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Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 2

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2023

### Identities of Women in Indian Art and History

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#### Recommended Citation

Rao, Nalini (2023) "Identities of Women in Indian Art and History," *Monsoon: South Asian Studies Association Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 2.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/monsoon-sasa-journal/vol2/iss1/2>

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## **IDENTITIES OF WOMEN IN INDIAN ART AND HISTORY**

*Nalini Rao, Soka University*

### **Abstract:**

*The stereotypical image of Indian women portrayed in the art of stone sculpture is often interpreted as images of beauty that are sensuous, religious as well depict social life. There are historical reasons for depicting her as such. This paper inquires into the changing depiction and social forces that influenced feminine imagery. This paper examines the portrayal of beauty through idealization of female body which has evolved over the centuries in India. It also aims to understand their changing status and explores issues of feminine identity, status, and empowerment largely in ancient and medieval India. It also provides a brief account of their contribution to society, as revealed by literary and historical evidences. The role of women, both in private and public life, was shaped by cultural traditions and historical circumstances.*

**Key Words:** Goddesses, women, *apsara*, feminine imagery, status, role

### **Introduction**

The identities of women in present-day India have undergone significant transformations compared to earlier eras. Within Indian painting and sculpture traditions, they frequently manifest as representations displaying both the idealized beauty of goddesses and the ordinary women. This paper briefly traces the trajectory of their depiction and the historical and religious factors that might have contributed to their imagery on Indian temple architecture. It also examines women from a historical mode of inquiry that reveals her substantial role in governance, politics, arts and literature apart from her role as caretakers of the family. Such a dichotomy in the selection of art and historical evidences and their interpretation is a conundrum due to the diversity of traditions and contexts. A generalization about feminine portrayal that is considered here has its merits for an introduction about women's history in India.



Fig. 1. Terracotta Figurine, Mohenjodaro. Photo: author

### **Representations of Women in Indian Art and Religion**

Representations of women from Mohenjodaro and Lothal (2500 -1500 BCE) are earthly, and functional (fig.1).<sup>1</sup> At other sites, such as Zhob, Mehargarh, Nausharo, and Mudnigak they are portrayed as half emerging from the ground representing the Earth Goddess. Since women played a central role in agricultural societies, in planting and reaping crops, as well as being a mother they were revered as Earth Goddesses of chthonic character. The idea that women assist the earth in its productivity can be found in later Mauryan art period in the voluptuous figure of *vr̥kṣadevatā/śālabhañjikā* on the gateway of the Sanchi *mahāstūpa* (fig.2).<sup>2</sup> Her association with a fruiting tree suggests the notion of abundance and fruitfulness. The woman and tree motif becomes a popular feminine motif in Indian architectural sculpture for next 2000 years.

<sup>1</sup> Rao, Nalini, 2013; Rao, S.R., 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Sharma, R.C., 1997.



Fig. 2. *Śalabhañjikā*, East Gate at Sanchi Great Stūpa. Photo: Wikimedia



Fig. 3. *Mahāmāya*, Gandhāra. Photo: Wikimedia



Fig. 4. Woman on Pillar, Mathura. Photo: <https://clevelandart.org/art/1965.250>

Later in the art of Gandhāra, mother of Buddha, Mahāmāyā is represented as a *śālabhañjikā* holding a tree while Buddha is being born from her right hip (fig.3). The role of the female as a mother while maintaining her fertility symbol was soon incorporated into Indian religious art . Both her roles of sensuality and fertility as symbols continued to be depicted in later art on the railing pillar from Mathura (fig. 4).<sup>3</sup> Here she stands on two lotus buds that arise out of a vase of plenty (*pūrṇaghāṭa*). Her apparent fecundity is indicated by her right hand, that holds a fruit (and points to her genital area) while her left hand holds her breast like a lactating mother to offer milk to her child. She is now Lakshmi the goddess of sustenance, abundance and fortune. Normally depicted as two elephants pouring water from golden vessels reminds us of Greek Venus who is born from the waters. Having established a canon for feminine imagery in the *śāstras* and Sanskrit literature was not contrary to the four aims of life (*puruṣārthas*) namely *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa* in Hinduism. Goddesses symbolized sacredness of love, fertility and creation within a sensuous naturalistic form seen profusely in Hindu and Jain art.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Clark, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Gimbutas. 1974.



Fig. 5. Ganga as River Ganges from Sri Lanka temple Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara. Photo: Wikimedia

In the Gupta Classical Period (4-6<sup>th</sup> C CE.), females personified as rivers particularly Ganges (fig.5) and Yamuna, are portrayed as goddesses on the doorjambes of Hindu temples, symbolizing purity of body and mind.<sup>5</sup> The plurality of goddesses is immense and some of the major goddesses that play a vital role in religious art, scriptures, and ritual worship are Durga, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Parvati, Brahmi, Maheshvari, Kumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani and Chamunda and many more.<sup>6</sup> In fig. 6 Durga is seen battling the *āsura*, Mahisha, who is



Fig. 6. Durga, Aihole. Photo: Wikimedia

depicted in the form of the head of a water buffalo and hence known as Mahishasuramardini. When the demon, Mahisha threatens the world, the male gods give up all their weapons to the goddess who

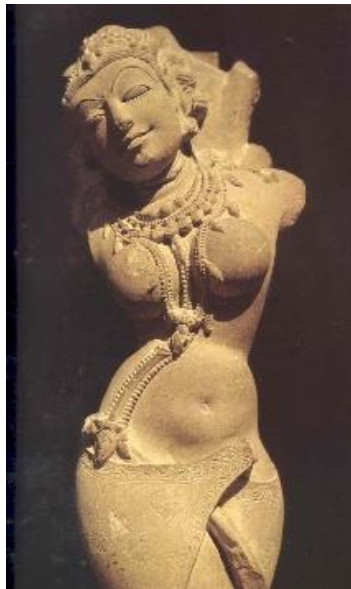
<sup>5</sup> Rao, Nalini, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Sen, 1983.

alone could kill him.<sup>7</sup> Her iconography includes multiple hands that show her superhuman power and rides a lion. Her powers and emotional drama are revealed forcefully substantiating the description in the *Devi Mahātmya*.<sup>8</sup> In her ferocious form, she is Kali, (fig.7 ) frightening in appearance. Kali is also the strong mother and the goddess of preservation. She subdues even the greatest god, Siva.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 7. Kali as Chamunda, 11th-12th century, National Museum, Delhi. Photo: Wikimedia



<sup>7</sup> Coburn, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Agrawala, 1963; Coburn, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Harding, 1993; Kinsley, 1997.

Fig. 8. *Apsara*, Gwalior. Photo: author

Apart from the transformation of women as goddesses, all feminine imagery including those of goddesses were imbued with voluptuousness and hence portrayed sensuously with attractive contours, gestures, and alluring postures. While these women are revered as celestial beings known as *apsaras* they partake in mundane pursuits like playing ball or applying makeup.<sup>10</sup> The male artist shows her contours in the pretext that a scorpion was beneath her garment—all reflecting contemporary society.<sup>11</sup> There are detailed evidences of such pastimes in Sanskrit literature.<sup>12</sup> But this is not uncommon in world art, whether in Renaissance, modern or ancient arts. The sexual objectification of women, male and female is socially constructed. She was idealized both in literature and art. Secondly, *kāma* or enjoyment of love making was (and is) one of the aims of life in Hinduism. Hence all these aims are represented on the temple architecture which symbolized the world of *samsāra*.



Fig. 9. *Apsara* at Chennakesava Temple, Belur. Photo: Wikimedia

<sup>10</sup> Meghaduta 448,472. Wilson.  
Uttaramacarita. Rashmi, 87.

<sup>11</sup> Pal, 1978.

<sup>12</sup> The figure of a male approaching a “donkey-faced” woman reminds us of the local saying in Sanskrit, “Prapteshu shodase varse, gadahi api apsara bhavet.” When a boy attains the age of sixteen, even a donkey-faced girl looks beautiful like a celestial nymph. Rao, N.1979, 121. Image in Huchchappaya math, Aihole, Karnataka.





Fig. 10. Woman in a Bharatnatyam dance pose. Photo: Wikimedia

Hindu temple (fig. 9) stands as a prominent symbol of Indian culture. Within these grand structures, one can discover countless depictions of women captured in graceful dance postures. Dance in India has served as a powerful medium of expression for the dissemination of art, culture and religious devotion. Similar to classical music, all classical dances strive for a profound connection with the divine. Hence, through the retelling of religious narratives, portrayal of emotions, and intricate choreography, these dances facilitate the attainment of self-awareness for both the performer and the spectators.<sup>13</sup> Classical dances were performed in a sacred context within a Hindu temple – from about 12 to 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Various forms of visual and performing arts, were dedicated to the worship of gods. Such an interrelated arts aesthetic by women presented an integral view of life. The dancer ‘becomes’ the goddess of knowledge, Saraswati. She is the heroine, Shakuntala in the literature of Kalidasa, and she is Radha the beloved of Krishna in the *Gitagovinda*. Large Hindu temples had women attached to them called *devadasis* or handmaidens of the god.<sup>14</sup> They were proficient in the arts of dance and music, and helped in the temples. Like the vestal virgins in Europe they were held to be married to the God. They remained unmarried, and were loyal to a partner, normally the king or one among the elite. Later, the institution was debased and become degenerated, and women were subjected to male sexual fantasies, and during the late Islamic period, were called *nautch* girls in North India, and ultimately the British banned the tradition.

### **Goddesses and Empowerment of Women**

The idealized woman associated with sacred material culture was a product of societal values, as well as the result of an

<sup>13</sup> Iyengar, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Parasher, 1986.

incorporation of earlier philosophical and textual concepts. Worship of diverse goddesses displays an ancient continuous and diverse history of women as goddesses in India. Goddesses are considered *śakti*-s (powers). When the image is worshipped in a temple or a roadside shrine or at a home, the woman recalls the power of the Durga to empower herself.<sup>15</sup> When she prays to Sarasvati, the goddess of knowledge and speech, she identifies herself with that *śakti*. For instance, Aditi is the power of nurture, Parvati is the power of wife, mother and beauty, Lakshmi is the goddess of happiness and fortune.<sup>16</sup> The personification of women as goddesses or embodiments of abstract concepts is not unique to India. Similar manifestations can be found in Greek mythology, such as Athena or Cybele, representing wisdom and motherhood respectively, or in figures like Venus or Aphrodite, symbolizing love, and beauty. Even in places like New York City and Paris, we encounter the representation of Liberty as a goddess, embodying values like liberty, equality, justice, and fraternity. These reversed goddesses, with their elevated status, have significantly influenced societal and ethical norms while also serving as sources of enlightenment.

### **Women in History**

Goddess worship was also instrumental in understanding how men look upon women. In ancient India, women were given a high status in society and provided with opportunities to attain high intellectual and spiritual standards. The Vedic period witnessed many women scholars, poets and philosophers, who composed hymns, read the Vedas and performed fire sacrifices called *homam*. Women ascetics such as Apala, Ghosha and Visvavara composed *mantra*-s and were also *ṛṣi*-s.<sup>17</sup> Yajñvalkyya imparted divine knowledge to Maitreya; she could comprehend high philosophy and had also acquired divine knowledge. Lopamudra was one of the female teachers of this period, and is believed to have taught 179 hymns of the first book of the *Rig Veda*, along with sage Agasthya.<sup>18</sup> There is Ubhaya Bharati, wife of Mandana Mishra, who would have defeated Shankaracharya.<sup>19</sup> Women were given equal opportunities in education till the tenth century. Female gurus were known as *upadhyayi*-s. Then there were the *brahmavādinī*-s (who knew the *Vedas* but were unmarried) and the *sadyodvāha*-s, (who studied the

<sup>15</sup> Shanthi, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Narayanan, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Rout, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Altekar, 1956.

<sup>19</sup> Krishnakumar, 1978.

*Veda-s* till they married).<sup>20</sup> There are many evidences to show that kings were especially aware of the importance of education of women both for their well-being and for the family. Women also learnt music and dancing and many mastered the skills of spinning, weaving, and needlework. They participated in religious ceremonies and sacrifices, along with their husbands and social relations were maintained with mutual spirit and cordiality.

During the medieval period, Indian was largely patriarchal in nature. The joint family system relegated women to the realms of sexuality, reproduction, and nurturing of children. Thus, women were given recognition because their role was considered important in the implementation of these functions. Women, apart from being devoted wives and mothers, rendered a significant contribution in terms of areas such as household responsibilities, health care, child development, taking care of the needs and requirements of the elderly family members, preservation of the environment and so forth. The women were vested with the responsibility of inculcating morals and ethics. Hence, in order to carry out all these tasks and functions in a well-organized manner, it was vital for women to acquire knowledge and upgrade their skills and abilities, albeit largely in higher stratas of society.

Additionally, women played a prominent role in politics. Megasthenes mentions that Pandyan women carrying out the administrative functions.<sup>21</sup> In royal households, women were given respect. They rendered a significant contribution in the making of decisions and administrative functions. They were made aware in terms of all areas and played an important part in politics as well. They were employed as bodyguards, warriors, messengers and spies.

Women patronized all religions, gave endowments to temples, Buddhist *saṅghas*, Jain monasteries and Hindu temples. The virtue of empathy and compassion has been brought out in Sanskrit literature. Numerous inscriptions on the monuments in Ajanta, Nagarjunakonda, Tanjore, and Vijayanagar clearly state the amount donated by women. There is also the relevant story of Amrapali, the famous courtesan of Vaisali who donated land and money to the Buddhist Sangha. One may recall that Brhamani was the first to throw herself at the feet of the Buddha and prevailed upon her countrywomen to follow her.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> In the Mahabharata, references to the brahmabadinis are found, such as Sulabha, the daughter of Sandilya. Kalidasa in his *Kumarasambhava*, Abhijnasakuntala, and Bhavabhuti in his *Uttararamacarita* mention Atreyi. Pramanik, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Rout, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Milligan, 2019.



Fig.11. Rani Ki Vav. Photo: Wikimedia

Women also helped fund important community facilities, such as the step wells in Western India (fig.11). The stepwell is one of the most ornate and unique pieces of world architecture, where a natural tank or constructed well consists of series of platforms and steps for women to go down and collect water, particularly in summer and in these arid regions. Above is an example of a stepwell, called Rani Ki Vav built by Queen Udayamati, around 1050 CE.<sup>23</sup> The descending levels of the stepwell are ornately carved with amazing figures of gods and goddesses, flora and fauna. There are about thirty-two stepwells in Western India, mainly sponsored by women.

Another unique role of medieval women is the aspect of devotion, called *bhakti*.<sup>24</sup> *Bhakti* has been defined in various ways. It is love toward God, religious devotion, surrender, experiencing communion with God. The *bhakti* movement spread all over India during the mediaeval and early modern periods. There were great women devotees who composed music and poetry, and sang songs spreading the word of compassion. Examples of such great women saints are Meera Bai,<sup>25</sup> Andal, Muktabai,<sup>26</sup> Sarada Devi, Akka Mahadevi,<sup>27</sup> and today, Mata Amritanandamayi.<sup>28</sup>

### Changes in Status of Women

<sup>23</sup> Rao, Rekha, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Frazier, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Mushtaq, 2014  
Subramaniam, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Chakravarty, 1989.

<sup>27</sup> Mudaliar, 1991.

<sup>28</sup> Warriar, 2005.

During the Medieval period, India faced invasions by Moslems and due to autocratic rule and abductions, Hindu women were made to stay at home and restrictions were imposed upon them. They were married early and could neither participate in public affairs, nor attend schools. The position of women, further experienced a decline with the prevalence of child marriage, *sati*, polygamy (in some parts of India) and they were deprived of social rights. The discrimination was observed primarily in terms of acquisition of education and other rights and facilities. The formulation of rules and policies deprived women from practicing certain rights which ultimately led to their subordinate status. Over the course of time, the position of women declined to such an extent that the birth of the girl child within the family was regarded as a misfortune.

Another reason that women experienced a decline in status was the authority of the *smṛti śāstras*. Manu dictated that they would be dependent upon their fathers during the childhood stage, on husbands in youth and on sons in old age. In the perspective of Manu, women are viewed to merely perform the roles of the wife and mother.<sup>29</sup> As a mother, she was responsible for the implementation of tasks and functions that are necessary for the child while as a wife, for fulfilling all the tasks at home. Such attitude and dogmas led to practices that had a detrimental effect upon the status of women.

However, if we examine the role of women belonging to the stratum of society or to the ruling classes during Medieval period, there are many instances when women were engaged in political and administrative functions of the state. They knew Hindu law, philosophy, swordsmanship and even participated in the decision-making process; they had leadership skills, managing and controlling organizations. There is an abundance of examples of queens found in literature, along with numerous narrations of their stories in inscriptions and oral traditions. For example, Draupadi, wife of five brothers in the Mahābhārata, determined in her resolve, sought revenge against the men who had publicly disgraced her. Similarly, Rudramma Devi Devi of the Kakatiya dynasty, Rani Durgavai and Tarabai – all fought against the Mughal attacks.<sup>30</sup> They acted as spies and messengers (*nagakanya-s*) between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries.

In 1664, Kittur Chenamma, of the Keladi dynasty repelled the Muslim forces at Bijapur and ascended the throne in 1671.<sup>31</sup> Ahilya Bai Holkar was an astute politician and diplomatically

<sup>29</sup> Anantha Raman, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Rajagopal, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Banerjee, 2017.

brought peace to the kingdom in Maharashtra.<sup>32</sup> Mangammal in Madurai who disposed Chokkanath Nayak averted wars and built roads for the welfare of her subjects.<sup>33</sup> There were Islamic queens, such as Nur Jahan the wife of the Mughal emperor Jahangir, who took charge of the kingdom after her husband's death.<sup>34</sup>

In the colonial period, Rani of Jhansi wore a man's clothing and fought the British, during the First War of Independence in 1857 (fig.10).<sup>35</sup> Begum Hazrat of Awadh quelled the British forces in 1858. Jhalkaribai of the Durga Dal (belonging to the Dalit community) was a woman warrior in the 1857 rebellion in Lucknow.<sup>36</sup> There were women in Bengal, such as Kadambini Ganguly and Swarnakumari Devi who took action against the Bengal Partition in 1905.<sup>37</sup> Other women who fought against the British in Karnataka were Kittur Rani Chennamma, Yashodhara Dasappa, Rani Abbakka Chowta, Belawadi Mallamma, Keladi Chennamma, Umabai Kundapur, Padmavati Bidari and Sarojini Mahishi. Those who protested using their pens for the sake of unity were Kumudini Mitra, who edited *Suprobhat*, and Banalata Devi, Khairunnesa Khatun. Sarojini Naidu, the Nightingale of India was the first woman president of the Indian National Congress.<sup>38</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Muthulakshmi Reddi, who was the first woman to acquire a medical degree in Chennai, became a pioneering social activist. She was the founder of the Women's Indian Association in 1917 and was instrumental in passing the bill that raised the marriageable age.<sup>39</sup>

There are instances when women could make major decisions or put into practice the strategies and approaches. They were not only allowed to give their ideas and suggestions, but also implemented the methods. In some cases, it was believed that women were wiser and more skilled compared to men in the implementation of managerial and political functions. The lower- or middle-class women possessed adequate knowledge of healthcare, household finance, preservation of environment, childcare and eldercare, management of household responsibilities, and taking care of the needs and requirements of other members of the family.

## **Conclusion**

<sup>32</sup> Cummings, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Branfoot, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Kozlowski, 1994.

<sup>35</sup> Lebra, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Reckitt, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Chakraborty, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Sturman, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Anantha Raman, 2009, 1996.

Throughout various art forms, women have held significant roles, particularly in the realm of visual culture. The evolution of their depictions in Indian art reflects their physical form, allure, and religious roles. However, delving deeper into history unveils their pivotal contributions to the social, political and cultural spheres of ancient and medieval India. The formation of their various identities, both in personal and public spheres, was intricately influenced by cultural traditions and historical conditions. The molding of feminine expressions encompassed matters of identity, social standing and empowerment, all of which were shaped by cultural norms and historical events. Consequently, recognizing the potential of visual mediums to shape our thoughts and drive cultural, political and economic transformations necessitates a profound comprehension of visual forms and their analysis.

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