



## GODDESS LAKSMI

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The Goddess Sri Lakshmi does not appear in the earliest Vedic literature. The term 'Sri', however, does occur quite often in the Vedas and it is clear that the meanings of the term are related to the nature of the latter goddess Sri Lakshmi. As used in the Vedic hymns, the term Sri suggests capability, power and advantageous skills. As an external quality, Sri suggests beauty, lustre, glory and high rank. Sri also refers to riches, prosperity and abundance in general. In short, Sri refers to most auspicious qualities and suggests general wellbeing in terms of physical health, material prosperity ; bodily beauty and ruling majesty.

The most detailed picture of Sri Lakshmi in Vedic literature is found in the "Sri Sukta", a hymn in praise of Sri which is the part of an appendix to the "Rug Veda" and which is probably pre-Buddhist in date. Perhaps this is surely one of the earliest hymns to Sri and associates her with certain symbols and qualities that persist throughout her history in the Hindu tradition. An important feature of Sri in this hymn is her association with fertility, a feature that was not significantly emphasized in earlier usages of the term Sri in Vedic literature.

The hymn to Sri mentions two objects that come to be consistently associated with Sri throughout her history, i.e, the

lotus and the elephants. She is seated on a lotus, bears the colour of lotus, appears like a lotus, is covered with lotuses and wears a garland of lotuses. As per her history, in fact Sri Lakshmi is often called Padma and Kamala. The popularity of the lotus in Indian art and in conography, both Buddhist and Hindu, suggests a complex and multivalent meaning associated with the lotus. Images of Sri Lakshmi with elephants are probably meant to portray the act of royal consecration. The central ritual action of the Vedic royal consecration ceremony, i.e, the "Rajsuya" was the "Abhisheka" ritual in which the king was consecrated by bathing in auspicious waters poured over him to bestow authority and vigour on him. In so far as the elephants in these images of Lakshmi is concerned, it may be learnt to be portraying the "Abhisheka" by this they bestow the qualities of fertility and royal authority on Lakshmi herself who is the source of these very qualities. The elephants further more shown standing on lotuses. A more highly charged image denoting the increase of royal authority, fertility and vigour would be different to imagine.

As per the versions of the myth, when the milk ocean was churned by the Gods and Demons, Goddess Lakshmi appeared from the churning and most variants of the myth say that Sri Lakshmi's association



with Vishnu took place at the churning of the ocean. The relationship of Sri and Vishnu seems appropriate in the context of the myth and at a general symbolic level in several ways. As per "Vishnu Puran", "Sri Vishnu" or Hari descends on the world in various shapes. So does his consort Sri. Thus when Hari was born as a dwarf, as a son of Aditi, Laksmi also appeared from a lotus. When Hari was Raghava, Laksmi was born as Sita and when Hari was Srikrishna, Laskmi was Rukmani. In the other descents of Vishnu, she is his associate. If he takes a celestial form, she appears as divine. If a mortal, she becomes mortal too, transforming her own person agreeably to whatever character it pleases Vishnu to put on. Her role as a model wife typifies her more subdued nature. She is occupied in this role with household order. Indeed she is said to cook food at the Jagannath temple which

come to be known as "Mahaprasad". In her role as ideal wife, she exemplifies the orderliness of human society and human relations.

Reflecting her increasing association with social order, several texts locate Laksmi's presence in righteous behaviour, orderly conduct and correct social observance. She is said for example to live with those who tell the truth and are generous. She dwells with those who have clean bodies and are well dressed. In the "Mahabharat" she says that I dwell in truth, gift, vow, austerity, strength and virtue. Orderly social relations and traditional social virtues attract Sri Laksmi herself a model of social decorum as Vishnu's wife.



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