward Press Books

**ISBN: 978-81-932584-4-6**

First Edition: 2016

Reprint: June 2017

**Cover painting:** Dr Lal Ratnakar

**Layout design:** Rajan Kumar

**Printer:** Vikas Computers and Printers,

Naveen Shahdara, New Delhi-110032

**Mahishasur: A people's hero (A discourse on culture)**

**Edited by Pramod Ranjan**

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## The power of a book

I would like to begin with a quote of the great Bahujan thinker Bhikku Bodhanand. But before that, I have to tell you about Bodhanand. It is really strange that the common man and even the intellectual class of today is unaware of his multidimensional contribution to the cause of the deprived communities. Born into a Brahmin family in 1874, Bodhanand was orphaned at an early age. His widowed maternal aunt, who lived in Kashi, brought him up<sup>1</sup>. We can only imagine the vulgar face of Brahmanism Bodhanand must have seen while living with a widow in Kashi. By the time he attained youth, he had become an ardent opponent of Brahmanism, and freeing Dalits and the Backwards from its clutches became the mission of his life. He embraced Buddhism in 1904 at the age of 30. It was in his company that Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar and Rahul Sankrityayan, among others, were drawn to Buddhism. Dr Ambedkar used to spend hours with him.

Bhikku Bodhanand's thoughts not only gave a new direction to the Buddhist movement in the 1930s but also helped build a massive ideological movement among the backward and Dalit castes in north India. The Buddha Vihar that he established at Risaldar Park in Lucknow became the centre of the activities of the contemporary Bahujan intellectuals and the place from where his thoughts were disseminated far and wide.

“At that time, the ‘Navratnas’ (nine gems) of Bodhanand ji included, besides himself, Swami Achhutanand (Chamar), Raisaheb Ramsahai (Pasi), Raisaheb Ramcharan (Mallah), Shivdayal Singh Chaurasia (Barai Tamoli), Mahadev Prasad (Dhanuk), Badluram Rasik (Teli), Gauri Bhankar Pal (Gadaria) and Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu (Kalwar). They all were well-known personalities of their times. The movement they had launched for awakening Bahujan consciousness lasted till the 1980s. This movement gave birth to Bahujan thinkers like Lalaisingh Yadav, Ramswaroop Verma, Mangaldev Visharad and Dr Angne Lal.”<sup>2</sup>

Bhikku Bodhanand's ideological disciples later founded Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan and Samaj Sewa Press and took up the task of pub-

lishing Bahujan literature. The same set-up was subsequently used to propagate the thoughts of Dr Ambedkar in north India. All this is recent history that was not allowed to become a part of our collective memory. Within just 60-70 years, most of the books of Bahujan Kalyan Mala faded into oblivion. The universities and so-called social research institutions completely forgot about them. When so recent a history can be erased in this manner, you can imagine what must have been done with the narrative of people's hero Mahishasur that is thousands of years old.

Why was this done? Which idea of Bodhanand made the class dominating the realm of knowledge so frightened of him? That idea was of the downtrodden Bahujans staking a claim on their cultural heritage.

Bhikku Bodhanand had written a book *Mul Bharatvasi aur Arya* (Indigenous Inhabitants of India and Aryans), which was published by Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu in 1930 with financial support from Babu Ramcharan, a legislative councillor of Nishad caste in what is now Uttar Pradesh. This book formed the ideological basis of the contemporary movement.

8 What the book contained would become evident from a comment of Bhikku Bodhanand. But before that, let us see what kind of apprehensions Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu had while publishing the book. Jigyasu wrote in the introduction to the book: "People say that such a book will divide the country. If they say so believing what the book says is true but it is not the right time to say it, then I would say that their conscience is sullied and their mind weak. There is no auspicious time for revealing the truth. Whenever truth is revealed is auspicious. One who does not want to hear the truth is a sinner. One who believes that truth can divide, smothers justice ... When this book is published, the selfish oppressors, who have been making merry for hundreds, thousands of years by looting the Hindu community, will rant and rave and driven by rage, may try to inflict grief on the author. They may also harm the publisher and editor ... The author and publisher, etc, of this book are ready to welcome all those calamities."<sup>3</sup>

The first edition of this book, which sparked a big ideological movement, sold out in a short period. But for the next 75 years, perhaps due to apprehensions surrounding it, no one could gather the courage to publish the second edition.

A.R. Akela, an Aligarh-based follower of Kanshi Ram, published the second edition in 2005 with donations from the public. He wrote

in his publisher's note, "This book was not reprinted because after its publication, Pujya Bhikshu Bodhanand must have received threats from the patrons of the brahmanical system and its publisher Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu must also not have been spared."<sup>4</sup>

Hence, the police action against *Forward Press* in October 2014 on the orders of the Manuwadi forces for drawing attention to the Asur culture and discussing folktales associated with Mahishasur was not a spontaneous, one-off response. It was just a continuation of our commitment to say the truth, our resistance to injustice and our repression that has been going on for years.

Bhikku Bodhanand's book in question, *Mul Bharatvasi Aur Arya*, conclusively proves that Asurs were the indigenous inhabitants of India on the basis of different Brahmin scriptures. They are today's Dalits, OBCs and Tribals. The dwijs destroyed their culture and civilization and established their socio-economic and political hegemony. He calls upon these subjugated communities to come together and take on Dwi-jism/Brahmanism. It is these claims about culture that Manuvadis fear the most and make them really aggressive.

Nearing the conclusion, Bodhanand writes:

*"Another thing people often say while discussing this issue is that even if the Aryans came from outside India, they now coexist with the indigenous people; then why dig up this old dispute and sow the seeds of hostility in this age of unity? Our humble response to this question is that we are not interested in digging up this old dispute and sowing seeds of hostility. There is neither any need for it, nor do we have the time for it. We are believers in non-violence, equality and peace and we are for global solidarity. But we want to warn our readers that we are not sowing the seeds of hostility. Others are doing this and you should identify them clearly. Any person with even a rudimentary knowledge of history knows that the present Hindu community includes the indigenous Jains and Buddhists and foreigner Aryans, Sakas, Huns, etc, and their combined civilization is known as Hindu civilization. But it is regrettable and painful that for the past some time, paeans are being sung only to Aryan and Vedic civilization and culture so as to establish its predominance and supremacy and attempts are being made to obliterate the glorious civilization and culture of the indigenous inhabitants from the minds of the people ... That has compelled us to bring out this book on the glorious civilization of the perpetually enslaved indigenous inhabitants of India. This book conclusively proves that the indigenous*

*inhabitants of India, who have been branded as slaves and Shudras, had a glorious past and had their own civilization and culture.”<sup>5</sup>*

This quote of Bodhanand is even today the “Man ki Baat” of the supporters of the Mahishasur movement and succinctly and precisely delineates the objective of the book in your hands. This book, in a sense, takes his movement forward using new references and research, and calls for breaking free from the barbaric and violent Manuvadi culture and traditions and building a compassionate, egalitarian Bahujan culture.

While Mahasthivir Bodhanand has used the Brahmin scriptures to establish his hypothesis, this book banks on lesser-known non-brahmanical sources and Tribal tales to make its point.

In 2013 and 2014, I had edited two books on the same subject titled *Kiski Puja Kar Rahein Hain Bahujan?* and *Mahishasur*, respectively. Most of the contents of those books have been incorporated in this one. Additionally, I have enough material on the subject for two more books. If readers like this book, I would like to publish the others.

If these books help bring about a cultural awakening among the Bahujans, the editors and writers will consider their effort successful. - **Pramod Ranjan**

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#### On this reprint

This book was published in June 2016 along with its Hindi edition. Copies of the Hindi edition sold out within just four months and its first reprint is already in the market. The Mahishasur Movement made waves mainly in the Hindi belt, so the demand for the Hindi edition was not surprising. But the English edition selling out in less than a year has left us astounded. This is a sign that this experiment of simultaneously publishing the English and Hindi editions has been a success. We believe that such efforts will be able to bridge the widening ideological gulf between the two linguistic worlds.

Reviews of the Hindi and English edition by Ish Mishra, Bhagwat Prasad, Kamalanand Jha, Dharmendra Sushant, Veena Bhatia, Nawal Kishore Kumar, Arif Khan and Sunil Amar have appeared in various newspapers and magazines.

A big thank you to all readers and reviewers! - **Pramod Ranjan**

# A cultural battle

PRAMOD RANJAN

What is this movement launched in the name of Mahishasur? What are its implications? These are some of the questions that will be tossed at us. But what is more important than answering these questions is to question ourselves: How do we see this movement? How do we perceive this mythological hero? Before plunging into a mega-cultural battle, it would be better for us to closely examine our launch pad. We have the glorious tradition of Jotiba Phule, Dr Ambedkar and Ramasamy Periyar – the personalities who prepared the ground in the modern era for the scientific scrutiny of the myths. It is this tradition that the movement – of declaring Mahishasur our hero – will have to draw on. Obviously, we will have to keep away from all kinds of religious rituals. It is also clear that Marxist formulations will be of no use to us. This movement will have to firmly shut the doors on the Marxist ideologues as well as on ritualism. As the movement gains momentum, both will try to get a foothold in it through surreptitious means.

Cultural enslavement only strengthens social, political and economic enslavement. North India did witness a struggle against political, social and economic enslavement but its cultural enslavement was left untouched. Whatever struggles did take place were limited to religious reforms and their realm was limited to combating distortions prevalent in the brahmanical-dwij social order. No attempt was made to strike at the nerve centre of the Manuwad. The significance of the Mahishasur movement lies in the fact that it seeks to strike at the life force of the brahmanical religion. Basically, there are two claimants of this movement – one is the biggest section within the Hindu religion, which is known as the OBC, and the other is the tribal

community, which is out of the pale of the Hindu religion. If this movement gains ground at the present rate, it will deliver a severe blow to the brahmanical domination of the Hindu religion – both internally as well as externally. One result of this movement will be that other social groups oppressed by the brahmanical religion will also deconstruct the myths and rewrite and retell them; the louder the voices of these retellers, the faster the process of breaking the chains of Bahujans’ cultural enslavement.

Anyway, at the persistent request of my associates, I’ve had to get this booklet ready in a very short time. But I can draw satisfaction from the fact I have been able to find space for all the important articles and material that will help the readers understand the background and intent of this movement. On behalf of my friends, I would like to express my gratitude to Premkumar Mani, Ivan Kostka, Ashwini Kumar Pankaj, Dilip Mandal and Chandrabhushan Singh Yadav.

*This is the preface to the booklet Kiski Puja Kar Rahein Hain Bahujan published in October 2013.*

# Expression of different life values

PRAMOD RANJAN

The last three years have witnessed rapid expansion of the Mahishasur movement. Mahishasur Martyrdom Day is being observed in different institutions of higher learning and in cities and towns across north India by small groups. It is apparent that this day is fast taking the shape of a festival of the Bahujans who have been socially, economically and culturally oppressed for ages.

Even as this movement gains momentum, some discordant notes have been struck, some objections raised. There is a need for clarification.

Some people believe that being an atheist is being progressive. Such people claim that “those who accept that Mahishasur was killed by deceit will also have to accept the glorification of Durga in scriptures”. In our view, this is a fallacious argument. Because, what problem can a truly reasonable mind have in accepting that every myth is just a “reading” invested with the social realities and historicity of its times? This is as true of the myth of Durga as of any piece of modern literature. For instance, take the characters of Hindi’s most famous novelist Premchand or for that matter any other writer. Whether it is Hori or Ghisu-Madhav, don’t we get to study through them society then and social history? Even if no historical text was available, don’t these characters tell us about the injustice and exploitation that prevailed in contemporary society? Haven’t we been pointing out the hypocrisy of the writers or where their sympathies lay on the basis of the kind of characters they chiselled? Can anyone say that characters are a product of the writer’s imagination alone?

No story is completely detached from the contemporary realities. Of course, the reality-to-fiction ratio may vary. Therefore, there can be a debate on what or how much in the Durga-Mahishasur legend

is reality, how much of it is fiction and how much is exaggeration. All exaggerations or glorifications should be bookmarked, but it cannot be said that contemporary society is missing from this tale. If it is foolish to say that these mythological characters were real, it will be even more foolish to get down to somehow proving that Mahishasur is “baseless”. Neither has history been dug out in its entirety, nor has the ultimate truth been revealed.

The Durga-Mahishasur myth aside, many historians and anthropologists have proved the historicity of the clash between Aryans and Asurs. The fact is that those who are raising these questions are status quoists in the garb of atheists. They never had any objection to the glorification of Durga or to the celebration of the murders of Bahujans. Their objection is only to the Bahujan interpretation of the legend. But they should remember that the victims of injustice cannot postpone their struggle till the so-called ultimate truth of history is unveiled.

### **Objective of re- rendition**

14 To understand the implications of any story – whether literary or mythological or even tales of “Ayyari” – one needs to deconstruct it. If you deconstruct any brahmanical mythological story, you will find that it admits the injustices and deceits perpetrated by the heroes and heroines without demur, portraying them as acts of valour to glorify the characters. It is clear that for Brahmins, everything that the powerful did was moral. They didn’t have the concept of “justice”. While trying to re-establish Brahmanism in the medieval era, Tulsidas also said that “samrath ko nahin dosh gosain” (The powerful do no wrong). Here lies the need for a re- rendition. What would Indian society gain from it? What would Bahujan society gain from it? This re- rendition is aimed at establishing the concepts of justice and humanist morality – to prove that ultimately truth prevails over power. The subconscious of Indian society, riddled with casteism, is based on these legends. To liberate itself, this extremely unequal society will have to imbibe this re- rendition. A mere superficial surgery, using the instruments of so-called modernity, will not free this society from this mental disease. The re- rendition of myths should be seen as a psychological treatment of the problem.

Descriptions of wars and deceits in mythology clearly indicate

that Mahishasur was a valiant sociopolitical leader of that section of society whose life values were different from those of the Surs (Brahmins/Aryans). They were more powerful, resourceful and prosperous than the Surs. They were the rulers of their kingdom and the Surs were finding it impossible to defeat them. Ultimately, the Surs used a woman to trick and conquer them. If the youth of the Bahujan community study this tale, they will discover that their ancestors were the owners of this land's resources and that a minority group took control of their ancestors through deceit and enslaved them politically, economically and ultimately, culturally. This fact will inspire the Bahujan youth to challenge not only their cultural but also their economic and political enslavement. It will spur them on to devise political strategies to achieve their objectives. In this way, this rendition will establish life values based on the modern concepts of justice and humanist morality.

*This is the preface to the booklet Mahishasur published on Sharad Purnima (Mahishasur Martyrdom Day), October 2014.*

# Re-rendition

# Who are the Bahujans really worshipping?

PREMKUMAR MANI

Since the beginning of civilization, Shakti (cosmic power, often described as the feminine creative force) has been worshipped in its various forms such as capability, power, influence, strength and energy. Not just in India but in all the regions of the world. The entire mythology of the world has been woven with gods and goddesses who symbolize Shakti. Even today the importance of Shakti is indisputable. America can bully the whole world only because it has the maximum military power and wealth. Nobody listens to those who don't have nuclear bombs; their voice carries no value. Only he succeeds in having his *Gita* heard who carries a Sudarshna Chakra in his hand. It is his forcefulness alone that carries any weight; and so does his politeness. Poet Dinkar has said, "Forgiveness is becoming of that serpent who also carries the poison/ Not of him, who has neither teeth nor poison, who is polite and a simpleton."

A toothless and poison-less snake cannot even pretend to be civilized. His politeness, his forgiving attitude are all meaningless. The Buddha has said, "The weak cannot tread the right path." Even in his non-violent civilization, it is permitted to hiss. In one of the Jataka tales, there's an incident where a dangerous snake becomes a follower of the Buddha. Being a Buddha follower, he gave up biting people. When people came to know that he no longer bit they started stoning it. Even then it did not retaliate. When the Buddha met his blood-soaked follower, he was overwhelmed and said, "I forbade you to bite, not to hiss. People would have fled if you had just hissed."

In India too there has been a long history of worshipping Shakti. But this history is not so simple. Complexities and confusions are

aplenty. The symbol of Shakti evident in the Indus Valley Civilization is not the same one we see after the arrival and settling of the Aryans. The centres or symbols of Shakti kept changing with the pre-Vedic, early-Vedic, Vedic and post-Vedic periods. As the influence of Aryan civilization increased, its various forms also came to light. So if any contemporary Hindu considers Durga or any other goddess to be the first and the final symbol of Shakti, he or she is being childish. In the non-Aryan or Dravidian civilization of the Indus Valley, Prakriti (feminine) and Purusha (masculine) were combined symbols of Shakti. That was an era of peace – in Marxist terms, the era that just succeeded the primitive communist society. That civilization had developed enough for people to live in houses made of baked bricks and there were great baths and marketplaces. Shiva must have been the leader of these copper-complexioned and flat-nosed people; a carefree, happy-go-lucky kind of hero. There was no Shakti worship in the civilization of these Dravidians. In any case, in advanced civilizations power is not an object of worship.

It was the arrival of the Aryans that set the stage for Shakti Puja. The peaceful, civilized Dravidian cow-rearers of the Indus Civilization (note that Shiva rides a bull, which is born of a cow) were destroyed and pushed back by comparatively crueller horse-riding Aryans. Dravidians would not have given up easily. The battle between “gods” and “demons” is the same Aryan-Dravidian battle. Indra was the leader of the Aryans. Indra was also the symbol of Shakti. Vedic sages have praised this god, Indra, to the high heavens. At that time, Indra was the greatest god, the greatest hero of the Aryans. He was the Hercules of the Aryans. There is no mention of worship of any goddess during that period. Aryan society was patriarchal. Men had the upper hand. The position Prakriti (feminine) had in the Dravidian times had almost vanished. In the Aryan-dominated society, male supremacy carried on for a long time.

However, Indra continued to face challenges from the Dravidians. If the cow-rearing Krishna has anything to do with history then his proverbial dark skin complexion likens him to a Dravidian hero. This Krishna also publicly opposed Indra worship. He established his own power instead. Shiva too was co-opted within the three main gods by Aryan society. Indra was totally discarded. From the orthodoxy of Bhartiya Jana Sangh to the limited liberalism of the Bhartiya Janata

Party (BJP) and finally the National Democratic Alliance (NDA structure), the Aryan society too changed along these lines. This pretension of liberality is necessary to expand. Like a George Fernandes or a Sharad Yadav, it was important to make Shiva the convener, because without that, it was not possible to create a trouble-free kingdom.

The Aryans tried to bring harmony by marrying their daughter to Shiva. When both the parties are strong there is harmony and coordination. When one is weaker, the other slaughters. Aryans and Dravidians were both in positions of strength. It was possible to attain harmony and coordination between the two. Where was the question of Shakti Puja? Shakti Puja happens after the slaughter. The victor becomes worship-worthy; the loser worships. Though a limited sense of worship exists in civilized societies as well, it is worship of the hero, not worship of the mighty. Only a weak, indolent, defeated society worships the mighty. Shiva worship is worship of a hero. Shakti Puja is not that. The worship of Raavan in the myths is Shakti Puja. It is adoring the powerful; singing hosannas to the mighty!

But what does it mean to worship Shakti as a goddess? The meaning is deep as well as simple. Matriarchal societies existed in eastern India, diametrically opposite to patriarchal societies in the western parts. Culturally, East is Banga (Bengali) land, which stretches to Assam. This region worships the goddess form of Shakti. One of the meanings of Shakti is vulva or vagina. Vagina is the centre of reproductive power. In ancient societies, during the yajnas (sacrificial fires) carried out to enhance fertility of the land, women were made to parade naked. In the East, woman is traditionally considered to be a symbol of Shakti. This tradition was culturally used by Brahmins for their own ends. This was a well-thought-out campaign of the Brahmins to co-opt non-Brahmins into Aryan society. This can also be called the expansion of Aryan culture into the East. For expansion it was necessary to harmonize with the existing matriarchal society, the intermingling of patriarchal and matriarchal societies. Aryan society had to accept the importance of the feminine, had to underline its power. Goddesses, instead of gods, became important. This Eastern form of Shakti was unprecedented for Aryan culture.

### **What is the Mahishasur-and-Durga myth?**

So what is this myth of Mahishasur and Durga? Unfortunately,

we have only looked at it from an elitist brahmanical perspective. I remember that after the 1971 Indo-Pak war and the creation of Bangladesh, the then Jana Sangh leader Atal Behari Vajpayee referred to the then prime minister Indira Gandhi as Abhinav Chandi Durga (The New Chandi Durga). At that time, Communist leader Dange was still in control of his senses. He fiercely opposed it and said, “Atal Behari fails to understand what he is saying and Mrs Gandhi fails to understand what she is hearing. Both must understand that Chandi Durga was a slaughterer of the Dalits and backward sections.” After this statement by Dange, Indira Gandhi said in Parliament, “I am only Indira and that’s what I want to remain.”

The Shudra (and perhaps the unadulterated) reading of Mahishasur-Durga story goes like this. Mahish means buffalo. Mahishasur means the “buffalo demon”. Asur (demon) is “different from god [sur]”. Sur means god. God means Brahmin or Swarna (upper caste). Surs do no work. Asur means those who work – in today’s parlance, workers. Mahishasur means people who rear buffalo: the buffalo-rearers, those who trade in milk, the dairy people. Asur may have changed to Ahur and then to Ahir (the present-day milkman caste). Mahishasur or the buffalo-rearers must have been the people dominating the Banga region. Racially, they must have been Dravidians. They must have also been opponents of the Aryan culture. Aryans had to defeat them. These people used Durga. In the Banga region, prostitutes refer to Durga as one of their clan. Even today when one makes the Durga idol, some soil must be brought from the house of a prostitute. It took Durga nine nights to kill Mahishasur. The Brahmins who sent her waited nine nights with bated breath. This was a difficult task. If not force, deception. Force of deception. On the ninth night, Durga tasted success, she killed Mahishasur. As they heard the news, the Aryans (Brahmins) were all agog. They swooped down on Mahishasur’s people and cutting their heads (munda) off made a new kind of garland. They put this garland around Durga’s neck. Even Indra couldn’t do what Durga had done. Parvati too only seduced Shiva, she did not slaughter him. What Durga achieved was miraculous. She was most important. Most blessed of all! The very incarnation of Shakti!

*(Forward Press, October 2011)*

*(This essay by Premkumar Mani – short-story writer, thinker and political worker – is the point of departure of the Mahishasur Martyrdom Movement. Mani wrote it for the Dainik Hindustan newspaper's Patna edition about a decade ago. Janvikalp, a magazine published from Patna, reproduced it in its October 2007 issue. However, the essay went virtually unnoticed until it appeared again in the October 2011 issue of the Forward Press magazine. Once Forward Press republished the essay, it caught the attention of the students of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and the Mahishasur Movement was born in North India.)*

## Why this celebration of death?

PREMKUMAR MANI

When Asuras are a tribe, how can defeating them or killing their hero be a reason to celebrate? What sort of a psyche does that symbolize? If someone were to launch a festival to celebrate the massacre in Gujarat or the massacres of Dalits in Bihar, or say, a celebration of the death of Bhumihars – how would that feel? Agreed, the hero of Asuras, Mahishasura, was killed by Durga and the Asuras were defeated, but why does this have to be celebrated each year? You are actually insulting people through this festival.

We don't intend to hurt anyone by our observance of the martyrdom day of Mahishasura. In fact, we've set aside this day to reflect on why we lost. We are told our hero was killed through deceit, and/but we are still being deceived. Actually, by learning from our past we want to uplift ourselves in our present. There is no malice here. All our symbols are being erased. We only found out through these sources that Ekalavya was a better archer than Arjuna. So then why are awards instituted in the name of Arjuna and not in the name of Ekalavya? Our heroes were pushed back in history. Our symbols are being insulted. We want to question the tradition that cut the thumbs and heads of our heroes. Their insult is our insult. Any society, thought, country is not merely a piece of cloth.

There is talk of saving the river Ganga. But that does not mean one destroys the Narmada, the Gandak and other rivers. If there is life next to the Ganga then the Narmada, the Gandak and other rivers also have people living on their banks. To keep the Ganga clean does not mean one has to make the Narmada dirty. We consider a pond to be as important as the Ganga. If the cow is holy then it does not mean one kills the buffalo. The buffalo is as important and valuable as the cow. Actually, the buffalo has a more crucial role in Indian society.

Due to geographical reasons, more families depend on the buffalo. If the cow can be worshipped, then why is not the more valuable buffalo being worshipped too? A lion once killed a buffalo and that is being celebrated as a festival. Does anyone drink lion's milk? The lion has to be kept away in the forest, else it will cause destruction. What kind of a symbol is that? What are you doing in the name of symbols?

If your religious sentiments are being hurt by the celebration of this festival, then so be it. To satisfy your religiosity we are not pushing Shudras into untouchability or women into sati. We would protest against such a petty religion. Killing a Brahmin is punishable but killing a Dalit leads to salvation – what sort of a religion is that? This could be your dharma, it certainly is not ours. We see life similarly in a cow and a pig. We want our dharma to expand. We want to take it from the cow to the buffalo. We want even the pigs of a musahar to not die. We are more ethical than you.

If your religion is keen on treating some of the lower castes as untouchable, then are we supposed to accept that to satisfy your dharma? In the Constituent Assembly most landlords were saying that abolishing zamindari would bring about their deaths. So does that mean that zamindari should be allowed to continue? Actually, your vested interest is colliding with our interests. And that is subsuming even our basic interests. Your and our interests have always been different; we are just trying to establish some harmony there.

The worship of Durga and our defeat is for you the celebration of your tradition and culture. But since your tradition has also found happiness in sati, the varna system, untouchability, karmakanda, etc, do we let ourselves be oppressed? There is a major flaw in your religiosity.

We just want to know what happened to our history. Why are we so miserable?

The present PM gifts the *Gita* to everyone. The *Gita* recognizes the varna system. We also have *Buddhacharita* and *Tripitakas*. We are talking of an equal society. You are doing the politics of domination and inequality in the name of religion whereas our struggle is for equality.

(As told to Jitendra Yadav; Mahishasur, 2014)

# On Dussehra

PREMKUMAR MANI

The festival of Dussehra is here and with that a huge part of India is bracing itself to worship Durga. A magical story of the defeat of demons is related to Durga worship – a story we've been hearing and seeing since childhood. In her worship-worthy form, Durga is the slayer of Mahishasur – a goddess who defeated the demon Mahisha.

Our knowledge of the demons (Asuras) is extremely limited. The young writer Ranendra has written a novel titled *Global Gaon ke Devta* (Gods of the Global Village), which provides us with some information. More than anything else it encourages us to think about the history of the Asuras. You will be surprised to know that from the battle between gods and demons to the killing of Mahishasur, all the demons described there are still found as a tribe of 10,000 people in the state of Jharkhand. These are the people who discovered metals and till today are engaged in iron-making. Contrary to what history tells us about non-Aryans or people from ethnicities other than Aryan, these people are not (Anasa) flat-nosed and copper-complexioned; they are mostly fair and tall. Perhaps these are the people who laid the foundation of the Mohenjodaro and Harappan civilization and fighting the Aryans continued to retreat. Their only crime was that they refused to surrender to the Aryans. Their resistance continued. However, Asuras had to pay a heavy price for that.

Devayani in the *Mahabharata* was an Asura girl – daughter of Asura priest Shukracharaya – who married Yayati. Yayati's second wife Sharmishtha too was a daughter of an Asura king. His name was Vrishparva. Hence, those belonging to Kuru and Yadu dynasties were all children of demon mothers. The study of their cultural history remains to be done, but the 19th-century social revolutionary Mahatma Jotiba Phule has discussed Asuras at length in his book *Ghulamgiri* (Slavery).

Hopefully people will be able to cut through challenging facts encountered in pre-historic periods and mythological disputes and find new meanings. We must accept that the dominant and the deprived do not give the same explanation of history or mythology. A character from *Global Gaon*, Rum Jhum Asura, says at one point: “We have been continuously retreating from the Sapta Sindhu region of the Vedic period and via Azamgarh, Shahabad, Ara, Gaya, Rajgir have reached the forest area of Kikat, Paundrik, Kokrah or Chuttia Nagpur. There is no record in history of innumerable Indras, Pandvas, Singbogas destroying us so many times, pulling down so many of our bastions. We live only in folktales and myths.”

Rum Jhum continues: “When our ancestors decided to protect the forests they were called Rakshasas [demons]. When they protested cutting and burning of forests for cultivation, they were called Daityas [monsters]. They were attacked and were constantly chased down ... but the defeat we suffered in the twentieth century is history’s greatest defeat. This time it’s not the Sing-Bonga of the stories but companies like Tata that destroyed us. The iron, spade, trowel, pickaxe, shovels made in their factories have reached remote village markets. The tools made of iron smelted by us are not much in demand. Our skill in smelting iron has slowly vanished ... our daughters and our land are slipping out of our hands. Where will we go from here, we are not able to figure out.”

And this Dussehra celebrates the killing of Mahishasur – an ancestor of this demon, Rum Jhum. Statues are placed in pandals all around. Durga’s trident is piercing the torso of the demon king. Durga’s tiger has overpowered the demon’s buffalo. Durga is wearing a necklace of heads.

I feel that Durga herself was from the demon lineage and the Aryans used her. In that initial battle of the Sapta Sindhu region when the Aryans and the Dases or Dasyus were facing one another, the decisive battle was between Vritra and Indra. A Das called Divodas joined hands with Indra and as a result Vritra lost the battle. Durga’s story also resembles this. Going over to the enemy’s side, Durga slaughters her own people. Immersed in the shouts of victory, this goddess does bite her tongue in remorse, when in the process of carrying out the slaughter she steps on the chest of her god Mahadev (Shiva). This form of Durga is called Kali, and it repeatedly forces me to ask if the goddess had realized how far she had

gone. This form is very poignant. Thirty-three years ago, I had written a story “Kaas ke Phool”. In that story a potter who makes idols replaces Mahishasur with the figure of a local Seth and in the necklace fits skulls of city’s criminals instead of those of the Asuras. With this minor change the meaning of the entire festival is transformed.

This Dussehra, if the Dalitbahujan leaders are able to recognize whose chest they are stepping on to receive all the praise, it will bring some meaning to the festival. If they can show remorse like the goddess, the significance of the festival will change completely.

*(Forward Press, October 2011)*

# ‘I am proud to be an Asur!’

## Jharkhand’s former chief minister Shibu Soren in conversation with Nawal Kishore Kumar

“We tribals are the original inhabitants of India. All the outsiders deprived us of our rights. All sorts of untruths were used to serve this end. We were called barbarians; we were not even considered humans. Especially, the Hindu scriptures described us as ‘Asurs’. But I am proud that I am an Asur and I love my land.”

The voice of former Jharkhand Chief Minister Shibu Soren, now 68, speaking from Jharkhand, is not very clear. Age and illness have taken their toll on him. He cannot talk much. But in a telephonic conversation, Soren spontaneously described Ravana as his “kulguru” (clan mentor).

Shibu Soren, who has been given the title of “Deshom Guru” (Teacher of the Nation), says that in his childhood, whenever he heard of the killing of Ravana and Mahishasur-slayer Durga, he felt very odd. The reason: Mahishasur’s looks and costumes closely resembled those of his own people. “Like us, he lived in the forest. Like us, he grazed cows and, like us, he hunted.” One question that often perturbed him was what made the so-called gods fight against the Asurs. When he grew up, he realized that all this was a conspiracy of the elite classes to wrest control over the water, forests and land of the Tribals.

Soren says that when he became the chief minister of Jharkhand for the first time in 2005, he decided to get a survey done for the welfare of the Asur community. The idea was to save the community from the verge of extinction and bring it into the social mainstream. He says that during his second term in 2008 too, he took the initiative to draw up a policy for the purpose. But the move came to nothing as he lost a by-election while he was the Chief Minister.

Soren wants that the younger generation to see the truth behind the superstitions and myths propagated by the elite and to contribute its might to the building of a new society.

*(Forward Press, October 2011)*

## Durga the Santal Slayer

MADHUSREE MUKERJEE

Durga Puja, one of the most spectacular of Hindu festivals, is conducted mainly in Bihar and Bengal, for nine days after the monsoon rains. According to Hindu scripture, Durga – who is depicted with a weapon in each of her ten hands, and in the act of slaying Mahishasur, the buffalo demon – was created by the gods to fight the Asura, or the race of demons. For devotees, the festival is a celebration of good over evil, with speakers of Bengali and Hindi routinely using the word ‘asur’ to mean an evil, treacherous enemy. “Our collective strength must be harnessed to resist evil powers in society,” stated India’s president, Pranab Mukherjee, in 2015, expressing the hope that “the combination of all positive forces would eliminate the Asuras or divisive forces”.

Even as the Durga festival reaches its climax, however, Santals observe their own Dashoi ceremony, when the men dress up as women, hide weapons under their clothes, sing mournful songs, and dance in slow, heavy motions. Bajar Hembrom, a Santal musical genius who could construct and play several instruments, gave Bengali activist Kunal Deb the following explanation for this strange custom:

“A long, long time ago there was the Har kingdom on Earth. That is, a Santal Raj. Our king was Adur. He was also called Raja Debi. He was as famed for his governance – for the way he looked after his people – as for his heroism. He could fight a tiger with his bare hands; he could alone stop the rampages of crazed elephants. His soldiers too were very fierce. Nobody could beat them in battle. Raja Indra had been crushed many times in battle against him.

“But Indra too was not someone to give up. This time, in order to defeat Raja Debi and seize the Santal kingdom, he resorted to deceit and trickery. He sent the dancer Durga from his heavenly court to

Earth. One of her assistants placed her on the back of an elephant and directed her to the jungle palace of Raja Debi. Another of her helpers covered the skies with an intoxicatingly beautiful moonlight, yet another spread music in the air. A fourth filled the surroundings with dancing peacocks. In such a heady atmosphere, Durga had no difficulty in seducing Raja Debi with her beauty and dance.

“Not long after, Raja Debi got married. His queen was Durga. She started sending news to Indra about when the raja slept, when he was unarmed, when festivals preoccupied his soldiers and commanders, and so on. Indra linked these snippets of intelligence with one another to formulate a plan. He decided the day and time, and one day he imprisoned Raja Adur in a sudden attack. The soldiers were taken by surprise and could not recover from that assault. Debi’s kingdom was easily seized. Our Santal ancestors lost their king and their kingdom. Everyone scattered where they could.

“The trusted guards and friends of the king started to look for their beloved monarch. Disguised as women, their weapons concealed, they wandered and danced in villages and towns, in many places, always searching. If they hear the faintest reply to their mournful song, from the imprisoned raja, out will come the weapons from under the feminine clothes of the warriors. They will fight and recover their lost kingdom. And when Raja Adur Debi returns, they will get back their Santal Raj, their lost wealth, their forests, their rivers, everything.

“The Dashoi dance is on the last day of Durga Puja. You worship Durga. We search for, we still search for, our lost Raja Debi. You call him Asur.”

A version of this poignant tale is also told by Asurs, a highly marginalized Austro-Asiatic tribe that lives mainly in Jharkhand and numbers no more than 11,000. Asurs observe the entire period of Durga Puja as a time of mourning, and their children are said to behead effigies of lions, which are symbols of Durga. To understand the meaning of this legend, it helps to review the prehistory of Austro-Asiatic tribes, including Santals, who appear to be descended from the very first modern humans to have emigrated out of Africa and into Asia.

These wanderers, who lived by hunting, gathering, and fishing, travelled across the Red Sea, along the Arabian coast, and crossed

the Persian Gulf into Asia around 70,000 years ago. Subsequently the group may have divided, one branch travelling eastward along the northern side of the Himalayas to southern China. Another walked southward along the Persian coast to arrive in South Asia perhaps 65,000 years ago. The latter gave rise to the subcontinent's Austro-Asiatic speakers: the Santals, Asurs, Mundas and others. They seem to have first peopled the coasts, and then penetrated into the subcontinent along the river basins – probably being pushed eastward by the arrival of a people from the Middle East, the Dravidians, in several waves starting about 45,000 years ago. Interestingly, a branch of the Austro-Asiatic speakers appear to also have entered India from southern China and Southeast Asia by crossing the eastern edge of the Himalayas.

Santal legends indicate that the tribe repeatedly enjoyed long periods of peace and prosperity in munificent lands before being rudely expelled, and the Durga-Mahishasur legend appears to codify one such conflict. Although often regarded as a battle between Aryans and Adivasis, the iconography suggests instead a struggle between Austro-Asiatics and Dravidians. Durga is not only a mainstream goddess in eastern India, but is also worshipped by certain Dravidian tribes, such as the Kondhs of Odisha. Since lions, an animal with which she is indelibly associated, used to roam across the arid parts of western and central India, the goddess may have been conceived in these parts. Alternately, the Dravidians may have brought a lion goddess with them from the Middle Eastern cultures, where goddesses such as Sekhmet, who has the head of a lion, proliferated. The mahish, or buffalo, which has a special place in Santal legend as the first domesticated animal, may have represented Austro-Asiatics.

In a fascinating book, *Blood Rites*, Barbara Ehrenreich explains the origins of the fierce goddesses of many ancient cultures. The primordial terror of humans lies in their experience of having been prey: holes in prehuman skulls match the fangs of sabre-toothed cats, and, as late as the 19th century, predators such as tigers were taking thousands of Indians a year. Imagine the feelings of a band of humans from whom a predator has claimed a victim: horror, mingled with secret relief that it was someone else. It may be that our ancestors took to leaving out dead bodies and later, living people, to appease the hunger of the beast. The carnivores became gods – almost every an-

cient culture has its ferocious deity, associated with an animal. From time to time they require blood sacrifices. Kali, her red tongue lolling, roams cremation grounds by night just as a tigress might have; in battle she slashes with her fangs and claws and laps up blood. Worshipped by Sabars, an Austro-Asiatic people, she appears to be associated with tigers, just as Durga is connected with the lion.

Oddly, the fearsome gods are usually goddesses. Ehrenreich invokes the mystique of menstrual blood to explain the gender, but the simple fact of motherhood offers a more streamlined scenario. The earliest humans were scavengers, dependent on better hunters to leave parts of a kill, such as a buffalo carcass, lying around. So the neighbourhood carnivore was not only a terrifying predator, but also a provider. Who does a lion or tiger, or rather lioness or tigress, feed? Her cubs, of course. Perhaps our ancestors sought to become those cubs, to be nourished by the predator while being protected from her wrath by the magical power of the maternal instinct. The goddesses are worshipped not as tyrants who need to be appeased, but as mothers who grant boons: Ma Kali, Ma Durga.

It may be that the early carnivore deities transmogrified into human form as their worshippers came to identify more closely with their protectors. And the primary source of terror changed – to other humans. Kali is invariably depicted as black with strings of white heads strung around her neck: it seems likely that she became the aboriginals' fierce protector against their lighter-skinned enemies.

Durga has, however, long been tamed – by being shoehorned into the mainstream Hindu pantheon as one of Shiva's many turbulent wives. When Brahmin men from central India, worshippers of Shiva (also originally an aboriginal god, representing fertility), moved to Bengal many centuries ago, they were forced to accept their native wives' worship of goddesses such as Durga. Marrying these turbulent, angry females off to Shiva became their device to retain a measure of patriarchal control. During the nine days when she is worshipped, typically in October, the beautiful Durga is said to be visiting her parents from her husband's Himalayan home. (Despite a similar attempt to also tame Kali, she's never been successfully portrayed as a dutiful wife.)

In sum, the story of Durga and Mahishasur is at first sight a tale of prehistoric conflict between Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic peoples.

It is possible, however, that by the time this epic encounter took place, Durga had already been incorporated into the mainstream, and represented the dominant culture. What makes Bajar Hembrom's story even more complex is the role played by Indra, an Aryan god who first shows up in the Rig Veda, composed between 2,000 and 1,000 BC – and who, we are told by that august text, also fought dark natives. That is, the Durga-Mahishasur story seems to have been modified and refined over the ages so that it represents multiple defeats of Adivasis, whether Austro-Asiatic or Dravidian, and visualized by the buffalo – at the hands of the mainstream, seen as a lion – and their banishment from the bountiful territories that they once enjoyed.

Frighteningly, this conquest is not prehistoric but ongoing: although Adivasis form only 8 per cent of India's population, they comprise more than 40 per cent of the tens of millions forcibly displaced from their fields, forests and rivers by the imperative of development. Even as mainstream industrial society, whose need for land is voracious and inexhaustible, expands into what remains of India's wilderness, it consumes the lands of Adivasis – and rationalizes their dispossession by the claim of “civilizing” them and bringing them into the mainstream.

A pernicious movie released in 2015, *MSG-2*, explicitly celebrates the modern-day defeat of Adivasis as a civilizing mission. It features a muscular, light-skinned, AK-47-wielding superhero – a warrior of the modern Indian nation-state – felling legions of small, dark-skinned people, along with the occasional elephant and buffalo, symbols of Adivasis. “The state has declared all the Adivasis who live in the jungles to be terrorists,” declares the superhero. “They're not human, not animal, but shaitan” – devils. In another scene, the Adivasi is characterized as a rakshasha, or demon. His mission among the Adivasis, is “to turn them into humans”, says the superhero: to crush the natives, destroy their will, and transform them into dutiful, law-abiding citizens of emerging India. As such, he is only completing the process that Durga started thousands of years ago – of clearing the wilderness of other kinds of peoples, usurping the terrain, and claiming it all to be a triumph of good over evil.

*This essay is not a translation.*

# Asur traditions in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh

RAJAN KUMAR

India is a country known for its diverse traditions. Many of the traditions have become extinct, whereas many are on the verge of becoming so, mainly due to neglect and indifference. Among those that need to be recognized are the Asur traditions, which still exist in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh and generally pertain to the commemoration of Bhainsasur or Mahishasur. Other familiar names representing these traditions include Mayakasur, Mayanasur and Varasur. These traditions take on different forms and beliefs.

Asur traditions in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh are found mainly among Gond, Baiga, Asura and Halwa tribes and some of the Scheduled Castes and other backward castes. Many villages, other places, mounds, soil or rock platforms have been named after Bhainsasur.

The Barasur area of Bastar, Chhattisgarh, where the Halwa and Gond tribes are predominant, also treasures Mahishasur and Asura traditions. Many villages remember Mahishasur as the village god (gramdevta). A mound, made of stone or soil, outside the village or inside the farms, represents him. The tribes here believe that Mahishasur will help them get a better crop or save their village from evil spirits. In northern Bastar's Kanker district, there is a village panchayat called Bhainsasur near Sarandi and Nagarbeda. Gond, Muriya, Madiya, Dorla, Bhatra, Parja and Halwa tribes are prominent among those who have given Bhainsasur a godlike status. These tribes also worship Budhadev, Thakur Dai, Ranimata, Ravdevta, Mawli, Agar-moti, Donger, Bagroom and more.

There is a village in Chhattisgarh near National Highway 30

called Bade Urla, which is covered by forests. Girola and Beldih are nearby villages. This area is known for its plentiful supply of tendu leaves. Plucking leaves for making beedi is one of the main occupations here during summers. Karrabaghin is kept as the forest goddess at a spot about a mile away from Bade Urla while the seat of Mahishasur is the village's fields. Mahishasur is the forest god and is remembered especially during festivals. Temples of the forest goddess Karrabaghin have been built at the entry gates of the forest, where one remembers her and prays for safety for oneself before entering the forest. The name "Bagbuda" in a village called Viran is striking. The literal meaning of the term is "a dense forest where not even a tiger can be traced". People here consider Bhainsasur the god of the forest and Karrabaghin the goddess.

There is a temple of Mahamaya in Raipur, the capital of Chhattisgarh. Behind the temple, towards the quarters of the priest, there used to be a dense bush where there are still two ancient mounds of rock. This mound is known as Bhainsasur. Buffaloes used to be sacrificed here up to a few decades ago. Now a structure has been erected around the mounds and the mounds have been coated with vermilion.

Similarly, in the village Damru of Baloda Bazar district (adjacent to Raipur), Chhattisgarh, there are places set aside for commemorating Mahishasur. There is also a tradition to sacrificing boars.

Many stories about Bhainsasur can be heard in the Bhaisma village of Korba district. According to one of them, a long time ago a wild buffalo used to come to a pond in the village and wallow in the slush. For centuries, this has now been a place where Bhainsasur is remembered. A rock represents Bhainsasur where the commemoration is held and a pig sacrificed once in three years. Apart from in Bhaisma, Bhainsasur is commemorated in Pulali Kala and other neighbouring villages.

Bordering Madhya Pradesh, Bilaspur district has a large Gond tribe population. Here, in almost all the tribal villages Bhainsasur is considered the most powerful Punem (god). Six kilometres from Ratanpur on the road to Kota lies Bhainsajhar village. The locals believe that once the area used to be a huge forest and had a pond named Bhainsamudha. Bhainsajhar has been derived from Bhainsamudhay. Bhainsasur is considered the physician (baiga) of the village that gets rid of evil spirits and protects the crop.

Parts of Madhya Pradesh have a similar tradition. In areas with a Gond and Baiga majority, including Vidisha, Chhattarpur, Mandala, Jabalpur, Siwani, Burhanpur, Shahdol, Anuppur, Balaghat, Damoh, Katni, Chhindwara, Riwa, Dindori and Umaria, this is how Bhainsasur is remembered. In every pargana (village), one of the mounds or hillocks has been set aside for Bhainsasur, which is called Dobri.

A pair of boars (paddi peda, gheti ghetta) is sacrificed twice a year at the tree of Persa (Palas). Women do not take part in the ritual. They make arrangements for the men to bathe when they return after performing the ritual. Tribes believe that Bhainsasur keeps their milch cattle healthy and protects them from wild animals.

The Manjhi (Malah) community of Indore, Dewas, Harda and Hoshangabad, especially those among them who live near the Narmada River, regard Bhainsasur as their totem.

There are many villages, towns and colonies in Madhya Pradesh named after Bhainsasur. This indicates the importance of Bhainsasur here. In the Maihar police station area of Satna district, there is a village named Bhainsasur. In Jabalpur, there is a junction famously known as Bhainsasur. Near Sehore town, on the Ichhabar Marg hills, there is a temple of Bhainsasur Baba. In Chhattarpur, there is a sacred place called Bhainsasur Mukti Dham. There is a small town named Badagaon, near Tikamgarh district, which has a Bhainsasur temple. The temple is known as Madia of Bhainsasur.

The ancient temple of Bhainsasur, which is being conserved by the Archaeological Survey of India, is situated in the Chauka Sora village of Kulpahar Tehsil, Mahoba district, Uttar Pradesh, near its border with Madhya Pradesh. Here, Gararia and Pal communities invoke Maikasur for the protection of their cattle.

Asur traditions are widespread in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. A large population is unaware of the traditions due to neglect. The need of the hour is a scientific analysis of these traditions to develop an understanding that is in sync with modern values.

## Dalitbahujan perspective on the Mahishasur debate

BRAJ RANJAN MANI

The ruling party's despicable invocation of Mahishasur and Durga legend in Parliament recently and its castigation of the JNU students who organized Mahishasur Martyrdom Day as a case of depravity and treason represents the belligerent brahmanical politics of the RSS-BJP that wants to muzzle all dissenting voices of Dalitbahujans. Such politics reduces arguments to bluff and history to myths in order to equate Brahmanism with nationalism so that the Dalitbahujans can be kept enslaved to the historical frauds. But there is change in the air now, as a new generation of Dalitbahujans, inspired by the emancipatory ideology of Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar, is rereading history and rejecting the brahmanical deception that has been passed off as Indian history. This is the backdrop in which the raging debate over the Mahisha-Durga myth should be grappled and grasped.

We have several partial and contesting visions of the Indian past. But they can be broadly categorized into the two – brahmanical and Dalitbahujan. The reality of this longstanding divide is in sharp contrast to the dominant elitist discourse that serves the upper-caste interests in several ways. The brahmanical vision, as we know, represents the orientation of the powerful and privileged sections, while the Dalitbahujan vision (under which we include the Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs, as well as common women) stands for the perspective of the demoralized and fragmented majority. The brahmanical and Dalitbahujan visions of the past are so contrary and contemptuous of each other that the real history of India will perhaps never be authoritatively known or reconstructed. This is the tragedy of India because its troubled history is not going to become history

in near future. As the past shapes our present and future in significant ways, history continues to evoke conflicting emotions in the privileged and the disadvantaged. In fact, the contest over the past is the contest over the affairs of the present and mirrors the real social fissures and distrust that divides Indian society. Some may argue, and quite rightly, that such contestation over the past and present is not unique to India, but few can deny that social conflicts tend to turn more bitter and vicious in a more hierarchical and patriarchal society like ours.

Thus, it is not surprising that the mystery of history, as reflected in the ongoing Durga-Mahisha controversy, continues to haunt a new generation of defiant Dalitbahujans that wants to grasp how and why it became enslaved to the oppressive caste culture. But as these Dalitbahujans still continue to be by and large absent or excluded from the professional domain of knowledge-construction and history-writing, they often fall back on the stories of their remembered past that have been handed down to them from generation to generation. Such visions of their oppressive past are buttressed by the contemporary reality of discrimination and marginalization that they face in their everyday life. In my view, the remembered past and lived experience of the Dalitbahujans are much closer to the socio-historical reality than the sum and substance of various brahmanical narratives that generally are passed off as standard history in the mass media as well as academia.

It is a revealing fact in itself that modern historiography in India, save some exceptions, continues to be the fiefdom of the caste elites who variously concoct an imaginary “Hindu-national” or “liberal-progressive” history based on the selective and cunning reading of the ancient texts and sources. In their breathtaking exaltation of ancient India as a uniquely non-violent society, even the liberal-secular pundits like Amartya Sen and Romila Thapar, despite their obvious scholarly excellence and superiority over the Hindutva-type hacks, envision a make-believe past that effectively hides the historical violence of caste and brahmanism. Liberals like them glibly argue that India has a glorious history of being a wonderfully tolerant and liberal society and the problem lies only with the RSS-type distortion of this glorious history. By normalizing the longstanding oppressive history of caste and Brahmanism, the privileged-caste liberal scholars do not

touch the fundamentals of brahmanical Hindu assumptions about Indian history. [For this point, and especially the exposure of Sen as a closet brahmanical apologist, see my *Knowledge and Power* (2014).] It is admirable that they oppose the hate politics of Hindutva against Muslims and Christians, but they remain blind, like the Hindutva rascals, to the sinister politics of Varnashrama Dharma and the unparalleled brutalities of caste and its consequences. Their privileged caste-class position – and the lure of getting easy praise and prizes from the brahmanical intellectual establishment – make them obscure what is obvious to the Dalitbahujans who are at the receiving end of the most brutal hierarchy ever known to humanity. In other words, we see normalization of caste and Brahmanism even in the best of social-science writings. It can be argued that it is this stubborn refusal to recognize the brutalization of the lowered-castes majority under the culture of caste and Brahmanism in the liberal-progressive scholarship that has contributed to, if not paved, the way for the BJP-RSS' rise to power and the macabre Hindutva dance that we witness today. This also makes clear why the liberal caste elites are utterly ineffective in countering the menace of Hindutva forces, and the Hindutva rascals fully enjoy and exploit this hypocrisy of their liberal caste cousins.

It seems as if the entire burden of the established knowledge and historiography about India is to somehow converge on one or other kind of brahmanical conclusion, and, thus, to variously discredit and destroy the Dalitbahujans' memory of their oppressive past and their own lived experiences of caste and discrimination. This, however, is not surprising, given the fact that almost all academic research and writings still remain the fiefdom of the caste elites. The tendency to belittle and dismiss, directly or indirectly, the Dalitbahujan perspective on history (pioneered in modern times by the rebellious thinkers like Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar) as "sectarian" and "unscientific" is pervasive in the elite-controlled academia. Such academic blindness to the historical injustices of caste and Brahmanism – and a long-standing struggle against them – has strengthened the Hindutva forces and deepened the distrust between the brahmanical and Dalitbahujan minds.

This, I think, is the broad historical context in which the raging debate over the Durga-Mahisha myth should be grappled. Let us first

know the basic facts related to the myth and the controversy about it before we try to comprehend the larger meaning hidden behind the symbol of Mahishasur.

### **The religio-mythical device to conceal historical reality**

The legend of Durga's killing of Mahisha, which forms the basis of Durga Puja, is fairly well known. Its foundational text is *Devi-Mahatmya* (Glorification of the Goddess), a long poem in the *Markandeya Purana*, written between the fifth and seventh centuries AD. The narrative and complexity of the myth suggest that *Devi-Mahatmya* incorporates accounts of some earlier texts in Sanskrit or Prakrit languages. In the Puranic account, Durga (which literally means "hard to get [to]") first appears under the name of Chandika (the fierce). This warrior-goddess takes to the violent heights the tradition of earlier supernatural enchantresses such as Mohini (Vishnu in disguise) and Tilottama (a celestial beauty) who merely seduce the Asuras ("non-Aryans") so that the Suras ("Aryans-Brahmans") can overpower them. What makes Durga remarkable is the fact that she is the first goddess who herself kills the Asuras and their leader Mahisha.

The legend of this lion-mounted magnificent goddess with eight arms, each of which carries deadly weapons, with which she makes mincemeat of the Mahisha and his army, is celebrated in the brahmanical tradition as a triumph of virtue over the forces of darkness. In modern times, Durga, who symbolizes shakti (power) and beauty, has also been resurrected as an unparalleled feminist icon in the writing of many brahmanical-minded men and women scholars. India, they claim, is the only country that has produced an amazing range of gorgeous and powerful goddesses who are even superior to the male gods.

The above assumptions, however, throw up the following questions.

Does Durga really represent the forces of good? Or, was she just a willing tool in the hands of the scheming gods who wanted to kill Asuras by hook or by crook?

Was Mahisha a cruel monster, as shown in the brahmanical lore? Or, was he the righteous leader of the non-Aryans who were treacherously annihilated?

And, does the claim of feminist power hold any water, or is it just a figment of brahmanical imagination or an exercise in self-congratulation?

Above all, is it desirable to religiously perpetuate and celebrate the politics of violence and killings?

And these are the questions or suspicions that agitate many Dalitbahujans, and they articulate them variously, angrily – often linking the oppression of the past with that of the present.

It seems quite plausible that the myth of Durga is a redacted and garbled account of some real historical events, as the brahmanical sources themselves reveal. Many Sanskrit texts also divulge the erotic relationship between Durga and Mahisha. *Devi-Bhagavat Purana*, for example, explicitly states that the Suras created Durga, and she seduced and then killed Mahisha. It is this treacherous killing of Mahisha that infuriates the Dalitbahujan and animates their subversive reading of the myth. They argue that the demonized Asuras such as Mahisha were actually their honoured ancestors who fought against the Aryan-brahmanical onslaughts. They link this fact with their larger argument that the brahmanical social order was constructed through a violent process, which the Puranic legends such as Durga-Mahisha try to conceal through the rigmarole of supernatural accounts. They conflate their subversive rereading of the mythology with other brahmanical texts such as Dharmashastras, which proclaim and preach that knowledge, power and prosperity of the Brahman and allied castes must rest on the enforced ignorance, powerlessness and poverty of the shudra-atishudras.

This is what the students of JNU who organized the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day were trying to do by presenting a trenchant counter-narrative of the Mahishasur-Durga myth. And this is what several incisive articles in *Forward Press*, a prominent Dalitbahujan monthly, had variously tried to underline. This perspective finds resonance in several Dalit, OBC and Adivasi communities across India that celebrate Mahishasur as their hero. And this perspective is reflected by several historical sites in several states that have memorials built in honour of Mahishasur. Even a city like Mysuru (known as Mysore in its Anglicized form) is named after Mahishasur, as compelling historical sources prove. In other words, the brahmanical version of the Mahishasur-Durga myth is nothing but a historical misrepresenta-

tion in the eyes of Dalitbahujans.

What particularly rankles the Dalitbahujans is the fact that their shudraization or social enslavement was given a religious gloss in the brahmanical cultural tradition. But as the caste subjugation of the toiling masses was turned into the sacred laws of the brahmanical culture and religion, there has also been a long tradition of struggle against Brahmanism, as the Dalitbahujan ideology variously, powerfully underlines. It is in this longstanding anti-brahmanical tradition – the tradition nurtured in modern times by Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar – that informs the new generation of Dalitbahujans that sees the Durga Puja as a living symbol of the violent anti-Dalitbahujan tradition. Opposing such sacralization of violence, these Dalitbahujans revere the martyrdom of Mahisha, who was seduced and deceitfully murdered, as many brahmanical sources themselves suggest.

Similarly, it can be argued that the claim that Durga – and other goddesses – is an unparalleled symbol of stree shakti (feminist power) in ancient India is based on dubious logic. First of all, Durga's power, as *Devi-Mahatmya* and other texts inform us, comes not from within herself but from the energy (tejas) of the male gods. Secondly, she is not an autonomous force but merely a willing instrument in the hands of the scheming male gods who cunningly employ her to defeat their arch-rivals. To seek feminist salvation in the bosom of such goddesses is like asking for the moon – which no one is going to ever get. As Wendy Doniger, who has incisively researched Hinduism and its mythology, astutely observes, “The pious hope of goddess feminists, and others, that the worship of goddess is Good for Women is dashed by observations in India, where the power recognized in goddesses certainly does not necessarily encourage men to grant to women – or women to take from men – political or economic powers. Indeed we can see the logic in the fact that it often works the other way round (the more powerful the goddess, the less power for real women) ... In taking the mythology of goddesses as a social charter, the goddess feminists are batting on a sticky wicca.”

Above all, it is not hard to find that the brahmanical tradition recognized and glorified goddesses in the Puranic period, when it was assimilating a lot of indigenous and tribal practices into its fold in order to entice the reluctant masses to the brahmanical social order. The non-Aryan communities, many of whom had a marked matriline-

eal orientation, had already been worshipping their goddesses, and among them were Chandika and Durga. In other words, these names were current in the non-Aryan tradition before their brahmanical appropriation. It is notable that the Kushans, centuries earlier than the Aryans-Brahmans, had put goddesses on their coins. As Doniger has pointed out, at some moment in the Puranic period, which also marked the rise of cult of devotional bhakti, the critical mass of Devi (goddess) worship already current in the local indigenous cultures forced the brahmanical custodians of Sanskrit narratives to acknowledge it. Thus, the reinvention of the goddesses in the brahmanical mould and turning them into a war machine against the Asuras (which indeed seems a code name for the ancestors of Dalitbahujans) was a masterstroke that worked excellently for the Aryans-Brahmans. It helped them immensely in killing the memories of the violent Aryan-non-Aryan warfare that stretched over the centuries, the garbled and distorted accounts of which we find in the Veda-Purana and other brahmanical texts.

### **Conspiracy to lock up the mind and society in caste prison**

It would be in order here to make some pertinent points about myth and history that can deepen our understanding of India's troubled past. Of course, myth is not history, but myth is not simply the opposite of truth either. Intermingling fiction and fact, fantasy and reality, myth is a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events. Abounding in symbols, allusions and fantasies, mythology both reveals (leads) and conceals (misleads), and, alongside the historical sources and writings, helps us understand and reconstruct the human past. But the problem in India is peculiar. Ancient India has only mythography in the form of Itihaas-Purana (myth-history and legends) and hardly any historiography in the dominant brahmanical tradition. It is interesting to explore why historical-mindedness didn't develop in India. The fact that the study of history flourished in other countries such as Greece and China but not in India is quite revealing, and lends credence to the Dalitbahujan suspicion of a political-intellectual conspiracy to lock up the masses in the prison-house of caste.

It seems that the brahmanical choice of mythography over histo-

riography was deliberate and a crucial part of a sinister strategy to suppress or misrepresent the historical events in order to keep the society closed and enslaved in the caste mould. It is true that all societies have undergone and experienced some form of hierarchy in the past, but as Donald Brown shows in his important work *Hierarchy, History and Human Nature* (1988), the degree of hierarchy is not the same in every society. Less hierarchical societies tend to be more open and inclusive, with more avenues and scope for social mobility, whereas rigidly hierarchical societies like India's are by and large closed, where only those from the privileged families or castes are able to get ahead. In more open societies, success depends in large measure on an individual's skills and initiatives, giving rise to an interest in history as a repository of facts and interpretations about why certain individuals succeeded and others didn't. Open societies have a propensity to be interested in the accurate recording of chronology and biography, and in realistic portraiture as well as in a common educational philosophy, social and political science, the pace and direction of change, the shape of things to come, and, above all, belief in the idea of universality of human nature.

By contrast, closed societies – of which pre-modern and caste-ridden India is a prototype – tend to represent individuals symbolically, identifying persons through the symbols of their caste or rank rather than depicting their individual characteristics. A classic example is the legend of Mahisha itself, as his very name makes clear. Mahisha is a human being, but in the brahmanical eye, he is no different from the buffalo (the bovine which apparently occupied a vital place in the then pastoral society). He is reduced to a buffalo: his very name is Mahisha (Sanskrit for buffalo). In producing images, art and literature that are highly stylized, symbolic and non-representational (which are, again, vividly visible in the art and literature on the Durga-Mahisha legend), the objective of the ruling castes in closed societies is to perpetuate illusions and mystification about society and culture, thus keeping people away from the reality of historical truth. For this reason, closed societies like India have traditionally elevated myths and legends over historical facts, hagiography over biography, iconography and symbolism over realism, superstition over rationality or science, education of the few over education of the many, and above all, casteism and sexism over humanism and

egalitarianism.

This explains why the Brahman in India wrote only Itihasa-Purana, which, unlike historical narratives, are a make-believe account that conceals the reality far more than it reveals. The point is not that mythology is undesirable or inferior to history – it may not be an inferior mode of thought either, as many critical traditionalists argue – but it cannot be a substitute for history. By mixing the natural with supernatural and fact with fiction, myths allow us to read whatever we like to read. But if a society is left only with myths, it will be well nigh impossible to understand the past – anyone could read anything into those myths. This was however the precise purpose of the Brahman literati – to hide actual history and destroy as far as possible the evidence of real events and their nefarious role therein so that real history could not be reconstructed.

This understanding gives a plausible explanation to why the Brahmans fictionalized and not historicized their – and India's – history. It reveals the reason why they wrote all kinds of myths and legends, but no history or narrative of what had actually happened. For example, the very origin of caste was explained through a myth in the Purusha-sukta of the Rig Veda. The tendency to base the origin of caste on a supernatural agency, fictitious claims of descent from mythic figures and similar mythifications were essential to the bigger ploy of keeping the people in the dark about how they were enslaved in the caste system. Opting for myth over history (where accurate names, facts, and chronicles are needed and understanding of the past is animated by an objective concern about what exactly happened) became necessary to hide the hideous historical truth. The literati who wrote misleading accounts kept their own identities hidden from the public eye. It is striking that the most brahmanical works remain either anonymous or attributed to fictitious or false authors. Manu, for example, is not the real name of the man who wrote the *Manusmriti* [see my *Debrahmanising History* (2005) 2015: 131].

By filling the public space with misleading stories and legends, by blurring the difference between myth and reality, the Brahman destroyed the very possibility of any meaningful discussion about society and its actual functioning. In many of the Puranas, statements about events were made in the future tense, although they were written much after the events had happened. Similar falsification and

mystification is evident in the Dharmashastras, the Sanskritized epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and other sacerdotal texts in which the general design is to confuse brahmanical prescription with social description. So fraudulently was fiction interwoven with selective facts that the anti-caste and non-brahmanical traditions, especially the Buddhist-shramanic movements, were erased, suppressed, or at best, grossly misrepresented in some fleeting references. For example, a Puranic text depicts Ashoka, one of the most benevolent kings in history, as a hated Buddhist and a despised shudra. In brahmanical eyes, the Mauryas, the dynasty to which Ashoka belonged, was shudra-prayastv-adharmikah – mainly Shudras and unrighteous. The brahmanical records completely ignore Ashoka until the time when, ten or twelve centuries afterwards, all danger from his influence had passed away. Expunged from the Indian history, Ashoka had to be discovered on the basis of his rock edicts and the Ceylon chronicles.

Ashoka's icon, Gautam Buddha fared no better as the brahmanical forces tried to destroy the Buddhist ideology and movement through a criminal conspiracy and large-scale violence that stretched over centuries, as my *Debrahmanising History* [(2005) 2015] and Giovanni Verardi's *Hardship and Downfall of Buddhism in India* (2011) have compellingly demonstrated, showing also the complicity of modern elitist historiography to hide the real history of India. Brahmanism not only succeeded in banishing Buddhism from India but also in destroying the very historicity of Buddha. So much so that there was a raging debate among historians in the first half of the 19th century about the historicity of Buddha and whether he was an Indian! Buddha had to be rediscovered after centuries of forced oblivion in a country whose pundits take great pride in advertising their brilliant intellectual legacy.

Not only did the Brahman not keep any specific chronologies or sequences of events, they also destroyed the records and literature of their supposed adversaries. They indulged in massive forgeries to recast Indian culture in the brahmanical mould. They suppressed facts, changed names, confused places and periods, proffered false data, created fictitious dynastic pedigrees, frequently revaluated and tampered with their Vedas and Puranas, Sanskritized the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and above all, brutally censured all oppositional

voices and events. [For elaboration and illustration of this point, see my *Knowledge and Power* (2014:194-209) and *Debrahmanising History* (2005) 2015: 134-8.]

By obliterating historical facts, records and events when Buddhism opposed Brahmanism, and the memories of the people – considered “enemies” and hence lowered and ensnared in the caste hierarchy – the Brahman destroyed the possibility of a realistic understanding of what really happened. Instead, they (mis)represented India through the rigmarole of myths and legends which served the purpose of hiding the real history. Besides, Shastras and Puranas were frequently altered and rewritten over the centuries to incorporate elements (that were felt necessary for the brahmanical supremacy) that in historical terms were simply lies.

Summing up, brahmanical misrepresentation of Indian history and culture was driven by a ruthless politics of power, the kind of politics we see today in the obnoxious politics of RSS. For all this, it was essential that the people lived in ignorance and remained uninformed of historical truth. To establish caste order and a religion based on it, Brahmanism had to promote mass ignorance and prohibit emancipatory learning for the lowered castes and women. This is the tradition the RSS valorizes and wants to perpetuate under the cover of Hindu nationalism. Its aggressive reinvention and dissemination of old and new brahmanical myths about Indian society and culture constitute the new oppressive power. For the struggling Dalitbahujans, a cutting-edge understanding of this oppressive power and its outright rejection is essential for launching a liberating cultural movement. And its counter-narrative of the Mahishasur-Durga legend is a part of this liberating cultural struggle.

*This essay is not a translation.*

# Mahishasur: A linguistic view

RAJENDRA PRASAD SINGH

As we all are aware, the word “Mahishasur” is a fusion of two words – “mahish” and “asur”. The oldest meaning of “mahish” is “very mighty”. The word “mahish” is formed by adding the suffix “ishan” to the root word “mah” and conveys the impression of greatness. The root word “mah” is used to form many words that convey the sense of “greatness”, for instance “maha” (mighty or great), “mahaan” (great), “mahatva” (importance), “mahima” (glory or magnificence), etc. “Mahish” is also one such word.

When monarchies began to be established in India, “mahish” took on a new meaning – a king. That is because only the kings were “very mighty”. That is why, queens are still known as “mahishi”. In Indian literature, “mahish” was used to mean a male buffalo for the first time in the Smritis. Before the Smritis, the word “mahish” does not figure anywhere with that meaning. This is called pejoration (depreciation of meaning) in linguistics.

The meanings of words keep on changing, and the new meaning may give the word a better or a worse connotation, or at times an equivalent one. Linguistics has proved that ethnic discrimination also brings about changes in the meanings of words. Since most of the ancient kings were dark-complexioned and non-Aryans, over the course of time, “mahish” came to mean “male buffalo” – an animal that is black in colour.

To sum up, today “mahish” has three meanings: 1) very mighty, 2) king and 3) male buffalo. The word acquired these meanings in three phases. In the first phase it meant “very mighty”, in the second, “king” and in the third, “male buffalo”.

Asurs (dark-complexioned people) must have been the kings at the time when the word acquired the second meaning. So, we can

conclude that Mahishasur lived in that era. The accurate meaning of “Mahishasur” is “king of Asurs” and not “Bhainsasur”. It came to mean “Bhainsasur” when “mahish” went through the third phase of change in meaning.

Now, let us try to understand the true meaning of the word “Asur”. The old, correct meaning of “Asur” is not demon. The Vedic Kosh says, “Asurati dadati iti asurah”, meaning one who gives “asu” (life) is “Asur” (life-giver). Famous Sanskrit lexicologist V.S. Apte has also translated the word “asu” as “pran” or “life”. Well-known Hindi lexicologist Ramchandra Verma concurs with this view. In both Hindi and Sanskrit, the word “Asur” has its origins in the word “Asu”. “Asur” is thus “asu + r”. Some people have the misconception that it is the combination “a + sur” and that it therefore means “a” (non-) + “sur” (god), ie non-god or demon.

Here is an example to illustrate the point. The word “asar” means “effect”. What would you say if someone, out of ignorance, insists that it means “a” (non-) + “sir” (a word used to address a person respectfully). Similarly, the root word of “asur” is “asu” (life). “A” cannot be separated from “sur”. One doing so, linguistically speaking, is a victim of “misleading derivation”. The word “sur” (god) was created out of ignorance. “Asur” is the original word. It is not derived from “sur”. In ancient times, the word “sur” did not exist. That is why, the Vedas use the word “Asur” for Indra. Taking “Asur” to mean demon was a later development and was misleading. The word “asur” in “Mahishasur” doesn’t refer to demon but to life.

Mahishasur is a historical character. The word “Mahishasur” appears many times in the works of eminent historian D.D. Kosambi. His books also carry pictures of many clay temples built in the memory of “Mahisha”. He also talks about Mahisha’s association with Durga. It is true that today Mahishasur is not considered a historical character but a mythical one. But it should be kept in mind that sometimes, popular historical heroes come to acquire a mythical character. Mahishasur lives in the collective memory of society. Any attempt to search him in historical texts is meaningless because his opponents sponsored these texts.

As we saw earlier, “Bhainsasur” gradually became a synonym of “Mahishasur”. Many villages in India are named after “Bhainsasur”. Several road junctions and localities are also named after him. This

shows that Mahishasur was a historical figure. There is a Bhainsasur village in Jharkhand (Padma panchayat, Manatu block, Palamu district) and in Puranpur assembly constituency, in Pilibhit district, Uttar Pradesh. Madhya Pradesh has many villages called Bhainsasur. One of them is in the Antagarh tehsil and another one is in the Maihar police station area of Satna district. There is a small town called Bhainsasur in Charkhari block of Mahoba district, Uttar Pradesh. Mahoba itself commemorates Mahishasur. D.D. Kosambi has described Mahishasur as “Mahsoba”. From Mahsoba comes Mahoba. The Mahoba area is replete with memories of Mahishasur.

Road junctions in many cities of the country have been named after Bhainsasur. There is a Bhainsasur road junction in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh and in the town of Bihar Sharif, Bihar. There are many places of worship of Mahishasur. There is a “Bhainsasur Baba Sthan” on a hillock on Ichhawar road near Sehore in Madhya Pradesh. There is also Bhainsasur Mukti Dham at Chhattarpur, Madhya Pradesh.

There is a Bhainsasur ghat and temple in Benaras. A Bhainsasur temple in the town of Badagaon, in Tikamgarh district, Madhya Pradesh, is known as “Bhainsasur kee madia”. Bhainsasur Baba is the chief deity of the town. He enjoys listening to Aalha. Bhainsasur Baba permeates many rivers, ponds and mounds. He cannot be effaced from history. You run into Bhainsasur in Jharkhand, in Bihar, and all the way to Maharashtra. Truth cannot be obliterated. It leaves its mark on stones, on mounds and everywhere else.

## The real Durga

NUTAN MALVI

Navratri precedes Dussehra. The festival of goddess Durga is celebrated nationwide. Driven by brahmanical myths and a brahmanical understanding of history, the media and other disseminators of information consistently publicize and propagate the brahmanical/mythical history of Navratri – despite it being a clear distortion. Idols show a tiger-riding Durga slaying Mahishasur. She is holding a garland of skulls in her hands but her demeanour is calm. She is killing Mahishasur very calmly. What do these idols show? A calm killer?

Devi traditions exist in Indian Bahujan communities but they have been distorted beyond recognition due to the brahmanical cultural domination. Last year (2015), a popular Marathi periodical *Lokprabha* and another periodical *Aajkal* brought out their Navratri special numbers. Both make for interesting reading. *Aajkal* lists the “peeths” (places of pilgrimage) of goddesses. According to Devi Bhagwat, it says, there are 51 “peeths” of Devis, which are known as “shakti sthals”. Of these, one each is in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Tibet; two in Nepal; and 42 in India. The remaining three have yet to be identified.

Durga has been given many new names. Mahalaxmi of Kolhapur or Karveer, Renuka Mata of Mahur in Vidharbha, Tuljabhawani of Tuljapur, and near Chandrapur in Vidharbha, Mahishasur Mardini of Vani village, Saptashrungi Devi, etc. Nasik’s Saptashrungi Devi is also called Brahmaswaroop Peethi. These Devis have been given other names as well, including Trigunatmak Mahakali, Mahalaxmi, Mahasaraswati, Jagdamba, Amba, etc. Mythical stories have been crafted for each of them. The Devi’s idols are eight feet high and show her with 18 hands, vermilion-filled parting of hair and reddish complexion. It is said that all gods provided arms to this Devi to fight

Mahishasur. But this tale is a brahmanical creation.

Neeraj Salunkhe (Lokayat Prakashan, December 2002) presents devis as Gannayika (consorts of the Lords). He writes, "In Indian history, the ancient period is of great significance. To understand it in its correct perspective, one has to delve deep into Indian literature and mythology. The invader Aryans wrote the *Atharvaveda* after casting the rituals of the indigenous Asiatic residents in their own mould. The pastoral Aryans had encountered the advanced Harappan civilization, whose norms and way of life they couldn't understand. That is why they borrowed a lot from the Harappan civilization for building their own system and traditions. But these symbols were not given pride of place in their value system. Aryans loathed these symbols and cooked up imaginary stories to degrade them and to create malice towards them." Despite being buried in prejudices, these symbols continue to tell their original stories.

The Aryans' treatment of Gannayika (chief queen) Nishriti, who was the goddess of agriculture, was no different. The Vedic people hated her. Amarkosh says Nishriti was the goddess of hell. The area to the south of the Vindhyas was despised as hell or the netherworld. They believed that the people living in the south were residents of hell. Well-known Marathi author and President of Satyashodhak Communist Party Sharad Patil says that "Narak" (hell) meant the descendants of "Nar Gann". This means that the indigenous inhabitants of India were known as "Nar" and word Narak was coined to denote the place to which sinners were condemned.

Nishriti was closely linked to "Pishach": Paishachi was the language of the present-day Maharashtra during the rule of the Satvahan dynasty. The residents of Maharashtra were then known as Pishach. They were also known as "Pratham Bhoot", "Yaksha" and "Rakshas". Vedic Brahmins hated Nishriti but were also in awe of her. Yam's name is also mentioned along with Nishriti's as Yam was the presiding deity of Narak. Nishriti, Yam, Mahish or Reda (rhinoceros), owl, Varah, etc were all disgraced. D.D. Kosambi also refers to Nishriti as the goddess of death. The Jains' Kalpasutra says that Mahavira attained Nirvana on the Nishriti Amavas (new moon day) and hence that day is sacred for them. Nishriti held great importance to the indigenous non-Brahmin, Jain inhabitants of Harappa. She was the goddess of wealth – equivalent of Laxmi – for the non-Brahmins. Nishriti was also closely associated with

agriculture. She was also considered Kali Maa and goddess of land. There is evidence to this effect. She was also creator of the world of plants and trees. Hence, she also takes the form of the Earth. The *Shatpath Brahman* says so.

A shapeless stone was worshipped as Nishriti. She was also considered the goddess of harvest. The Vedics could not hide her association with agriculture. The word “Kshatriya” was born of the word “Kshetra”, meaning plough. This is a construct of Neeraj Salunkhe. In his book *Abrahman Sahitya Ka Saundayashastra* (Aesthetics of Non-Brahmin literature), Sharad Patil says, “The truth is that describing *Atharvaveda* as *Kshetraveda* or *Streeveda* and post-Vedic literature as brahmanical shows the transition from one age to another. The Kshatriya Rajshri creators of Upanishadic spiritualism describe their supreme truth as omnipresent and ‘Vigyanmaya Purush’, not ‘Brahm’. The philosopher Rajshri of Panchaal has no doubts whatsoever while telling Mahshotriya Brahman Udyalak Aaruni that the most primitive rule was of ‘Kshetras’, that is, of women.” (page 104)

This means that there existed independent states ruled by women like Nishriti, Durga or Amba (Nishriti’s granddaughter) that were not acceptable to the Vedic people. The high pedestal on which Durga is placed shows the prevalence of a matriarchal system. Modern-day texts, including *Daas Shudron Kee Gulamgiri* (Sharad Patil), *Ramayana Mahabharat Ka Varg Sangharsh* (Sharad Patil), *Mithak Aur Yatharth* (D.D. Kosambi), *Article of Tuljabhawani* (Rajkumar Ghoghre), *Daitya Baali Aur Kuntal Desh Maharashtra* (Neeraj Salunkhe) and *Balirajya* and *Gudhi Aur Shiv Parvati* (A.H. Salunkhe) also make this argument.

There were many states ruled by women at that time: Nishriti (whose granddaughter was Durga) ruled around the Indus River, Urvashi near Yamuna River, Tatika (Tadka) near Narmada River, Shurpanakha (Ravana’s sister) near Godavari River, Amba near Panchganga River and Tulja near Terna Manjre River. Nishriti invented agriculture; she started building dams, for contemporary society was an agrarian and pastoral one. Indra, the king of the devas, used to destroy these dams. The farmer-queen Shurpanakha, who sifted grains with her fingers, is the Sap-tashrunji Devi of today’s Nasik. The Marathi word “mavla” had its origin in the word Mavlai (Devi). Shivaji’s soldiers were called “Mavle”. Tula meant “to count”. Tuljabhawani counted all the residents of her

state as equals. She was Shivaji's inspiration. They all were Gannayikas – they were valiant women. But they have been denigrated in the Vedas. It was an era when women were the rulers, when they were dominant.

“In the republics of Mahakavyakaleen (1000 BC-800 BC) era, the Varna of apatya (offspring) was that of the mother and not of the father (Kshatra) (6-4.171). This contemporary language suggests this (*Abrahmin Sahitya Ka Saundaryashastra*, Sharad Patil, page 105). In the post-*Mahabharata* republics, the varna of apatya became that of the father. Talking about the independent rule of the women, Patil writes in his book *Samagra Swatantrya Va Samta*, “Farming was invented by women and that is why the primitive agricultural societies all over the world were matriarchal.” The “Gansamaj” had also begun with women rulers. (“Stri Rajya”, Sharad Patil, *Navbharat*, September-October 1975; *Ghulamgiri Part 1*, Page 135-179)

Now, among others, Robert Briffault, W. Robertson Smith and George Thomson have proved that in the women-ruled republics, women were the producers, rulers and priests and thus were liberated. (Free sex was the norm in these republics – a practice that was subsequently banned by Emperor Ashoka). The men were not the producers, rulers or priests and thus were dependent. But in this society, surplus production and wealth acquired through hunts and battles was divided equally among the men and women by the Gyati Mata or the Ganrajyi. Thus, there was economic equality but from the dialectics of liberated women and dependent men emerged the matriarchal rule. Women became rulers – ancient Bhoodevta/Krishikamaya/Adimaya like Nishriti, Durga, Rohini, Usha, Urvashi and Saati Jaldevta (Saati Aasra) are present in Bahujan traditions.

According to *Excavations at Harappa* by M.S. Vats, Seal 25, a seal showing seven women standing together, was found in Harappa and in Verul (Ellora, Aurangabad district, Maharashtra). Rural women worship these images even today as Kritika Nakshatra, Saati Aasra (Sapt Jaldevta), Saptkrita or Skandmata. Mahatma Phule has also referred to them. The tradition of Ghatsthapna during Durga Puja is symbolic of a woman's womb. Apart from the tradition of free sex, a woman conceiving was considered important in this matriarchal society. It was her power to reproduce that gave women the exalted status of a great goddess with supernatural and earthly powers. Subsequently, this power of women began to be worshipped. This natural

power of women was respected by Gann society and women were given the high status of Gannayika or the chief queen. The tradition of worshipping the womb lasted a long time. The germination of a seed after sowing was seen by Gann society as nature's marvel. They linked it to the women conceiving and thus the tradition of respecting women and Earth took root. Women became producers, rulers and priests. Today, respecting women has become just a ritual but Gann society of Asurs, Pishachs and Rakshas genuinely venerated women. Here lay the genesis of the devis. Dr A.H. Salunkhe writes in *Gudee Aur Shankar Parvati* that "Parvati is related to Durga". He has quoted from many legends and Puranas to prove his point. In *Devi Bhagwat* (ed Pundit Shri Ramtej Pandey, Chaukhambha Prakashan, Varanasi, Chapter 14-25), the legend about Navratra is important in the context of Dhvajotsava. In *Devi Puran*, the days of Navratra festival have been described as Chaitra Amavas and Pratipada. In south India, people fast in the name of the Devi in Phalgun Amavas. In north India, Chaitra Navratra begins from the second day of Purnimant month – the day of Chaitra Shukla Pratipada. According to Dr Salunkhe, the Devi worshipped as Gudi during the Gudi Padva celebrated in Maharashtra is Parvati. He says that Durga Devi is also Parvati. In our society, Shankar (Shiva) and Parvati are considered the creator and the mother of the Universe, respectively.

Dr Ambedkar writes in *Riddles of Hinduism* (page 85), "Let us take the case of Shiva. That Shiva was originally an Anti-vedic god is abundantly clear. There can be no better evidence to prove that Shiva was an anti-Vedic god than his destruction of Daksha's Yajna."

Well-known Marathi scholar Dr R.C. Dhare writes in *Lajjagauri* (Shri Vidhya Prakashan, Pune, first edition, June 1908, page 19), "The history of worship of Shakti is very old. The first god that humans conceived and started worshipping was a female. She was a devi equipped with esoteric creative powers. She was the primeval Shakti, which humans saw in different forms, gave different names and worshipped in different manners. Those who want to dig out the history of worship of Shakti should work from all possible angles. They should try to identify the different flows, paths, orientations and stages of human growth and development. The history of Shaktapanth is there for all to see. And it was not a panth of only the Tantriks. It pervades the life of Indians. From the Rigvedic Aditi (mother of gods)

to the songs written on doorframes today – there is an unbroken tradition of hailing the greatness of Bhawani, Renuka and other Shaktis. The female images excavated near the Indus River are still worshipped in villages as Gramdevta.”

Different scholars at different times have written reams of literature on Navratra and on the veneration of Devis. Dr Salunkhe believes that the festival, which begins in the month of Chaitra and is celebrated as Gudi Padwa, Navratra and Shiv-Parvati Vivah in different regions, has ancient roots in non-Brahmin culture. It is thus clear that burning the effigies of Ravana or showing the Devi slaying Mahishasur are distortions, born out of the brahmanical mindset.

## Mahishasur and Bali Pratipada

GAIL OMVEDT

Diwali, or the “Festival of Lights”, comes in the period after the harvest, as days begin to get shorter. The first day is for honouring cows and buffalos. The second day, in brahmanic culture, commemorates the killing of Mahishasur: this symbolizes the struggle between “devas” and “asuras”. In the legends, both are children of the same mother, but asuras are portrayed as not-human. The asuras represent stable agriculture, the devas represent foraging and herding as means of sustenance. The third day is “Bali Pratipada”, the day of king Bali. Brahmanic tradition re-enacts the killing of Bali, the non-brahmanic tradition remembers Bali and seeks his return. All of these are myths, and Phule treated them as myths. Phule used myth and counter-myth. But these days much of the counter-culture treats Bali as if the story represented a real history.

“Ida pida javo, Balica rajya yevo” – let troubles and sorrows go and the kingdom of Bali come! This is the ancient saying of the Marathi peasantry. It remembers Bali Raja as a kingdom of prosperity and happiness.

On Dussehra, non-Brahmans go out and women collect leaves of the Apte tree, joined together like hearts – symbolizing our hearts’ joining. Brahmins go and come back, the men carrying a stick of grass which they poke into the stomach of an effigy of Bali made of wheat flour. All of these represent the contradictions of the ongoing oppression of the caste system.

*Posted on Gail Omvedt’s blog  
seekingbegumpura on 5 November 2013 (not a translation)*

# Mahishasur, Ravan and Mahabali

The hegemonic genealogies of demonization  
discourses and narratives in India

AJAY S. SEKHER

*The rhetoric that renders god as demon  
And demon as god by Brahmanism is terrorizing ...*

- Sahodaran Ayyappan

The disparaging references to Sri Lanka in the Hindu epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have to do with it being a Buddhist country – which it has been from the time of Asoka or earlier. No wonder, Ravan, the Buddhist Lankan chief who fought Hindu imperialism from the mainland, was fashioned into a demon or Asura. It was Mahinda and Sanghamitra, the children of the Mauryan emperor Asoka, who proselytized Ceylon peacefully and democratically in the third century BC. Mahavamsa, the Buddhist chronicle of Ceylon, also talks about Buddha himself coming to Lanka and delivering a few of his 65,000 sermons there. Asoka might have built his viharas, stupas and pillars – with lion capitals signifying Dhamma – in locations where the Buddha had actually taught (Thapar 1998: 68). Nineteen of these great Asokan pillars are in China today (Chen 1973: 14).

Even in Kerala's Vanchi (or Kodungallur or Muziris), there was a ruined pillar at the place where Sakya Muni once delivered his speech, wrote Xuan Zang (602-664), the Chinese pilgrim, traveller, scholar and translator (Panikasery 2001: 61). According to local historians, this ancient Asokan pillar was demolished in early 8th century by Hindu hooligans and Saivite Kapalikas – who were turned against Buddhists by cunning Brahmanism – and the column of the

pillar was erected as a linga in front of the Jain temple at Matilakam or Trikana Matilakam, north of Vanchi. (Krishnakumar 2013: 14). Then, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Portuguese and the Dutch looted the Matilakam temple, taking with them to Fort Cochin the pillar and a number of other granite columns and shafts. The pillar was used to anchor and tie their ships to at the quay and was passed onto the British subsequently (Silvery 2012: 121).

In early 20th century, Tirumalai Devaswam procured this pillar from the British. It is now placed at the Udyaneswaram temple in Matanchery: 17 feet are underground and only 4 feet are visible now as a linga. Similar huge lingas are found in Varavoor, in the northern part of Kerala's Thrissur district. Local historians say that relics of such demolished or modified Asokan pillars are there at Tirunavaya and Pattambi in Kerala. It is well known that at the Bhaskareswara temple in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, Saivites modified an Asokan pillar in the early Middle Ages into the colossal linga that stands today within a double-storeyed outer structure. The mutilated lion capital fragment of this Asokan pillar is on display at the State Museum, Bhubaneswar. The modification of Asokan pillars into lingas tells the violent and heinous history of Hinduization. This was how India, the birthplace of Buddhism – which was called Indirar Desam or the land of Indirar [Buddha referred to as a conqueror of the Indriyas or five senses by Ayyothee Thasar, who was the pioneer of neo-Buddhism in India and who founded the Sakya society in the Nilgiris in 1901 (Geetha 2002; Aloysius 1998)] – was converted to a Hindu heartland. Huge stone lingas exemplified the might of brahmanical patriarchy. But they couldn't replicate the destruction in the neighbouring countries.

Sri Lanka, where the Sri Pada (sacred footprint on a mountain) of the Buddha is enshrined, has been a Buddhist country from the 3rd century BC or earlier. Arab pilgrims used to come here to worship it as the feet of Adam Nabi. Mediterranean and Italian pilgrims also used to visit Sri Pada, which they called Adam's Peak. It shows that the Buddhist pilgrimage was in vogue at least from the time of Asoka, who sent missionaries to West Asia and Greece or Italy. Sanghamitra brought the Bo tree from Gaya and planted it at Anuradhapura and nurtured it herself. The art and architecture that flourished and became renowned as the Anuradhapura style, even in the mainland, grew around this tree of life and light. In the 4th century, the Kalinga Princess Hemamaala and Prince Dantakumara took a relic of the Buddha – a tooth –

from Dantapuri (Puri) to Konakamana (current Konark) to Abhayagiri Vihara near Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. Later, it was enshrined in Kandy. In India, even the Buddha Danta or the tooth of the Buddha was in peril of being destroyed by the brahmanical forces. The plight of the Buddha Danta may be compared to the history of the Bodhi tree. The Bo tree is a universal symbol of the enlightened one, like the elephant, the Kumbha or pot, and the ceremonial umbrella, the Mutukuda of Kerala. In the early 11th century, there was a Chola Hindu Saivite attempt to conquer the Buddhist Lanka but it failed. Despite series of attempts to invade from Hindu India, Lanka has remained Buddhist to date. The Bodhi tree at Gaya was cut down and burnt by generations of Brahman rulers – such as Pushyamitra Sunga, the Brahman militiaman who assassinated his emperor, and Sasanka, another covetous Brahman king – who usurped power by killing the Mauryan Buddhist emperors. Like this Bodhi tree in Gaya, Buddhism was annihilated in the land of its birth by Brahmanism through Bhakti frenzies that took the form of Saivism and Vaishnavism. It was Alexander Cunningham, an Englishman and the first chief of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), who nurtured the Bodhi tree back to its glory in the 19th century and reinstalled the dumped idol of the Buddha at the Mahabodhi shrine in Bodhi Gaya where a linga had been placed by Brahmans during the Middle Ages. After decades of legislation and peaceful dialogue, in May 1891, the temple was also freed from the clutches of Saivite Brahman priests. Anagarika Dharmapala, the Sri Lankan monk and founder of Mahabodhi society, and Edwin Arnold, who wrote *The Light of Asia*, were instrumental in making this happen. It is noteworthy that Dharmapala's fraternity made possible the emergence of a voice like Ayyothee Thasar, who got his Deeksha from Mahatero Sumangala Nayake of Ceylon in 1898.

Though Hindu Brahmanism uprooted the enlightened culture of Theravada Buddhism from India, it survived in Ceylon, Burma and Thailand. It was U. Chandramani, a senior Theravada monk from Burma, who gave Dhamma Deeksha to Dr Ambedkar in Nagpur on 14 October 1956. Ambedkar visited Ceylon and Burma twice to study Theravada. Buddhism also survived in disguised forms, as in the Chita or Siddha traditions of Tamilakam or Tantric traditions of Vajrayana in Kerala (Davidson 2002). Since it couldn't erase Buddhism from these pockets and margins, Hinduism unleashed its wrath in narratives. They demonized the Lankans as inhuman Asura or Rakshasa. It is similar to what Toni Morrison calls, in her major critical work *Playing in the Dark*, the shadowy and ghostly presence of black people in American canon (Morrison 1992: 4). Ravan

is called a Rakshasa or Asura because he was a Sri Lankan Buddhist leader, like Mahabali in Kerala or Mahishasur in Vanga (Bengal) region. The hegemonic discourses of Brahmanism also animalized the conquered or coerced South Indian former Buddhists as apes and bears. Hanuman, Bali, Sugriva and Jambavan are examples of animalizing slur discourses against the South Indian warriors who resisted Varnasrama Dharma, and Ravan and his Rakshasa clan were clearly Buddhists, specifically anti-brahmanical Teravada Buddhists of Sri Lanka.

So Hindu Brahmanism and its most fierce phallic cult called Saivism couldn't conquer Lanka. Thus they satisfied themselves with the epic narratives in which Ram, the ideal lord protector of Vedic Varnasrama Dharma or Chaturvarnaya who beheaded the Sudra Sambuka for learning letters, conquered Lanka and killed the ten-headed demon or Asur called Ravan. Even today, the Bajaj ads on TV burn the effigies of Ravan and reiterate the demonization. The 10 heads of Ravan the Rakshasa symbolize the extended intellectual and brain powers of the Buddhists. The 20 hands represent the creative and constructive working potential of the Buddhist leader who could also be a skilled technician, labour leader, architect and artist or designer. There are also legends and slur discourses that operate in every village of South India according to which it was the Rakshasas or demons or Bhuta who constructed all the grand old structures, including ancient temples and citadels. All these were the engineering and architectural achievements and legacies of the Buddhist monks and demonized Buddhist or Avarna/Amana/Chamana/Sramana leaders like Ravan, Bali or Mahishasur.

Thus it is clear that these brilliant and powerful people's leaders had outshone the Varnasrama Kshatriya kings of Brahmanism, who resorted to portraying them as animals, monsters or demons. Mahishasur is a typical example of animalizing slur discourses of Brahmanism. Since he was from the cattle-rearing Asur/Ahir or Yadav or Ayar (in South India) clans he was portrayed as a half-beast and half-demon monster (the buffalo demon) called Mahishasur. The narratives also demonize his birth, calling him the offspring of Mahishi, a water buffalo. It is like the modern media animalizing Lalu and reducing a great leader of the people to the buffalo. Kancha Ilaiah, in his *Buffalo Nationalism* and many other works, has pointed out this racial slur discourse operating in the present cyber age.

The myth and discursive legends related to Mahishasur and Durga

clearly explain that it is by using the sexed subaltern that Brahmanism conquered and murdered native leaders like Mahishasur. This shows how women were used to seduce and subordinate the indigenous men and to slay them. Even in popular cinema and serials in India today the Mahishasur Mardini cult images are reloaded in the context of the second coming of Brahmanism through Hindutva fascism. Creating sex colonies of indigenous women by legitimizing unethical liaison, called Sambandham in South India, through religious metaphysical obscurantism – “the Brahma or the infinite itself enters the finite body of the local Sudra woman through the priestly Bhudeva or the earthly god Brahman” – are typical examples of brahmanical internal imperialism. Such sex colonies ensured the perpetual sexual slavery of Sudra women and perpetual paternal ambiguity among Sudra males that ensured the sustenance of brahmanical hegemony. The idea was that once paternal ambiguity is created, the Sudra male would never question the patronizing authority of the Brahman high priests. Slavish fidelity is expected from the Padaja or Sudra male who is also animalized as dogs or donkeys or crawling reptiles that lick the kicking feet. So, the demonization or animalization discourse is a double-edged sword that hits the marrow of the human. It dehumanizes the victim and sucks the blood like a voluptuous vampire. Brahmanical patriarchy is such a double-edged sword and a double hierarchy of caste and gender that creates soulless beings, the Sudra undead (Sekher 2008: 23).

In South India, such demonizing discourses were specifically aimed at otherizing the Buddhist nun and monk. The nuns were portrayed as Rakshasis and Papinis and were raped and killed, or forced into becoming Devdasis in the converted Mahayana or Vajrayana temples with the installed linga or yoni in the sanctum (Jamanadas 2002: 8). As the nuns and monks were teaching the people ethics and letters they were specifically targeted because the *Manusmriti* prohibited education to the Sudra and Avarna. The nuns were preaching against caste and priesthood itself. Varnasrama Dharma was in peril.

The same narratives are used even today against the minorities in the lead-up to genocidal pogroms and communal riots. In the context of “Ghar Wapsi”, such violent and genocidal discourses are booming against the proselytizing Christian missionaries and Islamic sects (Guru 2015; Reghu 2015). Only ethical scholars and Dalit intellectuals like Gopal Guru were there to raise the question “return to

which home?" when Parivar forces were campaigning for Ghar Wapsi. Now, in North India and even in Karnataka, Dalit children and writers in particular have come under direct attack from the Savarna caste Hindu forces (See any national daily in Oct 2015).

Bali or Mahabali or Maveli is also such a demonized subaltern leader of the people in South India. It was Mahatma Phule who invoked the Bali myth to teach the Sudra and Ati-Sudra about the covetous acts of Brahmanism. In Kerala, it was Sahodaran Ayyappan, a leading disciple of Narayana Guru, who revived the Bali myth in modern times through his song-poem *Onapattu* or the Song of Onam. Onam is a festival associated with the second coming of Maveli, the great ruler of the people. The caste Hindus and Vaishnavites in particular celebrate Onam as the birthday and triumph of Vishnu. According to the legend, it was Vishnu as a Brahman dwarf called Vamana who cheated the charitable and ethical emperor Mahabali and conquered his empire and pushed him down to the netherworld. This is a metaphorical articulation of the cunning Hindu invasion of South India, which used to be the land of just rulers like Maveli. In his poem, Sahodaran appeals to the people to leave the covetous ideology of Vamana, that is Brahmanism, and to recover the just and ethical governance of Mabali. The ethical or Dharmic governance and the just and egalitarian tradition exemplified by Maveli are clearly the Buddhist legacies of South India.

It was again Sahodaran who invented the practice of burning the effigy of caste monster in Kerala during the cultural renaissance struggles of the early 20th century. It was a brilliant and effective subversion of the Ramlila of North India in which the effigies of Ravan are burnt. It is worth remembering the recent incident in which Shibu Soren refused to take part in this symbolic violence against an ancient people's leader who fought Ram and his Varnasrama Dharma. Soren, an enlightened member of a tribal community, sees Ravan as a brave Dalitbahujan ancestor who resisted Varnasrama Dharma.

Sahodaran has also included a bunch of 18 poems as Bauddha Kanda (section) in his poetical works of 1934 (Sekher 2012: 203). When Madan Mohan Malaviya came to campaign for the Hindu group and proclaimed "Jai Sree Ram" in Kottayam, it was Sahodaran and his friends who shouted back "Jai Ravan". It was Sahodaran and Mitavadi, along with C. V. Kunjiraman, who led the neo-Buddhist movement in Kerala in the 1920s and 1930s. In the Dravidian movement, founded

by Pandit Ayyothee Thasar and later popularized by E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker, the notion of Dravidstan was compared to Ravanstan, Ravan's kingdom (Pandian 2006). Phule's imagining of India as Baliraj and Christuraj are also significant here.

The Bali myth is what connects Maharashtra and Kerala and the whole Konkan coast. Mahabali is called Maveli in Kerala. Onam is associated with both Vishnu as Vamana and with Maveli. It is celebrated today as a harvest festival marking the end of monsoon and the beginning of the New Year in mid and south Kerala. Though Onam is celebrated in Malabar, another festival Vishu marks the New Year there. It is interesting to note that Onam is the beginning of the New Year in Ceylon as well, showing the cultural proximity and shared past. Historically, it marks the end of the Buddhist age and the institutionalization of the Hindu brahmanical caste and calendar system or the Varnasrama Dharma world view and chronology in Kerala.

Onam is a popular shortened rendering of Aavanam or Saavanam (Sraavanam or Sramanam). Savanam or Sravan/Savan is part of the Saka calendar instituted by Kanishka, a Buddhist emperor, also known as the second Asoka. There are references in the Sangham literature of Tamilakam to Onam or Savanam being celebrated throughout South India till the 8th or 10th century AD when Saivism and Vaishnavism – the Bhakti facades of Brahmanism – engulfed the Mahayana shrines and annihilated the Jain, Ajivaka and Buddhist monks, the Nastikas and Nirgrandhas who challenged the Vedas, the Purush Sukta and the Varna (Gopalakrishnan 2008). With the help of rabid squads of Saiva Kapalikas who specialized in murder and rape and other unimaginable acts of phallic barbarism that is still paraded as religion in Kumbh Melas and other revelries, the priestly patriarchy unleashed its violence on the nuns and the shrines. The violence continues even today, especially against Christian nuns and monks. The brahmanical patriarchy used bloody violence in tandem with diabolic phallic and sex cults to erase the Amana and to woo people to the newfound, “noble” Hindu religion throughout the Middle Ages. The sex colonies also ensured its gradually enlarging sphere of influence, and firm libidinal economy, regressive unconscious and ideological foundations.

The mythology and symbology of Onam represents the Buddhist past of Kerala (Purushotaman 2008). The yellow robes given by the Buddha to the new converts who stepped in to the Sangha is symbolized in onakodi or

the new cream-coloured mundu or dhoti of Onam. The Dhamma Chakra or the wheel of ethics is symbolized in the round floral carpet. The pyramidal clay figure of Onatappan placed amid the floral carpet represents the Buddhist stupa, a key icon of the Buddha. In the post Buddhist period, it has been given an elongated, phallic shape and Saivite accent. The eight steps of the ground prepared for the floral arrangement in some places also suggest the eightfold paths or the Ashtanga Marga as elaborated by the enlightened one. The Sashtanga Pranama was also originally Buddhist. There are several phrases and words in current parlance in Kerala that suggest contact with Pali and the Buddhist world view. The common affix in place names and family names is Pally or Chery in Kerala and throughout South India (Purushotaman 2008: 125). These are also from Pali and denoted a Vihara or residential area of the monks originally and later, post Hinduization, the dwelling place of the Avarna. The word lamasery (the abode of the lamas or monks) is in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. From Pali, it found its way into Tibetan through Tantric Buddhism and then into English and it still survives.

It is mentioned in a Malayalam folk song that Maveli was a just ruler and there was no caste hierarchy in his kingdom. It clearly says it was a pre-Varnasrama society, or a Buddhist society without caste and gender hierarchies. Subaltern historians and ethical researchers are of the view that the 16th-century Dalit poet and shaman called Pakanar, a Paraya leader, composed the song. Only in Poykayil Appachan – another Paraya songster-preacher-reformer – we have such a unique voice and agency in Kerala (Chentarasery 1983). Mulloor, a lead Avarna poet-disciple of Nanuguru who composed Pula Vritangal on the Dalits and translated the Dhammapada from Pali to Malayalam in early 20th century (under the loving compulsion of Sahodaran), has also paid homage to Pakanar. Pakanar's ballad was adapted and rendered in a modern idiom as *Onapattu* by Sahodaran Ayyappan, the early 20th-century reformist poet and cultural activist. Sahodaran turned the song into a scathing critique of the caste system and Brahmanism that have marred society and polity in Kerala and in India at large.

In *Onapattu*, Sahodaran talks about Brahmanism invading South India and cheating and defeating the just ruler Maveli. He clearly exposes the brahmanical conspiracy in the caste and feudal Hindu system taking over Kerala between the 8th and 12th centuries. He elaborates how this resulted in the cultural destruction and a moral catastrophe and the violent establishment of the most heinous system of purity-

pollution and untouchability. Sahodaran's *Onapattu* concludes with a great appeal to the people to leave the ideology of Brahmanism and recover the just and egalitarian rule of Mabali.

But unfortunately the caste Hindu consensus in the publicly funded media, academia and cultural institutions deliberately obscure and erase such radical and democratic literary expressions that made possible the Kerala renaissance and use taxpayer's money for aggressive Hinduization. All India Radio and other official organs of the state are violently propagating the message of Varnasrama Dharma and brahmanical values through Ramayana campaigns and Gandhi Marga. In the month of Karkidakam or the monsoon, the caste Hindu cliques aggressively use the 16th-century text of Malayalam *Ramayana* called *Adhyatma Ramayana* to suppress the memory and tradition of Buddhism that had existed in Kerala from the 3rd century BC to the 14th and 16th century AD. As in Hindi, the fact that *Ramayana* was introduced in Kerala only after the 16th century itself attests to the presence of a largely Buddhist culture till then. Even after the introduction of Rama through Ezhutachan's text, many parts of Kerala continued to be Buddhist till the 17th century. *Ramcharit Manas*, the Hindi *Ramayana* by Tulsidas, was composed only in the 17th century. Kambar's *Ramayana*, South India's earliest Ramayana, was created in the 13th century. All these literary historical facts clearly prove that the Ramification or Hinduization of South India happened only in the late Middle Ages or in the early modern era. As Sahodaran's song of *Onam* tells us, this violent pagan barbarism masquerading as religion must be uprooted to humanize Kerala and India again. Only by unleashing violence on nuns and monks, murdering egalitarian rulers and getting rid of ethics itself, caste and Varna barbarism could be established in India. We must note the historical trajectory of this violence and see through the barbaric discourses of othering and demonization to fight the present Hindu imperialism and its fascist forms. A modern version of Ramrajya is taking shape. Let us regain our Ravanraj and Baliraj. Let the Asura or Avarna reawaken.

*This is not a translation.*

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# **Cultural War**

## ‘Mahishasur’s daughter’ gets award from President

SANJEEV CHANDAN

While conferring the Nari Shakti Samman on Dr Saurabh Suman, a resident of Bihar’s Nawada district, on 8 March 2016, the International Women’s Day, even President Pranab Mukherjee was perhaps unaware that Dr Suman’s story stood out among the feats of the 14 other awardees. These women, all of whom were associated with social work, were honoured at a ceremony in Rashtrapati Bhavan with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Women and Child Development Minister Maneka Gandhi and other dignitaries in attendance.

It had only been a few days since the Union Human Resources Development Minister, on February 25 and 26, expressed her anger in both houses of Parliament over the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day celebrations and Dr Saurabh Suman, who considers herself the “daughter of Mahishasur” and has been celebrating the “Mahishasur Martyrdom Day” in her city since 2010, was now being honoured at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. She was presented with the award for her research in agriculture. Dr Saurabh Suman’s presence at Rashtrapati Bhavan, the seat of the highest powers, is indicative of a nation about to free itself from the brahmanical culture. The nation was honouring such a woman who has, in the eyes of a powerful minister and several others in the government, been involved in a so-called anti-national activity in the past six years. As soon as the news of the award reached her district, journalists confronted her over the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day celebrations she has been organizing.

“They asked me pointed questions but I had to travel to Delhi, so I couldn’t say much then but now I want to tell them why we celebrate Mahishasur Martyrdom Day”, says Dr Saurabh Suman,

calling herself Mahishasur's daughter.

### **On celebrating Mahishasur Martyrdom Day**

“For the first time, it struck me in 2010: ‘Why are there three different names for the same festival – Durga Puja, Vijaydashmi and Dussehra?’” Dr Suman recalls. “In order to stay in power, Aryans killed kings like Shumbha and Nishumbha, Madhu Kataiya, Dhurmlochan through deceit. Similarly, a conspiracy was hatched to kill the king of Bang, Mahishasur. After Vishnu failed to eliminate Mahishasur, he trained Durga, who was called Amritapushpam, in the art of warfare and enhanced her appearance, and sent her to kill Mahishasur. Amritapushpam tricked Mahishasur and killed him. This is how they captured Mohenjodaro, Harappa and other places. Amritapushpam was popularized and began to be worshipped.

“The last king of Maurya dynasty, Brihadratha, was killed by his general, Pushyamitra Sunga, bringing an end to the good rule of the ten kings of the Maurya dynasty. Brahmins established their power and Dussehra began to be celebrated to mark the end of the Maurya dynasty. The great ruler Ashok used to celebrate a victory fortnight in the month of Ashwin. The celebrations would conclude on the tenth day (dashmi) of Ashwin with the king receiving a spear salute in the presence of his generals, the army and the people. That's why the festival is called Vijaydashami. However, the brahmanical system co-opted the tradition and turned it into an occasion to celebrate the killing of Brihadratha at the hands of Pushyamitra Sunga.”

Dr Suman continues, “I went deep into the intricacies of these battles and in 2010, I decided to celebrate Mahishasur Martyrdom Day to create social awakening. In my own home, I gathered my family members and prepared their minds. There was strong opposition and I had to face social ostracism, but I didn't lose heart. I kept moving forward. In 2013, I happened to read the magazine *Yadav Shakti*. It said there that Mahishasur Martyrdom Day was celebrated openly in Jawaharlal Nehru University. On reading this piece of news, I too decided to celebrate it openly on a large scale.”

### **Decision to celebrate annually**

Dr Suman recalls how the event became an annual affair: “In the

year 2014, a lot of people came forward to help me and the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day celebrations turned out to be huge. It was held at the Bihar Sewa Sansthan, Nawada.”

Among the hundreds of participants were former minister Bhagwan Singh Kushwaha; Krishna Nandan Yadav, MLA; Chandrika Yadav, deputy development commissioner, Nawada; Anita Devi and Umesh Singh, members of the district council; Gayatri Kumari, founder, Budh Vihar; Chandan Chaudhar; and Dilip Sav.

In 2015, Dr Suman wasn't given permission to hold the event because the Model Code of Conduct was in force for the assembly elections. Despite this, on Mahishasur Martyrdom Day, hundreds of followers of Mahishasur gathered at the Bihar Sewa Sansthan to pay floral tribute to Mahishasur's statue. A Mahishasur Martyrdom Day Organizing Committee was also set up. Among the members of the committee were Umesh Singh Baudh (patron), Dr Saurabh Suman (patron), Suresh Paswan (chairperson), Kamal Nayan (general secretary), Savitri Baudh (treasurer), Chandan Kumar Chaudari (member), Dilip Sav (member) and Gayatri Kumari (member).

### **A Bahujan daughter's struggle**

A PhD in Agricultural Science from Aligarh University, Dr Saurabh Suman's personal life hasn't been any freer from struggles. In 1980, when she was little, her father Kameshwor Singh was put behind bars after being accused of killing a feudal lord. This incident is known as Nawada's Chando Singh murder. According to Dr Suman the murder was the result of the public taking law into their hands due to the fear of feudalism. But the court sentenced her father to death. Later the Supreme Court commuted the death sentence. In the absence of her father, a Musahar labourer took care of the family. “I was born into a Kushwaha (OBC) family but I consider myself a daughter of a Dalit foster father who worked as a labourer to provide for me, my sister and my mother. He sent us to school and fed us.”

After completing primary school education in Nawada, she learnt tailoring and began working as a tailor because of her family's poor economic condition. She completed standard 10 from the Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Nawada. In 1992, when she became associated with the Bihar Sewa Sansthan, she was inspired to study further. She went on to enrol in a college in Gaya and ended up with a doctorate in

Rural Agriculture and Marketing from Aligarh.

After completing her studies, Dr Suman returned to her district and became a social activist. Apart from sharing information with the locals about good agricultural practices, she became actively involved in the fight against the prevalent culture of dominance.

“I read Buddha, Dr Ambedkar and I understood the trap laid for the Bahujans,” she says. “In a number of districts of the Magadh region, including Nawada, Buddhist mutts and temples were being taken over. Buddhist statues were being given Hindu names after applying oil and vermilion. This is clearly cultural hooliganism. We are creating social awareness about this.”

### **Struggle for women to continue**

How did the government honour a woman with such a rebellious attitude? She says the Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Nawada, recommended her name as a success story. “Is the government only of the adherents of Brahmanism?” she asks. “A minister can be brahmanical, but the Constitution is against Brahmanism and against the dominance of an individual or group. The Constitution is committed to a scientific consciousness.”

Dr Suman has handed over the Rs100,000 she received with the award to the local administration for its women’s development initiatives. She says, “This award was not for me but for all downtrodden women who through our efforts have joined the mainstream and have, through their works, become an inspiration to the common man.” She says she is now fully convinced that good work will be rewarded one day. “My goal for life is the upliftment of women and to build a casteless society,” she says.

# Mahishasur's descendant Sushma

ASHWINI KUMAR PANKAJ

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Vijaydashmi, Dussehra and Navratri are ritualistic celebrations of the Aryan massacre of Asur King Mahishasur and his co-warriors. The Vedic literature is replete with tales of battles between the Surs and the Asurs, the gods and the demons. But what is the real truth? Who are the Asurs and what has been their contribution to the growth and development of Indian civilization, culture and social order?

On this Dussehra, let me introduce you to a lady of the Asur clan. Despite the bloody war waged against the Asurs for centuries, a few of them have managed to survive and they inhabit some areas of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh states. They do not even remotely resemble the demons, as described in Hindu scriptures. They are human beings – just like you and me. But even in 21st-century India, neither the attitude towards the Asurs has changed nor have violent attacks on them ceased. The anti-Asur brahmanical thinking continues to dominate education, literature, politics and other fields of human endeavour.

The Government of India has classified the Asurs as an aboriginal tribe. Sushma, who lives on the elevated Netarhaat plateau amid dense forests, hails from the Asur community – whose origin predates that of other tribal communities in the area. Sushma lives in village Sakhuapani (Dumbarpat), Panchayat Gurdari, block Bishunpur, district Gumla (Jharkhand). She is the first creative writer of her community. She has also passed the Intermediate exams. And this is no mean achievement, for she comes from the Asur community – a community whose introduction to the written word is fairly recent. Sushma is well aware of the threats to the very existence of her community. The Netarhaat area of Jharkhand is a picturesque natural abode of the Asur tribals. The area, however, is fast losing its natural beauty, owing to the Bauxite mining project of the Birlas.

Notwithstanding the numerous welfare programmes being run by the Central and Jharkhand governments for the primitive tribes and the mining project of the Birlas, the Asur community remains at the margins of development. They are being killed relentlessly in invisible and undeclared battles. In 1981, the Asur population of Jharkhand was 9100 but fell to 7793 in 2003. In Chhattisgarh, the total number of Asurs is a mere 305, though Verrier Elwin considered Chhattisgarh's Agaria tribals Asurs because both Asur and Agaria communities are metallurgists of yore and refining iron has been their traditional occupation. The ancient wisdom of the Asurs laid the foundations of the iron and steel industry in this country but they have also paid a big price for the industrialization of their world. In the first census in India in 1872, Asurs were at the top among the 18 tribes categorized as aboriginal Tribals. But in the last 150 years, these tribals have only lost more and more ground.

Besides in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, a small number of Asurs also live in the Terai areas of West Bengal. The kids of the community play with clay tigers – all headless. The kids themselves behead the tigers because they believe that Durga riding on a tiger had slain their forefathers. According to a BBC report, Daharu Asur, who lives in Majherdhavri tea estate at Alipurduar in Jalpaigudi district of West Bengal, says: “In both the worlds – on the earth and in the heavens – Mahishasur was invincible. The gods feared that if Mahishasur lived any longer people would stop worshipping them. So, they all joined hands and killed Mahishasur treacherously. Ever since Mahishasur was killed, our ancestors stopped worshipping the gods and we are following the same tradition till now.”

Sushma Asur of Jharkhand also raises the same question. She says: “I have read in my schoolbooks that we are demons and our ancestors used to torment, loot and kill the people. That is why, the gods destroyed the Asurs. Our ancestors were subjected to mass killings and Hindus celebrate that genocide with festivals like Dussehra. As for me, since I was a child, I have seen that we do not loot anyone. In fact, others are looting and killing us. Whether it is the Birlas, the government or other communities; they have been coming to our area and are looting us. We are not only being deprived of our water, forests and land but also of our language and culture. Now, you tell me. Who are the demons?”

Here, it may be pertinent to mention that most of the tribal communities of India consider Ravana as their ancestor. In many Dravidian communities of South India, worship of Ravana is very common. Santhals, the biggest tribal community of Bengal, Odisha, Assam and Jharkhand, declare themselves to be the descendants of Ravana. In many areas on the Jharkhand-Bengal border, Ravanotsava is formally celebrated around the time when the rest of India celebrates Dussehra and Navratri. Santhals also give the name Ravana to their children. Shibu Soren, a Santhal tribal was the chief minister of the UPA government of Jharkhand in 2008. Describing Ravana as a “great scholar” and “my revered kulguru”, Shibu Soren refused to set Ravana’s effigy afire on the day of Dussehra. As a chief minister, Soren had asked how he could burn alive his mentor, someone whom he worships. Soren thus broke the tradition of the CM setting Ravana’s effigy afire at the Morhabadi ground in Ranchi on Dussehra day. The function is jointly organized by the various Hindu and Punjabi organizations. The tallest tribal intellectual and international scholar, the late Dr Ramdayal Munda also held the same view.

It is not that only tribals and the Dravidians of South India consider Ravana as their ancestor. There is a very old temple of Ravana in Sahukara, Badayun, in western Uttar Pradesh, where the idol of Ravana is bigger than that of Lord Shiva and where Dussehra is observed as a day of mourning. Similarly, in Indore, the admirers of Ravana have constituted a Lankesh Mitra Mandal. The Shrimali and Godha communities of Rajasthan celebrate “Ravana shraddha karma” at the Ravana temple in Jodhpur and observe “sutaka” (period of mourning) on Dussehra. Godha and Shrimali communities believe that Ravana was their ancestor and that his queen Mandodari hailed from Mandor in Rajasthan. Last year, the Dalit-tribal and Backward students of JNU had held a function in opposition to the brahmanical Dussehra.

Sushma Asur was the chief guest at the “Ravanotsava” organized by the Santhal community in West Bengal last year. A large number of people approach our organization Jharkhandi Bhasha Sahitya Sanskriti Akhra to know about Sushma Asur and to invite her to their functions. Sushma is associated with this cultural organization of Dalit, Tribal and Backward communities. She has visited several places in the country and is receiving more invitations. She says, “I am surprised that even the well-educated people and the country as a whole, con-

sider us Asurs demons with long teeth and claws, adept in magic and in guile and deceit. They look for a demon in me and are disappointed when they find none. It is with great difficulty that they admit that, like them, I too am a human being. This discrimination towards us, our persecution and exploitation should end. If society considers us human beings then it will have to abandon all religious biases and observe Vijayadashmi – that celebrates ethnic violence and humiliation of a community – as a day of national shame.

*(Forward Press, October 2011)*

# ‘Pluralist democracy is an imperative’

Misa Bharti gets candid on Rohith Vemula’s suicide  
and Mahishasur during an interview  
with Naval Kishore Kumar

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*Do you believe that the deprived need both political and cultural rights to achieve the goal of social justice?*

While submitting the draft of the Constitution, Babasaheb Dr Ambedkar had warned that if political equality did not result in social, economic and cultural equality, the democratic political structure would give way. What’s sad and disappointing is that those who go to Mhow and pay floral tribute to Ambedkar’s statue haven’t bothered to understand even the essence of the Preamble to the Constitution. The broad philosophy of the modern Constitution and Brahmanism’s mythological and narrow philosophy cannot coexist.

*Jharkhand’s former chief minister Dishom Guru Shibu Soren said that he represents the Adivasis’ own tradition and religion. He said Ravan and Mahishasur were his ancestors, when in Hindu scriptures they have been portrayed as villains. What do you say to this?*

See, it’s not just Guruji but a large number of people in different regions of India believe in Mahishasur and other people’s leaders like him, and in myths and lore. According to the Constitution that Babasaheb gave us, every people and section, and every caste and community has the freedom to determine their own method of worship and priorities based on their lore and tradition. The problem is that those who are in power today want to run this nation that has a vast pluralist culture and tradition on the basis of their brahmanical concerns and the Sangh’s [RSS’] rules rather than on the basis of the Constitution.

*An ideological war has broken out in the whole country over cultural and religious symbols. On the one hand, we have Shankaracharya's statement against Sai and on the other, Union Human Resources Minister Smriti Irani's comments on Mahishasur. Because you represent a party that believes in an ideology centred on social justice, how do you analyse these incidents?*

All of us should have an understanding of our historical and cultural legacy. All the way from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, there are various streams of history, myths and lore. This common heritage has given this nation a special beauty. Adherents of different symbols, traditions and beliefs have together strengthened this heritage. Tinkering with it in any way would weaken the social foundations of our democracy. I also believe that the present government at the Centre wants to have people involved in these tussles over competing myths to hide its own lethargy and failures.

*In several of the country's prestigious institutions of higher education, for example JNU, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad University and BHU, Adivasi, Dalit and OBC students have been trying to reinstate their heroes like Eklavya, Shambuk, Mahishasur, etc. These students say that they are inspired by these symbols in their struggles. What is your message to these students fighting for the reinstatement of Bahujan culture?*

We know very well that the religious systems or beliefs that have been delivered to us have been written by a small section of people using Manuvadi ink and pen. For thousands of years, knowledge and philosophy were controlled by one or two castes and predictably they built myths and traditions to maintain their grip over power and resources. The villainizing of people's leaders like Mahishasur is a part of this effort. However, just before as well as after Independence, the castes that had been deprived earlier through a criminal conspiracy got a bigger part to play in education and the world of ideas. Hence, people started scientifically investigating the myths, lore and history. The result was that many beliefs and traditions began to be questioned. I urge my friends who are concerned with restoring a Bahujan culture to keep their initiatives alive and strengthen a pluralist democracy's quality of striving for equality.

*Do you feel that during the last few months the politics over religion has been excessively acrimonious?*

The kind of incidents being reported from different parts of the country leaves one with no doubt that the mixing of religion and politics has poisoned public life, especially the political atmosphere. An image of aggression and violence hanging over our democracy can be lethal.

*What do you think should be the role of religion in politics?*

See, religion and culture enrich human life. Both give society a feeling of wholeness. However, the meaning and concerns of politics are different. We have to accept that in a pluralist nation, politics has to adopt a radically inclusive perspective. In this country with many religions and cultures, politics should be seen an ideology that can take a caravan of all Indians along.

*What's your take on Rohith Vemula's suicide and the debates in JNU?*

Rohith Vemula's suicide note is a document that should cause our entire civilization and society to introspect. When Rohith says "My birth is my fatal accident" he is not just telling a personal story but the painful story of structural and institutional oppression of all Dalits and backward classes. However the government's insensitivity in the way it dealt with the incident only shows how it sustains the Manuvadi tradition. People began to stand up for Rohith's questions in different places, including universities, and JNU was one among them. However, the government created a smokescreen by talking about patriotism and sedition and tried to cover up the real issues of institutional animosity and oppression. There are no two views about patriotism in this country. But the interesting thing is that the contribution of the party that talks the most about patriotism has been zilch in the building of this nation. The truth is that those ruling the country from Delhi have been engaged in an undeclared war against students and the youth.

*Translated from the original Hindi by Anil Varghese*

# Kannada intellectuals on Mahisha's side

M. DILEEP KUMAR

The rationalists of Mysore celebrated Mahishana Habba (Festival of Mahisha) on the eve of Navaratri, the Dasara festival, on October 11, at Chamundi Hills. Karnataka Dalit Welfare Trust and other progressive organizations held this programme. The statue of Mahisha, the founder of Mahisha Mandala and ruler of the welfare state, was showered with petals.

Prof B.P.Mahesh Chandra Guru, a rationalist and media scholar from University of Mysore, observed: "Mahisha is projected as a villain by those with vested interests. There is no evidence to prove that Chamundeswari killed him, as mentioned in the Hindu mythology. Mahisha was indeed a Buddhist-Bahujan king who ruled Mahisha Mandala on the basis of human values and progressive ideologies. He was a symbol of equality and justice. The sword represents heroism and the snake represents the love for nature in the Naga culture inherited by Buddhists. Ample evidence of this can be found in Pali literature. The brahmanical forces that are bent upon doing injustice to history and retaining the status quo have created the fictitious story of the killing of Mahishashura by Chamundeswari. The celebration of Mahisha Habba is the beginning of the Dasara festival of the indigenous people. From now on, the indigenous people will be celebrating a festival in honour of Mahisha, not Dasara."

Folklore expert Prof Kalegowda Nagawar also participated in this historic event. He said that Mahisha ruled Mahisha Mandala, the former state of Mysuru. Nagawar added: "He was a noble Buddhist king who led a progressive administration and empowered all sections of society. Facts have been twisted. People need to understand the truth

and stop seeing him as a villain. The Hindu mythology has portrayed Mahisha negatively. The people of the region should celebrate Dasara differently, under the banner of Mahisha Mandala.”

Noted writer Bannur Raju recalled that Chamundi Hills was formerly known for the Mahabaleswara temple: “Even now, there is a temple of Mahabaleswara on the hillock, which was named after Chamundi during the reign of the Yaduvamsha rulers of Mysuru. They colluded with the priest and cooked up a story that Chamundeswari killed Mahishasura, which is baseless and condemnable.”

Siddaswamy, progressive thinker and author of book *Mahisha Mandala*, argued: “Mahisha became the target of sectarian writers who portrayed him as a villain. Mahisha was a great Buddhist ruler who cherished the noble ideals of Buddha and Ashoka. The indigenous people of the Mysuru region should organize themselves under the banner of Mahisha Habba and rewrite the history of Mysuru.”

The programme was attended by hundreds of progressive thinkers, organizers and activists under the leadership of Shantaraju, president of Karnataka Dalit Welfare Trust. He too reminded the audience that it was the duty of the residents of Karnataka’s cultural and historical capital to highlight the origin of the state and the founder of Mahisha Mandala. Purushotham, former mayor of Mysuru; Gopala, president, Research Scholars’ Association, University of Mysore; D.K. Srinivasa, former president, Dalit Students’ Federation; Gurumurthy, president of Dalit Students’ Federation; Harohalli Ravindra, progressive writer; Smile Shashi, president of Jai Bhim, an organization based in Tagadood; and Gowtham Devnoor, research scholar, were among those participated in the unique festival. Subsequently, the region’s indigenous communities also celebrated Dasara in honour of Mahisha on October 23 at Chamundi Hills.

*This report is not a translation and appeared in the December 2015 issue of the Forward Press magazine*

# Four years of a cultural movement

PRAMOD RANJAN & RAVI PRAKASH

When, on 25 October 2011, a handful of students of Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University celebrated Mahishasur Martyrdom Day for the first time, no one could have imagined that the movement would spread like wildfire. In just four years, these events have not only created a nationwide stir but have provided a common basis for unity between Tribals, OBCs and Dalits. This year (2015), Mahishasur Martyrdom Day or Mahishasur Remembrance Day was celebrated at more than 300 locations in the country. This is not all. The new tradition has crossed the country's borders and reached Nepal, too.

The size of the events ranges from 10-15 enthusiastic youths holding placards to huge public meetings attended by 1,000-20,000 people. These events clearly show that through them, the Dalit identities of India are writing their new cultural history.

Durga Puja, which is a celebration of Durga's victory in the battle between gods and demons, no longer enjoys unquestioned acceptability. Those who celebrate Mahishasur Day say that it was a battle between the Aryans and the non-Aryans, and as non-Aryans, Mahishasur is their ancestor and hero. Mahishasur, who was the mythical hero and god of the Tribals, is now being described as a martyr by members of the deprived Bahujan communities like Yadav, Kushwaha, Kumhar, Kurmi, Nishad, Manjhi, Rajak and Ravidas.

Talking to the organizers of Mahishasur Day functions in different parts of the country was a novel experience for us. Each of them had many things to say, but they had many things in common that drew one's attention. Almost all of them said, "From our childhood, we used to wonder why the Asurs in idols of Durga resemble us in looks and why the body type and clothes of those who killed Asurs were similar to today's Dwijs!" Subsequently, when they thought about it

and went about exploring, they were in for a surprise. They discovered that many Asur traditions relating to Manuj Dewa, Maikasur, Daityera, Karas Dev, etc were alive around them and in some cases, in their homes. Some organizers believe that Mahishasur was not a mythological figure. He was a historical personality – the protector of their clan, a valiant king and people's hero. All of them are against worshipping Mahishasur and do not follow any rites or rituals, which is probably the real strength of these events.

In the last four years, this event has also assumed a form of cultural politics. Not only is this metamorphosis taking place on campuses of prestigious universities but is being talked about in remote villages and towns. The state governments are aware of the development and at many of these functions, they have provided security.

Mahishasur is linked to the ancient culture of India's primitive "Asur" tribe. The strength of this tribe now is barely nine thousand. Few among them are literate. Anil Asur, a social activist who lives in Vishunpur sub-division of Gumla district, says, "I have read in my schoolbooks that the gods had killed Asurs. Those were mass murders of our valiant ancestors". Ashwini Kumar Pankaj, editor of *Johar Dishum*, published from Ranchi, says, "Those who insist that Mahishasur was a villain should understand that he is the hero of Tribals, OBCs and other deprived sections." According to Pankaj, this year Mahishasur Day was celebrated at more than 350 places in Jharkhand. According to those who celebrate Mahishasur Day, after the murder of Mahishasur by Durga and other gods, his disciples held a huge public meeting on Ashwin Purnima in which they vowed to preserve their egalitarian culture and win back their lost glory. That is why in most of the places the functions are held on Ashwin Purnima. This Purnima (full moon day) falls on the fifth day of Dussehra. In some places, it is held on the Durga Puja day and in other places, the organizers have fixed a day that suits their convenience. Again, in some places, it is called Mahishasur Martyrdom Day and in other places it is observed as Mahishasur Remembrance Day.

Come, join us in sampling the Mahishasur-related celebrations to understand their nature. Owing to time constraints, we haven't been able to draw up a list that is representative of the regional diversity. But, nevertheless, it does give us a glimpse:

- In the Jhalagaowda village of Kashipur sub-division in Pu-

purulia District, West Bengal, a huge function is held on Mahishashur Martyrdom Day. This year, around 20,000 people gathered in the village to observe the day. Most of them were Tribals, OBCs and Dalits, including Santhals, Bavri, Rajhad, Mahali, etc. The event here is organized under the leadership of Charian Mahto. A Kurmi himself, Mahto not only organizes the event here but has inspired Tribals in many other areas to observe the day. He says the roots of agricultural and pastoral communities like the Kurmis lie among the Tribals and that is why they feel that Mahishasur is their hero, too. Mahto says, “We started celebrating this day here after we heard the news of the celebrations in JNU, Delhi, in 2011. But I had this desire from a much earlier time. In 1997 itself, I had written an editorial on this in my Bangla weekly *Naya Suraj*.” Under the title “Durga festival is against humanity and nationalism”, he wrote that Mahishasur was an indigenious inhabitant of India and Durga Puja celebrated his murder by the alien Aryans, which was akin to glorifying invaders. In 2010, he elaborated his thoughts in his article published in *Akhda* – the Bengali organ of Kurmi Milan Sangam published from Purulia. It was much talked about. After reading it, local social activists Ajit Prasad Hembram and Shatrughan Murmu proposed that they should jointly oppose Durga Puja. But that was easier said than done in the circumstances prevalent then. So, they decided to observe Mahishasur Day on Durga Puja and give expression to their opposition. Swapna Biswas, joint registrar general, Government of India, was the chief guest of the first function. Since then, a large number of bureaucrats, technocrats and other influential personalities hailing from the Bahujan community have been attending the programme every year. The details of Mahishasur-related events in West Bengal are on Charian Mahto’s fingertips. After his function in 2011, it was celebrated in Malda from 2012 onwards. In 2013, Mahishasur Day was celebrated at 24 locations in West Bengal. In 2014, that number rose to 74. The pace at which its popularity is growing can be gauged from the fact that this year, Mahishasur Day was celebrated at 182 places in the state.

- Mahishasur Day was celebrated for the first time this year in Veerabandopalli, which falls under the jurisdiction of Ashok Nagar Police Station, in the 24 Parganas (North) district of West Bengal. The function was held on 20 October and around 400 people took part. One of the organizers, Sursenjit Vairagi, said that Dalits, who are in a major-

ity in the area, attended the function with great enthusiasm. Muslims and OBCs also joined in big numbers. The local police had served a notice on Vairagi, asking him not to hold the function. However, he didn't bow to the pressure. He asked the police whether the administration's permission was needed to celebrate the birthday of one's family members or hold a condolence meeting after the death of a loved one. Ultimately, the police decided not to intervene. According to Vairagi, Durga Utsav is not only a celebration of the murder of our ancestors but the idols made for the occasion depict the gory end of a human being, which has a very bad effect on society. Under the leadership of Kolkata resident Saradindu Biswas, Mahishasur Day was celebrated this year, too. According to Biswas, the day was celebrated this year at dozens of places in 15 districts of the state, including 24 Parganas North and South, Midnapore East and West, Burdwan, Bankura, Birbhum, Murshidabad, Jalpaigudi, Cooch Behar and Malda.

- For the last two years, Mahishasur Martyrdom Day has been celebrated at several places in Kolkata and its suburbs. The celebrations in the city were an initiative of the Bengali fortnightly *Nirbheek Samvad*, edited by Samudra Biswas. Biswas says he consistently publishes news items and reports related to the preparations for the event. He also publishes articles supporting the idea behind and the concept of Mahishasur Martyrdom Day. These have rapidly increased awareness about the event among the deprived sections of society. Biswas also brings out a literary fortnightly *Janman* and has also written a book titled *Durga Puja Aantru* (The inside story of Durga Puja) that presents the Mahishasur story from the Bahujan perspective. This book was released in 2014 at the Kolkata Book Fest. According to Biswas, Asur Diwas has been celebrated at Kaalcheeni in West Bengal's Jalpaigudi district since 1985. After the 2011 movement in Delhi, it has become a statewide phenomenon. This year, even a rabid Durga Puja supporter newspaper like *Anand Bazar* had to concede its growing popularity and publish positive reports about it.

- Mahishasur Martyrdom Day is celebrated at Doomri, near Deoria, in Uttar Pradesh under the direction of Chandrabhushan Singh Yadav, editor-in-chief, *Yadav Shakti* magazine, and Rajvir Singh, editor of the magazine's Lucknow edition. According to Chandrabhushan, Mahishasur was a king of the Yadav dynasty. He has published an article on this subject in the April 2011 issue of his mag-

azine. *Yadav Shakti* celebrated the day on 26 October this year. At the event, intellectuals of the deprived classes laid emphasis on cultural freedom. Those who take part in the celebration say that Mahishasur Martyrdom Day is being organized at a number of locations in the state for the last two years.

- At Mugma, in the Nirsa sub-division of Jharkhand's Dhanbad district, Mahishasur has been remembered annually since 2012. This year, Mahishasur Martyrdom Day was observed here on 1 November. Speaking at a seminar organized on this occasion, Dr Ramashish Ram, Bahujan Samaj Party leader from Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh, said, "Mahishasur was a great hero of the Bahujans. Unity among Bahujans is essential to rewrite our history. We have no faith in the history written by the Manuvadis." Around 100 people were present at the seminar. Most of them were OBCs.

- Mahishasur Day is celebrated at many locations in the Giridih district of Jharkhand. Senior advocate Damodar Gop has taken the lead in organizing these events. Gop was a member of the CPI (ML) for many years but he felt that "under the pressure of upper castes, the communist parties want to perpetuate the cultural and social enslavement of Bahujans". He asks: "Are we as human beings entitled to only food, clothes, a house? Is cultural pride the exclusive preserve of the upper castes? Talking of only economic empowerment without cultural and social freedom is nothing but a mirage. Only a society that has deep cultural and social roots can become economically prosperous and sustain its prosperity." Similarly, Arvind Paswan organizes Mahishasur Day programmes in the Dhanwar sub-division of the district. This year, they were held on 24 October. He says that from the next year onwards, Mahishasur Remembrance Day will be held on a large scale on Ashwin Purnima in Giridih and the neighbouring districts. A Jharkhand State Asur Sangh will be constituted and plans are afoot to hold a state-level Asur convention.

- At Sikandarpur Kundal, in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, Mahishasur Day was celebrated this year on 26 October (Ashwin Purnima). Around 100 students attended seminars held as part of the celebrations. The Eklavya Sena organized the event. Prior to this, some activists of Eklavya Sena had gathered at the Khudiram memorial, opposite the district collector's residence, on Dussehra. They declared Dussehra a "black day" for Dalits and OBCs and appealed to these

communities not to join in the celebrations of their ancestor's murder. Naresh Kumar Sehni, chief of the Eklavya Sena, says, "Right from my childhood, I've wondered why Asurs do not have a family tree that the so-called gods do. Later, when I read an article published in *FORWARD* Press, I realized that there are others who think like me. That article gave me the courage to speak out what I felt." He adds: "There is a sub-caste of our caste Nishad (Mallahas) called Mahishi. They are mainly cattle-rearers. Mahishasur was the ancestor of us Mallahas." Unsolicitedly, he explains: "I don't think the caste system existed in Mahishasur's time in the present form. That is why, his caste cannot be determined. Yadavs and other castes also consider him their ancestor. All Dalit, EBC and OBC castes have tribal roots. Mahishasur is the hero of all indigenous inhabitants of India."

- Mahishasur festival was also celebrated at Bhagwanpur, in Muzaffarpur. Heera Yadav was the chief organizer. When asked whether he faced resistance, he replied: "Earlier, I did face resistance. When I started organizing this event in 2011, even my family members opposed it. They argued that Durga is the goddess of the Hindus; how could I go against her? But now, everyone has understood that it was not a religious war. It was a battle between the Aryans and the non-Aryans. Hence, it is a historical incident. It had nothing to do with religion. Brahmins do not represent all Hindus."

- In the Chittra village of Minapur sub-division, Muzaffarpur (Bihar), an idol of Mahishasur was built in 2014. However, idols did not figure in this year's Mahishasur Remembrance Day celebrations. As people are becoming aware that the Tribals' traditional beliefs do not involve idol worship, increasingly such events have just a picture of Mahishasur put up and feature speeches or cultural programmes. About 1,500 people from the nearby villages took part in the function at Chittra. Traditional songs of Bahujan castes were sung and pro-people cultural programmes held.

- Hareram of Madhepura, Bihar, is a teacher by profession and a social activist at heart. Mahishasur Day was celebrated on 26 October 2015 at a school ground under the direction of his team. There were around 150 participants. A seminar was also organized but no newspaper carried the news. Hareram says that he had sent a press note and photographs of the event to all newspapers but neither any journalist turned up to cover the function nor deemed it newsworthy.

But for the Bihar Vidhan Sabha elections, which were under way at the time, he says, at least 1000 people would have turned up at the function. “Because BAMCEF founder Kanshi Ram’s movement was quite active in this area, I faced no problems in convincing people about the Mahishasur festival,” Hareram says.

- Mahishasur Martyrdom Day is being celebrated at Nawada, in Bihar, since 2012. In 2014 an idol of Mahishasur was installed here and a large number of people gathered. The organizers of the programme, Ramphal Pandit, Advocate Jairam Prasad, Umesh Singh, Suman Saurabh and Ramswaroop Manjhi, say that the function created quite a stir in the social circles. They say that people have realized that they can get economic and social freedom only when they throw off the yoke of brahmanical culture and that “these functions have also brought about political awareness”.

- On 1 November, a huge public meeting was organized at Bhagwanpur Atta, about 16 km from Hajipur, a Bihar town situated on the banks of the Ganga. Around 1000 people, including a good number of women, were present on the occasion. The organizers were the Rashtriya Mulniwasi Sangh and the Satyashodhak Vichar Manch. Divided into two sessions, the function began at noon and went on till 2 am. The questions addressed in the first session were: “Who was Mahishasur? Why was he murdered? Do his descendants know about his murder? What has been the fallout of not knowing about his murder? The second session dealt with the following questions: “Our mythology talks of Aryan-non-Aryan, Dev-Danav, Sur-Asur, Savarna-Avarna struggles. Who were the non-Aryans, Danavs, Asurs and Avarnas? And after they were defeated through deceit, what happened to their descendants and how can we identify them today?” Social and cultural activists from all over the country spoke on these weighty issues at length and drew applause from the audience. Key speakers included Shivaji Rai (a Yadav), convener of Rashtriya Satyashodhak Manch; Tararam Mehna (a Bhil/Tribal), national president, Rashtriya Mulniwasi Sangh; and Dr Deshraj (a Dalit), president of the Delhi unit of BAMCEF. Addressing the function, social activist Neelam Kushwaha said that the Manuvadis had insulted women by portraying them as goddesses and that the goddesses couldn’t be the ideal of the present-day women. She said that women’s empowerment didn’t mean that they had to be shown as born from the “tej” of

men. She said that today's women should learn to differentiate between true empowerment and humiliating allurements, and stand by those social forces that are battling for justice. Udyan Rai said that they should try to get celebrations of the murders of their ancestors banned by the Parliament and the courts. The function was also addressed by, among others, Mahendra Rai, Dileep Pal, Mahavir Das Sisodia, Rajnarain Gupta, Vinod Kumar, Babykumari Prarthna, Tanisha, Mahendra Rai, satirical poet Gaya Prasad, Satyendra Paswan and Parasnath Rajak. Local leader Subodh Rai presided over the function and Jeeveshwar Prasad was the host.

Several other people are involved in educating the people of Bihar about Mahishasur by organizing martyrdom/remembrance days: Advocate Manish Ranjan, journalist Nawal Kishore Kumar and Rakesh Yadav in Patna; Abhunandan Kumar in Supaul; Ramnaresh Ram and Pradeep Yadav in Sewan; Birendra Gupta in East Champaran; Raghunath Mahto in West Champaran; Chandrika Sahu in Shivhar; Ramshreshtha Rai in Sitamarhi; and Radhakrishna Das, the mahant of Thawe temple, in Gopalganj. Similarly, at Jugwa, in Kaushambi, Uttar Pradesh, N.B. Singh Patel and Ashok Vardhan hold a large function every year. Last year, they announced that their village would be renamed "Jugwa Mahishasur" and that a signboard with the new name would be installed. Others parts of Uttar Pradesh also have been witnessing Mahishasur Day celebrations, courtesy of Kamal Patel and Surendra Yadav in Mirzapur; Laddu Singh and Rammanohar Prajapati in Allahabad; Mohit Verma in Banda; and Krishnapal, Arvind Gaud and Ripudaman Sahu in Benaras. The Mahishasur Day celebrations have become an annua affair in Mysore, Karnataka; Hyderabad, Telengana; Morari colony, Balaghat, in Madhya Pradesh; and in many cities and towns of Odisha. The functions organized by Swapna Kumar Ghosh in Purulia, West Bengal, and by Narayan Bagarathi, in Kalahandi, Odisha, have got ample media coverage. Outside India, there've been reports of the celebrations from many places in Nepal. However, due to a lack of time, we could not contact their organizers.

*With Rajdev Yadav (Dhanbad), Arun Kumar (Muzaffarpur) and Aadeshum Lohuk (Kolkata)  
(Forward Press, December 2015)*

# ‘There is no stopping these cultural battles’

KANCHA ILAIAH

Sometime ago, Premkumar Mani wrote an article on Mahishasur and Durga in *Forward Press* – a fortnightly magazine published from Delhi.

He undertook the project of rewriting the history of Shudras as opposed to the brahmanical history, based on the mythology, which became popular during the freedom struggle.

In this article, he told the story of how Durga killed Mahishashur. Mani, from the “Other Backward Classes” of Bihar, is the elder brother of Braj Ranjan Mani, who wrote the famous book, *Debrahmanising History*.

The All India Backward Students’ Forum (AIBSF) of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) printed this article as a pamphlet and celebrated Mahishasur Jayanti. The Hindutva forces on the campus were very worried about this ideological and historical transformation of the OBCs of North India. They complained to the police and also to JNU authorities.

University authorities were also worried about this new writing of history taking place as they too believed in brahmanical history. The unfolding of multicultural historiography was part of the post-Mandal transformation of the Indian educational institutions.

By quoting the pamphlet selectively in Parliament, Irani opened an ideological battle between the BJP-led central government and Dalit-OBCs. The Proctoral committee examined the pamphlet and heard the arguments of AIBSF leaders and could not find anything wrong with that kind of new historiography.

Ever since, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), headed

by brahmanical, upper-caste students, have started celebrating Ram Navami, Ganapathi, Durga Puja festivals, etc on university campuses, while Dalit-OBC students have celebrated their own icon-centred festivals. This, they thought, would lead to de-hinduization of OBCs, who were being used by Hindutva forces as the main muscle-power resource from the days of the demolition of Babri Masjid. The Dravida icon celebration has been there in the South: The famous Onam celebration of Kerala around the icon of Bali Raja, whom the Hindu Vamana killed in a criminal conspiracy, is well known.

Similarly, near Mysore there are small temples of Mahishashur, Ravana and other Dravidian gods and goddesses, and people – but only Shudras and Dalits – pray to those deities. In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, there are many local Dravidian deities, who have no history of a violent life like Durga. Millions pray to such deities. Hindutva forces wanted to brahmanize them, but haven't been successful yet.

There is a big statue of Mahishasur in Mysore. In fact, there are several stories about how the name "Mysore" comes from Mahishasur. That area used to be called Mahisha Mandala. This divine image has a narrative that goes with buffalo-friendly nationalism as against the cow nationalism of the Hindutva forces. Mahishasur is also shown in the jet-black colour of a buffalo.

Periyar Ramasamy Naicker invoked several such Dravid icons while fighting against Hindu Brahmanism. By quoting from that pamphlet selectively in Indian Parliament, Minister of Human Resource Development Smriti Irani launched a major ideological battle between the BJP government and the Dalit-OBC culture.

By opposing all Dravidian history narratives and its culture of divinity, the minister opened yet another intolerant chapter. The Sangh Parivar treats the Dalitbahujan (Dravidian) cultural heritage as un-Indian as they treat Islam and Christianity as un-Indian. In their notion of nationalism, Indian culture is equivalent to brahmanical culture. It was Minister Irani who sent feelers to universities that they should serve only vegetarian food in campus hostels and canteens. Thus, the present regime considers anti-national the serving of meatatarian food items. In Minister Irani's view only Durga is Indian, not Mahishasur. In her view only Vaman is Indian, not Bali Raja. In her view only Ram is Indian, not Ravan. In her view only Sita is an Indian woman, not Shurpanak.

Thus, the Mahishasur-Durga metaphors are “national” and “anti-national” metaphors. Mahishahur is “anti-national” like Rohith Vemula, Kanhaiya Kumar, Omar Khalid and other Hyderabad University and JNU students.

The fundamental discourse around Mahishasur and Durga relates to violence and victimhood. Brahmin ideologues construct this discourse around “dharma” and “adharmā” and say all adharmics should be killed.

This means the opponents of BJP and its vegetarian cow nationalism should also be eliminated: all Dalitbahujans who have ideas of alternative history should be eliminated as they are refusing to follow the brahmanical Hindu Dharma. So also the Muslims and Christians should be eliminated because they have a different understanding of God and Allah from that of Ram and Durga. They precisely started doing this by eliminating Kalburgi, Akhlaq, Rohith Vemula and so on. There is specific hatred towards everything black in the Hindutva camp. Mahishashur is buffalo-black in his historical image, whose death does not matter at all, like buffalo slaughter does not matter in all BJP-ruled states.

They believe in protecting the cow, Brahma, Ram and so on. The Brahmin Rishi cultural history is a racist history. The Dalitbahujan scholarship initiated by Mahatma Jotirao Phule started taking on this Hindu mythology and turning it on its head. The Indianness of this kind of reading of even mythology is indigestible for the Hindutva school. During the 2014 general elections they put Narendra Modi in the forefront of their campaign and announced that he is an OBC and Dalit-OBC concerns would be taken care of through their development agenda. But, having come to power with that promise, they are attacking everything that Dalit-OBCs believe as their culture, their history, their mythology, their food, their symbols and so on.

Irani’s attack on the Dalit-OBC cultural heritage will have a huge backlash as did the death of Rohith Vemula. If Irani wants to destroy the productive and native cultural ethics of Dalit-OBCs, the BJP will realize how that will damage Narendra Modi’s ‘Make In India’ project.

Once the cultural battles between Dalitbahujans and upper castes take a definite shape, from Panchayats to Parliament, nobody will be able to stop them.

*This article appeared in English on CatchNews.in on 28 February 2016.*

## Durga, Mahishasur and caste politics

RAM PUNIYANI

In the recent war of words over Jawaharlal Nehru University one crucial aspect of Indian mythology and its present interpretation came to the fore. HRD minister Smriti Irani, while defending the actions of her government, said that JNU is the den of anti-national activities. Seeking to substantiate her argument she cited the celebration of Mahishasur Martyrdom Day on the campus and a pamphlet with derogatory references to the goddess Durga. Many worship Durga as the slayer of Mahishasur.

The issue of interpreting the slaying of Mahishasur, who has been projected as a demon in the popular narratives, has been in the air for quite sometime. Before this, another controversy about the goddess had broken out a few years ago. It was over a reference in an IGNOU textbook to the goddess drinking alcohol. Pranab Mukherjee, who was a union minister at the time, had responded by quoting shlokas from the scripture *Chandi Path*, which describes the goddess drinking once, and then again and again, in the middle of a battle, her eyes bloodshot – as red as the rays of the rising sun.

In October 2014, copies of a special issue of the *Forward Press* magazine that delved into the Bahujan understanding of Mahishasur and Durga were seized by the police on the complaint by members of the ABVP that they would precipitate hatred between Brahmans and OBCs. This matter is still in the court. Durga Puja in its present form began not very long ago. It is only 260 years old. After the defeat of the Nawab of Bengal in the 1757 Battle of Plassey, Raja Nabakrishnadev of Calcutta organized the first Durga Puja to honour Lord Clive. This festival is thus not only a relatively new tradition, it is also anti-Muslim and pro-imperialism by implication.

While there had been communities celebrating Mahishasur's life,

the observance of Mahishasur Martyrdom Day came to light just a few years ago. Starting in 2011, a group of students have been organizing the event in JNU. Udit Raj, who has now joined the BJP, was a speaker in one of these programmes. Today, this day has found a place in the calendar of Adivasis communities in various places, especially in West Bengal. Last year, the day was observed in more than 300 places. Many Bahujan scholars, including those writing in the *Forward Press* magazine, have been arguing that the celebration of the slaying of Mahishasur is not in good taste on two counts. One, it celebrates death and two, it is based on a brahmanical interpretation of the incident, with Mahishasur, the tribal king, projected as a demon.

The interpretation of the myth is mired in problems. The myth obviously concerns the pre-historical period and the usual, rigorous tools of history cannot be applied easily. As such the dominant narrative is that the goddess killed the demon and so this day is celebrated as a victory of good over evil. According to this version, Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh together created Durga and endowed her with supreme powers, because the demon could not be easily defeated. This narrative also presents the demon king as half-man, half-buffalo.

According to the leaflet that Minister Irani read out in the Parliament, Durga was a sex worker who was commissioned to kill Mahishasur. She honeymooned with him for nine nights and then killed him in his sleep. It may be recalled here that the city of Mysore was named after him. A friend brought to my notice a Tyeb Mehta painting from the *Kali* series, showing the goddess in deep embrace with Mahishasur. It sold for an astronomical price.

As such, the first mention of Durga is found in the *Markandey Purana*, written between 250 and 500 AD. While the popular celebrations and perceptions are in agreement with what Irani asserted, these are the brahmanical or dominant versions. That many communities remember the same “event” as Mahishasur day is not so well known. This has come to light in the so-called mainstream only very recently, especially with the observances in JNU and the discussions in the *Forward Press* magazine. I may add here that the dominant discourse is always of the dominant castes/classes.

The interpretation of this good versus evil, Gods versus Asuras is

what is prevalent, and this hails the coming of Aryans here. Jotirao Phule presented the other interpretation, standing the brahmanical interpretation on its head and pointing out that Aryabhata Brahmins invaded this land and defeated the native Tribals by force and deceit. This interpretation also brings up the social change that resulted from the struggle of the downtrodden against caste slavery. Extending this further, the Ram-Ravana duality has also been reinterpreted. It may come as a surprise to many but it is true that many communities celebrate the life of Ravana. They remember him as one who was a great soul, full of wisdom.

While Hindutva politics has constructed its campaign around Ram, he comes under heavy criticism from both Ambedkar and Periyar. Ambedkar takes him on for killing the popular king Bali by shooting an arrow on his back, terming it unethical. Bali was a popular king, who is celebrated even today and his rule is remembered as a period of happiness for non-Brahmins. The killing of Shambuk by Ram because he was doing penance, which was forbidden to the Shudras, is again a Brahmanical ploy to retain social hegemony. There can be no justification for Ram banishing his pregnant wife Sita. So, interpreting the Ram-Ravana story has added caste/race and, of course, gender dimensions to it.

One must clarify that the theory of race and of the arrival of Aryans and the invasion of the natives has been superseded by the theory of communities intermixing over a period of time. One major dimension to myth about Durga is gender. Mrinal Pandey, in her essay on Scroll.in, presents the issue as one of assertion of women against the might of patriarchy. So, there is race, there is caste and there is gender! It is natural for a diverse society to have these multiple narratives and it is wrong to crush or suppress any of them.

Irani, the BJP and the RSS are opposed to the emergence of subaltern narratives, as they are a threat to their hegemonic project to establish the upper-caste/upper-class dominion over society. They cannot tolerate pluralism, hence the supercharged attack by HRD minister in Parliament, branding the alternative version of the Durga-Mahishasur myth as undesirable and anti-national.

# Understand India, Modi ji

## Honourable Modi ji,

I believe every citizen has the right to directly communicate with his Prime Minister. And if the mode is a letter, one can avoid the hassle of a hard-to-get appointment. So, I have chosen to write this letter to you.

Of late, the country has witnessed a string of incidents. I don't think I need to recount them to you. It is true that in a large country like India, many kinds of things will keep on happening and I would not like you to waste your valuable time in paying attention to petty incidents. But there are some incidents, which shake us, which are a threat to our very existence as a nation. And to my mind, what happened recently on the campus of Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University and what followed in the capital and other parts of the nation fall in that category. What happened was out of the ordinary and I would request you to seriously reflect on the chain of events and its implications. I am requesting you to give this personal consideration as I feel that you are somewhat confounded on this issue. By prostrating at the gate of Parliament and raising full-throated slogans of "Bharat Mata ki jai" you have given us some idea of your mindset. Have you ever tried to analyze your psychology? Please do find time to do that. That is because the country's future depends on it. Russian writer Chekhov had said, "Just show a man his real self and he will reform." That is why I see a possibility of reform in you. Mr Prime Minister, Sir, begin with comprehending the power you wield. You are presiding over the destinies of 1.25 billion people. And you have been elected by them. You are the de facto ruler of this great nation – just as Chandragupta, Ashoka and Akbar were at different times. But even they were not ruling such a

huge India. During the reign of Chandragupta and Ashoka, India extended much farther in the west than it does now but the south was not under the control of the Mauryans. Akbar's India was also not as big as today's India.

But India is not just a geographical entity. There is cultural India too. As Rabindranath Tagore had said, "India is a thought; not a geographical fact." India has not been created by its rulers. It has been built by its poets, scholars, philosophers, saints and, in fact, by nature herself. This India has evolved over centuries. The process of its creation was simple and complex at the same time. One doesn't know how many sagas, legends, poems, songs, pasts and futures have gone into its making. And today, this India beats in the hearts of 1.25 billion Indians.

Just peep into its past – into its cultural legends and mythology. You must be aware that it was named "Bharat" after the one who was born of the love and matrimony of Dushyanta and Shakuntala. Bharat was not brought up in a palace. He grew up in the ashram of a rishi. These ashrams were located deep inside forests. Today, your government has embarked on "Greenhunt" because you think traitors are hiding in these forests. The story of Bharat and his mother Shakuntala is enchanting and touching. Then, there was the great sage Dwapayan Krishna, who is also known as Ved Vyas. He wrote the awesome epic *Mahabharata*, which was initially called Jai and Bharat. The *Mahabharata* is our greatest cultural heritage. Not more than 100 years ago, some people turned this Bharat-*Mahabharata* into Bharat Mata. Have you ever thought how Bharatvarsha became Bharat Mata? The British called their nation motherland. In India, the tradition was of describing one's place of birth as fatherland. You have been a pracharak of the RSS. You must be aware of these facts. Influenced by the British culture, some people started associating India with motherhood and turned Bharat into Bharat Mata. Since those who did this were the rich gentry and feudal landlords – whose drawing rooms were adorned with skins of tigers and lions – they perched Bharat Mata on the back of a tiger. How could the mother of these great men ride a cow or a buffalo? Have you ever given a thought to what Bharat Mata would be doing had she been the creation of the common man? Maybe she would be breaking stones like the woman in Nirala's poem *Woh Todti Patthar*. Renowned

Hindi poet Pant has also woven an image of Bharat Mata:

“Bharat Mata gramvasini,  
tarutal niwasini”  
(Bharat Mata lives in a village,  
she dwells under a tree)

Pant’s Bharat Mata thus lives under a tree, Nirala’s breaks stones. If the rural proletariat had created the image of Bharat Mata, then maybe she would have been grazing goats or spinning a charkha.

But you are not the prime minister of this Bharat. You are the prime minister of only that Bharat, which has been described as “that is India” in the Constitution. This India was shaped by our great freedom struggle and was given the final touches by the Constituent Assembly. We adopted this Constitution on 26 January 1950. “We, the people of India ... adopt, enact and give to ourselves this Constitution.” We adopted a political India that had grown on a great cultural foundation. The Constitution became our soul and as you say – our scripture.

But some people did not imbibe or adopt it. Our Constitution exemplifies the values of quality, liberty and fraternity – which had evolved from the French Revolution. It forbids all kinds of discrimination and assures equal opportunities to all. It is not rigid; it is amenable to alternations, deletions and additions in keeping with the changing times – and we have seen this happen. Attempts were made to tinker with it – as in 1975, when Emergency was imposed. But these attempts were destined to fail.

And today’s India rides on the back of this Constitution, not on the back of a tiger or a lion. It is not Bharat Mata. It is the India that has been built with consensus. It is our strength and we are its strength. It is somewhat like the relationship of a drop of water with the ocean. The moment the drop separates from the ocean, it is obliterated. We will be obliterated if we separate from India.

Prime Minister, Sir, some people have reduced worshipping India to mockery. They understand neither politics nor culture. They are only interested in creating an illusory world that they can use to perpetuate their domination. In the times gone by, some people maintained their domination through socio-cultural deception. Since the present Constitution has tied their hands, they are exploring new

ways to do it. It is unfortunate that these great men, who once hung tiger hides in their drawing rooms, have now hung the skin of Bharat Mata and as the self-appointed priests of India, are dishing out certificates of patriotism. They do not have faith in the Constitution. They believe in Manusmriti and other similar Indian codes. Their India is the India of sadhus, beggars and charlatans – as that India won't challenge their Manuvad. This is their country, this is their nation.

What happened at Jawaharlal Nehru University is being talked about everywhere. I am one of those who see this in a positive light. I believe that free debate and discussion strengthen a nation. But I would request you to keep a close eye on the entire issue and discourage forces that are socially retrograde, because they want to weaken the nation. In today's world, no country or society with an outdated and conservative mindset can grow and progress. We move even when we move backwards but that is retrogression. We have to decide whether we want to forge ahead or move backwards. We cannot forge ahead if we hold on to religious bigotry and narrow-mindedness. In this century, we can forge ahead only by tapping into the knowledge and wisdom granted to us by science and by adhering to scientific reasoning. As globalization continues, the challenges before us are growing. Unless we take a big leap, we will fall by the wayside. And once that happens, we will never be able to recover.

So, please do correct yourself. You and your associates talk of nationalism at the drop of a hat. I don't know whether you have ever given thought to what it exactly means. It is not possible to explain nationalism in detail in a letter but I would like to say something about the circumstances in which a country becomes a nation. The way Western nations evolved was a bit different from how India evolved. But both here and in the West, nation is a modern phenomenon. It evolved along with the industrial revolution and, for different reasons, flourished in the capitalist era. When the Western nations were evolving, besides a piece of land with definite boundaries, sovereignty, population and language, what contributed to their making was the common good of their citizens. This common good is interpreted by our Constitution as equality of opportunity.

But nationalism took an ugly form in Europe and today, no one wants to talk about it. Bearing the badge of nationalism on their

chest, the Western nations fought two ruinous world wars among themselves and turned Europe into a massive graveyard. Nationalism, ultimately, proved to be a Frankenstein's monster that took the largest number of lives in human history. In this context, our great poet and thinker Rabindranath Tagore had lambasted nationalism. On 14 April 1941, shortly before his death, he wrote an article and delivered a speech on the "Crisis of Civilization". Prime Minister, Sir, you should find time to read this article.

India did not witness an industrial revolution and here, feudalism formed the lifeblood of capitalism. Indian nationalism was very different from its Western cousin. While its political face opposed colonialism, its social face took on the priestly class. In both cases, freedom was the objective. The creators of this nationalism were Tilak, Gandhiji, Subhash, Bhagat Singh and others on the one hand and Jotiba Phule, Ranade, Ambedkar and the like on the other. After the end of colonial rule, freedom from social-economic domination became more relevant. Like a true statesman, Jawaharlal Nehru drew the contours of the new India. Retrograde ideas had no place in his scheme of things. His new India was to be built not by sadhus and sanyasis but by scientists, workers and farmers. He stressed on the need to develop scientific temper.

But Prime Minister, Sir, you do not talk of either of these two streams of nationalism. Your nationalism is the nationalism of Shivaji, Savarkar and Golwarkar, which, to say the least, has been controversial from day one. The nationalism of Savarkar and Golwarkar is not Indian, it is Hindu. This kind of nationalism requires a prop – in the form of a counter-balance, in this case another theocratic nation. Shivaji's Hindavi state was pitted against the Mughal Empire and Savarkar's Hindutva was juxtaposed against Islam. The Hindu nationalism of Hedgewar and Golwalkar will also require a Muslim or Christian nationalism to sustain itself. In contrast, the Indian nation can survive independently; it does not need an "other" and it has the capability to ensure that all its subjects have equality of opportunity.

As far as I understand, JNU is the best school of this nationalism – Indian nationalism. I visit it off and on and I have felt that most of the students there want to build an "India without fear" – as Gurudev dreamt. It is true that it was a bastion of Marxists and to some extent

continues to be so. The Manuvadis somehow tolerated the Marxists but their patience gave way when the new students started talking about Phule-Ambedkarism and for the first time, the Marxists joined forces with them. The first flashpoint was the Mahishasur issue. The Manuvadi students had started worshipping Durga there. The Phule-Ambedkarite students started observing “Mahishasur Day”. Durga and Mahishasur are not part of our history, they are part of our mythology. And Prime Minister, Sir, not only the dominant sections have their history, their mythology and their culture. Those who are the ruled, those who are the members of the so-called lower castes – one of which you had become during the elections – too have their own history and mythology. If the dominant classes have their mythological Durga, the backward classes have their mythological Mahishasur.

You must have heard about Devasur Sangram (Battle between the gods and the asurs). The dominant class uses its mythology to strengthen its stranglehold; those who are left behind reinterpret their mythology to put up cultural resistance. The dominant class asks us to worship Rama; we are reminded of Shambuk whose head was severed by Rama just because he wanted to gain knowledge. Have you ever thought what a Dalit-OBC sportsperson must be feeling when the Arjuna Award is conferred on him? Will he not remember Eklavya?

Just put your hand on your heart, Prime Minister, Sir, and think who Mahishasur, Shambuk and Eklavya were. Were they foreigners? Did they belong to some other religion? Talking about them, underlining their contribution – how is that you consider this sedition? The time has come for you to ask the members of the RSS to do a re-think on their Hindutva. Their Bharat is not *akhand* (united), neither is their Hindutva. Their Hindutva is fragmented. It is brahmanical Hindutva. You only talk of this brand of Hindutva.

Now, let us revisit the JNU incident. It happened on 9 February. If any student raised anti-India slogans, it was patently wrong. I have been told that statements like “War will continue till India is ruined” were made. I condemn such statements in the harshest possible terms. We should not wish the ruin of anyone – not even of Pakistan. It is our neighbour. Let it grow and prosper. Let all countries of the world grow and prosper. I really love your slogan “Sabka Saath, Sabka

Vikas". But let it not remain a mere slogan. Let it become a reality.

Universities are meant to bring about "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas". In times of yore, we had our Nalanda. Hiuen Tsang and Fa Hien had come to study here. In the British era, students from our country went to Oxford and Cambridge. There, they talked about freedom of India. They formed their associations and organizations. But the British government never charged them with sedition. Your Savarkar had also studied in England and had written his famous book, *Indian War of Independence: 1857* while living in that country. He had also established "Free India Society" there. Let us give the same degree of freedom to our universities. Let us allow the students and the teachers to think, discuss and debate freely. Please note the "vishwa" in the word "Vishwavidhyalaya". Do you want to convert them into Saraswati Shishu Mandirs? Universities discuss problems and issues confronting the whole human race. Don't try to make them schools of patriotism. Don't send out the message that we do not even know how to run universities. Suppose 100-200 students from Pakistan study in JNU. Would they not talk about their country? Our students study abroad. Don't they talk about India?

Let us touch on the Kashmir issue too. Some students talked about Afzal Guru. By kicking up a furore about him we have only highlighted the Kashmir problem and brought it into the limelight. This is nothing but foolhardiness. Kashmir's problems are a bit different and more complex than the problems of the rest of India. In Kashmir, you had formed government with the PDP, which considers Afzal a martyr. Not that there is anything wrong in aligning with the PDP. Only dialogue can take us forward. That is the right way, the only way. Despite Pakistan engineering heinous acts of violence on our soil, we are trying to hold a dialogue with it. Kashmir, in any case, is ours. I believe that you understand the Kashmir issue much better than I do as I have been told that you have spent some time there. The Kashmir problem is a complex one. It was never a part of British India. It was a separate state. It became part of India under particular circumstances, which was natural. It is like a child adopted by a family. That is why there is a special Article in the Constitution for that state. This article should be respected. Such special provisions may, in the times to come, persuade other countries to become a part of the Indian confederation. And these countries may be even

Pakistan, Bangladesh or Nepal. We should not stop dreaming. Sometimes, dreams come true.

So dear Prime Minister, Sir, the need of the hour is a dialogue – not wrangling – with citizens, especially students, who are angry for one reason or the other. Patriotism cannot be thrust upon anyone, such as through punishment. I think your disciples, who are sporting the badge of patriotism and looting the country, are a much bigger threat than a handful of angry young men. Did you ever ask your friend Ambani why he is building a Rs1000 crore home for himself when farmers are committing suicide in the country over loan defaults of petty amounts? You have announced waiver of loans worth lakhs of crores of rupees taken by capitalists but you are hardly concerned about the workers and farmers of the country. Rohith Vemula, a promising student of Hyderabad University, was forced to commit suicide. You were nearly in tears. I can understand you. In your own words, you come from a lower caste, a backward community. You are a proletariat in Marxist jargon. You are the son of a great mother who used to work in other people's homes; you sold tea as a child. I have some faith in you. Maybe a dialogue with you can help. Sometime back, when you were garlanding a bust of Ambedkar, I just thought how good it would have been had you put a garland of his thoughts around your neck. It would have initiated a silent revolution. So, I will borrow Vivekananda's words to say, "awaken, rise, march and do not stop". You are not steeped in the value system of the Sangh, you should revolt against the Manuvadis, destroy them. Their country is phoney, their religion is phoney, and their nation is phoney. Come out of this palace of deceit and lies, Modi ji. It will benefit you – but it will benefit the country more.

**Regards,  
Premkumar Mani**

# Mahishasur via the Hindi media

KARMANAND ARYA

The Mahishasur movement was launched in October 2011 in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), south Asia's centre for learning and teaching literature, languages and humanities. The movement has got a lot of space in the Hindi print media in the last few years. However, English newspapers have conveyed the news more positively than the Hindi print media. Although this movement is also talked about in the Hindi social media from September to November each year (generally Mahishasur Day is celebrated in the month of October), it gets little airtime in Hindi and English news channels. Whenever, inspired by Phule, Periyar and Dr Ambedkar's ideas, youth activists of OBC, Tribal and Dalit social background post comments on social media (particularly Facebook) to express solidarity with the movement, young right-wing Brahmins and other twice-borns protest endlessly.

There are more than 1000 published essays and articles in favour of and against this movement in Hindi only – including various newspapers and blogs – from the last few years. It is not possible to count the related comments that have appeared on Facebook. If we restrict ourselves to the long comments, they could number more than ten thousand. It will not be possible to sum up here all the points raised in these comments. Given the limited space, we will have a cursory view of the comments that appeared from 2011 to 2015 in a few major Hindi blogs/websites and Hindi newspapers. This bird's-eye view of this movement is necessary to understand the undercurrent of this movement. Arguments and counterarguments made in these publications will help us understand the relevance of this movement.

The article "Durga Chandi Nahin Thi, Uski Puja Kyun Kare Bahujan?"<sup>1</sup> (Durga was not a Chandi, why worship her, Bahujan?), in which Premkumar Mani<sup>2</sup> wrote about the Shudrapath of the Durga

narratives, stirred up the media. This article can be considered the starting point of this discourse. This is the article that attracted the public attention to the issue of Bahujan heroes, including Mahishasur. This article was republished in *Forward Press*' October 2011 issue as the cover story titled "Kiski Puja kar Rahe hain Bahujan?" ("Who are the Bahujans really worshipping?") The article begins with the myth about Mahishasur and Mahishasurmardini (Durga) and invokes the passion in the people for their lost identity. This movement has given birth to a new identity-conscious, enlightened class. For the first time, the enlightened youth have joined a movement that is in the interest of Bahujans. In his electrifying and informative article, Premkumar Mani refers to the hegemony of a culture that is as maliciously provocative as a toothless and non-poisonous snake that cannot even pretend to be civilized; its humility and forgiving nature makes no sense; it has been continuously losing its relevance. Mani writes, "Buddha has said, 'The weak cannot tread the right path.'" The dominant-caste media interpreted and ranked his utterances as it were destined to, but it wasn't able to hide its intentions.

This article has built up an intellectual discourse among Bahujan community, enriching in terms of the spirit, language and sensitivity the tradition of reflection that had been on the wane after the Buddhist period. As expected, it was fiercely opposed by the right wing. The forces that enjoy cultural dominance in society don't want such ideological emergence among the Bahujans because this could dent their power. But the large section of society should be thankful to social media and liberals for taking the movement to the public. The media highlighted less positive news instead of the negative news, baring its mentality in the process.

In response to the article<sup>3</sup> by Premkumar Mani, a lot of comments appeared on the website Mohalla Live. The praises and criticisms for the article are an indication of the form the discourse on this issue took<sup>4</sup>.

### Comments in favour

Commenting on the issue, Pradeep Kumar wrote, "Very thought-provoking piece. It is only Mani who has had the courage to tell such a truth. To maintain this level of courage he has paid a high price. But history remembers only this genre of thinkers." Replying to a question from Rupesh Devgan, Sunil Kumar said, "Country does not appear as a readymade concept; it is created by the participation of the people,

particularly marginalized people, over thousands of years. Our mythology has divided the people. Peoples such as Asur and Rakshas born on the very soil here were enslaved. And today when the reality of the scriptures is being demystified and revealed, you say someone is breaking the nation! Who will teach us what patriotism is? As far as external forces are concerned, you should know that Muslims and the British played an important role in the all-round development of this whole country. It is a brahmanical myth that they were just invaders and they came here just to loot us, which is yet to be reinterpreted. My humble request to you is that you should read these great men.”

After Mani’s article appeared in *Forward Press*, while a number of student organizations in various universities came out in support, a few strongly opposed it. These student organizations surfaced as flag-bearers of the sections they represent. Vishal writes on Mohalla Live, “Mani Babu, one thing is clear – that in this write-up, you have jolted the brahmanists from top to bottom. In return, you are experiencing what the front of a fast-flowing body of water comes up against. It is a well-acknowledged fact that brahmanists always avoid the discussion on history because they know the base of the history they believe in.”

An article titled “Hamne itihās ki dhool jhadne ki koshish ki hai” (We have tried to shake the dust off history) appeared in Mohalla Live on October 29 and hailed Mani ji’s views. A news report headlined “Mahishasur Martyrdom Day celebrated in the JNU”<sup>5</sup> on Mohalla Live said that the “end of the dispute over Mahishasur and Mahishasur Mardini in JNU seems to be nowhere in sight”. The website focused on the views and statements expressed by Ivan Kostka, Ramnika Gupta, Jitendra Yadav, Kanwal Bharti, etc in the seminar on the lower strata’s reinterpretation of Lord Macaulay and Mahishasur, organized on this occasion. Mani’s article kicked off an intellectual discourse, which in turn boosted the morale of the supporters of the Mandal Commission. Journalist Dilip Mandal made an interesting comment<sup>6</sup>: “Because they have carried Brahmanism on their shoulders, the plight of OBCs has been such that you’ll find a few Dalits holding high positions but not OBCs. Mandal’s concern is very relevant. So many years after Independence we are far from Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Why does a small section of Brahmins control all the resources? Why is a large part of the population kept away from national resources even today?”

Reacting to the article<sup>7</sup>, Narendra Tomar<sup>8</sup> said: “In an era when almost the whole ‘mainstream’ media is engaged, virtually day and

night, in planting old superstitions and shaping new ones, the importance of such well-researched articles can't be overstated. Forging new superstitions and opposing reservations are going hand in hand and being undertaken by the same regressive forces. Even as they enjoy the achievements of modern science and technology, they are pushing the country back to thousands-of-years-old inhuman system of Varnashrama in the name of religion and tradition, and they are trying to get back their privileges in the same old system. In such an era, it is necessary not only to foil manoeuvres of such vested interests, but also to highlight those interpretations of mythical tales so that the democracy in the country can be sustained – as progressive intellectuals such as Rahul Sankrityayan, Bhagwat Sharan Upadhyay or later D. P. Chattopadhyay and Ved Prakash Verma did.”

*Forward Press*' editor-in-chief Ivan Kostka said: “Our heroes were buried in the abyss of history, and there was a need to dig them out. Let us not fall into the trap of myths; if we do so, we will nurture the same Brahmanism.” Ramnika Gupta said: “Even today, Jharkhand is inhabited by the tribal Asur communities in large numbers. These Asur tribes do not worship Durga. We are living a paradox. On the one hand, we pretend to be modern but on the other hand, we are unable to get ourselves out of the 16th century.”<sup>9</sup> Girijeshwar said, “Bravo! Students of JNU! We salute you, your courage and valour.” Over 30 people posted detailed comments on this article.

Under “Mahishasur ke Bahane”, Rajneesh wrote, “Ramesh Dutt Dube's views [in *Jansatta*, Chaupal, 1 November] is the outcome of an incomplete understanding of a society based on the caste system. There are still caste-based standards alive in society and they can't be overlooked.” One reader wrote, “Dalit-Backwards are still worshipping those who wronged them. This goes to show the cunning of those who have made the Hindu religion their fortress and have their flag flying high through unscrupulous ways. This is going to continue for years to come.”

Outlook magazine<sup>10</sup> covered this issue well on its website. At one point, it said that the JNU authorities were motivated by revenge.

### **Critical comments against the Mohalla Live campaign**

Madhukar wrote, “I'm not with any 'ism'. The only thing I want is the wellbeing of everyone. But from a purely practical point of view, whoever the Durga may be, she for sure flushes the market with money

in Navratris. She provides employments to Jagran artists and hawkers. To me this is the meaning of this festival.”

The All India Backward Students’ Forum and the United Dalit Students’ Forum jointly published a detailed report of the programme held on the eve of the birth anniversary of Lord Macaulay (24 October 2011) on Mohalla Live, the Hindi website popular among the progressives. The event was held at the Jawaharlal Nehru University’s Cauvery Hostel mess. Ramnika Gupta and Kanwal Bharti were the speakers. The title of the report is “Aaj Mahishasur aur Lord Macaulay ka Bahujan Path karega JNU” (Today, JNU will recite Mahishasur and Lord Macaulay the Bahujan way). Mohalla Live gave space to these issues and programmes in its blogs consistently<sup>11</sup>. Two key comments appeared in response to the report. Raj Kishore<sup>12</sup> wrote, “If you want to see ahead, it is necessary to look back. It would be better for us to demand a separate Dalitsthan and a Pichhdasthan from the Indian Union. It is not going to affect us whether democracy prevails or not. There could be Chamaristan, Yadvistan, Domistan, Kurmistan, etc.” Although, this comment was actually a satirical take on the status quo, others appeared concerned and warned that such views could lead to the division of the country. Ashwini Kumar commented: “If a Dalit or Backward organization advocates English, then it simply means that it wants to entangle a large section of Dalit and other backward castes over the English, so that the benefits of education will go to middle/upper class of the castes only.”

In his article titled “Mahishasur ke paksh mein nahi, Zar, balatkaari ke khilaph ladein!”<sup>13</sup> (Don’t take Mahishasur’s side, fight against the Czar, the rapist!), Kailash Dahiya wrote, “Kanwal Bharti and other speakers, including Premkumar Mani, not only talked baseless things, but they also tried to distort history. Let’s talk about Premkumar Mani. In his article he is entangled the same way as the Brahmin has been getting entangled in his scriptural postscripts. Even our guide Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar was caught up in the Brahmins’ riddle, then what could be said about these people? Dalits don’t identify with Mahishasur. Dalit life has also nothing to do with the stories such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Yes, these stories contain the killings of our two great Aajeevaks, Shambuk and Eklavya. Their killers are to be punished, and Aajeevaks have been waiting for this to happen for thousands of years.”

Sometime in 2012, Mohalla Live uploaded a video<sup>14</sup> titled “Mahishasur Vivad: Chief Proctor ke Khilaph Aaj Pradarshan”

(Mahishasur controversy: Demonstration against chief proctor today). “Angrezi Devi” has posted a comment below it. She asked: “Are you anti-women? We don’t get to hear from a single woman? Is there no place for women in the Dalit and OBC community?”

The same year Arvind Mohan made satirical remarks about the religious broadcasting about a particular community in “Lal akla banam Bhagwa Akla ... Chanchal Mati Mori”<sup>15</sup>.

### **Mahishasur in Hindi newspapers**

*Dainik Hindustan* published a news report headlined “JNU mein Chhatra Guton ke beech Marpeet”<sup>16</sup> (Members of student groups thrash each other), which was clearly distorting the issue at hand. *Dainik Bhaskar* (National Edition, 10 November 2011) reported that the source of the conflict was Premkumar Mani’s article, which said that Bahujans should not worship Goddess Durga. The weekly magazine, *Shukrawar*, published an interview<sup>17</sup> with Jitendra Yadav, president of All India Backward Students’ Forum. “Why was the plan to celebrate Mahishasur Martyrdom Day made so swiftly?” asked the interviewer. Jitendra said, “It didn’t happen all of a sudden. It was in the works for some time.” The interviewer: “Won’t these activities spoil the atmosphere of university?” Jitendra: “We are sensitizing the students. It is the other organization that is spoiling the atmosphere.”

*Dainik Jagran* published a special report on the JNU poster controversy with the headline “Devi Devtaon par Tippani kyon, Notice Jari kar Manga Jawab” (Notice issued: Why these comments on gods and goddesses?)<sup>18</sup>. The news was that the JNU administration had issued a show-cause notice to All India Backward Students’ Forum on the poster controversy. Pramod Ranjan, the consulting editor of *Forward Press*, condemned the protest of right-wing student organizations of JNU and other universities against the article “Kiski Pooja kar rahe hain Bahujan?” by Premkumar Mani. *Nai Dunia* published the news “Vivadaspad poster par JNU prashasan ne jawab-talab kiya” (JNU administration enquires into the poster controversy)<sup>19</sup>. The leading Hindi daily *Jansatta* cited a statement by All India Backward Students’ Forum to report<sup>20</sup> that the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day was celebrated in JNU and that a seminar titled “Revisiting Lord Macaulay and Mahishasur from the standpoint of the downtrodden” was held on the occasion. The report also mentioned the exhibition of Lal Ratnakar’s paintings and the controversy over it.

*Dainik Bhaskar* explained why the show-cause notice was issued to Jitendra Yadav, adding that Mahishasur was an Anarya king whom Aryans could only defeat through deceit<sup>21</sup>.

*Dainik Jagran*<sup>22</sup> referred to that Proctorial Board's notice, which sought clarification from Jitendra Yadav, and said that Jitendra would himself send a written notice to the administration. The headline for a related *Dainik Bhaskar* article was "JNU Poster Vivad – Do Chhatra Sangathano ke Neta Phanse".<sup>23</sup> (JNU poster controversy – leaders of two students' organizations in trouble). *Rashtriya Sahara* carried the news "Prashashan aur Chhatra Aamen-Saamne".<sup>24</sup> (Administration and students come face to face). The newspaper also published a box item that said that the notice issued to Jitendra Yadav had angered student organizations. The report also pointed out the increasing number of Dalit, Backward and Tribal students in JNU and how this had irked other students. The online magazine pressnote.in posted an article headlined "Mani Mahishasur ki Shahadat"<sup>25</sup> (The martyrdom of Mani Mahishasur). *Nai Dunia* reported that the administration had expelled two ABVP students for disturbing communal harmony and submitted a report<sup>26</sup>. On 6 November 2011, *Dainik Bhaskar* carried the headline "JNU Vivad: Chief Proctor ne Khed Jataya" (JNU controversy: Proctor expressed regret). The newspaper said that the university administration had accepted that it had made a mistake in the Mahishasur-Durga poster controversy following the mounting pressure from intellectuals and educationists. *Punjab Kesari* quoted Dalit thinker and writer Kancha Ilaiah as having said that celebrating Mahishasur was an endeavour to rewrite history and that Mahishasur was among the heroes of Dalits, Backwards and Tribals, some of whom were good administrators as well as good reformers<sup>27</sup>.

According to *Dainik Jagran* (26 October 2011), seminars titled "Asur Mithkon ka Aadhunik Path", "Aadim Jatiyon ke Aakhyanon ki Punarvyakhya ki Aawashyakta" and "Mahishasur and Macaulay: The Limits of Postmodernity" were held on Mahishasur Day. In these seminars, the speakers noted that the Brahmins' festivals centred on killings and that these should be stopped. They also said that there was a need to rewrite history by taking into account the contribution of the Dalits and deal a blow to the caste system.

A 2012 news story with the headline "Sharad Purnima ki Sham Mahishasur ki Shahadat ka Shok Manega"<sup>28</sup> (Mahishasur's martyrdom

to be remembered on the evening of Sharad Purnima) says that the opponents tore up posters put up by AIBSF. The AIBSF branch in Banaras Hindu University too would organize the martyrdom day, the report said, whereas a good number of students from Lucknow University and Bhimrao Ambedkar University would go to JNU to participate in the martyrdom day events.

The article by Premkumar Mani in *Nav Bharat Times* attracted hundreds of reactions. These comments covered all possible points for and against the article. It won't be possible here to discuss all the comments but we can take a look at a few examples. Here, we must take note that comments were sometimes made in response to other comments. In a comment to the Mani's article of 27 October 2012, Kaushal Baghel wrote succinctly: "Bravo! I salute you. I bow to your courage and bravery! You are doing what needed to be done hundreds of years ago. Go ahead and break the false strongholds and monasteries of myth! Shatter the glorification of gods! The so-called 'holy' scriptures (in fact, call them unholy scriptures) should be reinterpreted. Aryans' atrocities on original inhabitants have been glorified so far. Now we need to identify and establish our heroes. But remember, we must not fall for any rituals. If one's caught up in rituals then they will become Brahmins, irrespective of whether they are Aryans or the indigenous inhabitants. Shouting will not help, upper-caste friends, listen carefully and please accept the truth! That is the need of the hour and it makes sense too."

Another comment went like this: "Only winners were worshipped? Are losers not worshipped? History is the witness. Mani says, 'He who won became god and who lost became worshipper.' But the point to understand is what that period was. There are many contexts in which Asurs have won. Ravan had apparently won three worlds; Mahishasur had also won almost everything. Kans was also a great victor. Later all these victors suffered defeat, and for that reason, they are not worshipped. Krishna was also killed and just a few Bhils destroyed Yaduvanshis. But Krishna is worshipped, Kans is not. Ravan is described as the son of a Brahmin but Aryans do not worship him. Many a king lost the battle but still they are remembered with respect. Why so? Historians make a fool's paradise. If any historian finds any mention of Ashoka on a stone, they will link the stone to the great Ashoka period. That's not all. They will write a huge book based on the four to five lines inscribed on that stone and show Ashoka to be a very kind king. A year later, if another stone is found somewhere else that has the

name of Ashoka and a few words of admonition inscribed, Ashok becomes a cruel king and a tyrant. They don't even have correct information on the British era, then how can they tell you the history of thousands BC? College-goers are expected to bring country and society together, but what about vandalism for personal interests? OK, there are good arguments, but then those were convenient. Brahma blessed Mahishasur, which made him stronger. Let's assume gift as aid here, but again, Brahma is an Aryan? Then an Aryan supported a non-Aryan? I salute those who are looking for their ancestors in the myths and legends for their studies. One question comes to mind. Why is Labour 'Day' celebrated when labourers work nightshifts too? It is possible that I am the descendant of Mahishasur. Nobody can casually take someone to be his/her ancestor. It is just a political stunt and nothing else. I will quote that world-famous report which brings to an end the study of race in human science. The problems of the Dalits and this festival are poles apart."

Madhav Agrawal questioned the relevance of this event: "We already have many problems. Why is then communalism being spread in the country. What do the people want to achieve by organizing such a stupid event?"

### **Caravan and criticism: Marching ahead together**

The campaign to link Mahishasur's martyrdom to Bahujan identity became successful. Criticism has made the campaign stronger. Arun Kumar says, "New events on Mahishasur's martyrdom are being organized, the main aim being to let people from Backward and Tribal society know that Mahishasur was a just king. But there are two views on Mahishasur in the Bahujan community: one, based on Premkumar Mani's 'Kiski Puja Kar Rahe Hain Bahujan', the cover story of *Forward Press*, October 2011 issue, which says that Mahishasur was the king of the cattle-rearing community, whereas the other links him to the Asur community and considers him the king of Tribal community. Before *Forward Press* published Mani's article, *Yadav Shakti* had published a long essay portraying Mahishasur as the Yadav King of the Tribal community. On 23 October 2013, Mahishasur Day was celebrated in Nawada. Ramphal Pandit, the convener of the programme, said, "Nawada is a Yadav-dominated area, and if we have succeeded in conveying this view to the Yadav community, it is the biggest victory of Bahujan cultural movement. How can we have a caste celebrate the deceitful murder of its own hero?"

Rajeev Asur wrote, “Jai Bhim, Jai Asur, Jai Mahishasur ... prostitutes must be destroyed.” Neelambuj said, “It is just this kind of events that develop counterculture, which is very important for India. My best wishes! Unless a feeling of retribution against the wicked Aryan culture is built up among the indigenous people of this soil, all brahmanical people together will destroy this country.” Mahendra Singh wrote a long comment and raised doubts: “As we see, riots frequently erupt between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq and Iran, which have dreadful consequences. Isn’t there a fear that followers of Mahishasur and worshippers of Durga could similarly end up fighting each other, as described in *Durga Saptasati*?”

### **Forward Press attacked by the powers that be**

The police took action against *Forward Press* on 9 October 2014. Right-wing student organization ABVP lodged a complaint against the magazine and the government machinery sprung into action. The police raided the office of the magazine and tried its best to arrest the editors but failed when they obtained anticipatory bail from the court. Hundreds of intellectuals of the country condemned this action of the government and spoke up for the Bahujan identity. Eminent critic Virendra Yadav said, “The news doing the rounds is that the police is taking action against the editors of *Forward Press* after confiscating copies of its October issue. This is an onslaught on the freedom of expression. Public opinion must be mobilized against this action. According to Editor Pramod Ranjan, the police raided the *Forward Press* office and seized the special issue of the magazine on Bahujan-Shraman tradition<sup>29</sup>. Apart from this, the police detained office driver Prakash and Marketing Executive Hashim Husain illegally. The police wanted to arrest Pramod Ranjan and Jitendra Yadav (the president of All India Backward Students’ Forum). This action is extremely condemnable and there is a need to unite against it. Why do all god and goddesses in the Hindu religion keep weapons with them, while the Hindu religion itself glorifies non-violence? Why do major festivals celebrate violence? We see that Vijayadashmi is the celebration of the killing of Ravana and Durga Puja is the celebration of killing of Mahishasur while the murder of Narkasur is celebrated as Deepawali and the murder of Hirankashyap and Holika as Holi. On the other hand, the festivals of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism have to do with births and martyrdoms. Why?” According to noted litterateur Kanwal Bharti, “Democracy can’t be sustained by the might of

fascism. Dalits and the Backwards are now waking up and they have every right to know and revisit their history.”

Jan Vikalp published the news about the Delhi Police raiding the office of *Forward Press* and the home of its editor-in-chief, Ivan Kostka. According to the blog, the police seized copies of the magazine and kept the employees in detention till late in the night. A photo of the protest march held against this police action accompanied the news story. Jan Vikalp (9 November 2014) quoted Pramod Ranjan as saying that “*Forward Press* is the magazine of the south of North Indian settlements [where the Dalits and the Backwards live].” On 16 December 2014, Visfot.com published the news that the court had granted anticipatory bail to *Forward Press* Editor-in-Chief Ivan Kostka and Consulting Editor Pramod Ranjan.

“The Archaeological Survey of India has found that a temple in Mahoba district, Uttar Pradesh, is actually a Mahishasur temple,” Pramod Ranjan told the website. Explaining why he put together a booklet on Mahishasur<sup>30</sup>, he said, “The controversy [which led to police action against *Forward Press*], in fact, is linked to the re-rendering or ‘Bahujan rendering’ of the mythologized character Mahishasur, but maybe you are not very familiar with this concept. I have found that the material that has appeared in various newspapers and on social networking websites is incomplete and in many cases completely misleading and contrary to the facts – for example, that the re-rendering is anti-women and oriented toward the establishment of a new god. In fact, in its essence, it is against Manuvad, and establishes the dignity of women.”

Vidya Bhushan Rawat wrote in Jan Vikalp, “The police action against *Forward Press* following a complaint filed against the magazine for hurting Hindu sentiments is a cowardly act of the Delhi Police to terrorize the magazine.”<sup>31</sup>

*Forward Press* republished the famous poet and author Uday Prakash’s blog, where he made a concise comment that now can be read on various websites. He wrote: “I am not a Dalit, but can understand by studying the conflicts and clashes between active social factors against the background of ancient myths. I have read several important books, including *Myth and Reality* by D.D. Kosambi, and those books qualify your approach. The findings of Anthropological Survey of India also confirm your views. A few days ago, I was invited to the Europolia festival in Belgium. A huge pandal stood on a ground in Brussels and at the main gate, the same eighteen-armed Mahisasur Mardini Durga’s idol

was placed with a black man's severed head in her hand. There were weapons in her every hand, eyes were dilated menacingly, around her neck were severed heads of black people. Most shocking was the plaque under the statue that said: Mother Goddess of India. In my lecture at the prestigious University of Leuven, I registered my protest. But the problem is that only filling up sheets of paper will not yield results until in the same manner we make our practical, Constitutional disagreements visible."

Uday Prakash was unambiguous when he wrote that "with the dissemination of education, democratic perception in people will increase. The time has come to understand who was or is Sur and Asur. The granting of fundamental human rights to anybody cannot be postponed for such a long time. If we consider ourselves civilized, modern and democratic, then we have to stand up for Dalit identities."

Uday Prakash also wrote: "Indeed, not only Durga, Mahishasur (of the community of buffalo-herders), Vrtrasur (the dam-breaking former forest dwellers who relied on the agricultural economy), but, those described in the *Ramayana* – Hanuman, Jamvant, Atibl, Dadhibal, Sugriva, Bali, Angad, Guha, Nishad, Kaustubh, Mareech – all of them are mythical, identity-oriented icons of different communities. We can call them 'totems' of different human communities. (Sorcery and occultism must have been derived from them). Similarly, Shiva, Rudra, Bhairav, Ganesh, Vinayaka, etc are also icons of different communities. In the past, after a war, the conquered communities would build these concepts and disseminate them among the defeated. God-demon, Sur-Asur, etc are in fact inter-community perspectives or outlooks. You can easily spot Adivasi and Dalit icons among communities that stand with 'Ram'. Guha, Nishad, etc are the symbols of Dalit and OBC communities (in today's politics) and Hanuman, Angad, Sugriva, etc are the symbols of Adivasis. There have been innumerable inter-community conflicts in the past in this subcontinent and still they are unresolved. Buddha knew the truth of social plurality and that's why he fought against it, and for a long period, he succeeded. You know the narrative of break-ups and counter-attacks afterwards."

Thinker and poet Musafir Baitha said, "There is no freedom of expression for Bahujans, even in a democracy. A student organisation affiliated to a political party and the flag-bearer of brahmanical, saffron culture, created panic and terror on the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day with the help of the police. JNU's Bahujan students organized the Mahishasur Day events. The police went after the owner of the magazine, Ivan Kostka,

and the editor, Pramod Ranjan. They had to seek bail from the court before they could be seen in public. A modern, democratic and scientific thinking should make man aware of its rights and duties. We should only rely on human strength and labour. To bring about a normal healthy society, there is a need to throw off the brahmanical-feudal yoke of traditions.”

Under the headline “Authors in favour of cultural pluralism”<sup>32</sup>, Jan Vikalp presented the views expressed in solidarity with *Forward Press* by authors and thinkers such as Arundhati Roy, Shamsul Islam, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Giriraj Kishore, Anand Teltumbde, Kanwal Bharti, Manglesh Dabral, Anil Chamadia, Apoorvanand, Veer Bharat Talwar, Ram Puniyani and S. Anand: “In this country, different texts of classical myths exist as folk myths. In many parts of the country, Ravan is worshipped. Ravan’s worshippers also include Saraswat Brahmins. Baliraja is worshipped in Maharashtra extensively, which is not in keeping with Vaishnavism. If we are civilized, then we must stand on the side of the oppressed identities.”

Writers supported *Forward Press* on the issue with their “ifs and buts”. In the comment titled “Saidhantik samarthan mein kuchh jaroori sawal”<sup>33</sup> (Essential questions regarding an in-principle support), Abhishek Srivastava said, “There should be freedom of expression. The leftists and left-wing organizations put themselves in a paradoxical situation. They have issued a statement in support of freedom of expression and put their signatures to it, but have stayed away from the Mahishasur episode and the magazine’s political stand. Freedom of expression cannot exist in the air – it has to have a solid political base, which is required to decide the dimension of the sides being taken. If a right-wing government attacked a purely right-wing magazine we would still stand in support of freedom of expression, but there are two difficulties in the specific case of *Forward Press*. First, its politics isn’t clear. Second, making a mythical character a tool to fight a political battle against another mythical character. Even general scientific understanding doesn’t allow recognize myths. This should be seen apart from politics.”

### **Bahujan discourse has got an upper hand**

*Mahishasur*, the booklet edited by Pramod Ranjan, is available as a free download on various websites. Ashwini Kumar Pankaj’s essay “Durga Sapshati ka Asur Path” forms part of the booklet. He writes, “The elimination of cultural colonies must be a priority. Buddha was the pioneer of this campaign. He hit directly at the base of the brahmanical religion

and culture.” Pramod Ranjan clarified in his editorial that “this revisiting is to establish the concept of justice and human morality. The society suffering from gruesome inequality must dig deep into its unconscious for its liberation.” Dilip Mandal wrote in his essay titled “Dharmgrantho ke Punarpath ki Parampara” that “Phule exposed Purush Sukta of Rigveda, the base of caste system, by revisiting the myths, and marked them as unscientific and complete gossip. Nobody can be born out of the mouth. Was Phule hurting anybody’s feelings by doing such things? Maybe Phule’s writings did hurt people, but Phule didn’t postpone this historical task. “Young poet Sushma Asur, who belongs to the indigenous tribal Asur community, said, “I am surprised that even the well-educated people and the country as a whole, consider us Asurs demons with long teeth and claws, adept in magic and in guile and deceit. They look for a demon in me and are disappointed when they find none. It is with great difficulty that they admit that, like them, I too am a human being. This discrimination towards us, our persecution and exploitation should end.”

Reviewing *Mahishasur*, the booklet, Harnam Singh Verma said that it is a “noble work to expose the self-proclaimed abbots of Hindi literature. To strengthen Bahujans, it is most essential to establish their independent identity and strengthen it. Mahishasur and the Mahishasur movement present the myth of Durga and Mahishasur from the perspective of the indigenous Bahujans. It is very clear that this is a cultural war. If cultural movements do not emerge from educational institutions, they do at least flourish there. Now, Bahujan organizations are celebrating Mahishasur Martyrdom Day in various institutions of higher education and in different towns and cities of north India. Now, it has been established as the festival of indigenous Bahujans.<sup>34</sup>”

Media Morcha raised an important question<sup>35</sup> about *Forward Press* in the context of Durga-Mahishasur debate. The magazine asked, “Is *Forward Press* the only magazine to raise this issue?” It also had the answer: “No, this issue is not new. Mahatma Jotiba Phule had already raised discussed Baliraja, Prahlad and Mahishasur in his writings.” In a BBC report on 12 November 2014, Neeraj Sinha wrote, “Now a young leader Vimal Asur from the tribal Asur community is contesting the Jharkhand elections. He is being talked about as a potential leader of the Asur community. We are happy. They say they are fighting to preserve their existence. The primitive tribes could not keep up with the pace of development and this is the reason we are confined to the museum and

have become full of research possibilities.”

Recently, there was a discussion in Parliament on a government that appeared baffled after the institutional murder of Rohit Vemula and on the exploitation in Indian universities. Earlier, on March 9, the government had registered a case against a few progressive students of JNU for holding a programme. The Minister of Human Resource Development had to give a statement on the issue in Parliament. She talked about the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day. She said that the people who organized events on this day presented mother Durga as a prostitute. The minister provided lots of misleading information, but confronted with the tradition of Bahujan people, the ruling class soon realized it had made a mistake.

*Translated from the original Hindi by Shree Prakash*

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## The truth about a myth

SURESH PANDIT

Since time immemorial, discerning people have been raising their voices against hypocritical religious rites and rituals, and they have been getting public support too. Jyotirao Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar tore apart the various myths of Hindu religion to reveal the truth lying underneath. Premkumar Mani and Rajendra Yadav belong to the same tradition of cultural criticism. Yadav repeatedly used to say that *Ramayana* and Ganga have damaged Hindu religion the most. Despite being one of the most polluted rivers, the Ganga is considered supremely holy and capable of purifying the people from their sins and guaranteeing them salvation after death. In the same way the supremacy of the *Ramayana* has continued unbroken, although there have always been questions and doubts over the principles of religious authority and state power and the mentality of dignity created by the text.

One of the key thinkers of the Hindi-speaking world, Premkumar Mani, explores the truth of Mahishasuramardini Durga in an article he wrote a decade ago for *Hindustan*, published from Patna. It was then republished by the monthly *Jan Vikalp* and, in October 2011, by the *Forward Press* magazine. This article came to the attention of some intellectuals and students of JNU. Soon, posters carrying this article were pasted on the walls of the campus. This poster declared that Durga was the one who carried out the murder of Mahishasur. This was followed by a violent reaction of upper-caste students. But the movement that sprang up in favour of Mahishasur has not ended. A collection of nine articles written by various writers was published in the form of a booklet. Pramod Ranjan edited the booklet titled *Kiski Puja Kar Rahe Hain Bahujan?* (Who are the Bahujans really worshipping?).

The main objective of this booklet was to clarify what this movement that has been launched in the name of Mahishasur really is. Why

was this needed? What are its implications? And how should we view this movement? The editor of this booklet believes the significance of this movement to be that it seeks to strike at the vitality of the brahmanical religion. As the influence of the movement grows and becomes more widespread, other marginal sections of society oppressed by the Hindu religion will begin deconstructing religious texts and creating their own texts. The louder and aggressive the tones of these texts, the quicker the Bahujans will be free from the cultural slavery.

According to Premkumar Mani, the seeds of this revolution were sown in “Devasura Sangram”, which actually was a battle between the Dravidians and Aryans. Indra was the leader of the Aryans and was considered the centre of power. Aryans had a patriarchal society and this is why they used to salute fatherland instead of motherland. They developed harmonious relations with eastern states like Bengal and Assam for expansion of their society. The east had a matriarchal society and so Aryans also began treating Durga as an embodiment of power and their goddess. Even today, the majority of north Indians worship gods like Ram, Shiva, Krishna and Hanuman – all symbols of masculinity. But Durga and Kali have now become acceptable to them as goddesses. To make Durga a symbol of woman power, Mahishasur was imagined and then portrayed as the enemy of society, and his killer Durga became venerable to the followers of the religion.

But according to Mani, the actual meaning of this story is something else – Mahish means buffalo, Mahishasur means Asur of Mahish. Asur means the one who is not a Sur. Sur means god – those who do not work and are dependent on others. Asurs are those people who earn their living. Mahishasur means people who earn their living by rearing buffaloes – Gwalas, Ahirs. These buffalo-rearing Ahirs were predominant in Bangladesh. They belonged to the Dravidian race and hence were opponents of the Aryan culture. In order to defeat them, Aryans enquired into Durga. The sex workers in Bangladesh believed that Durga belonged to their clan. That is why even today some soil from their houses is brought to make the statue of Durga. It took nine days for Durga to murder the hero of the buffalo-rearing community. Navratra is celebrated in memory of this event. This is how Durga, who killed the leader of a buffalo-rearing community, was glorified as the goddess of power. It is a strange coincidence that Vijaydashmi, which commemorates the victory of Durga in the battle against Mahishasur, is

also celebrated to hail Ram's victory over Ravana.

Former chief minister of Jharkhand Shibu Soren proudly announces that he is a descendant of the eminent Mahishasur, hence he doesn't celebrate Vijaydashmi or Dussehra. Playwright Ashwini Kumar Pankaj says that Asurs are still found in a few regions of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh despite the killings that went on for centuries. They are not demons (Rakshas) whichever way you look at them. The Government of India has classified them as a primitive tribe. They are still on the margins of development. According to the census of 1981 their total population was 9,100; it became 7,793 in 2003; and in Chhattisgarh there are only 301 of them today. The corporate houses can't wait to mine bauxite from the land where Asurs roam. Renowned anthropologist and activist Verrier Elwin had also categorized the Agaria community of Chhattisgarh as Asur. Daharu Asur, who lives in the Majherdabari tea garden near Alipur Dwar station in Jalpaiguri district, says that Mahishasur was the most powerful person in both the worlds (earth and heaven). The gods believed that till the time Mahishasur was alive they wouldn't be valued. Therefore, under the leadership of Durga, they killed not only Mahishasur but his associates too and garlanded Durga with their heads. In paintings, Durga is depicted as being fierce and standing on the chest of Mahishasur.

Most of the Tribals consider Ravana too as their ancestor. Various Dravidian communities of the south worship Ravan even today. In areas where West Bengal shares its border with Jharkhand, Ravanotsav (a festival of Ravan) is celebrated on the occasion of Navratra or Dussehra. Even today, Shibu Soren regards Ravana as the teacher of his clan (kulguru).

Dilip Mandal, the former managing editor of *India Today's* Hindi edition, raises a question in this context: Why can't an alternative interpretation of religious text be done? According to Mandal, the truth is that by this method, new aspects of the characters and incidents mentioned in these texts come to light and encourage scientific thinking. In the ancient past, he says, the debates over the interpretation of ancient scriptures of Hinduism resulted in the origin of various, sects, communities and schools of thought. However, he rues, as society became enriched with knowledge and science the mindset of the people became narrower; they want to accept a text the same way it has been taught to them; they neither think innovatively themselves

nor are open to accepting new ideas given by others. In fact, Mandal notes, the process of re-reading a text keeps the method of democratic thinking alive and enriched. In this context, Dilip Mandal puts forward the examples of the eternal *Ghulamgiri* by Phule and *Riddles of Hinduism* by Ambedkar. According to Phule, the Hindu priests produced the religious texts to protect their interest and opposed new interpretations so that they can maintain their grip on society.

Mahishasur Martyrdom Day celebrations have sparked off a new debate in the country. Now, people have been asking questions undauntedly: If Durga was so powerful then why did not she kill people like Ghorī, Ghazini, Babur, Hitler and so on? The Mahishasur who has been portrayed as a brutal demon who intimidated and terrorized people was actually a common citizen of this country who condemned violence and worshipped nature. He was killed being declared a bad person while the justices of Supreme Court of India Markandey Katju and Gyan Sudha Mishra said in their January 2011 judgment that the people referred to as Rakshas and Asur are the original citizens of this country. Scholars also believe that Asurs are superior to Aryans because they do not consume alcohol. According to brahmanical texts, Mahishasur opposed yagya and his father Rambhasur was the king of Asurs and his mother's name was Shyamala Rajkumari. The Aryans who destroyed the Indus Valley Civilization 3,500 years ago finally defeated the indigenous people of this country in a war that had gone on for thousands of years by deceitful and fraudulent means, weakened them socially, culturally and economically and enslaved them, and having killed their leaders, declared them Asur and Rakshas. It is said that Mahishasur was such a mighty king that he had defeated Indra, the king of gods, in battle. It was to kill such a king that the gods had sent Durga.

Actually, historical texts do not reveal any such fact that cannot be reconsidered. Each generation creates its own history on the basis of its acquired knowledge and accumulated experiences. In this process often the previously heroes become villains and the villains, deserving of respect. The Asur and Rakshas who have been condemned as enemies of humanity come forward as the indigenous people of the country and get ready to write their own story to establish their identity.

*This review of the booklet Kiski Puja Kar Rahe Hain Bahujan? (2013) appeared in the September 2013 issue of Vartmaan Sahitya*

## Satiating your curiosities

### What do we know about Mahishasur and Durga?

The Indian subcontinent has not had a systematic tradition of history writing. Therefore, ascertaining the period when Mahishasur lived and the day of his martyrdom is difficult. We find a story about Durga in *Markandeya Purana*, which historians say was written between 250-500AD. On the basis of this information, it can be assumed that the events surrounding Mahishasur took place before this text was written – that is around 2000 to 2500 years ago. However, while *Markandeya Purana* is the only text that sheds light on the culture related to Mahishasur, it provides distorted information. There is more reliable information on Mahishasur available in our folk traditions and Bahujan legends, although they don't tell us the exact period in which Mahishasur lived. What we discover from them is that Mahishasur must have been a historical character rather than a mythical one. However, to understand this tradition, we need to explore those traditions different from brahmanical traditions. Noted historian D.D. Kosambi has referred to Mahishasur as the deity of shepherds who, according to the "Brahmin religion", was killed by "Mahishasur Mardini" (*Praachin Bharat ki Sanskriti aur Sabhyata*, Rajkamal Prakashan). On the other hand, Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya cites evidence in a chapter titled "Original Source of Durga Puja" of his book *Lokayat: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism*, published in 1959, to prove that "there is nothing in Durga Puja that could be clearly called religious or spiritual, this puja is only a kind of totemism related to agriculture". It becomes clear after studying different sources that Durga in the form of a goddess is only a mythical character and a figment of imagination of the Brahmins, while Mahishasur is a real character, who was a brave, egalitarian and popular mass leader.

### When should we celebrate Mahishasur Martyrdom Day?

Mahishasur Martyrdom Day should be celebrated on Sharad (Ashwin) Purnima of every year. You can also call it Mahishasur Memorial

Day. It is both a martyrdom day and a memorial day. According to Adivasi legends, Durga, who was sent by foreign invaders (who have been called gods in brahmanical scriptures and are today known as dwijs), reached the castle of Mahishasur on the 16th day of the month of Ashwin and the seventh day of the Shukla Paksha. Durga opened the gate of the castle so that the gods hiding nearby could carry out an assault on Mahishasur. The gods had been in a bad state, hiding in the bushes with their weapons and feeding on plants. There was fierce fighting for two days. Despite the gods having cheated him and launched a sudden attack, Mahishasur held his ground. Hence, on the ninth day of the battle, the gods sent Durga to the front line because they knew Mahishasur was a virtuous man who had taken the vow to protect women and animals. The gods thus killed a valiant social, cultural and political leader, and a genocide followed. It is this murder and genocide that is celebrated on Dussehra, on the tenth day of the month of Ashwin. This festival is the celebration of the killing of the hero and the ancestors of Bahujans.

According to legends popular among the Tribals and different non-brahmanical castes, on the fifth day after the killing of Mahishasur (five days after Dussehra), the day of Sharad Purnima, the followers of Mahishasur held a huge meeting where they resolved to get back their lost prosperity and keep their culture alive. It is in memory of this event that Mahishasur Martyrdom Day should be held on the day or the night of Sharad Purnima. The Asur-Shraman-Bahujan tradition places great importance on Sharad Purnima. In the myths about Krishna, this day is celebrated as “Kaumudi Festival” while in the life of Buddha this day is considered the beginning of a new journey.

In the Modern Age, the hero of Indian Bahujans and social revolutionary, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, has written that in the morning before the wedding, the Bahujan bridegroom should remember his creator and Mahishasur in a pre-decided place (*Mahatma Jotiba Phule Omnibus*, “Marriage rites for Satya Sodhak Samaj”, Radhakrishna Prakashan).

### **What should the organizers bear in mind?**

Certain methods that have evolved within the last few years have been accepted by everyone:

1. There must be a concerted attempt to ensure the participation of women.
2. The celebration is to go on for seven days. It should begin on the day

when Mahishasur was killed (the 24th day of the Ashwin month/Navami of Dussehra) and continue till Sharad Purnima. Keep the main celebration for Sharad Purnima. Where people don't have the time to organize an event on this scale, they can have a daylong celebration on Sharad Purnima.

3. The celebrations can also be held privately, among family and friends. A big portrait of Mahishasur should be garlanded and a seminar held. Readings of literature related to Birsa Munda, Jotiba Phule, Narayan Guru and Dr Ambedkar can also be part of the event.
4. If possible, organize a symbolic death procession of brahmanical texts like *Durgasaptasati* and *Markandeya Purana* or any other scripture that holds Bahujans in contempt. Ideally, this procession should begin at the venue and end at the powercentres (that is the legislative assembly for a state-level programme; the administration headquarters for a district-level programme; the subdivision headquarters; the panchayat office of a village; or a public community centre if none of the others are accessible)
5. The burning of the texts must be carried by a reputed lady of the area.
6. Games and painting competitions can be organized to honour Mahishasur.
7. Traditional songs of labour sung by Bahujans like Birha, Faruwahi, Kahruwa and Jatsar and sowing songs may be performed.
8. Dramas based on folktales related to Bahujan heroes can be staged. Creative young writers should be encouraged to write new plays based on these subjects from a Bahujan perspective and their plays staged.
9. These events should be filmed and broadcast using the latest mediums and technology and the videos should be preserved.
10. The most important objective of this programme is for the Bahujan community to resolve to stay united, reestablish their culture, and to get back their lost material prosperity. The speeches, seminars, etc, should be centred on these themes.

Courtesy of *Mahishasur* (2014), Revised

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## COVER PAINTING

Dr Lal Ratnakar's painting titled *Sharad Purnima Mein Shok Sabha* from the *Mahapratapi Mahishasur* series

**Dr Lal Ratnakar** (born 12 August 1957) was born into a well-to-do agriculturist family in Bishunpur, Jaunpur district, Uttar Pradesh. He has a PhD on 'Folk Arts of Eastern Uttar Pradesh' from Banaras Hindu University. Currently, he is an associate professor in the Department of Art, MMH College. His artworks usually feature rural life and stand out for their portrayal of women. His art exhibitions have graced prestigious galleries in India, Europe and the Arab world.