



From Locality to Sovereignty: Semiotics in the Iconographic Evolution of Goddess Lakshmi

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Abstract: This article examines the semiotics of Goddess Lakshmi within the Hindu traditions of India, focusing specifically on the iconographical representation of her sacred idols, symbols, and *mudras* (hand gestures). By critically evaluating the genesis, history, and structural evolution of her iconographic motifs alongside relevant textual evidence, this study traces her ideological transition from an abstract, localized agrarian force to a centralized, multi-armed sovereign deity. Relevant semantic and iconographical frameworks are integrated throughout to provide a cohesive, structured analysis of her changing visual grammar. While acknowledging that Lakshmi is deeply embedded within Buddhist and Jain cosmologies, the scope of this paper is confined strictly to her manifestations within mainstream Hindu traditions. Methodologically, the study utilizes traditional temple sculptures and historic icons in tandem with contemporary digital visual resources, including AI-enhanced archival imagery and digital restoration projects, as reliable primary specimens for semiotic analysis.

Keywords: Lakshmi, Semiotics, Iconography, Vedic Literature, Puranas, Mudras, Śrī Sūkta, Gaja-Lakshmi, Hindu Iconology, Comparative Religion, Numismatics, Epigraphy, Sanatana Tradition, Digital Art History.

पद्मानने पद्मविपद्मपत्रे पद्मप्रिये पद्मदलायताक्षि विश्वप्रिये विष्णुमनोज्जुक्ते त्वत्पादपद्मं
मयि सन्निधत्स्वा॥

Padmānane padma-vi-padma-patre padma-priye padma-dalāyatākṣi |
Viśva-priye viṣṇu-mano'nukūle tvat-pāda-padmaṃ mayi sannidhatsva ||

Śrī Sūkta (Khila Sūkta of the *Rigveda*, Verse 20 / traditional prayer)

Translation: "O Mother, whose face is as radiant as a lotus, who is seated upon a lotus, who loves the lotus, and whose eyes are as expansive as lotus petals; O Beloved of the Universe, who acts in perfect harmony with the mind of Lord Vishnu - kindly place Your sacred lotus feet within my heart."

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INTRODUCTION

The semiotics of Indian religions primarily encompasses the systematic study of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain icons and symbols. Regardless of their primordial historical sources, these structural representations evolved and transformed mainly across ancient and medieval India (Gupte, 1972, 14–18). Certain motifs are shared across these religious traditions, most notably the Lotus, *Om*, *Swastika*, and Trident, yielding similar structural forms (*murtis* and *pratimas*) that display major and minor iconographical deviations (Rao, 1914: 73–79).

Compared to other global theological beliefs, Indian semiotics contains an extraordinarily vast corpus of icons and symbols. This density is multifaceted because of the antiquity and length the timespan of Indian civilizations, which has endowed her the status of one of the ancient global centers of culture, covering a massive geographical area characterized by diverse cultural, ethnic, traditional, and their local sub-traditional evolutions (Banerjea, 1956: 110–115). Furthermore, these varicose cultures and traditions have attracted a global following over millennia.

Subsequently, these traditions disseminated sacred symbols and iconographic motifs across various global regions, while simultaneously developing distinct regional variations within mainland India. Executing a comprehensive comparative study across Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism from semiotic and iconographic perspectives demands the navigation of an expansive corpus of textual data and pictorial manifestations (Gupte, 1972, pp. 22–27). This study initiates that trajectory by systematically analyzing the Hindu iconography and symbolism of Goddess Lakshmi, thereby establishing a necessary baseline for future comparative inquiries. Consequently, while the primary focus remains dedicated to the Hindu paradigm, brief foundational discussions and visual variants of her Buddhist and Jain iconographical counterparts are incorporated to provide a holistic, preliminary cross-tradition framing.

THE ICONS AND SYMBOLS OF GODDESS LAKSHMI IN THE SANATANA TRADITION

According to Hindu belief, Goddess Lakshmi is the quintessential embodiment and symbolic manifestation of wealth, prosperity, and fortune. As she has occupied a paramount position in Hindu mythology, cosmology, and the broader pantheon, she bestows auspiciousness (*shubha*) and peace (*shanti*) upon devotees (Kinsley, 1986: 19–21). Within the theological architecture of Vaishnava henotheism, she acts as the complementary force, the *Hladini Shakti* (the energy of divine ecstasy and enjoyment), and the primary powerhouse of Lord Vishnu. Her iconographic depiction alongside Vishnu is a standard motif across Indian art (Rao, 1914: 261).

Lakshmi does not merely represent material abundance; she is equally a symbol of profound spiritual depth and enlightenment. "The evolution of her symbols is traced through two main structural strata of historical Hindu literature, namely the early Vedic hymns and the later Puranic narratives (Kinsley, 1986: 22–25)."

- (a) **Vedic Literature:** In her earliest manifestations, she was revealed as an aniconic divine force of abundance, deeply intertwined with soil fertility, moisture, and agricultural prosperity (Kinsley, 1986: 19–21). In the earliest Vedic hymns (*sūktas/ sūktāni*), the words *śrī* and *lakṣmī* were not yet associated with a specific, personified deity; instead, they functioned as abstract concepts representing signs of good luck, beauty, and cosmic auspiciousness (Kinsley, 1986: 19).

Early Vedic communities did not visualize or worship Lakshmi in a humanized, bodily form. Instead, her divine presence was recognized without anthropomorphic representation, experienced directly through natural markers of wealth like a field of ripe grain, a filled water vessel (*purna-ghata*), or her explicit scriptural association with moisture and cow dung (*karīṣiṇī*) as life-sustaining earthly elements (Kinsley, 1986: 20–21). It was this abstract, formless force of organic prosperity that laid the conceptual and linguistic groundwork for the visual symbols, such as lotus, which later defined her iconographic evolution in classical Indian art.

- (b) **Puranic Texts:** In later classical texts, she gains prominence as a highly stylized, multi-armed consort of Lord Vishnu, representing a semantic fusion of material wealth with ultimate spiritual liberation (Pratha, 2025). This Puranic transition marks a monumental shift from her early role as a localized, fluid earth spirit to a centralized sovereign deity integrated directly into the orthodox Vaishnava pantheon (Kinsley, 1986).

Within this narrative stratum, as extensively detailed in texts like the *Vishnu Purana*, she is conceptualized as the dynamic *shakti* (cosmic energy) that inherently complements Vishnu's role as the preserver of the universe, establishing an inseparable cosmic bond where he is the meaning and she is the speech (Rocher, 1986; Wilson, 2001).

Her iconographic features expand dramatically during this era to include four arms (*chaturbhujā*), which sculptural and scriptural manuals interpret as a systematic representation of the four cardinal goals of human existence: *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (wealth), *kama* (pleasure), and *moksha* (spiritual liberation) (Banerjea, 1956; Rao, 1914). By anchoring her visual identity simultaneously to the bestowal of earthly riches and the realization of transcendental freedom, the Puranic literature elevates her from a goddess of simple agricultural abundance to the supreme dispenser of both cosmic order and ultimate salvation (Gupte, 1972).

Emergence as an embodied deity

The primordial icon of the Goddess emanates directly from the *Śrī Sūkta*, a celebrated Vedic hymn found in the *Khila*, which constitutes the supplementary portions of the *Rigveda* (Sastri, 1987, pp. 2–5). It is to be noted that the *Śrī Sūkta* exists precisely in these *Khila* sections, specifically known as the *Khilani* or *Khila-sūktas*, which marks it as a later chronological addition to the canonical core text of the *Rigveda*. Composed long before the elaborate, anthropomorphic descriptions found in later Purāṇic literature, the *Śrī Sūkta* serves as the foundational structural text for the iconographical evolution of Goddess Lakṣmī. Rather than describing a fully formed, multi-armed physical statue, the hymn utilizes rich natural, agricultural, and cosmic metaphors that directly shaped classical Hindu iconography (Banerjea, 1956, p. 372).

1. Lotus (Padma or Kamala)

There are extensive textual and scriptural references that directly equate the goddess Lakshmi with the lotus, identifying her by names such as Kamala or Padma (*Śrī Sūkta*, Verse 4; *Vishnu Purana*, 1.9). The connection between Lakshmi and the lotus is one of the most profound and oldest associations in Hindu mythology, representing purity, fertility, spiritual liberation, and cosmic life (Rocher, 1986: 72–75).

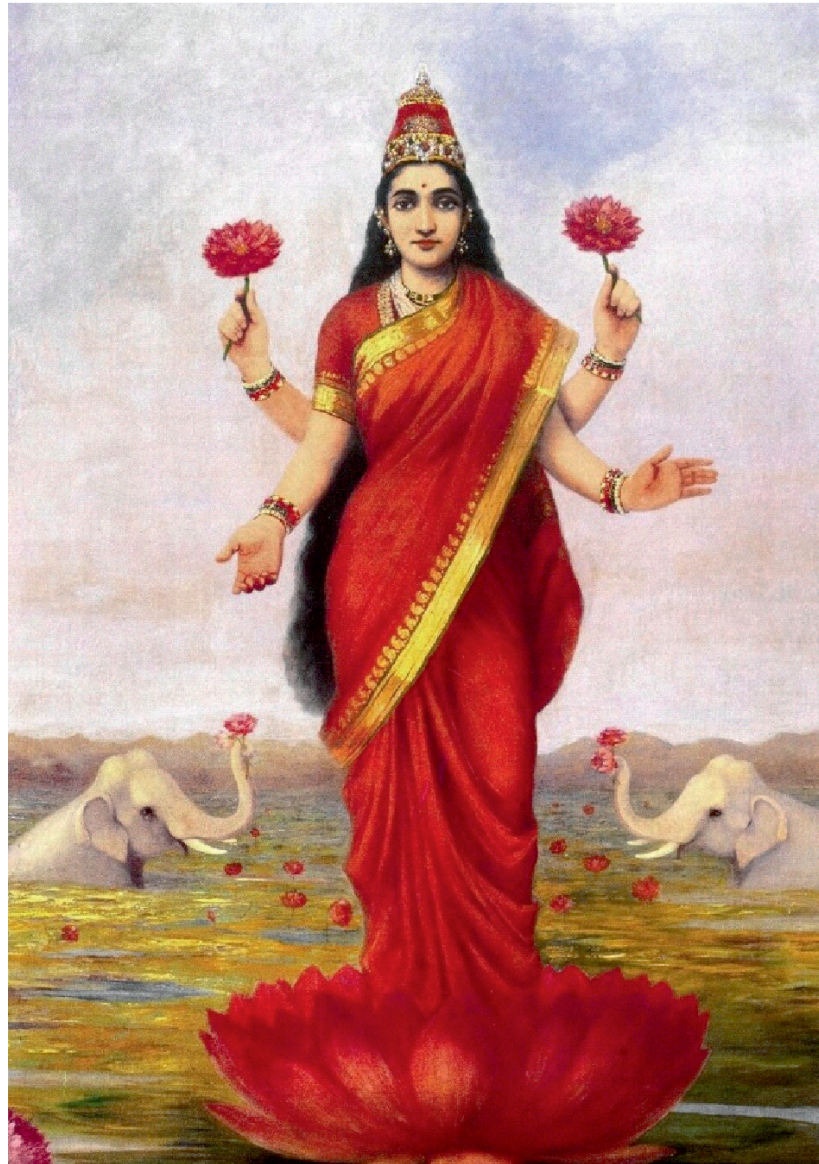


Figure 1: Raja Ravi Varma, *Gaja Lakshmi*, 1896, oil on canvas. The composition depicts a standing image of Lakshmi upon a lotus, drawing inspiration from classical textual descriptions. This masterpiece initiated a broader series of devotional paintings by the artist. (Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).

The lotus is the most prominent visual and semantic motif in this textual matrix, weaving continuously through the verses to define the Goddess's physical form, her abode, and her temperament (Sastri, 1987, pp. 12–15). Semiotically, it functions as a symbol of spiritual purity, absolute beauty, fertility, and self-creation amidst worldly attachments.

Textually, these verses belong to the *Śrī Sūkta* (Hymn to Śrī), located within the *Khila Sūktas*, which function as the authentic, canonical appendices and supplementary hymns found at the end of the Rig Veda's internal sections (*Mandalas*). While these foundational verses explicitly favor the linguistic root *padma* to establish her primary identity, the exact synonym *kamala* became so deeply intertwined with this theological framework that it directly birthed her definitive standalone epithet, *Kamalā* (She of the Lotus), which features prominently in the text's later *Phalaśruti* (celebratory appendices) and broader Puranic traditions (Kinsley, 1986, pp. 19–22; Sastri, 1987, p. 16).

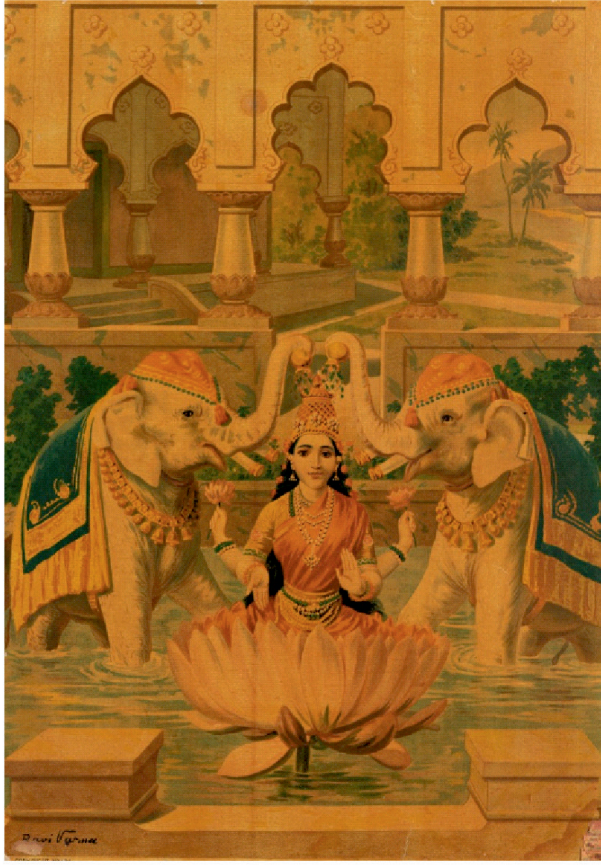


Figure 2 (a): *Gaja Gauri (or Gaja Lakshmi)*, Ravi Varma Press, c. 1910. This twentieth-century print reproduces a classical iconographic archetype: the four-armed deity is seated in *padmāsana* (lotus posture), with two hands holding lotuses while the remaining two display the *abhaya* (fearlessness) and *varada* (boon-bestowal) *mudrās*. She is flanked by celestial elephants pouring water from *kumbhas* (pots), symbolizing power, strength, and life-giving fertility. (Image courtesy of Google Arts & Culture)

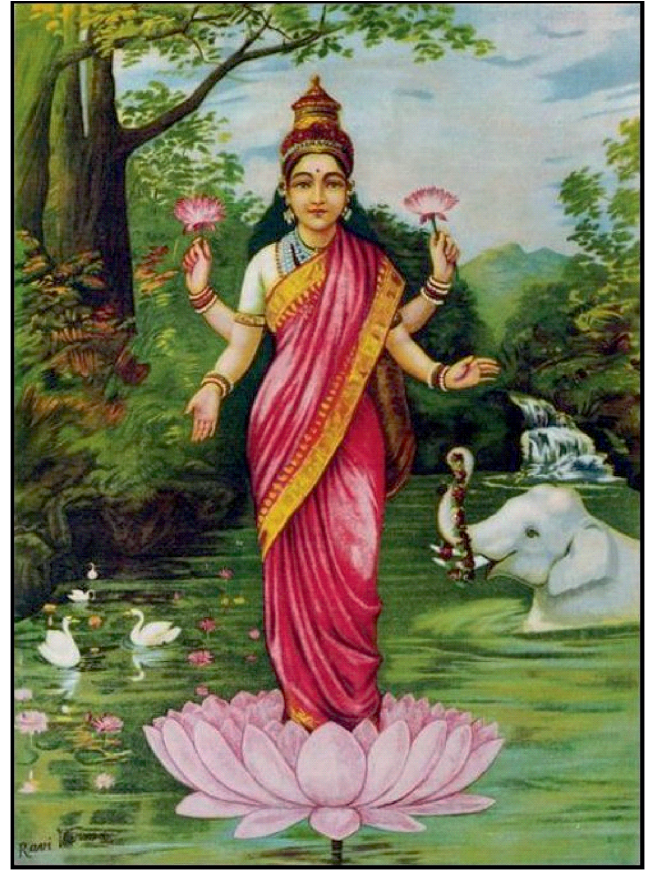


Figure 2(b): A lithographic oleograph of a standing Goddess Lakshmi produced by the Ravi Varma Press, based on the original 1896 canvas composition by Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906).

(Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

The *Śrī Sūkta* (Hymn to Śrī) establishes her primary lotus-derived identities through key verses:

- **Verse 4 (Padme-sthitām & Padma-varṇām):** This layer provides the primary iconographic blueprint for her physical manifestation. The compound *Padme-sthitām* translates literally to "standing or seated upon a lotus matrix," defining her sacred cosmic platform, while *Padma-varṇām* defines her as "having the color and textural radiance of a fresh lotus blossom." The text frames this visual identity alongside descriptions like *ārdrām* (moist/overflowing with life fluid) and *jvalantīm* (blazing with solar energy), establishing her as both a nurturing water-matrix and a dynamic universal force.
- **Verse 5 (Padminīm):** Here, the Goddess is addressed as *Padminīm*, which means, "she who is possessed of lotuses" or is inherently bound to the lotus ecosystem. This visual marker is immediately tied to a formula of absolute surrender through the phrase *Śaraṇamaham*

prapadye ("I approach her as my ultimate sanctuary and refuge"), where the devotee implores the lotus-bearer to permanently banish *Alakṣmī* (the force of scarcity and misfortune).

- **Verse 11 (*Padmamālinīm*):** This verse constructs a direct bridge between organic earth fertility and divine presence. It invokes Kardama, a term acting dualistically as the name of a mythical Vedic seer born of Śrī, and as the literal Sanskrit noun for "mud" or "moist, fertile soil." The text declares the Goddess to be *kardamena prajābhūtā* ("brought into being through mud/moisture"), linking her directly to agricultural topsoil, and requests that this Mother, who is *Padmamālinīm* ("garlanded with lotuses"), abide permanently in the devotee's lineage.

By utilizing this dual meaning, the verse highlights a critical semiotic transition where the spiritual and material realms intersect. By declaring the Goddess to be *kardamena prajābhūtā* ("brought into being through mud/moisture"), the text refuses to separate the spiritual from the material (Sastri, 1987, p. 28). It anchors her genesis directly to the wet agricultural topsoil necessary for sustaining life, yet immediately juxtaposes this raw, muddy origin with her highly refined manifestation as the lotus-garlanded queen. This progression from *kardama* (the murky mud) to the *padma* (the pristine blossom rising above it) serves as a profound structural metaphor for transformation. Ultimately, when the hymn requests that she reside permanently within the devotee's lineage, it functions as both a spiritual plea and a pragmatic invocation for enduring agricultural abundance, generational wealth, and the stabilization of life-sustaining earthly resources.



Figure 3: Another lithographic oleograph of the standing Goddess Lakshmi series of Raja Ravi Varma Press. (Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

2. Abhiṣeka Elephants (Gaja)

The imagery of majestic elephants pouring water over the Goddess represents the earliest textual precursor to the famous *Gaja-Lakṣmī* structural motif in Indian art (Rao, 1914, p. 265). Semiotically, elephants represent royal majesty (*rājya*), cosmic strength, stability, and the rain clouds that bring agricultural abundance.

- **Verse 3:** The hymn states *Aśvavārām rathamadhyām hastināda-prabodhinīm*, which translates to her being preceded by galloping horses, seated in the center of a cosmic chariot, and awakened or glorified by the thunderous trumpeting of elephants (Sastri, 1987: 8; Wilson, 1997(4): 211).



Figure 4: A Mauryan terracotta goddess figurine from Mathura, north-central India. The exaggerated hips, prominent breasts, and elaborate floral headdress emphasize fertility, defining traits associated with early, pre-canonical manifestations of Śrī-Lakṣmī. (Image courtesy of the Timothy S. Y. Lam Museum of Anthropology, Wake Forest University)

3. Golden Radiant Hue (Hiraṇya-Varṇā)

Unlike later, fierce manifestations of the Divine Feminine, such as Durga or Kali, Lakṣmī's Vedic character is distinctively luminous, serene, and peaceful (Kinsley, 1986: 31–33). Gold represents pure light, imperishability, wealth, and the life-giving warmth of the sun.

- **Verse 1:** The opening line designates her as *Hiraṇya-varṇām hariṇīm suvarṇa-rajata-srajām*, meaning "of a golden hue, brilliant like a doe, adorned with gold and silver garlands" (Sastri, 1987: 3).
- **Verse 13:** She is explicitly identified as *Sūryām* (radiant like the sun) and *Hiraṇmayīm* (composed entirely of gold).

4. Bilva Fruit (Wood Apple)

The text connects Lakṣmī directly to the flora of the earth, establishing her sovereignty over vegetation and food security. The Bilva tree stands for spiritual *tapas* (austerity), the righteous fruits of one's actions (*karma*), and the total eradication of internal ignorance.

- **Verse 5:** *Āditya-varṇe tapaso'dhijāto vanaspatistava vrkṣo'tha bilvaḥ*, identifying that "O radiant as the sun, by your intense penance was born the king of trees, the Bilva" (Sastri, 1987: 18). The text dictates that its fruits possess the power to dispel internal ignorance and external misfortune, while the subsequent Verse 6 systematically invokes her to destroy *Alakshmi* (poverty and distress).

5. Moistness and Nourishment (Ārdrā and Tr̥ptā)

The *Śrī Sūkta* heavily features agricultural vocabulary to highlight the Goddess as the physical source of human sustenance. Moisture represents fertility, flowing water, and the vital life-force that turns barren land into green fields, satisfying (*tr̥pti*) hunger (Wilson, 1997(6): 45–47).

- **Verses 13 & 14:** She is addressed as *Ārdrām* (moist/wet with compassion or morning dew), *Puṣkariṇīm* (nourishing), and *Puṣṭīm* (personified growth/abundance). Verse 14 calls her *Tr̥ptām tarpayanīm*, meaning she who is completely satisfied herself, and satisfies all living beings with nourishment (Sastri, 1987, p. 29).

6. Moisture-Rich Soil and Cow Dung (Karīṣiṇī)

Before coins and gold bullion became standardized measures of wealth, socio-economic prosperity was measured in cattle and fertile soil (Banerjea, 1956: 134–136). Cow dung (*karīṣa*) was highly prized in Vedic agrarian society as the primary organic fertilizer ensuring rich harvests.

- **Verse 9:** She is explicitly termed *Gandhadvārām durādharṣām nityapuṣṭām karīṣiṇīm*, defined as "Perceived through her fragrance (the earth), unassailable, eternally thriving, and residing in the rich moisture of cow dung" (Sastri, 1987: 22).

Anatomy of Classical Iconography: Purāṇic and Āgamic Morphologies

I) The Four Arms and the Puruṣārthas

A defining feature of classical depictions of Goddess Lakshmi is her four arms. As detailed in classical textbooks on image installation, these limbs represent the four *puruṣarthas*, or the noble goals of human life (Rao, 1914: 268–271):

- **Dharma:** Moral righteousness and duty.
- **Artha:** Worldly prosperity and economic security.
- **Kama:** Emotional contentment and fulfillment of desires.
- **Moksha:** Ultimate spiritual liberation from the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*).

This architectural layout demonstrates that her blessings are not confined to financial success, but demand moral living, mental fulfillment, and spiritual maturity. A balanced human life requires a harmonious blend of these four elements (Ramanuja, 2014: 44–48).

II) The Symbolic Hand Gestures (Mudras)

- **Abhaya Mudra (Front Right Hand):** Raised with the palm facing outward, this gesture represents the divine protector who dispels fear (*abhaya*) and shields followers from negative energies (Rao,

1914: 14). It acts as a semiotic code encouraging seekers to cultivate courage, confidence, and faith.

- **Varada Mudra (Front Left Hand):** Lowered with the palm facing downward, this hand positions Lakshmi as a boundlessly generous provider. It expresses deep compassion and her readiness to bestow boons, material assets, and spiritual grace (Ramanuja, 2014: 52). Semiotically, it inspires individuals to practice empathy and engage in charity.

III) Handheld Lotuses

The lotuses held in her two upper hands symbolize the blossoming of consciousness within the material world (Banerjea, 1956: 290–294). They serve as a structural reminder that wealth and prosperity must be accompanied by purity of purpose and righteousness (*dharma*). The blooming flower denotes that Lakshmi's blessings must elevate human awareness toward higher consciousness, rather than causing degradation through greed.

According to Coomaraswamy, early iconographical classifications show three main varieties of Śrī-Lakshmī based on her relationship to the lotus:

- a) She is depicted holding a lotus flower in her right hand, while her left hand hangs freely or rests upon her hip in the *kaṭyavalambita* posture (*Padmahasta*).
- b) She is shown supported by the flower, either seated or standing directly upon a lotus seat or pedestal (*Padmāsana* or *Padmapīṭha*).
- c) She is placed in an environment entirely consisting of lotus foliage, where she is sometimes seen holding a flowering stem in each hand (*Padmavāsini* or *Kamalālayā*) (Dey, 2021).

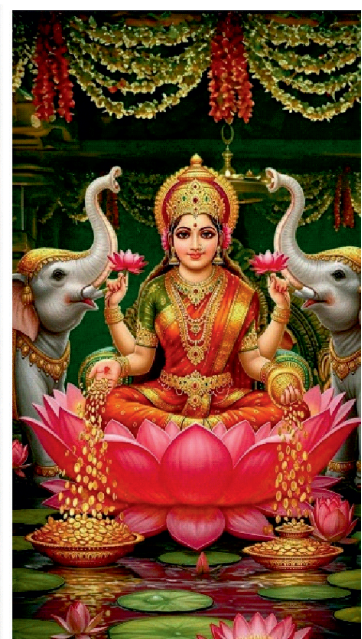


Figure 5: Iconographic study of Goddess Lakshmi displaying the attributes of *Padmahasta* (holding a lotus), *Padmāsana* (seated upon a lotus), and *Padmavāsini* (dwelling within the lotus habitat).

IV) Cascading Gold Coins

Precious gold coins flowing from her hands signify material abundance, embodying her role as the provider across both the material and spiritual worlds (*lokas*). This imagery suggests that she enriches her devotees when wealth is mediated by ethics. Iconographical variations exist regarding this presentation (Rao, 1914: 273–275):

- **Standard Form:** A torrent of gold coins cascades from her lowered front left hand (*Varada Mudra*), or a specialized asset-dropping gesture (*Varada-hasta* modified with gold torrents), directly into a golden dish or pot below, while the front right hand remains raised in *Abhaya*.
- **Kumbha Form:** Coins cascade from her lower hand alongside an open, overflowing pitcher (*kumbha*).
- **Dual Torrent Form:** In specific regional lineages, coins flow symmetrically from both her front right and front left lowered hands, collecting in a centralized golden vessel (Banerjea, 1956: 376).



Figures 6(a), 6(b), 6(c): Figure 6 (a). A traditional image of *Gaja Lakshmi*, where a torrent of gold coins cascades from her lowered front left hand displaying the *varada mudrā* as a specialized asset-dropping gesture. (Image courtesy of Dolls of India). Figure 6 (b). A traditional image of *Gaja Lakshmi*, where coins cascade from her lower hand alongside an open, overflowing pitcher (*kumbha*). (Image courtesy of Pinterest). Figure 6 (c). A traditional image of *Gaja Lakshmi*, where coins flow symmetrically from both her lowered front right and front left hands, collecting in a centralized golden vessel. (Image courtesy of Pinterest).

V) The Gaja-Lakshmi Motif and the Churning of the Ocean

In classical *Gaja-Lakshmi* depictions, two beautiful white elephants are positioned flanking the Goddess, showering her with holy water poured from golden pots. This specific imagery is derived from the popular mythological narrative of the churning of the milk ocean (*Samudra Manthan*). The primary literary sources for this narrative are the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (Book 1, Chapter 9, 72–75) and the *Padma Purāṇa* (Srishti-Khanda, Chapter 4, 118–122) (Bhattacharya & Tagare, 1988; Wilson, 2001).

Within this framework, the divine elephants pouring water over her body symbolize her glorious majesty, sovereign dignity, and the boundless abundance of Mother Nature. Elephants reflect strength, wisdom, moral integrity, and stability, positioning Lakshmi as the living manifestation of cosmic splendor (Kinsley, 1986: 36–39).

Critical Epigraphical and Early Historical Syntheses

Historical Evolution on Ancient Coinage and Monuments

The transition of Lakshmi from aniconic agricultural symbols to highly stylized anthropomorphic representations is physically preserved across ancient Indian numismatics and monumental architecture (Banerjea, 1956: 180–185). Historical studies demonstrate that early Indian coins serve as intermediate markers between Vedic literary metaphors and early medieval temple images.

- **Punch-Marked Currency:** The earliest physical trace appears on silver punch-marked coins (*kārṣāpaṇas*) from the Magadhan Empire and early regional Mahajanapadas dating back to the 5th–3rd centuries BCE (Banerjea, 1956: 181). These artifacts carry standalone abstract, aniconic symbols, such as the stylized lotus, hills, and trees within railings, which directly overlap with the agrarian wealth concepts described in the *Śrī Sūkta*.
- **Early Anthropomorphic Coins:** By the 2nd century BCE, the local coinage of regional oligarchies, such as the Audumbaras and Kunindas, along with localized monetary issues from ancient Ujjayinī, explicitly feature an anthropomorphic female figure standing on a fully bloomed lotus, frequently holding a lotus stalk in her hand (Banerjea, 1956: 183).
- **The Gaja-Lakshmi Numismatic Motif:** The structural motif of *Gaja-Lakshmi* appears on the coins of foreign rulers like Azilises (1st century BCE) and the Indo-Scythian satraps of Mathura, where two flanking elephants are shown pouring water over her head. This proves that her worship crossed indigenous sectarian borders and entered the mainstream commercial identity of ancient Indian cross-border networks (Banerjea, 1956: 184).

Monumental Reliefs: Bharhut, Sanchi, and Bodh Gaya

The earliest monumental representations of *Gaja-Lakshmi* are not sectarian Vaishnava images, but rather decorate the protective gateways (*toranas*) and stone railings (*vedikas*) of early Buddhist and Jain monuments (Kinsley, 1986: 41–44). The cross-cultural currency of this motif indicates that the figure of Lakshmi functioned fluidly as a shared indicator of commercial luck and cosmic security across different ideological landscapes:

- **Bharhut and Sanchi Stupas (2nd–1st Century BCE):** The stone lintels display deep relief carvings of Lakshmi standing or sitting on a lotus, flanked by overflowing lotus stalks (*kalpalatas*) and pairs of elephants holding inverted water pitchers.
- **Bodh Gaya (1st Century BCE):** The ancient stone balustrades feature a clean execution of the *Gaja-Lakshmi* motif.

The historical presence of these images on early Buddhist and Jain monuments underlines that Lakshmi originally functioned as an overarching cultural signifier of auspiciousness (*mangala*), fertility, and organic abundance common across ancient India, before being exclusively integrated into the formal pantheon of Puranic Hinduism (Kinsley, 198: 46–48).

Exceptional Iconographies of Lakshmi

While standard Hindu text and imagery overwhelmingly depict Goddess Lakshmi as a benign, four-armed deity seated symmetrically upon a pink lotus, several profound iconographic exceptions exist across regional traditions, historical eras, and esoteric sects. These deviations reflect her complex mythological evolution and her integration into non-Hindu pantheons.

a) Two-Armed (Dvibhuja) and Standing Variants

In mainstream worship, Lakshmi is almost universally recognized as *Chaturbhuja* (four-armed), with her hands representing the four goals of human life: *dharma* (duty), *artha* (wealth), *kama* (desire), and *moksha* (liberation) (Kinsley, 1986). However, some of her oldest historical and regional depictions break this pattern:

- **The Dvibhuja Form:** Early numismatic and sculptural evidence from the post-Mauryan and Gupta eras frequently depicts Lakshmi with only two arms (*dvibhuja*). In these early forms, she often holds a single long-stemmed lotus in one hand while her other hand rests on her hip (*katyavalambita* position) or dispenses coins (Banerjea, 1956). These depictions are not unavailable even till today.



Figure 7 (a), 7(b): Figure 7 (a). The two-armed (*Dvibhuja*) Lakshmi with Narayana, seated variant. (Image courtesy of Pinterest). Figure 7 (b). Alternative representation of the two-armed (*Dvibhuja*) Lakshmi with Narayana, seated variant. (Image courtesy of Pinterest).

- **Standing Iconography:** While sitting symmetrically (*padmasana*) emphasizes her stable, unmoving presence as domestic wealth (*Chala Lakshmi* vs. *Sthira Lakshmi*), early stone

reliefs at sites like Mahabalipuram and Ellora showcase her standing elegantly amidst bathing elephants (the *Gaja-Lakshmi* motif). This dynamic stance emphasizes her role as the fluid, active energy of cosmic fertility and sovereign power (Rao, 1914). These depictions are not unavailable even till today.



Figure 7(c), 7(d): Figure 7 (c). The two-armed (*Dvibhuja*) Lakshmi with Narayana, standing variant. (Image courtesy of Pinterest). Figure 7 (d). Alternative representation of the two-armed (*Dvibhuja*) Lakshmi with Narayana, standing variant. (Image courtesy of Pinterest).

b) Multi-Armed and Asymmetrical Weapon-Bearing Forms

In esoteric traditions, particularly within Pañcarātra Vaishnava texts and Tantric Shaktism, Lakshmi's iconography shifts dramatically from a peaceful goddess of abundance to an omnipotent supreme deity:

- **Mahalakshmi of Kolhapur:** It is a major iconographic exceptional variant, which is found at the Ambabai Temple in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. Here, the stone icon of Mahalakshmi is carved with four arms but holds highly unusual, destructive, and sovereign symbols. Her lower right hand holds a *mātulinga* (a citrus fruit), her upper right holds a heavy mace (*kaumodaki*), her upper left holds a shield (*khetaka*), and her lower left holds a bowl (*panapatra*). Rather than standing or sitting on a lotus, she features a crowned lion, which is the traditional vehicle of Durga, carved directly behind her. This unique imagery beautifully blends the attributes of preservation, wealth, and fierce destruction (Gupte, 1972).



Figure 8: Mahalakshmi of Kolhapur, an exceptional iconographic variant located at the Ambabai Temple in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. The stone icon is carved with four arms holding unusual, sovereign, and destructive symbols: a *mātulinga* (citrus fruit), a heavy mace (*kaumodakī*), a shield (*khetaka*), and a bowl (*pānapātra*). A crowned lion, the traditional vehicle (*vāhana*) of Durga, is carved directly behind her. (Image courtesy of Pinterest).

The Eight to Eighteen-Armed Variants: In the *Devi Mahatmya* framework, when Lakshmi is viewed as the primordial Prakriti (Mahalakshmi), she is visualized with eighteen arms holding an array of weapons including a trident, thunderbolt, bow, arrow, and noose, fundamentally challenging the modern, purely pacifist perception of her character (Kinsley, 1986).



Figure 9: Mahalakshmi conceptualized as primordial *Prakriti* within the *Devi Mahatmya* framework, visualized with eighteen arms holding an array of cosmic weapons, including a trident, thunderbolt, bow, arrow, and noose. (Image courtesy of YouTube)

Cross-Cultural and Synchronous Variations

Lakshmi's imagery gracefully crossed theological boundaries, leading to unique visual adaptations in Buddhist and Jain art traditions. These distinct sectarian manifestations are explored below:

- **Buddhist Adaptation (Vasudhara):** In Buddhist iconographical traditions across India, Nepal, and Tibet, Lakshmi's characteristics blend into Vasudhara, the goddess of abundance. While keeping the symbolic relationship to wealth, Buddhist text and art often depict her holding a sheaf of grain (*dhanyamanjari*), a gem-showering vase, and the sacred Buddhist sutra text, adapting her traditional role into a Mahayana context (Bhattacharyya, 1924).
- **Jain Representation:** In Jainism, Lakshmi is a deeply revered figure who appears prominently as one of the auspicious dreams dreamt by the mothers of Tirthankaras before their birth. Jain iconographic manuals specify her depiction as *Gaja-Lakshmi*, but she is frequently integrated directly onto the door-lintels (*lalata-bimba*) of Jain temples, serving as a protective, non-sectarian symbol of spiritual and material prosperity (Bhattacharya, 1939).

CONCLUSION

The iconographic journey of Goddess Lakshmi reflects a profound and beautiful harmony between strict scriptural ideals and dynamic artistic expression. While foundational texts like the Vedic *Śrī Sūkta* and the subsequent Puranas firmly rooted her identity in the pure, life-giving symbolism of the lotus, historical practice allowed her visual forms to adapt fluidly across changing eras and diverse landscapes. Rather than being confined to a singular orthodox image, her depiction evolved in tandem with the spiritual needs of her devotees.

Whether appearing in her early, two-armed ancient forms, her fierce, weapon-bearing Tantric manifestations, or as a cross-cultural icon of universal prosperity revered within Buddhist and Jain sanctuaries, Lakshmi's visual variations reveal a deity whose significance transcends mere material accumulation. Ultimately, her iconography functions as a highly sophisticated, multi-layered symbolic language. It is a visual grammar that masterfully balances the immediate, earthly realities of physical fertility and material abundance with the highest, most profound philosophical pursuits of spiritual purity, cosmic order, and ultimate liberation (*moksha*).

Appendix 1: Anatomical Alignment of the Classical Four-Armed Form

Attribute	Upper Right Hand	Upper Left Hand	Lower Right Hand	Lower Left Hand
Iconic Element	Holds Lotus	Holds Lotus	Abhaya Mudra	Varada Mudra / Cascading Coins
Symbolic Meaning	Purity & Spiritual Awakening	Material & Purified Wealth	Dispelling Fear & Divine Protection	Bestowing Boons & Generosity

Appendix 2: Semiotic Matrix of Lakshmi's Transformation

Historical Era	Dominant Sign Medium	Primary Semiotic Category	Visual Signifier (Iconography)	Concept Signified (Semantic Meaning)
Early Vedic (c. 1200–800 BCE)	Oral Text / Ritual Metaphor	Indexical (Natural Sign)	Karīṣa (Moist cow dung), morning dew, fertile soil, vegetation.	Absolute organic abundance, soil fertility, crop security, and metabolic sustenance.
Late Vedic / Khila (c. 700–500 BCE)	Early Anthropomorphic Text	Iconic & Symbolic	Padma (Lotus base), trumpeting Gajas (Elephants), golden hue.	Self-generation, purification out of mud, royal sovereignty, and cosmic rain clouds.
Mauryan / Post-Mauryan (c. 3rd–1st Century BCE)	Numismatics & Monumental Reliefs	Aniconic / Proto-Iconic	Punch-marked abstract lotus emblems, Gaja-Lakshmi lintels at Sanchi/Bharhut gateways.	Collective cultural signifier of Mangala (universal auspiciousness), civic protection, and trade wealth.
Classical Purāṇic / Āgamic (c. 4th–12th Century CE)	Temple Sculptures & Liturgy	Highly Codified Symbolic	Four arms, Abhaya & Varada Mudras, cascading gold coins, flanking Samudra Manthan elephants.	Universal sovereignty, structural balance of the Purusharthas, Hladini Shakti, and ultimate spiritual liberation (Moksha).

Appendix 3: Chronological Matrix of Major Epigraphical and Numismatic Evidences

<i>Chronological Period</i>	<i>Artifact Designation</i>	<i>Primary Semiotic Class</i>	<i>Visual Signifiers & Key Scholarly Evidence</i>
5th–3rd Century BCE	Magadhan Punch-Marked Silver Coins	Aniconic Symbolism	Early silver currencies (kāṛṣāpaṇas) showcase standalone geometric designs. The stylized lotus and tree-within-railing act as abstract markers for agrarian wealth (Śrī) before the creation of anthropomorphic forms (Banerjea, 1956, p. 181).
2nd Century BCE	Oligarchic Tribal Coinage (Audumbara & Kuninda)	Early Anthropomorphic Iconography	Tribal republics shift from abstract geometric punch marks to explicit human representations. Issues portray a female figure holding a lotus in her right hand, showcasing the evolution of the lotus as a stabilized personal indicator for the Goddess of Fortune (Banerjea, 1956, p. 183).
2nd–1st Century BCE	Sanchi and Bharhut Stupa Gateway Reliefs	Shared Cultural Iconography	Deep stone lintels and architectural balustrades display complete Gaja-Lakshmi scenes with a central female figure being bathed by flanking elephants. Their placement on early Buddhist installations highlights that this motif was a shared cross-sectarian symbol of luck before its narrow Puranic integration (Kinsley, 1986, p. 43).
1st Century BCE	Indo-Scythian Currency of King Azilises	Cross-Cultural Commercial Signification	Silver numismatic assets showcase an exact execution of the Gaja-Lakshmi schema paired with bilingual legends. This verifies that ancient cross-border commercial networks adopted Indian auspicious iconologies to legitimize fiscal tender across regional borders (Banerjea, 1956, p. 184).

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