

THE GODDESS LAKSMI

In Hindu mythology, the goddess Laksmi (sometimes called Sri), is widely recognized as a symbol of good fortune and prosperity (Fowler 36). She is regarded secondly, as the Goddess of wealth, beauty and fertility. Her origins can be traced back to pre-Vedic times but her development as a goddess has not been met without disagreement by scholars. Iconographically, Laksmi is sometimes depicted individually, however due to her dependent relationship upon her male consort Visnu, one of the three major gods of modern Hinduism, she is most often depicted alongside him. Consequently, depending on this division, Laksmi has been represented in various ways (Fowler 37). Laksmi is widely worshipped by many Hindus for various reasons; however her most significant worship is the Hindu festival of Diwali, in which she is called upon by many shop and business owners to bring good fortune and prosperity in the coming business year (Husain 146).

Laksmi has been an important element of Hindu religious life for over three millennia and the history of her development as a deity has not been presented without controversy and disagreement. The origin of Laksmi has evolved since pre-Vedic times when Laksmi may have first existed as an earth goddess (Turner and Coulter 285). The Sanskrit term “*Laksmi*” has also been explained as an abstract concept originally meaning “a sign or an omen of good or bad luck” and, accordingly, Laksmi later developed into the deity of good fortune and prosperity (Olsen 126), while Alaksmi conversely developed into the bringer of bad luck (Dhal 134).

Due to the patriarchal structure of the Indo-Aryan society, female divinities were rarely mentioned in Vedic literature as a consequence of their secondary place in Vedic religion. Laksmi as a goddess was not mentioned in the *RgVeda*, however, in the fifteen versus appended to the fifth book of the *RgVeda*, Laksmi does appear as two separate, although, relatively minor deities:

Laksmi and Sri. Yet, even before this distinction, the abstract concept of Sri is mentioned several times throughout the *RgVeda* where it refers to benefit, advantage, riches, prosperity and well-being (Dhal 1-2). Early in the Upanishads, Sri and Laksmi are fused together to form one deity and by the time of the Puranas Laksmi is firmly established as the goddess of good fortune, prosperity, wealth and beauty (Olsen 126).

In the *Ramayana*, Laksmi is said to have risen, as Padma, from the ocean when its waters were churned to milk and later became the wife (*sakti*) or consort of Visnu. According to different descriptions, Laksmi arose from the sea of milk in some cases holding a lotus flower and in others standing on the expanded petals of the lotus (Stutley 160). In either case, the lotus flower becomes the most significant symbol associated with Laksmi. Visnu, one of the three major gods of modern Hinduism, is associated with ten divine incarnations (*avatara*), and Laksmi, as Visnu's consort, is reborn each time along with him (Williams 70). In the *Ramayana* she is reborn as the wife of Rama, Sita. Laksmi is also reborn as Radha, the favorite *gopi* (cow-herding maidens) of Krsna (Fowler 36).

The most prominent feature of the iconography of Laksmi is her continuous association with the lotus flower on which she is most often shown standing or sitting atop. For Laksmi the lotus flower is a symbol of beauty, purity, happiness and eternal renewal. The lotus is portrayed as the throne of the gods and is generally shown along with Surya (the Vedic solar deity), Visnu and Laksmi (Jansen 47). Because Laksmi is understood as having a very dependent relationship with Visnu, they are usually depicted together; on occasion their two forms are combined into one, Visnu on the right, Laksmi on the left; the left being a position of inferiority. However, when Laksmi is depicted alone, usually in calendars or in a shrine dedicated to her in a temple, like Visnu, she usually has four arms. In two of her arms she is frequently holding a lotus blossom and

from her other two arms, coins and gifts of prosperity fall from her hands, showing that she imparts blessings for those who worship her. Conversely, when Laksmi is depicted together with Visnu she is shown as having only two arms suggesting her subservient position in relation to Visnu (Olsen 137-138).

Laksmi is often depicted as a fair goddess, with a golden complexion (a demonstration of her association with wealth and corn), decorated in fine garments and precious jewels (Olsen 141). She is sometimes depicted with two attendant elephants, symbols of royalty and fertility, one on either side, spraying or watering the lotus (Jansen 92). She is also commonly depicted atop Visnu's chest, or massaging his feet or being touched by his foot, another suggestion that Visnu is dominant in his relationship with Laksmi (O'Flaherty 117). Laksmi has also come to be associated with the harvest, and in some cases is represented by the image of unhusked rice in a corn-basket (Stutley 160). An association with cow dung is also present, representing vegetation and fertility, due to the fertile and fruitful nature of the substance (Dhal 62).

Goddesses within Hindu mythology are frequently represented by, and categorized into contrasting groups. According to some scholars, the Goddess Durga is an example of one such representation, in which Hindu goddesses are viewed as independent and fierce. Therefore, independent goddesses usually are not connected to any male consort. Scholars sometimes characterize these unconstrained goddesses as unpredictable and aggressive, and maintain that they are frequently worshipped during times of emergency (Olson 124). However, although scholars such as Hawley consider a goddesses such as Durga to be an independent and fierce goddess, he contends that these goddesses are "characterized by their supremacy over all other forms of life, whether animal, human, or divine" (Hawley 9). A second representation of the goddess is epitomized by the relationship of Laksmi to Visnu, in which a goddess is shaped by her

relationship to her male consort (Hawley 9). In this case the goddess is seen as dependent, subservient, and nurturing to her male partner. This dependency can be perceived in the various depictions of Visnu and Laksmi where they appear together. In there, Laksmi is most often shown at the feet of Visnu, or seated upon his chest (Hawley 88). Laksmi serves as the ideal devoted wife, and is often used as an example as such in Hindu culture. However, while some goddesses embody both traits (independent/fierce and nurturing/consorts), other goddesses appear to personify one or the other.

Laksmi is a widely worshiped deity within Hindu society especially amongst the Vaisnavites (worshippers of Visnu and/or his incarnations). Although very few temples have been erected in Laksmi's honor, her picture is regularly found to grace many homes, shops and businesses across India. Because Laksmi is worshipped as the Goddess of Good fortune and Prosperity, she receives her greatest homage from those owning businesses in India during the winter festival, Diwali (feast of lamps). During this festival, terracotta lamps burning off of edible oil or ghee, are lit by families and often surround their homes and businesses, in an attempt to attract her presence (Husain 146). Laksmi is also worshipped during a festival in July and August known as Laksmi-Vrata. She is sometimes called upon by those wishing to bear children, and in some cases, Laksmi is also worshipped as the Empress of the Sea, by those who fish for a living. These fisherman offer sacrifices to Laksmi as a wish to secure a good catch and a safe journey home (Turner and Coulter 285). Laksmi is worshipped by various groups for various reasons, establishing her as an important goddess, even in present-day Hindu society.

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Related Research Topics

Alaksmi, Durga, earth goddess, Krsna, Padma, Radha, Sita, Sri, Surya, Visnu, *RgVeda*, Puranas, *Ramayana*, Upanishads, Diwali, Laksmi-Vrata, avataras, lotus flower, sakti.

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