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UNCOVERING THE AMBIKA OF URVAHI

Pragya Jain
Miranda House, University of Delhi

Abstract

"A sculpture is not merely a piece of art- it is a mirror of the society, a reflection of desired forms of beauty, a yardstick for moral standards, a symbol of entrenched notions, a visualisation of cultural traditions, a muse for creative literature, a tool for mass appeal and popularisation, an instrument for institutionalising the 'unwritten norms', and a vehicle for registering dissent and shattering the conventional societal images."

The study focuses on the Yakshi carvings at the Urvahi Valley of the Gwalior Fort during the 7th century and in the 15th century, primarily under the Tomar king Dungar Singh. Placed under majestic Jina statues, these sandstone figurines, though minuscule in size, stand tall as the epitome of maternal affection (vatsalya). The author, through field study and a reading of the texts, has applied a gendered prism to view the relief within but against the patriarchal notions of an 'ideal woman'. These dogmatic beliefs, on the one hand, glorify piety and servility, and on the other, they act as an impediment to the elevation of a woman's spiritual status. Therefore, such identities need to be reclaimed and women, through the example of Ambika, be understood by way of their agency, as a counterweight to masculine authority and as repositories of valour and virtue.

Introduction

Women's spiritual being continues to be time and again questioned and reconceived, their depictions of divinity often juxtaposed with limitations on their autonomy. This inherent paradox needs to be reapproached, keeping in mind both the conventional and the unconventional conceptions of female deities. This paper, using Ambika as a prototype, aims to re-examine traditional notions of femininity and the concept of 'true womanhood'. By employing an iconopraxical analysis of the Urvahi rock-cut architecture at the Gwalior fort, the research highlights how the devotional sculpture reflects society. The ultimate objective is to explore the myriad facets of Ambika, an embodiment of maternal love, a guardian deity, a fierce and unyielding woman, and a personification of unwavering faith. The complex dynamics of women's identities thus lie at the undercurrent of this study.

The research attempts to place this multifaceted role of women in a prism of societal expectations and moral judgements. It attempts to place the history of the subalterns in a broader narrative that depicts the nature of the society and reconstructs inherent ideals. At the same time, it navigates through the 'greater culture' (Tirthankaras) and the 'lesser culture' (Yaksha Cult), highlighting two disparate yet parallel strands in the devotional history.

Literature Review

The prominence of the Yakshi has attracted varied scholarly literature from art historians to academics in the field of gender studies. This paper has considered the various Jain texts that illuminate Ambika's iconography and ritual practices associated with her. Alexander Cunningham (1871)

and James Fergusson (1876) were among the first to explore the sculptures on the Gwalior Fort. The Archaeological Survey of India's reports and the Gwalior Gazetteer (1937–38) describe the figurines at Urvahi. Texts of B. C. Bhattacharya (1939), U. P. Shah (1987), M. N. P. Tiwari (1987), and John Cort (2010) have thrown light on the symbolic dimensions of Jain iconography. Historians Uma Chakravarti (2006) and Ellen Gough (2021) have lent a gendered lens to the interpretations. Recently, a Jiwaji University (Gwalior) researcher wrote a PhD thesis on the Ambika of Gwalior (2023). Further, the Detroit Institute of Arts conducted a descriptive analysis on 'Jinas with Family and Goddess Ambika' (2024).

Situating Gwalior in a Geographical and Historical Context

Gwalior[1], situated in the heart of India, Madhya Pradesh, is an important juncture between the north-south and the east-west routes[2], standing today as one of the most important cities in the state. The Gwalior-Chambal region has historically been referred to as *Gopa, Gopadri, Gopacala, and Gwalehar.* It is one of the ten divisions of Madhya Pradesh, consisting of eight districts with the divisional headquarters at Gwalior. The Chambal River, the lifeline of the region, finds a mention in Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*.[3] Travellers like Ibn Battuta laud its mineral wealth and especially praise the sheen of the Gwalior sandstone.[4] This sets Ambika, carved in this very sandstone, within the rich historical context of the city.

Jainism revolves around the five principles of *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Satya* (truthfulness), *Asteya* (non-stealing), *Brahmacharya* (celibacy), and *Aparigraha* (non-possessiveness). Its popularity can be traced to Mahavira, the last Tirthankara, in the 6th century BCE. According to the Jain belief, he was preceded by 23 Tirthankaras, beginning from Rishabdeva/Adinath.

The Tirthankaras are the ones who guide the masses to the *tirths* (pilgrimage) and initiate them towards *nirvana* (liberation). Jainism has two major sects – the Digambaras (skyclad) and the Svetambars (white-clad).

Jain imagery can be understood over the centuries. Initially formless, the first Tirthankara statue appears in the Mauryan period in Lohanipura, near Patna. The Hathigumpha inscription of Kharavela suggests that Jainism spread as far as Odisha. During the Kushanas, Jain sculpture flourished, especially in centres like Vidisha and Mathura. The Gupta period was the golden period of Jain sculpture, where a decrease in Tirthankara statues is discerned in comparison to the expansion of the Jain pantheon at large. Later, in the Sultanate and Mughal periods, Jain art continued to find patrons, as in the case of Gwalior.

The Yaksha and Yakshini need to be understood within this monastic framework. They first appear in the post-Gupta period. While some scholars trace the emergence of the idea of Yaksha-Yakshini to Brahmanical influence, others call it a pragmatic move to appeal to the masses, for whom the perils of the material world were more intriguing than the puritanical world. The Yaksha and Yakshini, with their elaborate ornamentation, protruding belly, and voluptuous torso, therefore, appear in sharp contrast to the nude and austere Tirthankara images.

Jainism became popular in Madhya Pradesh during the Mauryan period.[5] During the Kushana and the Gupta periods, Jainism thrived in Mathura and Vidisha, and the influence from here reached Gwalior due to its geographical proximity. The earliest sculptural evidence here can be seen from the 6th century in the form of two images of Rishabhnath. During the 8th century, the Gurjar Pratihara rulers (8th century-10th century CE), due to their secular leanings, encouraged Jain art. Nagabhata II gave state

patronage to Jainism, and its influence can most prominently be observed in Panihar and Padawali near Gwalior.

Fig 1: Ambika at Parihar

Their successors, the Kachchhapaghata dynasty (950–1150 CE), had Digambara Jains holding prominent positions in their court.[6] A point to emphasise here is that it is the Digambara art, and not Svetambara, that predominates the Jain landscape here. Even today, Svetambara Jains number just about 700 in comparison to the far greater Digambara population (Jain, Navneet 2023).

Jain statues continued to be commissioned during the 12th–13th centuries, even at the onset of Islam in the subcontinent. By the end of the 14th century, with the establishment of the Tomar dynasty, Jainism once again received state patronage. They had many Jain ministers in their council and encouraged prosperous Jain merchants to boost commerce in their state. Local guilds of Jains had become influential, and inscriptions mention individual traders making donations for building sculptures.[7] As a result, several Jain texts mention Gwalior as a major pilgrimage centre.[8]

The most revered Jain sculptures can be seen in the vicinity of the Gwalior Fort. These were erected over subsequent periods under the various dynasties. The key rock-cut architecture along the fort is in five clusters—Gopachal (South-East), Trishala giri (South-West), Urvahi (North), Neminathgiri (North-West), and Nemgiri (North-East). This paper primarily focuses on the Urvahi group of sculptures, built largely under the Tomar king Dungar Singh during the 15th century.

Fig 2: The Siddhanchal Caves, Urvahi Valley

The Concept of Yaksha and Yakshini in Jainism

The first mention of Yakshas and Yakshinis is in the Jinabhadragani Shramana. The Harivamsha Purana (783 AD) begins to refer to them as '*Upasaka*' or '*Sasanadevatas*'. While traditional texts like the Purva Purana, the Uttara Purana, and the Chandraya Purana do not mention them, it is the later scriptures, like the Pratishtha texts, that have a notable Yaksha-

Yakshini presence. The Trishasti Shalaka Purusha and Abhidhan Chintamani of Hemchandra, and the Pratishtha Saroddhara of Vasunandi, most prominently mention Yaksha and Yakshini. They are basically semi-divine beings who function as the guardian deities of the Tirthankaras, with each one of them having their own pair of Yakshas and Yakshinis. The Yaksha is the male devotee of the Tirthankara, while the Yakshinis are the leaders of women devotees and some of them are also referred to as '*Vidya Devis'*. According to belief, Indra appoints them to serve as attendants to each Tirthankara, with the Yakshi on the left and Yaksha on the right. They are known differently as *Yaksha* and *Yakshini/Yakshi* in Sanskrit; *Yakha* and *Yakhini/Yakhi* in Pali; *Jakha* and *Jakhini* in Prakrit; and *Yakha* and *Yakhini* in Sinhalese.

The emergence of the Yaksha cult within Jainism is primarily attributed to the rising affluence of the merchants. Since the Yakshas came to be regarded as presiding spirits over wealth, they appealed to the masses. The first art depiction of a Yaksha-Yakshi pair dates to the 6th century CE. (Misra 1981)

However, it was during the 10th–15th centuries that they flourished in Jain art. Their popularity sometimes reached the extent that independent images were erected for them. Special emphasis was given to their aesthetic enhancement. B.C. Bhattacharya, citing the Shilpa or art manuals, illustrates its significance by stating that, "Beauty had to be emphasised to imbibe the symbolism. Indian art, therefore, had to be a mixture of symbolism and a beautiful art form. An ugly figure could never gratify a devotee's mind and his thirst for the infinite through a visible form. Hence, mystical symbols are represented with beauty, exquisite in quality and impressive in form." Thus, the Yaksha and Yakshini, in a pragmatic move,

came to be visualised to make an austere religion approachable and attractive to people from all walks of life.

The Yaksha and Yakshini existed in popular belief and in the literary tradition of Brahmanism way before they were incorporated into Jainism and Buddhism. In Hinduism, they are seen as patrons of the forests. The Buddhist texts, however, give more importance to Yakshinis than the Yakshas, as reflected in stupas at places like Bharhut and Sanchi.[9]

Within Jainism, initially in the 6th–9th century CE, Tirthankaras like Rishabhnath, Santinath, Neminath, Parsvanath, Mahavira, etc., were accompanied by a single Yaksha-Yakshi pair. In fact, the earliest Yaksha-Yakshi pair in Jain sculpture were indeed that of Sarvanubhuti and Ambika (Tiwari 1987). The depiction of the pair was, however, restricted to western India, as few have been found in Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar. By the end of the 9th century CE, one pair of Yaksha and Yakshi came to be identified with each Tirthankara. The prominent Yakshas were Dharanendra (Yaksha of Padmavati) and Gomukha (Yaksha of Cakresvari; depicted with Rishabhnath). Between the 10th and 13th centuries CE, those like Padmavati, Jvalamalini, and Ambika became powerful Yakshis around whom individual cults developed (Pathak 2023).

While the iconography of Ambika shall be revealed in the subsequent paragraphs, it is imperative to discuss the other prominent Yakshinis for a comparative study. Padmavati, the Yakshi of Parsvanatha, the 23rd Tirthankara, is represented as riding on a snake and cock, and holding a lotus, noose, fruit, and goad. Like Ambika, she is visualised with several arms. The four-handed image holds a goad, rosary, and two lotuses. The six-handed type has a nose, sword, crescent, club, and a staff. The eight-handed figure has a noose and other attributes. The twenty-four-handed relief holds a conch, sword, crescent, lotus, bow, spear, and noose. The legend of

Padmavati associates her with Patala. Jvalamalini, the Yakshi of Chandraprabhu, the eighth Tirthankara, rides a cat and is adorned with a sword, dub, spear, and axe. In the Digambara tradition, she has a buffalo symbolising her connection with her consort Vijaya, who is synonymous with Yama, the rider of a buffalo. An eight-armed figure of this Yakshini was identified by B.C. Bhattacharya in a cave under the Eastern roof of the Gwalior Fort (Bhattacharya 1939). A significant point to consider here is that, unlike Ambika, who is visualised with her maternal attributes, these other Yakshinis are depicted in a rather fierce form. These features, therefore, also emphasise the 'unique' place of Ambika within Jainism.

S. no.	*Tirthankaras*	*Congizance*	*Yaksha*	*Yakshini*
1	Rishabha	Vrsa	Gomukha	cakresvari
2	Ajithnath	Gaja	Mahayaksa	Ajitabala
3	Sambhavnath	Asva	Trimukha	Duritari
4	Abhinandannath	Kapi	Yakesavara	Kalika
5	Sumatinath	Kraunca	Tumburu	Mahakali
6	Padamprabhu	Raktabija	Kusuma	Syama
7	Suparshva	Svastika	Matanga	Santa/ santi
8	Chandraprabhu	Sasi	Vijaya	Bhrkuti
9	Suvidhinath (Pushpadanath)	Makara	Jaya	Sutrika
10	Sheetalnath	Srivatsa	Brahma	Asoka
11	Shreyamshnath	Gandaka	Yakset	Manavi
12	Vasupujya	Mahisa	Kumara	Candi
13	Vimalnath	Sukara	Sanmukha	Vidita
14	Anathanath	Syena	Patala	Ankusi
15	Dharmnath	Vajra	Kinnara	Kandarpi
16	Shantinath	Mrga	Garuda	Nirvani
17	Kunthunath	Chhaga	Gandharva	Bala
18	Arnath	Nandyavarta	Yakset	Dharini
19	Mallinath	Ghata	Kubera	Dharanpriya
20	Munisuvrata	Kurma	Varuna	Nadarakta or Naradatta
21	Suvratanatha	Nilotpala	Bhrkuti	Gandharva
22	Aristhnemi (Neminath)	Sankha	Gomedha	Ambika
23	Parshvanath	Phani	Parsva	Padmavati
24	Mahavira	Simha	Matanga	Siddhayika

Table 1: *The various Tirthankaras with their respective Yaksha-Yakshi.*
Source: Pathak, Smriti, and S. K. Dwivedi. "Some Sculptures of Yakshi Ambika from Gwalior Region",
ICON: Journal of Archaeology and Culture, 2021

Ambika Yakshi

Ambika, literally meaning 'mother', is known variously as Amba, Ambalika, Ambika, Ambali, Ambi, Chamudi, Amra, Kusmandi, etc. She is the Yakshi of the 22nd Tirthankara, Neminath. Neminath, Rishabhnath, and Mahavira are the only three Tirthankaras who attained *nirvana* in *padmasana*. Neminath, also known as Aristanemi, is also believed to be the cousin of the Hindu god Krishna. Gomedha/Sarvanubhuti is her Yaksha with three faces, six arms, and the vehicle of a man. While the Svetambara tradition depicts him with a disc, mongoose, axe, citrus, spear, and trident, the Digambaras show him with an axe, hammer, staff, fruit, and vajra. He is believed to be a form of Kubera, as he is called Naravahana, another name for the Hindu deity.

The Svetambara tradition recounts the figure of a woman named Agnila (Jain, Navneet 2023). While her husband Soma and mother-in-law were not at home, she gave the food cooked for the Brahmanas to a starving Jain monk. Agitated by this, she was disowned along with her sons and took refuge under a mango tree. Seeing her righteousness, the demigods converted the tree into a *kalpavrisha* and filled the dry tank with water. Startled by her divine qualities, Soma was filled with remorse and ran to seek her forgiveness. Frightened at this sight, Ambika jumped into the water. As a result of her meritorious conduct, she was reborn as Neminath's Yakshi, Ambika, and her two sons were also initiated by him. Her husband became her vehicle, the lion.[10]

The story underscores the contestation between the Brahmanas and the Jains. More importantly, it emphasises Ambika's virtues as a devout wife and a pious woman, ideas that came to be prized in the Jain archetype of a perfect woman, but her husband's inception as her vehicle and his seeking her forgiveness highlight the elevated status of but a respected one. Even the

Jain idea of *Micchami Dukkadam*, which means seeking forgiveness from all, includes the idea of a man asking for the forgiveness of the woman of the house. Yet again, Ambika is admired above all as the paragon of motherly affection. Notably, she is accompanied by her two sons and no daughter, viewing her primarily in the limited role as the birth-giver of a male child.

Textual References to Ambika

The earliest reference to Ambika in the textual tradition can be seen in the commentary Viśeṣāvaśyaka Bhāṣya (585 CE). As centuries passed, her persona gained depth in scriptures like the Aparājitapṛcchā and Rūpamaṇḍana. The Tantric period saw an extensive outpouring of literature, such as Ambika-Kalpa, Ambika-Tāḍaṅka, Ambikatāṭaṅka, Ambika-Stuti, Ambika-Devi-Stuti, and Bhairava-Padmāvatī-Kalpa. Later, in the 12th–13th century, Bhuvanadeva compiled the Aparājitapṛcchā, a lyrical tribute to Ambika. Ambika-Stavana, a hymn to Ambika penned by Vastupala, minister of the Chalukyas, was added to the repository of texts in the 13th century. The Ambika-Devi-Kalpa of Acharya Jinaprabha Suri, produced in the 14th century, contributed to this growing corpus, solidifying Ambika's position as an eminent deity.

Hindu and Buddhist Influence

Scholars are divided on the influence of Hinduism on the origin of Ambika in Jainism. Amba has been associated as a common epithet of Durga, Parvati, the sister of Rudra, and even one of Skanda's mothers (The Krittikas). J. N. Banerjee calls Ambika the Jain opposite of Durga, surrounded by her own mythology (Banerjee 1956), while Kalipada Mitra

makes the connection between Kusmandi and Durga and calls Ambika the 'Hindu Amba' (Mitra 1971). S. K. Jain argues that the idea is borrowed from Simhavahini Durga (Jain, S K 1973).

Other scholars like T. N. Gopinatha assert that Jain Yakshis are different from Hindu goddesses. They point out that the fertility cult was first adopted by Jains in the form of Yakshi Bahu-Putrika (the one with many children), who by the 6th century became Yakshi Ambika, and disregard any similarity with Durga. (Rao 1927) Interestingly, Debala Mitra underscores a close iconographical resemblance with the Buddhist Hariti, calling Ambika an 'amalgamation of different ideas'. Hariti, a devourer of children, evolved as their protector, and is represented with a child on her lap and a pomegranate in one hand as the quintessence of procreativity (Tiwari 1987). However, whether or not influenced by other traditions, Ambika has certainly evolved her distinctive features.

The Basic Tenets of the Iconography of Ambika

The fundamental attributes of Ambika's iconography can be traced to her earliest representation in the 6th century from Akota near Baroda (Gupte 1972). Her iconography typically features a child, mostly Priyankara, the younger son, sitting on her left lap and Subhankara, the elder son, standing on the right beside her; a mango branch in her hand (*amralumbi*) or a mango canopy above her. Mango (*Mangifera indica*) is one of the most sacred trees in Jainism, along with the acacia (*Vachellia nilotica*), bel (*Aegle marmelos*), bodhi tree or pipal (*Ficus religiosa*), and other figs (*Ficus spp.*), kadam (*Neolamarckia cadamba*), tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*), and teak (*Tectona grandis).* It is the personification

of new life and is associated with various spiritual events in the texts. It appears in dreams and acts as an aid in satiating hunger.

These are, therefore, essential elements reflecting Ambika as an embodiment of fecundity and plentitude. *Matulinga* (citron fruit) is another symbol of fertility, key to her role in procreation. Her *vahana* is the lion. As the symbol of Mahavira, it is an embodiment of fearlessness (*Abhaya*). Thus, here, it reflects Ambika as a resolute woman exemplifying maternal power and strength. However, she is often seen seated on the lotus as well.

All these defining motifs, along with her elaborate attire and jewellery, emphasise her role as the mother and protector of children. Between the 6th–9th centuries, her two-armed figures began to appear. The earliest reference to her iconographic form can be traced to the Caturvimsatika. From the 10th century, she came to be visualised with four arms, as in texts like *Nirvana Kalika*. (Tiwari 1987)

During the 10th–13th centuries, there were several additions to her attributes, which saw her rank rising and sometimes equaling that of the Jinas. The inclusion of the goad (*ankusha*), noose (*pasha*), sword, and disc projecting Ambika's role as the destroyer of evil spirits is attributed to the influence of the Shakti cult. From the 13th century onwards, Ambika came to be associated with terrific tantric forms and given names like Shankra, Chandrika, and Aghoda. Prominent texts, such as Ambika Tadanka and Ambika Stuti depicted her with a bow and arrow as well (Pathak 2023). U. P. Shah mentions an eight-armed Ambika in *dhyana mudra* at this time (Shah 1987). Eventual popularity had led to the evolution of independent cults around the Yakshi, and she came to be visualised in majestic forms. However, her rank was always restricted by her primary role as a divine

mother, which would conveniently align with the patriarchal notions of womanhood.

The conception of Ambika differs between the two sects. Within the Digambara tradition, she is visualised with two hands, a lion, mangoes, and a child. In the Svetambara tradition, on the other hand, she is often depicted with four hands and a noose and goad, in addition to the basic Digambara features. Differences can also be seen in different geographical regions. In the South, she has a dark blue complexion in contrast to the golden hue in the North. Further, mangoes didn't find much support in the South, where she is mostly depicted holding a sword and disc in hand. Also, both children are shown resting on her lap in the South. However, whatever the differences may be, she is universally visualised as a metaphor of maternal love.

Ambika in Gwalior

Ambika is one of the most prominent Yakshis in the Gwalior-Chambal regions. While her relief can be found in other groups, this paper solely focuses on the Ambika of the Urvahi valley. Urvahi stands as the entrance to the majestic Gwalior Fort. James Fergusson, in his History of Indian and Eastern Architecture, first published in 1876, gives an apt description:

"The fortress stands on an isolated flat-topped hill about 300 feet high, 1½ miles long north to south, and 600 to 2,800 feet wide east to west. There are now two approach roads to climb the rock (although formerly there were some more) — one through the Gwalior Gate on the east and the other through the Urvahi Gate on the west." (Fergusson 1876)

On the left-hand side of this valley, at the top, is the majestic Jain rock-cut architecture. They are known as the Siddhanchal Caves. These mainly house the Tirthankaras, in both standing and sitting postures. The most revered among these is the 57-feet-tall statue of Adinath, the 1st Tirthankara. Placed here in small niches under the Tirthankaras are the images of Ambika. She is seen at Urvahi at two places prominently, one at the base in the Trishala Mata Atishay Kshetra, and the other at the Siddhanchal Caves about 200 metres from the Urvahi Gate. Carved in the locally available sandstone, these figures have become the defining features of the valley.

Ambika in the Upper Urvahi Valley (15th Century CE)

The figures of the Siddhanchal Caves in the Upper Urvahi Valley portray Yakshi Ambika seated in *lalitasana* (relaxed pose) with her face exuding a serene expression. A child sits on her left lap. Here she is typically two-armed. Her left hand supports the child in the *vatsalya mudra*, stressing motherly affection. The right hand holds *matulinga* (citron fruit). She is adorned with intricate ornamentation – *kireet* (the elongated crown), *kundal* (earrings), a *har*, and a *mekhla* (waistband). Interestingly, the design of the necklace in each of these images is different, adding to its aesthetic appeal. A Yaksha accompanies her, and they are enshrined in a tiny rectangular niche placed beneath the feet of various Tirthankaras, including Mahavira and Neminath in *padmasana* (sitting pose), and Rishabhnath and Parsvanath in *kayotsarga* (standing meditative pose). *[see, next pages]*

Fig 3: (Refer to the prev. description)

Fig 4: This Yakshi holds no object in the hand

Fig 5: The child in the figure rests on the right lap,
with both hands of Ambika supporting him

Fig 6: (See the prev. detailed discussion)

Fig 7: In contrast to the other figures, the child here has his right hand raised in the air, perhaps reflecting the innocence of a boy reaching out for his mother's affection

Ambika in the Trishala Mata Atishay Kshetra at the Urvahi Gate (7th Century CE)

The relief depicted here is one of the most exquisitely carved Ambika Yakshi in the Chambal region, positioned at the entrance of the road to the Urvahi Gate. Her figure is of considerable size, located next to Trishala Mata's relief, which lends the place its name. Ambika sits on a lion mount, turned to the right and facing the viewer. Priyankara rests on her left lap, and Shubhankar stands to her right. She is surmounted by a mango canopy with the Tirthankar's small image placed in between. In her left hand, she holds a branch of the mango tree, while her right caresses the child. Her ornate jewellery includes: *kireet* (headgear), *patra-kundalas* (earrings),

bhujband (bangles on the forearms), *stanasutra* (*hara* at breast), *katibandh* (waistband), and *paajeb* (anklets). Further, her curvaceous form, almond-shaped eyes, arched eyebrows, sharp nose, and rounded chin project her as a manifestation of the procreative capacity. In the foreground, she is accompanied by her Yaksha, who is adorned with fine ornaments and has a prominent belly, symbolising profusion.

Fig 8: Savarnubhuti

Fig 9: Ambika

A comparative look at this can be drawn from the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Ellora Caves. While both are inscribed in the intricate rock-cut architecture, in Maharashtra and in Madhya Pradesh, these show considerable differences in their iconography. Out of the 34 caves at Ellora, the last four are dedicated to the Digambar Jain tradition, carved between the 9th and 12th centuries. Here, Ambika develops as an independent cult figure, specifically attached to Neminath. Also, the figurines are crafted with delicate features and rich embellishments, unlike the less detailed ones at Siddhanchal. These differences highlight the regional variations in cave temples across the subcontinent and situate the distinctive characteristics of Gwalior within a larger framework.

Evidential Reasoning

The most startling aspect of the Ambika relief of Urvahi Gate at Gwalior is the apparent contrast between the colossal statues of the Tirthankaras and the miniature figures of the Yaksha and Yakshini. This spatial marginality gives a sense of the relative significance of the two images. Ambika, placed at the feet of the Tirthankara, marks her subordinate position. The tiny sculptures of Ambika here are, however, different from the independent statues that were built elsewhere by the fifteenth century. On the contrary, the most elaborate statue of Ambika that is found in the Urvahi valley belongs to an earlier period, the 7th century. Therefore, it is not the period but the visual representation that is of significance. The objective in the rock-cut architecture here was to focus on the Tirthankaras, and the Ambika figurines are merely an iconographical embellishment. These characteristics of the rock art also shed light on the fact that while elements of maternal love and material embellishments had seeped in, the religion, especially the Digambar sect,

remained primarily centred on asceticism. While this overshadows the Yakshi, it does not negate her importance per se.

An interesting aspect showcasing Ambika's importance here is that she is not just attached to Neminath but has almost a ubiquitous presence under the niches of the images of various Tirthankaras. Thus, the iconography categorically points out that while the spotlight is on the austere Tirthankaras, the Yakshi, a personification of motherly love, must not go unnoticed. Her recurrent presence signifies her as the standard Yakshi in all the reliefs. Another aspect of the relief here is that conventionally the Yakshini is placed on the left, but here she sits on the right. This deviation can be a topic for future research.

Even today, diseased children are bathed in the Trishala Mata Atishaya Kshetra, believing that the water would cure their illness. Protection against childhood diseases is a major aspect of Ambika's mother cult. This lends an iconographical interpretation to the modern relevance of Ambika. In fact, according to the 2011 Census, Gwalior has an infant mortality rate of 52, much worse than the national average of 44. (GoI, 2011), thereby contributing to making Madhya Pradesh the state with the highest infant mortality rate in the country.

This relevance projects Ambika as the emotional anchor of the community. Asceticism was made appealing by rooting it in the tangible world by way of the Yaksha and Yakshini. The importance of a mother in a religion centred on mendicancy can perhaps be traced to the need for the continuity of the lineage. Ideas of compassion and selfless love would appeal to those who couldn't walk on the harsh path of renunciation. Since the majority of the followers were merchants, this path drew them closer.

In that way, the idea of Ambika has helped see the divinity in *vatsalya* and appreciate that it is the mother who acts as the Tirthankar's guardian. Recent ideas of 'ecofeminism' can also be understood in this context. The mango tree and Ambika's attributes as a nurturer personify harmony with nature. Indeed, the fort would act as a mirror, reflecting these ideas from above and projecting them to the masses.

However, seen from a gendered lens, the concept of Ambika has idealised women and has evolved a prism to judge them through societal norms. While her prestige as a mother is revered, it reinforces the patriarchal mindset where women are just seen in their capacity as submissive, docile, and self-abnegating. The spiritual upliftment of women is possible only when it takes place within the sphere of male authority. Uma Chakravarti (2006) suggests that the idea of motherhood was 'instrumentalised' and attached to her virility and not her free will. Thus, they were "exalted as mothers but denied any status beyond this role" and were "a vessel to transmit the male seed." Paradoxically, however, while here her fecundity is venerated, the female reproductive physiology is itself seen as a hindrance in Digambara texts to the woman's path to liberation. While Svetambaras believe women can attain *nirvana*, the Digambaras hold them incapable of doing so.

It is through the household, and not the ascetic path, that Ambika derives her divine status. Although it gives space to nuns, Jainism sees the domestic sphere as the fundamental abode for women. The idea of a hermit becoming a householder is present in Shaivism, which grew in opposition to Buddhism's conception of a householder's initiation into hermitage. While Buddhism stresses the middle path, Jain philosophy draws from the inherent contradiction between the lay devotee and the renunciator and

incorporates notions of the mother amid extreme penance. This also brings about an important observation that while primarily being a monastic faith, domestic affairs still hold significance. Contradictorily, today the nuns far outnumber the monks in the Svetambara tradition, but are accorded an inferior rank and must show deference even to the junior monks.

It is this binary between the householder and the ascetic that Ambika attempts to bridge. She sets an ideal standard for the laywoman to incorporate in herself the glorified conception of motherhood. A point to note here is that the Yakshi is attached to Neminath, who broke off his marriage and took the path to asceticism, leaving his wife in the middle of the wedding. Thus, this contrast in the symbolism of the two highlights the inherent contradiction between the monastic and the domestic affairs. The conception of womanhood is the same; however, the female's agency is neglected, and her sole role is as a devout wife and a doting mother. Even today, women imagine themselves within this patriarchal set-up and see it as their ultimate fate. The famous Svetambara bhajan 'Rajul ki Vyatha' (the condition of Rajul, Neminath's fiancé), which women like the author's grandmother sing with gusto in parts of North India, depicts that such notions have become entrenched in the female mind. The bhajan laments Rajul's condition when she is left by Neminath, but instead of holding him responsible for her misery, it instructs laywomen to follow her example and sacrifice their identities for the 'greater good'. Ambika too perpetuates through this archetype.

Misogynist comments, assassinating a female's character, and prejudices against her menstrual health are evidenced in numerous Jain texts. This male dichotomy is perhaps the reason for the restricted role of

women within the spiritual sphere. The need for modern historiography is therefore to reimagine Ambika not just in terms of her motherly attributes but also as a strong and virtuous woman. These virtues, too, need to be revisited, whether one emphasises docility and submissiveness or independence and grit. In fact, Ambika's unyielding attitude and fierce appearance can be discerned best from her tantric iconography, where she is represented with a sword, disc, and sometimes even a bow and arrow. She is seen not just as a caregiver, but also as a protector and a power to ward off evil. The very fact that she sits on a lion, which is her subordinated husband who harassed her, reflects her as a steadfast and resilient woman. Her independent worship, sometimes at par with the Jinas, is itself a testament to her status as a dominant guardian deity. Our deities are often a reflection of the values that we venerate; now is the time to question some of those values.

Conclusion

A woman in her individual capacity, exercising her might – is itself a stupendous change in the rather male centric Jainism. Highlighting the socio-cultural changes that have engulfed the community, it propounds the vision of egalitarianism in the secular and the sacred and ultimately acts as a catalyst for progressive transformation. The problem of holding the narrative of motherhood as the sole criteria for viewing Ambika neglects her multidimensional personality and restricts feminine characteristics in a narrow prism. It confines divinity to certain 'virtues' and generated an arbitrary yardstick to judge other morals. The issue is evident; regardless of her roles, there is a need to inculcate perspectives that view her for her greater individuality.

The study has aimed to initiate a reclaim of Ambika's identity as a symbol of resistance in amidst the rather male dominated contexts. Her multifaceted role is the embodiment of a woman's spirit of courage and compassion. Independence over subjugation, as depicted in her iconography, highlight both the nuances in Indian devotional tradition and the developments in feminine identity and politics. In addition, placing Ambika in the present context in the Gwalior-Chambal region also sheds light on the condition of women in the region as well. The sex ratio, according to the 2011 census, is 864 women per 1000 men. This skewed ratio is much below the national average of 943. Moreover, the very recent World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2025) places India at the 131st position out of 148 countries. The parameters indicated low female economic participation and an enduring son preference, showcasing that these deep-rooted ideas have persisted over the centuries. The objective of this study has been, therefore, to also highlight the historic marginalisation of women. The need of the hour is to reclaim women's identities not just as mothers, wives, and daughters, but as independent and brave women exercising their agency.

Endnotes:

1. Gwalior is first referred to in Buddhist texts such as those of *Varahamihira* and *Buddhaghosa*.
2. The existence of Ashoka's inscriptions as far as Datia indicates the significance of Gwalior as a crossroads for important trade routes. Al-Baruni (11th century) mentions Gwalior Fort during his visit from Kanauj to Khajuraho. European travellers like Terry and Tavernier mention Gwalior as a *qasba* (a town). Sher Shah Suri also mentions Gwalior. In modern times, British records refer to it as the Scindia state.
3. Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* mentions Chambal as "Charmadyati". Agrawal, V.S, *India as Known to Panini,* Lucknow, 1953, Pg 47
4. *Ibn Battuta*, Bhattacharya, P.K., *Historical Geography of Madhya Pradesh*, Delhi, 1977, Pg 258
5. Chandragupta Maurya received monkhood in Ujjain, from where he proceeded to Shravanabelagola, where he died following the *Sallekhana* tradition.
6. The Sahasrabahu Temple, dedicated to Vishnu (1093 CE), houses an inscription attributed to a Jain scholar.
7. Directory of Gwalior Jains, Archives, Svetambara Jain Sangh Gwalior, 2011-12
8. *Shrimali, Oswal, and Parwar Jains* sponsored many of the cave sculptures. This period, therefore, witnessed the establishment of the Bhattaraka Peeth.
9. Tirthankara Mahavira Smriti Grantha*,* edited by Ravindra Malav, Gwalior, 1977, p. 324.
10. Each of the 24 Tirthankaras has their own symbol.
11. In comparison to the images, the scale of embellishments and detailing is magnified.

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4. World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2025*. 11 June 2025. World Economic Forum

Artworks

1. *Jinas with Family and Goddess Ambika*. 950–1050 CE, Detroit Institute of Arts. Sandstone sculpture.

Photographs

Jain, Pragya. All photographs taken during field work at the Gwalior Fort. 2025