Chapter III
Gaṇikā Tradition as Reflected in Indian Art

In the previous chapter an attempt was made to discuss the development of gaṇikā tradition through the literary sources. Initiating our research further the aim of the present chapter is to trace the gaṇikā tradition in the representations of the early Indian art. Beginning with the tracing of the evolvement of early Indian artistic tradition on the backdrop of the different socio-cultural as well as political phases, the chapter focuses on the visual representation of the body in sculptures.

Art (śilpa, kalā, kāvya, etc.) in its becoming (utpatti) is the manipulation or arrangement (samskarana, vidhāna, etc.) of materials according to a design or pattern, preconceived (dhyāta, nirmāta) as the theme (vastu) may demand, which design or pattern is the idea or intelligible aspect (sattva-jñāna-rūpa) of the work (karma) to be done (kārya) by the artist.¹

The term ‘art’ has a wide range of implication and the etymological meaning indicates that the term was used first by the Italians in order to suggest skill or craftsmanship. In early India the term was used in a similar style to indicate the proficiency or skill in any special field. ² Vātsyāyana speaks of sixty-four such arts and stipulates that to be called as cultured person one should be proficient in these arts. ³

Human artefacts may embrace a wider category of material remains that includes the decorative and minor arts, such as jewellery, pottery, metal and wooden utensils, and even toys. It is important to note that in the present work the focus is on the art in general which, Partha Mitter observes, means sculpture and painting, and

³K. Sundaram, op. cit.; Kāmasūtra, I.3.15; Vātsyāyana in the Kāmasūtra includes music, painting and architecture in the list.
often includes architecture.\footnote{Partha Mitter, \textit{Indian Art}, Oxford University Press, USA, 2001, p. 8.} Early India has witnessed evolution in the various forms of art like paintings, architecture and sculpture throughout the centuries.

With the decline of the Indus cities at around 1800 BCE, there is not much material evidence of culture that existed till the third century BCE.\footnote{Partha Mitter, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 9.} Several art historians share the opinion that apart from pottery the art until third century BCE is comparatively few or there is no extant of either sculpture or architecture that can definitely be chronologically dated as pre-Maurya.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, Swarajya Prakash Gupta, \textit{Roots of Indian Art: A Detailed Study of the Formative Period of Indian Art and Architecture, 3-2 Century BC, Mauryan and Late Mauryan}, B.R. Publication, Delhi, 1980, p. 1; Anand K. Coomaraswamy, \textit{Introduction to Indian Art}, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1969, p. 13; Niharranjan Ray, \textit{Maurya and Post-Maurya Art}, Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi,1975, p. 3.} As demonstrated by Niharranjan Ray,\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 1.} the first organised art activity in India in a monumental scale and permanent material of which there is evidence belonged to the period of the Mauryas.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 1.}

The diverse or the similar elements of the artistic nuances in Indian sculpture and architecture in different regions and their evolution has been an important challenge for the art-historians.\footnote{R.N. Misra, \textit{Ancient Artist and Art Activities}, Indian Institute of Advance Study, Shimla, 1975, p. v.} The artistic traditions and its different forms are the different aspects of the innovative momentum that is inborn in the human mind and is greatly linked with his environment. Accordingly, for an understanding of any art-form, the total perspective of the society is a necessary condition and the
chronological and special sequence in which the study of the art is done by the historians becomes the study of the entire society since they presupposes that an art-form is but a reflection of a particular period in a nation’s history. The history of art thus is basically the study of the cultural history of a nation.\textsuperscript{10}

The art and material culture of the early India has been important for the reconstruction of the cultural history of the period. They represent the styles and culture of the period and the styles are a set of manifestly peculiar characteristics which have a general validity in the development of sculpture and architecture of any country.\textsuperscript{11} The social history of art explores the dynamics of the relationship between the patron/public, the artist and the work of art in the context of the social formation of a given period of history and it is also to be noted that the dynamics of this link changes according to the changes in the economic base of the society.\textsuperscript{12}

The art produced in South Asia throughout the millennia is apparently of unlimited quantity and of virtually infinite diversity and such objects of art were as Huntington said,

recurrently materializations of the creators’ highest religious and philosophical ideals, yet they could be interpreted on many levels by individuals at various stages of their spiritual development.\textsuperscript{13}

She further underlines that –

On one level, art expresses concepts so abstract that the most complex philosophical language of the world, Sanskrit, had to be developed to give

\textsuperscript{10}K. Sundaram, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 1-2.
\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 4.
full verbal expression; at another level, the art conveys the simplest devotionalism indicative of the belief that an offering and pure faith could assure the material well-being of human kind.\textsuperscript{14}

The art works during the ancient period is not just aesthetic expressions or exercises in colour and form but are visualisations of the transcendence, brought into the range of human understanding.\textsuperscript{15} Works of art in the early Indian context (\textit{śilpa-karmāṇi}) are means of existence made (\textit{kṛta, saṃskṛta}) by man as artist (\textit{śilpin, kāraka, kavi}, etc.) in response to the needs of man as patron (\textit{kārayitr}) and consumer (\textit{bhogin}) or spectator (\textit{draṣṭṛ}).\textsuperscript{16} At all times the Indian art has an intelligible meaning and a definite purpose.\textsuperscript{17} On the discourse of Indian art, Stella Kramrisch puts forward that, the ultimate aim of life in India is Release or \textit{mokṣa} and art is one means of attaining this aim.\textsuperscript{18} On the other hand, Niharranjan Ray while discussing Buddhist art and architecture states that according to the teachings of Lord Buddha all forms of art are expressions of and lead to \textit{Vasana}, desire and nostalgia and are instruments of \textit{muhūrta sukha}, pleasures of the moment, and are, therefore shunned by one who aspires for \textit{nirvāṇa}.\textsuperscript{19}

It is generally held that the art of early India, both architecture and sculpture are of entirely religious in character. Huntington observes that –

Religion was the major force stimulating the creation of art and architecture in ancient India...What we call the art of ancient India is, in fact, the

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Roger Lipsey, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 71.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. xii.
reification of certain metaphysical concepts, the purpose of which is to enable
the religious devotee to more easily internalize the ultimate Truth. 20

It is stated that art of ancient India has always been purely religious and was never
and nowhere employed for secular purposes. J Burgess opines:

The sculpture of ancient India, originating as it did in religious tendencies
and destined to serve religious purposes, could only follow its own
immediate purpose in sacred representations: otherwise it was, and remained,
simply decorative and always connected with architecture. 21

Whereas Kramrisch have put forward that –

The art of India is neither religious nor secular, for the consistent fabric of
Indian life was never rent by the Western dichotomy of religious belief and
worldly practice. 22

The art of the Maurya period are all directly or indirectly affiliated to Buddhism
and quite a few items may have been pre-Buddhist tribal and traditional, even
Brahmanical, but popular Buddhism seems to have accepted them and made them an
integral part of the Buddhist life and society. 23 At the time when there was intimate
contact of Maurya kings and court with the Hellenistic East, which had an influence in the
Indian art. 24 Maurya art was essentially the court art representing the imperial ideology
and popular elements were not taken into consideration. Niharajan Ray has opined that
Maurya court art is individualistic and symbolic in its essential character and ideology. 25

20 Susan Huntington, op. cit., p. xxvi.
21 Jas Burgess, Buddhist Art in India, Translated from the ‘Handbuch’ of Prof. Albert Grunwedel by A.
22 Stella Kramrisch, op. cit., p. 10.
24 Niharajan Ray, Maurya and Post-Maurya Art, pp. 11-13; Anand K. Coomaraswamy, History
of Indian and Indonesian Art, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1972, p. 17
There was a revival of popular elements in both religion and art with the disintegration of the Maurya Empire. The art of the Buddhist monuments in Barhut and Sanchi shows strong links with the tribal and village cults of the yakṣa, nāga and tree spirits; the Buddhist art had to compromise with the folk-beliefs as without that no progress was possible. The Bharhut rail is the most interesting monument in India from an historical point of view and is especially important for the study of Indian sculpture as it shows the degree of technical development the fine arts in India had reached. Thus in contrast to the individualistic preferences of the Maurya ruler, in the post–Maurya art there was representation of the collective tastes of the people; The narrative character of the post–Maurya art stands in contrast to the symbolic as well as dignified and aristocratic art of the Maurya.

There was fundamental shift in attitude within Buddhism which reflected in the form and content of Buddhist art during the second century CE. New ideas and ideals were incorporated in the Buddhist ideology as a result of their contacts with other people, culture and religion. The control of saṅgha on the agricultural and commercial communities became stronger and this resulted in coming of donations as well as intermingling of new ideas and elements in the monastic establishment.

During the early centuries of the Christian era Mathurā and Gandhāra became an important and flourishing centre of the Buddhist art. The Buddha was represented in the Gandhāra and the Mathurā art in the anthropomorphic form. Buddha images

---

became common by the second century CE and changed the course of narrative art in India. And this change of the Buddha image from ‘aniconic’ to the ‘iconic’ phase in the Buddhist art has been one of the most contentious issues in Indian art history. These two schools are the major representatives of the contemporary art but along with them art tradition also flourished in at number of places like Amravati, Nagarjunakonda and Goli.

The consequent phase in the history of Indian art is the period of the Gupta dynasty dated c. 320–467 CE. The Gupta period was marked by impressive literary works in Sanskrit and the high quality art, which coincided with what was viewed as a brahmanical ‘renaissance’. The characteristic of the art of this period is its classical quality. According to Coomaraswamy, the formulae of Indian taste were definitely crystallised and universally accepted; iconographic types, and compositions, still variable in the Kuṣāna period were standardised in forms whose influence extended far beyond the Ganga valley. The sculpture of this period is mainly Buddhist and Brahmanical, with Jain works being few and less artistic interest. In this phase the main interest was in human form and both the Buddhist and Hindu images were at its best; the emergence of the Buddha figure as well as the Brahmanical revival during the Gupta period found its expression in the sculptures of Brahmanical divinities. Temple architecture and sculptures adorning the architecture were significant during this period.


Ibid., p. 20.
Indian sculpture in its maturity during the fourth to eighth centuries is the concrete form of gods according to Kramrisch, a realisation by perceptible means of their casual bodies and active presence. By the fifth century the school of Sārnāth had improve on Mathurā in the art of making Buddhist images; it established the features of the Buddha with refinement of clear-cut shapes and merging planes. The sculptures attained refinement and ‘classical’ quality at Sārnāth and Mathurā.36 By the sixth century these features had become stereotyped.37 In the late sixth century CE the centre of art activity in India shifted from north central India, the heart of the Gupta empire, to southern India.38 And the history of Northern Indian sculpture from the sixth to the ninth century CE is one of the most obscure periods in the knowledge of Indian art.39

**Representations of the body**

The developments in the art forms and their socio-cultural and political significance also assume the form of dominance of culture, ideologies and power. And the means of materialisation of ideologies like ceremonial events, symbolic objects, public monuments and writing systems, take innumerable forms.40 Geertz have stated that the concept of culture denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.41 He adds a new aspect to the study of art, culture and religion. He emphasises on religion as a cultural system and in order to

---

36 Devangana Desai, op. cit., p. 13.
37 Stella Kramrisch, op. cit. p. 34.
38 Devangana Desai, op. cit., p. 15.
39 Pramod Chandra, op. cit., p. 23.
understand it he suggests not to abandon the established traditions of social
anthropology in this field, but to widen them.\footnote{Ibid., p. 88.} According to him –

Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of
life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing
sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other.\footnote{Ibid., p. 90.}

He further states religion as a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful,
pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating
conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such
an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.\footnote{Ibid.}

Ananda Coomaraswamy has stated that the early Buddhist art is strictly
hedonistic. Just as little as early Buddhism dreamed of an expression of its
characteristic ideas through poetry, drama, or music, so little was it imagined that the
arts of sculpture and painting could be anything but worldly in their purpose and
effect. The arts were looked upon as physical luxuries, and loveliness as a snare.\footnote{Ananda Coomaraswamy, ‘Buddhist Primitives’, The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs, Vol. 28, No. 154, 1916, p. 151.} He
quotes Cullavagga, where it is stated that, ‘Beauty is nothing to me’, says the “Dasa
Dhamma Sutta”, ‘neither the beauty of the body nor that that comes of dress’. The
Brethren were forbidden to allow the figures of men and women to be painted on
monastery walls, and were permitted only representations of wreaths and creepers.\footnote{Ibid.; Also see Cullavagga, VI. 3. 2.}

The psychological foundation of this attitude is nowhere more clearly revealed
than in a passage of the Visuddhi Magga, where it is found that painters, musicians,
perfumers, cooks, and elixir-prescribing physicians are all classed together as
purveyors of sensuous luxuries, whom others honour “on account of love and devotion to the sensations excited by forms and other objects of sense”. This is the characteristic Hinayana position throughout, and it is, of course, conspicuous also in the Jaina system, and in certain phases of Brahmanical thought, particularly in the period contemporary with early Buddhism. It is only in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C. that we find the Buddhists patronizing craftsmen and employing art for edifying ends. From what has just been said, however, it will be well understood that there had not at this time come into being any truly Buddhist or Brahmanical idealistic art; and thus ‘Early Buddhist’ art was necessarily the popular Brahmanical art and animistic art of the day, adapted to Buddhist requirements.47

Accordingly, it is seen that women in Indic poetry, as in sculpture and painting, are invariably young and beautiful. As claimed by Vidya Dehejiya, like in the literature, the majority of women in the sculpture and painting who are treated alike as generic entities.48 The poetry read in the courts, the dramas performed for selective audiences, and the art admired by elite spectators were all transported into an idealised world where women and men, queens and kings, goddess and gods were all beautiful and nubile. Youth, beauty, and the ability to attract others translated into power and authority, whether in the earthly or in the divine sphere.49

Moreover these models developed in writing when the śilpa śāstras (art texts) were developed. The śilpa śāstras are often phrased to read as instructions for sculptors, painters, and architects; among the earliest extant is the ‘Chitra-sutra’ section of the sixth-century Viṣṇu-dharmottara-purāṇa. And it is certainly a matter

47 Ananda Coomaraswamy, op. cit., p. 151.
49 Ibid.
for debate whether the texts or the art came first; it is quite likely that the texts drew on the artistic corpus. According to Dehejiya, some of them must have served as artists’ manuals, particularly in the hereditary guild and workshop tradition in which craftsmen took up sculpture or painting, not because they had particular talent in that direction but because it was the traditional family profession. The art texts seemingly parallel the poetic tropes in proposing models for sculptors to follow in their creation of the human physique.  

One of the visual representations of the body is sculpture, a plastic art, where an idea is translated into an appropriate form on a given material by the sculptor. It is generally divided into two categories, viz. the free-standing sculpture in which the figure exists independently in three-dimensional volume and there is also relief sculpture in which figures are carved against a background. And in the present work the attention will be on the plethora of terracotta and stone sculptures representing the different body forms. As it is seen over the centuries, the sensuous bodily form, female and male, human and divine, has been a dominant feature in the artistic tradition of India. And in addition, Vidya Dehejia observes that the human figure – complete, elegant, adorned, and eye-catching – was, indeed, the leitmotif. Seema Bawa has covered the period from 181 BCE – 320 CE as it was from this period onwards that a systematic and large body of art is found and it was a phase of great turmoil and flux in the socio-cultural, politico-economic and religious spheres, giving rise to a number of contesting ideologies and gender complexities. Moreover the period is that of development of engendered representation in art, with the creation of

50 Ibid., pp. 29-30.
51 K. Sundaram, op. cit., pp. 3-4.
52 Vidya Dehejia, op. cit., p. 1.
both aesthetic and sexual archetypes and stereotypes – of various categories of women recovered from art and texts of females, of mothers, wives, nuns and prostitutes, semi-divine yakṣīs and ogresses and temptresses.\textsuperscript{54} In the artistic history of India the sensuous female figure, often provocatively poised and frequently presented in three-dimensional sculpture, is a persistent theme.\textsuperscript{55}

The earliest depiction of such a female is that of the semi-divine yakṣī. The semi-divine yakṣas and yakṣīs may be represented by independent cult images, or in connection with other sectarian systems as attendants, guardians and worshippers.\textsuperscript{56} The pillars and crossbars portray yakṣīs dressed in most sumptuous costumes of the second century BCE.\textsuperscript{57} In the art of Barhut, that preceded the Mathurā art by about 200 years, the yakṣīs represented cultic characteristics in their solemn poses and typical hand gestures, which is not present in the voluptuous female figures of Mathurā and they suggest secularisation of the original deities.\textsuperscript{58} The woman and tree motif, characteristic of Indian art, appeared on the reliefs on pillars of gateway and railings at Barhut, Bodhgayā, Sāñcī and Mathurā; and the sculptures of the female figures associated with the trees are voluptuous beauties, scantily clothed, and almost nude, but always provided with the broad jewelled belt. According to Coomaraswamy, from these types of yakṣī dryads are derived three types iconographically the same, but differently interpreted the Buddha Nativity, the aśoka-tree dohada motif in classical literature, and the so-called river-goddesses of medieval shrines.\textsuperscript{59} The nude figure originated in the nature deities, the yakṣīs, the bearers of

\begin{flushleft} \textsuperscript{54} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{56} Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, \textit{Yakṣas}, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1971, pp. 28-29. \\
\textsuperscript{57} Moti Chandra, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 12. \\
\textsuperscript{58} Devangana Desai, \textit{Erotic Sculptures of India: A Socio-Cultural Study}, Tata Mcgraw Hill, New Delhi, 1975, p. 23. \\
\textsuperscript{59} Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, \textit{Yakṣas}, pp. 32-36. \end{flushleft}
fertility magic in India and the literary trope of trees needing the touch of a nubile girl to blossom connects sexuality with auspiciousness. Although, as Mitter observes, sculpture moved beyond fertility, creating a feminine ideal that acted as an arbitrator between literature and art.  

60 Regarding the explicit erotic nature of the *yakṣīs* or nature spirit, 61 Dehejia explains that the sensuous female figures including those carved against Barhut railings were not intended for the viewing pleasure of men. The popular motif of a woman standing beneath a tree, leg wrapped around the trunk and one arm pulling its branches was meant to glorify women because it was believed that by their very touch they could cause a tree to blossom or bear fruit. This, according to Dehejia, is a manifestation of a positive attitude towards women as such imagery is likely to have sent out a positive message and been viewed by women as a powerful affirmation, and a sign of affirmative engenderment.62

One of the earliest and most prominent stone sculptures in India is a life-size female image from Dīdārgañj, carved from sandstone and polished to a glossy tan finish which has been assigned to the second century BCE. 63 There has been a controversy regarding the dating of the sculpture to the Maurya period. The sculpture is of a perfect poise, voluptuous figure wearing a long skirt, held by a jewelled hip-belt (*mekhela*), and its inner folds fall in a series of looped folds between her legs, while the heavily pleated outer end drapes across her back and adorned with jewelled

---

60 Partha Mitter, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
61 Ibid., p. 18.
headband, gem-set hair ornaments, heavy earrings, a choker, a long necklace with a pendant, rows of bangles, armlets, and heavy, chunky anklets. The figure also holds a chowri, a fly whisk in one hand. Additionally, it is fascinating to note that this female chowri-bearer has been identified by scholars as a yakṣī and as a gaṇikā as well.

While Coomaraswamy and F. Asher and W. Spink have simply described the sculpture as the female chowri-bearer, scholars like Niharranjan Ray, G.S. Bhadouria, and Moti Chandra has branded her as the Dīdārgaṅj yakṣī. On the other hand scholars Doris M. Srinivasan and Vidya Dehejia have recognized the figure as a gaṇikā. Srinivasan suggests that, the female image from Dīdārgaṅj, represents an image of a royal gaṇikā, carved in the environs of the Mauryan capital; the sculpture is imbued with the characteristics that mark her as a gaṇikā, possibly the chief gaṇikā or the prati-gaṇikā attached to the imperial court. She further states that the label as the Dīdārgaṅj yakṣī is probably because a yakṣī is a fertility figure and the female’s large globular breasts, tiny waist and broad hips are the typical attributes associated with the fecund female. F. Asher and W. Spink have pointed out that, yakṣī figures in early Indian art, for example at Bharhut, the sculptures bear identifying labels; there, however, the chowri is not an identifying attribute of a yakṣī. According to Dehejiya examination, the sculpture despite its size is not a divinity, since she holds an attendant’s chowri in one hand and could never have occupied the central place in any conceivable representation. She further posits that since the Indian system of artistic proportions dictates that a female figure, whether attendant or consort, be of

---

64 Vidya Dehejia, op. cit., p. 25.
68 G.S. Bhadouria, op. cit., p. 32.
69 Moti Chandra, op. cit., p. 12.
70 Doris M. Srinivasan, op. cit., p. 351.
71 Frederick Asher & Walter Spink, op. cit., p. 7, fn. 1.
significantly lesser height than the central image. In Srinivasan’s deduction, it seems almost inconceivable that one of the first life-size female statues in the history of Indian art should be an attendant. Interestingly, Pratapaditya Pal’s study has revealed the chowri-bearing goddess on the aśvamedha type of Samudragupta’s coin, and Dehejia has suggested the association of the chowri-bearing attendants with royalty. And eventually Srinivasan as well as Dehejia raises the possibility of the sculpture being a figure of a ganikā, a highly placed royal courtesan whose prerogative it was to stand by the monarch at the court and hold the fly-whisk, the chowri, as prescribed in the Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya. Srinivasan in order to prove her observations have cited the scene that appears in a relief on the verandah of Buddhist vihāra XIX at Bhājā (Maharashtra). The male figure in the quadriga wears the large, elaborate turban also associated with royalty and the royal chatra is held above his head by female on his right who stands to his side on the chariot with another maiden prominently holding the vyajana, or fly-whisk to his left. The resemblance to Arthasāstras description of a royal personage, the king in his chariot flanked by his ganikā and pratigānikā, each holding a symbol of royalty mentioned in the text has been highlighted by the scholar. The Dīdārgañj figure may be the earliest sculpture of ganikā glorified in ancient Indian art according to Srinivasan.

The sensuous female figure in the Indian sculpture is furthermore visible in the erotic motifs of the mithuna representations and here the focus for the most part will be on the secular sculptures. It is interesting to note that there is range of

72 Vidya Dehejia, op. cit., p. 27.
73 Doris M. Srinivasan, op. cit., p. 352.
75 Vidya Dehejia, op. cit., p. 27.
76 Ibid., p. 28; Doris M. Srinivasan, op. cit., p. 356.
77 Ibid., pp. 356-357.
78 Ibid., p. 361.
representation of woman as wives and female partners with a multitude of meanings instead of the glorified portrayal of the devoted and ideal wife in the early Indian art. These comprised the depiction of wives/female partners forming one half of divine couples with overtones of fertility; devotee couples; mithunas denoting propitious/apotropaic elements; or erotic mithunas connected with fertility and sexuality.\textsuperscript{79}

The mithuna is the ubiquitous symbol found in the art dated to the Śuṅga-Kuśāṇa-Sātavāhana period.\textsuperscript{80} Representations of mithuna, maithuna and the erotic group as suggested by Devangana Desai were the elementary erotic motif, where the word mithuna means a couple who may or may not be involved in a erotic relationship and on the other hand maithuna stand for coitus, indicating a couple in coitus; the expression ‘erotic group’ has been used for scenes which depicts more than two people in erotic activity.\textsuperscript{81} These erotic groups, theoretically, are of innumerable possible types and out of the basic types found in the Indian sculptures are a type where one man is seen with two women, which is the natural way of depicting a polygynous husband with two wives, another type where one woman is seen with two men, which most possibly suggest non-marital relationship, probably with a gaṇikā or a devadāsī and the type which depicts a copulating couple being helped by a male, female or eunuch attendant or attendants.\textsuperscript{82}

The secular sexual representations were offered in terracottas, with poetic and nāgaraka touches, fulfilling the demands of sensuous public. Some of the terracottas symbolised the tastes of the nāgarakas and gaṇikās. The nāgarakas made use of the

\textsuperscript{79} Seema Bawa, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 203.
\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{81} Devangana Desai, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 7-8.
toys of clay, ivory, horn, wax, thread and wood to flatter young girls. Desai has referred the terracotta from Kauśāmbī, which depicts goṣṭhī of the nāgarakas and gaṇikās and states that pleasures in the garden (upavana) are portrayed on a large number of terracottas of Northern India and such art reflected the tastes of the cultured elites. While citing the sacred mithunas in a steatite plaque found in Rājgīr near Patna datable to c. 245-105 BCE where the panels represents wine-drinking/offering, Seema Bawa observes that, these scenes and other scenes from Mathurā art belonging to the Kuśāṇa period of women being offered wine by their male partner suggest that wine drinking could take place in a secular setting, in a normal social ritual and in religious-cult settings. It presents a social image of a sophisticated and mature society in relation to wine, in which it is used to ease social relations, including sexual relations, and as part of religious rites as well. On the contrary in the later periods, wine-drinking by women was associated with deviant behaviour of women who were regarded as sexually uncontrolled. Illustration can be taken of the art of post-Maurya period depiction such as the Vasantasenā series where the woman is shown being offered wine in one scene and kneeling over as if drunk in another seems to associate potentially negative side of wine-drinking with women – but not with men. The sculptors in any case would tend to portray the current fashions of the elite. The social ideology of the upper and middle class patrons and donors is visible in the sort of urban sophistication and delicate tastefulness that are unmistakable in the post-Mauryan terracottas or in the consciously languorous attitudes, sensuous bhaṅgas and luxurious ornamentation of the yakṣīs of Barhut and Bodhgaya.

83 Ibid., pp. 16-17.
84 Ibid., p. 17.
86 Ibid., p. 206.
87 Devangana Desai, op. cit., p. 25.
The sculptural evidence of the gaṇikā representation has been very systematically documented by Seema Bawa, though there were other scholars who have interpreted the representations in earlier works. Bawa depicts two types of sculptures viz. a series of reliefs identified with the gaṇikā Vasantasenā, the protagonist of the plays Daridra Cārudatta and Mrčchakaṭika and narrative friezes depicting the gaṇikā Āmrapālī, making donation of the mango grove to the Buddhist saṁgha. The eleven representations of the series identified with Vasantasenā has been accepted by scholars as Sivaramamurti, T.S.Maxwell, Donald M. Stadtner and National Museum in its label and catalogue, though they are not identical but share similar representations and arrangement of figures.89

Out of the series of reliefs of the Vasantasenā scene, the most complete surviving representation is on the Maholi panel from Mathurā (Fig. 1 and 2), belonging to late second century CE, Kuṣāṇa period and made of red Sikri sandstone.90 First discovered and published by V.S. Agrawala as a bacchanalian (madhupāna),91 which C. Sivaramamurti identified with a gaṇikā stating that the obverse side of the scene is laid inside the veśavāsa or the gaṇikā establishment.92 The scene is of a woman kneeling, apparently drunk or overwrought, being supported on the right by a dwarf and on the left by a man of natural proportion. On the far right is another woman, less voluptuous than the central figure, standing against a pilaster.

89 Seema Bawa, op. cit., p. 272.
90 Ibid., pp. 268, 273.
91 V. S. Agrawala, "A New Bodhisattva and a Bacchanalian Group from Mathura ", Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, Vol. 6, 1938, pp. 70-72; The most spectacular sculptural forms of the bacchanalian image occur on Mathuran double- sided relief blocks, of which the so-called Stacy Silenus and Palikhera block are the best known examples. Colonel L. R. Stacy was the first to identify these bacchanalian representations and V. S. Agarwal states that the Maholi bacchanalian is an important addition to the Stacy Silenus and Palikhera block; Martha L. Carter, “Dionysiac Aspects of Kushān Art, Ars Orientalis, Vol. 7, 1968, p. 121; Seema Bawa, op. cit., p. 278.
92 C. Sivaramamurty, op. cit., p. 37; also see Devangana Desai, op. cit., p. 22.
with a bowl at top.\textsuperscript{93} Agrawala has interpreted the dwarf figure as a “girlish figure holding a drinking cup”,\textsuperscript{94} Sivaramamurti as a girl attendant offering wine to the woman\textsuperscript{95} and Desai, following Agrawala, studies as a small girl who holds a wine cup.\textsuperscript{96} And both Sivaramamurti and Desai have inferred the man as the central figures paramour or husband and the other woman as an old \textit{kuṭṭanī}.\textsuperscript{97} Agrawala almost similarly posits the male figure as the husband though identifies the other female figure as an attendant shown in the attitude of \textit{vismaya} or amazement, and is apparently a hermaphrodite as seen from her underdeveloped breasts, masculine shoulders and hips.\textsuperscript{98} However the interpretation of Agrawala has not been followed.

Before considering the bacchanalian interpretation it is important to note the alternate plausible scenes from the text \textit{Mrcchaṭika} for this particular portrayal demonstrated by Donald M. Stadtner and Mariela Álvarez. The kneeling figure, according to them, can be identified as Vasantasenā, resting on a bent knee. Though there is no scene of the play that fits this description perfectly, but fainting and recovery were a theatrical trick common in drama, for both men and women. Čārudatta, for example, faints when he discovers that a thief broke into his house and took the jewellery that had been entrusted by Vasantasenā for safe keeping. And in the next act, Vasantasenā similarly faints when she hears the thief telling about the robbery to her maid, who also passes out. Stadtner and Álvarez have deduced that perhaps the kneeling woman is the heroine in this scene who is assisted by household

\textsuperscript{93} Seema Bawa, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 273.
\textsuperscript{94} V. S. Agrawala, ‘A New Bodhisattva and a Bacchanalian Group from Mathura’, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{95} C. Sivaramamurty, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{96} Devangana Desai, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Ibid.}; C. Sivaramamurty, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{98} V. S. Agrawala, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 71.
servants to stand at her feet. The male figure possibly is the thief, who confesses theft in the same act, and the older woman to the right may be the mother of Vasantasenā.99

Another possibility is the scene in the play where Samsthanaka strangulates Vasantasenā in the garden and leaves her for dead but is revived by a recently converted Buddhist monk, who formerly a gambler was helped by the gaṇikā. The monk takes the gaṇikā to a bhikkhuṇī samgha, where she takes temporary refuse. The obverse of the Maholi panel may illustrate an unconscious Vasantasenā being supported by the monk, a śākyabхikkhu.100 It is the vulnerability faced by the gaṇikā and the help given to her is what constitutes the essence of this episode is captured in the visual composition of women ‘kneeling’.101 Bawa observes that it might have transmitted a didactic message through this representation – ‘that even a gaṇikā can be saved by faith and receive refuge in the faith, thus offering redemption to the wayward.’102

Further plausibility has been suggested by Stadtner and Álvarez by suggesting the climax scene of the play of the last act, when Vasantasena enters the execution to save Čārudatta and is wedded to him. She falls at the feet of Čārudatta exclaiming that it was due to her wretchedness that he was subject to the undeserved predicament.103 Perhaps the sculptors have represented the potential of Carudatta of helping his beloved to his feet as the text does not refer to it.104 Yet the dwarf and the cup held by the woman in the centre do not add up to this identification by the scholars.

---

100 Ibid., pp. 153-154; Seema Bawa, op. cit., p. 281.
101 Donald M. Stadtner and Mariela Álvarez, op. cit., p. 154.
102 Seema Bawa, op. cit., p. 281.
103 Mrccchakajika, X, p. 169.
104 Donald M. Stadtner and Mariela Álvarez, op. cit., p. 154.
And on the reverse side of the Maholi panel, there is a figure of a standing woman with a bend at the knees and waist so that the figure is balanced and moreover the sculpting of the body with the clothing and ornaments roughly represented the usual yakṣī figure of the period. The voluptuous woman is exhibited nude from above the waist, wearing a mekhalā and a profusion of necklace, earrings and the like. An unusual feature of the sculpture, in comparison to the other female figures of the period along with the one on the obverse side, is the anklets that were drawn up to her knees. The right arm of the figure is raised to touch the headdress, scarf (uttarīya) above the head. And the other figures in the scene were a small female figure, an attendant, holding up a parasol to the immediate right, and two men standing on the standing on the right of the attendant, with one only partially visible, while the other appears to be well dressed, interpreted as an aristocrat. On the reverse side as well Sivaramamurti has commented that the figure was a wealthy damsel moving away from a couple of youths which reminded of the scene from Mṛcchakaṭika where the gaṇikā Vasantasenā was chased by the villain Śakāra. The anklets were pulled up tight to avoid jingling and the upper garment was held fluttering about almost as if to cover the coiffure decked with flowers. Though in the scene represented in the play Vasantasenā removes the anklets and lays aside the garlands. The sculpture decorated an āchamana-kumbhī or a bowl containing water for washing the hands of worshippers as according to her the piece must have been place inside or at the entrance of the Buddhist shrine.

The Vasantasenā series has several other representations and Seema Bawa has given details of eleven such representations with the bacchanalian scene being

106 C. Sivaramamurty, op. cit., pp. 37-38; also Devangana Desai, op. cit., p. 22.
107 C. Sivaramamurty, op. cit., p. 37.
reproduced in several more or less similar representations. The second image also made of the red sandstone and belonging to the second century CE, had a slightly feature of the kneeling gaṇikā, with more rounded and downward looking face contrasting the straight one in the Maholi scene. The second female figure had wrinkles on the face and a finger raised to the lips probably in wonder or dismay. In this scene there are two additional partially hidden attendant women one on each side.109 (Fig. 3) While on the reverse is a row of three females of normal size and a fourth female of diminutive in stature and the figures holds some objects in their hands resembling the style of the yakṣīs of the vedikā pillar, with a mango tree laden with fruits carved behind the figures. Here as well in the middle is the pilaster, which ends at the top in a bowl.110

The third panel has the Maholi scene repeated on the reverse (Fig. 4) and on the obverse (Fig. 5) is depicted a scene four female figures with the central figure seated on a tall stool, right foot placed on a slab and left being held by a female attendant; the figure on the left is holding a covered dish and surāhī and the other figure on the right is holding a basket with a richly carved aśoka tree as the backdrop above which there are traces of a bowl.111 Desai refers to a vertical panel which seems to be the part of a Kuṣāṇa door-jamb of Mathurā has portrayals of gay women of palace enjoying madhupāna and music, and involved in prasādhana (toilet).112

The fourth panel, cited by Bawa has survived in fragmentary condition. The obverse is with a leg of a female figure without a torso, a kneeling attendant removing an anklet from this leg and two other figures with one standing with an unidentified

110 Ibid., p. 274.
111 Ibid., p. 274.
112 Devangana Desai, op. cit., p. 23.
object and the other not identifiable due to erosion; the scene has a backdrop of an aśoka tree. The reverse (Fig. 6) depicts two male standing figures with one very finely detailed and the other a partial figure standing or hiding behind the first one.\footnote{Seema Bawa, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 274.}

The fifth panel from Naroli in Mathurā (Fig. 7) and the sixth panel have similar scene of kneeling woman. On the other hand the seventh panel (Fig. 8) from the Kaṅkālī Ṭīlā, Mathurā contains the scene of a woman with raised anklets, covering her head with a \textit{dupatta} and depiction of two men, one hiding behind the other, is repeated. The scene has the same scene of the fleeing female figure but the panel has torches that the male figures hold, thus having the essential elements of the ‘fleeing woman’ representation type.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 275.} The eight one is from Sangol (Fig.9) on one of the panels in the \textit{vedika} pillar probably encircling a \textit{stūpa}. According to Seema Bawa these depiction can be placed within the \textit{śālabhañjikā-yakṣī} decoration scheme where the majority of other railing pillar reliefs depict female figures of the \textit{yakṣī} type in various poses. But so far it has been identified as a bacchanalian scene which depicts Kubera drinking in the company of his male and female companions or attendants; it is a version of the kneeling woman version with only the male figure supporting the female (Fig.10,11).\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 275.}

Moving to the ninth depiction, there is an interesting variation on the theme. On the obverse (Fig. 12) the central female figure is kneeling over and the arm over the attendant female on the left, another female figure on the far left in the \textit{tribhaṅga} posture and holding up an object on her left hand and finally on the right is a defaced male figure dressed in elaborate \textit{dhotī}, armlet and thick bracelet, holding the breasts of the central female figure.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 275-276.} On the reverse (Fig. 6) is a similar male figure found on the obverse holding both the
arms of the central female figure from behind and to her left is another female figure with the right-hand covering the mouth and the left holding a fan of a pān-like leaf; also a variance in the background which had two hanging tassels made of cloth rope or flowers.\footnote{Ibid., p. 276.}

Similar panels are found on the Begram ivory carvings resembling the kneeling woman with slight difference of left leg extended and right leg pulled under the central figure.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 276-277.} Other such depictions are from the Deccan area, Nasik Cave III, which also has an inscription of the Gautamiputra Sātakrṣṇi (CE 106-130). The five compartments in the door-jambs consisted of erotic motifs where one compartments depict a male figure carrying a female and another is a similar bacchanalian scene portraying a kneeling woman supported by a male figure. The Begram ivory panels’ depiction of two women with a child can be related to the Sixth Act of the play Mrčchakaṭika, where the maid of Carudatta brings his crying son Rohasena to Vasantasena. In the scene Vasantasena puts her ornaments on the clay cart of the child to console him.\footnote{Ibid., p. 283.} Among the various panels with this popular theme in Mathurā and other places is a panel where a child is shown near an amorous couple; the couples depicted were mildly amorous.\footnote{Devangana Desai, op. cit., p. 23.} The kneeling woman scene has also been discovered in terracotta belonging to the Gupta period.\footnote{Seema Bawa, op. cit., p. 277.}

While examining the representation of the ganikā it is seen that the most significant figure among the ganikās who also was a prominent patron of Buddhism, Amrapālī, has been very rarely depicted in the early Buddhist art. There has been a very few depiction of the ganikā’s gift of the mango grove to the Buddhist order,
which on the other hand has been a very significant event in the Buddhist literature. A relief from the Sīkrī stūpa in Gandhāra is one of the rare examples. The female figure on the left pouring water to signify the ratification of a gift, as remarked by Vidya Dehejia, indicates that the donation of the mango grove is the subject of the relief.\(^{122}\) However the date is not mentioned and according to Seema Bawa it appears to be a post Kuśāna art of Mathurā.\(^{123}\) There are two panels in the Gāndhāran tradition which is datable to the third century CE and one of them give an unambiguous representation of a female on the left of Buddha with a water vessel in the hand.\(^{124}\)

Gender constructs in the society are firmly rooted in such visual representations and Seema Bawa has identified interesting gender portrayal in the sculptural series of the play Mrčchakaṭika. She has noted that the sculptor/creator/designer made a choice from his skills in order to depict a gaṇikā figure and a model through which a gaṇikā could be visually interpreted. In terms of physical features, the gaṇikā has been represented as the usual youthful woman with ample hips, large breasts and slender waist, richly ornamented and not any different from the imagined and codified beings such as the šālabhaṅjikās, yakṣīs and the performers of aśoka dohada. It has also been brought to notice that unlike the yakṣīs, who were sculpted as single figures, the gaṇikās were seen with an ensemble of figures which provided the reliefs with an internal context meant to depict some well-known story which may well have been that of Mrčchakaṭika. The centrality of the figure in the kneeling woman type narrative is further noted by the gaze of the other


\(^{123}\) Seema Bawa, *op. cit.*, pp. 278.

figures, accept the old woman, that is concentrated on her; the figure itself does not look at the viewer.\textsuperscript{125}

Furthermore, considering the bacchanalian element in the portrayal of the intoxicated woman, it strengthens the image of the evils connected with the material world and especially the attachment to loose women, a woman who in the patriarchal setup did not match with the image of \textit{kulastrī}. The bacchanalian aspect in the panels showing the overwrought and uncontrolled lolling of the main female figure may be the reminder of the viewer to the negative consequences of transgressing the conventional female behavioural pattern.\textsuperscript{126} The \textit{Vasantasenā} series shows the ambiguous position of women in society and art. On one hand the very choice of subject has important gender indicators that highlight the ideal gender roles and the transgression of it and on the other hand the wealth and status associated with the \textit{gaṇikās} is reinforced in such a depiction through her entourage of dependants and admirers. And even if the depiction is not conceded with that of an episode from \textit{Mṛcchkaṭika}, it has to be admitted that the woman figure is central to the composition and is accompanied by clearly subservient men who helped and supported her.\textsuperscript{127}

The \textit{gaṇikā} \textit{Vasantasenā} with the ensemble of figures, taking the Maholi panel for instance, depicts the centrality of the woman in the so-called bacchanalian scene as well as the fleeing scene. And the figure as well as the character has its own gender identity. The male characters as well as the other female characters received recognition in reference to the \textit{gaṇikā}. The representation of the fleeing scene in

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{125} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 283.
\item \textsuperscript{126} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 294.
\item \textsuperscript{127} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
addition reveals the anxiety of the gaṇikā towards a despicable follower who thought had the liberty to pursue a gaṇikā as she was a public woman.ⁱ²⁸

Thus in the art as well gaṇikā tradition was reflected and scholars are of view that the ornamented and decorated representations of the female figurines are mostly inspired by the living style of the gaṇikās. The representations of the female figures required some models/replicas which in the urban and royal culture were forwarded in the form of gaṇikās who were the public women and could be reproduced in the sculptures. The voluptuous female figurines with splendid ornaments, draperies and poises that were represented in the early Indian art had to be of these public women, most likely the gaṇikās, as patriarchal norms did not favour the representation of queens or wives in such a sensuous way. Thus this chapter has attempted to locate the tradition through the art remains and these representations have suggested the extravagant life style and ornamentation which was the peculiar characteristic of this tradition and for maintaining such a pomp life they were naturally needing wealth and proper management of household as well as clients which will be the point of discussion in the next chapter.

ⁱ²⁸ The figures are provided in pp. 131-133 of this work.
Fig. 1 Kneeling woman supported by two male companions and a diminutive attendant, reverse of a double-sided panel depicting scenes from *Mrčhakaṭika*, Kuśāna, red sandstone, late second century CE, Maholi, Mathurā.

Fig. 2 Woman fleeing *chatradhārīṇī* and two males obverse of a double sided panel depicting scenes from *Mrčhakaṭika*, Kuśāna, red sandstone, late second century CE, Maholi, Mathurā.

Fig. 3 Kneeling woman supported by two male companions and diminutive attendant, red Sikri stone, second century CE, Mathurā.

Fig. 4 Woman covering her head and wearing upraised anklets, a *chatradhārīṇī* and two males, red Sikri stone, second century CE, Kuṣāṇa.
Fig. 5
A group of four women, one seated in the middle with upraised anklets being removed, red Sikri stone, second century CE, Kuṣāṇa.

Fig. 6
Male holding the arms of female in a constraining manner, with female attendants, tasselled curtain in background, reverse of a double sided panel, red Sikri stone, second century CE, Kuṣāṇa, Doris Weiner Collection.

Fig. 7
Kneeling woman supported by two male companions and a diminutive attendant, red Sikri stone, first-second century CE, Mathurā, Indian Museum Calcutta.

Fig. 8
Woman covering her hair and with raised anklets, a *chatradhāriṇī* and two males, first-second century, Kanākāli Ṭīla, Mathurā
Fig. 9 Kneeling woman being held by male companion second century CE, Kuśāṇa, Sanghol, Punjab.
Fig. 10 Corpulent man, perhaps Kubera, drinking from a cup with attendants, second century CE, Palikherā, Mathurā, GMM.

Fig. 11 Reverse of fig. 10, with drunken man being assisted by companion.
Fig. 12 Male embracing the female figure intimately, with female companions, obverse of a double-sided panel, red Sikri stone, second century CE, Kuśāṇa, Doris Weiner Collection.

The figures 1 and 2 is the courtesy of Google images and the description provided is cited from Seema Bawa op. cit. The figures and description from 3 to 12 are cited from Seema Bawa, op. cit.

129 https://www.google.co.in/search?q=maholi+panel
https://www.google.co.in/search?q=maholi+panel