



# CONTRASTING ASPECTS OF WOMEN IN THE SCULPTURAL ART OF KULŪTA, HIMACHAL PRADESH

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**Abstract:** *The Kulūta region is located in the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh in northern India. Its sculptural art depicts on the one hand Śāktism i.e., worship of woman as a deity which was prominent in the region, whereas on the other hand, the prominent duties were performed by the men of the society and women were restricted to household chores or seen as musicians and dancers. Men are depicted as yogī, warriors, musicians who are playing musical instruments for which women are not considered apt. Women are depicted as wives who are worshipping various deities, singing, dancing and entertaining the men. The present research finds a clear-cut discrimination and hypocritical mind set of the society regarding the status of a female deity and an ordinary woman. This division of the social duties is highlighted and visible in the sculptural art of the ancient Kulūta region, as art mirrors society. It is proposed to make an attempt to depict the condition of women using certain images of the sculptural art of the respective region.*

**Keywords:** *Art, Discrimination, Goddess, Kulūta, Śākta, Sculpture, Society, Women.*

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## Introduction

In Hindu society there are two aspects of women – divine and as a human being. In the divine form she is worshipped as a goddess like Kālī, Durgā, Śakti, Jwālā, Tārā, Laxmī, Sarsvatī in the form of energy, power, prosperity and knowledge. It is said that Śiva is śava without Śakti. But ironically

as a human being she is considered subordinate to man. This dual aspect of woman in India has persisted from the very early times. It can also be understood through the sculptural art. Sculptural art throw light on the perceptions of the society. It is proposed to examine these two contrasting

aspects of the society of Himachal Pradesh particularly in the Kulūta region, as Kullu was known in the ancient time, through the sculptures of the ancient and early medieval period.

### Woman as a Goddess or Devī

It is to be pointed out that in the Brāhmanic pantheon Śakti as *Mātri Devī* (Mother Goddess) has the highest position. Right from the prehistoric period, she has been worshipped in one form or other in various parts of the world along with India. From the beginning of human history, humans have been worshipping Nature (*Prakriti*), regarding Nature as a life giving entity and a symbol of fertility. This is evident through the paintings, drawings and artefacts of prehistoric age. But the more definite evidences of her worship are evident in the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) and those are terracotta figurines, seal amulets and ring-stone (Singh: 1977: 145). In the IVC, *Mātri Devī* has a principal position. But during the Vedic period the most important goddesses were Pṛithivī, Ushā and Savitri (Majumdar: 2017: 366). In the *Ṛgveda*, three goddesses – Aditi, Prithvi and Sarasvatī – are mentioned as the mothers of gods (Foulston: 2002: 6). In the *Ṛgvedic* hymn *Devī Sukta* Vācā and Śri, also known as Sarasvatī and Laxmī respectively – are also mentioned (Kali: 2003 : 213-17). Vācā is the source of powers of male gods such as Rudra, Vasu, Āditya etc., and thus becomes the supreme deity (Muller: 1890-92: X, 125, 1) while Śri is associated with life giving grain and wealth.

In the later Vedic period, the female deities gained a status higher than that in the early Vedic period. The female deities represented the primary energy (Śakti) of Brāhmaṇa with which he created the universe (*Śvetāśvatara Upanishada*, 1949: IV, 1). The *Devī Mahātmya* gives the concept of the origin of the cosmic gods and goddesses from the supreme Goddess Mahālxmī who is the cause, creator, protector and the annihilator of the universe (Singh: 1977: 147). Thus, gradually Durgā, Pārvatī, Laxmī and Sarasvatī became most popular goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. Even,

at present, *Mātri Devī* is worshipped in every village as *grāmadevī* under various names as Mātā, Devī, Ambā, Ambikā, Kālī, Cāmuṇḍā, etc. (Majumdar: 2017: 189-90).

### Woman as a Human Being

In the earliest time woman had a pivotal role in the society. From the Stone Age to the Vedic period, she played a prominent part in the family and society. From the paintings, sculptures, figurines of the Stone Age and IVC period we get clear indications of the important position of woman. But as the journey of human being progresses the position of woman goes declining as she gets subordinate treatment to man. In the Vedic Age she was the *ardhāngini* of man – she complemented and completed him. She received formal education like the men (Majumdar: 2017: 392). But gradually the position of woman degraded. It was a very slow process. From the later Vedic period till the present times we notice a continuous downfall of the status of woman in the family and society. From the *ardhāngini* to the position of a subordinate was a long journey. Although during this long span some women got prominent position in the society but they were very few. In general, she had become subordinate to man. She could not lead an independent life. She was depended from her birth to death on her father, brother, husband and son. Her freedom was restricted to the domestic sphere. On the one hand as a goddess she was worshipped for energy, power, knowledge and prosperity whereas on the other hand she was restricted to her house. The prominent duties were performed by man and woman was restricted to the household chores and also as musicians and dancers.

In the Kulūta region, during field survey many stone and wooden temples with an abundance of marvelous sculptures were found. Among these sculptures some are independent whereas many others are carved on the walls of the temples by sculptors. Some of the independent sculptures are kept in the *garbhagriha* of temples and others are found in the open areas of the temple complexes.

Majority of these temples are dedicated to different manifestations of the goddesses. Among them are temples dedicated to Ambikā, Čaṇḍī, Kśumbā, Gaḍā Durgā, Tripura Sundarī, Śūrū Mātā, Sandhyā Gayātrī Devī and Haḍimbā. Sculptures of women as goddess and human being are found in these temples, as well from the temples which are dedicated to male gods. The sculptures of women in these two contrasting form as a goddess and human being are abundant, but here we shall examine a few of them to understand the dual aspects ascribed to women by the society in the ancient and early medieval period in the Kulūta region.

### Woman as Goddess

#### *Mahīśāsuramardinī*

There is a legend that after killing a demon named Mahīśāsura, Śakti is known as Mahīśāsuramardinī (killer of Mahīśāsura). The description of the goddess is given in various Purāṇas such as *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (Pargiter: 1904: 465-523) and *Vāmana Purāṇa* (Singh: 1977: 157-58). In the *Padma Purāṇa*, *Agni Purāṇa* and *Matsya Purāṇa* with some variations we find the description of Devī as Mahīśāsuramardinī or the goddess as the slayer of the buffalo demon. A number of stone and wooden images and some bronze images of the goddess have been found in the Kulūta region. A stone sculpture of Mahīśāsuramardinī of the eighth century CE (Fig.6.1) is found in the yard of the Sandhyā Gāyatrī Devī temple at Jagatsukh. It is a small sculpture of the goddess. The four-armed goddess is shown holding a sword in her front right hand, a noose in her back left hand. In the back right hand she holds a *triśūla* which is shown piercing the head of Mahīśāsura, the demon. Thus, we see that the goddess killed the demon and got the name Mahīśāsuramardinī. After this incident people started worship her as the form of Śakti. We find many such sculptures of the same goddess in the Kulūta region and temples which have been dedicated to this goddess.

#### *Vaiṣṇavī*

An eleventh or twelfth century stone sculpture of Vaiṣṇavī in the collection of Himachal State Museum, Shimla (Fig. 6.2) is shown seated on her mount i.e., lion in *lalitāsana*. The four-armed goddess holds a *cakra* in her right back hand, a lotus stalk in the front right hand, while in her left back hand is shown a *śakti* or *aṅkuśa* and in the left front hand a *śaṅkha* or *khetaka*. Behind her head there is carved a round *prabhāmaṇḍala*.

#### *Sarasvatī*

The *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* states that Sarasvatī, the goddess of knowledge, should be represented with four hands that carry an *akśamālā*, a *triśūla*, a *pustaka*, and a *kamaṇḍalu* (Bhattacharyya: 1991: 105-07). A sculpture of goddess Sarasvatī is found in the *garbhagriha* of Gaurī-Śaṅkara temple at Dashal (Fig.6.3). The four-armed goddess is depicted here sitting in *padmāsana* and holds a book in her left upper hand, a *kamaṇḍalu* in the left lower hand while in the right hand she holds a flower. The fourth hand is not visible.

### *Man and Woman in the Kulūta Art*

Woman is considered subordinate to man not only in the present time but in the ancient times also she was subordinate. There are numerous evidences which reveal such position of woman in the society. In the ancient and medieval period, we find several references which tell about the subordinate position of woman in a male dominated or patriarchal society (Majumdar: 1993: 378-82). Not only the literature but art also reveals the subordinate position of woman. As a goddess woman had gained an elevated space in art especially in the sculptural art. But if we look at her as a common woman there is scarcity of space for her. In the little space which she has gained in the sphere of art, she is depicted as dancing, worshipping, and doing domestic chores to which she is limited. But in case of men, the condition is different. He occupies a much broader canvas and is depicted as a *yogī*, warrior, head of the house,

landlord, *dwārapāla*, etc. Here, in the Kulūta region the researcher also found such kind of discrimination in the society as observed through the prism of sculptural art.

### **Woman in the Sculptural Art**

In the Kulūta region we can notice abundant pieces of art which reflect the society of the ancient and medieval period. We have very few literary sources to know about the society of this period. Existing sources throw more light upon the ruling class. Therefore, to know about the position of woman we can depend upon the sculptural art. There are some images of women that define her position in that society. We shall now discuss some of these images to determine the position of woman in the Kulūta region in the period under scrutiny.

In the Jageśwara Mahādeva temple at Dalash, Kullu, an image of a woman is carved on the wooden railing (Fig.6. 4). The woman is depicted with a pitcher on her head. With her right hand she is shown balancing the pitcher while her left hand is on her waist. In the Dakṣaṇeśwara Mahādeva temple at Nirmand an image of a woman who is a *chauwrī* bearer is carved on the left doorjamb (Fig.6.5). She is depicted holding a *chauwrī* with her right hand above her head. With her left hand she holds a corner of her scarf near the waist at her right side. On the top of a similar doorjamb there is carved another image of a woman (Fig. 6.6). In this sculpture she is shown holding a mirror in her right hand near her face.

A stone sculpture of a woman is carved on the wall of the Muralidhara temple at Thawa near Naggar in Kullu (Fig.6.7). Here she is depicted as going somewhere possibly to a temple or place of worship. In her right hand she is shown holding a *kamaṇḍala* or *karaṇḍī* (a wooden or grass pot in which material used for worshipping are kept). In her left hand she is depicted holding her scarf. In the same temple, on the wall, another sculpture of a woman is carved. She is depicted here as a dancer (Fig.6.8). Her upper body is shown leaning towards left side and she spreads her both arms outwards like a dancer. Both her hands are also in dancing posture. Thus, we see a common

woman in various roles as a housewife, a *chauwrī* bearer, a *darpaṇadhāriṇī*, a devotee, a dancer, etc. But we do not find any sculptures that represent her as a warrior or wielding power over man or giver of knowledge, wealth, etc. On the other hand, we find several sculptures of man in which he is depicted in different roles such as warrior, horseman, landlord, etc.

### **Man in the Sculptural Art**

To know the position of woman in the society of ancient and medieval time in the Kulūta region it is important to know the position of man in that society. Hence, some sculptures of men which are also carved on the walls of various temples, were also examined.

A warrior is carved on the front wall of the Behanā Mahādeva temple at Behna village (Fig. 6.9). It is carved upon a wooden panel. The warrior is depicted seated on the back of a horse. He is shown holding a bow in his left hand while the arrow is in his right hand as he is attacking his enemy. In another wooden sculpture the right side of the entrance door in the Tripura Sundarī temple at Naggar, an image of a man is carved. It is an image of a *dwārapāla* (doorkeeper) (Fig. 6.10). In his right hand he holds a *bhālā* (spear) while in the left hand he holds a stalk of a flower.

A stone sculpture of a man is carved on the wall of Gaurī-Śaṅkara temple at Naggar. He is depicted as a *yogī* (Fig.6.11), i.e. a man in meditation. He is shown sitting in *dhyānamudrā* in *padmāsana* upon *mrigacarma* (deer skin). Both his hands are on his respective knees. In the collection of Naggar castle, a *sāmanta* (landlord) is depicted on a stone slab (Fig.6.12). He is carved sitting in *sukhāsana*. He is shown taking his meal. He is depicted sitting on a square low *āsana*. And a small square table is in front of him for his food. His left hand is shown on his left knee while with the right hand he is taking his food.

Thus, in the above-described sculptures we see a man as warrior, a gatekeeper, a *yogī* and as a landlord. But no such sculpture of woman is found in the Kulūta region. We see that as a goddess woman is depicted as a most powerful,

knowledgeable being. She is depicted holding *triśūla*, *khadaḡa*, *dhanuṣa*, *bāṇa*, *cakra*, *gadā*, bell, rosary, book, lotus, etc. She is depicted as a warrior in the form of Mahīṣāsuramardinī, goddess of knowledge in the form of Sarasvatī, goddess of wealth in the form of Laxmī, mother of the world in the form of Gaurī and Ambikā and in many more forms. On the other hand, she is depicted as a common woman who is subordinate to man whether she is a housewife, a dancer, a *chauri* bearer, worshipper, *darpaṇadhāriṇī*. No sculpture of the region has depicted her as the most powerful, knowledgeable, wealthy being.

When we see the sculptures of man, he is depicted as a warrior holding bow, arrows, sword, dagger, and other weapons, as a gatekeeper, as a landlord who is taking his meal. The sitting posture of the landlord indicates his high position in the family as well as in the society. Man is also depicted as a *yogī*. While woman as a common human being have not been depicted like the man. She is not shown as a powerful being. The study of the sculptures thus provide us a glimpse into the society of the Kulūta region in the ancient and early medieval period.

### Conclusion

It can be concluded from the above mentioned discussion that there was a clear-cut differentiation in the status of man and woman as well as how the particular society saw a female deity and an ordinary female in human form. In the society in the past where men enjoyed a a more prominent space in the social sphere, women had limited space in the public sphere. The sculptural art clearly depicted the confinement of women primarily to the domestic sphere. At the same time there was a marked difference in how a patriarchal society viewed a goddess and women folk. Men considered the female deity a source of energy and worshipped her as a ‘Devī’ whereas the mortal women did not share equal space and status in both the domestic and public spaces. Thus, the sculptural art of the Kulūta region, regarded as a mirror of society provides insights into the contrasting aspects of women.

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### Illustrations



Fig. 6. 1: Stone sculpture of Mahīṣāsuramardinī in the complex of SandhyāGāyatrīDevī temple at Jagatsukh

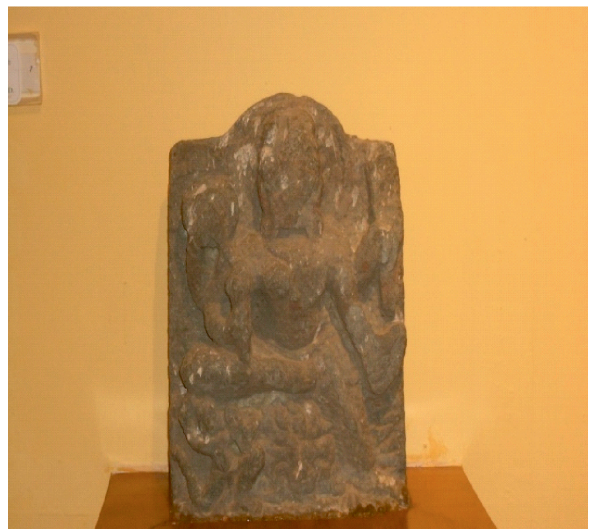


Fig. 6.2: Sculpture of Vaiṣṇavī in the Himachal State Museum, Shimla



Fig. 6.3: Sculpture of Sarasvatī in the *garbhagriha* of Gaurī-Śaṅkara temple at Dashal



Fig. 6.4: Sculpture of a housewife in Jageśwara Mahādeva temple at Dalash



Fig. 6.5: Sculpture of *Cowrī* bearer woman in Dakṣaṅeśwara Mahādeva temple at Nirmand



Fig. 6.6: Sculpture of *Darpaṇdhāriṇī* in Dakṣaṅeśwara Mahādeva temple at Nirmand



Fig. 6.7: Sculpture of a woman with a *kamaṇḍala* or *karṇḍīn* in Muralidhara temple at Thawa



Fig. 6.8: Sculpture of a dancing woman in Muralidhara temple at Thawa



Fig. 6.9: Sculpture of a warrior in BehanāMahādeva temple at Behna



Fig. 6.10: Sculpture of a *dwārapāla* in Tripura- Sundarī temple at Naggār



Fig. 6.11: Sculpture of a *yogī* in Gaurī-Śaṅkara temple at Naggār



Fig. 6.12: Sculpture of a *sāmanta* at Naggar castle

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