

## THE MULTI-FACETED CONTRIBUTION OF FEMALE FIGURES AT THE ENTRANCES OF ANCIENT SRI LANKAN BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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### Introduction

The methodical beginning of Sri Lankan built environment goes back to the early historical period and the most of the buildings of this era belong to the elite class of the society. The monastic architecture and royal palaces portray noteworthy architectural tradition of that period. The entrances of these monastic complexes and their buildings have been ornately decorated with a multitude of designs and the efficacy of female figures in these entrances is outstanding amongst them. The objective of this study is to investigate the multi-faceted contribution of female representation and social attitudes towards women within historical societies. Furthermore, to recognize the place attributed to women by the society, in comparison to the 'male' and understanding the nature and the position of women in history. This study also attempts to understand how females lived in changing social contexts in historical Sri Lanka.

### Methodology

The growing body of data retrieved from archaeological collections of information from primary sources, mainly sculptured art from early historic period to late medieval period has helped us to construct this study. Sculptured art from *Isurumuniya*, *Abhyagiri*, *Jetavana*, *Nalanda Gedige*, *Manankattiya*, *Lankatilake* image

house and *Watadage Polonnaruwa*, *Yapahuwa* and *Uda Aludeniya* have been investigated for this study. Observation of places where female figures have been portrayed has also helped in putting this study together. We have also analyzed the nature of contextualizing women in art representation.

### Results

A range of entrances have evidenced the efficacy of female figures. They are the door frames, door posts and door steps of buildings. The figure of *Lakshmi* is idealized as the Goddess of wealth, both materialistic and spiritual (Dhal: 1978) had been frequently employed for this. Female figures were carved at the entrance of several Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka, beginning from the Middle Historic period at *Issurumuniya* and at Late Historic sites such as *Nalanda gedige* and at *Yapahuwa*. (Karunarathna: 2010). The figure of goddess *Lakshmi* in Indian Buddhist sculpture is depicted at *Sanchi*, where it is constantly repeated on the gateways of the Great Stupa. Similarly, she had been replicated at *Bodhgaya*, *Bharhut* and *Amaravati*. (Brown: 1959). The goddess *Lakshmi* also occurs in entrances of Jain architecture at *Udayagiri*. It demonstrates the fact that Sri Lankan artists emulated the concept from India and replicated it here. (Karunarathna: 2010) Furthermore, that Indian imitation

reflects in Sri Lankan *Stupa Ayakas* and it also could be considered as a certain kind of an entrance to the *stupa*. The *ayakas of Jetavana* and *Abhyagiri* positioned female in the lower panel in small sizes, whereas the male figures were seen positioned on the upper panels, in large figures (Karunarathna: 2008).

The guard stones (*muragala*) and balustrades (*korawakgala*) Have been ornated with different profiles of women. When female is associated with male figure in guard stones she has given a less important place. The male figures are highlighted by female figures who venerate male figures. The role of the woman, as a person who guards the entrance to a building or a monastery, had been considerably depicted in the above mentioned creations. The guard stone of *Manankattiya* with women carrying a "pot" (*Purna ghata*), and *nagarajini* depicted on the balustrade of *Lankatilaka* image house at Polonnaruwa are examples.

### Conclusion

Different purposes of utilizing female figures in ancient art forms could be recognized. The protection, prosperity and a decoration are vividly emphasized among them. The Indian influence is undoubtedly evident. On some occasions when women were portrayed with men, these female figures were given an inferior place (Karunarathna: 2008) and were placed

in a secondary position in relation to the 'male' figures.

### References

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