ORIGIN AND ANTIQUITY OF THE SAPTAMAŚTRIKAS
CHAPTER II

ORIGIN AND ANTIQUITY OF THE SAPTAMĀTRIKAS

Saptamātrikas or the "Seven Mothers", represent the śaktis or the "endowed energies" of the important familiar male deities. They are Brāhmaṇī (Sarasvatī), Mahēśvari (Raudri), Kaumāri (Kārttikeyani), Vaishnavi (Lakshmi), Vārāhi, Indrāṇī (Mahēndri) and Chāmuṇḍa (Chāmuṇḍī)\(^1\). There are, however, occasional variations in the list of the Mātrikas with regard to their number and the order of their enumeration, usually they are seven, though eight or more of them can be counted\(^2\). It may however, be noted that the Skandapurāṇa, the Dēvipurāṇa, and the Brahmandaivartapurāṇa mention more mātrikas, whereas only eight mātrikas have been mentioned by the Dēvībhāgavata, the Nityasīdasikarnava, the Prapanchasēratanaṭra, the Lingapurāṇa, the Mantramahōdadhi of Mahīdhara and the Varāhapurāṇa\(^3\). Even the Dēvipurāṇa gives eight names of the Mātrikas at another place. The Kathāsaritasāgara refers to a group of the Mātrikas headed by Nārāyaṇī, the other names being not given\(^4\). In the subsequent liturgical literature of Hinuds, as many as sixteen Mātrikas are given beginning with Gaurī. But the usually accepted list supported by the Iconographic data, as suggested by Benerjea\(^5\), consists of the seven Mātrikas, namely Brāhmaṇī, Mahēśvari, Kaumāri, Vaishnavi, Vārāhi, Indrāṇī and Chāmuṇḍa. The Purāṇas and archaeological evidence throw considerable light on the origin and antiquity of such a group of Saptamātrikas and the evolution of the practice of their worship. While the Puranic accounts are legendary and traditional, the archaeological data is more useful for analysing the historical development of the cult of the Saptamātrikas.
LEGENDARY ORIGIN:

Among the Purāṇas and the Epics, many refer to the Mātrikas, their origin, achievements and characteristics. Of these, the most important ones referring to the Mātrikas in considerable detail are the Varāha, Vāyu, Mārkandēya, Matsya, Kūrma and the Dēvīpurāṇas besides the Suprabhēdāgama which is essentially a Śilpa text. There are two different Pauranic versions relating to the origin of the Mātrikas. The account given in the Vārāhapurāṇa is more detailed than that given in other texts and this has been summarised thus by T.A.Gopinatha Rao:

"Kāsyapa had two sons known as Hiranyaśaksha and Hiranyakāśipu by Diti. They were respectively killed by Vishnu in his Varāha-avatāra and Nrisimha-avatāra. Prahlāda, the son of Hiranyaśaksha, became a devotee of Vishnu and renounced all concerns of worldly life. After him Andhakāśura began to rule over the aśuras. By piously practising a long series of austerities, he obtained several boons from Brahma and became very powerful. He then began to cause annoyance to the dēvas; and they ran to Kailāśa to complain to Śiva about the troubles caused by the aśura chief. Even as Śiva was listening to their complaint, Andhakāśura appeared at Kailāśa with a view to carry away Pārvati. Śiva thereupon got ready to fight the aśura and made the three well known snakes Vāsuki, Takshaka and Dhananjaya to serve as his belt and bracelets. An aśura named Nīla, who had secretly planned to kill Śiva came out in the meanwhile in the form of an elephant. Nandi came to know of this and informed Viśrabhadra and he took the shape of the lion and attacked and killed Nīla. The skin of this elephant was presented by Viśrabhadra to Śiva. It was worn by Śiva as his upper garment. Clad with this curious garment and ornamented with the serpents and wielding his powerful trīsūla, Śiva started out on his expedition against Andhakāśura taking with him his army consisting of the gaṇas. Vishnu and
the other gods also went with him to offer help. But in the struggle that ensued Vishnu and other devas had to run away. At last Siva aimed his arrow and shot at the āsura and wounded him, blood began to flow in profusion from the wound and each drop of it as it touched the earth assumed the shape of another Andhakāsura. Thus, there arose thousands of Andhakāsuras to fight against Siva. Immediately Siva thrust his trisūla through the body of the original and real Andhakāsura and began to dance. Vishnu destroyed with his cakrāyudha the secondary āsuras produced from the blood-drops. To stop the blood from falling on the earth, Siva created out of the flame that was issuing from his mouth a Sakti called Yōgēśvari. Indra and other devas also sent their saktis (female powers) to kill the āsuras. They (saktis) are Brāhmaṇi, Mahēśvari, Kaumāri, Vaishṇavi, Vārāhi, Indrāṇi and Chāmunda. These are the female counterparts of the gods — Brahma, Mahēśvara, Kumāra, Vishnu, Varāha, Indra and Yama and are armed with the same weapons, wear the same ornaments and ride the same vāhanas and carry the same banners as the corresponding male gods do”. The seven Mātrikas caught all drops of blood as they fell in the battle between Siva and Andhakāsura and thus stopped the further multiplication of secondary Andhakāsura. In the struggle Andhakāsura finally lost his power known as āsura-maya and was defeated by Siva. Nevertheless through Siva's grace he gained a good end. Such is the account of the origin of the Saptamātrikas or the seven Mother-Goddesses.

The Varāhapurāṇa, also states that these Mother-Goddesses are eight in number and includes among them the goddess Yōgēśvari mentioned above, although all other Purāṇas and Āgamas mention them to be seven. The same Purāṇa interestingly gives a metaphysical interpretation of the battle between Siva and Andhakāsura. According to it was the struggle between Ātma-Vidya or spiritual wisdom represented by Siva and Ajñanandha-kāra typified
by Andhakāsura. It further says that these Mātrikas represent eight mental qualities which are morally bad; accordingly Yogeśvari represents kāma or desire; Mahēśvari, krōdha or anger; Vaishnavi,ābha or covetousness; Brāhmaṇi, mada or pride; Kaumāri, mōha or illusion; Indrāṇi, mātsarya or fault-finding; Yami or Chāmuṇḍa, paisūnyā, that is, tale-bearing; and Vārāhi, asūya or envy.

According to the Mārkandeya Purāṇa, the Mātrikas aided Ambika along with Chāmuṇḍa in causing death to the most powerful ally of the demon king Sumbha, named Raktavīja, who was endowed with the character of multiplying into secondary demons equal to himself in strength and prowess no sooner drops of blood oozing from the wounds on the person of the Asura touched the ground. Similar was the case with Andhakāsura, another mighty demon, who fought against Siva. This Purāṇa also mentions that the Saktis of the individual gods are characterised by the respective forms, ornaments and mounts of the corresponding male gods. T.A. Gopinatha Rao remarks, "these (Saptāmātrikas) are the female counterparts who are armed with the same weapons, wear the same ornaments and ride the same vāhanas and carry the same banners as the corresponding male gods do". Brāhmaṇi should be sculptured like Brahma, Mahēśvari like Mahēśvara, Vaishnavi like Vishnu, Vārāhi like a short woman with angry face and bearing a plough as her weapon, Indrāṇi like Indra and Chāmuṇḍa as a terrific woman.

In the above two Pauranic versions, the Mātrikas manipulated so as not to allow the blood dropping from the wounds of the demons to fall on the ground, there by stopping further multiplication of the secondary demons and consequently the demons, becoming powerless after the blood ran short, were defeated and slain.
The story after the defeat and killing of Andhakāsura is contained in the Kūrmapurāṇa. After the fight was over, Siva directed the Mātrikas and Bhairava to go over to Patāla-lōka (abode of tamasic and destructive elements) where Narasimha resided. They obeyed Siva's order and accordingly did so but when Bhairava, who is only an aspect of Mahēśvara, merged with Siva, the goddesses had no means of subsistence and started destroying the world for their feeding. On finding this, Bhairava made a prayer to Narasimha to deprive the goddesses of their tamasic nature and the latter did so. Since then these seven mātrikas have a benevolent character instead of a malevolent one.

A variant version of the account regarding the origin of the Mātrikas is given in the Suprabhedhāgama. According to this āgama, the Goddesses were created by Brahma to kill the demon Nīrṛta. The Dēvipurāṇa describes the story of the demon Ruru's war with the gods and his death at the hands of the Mātrikas. The Vāyupurāṇa, which is one of the earliest Purāṇas, shows the Mātrikas as the wives of the seven great sages (the Saptarsis) who nursed the god Skanda who had no mother and who was born of the body of the god Agni. This Purāṇa also contains a vague reference to the Krittikas who also nursed him. We may therefore take that the Vāyupurāṇa seems to indicate that the Krittikas were the Mātrikas.

In a few other Purāṇas some of which may be later than the sixth century A.D., different identifications of the Mātrikas are made. For example, in Chapter fifth of the Pūrvakaṇḍa of the Brhaddharmapurāṇa, the river goddess Ganga is identified with Brāhmaṇi, Vaishṇavi, Rudrāṇi and Kāli. In describing the story of the killing of the demon Ghōra, the Dēvipurāṇa says that Siva eulogised the Devi with the Mahādaṇḍaka hymn in which she is identified with Brāhmaṇi, Kaumāri, Mahēndri, Mahēśvari, Vaishṇavi, Vārāhi, etc. All these are obviously later developments.
HISTORICAL ORIGIN:

The historical origin of the Saptamātrikas has been traced back to the Vedic times by S.K.Dikshit and to that of the Indus Valley Civilization by M.K.Dhavalikar. The implications of these claims have far-reaching meaning and hence deserve careful examination. In the first place the Ṛgveda contains some references to the Mātrikas. A hymn in the Ṛgveda informs that Agni has seven mothers and another reveals that the seven mothers regulate the preparation of the Sōma juice. The Ṛgveda further tells that the seven rays of Āditya correspond to Agni's Sapta-rasmi which are the seven flames. Elsewhere these flames are mentioned as his seven tongues and the Muṇḍka-Upaniṣad names them as Kāli, Kārāli, Manōjava, Sulchita, Sudhamra-varna, Sphullingiṇī and Visvaruci. S.K.Dikshit points out that "there can be no denying the fact that these tongues correspond to the 'Seven Sisters' or Saptamātrikas with whom we are now familiar." M.K.Dhavalikar also expresses the view that these references "stretch back the antiquity of Saptamātrikas to the early Vedic period"; but he feels that the conception of the Seven Mothers appears to be of more remote antiquity and opines that some seals discovered at Harappa and Mohenjodaro in the Indus Valley substantiate this.

One seal from Harappa and two seals from Mohenjodaro have been examined by Dhavalikar. The seal from Harappa contains in its lower half, which only is intact, a row of seven standing human figures with tall head-dresses and numerous bangles adorning their hands. Though the seal is too fragmentary it gives us a complete idea of the meaning it conveys; it would not be too much to hypothesise that they represent seven mother goddesses. The first piece from Mohenjodaro is a terracotta tablet showing "a scene consisting of seven human figures standing in a row above and a goat-drawn vehicle driven by a man below". Dhavalikar identifies the figures as the Saptamātrikas.
The most important and well-preserved of all the three seals is the second piece from Mohenjodaro depicting a deity in a stylised tree, with a kneeling human worshipper behind whom stands a ram. In the register below are seven ministrants or votaries, each dressed in a short kilt and wearing a long pig-tail and spray of leaves or a feather in the hair. The tree spirit is apparently nude but has a pair of horns between which is a projection which was probably intended to represent a spring of foliage. The worshipper has a very similar head-dress and like the deity and the seven ministrants are adorned with many bangles. Beyond the foot of the tree, on the right is a square partitioned receptacle, very similar to the pottery dishes from Mohenjodaro, which was probably intended for offerings to the deity. In this connection, it is to be noted that Mackay and Marshall have identified the seven figures as female. Dhavalaikar identifies the scene in the seal with the preparation of the Soma juice described in the ninth mandala of the Rgveda. The expression "jananam Saptamātaro Vēdhama sāsta śriya" in the Vēda reveals that the Saptamātrikas regulated the preparation of the juice. He identifies the deity in the tree (shown in the seal) with the god Sōma, the kneeling figure with Agni with the ram as his vāhana and the seven figures with the Saptamātrikas. Referring to the mystical quality of the number seven in ancient Indian traditions and the veneration in which the rivers were held besides the reference to the seven rivers in the Rgveda he concludes: "The apah, also called in India sindhavah, are said to be seven in number, and are thus equivalent of seven mothers as they are said to bear the foetus in the Agni or the sun-god. All this evidence from the Vedic literature goes to show that the seven rivers were revered by the Indo-Aryans as mother-goddesses."
However, the figures in the seal from Mohenjodaro have been subjected to more than one identification and interpretation. Father Heras felt that the seven figures are the victims to be offered to the deity in tree\textsuperscript{19} which has been taken by him as the deity An. According to T.N. Ramachandran\textsuperscript{20} the seal depicts the story of Medhyatithi as contained in the Rgveda. He identifies the kneeling figure in the seal with Medhyatithi and the seven figures as hotaraha who stand in a row in consonance with the description in the Rgveda I-162-2-5. O.P. Misra is of the opinion that "the origin of the Saptamātrikas can be traced back to Indus Valley civilisation and on a seal the seven figures found standing in a dancing pose besides a tree with goddess and devotees, may either represent some sort of religious dance or seven divine figures".\textsuperscript{21}

The identification of the seven figures in the seal which is crucial for antedating the Saptamātrika workshop to the days of the Indus Valley Civilization is thus a matter on which there is no unanimity of opinion among scholars. As far as dependable archaeological evidence goes it is difficult to postulate a pre-kuśāna Mātrika cult even though the worship of the Mother Goddess is certainly of more remote antiquity; the worship of the Mātrikas of which we hear from Kushāna times onwards is different from the worship of the Mother Goddess in matters of detail. To trace back everything to the Indus Valley Civilization is a temptation which some scholars find too difficult to resist. V.R. Mani says that "the available archaeological evidence in the form of sculptural vestiges warrant the conclusion that the beginnings of the worship of the Mātrikas can be placed only in the early centuries of the Christian era and not earlier".\textsuperscript{22}
The Cult of Saptamātrikas in Āndhradeśa:

When did the worship of the Saptamātrikas spread to Āndhradeśa and what is the earliest reference to it testifying to the antiquity of the cult? We can trace back the worship of the goddesses in Āndhradeśa from the early period onwards. Goddess worship was prevalent in Āndhradeśa from early times in one form or the other. The Saptasati of Hāla (A.D.19-24), the Sātavāhana king, contains references to the temples of Goddesses. At Nāgārjunakoṇḍa has been excavated a shrine - complex which has six shrines in a group. The pattern of building such shrines in the same size and in the same compound is implied by the term Yathēṣṭha in the Vishnu-dharmottara which is a late work (between 7th and 9th centuries A.D.) presumably embodying and compiling widely prevalent modes in temple architecture. The Vishnu-dharmottara assigns Yathēṣṭha types of shrines to many deities including the Saptamātrikas. It is therefore possible to postulate that even in early times there were probably shrines for the Mātrikas in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and that similar shrines were in existence in other parts as well, which afforded scope for the inclusion of the Mātrika shrines also in the Yathēṣṭha type in the Vishnu-dharmottara at a later period. The probable objection to this would be that the shrines at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa are six in number and not seven to warrant such a surmise. But it is possible that the number of Mātrikas which was undefined even as late as the Gupta period, was only six during the fourth century in some parts of South India. The reference to āruvar (the group of six) in early Tamil literature Tōlkāppiyam also seem to confirm this. Further in his Bhramarāmbikastotra, Sri Sankarāchārya also refers to only six yōginis and it is stated that these yōginis were not different from the Mātrikas at such an early period. The worship of the Mātrikas in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa in the Krishna valley in the 4th century A.D. could not be an isolated phenomenon and one may hazard the suggestion that it was prevalent in the Deccan also.
The earliest extant sculptural relief of Mātrikas in Āndhradēsa is the early Chāluukya panel from Yellēswaram, now preserved in the State Museum at Hyderabad. This panel shows two armed female figures of divine mothers seated in a row. The hands of each figure are devoid of weapons and rest simply on the lap. There are no vāhanas. This panel represents the earliest iconography of Saptamātrikas which existed at the beginning of the rule (A.D.6th Century) of the Early Chāluukyas of Bādāmi. This panel indicates a stage when the Saptamātrika cult prevalent in Āndhradēsa during the rule of the Early Chāluukyas of Bādāmi. Writing on this earliest panel, M L Nigam observes "The Saptamātrika cult seems to have made greater headway in Āndhradēsa only during the rule of the Early Chāluukyas of Bādāmi" (A.D.6th to 8th Century).26

The Chāluukyas of Bādāmi worshipped the Saptamātrikas, all their inscriptions making reference to them. In the early inscription of the Chāluukya king, they are spoken of as the descendants of Hāriti nurtured by the seven mothers. For instance Putranam Sapta (10) Kāmatribhis - Saptamātribhik abhivardhitānām abhivardhi-tānām Kārttikēyapari rakshana-prapata -(copper plate grant of Pulakesin - I, dated Saka 411 (A.D.489-90). The early Chāluukyas who ruled the tracts of Āndhradēsa, had contributed much for the growth of the cult of Saptamātrikas. After the early Chāluukyas (A.D.6th - 8th century), the successive dynasties such as the Eastern Chāluukyas (A.D.7th - 11th century), Rāstrakītās (A.D.8th - 10th century), Nōlāṃbas (A.D.8th - 10th century), Chōlas (A.D.9th - 13th century), Kākatiyas (A.D.11th - 14th century) and the Vijayanagara rulers (A.D.14th - 17th century) also contributed their mite for the growth of the cult. In the temples of Āndhradēsa, we find that there has been a steady increase in the number of Saptamātrika panels and images in Āndhradēsa from the 6th century A.D. i.e., from the early Chāluukya period onwards. The presence of a very large number of sculptural panels and images of Saptamātrikas in the temples of Āndhradēsa enables us to state that the cult of Saptamātrikas was popular and widely prevalent in Āndhradēsa during 6th and 17th centuries A.D.
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