

## Śrīsūkta and Iconography of Lakṣmī

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Besides the main stock of hymns (*mantras*) in *Ṛgveda*<sup>1</sup> there are some appendix parts known as *Khila-sūktas*. These have not been included in the *samhitās* and *padapāṭha* in the Śākala recession of *Ṛgveda*, but this does not affect their antiquity. All the *Khilas* reckoned in the *Khilānukramaṇī* belong to the period in which *Yaju*, *Sāma* and *Atharva samhitās* were compiled.<sup>2</sup> Total number of the *Khilasūktas* of *Ṛgveda* is thirty two or thirty-five according to Satavalekar. These have been divided in five *adhyāyas*.<sup>3</sup> *Śrīsūkta*<sup>4</sup> is the sixth *sūkta* of the second *adhyāya*. This *sūkta*, devoted to the goddess Śrī or Lakṣmī has fifteen main *mantras* or *ṛcās* (*pañcadaśarcam*). Apart from them there are additional thirteen or even fourteen *mantras* in different variants, the total thus coming to twenty-eight or twenty-nine. Sāyaṇa, the authoritative commentator of the Vedas, who flourished in 14<sup>th</sup> century has his commentary (*bhāṣya*) only on the main or first fifteen *mantras* of *Śrīsūkta*.<sup>5</sup>

The matter stored in the Vedic *samhitās* is said to have been further elaborated in the *Purāṇas*. It is, therefore, natural to find roots of various disciplines, which further get evolved and enormously enlarged with several additional factors in subsequent ages. Art and Iconography are naturally no exceptions. In the following pages we propose to take note of a few words or glimpses present in *Śrīsūkta*, which seem related with iconographic features of Abhiṣekalakṣmī. This has been done in light of Sāyaṇas commentary, who must have seen a good number of Lakṣmī figures datable to past as well as to his own age.

Different terms or words related with Lakṣmī in *Śrīsūkta* appear mostly in accursive form (*dvitīyā vibhakti*) because through this *sūkta* the devotee is requesting Jātaveda, that is Agni to 'call' the goddess for favouring him (*jātaveda*

*ma āvaha*)<sup>6</sup> by granting several boons. Citing the root word with its meaning according to Sāyaṇa we have proceeded to discuss the related image forms of Lakṣmī.

### **Hariṇī (II.6.1)**

The word stands for a doe, the female of a deer. Sāyaṇa<sup>7</sup> gives two meanings, namely, (i) of green colour and (ii) assuming the form of a doe. For 'doe' we have some supporting references from the Purāṇas also. Pt. Kāshikar, in his Sanskrit discussions on Sāyaṇa, cites a verse from *Devīpurāṇa* (without exact reference) informing that the goddess Śrī roamed in the forest in the form of a doe.<sup>8</sup> Some interesting evidence to this effect is to be seen in the numismatic field. On the silver and copper coins of the Kuṇinda<sup>9</sup> (c. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) we see a doe standing facing left with Śrīvatsa symbol between her horns (Fig.1). In



Fig.1: Hariṇī on Kuṇinda coin.

front of the animal stands two-armed Lakṣmī with lotus in right hand. Sivaramamurti<sup>10</sup> in this connection observes that in this device possibly we have both human and animal form of the goddess.

### **Hiraṇmayī (II.6.1, 13, 14)**

According to Sāyaṇa<sup>11</sup> the term means 'of golden form, or of gold'. This reminds a gold *repousse* figure of Lakṣmī datable to c. 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century CE found

from Motīḍīh in district Shahjahanpur, U.P.<sup>12</sup> (Fig.2). The goddess in this case is seen standing with lotus in hand, a miniature Yakṣa also appears near her feet.

**Āradrā (II.6.4, 13, 14)**

Sāyaṇa gives two interpretations. At one place<sup>13</sup> he takes the goddess 'wet' due to her coming out from the Ocean of Milk (*kṣīrasāgara*). At another place<sup>14</sup> commenting on two words namely 'ādrā' and 'puṣkariṇī' he observes the deity 'saturated due to



Fig.2: Gold repousse figure, Lucknow Museum.



Fig.3: Gajalakṣmī, eight elephants, Bundi (Photo Courtesy: L.D. Vyas, Varanasi).

anointment (*abhiṣeka*) by the elephants of the cordial points (*diggajas*).

The term *ādrā* obviously indicates the figure of *Abhiṣekalakṣmī* or *Gajalakṣmī*. In sculptures the goddess is seen being anointed by two, four or even eight<sup>15</sup> elephants. Among the figures of *Gajalakṣmī* in general two deserve special mention. In one case<sup>16</sup> (Fig.3) presently placed in a small shrine at Bundi, Rajasthan, datable to 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century the goddess is seen squeezing water from her wet

tresses with both hands. In the other case (Fig.4, 4a) hailing from Maheshpur,<sup>17</sup> district Sarguja in Chattisgarh, a thin water stream is seen distinctly coming down from face, left breast, crossed legs, lotus seat finally reaching the tail of the monkey below. The feature 'wet' or saturated with water has been very clearly shown in these two cases. No parallels of them have yet been reported.

#### Tarpayantī (II.6.4)

Sāyaṇa<sup>16</sup> interprets the word as 'satisfying' (somebody or granting something; hence the word *tarpaṇa*).

A beautiful sculpture of Pratihāra period (c. 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century) housed in the Museum at Kannauj, U.P.<sup>19</sup> depicts Ardhanārīśvara figure on obverse and standing two-armed Lakṣmī (some have called her Tārā, which is not correct)



Fig.4,4a,4b: Gajalakṣmī, Maheshpur (Photo Courtesy: K.P. Verma)

with lotus in left hand on reverse (Fig.5). With her suspended right hand she is giving, rather pouring something in the open hands of the devotee sitting on knees near her right foot. Obviously the devotee is being satisfied with what he needs, hence *tarpayantī*.

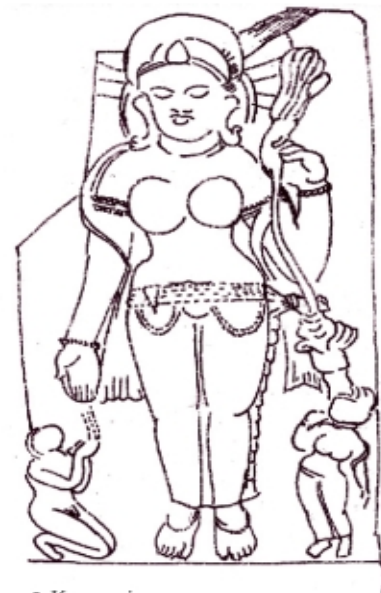


Fig.5: Lakṣmī, Karnauj.



Fig.6: Gajalakṣmī, Bharhut.

#### Padmeṣṭhitā (II.6.4)

Standing or seated on lotus,<sup>20</sup> both these forms are visible in sculptures. For example, in one case from Bharhut<sup>21</sup> datable to c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (Fig.6) the goddess stands on central lotus, while the two other lotuses serve as seats for the anointing elephants. All the three flowers are emerging from a full vase below. Figures of the deity seated on lotus are more than one. A beautiful one, for example, can be seen in the Kailāśa Temple at Ellora<sup>22</sup> (c. 8<sup>th</sup>

century CE) (Fig.7) wherein a double lotus appears as her seat.

**Devajuṣṭā (II.6.5)**

Sāyaṇa explains the term as attended by gods like Indra and others.<sup>23</sup> Gods and Goddesses attending Lakṣmī can be noticed in several sculptures such as:<sup>24</sup>

(i) **Gaṇeśa and Kubera:** A good number of sculptures show Gajalakṣmī flanked by seated Gaṇeśa on right and similar Kubera on left. These range in date from c. 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century.

(ii) **Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma:** A sculpture from Rajasthan (Fig.8) and one from Ellora (Fig.9) show the two gods flanking Gajalakṣmī in seated or standing pose. The sculptures are datable to c. 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>25</sup>



Fig.7: Gajalakṣmī, Ellora, (L.D.)



Fig.8: Gajalakṣmī, Amjhara, Rajasthan (L.D.)



Fig.9: Gajalakṣmī, Ellora

- (iii) **River goddesses with pitchers in hands:** As per Purāṇas several rivers participated in the *abhiṣeka* ceremony of Lakṣmī. The *Skandapurāṇa*<sup>26</sup> records names of no less than twenty-four such rivers including Gaṅgā and Yamunā. A number of sculptures from North (Fig.8) datable to c. 5<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century CE evidence this feature.<sup>27</sup>
- (iv) **Males with jars in hands,** obviously the oceans, *samudras* (Fig.9).<sup>28</sup>

#### ***Bilva* (II.6.6)**

*Bilva* tree and fruit. According to Sāyaṇa, the *Bilva* tree came in existence from the hands of Lakṣmī<sup>29</sup>. This is well supported by the *Vāmanapurāṇa*<sup>30</sup>, which gives a long list of trees produced from the limbs of different gods and goddesses. Association of *Bilva* fruit with Lakṣmī is visible in the following sculptures:

- (i) Lakṣmī standing with *Bilvaphala* in right hand and lotus in the left. The sculpture (Fig.10) hailing from Murshidabad, Bengal is datable to c. 11<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>31</sup>
- (ii) Lakṣmī with owl as mount from Kuṣmāṇḍī, Bengal datable to c. 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century CE (Fig.11).<sup>32</sup>



Fig.10: Lakṣmī (L.D.), Murshidabad



Fig.11: Lakṣmī, Kushmandi

- (iii) Gajalakṣmī from Bhitari, U.P. (c. 6<sup>th</sup> century CE) (Fig.12).<sup>33</sup> In this connection it has to be kept in mind that the fruit in the hands of Lakṣmī has sometimes been described as *mātuliṅga* or *bijapūraka*.<sup>34</sup>

### Devasakhā, Kīrti and Maṇi (II.6.7)

The goddess has been requested to favour the devotee with the above three. Devasakhā according to Sāyaṇa<sup>35</sup> is Kubera, the friend of Mahādeva. Kubera is well known as Trymbakasakhā. In number of icons Kubera is seen with Lakṣmī either with Gaṇeśa or even independently (e.g.Fig.4 b).

Sāyaṇa takes Maṇi<sup>35</sup> as either Cintāmaṇi, a jewel capable to ward off all anxieties or as Maṇibhadra, the Treasurer (*kośādhyakṣa*) of Kubera. This Maṇibhadra commanded worship from early times. An inscribed image of Maṇibhadra datable to

1<sup>st</sup> century BCE hailing from Pawāyā is presently



Fig.13, 13a: Lakṣmī, Kannauj (L.D.)

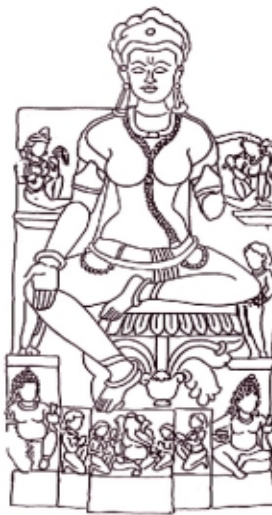


Fig.12: Gajalakṣmī, Bhitāri

housed in the Gwalior Museum.<sup>36</sup> An interesting image of seated Lakṣmī, datable to Pratihāra period hailing from Kannauj (Figs.13, 13a) depicts two Kubera like figures flanking the outer folds of the seat.<sup>37</sup> In light of Sāyaṇa's observation on Devasakhā and Maṇi, these two similar figures



can be identified as Kubera and his treasurer Mañibhadra. This seems applicable to an earlier figure of Lakṣmī from Mathura<sup>38</sup> datable to c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, which has two corpulent Yakṣas seated cross-legged on the left side of the goddess. Three worshippers are seen on the corresponding side.

So far Kīrti is concerned, Sāyaṇa<sup>35</sup> explains the word in two ways, namely, either the daughter of Dakṣa or as the treasury (*kośaśālā*) of Kubera.<sup>35</sup> The treasury of Kubera is supposed to be housing nine Nidhis (*navanidhi*), namely, Padma, Mahāpadma, Śaṅkha, Makara, Kacchapa, Mukunda, Kuṇḍa, Nīla and



Fig.15: Kubera, Pabhosa



Fig.14: Gajalakṣmī, Verman, Rajasthan (L.D.)

Kharva, hence Kubera is known as Nidhi-īśa or Nidhinātha. The two corpulent seated males with big jars by their side, identified as Śaṅkha and Padma Nidhi seen in a Gajalakṣmī figure from Varman<sup>39</sup> in Rajasthan (Fig.14) datable to c. 9<sup>th</sup> century CE may be taken as representing *Kośaśālā* of this god of wealth. This applies to the two big jars also often seen under the feet of seated Kubera, for example the one from Pabhosa in the Lucknow Museum (Fig.15) and also the Buddhist correspondent Jambhala with inverted jar below his feet.

### Kardama and Ciklīta (Śrīputra) (II.6.11.12)

Sāyaṇa<sup>40</sup> makes it very clear that Śrī is *suputrā* because of her two sons Kardama and Ciklīta. Elsewhere<sup>41</sup> along with these two, two more, namely, Ānanda and Śrītaḥ find mention as the sons of Śrī. All of them have been called sages (*ṛṣis*). This iconographic feature of Śrī with child finds evinced in the following sculptures:

- (i) Lakṣmī seated in *godohikāsana* (posture of milking a cow) with long stalked lotus resting on her left shoulder (Fig.16). Her right hand is raised in *abhaya* and the left holds a cradled child. The figure is datable to early centuries of the Christian era.<sup>42</sup>
- (ii) Lakṣmī seated with grown up baby flanked by two attendants, one of them carries an umbrella. This Kuṣāṇa icon also hails from Mathura.<sup>43</sup>
- (iii) Terracotta seal from North-west showing Gajalakṣmī supporting a baby seated in her lap (Fig.17). The seal has been dated in the Kuṣāṇa period.<sup>44</sup>
- (iv) Gajalakṣmī with child from Bengal datable to c. 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, now in San Francisco Museum of Asian Art.<sup>45</sup>



Fig.16: Lakṣmī with cradled child, Mathura



Fig.17: Gajalakṣmī with child, North-west (after D.M. Srinivasan & V.K. Gupta)

### Mātaram (II.6.11,12)

The aspect of motherhood seems represented in some early sculptures from Bharhut (Fig.6) and Mathura (Fig.18) wherein the goddess appears holding her own breast with left or right hand. In this connection it is worthwhile to note that according to Caraka the mother should start feeding the child for the first time with her right breast (*prathamam dakṣiṇastanam pāyayet*).<sup>46</sup> In this connection one is reminded of an episode appearing in the Revākhaṇḍa of the *Skandapurāṇa*, which describes Śrīdevī, who invites and asks the thirsty sage Mārkaṇḍeya to come and suck her breast if the latter intended to remain alive.<sup>47</sup>

### Colours

Apart from the features discussed above Śrīsūkta has some interesting information about the colour of the goddess. This can be gathered from the words *Hiraṇyavarṇā* (II.6.1), *Ādityavarṇā* (II.6.6) and *Piṅgalā* (II.6.13) suggesting yellow colour. Similarly *Padmavarṇā* (II.6.4) suggests lotus colour, namely pink or red. The words *Candrā* (II.6.1) and *Yaśasājvalantī* (II.6.5) indicate white colour. It is well known that in literary

tradition 'fame' (*yaśa, kīrti*) is white in colour.

This feature, that is the colours, is not discernable in sculptures, but they can be well noticed in products of folk terracotta art. In Varanasi on the occasion of Sorahī melā on Lakṣmikuṇḍa crested terracotta heads of the goddess Lakṣmī are available in large numbers for traditional worship (Fig.19). These are of three colours namely yellow, red and white.<sup>48</sup> It is interesting to note that the *Vāmanaapurāṇa* also refers to four forms of Lakṣmī under the names Śvetā, Raktā, Pīta and Nīlā.<sup>49</sup>



Fig.18: Lakṣmī: Padmā, Mathura



Fig.19: Terracotta heads of Lakṣmī, Varanasi (after Prof. Kamal Giri)

## Alakṣmī, Jyeṣṭhā

Besides Lakṣmī, *Śrīsūkta* refers to her elder sister called Jyeṣṭhā or Alakṣmī, the goddess of indolence, misfortune and poverty (II.6.8). Sāyaṇa<sup>50</sup> commenting on Jyeṣṭhā observes that Lakṣmī is being requested that the 'unclean' (due to hunger and thirst) Alakṣmī be driven away from my house. Here the word *bāhyā* (II.6.6) is significant. In the field of sculptures we know of the figures of this goddess, especially from South, which are not installed in the temple proper, but placed outside in the premises and that too in a way as if pulled out of the seat and thrown away or discarded.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps, the word *bāhyā* is responsible for this practice.

Sāyaṇa, of course has a different view.<sup>52</sup>

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2. *Ibid.*, p.901.
3. *Ibid.*, p.891.
4. *Rgveda*, Khila II.6.
5. Serial 1 above, p.929 last line.
6. *Śrīsūkta*.1.
7. Serial 1 above p.927 – हरितवर्णा हरिणीरूपधरां वा
8. Serial 1 above p.927 – श्रीधृत्वा हरिणीरूपं अरण्ये संचचारहेति देवीपुराणाच्च।
9. N.P. Joshi, 'Lakṣmī as Cow and Stag on Coins: A Note', *Kalā*, The Journal of Indian Art History Congress, Guwahati, XVIII, 2012-13, pp.1-3.
10. C. Sivaramamurti, '*Śrī Lakṣmī in Art and Literature*', Fig.59, p.28.
11. Serial 1 above, p.927 – हिरण्यस्वरूपां, हिरण्यविग्रहां वा
12. N.P. Joshi, 'Some Unnoticed finds of Iconographic Interest', *East and West*, N.S.22, Nos.1-2 (March-June). 1972, Rome, Fig.9, p.96.
13. Serial 1 above, p.928 – लिक्न्नां क्षीरोदधेरुत्पन्नत्वात्
14. *Ibid.*, p.929 – आद्रां पुष्करिणीमभिषेकोद्युक्त दिग्गजशुण्डाग्राम्। पुष्कर शब्दः गजशुण्डाग्रवाचकः।
15. Two elephants – very common  
Four elephants – e.g. State Museum, Lucknow, acc.nos.S.767 & 832.  
Eight elephants – Sculpture from Bundi, Rajasthan, शिल्पी गुप्ता, 'राजस्थान की शक्तिपूजा: कतिपय असाधारण शक्ति प्रतिमाएँ', वैचारिकी, XV, 4, March 2010, Fig.2, p.65.
16. Shilpi Gupta, as above.

17. K.D. Verma, 'महेशपुर की कला, रायपुर, 2012, p.10, Fig.10. I am grateful to Dr.A.L. Srivastava, Bhilai, who brought this figure to my notice and made the photographs available.
18. Serial 1 above, p.925 – तर्पयन्ती-भक्तान् मनोरथैः इतिशेषः
19. N.P. Joshi, 'Two Problematic Sculptures of Pratihāra Period', *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, Bombay, 56-59, 1981-84, pp.175-79.
20. Serial 1, above – कमलेनिषण्णामासीनाम्
21. C. Sivaramamurti, 'Śrī Lakṣmī', Fig.72.
22. J.Burgess, *The Cave Temples of India, Ellora*, London, 1980, Pl.LXXXIII, Fig.1.
23. Serial 1 above – देवजुष्टां देवैरिन्द्राद्यैः जुष्टां सेवितां प्रीतां वा
24. For example:
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  - (ii) c. 9<sup>th</sup> century CE – R.C. Agrawal, 'Sculptures from Abaneri', *Lalitkalā*, I-II, 1955-56, Pl.LIV, pp.132-33.
  - (iii) c. 10<sup>th</sup> century CE – Govt. Museum, Mathura, acc.no.15.1119.
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- R.C. Agrawala, 'A Note on Pitcher Carriers in Gajalakṣmī Relief', *Kalā*, VIII, 2003, Fig.2, p.6.
26. *Skandapurāṇa*, Vaiṣṇava., 14.1-11, Mor Ed. pp.800-01.
27. A.L. Srivastava, 'Identification of Pitcher Carriers in Gajalakṣmī Reliefs', *Kalā*, IX, 2004, Figs.1-11, pp.67-74.
28. R.C. Agrawala, 'A Note on Pitcher Carriers.', *Kalā*, VIII, Fig.2, p.6.
29. Serial no.1 above p.928 – विल्व नामको वृक्षः प्रादुर्भूतः त्वत्करादिति शेषः ।
30. *Vāmana.*, 17.8 – कात्यायन्याः शमी जाता बिल्वो लक्ष्म्याः करेऽभवत् ।
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32. *Ibid.*, Pl.227, p.283.
33. N.P. Joshi, *Catalogue of Brahmanical Sculptures in the State Museum, Lucknow*, Fig.61, p.127.
34. *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa, prādhānika rahasya*, verses 5-6.
35. Serial no.1 above, p.920 – देवः महादेवः तस्य सखा कुबेरः कीर्त्यभिमानीनी दक्षकन्या देवता । कुबेर कोशशाला वा । सा च मणिना चिन्तामणिना मणिभद्रेण कोशाध्यक्षेण वा सह सार्थमुपैतु उपगच्छतु । मह्यं ददातु यच्छतु ।
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37. A.L. Srivastava, 'The First Stone Image of Lakṣmī found at Kannauj', *Kalā*, XV, 2009-10, Figs.1,2, pp.1-4.
38. N.P. Joshi, *Catalogue.*, *op.cit.*, Fig.57.

39. R.C. Agrawala, 'Unpublished Temples of Rajasthan', *Arts Asiatiques*, XI.2, 1965, Fig.25, pp.59-60.
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The author is grateful to Prof. Yugal Kishor Mishra of Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, Varanasi for drawing my attention to this significant reference explaining the word Ciklīta.
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ऋषयः श्रियः पुत्राश्च श्रीदेवी देवतामताः ॥
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48. Kamal Giri, 'Festive Terracottas from Varanasi', *Kalā*, XVIII, 2012-13, Fig.3, pp.21-23.
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50. Serial no.1 above, p.229 – क्षुत्पिपासामलामशनतृष्णामलिनात्मिकां ज्येष्ठां वृद्धां । श्रियाप्रागुत्पन्नामित्यर्थः .... मे गृहात् निर्णुद निवारय ।
51. T.A. Gopinath Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, I/2, p.390.
52. Serial no.1, above, p.928 –  
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