

The Goddess Matangi – Reclaiming the Wild Feminine in Indian Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

Among the ten Mahavidhyas, the ninth Mahavidhya- Matangi- remains one of the least studied and most provocative. Some consider her a more intense, inward-looking version of Goddess Saraswati. She is the Goddess who governs the outward articulation of inner power in the form of speech, poetry and art. She is also called the outcast Goddess, both because of the myth of her origins as well as because of the disregard for notions of ritual purity associated with her worship. She is offered leftover food as prasad. According to one myth, she arose out of the food left over from the feast offered to Shiva and Parvati by Vishnu and Lakshmi. She is the Goddess associated with tribals and with those at the margins of Hindu society.

The present review-based paper contends that while IKS has made great strides in decolonising and indigenizing education, it could be further enriched by the study of fierce Goddesses, like Matangi, which exist in the vernacular languages and in the indigenous ecosystems. Matangi is a powerful Indian Goddess who embodies gender empowerment.

Keywords: fierce goddess, Mahavidhyas, antimodels, Indian Knowledge systems, Uchchista matarigini, outcast- Goddess, iconography, Prakriti.

Matangi is a fierce goddess who is part of the Goddess formation of Mahavidyas. The origin myth states all ten forms arose from one goddess (Sati, Kali, or Durga) and all are different facets of this goddess. The Mahavidyas have been known as a group since the early medieval era. An adept scholar who delves deeply enough into any one of the Mahavidyas will find them all in her. They merge with each other and represent different facets of a single, multifaceted being.

David Kinsley writes:

“An important key to understanding, or appreciating, the Mahavidyas, I think, lies precisely in their radical or outrageous aspects. It is true that some of the Mahavidyas are benign deities, associated with such worldly boons as wealth, fecundity, and security. However, most of the Mahavidyas are associated with marginality, inauspicious qualities, pollution, and death; they

might be termed antimodels, especially for women. By antimodels I mean that their roles violate approved social values, customs, norms, or paradigms.”¹

Most of the Mahavidyas are independent of men or dominate them in some way.

Matangi represents the power of knowledge, wisdom and speech. She is often regarded as the goddess of the outcastes. She is traditionally represented as a dark-skinned or emerald-skinned goddess. She sits on a tiger-skinned throne and wears a garland of skulls or flowers around her neck. She reconciles duality, holding in her hands a veena (musical string instrument) and a scythe.²

Among the Ten Mahavidyas, Matangi remains one of the least studied and yet most philosophically provocative. She is the goddess of the outcaste, polluted leftovers (*ucchiṣṭa*), as also artistic inspiration, speech, music, and wisdom.

This paper contends that, though the Indian Knowledge System drive of the country does an admirable job of decolonizing and indigenizing education and knowledge, it concentrates on areas of Yoga, Ayurveda, Astronomy, Architecture, Metallurgy etc.³ It would be deepened and enriched by an exploration of those divine goddesses who live beyond the domain of established social roles and responsibilities.

The origin myth of Matangi reinforces her image as the goddess who dwells outside social boundaries. Vishnu and Lakshmi went to visit Shiva and Parvati. They offered fine food, some of which fell to the ground. Out of this was born Uccista-matarigini. The word “Uccista” refers to left-over food.

“From then on, this maiden became known as Uccista-matarigini. She is the bestower of all boons.”⁴

Matangi demands leftover food from her devotees. Worshipping her does not have the normally strict rules of pollution associated with Hindu rituals. Devotees need not bathe, fast or undertake any vows before worshipping her. She is worshipped for being polluted and demands pollution of her worshippers.⁵

¹ Kinsley, David.(1997). *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahavidyas*. University of California Press, pg.6

² [Matangi Devi – Significance, Iconography & Mantra | https://sanathan.ap/en/deities/matangi-devi](https://sanathan.ap/en/deities/matangi-devi)

³ [UGC NET Indian Knowledge System Syllabus 2026 & Exam Pattern https://www.adda247.com/teaching-jobs-exam/ugc-net-indian-knowledge-system-syllabus/](https://www.adda247.com/teaching-jobs-exam/ugc-net-indian-knowledge-system-syllabus/)

⁴ -Kinsley, David Tantric Visions. p 213

⁵ [The Goddess Matangi | Mahavidya https://mahavidya.ca/2012/06/18/the-goddess-matangi/](https://mahavidya.ca/2012/06/18/the-goddess-matangi/)

She accepts what orthodox society rejects, including leftovers and those deemed impure. David Kinsley describes her as the “Outcaste Goddess,” emphasizing that her liminality is central rather than incidental to her theological identity.

Who Is Matangi?

Matangi is the goddess of speech, poetry and creativity. She is “Nigamadharma” – the foundation of the Vedas and the supreme reality of the Vedanta. She is the Great Wisdom Goddess but also the goddess of wine, of cremation grounds, of mud. She is the goddess of the poor, the troubled and the fallen. She is pleased by offerings rejected by the orthodox; she accepts wine and meat. Remarkably enough, she embodies political authority (as Raja Syamala), is associated with statecraft and with political wisdom itself. She is the goddess of healing who cures fevers and epidemics.

It is said that sage Matanga performed severe penance and austerities and was granted a boon that the divine mother would be born to him as his daughter. She would embody all the knowledge in the world and all the arts. It is through this paternal connection to the granting of proficiency in knowledge and art.

Long before modern discussions of inclusion, Matangi embodied spiritual equality. She blesses

- artists
- musicians
- forest dwellers
- marginalized communities
- unconventional thinkers
- those rejected by society

Her theology rejects spiritual elitism.

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF MATANGI



RAJA MATANGI: The Mahavidya Matangi, intoxicated with passion like the masth elephants, is often depicted as a sixteen-year-old girl seated on an altar. The disc of the moon

adorns her head. Her dress and ornaments are red, and she wears necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. She holds in her hand a skull and a chopping blade, dropping blood. She is flanked by two parrots. She holds a veena in her hands and represents the sixty-four arts. She is seated on a gem-studded throne, one foot on the lotus, holding a veena, with the crescent moon on her head, with a garland of jasmine flowers around her neck.

RAJA SHYAMALI

She is blue in colour. The crescent moon, the many arms, the veena and the lotus flower are repeated motifs.

MODINI

Matangi is blue in color and dressed in red. The crescent moon adorns her forehead. She has three eyes and a smiling face. She is bejewelled and is seated on a lotus throne. In her four arms, she carries a skull, a sword, and a veena. She is Modini, the goddess who grants worldly pleasures.

There are not many temples dedicated to the Goddess Matangi in the world. The most significant one is the one at the Kamakhya Temple in Assam. Matangi is described on the Kamakhya Devi website in these terms: “Matangi Devi is the ‘Tantric Saraswati’ and the *adhithakti* devi of Rabi (Sunday). She sits on a bejewelled throne, sports a white half-moon on her forehead. In her four hands she holds a kharga, khetak, lasso and spear. Apart from the natural naibaidya, she likes rice custard sweetened with sugar.”⁶

In the South she is often called Raja Matangi. In addition to the veena and the parrot, she wears a royal crown and carries a *goad*, a musical instrument and a noose in her hands. The Adimaya Matangi of Tuljapur, Maharashtra, is richly ornamented. Here Matangi is seen as the source of all creation. The word ‘Adimaya’ itself means primordial power. Here the goddess is considered to be a living embodiment of Shakti and is worshipped through daily rituals, pilgrimages, vows and festivals.

Several Matangi temples exist in Gujarat. These are inspired by Tantrism and depict Matangi on a lotus throne with a jewelled crown and richly embroidered clothes.

Most images of Matangi show her as lush emerald green in colour. The contrast with the pristine white Saraswati and the black Kali is significant. The green colour associates her with the forest. She is often referred to as the one who dwells in and enjoys the forests. Kadamba flowers and a green parrot complete this image. She has luxuriant hair and a youthful body. These are all

⁶ [Maa Kamakhya Devalaya Official Website https://www.maakamakhya.org/nilachal](https://www.maakamakhya.org/nilachal)

symbols of fertility, but it is creative rather than biological creativity that Matangi signifies. Matangi governs *living speech* (*vāk*) in all its forms – music, poetry, improvisation, conversation, and mantra

She is often portrayed as holding a veena. This invites a comparison with Saraswati's veena, but the two have different connotations. Saraswati's veena implies the transmission of sacred knowledge, while Matangi's veena is the voice of knowledge beyond conventional purity. It is more than a musical instrument. It is a model of how Indian Knowledge Systems understand the act of knowing itself as a resonance between self, sound, world and consciousness.

This resemblance to Saraswati has made it difficult to identify Matangi in the various exhibits abroad. She is often identified as an Indian goddess, as Saraswati or as a Mahavidya. Her temples were often built in forests or cremation grounds of villages. It was easy to steal the sculptures and ship them abroad. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Brooklyn Museum in New York and the Bonhams Private Collection have images definitively identified as Matangi. What happens when a deity, considered a living embodiment of the goddess, is transported from the temple to a museum or a collection? This is an important consideration in any discussion of Indian Knowledge Systems. A demand for repatriation of the images and sculptures seems legitimate.

Matangi in the Hindu Tradition

In her article entitled "The Great Indian Goddess" Stella Kramrisch describes the great goddess or Devi as created solely by her own self. She created the universe and is its substance, "Prakrati." She is known in innumerable forms.⁷

Two of these forms that appear in the Rig Veda are relevant to our discussion of Matangi. The first is the Goddess, Vak.

**"Vak, the goddess, sings of herself (R V. 10.125.1-8;
I move with the Rudras, Vasus, Adityas, with the All-Gods
I carry Mitra and Varuna, Indra and Agni, the two Asvins,
I carry Soma, Tvastr,
I am the mistress who collects treasures- I assume many shapes."**⁸

⁷Kramrisch, Stella. "The Great Indian Goddess." *History of Religions* 14, no. 4 (May 1975): pp. 235–265.

⁸ Kramrisch, Stella. "The Great Indian Goddess" *History of Religions*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (May, 1975), pp. 235–265 (31 pages)

Vak was born in the flowing waters of creation; she carried with her the gods. The heavenly ocean of light flowed from her. All the worlds were in her breath.

When Vak loves someone, she makes them mighty. She is the Word and the Will. This fierce goddess gave birth to her father. She is power itself. She is the absolute mistress of creation.

Speech has three states of manifestation. There is the unmanifest speech, the speech that perceives itself and the articulated speech, “vaikhari vak.” The expressed or articulated speech is expressed by Matangi. Matangi is the *process* whereby the unmanifest speech first perceives itself and then touches the thinking mind to be transformed into expression. Matangi is the shakti of this process of matanga.⁹

The other Rig Vedic goddess that Matangi is associated with is Saraswati herself. Saraswati is considered first among the great Mother Goddesses. A mother protects and nourishes. Mahasaraswati is knowledge itself, and this is what protects us and helps us prosper. Saraswati also is the first among rivers. It arises from the mountains and merges with the Ganga and the Yamuna at Allahabad. The river forces its way forward and moves swiftly. Praying to Ma Saraswati gives us force and power. She removes obstacles on our way to true enlightenment. Just as a river merges with the sea, our souls merge with consciousness. Saraswati, in the form of knowledge, helps us to gain the riches of knowledge and education. This helps to expand our consciousness. Otherwise we shrivel.¹⁰

Infinitude is our natural state. We do not reach this state because of limitations imposed by ignorance or illusions. Saraswati is the Goddess of Knowledge, and she is also known as Vaagdevi, Goddess of Speech. Everything in the universe is created by sound or words, therefore, the presiding deity of speech is worthy of worship by all. All the gods attained knowledge by worshipping the Mother.

Matangi shares much in common with Saraswati. In fact they are often confused with each other. Like Saraswati, Matangi governs speech, music, knowledge and the arts. Her worship enables the acquisition of supreme knowledge.

While Saraswati radiates serenity, Matangi is fiercer and more aggressive. Saraswati is the serene goddess of knowledge. Matangi is her more intense, more inward focused avatar. She governs the same domains – speech, music, scholarship. She reaches them through a different path—one that runs closer to raw experience.

⁹ [Dasha Mahavidya – Matangi](https://svatantra.institute/dasha-mahavidya-matangi) <https://svatantra.institute/dasha-mahavidya-matangi>

¹⁰ Poddar, Hanuman Prasad. (ed) Kalyan Shakti Ank “Mahasaraswati Tatv” Gita Press, Gorakhpur.No.2059. Tenth Edition(1991). p.378

She appears to have been the daughter of Matanga, who according to some was a chieftain of tribal elephant hunters (Maatanga – raja). He belonged to the low caste of Chandalas. Thus, Matangi, right from her early stage, became closely associated with birds, forests, wilderness, elephant hunting culture: the Chandala way of living; as also with casting magic spells.

Like Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati, Matangi is considered one more manifestation of Shakti. The Shakta worships God as Shakti, the Great Mother. In the words of the Indologist John Woodruffe:

“The Power, or active aspect of the immanent God, is thus called Sakti. In her static transcendent aspect the Mother or Sakti or Siva is of the same nature as Siva or ‘the Good.’ That is, philosophically speaking, Siva is the unchanging Consciousness, and Sakti is its changing Power appearing as mind and matter. Siva-Sakti is therefore Consciousness and Its Power.”¹¹

The goddess Shakti is the essence of divine power, whose presence is said to manifest at certain places on Earth. There are two aspects of the goddess. On one hand are the benign and benevolent goddesses. They are embodiments of fertility, good fortune and health. Lakshmi immediately comes to mind. Other goddesses in this tradition include Uma, Gauri, Parvati, Maheshvari, Lalita, and Annapurna. In her peaceful form the goddess is wife, mother and daughter.

There is however, a fiercer aspect of the goddess. This is evident in Kali, Durga, Chandi, Chamunda, Bhadrakali, and Bhairavi. “Whereas the fierce forms tend to portray the goddess as independent, often creating and destroying worlds and lives on her own initiative, the mild forms present a nurturing and sympathetic goddess, not acting alone but rather in a family situation.”¹²

The Shaktas typically worship the fierce form of the goddess – as Shakti, Kali or Tara. The Bengali Shakta traditions involve the worship of various goddesses, of which the ten Mahavidyas are important examples. “The Mahavidyas are late medieval goddesses, who show ten aspects of the cycle of existence, of divine day and night, and they are the energies of which the physical universe is the outer expression.”¹³

The ninth Mahavidya is Matangi. Matangi, has dark skin and three eyes. She wears necklaces of pearls and conch earrings. She is the elephant power, the power of domination. There are

¹¹ [Indian Religion as Bhārata Dharma \[Chapter 1\] https://www.wisdmllib.org/hinduism/book/shakti-and-shakta/d/doc210177](https://www.wisdmllib.org/hinduism/book/shakti-and-shakta/d/doc210177)

¹² Mc Daniel, June. “Offering Flowers Feeding Skulls” https://archive.org/details/Xkr_offering-flowers-feeding-skulls-june-mc-daniel/page/4/mode/2up Introduction p.5

¹³ Ibid. p. 260

various forms of Matangi which wear red or black robes, sit on a lotus, a throne or a corpse, and hold a skull or a knife.

Mata literally means “a thought” or “an opinion.” Matangi is thus the goddess power, which has entered into thought or the mind. She is the word as the embodiment of thought.

Matangi bestows knowledge, talent and expertise. She is the goddess of the spoken word and of any outward articulation of inner knowledge, including all forms of art, music and dance. Mata also mean “wild” or “passionate.” Matangi is one who is wild or passionate in limbs and movement. Matangi also means a female elephant.

Matangi in the Tantric Tradition

Matangi entered the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition though she never attained the centrality of Tara.

The Vajrayana tradition embraced figures dwelling beyond orthodox boundaries, viewing cemeteries, wilderness, outcastes and fierce goddesses as ways to encounter reality. David Kinsley recounts the story of how Buddha’s disciple, Ananda, met Matangi’s daughter, Prakriti. He asked for a drink of water. She told him she belonged to the Chandala community.

He said he asked for water, not her caste. She promptly fell in love with him. She asked her mother to help her attract him,

Her mother was Mahavidyadhari (she who is skilled in the mantras), she built an altar and chanted mantras to attract Ananda to her daughter.

Her magic was so potent that Ananda felt restless and returned in search of Prakriti. It was only by praying for Buddha’s help that he could return to his monastery. Prakriti followed him there and became a Buddhist nun.

The name Prakriti itself is suggestive of nature, of forests and a hunting culture, attributes associated with the goddess Matangi.

The rites which are aimed at attracting another person remind us of Matangi’s power to attract and control others.

Mahavidhyadhari (the knower of great mantras) also relates her to the Mahavidhyas. This story may have played a part in the emergence of the goddess Matangi in her later form.

Kinsley discusses various origin myths of Matangi in her various forms. The most striking common feature of these myths is she is the goddess who prefers pollution. No fasting or bathing is required for worship of Matangi. No strict rituals or pilgrimages are necessary. Her mantras can be recited by anybody.

“For some Hindus, it is exhilarating, if not spiritually liberating, to intensely embrace the forbidden, to come to terms with it once and for all and in so doing to overcome its hold over them. Uccista matarigini, as the embodiment of the polluted, is the goddess by means of whom one can come directly to terms with pollution. As such, she is both powerful and liberating.”¹⁴

The Goddess is also repeatedly identified with pollution and “low” castes. Undue obsession with purity can be dangerous and destructive. In Nepal it is believed that the dangerous Goddess Matangi accepts polluted things as offerings and hence helps get rid of pollution.

“Matarigi is closely identified with a goddess named Savaresvari (mistress of the Savaras). The Savaras are a tribal people often mentioned in Sanskrit literature, and they typify forest culture, life beyond the boundaries of civilized society.”¹⁵ Matangi is strongly associated with the forests, she is the one who knows the forests, roams the forests and enjoys the forests. She is also associated with the gaining of magical powers, especially to control others. Some texts cite the specific rituals to be conducted at cremation grounds to propitiate the goddess so that she may be appeased. Her mantra needs to be made powerful through certain processes and then the repetition of the mantra will help the *sādhaka* to accomplish their desires. The description of the various rituals to fulfil desires seem almost gruesome, including burning a dead crow and offering the ashes to the one you wish to enslave.

The Matangi Sadhna identifies Matangi as the bride of Mahadeva and the daughter of Matanga. All the gods achieve fame by worshipping the lotus feet of Matangi. The supreme beauty and power of the goddess is emphasized. She is the goddess of speech. The one who worships her will be blessed with opulent wealth.

Conclusion

The oft-forgotten goddess Matangi offers an indigenous paradigm for an exploration of feminine power. She is the patron of speech, artistic creativity, ecological consciousness and the knowledge of marginalized communities. She embodies inclusivity. Matangi governs living knowledge, which dwells in stories, in songs, forests, tribal communities and women. She reminds us that the Indian Knowledge Systems reside outside revered texts too. She represents the voices outside the classical Sanskrit knowledge system to a celebration of vernacular knowledge and indigenous ecological systems. Matangi is the goddess of living knowledge and represents oral, artistic, ecological and creative epistemologies outside the canon of the IKS discourse. She is the goddess of gender empowerment, urging women to find their voice and use it. In contrast to the domesticated, sanitized images of goddesses she represents fierce, wild feminine power.

¹⁴ Kinsley. David. *Tantric Visions*.p.216

¹⁵ Ibid. p.219

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