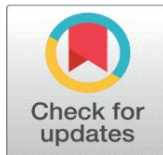
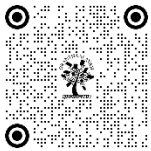


# LAJJA GAURI'S LEGACY: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON SPIRITUALITY AND GENDER RIGHTS

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## ABSTRACT

Lajja Gauri, an ancient lotus-headed goddess often associated with fertility and creation, is a potent symbol deeply embedded in the religious and cultural consciousness of India. Her iconography, with its overtly feminine form and birthing posture, historically depicted her as the embodiment of life-giving power. However, modern feminist scholars have reinterpreted this ancient symbol, viewing her not merely as a goddess of fertility but as an icon of female autonomy, empowerment, and spiritual purity. This paper explores the evolving symbolism of Lajja Gauri through the lens of contemporary feminist thought, connecting her image to broader discussions on gender equity, women's rights, and the fight against gender-based violence. By examining how her iconography has been reclaimed by feminist movements, the study underscores the intersection of spirituality and gender within the context of modern struggles for social justice. Through an interdisciplinary methodology that combines art history, feminist theory, cultural studies, and comparative religious analysis, this research illustrates how the Lajja Gauri remains relevant as a powerful metaphor for female strength, autonomy, and spiritual authority. Ultimately, this study argues that ancient symbols like Lajja Gauri can inspire modern feminist movements, offering new pathways to challenge patriarchal structures and reaffirm the sacredness and autonomy of women's bodies and identities in both spiritual and societal contexts.

**Keywords:** Lajja Gauri, Feminism, Gender Equity, Spirituality, Autonomy, Women's Rights

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Lajja Gauri stands as one of the most enigmatic and potent symbols within the broader tradition of Hindu iconography. Her roots stretch back to the Indus Valley Civilization, where the worship of fertility goddesses symbolizing the natural cycles of life began to emerge. Over time, this imagery was absorbed into Vedic and later Hindu religious traditions, where it developed into the distinct figure we recognize today as Lajja Gauri. Her iconography is characterized by the depiction of a female body, often shown in a squatting or birthing posture, symbolizing creation and fertility. Her head is frequently replaced by a lotus, a sacred symbol in Indian spirituality, representing purity, divine wisdom, and spiritual enlightenment.

The lotus-headed goddess encapsulates dualities that speak to the complex nature of femininity in both religious and societal contexts. On one level, her physical form invokes notions of motherhood and fertility, aligning her with the procreative aspects of nature and womanhood. Yet, the lotus symbolizes transcendence, suggesting that Lajja Gauri exists

beyond the physical realm, embodying spiritual power and purity. This dual symbolism offers a rich interpretative ground for understanding femininity not only in its biological sense but also as a sacred, autonomous force. Traditionally, Lajja Gauri's worship was closely tied to fertility rituals and agricultural cycles, symbolizing the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth. Her birthing posture represents the ultimate creative force, emphasizing the vital role of women in both the spiritual and material worlds. In many depictions, her exaggerated breasts and hips further accentuate her connection to fertility and maternal abundance. For centuries, she was revered primarily as a fertility goddess, a role that confined her to the biological aspects of womanhood.

However, in recent decades, feminist scholars have revisited Lajja Gauri's iconography, seeking to reinterpret her image in a way that aligns with contemporary understandings of gender, spirituality, and power. No longer seen as a mere symbol of reproductive ability, Lajja Gauri has been reclaimed as a symbol of female autonomy and empowerment. Her open posture, often interpreted as one of vulnerability, is now seen as an assertion of bodily autonomy, a reclaiming of the female form from patriarchal narratives that have sought to define and control women's bodies.

This reclamation coincides with the broader rise of feminist movements across the globe, particularly in postcolonial contexts like India, where the intersections of gender, spirituality, and politics are particularly potent. Scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Vandana Shiva have highlighted the importance of revisiting indigenous symbols and narratives in the context of feminist resistance to patriarchal and colonial oppression. Within this framework, Lajja Gauri's image becomes more than a symbol of fertility; it becomes a powerful metaphor for the struggle for women's rights and bodily autonomy.

Feminist reinterpretations of Lajja Gauri also challenge the male-centric religious hierarchies that have historically sidelined female deities and reduced their roles to supportive or secondary figures. In reclaiming Lajja Gauri, feminists assert the inherent sacredness and authority of women in religious and spiritual practices. Her image serves as a reminder of the divine power inherent in women's bodies and experiences, challenging traditional religious narratives that often depict women as subservient or secondary to male figures.

This reinterpretation also extends to contemporary art and activism, where Lajja Gauri has been embraced as a symbol of resistance against gender-based violence and oppression. Artists and activists draw upon her iconography to highlight issues related to reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and gender equity. In this context, Lajja Gauri is no longer confined to the realm of religious iconography; she has become a living symbol of feminist resistance and empowerment.

As global feminist movements continue to evolve, the figure of Lajja Gauri offers a unique intersection of the sacred and the secular. She represents the possibility of a world in which women's bodies are not only respected for their life-giving power but also revered for their spiritual strength and autonomy. This paper aims to explore this intersection, offering a comprehensive reexamination of Lajja Gauri's legacy through the lens of feminist theory and contemporary art practices. By doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to bridge the gap between ancient symbols and modern feminist movements, ultimately reaffirming the importance of cultural reclamation in the fight for gender equity.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs an interdisciplinary methodology, integrating insights from art history, feminist theory, religious studies, and cultural anthropology. The objective is to unpack the multiple layers of meaning embedded within the iconography of Lajja Gauri and to explore how these meanings resonate with contemporary feminist movements. The research is structured across four phases, each designed to address different facets of Lajja Gauri's legacy and its contemporary relevance as a symbol of female empowerment, spirituality, and resistance against patriarchal norms.



**Figure 1** Lajja Gauri seal, 5x5 cm, Bronze, found in Kashmir Smast caves, also called Kashmir Smast.

### 1) Historical and Iconographic Analysis:

The first phase of this research undertakes a comprehensive examination of Lajja Gauri's iconography, tracing her representation across various historical periods and cultural regions in India. This process involves a detailed review of primary sources, including ancient sculptures, temple carvings, and manuscripts that depict or reference Lajja Gauri. The focus is on understanding how Lajja Gauri has been visually represented, particularly in her most iconic forms: a female figure in a birthing posture with a lotus head, symbolizing fertility, purity, and divine consciousness.

A key aspect of this analysis is the investigation of regional variations in Lajja Gauri's depiction. For example, in the Deccan region, sculptures dating from the 2nd to 4th centuries CE typically portray Lajja Gauri with exaggerated reproductive attributes—prominent breasts, hips, and a distinct birthing posture. These sculptures emphasize her role as a fertility goddess, revered for her life-giving powers. The lotus in place of her head serves as a symbol of spiritual purity and regeneration, reinforcing the notion that femininity is intrinsically linked to both biological and spiritual creation. In contrast, representations from northern India often place less emphasis on her reproductive aspects and depict her in a more abstract, less corporeal form. These variations highlight regional and cultural differences in religious beliefs and artistic traditions.

Art historical methodologies are applied to trace stylistic changes in Lajja Gauri's representation over time. This involves comparing her iconography with that of other female deities in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, such as Durga, Lakshmi, and Tara, to highlight both the similarities and divergences in how the sacred feminine has been portrayed. In doing so, the study contextualizes Lajja Gauri within the broader spectrum of South Asian religious art, allowing for a deeper understanding of her unique role as a symbol of female divinity and power.

This phase also examines how Lajja Gauri's iconography reflects the socio-political and religious dynamics of different historical periods. Shifts in religious beliefs, cultural exchanges, and political transformations often influenced the ways in which female deities were portrayed. For instance, periods of increased interaction between Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism may have resulted in a synthesis of iconographic elements, leading to more complex representations of Lajja Gauri that combined fertility, spirituality, and maternal protection. By mapping these changes, the research uncovers the evolving significance of Lajja Gauri and the cultural factors that shaped her portrayal over time.



**Figure 2** Lajja Gauri, in a birthing posture (uttanapad pot) symbolizing fertility and spiritual purity: Ter, Osmanabad, Maharashtra, made in Terracotta, 100-399 CE.

## 2) Feminist Theoretical Framework:

The second phase of the research employs feminist theory to reinterpret the iconography of Lajja Gauri. Feminist scholarship, particularly within the domains of postcolonial feminism, intersectionality, and ecofeminism, is used to challenge traditional interpretations of Lajja Gauri that have narrowly focused on her role as a symbol of fertility. Instead, this research advocates for a more nuanced understanding of the goddess, one that recognizes her significance as a representation of female autonomy, spiritual authority, and resistance to patriarchal oppression.

This section of the research engages with the works of prominent feminist scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Vandana Shiva. These thinkers have contributed to feminist discourses on the ways in which women, particularly women of color and women from postcolonial societies, have been historically marginalized by both patriarchal structures and Western feminist movements. Drawing on their work, the study reinterprets Lajja Gauri's iconography as a symbol of bodily autonomy and spiritual resilience. By focusing on her birthing posture and lotus head, the research argues that Lajja Gauri embodies the power of creation and the sacredness of women's bodies, while also challenging patriarchal systems that seek to control female reproduction and spirituality.

Feminist critiques of traditional religious and cultural practices are also employed to reinterpret Lajja Gauri's significance. While earlier interpretations may have reduced her to a symbol of fertility and reproductive roles, this study seeks to reclaim Lajja Gauri as a goddess who embodies the broader spectrum of female experience, including agency, empowerment, and spiritual autonomy. This feminist reinterpretation positions Lajja Gauri as a symbol not just of life-giving power but of women's right to control their own bodies and destinies, thus aligning her with contemporary feminist movements advocating for reproductive rights, gender equity, and bodily integrity.



**Figure 3** Lajja Gauri, Lotus Headed with Arms, Sangameswara temple, Kurnul, Andhrapradesh, 675-699 CE,

## 3) Cultural and Anthropological Studies:

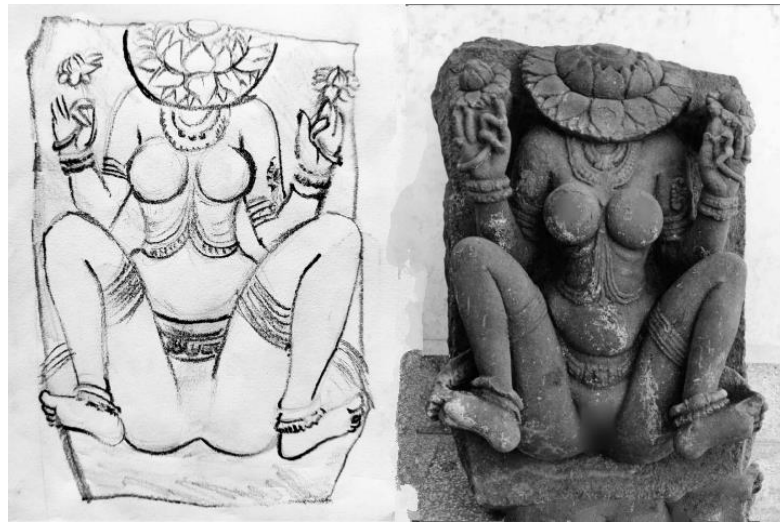
The third phase of the research draws on cultural anthropology to explore how Lajja Gauri has been reimagined in contemporary artistic and activist practices. This phase involves conducting fieldwork and interviews with modern artists, feminist scholars, and activists who have engaged with Lajja Gauri's iconography in their work. By examining how her image is being used in contemporary contexts, the research aims to uncover the ways in which Lajja Gauri continues to inspire resistance against traditional gender roles and promote gender equity.

One focus of this phase is on contemporary artworks that feature Lajja Gauri as a central theme. Artists from India and the global South have reinterpreted her image in ways that challenge patriarchal assumptions about women's roles in society. These artworks often emphasize themes of female empowerment, resilience, and resistance to gender-based violence, drawing on Lajja Gauri's legacy as a symbol of strength and spiritual authority. By analyzing these case studies, the research highlights how modern representations of Lajja Gauri are being used to convey powerful messages about gender justice and women's rights.

This section also explores how grassroots feminist movements in India and other parts of the world have reclaimed Lajja Gauri as a symbol of resistance. In particular, the study examines how her image has been used in protests and



campaigns for reproductive rights, gender equity, and the eradication of gender-based violence. By reclaiming Lajja Gauri as a symbol of empowerment, these movements are challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and advocating for greater autonomy and rights for women.



**Figure 4** Sandstone sculpture of Lotus headed Lajja Gauri, Naganath Temple, Naganathakolla, Bagalkot, Karnataka, 601-700 CE, depicted in a birthing posture, symbolizing purity and fertility.

#### 4) Comparative Religious and Spiritual Contexts:

The analysis of female deities and symbols in other religious traditions, including Greco-Roman, Egyptian, and Indigenous cultures. This comparative approach allows the study to identify universal themes in the representation of the sacred feminine and to draw parallels between Lajja Gauri and other goddesses who symbolize fertility, creation, and female power.

For example, comparisons are made between Lajja Gauri and figures such as Isis in Egyptian mythology, Demeter in Greek mythology, and Pachamama in Indigenous South American traditions. Like Lajja Gauri, these goddesses are often associated with fertility, motherhood, and the cycles of nature. However, they also embody the resilience and strength of women in the face of patriarchal control, making them powerful symbols of resistance and empowerment in their respective cultures.

By placing Lajja Gauri in conversation with these other figures, the research aims to highlight the universality of the sacred feminine and its relevance to contemporary feminist movements across different cultures. The study also examines how patriarchal religions have historically marginalized or appropriated these symbols of female power and how feminist scholars and activists are now reclaiming them as sources of inspiration for gender justice and social change.

In sum, this interdisciplinary approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of Lajja Gauri's legacy, situating her within both ancient religious traditions and modern feminist discourses. By engaging with multiple methodologies, the study offers new insights into the ways in which the goddess's iconography continues to inspire and empower women in their ongoing struggles for autonomy, rights, and spiritual authority.

### 3. DATA COLLECTION AND INTERPRETATION:

The data for this research is drawn from a diverse range of sources, providing a multidimensional perspective on Lajja Gauri's iconography and its relevance to contemporary feminist discourses. The primary data includes ancient texts, temple carvings, and historical sculptures that depict Lajja Gauri, offering insights into her role in religious and cultural traditions across different periods and regions. This is complemented by contemporary artworks and feminist scholarship, which reinterpret the goddess's symbolism in modern contexts. Additionally, interviews with artists, feminist scholars, and activists form a crucial part of the data collection, allowing for the exploration of how Lajja Gauri's image is being reclaimed and reimagined in contemporary feminist movements.

Qualitative research methods are used to analyze the data, with a particular focus on thematic analysis. This involves identifying recurring motifs of autonomy, empowerment, and resistance that emerge across the various representations of Lajja Gauri, both in ancient iconography and in modern reinterpretations. The interdisciplinary approach of this study—drawing on art history, religious studies, cultural anthropology, and feminist theory—allows for a rich and nuanced interpretation of the data, bridging the historical and the contemporary, and facilitating a deeper understanding of Lajja Gauri's enduring significance in the ongoing struggle for gender equity and social justice.

#### 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of Lajja Gauri's iconography reveals its profound and multifaceted symbolism, particularly in relation to the intersection of the physical and spiritual aspects of womanhood. Lajja Gauri, often depicted with a lotus for a head and an open, birthing posture, represents both creation and spiritual purity. The lotus, long revered in Indian spirituality, symbolizes purity, renewal, and enlightenment, while the female form evokes fertility, nurturing, and life-giving powers. Together, these elements create a potent symbol of the sacred feminine, resonating deeply across both ancient religious traditions and contemporary feminist interpretations.

Feminist scholars and artists have reinterpreted Lajja Gauri's imagery as a symbol of autonomy and empowerment. Her open posture, often associated with the act of giving birth, is viewed as an expression of bodily freedom and control over reproduction, directly challenging patriarchal norms that have historically sought to confine women's bodies to roles of subordination. Lajja Gauri's imagery, therefore, becomes a metaphor for reproductive rights and the fight for personal agency, making her a powerful symbol in modern feminist discourses on bodily autonomy.

Contemporary artists incorporate Lajja Gauri's iconography into their work to challenge traditional gender roles and bring attention to issues such as gender-based violence and societal inequality. Through these artistic expressions, Lajja Gauri's ancient symbolism is revived and recontextualized to address modern struggles for gender equity. By presenting her as a figure of strength and resilience, artists emphasize her role as a source of inspiration for women's empowerment. This reinforces her relevance in contemporary feminist movements, illustrating that ancient symbols of the sacred feminine can still serve as powerful tools for challenging oppression and advocating for women's rights in both spiritual and secular contexts.

#### 5. DISCUSSION

The resurgence of Lajja Gauri in contemporary feminist discourse is emblematic of a broader movement to reclaim ancient symbols that highlight the sacredness and power inherent in femininity. For centuries, patriarchal interpretations of religion and mythology have often placed women in subordinate roles, limiting their representation to passive or reproductive functions. However, Lajja Gauri stands as a compelling counter-narrative, embodying autonomy, authority, and spiritual strength. She challenges the dominant narratives that have historically diminished the sacred and transformative powers of women. Her iconography—simultaneously maternal and divine—suggests that women's power is far more encompassing than mere biological functions, extending into realms of spiritual authority, creation, and renewal.

The modern feminist reclamation of Lajja Gauri demonstrates a significant shift in how historical symbols are being interpreted and integrated into contemporary gender equity movements. Lajja Gauri's open posture, her lotus-headed form, and her representation as both a giver of life and a symbol of purity have all been recontextualized to advocate for women's autonomy over their bodies and their roles within society. This goddess, therefore, becomes a powerful metaphor for resisting patriarchal constraints and for promoting women's rights, independence, and equality in a world still grappling with gender-based oppression.

Moreover, the intersection of spirituality and gender in Lajja Gauri's iconography provides an inclusive and holistic framework for understanding women's contributions to both religious and social spheres. By merging the sacred and the secular, her imagery serves as a reminder that women's empowerment is not just a social or political pursuit but also a deeply spiritual one. Revisiting and reinterpreting such symbols allows modern generations to find inspiration from the past, reaffirming that the fight for justice, equality, and respect for women's autonomy has deep historical roots that remain highly relevant today. Lajja Gauri's enduring symbolism reinforces the notion that ancient traditions can offer powerful guidance and validation in contemporary struggles for social justice.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Lajja Gauri, with her rich and multifaceted symbolism encompassing fertility, spirituality, and female autonomy, remains a potent figure in both historical and contemporary feminist discourse. Her enduring iconography serves as a bridge between ancient religious traditions and modern feminist movements, offering a powerful metaphor for the sacredness and strength inherent in womanhood. As this research illustrates, the reinterpretation of Lajja Gauri in contemporary contexts reflects a broader movement to reclaim and repurpose ancient symbols in service of gender equity and social justice. The goddess's open posture, lotus symbolism, and portrayal of both maternal and divine attributes emphasize her role as a figure of life, renewal, and empowerment.

In contemporary feminist movements, Lajja Gauri has been embraced as an emblem of female autonomy and bodily freedom, resonating deeply with ongoing struggles for reproductive rights, gender equity, and resistance to patriarchal oppression. Her resurgence is not merely a revival of an ancient symbol but a testament to the enduring relevance of the sacred feminine in addressing the challenges faced by women today.

This study contributes to academic discussions on gender, spirituality, and cultural representation, while also serving as an inspirational resource for ongoing efforts to uplift and honor the diverse contributions of women. The Lajja Gauri, with her profound symbolism, continues to be a beacon of strength and renewal, offering timeless lessons for the fight toward a more just and equitable world.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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