

Lion-Mount in Gaja-Lakṣmī Figures

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Normally, it is believed that *siṃha* or lion is associated as the mount with Śaivite goddesses, namely, Pārvatī and Durgā and her other forms like Maḥiṣamardinī and Kṣemaṅkarī. But in sculptural art we come across several other examples of goddesses like Gaja-Lakṣmī, Vārāhī and some unidentifiable ones, having one or two lions flanking or couched below the seat. Gods Viṣṇu, Nṛsiṃha, Sūrya, Śiva, Gaṇeśa have also been provided with the mount of two lions. Even the sage Agastya is no exception to it. In this paper we will discuss only the figures of Gaja-Lakṣmī with lion mount.

Representation of one or two lions with Gaja-Lakṣmī in Indian art begins from the Mauryan times and continues up to the medieval period. The earliest example is a terracotta plaque hailing from eastern Uttar Pradesh and presently housed in the Rahul Sankrityayan Museum, Kushinagar, U.P. (Acc. no. 78, fig. 1)¹. The standing goddess with *gajābhiṣeka* above is flanked by a standing lion near her feet. One each of the two Gaja-Lakṣmī figures from Kashmir belonging to the late Gandhāra period and having one lion below their seat are in the Los Angeles County Museum, California and Museum of Fine arts, Boston in U.S.A.² A unique representation of Gaja-Lakṣmī seated on the back of a lion hails from the well known Gupta site Bilsaḍ in Etah district of Uttar Pradesh. It is located on the gateway pillar of the temple of Mahāsenā, known from the inscription of the Gupta emperor Kumāragupta-I found on the two other pillars *in situ* at the site.³ Two post-Gupta images of the seated Gaja-Lakṣmī of Kashmir art, one with two and the other with one lion below the seat are housed in the Pratap Singh Bhuri Museum, Srinagar, J-K (Acc. No. A-27)⁴ and British Museum, London⁵ respectively, Another post-Gupta image of the standing Gaja-Lakṣmī belonging to c.6th-7th century CE found at Gaṇḍaī, district Kawardhā in Chhattisgarh has only one lion couched on the left of her seat.⁶ One beautiful Pratihāra panel representing Gaja-Lakṣmī in the middle with flanking lions, Gaṇeśa on her right and Kubera on the left hailing from Ābānerī near Jaipur in Rajasthan is a prized piece of the Government Museum, Amber (Acc. No. Amb. 4/139, fig.2)⁷ Two Gaja-Lakṣmī images are found at Khajurāho in Madhya Pradesh belonging to the 11th century CE. (figs. 3-4). One of them in standing posture and having two lions flanking her seat is a detached piece and is housed in the Khajurāho Museum (Acc. No. 817)⁸ while the other figure seated with a single lion below facing outward is located on the wall of the Visvanātha Temple⁹.

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Now we will examine the justification of one or two lions as mount with the figures of Gaja-Lakṣmī. We are well aware that no canonical treatise on Indian art (*śilpa*) prescribes lion or lions as *vāhana* with Gaja-Lakṣmī. So, as far as our knowledge goes, none of the divine figures, god or goddess, has been shown with double mount. Then the question is why artists have carved one or two lions with Gaja-Lakṣmī figures?

Out of the various names and forms of Lakṣmī, one is Rājya-Lakṣmī, which is frequently mentioned in literature and inscriptions. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (XI.4.3.1 ff), Śrī (Lakṣmī) is said to possess power, prestige, universal kingdom and many other things that a man would like to possess in this world.¹⁰ She is described as the goddess bestowing kingdoms - *Rajja-siri dāyikā devatā (Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā)*¹¹ and *Rājyadā rājyahantrī ca lakṣmī devī namostu te (Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa)*.¹² The *Siri Kālakaṇṇi Jātaka* (No. 392) quotes her saying, "I bestow the victory to men, I am Śrī, I am Lakṣmī and I am Bhūripannā". In the *Mahābhārata* (XII.83.45) too, she speaks in the same way, "I am the victory, I am the prosperity and I live with victorious kings".

The goddess in this context has been termed variously in literature. For example, she is called Narendra-Śrī (Bhāṣa's *Svapnavāsavadattā*, VI.7), Rājya-Śrī (*Pratimānāṭaka*, III.27), Rājya-Lakṣmī (*Raghuvamśa*, IV.5), XII.15-16; *Kumārasambhava*, VII.89, XIV.3; *Kaṇṇabhāra*, I.19; *Mudrā-rākṣasa*, VI.6; *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, Prakṛti Khaṇḍa, XXXV.18, Brahma Khaṇḍa, III.66 and *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, III.82.14). The terms Maurya-Lakṣmī and Nanda-Lakṣmī in *Mudrā-rākṣasa* (I.13, VI.6) and Mālava Lakṣmī in *Harṣacarita* (ch. IV) were also meant for the Rājya-Lakṣmī of those dynasties. Inscriptions also refer to her as Rājya-Lakṣmī in the Junāgaḍh Rock Inscription of Rudradāmana, Eraṇ Pillar Inscription of Budhagupta and Eraṇ Varāha Pratimā Inscription of Toramāṇa. Skandagupta's Junāgaḍh Inscription refers to her as Lakṣmī and his Bhitari Pillar Inscription as Kula-Lakṣmī and Vamśa-Lakṣmī. The Poona Copper Plate Inscription of Prabhāvatīguptā names the goddess as Nṛpa-Śrī. Numismatists call her Abhiṣeka Lakṣmī.

Lakṣmī is so called because all the royal insignia are associated with her. *abhiṣeka* (anointment ceremony), *dik-gajas* (elephants of the Four Quarters), *chatra* (parasol), *cāmara* (flywhisk) and *siṃhāsana* (the royal throne), all the royal insignia, have been prescribed by the *śilpa* texts which are found with the figures of the goddess.

Abhiṣeka or the anointment ceremony performed at the time of the coronation of a king established him in Śrī (Lakṣmī), undisputed sovereignty, majesty and prowess.¹³ The *abhiṣeka* of the goddess performed by the *dik-gajas* obviously bestows upon her much more dignified royalty. Elephants, by virtue of their huge body and enormous

strength are supposed to be the symbol of glory and royalty. Being the overlords of Four Quarters, they represent the *cakravartin* form of the goddess. It is more obvious when we find the goddess being anointed by four elephants, the Regents of all the main Four Quarters. Panels showing the goddess being bathed by four elephants have been found from many places, namely, Ellora (Cave Nos. 14-16, fig. 7)¹⁴. Badami (Cave No. 3, fig. 9)¹⁵ Indragadh Mandsaur, M.P., 8th century CE, housed in the Central Museum, Indore, fig. 8), Amjhara (Dungarpur, Rajasthan, c.8th-9th century CE (fig. 6) and from Śiva Temple at Varmāṇa (Sirohi, Rajasthan, fig. 5).¹⁸ *Abhiṣeka* or sprinkling of water by four elephants is also corroborated by literature. A *dhyāna-mantra* of Gaja-Lakṣmī clearly mentions it - *caturbhirgajaiḥ*.¹⁹ It is also found in the *Śilparatna* (XXIV. 9) - *caturbhir - dvipatibhiḥ*.²⁰ Presence of four elephants, (fig. 12) two bathing (*snāpyamānāsau*) and the other two (*tathā aparau*) sprinkling (*prakṣālayantau*), is also alluded to in the *Matsyapurāṇa* (261.46).²¹ Since the *abhiṣeka* of the goddess Lakṣmī is performed by *dik-gajas*, she is popularly known as Gaja-Lakṣmī, but her status of Rājya-Lakṣmī is very much there.

Like *gajābhiṣeka*, maidens with *cāmara* (flywhisk) and *chatra* (parasol) have also been mentioned in literature to attend the goddess and so are represented on her figures. A few examples in this case may be cited from the *Matsyapurāṇa* (*pārśve tasyā stryā stryaḥ kāryāś-cāmara-vyagra-pāṇayaḥ*, 261.26), *Mānasollāsa* (*cāmarair-vījyamānām ca yoṣidbhyām pārśvayo dvayo*, 1.97) and *Dhyānamālā* (*stryau pārśve dvai kārye śubhe cāmara-hastike*, mss, folio 33).²² Similarly, we may notice the presence of *chatra* over the head of the goddess in the *Samarāṅgaṇa-sūtradhāra* (*sachatra-sraga-vibhuṣaṇā*, XXXIV. 39). This literary description is supported by some figures of Gaja-Lakṣmī attended by *cāmara* and *chatra* bearing maidens along her sides. Such sculptures are found at Sanchi (both Great Stūpa and Stūpa No. 2, figs. 10-11), Kauśāmbī, Ellorā (Kailāśa Cave), Bhubaneśwara (Muktesvara Temple (fig. 13), Koṅārḥ (Sun Temple) and on a Gupta terracotta sealing recently discovered from Allahabad bearing an inscription "of the office of the chief Kumārāmātya" - *mūla-kumārāmātya-adhikaraṇasya*²³ and on the lintels of the two wooden doorway frames of domestic shrines from Western India, now preserved in the National Museum, New Delhi.²⁴

Now we will take up the lion. It is also a symbol of royalty, which inspired to create *simha-dvāra* (the royal gate) and *simha-āsana* (the royal throne). The main gate of a royal palace is normally called *simha-dvāra* (the lion-gate) because of the large lion figures installed on both sides of the steps or the gate. Similarly, *āsana* or the royal throne is called *simhāsana*, which literally means the lion-throne. This nomenclature is

the result of the making of all the four feet of throne in the form of a lion figure. But only the two frontal feet of a throne are visible; and so are the two lion figures supporting the throne of Gaja-Lakṣmī.

Dr. N.P.Joshi rightly informs us that the term *siṃhāsana* in the *Nārādīya-Saṃhitā* (XIII.205), a pre-8th century CE text, means a seat with figures of lions.²⁵ The commentator of the *Jaina Bṛhat-kalpasūtra*, while explaining the term 'āsana', states it to be the lion-throne. As the name *siṃhāsana* implies, miniature figures of lion would serve as front supports to the main seat, over which would appear the teacher. Association of a lion-throne with the Jaina Tīrthaṅkaras can be traced from as early as the first century CE. Traditionally, a lion-throne could only be used by very high authorities like the deities, emperors or teachers.²⁶

Normally, Lakṣmī or Gaja-Lakṣmī sits on *padmāsana*, the lotus-seat. But there are a few references wherein the goddess is described to be seated on a *siṃhāsana* (lion-throne). The *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (III. 82.3b), a *śilpa* treatise of the Gupta period (6th CE) ordains the image of Lakṣmī. When made separately without her lord Viṣṇu, she should be made four-armed and should be seated on an auspicious *siṃhāsana*, the lion-throne on which should be made a lotus of beautiful pericarps and eight petals - *prthak-caturbhujā kāryā devī siṃhāsane śubhe*.²⁷ The *Matsyapurāṇa* (261.45) also clearly mentions her to be seated in a cross-legged posture on *siṃhāsana* covered with a lotus flower - *padmāsanopaviṣṭā tu padma-siṃhāsana-sthitā*.²⁸ In the *Devatā-mūrti-prakaraṇa* (8.106) she has also been associated with *siṃhāsana - pratimā-caturbhujā kārye devī siṃhāsane śubhe*.²⁹ Similarly in the *Rūpamaṇḍana* (v.57) she is described as seated on an eighty petalled lotus placed over an auspicious *siṃhāsana- Aṣṭambujasyordhve Lakṣmiḥ siṃhāsane śubhe*.³⁰ These textual references justify the carving of the two lions on either side or below the seat of Gaja-Lakṣmī.

The single figure of a lion below the seat of the goddess represented quite similarly as that of *siṃhāsana*, may be taken as mount. The only Gaja-Lakṣmī figure of the Gupta period from Bilsad (Etah, UP), which sits directly on the back of a lion like Durgā, strengthens our conjecture.

Notes and References

1. A.L.Srivastava, 'A Unique Terracotta Plaque Representing Gaja-Lakṣmī with Two Lions' *Kalā*, Vol. X, pp. 37-44, fig.3 on p.38.
2. P.Pal, 'Dhanada Kubera', *Lalit Kalā*, No. 18, p. 21, Pl. X, fig. 11 and Pl. IX. fig. 10 respectively.
3. A.L.Srivastava, 'Siṃhavāhini Gaja-Lakṣmī : A Unique Icon in Indian Sculptural Art', *East and West* (Rome), Vol. 42, Nos. 2-4 (1992). pp. 485-488, figs. 1-2.

4. R.C.Kak, *Hand Book of the Archaeological & Numismatic Sections of the Pratap Singh Bhuri Museum, Srinagar*, Calcutta/Simla, 1923, pp. 64-65, fig. On p.64 (vide R.C.Agrawala, 'Gajābhīṣeka in Devī Icons', *Kalā*, Vol. X, p. 7, f.n.3).
5. V.C.Vohri, *Sculptures of Western Himalayas*, Delhi, 1991, Pl.V.12 (vide R.C. Agrawala, 'Bilsad kī Simhārūḍhā Gaja-Lakṣmī', *Pañchāla*, Vol. VIII (1995), p.2, f.n.2).
6. Mangalnand Jha, 'Chhattisgarh ki Viśiṣṭa Pratimāyen', *Kalā-Vaibhava*, Vol. XIII-XIV (2003-2004), p. 195, fig. 2 on p. 295.
7. R.C.Agrawala, 'Sculptures of Ābānerī', *Lalit Kalā*, Vol. I-II (1955-56), pp. 132-133, Pl. LIV, fig.5.
8. R.A. Awasthi, *Khajuraho kī Deva-Pratimāyen*, Agra, 1967, fig. 4.
9. *Ibid.*, fig. 5.
10. Vide K.K.Thaplyal, 'Gaja-Lakṣmī on Seals', *Foreigners in Ancient India & Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī in Art and Literature*, ed. D.C.Sircar, Calcutta University, 1970, p. 120, fn. 46.
11. *Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā*, Pāli Text Society, Vol. 1. p. 17.
12. *Brahma-vaivarta Purāṇa, Brahma Khaṇḍa*.
13. *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, VII. 34.9 vide U.N.Dhal, *Goddess Lakṣmī : Origin and Development*, New Delhi, 1979, p.30.
14. JAS Burgess, *Elura Cave Temples and The Brahmanical and Jaina Caves in Western India*. Edinburg, 1882. Reprinted by Sagar Publications, New Delhi, 1970, p.25. The line-drawing is published by R.C.Agrawala in *Kalā*, Vol. VIII (2001-02) on p.6 as fig. 2 who gives its reference from *Cave Temples of Deccan*, Pl. XLVII-B; R.S.Gupte, *Iconography of Hindus, Buddhists and Jainas*, Bombay, 1972, Pl. XIX, No. 110 (Kailāśa Cave); A.P.Srivastava, *Ellora kī Brāhmaṇa Deva Pratimāyen* (Hindi), Allahabad, 1988, p. 141, figs. 48 and 51.
15. JAS Burgess, *op. cit.*, p. 51, Pl. XLII (top row).
16. R.C.Agrawala, 'Gaja-Lakṣmī from Indragadh, M.P.', *Kalā*, Vol. VII (2000-01), p.15, fig.2.
17. R.C.Agrawala, 'A Note on Pitcher Carriers in Gaja-Lakṣmī Reliefs', *Kalā*, Vol. VIII (2001-02), p.6, fig.1.
18. R.C.Agrawala in *Arts Asiaticques*, Paris, Vol. XI, No.2 (1965), p.60, fig.25 on p.72.
19. S.K.Ramchandra Rao, *Vishṇu Kosha*, Kalpataru Research Academy, Bangalore, 1998, p.385 : *Kāntyā kāñcana-sannibhām himagiri-prakhyaiścaturbhigajaiḥ / Hastotkṣipta-hiraṇyamayāmṛtaghaṭaiḥ-siccyamānām śrīyām //*
20. *Śilparatna*, Part 2, ch. XXIV.9, Government Press, Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram), 1929, p.135.
21. *Matsyapurāṇa*, Vol.2, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, 1988.
22. *Dhyānamālā*, mss., an unpublished work on iconography by Śrīrāma preserved in the Utkal University Library vide K.S.Behra, 'Lakṣmī in Orissan Literature', *Foreigners in Ancient India & Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī in Art and Literature*, *op. cit.*, p.94, fn 7.
23. O.P.Srivastava, 'A Rare Terracotta Sealing from Allahabad Throwing New Light on the Office of kumārāmātya', *Journal of Kendriya Sanskrit Vidyapeetha, Allahabad*, Vol. XXXV. Pts. 1-2, pp. 101-109, Pl. facing p. 106.
24. See V.P.Dwivedi, 'Jaina Wood Carving in the National Museum, New Delhi Collection,' *Aspects*

- of *Jaina Art & Architecture*, eds. U.P.Shah and M.A.Dhaky, Ahmedabad, 1975, Paper no. 31, illustrations 5-6.
25. N.P.Joshi, 'Vaiṣṇava Iconography in Nārādīya Saṁhitā', *Bulletin of Museums & Archaeology*, State Museum, Lucknow, No. 11-12 (1973), p.10.
26. N.P.Joshi, 'Some Interesting Passages from Bṛhat-kalpasūtra', above noted Bulletin, No. 8 (1971), p. 55.
27. *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, III. 82.3-4 :
Pr̥thak-caturbhujā kāryā devī śimhāsane śubhe //3
Śimhāsane 'syāḥ kartavyaṁ kamalaṁ cārukarnīkam /
Aṣṭapatraṁ mahābhāga karṇikāyāṁ tu saṁsthitā //4
Ed. by Priya Bala Shah, Oriental Institute, Vadodara (1994), p. 216.
28. *Matsyapurāṇa*, 261.46 :
Karibhyāṁ snāpyamānā' sau bhṛṅgārābhyāṁ anekaśaḥ /
Prakṣālayantau kariṇau bhṛṅgārābhyāṁ tathā 'parau //
29. *Devatā-mūrti prakarṇam*, VIII. 106 :
Prathamā caturbhujā kāryā devī śimhāsane śubhe /
Śimhāsanaṁ prakartavyaṁ kamalaṁ cārukarnīkam //
Edited & Translated by Dr. Śrikrishna 'Jugnu', New Bharatiya Book Corporation, Delhi, 2003, p. 114.
30. Balarama Srivastava, *Rūpamaṇḍana*, Varanasi, 1989, p. 197.





Fig. 1 : Gaja-Lakṣmī with lions, terracotta, Maurya-Śuṅga period



Fig. 2 : Gaja-Lakṣmī flanked by Gaṇeśa aṙ Kubera, Ābāuerī (Jaipur), 9th century C.E.



Fig. 3 : Gaja-Lakṣmī with
bious, Khajuraho



Fig. 4 : Gaja-Lakṣmī with bious,
Viśvanatha temple, c.1002 C.E.,
Khajuraho



Fig. 5 : Gaja-Lakṣmī with four elephants,
Varanāṇa, Sirohi (Rajasthan), 8th century C.E.



Fig. 6 : Gaja-Lakṣmī with four elements, Anujhara,
Dungarpur (Rajasthan), 8th-9th century C.E.

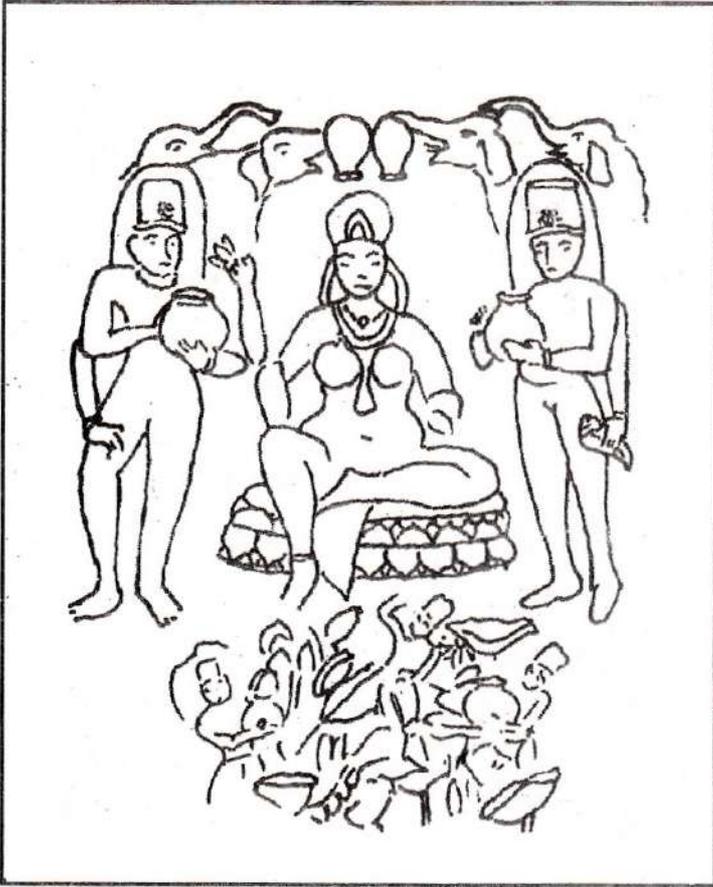


Fig. 7 : Gaja-Lakṣmī with four elements,
cave 14, Ellora, 8th century C.E.

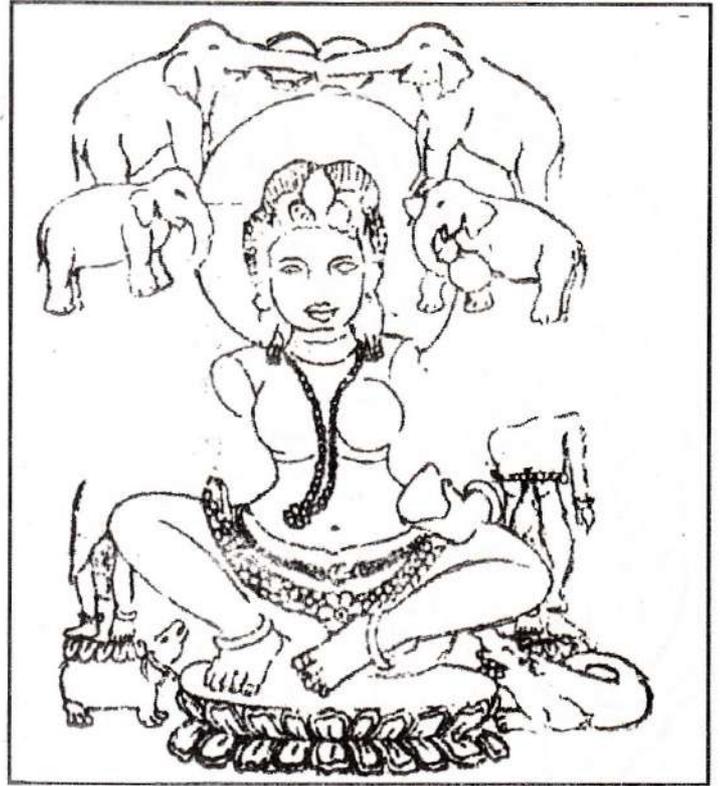


Fig. 8 : Gaja-Lakṣmī with four elements,
and Gaṅgā-Yamuna, Iṛṛagarh, Mandsaur,
N.P., 8th century C.E.



Fig. 9 : Gaja-Lakṣmī with four elements, cave 3, Bādānī, c. 6th century C.E.



Fig. 10 : Gaja-Lakṣmī with parasol,
Great Stupa, Sanchi

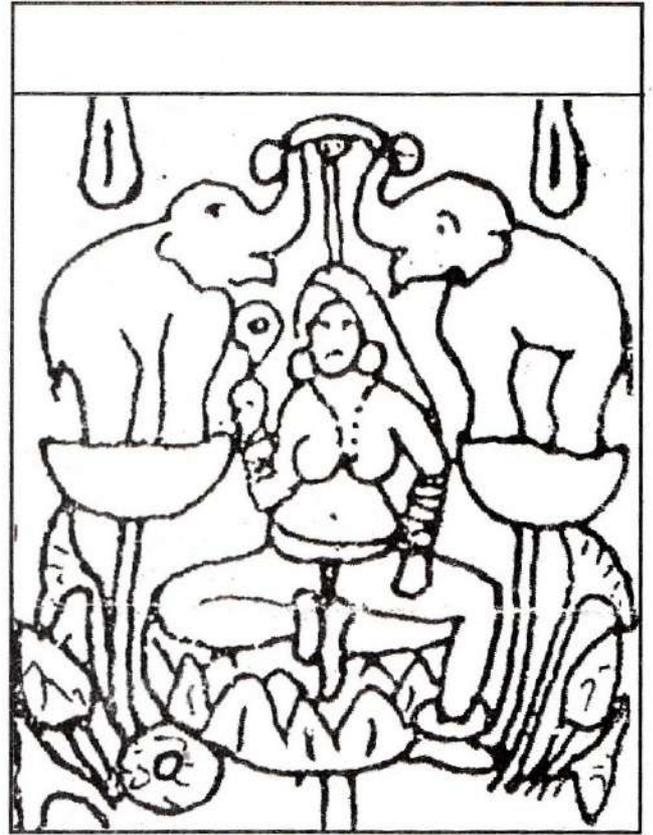


Fig. 11

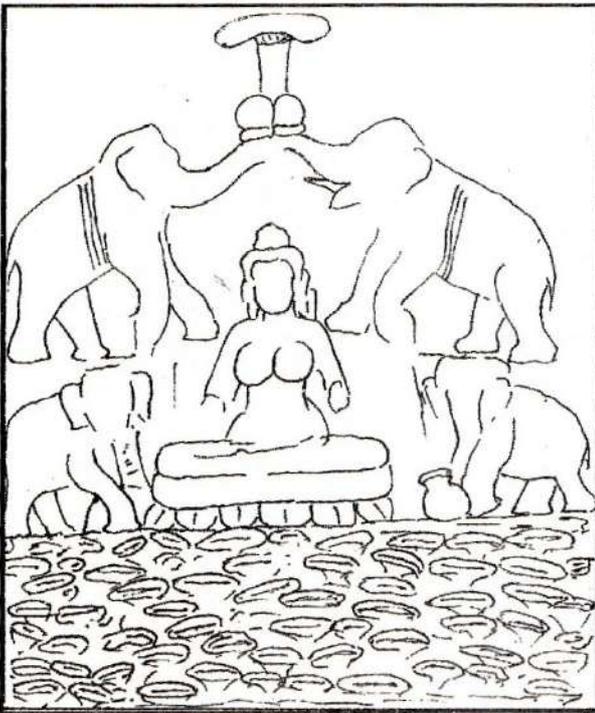


Fig. 12 : Gaja-Lakṣmī with four elements,
cave 16 (Kailash Temple) Ellora, 8th
century C.E.

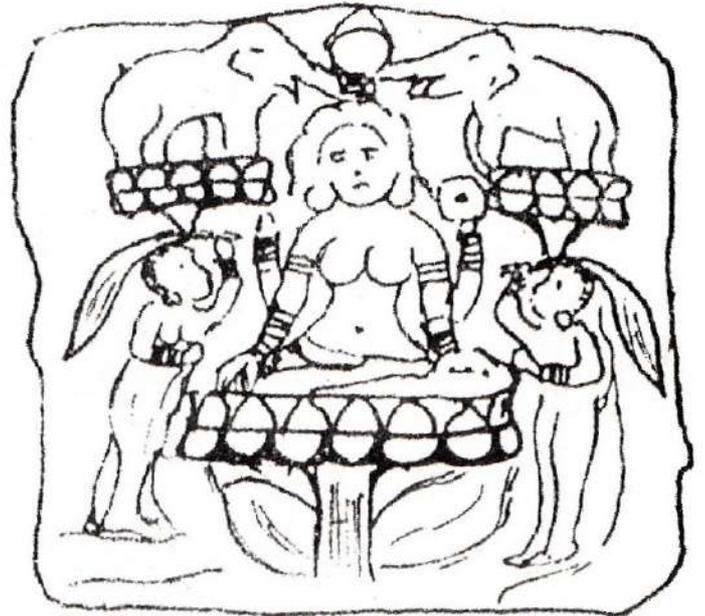


Fig. 13 : Gaja-Lakṣmī Mukteśvara
Temple, Bhubaneśvara, 13th century C.E.