

SAPTA MATRIKAS IN INDIAN ART AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN INDIAN SCULPTURE AND ETHOS: A CRITICAL STUDY

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This paper focuses on the study of ancient Indian sculptures of seven mother goddesses called *Sapta Matrikas*, and brings out their distinctive features as conceived by the master sculptures of different periods. It also explains their importance in Indian art and cultural ethos.

Introduction

The seven mother goddesses are: *Brahamani*, *Vaishnavi*, *Maheshwari*, *Kaumari*, *Varahi*, *Indrani* and *Chamunda*. Their description in ancient *Puranas*, such as *Varaha Purana*, *Matsya Purana*, *Markandeya Purana* etc refers to their antiquity. Each of the mother goddesses (except for *Chamunda*) had come to take her name from a particular God: *Brahamani* from *Brahma*, *Vaishnavi* from *Vishnu*, *Maheshwari* from *Shiva*, *Kaumari* from *Skanda*, *Varahi* from *Varaha* and *Indrani* from *Indra*¹. They are armed with the same weapons, wears the same ornaments and rides the same *vahanas* and also carries the same banners like their corresponding male Gods do. The earliest reference of *Sapta Matrika* is found in *Markandeya Purana* and V.S Agarwalla dates it to 400 A.D to 600 A.D

Mythology

There are different *Puranic* versions related to the origin of *Matrikas*. According to *Puranic* myths *Matrikas* are *Shakti* of *Shiva*, *Indra* and other gods and they are goddesses of the battlefield. But in the sculptural portrayals, they are depicted differently as benevolent, compassionate and aristocratic mothers. It is said that the *Sapta-Matrikas* are connected with *Shiva*. Their names reveal that they were born from the bodies of *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and other Gods. There is a story that when *Shiva* and *Vishnu* joined together and tried to kill the *asura* named *Andhaka* and failed, they then created the seven mothers to kill him. From each drop of blood that fell on the ground of *Andhakasura* there rose another *asura*. It is believed that the seven goddesses drank up that blood and did not allow it to fall on the ground, which made it easier for lord *Shiva* to kill the *Asura*.²

Another version about the birth of *Sapta Matrikas* is found in the story in *Vamana Purana* (Chap 56). A war took place between the *Devas* and the *Asuras*. When the *Asuras*, *Chanda* and *Munda*, were killed, another *asura* named *Raktabija* entered the battlefield with chariots, elephants, horses and infantry. Seeing the large troop, *Kauisiki* and *Kali* made a loud sound and from their mouth *Maheshwari* and *Brahamani* came out seated on a swan and wearing rosary and holding water pot in their hands. From the lion of *Maheshwari* came out *Kaumari*, seated on a peacock and holding a lance. *Vaishnavi* came out from *Kaumari*'s hand, seated on *Garuda* and holding a conch, discus, club, sword, bow and arrow. From her posterior came out *Varahi*, seated on the *Seshnaga* (serpent), and from her heart came out *Narasimhini* with fierce claws, and from her foot *Chamunda* came out. From the eye of *Brahmini* came out *Maheshwari*

with three eyes, seated on bull and wearing snakes as bangles and earrings, holding a trident.

According to the *Matsya Purana*, when *Shiva* shot *Pasupata* on *Andhakasura*, the blood gushed from the body of that demon, and thousands of *Andhakasuras* sprang forth from that blood, and the wound of those demons also similarly multiplied itself into hundreds of demons. Then *Shiva* created the Divine Mothers to drink their blood. They were fearful looking and they all drank the blood of these demons and were exceedingly gratified. But when they were no longer capable of drinking their blood, the demons again began to multiply by leaps and bounds; therefore *Shiva* went to seek the help of *Vishnu*. Then *Vishnu* created *Sushka Revati* who, in a moment, drank the blood of all and they were completely annihilated³. It was assumed that the people locally worshipped these goddesses, such an example is also described in Zimmer Heinrich book *The Art Of Indian Asia*, about the seven shrines of seven Mother Goddesses worshipped locally. Later on all these goddesses were incorporated in the mainstream.⁴

Symbology

From among the Vedic sources what appears to be more important to the *Sapta Matrikas* is the symbology of *heptads*. This numerical pre-figuration is often found in *Rigveda* as a sacred number. The numerical fixations of the *Puranic* materials as group of seven goddesses is linked to the Vedic sacred number seven. The Vedic Aryans considered that the universe consisted of seven regions having seven *Adityas*. Also the chariot of *Surya*, or Sun God in Hindu mythology, is driven by seven horses.⁵ The colour of the spectrum was reinforced on the idea that seven was the basic unit of measuring life. Therefore, the connection of the *Sapta Matrikas* with the Vedic sources would be fundamental. In the book *Iconography of Saptamatrikas* by Kathrine Anneharpen, she says that Babylonians, Greeks, Hibrus and Indonesians recognize number seven as sacred too.

In the *Varaha-purana*, however states that these mother goddesses are eight in number and includes among them the goddess *Yogeswari*, the *Purana* further says that these matrikas represent eight mental qualities, which are morally bad,

- ❖ *Yogeswari* represents *Kama* or desire;
- ❖ *Maheswari*, *Krodha* or anger
- ❖ *Vaishnavi lobha* or covetousness
- ❖ *Brahmani*, *mada* or pride,
- ❖ *Kaumari moha* or illusion
- ❖ *Indrani*, *matsanya* or faultfinding
- ❖ *Chamunda pasunya* or tale bearing and

Description of Matrikas and their application in art

Brahmani has four faces, body bright as gold, at the back right head she carries the *Sula* and back left hand *Akshamala*, front right hand is in the *Abhaya Mudra*, the front left hand in the *Varada* pose. She is seated upon a red lotus and has the *Hansa* as her *vahana* and also emblem of her banner, adorned with a *Karana Mukuta* and sits under a *palas* tree. In *Vishnudharmothara* she is described as having six hands, the left hands are described showing the *abhaya mudra*, holding *Pustaka* and *Kamundalu*. But the right hands are shown with the *Varadha Mudra*, holding the *Sula* and *Sruva*.

Tatra brāhmī caturvaktrā sadbhujā hansa-sansthīta

Pingla bhuṣaṇopetā mṛgacarmottarīyakā,
 Varam sutram sruvam dhatte dakṣabāhutraye kramāt
 Vāme tu pustakam kundīm bibhrati cābhayapradā

(Vishnudharmothara ||)⁶

At Virattanesvara temple Tiruttani, *Brahmani* is depicted having four arms carrying an *Akshamala* and *Sula* and the other two hands are in *Abhaya* and *Varada Mudra*. *Hansa* is depicted as her *Vahana*.

Vaishnavi carries in one of her right hands the *Chakra* and in the left hand the *Sankha*, her two other hands are held in the *Abhaya* and the *Varada Mudra*. She wears a yellow garment and a *Kirita Mukuta*. She is adorned with all the ornaments generally worn by *Vishnu*, and the element of her banner and *Vahana* is *Garuda*. Her place is under a *Raja vrikasha*.

The *Vishnudharmottapurana* states she has six hands characterized by the *Gada*, *Padma* and *Abhaya Mudra*, while left ones she holds holding the *Sankha*, *Chakra* and *Varada Mudra*. In *Devi-Purana* she is represented as possessing four hands in which she carries *Sankha*, *Chakra*, *Gada* and *Padma*.

Vaiṣṇavi tārkṣyā sāmā sadbhujā vanamalinī
 Vardā gadinī dakṣe bibhratī cāmbujasrajam |
 Śankchacakrā bhayān vāme sa ceyam vilasdbhajā

(Vishnudharmothara ||)

Susiddhā vaiṣṇvī kārya śankhacakraḡāmbujā
 Vanamālākr̥tapīda pitavastrā suśobhitā

(Devi-Purana ||)⁷

At Virattanesvara temple Tiruttani, *Vaishnavi* is shown carrying *Chakra* and *Shankha* and the other two hands are in the *Varadha* and *Abhaya Mudra*. She is shown seated on *Garuda*.

Indrani has three eyes and four arms. In two of her hands she carries the *Vajra* and the *Sakti*, the two other hands being respectively held are the *Varada* and *Abhaya Mudra*. Complexion of this goddess is red, and she wears a *Kirita Mukuta*, clad with ornaments. Her *vahana* and emblem of the banner is an elephant and her abode is under the *Kalpaka* tree.

According to the *Vishnudharmottara*, she should have a thousand eyes, and should have golden complexion with six arms, holding the respective attributes *Sutra*, *Vajra*, *Kalasa* and *Patra* associated with her. The *Devi Purana* says *Indrani* carries the *Ankusa* and *Vajra* only.

Aindrī sahasradṛkṣaumyā hemā bhā gajasmsthita,
 Varadā sutrinī bibhratyurdhvam tu dakṣiṇe

Vā me tu kalaś am patram tvabhayam tadadhakare

(Vishnudharmothara ||)⁸

At Virattanesvara temple Tiruttani, *Indrani* is depicted in sitting posture carrying in her hands the *Vajra* and *Akshamala* and with the other two hands she is showing the *Abhaya* and *Varada Mudra*. she is shown seated on an elephant which has a very long tusk.

Chamunda is shown having four arms and three eyes. Her complexion is red in colour. In one hand she holds a *kapala*, and in another she holds a *Sula*. With the other two hands she shows the *Varada*, and the *Abhaya Mudra*. She is shown wearing garland of skulls in the manner of the *Yajnapavita* and is seated in the posture of *Padmasana*. Her abode is under a wide fig tree. Her seat, according to *Vishnudharmotara*, is the dead body of human being and has a fearful face with powerful tusks having a skeletal body. Her *Vahana* is an owl and emblem of her banner is an eagle. She wears in her ears *Kundalas* made of conch shell (*Sankha Patra*).

Cā mundā pretgā rakta vikr tasyā hi bhū ś aṅ

Danś trogrā ks ī ṅ adehā ca gartakṣ ī bhī marutiṅ

Digbā huh kṣ amakukṣ hiś ca musalam kavacam ś aram

Ankuś am bibhratī khangam dakṣ iṅ e tvatha vā matahi

Khetam pā ś am dhanurdandam kuthā ram ceti bibhratī

(Vishnudharmothara ||)⁹

Goddess *Chamunda* is depicted in various manners in sculptures. At Virattanesvara temple, Tiruttani she is seated in *Padmasana* carrying in her hand a *Patra*, *Damru*, *Trishul* and one hand in *Abhaya Mudra* she wears a *Munda mala* as *Yajnopavita* Her *Vahana* as described in *Puranas*, is a skeletal corpse. At Ambika Mata temple Jagat, she is in a standing posture carrying sword, *Kapala*, and one hand shows the *Abhaya Mudra* and wears a long *Mundamala*.

Another example of Goddess *Chamunda* is from the Musee Gurimet, Paris showing four arms and sitting on a *Padmasana*. She wears armlets of snakes, two of her hands are broken, but in the other two she is holding a *Sula* and other a *Patra*.

Maheswari has four arms of which one in *Varada Mudra*, one in the *Abhaya Mudra*, and with the remaining two hands she holds the *Sula* and *Akshamala*. Her *Vahana* is a bull. In *Vishnudhermottara* there is a description of *Maheswari* having five faces with three eyes who wears in her crown the crescent moon. In four of her hands she carries the *Sutra*, *Damaru*, *Sula*, *Ghanta* in the two remaining hands the *Varada* and the *Abhaya Mudra* is shown.

Mā heś variṅ vr ś arudhā pamcavaktrā trilocanā ,

Ś uklendubhr jjatā jutā ś uklā sarvasukha pradā

Sadbhujā varadā dakṣ e sū tram damarukam tatha,

Ś ū laghantā bhyam vā me saiva dhatte mahā bhujā

(Vishnudharmothara ||)¹⁰

At Government Museum Madras, *Maheswari* is depicted in a sitting posture on a lotus pedestal. She is shown with four hands holding the *Akshamala*, *Sula*, *Patra* and one hand is in the *Abhata Mudra*.

Kaumari is shown with four hands, and she carries *Sakti* and *Kukkuta*. Her *Vahana* is a peacock, and she has abode under a fig tree. According to *Vishnudhermottara*, she is described as having six faces and twelve arms. In her hands she holds the *Sakti*, *Dhvaja*, *Danda*, *Dhanus*, *Bana*, *Ghanta*, *Padma*, *Patra*, and *Parasu* in her other hand. In *Purvakaranagama* it is written that goddess should be so sculptured as to suggest the idea of valour and courage.

Kumārī raktavarṇā syat śadvaktrā sārkalocana

Ravi bāhur mayurasthā varadā śaktidharinī

Patākām bibhratī dandam pātram bāṇam dakṣiṇe,

Vame cāpamatho ghantām kamalam kukkutam tvadhah

(Vishnudharmothara ||)

Kumārāsadrśā kanyā varṇavāhanaketubhi

Vasikā baddhamakutā s'aktikan kus'dharinī

Raktavastrā mahavīryā harkeyūrbhūsanī

Varadabhayahastā cakaumārī kun kumprabhā

(Purvakarnaagame Dwadashpatle)

At Golingesvara temple *Kaumari* is shown seated on a peacock, wearing a very long *Yajnopavita*, carrying a *Mala* and a *Sakti*. Another sculpture in Samalaji, Gujrat of *Kaumari* is shown with a peacock by her side but because her hands are broken we cannot tell the attributes that she carries.

Varahi is shown having face of a boar and complexion of the storm cloud. She wears the *Karanda Makuta*, as her crown and holds the *Hala* and the *Sakti*, seated under *kalpaka* tree. Her *Vahana* is an elephant. *Vishnudharmottara Purana* describes *Vahari* as having six hands, in four of which she carries the *Danda*, *Khetaka*, *Khadga* and *Pasa*, the two remaining hands being held in *Abhaya* and *Varada Mudra*. The *Purva-Karanayama* says that she carries *Sarnga-Dhanusa*, the *Hala* and *musula* as her weapon.

Krṣṇavarṇā tu vārāhī sukarāsyā mahodarī,

Varadā dandinī khangam bibhratī dakṣiṇe sadā

Khetapaśā bhayān vame saiva cāpi lasadbhuja

(Vishnudharmothara)

Kṛṣṇā pītā mbarā s'arṅgī s'arṅgī sarvasam-
 Patkarī nṛnām pavitrā nkṛtoraskā
 Pādānūpursam yuktā
 Savye abhayahalam chiva musalam vara(da) manyake
 Varāh vaktrī vārāhī yambūsh bhūsanī

(Purvkaarnage Dwadashpatle)

At Abanesi, *Varahi* is sculpted with lord *Shiva* in a dancing posture and it dates back to the Gurjara- Pratihara period. She is shown with the face of a boar and with two of her hand she holds the *Sakti* and the *Hala*.

By looking at the sculptures we can assume that the sculptors did not follow the descriptions as written in the different *Puranas* because, in the *Puranas*, it was written that the *Matrikas* had six hands and sometimes also more than six, but in the sculptures we find generally four or two hands.

Sapta Matrika Sculptures

The earliest sculpted forms of Mother Goddesses date back to third century B.C. The development in later period exhibits increasingly profound interest in sculptures of Mother Goddesses in the form of *Sapta Matrikas*. The sequence of development can be traced from Gupta period (3rd to 6th century A.D.), Gurjara Pratiharas (8th to 10th century A. D.), Chandellas (9th to 12th century A.D.), Chalukyas (11th to 13th century A.D.), Pallavas and Cholas(7th to 9th century A.D.).

The Gandhara period (1st century B.C. to 5th century A.D.) was the period when sculptors took delight in carving the human figures. Sculptures of mother goddesses exhibit aesthetic maturity and divine charm. A sculpture of this period is found to represent *Matrikas* with *Ganesha*.

The Gupta age is recognized as the golden period of Hindu sculptures. During this period, *Matrikas* were excellently carved with stunning elegance. An example of *Matrika Kaumari*, depicted in Fig. 1, is known to originate in Samalaji, Gujarat. A very distinctive curly hair dress is a notable feature of this rhythmic sculpture, which is further accentuated by the flowing apparel following the form of the body. The serenity on facial expressions brings out the powerful imagination of the master sculptors. During the Gupta Period, the stylistic change that could be seen are the faces more ovalish and matured. The modeling of the body was more slender the draperies were more transparent. The upper eyelid was heavy and the result is large lotus shaped eyes. The face is transformed much more sensuous by depicting of lips with fuller sensuousness.

The evidence of *Matrika* sculptures is further pronounced in the Gurjara – Patiharas and Chandella period (8th to 12th century). The Chandellas were at their zenith in 950 AD, and some of the finest sculptures of *Matrikas*, found in Mahadeva, Devi Jagadamba, Chitragupta Vamana Temples etc., belong to this period. Some examples are included in Fig.2. While the faith of people grew further in the *Matrikas* during this period, the quality of sculpting them actually saw a decline. The depth and thoughtfulness on the facial expressions was missing. The emphasis appeared more focussed on completeness in terms of attributes than on artistic sensibility.

During 11th to 13th century, the Chalukyas ruled over Gujarat and western Rajasthan. All *Matrikas* continued to figure among the deity sculptures of this period. An example is given in Fig. 3(a) of *Kaumari*. The matted hair dress, piled above the head and elaborate ornamentation the single broad necklace, *yajnopavita* (sacred thread), *Sarpa Kundalas* (ear discs) are some distinctive features of this period.

The *Matrikas* have come to be associated with Shiva. This is evidenced, for example, by the *Sapta Matrika* flanked by *Shiva* and *Ganesha* (Fig. 3(b)) at the Rameshwara cave, Ellora, a cave dedicated to *Shiva*. This example is one, which affirms the number of *Matrikas* as seven. Each *Matrika* is shown with her own *vahana* at the bottom of the panel.

The period of Pallavas, Cholas and Pandyas (7th to 13th century) influenced the *Sapta Matrika* sculptures with the south Indian elegance. The form is slender and elongated with sharp facial impressions. The emphasis on apparel is minimum. Some representative examples are given in Fig. 4. The tall *mukuta* adds to the height (Fig. 4(a)). The broad armlets are typical of Chola period.

The Indian treasure of sculptures related to mother goddesses is rich with *Sapta Matrikas*. The *Matrikas* are idolized as caring and protective mothers by the sculptures as against their frightening and ferocious depiction in the scriptures. In some places the goddesses are each provided with a child each, which is placed either on the lap or is made to stand by the side.¹³ The sculptures radiate reverence, not horror, though the associated symbolism and attributes of each *Matrika* are retained. This singular characteristic has been the mainstay of *Sapta Matrika* sculptures. This moderation of the ferocity of the *Sapta Matrikas*, when transferred from scripture to a sculpture is guided by the fact that art must look beautiful and hence something terrible is to be transformed into a likable figure. Secondly master sculptures were also guided by their patrons- the kings and their likes. Lastly, every artist is inspired by his individual perception too, and to that extent, he is free to modify his original sources. The only exception is the two *Matrikas*, *Chamunda* who is always present as ferocious even in art, and *Varahi* with a boar's face.

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