

Representations of Śrī-Lakṣmī in Early India: A Survey of Textual Traditions and Material Remains

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Abstract: This research paper explores some of the representations of Śrī-Lakṣmī in early India with the help of textual and archaeological material. Goddess Lakṣmī is being worshipped by millions of people in India, especially on the occasion of Diwali. In the contemporary period, she is generally associated with prosperity and wealth. However, as we explore and analyse the textual and archaeological material, we find various representations of Śrī-Lakṣmī. This paper reflects on those representations and argues that the association of Śrī-Lakṣmī with Vishnu in the Epic-Puranic textual traditions plays a significant role in her relegation as a goddess who is associated with few qualities and is generally associated with wealth. This paper argues that the present-day representations of Śrī-Lakṣmī are influenced by her depiction in the Puranic legends, such as one associated with the 'Churning of the Ocean'. The paper tries to initiate a renewed interest in studying the continuities and changes in the representations of Śrī-Lakṣmī.

Key Words: Sculptures, Textual Traditions, Lakṣmī, Indra, Early India, Religion.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The goddess Lakṣmī has remained a significant part of the religious and cultural lives of people living in the Indian subcontinent for about three thousand years. Although devotion to Lakṣmī and her active role as a goddess are not as powerful as those of other goddesses such as Durga and Kali, one cannot ignore her role in the lives of commoners. Even today, her symbolic role as a goddess of wealth and prosperity is an integral part of the lives of many people in India. The word 'Lakṣmī' is suggested to mean 'one endowed with beauty,' and therefore, according to A.P. Jamkhedkar (2016), she is the 'charming one'.

Tracing the beginning and development of Lakṣmī's representations essentially includes a survey of textual traditions and different forms of material objects such as sculptures, coins, and images. Lakṣmī appears on coins, seals, and also on the walls of temples. Her iconography has a deep connection with her early representation in the textual sources. To begin with, Lakṣmī's emergence as a goddess and her symbolic representation can be traced from early Vedic times itself. She is associated with beauty, lustre, glory, and power in early references. However, her detailed description, as David Kinsley and others suggest, can be traced only from the Sri-Sukta hymn, which occurs in the appendix (khila) of the Rigveda, possibly a later addition. In this hymn, she appears as a goddess who brings fame and prosperity in the form of gold, cattle, horses, and servants. She also banishes her antithesis, i.e., Alakṣmī, who is supposed to be a goddess inflicting the world with physical and mental difficulties.

However, the most significant aspect that comes out of this particular hymn is her association with two objects: the lotus and the elephant. This is of our relevance while studying the beginning and development of Lakṣmī's iconography because these two objects would subsequently become an integral part of Lakṣmī's representations across different sects and in different material forms. It should be kept in mind while studying Lakṣmī's representations that she is not confined to one religion or one sect. Her presence can easily be found in Buddhist, Jain, and Brahmanic sculptures. However, by the Puranic period, she becomes primarily a Hindu goddess when she is being associated with the Hindu gods, especially Vishnu. In this research paper, we explore some of her representations in the textual and iconographic material and their implications.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The study of our subject in this paper is primarily based on historical methods of analysis. Both the primary sources and secondary sources are utilised to answer the raised questions. The primary sources mainly include the literary texts composed in the ancient and early medieval periods. The primary focus in this study will be on the Puranic texts, especially the Viṣṇu Purāṇa. Other sources have been used to explore the secondary aspects of this study. The major focus is on exploring the representations of Śrī-Lakṣmī by analysing existing historiographical research and textual traditions in their socio-historical contexts. Since the main primary sources are literary texts, the method of close textual analysis and critical textual reading remains beneficial. It is also a well-known fact that the literary texts of ancient times do not state everything explicitly. There is much which is hidden inside the texts. Keeping this in view, reading silences and anxieties within the texts becomes an effective tool for this study. To address certain research questions, a wide variety of secondary literature has been utilised. The existing books and articles on the epic and Puranic traditions written by historians were of much significance in developing an effective methodology. The methodology involved in this research paper is influenced by the ideas, theories and concepts given by historians and sociologists engaged in religious studies.

3. EARLIEST REPRESENTATIONS OF ŚRĪ-LAKṢMĪ:

The study of Śrī-Lakṣmī's early iconography was undoubtedly inaugurated by A.K. Coomaraswamy in 1929 (Srinivasan, 2010, p. 77). All subsequent studies have followed, more or less, his premises. Commaraswamy found that the most frequent iconographic representation in all of early Indian art was of Gaja-Lakṣmī form. David Kinsley (1988) suggests that in this form the goddess Lakṣmī is flanked by two elephants, signifying two important things: one, that the goddess secures fertilising rains for crops with the help of her elephants, and the second, that these images portray the act of royal consecration because the elephant symbolises the power and wealth of the king in ancient India. C. Shivaramamurti's (1950) work suggests further that the Gaja-Lakṣmī form is a popular motif, depicted on the gates of Sanchi Stupa, in which Lakṣmī is shown seated or standing on a lotus. He further argues that in later sculptures, Lakṣmī can be seen having four hands instead of two and can also be found sitting in a padmāsana pose on a lotus.

Early iconographic representations of Lakṣmī in Indian art can be traced in the tribal coins. The uninscribed coins having the Gaja-Lakṣmī form have been found from the third century BCE onwards in the Ujjayini, Kaushambi and Ayodhya regions. One can argue, therefore, as D.M. Srinivasan has also suggested, that by the 2nd century BCE, the iconographic representation of Lakṣmī had been formalised in the Indian subcontinent. The sculptural art of Buddhist *stupas* marks the further development and growth of Lakṣmī's iconography in the Indian subcontinent. D.M. Srinivasan's three categories of these early Śrī-Lakṣmī forms are quite useful for understanding and also differentiating multiple forms of representation. Some of the early examples of these categories can be found in the Buddhist stupas of Bharhut and Sanchi. These three categories, which sometimes overlap too, are the following:

- i. The Goddess as Supporter of Life
- ii. The Goddess of Sovereignty
- iii. The Goddess of Fortune.

One of the impressive examples comes from the railing relief of the Bharhut Stupa in Madhya Pradesh, belonging to the second century BC. In this image Lakṣmī is flanked by two elephants pouring water over her, and she is standing straight upon a water-filled vessel called purna-ghata, cupping her breast. Moreover, in this image, she is surrounded with lotuses. With these elements the image forms an overlapping category representing the goddess not only as a supporter of life but also as a goddess of sovereignty. As mentioned in the Śrī-Sukta hymn, the lotus is a symbol of fertility and life, and when it is associated with Lakṣmī, it becomes a symbol of blossoming organic life, purity and spiritual power. In images such as one illustrated above, the lotus signifies a variety of things. However, those images with lotuses not having elephants do not represent her as a goddess of sovereignty. One such example is an image from the railing relief of Stupa 2 at Sanchi belonging to the 2nd century BCE. One other kind of depiction of Lakṣmī on the Sanchi stupa occurs in *svastika mudra*. In this depiction, Lakṣmī is seated on a lotus, with folded hands crossing and touching each other. According to Jamkhedkar, this can be a representation of the wheel of the sun and can also suggest the worship of Buddha on the part of Śrī-Lakṣmī. In this way, one can argue that the iconography of Lakṣmī in the Buddhist sculpture is concerned with different forms and meanings.

4. IMAGES OF ŚRĪ-LAKṢMĪ ON COINS AND SEALS :

Further development of the iconography of Lakṣmī in early Indian art can be traced with the help of coins, seals, icons, and sculptures from mainly Hindu temples. From the time of the Kushanas to the Guptas and later Guptas, images of Lakṣmī on different kinds of coins and seals can be easily found across the subcontinent. D.M. Srinivasan's (2010) study of northwestern iconography of Lakṣmī is of quite significance because it not only explores the early appearance of Lakṣmī in Indian art but also traces the interconnection between northwestern and northern developments in Lakṣmī's iconography.

By analysing some seals from the northwestern region, Srinivasan suggests that *abhiṣeka* Lakṣmī on these seals reflect some early Indian iconographic and stylistic features. For instance, he picks up three seals from *Aman ur Rahman* collection and finds that certain symbols such as lotuses, elephants, and Lakṣmī cupping her breast can be seen on them. One oval bronze seal from the same region is worthy of discussion because in this seal, lotuses are missing. This seal contains only the elephants, thus signifying the '*abhiṣeka Lakṣmī*' but not the complete insignia.

Srinivasan's study (Srinivasan, 2010, pp. 77-95) of the northwestern evidence further suggests an interaction between the symbolic attributes of different goddesses of the northwest and Śrī-Lakṣmī. In the subsequent period, i.e., in the Gupta and post-Gupta periods (c. 4th century CE onwards), one can find that some symbolic attributes of the northwestern goddesses, such as Ardoxsho and Nanā, were adopted in Lakṣmī's icons. So, Gupta coins belonging to the period of rulers like Samudragupta, Chandragupta II, and others are full of such symbols associated with Śrī-Lakṣmī. In the development of Lakṣmī's iconography, one feature that is sometimes neglected is Lakṣmī's depiction with a lion. The lion as a symbol of royalty has already appeared in Indian art since the Mauryan times; however, the interaction with the northwestern symbolism led to the incorporation of the lion in the images of Śrī-Lakṣmī. Srinivasan argues that the resultant combination—*abhiṣeka* Lakṣmī seated on the royal lion—is the perfect expression of 'royal sovereignty' (Srinivasan, 2010, p. 89).

In the early Gupta coinages, such depiction can be easily traced. However, one may ask what differentiates Lakṣmī from other goddesses who were associated with the lion. To this, Srinivasan (2016, pp. 247-48) suggests that certain features like her sitting posture, elephants, additional identities such as cornucopia and the lotus, absence of weapons, and others clearly differentiate Lakṣmī from goddesses such as Durga and Parvatī. Gupta Gold *ḍināra* of the King and Queen type from the Bayana hoard illustrate that the coin makers depict a goddess seated on a lion on its reverse, and it has a cornucopia against her left arm. It is a well-known fact that the Gupta coins had an influence of late Kushana coinages, and in Kushana coins, Lakṣmī is depicted with a cornucopia. Srinivasan, by an analysis of northwestern coins and early depictions of Lakṣmī in North India, argues that the goddess on the reverse is Lakṣmī. In this way, one can see that Lakṣmī seated on a lion is a development that represents a picture of an evolution in the iconography that connects it with different sectarian and material contexts. One can notice an evolution in the textual representations as well, as explored in the next section.

5. MALE GODS AND ŚRĪ-LAKṢMĪ: EXPLORING PURANIC NARRATIVE:

In three Puranas, Śrī-Lakṣmī appears as one of the central characters in the narrative of *samudramanathan* (the churning of the ocean). This narrative has been told in the Viṣṇu Purana as follows (Vishnu Purana, Book I, Chapter IX):

Once Indra, the god of kings, insults Durvasa rishi, a renowned Brahmin saint. Durvasa offered a garland to Indra, to which Indra did not show proper respect. This enrages Durvasa, who refers to Indra being made insolent by saints such as Gautama, who did not punish him properly. His anger leads him to curse Indra with a loss of his dominance over the universe. Indra tries to reconcile with Rishi Durvasa, but the latter responds negatively. The curse leads Indra and his three worlds to lose their vigour. This gives Danavas and Asuras a chance to defeat the gods and their king. The gods suffer a defeat in the war with their enemies and flee for refuge to the god Brahma. Brahma, in turn, suggests them to seek protection from Vishnu, who is being described as anything and everything. Along with the gods, Brahma then proceeds to the place of Vishnu and praises him. Vishnu is being described as someone whose nature cannot be apprehended even by Sankara and Brahma himself. Vishnu, after listening to the prayers of Brahma and the gods, appears before them and asks them to churn the ocean for ambrosia (*Amrita*), a drink that would help gods in regaining their vigour. Vishnu suggests gods to befriend their enemy beings to perform this task. Gods follow Vishnu and start churning the ocean. This results in the arising of certain things out of the ocean. At the fourth and fifth place arose *Amrita* and the goddess Śrī, respectively. The *Dāityas* forcibly seize the *Amrita* cup, but Vishnu, by taking the shape of

an attractive female, deludes them and recovers Amrita only to give it to the gods. Thus, gods receive *Amrita* and regain their vigour. They subsequently defeat their enemies. Indra regains his position and is being restored to power.

This legend proceeds with the praises of the goddess Śrī by Indra in heaven. Sakra (Indra) eulogizes the goddess and pleases Śrī, who happily asks Indra to demand from her whatever he desires. Indra demands two boons from Śrī: one that she must remain forever in the three worlds and a second that she should not leave a person who praises her in the same words he himself has praised her with. Śrī grants both boons to Indra. She is then described as a goddess of fortune who is also an eternal consort of Vishnu.

This narrative reflects several notions about the relationship between Lakṣmī and Viṣṇu. At the same time Indra appears as someone who troubles saints and is thus being cursed often by them. Indra also loses his power and suffers defeat because of a mere curse, which tells us that he is not the mightiest. After his defeat he runs to the more powerful divinities of Puranic traditions and asks for their help. This narrative indicates that Indra is unable to defend himself and his subjects with his own power. The Vedic Indra also asks for help on certain occasions, but either in a position of equality or as a greater god. In this narrative he is being represented as someone inferior to Brahma and Vishnu. A cursed, defeated, and humiliated Indra is only being saved with the help of Vishnu. The text considers Vishnu as the supreme being, and therefore Indra's representation as someone inferior to Vishnu can be explained as a natural outcome of the basic premise of Vishnu Purana. It is also interesting to note that the same Indra who dominates the feminine in Vedic traditions is being portrayed as someone who bows down before a goddess (Śrī-Lakṣmī) and demands boons from her. One should not, however, make the mistake of reading this as evidence of the greater agency being given to the divine feminine because the powers of Śrī are being derived from her connection with Vishnu. It is Vishnu who is the supreme being and not Śrī. She is being represented as an associate of Viṣṇu: अन्येषु चावतारेषु विष्णोरेषा सहायिनी॥ १४२॥. Therefore, Indra's submission to her should be seen as a result of Indra's own declining status rather than an unusual assertion of the divine feminine.

Historiographical research has shown that the Epic-Puranic textual traditions reflect the values of a male-dominated society and a contestation to those values (See Chakravarti, 1993; Roy, 1999; Ramaswamy, 2016; Tyagi, 2014; and Sutherland Goldman, 2018). In the Puranic narrative (Viṣṇu Purāṇa, Bhāgavata Purāṇa, and Padma Purāṇa) related to goddess Lakṣmī, we may observe both the submissive and creative aspects of goddess Lakṣmī. Her relation with Viṣṇu is largely submissive, but her boon-giving aspect reflects her creative power. She is described as assisting Viṣṇu in various periods in various forms (Vis. P., Book I, Ch. IX). Indra states in her praises that she and Hari are the mother and father of humanity, respectively (त्वं माता सर्वभूतानां देवदेवो हरिः पिता). At the same time, she promises Indra in her personal capacity to never deprive the three worlds of her presence and also not to leave those who will sing her praises. The voice of the divine feminine is being listened to and given due respect. The traditions connected with Śrī-Lakṣmī cannot be compared to those goddesses who have been represented as independent goddesses as well. If we compare the Śrī Sūktam of Rigvedic Khila with the praises of Śrī-Lakṣmī in the Puranic narratives, one major difference can be seen in the context of her relationship with Viṣṇu. The absence of Viṣṇu as her spouse in the original 15 verses of the Śrī Sūktam says a lot about the changes in the representations of Śrī-Lakṣmī. However, it is in the Puranic narratives that Śrī-Lakṣmī is being described as a speaker. In Śrī Sūktam, she is being praised by her devotee, but she herself doesn't address her worshippers. This remains as one of the important historical changes in her representations.

6. CONCLUSION:

The representations of Śrī-Lakṣmī are varied in the textual and iconographic material. However, Lakṣmī's depiction in association with several gods is a constant theme in the Puranic narratives. It is our understanding that Lakṣmī's association with Viṣṇu as her consort cannot be thoroughly understood as part of the process of spousification, in which the independent, autonomous feminine power of goddesses is subordinated to the male deities by assigning them as their wives. Lakṣmī is not generally represented as a goddess of fierce and aggressive character. In fact, her depiction as a goddess seated on a lion may be linked to royal sovereignty but not with aggressive character. In North Indian temples, from the 5th-6th century onwards, Lakṣmī is depicted seated with Vishnu, signifying the role of an ideal Hindu wife, who is loyal and supportive to her husband. However, Lakṣmī's existence as an independent feminine goddess coexists alongside her presence in rituals and festivals. Even today when she is being worshipped on the occasion of Diwali, her idol or picture generally depicts her either alone or with Ganesh and Saraswati. In India, especially in the Northern region, Lakṣmī is one of the synonyms for wealth. The continued existence and popularity of Lakṣmī as a goddess of prosperity indicates the influence of her representations on the masses. While analysing her representations, it is essential

to reflect upon the changes and continuities to find out which of her depictions is most popular and most suited to her present-day worshippers. In our understanding, it is her Puranic representations that find expression in her contemporary depictions as a goddess. However, there is a wide variety of primary sources that need to be explored and analysed to deepen our understanding of the continued religious significance of Śrī-Lakṣmī.

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