

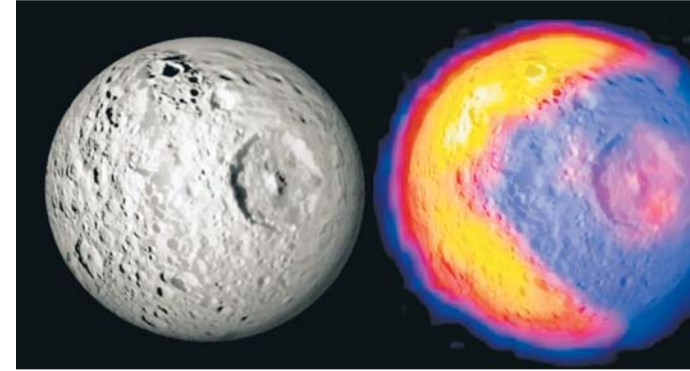


World Animal Day is an ideal time for humans to speak on behalf of those animals who cannot speak for themselves. This is a great day to get involved with various charitable organizations that fight against treating animals poorly, especially when it comes to big business and industrialized farming. Speak up by arranging to host an event at work in support of animals, attending a group meeting about animal welfare in the community, or sharing about the care for animals on social media to raise awareness.

### #COVID LOCKDOWN

## Cooler days & nights at Moon

Lockdowns have been shown to have starkly impacted human activities such as industrial pollution, transportation and fossil fuel burning



Effects of COVID-19 lockdowns on Earth may have reached the Moon, as lunar temperatures were found to have abnormally dipped during April-May 2020, according to a study.

Maximum temperatures on the Earth's natural satellite fell in this period, while nights were found to be cooler by nearly 8-10 degrees Celsius. The Moon could therefore possibly serve as a 'stable platform' to study climate change on Earth, K. Durga Prasad and G. Ambily, researchers from the Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad, said in a study published in the journal, Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society.



Brought in to arrest the spread of the COVID-19 disease, lockdowns were first introduced in China and Italy in March 2020. The measures were quickly adopted by other countries and by the following month, about half the world's population were reported to have been under some form of lockdown, including quarantine and stay-at-home orders.

Lockdowns have been shown to have starkly impacted human activities such as industrial pollution, transportation and fossil fuel burning.

The reduced human activity translated into lower greenhouse gas emissions and pollutant levels, and therefore, less heat being released from the Earth's surface during night-time, the researchers said. Part of this heat is known to reach the Earth-facing side of the Moon at its night-side and warm the lunar surface.

Therefore, to look for lockdown-induced effects, the researchers analysed night-time surface temperatures recorded at six sites on the Earth-facing side of the Moon from 2017-2023.



Lajja Gauri with lotus head.

#### Kamayani Sharma

Many readers might be familiar with the facetious pop culture term used to describe men taking up space - manspreading. But fewer might know that there's a long and established global art history involving goddess-spread-ing. Almost every year, centuries-old sculptures and carvings are discovered in India's fields and by its roadsides, featuring a mysterious female figure with her legs spread wide, as though displaying her genitals.

This type of image has been found in cultures around the world - from the ancient Egyptian face-in-vagina figurine Baubo (characterised as a vulva clown in one tongue-in-cheek article) to the mediaeval Irish labia-flasher called Sheela Na Gig. "The embodiment of big vagina energy".

In the 1930s, Anglo-Indian archaeologist Margaret Alice Murray, in her classification of various "fertility figures", identified Baubo and Sheela Na Gig as examples of "the personified yoni". The idols and drawings of women that keep turning up in unexpected places in South Asia are a member of this group, a kind of figure known as the Lajja Gauri.

The Lajja Gauri is a visual form featuring a reclining body with legs spread, representing a yoni or womb, ostensibly at the moment of birth. The form dates to the Harappan period in its most nascent version, with production flourishing during the early Common Era, between the 2nd and 11th century, in parts of India and Pakistan. Based on an examination of private collection, University of Peshawar archaeologist M Nasim Khan has written on the bronze and gold seals excavated in Gandhara's Kashmir Smast in Pakistan, discerning "seven different types".

More information about the Lajja Gauri is provided by Carol Radcliffe Bolon, former Assistant Curator of South and Southeast Asian Art at the Arthur M Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art, in her comprehensive art historical study *Forms of the Goddess Lajja Gauri in Indian Art*. According to her research, relics in India have been found mostly at Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, particularly at the sites of Ter, Nagpur, Kondapur, Kausambi and Bhiha.

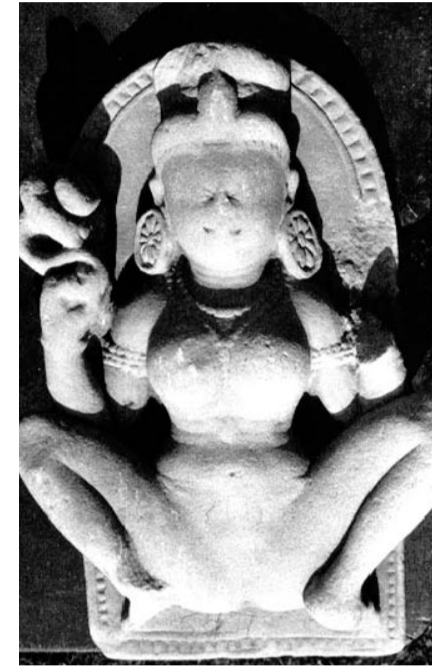
Ranging from two inches to larger than life-size, the material used to make the Lajja Gauri in India comprised "moulded or hand-formed terracotta or of stone carved in relief". What was the purpose of this figure? It most likely had to do with enhancing fertility. In her article *Lajja Gauri - Semiotics of the Goddess' Striking Image*, researcher Stuti Gandhi substantiates this with historical evidence. She finds support for the "goddess' connection with fertility" through an inscription at Nagarjunakonda from the late 3rd-early 4th century CE, which states that a queen's "husband and sons are alive", as well as through contemporary worship at Chalukya-era temples. She underscores this connection between fecundity and the deity by observing that "several examples of Lajja Gauri have been discovered near sources of water", perhaps an act of propitiation for agricultural abundance.

While it's important to be mindful that female-assigned anatomy in ancient art is often too-easily explained by reference to a "mother-goddess", the Lajja Gauri's characteristics reasonably lend themselves to at least an association with childbirth.

Given that the prominence of the exposed yoni is its definitive characteristic, how can the South Asian Lajja Gauri be related to similar figures elsewhere, such as Baubo and Sheela Na Gig? Though she does seem to share with them a talismanic aspect related to fertility rites, there are differences.

Bolon distinguishes the Lajja Gauri from other yonic figures by pointing out that the former is not shown physically revealing her vagina, rather it is the subtle slit of the vulva and "spread-leg" or uttanapad pose that constitutes the form. Not bearing the ribald connotations of Baubo's lore nor the sexual blatancy of the Sheelas, what does this pose mean?

# It Is The Worship Of The Womb



The Lajja Gauri is a visual form featuring a reclining body with legs spread, representing a yoni or womb, ostensibly at the moment of birth. The form dates to the Harappan period in its most nascent version, with production flourishing during the early Common Era, between the 2nd and 11th century, in parts of India and Pakistan. Based on an examination of private collections, University of Peshawar archaeologist M Nasim Khan has written on the bronze and gold seals excavated in Gandhara's Kashmir Smast in Pakistan, discerning "seven different types".



## # LAJJA GAURI



With the supine posture for both parturition and coitus being the same, it is easy to regard the image as having sexual overtones, but scholars are quick to mention the spiritual allegories the yoni stands for. In his essay 'A Lajja Gauri in a Buddhist Context' Aurangabad, UCLA professor and Curator in the Department of South and Southeast Asian Art at LACMA Robert L Brown notes, "That the position is a sexual one...is difficult to support from artistic and textual evidence. The Lajja Gauri figure appears frontally and almost without male partners, with the artist's intention being the exposure of the yoni and not the presentation of the sexual act."

As persuasive, and probably accurate, as these interpretations are, we must keep in mind that archaeological and art historical discourse on the eroticised female body in the South Asian context often has to operate within a field constituted by colonial repression and postcolonial release, as art historian Tapati Guha Thakurta says in *What Makes for an Authentic Female Nude?* This tension is evident in scholarship on the Lajja Gauri from the 19th century. Bolon cites the reaction of English civil servant, historian and epigraphist John Faithful Fleet encountering a Lajja Gauri in the wild. In his 1881 essay *Pali Sanskrit and Old Canarese Inscriptions*, he describes stumbling upon "...a somewhat notorious and very indecent headless stone figure of the goddess Parvati under the name Lajja Gauri..." at the Mahakuta temple complex.

Art historian HD Sankalla translated the name Lajja Gauri in the very title of his 1960 essay to mean "shameless woman". Indeed, Lajja Gauri is a name that could mean both that she is shameless and that she is modest - it is this double entendre that sharpens the iconographic pun between brimming pot and pregnant womb in the figure itself. Rejecting the label of Mother Goddess, Bolon positions her as "the elemental source of all life...that she is creative power personified is apparent from the symbols employed in her form and their deep cultural and artistic significance. Bolon establishes the Lajja Gauri's genealogy with a number of symbols such as the lotus, the brimming pot (purna kumbha) and the sivatras, an Indic mark of auspiciousness that usually takes the shape of a triangle or flower. In Indian art commentary, the association of the female body with the symbols of fertility and nature is common. In *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, Constance Jones and James D Ryan contextualise the yoni's spiritual meanings: "...seen as the embodiment of the Great Goddess, [it] is worshipped in emblematic form in many Indian traditions...The association of female genitalities with the divine female principle, and the correlation of women's reproductive and sexual cycles with the Earth's seasonal and vegetative cycles, have given yoni cosmological significance."



An artefact at the Chandraguptagarh Archaeological Museum.



Lajja Gauri with uttanapad position.

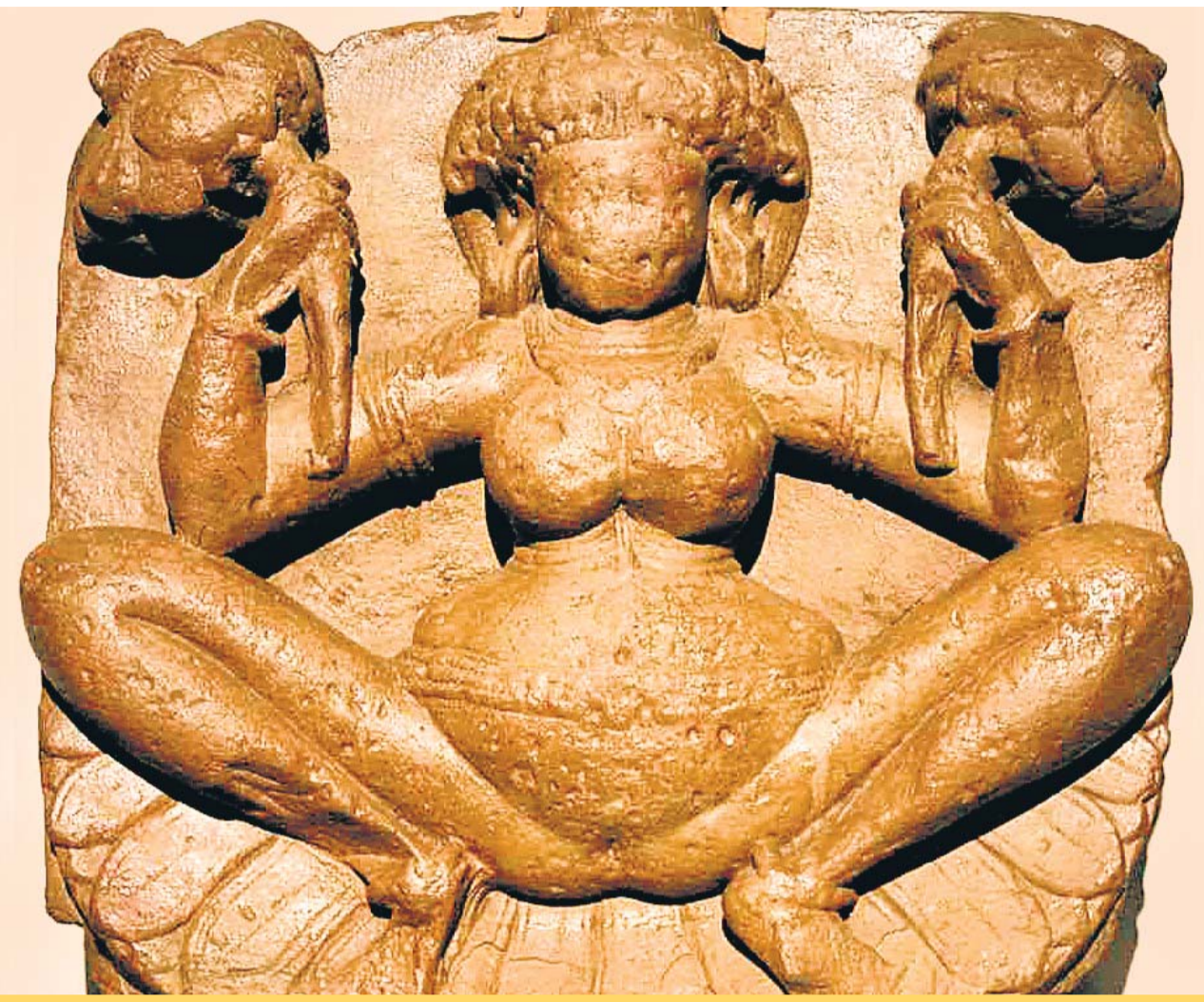


A 6th century Lajja Gauri relief from Madhya Pradesh.

Bolon employed in her form and their deep cultural and artistic significance. Bolon establishes the Lajja

Commenting on the origins and transformation of the iconography over a few centuries, Bolon cites Dutch scholar FDK Bosch's theory of "resemblance-elaboration" to account for it: "Visual elements of entirely different species...are translated into one another over a period of time in a subtle process...images stimulate concepts and concepts stimulate the new conjunctions of images."

Bolon goes on to divide the forms of Lajja Gauri into four variations that, while indicating a progression from a smaller, simpler style to a larger, more elaborate one, arose at similar points in time and coexisted concurrently in different regions. From the basic pot with legs most visible in southern India, to the lotus-headed images



Norun420

(without and, later, including arms) of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, to the fully anthropomorphised head-and-torso iteration of north India.

The shift from abstract symbolism to direct representational imagery is attributed by Bolon to a term first used by the scholar Anncharlott Eschmann to describe the subsumption of the Jagannath cult in Orissa by the high Hindu establishment.

Professor Emerita at York University's Religious Studies Department Johanna H Stuckey, in her essay *Ancient Mother Goddess Cults and Fertility Cults*, writes of goddess worship: "Scholars classify these as two kinds of religion: official or elite, comprising state or temple worship, and folk or popular, the cultic practices of the common people. Typically women's spiritual devotion falls into the latter category."

And yet, their personal worship of an indigenous goddess ultimately led to the figure being represented at a temple in a style aimed at the male spectator and not necessarily the female devotee as subject. In one example of an idol of the Form III type commissioned by an Ikshvaku queen, the variety of anklets is carefully carved and bespeaks wealth, as does the elaborate mekhala (belt) with its buckle and ornate straps. A chamavira (body jewellery) decorates the upper body. The pouchy layer of belly bulging out slightly above the womb is pierced in the navel, underscoring the erotic pleasure that the rest of the figure hints at.

Once the form of the Lajja Gauri became situated in the sphere of the temple, it became



Mithun dampat and Lajja Gauri.

available to the gaze and codes of male public space and got appropriated into a regime of fetishisation and ritual. According to Bolon, the Lajja Gauri became, by the 6th century CE, a Shakti of Shiva. At the same time, there is negotiation at play: she speculates that by funding local autochthonous cults or allowing its important deities a place in the royal temple complex, Hindu monarchs might have ingratiated themselves with their subjects and commanded their loyalty and devotion. Aristocratic female patrons - notably the Ikshvaku queens - commissioned Lajja Gauri idols and cave images. Brown explains that they followed Buddhism while their husbands practised Hinduism, ostensibly wielding a certain kind of independence in terms of the circuits and channels of power they would access and the sort of culture they would then promote.

And yet, their personal worship of an indigenous goddess ultimately led to the figure being represented at a temple in a style aimed at the male spectator and not necessarily the female devotee as subject. In one example of an idol of the Form III type commissioned by an Ikshvaku queen, the variety of anklets is carefully carved and bespeaks wealth, as does the elaborate mekhala (belt) with its buckle and ornate straps. A chamavira (body jewellery) decorates the upper body. The pouchy layer of belly bulging out slightly above the womb is pierced in the navel, underscoring the erotic pleasure that the rest of the figure hints at.

The goddess has an online presence these days: Bolon gifted her collection of images to the American Institute of Indian Studies and in June 2022, the institute's Centre for Art & Archaeology launched an exhibition curated by Gandhi.

What is the continued appeal of this ancient figure? Surely with advancement in medical technology (though not laws of course) that enables greater control over reproduction and fertility, there is no longer the need to merely rely on prayer and hope. And yet, as the conversation around bodies, sexuality, gender and power becomes more nuanced and multiperspectival, new ways of looking at the old goddess will emerge, from queer, trans feminist and Adivasi points of view, for example.

Like all talismans, there is a sense of immediacy which anchors the Lajja Gauri eternally in the present, in earthly time, as it gives us a glimpse of the future through the body about to give birth. Maybe it is the metaphor that remains relevant, that doesn't quite age: just as the pregnant body bides its time before its water breaks, so must one wait to complete one's spiritual journey.

This is imagery meant to be visually consumed as much as worshipped. In *Rethinking Gender Issues in Indian Art*, art historian Parul Dave Mukherji asserts the gender of the patron is no indication that the art produced will offer an alternative to dominant modes of representation. Patronage implies resources that are accrued in collusion with the dominant order, not at its expense.

By tracing the trajectory of the Lajja Gauri as a ritual image within indigenous folk traditions as well as its worship in the modern state religion through the early mediaeval period, we might speculate on the way in which the iconography shifts in response to the gaze determining its production. Challenging the assumption that relating the female body to tropes of prosperity and motherhood meant positive signification, Mukherji states that "the nature-woman equation works more to contain women as objects of representation conforming to the patriarchal expectation of perfection in domesticity, sex and architecture".

The iconographical features of the early form downplay erotic signification by drawing on abstraction to emphasise the experience of pregnant embodiment. However, the adornment of the birthing body in later forms through jewellery and suggestive rendering indicates its objectification. Perhaps the Lajja Gauri's journey from village cults to temples represents the status of the yoni as an object of veneration within a structure of patriarchal control.

According to Gandhi, one of the major collectors of the Lajja Gauri is at the Ramlingappa Lamture Museum at Ter, Maharashtra, once a major trading centre in the ancient world. In recent times, the Lajja Gauri has resurfaced in Karnataka, making its way into government museums in the state. The Archaeological Museum, Badami, for instance, lists the Lajja Gauri among its collections on its website.

RN Kumarashi, assistant superintendent, ASI Dharwad Circle, which operates the museum, recalls the case of the 6th century CE idol found lying on a public road at Barkur, Karnataka, in 2020. "The villagers had thrown it out because they considered the nude form of the woman to be inauspicious." The Hindu reported that the sculpture was rescued by an archaeologist from ASI Bengaluru Circle who saw a photograph being circulated online. Given the rejection of extant examples of the Lajja Gauri for being "indecent" by contemporary communities, it is difficult to definitively reconstruct the relationship their forebears might have had with it.

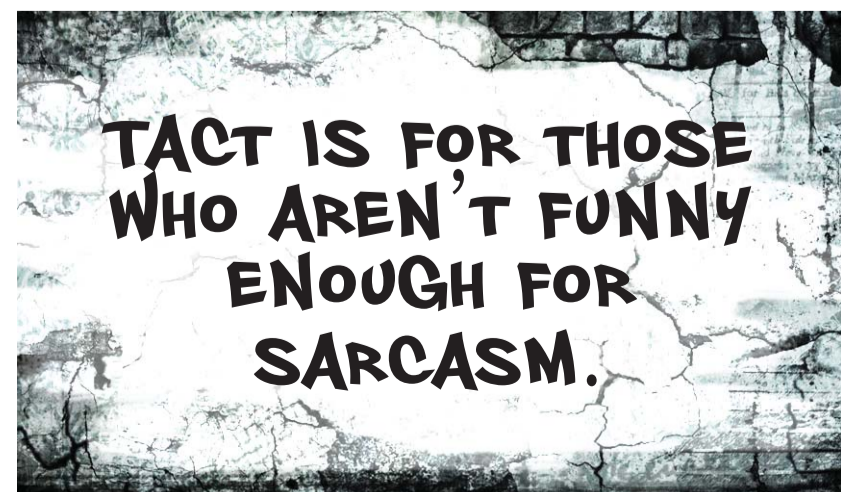
The goddess has an online presence these days: Bolon gifted her collection of images to the American Institute of Indian Studies and in June 2022, the institute's Centre for Art & Archaeology launched an exhibition curated by Gandhi.

What is the continued appeal of this ancient figure? Surely with advancement in medical technology (though not laws of course) that enables greater control over reproduction and fertility, there is no longer the need to merely rely on prayer and hope. And yet, as the conversation around bodies, sexuality, gender and power becomes more nuanced and multiperspectival, new ways of looking at the old goddess will emerge, from queer, trans feminist and Adivasi points of view, for example.

Like all talismans, there is a sense of immediacy which anchors the Lajja Gauri eternally in the present, in earthly time, as it gives us a glimpse of the future through the body about to give birth. Maybe it is the metaphor that remains relevant, that doesn't quite age: just as the pregnant body bides its time before its water breaks, so must one wait to complete one's spiritual journey.

rajeshsharma1049@gmail.com

## THE WALL



## BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

## ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman