

Iconography and worship of the Mother Goddess from ancient times to the post- Gupta period (Harappan era -1000 CE)

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Abstract :

The worship of Matrika or Mother Goddess or the Feminine Principle is held as among the oldest religious elements originating from the prehistoric era, which is still continuing in India as the worship of the Devi- Sakti. As evident from various archaeological findings, the practice of worshipping the Mother Goddess was prevalent in India and other ancient cultures of the world from almost the start of human civilisation. This worship of the Feminine Principle started in primitive societies, where women were viewed as symbols of regeneration and the creators of new lives. Her female organs and associated attributes were believed to have held magical powers capable of producing new lives, hence they became symbols of creation, and Mothers became the core figure of religion, starting the worship of Matrika/Mother Goddesses. In India, the worship of Matrika that existed from the earliest phase of human civilisation, became systemised and more organised during the early Gupta period. In that context, this article will examine the iconography of Matrika or Mother goddess from the ancient times to the post Gupta period (Harappan era -1000 CE).

Keywords : Devi, Gupta, iconography, Mother Goddess, Matrika, post-Gupta, Sakta.

Introduction :

Harappan seals and figurines set the trend of Matrika worship for the later Mauryan, Sunga, Kusana, and Gupta periods.

Various excavations at the Harappan sites have yielded many seals and artefacts, which scholars believe were a part of the Mother-goddess worship, as for example ring-stones, other baetylic stones, and phalli that were found in plenty from the excavated sites, and dated around 3rd-4th millennium BCE. The terracotta female statuette figures held as Mother Goddesses that were discovered from the Harappan sites in India and pre-Harappan sites in Baluchistan (Mehrgarh) mostly show broad hips, narrow waists, and heavy breasts, often with elaborate headgears. It is contented that “these images of the goddess whose name is unknown were kept almost in every house in the ancient Indus cities, probably in a recess or on a bracket on the wall” (Mackey, 1934, p. 54). The same styled female fertility figures of Mother Goddesses continued into the historic period, and are seen in plenty from the Chandraketugarh site in West Bengal (dated 400-100 BCE, Maurya-Sunga periods).

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The Harappan, Sunga, Kusana, and Gupta era seals often contain various figures that are depicted in theriomorphic, anthropomorphic, and therio-anthropomorphic forms. These figures along with their associated symbols represented the popular religious deities of those eras. One particular example is a Harappan seal depicting an upside-down female deity with legs spread out and a plant coming out of her womb through the vulva, which represented the growth of crop-vegetation from the womb of Mother Earth (Marshall, 1931). This depiction of female fertility is easily relatable to the terracotta relief from Bhita site of the early Gupta period, where we see Devi in the same legs-spread-out position with a lotus issuing from her neck instead of the womb (Lajjagauri or Aditi Utanapad). These figures, which represent female fertility and the creation of lives, show Devi as a source of nourishment, and are a part of Matrika worship.

A seal from Mohenjo-daro showing a female deity between two trees is suggestive of a tree goddess, and as per scholars, she can be viewed as the prototype of Lakshmi standing on a padma pitha (lotus pedestal) with long stalked lotus flowers and leaves spreading out on her two sides (Vats, 1940).

Besides the seals and statuettes of the Mother Goddess found from various pre-Harappan and Harappan sites, there were also found many ring-stones in the Indus-Saraswati civilisation, ranging from large stone ones (4 feet in diameter), to small ones made of faience or shells. These ring-stones can be considered as aniconic emblems of the Mother Goddess, symbolising the yoni, denoting fertility and motherhood. These ring-stones are comparable to the stone discs found from the Taxila site of Bhir (4th century BCE), and Hathial (1000 BCE), with cross and cable motifs, and female figures alternating with honeysuckle patterns (Marshall, 1927-28). A partly broken disc from Rajghat (8th century BCE) depicts a seated female figure holding a bird in hand, with a palm tree and a horse in the foreground. A ring-stone from Kosam, with Ashokan era Brahmi-lipi, has Matrika figures with an array of alligator-like animals. It is interesting to note that these alligator-like animals shown with the Mother-Goddess is relatable with the Devi-iconography in the post-Gupta period. In early medieval Pala era, Parvati murtis from Bihar-Bengal belt are often shown with similar alligator-like figures, which are of the iguana or godha. In 1951, twenty-one soapstone stone discs were found in Patna of the Sunga period (187-78 BCE). These discs depicted Mother-Goddesses with various birds and animals, such as lion, parrot, antelope, peacock, horse, elephant, ram, and stag, thus linking these animals with Devi-Sakti (Agrawala, 1979).

The Mauryan, Sunga, and Kushana era carved discs are later variations of the proto-historic Harappan ring-stones, and their characteristics depict that “they were cult objects comparable with the prehistoric ring stones of the Indus Valley on the one hand and the cakras and the yantras of the later Shaktas on the other” (Banerjea, 1956, p. 171). Thus, through a study of the female figurines and seals, a clear connection can be established of the worship of the Mother Goddess from the pre-Harappan and Harappan times, to the Mauryan, Sunga, Kusana, Gupta, and post-Gupta periods.

These archaeological relics attest the uninterrupted worship of the Feminine Principle or Matrika from ancient to historic times that culminated into the Sakti form of worship. As the Pauranic literature further developed during the Gupta period, it gave her a more defined form with various aspects

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(iconography wise) through the dhyana mantras, and associated her with the male deities as embodying their combined energies.

This article in the next section will discuss the iconography of the Devi, as it had evolved from the ancient times to the Gupta and post-Gupta period (300 BCE-1000 CE), from literature study, and a study of the various available seals, coins, and sculptures.

Discussion :

A study of the Epics shows the popularity of Matrika worship from prior to the start of the Common Era. The two Durgastrotas in Mahabharata (Virataparva and Bhishmaparva), which provide the various names and aspects of Devi Durga, is considered among the most important hymns in Sakta worship. A verse addressed to Yoganidra (an aspect of Durga) in Harivamsha (Aryastava, III) is similar to the Durgastotra in Bhishmaparva, and also shows the importance of Mother Goddess worship from ancient times. The 'Devi Mahatmya' segment in the Markandeya-Purana, considered as one of the most important and the oldest of the Puranas, also refers to the worship of Devi Durga as Mahisasuramardini (Agarwala, 1963; Pargiter, 1969). The various passages referring to Devi in the Epics and Puranas, when read carefully, give us a good insight into the component elements that helped in developing the Sakta sect as one of the most important segments of Hinduism by early Gupta period.

Starting with the Vedas, there are mentions of various goddesses such as Uma, Ambika, Durga (Kali, Karali, and Bhadrakali), and Haimavati, in the Vedic texts, such as, Taittiriya Aranyaka, Mundaka and Kena Upanishads, Vajasaneyi Samhita, and Sankhyana Grihyasutra. The earliest among the Vedas, the Rig Veda, mentions female deities, such as Vak, Usha, Aditi, Prithvi, and Saraswati. The Rig Vedic hymn (X. 125), known as the Devi-Sukta, identifies Vak as the Primal Energy of all living beings, indicating the prevalence of Matrika worshippers from ancient times. The later Vedic texts delineate the 'mother,' 'daughter,' and 'sister' aspects of the great goddess, which is further elaborated in the Puranas and Epics (Banerjea, 1956). The non-Vedic elements of the goddess is indicated by certain names attributed to the Devi, such as, Aparna (not wearing any leaf garments or uncovered), Vindhyaasini, and Nagna-Savari (naked Savara woman). The Harivamsha mentions that the Devi was worshipped by the Savaras, the Pulindas, and the Barbaras (Savarair- Barbarais- chaiva-Pulindais-cha supujita).

Apart from being represented as consort of the male deities, the Devi is also depicted independently in her various rupa or forms, and her images can be categorised into two forms: Saumya (placid), and Ugra or Ghora (fierce) aspects (Banerjea, 1956). In her fierce or ugra form the Devi goes by the names Mahisasuramardini, Chamunda, Chandi, Kali, Karali, and the nava-Durgas (Chandrarupa, Ati-Chandika, Chanda, Prachanda, Ugra-chanda, Chandanayika, Chandavati, Rudra-Chanda, and Chandogra). In her Saumya or placid form, Devi is portrayed as the divine Universal Mother (mother goddess concept), and she appears as Gauri, Parvati, Uma, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, etc.

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One of her Saumya form that developed during the Gupta period is that of Sakambhari devi (Devi-Mahatmya), where Devi nourishes famine-affected people (like a mother feeds her children), with vegetation produced from her body :

Yato'hamakhilam lokam àtmadehasamudbhavaih;
bharishyàmi suràh shàkairàvrishteh pràadhàrakaih.
Shàkambhariti vikhyàtim tadà yàsyàmyaham bhuvì
(Markandeya Purana, XCI, pp. 48-49)

This image of Sakambhari Devi is comparable to the Harappan seal that depicted the image of an upside-down female deity with a plant emerging out of her womb through her vulva (discussed in the previous section). This connection of the Devi with vegetation and crop fertility that started in the pre-historic times, took a firm shape during the Gupta period, and still continues as the Navapatrika ritual that takes place during the akal bodhon (autumnal) Durga puja in West Bengal. Navapatrika ritual involves the worship of nine plants as living mediums (*Oryza sativa*, *Saraca asoka*, *Aegle marmelos*, *Curcuma longa*, *Punica granatum*, *Alocasia macrorrhiza*, *Sesbania sesban*, *Musa paradisiaca*, and *Colocasia esculenta*), and the Devi is invoked in them. The Navapatrika is viewed as a form of Durga, a personification of the crop spirit (Bhattacharya, 1977). At the core of the Harappan seal image, Sakambhari Devi concept of the Gupta period, and the later Navapatrika puja is the prehistoric practice of worshipping the Mother Goddess (Earth) for a good harvest.

Among the most popular forms of the Devi is Durga, where she appears with her vahana, a lion (Durga-simhavahini). Among the early representations of the Devi are copper coins of Azes (1st century BCE), where she stands in a tribhanga pose on a lotus, holds a lotus in her raised right hand, and the left hand is in a katihasta mudra; while the forepart of a lion is visible under her left elbow, and a humped bull on the reverse side of the coin stands for Shiva. A similar iconography of Devi Durga-simhavahini is seen Chandragupta-Kumaradevi coins and the lion-slayer coins of Chandragupta II in the imperial Gupta gold coin series. Here Devi is seated on a lion, holding a lotus flower or a cornucopia in her left hand, and often her feet remain resting on a lotus. Brhatsamhita and other texts like the Agamas describe Durga in her two-armed form, exactly as depicted in the Azes coins and the imperial Gupta coins: Dakshine cotpalam haste vama hastam pralambitam.

In a seal found at Rajghat in Uttar Pradesh (Gupta period), Devi Durga is seen holding a wreath in her left hand while the right hand holds a four-pronged object, and an inscription which reads Durggah in Gupta script clearly identifies the Devi (Banerjea, 1956). In another seal from Bhita in Uttar Pradesh (Gupta period), the Devi is seen holding a trishula in her right hand while her left hand is held in katihasta mudra, with Nandi by her side. The Nalanda archaeological site has yielded many Gupta era seals and murtis of Devi Durga both in her saumya and ugra aspects. One particular Saumya murti of the Devi from Nalanda worth noting, is a beautiful bronze image showing trinayani Durga, standing in samapada sthanaka posture. In her three hands she carries a japmala, a kamandala, and hooked staff, while the fourth hand is broken. The most interesting feature of this murti is the presence of an iguana or godha as the Devi's vahana near her right leg (Rao, 2017). The iguana or godha from

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here becomes a standing presence in Devi Parvati's murti, especially in the Bihar-Bengal belt during Pala dynasty rule.

Another unique Gupta era bronze murti of Devi Durga was found in Deulbari in Bangladesh, where Devi is depicted as ashtabhujā or eight-armed. Here Devi is seen standing in samapadaṣṭhanakā posture on a lion that is on a double lotus and triratha pitha (pedestal), along with two female attendants carrying chawri. An inscription on the pedestal refers to the devi as Sarvvani (another name of Parvati/Gauri, where Sarva is one of the names attributed to Shiva), and she carries dhanush, khetaka, ghanta, sankha, chakra, trisula, sara and khadga in her eight arms (Banerjea, 1956). While this murti shows 8 arms, Devi in her saumya aspect in ancient Bengal is typically shown as four armed, carrying a linga and japmala, kamandala, trisula, and showing varada mudra (or sometimes carrying a pomegranate in hand), with an iguana at the base as her vahana. This iconography of the Devi was carried over to South East Asia, and many similar murtis have been found from Java.

While the Devi was popularly worshipped in North and central India and separate shrines were built for her, in the south Devi was generally worshipped along with Shiva and their son Skanda (Soma-Skanda murti). Similarly, the Annapurna aspect of the Devi (giver of food) is popularly worshipped in north and eastern parts of India, while absent from south Indian worship of the Devi. Devi Annapurna is seen on the southern façade of the post-Gupta era (7th century CE) Parasurameswara temple in Bhubaneswara, where the Devi is seen giving food as alms to Shiva. Another murti of Devi Annapurna was found from the Paharpur site, now in Bangladesh.

Two other saumya aspects of the Devi are Lakshmi (Sri-Lakshmi) and Saraswati (Pushti-Saraswati), both associated with Vishnu as his consorts, but the two devis are also known to have separate representations. Lakshmi, who is seen as goddess of wealth, in her early iconography is seen seated or standing on a lotus (padmastha), holding a lotus in one hand (padmadhara), while the other hand is in katihasta mudra, and two elephants are seen doing her jalabhisheka (consecration by pouring water on the Devi). This form of the Devi is known as Gaja-Lakshmi or Abhisheka-Lakshmi, and are seen on 2nd-1st century BCE coins, and in the Bharhut-Sanchi panels (Rao, 2017). The same iconography is carried forward in the 8th century CE murti of Gaja-Lakshmi in Ellora Cave number 16, where Devi is seated on a lotus pond with her attendants, and her lotus seat is supported by two nagas, while two elephants do the jal-abhisheka. Iconography of Lakshmi without the two elephants is also popular, and she is identified with the Sirima devata from Bharhut, and seen on some early coins. On a series of Kuninda coins (2nd-1st century BCE), Lakshmi is seen holding a lotus, while a stag is shown accompanying her. The stag is often considered as the theriomorphic representation of the Devi, while there is also a line of thought that says the animal as mount shows her in a composite form termed as Durga-Lakshmi (Kramrisch, 1975). In support to the composite nature of the Devi, there are few more murtis that suggest the same. One is in the form of relief found at Bilsad (Uttar Pradesh), dated to the Gupta period, where Gaja-Lakshmi is shown riding a lion. Devi Durga, accompanied by both lion and stag, are seen in temples at Kanchipuram and Mahabalipuram.

Devi Saraswati is first recognised on a Bharhut railing where she is seen standing on a lotus and playing a vina, a musical instrument typically associated with the Devi. The famous Saraswati murti

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found at Mathura (Kankali tila), dateable to 2nd century CE, is seen carrying pustaka, another distinctive feature of the Devi. Sarswati is also found represented on 6th century CE coins of raja Samacharadeva from Bengal, where Devi stands on a lotus bed, carries lotus in her hands, and is accompanied by her vahana, the goose (Banerjea, 1956). In the 9th century built Mukteswara temple (Bhubaneswara), in a niche on the outer face of the compound wall, Devi Saraswati is seen seated on a lotus, playing the vina, and accompanied by two female attendants.

Among the most popular form of Durga is Mahisasuramardini, which is ghora aspect of the Devi. The earliest images of Durga-Mahishasuramardini were found from the pre-Kushana era, as terracotta plaques from Nagar in Rajasthan, dateable to 1st c. BCE – 1st c. CE. The murtis found at the site were mostly four-armed, and the Devi is seen pushing mahisasura up with her front right hand, while pulling his tongue out with her front left hand. She carries a khetaka (armour) in her back left hand, and a trisula in her back right hand (Agrawala, 1958). Similar images of the Mahisasuramardini (Kushana period) were found from Mathura and Besnagar, and the style continued into the Gupta period, as evident from similar terracotta murtis found at Ahichchhtra, and a sandstone relief from Bhita.

Thus, iconography wise Durga-Mahishasuramardini had already evolved before Gupta period, and this is made evident by a sculpture of the 12-armed figure of Mahisasuramardini, carved at the Udayagiri caves in 401 CE, during Chandragupta II's reign. The position of Durga-Mahishasuramardini by the side of Vishnu on the Udayagiri cave facade, shows the association of the two deities, as emphasised in the Durgastrotras of the Mahabharata, and some Puranas. The association of Durga with Vishnu is also seen in Brihatsamhita (chapter 57, vv. 37-39) that says, Ekanamsa (another aspect of Durga) must be depicted as standing between Krishna and Balarama, and a lotus must be held in her right hand, while the left hand must be in katihasta mudra.

Durga-Mahisasuramardini form as found across India can be divided into three categories: in first category, mahisasura is shown in fully animal form (buffalo, theriomorphic); in second category, the mahisasura is half human and half animal, or hybrid; and in third category, mahisasura is fully a human. The number of arms of the Devi (iconography-wise) may vary from two to thirty-two, though Devi with more than 12 arms is a development of later medieval period. If Devi's expression is taken into context, there are also three categories; in the first category Devi is seen pulling the mahisasura up using her bare hands and pulling out his tongue or squeezing his throat (as seen in the pre-Kushana murtis from Nagar), or she is thrusting her trisula into the neck of the mahisasura (Gupta and post-Gupta period style); in the second category, Devi is fighting the Mahisasura vigorously, which is beautifully depicted in Mahabalipuram Pallava era rock cut cave; and in the third type, Devi is seen standing over the severed head of a mahisa (buffalo), a sculpture art very common in Tamil Nadu temples (especially in Pallava era temples). The third type, where Devi stands over the severed head of the mahisa, though popular in Pallava temples insouth India, was likely to have been modelled from a Gupta period colossal murti of the Devi (5th -6th century CE), found in Besnagar (Kramrisch, 1975). Here Devi is 6 armed, stands on the severed head of the mahisa, and has two lions seated on two sides facing each other.

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The pre-Kushan era Nagara iconography of the Devi continued into the Gupta period, where a similar murti of the four-armed goddess is seen on a panel from the Bhumara temple (5th-6th century CE). The same fight posture of the Devi is repeated in the Udayagiri cave relief, though Devi here is depicted with 12 arms.

Conclusion :

Worship of matrika or Mother Goddess is among the earliest religions, and it started with the belief that women giving birth to new lives had magical powers. This worship continued into the proto-historic period and historic era, without losing its popularity, as evident from the Epics and Puranas. With the coming of the Gupta period, the Matrika worship became more systematised, where the Devi became the Supreme Feminine principle, and acquired her many aspects; thus, leading to the creation of a strong Sakta sect of worshippers among Hinduism that gained even greater popularity in the later centuries, continuing into the modern and postmodern era.

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