Art is part and parcel of man's life. Life without art is dull and dreary. The importance of art in man's life was recognised by the primitive man as well who had to eke out a difficult living against heavy odds of the nature.

Artists do take the help of the female figures to make their art look passionate and eye-catching. Sculptors of yore have used female figures in different forms and shapes to decorate their art. At some places, women have been represented in the form of Devi — all powerful one — while in some other places, these have been used in erotic forms. Female figures have been abundantly depicted in religious and historical stupas. At some places, there is only a symbolic representation of the female form.

Since our boundaries are fixed from the earliest time to the 8th century A.D., we will have a bird's eye-view of the entire period, as it represented female figures in the art of that period, i.e., literature, iconography, terracotta, sculpture, paintings, and seals.
The Vedas are the earliest literature available to us. They describe the condition of women of that time. They amply show that women were given a place of importance in all religious worship and were, in fact, eulogised as Devīs - the counterparts of Deva, their Śakti having equal status with men.

Various Puranas, viz, the Vishnu Purāṇa, the Agni Purāṇa, the Śiva Purāṇa, the Markandeya Purāṇa, the Devi Bhāgavata etc., are important sources of information regarding various Hindu Devīs.

The Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata are the two great epics which throw light on the various aspects of the female life of that time. They sketch the true picture of an ideal woman. Śītā and Draupadī were the two main characters of these epics. Besides, there are other characters also which help us in drawing the true picture of that time. The story of Satyavān and Sāvitri is another example of an ideal and devoted woman.

Literature of different periods is one of the sources of our study. The great plays of Kālidāsa and Bana Bhāta are of immense help to the student of Indian art. The popular plays of Kālidāsa are:

Abhijnana Sakuntalam
Kumāra Sambhava
Meghadūta
Mālavī Kāgnimitra
Raghuvaṃsa
Ṛṣitū Samhāra.

The Buddhist texts especially, the Tripitakas, the Jatakas, Mahā Vamsa, Dīpavaṃsa and Lalita-vistāra portray the true life style of their period.

Thus we see that literature reflects the mood of the society of its time.

Next most important source is iconography of ancient times. We know from the Purāṇas the extent to which cosmogonic myths and legends had been developed reflecting numerous patterns of Hindu religious thought. The artist was called upon to give visible expression of the Puranic concepts through the medium of stone, clay and painting. This he accomplished with extraordinary success by means of some simple, but profound, formulas of iconography and sculpture.

From very early times, we find the icons of Mother Goddess. We do not find any icon of the Vedic period. However, an important golden plaque was found from Lauriya Nandangarh on which the figure of Mother Goddess is engraved. The best representation of Mother Goddess is found in a Udayagiri cave — Varaha holding the Earth Goddess.
At Bharhut, Sāṃchi and Bodh Gaya we find the standing or sitting figures of Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. At Amaravati also, we see her, holding lotus in her hand. She is also represented in her popular form either standing or sitting on lotus, holding a lotus-stalk or in the form of Gaja-Lakṣmī bathed by two elephants. Similar icons of Lakṣmī are also found in Aurangabad and Kailasa Temple, Ellora.

The next popular icon of Hindu pantheon is that of Goddess Durgā, who comes to the world to crush the evil spirits. Normally, she is represented in the form of Mahisasuramardini. The best example of Durga is found at Havan ki Khai and Hamesvara cave, Ellora, where she has been shown slaying the demon, Mahisa. At Kailasa temple also we find the same theme.

Goddess Pārvatī, was very popular with the sculptors of ancient India. Very often we see her along with her husband Lord Śiva. All the walls of Elephanta and Kailasa temple are filled with same theme. She is so closely associated with her lord that sculptors combined her icon with her Lord Śiva. This new form possessed of all the iconographic features of Śiva in the right half and features of Pārvatī in the left half, has been glorified as Ardhanārīśvara.

Besides these popular icons of Hindu pantheon,
there are some other goddesses also as Sarasvatī - Goddess of Vac. She is the patroness of music and poetry. We see her figure at Bharhut and Kailasa temple.

Then comes the panel of Saptomātrikās from Ellora, Elephanta and Aurangabad. They are the Saktis of different gods of Hindu religion. They are Brahmanī, Maheśvarī Kaumārī, Vaishnavī, Varahī, Indrānī and Chāmundā.

Next important figures for the student of Hindu iconography are Gangā and Yamunā. Perhaps the best representation of these river Goddesses is at the Udaygiri cave.

Amongst the Buddhist goddesses, the most popular icon is of Tārā, which is available at Aurangabad, Ellora and Sarnath. There are some other icons of Buddhist Pantheon depicting goddesses Mahāmayurī, Cūndā and Māricī.

Terracottas

Terracottas form another important branch of Indian art. In this modest medium gifted clay modellers created things of real beauty and achieved a wide popular basis for their art. Clay figurines were used both for religious and secular purposes. They served as the poor man's sculpture and contributed largely to broad-based aesthetic culture and popularised art.
As small objects easy to reproduce mechanically from moulds, they were capable of mass production. Men and women, passionately fond of creating beautiful forms, employed the terracotta medium with fondness and success. We see crude figures of Mother Goddess of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. These terracottas are symbolic of the culture of that time. In later period also the figurines of Mother Goddess are found in great numbers. While many terracottas are crude, others are of fine workmanship and real beauty. Some faces are well characterized, and divine heads are sometimes beautifully modelled. The terracotta plaques often have much charm. Most of the terracottas, which have been found, are dated from the Maurya to the Gupta period. Some terracotta figures are found in the excavation at Bulandibagh near Pataliputra. From Tamluk, we have found some very beautiful figures. Normally, in most of the cases, a standing female divinity is found, with very elaborate coiffure. She is dressed either in tunic or is nude to the waist. In spite of the dhoti or the skirt, special care is taken to reveal the mount of Venus in apparent nudity. Goddess Durgā on lion from Sahet Mahet in the Lucknow Museum is the good specimen of the Gupta period. At Ahicchatra almost life size images of Gangā and Yamunā standing on the sides of the main approach to the terraced temple of Śiva constitute another example of the Gupta Period.
Besides this, several female heads, which show a projecting ridge of hair on the forehead and pig tail coiffure at the back of the head have been found. Thus we see the baking of such large sized images and plaques must have presented a difficult technical problem to the expert clay modellers of ancient India.

Much of our esteemed Indian art can be credited to its excellent sculpture. Under the stroke of the master's chisel the stone became malleable as it were, and was transformed into figures of permanent beauty and grace. Unfortunately, except some terracotta figurines and the bronze dancing girl, we do not find any other figures belonging to the Indus Valley.

Our sculptural examples start from Maurya period. Some of the master-pieces from this period are creations of real skill. Figure of Didarganj Yakshi is the best example of this period. It bears the distinction of the brilliant polish of the school, but the treatment of the figure suggests that it is post-Mauryan. There are a number of Yakshi figures of this period. Some, larger than the life size, are the only other important sculptures of the centuries immediately before Christ.

The most important sculptural remains of the post-Mauryan period are the carving on the rails and gate-ways of the great Buddhist sites at Bharhut, Gaya and Sarnath.
The great gate-ways of the Sāñchī Stūpa are carved with a multitude of figures and reliefs. From top to bottom and on all sides, the massive square upright and triple architraves are alive with the life of that period. Yakṣīs smile as they lean in easy graceful poses or serve as brackets to the architraves, which are supported by massive elephants or cheerfully grinning dwarfs. The carvings of the Sāñchī Stūpa are of high excellence and their treatment is very realistic. The sculpture of Sāñchī, everywhere, gives a sense of certainty. The artists knew what they had to depict and clearly saw in their mind's eye how to do so.

Next comes the school of Mathura. Perhaps the most striking remains of the Mathura School are the Yakṣīs from the railing pillars. The richly bejewelled women, their figures exag eratedly broad of hip and slender of waist stand in pert attitudes. The Mathura School owes much to earlier Indian traditions. It also borrowed from the North-West and adopted more than one Greco-Roman motif. Through Mathura, the style, generally known as Gupta, developed and produced some of the greatest Indian religious sculpture.

The School of Gandhara was evidently influenced by the art of the Roman empire, and some of its craftsmen may have been westerners. It was Kaniṣka who gave to
the school of Gandhara the encouragement and support through which it flourished.

While these schools were developing in the North, other appeared in the Peninsula. Here, in the Bhaja cave and at Udayagiri in Orissa, very ancient sculpture is to be found, possibly not of a later period than that of Bharhut. The great Buddhist cave temples of the western Deccan contain sculpture of great merit, perhaps the finest of which are the numerous figures of Donors, often carved in high relief on the cave-walls of Karle and Kanheri. They are frequently in couples, their arms placed on one another's shoulders. They seem to be idealized portraits of the wealthy patrons of the Buddhist caves.

The Stūpa of Amaravati was also of an early period. It was built by the Sātavahana kings. It was adorned with limestone reliefs depicting scenes of Buddha's life.

Later comes the Gupta period. The Gupta sculpture suggests serenity, security and certainty. The spirit of the Gupta period is depicted in the charming relief of the dancer accompanied by female musicians found at Pawaya near Gwalior.

Perhaps the most immediately impressive of all Gupta sculpture is the Great Boar carved in relief at the entrance of a cave at Udayagiri near Bhilsa.
Besides this, the figure of Mahisāsuramardini of Ellora cave is also very important. The figures of Pārvatī in different forms are very well shown in Elephanta and at Kailasa temple of Ellora. The sculpture of Goddess Laksāmi is found throughout the history of Indian sculpture, because she was the most important Goddess of the Hindu religion. She was also accepted by Buddhists as well as Jains.

At Ajanta also, we find beautiful depiction of the Hindu and Buddhist goddesses. Here we see some very important historical scenes also.

The carvings of the later Ellora caves, especially those of the Kailasanatha Temple, are among the finest sculptures of India. The whole series of reliefs is characterized by a balanced design and graceful energy. The dancing panel of Aurangabad is the most beautiful panel ever seen in the Indian art.

Painting was a very highly developed art in ancient India. Ajanta paintings are the greatest surviving paintings of any ancient civilization. The cave paintings of Ajanta are often referred to as frescoes. The earlier paintings are more sharply outlined and the later ones show more careful modelling.
The paintings of Ajanta are the great achievement of the Indian art. The painting of the "Dying princes" is most beautiful, full of emotion and pathos. The paintings of Apsarases are also of great importance. We also find some paintings at Mirzapur which belong to pre-historic period. They depict the social life of that time.

The painting of cave one and two are the latest of the series which may be dated to about the early seventh century. The special merit of individual figures in cave two consists in clever drawings which show that the artist apparently had gone out of his way to specially invent difficult poses. The woman standing with her left leg bent up and the swinging figure of lady Irandati are very pleasing.

The painting at Bagh represent only an extension of the Ajanta school in variety of design. Here the vigorous execution and decorative quality of the art seem to have ranked as high as that at Ajanta.

Thus, after studying all the elements of Indian art, we can divide female figures in three categories:

A. Religious figures.
B. Decorative figures.
C. Symbolic figures.
As we have already seen that the figures of Hindu and Buddhist goddesses come in this category. Perhaps, out of fear mankind created an object for their worship. That is why all the goddesses are the symbolic form of human beings.

Next is the decorative form. No doubt, artists of ancient India made some eye catching female figures, which serve the purpose of decoration. We see them on railing pillars, Toran doors, caves and in temples.

Some non-Aryan phallic stones and ring stones come in for symbolic representation. We also come across with the symbolic representation of Goddess Lakṣmī as well as Goddess Sarasvatī.

Our last source of study is the seals. Normally, we find the figures of Hindu goddesses on these seals. Thus, we see that the main sources of our study are literature, sculptures, terracottas, paintings, and seals. All these sources help us to sketch the true picture of woman of the ancient times, her religious, decorative and symbolic significance.