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

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

Meghali Goswami, Dr.Ila Gupta, Dr.P.Jha
Indian Institute of Technology
Roorkee, INDIA

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 form Brahma, Vaishnavi from Vishnu, Maheswari from Shiva, Kaumari from Skanda, Varahi from Varaha and Indrani from Indra. 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.

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 Brahmani 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 Maheswari.
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 annihilated. 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.

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. 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 mother and includes among them the goddess Yogeswari, the Purana further says that these matrikas represent eight mental qualities, which are morally bad,

- Yogesvari 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 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
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 vriksha.

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.

At Virattanesvara temple Tiruttani, Vaishnavi is shown carring 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.

Vāme tu kalaśam patram tvabhayam tadadhahkare

(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 Śūla. 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 Vishnudharmothara, 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).

Cāmundā pretgā rakta vikṛtasyā hi bhūsan
Dans trogrā kṣ īn adehā ca gartakṣī bhimarutiniś
Dīgbāhuh kṣ amakukṣ hiṣ ca musalam kavacam śaram
Ankusām bibhratī khangam dakṣīṇe tvatha vāmatahi
Khetam pāśam dhanurdandam kuthāram 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 Vishnudharmottara 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.

Māhesvari vr ś arudhā pamcavaktrā trilocanā,
Śuklendubhrjjatājutā śuklā sarvasukha pradā
Śadbhujā varadā daksīṇe śūtram damarukam tatha,
Śūlaghantābhyam vāme saiva dhatte mahābhujā
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 Vishnudharmottara, 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.

(Vishnudharmothara ||)

\[
\text{Kumārī raktavarṇā syat s advaktrā sārkalocana} \\
\text{Ravi bāhur mayurasthā varadā saktidharī} \\
\text{Pātākā m bibhratī dandam pātram bā nam daksīne,} \\
\text{Vame cā pamatho ghantām kamalam kukkutam tvadhah} \\
\text{(Vishnudharmothara ||)}
\]

(Kumārasadṛ s ‘ā kanyā varṇavāhanaketubhi)

(Vasikā baddhamakutā s ‘aktikan kus ‘dharinī)

(Raktavastrā mahāvīryā harkeyārbhūsanī)

(Varadabhayahastā cakaumārī kuṅkumprabhā)

(Purvakaṁnaagame Dwadashpatle)

At Golingesvara temple Kaumari is shown seated on a peacock, wearing a very long Yajnopavita, carring 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.

\[
\text{Krṣṇavarṇā tu vārāhī sukṛṣṇasyā mahodarī,} \\
\text{Varadā dandinī khangam bibhratī daksīne sadā} \\
\text{Khetapaśā bhayan vame saiva cāpi lasadbhuja} \\
\text{(Vishnudharmothara)}
\]
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 then 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 (6th 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, Chitrangupta 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 then 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. 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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