

Śakti Images from Varanasi

(A case study of Bharat Kala Bhavan Sculptures)

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Bharat Kala Bhavan has in its rich collection of sculptures a few Śakti images hailing from Varanasi. Though the number of such images has been microscopic yet some of these are unique and rare from the iconographical point of view. Aesthetically, the images are no less inferior either and visibly, they are quite pleasing.

Before analyzing such images, a reference needs to be made here about the omnipresent aspect of Śakti mentioned in the Sṛṣṭikhaṇḍa of **Padmapurāṇa**. It mentions Śakti as:

सर्वगा सर्वभूतेषु द्रष्टव्या सर्वतोद्भूता -(Pa. Pur. 17.182) It further gives a long list of Śakti's name and each one is associated with one place or other. Accordingly, goddess Śakti in her Viśālākṣī aspect has been associated with Varanasi¹. This has been quite a late reference but one finds Varanasi associated with Śakti from about the Mauryan period if not earlier (c. 4th-3rd century B.C.). A few ring stones in Bharat Kala Bhavan discovered from Rajghat, Varanasi in fragments laid bare the presence of tiny figures of Śakti on these in her aspects of mother goddess or fertility goddess or may even be as goddess Lakṣmī.² Besides these fragments, the Museum possesses a crystal pendant carved in the shape of a female head and this has been taken as a female energy or power which could save its owner from the inauspicious evil eyes. Of the stone images, the collection has a few *mātrkā* images which belong to the class of emanatory goddesses, aiding gods and goddesses in their fight against the demons. The *Mātrkā*s helped Śiva in fighting Andhakāsura; cooperated Caṇḍī to fight against Śumbha-Niśumbha and fought with Skanda against Tārakāsura. They sided Sitā to destroy Rāvaṇa and helped Brahmā to kill Niṛta and according to Kālidāsa, they were even present during the marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī.³

Indian iconography discusses two types of *mātrkā*s viz. *saumyā* and *ugrā* types. The term '*mātarāḥ*' (the mothers) appears quite justified when they are shown in '*saumyā*' roles. Sometimes, they are shown with a child in their laps and this further emphasizes their motherhood. They are also known as protectress of children and their worship has been associated with the removal of barrenness of women. Their terrific aspects (*ugrā*) are seen when they took part in violent struggle against the demons. Their *ugra* aspect becomes quite visible when they take up abode in cave or in burning grounds. The *sākta* and tantric overtones become quite apparent in such aspects.

When conceived in art, *mātrkā*s are shown either in single or in groups in a

panel accompanied by male guardian figures. Normally, such a panel shows Gaṇeśa on the left and Vīrabhadra on the right. Some have been shown with a child on lap.⁴

Br̥hat Samhitā in its chapter 57 discusses the iconographic characteristics of the mothers. It says that,

मातृगणः कर्तव्यः स्वनामदेवानुरूपकृतचिह्न (Br̥. Sam̥. LVII.56)

The mothers should be made with the forms and cognizances of the individual gods whom they are named. The **Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa** maintains nearly the same notion when it says that :

यस्य देवस्य यद्रूपं यथाभूषणवाहनानि तद्देवहि तत् शक्ति... (Mā. Pur. VIII.13)

The Śakti of each god is characterized by the god's form, ornaments and mounts.⁵ According to the tradition, the mothers emanated

- (a) from different gods
- (b) from Śiva
- (c) from Durgā/Caṇḍī

During the war between goddess Caṇḍī and demon Niśumbha, the mothers came out from the body of their related gods, Brahmāṇī came out of Brahmā, Māheśvarī from Maheśvara, Kaumārī from Kumāra and so on. Demon Niśumbha was killed by the great Mother, with help of *sapta māṭṛkās*. This led demon Śumbha to make a satirical remark that she could kill his brother with the help of other goddess. At this, the goddess replied that:

एकैवाहं जगत्यत्र द्वितीया का ममापरा।

पश्यैता दुष्टमय्येव विशन्त्यो मद्विभूतयः॥ (Mā. Pur. X.3-4)

On this earth there is no second one than me; these mothers are my *vibhūtis*, these are returning and merging with me.⁶ A Saivite mythology informs us that the mothers came out of Śiva and helped in killing Andhakāsura.⁷

The number of mothers was never been unanimous. The **Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa** refers to seven mothers viz. Brahmāṇī, Māheśvarī, Kaumārī, Vārāhī, Nārasimhī and Aindrī. Later on, in the text two more names were added: they were Śivadūti and Kālī. The **Agni Purāṇa** also refers to seven mothers initially (*Sapta Māṭṛkā*) and these are Brāhmī, Śaṅkarī, Kaumārī, Lakṣmī, Vārāhī, Aindrī and Cāmuṇḍā. Subsequently, another name Mahālakṣmī was added making the number eight (*aṣṭa māṭṛkā*). The **Matsya Purāṇa** mentions about nine mothers where names of Yogeśvarī and Kālīkā were added with the traditional list. Utpala, commentator of the **Br̥hat Samhitā** refers to eleven mothers, viz., Brāhmī, Vaiṣṇavī, Raudrī, Kaumārī, Aindrī, Yamī, Vārāhī, Kauberī, Nārasimhī, Vārūnī and Vaināyakī. Alberuni knew of seven mothers such as Brahmāṇī, Kaumārī, Vaiṣṇavī, Vārāhī, Indrāṇī, Bhagavatī and Cāmuṇḍā and in the Śalya Parva of **Mahābhārata**, there are references to numerous mothers but names only one hundred and ninety four only.⁸

Among these mothers, Bharat Kala Bhavan has in its collection single images of Vaiṣṇavī and Cāmuṇḍā hailing from Varanasi. Single images of *Mātrkās* are very rare but the said collection has single images of Indrāṇī, Brahmāṇī, Vārāhī, of course, not hailing from Varanasi.⁹

There is an interesting Vaiṣṇavī image in Bharat Kala Bhavan (Acc. No. 174). Made in Chunar sandstone, the image was made locally in Banaras in the 10th century A.D. (66 × 41 × 33 cms). What is unique in this image is that in this Vaiṣṇavī is seen dancing. Dancing *mātrkā* image is conspicuously extremely rare. Śakti images were usually made either in seated posture or in standing attitude. Her feet are, however, sadly broken away. She holds usual attributes like a Viṣṇu image; her upper right hand holds a club (*gadā*) and upper left carries a wheel (*cakra*). She has a conch-shell (*śaṅkha*) in her lower left while the lower right hand which was seemingly in *abhaya mudrā* is found mutilated away. This conclusion is drawn from the four miniature Vaiṣṇavī images carved on the plain back stella of this image. Their hands displayed the said attributes and gesture. The Vaiṣṇavī appears as a very young female with a full body and her voluptuous body has seen modestly executed. Her form reminds of Utpala, the commentator of **Br̥hat Saṁhitā** who emphasized that the breasts, slender waist and massive hips of the *mātrkās* should be depicted so as to give maximum emphasis to their feminine charms.¹⁰

The Museum has a badly mutilated figure of goddess Cāmuṇḍā (Acc. No. 205). It only shows the upper part of an emaciated head with the intact upper part of a rectangular back stellae (43 × 43.5 × 20 cms.). The terrifying countenance of the goddess appears as if she is hunger personified (या देवी सर्व भूतेषु क्षुधारूपेण संस्थिता). Combination of physical privation and awesome psychological reflections, *Śmasānajā* and *Raudrā*, she has wrinkled forehead, bulging out eye balls from their sockets, mouth opened with exposed canines, slack and elongated ears and her veins, nerves and arteries exposed. This very look of Cāmuṇḍā recalls the description of her in the 'संग्रामविजयविद्या' chapter of **Agni Purāṇa**:

'She lives in burning ground, sits, rides or dances on a corpse; is surrounded by vultures jackals etc. She wears tiger skin or elephant hide, is garlanded by human skulls, ornament of black serpent, emaciated with sunken belly, protruding ribs, swollen veins, eyes depressed, flame like hairs, fearful appearance' (p. 135).

Elsewhere, she is also described as of old age (*vṛddhā*) and having protruding teeth (*vivṛtānanā*). She is, however, rarely described as dancing. Incidentally, there is an image of dancing Camuṇḍā in the collection of the Museum of our issue (Acc. No. 20926) which also reportedly hails from Varanasi. During the course of her dance, her left leg is held aloft while her right leg is firmly placed on the lotus (*padmapīṭha*). The said lotus is placed on the leisurely reclining body of a male figure possibly representing Śiva. The latter was earlier a Śava and by the blissful touch of the feet of

the goddess, *Śava* became *Śiva*. This 11th century A.D. figure is badly mutilated and she is headless. She has an emaciated figure with a pair of pendulous breasts. Of her sadly broken ten hands, one intact right hand holds a kettle drum (*damaru*) and one partially survived left hand holds something indistinct and is drawn near her mouth. She wears a garland of human skulls. She is found surrounded by a number of Śākta images either carrying or holding skull cups.

There is a bust of female deity in this collection which maintains her ambiguity till date (Acc. No. 194). This 11th-12th century bust hails from Varanasi and was donated to the Museum by the famous Hindi poet Jai Shankar Prasad. This bust has a plain circular halo behind its head that discloses its divine association. Both of her hands are sadly mutilated away. The capital of a spear is slantingly adjusted to the left side of her circular halo. When in tact, the goddess (*Devī*) carried a spear (*śakti*) in her left hand. For this she was taken by many as representing Kaumārī. What eludes these scholars, the composition of her head gear. At the summit of this flat circular head gear appears an animal seated with its legs twisted backward. Unfortunately, the face of this animal is sadly mutilated away. The dispositions of its legs, its partially exposed testicles and its tail help identifying the animal as a bull. The animal helps identifying the female deity as Māheśvarī. The mount of a god or a goddess generally seen at the bottom. This is therefore, a unique image and a rare occasion where the mount is seen placed at the top of the head. Pandit Keshav Prasad Mishra donated a beautiful image of *Pārvatī tapaścaryā* (Acc. No. 182) to Bharat Kala Bhavan. Carved in Chunar sandstone, this 11th century *samapada sthānaka* image of Pārvatī is seen standing on a plain *pañca ratha* pedestal. Characteristically, carved in medieval traits, Pārvatī is seen accompanied by her acolytes include Jayā, Vijayā, lion and deer mounts, male and female worshippers. The figures of Vidyādhara, winged *vyālas* and *makara* heads are also found carved with this figure. The top right and left hands carry a tiny *liṅga* and a Gaṇeśa figure respectively. Her other hands are sadly broken.

The Museum has two images of Durgā Mahiṣāsuramardinī. Both of these images are twelve handed. One of these is stylistically dated to 12th century A.D. and it was discovered from a locality in Varanasi called Chowkhamba and it was donated to the Museum by Dr. Moti Chandra. The other image of the goddess also hails from Varanasi and is stylistically earlier in date. What is interesting in this image is this that on the buffalo's body appear the sun and moon motif which are somewhat unusual. It is very difficult to explain the association of sun and moon motif with the animal's figure. Perhaps, the sculptor wanted to convey that so long sun and moon would survive, the story of Mahiṣāsuramardinī should be remembered by the devotees of Śakti.

The images of Vaiṣṇavī, Cāmuṇḍā, Māheśvarī Pārvatī and Durgā in the Bharat Kala Bhavan spanning a period between 8th and 12th century A.D. prove that

the worship of Śakti received popular attention. But the lithic evidences mostly speak not of Śiva-Śakti but of Nārāyaṇī Śakti.

In the Caṇḍī, when Madhu and Kaiṭabha were killed, Devī appeared as *Yoganidrā* of Viṣṇu and she was called '*Harinetrakṛtālayā*'. She emerged from the body of Viṣṇu when Brahmā chanted for her. When Devī killed Mahiṣāsura, she received reverence as Nārāyaṇī. During the killing of Śumbha Niśumbha, she appeared as Viṣṇumāyā (*Vaiṣṇavīśaktiranantavīryā*):

या देवी सर्वभूतेषु विष्णुमायेति शब्दिता।

नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमो नमः॥ (Śrī Śrī Caṇḍī. V.12)

However, an analysis would show that among the Mātṛkās, Brahmāṇī is related to *śṛṣṭi-śakti*, Māheśvarī to *laya-śakti*, Kaumārī to *asura-vijayinī* Kārttikeya-śakti. Vaiṣṇavī to *śṛṣṭi-śakti*, Vārāhī, Nārasimhī are related to Viṣṇu Śakti, Indrāṇī to Indra's śakti and at the fag end all worshippers arrive at the *Śakti-tattva* and for this, it is said that '*śakti eva dvijaḥ sarve*'. When spiritually awakened, a devotee whether a Vaiṣṇava or Śākta, all could feel that ultimately they are worshippers of Śakti.

References

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3. Dr. Enamul Haque, *Bengal Sculptures* (Hindu Iconography upto 1250 A.D.), Dhaka, 1992, pp. 253-274.
4. J.N. Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, 2nd edition, pp. 505-506.
5. Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, ch. 8, verse 13.
6. *Ibid.*, chapter 10, verses 3-4.
7. Stella Kramrisch, *Manifestations of Siva*, Philadelphia, 1981, p. 50, also see T. A. Gopinath Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, 1968. Vol. I, Part II. Pp. 379-382
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