

# From *Mātrgaṇa* to *Sapta Mātrkās*: Brahmanical Transfiguration of Autochthonous Goddesses

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## Abstract

From a close observation on various textual and archeological evidences, it is certain that heterogeneous autochthonous goddess(es) cults have been incorporated into the Brahmanical traditions from the end of Vedic period. However, it does not mean that the incorporation has accidentally occurred. It is rather a historical process of 'selective and conscious adoption' of various local cults and customs by the *brāhmaṇas*. This process, needless to say, has proceeded in various ways according to different regional contexts. A significant point is that the autochthonous elements were transfigured and given new connotations in different socio-religious context by means of the carefully constructed Brahmanical theology. In essentialist interpretation of goddess(es) cults, however, the consideration on historical transition and disjuncture were often submerged in the presupposition of phenomenological continuity.

Focusing on '*mātrkās* (mothers)', one of the representative groups of goddesses in South Asia, this paper will argue the process of the Brahmanical adoption and transfiguration of autochthonous goddesses. The period between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries A. D. witnessed a critical change of the characteristic, attribute, and role of the *mātrkās*. In most early references, they are described as a loosely-organized band of innumerable local goddesses, often called *mātrgaṇa* (a band of mothers), without clearly defined individual identity. Though they seem to have acquired their benevolent nature, so-called 'motherhood', in the process of their initial entry into the Brahmanical pantheon, they remained cruel, uncontrollable, and dangerous. From the 4<sup>th</sup> century A. D., the *mātrkās* began to

appear as a distinctive cluster. Their names, numbers and iconographical features were gradually standardized following those of male deities, but not yet crystallized. During the early medieval periods, especially from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the Brahmanical transfiguration of the group seems to have been completed. The seven goddesses emanated from male deities are considered to be the fixed members of the *sapta mātrkās*. The artificial grouping of the seven goddesses was perhaps a conscious attempt to reformulate the *mātrkās*, from the loosely-clustered feminine divinities with ambiguous nature and autochthonous background to the distinctive group of warrior goddesses closely associated with male gods in the Brahmanical pantheon.

### I. Various Groups of Ambiguous Goddesses

By the end of the Vedic period, due to the coexistence of Vedic and non-Vedic forms of religion for a long time, an incipient interaction between two must have begun and some non-Vedic goddesses inevitably found their way into Sanskrit written records. Yet, the presence of these goddesses in the Vedic corpus was marginal, and they lacked the religious intensity witnessed in the tribal cults or in later Puranic literature. The first unmistakable attempt to incorporate a non-Vedic goddess in all her essentials within the Brahmanical fold was made in the *Mahābhārata* [MBH] and the *Harivaṃśa* [HV]<sup>(1)</sup>. The Śalyaparvan of the MBH gives an account of a huge group of feminine divinities called the '*mātrgaṇa* (a band of mothers)', who came to the aid of Skanda (Kumāra, Kārttikeya, Guha). It lists names of a large number of *mātrkās*, in all about one hundred and ninety<sup>(2)</sup>. This account may be one of the most important

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1 Chakrabarti 2001, p. 169. ; Although some scholars have sought to demonstrate that the *mātrkās* are known in the Vedic literatures (See Tiwari 1985, pp. 215-244 and Coburn 1984, pp. 316-317) the earliest clear description of group of goddesses known as the *mātrkās* appears in the MBH.

2 MBH, Śalyaparvan, 45. 3-29.

pre-Puranic references to the various local and non-Vedic goddesses who were gradually assimilated into the Brahmanical traditions. The band of mothers is described as follows:

“These and many other *mātrkās*... numbering by the thousands, of diverse forms, became the followers of Kārttikeya. Their nails were long, their teeth were large and their lips were protruding. Of straight forms and sweet features, all of them, endowed with youth, were decked with ornaments. Possessed of ascetic merit, they were capable of assuming any form at will. Not having much flesh on their limbs, they were dark and looked like clouds in hue, and some were of the colour of smoke. And some were imbued with the splendour of the morning sun and were highly blessed. Possessed of long tresses, they were clad in robes of white. The braids of some were tied upwards, and the eyes of some were tawny, and some had girdles that were very long. Some had long stomachs, some had long ears, and some had long breasts. Some had coppery eyes and coppery complexions, and the eyes of some were green. Possessed of great strength, some amongst them partook of the nature of Yama, some of Rudra, some of Soma, some of Kubera, some of Varuṇa, some of Indra and some of Agni. And some partook of the nature of Vāyu, some of Kumāra, some of Brahman, and some of Viṣṇu and some of Sūrya, and some of Varāha. Of charming and delightful features, they are beautiful like Apasaras. In voice they resembled the *kokila* and in prosperity they resembled the Lord of Treasures. In battle, their energy resembled that of Śakra. In splendour they resembled fire. In battle, they always inspired their foes with terror. Capable of assuming any form at will, in fleetness they resembled the wind. Of inconceivable might and energy, their prowess also was inconceivable. They have their abode on trees, open spots and crossings of four roads. They live also in caves, crematoriums, mountains and springs. Adorned in diverse kinds of ornaments, they wear diverse kinds of attire and speak diverse languages. These and many other groups [of mothers], all capable of inspiring foes with dread, followed Kārttikeya at the command of the chief of the celestials.”<sup>(3)</sup>

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3 *MBH*, Śalyaparvan, 45. 29-40a.

In this account, the *mātrkās* are described as highly ambivalent beings: they are very delightful, but for enemies they are terrifying. The facts that they reside in the peripheral places such as trees, caves, mountains, crossroads, and cremation grounds and speak diverse languages (*nānābhāṣā*)<sup>(4)</sup> imply their probable association with non-Vedic traditions<sup>(5)</sup>. The area beyond a sedentary society, that is the realm of autochthonous people, has been closely and continuously associated with various kinds of feminine divinities and their mysterious power. For instance, the *HV* mentions that Mahādevī Durgā dwells on the summits of mountains, terrible places, rivers, caves, forests and groves. She is said to have several forms and names in which she is worshipped in different parts of India by the Śavaras, Varvaras, Pulindas and the other tribes<sup>(6)</sup>.

Furthermore, the long list of the *mātrgaṇa* in the Śalyaparvan includes several names of goddesses which allude their bird or animal like feature. We will discuss this point later, but one goddess called Kukkuṭikā<sup>(7)</sup> should be mentioned in this context. Kukkuṭikā is the feminine form of Kukkuṭaka meaning 'Wild-Rooster'. An interesting point is that the term, Kukkuṭaka, also denotes the offspring of a Pulkasa (or Pukkasa) by Śūdra woman in the *Manusmṛiti*<sup>(8)</sup>. The Pulkasa is one of the indigenous tribes, often mentioned with the Niṣāda, Paṇḍaka, and Kirāta in the various Sanskrit texts. Though it is difficult to affirm whether the goddess Kukkuṭikā is a deity of the Pulkasa or not, their close association can be speculated.

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4 *MBH*, Śalyaparvan, 45. 39.

5 This point has been discussed by several scholars. For an insightful observation on this issue, see Kosambi 1962, p. 85. Though Harper (1989, pp. 27-45) argues the syncretic character of the *mātrkās* worship, she also highly emphasizes its autochthonous background by exploring various examples of the seven mothers in Indian folk culture. Kinsely (1987, p. 155) is of the opinion that the *mātrkās* are grounded in village-goddess cult.

6 *HV*, vol. II, no. 8, 7-9.

7 *MBH*, Śalyaparvan, 45. 14.

8 *MS*, 10. 18.

The reference to the *mātrgāṇa* suggests how a myriad of autochthonous and non-Vedic goddesses was perceived and categorized by the epic compiler(s) in the Sanskrit tradition in the early phase of history. In this stage they are conceived of as a band of various mothers without any agreement over names and numbers. They are only mentioned as a group, and it is as a group that they are characterized and functioned. It is noteworthy that these autochthonous goddesses were loosely associated with numerous male deities of the Brahmanical pantheon such as Yama, Rudra, Soma, Kubera, Varuṇa, Indra, Agni, Vāyu, Kumāra, Brahman, Viṣṇu, Sūrya and Varāha. Though the *mātrkās* are not recognized as the śaktis of these gods, a certain attempt to associate the *mātrkās* with several male deities seems to have made in the early phase of its development. Nevertheless, each individual *mātrkā*'s affiliation with her corresponding male god has yet been determined.

They are recognized as a group and their collective identity is often emphasized in their relation with Skanda, the commander in chief of gods (*mahāseṇa*). The Āraṇyakaparvan of the *MBH* recounts several informative episodes on this matter. In the first episode, it is said that a group of goddesses called 'the mothers of the world (*lokasya mātaraḥ*)' were sent by Indra to kill the infant Skanda shortly after his birth because the boy-god's power was so great that Indra feared he will conquer universe<sup>(9)</sup>. However, when the *mātrkās* saw he is invincible, they had desire to feed him with their breast and asked him to adopt them as his mothers. Their prayer was granted<sup>(10)</sup>. After he had honored them, Skanda saw his father Agni arrived. Agni received his homage, along with a band of *mātrkās*. One woman among all the *mātrkās* who had been born from Fury (*mātrṇāṃ nārī kroddhasamudbhavā*) guarded Skanda with a spike in her hand, as a nursing mother guarded her son. The cruel daughter of the blood sea (*lohitasyodadheḥ kanyā*), who feasts on blood, embraced Mahāseṇa and guarded

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9 *MBH*, Āraṇyakaparvan, 215. 16.

10 *Ibid.*, 215. 18-20.

him like her son<sup>(11)</sup>.

From this reference it is clear that some great powerful groups of *mātrkās* were worshipped before the rise of Skanda. After Skanda gained important position, the *mātrkās* came to be associated with Skanda as his mothers. Their character was understood to be ambivalent. Although they eventually end up serving and guarding Skanda as his mothers, their initial task in this episode was to kill him. As some of their attributes indicated, they were associated with fury and blood, but no details about their names or number are available here.

In the second episode, the origin of the *mātrkās* is explained in different way. It is said that a host of maidens was born from the impact of Indra's thunderbolt on Skanda. They cruelly robbed babies, both newborn and still in the womb<sup>(12)</sup>. They asked Skanda to accept them as the ultimate mothers (*mātarah uttamāḥ*) of the all the world. He agreed and further divided them into two groups, *viz.*, auspicious (*śivāḥ*) and inauspicious (*aśivāḥ*). Names of the auspicious group of *mātrkās* are not mentioned, but among the inauspicious group seven names are enlisted. They are as Kākī, Halimā, Rudrā, Bṛhālī, Āryā, Palālā, and Mitrā<sup>(13)</sup>. All the goddesses became the seven mothers of new born sons (*saptaitāḥ śiśumātarah*). They each had a most terrifying, red eyed and frightening son by the grace of Skanda, named the Newborn (*śiśuḥ*)<sup>(14)</sup>.

In the third episode, it is said that another group of the *mātrkās* approached to Skanda with an appeal to oust those who before had been fabricated as the

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11 *Ibid.*, 215. 21-22.

12 *Ibid.*, 217. 2.

13 The identity of each goddess in this curious group of mothers is not entirely clear. D. G. White gives some details of these goddesses (see White 2003, p. 39). It is explained that Halīmaka (Yellowness) is a form of jaundice described in the Ayurvedic classic, the *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, while Palālā (Sorghum Stalk) is the name of a male demon inimical to children in the *Atharvaveda*. Rudrā and Mitrā are feminine forms of the male gods Rudra and Mitra. Kākī probably has bird-nature as she appears one of five bird-daughters of Kaśyapa and Tāmrā in the first *parvan* of the *MBH*.

14 *MBH*, Āraṇyakaparvan, 217. 7-10.

mothers of this world and substitute them in their place. This request was turned down, but Skanda agreed to give them the status of mothers to all the children to be born, subject to the condition that they would protect children and not destroy them, if properly worshipped<sup>(15)</sup>. Skanda granted the *mātrkās* a Rudra-like immortal soul. Thereupon a powerful, golden-hued spirit flew out of Skanda's body to devour the offspring of the mortals<sup>(16)</sup>. It is called a grasper (*graha*), that is to say a dangerous spirit seizing men and causing death and disease, and there follows a long list of powerful demonic graspers<sup>(17)</sup>. It is claimed that the *mātrgaṇa* and male graspers are always to be known by embodied beings as Skanda *grahas*<sup>(18)</sup>.

It is important to note here that several female divinities in the list bear bird like features. Vinatā is said to be a bird grasper (*śakunigraha*) and Pūtanā is

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15 *Ibid.*, 219. 16-20.

16 *Ibid.*, 219. 23-24.

17 In fact, this list (*MBH*, *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 219. 26-40) contains a minute description of several male graspers as well. It is beyond the scope of this inquiry to examine characteristics of all the graspers. Therefore, let me note some important names and characters of female graspers and mothers: Vinatā is said to be a horrible Bird Grasper. Pūtanā, called a Rākṣasī, is an awful stalker of the night and evil in her ghastly shape (v.26). One horrifying Piśācī is called Śītapūtanā. She has terrible shape and aborts the fetus of women (v.27). People call Aditi [by the name of] Revatī. Her grasper is Raivata, who is horrible big Grasper and afflicts small children (v.28). Diti, the mother of Daityas, is unapproachable demoness feasting gluttonously on children's flesh (v.29). Kumārīs that sprang from Skanda are ferocious fetus eaters and the greatest Graspers (v.30-31). Surabhī is called the Mother of Cow. Together with the bird perching on her, she eats infants on the ground (v.32). The one who is named Saramā is the Mother of Dogs. She is constantly snatching away human fetus. (v.33). There is Kadrū who enters a pregnant woman, eats the fetus inside, and the mother gives birth to a snake (v.36).

18 *MBH*, *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 219. 42.

portrayed as a bird in the sculptures of the Kuṣāṇa period<sup>(19)</sup>. The latter is included in the name list of the *mātrgana* in the Śalyaparvan as well<sup>(20)</sup>. In subsequent passage, it is described that the *mātrkās* have protruding lips and voice resembling the *kokila*, a kind of bird. In this connection, it should be pointed out that Kākī, one of the *mātrkās* in the second episode, is She-Crow. The stray references in various texts suggest that bird or bird-like demonic goddesses are mostly dangerous and inauspicious, especially cruel to the children. They destroy fetus, cause miscarriage and transmit various kinds of disease and poison<sup>(21)</sup>. In addition to these bird-like goddesses, animal or animal-faced goddesses are included in the group of *mātrkās*. They are Surabhī (the mother of cows), Saramā (the mother of dogs),<sup>(22)</sup> Śaśolūkamukhī (Hare and Owl-faced),<sup>(23)</sup> Gokarṇī (Cow-eared), Mahiṣānanā (Buffalo-faced).<sup>(24)</sup> The *yoginīs*, the ravening horde of goddesses which appeared in the early medieval period, are likely to inherit their ambiguous forms from *mātrkās*.

Though their origin is not entirely clear, the absence of these goddesses in the Vedic corpus suggests that they may have belonged to different socio-cultural milieu. An Āyurvedic work, the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* contains some important

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19 Among various *mātrkās* icons, which are recognizable from the beginning of the Christian era, some figures of bird head goddess are identified as Pūtanā. See Joshi 1986, p. 21 and p. 71.

20 *MBH*, Śalyaparvan, 45. 16.

21 For instance, the *Harivaṃśa*, speaks specially of Pūtanā. Pūtanā is the name of a fearsome bird (*śakunī ghorā*) who causes fear, and she came in the middle of night flapping her wings in anger. (*HV* vol. I., 50. 20. note. 636) It is also described that she perched on the axel of the cart where the baby was lying and while everybody else was sleeping she gave him her breast full of milk. (*HV* vol. I., 50. 21-22.) In later Puranic literature, she appears as a demoness who gives her poisoned breast milk to infant god, Kṛṣṇa.

22 *MBH*, Āraṇyakaparvan, 219. 32 and 33 respectively.

23 *MBH*, Śalyaparvan, 45. 21.

24 *Ibid.*, 45. 25.



information on this matter. In this text, nine *grahas* who inflict disease upon children are mentioned. They are Skandagraha, Skandāpasmāra, Śakunī, Revatī, Pūtanā, Andhapūtanā, Śītapūtanā, Mūkhamaṇḍikā, Naigameṣa or Piṭṛgraha<sup>(25)</sup>. In the subsequent passage, it is said that these *grahas* being directed by Skanda to devour children from such family, where gods, the *pitris* (forefathers), *brāhmaṇas*, saints, teachers and guests are not honored; where the rules of cleanliness and virtues are not observed; where the members do not make daily offerings to the gods and give alms to beggars; where the members live on food prepared by others and eat from broken bowls and plates; and so on<sup>(26)</sup>. Agrawala opines that this reference indicates that the *grahas* were allotted a place in folk religion, outside the pale of Vedic and Smārta rites<sup>(27)</sup>. The original and essential aspect of the *mātrkās* seems to be closely associated with the frightening *grahas*.

In the aforementioned episode in the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, Skanda is portrayed as transforming these goddesses into benign presences, *viz.* the mothers who protect infants, but the transformation is unconvincing nevertheless. Thus, it is said that until [boys reach the age of] sixteen, they are malignant; thereafter, they are benign. They are essentially cruel and dangerous, but could be pacified and enticed to grant protection and boons<sup>(28)</sup>.

On the basis of the references to the *mātrkās* in the *MBH*, there are several points to note about their features in the early phase of history: i) the *mātrkās* are a group of goddesses who were given different names and numbers at different times;<sup>(29)</sup> ii) they are closely associated with non-Vedic traditions; iii) some of them are bird or animal goddesses bearing destructive power; iv) they

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25 SS, Uttara-Tantram, 27. 3-4.

26 *Ibid.*, 37. 16-18.

27 Agrawala 1970, pp. 77-78.

28 *MBH*, *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 219. 41-44.

29 Though they are once represented as the seven mothers of new born sons (*saptaitāḥ śiśumātaraḥ*) in the second episode (*MBH*, *Āraṇyakaparvan*, 217, 9), their number is not fixed in other episodes.

are fearsome, but yet to be warrior goddesses, though they were associated with Skanda;<sup>(30)</sup> v) they seem to have acquired much of their benevolent nature, so-called 'motherhood', in the process of their initial entry into the Brahmanical pantheon; vi) the Brahmanical transfiguration of their character still remains incomplete and vii) their iconographic forms are not defined<sup>(31)</sup>.

These points are substantiated by a number of *mātrkā* figures in the Kuṣāṇa period (from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A. D.). They appear to be undifferentiated sculptural group. Based on a total of one hundred and seven pieces of figures, Joshi lists five important features of the *mātrkā* images of the Kuṣāṇa period from Mathura as follows; 1) all the mothers put on *sāḍīs* or skirt and have hair-do and ornaments of the Kuṣāṇa style; 2) none of them is multi-handed or multi-headed except one; 3) none of them holds any weapon; 4) no mothers has been depicted with any *vāhana* (mount); 4) a baby or an infant is sometimes represented with mothers; 5) some of the mothers figures have a sort of canopy over their heads<sup>(32)</sup>. One of their common features is, he observes, that many of them have human faces, but some have the faces of birds like eagles, parrots, and others of animals such as lion, tiger, bull, etc<sup>(33)</sup>. In the sculptural representation, their number is not fixed and their affiliations with their corresponding male gods have not yet been determined. Unlike the icon of the seven mothers (*saṭpa mātrkāś*) who were mostly modeled on their male counter

30 It is significant to note that there is no mention of their mounts (*vāhanas*) or even weapons those *mātrkāś* carried in the *MBH*.

31 Rather, undefined forms are considered to be their characteristic feature. They are said to have numerous forms (*nānārūpāḥ*) (*MBH*, Śalyaparvan, 45. 29) and have unlimited power by which they can change the forms at will (*kāmarūpadharāś tathā*) (*MBH*, Śalyaparvan, 45, 31a).

32 Joshi 1986, p. 7. On the other hand, Harper (1989, pp. 59-70) divides the *mātrkā* images into following five categories. 1) single goddess with human, animal or bird head; 2) Gaja-Lakṣmī 3) seated image of Lakṣmī; 4) multiple goddesses with Kubera; 5) groups of goddesses with human, animal or bird head.

33 Joshi 1986, p. 159.

parts, the images of *mātrkās* in the Kuṣāṇa period bear their independent character and various terianthropic features.

## II. Becoming a Distinctive Group

At some time, possibly from the 4<sup>th</sup> century A. D., the *mātrkās* were installed in a temple and became special objects of worship. The earliest record is one of a set of copperplate inscriptions from Bagh, which locates in the Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh. The record belongs to the reign of king Bhuluṇḍa, dated year 50 (that is corresponding to 369-70 A. D., if it referred to the Gupta era). He was one of rulers of Valkhā, who were the subordinates of the Gupta. According to the editors of the plate, the name Bhuluṇḍa represents a tribal form of personal name. He was probably a powerful tribal chieftain, and Samudragupta appointed him as the Mahārāja<sup>(34)</sup>. This inscription records that Mahārāja Bhuluṇḍa installed the goddesses (*bhagavatīnām*) called Navataṭāka Mothers (*navataṭāka mātrīṇām*)<sup>(35)</sup>. The record further stipulates that the villages Dubhedikā and Dharmāṇaka, entrusted with Mūlaśarman, and a plot of land in locality called Arjunapaṃtikā, entrusted with Bhūtabhojaka, were granted by king Bhuluṇḍa for the performance of *bali*, *caru* and *satra* rites of the Great Mothers (*mahāmātrīṇām*) and to provide for perfume (*gandha*), incense (*dhūpa*) and garlands (*mālya*)<sup>(36)</sup>. The convergence of two elements in the ritual of worship of installed Great Mothers is religiously significant because they combine sacrifice (*bali*, *caru* and *satra* being three of five great sacrifices, that is, *pañcamahāyajña*) with what was essentially the ritual of the worship of image<sup>(37)</sup>. The other epigraphic record from Bagh mentions that the shrine of mothers

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34 Ramesh and Tewari 1990, pp. viii-ix.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 4; Here, Navataṭāka is probably the name of place where the mothers were installed.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

37 Chattopdhyaya 2003, p. 177.

(*mātrsthānadevakula*) was established by the Pāsupatācārya Bhagavat Lokodadhi in the village Pinchikanaka<sup>(38)</sup>. It is noteworthy that the *mātrkās* were separately installed and worshipped while the Valkhās paid their reverence for the Mahāsenadeva (Skanda)<sup>(39)</sup>.

Another important record occurs in an inscription from the village of Gaṅgadhār in Rajasthan. This inscription (423-425 A. D.) mentions Mayūrākṣaka, who was a minister to Prince Viśvavarman, a contemporary of Kumāragupta. It records how Mayūrākṣaka built a temple of Viṣṇu, a temple of the *mātrkās* and also a large drinking well<sup>(40)</sup>. The portion of the inscription mentioning the second temple provides an account of the *mātrkās* and their terrifying companions, *viz. dākinīs*. They are described as follows;

... also, for the sake of religious merit, the counselor of the king caused to be built this very terrible abode of Mothers (*mātrīṇān*), filled full of female ghouls (*dākinī*)..., these Mothers impel the great booming of the rain clouds and rose the ocean with the mighty wind that arises from the Tantra (*tāntrodbhūta*)<sup>(41)</sup>.

This passage from the Gaṅgadhār inscription is invaluable as it is often cited as the evidence for antiquity of Tantric religion,<sup>(42)</sup> and the *mātrkā* worship in connection with Tantric ritual in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century A. D.<sup>(43)</sup> We cannot enter here into the extremely complicated question of the origin and nature of Tantra. However, it must be mentioned that 'Tantra' as a distinctive ritual and doctrinal

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38 Ramesh and Tewari 1990, p. 22.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

40 Fleet 1963, p. 74.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 74 (line no. 35-37).

42 Lorenzen 2002, p. 30.

43 Joshi (2002, p. 48) interprets the term, 'tāntrodbhūta' as a tantric ritual. Furthermore, he observes that the somewhat obliterated portion of inscription appears to employ the terms *kuṇapa* (corpse) and *muṇḍa* (head), suggesting that it is referring to a shrine dedicated to the goddess Cāmuṇḍā and *mātrkās* and attended by *dākinīs*.

system associated with the texts known as *Tantras*, *Samhitās* and *Āgamas* is distinguished from the 'Tantric elements'. Despite the fact that the existence of Tantric elements, such as magic, sexual rite, medicine and so on, can be traced back to much earlier period, the clear and datable evidence of full blown Tantric religion appears in the Sanskrit literary texts around the 7<sup>th</sup> century A. D. The main body of early *Tantras* (mainly Śaiva *Tantras*) must have been composed between about 400 and 800 A. D., and the distinctive Tantric texts began to appear in written Sanskrit from the 8<sup>th</sup> century A. D. and by the 10<sup>th</sup> century A. D. Tantric texts had developed. Thus, it seems to be too speculative to associate the *mātrkā* worship with Tantric ritual or religion in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century A. D.

However, as Tiwari argues, this inscription greatly strengthens the probability that, although several extraneous elements went into the making of Tantrism, perhaps its nucleus was formed of essentially popular, unsophisticated, and non-Brahmanical cults largely of female deities like the *mātrkās*<sup>(44)</sup>. This point may be attested by the fact that the *ḍākinīs* are mentioned along with the *mātrkās* in the Gaṅgadhār inscription. The *ḍākinīs* are malevolent and dangerous human witches or non-human demonesses haunting cemeteries, feeding on human flesh, moving through air, sending sickness, infertility and death to humans and animals, practicing and teaching all sorts of black magic<sup>(45)</sup>. They are comparable to the *yoginīs* in many aspects. The *ḍākinīs* and the *yoginīs* were largely assimilated into Tantric circles during the early medieval period<sup>(46)</sup>.

Another inscription referring to the *mātrkās* in the 5<sup>th</sup> century is found in Patna district of Bihar. The inscription belonging to the reign of Skandagupta (455-467 A. D.) records the erection of the column, which is called a *yūpa* (sacrificial post) in line 10, apparently by some minister whose sister had become Kumāragupta's wife. The relevant portion of the inscription runs as follows;

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44 Tiwari 1985, p. 171.

45 For the discussion on various aspects of the *ḍākinīs* in the Indian religious history, see Herrmann-Pfandt 1996, pp. 39-70.

46 I have dealt with this point elsewhere. See Shin 2010, pp. 11-19.

... caused to be made a group of temples, not [rivalled by] anything else that could be compared with it in the world... assuredly in [Skandaguptabaṭa] which is beautiful with the erection of this best columns. ... of the trees... the group of fig trees (?) and castor oil plants (?), the tops of which are bent down by weight of their flowers... in the consequence of Bhadrār̥yā, the edifice shines freed from dirt like a flesh cloud or serpent slough... headed by the god Skanda, and by the divine mothers, on the earth (*skandapradhānair bhuvī-mātr̥bhiṣ ca*), ... mankind... [he] made, indeed the erection of this sacrificial post... for Bhadrār̥yā and others in [the village called] Skandaguptabaṭa<sup>(47)</sup>.

The inscription speaks of Skanda leading the mothers in line 9, indicating their close relation had continued in the Gupta period. It is noteworthy that the name of goddess, Bhadrār̥yā is specially mentioned in the inscription. As Bhandarkar points out, Bhadrār̥yā is represented as the predominant goddess in the worship<sup>(48)</sup>. In fact, the goddess Āryā had been the most broadly attested cult in the Kuṣāṇa period<sup>(49)</sup>. In the *MBH*, she is called the mother of Kumāra (Skanda) and offered a sacrifice separately for the fulfillment of desires<sup>(50)</sup>. The epigraphic account of Bhadrār̥yā may suggest that some goddesses in the group of *mātr̥kās* have gradually gained an exalted position and individual identity.

In addition to those epigraphic records, the archeological remains also testify the popularity of *mātr̥kā* cult in the Gupta period. Among several examples,<sup>(51)</sup> three separate reliefs of the *mātr̥kās* at Udayagiri in Bhopal may be the earliest one. They are dated the first few years of the 5<sup>th</sup> century A. D. Willis, who has observed the site in detail, reports that there are three goddess shrines

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47 Bhandarkar 1981, p. 349 (line no. 5-11).

48 *Ibid.*, p. 347.

49 White 2003, p. 39.

50 *MBH*, Āraṇyakaparvan, 219. 40.

51 Several important *mātr̥kā* images in the Gupta period are well documented in the work of Harper (1989, pp. 75-81) and Panikkar (1997, pp. 75-79).

at the site, each slightly different from another. The first one situated in the right side of Cave 4 contains six damaged female figures; the second one is adjacent to Cave 6 and has six seated *mātrkās* flanked by much-abraded figures of Skanda and Gaṇeśa; the third one located to the right of the second one has eight *mātrkās* seated on a bench with a much damaged Skanda, on a peacock, at a higher level<sup>(52)</sup>.

Based on the remains of staffs with emblems attached to the wall behind a few figures, Harper identifies some of the *mātrkās* as Brahmānī, Māheśvarī, Kaumārī and Vaiṣṇavī,<sup>(53)</sup> and claims that by beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century A. D., the *mātrkā* iconography has evolved into 'a standardized group of seven goddesses'.<sup>(54)</sup> Her argument is implausible in some aspects. Because of nearly obliterated condition of these panels, the identification of each emblem is not so certain. Even though one may recognize these emblems as attributes of the *mātrkās*, the evidence is too tenuous to claim the presence of the seven mothers as a standardized group in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century A. D. Besides, her dating of the *Devīmāhātmya* between the years 400 and 600 A. D. is rather early.

The *mātrkās* worshipped in the time of Gupta rules is probably not the standardized group of the *sapta mātrkās*. The epigraphic records belonging to the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries A. D. merely mention them as a group of goddesses without specifying their names, numbers, attributes and iconographic forms<sup>(55)</sup>. They are represented in various ways, that is, a collective group of goddesses, a group of goddesses accompanied by other group, the companions of Skanda and so on.

Nevertheless, three groups of *mātrkās* figures at Udayagiri demonstrate that the somewhat ill defined *mātrkās* or diverse forms of *mātrkās* of earlier periods

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52 Willis 2009, p. 312, note 43.

53 Harper 1989, pp. 75-79. fig. 16-30.

54 Harper 2002, p. 121.

55 Tiwari (1985, p. 106) also observed that by the time of the Gupta rule in northern India, the distinction in *mātrkā* icons had not been crystallized.

were gradually adapted and then adopted into the Brahmanical pantheon, especially into the pantheon of Śiva. In its iconographical development, it is observed that during the 6<sup>th</sup> century A. D., the *mātrkās* continued to be important deities, particularly within the context of the sculptural program of Śaiva temples. In addition, their traits and attributes became more elaborate. Gaṇeśa was fully accepted as a member of the group and other deities, e. g. Kala and Kali, sometimes were included as important adjunct figures in the iconographic program<sup>(56)</sup>.

It is still difficult to determine precisely when the number, names and iconographic forms of the *mātrkās* become standardized, but some attempt seems to have begun around the 6<sup>th</sup> century A. D. The *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* of Varāhamihira [BS], dated the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century, is probably the earliest text which contains a little suggestion of standardization of their iconographic forms. In the chapter on the attributes of icons of deities, it simply lays down “the host of mothers has to be made with the characteristics corresponding to those of gods whose name they bear.”<sup>(57)</sup> Though this reference does not specify their names and numbers, it alludes that their identity and iconography were made following those of male deities. Furthermore, it specifically mentions that one who knows the arrangement of *maṇḍala* (*maṇḍalakramavid*) would worship the group of mothers (*mātrgaṇa*)<sup>(58)</sup>. The *maṇḍala* is likely to have an important function in the ritual worship of *mātrkās*<sup>(59)</sup>.

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56 Harper 1989, p. 101.

57 BS, 58. 56a.

58 *Ibid.*, 60. 19.

59 The term *maṇḍala* often refers to a space with a special structure that is enclosed and delimited by a circumferential line and into which a deity or deities are invited by means of *mantras*. The circular arrangement of the *mātrkās* can be traced back to much earlier period. For instance, a terracotta fragment found during excavations at Sonhk near Mathura shows the circular disposition of the mothers as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century B. C. Later sources tell us the mothers used to dance in the circles around Śiva. (See Mallebrein and Stientencron, 2008, p. 145) In later Tantric traditions, the



A standardization of the *mātrkā* pantheon seemed to be an ongoing process during the 6<sup>th</sup> century A. D. One of the critical evidences testifying the presence of standard group of the *mātrkās* occurs in the Deogarh rock inscription of Svāmibhaṭa. This inscription, datable towards the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, is found the south side of the Deograh Fort in Jhansi district, U. P. It begins with an invocation to the *mātrkās* as follows: “may the group of mothers, the mothers of universe, having their dwelling in... and having power fit for the preservation of the world, be for your welfare”<sup>(60)</sup> and records that a person called Svāmibhaṭa caused to be constructed on that hill “a very costly and indestructible abode of the mothers”<sup>(61)</sup>. It is important to note that this inscription is engraved immediately above a niche which contains a panel of seven *mātrkās* flanked by Vīrabhadra and Gaṇapati. The distinctive feature of each figure is described as follows; 1) a male figure holding a vīṇa between both hands, probably Vīrabhadra 2) Brāhmaṇī with three faces, 3) Māheśvarī seated on a lion and holding Gaṇeśa in her left hand, 4) Kaumārī on her peacock, 5) Vaiṣṇavī on the Garuḍa, 6) Vārāhī, 7) Indrāṇī and 8) four armed Cāmuṇḍā, seated on human corpse and 9) two armed Gaṇapati. The editor of the inscription thought that the abode of the mothers whose erection the epigraph records is probably identical with this niche<sup>(62)</sup>. It is probably one of the earliest inscriptional evidences of the group seven mothers demonstrating their distinct individual identity and iconographical feature, though the name of group, the ‘*sapta mātrkā*’ does not occur in it.

In the epigraphic records, the *mātrkās* are specially counted as seven for the first time in the Cālukya inscription. The Cālukyas of Bādāmi (from the middle of

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*mātrkās* became the name of particular diagram written in character to which a magical power is ascribed. The characteristic circular arrangement of *yoginī* pantheon seemed to be derived from the *mātrkā maṇḍala*.

60 Sahni 1925-26, p.126, verse. 1.

61 *Ibid.*, p.126, verse . 7.

62 *Ibid.*, p.125.

the 6<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century A. D.) claimed to have been nourished by the seven mothers (*saptamātr*) who are the mothers of mankind and to have acquired prosperity through the favour and protection of the god Kārttikeya<sup>(63)</sup>. However, individual member of the group is not specified in the inscription.

The popularity of the *mātrkā* worship in the subsequent period is attested by several accounts in the literary works. In the *Harṣacarita*, when king Puṣpabhūti wished to see Bhairavācārya, he was informed that the ascetic was staying in a hut to the north of an old temple of the mothers (*mātr-grha*)<sup>(64)</sup>. On hearing about his father's illness, Harṣa returned to find all kinds of rites being performed to restore the king to health. One of such rites is described that 'there young nobles were burning themselves with lamps to propitiate the circle of mothers (*mātr-maṇḍalam*)<sup>(65)</sup>. Besides, in the *Kādambarī* the queen Vilāsavatī, who wanted to have a son, performed a variety of rites in a nearby shrine to the *mātrkās*, in whom faith was displayed by the people<sup>(66)</sup>.

From this series of evidences it is somewhat clear that at some time, possibly between the late 5<sup>th</sup> and the early 6<sup>th</sup> century A. D., there was a certain attempt on the side of *brāhmaṇas* to sort out the unwieldy numbers of *mātrkās*, put them into a distinctive group and upgrade their standing. Their names, numbers and iconographical features were becoming standardized following those of male deities, but not yet crystallized. Besides, their close relation with Skanda and motherly character had been on the wane in this phase.

### III. Making of the Brahmanical Śākta Tradition and the *Sapta Mātrkās*

The earliest extant text to explore explicitly and fully the subject of the *sapta mātrkās* is the *Devīmāhātmya* [DM] which has been ascribed to the 8<sup>th</sup>

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63 Fleet 1963, p. 48 and Madjumdar 1962, p. 228.

64 HC, Ucchvāsa, 46.

65 Ibid., Ucchvāsa, 21.

66 KB, p. 55-56.

century<sup>(67)</sup>. The *DM* consists of three episodes bounded by a frame story<sup>(68)</sup>. The third episode, which is an extensive account on the Goddess' triumph over Sumbha and Nisumbha, gives an explanation of how several different goddesses, namely, Kālī-Cāmuṇḍā,<sup>(69)</sup> the *sapta mātrkās* and Śīvadūti originated. As to the

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67 In the general opinion, the text was considered to be composed in about the 6<sup>th</sup> century somewhere in north-western India. (see Rocher 1986, p. 195; Coburn 1984, p. 241 no.101) However, Yokochi argues that the text seems to have been composed in the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century A. D. She gives an authoritative review discussion of the relevant evidence. See Yokochi 2004, pp. 21-22, n. 42.

68 The frame story (1.1-46) recounts the worldly ordeals of a king, Suratha, and a merchant, Samādhi, who meet in forest. Suratha has been conquered and deprived of his sovereign authority by enemy kings. Similarly, Samādhi has been deprived of his wealth by his greedy sons and wife. Yet, both men have attachment to what they have lost. They approach a sage, Medhas for advice. The sage explains that everything is under the control of the goddess Mahāmāyā (Great Illusion), who can both cause delusion and release one from it. The king asks for further explanation, and the sage recounts three main episodes of the text. The first episode (1. 47-78) offers a succinct delineation of the cosmic status of the Goddess. When Viṣṇu lies deep in sleep on his serpent, two demons, Madhu and Kaiṭabha, arise from the dirt in Viṣṇu's ear and try to slay Brahmā. Fearful Brahmā praises the Goddess in her form as Yoganidrā (Yogic Sleep) and asks her to leave Viṣṇu's body. Viṣṇu awakes and slays two demons. The second episode (2.1-4.36) focuses on the Goddess's destruction of Mahiṣāsura, a buffalo demon who defeats the gods in battle and usurps their power. The gods grow angry, and all emit from their bodies a fiery energy, *tejas*. The Goddess is formed from this pooled divine *tejas*. The gods shower the goddess with weapons, jewels, garments, and other adornments, preparing her to do battle against Mahiṣa and his armis. Riding on her lion mount, she charges onto battlefield and ferociously slays her demon enemies.

69 It is said that the beauty of the Goddess attracts the attention of Sumbha and Nisumbha. They wish to possess her and thus ask her to marry one of them. The Goddess explains that she would only marry someone capable of defeating her in battle. Angered by her unwillingness to submit to them, they order Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa

origin and characteristic of the *saṭta māṭṛkās*, it is mentioned that very valorous and powerful śaktis spring from the bodies of Brahmā, Īśa (Śiva), Guha (Skanda), Viṣṇu and Indra in order to destroy the enemies of the gods and for the sake of well being of the supreme gods. Each of śaktis is said to have the same form, ornament and mount as her male counterpart<sup>(70)</sup>. Their distinctive individual identity, form, and attribute are described as follows; “Brahmāṇī, emanated from Brahmā, holds a rosary and a water pot and has a swan as her mount; Māheśvarī, from Śiva, is seated on a bull, holds a trident, wears serpent bracelets, and is adorned with the crescent moon; Ambikā having a form of Guha (Skanda) as Kaumārī, emerged from Kārttikeya, rides a peacock and holds a spear; Vaiṣṇavī, from Viṣṇu, is seated on Garuḍa and holds a conch, a discus, a club and a bow in her four hands; Vārāhī, the śakti of Hari, has the matchless form of a boar; Nārasimhī arrives, having a form like man-lion, bringing down the constellations by the tossing of her mane; Aindrī, from Indra, holds a thunderbolt and is seated on an elephant. She has a thousand eyes, just like Indra<sup>(71)</sup>.” This group of seven śaktis is collectively referred to as the *māṭṛgaṇa* or *māṭṛs*<sup>(72)</sup>. It is perhaps the first clear textual reference to the *saṭta māṭṛkās* as a distinctive group of goddesses.

In the subsequent story, a gruesome goddess called Śivadūtī also emerges from the body of the Goddess Caṇḍikā<sup>(73)</sup>. She represents the power of Goddess

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to take the field. Seeing them prepared to attack her, she bristles in anger. Her face becomes black with rage and from the knitted brows of her forehead's surface the goddess Kālī springs, with her dreadful face, carrying sword and noose. Kālī vanquishes Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa and presents their heads to the Goddess, who declares that because Kālī has overcome the two demons, she will become renowned in the world under the name of Cāmuṇḍā. For the emergence of Kālī and her identification with the goddess Cāmuṇḍā, See *DM* 7. 1-25.

70 *DM* 8. 12-13.

71 *Ibid.*, 8. 14-20.

72 *Ibid.*, 8. 39, 49 and 62.

73 *Ibid.*, 8. 22 : She is named Śivadūtī, because she instructs Śiva to serve as a

herself along with the goddess Kālī-Cāmuṇḍā, who was also directly emanated from the Goddess, especially her wrath. They are Devī-śaktis. It is important to note that both goddesses are not included in the group of *sapta mātrkās*. Besides, those seven goddesses listed in the *DM* do not confirm entirely to those found in iconic groups. The somehow standardized group of *mātrkās*, from the 6<sup>th</sup> century A. D. onwards, consists of seven goddesses, that are Brahmāṇī, Māheśvarī, Kaumārī, Vaiṣṇavī, Vārāhī, Aindrī and Cāmuṇḍā. However, Nārasimhī is substituted for Cāmuṇḍā as the seventh mother in the *DM*. If the list of *sapta mātrkās* in the *DM* is compared with iconic representations, it is clear that an earlier formula had been altered. It is not so clear the reason why Nārasimhī takes the place of Cāmuṇḍā in the group of *sapta mātrkās*, though there is a speculation that the change in the formula can be attributed to the Vaiṣṇava sympathy of the composer(s) of the *DM* as Nārasimhī is a Vaiṣṇava goddess<sup>(74)</sup>.

In our opinion, exclusion of Kālī-Cāmuṇḍā from the group could be interpreted as a conscious attempt to reformulate the *mātrkās*, from the loosely-clustered feminine divinities with the ambiguous nature and autochthonous background to the distinctive group of warrior goddesses who are closely associated with 'male gods' in the Brahmanical pantheon. It seems to aim at a critical alteration of their nature, from the malevolent seizers to protecting warriors. Their ambiguous and intrinsic magical power is replaced by the extrinsic martial power, which is symbolized in their weapons. This is more or less stereotyped, or even an artificial grouping. Most of the seven goddesses, *viz.*, Brahmāṇī, Māheśvarī, Kaumārī, Vaiṣṇavī, Vārāhī, Nārasimhī and Aindrī, had little popularity and indistinct role in the Puranic literature. Their names and

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messenger (*dūtī*), conveying a final warning to the demons to restore the gods to power or face destruction.

74 Harper 1989, pp. 98-99; On the other hand, Yokochi (1999, p.87) argues that Nārasimhī in the group seems to be a reflex of Narasimha who appeased the mothers in the story of Andhaka mentioned in the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* and the *Matsya Purāṇa*.

iconographic features demonstrate that the *mātrkās* became a kind of duplicated images of their male counterparts in the Brahmanical pantheon. Hence, they are known as the Deva-śaktis. The exclusion of Kālī-Cāmuṇḍā from the redefined group of *sapta mātrkās* was perhaps an inevitable process as she represents the Devī-śakti.

The above inference would be more explicit by a comparison with a group of *mātrkās* appeared in the Andhaka myth. In the *Matsya Purāṇa* [MP], we are told that Śiva creates a group of about one hundred and ninety *mātrkās* to counter the demon Andhaka, who multiplies himself by means of his own blood. The *mātrkās* are described as terrible in appearance and as drinking the blood of demons they slay. After the battle, the *mātrkās* announce that they will now proceed to devour all the gods, demons and people of the world. Śiva finds that he is unable to control the famished *mātrkas*. Śiva summons Narasiṃha, who creates a host of thirty two benign mothers in order to subdue them. The benign *mātrkās* are supposed to stay with Viṣṇu and receive oblations along with him, whereas, the subdued *mātrkās* are instructed to grant all desires of devotees when propitiated separately<sup>(75)</sup>. The description of many *mātrkās* in the MP reminds us of that of the *mātrgaṇa* of the MBH in terms of their numerous numbers and malevolent nature. It is noteworthy that the long name list of *mātrkās* in the MP includes several mothers with bird or animal like features,<sup>(76)</sup> while it gives the names of goddesses who are categorized in the *sapta mātrkā* pantheon in the DM<sup>(77)</sup>. Nonetheless, it does not represent the latter as the Deva-śaktis. The *mātrkās* depicted in the Andhaka myth retain their earlier features, but they are redefined

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75 MP 179. 8-84.

76 Surabhī (Mother of cow) (179. 12), Vinatā (a bird grasper) (179. 19), Kukkuṭī (Wild-Rooster) (179. 17), Gokarṇikā (Cow-eared) (179, 24) Ulkāmukhī (Owl-faced) (179. 24), Ayomukhī (having an iron beak, a kind of bird ?) (179. 29). Most of these names are mentioned in the name list of the *mātrgaṇa* in the MBH.

77 Brāhmī (179. 9), Kaumārī (179. 9), Māheśvarī (179. 9), Nārasimhī (179. 11) and Vārāhī (179. 11).

within a new narrative structure. The *MP*'s account of the battle between Andhaka and the *mātrkās* seems to have influenced over the accounts of the *DM*<sup>(78)</sup>.

Finally, the most critical modification of the *mātrkās* was made in the latter part of third episode of the *DM*. In the end of battle, when the Goddess absorbs all śaktis, *viz.* the *sapta mātrkās*, Kālī-Camuṇḍā and Śivadūtī, she reclaims those of her powers that had been loan, so to speak, to the gods<sup>(79)</sup>. Her declaration clearly manifests the singular-yet-multiple and the universal-yet-particular nature of the Goddess. As Coburn rightly observes, śakti is a singular and universal phenomenon – as a phenomenon that Devī simply *is*. But in addition, the *DM* understands śaktis as plural and particular phenomena, as something that each individual deity *has*<sup>(80)</sup>. The conceptualization of the Goddess as the transcendent singular as well as the divine plural gives a theological ground to accommodate the *sapta mātrkās* within the Brahmanical Śākta framework. They are still fierce, but not any more uncontrollable dangerous female spirits dwelling on the places beyond a sedentary society and causing the death of infants. Besides, they are not merely a group of warrior goddesses derived from their male counterparts. They become a portion of the Goddess, the ultimate source of universe. In this way, they are exalted and subordinated.

## Abbreviations and Texts

*Bṛhatsaṃhitā* [BS]

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78 Melzer 2009, p. 143; Yokochi also thoroughly argues this point. For the *DM*'s several important modifications of the Andhaka myth, See Yokochi 1999, pp. 86-87.

79 She declared; "I alone exist here in the world; what second, other than I, is there? O. wicked one, behold these my manifestations of power entering back into me." Thereupon, all the goddesses, led by Brahmānī, went to their resting place in the body of the Goddess, and then there was just Ambikā, alone. The Goddess said, "when I was established here in many forms, it was by means of my extraordinary power. That has now been withdrawn by me. I stand utterly alone." *DM* 10. 3-5.

80 Coburn 1984a, p. 160.

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*Matsya Purāṇa* [MP]

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