Laksmi Narayana, Narsinghanath, Circa 12th century A.D.

Goddess Laksmi : The Consort of the Lord

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Gajalaksmi Narsinghanath, Circa 11th century A.D.

Laksmi, the consort of Lord Jagannath is enshrined in a separate and independent temple in the north-west corner in the Jagannath temple precinct at Puri. In Orissa, Laksmi is worshipped as an independent deity, especially during the closing days of Dessehra (Asvina) month starting from Purnami day at Dhenkanal and Kendrapara, which is called the Gajalaksmi Puja. She is especially worshipped by the females of each and every household of Orissa on every thursday of the month of Margasira which is known as *Manabasa Gurubar*. Gajalaksmi motif, Laksmi being bathed by two or four elephants, is carved in the centre of the architrave (*Dvaralalatabimba*) of the doorway of the sanctum sanctorum (*Garbhagriha*) of almost all temples, whatever might be their cult affiliation. This type of depiction started mostly during the Somavamsi period, from the second half of the 9th century and onwards. Such bathing scene of the goddess by two elephants is described in the *Visnudharmottara* where it is mentioned that a pair of elephants should stand behind her head upturning the water of two jars. (*Avarjitaghatam karyam tatprsthe kunjaradvayam*). Further, this text mentions that the two elephants are the two *nidhi*, Sankha and Padma (*Hastidvayam vijanihi sankhapadmavubhau nidhi*).

In the upper Mahanadi valley of Orissa, Gajalaksmi motif appeared for the first time in the royal seals attached to the ring of the copper-plate charters of the Sarabhapuriya kings who were ruling in the 5th-6th century A.D. The Sarabhapuriya kings were *Parama Bhagavata*. They patronised the propagation of the *Pancaratra* or *Bhagavata* cult in their kingdom. Learned scholar J.N. Banerjea has identified the mutilated standing female figure found by Major General Alexander Cunningham amidst the ruins of Besnagar alongwith the Banyan capital as Srilaksmi and has proved her intimate association with the *Pancaratra* or the *Bhagavata* cult. He has quoted the relevant texts from the *Markandeyapurana* in support of his suggestion. The royal seal attached to the copper-plates of the Sarabhapuriyas bears the figure of two-handed goddess Laksmi standing in the *Samabhanga* posture, being flanked by two elephants pouring water in their raised trunks on her head. The left hand of the goddess of wealth is in *Katyavalambita*, while the right hand is raised up.

This aspect of Laksmi, popularly known as Gajalaksmi became a common motif in the royal seals attached to the rings of all the copper plate charters of the Somavamsi kings, who were ruling the upper Mahanadi valley in the 9th-10th century A.D. and the entire Orissa (Utkal, Kalinga and Kosala) in the 11th century A.D. But in the Somavamsi copper-plate charter seals Laksmi is depicted in the seated posture instead of in the standing posture as found in the Sarabhapuriya royal seals. Two repousse gold coins found in a village near Junagad town of Kalahandi district also bear the figure of Laksmi seated in *Padmasana* being flanked by two elephants in both sides. Both the elephants are standing in their hind legs like human beings and their trunks are raised. This type of depiction of elephants standing in their hind legs is found in the royal seals of the Sarabhapuriya copper-plate charters also. Both the coins seems to be imitation of the Sarabhapuriya repousse gold

coins, and struck in the same fashion, and those are believed to be Somavamsi gold coins by this scholar.

The earliest of the Gajalaksmi motifs in the upper Mahanadi valley is found amidst loose sculptured panels of a temple ruins at Chandi Mandir, Saintala in the Balangir district, where two-handed Laksmi is seated in the *Padmasana* being flanked by two elephants, one in each side, standing in their hind legs and pouring water on the head of the goddess in their raised trunks. This motif might have adorned the central portion of the architrave or the *Dvaralalatavimba* of the doorway to the *Garbhagriha* of a temple of the Panduvamsi period, i.e. 8th century A.D. To the proper right portion of this figure there are two more depictions; one is that of three Yaksa-type figures and the other of a dancing Ganesa. The middle depiction might be that of Kuvera and his two associates. All the three depictions, Gajalaksmi, Kuvera and his two associates and dancing Ganesa are separated by pilaster designs. This seems to be a panel depicting the Trinity of Fortune,i.e Ganesa, Abhiseka Laksmi and Kuvera. Another such panel is found in the University Museum at Philadelphia, U.S.A.

Gajalaksmi as a motif in the centre of the *Dvaralalatavimba* in the Siva temple at Deulgudi in Balangir district seems to be interesting. In one such depiction Laksmi devoid of any ornamentation is seated in the *Lalitasana*. Two elephants are depicted in the top-corners of the niche, above her head. Both the elephants are carved in profile and not in the conventional posture of flanking the goddess in both sides. The connection of lotus flower with Laksmi is focussed by a three-dimensional full-blown lotus carved just below the Laksmi figure in the edge of the architrave. It can be dated to the beginning phase of the Somavamsi period in the upper Mahanadi valley, i.e. the middle of the 9th century A.D.(850 A.D). Such a plain Gajalaksmi figure is found carved in a stone beam, now kept in the Siva temple precinct at Jogisurda in Balangir district, and another carved in the door-lintel of the gateway to the Kosalesvara temple complex at Vaidyanath in Sonepur district.

The ornamentations became more elaborate. In a Gajalaksmi motif found carved on the centre of the *Dvaralalatavimba* of the gateway to the brick-built *Jagamohana* hall of the Kosalesvara temple at Vaidyanath, two-handed Laksmi is seated in *Lalitasana* on a *Padmapitha*. She is flanked by two lady attendants in both sides. In the top-portion, in both sides, two elephants with raised trunks are pouring water on her. In the base portions of the doorjamb, in both sides there are two *dvarapalas*. Such two-handed Gajalakshmi seated in Lalitasana, flanked by two lady attendants in both sides and two elephants in the top-portion is found in the *Dvaralalatavimba* of the eastern and northern doorways to the *Jagamohana* of the Narasinghnath temple at Paikmal also. But the Gajalaksmi motif of Paikmal (Narasinghnath) is very exquisitely carved, being bedecked by all ornaments like *Keyura, Kankana, Katimekhala, Kuchabandha,* and anklets etc. The lower portion of the pedestal has beautiful *Jalapatra* motif. The elephants are carved on two lotus flowers. Both the Gajalaksmi motifs of Vaidyanath and Narasinghnath are encircled by beaded line designs forming the rectangular niches in which they are. Three bands of scroll works, *Gelaba, Manusya Kautaki* and *Jalapatra* are carved in both sides of the Gajalaksmi niche and also in the doorjambs, in the base of which *Dvarapala* flanked by the river godesses Ganga and Yamuna are carved on their respective mounts, tortoise and crocodile. In the eastern doorway at Narasinghanath, Navagraha slab is fitted above the *Dvaralalatavimba*, which convention was also popularised during the Somavamsi period. Like the elaborately carved doorjambs of Vaidyanath and Narasinghnath, the doorways of all three temples of the Ramesvara group at Baudh are also notesworthy, where the doorjambs have all the three bands of scroll works, the *Dvarapalas* and Gajalaksmi motif as well as the Navagraha slab above the doorway. But the river goddesses are absent. In the case of the doorways to the inner sanctums of the Kosalesvara temple at Daspur Surda in Balangir district and the Vimalasvara temple at Huma in Sambalpur district, the doorjambs are having the Gajalaksmi motif, the three bands of scroll works and the *Dvarapalas*. But the Navagraha slab is absent. While Laksmi is seated in *Padmasana* at Daspur Surda, she is depicted in *Lalitasana* sitting posture at Huma. At Baudh, in the Ramesvara temple complex another slab is lying loose, in which the

Navagraha panel has a Gajalaksmi motif attached to it just below in the central portion, where Laksmi is depicted in *Padmasana*. Such a Navagraha slab with a comparatively smaller Gajalaksmi motif depicting Laksmi in *Padmasana* is found at Pandhuakhol in Naktideul block area of Sambalpur district also. In these cases Laksmi is shown in a diminutive form being over-shadowed by the Navagraha. In one common long panel found fitted in the *Dvaralalatavimba* of the brick-built Patalesvara temple at Budhikomna in Nuapara district. Gajalaksmi is carved in one row alongwith the Navagrahas. It seems to be the precursor of all the Gajalaksmi panels having Navagraha above them.

Gajalaksmi motif continued to adorn the centre of the *Dvaralatavimba* of the doorways to the inner sanctums, mostly of Siva temples even upto the Chauhan period i.e. 15th-19th century A.D. In a later example found at Deheli in Baudh district, Laksmi seated in *Lalitasana* is depicted, but the grace is lost in the carving. Instead of three bands of scroll works there are two bands, the top-one with *Jalapatra* and the middle-one with big flower bud motifs, while the lower-one is absolutely plain. In the *Garbhagrha* doorway of the Champesvara Siva temple at Champamal in Sonepur district, in both sides of the Gajalaksmi motif, the doorjambs and its base are having the carving of big floral decorations, with two lines of strings of buds in both sides.

The most elaborate of the *Dvaralalatavimba* (door-lintel) of the gateway to the *Garbhagrha* is found in the Kapilesvara temple at Charda in Sonepur district. The upper-most panel has the scene of Siva and Parvati playing chess, while the middle panel has the figure of Anantasayana Visnu, below which Gajalaksmi motif is depicted in a rectangular niche. Such *Dvaralatavimba* having Gajalaksmi motif and elaborate depiction of Nagas above it as well as Anantasayana Visnu in the upper panel(second one) is found fitted to the doorway of the *Garbhagrha* of the Rajivalochana temple at Rajim in the Raipur district of Chhattisgarh State. As the temple at Rajim is dated to the 8th century A.D. and belongs to the Nala rule, the elaborate depictions found on the *Dvaralalatavimba* of the temple at Charda might have been influenced by the Rajim style.

In most of the early temples of the upper Mahanadi valley of Orissa; generally, the *Dvaralalatavimba* of the doorways to the *Garbhagrha* are adorned with Gajalaksmi motif in the centre. In some cases, either a panel of ordinary letter as at Baudh, Karadi, Vaidyanath (the small shrine, Suvesvara temple), Deulgudi, Kusang, Narsinghnath and Harishankar or a panel of the Anantasayi Visnu; as at Charda, Vaidyanath and Kusang are found carved above the Gajalaksmi motif. This decorative programme has some variations at Budhikomna, where the Gajalaksmi motif is amidst the Navagrahas in one panel. But on the door-lintel of the *Garbhagrha* of the Khambeswari temple at Sonepur, a panel of ten lady figures is carved in one panel. In the first and tenth positions they are in standing posture with both hands folded in obeisance, whereas rest of the eight godesses (including Gajalaksmi) are in the seated position. Gajalaksmi is in the center, flanked by three and four seated *Devi* figures, carved under *Chhatra* design and on their left thigh they hold one child each, seated on it. In this Gajalaksmi motif, Laksmi is seen to be seated in *Lalitasana*. Most probably, this is a unique Gajalaksmi panel and the only of its kind, depicting the *Saptamatrkas*, a cult popularized some-time around the 9th century A.D. This panel might have been fitted during the Chauhan period by collecting it from the ruins of an earlier temple. We find another unique Gajalaksmi panel, flanked by four elephants at Sonepur, at present fitted on the *Dvaralalatavimba* of the *Garbhagrha* of the Rameswara temple, situated on the confluence of the river Tel with the Mahanadi. In this panel, a four-handed figure of Laksmi seated in *Padmasana* is carved in the center, flanked by four elephants, two in each side, standing with pitchers on their trunks raised to pour water on her. In the extreme left and right sides of this panel, there are profiled figures of one female and one male devotee, both sitting in kneeled down position worshipping Laksmi with folded hands in obeisance. Such Gajalaksmi motif with four elephants is also found at Budhikomna. Besides these Gajalaksmi panels of the Khambesvari temple and the Ramesvara temples, other temples where Gajalaksmi motifs

occur on the *Dvaralalatavimba* of the *Garbhagrha* are the temples of Suvarnameru, Samalei, Gopinath and one sub-shrine behind the Jagannath temple as well as in a *Devi* temple near the Gopinath temple. In all these five cases, the Laksmi figure is four-handed and seated in *Padmasana*. Her lower left hand is in *Abhaya* and the left one in *Varada*, while in her raised upper hands she is holding *Padmanada*. In the case of the Gajalaksmi panel of the sub shrine behind the Jagannath temple, both the elephants are seen to be standing on lotus in both sides of her with trunks raised above her head. The most astounding are two panels of the Anantasayi Visnu, one found on the door-lintel of the *Jagamohana* of the Rameswara temple and the other one in similar position in the Suvarnameru Siva temple. Learned scholar B.K. Rath has rightly taken both these panels to be of the Somavamsi period. Another learned scholar Henery Von Stietencron is of the view that the Anantasayi Visnu panel is a common feature found in the Visnu temples of the upper Mahanadi valley as found on the door-lintel of the *Garbhagrha* of the Laksmana temple at Sirpur (Raipur district of Chhattisgarh State) and on the massive western entrance of the Rajivalochana temple at Rajim (Raipur district). Both these temples are assigned to the Panduvamsi rule in Kosala and to circa 8th century A.D.

During the Chauhan period, although Gajalaksmi figures were carved on the *Dvaralalatavimba*, the sculptors have not followed the prescribed iconographic programme. In one such motif found at Pujaripali in Jharsuguda district, Laksmi is depicted as four-handed, sitting in *Padmasana*. Instead of holding lotus flowers, she is holding the legs of two elephants in both her upraised hands, while the lower proper right and left hands are in *Abhaya* and *Varada Mudras*. She is wearing a long garland, which is hanging from her neck up to the pedestal, below which petalled flowers in semi-diamond circle are carved, Such floral designs in continuation are carved in both sides on the *Dvaralalatavimba*. The Gajalaksmi motif found in the Ramesvara temple at Sonepur is unique, where the four-handed Laksmi, seated in *Padmasana* is flanked by big elephants of the same size of the image of the godess, although in other cases the elephants are depicted in a smaller size than that of the goddess.

Another peculiar Laksmi figure is found carved on a stone-panel, now lying amidst loose sculptures at Sukhabandh near Hemgir town of Sundargarh district. This *Dvaralalatavimba* is 52" in length and 15" in breadth. It is an excellent piece of art, having an image of Laksmi in the centre. To the proper right of Laksmi image, there is a carving of two lions (lion and lioness). Similarly in the proper left portion, there is a carved motif depicting two swans. In the extreme left side of the panel is a dancing Yaksa, while in the extreme right is the figure of Ganesa seated in *Maharajalila* posture. This panel has foliage motifs and dotted line designs. Laksmi, Ganesa and the dancing Yaksa figures are carved in miniature temple niche designs. It is very peculiar that, the image of Laksmi is not that of *Abhiseka* Laksmi or Gajalaksmi as found in the central portion of the *Dvaralalatavimba* of the temples of the Somavamsi period, i.e. 9th-11th century A.D. Elephants with raised trunks are absent in this case. We find here a four-handed image of Laksmi, seated in *Padmasana*. It is an image of *Saubhagya* Laksmi, who is worshipped for happy and blissful conjugal life.

Very few single images of Gajalaksmi are found in the upper Mahanadi valley, numbering only four at Uraladani., Gandharadi, Narasinghnath and Sonepur. Those were probably worshipped as independent images in separate temples dedicated to the Goddess. An image of Gajalaksmi of the size of around 15" in height and 6" in breadth is found in a *mundi* niche on the east of the *Jagamohana* of the Siddhesvara temple at Gandharadi in Baudh district, where she is depicted in the seated posture of *Padmasana*, holding a long-stemmed lotus in each hand.

A beautiful Gaja-Laksmi image of the size of around 2'.5" in height and 1'.4" in breadth has been collected from Sankushgad and worshipped by one Shri Chakradhar Patra, an inhabitant of Urladani village of M. Rampur Tehsil area of Kalahandi district. This image is chiselled on red stone. It is a four-handed image in which goddess Laksmi is seated in *Lalitasana*. In both her upper hands she is holding long-stemmed full-blown lotus, while her lower left and right hands are in *Abhaya* and *Varada mudras*. Two profiled figures of

elephants are in both top-corners of the slab with their trunks raised, pouring water on her head. The peculiarity of this image is that there is a ram carved as her *vahana* in the pedestal portion.

Although Gajalaksmi motif is usually carved in the centre of the *Dvaralalatavimba of the Garbhagrha or Jagamohana* doorways, a slight deviation is found at Narsinghnath, where we find a four-handed Laksmi figure fitted to a niche in the northern side, just below the Raha portion, in between an *Angasikhara* motif and the *Baranda*. This image is made of polished red stone, depicting the goddess seated in the *Padmasana* posture on a lotus pedestal. She is holding a *Sankha* in her upper right hand and keeping both her lower hands on the thighs. Her upper left hand is broken. She is flanked by two elephants with raised trunks over her head.

Besides the Gajalaksmi motifs and independent figures, two images of Laksmi-Narayana in the same style of Uma-Mahesvara are found at Belkhandi in Kalahandi district and Narsinghnath in Bargarh district. The Laksmi Narayana image found at Belkhandi, from the stylistic ground can be dated to the second half of the 8th century A.D. The other Laksmi-Narayan image found at Narsinghnath can be dated to around 12th-13th century A.D. The Laksmi-Narayana image of Belkhandi has been taken as the earliest of its kind by learned scholar J.P. Singh Deo.

The Laksmi-Narayana image of Narsinghnath is fitted in a niche to the left side of the eastern doorway of the *Jagamohana* of Narsinghnath Temple. Lord Narayana is sitting in *Lalitasana* with his consort Laksmi on his left thigh. The left leg of Laksmi and the right leg of Narayana are hanging below. The lower left hand of the Lord is around the back of Laksmi drawing her closer to his body. His arm has come out from under the left armpit of Laksmi and touching her left breast. Laksmi is holding a lotus flower in her left hand and looking at the Lord with a bewitching smile. The Lord is holding a *Cakra* and a *Gada* in his upper right and left hands respectively, while in his lower right hand is a *Sankha*. The divine couple are heavily bedecked with ornaments. This seems to be a sculptural representation of the 12th-13th century A.D. The facial charm of the Somavamsi period is not found in the faces of the divine couple, instead there is a tight-lipped frowning gesture.

The worship of the divine couple, Laksmi and Narayana seems to be popular from the 8th century onwards in the upper Mahanadi valley, as in the invocatory verses of the Kumurakela plates of the Bhanja king Satrubhanja of Khinjali Mandala, the divine couple Laksmi and Narayana has been worshiped at the beginning : '*Anabarata Bahala Pulaka Laksmikuchapidanena Duritambah / Apaharata Surabhi Parimalasusatapadamura sthalam Visnuh* // (Tr. Prof. Rajkishore Mishra - Laksmi in constant caress of Lord Visnu appears to be trans and drops of sweat coming out of her breast with all its ardour, wipe out sins and cleanse the Universe).

From all the above archaeological evidences it is clear that right from the period of the Sarabhapuriyas, i.e. 5th-6th century A.D. the worship of goddess Laksmi was given much emphasis and therefore she has been depicted in the Sarabhapuriya royal seals (of the copper plate charters), gold coins of the Somavamsis and Kalacuris, *Dvaralalatavimba* of most of the Siva, Sakti and other temples, built during the Panduvamsi, Bhanja, Somavamsi, Ganga and Telugu Choda periods. There are ample evidences of her worship as an independent deity and also alongwith her consort Lord Narayana (Visnu) in the upper Mahanadi valley of Orissa.

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