

Vedic Goddesses

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GODDESSES played a very important role in the life of the people from the time of Vedas. As powers of creation, protection and dissolution, their presence was felt always. Scholars have already pointed out the role of some of these Vedic goddesses like Sarasvatī, Uṣas, Aditi and others. It is proposed in this paper to focus attention on how some sculptural portrayals especially of the feminine powers, on the walls of most of the temples, are rooted in the Vedic hymns.

The Vedas are the basic verifiable collections of thoughts preserved with least changes in their content by an extraordinary system of recitation and analysis. And that helps us in tracing factual data about history and beliefs. For all forms of Indian thought and life the Vedas which are assigned to around the second millennium BCE are the roots. One of the most important prayers found in the Vedas, which is strikingly rationalistic, is what is called the "Gāyatrī hymn" in which the prayer is addressed to God Savitā (Sun) to bestow critical knowledge on the adherent. Interestingly this hymn has been continuously recited for the past four thousand years as the most important hymn even to this day, and that shows the ancient Indian's prayer from very early times was acquisition of analytical knowledge. No surviving religious hymn of the world has lived for such a long time as Gāyatrī hymn, playing a vital role in the life of a nation. But what is important is that this Gāyatrī hymn is visualized as a feminine principle, the Mother of the Vedas (*Gāyatrī Veda Mātā*). That would show that "root of knowledge" is the Female Principle for the ancient Indians.

That is further confirmed by the primordial position given to knowledge as a goddess, Sarasvatī in the Vedas. Thus, knowledge is feminine. The human knowledge is preserved by articulated sound, communicated to other fellow beings which was called *vāk*, and *vāk* is Sarasvatī, that spreads. Thus, "knowledge" and "speech" (*vāk*) are held identical and visualized as female goddesses. Also the foremost of the Vedas was Brahmā, the Creator. When the ancient Indian started preserving the knowledge also through written form, the script he visualized was

a female called Brāhmī. Thus both the two important tools of human progress in Indian civilization were visualized as Female Powers.

Mātrkās Are Sound Producing Energies

One aspect of visualization helps us conclude that dynamism is the essence of life but that requires to exist or manifest. These two essentials were given or imagined as male and female. The potential power is called the man but the movement of that power is held by a female Śakti. From all later literatures it becomes clear why the Indians considered the female principles as knowledge and script. The communicable sound is produced by human articulating energy and energy (Śakti) is feminine. The script is a visual symbol of speech and is effective only when the script and speech are correlated as one and that is the reason why the script was also called Brāhmī, the female goddess very closely associated with Sarasvatī. The Sanskrit syllables (sounds) were brought under eight groups as "vowels," and seven *vargas*. Each *varga* was the production of a particular energy and these energies were given names and were called the mothers. Like the "sapta sindhus," seven rivers flowing and making the land fertile, so these *mātrkās* flowed among the human beings and fertilized their life and came to be called seven mothers (*saptamātrkā*) and with the addition of the vowels they form the main life principle, the eight mothers (*aṣṭa-mātrkā*). The later Āgamic literature, for example, says that the seven mothers are the roots from which sprout articulated sounds and so are the Goddesses from whom the collection of knowledge emanates. The Āgamas call the base as the *mātrkās* that are also called *adhiṣṭhāna* over which the divine manifests in temple architecture. The base of a Hindu temple is not a pile of stones, built just as a course but are the symbols like the script and stand for the *adhiṣṭhāna mātrkās* or Śaktis. Thus the poetic compositions that create a powerful imagery with the help of *mātrkās* are also female Śaktis. So different knowledge groups were also given forms as Śaktis, and their totality called Śrīvidyā.

Mother, the Supreme Goddess

It is known that Vedas give the foremost place to the human mother as goddess, even preceding the father. There is a well-known passage in the Vedas in which the teacher tells the student, at the time of his completion of his studies, some basic tenets to be observed in worldly life, and in that the worship of God is advocated. The first sermon is "worship thy mother as god" (*mātr deva bhava*) and then only it speaks of worship of father as god (*pitr deva bhava*).

Mātr deva bhava, pitr deva bhava, ācārya deva bhava, atithi deva bhava is the Vedic dictum which shows the importance given to the mother as a God by the Vedic Indians.

Women Are Equal Partners

The goddesses appear in the Vedas as equal partners with manly power in many

passages. In the *Taittirīya Samhitā*, a number of gods are generally invoked on many occasions. Take for example, a hymn in *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda* (1.8.13) invokes many deities, most of them male gods, in the midst of whom we also find goddesses on equal footing. The hymn thus invokes Agni, Soma, Savitā, Pūṣan, Indra, Kṣetrapati and others. In the midst of them are goddesses Sarasvatī and Pṛthvī invoked on par with others, which is a clear indication that the goddesses of the Vedas enjoyed equal status with male gods.

*āgnaye svāhā, somāya svāhā, savitre svāhā, sarasvatyai svāhā, bṛhaspataye svāhā,
indrāya svāhā, kṣetrasyapataye svāhā, pṛthivyai svāhā . . .*

Viśvarūpī

Similarly in the *Rājasūya* rite, waters are obtained for purposes of *abhiṣeka* which are praised as goddesses:

*agneḥ tejasyaḥ stha apām oṣadhinām rasaḥ stha āpa devīḥ madhyamatīḥ iti agrhnan
ūrjasvatīḥ rājasūyaya ciṭānaḥ yābhiḥ mitrā varunau abhyaśincan.*

Here also we find Mitra-Varuṇa and Indra along with *āpaḥ* (waters) being praised as goddesses sweet in taste and capable of bestowing kingdom on the Yajamāna, a kṣatriya (patron king). In the same context a little later we get another prayer addressed to Agni, Indra, Viśvedevāḥ, Mitṛavaruṇau (dual deities) and Dyāvāpṛthvī (other dual deities) which are praised along with Aditī, the goddess, who is addressed as *viśvarūpī*, the goddess who encompasses the entire universe.

*agniḥ grahapatīḥ avinnāḥ, indro vṛddha śravāḥ, pūṣā viśva vedas, avinnau
mitṛavaruṇau, avinnau ṛtau, avinne dhyāvā pṛthivī, dhrataurate, avinna devī
aditī viśvarūpī. . . vo bhārata rājā somaḥ asmākam brāhmanānām rājendrasya. . .*

— *Kāṇḍa 1, praśna 8, anu. 22*

The commentator Bhaṭṭa Bhāskara explains Aditi as Deva-mātā or Pṛthivī but the term Viśva-rūpī denoted that she is portrayed as universal goddess, a primordial role assigned to the feminine principle.

Dvāra Devīs

It is generally believed that only males make good guardians, particularly of the entrances. But in the Vedas we find women are personified as the guardians of the entrances while male guards are given other assignments. There is an interesting passage that praises a number of gods and goddesses in the *Taittirīya Samhitā* (*Kāṇḍa 3*), in which the divinities are invoked to protect the patron from different forces. Among them Goddess Sarasvatī and two goddesses (*dvāra devīs*) guarding the entrances also come in for praise.

*sūryo mā devo divyād amhasa pātu, vāyuh antarikṣāt, agniḥ pritiyāḥ, yamah
pitṛbhyah, sarasvatī manuṣyebhyah, devī dvārau, mā mā santaptān.*

— Kāṇḍa 3, praśna 2, hymn 4

In most of the classical temples with sculptural portrayal, the entrances to the sanctum are flanked by two female figures, which are generally identified with Gaṅgā and Yamunā (11.1-3). Beyond them are seen Nandī and Mahākālā as doorkeepers in Śiva temples and Jaya and Vijaya in Viṣṇu temples. It is a Vedic tradition that states the entrance has dvāra devīs. We find the protective power of the entrances is thus assigned to goddesses in the Vedas. These goddesses are generally portrayed as standing on Makara and the other on a tortoise and the Āgamas tell us that they are the river goddesses. It is well known that the rivers were personified as devīs (goddesses) in the Vedas. The *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, for example, mentions the rivers Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Sarasvatī, Sutudrī, Paruṣnī and so on as goddesses.

*imam me gaṅge, yamune, sarasvatī, sutudrī stomam sacata paruṣaṇī asikniyā
marudorḍhe vitastaya ajikiye śṛnuhyā suśomayā*

— *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*, praśna 6, hymn 8.

Loka Dhārīṇī

It is also known that the main sanctums in all the temples also carry a primary stepping stone *ādhāraśilā* which represents the Goddess Pṛthvī variously called. And it is also known that the Goddess Earth called *mahī*, *dhārīṇī*, or *pṛthvī*, is a Vedic goddess who plays a vital role in temple architecture. She appears not only on the threshold of the entrance to the sanctum but also on the pedestal of the main image in the sanctum, constituting the five seats (*pañcāsana*) — *anantāsana*, *kūrmāsana*, *pṛthvī āsana*, *padmāsana* and *vimalāsana*. These seats are generally found in many classical sculptures of gods but often their significance is missed by the art historians. In this group, the Goddess Pṛthvī appears as Ādhāra Śakti. This is again the Vedic tradition where Dhārīṇī is mentioned as the bearer of all existence. The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* has the following to say on this concept.

bhūmir dhenuḥ dharaṇī loka dhārīṇī — praśna 6, hymn 7

She is also called *Mṛttikā* who is propitiated in all temple festivals. All temple rituals start with what is called *mṛt saṁgrahaṇa*, in which the earth from a sacred spot is ceremoniously obtained and seeds are sown to sprout on them as a worship of the goddess. In fact, an image of a feminine goddess is made with heaped-up earth on the spot where the earth is obtained, she is dressed as a female goddess garlanded and worship is offered to her as Bhūdevī. The priest recites the *Bhū-sūkta* from the Veda on this occasion. Bhūdevī serves as the substratum for supporting all beings and she is praised as the wife of Viṣṇu.

Three Goddesses

In later Purāṇic period we find three goddesses, namely Mahādevī (Gaurī), Mahālakṣmī and Mahāsarasvatī, occupying an important position, like the trinity Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. This concept of three goddesses as a group playing important role is already seen in the Vedas. The Vedas say three goddesses — Idā, Sarasvatī and Bhāratī — occupy the seat.

tiśro devīḥ edam sādantu idā sarasvatī bhāratī

Another passage in the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* gives the names of wives of many well-known gods. The following table sheds some light on it.

God	Spouse	God	Spouse
Indra	Senā	Sūrya	Marīci
Brahaspati	Dhenā	Candramā	Rohiṇī
Pūṣaṇa	Pathyā	Ṛṣis	Arundhatī
Vāyu	Vāk	Parjanya	Vidyut
Soma	Dīkṣā	East	Ahaḥ
Agni	Pr̥thvī	West	Rātri
Vasus	Gāyatrī	South	Kṛṣi
Rudras	Triṣṭuk	North	Vṛṣṭi
Ādityas	Jagatī	South-east	Tviṣi
Viṣṇu	Anuṣṭubh	South-west	Apaciti
Varuṇa	Virāṭ	North-east	Āpaḥ
Yajña	Paṅkti	North-west	Oṣadhayaḥ
Prajāpati	Anumati	Savitā	Prasūtiḥ
Mitra	Śraddhā		

These are called the wives of the gods (*devānām patnayaḥ*); *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*, praśna 3, hymn 9.

senā indrasya, dhenā bṛhaspateḥ, pathyā pūṣṇoḥ, vāk vāyoḥ, dīkṣā somasya, pr̥thvī agneḥ, vasūnām gāyatrī, rudrānām triṣṭuk, ādityānām jagatī, sūryasya marīci, candramaso rohiṇī, ṛṣinām arundhatī, parjanyaḥ vidyut, cātaso dīśāḥ cātāśraḥ avāntara dīśāḥ, ahaśca rātriśca, kṛṣiśca vṛṣṭiśca, tviṣṭiśca citiśca, apāśca auṣadhayaśca, urkca sunṛtā, ca devānām patnayaḥ.

It is interesting to note that in this list Pr̥thvī is called the *patnī* of Agni for he is identical with Viṣṇu.

Apsarases

It is known that most temples portray on their walls a number of beautiful feminine figures, which are interpreted by art connoisseurs in different ways. Some go to the extent of terming them as the visual embodiment of sexual urges. But a study



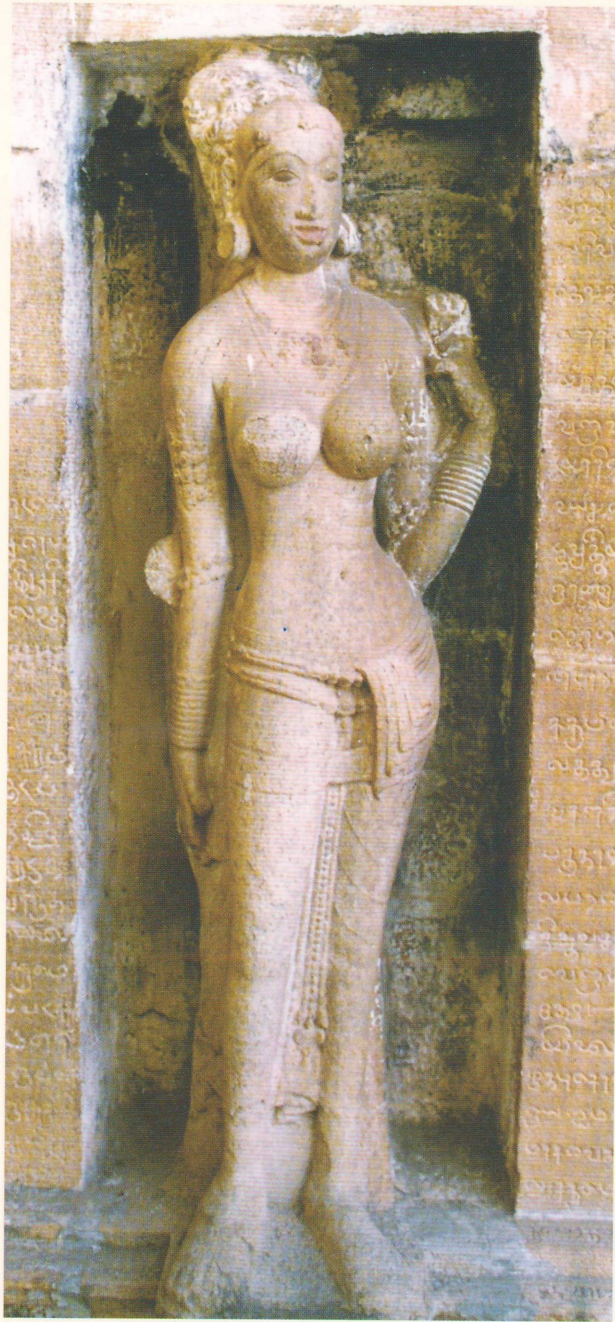
11.1: Gaṅgā, river goddess,
Gupta period, fourth century CE



11.2: Gaṅgā, Udayagiri Cave,
Vidisa, Madhya Pradesh,
Gupta period, fourth century CE



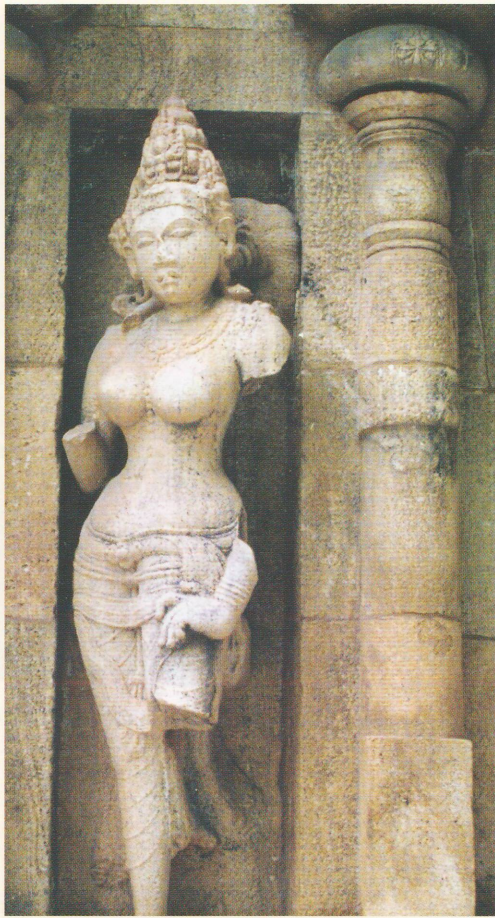
11.3: Gaṅgā-Yamunā, Udayagiri Cave,
Vidisa, Madhya Pradesh,
Gupta period, fourth century CE



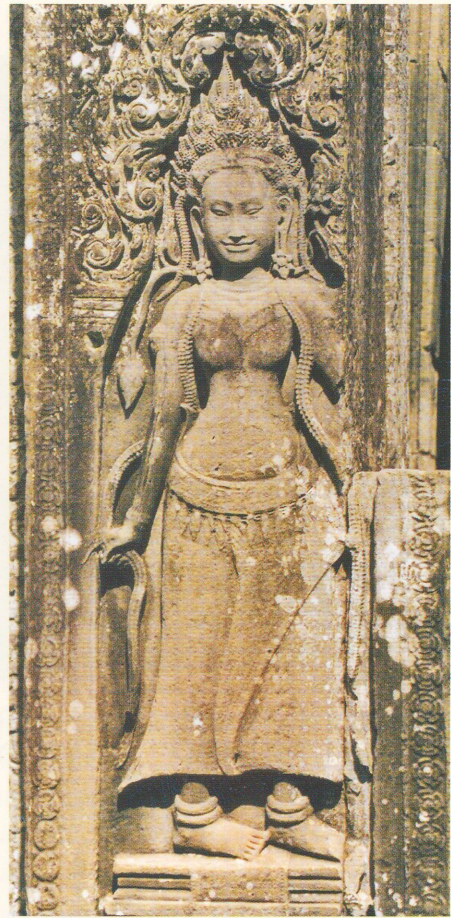
11.4: Apsaras, Nageswara Temple, Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, Coḷa period, ninth century CE



11.5: Apsaras, Nageswara Temple, Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, Coḷa period, ninth century CE



11.6: Apsaras, Koranganatha Temple, Trichy, Tamil Nadu, Coḷa period, ninth century CE



11.7: Apsaras, Bayon Temple, Angkor Thom, Cambodia, twelfth century CE



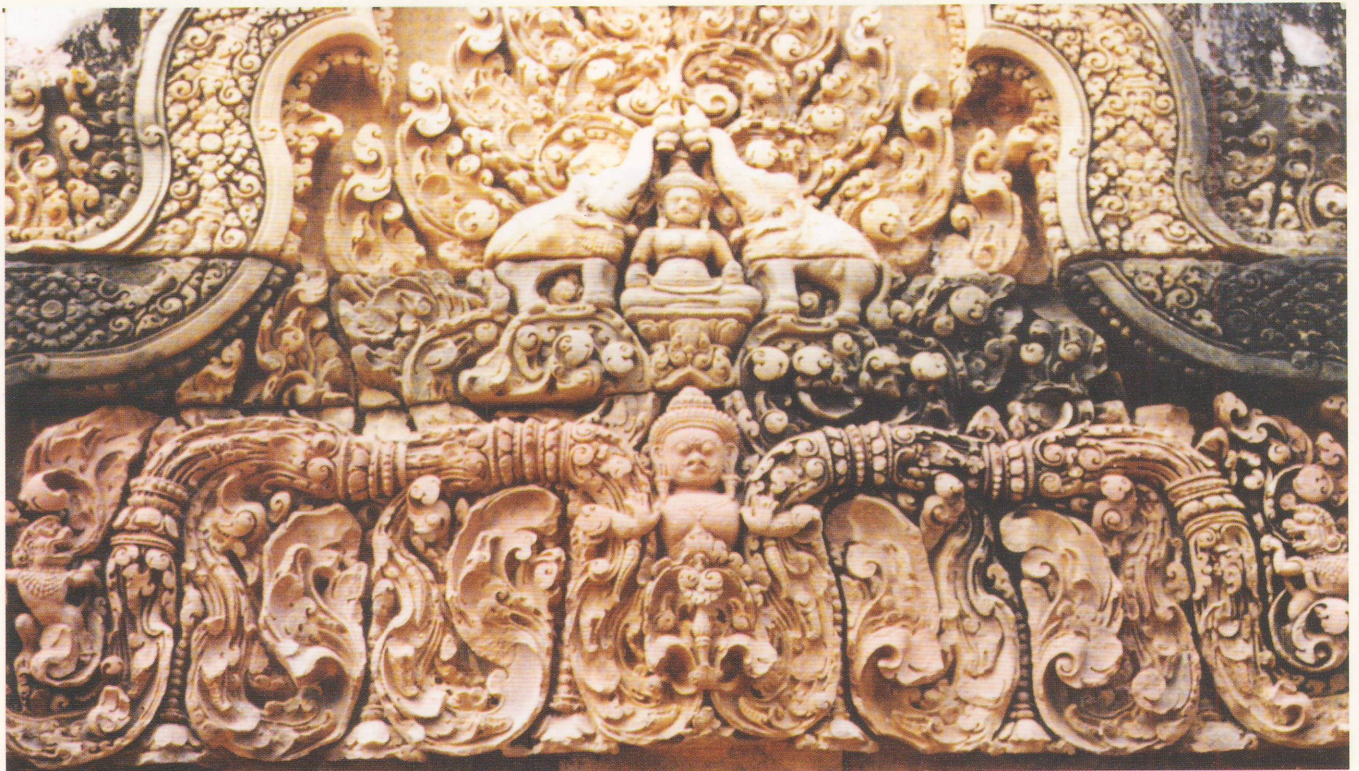
11.8: Dvāra apsaras, Tribhuvan Temple, Banteay Srei, Cambodia, tenth century CE



11.9: Cakrayī, Lajjā Gaurī,
Darasuram Tanjore, Tamil Nadu



11.10: Gajalakṣmī, Bharhut,
Indian Museum, Kolkata,
first century BCE



11.11: Gajalakṣmī, Tribhuvanam Temple, Banteay Srei, Cambodia, tenth century CE

of the Vedas gives interesting pictures and the earliest concepts referring to the portrayal of them on the walls of the classical temples (11.4-8). The *apsarases* are found to be as much an important retinue of the main gods as any other. We have seen also that most of the ideas embedded in temple portrayals are rooted in the Vedas and the case of *apsarases* is no different. They form essential elements of the entourage. An important passage in the *Taittirīya Samhitā*, in the core part of the *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda*, tells us that as pairs they are essential protectors of different directions. The following passage makes it clear:

ayam puro harikeśaḥ sūrya raśmiḥ tasya rathagr̥tsaśca rathaujaśca senānī grāmanyau, puñjikasthalā ca kṛtasthalā ca apsarasau, yātudhānā heti rakṣāṃsi praheti: ayam dakṣiṇā viśvakarmā tasya rathasvanaśca rathecitraśca senānī grāmanyau menakā ca sahajanyā ca apsarasau dakṣṇavaḥ paśavaḥ hetiḥ pauruṣeḥ vadhaḥ prahetiḥ: ayam paścāt viśvavyacāḥ tasya ratha-protāśca asama-rathaśca senānī-grāmanyau, pramlocanti ca anulomanti ca apsarasau, sarpā hetiḥ, vyāgrāḥ prahetiḥ: ayam uttarāt samyāt vasuḥ tasya senajit and suśenaśca senānī grāmanyau, viśvāci gr̥tāci ca apasarasau, avāpo hetiḥ, vātaḥ prahetiḥ : ayam uparyupari vāg vasuḥ, tasya tārkhyaśca ariṣṭanemiś ca senānī grāmanyau, ūrvaśī ca pūrvacittīś ca apasarasau, vidyut hetiḥ, avaspūrjan prahetiḥ, tebhyo namaḥ te no mṛḍayantu te yam dviśmaḥ yaśca nodvesṣti tam vo jambhe dadhāmi:

— *Taittirīya Samhitā*, kāṇḍa 4, praśna 4, hymn 3

We find that five directions are mentioned in this hymn and those in charge of these directions are mentioned. The eastern direction was that of Sūrya. It had a *senānī* (commander) and *grāmaṇī* (village elder) whose names are given as Rathagrithsa and Rathauja. In addition, it had two *apsarases* named Puñjikasthalā and Kṛtasthalā. Similarly each direction had its own *senānī* and *grāmaṇī* and also two *apsarases* each. Without going deep into other aspects, I am giving here the names of the *apsarases* alone of each direction:

East	Puñjikasthalā and Kṛtasthalā
South	Menakā and Sahajanyā
West	Pramlocantī and Anumlocantī
North	Viśvāci and Ghṛtāci
Upper region	Ūrvaśī and Pūrvacitti

Thus the presence of *apsarases* in religious context is absolutely essential to guard the directions (kāṇḍa 4, praśna 4 hymn 3). Elsewhere, the same Vedas mention *apsarases* along with *gandharvas* to be propitiated. Thus the presence of *apsarases* in the temple walls is an essential extension of the Vedic cult.

Four Sisters

There is another dimension to the presence of goddess in the Veda which almost suggests that the civilizing process of humanity is the result of goddesses. Four

goddesses are mentioned in this connection. Their names are given as Anumatī, Rākā, Sinīvālī and Kuhū. Each is a personification of a power that is responsible for the human child to be born. The first is of course the god who is called the Dhātā, the creator who gives the seed. Anumatī is the goddess who conceives the child by creating the union of the seed with the womb of the mother. Rākā is the one who protects the embryo to develop the child in the womb of the mother; Sinīvālī gives the power to bring the baby out of the womb (child birth), and Kuhū is the goddess who gives the faculty of speech to the newborn child. Thus these goddesses are the very fundamentals to Vedic Indians in the process of birth of human embryo and so greatly and lovingly venerated and at times also feared and propitiated for the painless birth of the child. These powers are called Devikās and also as sisters Caturbhaginī. The cult of these Caturbhaginī goddesses seems to have been very popular, for even Śaṅkara, the great Advaita teacher, refers to their worship in his commentary on *Bhagavad-Gītā*.

The relevant part of the Vedic passage, *Taittirīya Saṁhitā*, kāṇḍa 3, praśna 4, hymn 9, reads as:

*devikā nirvāpet prajā kāmāḥ chandāṁsi vai va khalu prajāḥ chandobhiḥ eva prajāś
prajānayati prathamam dhātāram karoti mithunī eva tena karoti anveva asmā
anumatī manyate. rāte rākā; pra sinīvālī janayati; prajāsu eva prajātāsu kuhvā
vācam dadhāti.*

This hymn also identifies these goddesses with poetic metres *chandaḥ*. *Chanda* is the rhythm; the rhythmic effort coming out of a specific human is identified with divine power, and so these *chandas* are called by different names. This hymn is prescribed for one who wants progeny. Once man is born he requires cattle, *paśus* (which also stands for vegetation for his food and survival). So one desirous of *paśu* should propitiate the four goddesses in order. The hymn repeats the same process for the creation of cattle but instead of articulated faculty of speech, it mentions that the *paśu* is established by Kuhū (who in the case of human being gave the faculty of speech). The third stage is that man who grows cannot live in isolation; he would like to live with the community of his species (clan) which is called *grāma*. So by the one desirous of *grāma* (*grāma kāmā*) the same goddesses are propitiated and in the case the Dhātā is established in the middle of the community — *madhyataḥ dhātāram karoti*. In this way the hymn lists one after the other the requirement of human progress and in each case it says these requirements are created by these Devikās which in turn are the poetic efforts. Once the *grāmas* are created there is a need to create a unitary institution that will knit a number of such *grāmas* together and that institution is called the *rāṣṭra*. That is the creation of "the State" *rāṣṭra*.

Before we further discuss the implication of these powers, we may see what the Veda has to say. The Veda identifies these four goddesses with specific metres

like Gāyatrī as follows:

Gāyatrī	Anumatī	
Triṣṭuk	Rākā	
Jagatī	Sinīvālī	
Anuṣṭup	Kuhū	
Vaṣatkārah	Dhātā.	— Ibid., kāṇḍa 3, praśna 4, hymn 34

Further the same goddesses are identified with the cycles of times as the bright fortnight and second fortnight, etc.

Rākā	Pūrva-pakṣa (bright fortnight)
Kuhū	Apāra-pakṣa (dark fortnight)
Sinīvālī	Amāvasyā (new moon)
Anumatī	Paurṇamāsya (full moon)

We have already noticed that these goddesses are identified with the different metres such as Gāyatrī. Each metre is made up of a number of syllables and each syllable is identified with different divine energy as well.

8 Vasus and Gāyatrī has 8 syllables.

11 Rudras and Triṣṭup has 11 syllables.

12 Ādityas and Jagatī has 12 syllables.

Prajāpati is Anuṣṭup.

Dhātā is Vaṣatkārah. — Ibid., hymn, 35

Thus the metres are composed of these goddesses and combining the syllables one has to worship these Devikās with Devatās. Whatever one worships he would get the same appropriate form. This seems to suggest that the hymnal invocation has powers to bestow divine descent and benediction and is responsible for creativity. So only by metrical utterances of divine hymns, man can finally create statehood, *rāṣṭram*. Thus we find that not merely the birth of human entities but the orderly stage by stage civilizing process is attributed to these goddesses. The role of goddesses is tremendous in the Vedic period.

Aditī

Aditī as a Vedic goddess is well known and has been dealt with by eminent scholars. Dr Stella Kramrisch has written on Aditī Uttānapāda, and identified her with what is called nude Goddess Lajjā Gaurī (11.9). Dr Carol Radcliffe Bolon has a well documented book on "Lajjā Gaurī" images. I have myself written about the concept leading to Kuṇḍalinī, in my article "From Aditī to Kuṇḍalinī." It is known that Aditi is Bhū, who gave rise to Śrī, and into Mahādevī, Mahā-Lakṣmī and Mahāsarasvatī.

Gaja-Lakṣmī

The concept of Gaja-Lakṣmī, seated with two elephants pouring waters over her, is an extension of this concept (11.10, 11). Ananda Coomaraswamy has shown that the two elephants pouring water from vessels over her represent Pṛthvī, and I have shown earlier that the same motif is found commonly for Mahāsarasvatī and Mahādevī. I have also shown that such representations are found in sculptures all over India.

But what is amazing is that this concept is also found in early Cambodian sculptures that have not been noticed so far. Many Cambodian inscriptions refer to the consecration of goddesses Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī and Durgā. An important temple is in Hariharālaya now called Rolous. It is a brick temple named Pra Kravan with five towers in a row, the central one dedicated to Viṣṇu in his Viśvarūpa form. Another tower in the same complex has the image of Lakṣmī at the back wall of the sanctum, carved *in situ* on the brick wall. The sculpture is over life size in height showing its importance. On the side wall of the sanctum is carved an image of Durgā, equal in height and magnitude as the central Lakṣmī. The other side wall also had a sculpture equal in dimension and magnitude as Lakṣmī and Durgā but the major part of the sculpture is gone except the leg part. It is obviously Mahāsarasvatī.

Durgā on the side wall of the sanctum is by the side of Lakṣmī-Pra Kravan, Cambodia. The temple in Cambodia that had all the three goddesses in the sanctum, with Lakṣmī in the centre, the Durgā in the north and Sarasvatī in the south is a temple dedicated to Durgā, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī and that these three goddesses are one is thus nowhere so overwhelmingly represented as in this ancient temple.

Goddess as Para-Brahman

The knowledge of *Para-Brahman* is given to Umā by all the gods when she appeared as a bright luminous being — *Yakṣam*, according to *Kenopaniṣad*.

Thus we find goddesses have played different roles as supreme Śaktis above all gods as in the case of Aditi; as equal partners with men; as guardians; supporters of the universe; as trinities (counterpart of male trinities Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahmā); as *apsarases* and so on. Their position on the whole can be said to be equal to that of male gods, and their presence in the civilizing process including the establishment of a State is personified and visualized in the Vedas, and deserves to be properly appreciated.

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