

The Graphic Goddess:  
Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī in the Modern Art World

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### Abstract

This paper examines six artists who have created Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī, images of the goddess Durgā slaying the buffalo-demon, including Maqbool Fida Husain, Bikash Bhattacharya, Tyeb Mehta, Vinod Dave, Roberto Custodio, and Arjuna. The paper focuses on the issues that arise when a divine character is depicted without its traditional ritual setting, becoming a site for individual interpretation and, simultaneously, group cultural identity. Modern concerns force the artist and the audience to reconsider their conception of the divine; in the images under discussion, this ‘theological’ evolution is visible. This article discusses how images of Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī have reformulated human understanding of the relationship with the divine, as the distance between the sacred and the mundane in the human-divine continuum is eroded through reconstruction as allegory.

### Introduction

Since the ‘Oriental Renaissance,’ (1680-1880) in which Europeans ‘rediscovered’ Indian art and thought, Indian depictions of deities have been central components of many Western museums’ Asian art collections. While this certainly played a crucial role in promoting knowledge and (partial) acceptance of Indian religious traditions for those living outside India, recategorisation of these pieces as ‘art’ also affected the perception of Indian artists engaged in the representation of deities. The ritual production of images (*mūrti*) that for centuries had been about proper reproduction, rather than personal innovation, was replaced by new schools of ‘art’ that used the images as allegory. This shift in the production process restricts the agency of the divine character, transferring it from subject to object, and making it devoid of ritual efficacy. However, these works remain involved in constructing the human relationship with the divine, which can be best described as a continuum of the sacred and the mundane.

This ‘high artistic’ individual conception of the divine must then be reconciled with the popular and ritual understanding of Indian practitioners for whom the deities are more than allegory, occupying real space and actively engaged in the cosmos. Some are more successful at reconciliation than others, but all representations, especially those which gain notoriety, enter into a theological dialogue with the tradition at large, which has also been affected by the museum mindset. With the rise of fundamentalism in India as a result of Independence and Partition, the collective heritage of ancient India began to be categorised according to religious traditions, resulting in the classification of Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī, formerly a religiously fluid deity, into a solely ‘Hindu image.’ Thus, these

images, which are important ritually and artistically, are also loaded with identity politics, sometimes giving rise to controversy.

Perhaps no example illustrates this better than images of the goddess Durgā slaying the buffalo-demon (Mahiṣāsūramardīnī). Therefore, in this article I will examine how artists have portrayed this goddess and the implications of their images for the construction of a modern human-divine continuum within the Indian artistic sphere. The artists discussed are those that have had most impact on the flourishing Indian art market since the mid twentieth century: Husain, Bhattacharya, Mehta, Arjuna, Custodio, and Dave, illuminating each artist's interpretation of the myth and focusing on the rationale behind either their controversy or acceptance within both the art world and India.

Maqbool Fida Husain (1916-2011) is arguably the most renowned of all contemporary Indian artists. Husain started from humble beginnings, born into the family of a low-level civil servant in Pandharpur, Maharashtra. After a stint in a *madrasa* (a school for Muslim children in India), where he began learning the geometric bases of Arabic calligraphy that would become a major aspect of his geometric interpretations, Husain moved to Indore, a princely state. There, under the rule of a religiously tolerant Raj that patronized Hindus and Muslims equally, Husain flourished in a harmonious religious culture. As an adolescent he had a natural gift for art and could produce beautiful pieces without formal training. Eventually, his abilities won him jobs producing artwork for Bollywood productions. At this time Bollywood produced many films based on Hindu mythological themes, giving Husain opportunity to become intimately aware of these images. Husain's earliest works were of Indian village life, but inspired by folk reenactments of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the two major epics of India, he began creating paintings that depicted Hindu deities. *Bhāratnāṭyam* (one form of classical Indian dance), which has also played an important role in Bollywood aesthetics, was significant in his development of movement within his paintings. The twisted torsos and subtle gestures (*mūdras*) of his deities are based on the dancers who retell the epics through their own rhythmic movements. Husain also incorporated Islam into the images by using the sharp geometric angles that he developed while studying calligraphy in the *madrasa*. He seems to have always remained conscious, however, of the strict Muslim prohibition against the creation of religious icons and has therefore never created any image in which a sacred character of Islam was portrayed.

Art historian Geeta Kapur has argued that since Husain's images of deities were inspired by folk reenactments "it is difficult to deny that Husain has just skimmed Hindu mythology for the purpose of extracting a quick image whereas it ought to have been so churned that the gods and demons might be thrown up in new shapes and relationships."<sup>1</sup> She goes on to explain that "A mythic character having lost its original significance, has to serve an allegoric purpose, and allegory presupposes that

the artist has some deliberate and specific intention, or a driving emotion which sees new meanings for mythology.”<sup>ii</sup> It seems, however, that Husain has deliberately re-mythologized the deities. Husain places the transcendent within the milieu of the folk. Casting off the shroud of stern monolithic mental formations of the divine to which he was accustomed, Husain creates a new whimsical mythology in which the deities reenact the narrative, like actors. It is not a depiction of the original event but a depiction of the deities’ own divine perception of the scene. The whimsical playfulness of Husain’s work is informed by popular folk performances, thereby thoroughly humanizing his portrayal of the deities, while simultaneously maintaining their existence on a non-human divine plane.

This re-mythologizing can be seen within Husain’s images of Durgā, an intriguing example of Husain’s use of Hindu mythological characters. Husain has produced several images of Durgā including an entire series by that name, which will be discussed to display his interpretation of divinity and the goddess.<sup>iii</sup> Husain typically portrays the goddess with her lion *vāhana*. This portrayal does not distinguish Durgā necessarily as the buffalo slayer; however the movement of the image with the goddess’s trident upheld suggests the imminent thrust of the weapon, and it is fair to presume that the popular Indian classical dance choreography to the *Mahiṣāsūramardinī Stotram* (‘The Hymn to the Buffalo Slayer’), in which the actor strikes a similar pose, inspired Husain’s work. In one such image, entitled *Durga*, Husain’s goddess is depicted as divine yet humanized. The goddess is shown nude astride the two-headed lion. She has three heads, all looking in the opposite direction to the lion. Two of these heads are female with the male in the middle, emphasizing the deity’s transcendence above and beyond human gender distinctions. The hair of each of the female heads is composed of arrows that extend to the left and upward toward the heavens. In the only hand that is visible to the viewer she clutches two arrows that form the lion’s tail, with a third ready for propulsion. The goddess’s grasp of the tail of the lion indicates her supremacy over living creatures. Three large breasts protrude from the chest of the goddess: the third breast could be based on the myth of Mīnākṣī in which the goddess, a manifestation of Pārvatī (whom Durgā is also a manifestation of) has a third breast that can be interpreted as a phallic symbol, resulting in the ridicule and masculinization of the goddess. In the myth, once she meets Śiva, her third breast falls off, and she is feminized, ready to be wed. Husain could have been inspired by this story and created the image; however, her breasts are soft and supple and have a feminizing effect on the otherwise harsh character. The third breast in this image suggests a hyper-femininity, revealing the nurturing aspect of the goddess above and beyond the normal capacity of women. Yet other aspects suggest the humanity of the goddess; for instance, Husain has added a navel, suggesting human birth.

Another image of Durgā created by Husain shows her mounted on her lion engaging the buffalo-demon in battle. In this painting, Husain again uses geometric shapes, this time to suggest movement. The deity straddling her vehicle, a lion-tiger hybrid, flows onto the canvas with the ease

of an unencumbered *bhāratnāṭyam* performer. Husain uses an array of bright and contrasting colors in this representation. The landscape burns with fiery red, contrasting the fair blue skin of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī's body. In her face and hair, innocence and purity are symbolized through the use of stark white against the black of her gloved right hand, by which she holds the lion, and her black skirt, on which she is seated. The black glove and skirt display her defilement upon contact with the phenomenal world, represented here by the lion. She has two spears – one of white and the other black - perpetuating a harmony of opposites within the image. Husain has chosen to give Mahiṣāsūramardīnī a gaze fixed on an abstract reference outside of the scene, distracting the viewer by taking their attention out of the composition.



M.F. Husain, *Durga*, acrylic on canvas, c1975.

An earlier of Husain's paintings of the goddess presents a very different image, presenting her alongside her vehicle, which is now a tiger, against a bright burning red background, similar to the previous image. Durgā, being removed from the tiger and no longer having control of it by grasping its tail, is rendered powerless. Husain demonstrates the vulnerability of the goddess by portraying her with no arms. Instead, it is the tiger that dominates the canvas. Durgā's breasts are also smaller, suggesting her power to supply for and protect her devotees has diminished. The deity, however, remains supernatural, as evidenced by her three heads. This image caused controversy during an exhibition titled *M.F. Husain: Early Masterpieces 1950s-70s* at Asia House Gallery in London, 2006. Under continued protest the gallery temporarily closed the exhibit. Eventually, the gallery re-opened, only to have to close its doors again after Hindu protesters vandalized this painting and another, titled *Draupadi*, by spraying them with black paint. This incident marked the third time Husain's work was vandalized by Hindu protesters. In 1996, members of the Bajrang Dal, the youth branch of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization, destroyed over fifty paintings and tapestries created by the artist. In January 2004 the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad burned a further painting at the Garden Art Gallery of

## Art and Textiles in Surat City.

Husain produced images of deities from the early 1950s until the 1980s, but it was not until the emergence of the Hindu 'right wing' as a force in national mainstream politics that his images received public scorn and extreme criticism from conservative Hindu organizations. The Hindu Jagruti Samiti has labelled the image a denigration of Hindu sentiments, stating that Husain depicts Durgā in the act of copulation with the lion.<sup>iv</sup> They contrast his images with images by Ravi Varma, the most renowned modern Indian artist whose realist neo-classical portrayals of Indian mythology depict the deities with natural qualities that led to the perception that the events were historical and contained no allegorical symbolism. This reveals an emerging problem of allegorical interpretation within traditions that seek to maintain religious images as relics of a cultural past. The rhetorical implications of realism, in which the deities are anthropomorphized, renders divine imaginary mundane. The images are also accused of being denigratory, as Durgā is presented in the nude. Numerous blogs and right wing websites host petitions and diatribes concerning Husain's blatant insensitivity to Hindu moral and religious sentiments, which hold female modesty paramount. Husain has argued in several interviews that he was inspired by ancient sculptures at the Hindu temple in Khajuraho. He explains that his images of the nude deity represent purity and innocence, not eroticism and lust, yet images at Khajuraho have an overtly erotic tone. His representations of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī are not out of place, however, within the corpus of her images. She has typically been pictured with her breasts exposed; it is relatively recently that the goddess began wearing a sari, finally taking her present canonical form through the mass dissemination of lithographs throughout the twentieth century. Much can be said about the apparent fear of the woman's body and the patriarchal control that such complaints harbor, but protest against Husain's images are not motivated by these issues of gender; rather, they are motivated by religion.

One common theme within these criticisms is that Husain is a Muslim. Meghnad Desai claims that umbrage was only taken because Hindu protesters thought that Husain had no right to artistic license concerning the image.<sup>v</sup> This is an unfortunate consequence of the colonial period, during which mythological narratives were historicized as events that had occurred in the ancient past of the human world, forcing the deities to descend down to the human realm, and thereby allowing a modern consolidation of a Hindu cultural identity through the reconstruction of myths as actual historical provenances, like those possessed by European states. The amorphous Hindu 'right' established itself as the proprietor of this Hindu history and culture, and now polices imagery in an attempt to form an identity that promotes the supremacy of their modern religious concerns.

Bikash Bhattacharjee (1940-2006) represents the other side of this religious divide. Bhattacharjee's paintings broke the mould of contemporary Indian art and continued to use

European realist techniques, focusing on the details of natural texture and tone. Orphaned in early childhood in Calcutta, he developed his skills through the generosity of a club for children named Sab Peyechhir Ashor. There he was taught precise techniques and a respect for art. After graduating from the Indian College of Art and Draftsmanship, he returned to the College as an instructor in 1968. Roused by the emotive power of Durgā Pūja, he began working on a series of the goddess. His portrayal of the deity took major artistic license by portraying the goddess as various common women of Calcutta, including a housewife, a beggar, and even a prostitute. Bhattacharjee focuses on the raw beauty of each of these women. There is a divine essence in their eyes, conjuring the emotive forces associated with Durgā. One might think that the portrayal of Durgā as a prostitute or street woman might offend the same religious sentiments as Husain's work, but there have been no protests against Bhattacharjee's images.<sup>vi</sup>

In a 2003 edition of *The Telegraph*, a Calcutta based newspaper, Bhattacharjee quashes any potential critics of his interpretations.<sup>vii</sup> He begins his article by saying "We Hindus believe that the Goddess Durgā vanquishes evil and delivers us from disasters." He thus establishes from the beginning that he is one of the group and part of an orthodoxy that believes in the divinity of the goddess. He goes on to explain that the commonly used image of Durgā on the lion is of Assyrian descent. He argues that the lion representation is not truly Indian or Hindu, and that the martial representation of the Goddess can instead be attributed to the Persians. He situates himself not only as a legitimate user of the image, but as the proponent of the Indian and Hindu representation of the goddess. He goes on to explain the power of the goddess as mother, the true motivation of his images: "During my lifetime, several mother figures have taken care of me. My own mother and others too. I am over 60, and even now they have kept me going. From this insight, as an artist I have visualised Durga in varied forms. They have a third or inner eye. [...] These mother figures have ruled and nurtured their households and families with ten arms that cannot be seen." In Bhattacharjee's work, the goddess has been fully removed from the mythic transcendent realm and now lives and moves amongst those men that idealise motherhood, and is rendered not as a divinity, but naturalistically.

Tyeb Mehta's (1925-2009) images of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī are the most internationally acclaimed. Though Mehta is regarded as one of India's least commercially motivated artists, his works have recently flourished in the international market. In 2001, *Celebration*, a forty foot triptych of rural Indian women, fetched over \$300,000 at public auction; *Mahisasura* later reached \$1.58 million. *Mahisasura* became the first painting by an Indian artist to sell for over one million dollars, setting records for prices achieved by Indian artists until March 2008, when this figure was surpassed by Husain's *Ganga-Yamuna*. Mehta painted in an abstract impressionist style, yet remains extremely traditional in interpretation, thereby avoiding some of the scandal that Husain has faced. Mehta

was born into a Shiite family in rural Gujarat, but while still a small child his family moved to Mumbai (formerly Bombay). He was raised in the Crawford Market district of the city and came into contact with popular lithographs of the goddess. He worked in the film industry for a short while before joining the Progressive Artists Group, of which Husain was a founding member. Many of Mehta's paintings are inspired by residual emotions from the 1947 Partition, as he witnessed inter-communal slaughters and riots. The image of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī became symbolic of these emotions, as Mehta explained: "I was looking for an image which would not narrate, but suggest something which was deep within me, the violence that I witnessed during Partition. Have you seen a bull running? This tremendous energy being slaughtered for nothing."<sup>viii</sup> The mythic Mahiṣa becomes expressive of violence in many of his paintings. Mehta, like Bhattacharjee, makes the myth a narrative of the modern, but does so in a very different way by emphasising conflict through the form of the mutilated buffalo. The mythic demon is reinterpreted as a tortured victim of violent crimes. In *Mahisasura*, the passion and energy that is symbolized by the buffalo bursts forth from the image in a blood red as it embraces the divine Mahiṣāsūramardīnī.

Beyond the Progressive Artists Group, a new generation of artists has been captivated by Mahiṣāsūramardīnī. These artists produce images that further blur the lines of divine and secular. Using innovative techniques such as mixed media and serigraphy the artists are formulating new interpretations of how the divine image might fit into the everyday life of the audience. In these new productions the divine is transplanted amongst the mundane in a way that removes all transcendence from the image. Vinod Dave is amongst these artists. He was formally educated in the arts and received an MFA from Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda,<sup>ix</sup> before moving to the U.S. to complete an MA at the University of South Carolina. Early in his career Dave was injured by one of his own paintings, rendering him blind in one eye. This disability inspired him to begin producing art that would reflect

his particular way of seeing. He also began producing images focused on Indian religious symbols and mythological characters, including Mahiṣāsūramardīnī.

The imagery of Durgā as the slayer of the buffalo also has personal significance. He uses his image of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, *Mother Victory*, on his biographical page to show his own personal triumph over obstacles that would

Vinod Dave, *Mother Victory*, mixed media, 2005.



have prevented his success. Dave uses his skills in mixed media to produce depictions of the goddess that intermingle various textures and styles: in *Mother Victory*, he used a classical manuscript of the *Devi Mahatmyam* as the centerpiece for an image set on a background of sombre earth tones. The manuscript is engulfed by smaller images of a pistol and a bomb. Dave's mixing of the old and new is reminiscent of Arpita Singh's *Durga* in which the goddess, dressed in a white sari, holds a pistol. Singh's influence is also felt in several other images by Dave, especially an untitled piece in which the deity holds a pistol identical to that of *Durga*. Dave's image, however, places the focus not on the deity but on the deity's historical context by including the manuscript. The origin of the deity is removed from 'time immemorial' to a definite moment of textual creation. But as with Singh's *Durga*, the focus of the image is the violence that ensues from such formations.

In *Mahisasur Mardini*, Dave again depicts a traditional form of the goddess in combat with the buffalo demon, but the use of various media expertly mixes the traditional with the new, and the magical with the real, as the image of the buffalo slowly transforms into a photograph of a raw piece of beef. From the goddess's uplifted head an arc sweeps down the image to the head of the buffalo, moving the viewer's eyes in the same motion as the swoop of her sword as she cuts off the head of her adversary. Similar arcs reverberate across the painting, while other hazy apparitions of the goddess fill voids in the image, displaying her as omnipresent. The work, like many traditional paintings, places the action in a mythological plane removed from the world of phenomenal existence; however, the use of such visceral imagery as raw meat ushers the deity into a very 'real' setting, while the use of photography gives realism to the battle: the viewer can see the texture of the flesh of the demon that has been torn apart by the goddess and her lion, while the buffalo's severed head glistens from the light of the camera's flash. Christopher Pinney has argued that by mixing photography and painting the mystical can become tangible.<sup>x</sup> In the works *Supreme Mistress* and *The Goddess' Feet*, Dave replaced the head of the painted deity with a photograph of a 'real' woman. Unlike the earlier works that placed the magical in the human realm, Dave's images innovatively place the profane within the sacred.

However, the use of photography in images of the goddess does not always suggest the upward mobility of humanity into the realm of the sacred. Brazilian mixed media artist Roberto Custodio, who though not necessarily Hindu believes himself to have been Indian in a previous life, blends the iconography of deities, including Hanuman, Lakṣmī, and Durgā, with 'real' elements. In his piece *Durga*, the figure of the goddess is composed of the body of a model wearing a flowing saffron gown and high-heeled shoes. Illustrations of a head and six arms have been inserted onto the body. Using this mode of production, the image does not have to be removed from the ritual of *darśan* (the reciprocal ritual viewing between deity and devotee in Hindu practice) but can still interact with the devotee. By preserving this reciprocal interaction, Custodio achieves a sort of 'magic realism'.



Roberto Custodio, *Durga*, photography and digital media, 2006.

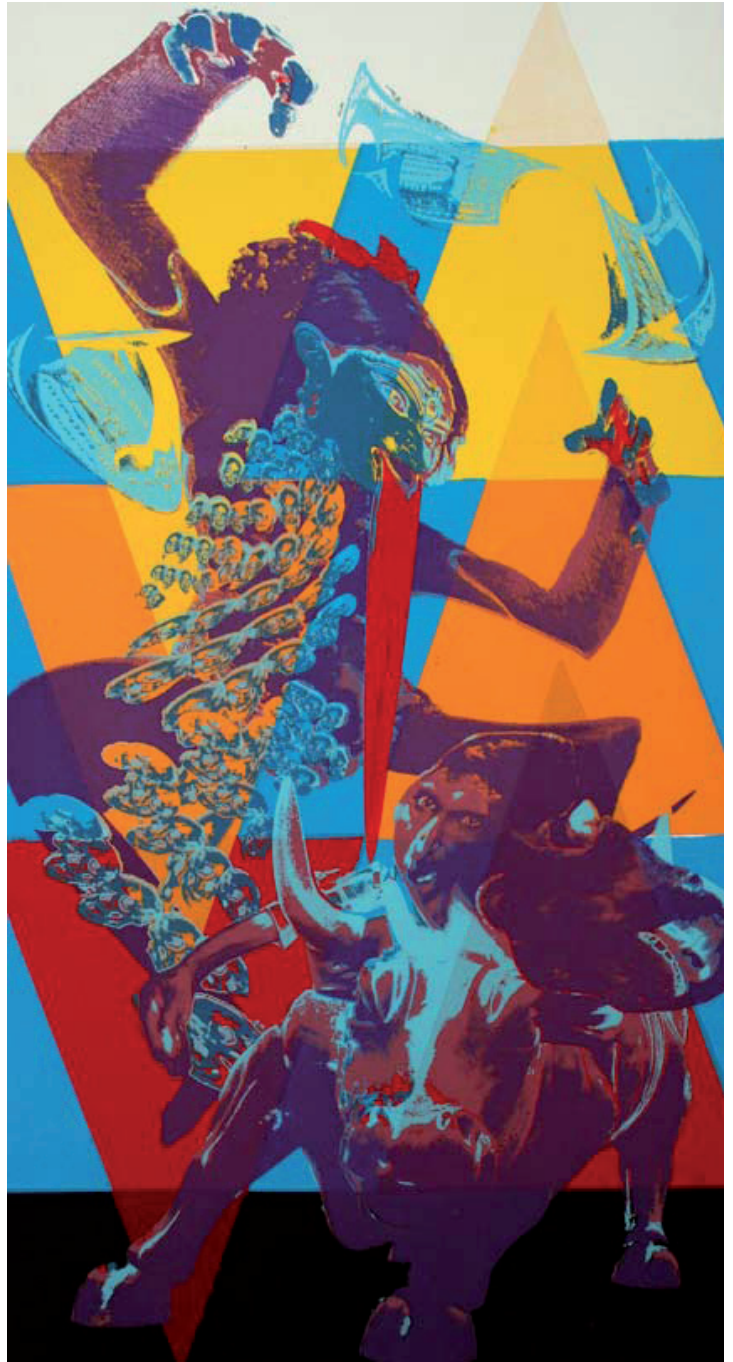
Though they use similar techniques, mixed media works by Dave and Custodio yield very different representations of the goddess. Within each of these images the use of photography contrasts painting or illustration to accentuate the reality of the image captured versus that of the image created. If the deity is to remain a divine character it must be depicted by imaginative creation, but if the deity is to be interpreted as human the captured reality of photography must be used to accentuate her tangibility. These images focus on the face as the seat of identity. Dave has elevated the human away from this world into the transcendent realm of the goddess while Custodio humanizes the sacred by inserting elements of 'real' people and animals into the image. The interweaving of reality and imagination makes mixed media an important innovation in the production of iconography, opening the realms of artistic interpretation of mythological narratives.

The artist known only as Arjuna has created a series of serigraphs titled *The Mega Laxmi*, mixing stencil work with bold geometric backgrounds, that also uses popular images of Bollywood actresses to depict the faces of deities. One image from Arjuna's oeuvre, *Maha Kali Slays the Wall Street Bull, Making Way for Mega Laxmi's Reincarnation in India* depicts Kālī as Mahiṣāsuramardīnī engaged in battle with the *Wall Street Bull* from New York's Bowling Green Park. The image of Kālī is an amalgamation of a distorted stencil of the face of Geeta Chandran, one of the foremost Bhāratnāṭyam dancers in the world, placed upon a grotesque form of Kālī performing her dance of destruction. The classically-trained dancer's mouth is agape and bright red blood flows from her unto the bull. A

photograph of a man has been superimposed between the head of the bull statute and that of another bull that is twisting and writhing in agony. The image is clearly depicting the rise of the Indian market, in contrast to the American market that has dominated the global market for many years.

### Conclusion

The image of Mahiṣāsuramardī has undergone a wide variety of changes since European colonization of the subcontinent. Alongside new technologies and techniques a new mode of interpretation of the sacred has developed, and the gap between the mundane and divine closes with each innovation. Modern images of Mahiṣāsuramardī are no longer strictly about the deity. As the image becomes 'art,' it is transferred into a new theoretical sphere and becomes a matter of individual interpretation and production, steeped with rhetoric of culture. Through contact with external Euro-centric art critics, the concept of religious imagery has altered. Critiques, like those against Husain's portrayals, are repeated against images that stray from a 'Hindu-ization' of Mahiṣāsuramardī. But this controversy only becomes possible after the incorporation of the image into the category of 'art.' With this distinction, the image ceases to be important as an individually crafted and ritually enlivened image, but important as a representation of an ancient religious tradition. Once this shift takes place it becomes the property of that tradition and part of a religious discourse, in tension with the use of deities by artists to explore personal psychological phenomena.



*Arjuna, Mahakali Slays the Wall Street Bull Making Way for the Mega Laxmi's Reincarnation in India, serigraphy, 2007.*

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### Notes

- i Kapur, Geeta. *Contemporary Indian Artists*. (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978) 129.
- ii Kapur, Geeta, *Contemporary Indian Artists*, 129-130.
- iii All of Husain's depictions of the goddess are either entitled *Durga* or untitled.
- iv Hindu Janajagruti Samiti website. "M. F. Hussain Campaign." <http://www.hindujagruti.org/activities/campaigns/national/mfhussain-campaign/> accessed 9 Feb 2008
- v Desai, Meghnad. "Closure threat to artistic freedom." *The Guardian* 26 May 2006.
- vi The two even had a great deal of respect for the others interpretations of the image with Husain even writing a foreword to pictorial biography of Bhattacharjee's life *Close to Events: Works by Bikash Bhattacharjee* that was released shortly before his death in 2006.
- vii Bhattacharjee, Bikash. "From Assyria, martial lady on a lion." *The Telegraph* 3 December 2003. [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1031003/asp/calcutta/story\\_2423668.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1031003/asp/calcutta/story_2423668.asp)
- viii Sengupta, Somini, "Indian Artist Enjoys His World Audience." *The New York Times* 24 January 2006.
- ix All biographical information comes from Vinod Dave's Website <http://evinod.4t.com>
- x Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, 98 ff.

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