

Iconography, Worship, Lexicology, and Soteriology in Matrika Tradition

Dr Sumitar Singh Walia

Associate Professor, Dept of English

DAV College, Sector 10, Chandigarh

1. Introduction

Matrikas are collective set of female / mother deities varyingly interpreted as five, sixteen, fifty-one, or sixty-four in number. Tantrik and Pauranic reference to Matrikas may be found in *Matrika Shakti Vilas*, *Durga Saptashati*, *Devi Bhagvatam*, *Shiv Mahapurana*, *Kurma Purana*, *Markandeya Puran*, *Varaha Purana*, *Matysa Purana*, *Mahabharat*, *Vamana Purana*. These texts venerate Matrikas or *Deva Shaktis* (powers of the gods) as group of seven (*saptamatrika*) or eight (*ashtamatrika*), ten (*dashmatrika*), sixteen (*shodashmatrika*). In the form of Sanskrit alphabet *Devanagri*, they become fifty-one. When they overlap in iconography with *chaunsath yoginis*, they are worshipped in sixty-four different and yet related *vigrahas* - specific iconographic forms with specific attributes.

In Trikha tradition numerous references to Matrika may be discovered in *Vigyan Bhairav*, *Shiv Sutras*, *Shiv Drishti*, *Malini Vijayottara Tantra*, *Netra Tantra* etc. often, however, Matrikas are confused and / or correlated with other female entities or demigoddesses like Yoginis or *Krittikas*. Sometimes the attributes of these different deities may appear similar, if not identical. Matrikas are perceived varyingly as consorts of various male deities, and / or as companion deities of *Adi Shakti*.

In many *sthalapuranas*, Matrikas are considered as having a mixed character - both benefic and malefic. Many wisdom traditions in the Indian subcontinent view them as

divinities that are quick to answer prayers. They get benefic and benevolent when appeased with scriptural injunctions. Whatever scripture, tradition, iconography, number or *vighraha* one may choose to analyse or worship, Matrikas are to be worshipped for *siddhi* (supernatural powers / accomplishments) *bhukti* (worldly pleasures) and *mukti* (liberation).

2. Iconography and Attributes

Though the number, forms, and *vighrahas* of the Matrikas may vary in different regions of India, yet some recurring and common list of matrikas are: (a) *shodashmatrikas* (b) *ashtamatrikas*

- (a) 1) Gauri 2) Padma (3) Shachi (4) Medha (5) Savitri (6) Vijaya (7) Jaya (8) Devasena (9) Swadha (10) Swaaha (11) Maatri (12) LokaMaatri (13) Dhriti (14) Pushti (15) Tushti (16) Aatmanah



These sixteen Maatrikas are of vedic origin. Alongwith Lord Ganapati, they are worshipped in every Hindu household during all benefic rituals. Normally, *Shodashopchaara* puja is adopted to appease them. Sometimes, Devi-Atharvashirsha is also chanted during ShodashMaatrika puja ceremonies.

- (b) *Ashtamatrikas*: *Ashtamatrikas* are both pauranic, tantric and, sometimes, localized deities. However, the names, forms, and attributes of *Ashtamatrikas* might vary as per their association with their respective sects, sub-sects, *shastra*, *parampara*, and other related belief systems. Nevertheless, they are all considered to be the forms of canonical and prototypical ashtamatrikas – which in turn are all different aspects and are very closely aligned with the will of the supreme Goddess Adi Shakti:

- (i) Brahmani: Considered *Brahma's* consort, yellow-hued, riding a *Hamsa*, four-faced / headed, having four hands carrying *akshamala*, *kalash*, *abhaya mudra* and *varad mudra*, Brahmi or Brahmani denotes wisdom, knowledge, and purity.
- (ii) Maheshwari: Considered *Maheshwar's* consort, white-hued, carrying a *trishul* having crescent moon and untied hair, as ornaments, riding a bull, *Maheshwari* embodies the ability to create and preserve.
- (iii) Kaumari: Considered to be the consort of *Kartikeya*, riding a peacock, having one / six faces and two/twelve arms, Kaumari embodies and symbolizes one-pointedness, fearlessness, courage, bravery and protective forces.
- (iv) Vaishnavi: Considered a consort of Vishnu, dark-hued, having *shankha*, *chakra*, *gada*, *kamal*, in her four hands, *Garuda* as her vehicle, donning yellow clothes, and *vaijyantimala*, *Vaishnavi* is a personification of grit, determination, *dharma* and *bhakti*.
- (v) Vaaraahi: Considered to be the consort of VaaraahNarayan, dark-hued, Vaaraahi has a wild boar's head and human body, Vaaraahi is the power of sublimation, transformation and an ability to overcome obstacles.
- (vi) Indrani / Aindri: Is considered to be the consort of Devraj Indra, red and golden-hued, having a thousand eyes denoting omniscience, riding an elephant, carrying a thunderbolt, *ankush*, *varad mudra*, *abhaya mudra*. Indrani represents royalty, an ability to lead, strength and victory.
- (vii) Chamunda: Interpreted varyingly as a form of Kali, a consort of *Chandeshwar* or *Yama*, having sagging breasts, sunken-eyes, sunken belly, a mere skeletal body, wearing *mrigadhisha-chaal* (skin of a dead lion/tiger), wearing *kapaal-*

mala and carrying *kapal-patra*, Chamunda embodies destruction of established norms and / or any human tendency hindering human liberation.

- (viii) Naarshimhi: Considered to be the consort of *Narasimha*, half-human, half-lioness, Naarsimhi is an embodiment of divine retribution and protection from malevolent, diabolic forces, aspects, and tendencies.

3. *Maatrika-Pujanam: Rites and Rituals*

The worship of *Matrikas* has been a pan-Indian sub-continent phenomenon. This is easily discernable when one observes the pan-India existence of temples and shrines dedicated to *Maatrikas*.

Maatrika-pujanam or the rites and rituals of worship may range from chanting of mantras / hymns, meditation on their forms and attributes, and forbidden esoteric mystical rites involving meat, alcohol, coitus, fish, and mudra. The intent behind this again ranges from seeking worldly favours, to removal of obstacles in growth and evolution, to appeasing the Goddesses, seeking the highest stages of human consciousness, to liberation. During *Navraatri*, *Mahavidya Jayantis*, *Shivaratri*, *Janamashtami*, *Holi*, *Deepawali* and some specific dates as per the Hindu almanac, they are worshipped with a special zeal and fervor.

4. *Matrika and Indian Philosophy of Language*

Matrikas, when they are considered fifty-one in number, come to represent Devanagari. The sixteen vowels and thirty-six consonants of the script of, Hindi, Marathi, Nepali, Prakrit, and Sanskrit languages are known as *Matrika* in Indian philosophies of languages. *Matrikas* or Devanagari script, seen this way, acquires a creative fervor.

Quantum physics, today, has recognized that the whole vast gamut of existence is vibratory consciousness. Same has been referred by Somananda as *spanda*. Likewise,

Indian philosophy of language – particularly *Trikha* – maintains that through various alphabets the highest reality / pure consciousness / *ParamSamvid* / *ParamShiv* descends into the world of name, forms, and attributes. Indian philologists from Matsyendranath, Panini, Bhritihari, Somanada, Kshemaraj to Abhinavgupta have repeatedly endorsed this in their corpus. *Paravac* encompasses the essence of all the scriptures – *Agam* and *Nigam* - in the subtlest and causal form. *Paravac* / Logos manifests and descends into the physical form as units of speech, sentences / phrases / words / syllables / vocables / morphemes / phonemes. Similar concepts – *Sphota*, *Nada*, *Nadant*, *Bija*, *Bindu*, *MahaBindu* have been delineated at length in the *Upanishads*, *Tantras* and works of grammarians like Bhritihari and Panini.

Somanada differentiates *Trikha* from Vedanta philosophy by one attribute – *vimarsha*. The highest principle of existence *ParamShiv* / *Bhairava* is conscious of its divinity, its non-duality. This consciousness it carries from the highest of the thirty-six tattvas – i.e., *Shiv* to the grossest – *prithvi*.

Shiv acquires the cloak of a bonded *Jiva* / *pashu*. *Jivatma* gets *abhijna* (forgetful) of his inherent *Shivatwa*. Matrika – the inherent group of deities of the sounds denoted by *Devanagri* script is consequential for this forgetfulness. Paradoxically, it also can enable *pratyabhijna* (recognition) of one's real self – *Shivatwa*. Therefore, the group of deities inherent in Matrika are different attributes of *Swatantraya Shakti* of *Shiv* / *Swachanda Bhairav*. It is believed in *Trikha* that *ParamShiv* / *Swachchanda Bhairav* remains established in his Supreme Self through *Swatantraya Shakti*. Concurrently and ironically, the *jiva* remains ensnared in his limited self, in dualistic world of time, space and objects, unaware of his *Shivatwa* through the interplay of names and forms - denoted by Matrikas. Such an interplay of the sound forms of Matrikas triggered waves and oceans of duality and energies from the absolute non-duality. So, in tune with their philological meaning the Matrikas have mothered this multiverse.

Hence, in direct contrast to the Saussurean, Barthesian, and Derridean semantic and semiotic opinions on the arbitrariness of language, the *Trikha* viewpoint on language is of direct correlation and inextricable oneness. Matrikas are not just arbitrarily

representational arrangement of letters. Language is inseparable from the reality it describes and embodies. They are fifty-one divine attributes of *Adi Shakti*. Instead of being mere letters / alphabets / *varnas*, all fifty-one Matrikas (from a to ksha) are embodiments of particular facets of *ParaSamvid* / *AdiShakti* / Supreme Consciousness.

5. Matrikas in Trikha Shavism

The fourth aphorism in ShivSutra indicates that Matrikas are the cause of three kind of *malas* (impurities) – *anava*, *mayic* and *karmic*. Jayadev Singh observes that the Matrikas are divine feminine beings that not properly known and understood. Such ignorance of the divine Goddess aspect of Matrikas is the reason of bondage, devolution, and degeneration of the *jivas*. However, when known appropriately they propel such bonded souls to liberation. Matrikas, thus, are the subtle and causal potency of sound that remain misunderstood, unrealized and inherent in the form of gross speech. Thus, unrealized they keep a *jiva* extroverted, enmeshed in words and their interplay of duality- name and form - far from his essential true self.

Together, following the scriptural injunctions, and after being revealed by a *Guru*, they manifest as a most potent force and elevate the consciousness of their practitioners. Thus, Matrikas release the sadhaka from the ensnares of duality of his consciousness and enable him to attain supreme level of Consciousness – known as *Shiv Samavesh* in *Trikha*.

6. Towards a Conclusion

Sages like Sri Aurobindo, Parmahans Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharishi, J Krishnamurti, Gita, Upanishads, and all shastras point to supreme consciousness / *ParaSamvid* / *Adi Shakti* as *chitti* as the ultimate deity to be adored, worshiped, and realized. *Vac* (Speech) is an eternally venerable offering of *chitti* towards human evolution.

Matrikas are incarnations of *Adi Shakti*, facets of the *Swantantraya Shakti* of *Swachchanda Bhairav*. They could be the creatrixes, preservers, guardians and subverters of the celestial order – the building blocks of the cosmos. They play complexly contrasted, nuanced and multifaceted role in the play and interplay of supreme

consciousness – obstructing, guiding, goading the journey of the *jivas* towards the supreme in the divine play.

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