



## Sapta Matrikas

*Bharati Pal*

The *Sapta Matrikas* or the seven divine mothers, representing the *saktis*, or the energies of the important familiar deities are Brahmani (Saraswati) Mahesvari (Raudani) Kaumari (*Karttikeyani*) Vaishnavi (Lakshmi) Varahi, Indrani and Chamunda (Chamundi). According to a legend described in the *Isanasivagurudevapaddhati*, the *Matrikas* were created to help Lord Siva in his fight against Andhakasura. When the Lord inflicted wounds on Andhaka, blood began to flow profusely from his body. Each drop which touched the ground assumed the shape of another Andhaka. Thus there were innumerable *Asuras* fighting Siva. To stop the flow of the blood, Siva created a goddess called Yogesvari from the flames issuing out of his mouth. Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswara, Kumara, Varaha, Indra and Yama also sent their *saktis* to follow Yogesvari in stopping the flow of blood. Thus the *Sapta Matrikas* originated and Andhakasura finally lost his power and was defeated by Siva.

In the *Suprabhedagama*, the *Matrikas* are said to have been created by Brahma in order to kill Nirrita. The *Agama* literature gives a brief description of these goddesses : that Brahmani should be sculptured like Brahma; Mahesvari like Maheswara; Vaishnavi like Vishnu; Varahi as a short woman with an angry face and bearing a plough as her weapon; Indrani like Indra and Chamunda as a terrific woman. This last-mentioned goddess should have her hair in a dishevelled condition, should possess a dark complexion and have four hands. She should

weild the *trisula* in one of her hands and carry a *kapala* in another. All the *Matrikas* are to be seated images and should have two of their hands held in the *Varada* and *Abhaya* poses, while the other two hands carry weapons appropriate to the male counterparts of the female powers.

The *Varaha Purana* states that these mother-goddesses are eight in number and includes among them the goddess Yogesvari. It further says that these *Matrikas* represent eight mental qualities which are morally bad. Accordingly, Yogesvari represents *kama* or desire; Mahesvari, *krodh* or anger; Vaishnavi, *lobha* or covetousness; Brahmani; *mada* or pride; Kaumari *moha* or illusion; Indrani, *matsarya* or fault finding; Yami or Chamunda *paisunya*, that is tale bearing; and Varahi *asuya* or envy.

The *Sapta Matrikas* are mentioned in the *Rigveda*, *Gobhilasmruti*, *Markandeya Purana*, *Matsya Purana*, etc. Varahamihira's *Brihat Samhita* also mentions about the images of *Sapta Matrikas*. The sculpture of the *Sapta Matrikas* are referred to in the *Krityaratnakara*. The *Devi Purana* mentions the name of the flowers used for the worship of *Matrikas*.

Prevalence of the worship of the divine mothers is believed to be as early as 3rd millenium B.C., when the Indus Valley Civilization flourished. The earliest epigraphic reference to the *Matrikas* is to be found in the Gangadhara inscription of Vishwa Varman, in Malwa Samvat



480 or 423-424 A.D. The *Matrikas* also figure in the Viharstambha inscription of Skandagupta. Kadambari mentions that the *Matrikas* were worshipped in every village.

The several *Tantra sastras* such as *Svachhanda Tantra* and *Yogini Hridaya* contain a detailed description of the *Sapta Matrikas*. As the *Matrikas* are stated to be sitting in *lalitasana* posture, they are adorned with heavy ornaments, necklaces and circular ear-rings. From the *Sadhana* in the Buddhist literature it appears that the Tantric Buddhism had also incorporated the *Sapta Matrikas* in its religious fold. This is amply corroborated by the discovery of a composite figure of the seven mothers at Nalanda.

A brief description of the *Matrikas* are given below :

#### **Brahmani**

The first *Matrika* in the series is yellow complexioned and has four faces, three of which are visible in her sculptures, the fourth one is at the back. Two of her arms in *varada* and *abhaya* gestures and she carries *kamandalu* and *akashamala* in two other hands, She is seated upon a lotus, has *hamsa* (swan) as her *vahana*. She wears a yellow garment (*pitambara*) and her head is adorned with a *Karanda Mukuta*. Her place is under a *palas* tree.

#### **Vaishnavi**

Vaishnavi is dark in complexion, carries in one of her hands the *chakra* and in the corresponding left hand the *sankha*; her two other hands are held in the *abhaya* and the *varada mudra* respectively. She has a lovely face, pretty eyes and she wears a yellow garment. On her head is a *Kirita Mukuta*. She is adorned with all the ornaments generally worn by Vishnu and the emblem of her banner as well as her *vahana* is the Garuda. Her place is under a *Raja Vriksha*. In the *Devi Purana*, she is represented as possessing four hands in which she carries the *sankha*, *chakra*, *gada* and *padma*. She wears

the *vanamala*, the characteristic garland of Vishnu.

#### **Indrani**

Indrani has three eyes and four arms; in two of her hands she carries the *vajra* and the *sakti*, the two other hands being respectively held in the *varada* and *abhaya* poses. The colour of these goddess is red, and she has on her head a *Kirita Makuta*. Her *vahana* as well as the emblem of her banner is elephant, and her abode is under the *Kalpaka* tree. According to the *Vishnudharmotra*, she should have a thousand eyes and should be of golden colour and should have six arms. *Devi Purana* states that she carries the *ankusa* and *vajra* only and in the *Purva Karanagama* it has been mentioned that she has only two eyes and she holds lotus in one of her hands.

#### **Mahesvari**

Mahesvari is white in complexion, she has three eyes. She has four arms, two of which are in the *varada* and the *abhaya* poses, while in the remaining two hands she carries the *trisula* and *akashamala*. Her banner as well as the *vahana* is Nandi (bull); she wears a *Jata Makuta*.

#### **Kaumari**

Kaumari is yellow in complexion and has four hands, in two of which she carries the *sakti* and the *kukkuta*, the remaining two hands in the *abhaya* and the *varada* poses. Her *vahana* is the Peacock. Her abode is under a fig tree. According to the *Vishnudharamottara*, she has six faces and twelve arms, in which she carries the *sakti*, *dhvaja*, *danda*, *dhanus*, *bana*, *ghanta*, *padma*, *patra* and *parasu*. The *Devi Purana* adds that her garlands are made of red flower and the *Purvakarnagama* adds that the goddess is so sculptured as to suggest the ideas of valour and courage.

#### **Varahi**

Varahi is dark complexioned, with human body and the face of a boar. She wears on her



head a *Karanda Makuta* and is adorned with ornaments made of corals. She weilds the *hala* and the *sakti* and is seated under a *Kalpaka* tree. Her *vahana* as well as the emblem of her banner is the Elephant. The *Vishnudharmottara* states that she has a big belly and six hands, in four of which she carries the *danda*, *khadga*, *khetaka* and *pasa*. The *Purvakaranagama* says that she carries the *hala* and *musala* as her weapons. She wears on her legs *nupuras* (anklets).

### Chamunda

Goddess Chamunda has four arms, two of which are in the *varada* and *abhaya* poses and in the other two hands she carries the *kapala* (skull) and the *trisula*. The Devi is destroyed the two demons, Chanda and Munda. She has a very emaciated body, aunken belly and a terrifying face with a grin. She wears a garland of skulls. Her garment is the tiger skin and her abode is under fig tree. As the mother goddess she is the fertility aspect of Durga. She has been praised as the tutelary goddess of Vindhya mountains. She has a very heavy *Jata Makuta*. In the *Purva Karanagama* it is mentioned that she should have her mouth open and should wear on her head the digit of the moon as Siva does, that her *vahana* is an owl and the emblem of her banner is an eagle. In one of the left hands she carries the *kapala* which is filled with lumps of flesh, and in another left hand she holds a snake. She wears in her ears *kundalas* made of conch-shell.

The sculpturing of the *Sapta Matrika* group of goddesses found in the cave temple of Ellora conform largely to the description given above. They, however differ in few points. For instance the group is invariably made of seven mothers flanked on either side by Virabhadra who is seen playing upon a *vina* and Vinayaka. There is being some blood-thirsty ghost surrounding Chamunda.

A stone slab of the early Kushana period, from Dhanagaon near Mathura now in the Mathura Museum, represents the *Matrikas* as

ordinary females without any distinguishing symbol or vehicle. In Orissa certain varieties of the *Matrika* figures in developed forms have been found. An early group of *Sapta Matrikas* with the two associates, Genesa and Virabhadra are found on the northern wall of the Parasuramesvara temple (605 A.D.) at Bhubaneswar. The ceiling of the *Jagamohana* of the Muktesvara temple also contains beautiful figures of the *Sapta Matrika*, each occupying one of the petals of the eight petalled lotus at the center conceived in the form of a canopy. These figures constitute a group of the *Sapta Matrikas* with Viresvara. In the inner walls of *Vaital deula* there are a group of *Sapta Matrikas* headed by Viresvara, with the largest image of Chamunda which is the presiding deity of the shrine. A group of *Matrika* images like Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani and Chamunda found in the Orissa State Museum. All the *Matrikas* are seat in *Lalita* attitude. An interesting relief in the Orissa State Museum, bearing the figures of the *Matrikas*, depicts Chamunda having emaciated body, sunken belly, wearing a garland of skull and seated in an easy posture, on a prostrate human being.

There is an interesting *Saptamatrika* panel in the Allahabad Museum. They were found at Gorgi in the Rewa dist of Madhya Pradesh. All the seven divine mothers along with Virabhadra and Ganesa have been rendered as dancing vigorously.

### References

1. T.A. Gopinath Rao. *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol-II-P-I.
2. K.C. Aryan. *The Little Goddesses (Matrikas)*.
3. Bhagwant Sahai. *Iconography of Minor Hindu and Buddhist Deities*.

Asst. Curator (Epigraphy),  
Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar.