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The Iconographic Evolution of *Shri:* Visual Representation, Vulnerability, and the Politics of Gender in Art Forms

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to examine critically the theologically driven iconographic transformation of Lakshmi (Shri) (the Hindu Goddess of abundance). Tracing Lakshmi's origins in Vedic Hinduism, one finds her image as a potent, independent deity who is widely revered for her ability to grant sovereignty to earthly kings. The existence of Gajalakshmi coins in the Kushana age is testament to her individuality, but is followed by the Vaishnava influence of the Gupta age; and finally with the onset of Puranic Hinduism and the growth in popularity of other devotional compositions, Lakshmi's identity began being attached to Vishnu, as his rather submissive consort. This paper argues that such a transformation may be viewed as an act of disciplining and domesticating the feminine powers in Hinduism. Placing it within the contemporary framework of vulnerability and precarity, one may draw on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, along with Jasbir Puar's work, and assess this evolution as a reframing of Lakshmi 's marital position not as co-existence of masculine and feminine divine energies, but as a kind of vulnerability that has been imposed due to patriarchal cultural developments. The paper aims to problematize Lakshmi's transformation as a mode of hampering the agency and autonomy of the divine feminine in religious thought. The methodology employed to conduct the analysis is primarily a visual one that synthesises iconographic representations, structural semiotics, and theological texts to assess the evolution of the varied forms of Lakshmi, along with her relational incarnation as Sita. The study of this iconographic evolution proves to be a relevant case study in advancing discourses on gender and art-history by demonstrating the impact of religious art on the social enforcement of conventional gender roles.*

Keywords: *iconography, gender, vulnerability, religion, Lakshmi, Shri.*

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Introduction

The iconography of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi has developed over centuries due to the numerous socio-cultural and theological changes that have taken place. Conventionally known as the goddess of wealth, prosperity, abundance, and well-being, Lakshmi's status in the pantheon of Hindu deities has always occupied the upper strata where she has been given immense importance in both domestic rituals as well as esoteric Tantra. This paper studies the transformation of Lakshmi from a potent, independent Vedic deity into a Puranic figure shrouded under the stories of domestic values. This process may be analysed as a phenomenon depicting the broader shifts that have occurred in social systems due to the influence of gender conventions. Upon tracing evidence in Vedic and Puranic texts, it may be observed that artistic motifs inspired by the narratives contained in these texts are a testament to the attempts of 'disciplining' and domesticating the divine. Applying theoretical concepts proposed by thinkers like Judith Butler and Jasbir Puar, for instance, it may be contested that Lakshmi 's divine energy has been changed into a site of vulnerability and precarity that is a direct consequence of the imposition of patriarchal structures.

Methodology

The study of the shift from Vedic through Puranic to contemporary times, in the context of the iconography of Lakshmi, has been carried out by assessing her illustration in sculptures, motifs, and textual traditions starting from Vedic and early historic times to the Kushana and Gupta periods, followed by the emergence of Puranic tales, and finally into contemporary representations in art. The methodology thus employed in this study is a combination of using art historical iconology (to analyse visual sources), philological textual analysis (to analyse textual sources), and critical feminist theory (to provide a theoretical grounding to the claims). The selection criteria of the corpus, for visual sources like sculptures, reliefs, coins and seals was the presence of iconographic features like the holding of lotus(es), presence of sacred elephants, or the positioning as Vishnu's consort; while for textual sources, the selection criteria include narrative descriptions of Lakshmi's cosmic functions, iconographic accounts, or her relationality with Vishnu.

Further, visual sources are contextualized in each section highlighting relevant details as recorded in archives. The study synthesizes textual and visual data by analysing them parallelly, and bridging these two categories of representations by suggesting that these are mutually influencing types of media.

Shri and Lakshmi in the Primordial Vedic Times and Early History

In the pre-puranic era of Indo-Aryan religious thought, the concept and entity of Shri and Lakshmi were not quite the same as how we are exposed to in contemporary practices. In the *Rig Veda*, for instance, the term Shri has been used time and again in both noun and adjective forms so that it may stand for the abstract as well as concrete concept of beauty and lustre. During the Vedic era, Shri was often understood as a fluid energy that could pervade the success and radiance of sovereign setups. She was perceived as the 'shri' of the king—the most sought-after power that bestowed prosperity and ensured the kingdom flourished. As R. Mohana Bai (2000) points out, 'The word "Shri" signifies "the sign of beauty", "the token of good fortune", "the mark of royal power", and is synonymous with luck, prosperity, grace, happiness and royal domain' (Bai 2000: 1236).

The presence of Lakshmi in the *Rig Veda* is more like an idea or concept, that is, it is abstract and refers to qualities of being auspicious and prosperous. It was in later Vedic times that this quality began to take the shape of a feminine deity. A Sanskrit text, *Shatapatha Brahmana*, recounts an important

myth that states that Shri had originally emerged from an ascetic by the name of Prajapati after he gets exhausted by the act of creation. In this tale, all the deities get mesmerized by her appearance, and aim to steal her positive attributes like royalty, wealth, and sovereign power (Eggeling 1882). The most noteworthy aspect of such narratives, with regard to the argument of this paper, is how there is no mention of any marital bond for Lakshmi. She is quite a powerful force to reckon with; and such that requires the devotion of male gods to obtain, rather than a submissive consort who serves them.

The Vedic goddesses of Hinduism were deeply rooted in material concerns pertaining to fertility and agriculture. In the *Shri Sukta* (one of the appendices of the *Rig Veda*), a detailed early portrait of the goddess may be found. Thomas B. Coburn has extensively studied epithets like Shri, Narayani, and Ishvari in the context of the Great Goddess of Hinduism, and has commented on its first usage as observed in the *Khila* section of the *Rig Veda* (Coburn 1984: 258). In this text, she is described as being 'moist' (*kardaminim*), who dwells in cow-dung (*karshini*), and smells like the earth. Such descriptions are proof of the goddess being connected to the fecundity of soil since the Vedic times, as the pastoral economy seemed to depend on the blessings of Shri. Here, she is described as a deity of golden brilliance, associated with fire (*Agni*) and moisture, embodying the dual nature of heat (procreative power) and water (agricultural fertility). In these verses, she is addressed as *Ishvari* (Supreme Ruler) and is said to wield the sceptre of sovereignty (Rao 2012). Rao (2012), in fact, goes on to present very interesting insights on Laksmi's iconography in the way he comments upon her puranic relationality with Vishnu as he writes:

> Shri in *Shri Sukta* is not portrayed in the limited sense of the consort of Vishnu (*Vishnu patni*) or the goddess of wealth. Shri, here, is the supreme mother Goddess (*devim mataram sriyam*), the supreme ruler of all creation (*Ishvari sarvabhutanam*), beyond any flaw (*durdharsha*) and revered by all gods (*deva-justa*)

and all of this almost resonates with Shakta principles and the way Shakta texts engage with the fierce forms of the Goddess like Durga or Kali. The *Shri Sukta* serves as one of the primary sources of understanding Lakshmi as a symbol of material wealth. One might understand this to be the reference point in the creation of sculptures that are found in the early second century in stupas and also on coins of the Gandhara period (1st century BCE). The absence of Vishnu from all of these early sculptural programmes is not incidental – it is, in fact, the 'original' iconography of the goddess as derived from the Vedic texts, against which the Puranic reorganisation must be read as a diversion or departure that was created upon the foundation of gender stereotypes.

The Kushana and the Gupta Age

The iconography of this period is observed in the early Buddhist and Jain sites like Bharhut and Sanchi, where some sculptures and artistic remains are preserved. The most commonly occurring motif is the Gaja-Lakshmi one, that depicts the goddess seated or standing upon a lotus and is accompanied by two elephants on either side. In these depictions, she is the only figure, without any accompanying deities. The elephants have been interpreted to be the rain clouds that are important for harvest and also represent royalty and sovereignty as they are likened to Indra's vehicle Airavata. The Gaja-Lakshmi form of the goddess, therefore, may be understood as one where the goddess is the source of her own authority, and rules the universe as her presence is what balances the cosmic stability and maintains order on earth. The Indian Museum in Kolkata, for instance, houses a Gaja-Lakshmi medallion from a Bharhut stupa pillar (carved out of sandstone) that is dated 125-100 BCE. The bas relief of this form of Lakshmi is found at the Sanchi Stupa as well, dated about 1st to 3rd century BCE. Further, in Mathura Museum's exhibit number 34.2520, one finds the only extant example of a sculptural relief from the Kushana period that depicts Vishnu and Lakshmi together, and as Vinay Kumar Gupta (2013) notes, "being

the consort of the highest *paralaukika* god Vishnu justifies her position" as Lakshmi is "strongly associated with the lotus, *purna-ghata* and water, is also a sustainer of life like Vishnu" (Gupta 2013: 61).



Figure 1: From the Mathura Museum, exhibit 34.2520- Panel of gods: Kubera, Visnu, Ardhanarishvara, Gajalaksmi, standing. Dated 200-299 CE, Kushana Period.
(Source: Virtual Museum of Images and Sounds)

From the Kushana to the Gupta period, as Jayaswal (2012) notes in his work, *Glory of the Kushans: Recent discoveries and Interpretations*, there is a marked observation in the visual depiction of goddesses on coins as Greek figures like Ardoksho begin to be transformed into Lakshmi-like goddesses, seated on a lotus or sometimes holding a lotus. However, in some depictions, she is seen holding a noose or a cornucopia, along with a lotus in the other hand. Such depictions may be interpreted as instances of projecting Shri or Lakshmi as an all-compassing deity who can be both a nurturer as well as a divine protector. Doris Meth Srinivasan (2016), in her work on Lakshmi has extensively engaged with the iconography of Lakshmi in her form where she is riding a lion. Before one might mis-attribute the figure of this goddess to being a form of Durga (or *Mahishasuramardini*), or Parvati (also often depicted with a lion or a tiger), Srinivasan clarifies her claim by explicitly mentioning "Lakshmi carries other emblems that, in combination, are additional identifiers. High on this list are the cornucopia and the lotus", thus, archaeologists and historians are certain that this goddess seated atop a lion is indeed Lakshmi. However, such depictions of Lakshmi have not survived much beyond this period as she is not seen accompanied by lions in most contemporary representation.

The Puranic Transition in the Iconography of Lakshmi

Somewhere between the 3rd and 10th centuries CE, the various Puranas began to sprout in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. Thus, there was a slow evolution of the fluid and independent Vedic goddess. In texts like the *Vishnu Purana*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, and the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, the synthesis of the diverse deities across Vedic and regional traditions was observed that led to the creation of a coherent and hierarchical pantheon with the *Trimurti* (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) occupying central

space. Within this concept, the existence of the divine feminine was a rather difficult incorporation as it was often seen as a challenge to the male dominant belief system with Vishnu at its centre.

The myth of the *Samudra Manthan* (the Churning of the Ocean) serves as the definitive narrative of Lakshmi 's redefinition. According to the *Vishnu Purana*, Lakshmi emerged from the primordial ocean of milk as one of the 'jewels' recovered by the gods and asuras. Upon her emergence, she is depicted as choosing Vishnu as her eternal consort (Wilson 1895). While devotional interpretations view this as a divine union of complementary energies, a critical analysis reveals it as an act of containment. Her 'fickle' nature (*chapala*), which in the Vedic sense meant she moved between kings based on their merit, was now 'tamed' by a permanent attachment to Vishnu.

Another interesting aspect about Lakshmi (in modern contemporary times) that must be studied is the iconography of the Ashta-Lakshmi (eight forms of Lakshmi) where all except one form (Santana Lakshmi) are depicted alone, without any accompanying figure. The *Ashtalakshmi Strotam* (a short devotional text) was composed in fairly recent times in the early 1970s by U.V. Srinivasa Varadachariyar. It is in this text that the iconography of the eight different forms of Lakshmi have been described in a concise yet visually descriptive manner.

As described in a blog post (using translated segments from the *Ashtalakshmi Strotam*), 'Iconographically, Santana Lakshmi is adorned with resplendent gold jewelry and wears a garland of vibrant flowers. . . typically depicted with six hands' (Cottage9 2023). The noteworthy aspect is in the description of what she holds in her hands— 'Among these hands, two hold pitchers of water, symbolising the nurturing and sustenance of life. Another hand clasps a shield, representing protection, while a sword in another hand signifies the ferocity of a protective mother.' As her name suggests, 'Santana Lakshmi lovingly cradles a baby in one of her hands, embodying the fulfilment of the desire for vibrant and long-living offspring.' This is certainly a unique depiction of Lakshmi with weapons, but ironically, the purpose of the weapons may be interpreted to protect the child in her arms. Hence, even the bestowing of weapons becomes a symbol of reinforcing maternal duties.

Textual Strategies of Subordination

The *Vishnu Purana* (1.8) articulates this new relationality through a series of hierarchical metaphors. It describes Vishnu as the 'meaning' and Lakshmi as the 'speech'; Vishnu as the 'righteousness' and Lakshmi as the 'devotion'; Vishnu as the 'tree' and Lakshmi as the 'clinging creeper'. This language systematically defines the feminine as the manifestation or support of the masculine essence. Lakshmi becomes 'Haripriya' (beloved of Hari), and her agency is redefined as the maintenance of the household of the universe on behalf of her husband.

The *Brahmavaivarta Purana* takes this domestication further by framing Lakshmi 's very existence as contingent on the pleasure of male sages and deities. In the account of the curse of Durvāsa, Lakshmi is forced to abandon heaven because of an insult to a male ascetic, and she is only restored when Vishnu directs the gods to churn the ocean to find her (Sen 2011). This narrative transition positions the goddess not as a sovereign who grants power, but as a prize that is lost and found through the actions of men.

In the *Lakshmi Tantra*, Shri's words to Shakra may be assessed for the complexity that is brought about in the relationality of Lakshmi with Vishnu. She introduces herself with the epithet 'Narayani', who is 'possessed of eternal, flawless, infinite and beneficial attributes', and is 'verily Vishnu's supreme being' (Gupta 2003: 15). She goes on to assert that she is 'regarded as exempt from limitations of space, time or form'. Firstly, the most noticeable aspect is the introductory name being Narayani, which is a derivative of Narayana. However, in the very next phrase, one finds a description of the

goddess being beyond conventional boundaries who is 'Vishnu's supreme being'. This assertion of supremacy while introducing her name as a derivative of Vishnu's name is an integral part of the paradoxical nature of the divine feminine wherein, she is meant to function in conjunction with her male counterpart, while simultaneously maintaining autonomy. Just as Kali is most often defined in scriptures as being above time, space, and death, Lakshmi also finds a similar association in Tantras. This may lead one to draw comparisons with Puranic descriptions where she mostly has a very concrete form and her appearance is described with details of the clothing, ornamentation, skin tone, and so on. However, popular interpretations almost always selectively choose snippets from such texts for future circulation, and most often these choices are informed by socially and culturally constructed thoughts. Therefore, a name like Narayani begins to be used extensively by practitioners as they associate it with Lakshmi's subservience to Narayana, without acknowledging the very next phrase used in texts like the *Lakshmi Tantra* where her transcendence above physical forms and boundaries has been described.

Iconographic Shift: From Gaja-Lakshmi to the Foot-Massage Motif

Lakshmi's iconography, in the Vedic times, has been very different from what it became in the puranic times. Seema Bawa (2002) states, 'The zoomorphic form of Lakshmi is the cow, the wish fulfilling and ever productive cow. From this we can deduce a link between Shri and fertility/giving/ nurturing and the mammary apparatus' (Bawa 2002: 126). This may be observed as the primary agent of confining Lakshmi to the maternal caregiver persona that is shaped by the conventional understanding of gender roles. As discussed in earlier sections, Lakshmi's ancient representations are most often independent, and her association is with royalty, prosperity, wealth, and abundance. However, what stands out in Bawa's work is the emphasis on the 'Dugdhadharini' motif of Lakshmi as she notes, 'We noticed that in Mathura art of the Kushana period the image, which started off as Aditi or Gaja Lakshmi or Shri Lakshmi in the Shunga period, becomes disassociated from the elephants and the lotuses and is reduced(!) to a Dugdhadharini - The milk giver' (126). The introduction of this motif further constricts Lakshmi to caregiving duties where an automatic domesticity overpowers her representation.

It has been a well-discussed thought over centuries as to how literature and art are the reflection of social structures, and vice-versa; therefore, one may infer that art and social norms are constructed in a continuous loop that continue to influence one another. Just the way Puranic traditions have found a way to insert maternal qualities even onto ferocious forms of the Goddess like Durga and Kali, Lakshmi is no exception as 'The Shri-Lakshmi, Gaja Lakshmi or Dughadharini figures found in post Mauryan art have been interpreted as fertility figures, symbolising the link between the child bearing- nurturing ability of women and universal fertility' (127). This is one of the earliest changes that one observes in the iconography of Lakshmi.

Further, with the evolution of Hinduism, the widespread Vaishnava culture found itself altering devotees' relationship with the goddesses. Despite the flourishing nature of Shaktism in certain parts of South Asia, one cannot do away with the manner in which Vaishnava and Shaiva cultures have superimposed their ideals onto the reception of the figure of the divine feminine. If one reads devotional texts, one of the most common epithets attached to Lakshmi is 'Vishnupriya' or 'the beloved of Vishnu'. By using a passive phrase to describe her, the identity of this goddess undoubtedly gets overshadowed by the presence of this supreme male deity who is a cosmic guardian. Vishnu's Puranic role as the protector of the universe gives him an elevated status, and posits Lakshmi right beside him, almost in a secondary role.

Symbolism of the Lotus and the Owl

Constantina Rhodes, in her scholarly work on Goddess Lakshmi, has extensively written on the Vedic, Puranic, and Tantric connotations of the lotus, and its association with the goddess. She writes, 'In the Vedic materials we find the first literary expressions to laud the primordial goddess of beauty and fecundity, embodied in the lotus' (Rhodes 2010: 49). Further, she goes to state the Puranic value of this flower based on the idea of it growing clean and pristine even amidst a mush and mud, and it serves as a reminder to 'the worshiper that even when entangled in the mire of worldly existence, one may transcend to the pristine realms of the liberation of the spirit' (50). Throwing light on its Tantric interpretation, Rhodes (2010) comments, 'The roots stretch deep into the mysterious, subterranean realms that are the essential foundation of all life in this world'(50). The lotus, therefore, in all its multifarious interpretations, continues to serve as a potent symbol of independence and autonomy as it showcases the ability to hold on to its inherent pristine nature without depending on external surroundings.

Another interesting aspect about Lakshmi's iconography are the accompanying non-human creatures. While earlier sculptures and coin-art represent her with elephants; the iconography of Eastern India (particularly Bengal) shows her with an owl. During Durga Puja, when Lakshmi is placed beside Durga, she is accompanied by an owl. Further, during the Kojagari Lakshmi Puja (that occurs on the full-moon night after the autumnal Durga Puja), also Lakshmi is showcased with an owl. The commonly understood symbolic meaning of the owl is that it pertains to wisdom and knowledge. However, mythologists like Devdutt Pattnaik have brought about contrasting perspectives on this and suggested that the owl might be seen as a form of Alakshmi (Lakshmi's inauspicious twin). Worshipping Lakshmi without her twin invites trouble as it might anger her; therefore, Alakshmi must be respected, and very respectfully be requested to remain away from the devotee's household (Pattnaik 2009).



Figure 2: Traditional Kojagari Lakshmi idol in Kolkata with an owl (2024)
(Source: image sourced from https://www.anandabazar.com/ananda-utsav/myths/this-kojagori-lakshmi-puja-unlock-financial-success-by-worshipping-devi-lakshmi-with-these-flowers-dgtl-photogallery/cid/1553193?slide=2)

Butler, Performativity, and the Imposition of Precarity

Judith Butler (2004), in her work *Precarious Life: Powers of Mourning and Violence*, touches upon several important issues that may be read in conjunction with this argument, but the most significant aspect of Butler's commentary is the emphasis on the dynamics between power structures and vulnerability. Butler's argument states vulnerability cannot be understood without perceiving the 'primary condition' and how it is 'exploited and exploitable, thwarted and denied' (Butler 2004: 31).

Butler's theory enables one to explore how certain prominent and popular forms of representation can be used to 'efface' or 'disrupt' the human/divine face (147). The core argument of this paper with regard to the transformation of Lakshmi's representation from Gaja-Lakshmi to Lakshmi-Narayana reflects Butler's idea that 'normative schemes' create the limits of what is 'speakable' or 'visible' within a given culture (xx).

The act of suspending law, as pointed out by Butler in her work, is described as a 'performative one' that brings a 'contemporary configuration of sovereignty into being'. This leads one to understanding the iconographic shift in Lakshmi 's identity as a phenomenon that has not resulted out of natural progression, but instead as a deliberate performative act of patriarchal disciplining that has suited the mass population. Upon assessing Butler's concepts, the idea of interdependency disrupting radical sovereignty becomes quite clear. Further, this also leads to the assertion, as stated by Butler, that vulnerability is, in fact, a precondition for humanisation (or, in this context, domestication), and that has ultimately led to Lakshmi's transition from an independent grantor of boons to a subservient wife, the beloved of Vishnu.

Namrata Narula, in a very recent 2026 article titled "Gender Non-Realism: Rereading Judith Butler's Performativity in Dialogue with Shankara's Advaita" suggests that if one observes 'from an Advaita perspective, knowledge regarding what constitutes gender/sex can only be accorded provisional validity, because these features, when scrutinized through deconstructive lenses such as performativity, can be revealed as changeful experiential categories rather than strictly unchanging or cultural truths' (Narula 2026:19). This re-affirms the idea of cultural reinforcement being the primary tool that propagates the performativity of gender roles; and situating this thought within the South Asian context brings forward the significance of religious narratives that weave the essence of South Asian existence. Be it sculptures made solely for art, or devotional pieces installed in temples, or simply paintings or calendar art—South Asian culture relies heavily on religious and mythological depiction of deities in objects of everyday life. Thus, when docile images of Lakshmi, or any other deity become popular, they become an active symbol of propagating a certain gender stereotype that is absorbed by members of the community.

In an article by Joy et al. (2015), they point out that, 'In Butler's view, the enactment of gender allows for the remaking of gendered reality along new lines: gender is prompted by obligatory norms for individuals to behave in a particular way' (Joy et al. 2015: 1742). This argument aids in establishing how Butler's concepts of gender performativity and precarity apply to the Indian context as well; by arguing that despite structural changes have encouraged increased agentic performativity in women of India, there still remains a culture of gendered vulnerability.

Jasbir Puar and the Differential Distribution of Vulnerability

Jasbir Puar (2017), in her work *The Right to Maim* posits that vulnerability is not a stable, static condition but is 'allocated differentially' across various communities and their spatial, geographical location (Puar 2017: xiv). Puar also argues that disciplining and domesticating non-normative populations is

often carried out through the use of specific charges (like 'homophobia'), as it is a 'well-worn tactic in the biopolitical management of populations' (3). Within the context of this paper, Puar's observation renders itself quite useful as the domestication of Lakshmi can be assessed more effectively through this lens.

Biopolitics is such that it operates as a tool or a 'capacitation machine, that aims to enhance the presence of some groups while simultaneously debilitating others' and maintaining the 'precarity of certain bodies and populations'(xvi, xviii). This allows one to read through Lakshmi 's position in contemporary Hindu narratives as a place that was created due to the perpetuation of conventional gender norms that created her persona in conjunction with her relationality with the divine masculine, Vishnu. Puar mentions that 'maiming' (or more contextually appropriate here, the reduction of capacity) is a method of 'value extraction' from those groups that could otherwise achieve sovereignty (xviii). Lakshmi 's reduction to a submissive figure can be viewed as a kind of 'theological maiming' wherein her independent powers are extracted and added on to the sovereignty of Vishnu. This, in fact, must be noted keeping in mind how religion and culture have evolved with the rise in patriarchal power that has always claimed its own 'ontological vulnerability' to justify itself (x).

While Butler's concept of performativity is used to support the illustration of the impact of repetitive performance as a tool of propagating a specific idea of the divine feminine (here, Lakshmi) that suits the majoritarian perception, and the concept of precarity highlights the vulnerability of the goddess within changing theological frameworks across sectarian groups, Puar's concepts contribute along a slightly different, yet related plane, wherein the idea of debility is used to illustrate how the divine iconography of Lakshmi shifts from having an active sovereignty to a more auxiliary figure who occupies the space as a subordinate character beside Vishnu.

Regional Deviance and the Persistence of the Independent Goddess

Archaeological remains from sites like Khajuraho have been recovered and analysed where motifs of Lakshmi have been found. R.K. Dikshith (Dikshith 1960: 83) elaborates on one such artefact and highlights the presence of the *simha-vahini* (goddess riding a lion) representation,

> The goddess is seated in *ardha-parvahka* pose, with the two elephants performing the ceremonial abhisheka, with upturned jars held by their trunks. The goddess is four-handed, two of which hold the lotus-stalks. The figure of a couchant lion is noticed below the *asana*

Such depictions of Lakshmi are rare, but do exist (As discussed in earlier sections as well). However, with Puranic influence, a lot began to change and these independent representations, especially with added factors promoting autonomy like the lion vehicle, do not seem to have percolated within the mass consciousness and were subconsciously chosen to not be carried forward.

R. Mohana Bai's (2000) work on Lakshmi 's iconography in the Srivatsa form in Southern India (particularly around the Tamil Nadu region) elaborately describes the various Lakshmi motifs discovered in that region. Most of these depictions are dated between the 6th to 9th centuries A.D where the goddess is usually adorned with visibly heavy ornaments, often accompanied by elephants pouring water from pots, with floriated feet, and never seated next to any male deity. However, Bai mentions towards the end of her work, 'In Brahminical mythology Shri is said to reside in Vishnu's chest and is depicted on the right chest of Vishnu. In the Vishnu images of the early Pallava period Srivatsa mark is absent on the chest of Vishnu' (Bai 2000: 1239). The key phrase here is 'Brahmanical mythology', which refers to the Hindu narratives that have been shaped through Sanskritization and Brahmanization of the practicing Hindu community. Much of this process has been influenced by gender-role-perpetuating concepts and ideas, and the dominance of the Shaiva and Vaishnava sects over the Shakta tradition.



Figure 3: Carving on a pillar at the Belur Chennakeshava Temple in Karnataka (dated 12th century CE) where Lakshmi is seated on Vishnu's lap, and her scale is diminished as the sizes of the two deities vary (Source: posted by The Hindu Heritage on October 29, 2025)

The Internalization of Docility and Trauma Through Sita

As the scriptures and epics of Hinduism point out, Lakshmi as the divine consort of Vishnu is said to have reincarnated in human forms to accompany Vishnu in his earthly presence across different *yugas* (ages). One of the most popular forms is that of Sita, and as the *Vishnu Purana* states

> …when Hari was born as a dwarf, the son of Aditi, Lakshmi appeared from a lotus (as Padma, or Kamala); when he was born as Rama, of the race of Bhrigu (or Parasurama), she was Dharani; when he was Raghava (Ramachandra), she was Sita; and when he was Krishna, she became Rukminí

one understands the reverence associated with these pairs (Wilson 1895: 155). In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, in fact, there are direct references to this; such as, when Sumitra consoles Kaushalya about Rama's exile, she says, 'Sita is with him, and Sita is no other than the Goddess Lakshmi' (Rajagopalachari 2012: 47).

However, as the readers of the *Ramayana* are familiar with, Sita's character has always been associated with that which embodies an ideal woman within the domestic space, and who knows how to remain within boundaries. In fact, the crossing of one such literal and metaphorical boundary, the *Lakshmana-rekha*, is what leads to the conflict in the *Ramayana's* narrative. Despite Sita's resilience and strength displayed throughout the narrative, especially her last step of returning to her birthplace, the earth, rather than going back to Rama; somehow, the popular consciousness still chooses to view Sita's act of devotion as a wife as her strongest trait. This is what leads most of the population to associate Lakshmi with Sita, and automatically attach docility and trauma to this form of the Goddess. Unlike the narratives of warrior goddesses, Lakshmi 's stories of independence and autonomy get overshadowed under the presence of her reincarnated forms like Sita. One almost forgets her fickle nature where she leaves Indra's realm time and again, and 'chooses' Vishnu instead. Rather, with the constant assertion in devotional texts about Lakshmi being Vishnu's beloved, the idea of Vishnu having chosen Lakshmi as her consort begins to look more natural. Mandakranta Bose (2018) points this out and writes, 'Early texts tell us that as the source of power and prosperity Shri/Lakśmī was a prize to be earned by any god or even any demon worthy of her allegiance as his companion for his good deeds' (Bose 2018: 82).

Uma Chakravarti's (1993) article "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender Caste, Class and State" mentions some of the most problematic ideologies that shroud the figure of Sita, and in turn, Laksmi. She writes, 'Pativrata, the ideological "purdah" of the Hindu women was thus the mask by which the hierarchical and inegalitarian structure of the social order was reproduced with the complicity of women' (Chakravarti 1993: 583). The control exerted on female sexuality are showcased in the *Ramayana* through Sita's constant need to prove herself innocent in the chastity trials hurled at her. Further, as Chakravarti writes, 'Women, as biological creatures, are representatives of a wild or untamed nature. But through the *stridharma* the biological woman can be converted into woman as a social entity, in whom the biological has been tamed' (583). This is precisely where the idea of taming women down through the institution of marriage takes birth, as women then, get bound to their male counterparts in a subservient manner. Like Sita, Lakshmi too, begins to be seen as an embodiment of the ideal wife who believes in the primary goal of serving her husband by sitting at his feet. This image takes the form of the most prominent puranic representation of the once sovereign and autonomous Shri. While it must be noted that the *Ramayana* has its cultural roots spreading into several directions as a result of the numerous regional retellings that have sprouted across many centuries, the idea of Sita being an ideal wife continues to find prominence. Contemporary retellings on television media and literary narratives often project Sita as a woman possessing a strong agency in determining her own fate, but viewing her as an incarnation of Lakshmi is still rooted in the idea of perceiving her as a subservient spouse.

Another noteworthy take on the reception of Sita's docility and compliance may be read in Linda Hess' (1999) work "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife". Hess points out the underlying issue within the practicing Hindu community as members of both sexes find Sita to be an ideal figure. She comments, 'The Sita who clung to the 'dharma' of worshipping her husband and bowing to his will, even when he repeatedly and cruelly rejected her, is still embraced as the ideal woman by many Hindus of both sexes' (Hess 1999: 27-28). The connection between Sita and Lakshmi gets blurred when the defining criterion is virtue, as both these entities continue to superimpose their identities onto each other, creating a rather homogeneous persona that is held together with a common ideology driven by conservationist gender patterns.

The Impact of Art and Culture on the Propagation of Subordination

In the early 20th century, for instance, painters like M.V. Dhurandhar painted Vishnu resting on the serpent Sheshnaga while Lakshmi sits at his feet, subserviently massaging them. This motif has become a recurrent one in contemporary calendar art and framed paintings, the consumers of which are regular practicing Hindus who end up associating Lakshmi with this depiction and nothing beyond it. Abhijit Maity (Maity 2022: 12) comments in his work,

> Lakshmi is the emblem of all virtuous, likeable qualities that have acquired an accepted version of 'goodness' in society. In the family, girls are told to be one like Lakshmi, to be free from sin, free from fierce or anger, not to be stubborn or individualist

Further, upon analysing some commonly used images of Vishnu and Lakshmi in calendar art, he writes, 'Each figure shows the position of Lakshmi below the God Vishnu. A gender hierarchy is maintained in these visual representations by positioning woman at the feet of man' (12). In fact, even during Lakshmi 's worship on the day of Deepawali by certain Hindu groups, she is accompanied by Ganesha, and is not worshipped independently.



Figure 4: *Sheshashayi Laxminarayan Lord Vishnu*—An Indian Masters Painting By M.V. Dhurandhar (dated 1941) (Source: sourced from Picryl's public domain)

Scholars like Tapati Guha-Thakurta (1991) have highlighted some other nuances of the artistic representation of goddesses and bring out more variations in perspectives. In her work "Women as 'Calendar Art' Icons: Emergence of Pictorial Stereotype in Colonial India", she comments on the evolution of the visual representations of goddesses in popular art, such as calendar art, and writes, 'Passing from "high art" to mass consumer items like the oleography (and later films and advertisements), these images of women fulfilled the multiple functions of seduction, passive self-display, romantic inspiration, or conjugal and maternal role models' (Guha-Thakurta 1991: 98). Insights like these become useful tools for sharpening the arguments proposed in this study as they provide a broader scope of understanding the diminution of autonomy in the depiction of goddesses like Lakshmi. The emphasis on the need and intent of sexualising feminine deities opens doors to a discussion beyond the claim of basic gender stereotypes (revolving around the docile wife and domestic mother figure) remodelling the deity's iconography.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Divine Feminine in the 21st Century

The evolution of Lakshmi from an autonomous bestower of sovereignty, be it in the depiction in scriptures or in artistic symbols like the Srivatsa, has ultimately led to more relational depictions where she is almost always shown beside Vishnu (Narayana). This becomes a noteworthy phenomenon in assessing the gendered history of Hindu religious thought. Patriarchal structures like these, therefore, become tools of subtle perpetuation and reinforcement of the subordination of women and the 'vulnerability' of this group. However, as one concludes this discussion with the thought of how Lakshmi's representation in art and literature has led to a gendered change in her iconography; it must be acknowledged that certain practices such as the Kojagari Lakshmi puja of Eastern India (particularly Bengal), continue to persist where Lakshmi is worshipped in her own independent right, without being accompanied by a male deity.

This study has critically engaged with the iconographic evolution of Lakshmi (Shri), tracing her development from Vedic to contemporary times employing both visual and textual traditions. The visual methodology is based on the synthesis of iconographic analysis and structural visual semiotics, coupled with the theories and concepts of gender, performativity, and precarity, proposed by Judith Butler and Jasbir Puar. The extension of this argument is studied in the context of Sita as well, to further solidify the observations on the codification of normative features of docility and domesticity within socio-cultural patriarchal structures. This case study, hence, has analysed how sacred visual traditions are not only a reflection of theological evolution, but they also inform socio-cultural power dynamics that is largely shaped by gendered performance. As a result, this study advances scholarship of gender, art-history, and theological visual traditions.

The problematization of the 'vulnerability' imposed on Lakshmi and recognizing it as a kind of precarity induced by political factors, leads to the understanding of the urgency of reclaiming that vision of the divine feminine that was meant to hold sovereignty, autonomy, and independence. Art and artists of contemporary times might utilize their role in the society to produce representations that highlight the multifaceted nature of the Goddess rather than confining her to a certain widespread depiction that is most suited for a society driven by patriarchal thought. Contemporary artistic and academic discourse can be an inlet for bridging the gap between the ancient and modern iconographic representation of Lakshmi. It must also be noted that tracing an evolution spanning centuries over a large geographical space cannot simply be studied through a single lens, and thus, the impact of the shifting socio-political patronage, sectarian politics, and the aesthetic evolution of rituals are factors that should be taken into consideration and may provide directions for further research on this area.

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