Woman in Indian art: a Historical Background
CHAPTER – I
WOMAN IN INDIAN ART: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The image of woman has been widely sculptured and painted in Indian art. With a long history, going back to about four thousand years, the iconography of the woman image has been depicted in a variety of visual narratives, women often being depicted as icons of fertility, as forceful and furious goddesses and as objects of desire in Indian art.

In the context of the image of woman in Indian art, our concentration is on the visual representation. When we analyze the image of woman, as projected in the traditional Indian art over the centuries, we come across certain classifications of woman which define the iconography of the woman form within certain parameters. These have been so strongly and deeply imbied in our social set up that evidently the visual representation of the image of women, over the centuries, has not changed much in Indian art. Woman has been paradoxically projected both as ‘ divine’ and ‘mortal’, one who is to be worshipped, yet to be ‘desired’ and also to be domesticated. This dualism present in the social structure, especially in the Indian sub-continent subordinates giving the importance of the body over the mind. In the history of traditional Indian art, we often come across ‘…The body, especially the female form, has become the focus of interest for artists for a long time…’ and the projection of the image of woman in the Indian Art is subtle and slow, yet the ‘… Woman has remained a consistently favored motif, even though the approach to its form and content has varied extensively in both time and space.’

The change in the iconographic representation of the visual image of women, in context with the form and content, is directly linked with the change in the cultural ethos and the social, political and economic conditions prevalent

1 Kesar, Urmi, ‘Women through the eyes of the Women painters,’ Edited By Pawar, Kiran ‘Women in the Indian History,’ Vision & Venture, New Delhi, 1996, p.133.
2 Ibid…pp.133-35.
at that particular period of time. It is intriguing to see, from a survey of Indian painting, that from the classical period up to around the nineteenth century the concept of woman remained largely the same even though her form acquired different manifestations through each succeeding period. ‘From a naturalistic/humanistic mould in Ajanta, she moves on to an ideogrammatic one in the early medieval period and then acquires an idyllic-romantic look in the late medieval period. Treated as a principle, she is raised above her physical personality...’³

‘One of the interesting aspects of Indian culture is that women are represented both as an object of gaze and as a part of the sacred... for women are central to sacred art as the focus of sexuality and auspiciousness.⁴ The woman ‘The Feminine’ came to be linked to as ‘The body’. The man, considered to be ‘the superior’, lay claim over ‘the mind’. This led to the power and superiority of men in the social order and the control of the mind over the body. Women becoming objects of male gaze and the voyeuristic pleasures associated with the male gaze, led to serious social and psychological repercussions as to how women looked at their own bodies- It was through the ‘eye’, the ‘mind’ of the man.

Bharat’s classic ‘The Natyashastra’ classifies woman as Devi, Naiyka and Ganika. (Goddess, heroine and courtesan)⁵

In the traditional Indian art and also in Indian literature we find innumerable images of women fulfilling these categories. ‘The continuing importance of this ideological struggle over representation lies in the powerful relationship between idealized or denigrating images of women ...and the internalization of these by females...’⁶

³ Kesar, Urmi, Ibid. p.133.
⁵ ‘Natyashatra’, a treatise on the art, particularly the arts of theatre, was written in Sanskrit between 200BC- 200AD by the sage Bharat Muni.
The visual depiction of the image of women did not show much change until the beginning of the twentieth century. Changes in the form surfaced with more artists trying to experiment with the projection of the female form, departing from the traditional and the conventional ways of projecting the image as seen earlier in Indian Art.

Looking back into the history of art, “The first images in plastic art in India appear in the form of terracotta figurines of the Kulli and Zhob peasant cultures.” These early examples of female figurine depicted in utmost simplistic manner were suggestive of some ritualistic purpose attached to them. “The Kulli figurines were meant to represent a female divinity connected with fertility or mother cult of ancient times...The female figures of Zhob valley with more naturalistic delineation...represent a divinity connected with the worship of a primitive fertility or mother goddess or a combination of both.”

Similar to these images are those produced during the Harappa Culture. These images representing the feminine power are found in large numbers in the vast span of this civilization. Made mostly in terracotta, projecting the ‘mother’ image of the women, believed to represent fertility, these ‘mother goddess’ figures are not images but symbols and do not represent the physical impression of the female form. They are projected as heavily ornamented, with wide hips and voluptuous breasts. Found in large numbers in the

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7 Saraswati, S.K., ‘A Survey of Indian Sculpture’, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1975 p.1-6. ‘About the first half of the third millennium BC, two significant cultures are known to have flourished in the North and south Baluchistan...The northern culture are mostly along the valley of Zhob after which the culture is named, The southern culture is designated after the type site of Kulli in the Makran.


9 Ibid. ‘Roughly belonging to a period from second half of the third millennium to earlier half of the second...In the latest phases of Kulli and Zhob cultures appear to overlap with Harappa culture and the same rendering of form and movement is observed in the Harappa culture, which seem to have followed the traditions earlier.’ p.1

10 Bhattacharya, Manoshi, ‘Shakti- The Mother Goddess’, The South- Asian Com., December, 2001. “Some scholars have traced the origin of the mother goddess to Pre-Vedic times. Sir J. Marshall who excavated the Indus Valley felt that the Shakti cult evolved from the mother goddess cult associated with proto Shiva cult prevalent around 2600B.C to 2000B.C”.

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Harappa culture, these images also established the prevalence of matriarchal societies in the Indian-Subcontinent and also other civilizations of the world during that time. Archeological evidence has suggested that there was prevalence of Devi cults around the time of the Indus valley Civilization, as their belief was centered on the idea of female power and goddesses.

‘The Great Mother, the pregnant goddess of fertility, was worshipped throughout the world in her sheltering, protecting and nourishing character.’

Besides supporting the cult image these figurines found in large numbers could be used as utilitarian objects as ‘Their heads generally support a huge flared head-dress which, in some cases, provide cavities for votive lamps.’ These figurines, much similar in purpose as those from the Kulli and Zhob culture, have the same religious and ritualistic intent. However other images of women also appear giving a more humane imagery ‘...such as female kneading dough, nursing mother, crawling child appear among the Harappa Culture.’ One of the most remarkable and perhaps the only one in copper is the image of a nude figure depicting possibly a young girl, perhaps a dancing girl from the Harappa culture.

It is probably the first sculpture in a dancing posture discovered in the Indian sub-continent. ‘..... standing nude except for a brief necklace and an arm completely ringed with bangles, her relaxed body twists so that one hand rests on her right hip, while the other holds a small bowl against her left leg...her negroid features identify her as one of the Dasas as described in the Rig Veda.’

Apart from various pieces of pottery, we have little evidence of art until the third century B.C. ‘Unfortunately, no sophisticated art remains to document during that time...we know from literally sources, however, that all the arts

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14 Saraswati, S.K.,op.cit.,p.4 What looks like a dancing pose, is argued for ‘The disproportionately long arms and legs are perhaps due to the peculiar technique of working in metal...inspite of the slenderness of the limbs, the figurine is not without certain vigor. The treatment of the back and the hips, the buttock and the legs is conspicuous for naturalism in modeling and alertness in movement.’
were practiced... Elaborate places of kings... are described as being embellished with wall paintings and ornate wood carvings.  

Art, however, did become visible as an integral part of architecture with the onset of Buddhism. It appeared in architecture not due to some compulsion, but out of an integral need of the society. Ornamentation and decoration were imbibed as an integral part of architecture. The Mauryan period proved to be of great significance for the development of formative arts in India, especially for sculpture. The image of the female form projected as the nude, originated in the form of ‘nature deities’ or as the ‘Yakshi’. Though the imagery was made using various materials like wood, paintings, and illustrations in manuscripts, these perishable materials could not survive the wrath of time and only large images in stone survived over the centuries. These ancient symbols of fertility, the nature deities were transformed into a more profound form—‘The female form’.

The Yakshi portrayal of women was depicted with the volupptuous bodies, rounded breasts and narrow waist. The link between these images of women and fertility has been projected widely in the traditional Indian Art and in literature. ‘These Yakshi images of women were linked with auspiciousness’. Yakshi also means ‘female earth-spirit’. With the rise in Buddhism, art became more centered on architecture and important places like Sanchi, Bharhut, Bodhgaya and Mathura were vigorous with a lot of creative activities in the early classical phase. Beautiful sculptures adorned the gates and railings of the stupas. Art was mainly narrative and was used as a communicative means. The railings of Bharhut stupa were festooned with beautiful yakshi images like for example the ‘Sudarsana Yakshi, Chulakuka Devata, and Chanda Yakshi’ but in Indian art we observe that the ‘representation of the human figure is in every case conceptual rather than realistic. In the portrayal of the Yakshi there is an emphasis on the attributes of

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16 Ibid. 28-29.  
18 Saraswati, S.K, op.cit., 1975, pp.50-57
fertility in the swelling breasts and ample pelvis. Widely depicted images of Yakshi are found in abundance in Indian art. Each of these yakshi images emphasizes on the beauty, her image as the bearer of fertility is supported by the mythical story of the touch of a young beautiful girl leading to the blossoming of a tree. This belief connects sexuality with auspiciousness, an element rampant in Indian art. These universal divinities of fertility, the ‘Yakshi’ or the ‘female earth-spirit’, were personification of the ‘primordial forces of the soil’. We also come across some very imposing yakshi images on the gates of the Sanchi stupa. The ‘Yakshini dryads’ depicted nude are sensual and erotic images which were initially not sculptured for decorative purposes. However, the yakshi appearing almost hundred years after Bharhut, is the ‘Vrikshadevata Yakshini’ on the eastern gate of the Sanchi stupa. It has a more voluptuous and fuller body and is in a classic ‘Tribhanga Pose’ [the three-body bend pose] giving her form more movement and sensuality. In this particular posture, the body is carved in an ‘S’ shaped format. In this posture, with the head sometimes inclined, a bent at the hips, waist and breasts is made. These kinds of proportions are highly formalized and unrealistic, and could possibly not be of real women. They represent the idealized and conceptualized perception of the feminine. These earth spirits were also called ‘Shalabhanjikas’ and kept appearing both in the Buddhist and Hindu art. They also appear during the medieval painting, especially in the Deccan, called as the ‘Dohad’. In the Rajasthan and Pahari miniatures, we again find these

19 Ibid
20 As Zimmer writes in ‘The Art Of India Asia: its manifestations and transformation’, compiled and ed.by Joseph Campbell, Vol.one: Text, Bollingen Series xxxix, Pantheon Books, New York, 1960,p.78. 1955, that ‘yaksha & yakshi, have been very popular in the pre-Aryan tradition, to judge from the frequency of their occurrence on early Buddhist monuments and later Indian art’. Going back into history the Aboriginal inhabitants of the Indian Sub-continent, even before the advent of Harrapa civilization around the third millennium B.C., worshipped nature spirits like trees, water, earth, serpents which later on took the human form.
21 Saraswati,S.K, ‘These were initially made for structural purposes, these figures had a more symbolic meaning’, op.cit., 1975,p.51
22 Shalabhanjika- It’s a pre-Aryan belief that a woman could make a tree fruitful by grasping its branches, examples of this belief are found in the east gate of the Sanchi stupa, on the Draupadi Rath at Mamallapuram and at the Bharhut railings.
23 Dohad scene from Tarifi-Hussain Shahi, in praise of Sultan Hussain, Deccan Painting from Ahmednagar [1565-69A.D.]It is a manuscript painting. The legend by which a tree blossoms at the embrace or touch of a woman, called ‘Dohad’, was popular for centuries in Hindu India Mulk Raj
women personification of fertility in oneness with nature, sometimes depicted as ‘Nayika’ or ‘Radha’ standing under a full blossomed tree and holding its one branch, waiting for the ‘lover’ or ‘Krishna’ to arrive.

Perhaps the best example of depiction of woman in a conceptually idealized form in traditional Indian art is the free-standing sculpture of the ‘Didarganj Yakshi’. It was made in stone in the third century B.C. in the Mauryan period. It depicts the feminine as the embodiment of the creative energy of nature. She is also called as the ‘Chauri bearer’, for she holds a fly whisk in her right hand to keep away the flies. This is also suggestive of her subservient role, perhaps as a maid in attendance, accorded to women during that period. With emphasis on her breasts and hips, her sexuality is enhanced. ‘...The carving is voluptuously realistic and each turn of the fold of the indicated flesh has a slightly inflated sensuousness...’

The idealized form of this yakshi image with its ‘...plastic treatment of the whole gives a dynamic character and articulation to the entire form...in the sensitive rendering of the warm and the lively flesh, in the treatment of the hair, of the drapery and the ornaments...in its graceful stance we have a female pattern, urban and sophisticated and classical in its idea and content’. Similar to this imagery is the suggestively erotic in physicality, emphasizing sensuality of form is the Bhutesar Yakshi from Mathura.

These yakshi images were of a more substantial size for they were intended primarily for public display in places like the stupas, temples and monasteries. These public images, primarily used for beautification had enhanced anatomical body proportions, making them more idealistic and...
sensuous to provide visual pleasure to the viewer, despite the fact that ritualistic implications were attached with them. ‘Art in India has been intimately concerned with the experience of the ‘ramantya’—the beautiful...’

this beauty in its idyllic form can be seen in the images of Mathura, Bharhut, Sanchi and Amravati. However by now a slow yet subtle change in the image of woman form was prevailing in Indian art. From the mother cult and the goddess of fertility, we now have the image ‘...carved in very high relief nude or semi-nude female figures-Yakshinis, Vrikshaka or apsaras’- the connotations and implications of which are anything but religious, for they have a flamboyance and sensuality of expression surpassing anything known in the art of the earlier periods’.27

As the female form was evolving in the northern parts of India, changes were visible elsewhere also. In the rock-cut caves of Karle, we come across a lot of ‘Mithuna Figures’ sculpted around that period. They were considered as lucky charm and were the visual representation of eroticism and harbingers of fertility.

The Gupta period is regarded as the pinnacle of Indian art from around the first quarter of the fourth century to the close of the sixth century AD. It portrays woman in an idealized conceptual form, which sprung up with an amalgamation of the plasticity of Mathura imbied with the elegance of the Amravati forms. There was a major reappearance and revival of the Brahamanical deities, surging a new life into the visual narratives in Indian Art. Iconic images of woman as idealized and as divine were created during the Gupta and the post-Gupta period with emphasis more on the human figure and

28 The mithuna symbols also express a series of particular philosophic beliefs concerning the architecture of the whole creation. In the beginning was Purusha (an aspect of God) who architected purusharthha. The joy of human union raised to the ninth degree is regarded as spiritual attainment of union of soul with the divine. Body is the physical manifestation of our inner life. Mithuna sculpture on temples is, therefore, an outer manifestation of man’s inward aesthetic pleasure. The arts of mithuna are essential for fulfilling the three basic aims of life, viz. Kama, Artha and Dharma.
all other elements as being secondary. During the classical period ‘...the idea of the divine image, conceived in terms of the human form, elevates it...to a supra-human level and adds to its possibilities in this direction...with the complete realization of these possibilities, the visible image becomes the vehicle of the invisible divine concept and the Indian plastic art reaches its destined spiritual goal.’

‘The Ajanta Frescoes epitomize the female beauty, not so much in the contours of the woman’s body but in the mature expression, linear rhythm, which embodies the great Ajanta Art.’

It is during this time that the ‘...Sadanga, aesthetic canons of paintings, were established, spelling out in detail the rules governing painted works’. Once these were established, this idealized concept of beauty was also followed in the literary texts, giving more substance to the depiction of the idealized woman form in both art and literature. The ‘Yajnavalkya Smriti’, the ‘Arthshastras’ and the ‘Kamasutra’ were the major texts written during the Gupta period, which strongly influenced the visual arts. ‘Indian ideas of beauty, especially the female beauty, received their canonical expression in literature and this subsequently influenced the Visual Arts.’

During this time the image of woman has been manifested in a variety of forms, she is sometimes projected as a beautiful queen, a sensuous Apsara, a dark princess, as Siddhartha’s mother, as an attendant or a maid in waiting, or as the pensively narrated dying princess. Whatever maybe the thematic narrative, the projections don’t change from the idealized form of the woman.

By idealized form, was meant, that which was not real but desired of in an image. ‘The strong physical and naturalistic rendering, characteristic of the previous epoch, is now subdued and gives place to a rarified and idealized modelling of human form...leading to the emergence of a new aesthetic ideal...the aesthetic and ritualistic canons, systematized in later age, echo this

31 Sadanga, The Six Limbs of Indian Painting are listed in Yashodhara commentary on Kamasutra.
32 Ibid p. 29.
divine beings, Buddhist, Brahamanical and Jain, but also of ordinary men and women.\textsuperscript{33}

From the sensuous to the image as Divine in Indian art came to be projected when there was a unification of various sects and schools of philosophies. Hinduism emerged as a strong unified religion, as the Brahamanical ritual of sacrifice progressed towards devotion and bhakti as a means of attainment. The image as ‘divine’ appears around this time in Indian art. This image of woman has been given by men, who essentially have been the ‘image builders’ in the context of visual depiction in Indian art.

The Gupta period had a comprehensive contribution to Indian art in the framework of the pioneering work they did in ‘...the standardization, classification and use of iconometry (Talamana) and the development of artistic techniques which led to the iconographic standardization of the image of woman as divine, as goddess...and this iconographic vocabulary developed during this period became a pan-Indian language of the iconic goddess image from then on.’\textsuperscript{34}

The image of woman as the divine, ‘the Devi’, ‘the Goddess’ appears around the seventh century A.D. Indian art being essentially a religious art, the depiction of the divine image, led to a slender delineation of the feminine body form. The rise in the Bhakti cult led to the resurgence of Hindu architecture in the form of temples being constructed in many parts of India.

\textsuperscript{33} Saraswati, S.K., op.cit., p.127.
\textsuperscript{34} Wangu, Madhu Bazaz, ‘Images of Indian Goddesses’, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 2003, pp.72-73, 80.
‘In contrast to the social subordination of women in ancient India, the feminine principle embodied in ‘Devi’, the Great Goddess has enjoyed primacy in Hinduism’. The image of Devi, the Hindu goddess, has varied shades to her manifestations and she is depicted in visual arts in her many personifications. She is ‘the Ganga’, the river goddess, Parvati as Shiva’s consort, Laxmi and Bhudevi [earth goddess] as Vishnu’s wives.

The ‘Devi’ is sometimes personified as the graceful, all beautiful in form like the images of Parvati, as found in the elegant Chola bronzes of the tenth century, or sometimes as the terrifying and hideous as the ‘Goddess Kali’. She is sometimes depicted as naked in her fierce form, standing on the prostrate figure of Shiva, her consort. In another of her projection she is ‘...The image of ‘Durga’, --She who is “difficult [dur] to go against [ga]”; that is to say, “the unassailable, unconquerable one.” The image of Durga as ‘Mahisasuramardini’ is represented a lot in Indian art. The youthful goddess is shown multiarmed, riding a lion, fighting a fierce battle and ultimately destroying and winning over the buffalo demon.

This iconic representation of the feminine power has become timeless in Indian art, and has been constantly a favoured subject for artists of all times.

36 Bhattacharya, N.N., ‘History of the Sakata Religion,’ Munshiram Manoharlal publishers, Pvt.Ltd, New Delhi, 1974, 2nd edition, 1996, pp.200-09. “Two major centers, devoted to Kali or centers of Shaktism are in Kalighat in Calcutta and Tarapith in Birbhum, district of West Bengal. It is a family of Kali i.e. Kali Kula and the main deities are Kali, Chandi, Durga and other goddesses like Mansa, Sitala, and all considered aspects of Divine Mother.”
38 Mahisasuramardini—“The unconquerable Goddess(durga), crushing(mardini) the Demon(asur/Buffalo(mahisa).” It depicts the most celebrated...exploits- that of rescuing the universe from the tyranny of the buffalo- shaped demon Mahisa...shown frequently in Indian art, and its details are recounted in a dramatic poetical style in the celebrated Sanskrit poem Devi Mahatmya. “The description of the great(maha) self(atma) of the goddess(devi) Mahatmya is a technical term designating a special branch of sacred writings devoted to exposition of the Divine powers of the hidden self.' Ibid., p.91.
‘...What is rendered is not the drama of the struggle, but a hieroglyph of timeless victory- a “static manifestation”, in the manner of an image fashioned for worship...supreme maternal principle which is eternally victorious through the reaches of time.’

Hinduism copiously projects the images of ‘Shakti’ the feminine force, as the female personification of Shiva, with god’s creative energy as the embodiment of the feminine and masculine powers as in the image of ‘Ardhanarishwara’ are depicted in traditional Indian art. The Ardhanarishwara is an androgynous deity composed of Shiva and his consort Shakti, representing the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies a constructive and generative power. The iconography in Indian art is depicted as half-male and half-female, split down the middle. The best sculptural depictions are to be seen in the sensuous Chola dynasty bronzes and the sculptures at Ellora and Elephanta.

Another personification of the divine is the images of ‘Tara’ the female counterpart of Buddha and the Bodhisattvas being projected in Indian art. ‘...Tara’ who is depicted as a powerful ‘Savior’. This iconography emerges around the seventh century A.D. with the rise of a new and complex form of ‘Mahayana Buddhism’, which was an outgrowth of the Tantric School of thought. This school of thought permeated not only into the Buddhist institutions of thought but also Brahmancial one. Hence, we see deities like Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma complimented by their consorts in Indian art, who were depicted sometimes as more active than the gods

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39 Ibid., pp.92-93.
40 The synthesis of masculine and feminine as the half-male, half-female god the ‘Ardhanarishwara’ personifies Shiva and shakti. The earliest known depictions are reported from the Kushanas (Circa35-60 A.D.) Later on we have the beautiful examples in the Ellora and Elephanta caves and the most famous ones are the Chola Bronzes of the 11th century. The iconographic representation shows as the breast, elegantly modeled as an essential element of the feminine anatomy. The male anatomy is bolder in the sculptured depiction, whereas the feminine aspects of softness are more representative in paintings.
41 Tara is the Buddhist Goddess of compassion, born from the tears of Avalokitesvara. ‘Tara’ images are often paired with ‘Bhrkuti’(wisdom) on statues of Avalokitesvara. There are two types of Tara images- the white Tara is the peaceful form and the green Tara is the forceful depiction of this goddess. Examples of white Tara are found in 17th century, from Nepal, now in Prince of Wales Museum. Also a lot of Tara images of Pala period from Bihar can be found in National Museum, Calcutta.
42 Ibid., p.171.
43 Tantra, the ‘doctrine and the ritual of the left hand’, asserted that the female principle[shakti] is the dominant force in the universe, Since it alone has the power to move the dormant male force to action'
numbers in temples across India during the Bhakti period. Indian art being predominantly a religious art, the personifications of woman forms kept changing with the ideological and social changes with the passage of time.

The woman image, around the medieval period, especially in the sculptural images of Khajuraho and Orissa celebrate the fecund principles of the Agrarian society. We see the Image of woman as erotic and sexual, as ‘Sura-sundaris’ and, ‘alasa-kanyas’, beautiful maidens, images of who are depicted frequently on temples in the form of dancers, musicians and hand maidens. Examples of such are seen in abundance at the Sun temple of Konark, and Devi Jagdamba temple at Khajuraho, known for its erotic and mithuna figures. As the Tantric philosophy flourished in many parts of India, visual imagery of woman became more sensuous, sexual and erotic.

‘Almost all possible sexual positions were sculptured, making the woman image ‘sacredly erotic’. Women were personified as metaphors of the unseeing and relentless power of nature, with the link between fertility and sexuality considered as auspicious. Ample examples to this have been found in Indian art and literature to substantiate this ideology.

The depiction of the female form in the Western and Eastern Indian miniature paintings does provides a link of continuity of painting from the Ajanta and Ellora times in the history of Indian art to the 10th century A.D. Despite the passage of time “…the lure of the female body remains constant: sublimated into a goddess, woman is drawn with the passionate yearnings…the unconscious seems to emerge above the surface and the more physical and

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44 “It is no accident that women played a dominant role in the Tantric kaula Kapalika cults”. Mitter, Ibid., pp.79-81. Tantric Kaula Kapalika cult : ‘...Yogini Temples became wide spread in north India from the tenth century CE. There are 64 yogini temples in Orissa which contain animal faced yogini figures. The Temple structure has a distinct circular structure open to the sky, suggesting the ‘yogini chakra’ or the female valua. There are royal temples of 81 yoginis belonging to the Kalacuri dynasty in Bheraghat’. V.Dehiya, Kalachuri Monarch and his circular shrine of the Yoginis: Royal Patrons 77-84, and Yogini cult and Temples, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 115-7.
sensual Tantra Yoga had begun to give freshness and vitality through the recognition of the female as mother, beloved and regenerator.45

The profile and posture of woman in the Jain Kalpasutras46 is somewhat squat and shown with sharp angular faces with fuller breasts sitting in tribhanga posture. As for the thematic projection of woman imagery, there is not much deviation from the earlier images of that of a mother, a courtesan or a queen. The 11th century Jain miniatures were the earliest examples of miniature paintings in Indian art. The dominant feature of these were the use of the color red, it was more of a symbolic representation taken from the Tantric rituals, where as in the later miniature paintings, however the use of this colour was more for pictorial effect. ‘Ashtrasahashirika Prajnaparimita’ a widely narrated theme on the illustrated manuscripts of the 12th century, from the Eastern Indian paintings, shows the iconic depiction of the goddess through whom devotion is directed. Prajnaparimita means “the perfection of wisdom”. It personifies the wisdom of all the Buddhas in the enlightened form of the female deity.

In Medieval Indian painting, the female and the male form lose their shape as painting was restrained to the specified space making the figures squat in the miniature format. ‘In the later phases, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the exaggerated tendencies towards elaboration and ornamentation lead to an overburdening in which the form itself is lost in a bewildering maze of details.’47 In contrast to the squatted and shapeless figures in the eastern and western miniatures, an image of beauty, visual perfection and expression can be seen in the sculptures and paintings from the Chola Period. The very expressive and life like bronze sculptures made during this time are a hallmark of grace, elegance and beauty. Woman as the divine was still a very favorable

46 The Kalpa Sūtra is a Jain text containing the biographies of the Jain Tirthankaras, most notably Parshvanath and Mahavira, including the latter’s Nirvana Bhadrabahu I is considered the author of the text and it is traditionally said to have been composed about one hundred and fifty years after Nirvāṇa of Mahavira (traditionally 599 – 527 BCE). It contains detailed life histories and, from the mid-15th century, was frequently illustrated with miniature painting. The oldest surviving copies are written on paper, a medium introduced into western India in the 14th century. Saraswati, S.K. cit. op.p.185
47 Saraswati, S.K., op. cit., 1975, p.185
subject of narration. The woman form especially in the Chola art is ‘slender and supple form of the earlier epoch is seen to have been recaptured…the dress and the jewellery are seen to be in a sort of organic relationship with the body and they add to the suppleness of the form in the Chola art…Ritualistic and functional needs apart, an intense spiritual and emotional movement, arising out of the kind of bhakti (theistic devotion)…appear to have been successfully reflected in the metal sculptures of South India.48 Both sculpture and paintings were parallel styles in art at that time whereas the paintings were more simplified, the sculptures were very naturalistic.

In the Sultanate period, again the paintings are more simplified and we do come across the image of woman repeated as the tree-spirit, the yakshi but now stylized and clothed in the painting from ‘Traif-e-Hussain Shahi’,49 from Deccan period.

The feminine description of beauty in our literary texts co-relate to a large extent with the visual representation of beauty found in Indian art. The pioneer in this area was the famous poet Kalidasa, considered the greatest classical poet, whose famous work the ‘Kumarasambhava’ describes the beauty of Paravati with rich similes and poetic metaphors from nature coordinating with her physical beauty. The same is seen in the ‘Chaurpanchasika’ and the ‘Laurchanda’50 series of paintings based on the Sanskrit literary texts in which women were depicted as beautiful, elegant and ever waiting for their lover. Women are represented as a beautiful princess or a courtesan, their iconographic representation shows them as wearing body hugging cholis[blouse], transparent ordhinis[veil], with sharp angular edges,

48 Ibid., p.206.
49 “The evolution of the Deccan painting styles and their exact provenance are still a subject of scholarly investigation…the earliest known Deccani miniature paintings are those illustrating the Persian- style epic Tarif-i-Hussain Shahi, which is a poetic account of the Ahmednagar ruler Hussain Nizam Shah I (ruled 1553-65), was commissioned by his mother when she served as a regent.
50 ‘Chaurpanchasika’ is a popular literary work of the court poet Bihana, A work of the eleventh century kashmiri poet, who fell in love with the daughter of the king. A series of fifty love poems were composed by him for his love Champavati. These were painted in Uttar Pradesh between 1525 and 1570. ‘The Chaurpanchasika’ inspired a major series of paintings that became a benchmark for pre-Mughal art…” Mitter,P.,op.cit.,p.102: The Turko- Afghan Sultanate of Delhi {1206-1526 C E }
‘Laurchanda’ a late fifteenth century manuscript from Uttar Pradesh area of North Central India, Laurchanda is a love romance still popular today. Craven, R.C., op. cit.,1975,pp, 219-220
narrow waist, full breasted body sitting in squat positions, heavily bejeweled bodies, epitomizing the projected image of women of that period. Bilhana’s composed ‘Chaurpanchasika’ series of love poems based on the romance and eroticism which led to the projection of woman as passionate lovers, unhindered, braving all odds to meet their lovers. From the popularity of these romantic poems, a new trend began, which was the turning point in Indian culture. This led to the beginning of popular literature being written in regional languages, making vernacular literature more popular.

Artists started taking inspiration from regional works like ‘Rasikapiya’, 'Gita Govinda, the Bhagvat Puran, the Baramasa', literary works which were a source of inspiration for artists to illustrate in miniature painting. These literary works are of the Bhakti cult which became very popular and artists used them as an inspiration to illustrate in miniature painting.

In the Mughal Empire the art of painting flourished and the splendor was kept alive with the synthesis of the Persian Kalam and the native Hindu workmanship. Paradoxically, the Mughal period witnessed women patrons of art, as for the visual representation of woman form in the Mughal art, ‘...It is interesting that when Mughal art was at its zenith, neither the nude nor the beauty of the women form fired the artists’ imagination’. The social compulsions of the Islamic ideology were one of the major reasons for the lack of woman images being projected in the Mughal miniature paintings.

To appreciate and understand Indian miniature paintings, we must realize that while Mughal art was basically realistic, Rajput paintings like

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51 Rasikapiya: which was composed in 1591 by the court poet of Orcha, Keshavadas. It is a poetic catalogue of the heroes and heroines and the various emotional characteristics and circumstances associated with them.

52 For further reference about the similes in Indian poetics see SANSKRIT POETRY FROM VIDYAKARA’S TREASURY, translated by Daniel H.H. Ingalls, London, Oxford University Press (2nd print), 1977.
Sanskrit literary texts are full of poetic metaphor and highly symbolic. The beauty of woman is personified in the form of nayikas in Rajasthani paintings. The artists have given prominence to woman form. The *nayaks* and *nayikas* are frequently depicted in the guise of the celestial lovers ‘Radha and Krishna’. Radha, depicted as the soul and Krishna the God, and together their union represent the ecstatic reunion of man’s soul with god. In these miniature paintings, the image of women is depicted with an intense longing for the lover and the joy of union with the lover. In the miniature paintings from Rajasthan, again the slim, slender, gentle and sensuous iconography of the idealized conceptual beauty is highlighted. Radha as the ‘Bani Thani’ from the Kishangarh School of painting epitomizes the essence of the importance given to the beauty while projecting the female form.

The ‘Naiyka’, ‘Radha’ typifies the essentials of Indian woman, hence forth projected as coy but not assertive, seductress yet not blatantly sexy, epitomizing a typical Indian beauty in a veil. The physical attributes are emphasized typifying the Indian beauty as having long flowing hair, a sharp nose, large beautiful angular eyes, fair skinned, slim slender profile, and heavily ornamented body with rich decorated Indian attire. This image of the Indian woman transcends, in art and literature with the heroine/ naiyka, as the quintessential woman, raised above her real and physical personality. ‘...All her activities and emotions are universalized, externalized and lifted from merely incidental, her finite context of account only in so far as it would lead into the infinite…’

The Pahari artists created a feminine ideal, an image of the Indian woman –a striking canon of beauty that was aristocratic and serene yet calmly remote. The elegant female form is central to Pahari miniatures. The woman is depicted as an embodiment of innocence and sensuality. Like Rajasthan

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miniatures, the Pahari paintings are full of poetic metaphor, with the main inspiration being the literary texts of the bhakti cult. Woman again is shown as longing for her lover and things like a flash of lightening, the pouring rain, and the swing becomes a metaphor for the climatic act of physical love. This conceptual idealization of the feminine beauty was done with emphasis on her physical attributes. Despite the change of time, the visual representation of woman, the iconography and the imagery did not seem to change much from the earlier classification of woman as the heroine (nayika), the courtesan (ganika) and the goddess (devi).

A change of interest and patronage in Indian art began with the Colonial period (1857-1947) being established. This had a huge impact on the Indian art leading to ‘...The eventual fragmenting of traditional Indian arts...the result of a culture imperialist infrastructure...hence a change in the style of art...’.54 The ruling dynasty of Nawabs existing at that time was crumbling, directly affecting the development of art in India. The artists for their survival took refuge under the patronage of the British. ‘The historical transition followed the same pattern all over India and thus we have Company paintings from Patna, Lucknow, Delhi and centers in the south too like Tanjore.’55

‘Company paintings definitely need a better evaluation and study than it has received so far...while it is true that this interest was stimulated by Western demand, let us not forget that the seeds were there in the tradition, though dormant.’56 As the thematic representation was involved, these paintings were more of a historical documentation by the British of India as they saw it. The style was deviant from the classical style of Indian painting and it also led to a stylistic crossover for the Indian artists. The commissioned Indian artists, to suit to the sensibilities of the British, modified their technique and style. They shifted to softer water colours from heavy opaque colours and also from brighter colours of Indian miniatures to softer colour tones. As for the

projection of women in these paintings, we do come across paintings of the ‘nautch’ girls, mostly commissioned by the British to be given as gifts. Perhaps the most valuable contribution of Company style\(^{57}\) of paintings was the historical record of many monuments and artifacts which were painted by the British, some of which now cease to exist. By the 1900’s this style lost its ground with the advent of photography.

The Company and the Kalighat style of painting were almost simultaneously happening. The Company painters were only trying to project the surroundings as commissioned by the British in an earnest manner and their social projections were only an indirect hint at the projection of the woman in art even the early 1900’s. ‘...almost all paintings show women (other than goddesses) as courtesans –Courtesan with a rose and mirror, courtesan trampling over lover, courtesan nursing a peacock…establishing the identity of the woman as ‘courtesan’ as the ‘public woman’.\(^{58}\)

The Kalighat paintings were a common man’s art, it reflected upon the social change and there was re-casting of imagery in these works. It imbibed the impressions from the contemporary society, reflecting upon the shifting realities and moved from the religious iconography towards more worldly and social events. The Kalighat painters’ thematic projections were satirically intended as a pun on the inconsistencies of the degrading society.

As for the thematic depiction, the spectrum had widened with narratives as diverse as a single woman sitting on a Victorian chair sometimes combing her hair or holding a ‘hookah’, caressing a peacock or playing a ‘sitar’. There were narratives projecting social satire with a painting in which a ‘Babu is being beaten by an anglicized wife’. These mundane narratives were well received by common people.

The imagery of woman as actress/heroine/naiyka was modified as fashionable ladies and courtesans projected by the Kalighat artists. The

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\(^{57}\) Company paintings dominated the art scene in India between 1775 to 1900. The Biggest collection of Company paintings, amounting to about 6000 are in the British Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. With the advent of photography this style vanished slowly.

inspiration of this visual representation was derived from the earlier projected images of woman as goddess. There was a remarkable transformation in the conceptualization of the visual image of the woman. Varied factors worked on the stylistic development of this era, which grew out of composite cultural circumstances, leading to the image of woman being depicted as more urban, innovative, somewhat liberal and uninhabited. Metamorphically speaking…‘The Sita’s, Parvatis, Annapurnas, Laxmis shed their crowns, their halo, in favour of fancy style of clothing…smoking pipes…seductive stances…they emerge in their new pictorial avatars as courtesans, actresses and heroines’.59

Despite the atrocities done by the British on the Indian people, there were, however a few things which worked positively for the Indians. The British, for their own meritorious glory, did a systematic and scientific documentation of our rich cultural heritage. The beginning of the 19th century saw a greater interest of the British in the rich cultural heritage of India. They translated our old Sanskrit texts and discovered and restored many of our monuments and artifacts, which could otherwise have been lost in oblivion. This resulted in the people becoming aware of our lost heritage and led to an increased national pride. The speedy network of railway lines laid for the better connectivity of the country, after the near defeat of the British in the 1857 mutiny, played to the Indian advantage and made communication and travel easier for Indians. The British education system also opened new vistas for the middle class people, especially for women.

The British set up Art Schools60 as they wanted to develop a class of Indian artists with European art values. These schools of art were to impart

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60 By 1867 Twenty-two Industrial Art Societies and three Government Art Schools, Calcutta, Bombay & Madras had been established…with the British crown taking over the earlier East India Territories in 1857 and Queen Victoria becoming Empress of India, The Bombay Government Art College (later re-named Sir J. J. School of Art) and the Madras Government College of Arts and Crafts were also established.” Tuli, Nevill, *Indian Contemporary Painting: The Flamed Mosaic*, Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd, Ahmedabad, 1997, p.184. ‘A uniform syllabus based on the School of Industrial Arts at South Kensington, London, was devised for all the art schools’. The purpose of the British to develop a uniform and systematic curriculum was intentional. ‘The Art institutions established by the British by the mid-19th century facilitated knowledge of Western Neo-classical art…with an initial attempt being to develop the “craft” tradition.’ The westernized syllabus in all the art schools of the country led to the ‘…Fine art education …with an emphasis on portraiture, landscape and still-
training in the field of painting, drawing and modelling, ornamental pottery, wood carving and metal work. A new approach to techniques of perspective, chiaroscuro and realism in art was a direct outcome of the Western influence on Indian art. With the new generation of artists trained in the academically-realistic style in the British art schools, a change was witnessed in the narrative and imagery in the Indian sculpture and painting. The shift in the thematic narrative towards social themes and imagery corresponding to pain and pathos also became evident in Indian art. Technological advancement and mechanization in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century leading to a lure of materialism were some of the major developments leading to social and economic changes in India and eventually leading to change in Indian art. The British were very appreciative of the Indian art and craft, but were not able to understand the true essence of the Indian traditional arts. The Indian concept of spirituality, the conceptualization of form as the essence of aesthetic experience, the supremacy of the soul over the body with the cosmic rhythmic order as the matrix of all creative activity were concepts new to the European sensibilities. This ignorance behind the philosophy of Traditional Indian art, led them to believe their own art to be superior. The gap increased even more with the Western concepts being taught in the art schools and the traditional Indian arts taking a back seat. The change in the Indian art scene started becoming evident and the Indian artists were caught between the traditional and the western value systems. However there were some artists who did not forfeit their indigenous creative pursuits. Raja Ravi Varma was one such formidable name in the history of Indian art that was not a product of the British academics. Though the medium of rendering his paintings in oil was a technique adopted from the British. Being a self-taught artist he has had a tremendous contribution individually towards the development, narrative context and the projection of the image of woman in Indian art. ‘Ravi Varma’s

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Life... The use of chiaroscuro instead of flat color patterns; of tonality rather than line; and perspective instead of decorative compositions were the changes... The Indian thought, the perspective of the mind’s eye was far more relevant than representation... This academic perspective was not the manner with which the Indian vision had been fashioned for centuries...’

*Ibid.* p.185
attempt to illustrate scenes from Sanskrit classics was a landmark in Modern Indian painting. Despite his training in Tanjore School and his acquaintance with the mural tradition of Kerala, his thematic works did not have anything to do with iconic images…

He approached the image of the woman at two levels: objectifying the body as sensuous with hints of nudity making it erotic and subjectifying the form as divine with a more visually acceptable image to be revered upon. Two parallel and paradoxical images of woman already established till now, were further strengthened by Ravi Varma’s paintings. One image is the pious, the pure, and the coy domesticated woman with all the goodness and values who is ‘the Devi’ or the personification of a goddess in a woman. In this imagery she is represented fully clothed, bejeweled with ornaments. The reverse, the paradoxically opposite of this image is the courtesan, the seductress, the enchantress with the body flesh suggestively exposed. This visual representation of the seductress carried on not only in painting and literature but also in the popular Indian cinema, which, as in art and literature, had clearly defined roles and fixed imagery of the heroine (the nayika), the seductress or the courtesan (the ganika) and the mother (the devi) the goddess who is the ever protective, sacrificing and caring one. The idealization of the Indian woman image continues, both in form and content.

Raja Ravi Varma preferred to abide by the Victorian concept of morality rather than the erotic feminine narration as in our Sanskrit texts. This adopted thought process led to many sociological changes and affecting the projection of the image of woman in Indian art in subsequent years. His major consideration was the larger audience of the common people, and keeping in

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mind the sensibilities of the people and the social moralistic values in mind he
dresses his gods and his goddesses in the costume and ornaments reflecting
reverence and purity.

‘The oleographs reached out to a wider audience, creating a calendar
image which has kept its gaudy yet wonderful mass appeal until today,
significantly molding the Indian eye’.\(^63\) Without doubt his oleographs of the
Indian goddesses easily found their way into the puja rooms of the middle-class
people throughout India.

His iconographic depiction of the Indian
woman had paradoxical representation with the
partially draped, the enchantress, the seductress image
of the woman in his paintings of minor character like
‘Matsyagandha’ or the apsaras, whereas the revered
images of ‘Laxmi’, ‘Sita’, ‘Saraswati’ were shown as
fully clothed. Hence on one side he projected the
image of a woman that needs to be worshipped,
protected and domesticated. On the other side, she was
the object of desire, ---‘The courtesan, the prostitute,
the enchantress’, one to provide pleasure to man. ‘Even today, one comes
across his voluptuous women reincarnated in cheap calendars and “Bollywood
films…”\(^64\) The social and psychological imagery supported by the texts and the
visual imagery continued in Indian art and transcend in the mind set of the
Indian women over centuries.

With the struggle for freedom reaching its pinnacle, by the early 20\(^{th}\)
century, a very powerful and indeed an impactful image of woman emerged
during the ‘Swadeshi’ movement. An image of woman, perhaps never

\(^63\) Kapur, Geeta, ‘Ravi Varma: Representional Dilemmas of a Nineteenth century Indian painter,’

projected before in Indian art. It was the visual rendering of the concept of ‘Bharat Mata’\(^{65}\) the motherland.

The image of ‘Bharat Mata’ with its delicate and loving image of the woman as the motherland touched the sentiments of the nation and united them in their struggle for the freedom. This image created interest because unlike the earlier personifications of the goddess Durga or Kali as fierce and slaying the enemy, this iconography of the ‘woman as the nation’ is depicted as serene, modest, civilized and very much ‘human’, ordinary and not as divine. ‘...from the iconography of a goddess to that of the mother nation...transforming her from a religious into a secular icon’.\(^{66}\)

‘In the sentiment the present day situation the Paleolithic and Neolithic figure of Mother Earth has become Mother India, the holy motherland, the native soil, which is to be cleaned of interfering foreign power ruling from afar. In the atmosphere of India’s long and culminating struggle for freedom and self-sufficiency, this transformation has placed the cosmic great goddess in the highest position...of a contemporary political mythology...the whole weight of India’s deep religious devotion has been brought to force in a vow of self-surrender (Bhakti) to the modern national cause.’\(^{67}\)

However by the 1920’s and 30’s, there is again a reversal of iconography of the image of ‘Bharat Mata’, as a fierce and militant outfit with

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\(^{65}\) The most popular of this image was in the form of a painting, painted by Abanindranath Tagore, from the prestigious and aristocratic Tagore family. They were very much involved in the freedom struggle for independent India and also the main force behind the Bengal revivalist movement in art in the early twentieth century. The painting titled “Bharat Mata” done in circa 1902-05. In the painting the central projection is the image of a woman depicted in delicate wash technique in saffron robe, with four arms, each arm unlike the previous images of the Goddesses does not carry any weapons but symbols like strings of beads referring to spiritual knowledge (diksha), clothing (vastra ), food (anna ) and a manuscript referring to knowledge and education (siksha ).This image of ‘Bharat Mata’ with its delicate and loving image of the woman as the motherland touched the sentiments of the nation and united them in their struggle for freedom.


the conventional sari wrapped between the legs making her more agile for combat. This image which appears mostly in posters and calendars was more politically motivated, propagating the sentiments of martyrdom amongst the people.

From the conception of the image of Bharat Mata, the iconographic shift from a goddess to a humble ordinary woman, transformed yet again as goddess Kali, to even render as the map of the country, chained in shackles. This fascinating transformation of her various images, can be attributed to historical, religious and political upheavals during the freedom movement. The compulsions behind this imagery were the need of the hour to be unified and fight for the independence of the motherland.

In the context of traditional Indian art, the female form has been given prime importance. The woman has been projected as a ‘mother goddess, a divine goddess, a nature spirit in the form of a beautiful yakshi, a sensuous, and erotic fertility image, a lover, a courtesan, a domesticated house wife, a fierce goddess, and lately as the motherland. All these various representations suggest in many ways that the ‘...history of Hindu tradition can be seen as a re-emergence of the feminine.’

Woman in Indian art has been depicted largely in a conceptually idealized manner, more so, as an ‘object of desire’, something ‘to be looked at’, an image rendered primarily by male artisans which focused primarily on the body, the image of woman.

The traditional thought process of the societies led to the objectification of the female body. The idealized feminine form has been projected for male consumption and sexual satisfaction. ‘...visual representation of women have been shaped by male definition of beauty, by projecting the qualities desirable as a woman...convention of imaging her as a passive recipient of the gaze, as the object of vision, a sight.’

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The idealized rendering of the image of the feminine with body as the focus of representation in Traditional Indian art had many repercussions. The impact of this visual narrative projected over centuries influenced the psychological mindset and the sociological ideology of Indian society. This had a direct impact on the social and economic status of women over the centuries.

The Indian women for centuries have been caught within the paradox, the dilemma of the ‘real’, the ‘ordinary’ with the ‘idealized’, the ‘divine’ personifications of feminine by the male artists and writers. However, a change though subtle in the image of the female form is observed to evolve in Indian art by the twentieth century. This shift in the depiction of the image of woman is very interesting. An attempt to approach the form and reflect the image, as different from its earlier depiction, huge credit goes to the new age women artists who emerged during the beginning of the nineteenth century in India. This change emerged with the changing socio-economic conditions by the end of the nineteenth century in the Indian society.