



Krishna with Radha, Rukmini.

A Study of Iconography of Gaja-Lakshmi –Over Pan India

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Abstract

Sri Mahalakshmi which has venetrated into different religions and is accepted as Goddess of auspiciousness, Nature for being granting, prolificacy,, fortune, well-being has placed her to an important position and she is omnipresent on the temple walls, pillars, lintels, niches and also in homes and society and community.

She remains an important element in the religious life of Hinduism and also other religions and cults as she is the one who brings of good fortune in all practical enterprises and the bestower of health, wealth and security to her worshipers this status is given to her throughout history till the day widely worshiped by everyone across Pan India and throughout India by various religions.

The word` Lakshmi' signifies the sign of beauty, the mark of royal power, luck, prosperity, grace, happiness, royal domain and good fortune. Lakshmi is identified not only as the wife of Vishnu (Shakti energy) but also as consort of Surya (Sun god), Prajapati (the Creator), Dharma (Virtue), Indra (symbol of royal prosperity), Kubera (the god of riches) and Bali (the pious and powerful monarch). Popular legends of her origin are from milky ocean — when Gods churned the ocean with the help of demons, along with Lakshmi appeared. She was seated on a lotus, holding a lotus in her hand, and residing in the lotus. The Indian thought, the lotus flower is a symbol of purity, 'spiritual wealth, divine power and growth and fertility. Hence, Lakshmi is always decorated with lotus.

Lakshmi also represented as motif of PurnaKumbha or the brimming vessel in the temple Lakshmi is also regarded as divine. She is Shakti (energy), Prakriti (nat ure), Grace (daya), Kirti (celebrity), Jaya (success) and Maya (creative).

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Usually Lakshmi appears in eight forms named **Adilakshmi** with creative power, **Vidya Lakshmi** with power of learning. **Santana Lakshmi** with power of progeny, **Shubha Lakshmi** with power of well being and happiness, **Dhana Lakshmi**, the deity of wealth, **Virya Lakshmi** with valour and energy, **Vijaya Lakshmi** the deity of success and glory and Mahalakshmi bestowing glory with eighteen hands and its attributes. Lakshmi's presence is also recognized in some of the important plants like Tulasi, and trees like Bilva as well as in the lotus, cows, elephants, house -threshold and money. Lakshmi is also associated with elephants. Elephant is a symbol of fertility, royal splendor and authority. Two elephants attending up on Lakshmi represent two treasurers known as Samkha' and Padma and these two -figures suggest of immense treasure. Her most popular form is the Form of Gaja-Lakshmi and other is Abhishek Lakshmi.

She is found in sculptures and various places and also various forms that depict prosperity, well-being, royalty and illustriousness. She suggests a refined state of perfection that goes par the material world. Right from the earliest times, she is associated with not only with royal authority but with spiritual ascendance as well and she coalesces royal and sacerdotal exponents in her presence She is

connected with lotus and elephants and also cosmic power (Shakti) of Vishnu not only she is associated to Vishnu she is also associated with prosperity gods Like Kuber, Indra, Ganesh and so on she is associated with agriculture which is the main source of prosperity and maintains economy of the Earth.

Iconic representation of Lakshmi goes back to 2nd century B.C. Image of Lakshmi is clearly depicted in the icons of Maurya, Sunga, Kushanas and Guptas. Such icons were found at Kausambi, Ujjayani and Bhita, North West, SriLanka and many places across the Pan Asia. Of various known form the Gaja-Lakshmi motif is most popular and has crossed the borders and became the goddess of Pan Asia , she has her influence from Central Asia down to South East Asia. Her various forms and depiction have arose time to time and has so many forms styles and beauty in all kinds of Arts Plastic form, Literature, Paintings and many more.

In this paper presentation I would like to discuss various forms of Gaja –Lakshmi across Pan Asia in various parts of India and also in Various Religions. The Study of iconography of GajaLakshmi In her various forms is quite fascinating since 2nd Century BCE.

In the Gajalaxmi motif the female represents the Earth and the Elephants (Gaja) stands for naga (Serpents or clouds). (O.P. Singh Iconography of GajaLakshmi)This motif

symbolizes prosperity and abundance throughout pan India. The Gajalaxmi symbol occurs on coins, Seals, and sculpture Panels at different places and in periods prior and post Sanchi which clearly depicts and proves that there was cult of Lakshmi in India and also re..... the foreign Goddess theory but proves her origin in India and the Icon or Motif evolved independently in the India (here I mean Pan India). This Gajalaxmi icon has been depicted by various artists in Various Centuries and represented in plastic, and nonplastic forms with various regional variations, beliefs and status that can be observed if the images are seen with different views which we will discuss and focus in this presentation.

Keywords: Lakshmi, Elephants Gajalakshmi, Nagas, Sanchi, Pan India, Lakshmi, Plastic Art, Paintings.

Introduction

Sri Mahalakshmi which has venetrated into different religions and is accepted as Goddess of auspiciousness, nature for being granting, prolificacy,, fortune, well-being has placed her to an important position and she is omnipresent on the temple walls, pillars, lintels, niches and also in homes and society and community.

She remains an important element in the religious life of Hinduism and also other religions and cults as she is the one who brings of good fortune in all practical enterprises and the bestower of health, wealth and security to her worshipers this status is given to her throughout history till the day widely worshiped by everyone across Pan India and throughout India by various religions.

Sri or Gaja-Lakshmi is probably the only deity that finds deification with great zeal amongst Hindu, Buddhist, and Jains alike. The concept of Gaja-Lakshmi or Sri has a hoary antiquity. A later verse from the Rig Veda called Sri-Sukta, describes her as "Padmini" the one possessed on the lotus, "Padmasthitha" the one standing on a lotus, "Padmathavarna" the lotus colored and "Padmasambhava" the lotus born. Sri is considered conferrer of property, riches, splendor, fame, long life and off springs.



Despite very early literary reference, her earliest iconic representation starts appearing only around 1st Cent BC and early 1st Cent AD. These images are primarily from Buddhist sites like Barhut' and Sanchi. Also found on a terracotta seal from Peddabankur in Andhra Pradesh.

These images divulge a definite iconographic character which had its basis in primeval literary traditions and portrayal. Lakshmi images were possibly done in perishable materials like wood' stucco, ivory or clay before they came to be executed in stone. In sculptural representation, she is often represented as seated or standing on a lotus holding lotus buds or flowers in her hand and flanked by elephants. She has an obvious association with water. Some scholars feel that essentially she is water cosmology represented in female form and giver of the life sustaining water and sources of divine earthly energy'.

Some scholars have opined that Sri or Gaja-Lakshmi motif in Buddhist monuments may represent the birth of Buddha. This argument however does not seem to gel when we observe stringent characters being ascribed and adhered to while depicting Gaja-Lakshmi and nativity scenes when they occur coevally in some Buddhist site. If they were intended to be one and the same such variety in scheme and treatment would have been hardly emphasized. In Buddhism, she is considered as the consort of Kubera and hence becomes associated with the bestowment of wealth and riches to her appeasers. It is her association with wealth and riches that makes her omnipotent and universally appealing to all religious folds.

Iconic representation of Lakshmi goes back to 2nd century B.C. Image of Lakshmi is clearly depicted in the icons of Maurya, Sunga, Kushanas and Guptas and others. Such icons were found at Kausambi, Ujjayani and Bhita, North West, Sri Lanka and many places across the Pan Asia. Of various known forms the Gaja-Lakshmi motif is most popular and has crossed the borders

and became the goddess of Pan Asia. This motif is not only used to represent her but many others have adopted the Abhishek Lakshmi in one or other form.

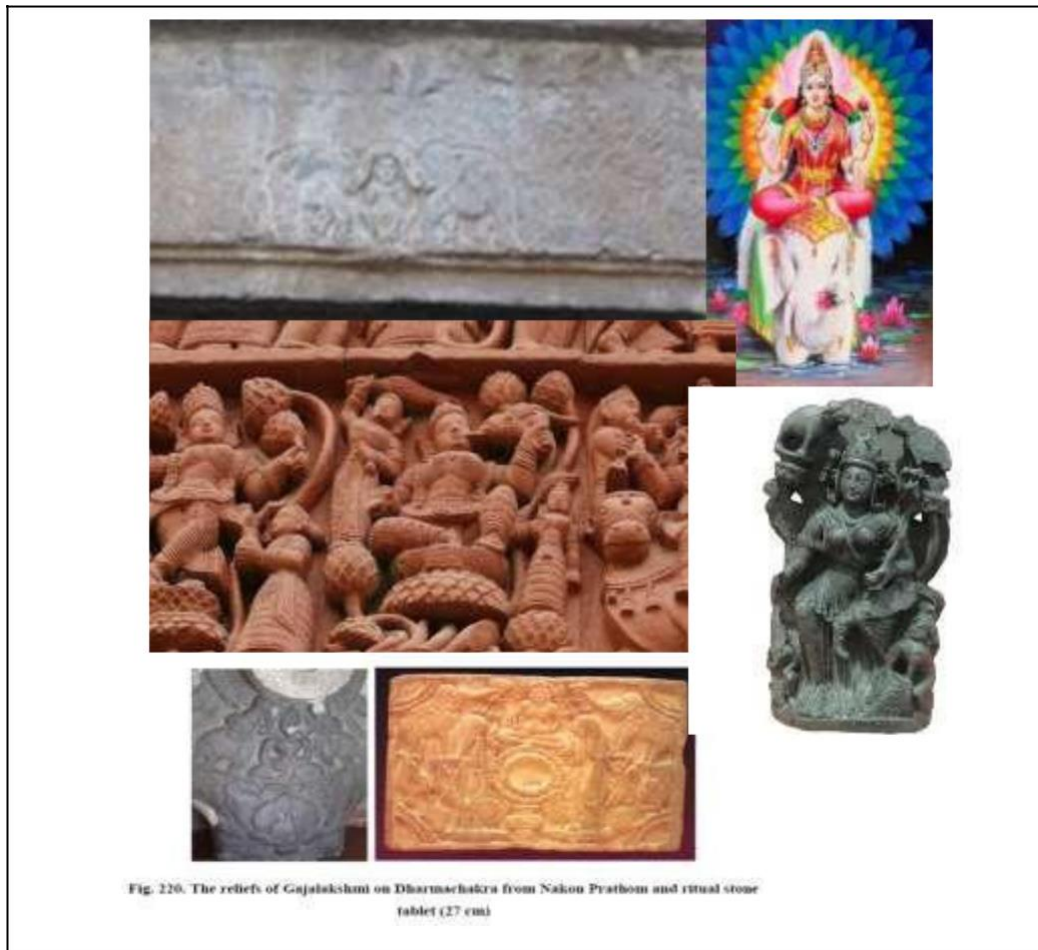


The word Gaja-Lakshmi is composed of 2 words Gaja (means the Elephants, nags, or clouds however Elephants are in Principal) and the Lakshmi where goddess Lakshmi is between, or with an elephant , 2 Elephants. Or more than two elephants the motif has its popularity along the pan –India and also has crossed borders along the silk route till far northwest to south east of Asia. While making this motif artists have experimented a lot since the inception of plastic art till today and we see various forms in terms of timelines (era) , regional and religious variation. It is really astonishing to see her popularity among Hindu, Buddhist and Jains the three major cults in India and also interplayed the motif to their Principal Deity.

Sculptures of Gaja-Lakshmi are seen from early Sunga period, looking to the Historical data the first occurrence of the motif is seen 2nd Century BCE It is noted that this goddess worshipped as the great mother from oldest times was venerated

throughout the country and society in this from Taxila to Orissa, down to Southeast Asia and similarly from Hindukush down to SriLanka by the followers of Buddhism, Jainism and Brahmanism. Her popular origin is hinted at in several ways, i.e. by her identity with the Earth, and by her birth from the waters on the one hand and from heaps of cow-dung on the other (Karishini).

Her representation are found in various ages on icons of sculpture and coins in various ages of in initial stage icon was represented as nude deity of fertility which perished on later period leaves nudity and the icons of her are found on Maurya, Sunga, Kushanas and Guptas. Such icons were found at Kausambi, Ujjayani and Bhita and icons based on the earliest known representation of Gajalakshmi are found all over India till this day.



The word 'Lakshmi' signifies the sign of beauty, the mark of royal power, luck, prosperity, grace, happiness, royal domain and good fortune. Lakshmi is identified not only as the wife of Vishnu (Shakti energy) but also as consort (here it can be thought metaphorically as power) of Surya (Sun god), Prajapathi (the Creator), Dharma (Virtue), Indra (symbol of royal prosperity), Kubera (the god of riches) and Bali (the pious and powerful monarch). Popular legends of her origin are from milky ocean — when Gods churned the ocean with the help of demons, along with 14 different objects Lakshmi appeared. She was seated on a lotus, holding a lotus in her hand, and residing in the lotus. The Indian thought, the lotus flower is a symbol of purity, 'spiritual wealth, divine power and growth and fertility and above all its cosmic universe. Hence, Lakshmi is always decorated with lotus. Lakshmi also represented iconically as PurnaKumbha or the brimming vessel in the temple. Lakshmi is also regarded as divine. She is Shakti (energy), Prakriti (nature), Grace (daya), Kirti (celebrity), Jaya (success) and Maya (creative).

Usually Lakshmi appears in eight forms named **Adilakshmi** with creative power, **Vidya Lakshmi** with power of learning. **Santana Lakshmi** with power of progeny, **Shubha Lakshmi** with power of wellbeing and happiness, **Dhana Lakshmi**, the deity of wealth, **Virya Lakshmi** with valour and energy, **Vijaya Lakshmi** the deity of success and glory and **Mahalakshmi** bestowing glory with eighteen hands and its attributes. Here there is no mention of Gajalakshmi however at later time Gajalakshmi form may have been incorporated in Ashtalakshmi group similarly she may have been added to saptmatruka panels too due to her motherly nature but in most of cases she is found **Independently** or shown independent.

We will here take look at her iconographical representation in BharatVarsh ([*Pan India*] *from here on word BharatVarsh will be used for the word Pan-India*)

Adi Lakshmi - the primal
mother goddess

Dhana Lakshmi - goddess of
material wealth

Dhanya Lakshmi - goddess of
good harvest and grains

Gaja Lakshmi - goddess of
power and strength

(Kirti Lakshmi)

Santana Lakshmi - goddess of
off-springs and progeny



Iconographically in general she may be represented with elephants, may be sitting in various aasan (sitting position) with lotus sitting on lotus, within lotus, holding lotus stalks, on throne the number of elephants may range from one, two or more than two, most of times elephants will be annotating here with water or having Garland, or having charmars , she may be added with attendants, in 2 or 4 or many, shown with 2 or 4 hands, in some cases her vahana owl is shown, or sometimes she is also shown with Lion (current find in Kashmir valley is one of them) she may be shown independent or with row of Gods, in similar height showing her authority similar to the gods or higher than other Gods.

Relief of Four Brahmanical Gods. Mathura. Kuṣāṇa Period.

Government Museum, Mathura (Acc. No. 34.2520) (courtesy of the Government Museum, Mathura).



The representation of Gaja Lakshmi are so many that it is really impossible to cover the subject at one sitting in one seminar however I have tried to cover various iconographical differences in various periods and also various regions. Every region

has its own identity and every artist has own style that they have used to present her in various plastic and non plastic forms, as collecting the images of her I had observed differences in iconography which am trying to discuss here in addition we shall also see her regional names at various places within BharatVarsh.



To the most, Gaja Lakshmi used to be in comparison with **Keerthi Lakshmi**, especially on war victory.



Though Sanchi epitaph belongs to Buddhists, it appears GajaLakshmi symbol attracted dynasties like Shung, Shatavahana and Guptas. Later, it spread in India to other parts as well.



We can notice GajaLakshmi is used as a motif or Logo on the door jambs in most of the temples Especially subordinates of Hoysala, Kakathiya, Nolamba dynasties used to show GajaLakshmi as their favourite deity and they used to be worshipped in temple sanctums like any other statue. But on later stage, this was limited to place on Lalat Bimb.



There are innumerable styles of Gaja Lakshmi prevailing over period of years. John Marshall, author book titled “Monuments of Sanchi”, refers Gaja Lakshmi as Goddess of Nativity. One thing that is common in these features is that, Lakshmi is shown surrounded by 2 four or two elephants, sitting on lotus flower.

In Karnataka, Mysuru palace has many representations of Gaja Lakshmi are seen. The motif extends into various states and regions Kalinga, Bangal, Assam, The Gangaitic Planes, Telgana, Konkan, Sahiyadhri, Khandesh, Marathawad, Maharsastra, Gujrat, Rajasthan, going towards north west, in the Gandhar Region, and further, in south in Southern states as well as countries Sri Lanka, Singapore, Java, Sumatra, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Nepal. GajaLakshmi symbol does not limit to a particular religion. It has been used in Jain and Buddhist sculptures too. Lakshmi has not been depicted as concert of Lord Vishnu anywhere may look strange, but is true! Instead, she represents values like affluence, development, fame, victory, symbol of a State, Sovereignty etc., and still continues to an expression of Indian lifestyle over centuries. She has also traveled along with Seafaring communities to different Places around the world Presently in many of the temples in Western Hemisphere you can See Gajalaxmi images.



The Bharuth stupa dating back to the Shunga period has the Gajalakshmi upon it. The Gajalakshmi stands atop the lotus which is placed over a 'Kalash' (urn). Two elephants also upon lotuses flank her and anoint her with

water. The sculpture on the TORANA (entrance) and the VEDIKA (surrounding wall of Stupa) on this stupa is significant in many respects. Artwork of these sculptures are excellent, but besides that content is more important. To feature important events in life of Gautam Budha without engraving his idol (as then norms did not allow engraving of Gautam Buddha

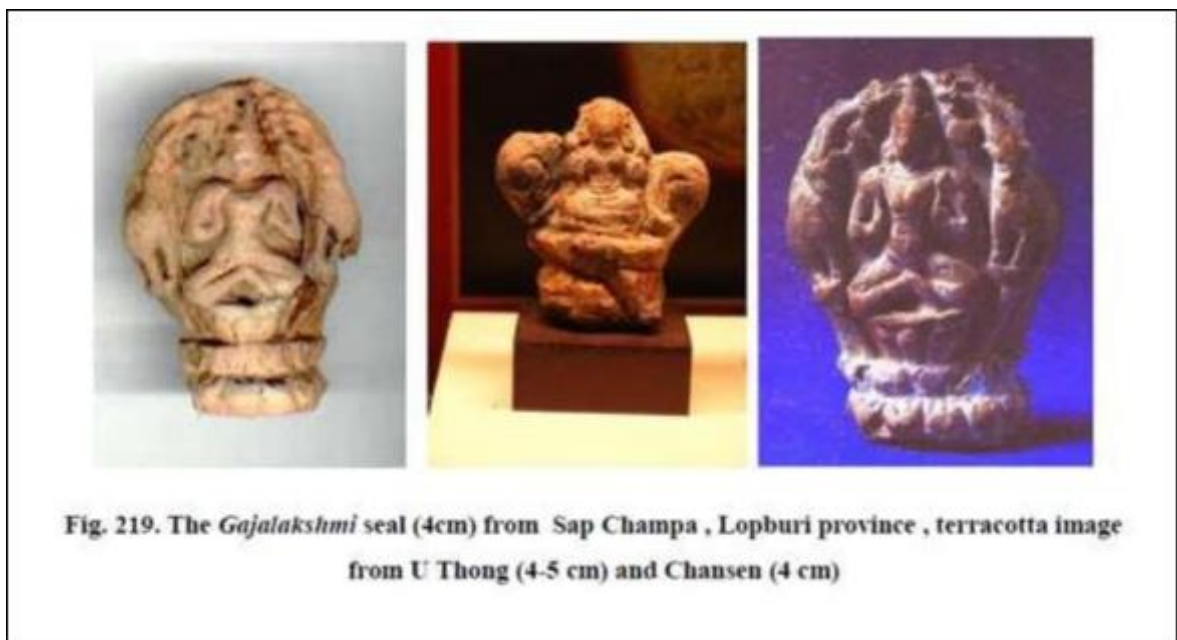
), was most difficult task. Artists took help of ancient symbolism and thus GAJLAXMI sculpture was created. Each of these elements are indicators that Goddess is earth or fertility Goddess. The anointing elephant(s) is symbol or metaphor of the cloud. Abhisheka is rain. When the rain falls on the earth, new creations emerge. The convergence of factors such as migrations, conquests, and trade contacts contributed to the transmission of symbols and the consequential appropriation and transformation in religious imagery.

The icons found at Behrur stupa that validates that the deity and her worship could have been extended from time before such motif came to existence in minds of human and society. The Journey of the motif had started and moved in all the directions which also influenced the northwest direction where the two schools of arts the Gandhara and the Mathura School developed and we can see motif in many of the terracotta seals. And idols found in the Region during various eras.

Images of Mathura



Gajalakshmi, Panchchura or Annapurna and Padmahasta were worshipped during the 2nd century BC. All of these were the different forms of goddess Lakshmi. Another Panchchura in terracotta adorns five rice kernels on her head and also bears few weapons. She is shown standing on a lotus. Padmahasta, yet another form of goddess Lakshmi is too shown standing on a lotus and she is surrounded by a wide pond.



Terracotta found from Uttar Pradesh. 1st century BCE. Los Angeles County Museum of Art also shows the goddess in between Lotus forest and lustered by elephants many similar images are found from Mathura, Vidisha and so on all the way till northwest the northwestern Gajalaxmi show different iconography and carry the traits of Gandharan and Mathura style. During the Same time the Motif had also travelled in ancient Nepal which is known from the statue found in Kathmandu Valley Lots of Seals and sculptures along with famous Seal of Azeleyes were found, The Kashmir and Himachal valley also had rich source of Gajalaxmi sculptures, and north western part of India, the Post Gupta sculpture at Amjhara, Bhilwada, and many places of Rajasthan and also in Uttar Pradesh, sculptures from various era and time line are found going towards Chhatisgarh, Bihar, West and East Bangal, ancient sculpture of Gajalaxmi have been found the Southeast coast states of Orissa and Andhra are rich in the sculpture, whereas Southern States are full to the brim with her sculptures, most of every corner of the ancient and new motifs are found, The south west costal states like Goa and Maharashtra have a rich sources of images along with the states of Madhya Pradesh that holds the first ever depiction not very ancient but few sculptures of Gajalaxmi are found in the Region of Gujrat and most in Saurashtra Region, Kutch and north Gujrat and few old in Gujrat as discussed above that the motif had venerated into various religions you can find th em on Jain temples too.



It has also traveled in the regions of Himachal Pradesh and along with various kinds of movement to South West of Maharashtra, Konkan, South of India South East of India, along with Maritime trades it also had gone down to south east of Asia along to pan India. Most of the time these Images goddess is shown standing in between forest or pond with a lotus along with elephants, she is also shown holding the lotus stalks in here hand, the Elephants may be free standing, sometimes elephants are shown by her side and sometime on the lotus which she is holding in her hands, the elephants also may vary in number from one and onwards mostly four , six or sometimes eight, she is also shown having 2 hands or 4 hands many time holding different attributes. The Satavahanas had adopted her in abundance, so as Kadambas, Cholas, Pandyas and many other rulers who dominated the southern part of India



After the Stupas of Shung era we see various caves and cave temples that house this motif especially on door or on architrave, the Caves of Udaygiri, Caves of Pitalkhora, Nadsur and Bhutling (Junnar) that are datable to Satavahana Periods, having Gaja - Lakshmi images from western India. The Walls of Pratihara temples and Many temples in Kalinga Region show her Depiction The temples in Rajasthan show and few of sculpture are found from Abaneri, Amzara, Sirohi, The Vijyastambh of chiitor and temple in the foot hills of Kumbhalgadh, Ekingji, many stepwells, Alwar and in many temples the image is found. The City of Ujayni has Gajalaxmi temple and many punchmarked coins also have Gajalakshmi, In Konkan and Shidhri region she is prayed by the name of Kelbai interesting feature of these icons is lot of people and devotes are shown around goddess some times playing music or in festive mood around goddess here she is prayed like folk diety (Gramdevta) and many time she is found in secred Groves in Forest as is Forest Deity or Protector Deity. In Many Regions of Maharashtra she is prayed as Protector Deity and has been found on both sides of Western Ghats the trend of her as Protector Deity extends towards the state of Karnataka and in Some parts of Telgana and Andhra Pradesh, Most of the temples in southern India she is found on Lalitbimb from start of the Temple till the womb (GarbhGruha) of the temples, and also placed in separate shrine along with the main deity of the Temple and on walls of the Temple. In Tamilnadu and Kerala same tradition of having her on The front of the Gate is continued in Tmailnadu many temples have her in separate shrines also. Due to the Trade and commerce in South Eastern Asia the Motif has Travelled down to various places like Maynma r(Burma), Vietnam, Java, Sumatra, Cambodia, Thailand etc.

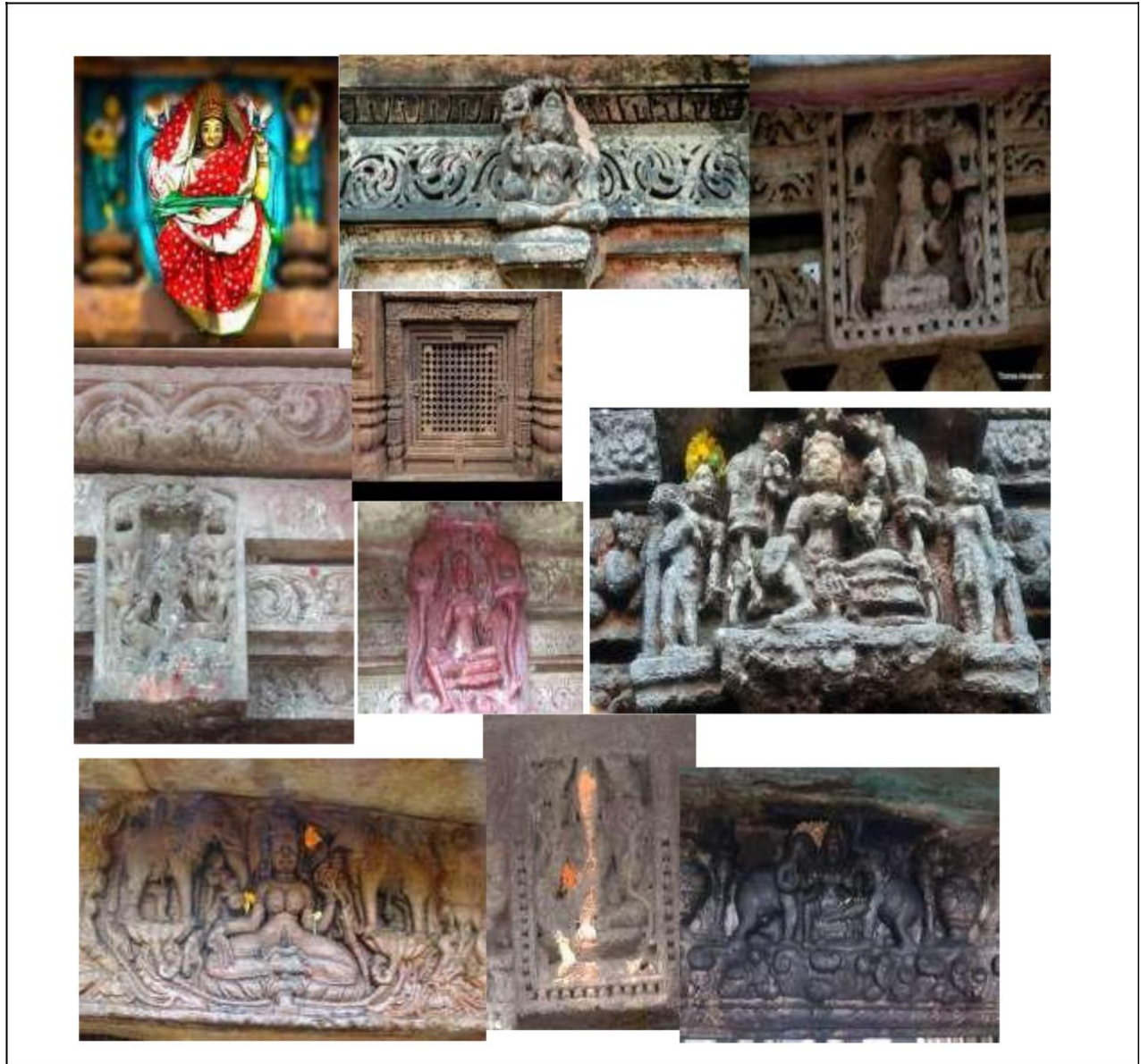
Lakshmi's presence is also recognized in some of important plants like the Tulasi, and trees like Bilva as well as in the lotus, cows, elephants, house - threshold and money. Lakshmi is also associated with elephants. Elephant is a symbol of fertility, royal splendor and authority. Two elephants attending up on Lakshmi represent two treasurers known as Sankha' and Padma and these two-figures suggest of immense treasure.



Orissa

The image of Gajalaxmi is depicted on the lintel of the eastern gateway. The goddess is seated on a lotus pedestal with her right leg hanging down and left being placed on the pedestal touching the right thigh. In the left hand she holds a full-blown lotus and is attended by two attendants from both sides. Two out-flanking elephants (one on each side) are shown above her head raising their proboscis upward and pouring water on her head. The representation of Gajalaxmi on the lintel of the gateway is found in many temples of Siva and Vishnu throughout Orissa. On the basis of the study of symbols of the royal seals of Somavamsis, B.C. Majumdar mentions that Matangi Mahalaxmi was the household goddess of the Somavamsis. This goddess was introduced by the Sarabhapuriya kings for the first time in south Kosala. Subsequently the representation of the Goddess Gajalaxmi was continued by the

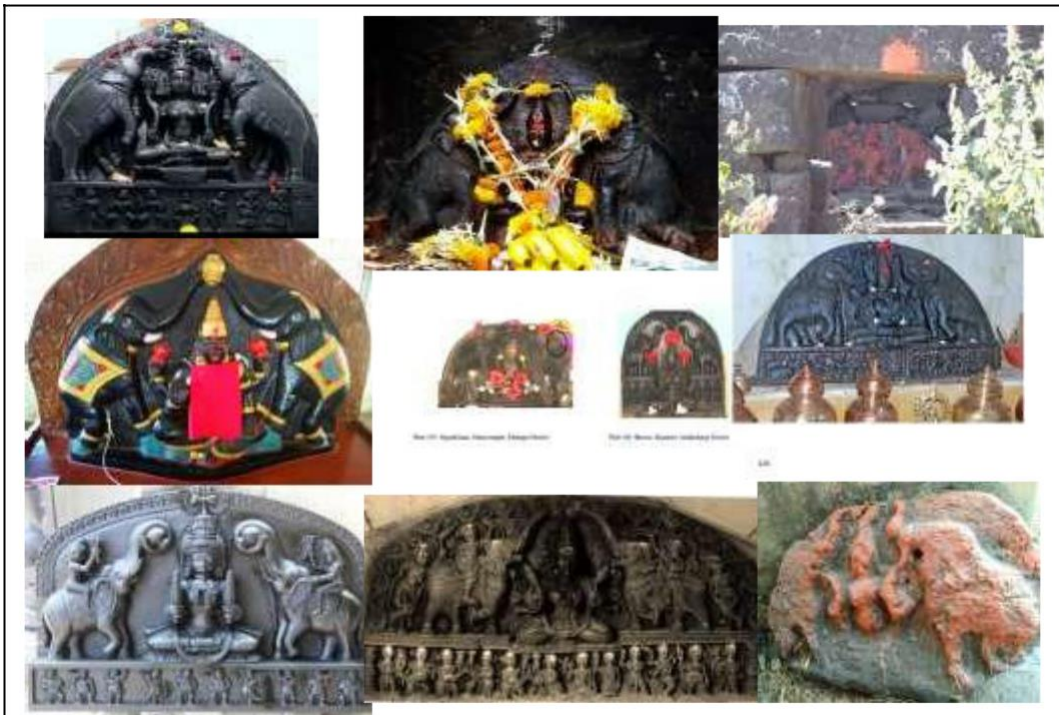
Somavamsi monarch in seals as well as on monuments. Most of the time devi is shown sitting in lalitāsana holding stalks of lotus and on top of lotus the elephants do Abhishek to her.



Sahiyadhri and Konkan

All the sculptures of Lakshmi that are found in Konkan are with the association of elephants. If Lakshmi represents with elephants along with their pots she is known as Abhishekalakshmi. Though the people of Goa worshipped the image of Gajalakshmi, they never call it Gajalakshmi. They rather call it Gajantlakshmi. They also call it as Kelbai or Bhauka and is worshipped as a gramadevata in the villages of Goa. Bhaukadevi since 15 th-16th centuries. The stone panels of Gajalakshmi of early medieval period of Goa are very simple. Lakshmi is seated in Sukhasanamudra and holds lotus buds in both the hands with kunjara dvayam (Elephants) on either side. Here elephants are display with water pots in their trunks to make it Abhishekalakshmi. The ornamentation in the sculptures of Gajalakshmi in Goa was more in the medieval period. Apart from kunjardvayam, a lion motif, musicians, and samudramanthan, are also added to Lakshmi. Gajalakshmi panels of Chandor, Shiroda, Chinchinim etc, are the best examples of depiction of lion motifs in them. Gajalakshmi panel at Zarmem (behind Sateri temple) was the best example for depiction of samudramanthan in it. Gajalakshmi panels of the late medieval period Goa are very interesting. Here, Lakshmi is shown with four arms, sometimes with kiritimukut and chanwardharini on either side, and on top with kirthimukh (glorious face). On either side, elephants are also shown with ornaments, water pots or while pouring water on Lakshmi. Apart from this, the stone panels were filled with musicians, royal possession scenes, sailors on the boat, mithuna couples and even erotic figures as decorative motifs. Gajalakshmi panels at Zarmem, Mauxi, Thane, Keri, Gaonkarwada, Usgao, ASI Museum Old Goa, Surla, Devacheraan, Barabhumi

etc, are the best examples for the above ornamentation in the sculptures. Gajalakshmi panel at rehabilitated colony of Keri dam site is the best specimen for depiction of erotic figures in it. Gajalakshmi temples in Goa are very simple with one-room structure. Sometimes Gajalakshmi is found accommodated with other affiliated deities in a common hall.



In the Southern states they were rare during period of Chalukyas, but gained importance in the period of Pallavas. The same has been continued during reign of Hoysalas to Vijayanagar empire in South. Even in recent temples also, G ajalaksmi holds a prominent place. Gajalakshmi motif was were common in Karnataka during medieval period. Same can be noticed in Aandhara Pradesh, TamilNadu and Maharastra also in later stages. We continue to see Gajalakshmi motifs and statues from the period of Shatavahanas. They continued for sometime and became scarce during the period of Badami Chalukyas and Rastrakootas. But they flourished back again in the periods of Kalyana chalukyas, Kalachoori, Yadavas, Hoysala and later in Vijayanagar period too. During these periods they are much more visible in Lalat Bimbs. They are common in many shrines, irrespective of religions prevailed then .



In the state of Karnataka dist of Dharwad consists of five taluks, namely Dharwad, Hubli, Kalghatagi, Kundagola and Navalgund. In these five districts, one can notice around 25-30 Gajalakshmi statues. Initially Gajalakshmi statues were more ornamental, but later they turned to be looking very simple. Especially one or two statues of Gajalakshmi belonging to the periods are beautifully

orientated. In villages like Kandali, Shirur, Belavatgi, Shishuvinahalli, Sulihatti, Byahatti, Betadooru, Marevada, Belahara, Gudisagara, Hala Kusagalli, Khannur, Katnuru, Manakavada, navalli, Talimoraba, and Pedasuru, we can witness only either Lakshmi with two elephants. In some Gajalakshmi depictions, two well decorated elephants and Goddess Lakshmi are found. Some are found installed at the main entrance of the village, whereas some are at the centre place of the village. During post Vijayanagara period, these statues are installed in temple, just as in the case of Surya, Ganesh etc., Most of the statues found outside the village are located near agricultural fields. In some statues a pair of elephants are seen along with another pair. Some places we can see only trunk of elephants are used symbolically. Notable point in these panels are, they were more worshipped statues than a piece of decoration. Later these were found less decorated and used as a symbol of auspicious feature. In some villages Gajalakshmi statues are important and worshipped as village chief deity even today.

