

ŚĀKTA CULT IN MATHURA ART

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The Mother Goddess cult is said to be the earliest and the most popular religious cult, the presence of which is universal in all the ancient civilizations of the world. There are various mantras dedicated to the various female deities as well as *Māṭṛī-śakti* in Vedic literature. The *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣada* very clearly refers to the Goddess Durgā by describing her fiery in luster and radiant with ardency, who is the power belonging to the Supreme that manifests in manifold forms, who is the power residing in actions and their fruits rendering them efficacious.¹ A number of hymns are devoted to the Goddesses like Sarasvatī, Gāyatrī, Lakṣmī etc. in the ancient literature including Vedic literature. In one of the most significant dedications to the Goddess, Ādi-Śāṅkarācārya in his *Saundarya Laharī*² narrates, 'United with Śakti, Śiva is endowed with the power to create the universe. Otherwise, he is incapable even of movement. Therefore, who except those endowed with great merits acquired in the past can be fortunate enough to salute or praise Thee, Mother Divine, who art the adored of even Hari, Hara and Viriñchī?'

Mathura region was one of the major centres of Mother Goddess cult during the

early historical period as is evident from the presence of a large number of terracotta Mother Goddess figurines during the pre-Mauryan, Mauryan and Sunga periods. During the Śaka-Kushan period, the cult of female deity however, was predominant not only in terracotta but it incorporated various other sub-cults like that of Mother Goddess, *Māṭṛkās*, *Sapta-Māṭṛkās*, Lakṣmī, Hārītī, Vasudhārā, Sarasvatī, Durgā, Mahisāsūramardīnī, Ekānāmīśā, Śaṣṭhī, Pārvatī, Nāginī, Yakṣī besides the consorts of other Brāhmaṇical deities.

The most common representation of the female power in the art of Mathura is that of the Divine Mother (*Māṭṛkā*). Divine Mothers are found as independent deities as well as in groups, generally consisting of seven (*Sapta-māṭṛkās*) female deities. N.P. Joshi has grouped the forms of mother-goddesses in the following thirteen categories³ :

- i. Seated *Māṭṛkā* with human face holding a cradled child.
- ii. *Māṭṛkās* with faces of birds, animals or humans, all seated in a line with cradled babies.
- iii. *Māṭṛkās* seated with cradled babies as in Type i, but further associated with *Yakṣa* figures.
- iv. *Māṭṛkās*, one or more, seated and carrying grown up infants.

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- v. *Mātṛkās* with a lizard (*godhā*) in hand.
- vi. *Mātṛkās* sitting without children.
- vii. *Mātṛkās*, one or more, seated by the side of Kubera, the god of wealth.
- viii. *Mātṛkās*, one or more, in association with Skanda or *Kārttikeya*.
- ix. *Mātṛkās* without children standing in line.
- x. *Mātṛkās* with wings in association with Lakṣmī.
- xi. Female divinity, probably *Mātṛkā*, standing alone.
- xii. Unidentified *Mātṛkā*, perhaps of malicious nature, *Śaṣṭhī* or *Jāṭāhārīṇī*.
- xiii. *Śaṣṭhī*, the chief *Mātṛkā*, associated with children.

The important features of these images are :

- i. All the *Mātṛkās*, are clad in *Sāris* with hair-do and ornaments of Kushan style.
- ii. None of them is multi-armed or multi-headed except one.
- iii. The six-headed *Śaṣṭhī* as a goddess forms a separate group.
- iv. None of them holds any weapon.
- v. The child is sometimes just a baby lying flat in a basket or a cradle, while in the other types it is often substituted by a grown up infant in the *Mātṛkās* lap.
- vi. Some of the *Mātṛkās* have a sort of canopy over their heads. This canopy, though not a specific mark of the *Mātṛkās* alone, is undoubtedly a special Kushan feature not to be seen in the succeeding periods. Interestingly, some scholars have mistaken this canopy as a snake canopy.
- vii. In a number of cases the figures are either in fragments or totally worn-

out; this makes it difficult to analyze the iconographic features as well as the number of the *Mātṛkās*.

The most popular and the most powerful of the female deities is Durgā. From the Kushan period onwards this deity has maintained higher status among the Indian deities. The important images of Durgā from Mathura are : Nos. 214/A, 592, 724, 879, 2020 and 1283; Berlin Museum No. MIK I 5894. The image from Itokri Tila, Manth (M.M. No. 214/A) represents the lower half of a deity standing against a couchant lion. The identification of the deity as Durgā adds a new dimension to the religious nature of the Kushan *devakula* at Manth. The general features of a standing (*samapāda sthānaka*) Durgā image are : A lion (*vāhana* of the deity) is depicted near her feet; the natural right hand of the deity is held in *abhaya mudrā* while the left is shown in *kativinyastha mudrā*; in her extra two hands she holds a spear and a trident.

One of the popular goddesses of ancient India is Śrī Lakṣmī whose earliest representation in art is found on a ring-stone from Lauriya Nandangarh, datable to the Mauryan period. The site of Bharhut has also provided her image of circa 2nd century BC. In the art of Mathura during the Kushan period, a number of images of this deity were noticed. These images from Mathura region are : M.M. Nos. 728, 798, 871, 878, 897, 1008, 1014, 2306, 2660, F 26, 75.20, 14.410 and 61.5371; Lucknow Museum No. O 241 and Los Angeles Collection no. 11. The general features of Lakṣmī images are : the deity, either shown standing or seated with her right hand in *abhaya* and left akimbo, holds a lotus parasol; a pair of elephants is shown emptying

the water-jars held in their trunk. This depiction is of *abhiseka* (consecration ceremony) of Lakṣmī. In some of the sculptural reliefs, she is shown seated along side Kubera and also some other deities. Sometimes a child is also shown in her lap, emphasizing her *māṭṛkā* aspect. Some of her Gupta period images are : M.M. No. D 9, D 10, D 17, 902, 985 and 2498.⁴

Another Goddess of prosperity, quite identical to Śrī Lakṣmī, was also very popular at Mathura during the Kushan period. This Goddess is identified as Vasudhārā. There are the following images in the Mathura Museum : Nos. 127, 748, 604, 1411, 1583, 1695 and 2523.⁵ The iconography of this Goddess is quite similar to Śrī Lakṣmī and at times it is difficult to differentiate between the two. The striking features of Vasudhārā images are the presence of two jars on both the sides of the deity and one or more pairs of fish (*mīnā-mithuna*) in the image. The Goddess in standing attitude has her right hand in *abhaya mudrā* while her left hand generally holds a lotus parasol from which a pair of fish hangs.

Recent Discovery of Mother Goddess :

1. Headless female deity from village Beri (Plate 1, Fig.1)

This sculpture was observed to be in worship at an open air shrine in village Beri of district Mathura. The size of the image is more than life size. It shows a female seated on a throne in *pralamba pādāsana*, somehow reminding the Wima Kadphises image found from Manth *devakula*. The physique of the figure is such that it creates some doubts about the deity's identification as a female. Earlier it was thought to

the a standing female in the lap of a seated male but on further examination, it was observed that the sculpture represents only a single deity and definitely a female. The head and the right hand of the figure are completely missing. The left hand of the deity is placed near her waist with some object held in her hand. The position of her hand near the breast, indicates probably that the image is suckling milk to a child held on her lap. A necklace is seen between her round prominent breasts. She is wearing a *dhotī* as the lower garment but a peculiar piece of cloth is running over her shoulders which appears like a garland on the arm but pleats of it are visible on both sides near the deity's waist. It counters the possibility of it being a garland and looks like a modern day *dupatta* worn by females. Near her feet, three figures are visible. The figure to the right of her foot is shown seated on an animal possibly a bull or a goat. He holds some unidentifiable object in his left hand. The figure to left of the deity's foot is quite identical in appearance to the figure described above. The figure depicted in between the deity's feet is too mutilated to form an idea. This sculpture somehow reminds us of the Śaiva sculptures in which near the feet of the deity three figures are shown seated; on the two sides there is presence of (her two sons) Gaṇeśa and Kumāra riding on his mount peacock and in the centre, a Gaṇa. I am inclined to identify this *Māṭṛkā* sculpture as that of *mātā* Pārvatī, though a solid argument for this identification is still needed. The sculpture

in all probability dates back to Kushan period.

2. Terracotta *Devī* plaque from Hathiya (Plate 1, Fig.2)

This small terracotta plaque was found from village Hathiya of Mathura. It possibly depicts a four-armed deity of which only upper two hands are visible, but in much defaced form. The deity is wearing an interesting head-gear and is also wearing heavy ear-rings and a triangular shaped beaded necklace. The *devī* might be identified as a form of Durga.

3. Bust of a female deity from Sankhi, Mathura (Plate 1, Fig.3)

This small bust of a female deity was found from village Sankhi of district Mathura. She is wearing a peculiar Kushan head-dress which appears like a snake canopy. Both her hands are missing in the image. She wears a triangular shaped beaded necklace. A scarf-like cloth is found over her shoulders as is observed in many Kushan sculptures. The deity bears close resemblance with images of *Ekānamśā*.

4. Lower part of a *Hārītī* image from Kakretiya (Plate 2, Fig.4)

This lower part of a seated figure was found from the village Kakretiya of district Mathura. The sculpture was actually found in an agricultural field belonging to Mr. Balbir and Harendra Singh. During the course of exploration, this site, much destroyed now, appeared to be an important Buddhist establishment of the Kushan period. The lower half of the image shows a lady

seated on haunches with two legs of a child held in her lap as visible in the fragmentary piece. This sculpture belongs to the Kushan period and is identified as the image of *Hārītī*.⁶

5. Lower half of a *Mātṛkā* image from Sankhi, Mathura (Plate 2, Fig.5)

This fragment of a small sculpture showing the lower half of a seated female was found from village Sankhi in district Mathura. The female is seated on a throne in *bhadrāsana*. She wears a pair of heavy round anklets in her feet. Two children are visible in between her legs. It is quite probable that she also carries a child on her lap. Generally such *Mātṛkā* sculptures surrounded by children and seated on a throne are identified as *Hārītā*. This sculpture also dates back to the Kushan period.

6. Fragmentary sculpture from village Paintha, Mathura (Plate 2, Fig.6)

This fragmentary sculpture in red sandstone was observed to be under worship at a shrine situated at the top of the mound of village Paintha in district Mathura. It depicts a deity with a peculiar head-dress. The right hand of the deity appears to be in *abhaya Mudrā*. Other details are not identifiable because of its mutilated condition. This image probably belongs to the Kushan period.

7. Headless bust of deity from Asgarpur, Mathura (Plate 2, Fig.7)

This headless and quite defaced sculpture of a female deity was observed at a shrine in village Asgarpur in district Mathura. The deity is shown seated on her haunches in *bhadrāsana*. She is

wearing *keyūras* and wristlets. She is holding an *akṣamālā* in her right hand unlike the usual *abhaya mudrā* of the female deity. Whether she holds a child in her left hand or not, is not clear. *Akṣamālā* is generally associated with the goddesses Śrī Lakṣmi and Sarasvatī in the sculptures of later period. The sculpture probably belongs to the late Kushan period.

8. Fragment of a Nāginī sculpture from Mal, Mathura (Plate 2, Fig.8)

This much mutilated sculpture of a female deity was observed to be under worship at village Mal in district Mathura. The snakehoods present over the head helps in identifying the deity as a Nāginī. The cult of Nāga and Nāginī were quite popular in the Mathura region during the Kushan period as supported by the discovery of this fragmentary image.

9. Defaced bust of a female deity from Rarah, Bharatpur (Plate 3, Fig.9)

This miniature bust of a female deity was discovered at a shrine in village Rarah in district Bharatpur. The deity is wearing a head-dress as was quite popular with female deities during the Kushan period. The right hand of the deity is in *abhaya mudrā* while the left hand holds some indistinct object. This image might represent the goddess Śrī Lakṣmī.

10. Lower half of a female deity from Mahuan, Mathura (Plate 3, Fig.10)

This lower half of a female deity was observed to be in worship at village Mahuan in district Mathura. The deity

is shown seated in *bhadrāsana* on a royal throne. Other details except the throne are missing in the sculpture. The sculpture might have been of a *Mātṛkā* or some other deity. It probably belongs to the Kushan period.

11. Broken bust of a Mātṛkā from Manth (Plate 3, Fig.11)

This headless and armless bust of a female deity was found at a shrine in village Manth in district Mathura. The female is identifiable as a *Mātṛkā* because of the presence of a child possibly playing with her breasts. The image probably belongs to the late Kushan period.

12. Mātṛkā sculpture from Sankhi, Mathura (Plate 3, Fig.12)

This miniature sculpture was found from village Sankhi in district Mathura. It depicts a lady seated on her haunches in *bhadrāsana* pose. She is holding a child to the left of her lap. This deity appears to be a *Mātṛkā* belonging to the late Kushan period.

13. Devī sculpture from Pelkhu, Mathura (Plate 3, Fig.13)

This sculpture was observed to be in worship at a shrine in village Pelkhu in district Mathura. It shows a deity in standing pose but her lower half is missing. The facial features of the deity reminds us of the Katra Buddha image (M.M. No. A 1). She is wearing a peculiar head-dress with a central medallion. Possibly a child is held by the left hand, supported on her shoulder. Other details are not recognizable because of the defaced nature of the

image. The overall treatment of the figure reminds us of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī sculpture but the possibility of the presence of a child on her lap indicates the deity as that of a *Mātṛkā*. This sculpture probably belongs to the early Kushan period.

14. Headless *Devī* from Patsal, Agra (Plate 3, Fig.14)

This headless defaced image of a female deity was observed to be under worship at a shrine in village Patsal in district Agra. The image depicts a deity seated on some unidentifiable animal, with four hands. She holds in one of her left hands some object (possibly a *naramuṇḍa*) while her natural left hand is busy in subduing the animal. Her extra right hand is holding some indistinct object while her natural right hand is attacking the animal with a trident. The lower part of the image is missing. The way she is subduing the animal, reminds us of the Mahiṣamardīnī images, but there is no similarity in the treatment of this image and those of Mahiṣamardīnī to identify it as the latter. The image should belong to some form of Goddess Durgā and might belong to the Gupta period.

15. *Mātṛkā* sculpture from Undi, Mathura (Plate 4, Fig.15)

This sculpture was observed to be under worship at village Undi in district Mathura. The deity is shown seated, possibly in *padmāsana*. Her hair is arranged in a beautiful manner and her head is surrounded by a halo. She is wearing heavy ear-rings, torque and a pearl necklace. Her right hand is placed

on her right knee probably holding an *akṣamālā*. Her left hand holds a child, seated on her left knee. This appears to be a beautiful specimen of a *Mātṛkā* sculpture belonging to the Gupta period and is quite comparable to the *Mātṛkā* sculptures of Gupta period housed in Gwalior Museum.

16. *Devī* sculpture from Jaghina (Plate 4, Fig. 16)

This sculpture was observed to be under worship at a shrine in village Jaghina in district Bharatpur. The deity is shown seated on her mount, possibly a lion which is now much damaged. The deity is seated in *lalitāsana*. She is having either six or eight hands. She is wearing an interesting head-dress as generally observed in the Gupta period sculptures. Attributes held in her hands are quite damaged and are beyond recognition. The sculpture seems to be of the Gupta period and might be representing a form of Goddess Durgā or a *Mātṛkā*.

17. *Śrī Lakṣmī* bust from Gosna, Mathura (Plate 4, Fig. 17)

This bust of the Goddess was found from near the Gosna mound in district Mathura. She is having a head-dress similar to those observed in some late Gupta period sculptures from Deogarh, now kept in Jhansi Museum. She is wearing a thick round necklace made of pearls. Both the arms of the deity are missing. The deity is pressing her left breast with her left palm. This feature of the image emphasizes the need to identify this female as of *Śrī Lakṣmī*. This image might belong to the late Gupta period.

ŚĀKTA CULT IN MATHURA ART



Fig. 1. Headless female deity from Beri, Mathura

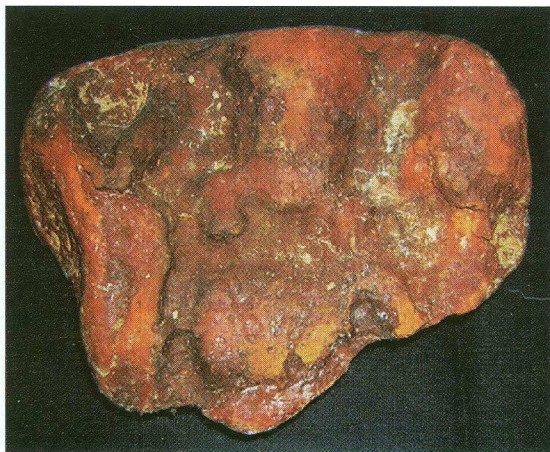


Fig. 2. Terracotta *Devī* from Hathiya



Fig. 3. *Devī* from Sankhi, Mathura

ŚAKTA CULT IN MATHURA ART



Fig. 4. Lower part of Hārītī image from Kakretiya, Mathura.



Fig. 5. Lower part Hārītī image, Sankhi.



Fig. 6. Sculpture from Paintha, Mathura

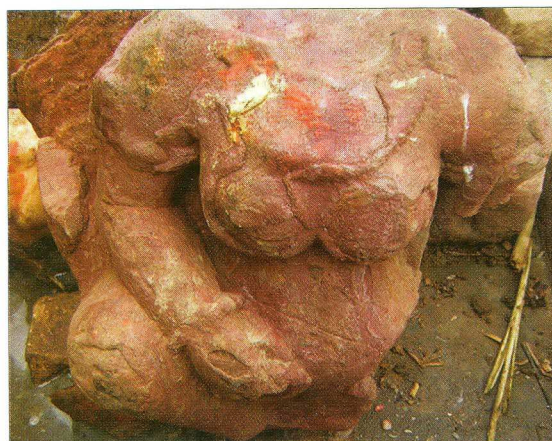


Fig. 7. Sculpture from Asgarpur, Mathura

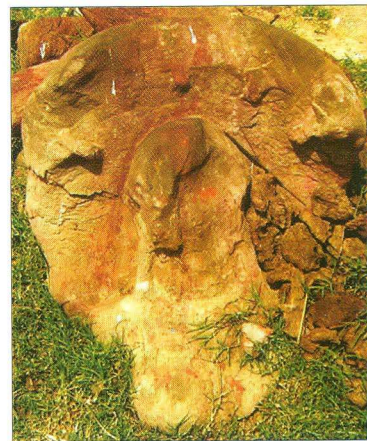


Fig. 8. Defaced Nāginī image, Mal.

ŚĀKTA CULT IN MATHURA ART



Fig. 9. Female deity, Rarah, Bharatpur.

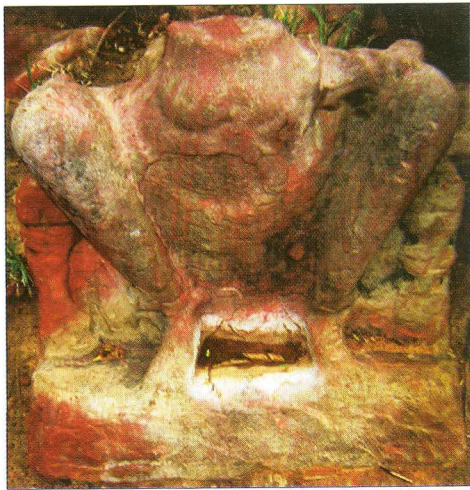


Fig. 10. Lower half of a deity, Mahuan.



Fig. 11. *Mātṛkā*, Manth, Mathura



Fig. 12. *Mātṛkā*, from Sankhi, Mathura



Fig. 13. *Devī* from Pelkhu, Mathura.



Fig. 14. *Devī* from Patsal, Agra

ŚĀKTA CULT IN MATHURA ART



Fig. 15. *Mātṛikā* From Undi, Mathura.

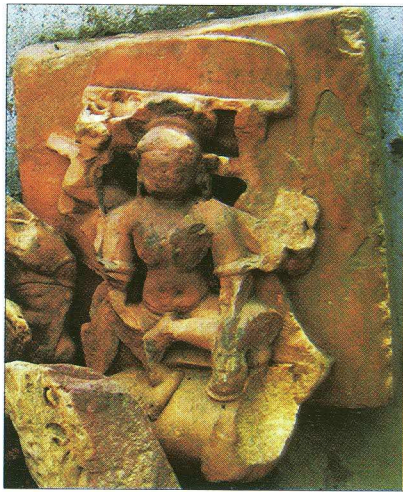


Fig. 16. *Devī* From Jaghina, Bharatpur.



Fig. 17. *Śrī Lakṣmī* from Gosna.

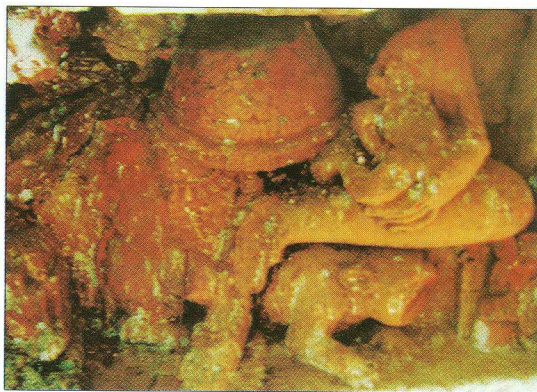


Fig. 18. *Skandamātā* from Akata, Bharatpur.

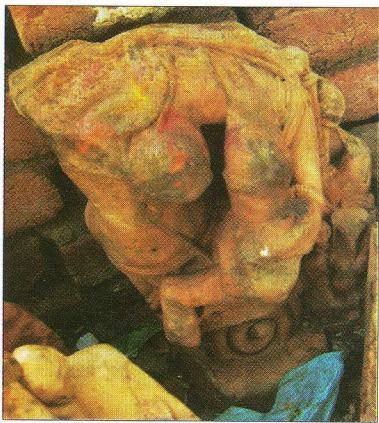


Fig. 19. *Mātṛikā* From Junhendi, Mathura.



Fig. 20. *Mātṛikā* From Chhichhinwari.

18. Lower half portion of a female deity from Akata, Bharatpur (Plate 4, Fig 18)

This sculpture was observed at a religious place in village Akata in district Bharatpur. From the same spot, many other post-Gupta period sculptures were observed, all belonging to the Śaiva cult. This sculpture shows a deity seated on her mount. The face of the animal is missing but it is possibly a lion. She is seated in *lalitāsana* and holds a child on her lap. Her waist and thigh portions are quite decorated with gold ornaments. From the Śaivite context of the sculptures, it is quite possible that this image is of *Skandamātā* who holds her son Skanda on her lap. This sculpture might belong to the post-Gupta period (about 7th-8th century AD).

19. Mātṛkā sculpture from Junhendi, Mathra (Plate 4, Fig.19)

This broken sculpture was observed to be in worship at village Junhendi in district Mathura. The deity seated in *lalitāsana* holds a child to the left of her lap. The richly ornamented deity is

surrounded by a number of figures. This is a *Mātṛkā* sculpture belonging to the medieval period.

20. Mātṛkā sculpture from Chhichhinwari, Bharatpur (Plate 4, Fig.20)

This mutilated sculpture was observed to be under worship at village Chhichhinwari of district Bharatpur. The deity seated in *lalitāsana* holds a child to the left of her lap. The sculpture could be identified as a *Mātṛkā* dating back to the medieval period.

References :

1. *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad*, 2.2, transl. Swami Vimalananda, Ramkrishna Math, Madras, 1957, p. 95.
2. *Saundarya Laharī*, 1, transl. Swamy Tapasyananda, Ramkrishna Math, Madras, 1987, p. 27.
3. N.P. Joshi, *Mothers (Mātṛkās) in Kūshan Art*, Delhi, 1986, p. 2.
4. V.S. Agrawala, *A Catalogue of Brāhmaṇical Images in Mathura Art*, Lucknow, 1951, p. 49.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.
6. (Late) Dr. S.P. Gupta identified this image as that of Hārīti.