

# THE *ABHAYA* GESTURE IN INDIAN ART. Visual Means to Invoke Divine Protection

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the main approaches in the analysis of artworks is to discuss the meanings of their individual elements. In the case of objects of Indian culture, many of the analyses focus on the iconography of divine images, especially since in the traditional Indian writings one can identify texts that specifically dealt with this topic (for example, *Brihatsamhita* of Varahamihira, *Vishnudharmottarapurana*, or *Agnipurana*<sup>1)</sup>). Primarily the objects of interest here were attributes and gestures, explained in detail in relation to beliefs, cultural narratives, etc. Moreover, when examining individual images, starting with the earliest stone sculpture, it is easy to notice a great emphasis on a thoroughly thought-out composition. In the visual layer, this often equals to a combination of various symbols aiming to transfer a specific message to believers. Some deities are easy to identify thanks to this language of symbols, especially when figures carry unique attributes or are depicted in a particular way (with multiplied body parts, special body marks or clothing and jewellery). On the other hand, one may indicate a certain group of items or symbols that are shared. Then, if gestures are discussed, obviously many

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<sup>1)</sup> The examples of critical editions of the manuscripts of those texts are: *Bṛhat-samhitā* 1981, *Viṣṇudharmottara-purāṇa* 1994, *Agni-purāṇa* 1966.

more of them should be considered common, shared by many characters. One of them is definitely the *abhaya* gesture, which became so popular in early religious sculpture that it can almost be perceived as an obligatory element of a divine image. Seema Bawa, a researcher of early Indian art, explained the gesture as illustrating protection and care offered by a deity, and also considered it to be a determinant of divine status – i.e., distinguishing the figure of a divine women from a mortal.<sup>2)</sup> It should be noted, however, that the gesture was used in many representations, not necessarily of divine figures, because, for example, it was also included as a permanent component of the Bodhisattvas and the Buddha images. Its meaning and prevalence were briefly defined by, among others:<sup>3)</sup> “Abhayamudrā (Also called *śāntida*.) A gesture (*mudrā*) which dispels fear because the presence of the divinity gives reassurance and protection to the devotee. In this *mudrā* the palm and fingers of the right hand are held upright and facing outwards. The *abhaya* and *varada mudrās* are the earliest and most common *mudrās* depicted on Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina images.” Indeed, the earliest sculptures may serve as evidence of its validity, and as long as the state of preservation allows identification of this gesture, it can be seen in both male and female deities, especially Yakshas, Nagas, various spirit deities, as well as in many gods who became key figures in the Hindu pantheon. However, as Stutley points out, not only this religion, but also other two main traditions – Buddhism and Jainism – made this symbolic gesture one of the most fundamental when creating religious representations. Besides, other, minor traditions also used it in their visual sphere. It is also significant that the alternative name of this *mudra* is “*śāntida*” (as reported by Stutley), for this compound literally means “causing tranquility or prosperity”<sup>4)</sup>. Probably due to the power to dispel fear, it was adopted from the very beginning in the visualisation of the supernatural world, the figures of deities, or exceptional persons (teachers, spiritual guides, deified heroes). Possibly it naturally met the needs of believers in the depiction of certain characters. In this article, I would like to focus on this function of images and the messages conveyed, which are embraced in the topic of welfare, protection, and support of believers in regulating

<sup>2)</sup> Bawa (2013: 156, 158).

<sup>3)</sup> Margaret Stutley (2003: 1).

<sup>4)</sup> *Abhaya*, on the other hand, as given in the Sanskrit dictionary (Monier-Williams 2005: 60) – means “unfearful, not dangerous, secure”, but also is explained as “absence or removal of fear, peace, safety, security”. Monier-Williams 2005: 1064.

the emotion of fear in the face of challenges and important life events. Due to the great popularity of the gesture, my study concentrates on selected representations of ancient sculpture.

## II. THE EARLIEST AND UNIVERSAL GESTURE

Among statues that attracted the attention of researchers – both for their large size and for being considered the earliest confirmed shrine cult objects in the historical period – were the Yakshas, most often referred to as *genii loci*. In a few examples, the *abhaya* gesture can be discerned due to the traces of the raised right hand. One of them is the so-called Yaksha of Patna stored at Indian Museum, Kolkata, dated to 3rd-2nd BCE. The second is the Yaksha named Manibhadra, found in Pawaya (Gwalior), dated 1st BCE, both described, among others, by Bachhofer,<sup>5)</sup> or Misra.<sup>6)</sup> An interesting cult object is the so-called Yaksha from Bhita, aka Chaturvyuha (State Museum, Lucknow, No. 56.394, 166x51 cm), dated to the 2nd century BCE,<sup>7)</sup> whose identification would be difficult, mainly due to its state of preservation. Nevertheless, the distribution of the male figures on the statue on four sides indicates it was intended as a shrine object, as it was viewed from all sides (circumambulated). The figures make this gesture, so they clearly acted as protectors of devotees and were worshiped, among others, for that purpose.

In another type, equally popular in ancient sculpture, the so-called Linga of Bhita stands out (Fig. 1, State Museum, Lucknow, No. H.4, 81x131 cm), an enigmatic monument. Those who had studied it<sup>8)</sup> interpret the combination of many heads in one pillar as the five-headed (*panchamukha*) *linga*. Yet, it should be noted that the upper part of the statue does not feature the head alone, but a fragment (bust) of the two-armed figure presented (the head is not preserved, only strands of hair are visible on the back). The character's right hand makes the *abhaya* gesture, and the left holds a water vessel. This set of attribute/gesture is repeated quite often, also in later centuries than those described here, very characteristic of Agni – e.g., in an object identified as Agni/Athsho (National Museum Delhi, No. 71.276), dated to the 1st–2nd

<sup>5)</sup> Bachhofer (1973: 9, 46, Pls. 10, 62)

<sup>6)</sup> Misra (1981: Pls. 24–26).

<sup>7)</sup> Joshi (1972: 115–116, Figs. 45–48).

<sup>8)</sup> E.g. Joshi (1972: 99–101).

century CE<sup>9)</sup> or in the stele with Agni in Government Museum Mathura (No. 43.3048), dated to the 3rd century CE.<sup>10)</sup> However, it is also an element of the image of serpent deities (Nagas), which similarly to Yakshas, were widespread in the earliest stone sculpture. Many artefacts are dated to the first centuries CE. The *abhaya* gesture can be spotted in the objects kept in various collections,<sup>11)</sup> and it seems that it offered the easiest way to link the universal message of care with the deity. Obviously, this cult was common due to the belief in the deity's agency primarily in the agricultural context – i.e., patronising the crops, providing adequate water resources (Fig. 2). The god Balarama, who is famous primarily for being Krishna's brother, is closely related to the serpents' cult. It is likely that his origins lie in the vegetation cult, and various types can be distinguished among the images identified as Balarama. In one of them, he is depicted as a human figure under a serpent canopy over his head. He is two-armed, with the right hand making the *abhaya* gesture, with an object recognised as a plough in his left hand.

Starting from the above-mentioned objects, when looking at various representations, both bas-reliefs and statues, it can be noticed that the gesture of removing fear prevails. It is read as a clear message to the devotee that a deity placed in a shrine offers reassurance and protection to the attending people. The gesture is repeated in diverse iconographic types. Most often in early sculpture there are two-armed figures, less often four-armed ones, and the *abhaya* is a gesture of the right hand. In the left, on the contrary, there is usually an attribute or it rests on the hip, holds the hem of garment, or makes the *varada* gesture (giving of boons), also explained above. Among the sculptures created for the needs of the Buddhist tradition, some narrative scenes may be enumerated, illustrating specific stories, in which the Buddha puts the hand in *abhaya* gesture. The earliest examples are dated from the 2nd century CE<sup>12)</sup>. They show a large variety of characters, prob-

<sup>9)</sup> Ashtana & Gupta (1999: Fig. 45).

<sup>10)</sup> Misra (1981: Fig. 5).

<sup>11)</sup> Serpent deity in the Government Museum Mathura, No. 30.204, Shaka/Parta period, or No. 439, 3rd CE; National Museum Delhi, No. 68.136, 2nd century CE; State Museum Lucknow, No. 47.122, 2nd century CE.

<sup>12)</sup> For example, the so-called Indra's Visit, illustrated in two objects, a relief in the Government Museum Mathura (No. M.3, 2nd century CE), published in: Rhi 1994: Pl. 14; and a relief in Indian Museum Kolkata (No. M.7, 2nd century CE), published in: Sharma 1987: Pl. 2.

ably due to the popularisation of cult images, and thanks to the production of workshops, as a larger part of the community was involved in the founding activity, many more objects survived than from the previous centuries. At the same time, the size of objects decreased significantly. Still, the *abhaya* gesture was the most common, a kind of a compulsory element, although new gestures and attributes also began to appear, which proves the great imagination of craftsmen and creators, looking for new solutions. Since the gesture was used despite evolving images of deities and introducing new components, it must have been essential, important, and best addressing the needs of devotees. Its power can be explained by certain measures of transferring human activities, customs and behaviours to the cultural narratives and stories about gods or deified heroes, while recognising the fear or desire to protect themselves against the interference of harmful creatures as the main motivation of the authors. The search for appropriate allies in protective practices, activities aimed at removing obstacles, preventing unfortunate events threatening the well-being of the family are the basis of many such stories or cults. Presumably, members of ancient communities were interested in engaging in protective activities and invoking divine protection. The objects I selected with focus on the *abhaya* gesture offer an approach to artworks as important elements of the human world. They may illustrate needs felt by the inhabitants of ancient India, concerns and ways of coping. Such cult images can also be used to formulate the assumption about the real role of universal factors (such as human fear of resources, welfare, offspring, survival) in the formation of beliefs, and thus in the invention of cultural products. The creators of such depictions put great emphasis on the importance of achieving certain human goals, based on the most essential needs. Supernatural beings assisted humans in their pursuit of these goals, while their worshipers tried to control the dangers that threatened the success of such endeavours. The worshipping could also involve apotropaic procedures.

Looking at the composition and the assumption that the role of images was to communicate certain content, it may be useful to include the concept of “strong image” here. It involves the possibility to select an appropriate repertoire of symbols, or means of expression, that guarantee the effectiveness of the representation<sup>13</sup>. This usefulness can be associated with the measurable impact of the image on the recipient – e.g., evoking an appro-

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<sup>13</sup> Jązwierski defines the effectiveness of a work, its effect by considering how it

priate perception, referring to a specific concept, triggering an emotional state or, going further, giving a sense of security, reducing the emotion of fear or feelings of weakness, etc. The opinion of Sperber<sup>14)</sup> may be recalled as he commented on the cult of deities. As a rule, it is impossible to confirm rationally the effectiveness of cult images, but thanks to symbolic interpretation, deities can be treated as signals, whose interrelations (more on a semantic level) help society to illustrate itself for its own needs. Therefore, it is necessary to consider what makes the image strong in the case of the analysed objects. Perhaps its strong components are responsible for power – symbols, essential elements, the most meaningful gestures and attributes, whose physical form relates to strong implications, helping the viewer see and discover “something” more. The fear removal gesture is special in this regard. At the coding level, thanks to the creation of a uniform structure of key importance for the power of a given representation, this structure plays one more important role. It provides the recipient with an appropriate framework of perception so that he does not get lost. The strength lies in the used language of art, which assists, through artificiality, in attaining cognition and recognition of the true nature of things, which is, in the case of Indian art, extremely important in the contact between a devotee and the image of spirit-deity. Reception may consist of experiencing<sup>15)</sup>, imagining, but also provoking specific reactions at the levels of perception, affect, and behaviour. After visiting a shrine with such a strong image, a devotee may experience a sense of real support from the world of supernatural beings and cope with difficulties.

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works, i.e. whether it moves the viewer, and therefore whether it is strong or weak in this sense. Jaźwierski (2018: 44).

<sup>14)</sup> Sperber (2008: 15).

<sup>15)</sup> Przyłębski (2005: 101–102) refers to Dilthey’s understanding of experience, in which it should be treated as certain acts of consciousness, primary to external objects (the so-called phenomenality principle), where objects are given as contents of consciousness. Thus, on the one hand, they are a way of participating in the world, they are the closest, direct, and on the other hand, they mediate in its research, they are the basis of understanding. Participation leads to an experience at the root of a given articulation as an expression of life, complex and multi-faceted motivations and thoughts, which should be the goal of research in the humanities.

### III. VISUAL MEANS TO INVOKE DIVINE PROTECTION – CONTINUATION OF EARLY SYMBOLISM

Over time, very popular symbols associated with water, fertility, abundance (water vessel, lotus, or other plants, moneybag) were added to the basic symbol, as the *abhaya* gesture may be considered. In the case of a female deity named Matrika, an object identified as a rattle or, perhaps, a meaningful “attribute” like an infant or older child were also included. The latter makes the message of the *abhaya* gesture special. The iconographic category of Matrika can be divided into many subtypes (e.g., individual and group images, female deities depicted with human or animal faces), and the number of preserved sculptures indicates a considerable extent of this representation. Thanks to it, and also due to a small figurative form of votive tablets, cult images probably came into closer contact with devotees. Appealing to a protective deity in case of a need to secure matters related to offspring could be crucial for a family seeking support during pregnancy or just before birth, and when a child suddenly fell ill (especially being vulnerable in the first days of life). Such images could help to deal with overwhelming fear. The fear dispelling gesture in contact with such beings’ representations could therefore assure the follower of the support of their supernatural powers. As for the Matrikas and their companions, however, it is important to note a clear division into two groups of deities. The first one includes those that are clearly ascribed auspicious action and benevolent character, while the second one included those of a malicious nature. Still, in both groups some elements are constant – e.g., the *abhaya* gesture made with the right hand, or a newborn placed on a pillow in the lap and supported with the deity’s left hand. Among the examples of the Matrikas venerated generally for prosperity, fortune, wealth (including a large number of children), there are several individual images and many votive panels with group representations. Their message is auspicious, which is also emphasised by the company of a male Yaksha-type deity<sup>16</sup>). It should be noted that although not every woman holds a child (Fig. 3), all of them make the *abhaya* gesture, often having such attributes as a lotus or a cup. The right hand is also raised in the same gesture by a male

<sup>16</sup>) Looking at the preserved panels, it can be stated that in a couple, the male deity always sits on the right hand of the woman. If the group includes more than one female figure, it is no longer a permanent rule, because the left, extreme part of the panel may be occupied by a female figure, and the extreme right part by a male figure.

deity, or an elongated object is additionally held in it; the left hand, resting on a prominent belly, usually holds a vessel. It can therefore be assumed that abundance-related benign deities are also naturally endowed with protective powers. Writing a specific message into images is based on the principle of combining such elements with each other. The relief at the Indian Museum, Kolkata (No. 9282/A 25038, 2nd century CE, h. 20 cm, w. 41 cm)<sup>17)</sup> also gives a fairly good opportunity to observe an extensive scene in which a group of 7 worshipers is illustrated. Those in the first row carry flowers with stems, and, apart from one woman, put their hands in a gesture of honouring and greeting. The inclusion of lay figures in the immediate vicinity of deities strongly supports the interpretation of such representations as scenes from the shrine. The goddess holds a round object, the god has a cup, and they both raise right hands in *abhaya*. The devotees who approach them get exactly what they expected, including the bestowing of wealth, as well as the protection clearly guaranteed by their gestures. A very good and well-preserved example is No. C.30 (Government Museum Mathura, 2nd-3rd CE, h. 16.5 cm, Fig. 4). We see a corpulent man who is probably holding a radish<sup>18)</sup> and a vessel; to his left sit two women with their right hand in *abhaya*. In the left hands, the first one has a flower stalk, the second a vessel.<sup>19)</sup> A similar depiction is given by a panel in Government Museum Mathura (No. 14.410, 2nd century CE, 17 cm), but four deities were gathered, 3 female<sup>20)</sup> and 1 male. Their distinctive features are the *abhaya* gestures, the vessel and the lotus, on both sides of the pedestal on which the deities sit, there are devotees making the gesture of salutation. The interpretation of the above examples may be complemented by an individual image of a male deity who, apart from the *abhaya* gesture, is equipped with a moneybag carried in his left hand<sup>21)</sup>. Misra identifies him as Kubera, the deity of wealth. The male figure in the Matrikas' panels is also

<sup>17)</sup> Maheshwari (2009: 167–169) believes that female deity shall be identified as Hariti, Chakrabarti (2006: 37, 112, Pl. XXX) that as Lakshmi.

<sup>18)</sup> The image described as Kubera (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, No. M.1975.11.4.S, dated to the Gupta period), published by Pal (2003: 100, Pl. 62) contains this attribute identified as a radish, which is to be used as a meat substitute, or as a symbol of fertility.

<sup>19)</sup> Agrawala (1949: 182).

<sup>20)</sup> Agrawala (1949: 190–191) recognises them as Hariti, Bhadra and Lakshmi.

<sup>21)</sup> It is published by Misra (1981: Pl. 3), but does not mention the collection number, only its name: Government Museum Mathura. The details of the image have been preserved exceptionally well here.



recognised as this character. In this group of figures, therefore, regardless of whether the god is alone or in company, it seems most appropriate to indicate as the primary function the prosperity and protection message, which has been symbolised by the attributes and specifically by the *abhaya* gesture.

Group panels, as the sculptures from Mathura prove, only feature female figures, who are presented almost identically – the right hands are raised in the *abhaya*, the left hands resting on their laps or holding some attributes. The lotus is the most recognisable one, the rest are hard to discern due to poor preservation. Goddesses can form groups of different numbers, starting from a sitting pair (Government Museum Mathura, No. 529, 2nd century CE, h. 11.5 cm), but one can also find 3 standing (Government Museum Mathura, No. 1024, h. 13 cm), or 4 Matrikas sitting under the canopies with the cross tables placed in front of them possibly for offerings (Philadelphia Museum of Art, No. 1965.152.2, 2nd century CE). This is probably a sign of the need to accumulate auspicious deities who have different functions but all stay in the area of prosperity. The *abhaya* gesture is common and universal, as evidenced by the Matrikas sculptures mentioned so far, but it should not be considered exclusively for them.

Female deities whose individual images are preserved in the collections, and who very often have similar attributes and the same gesture, are sometimes associated with the Matrika type (most of them have a human head). The key meaningful element of their representations is the child depicted in two ways: 1. lying on a tray/ in a cradle on the lap, or 2. held in the arm, sitting on a knee. For example, a seated figure<sup>22)</sup> that, except for the child, holds a lotus stem in the other, left hand (Government Museum Mathura, No. F.26, h. approx. 23 cm, Fig. 5) and makes the *abhaya* gesture with the right hand. A small table was placed in front of the deity. Thanks to the exceptionally good state of preservation, the details of the baby lying on the lap are visible. This way of depicting a recumbent new-born recalls another Matrika with feline head, kept in the Government Museum Mathura (No. 61.5331, 2nd century CE). Her right hand is raised in the *abhaya* gesture, while the left supports a cradle with a baby. To her left, in 2 rows, devotees are shown holding their hands in salute. It is therefore an important example to illustrate how

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<sup>22)</sup> Agrawala (1949: 189) suggests the identification Hariti or Bhadra for this character, and thus connects it with the patronage of abundance and fertility. According to Joshi (1987: 160–161, 165, 167), the deity is Lakshmi, and the set: a cradle with a baby in the left hand and a lotus – means that she should be interpreted as “Lakṣmī as *māṭṛkā*”.

a malevolent character who is believed to have a potentially harmful effects on babies, especially new-borns, is worshiped as recommended, to ensure that the child is properly protected. Some necessary information in this regard is provided in the *Mahabharata* passages (3.219), in stories explaining the origin and nature of the Matrikas – characters playing a role in the birth of Skanda. They made a request that he would actually be their son, and they could function as the Matrikas – Little Mothers – so that, duly honoured, they would become nurses and caretakers of other children. Besides, they wanted to accompany Skanda, acquire the ability to assume various forms and devour offspring. Skanda fulfilled their wish by declaring that until a human child reached the age of sixteen, they could take diverse forms and harass children with diseases. Then they would receive all due honour and the happiness they desire because they would not be ignored by devotees. Probably for these characters a bimorphic type of representation was developed – i.e., one with an animal head and female body. The gesture symbolising reassurance was also used in the case of a Matrika with a bird's head (Allahabad Museum, No. 109, 2nd, 12.8x10.8 cm). This specimen is particularly noteworthy, because the figure of a child is well preserved here, although it is not as small as in the objects described above, and sits on the woman's left knee. He touches her bare breast with his left hand. At the same knee, one can also see the head of a smaller, mutilated figure, possibly a worshiper or another child.<sup>23)</sup> The animal type is also illustrated in individual representations kept at the Government Museum Mathura No. 799 or No. 1210, where a goat-headed goddess may be identified, and the common significant elements are the child and the *abhaya mudrā*.<sup>24)</sup>

Obviously, in the sculptures mentioned, the significant elements are, apart from the gesture, the child and the lotus. They can symbolise both the fertility of nature and women, but also strongly emphasise the major values of the community that created these cult objects. The gesture of protection directed at the believers in the presence of their offspring, especially in conjunction with the Matrikas personifying certain fears of people of life and health of children, has a special meaning. It is also worth mentioning that the collective representations of various animal-headed and human-headed deities was common. They are also identified as Matrikas, usually depicted as sitting in a row, making the *abhaya* gesture with their right hands, while their left

<sup>23)</sup> Deva & Trivedi (1996: 45, Pl. 112).

<sup>24)</sup> Agrawala (1950: 67–68), Shah (1952–53: 25–26), Bawa (2013: 180).

hands very often carry babies, either infants on a tray, or older children in their arms. Their number varies, with five figures often arranged in a row (e.g., Government Museum Mathura, No. G.57, No. 53.2331, 2nd century CE), but there can also be seven (Russek Collection, No. 571, 2nd century CE, h. 18.5 cm, l. 51 cm) or even thirteen (Russek Collection, No. 683, 2nd century CE, h. 15.5 cm, l. 64 cm). At the left end of the row of goddesses stands Skanda, also raising his right hand in the *abhaya* gesture.<sup>25)</sup> These panels likewise show worshipers standing or kneeling with their hands in a gesture of salutation, next to the deities or in the bottom section. Joshi<sup>26)</sup> believes that the number of devotees may be from 2 to 7 (as in the Indian Museum, No. A. 25038, for example) and interprets their presence in sculpture as an illustration of such deities' close relationship with ordinary people. The way of presenting female deities – i.e., assigning them animal faces<sup>27)</sup> – and the connection with Skanda, who is presented in medical texts as harmful Graha<sup>28)</sup>, actually leads to the interpretation of these representations as scenes of worship, and even propitiation of supernatural beings. There are numerous panels with deities arranged in rows (more often sitting) in various configurations, which would indicate their considerable importance in cultural narratives and in religious practices. It is certainly noteworthy that the deities without exception have been endowed with the most common and recognisable gesture of protection. Mann<sup>29)</sup> is of the opinion that the character of the entire presentation of the row of Mothers with babies is benevolent, their function is protective (expressed by making the *abhaya* gesture), and all this is thanks to appropriate worship. I believe that this interpretation should be supplemented – i.e., the animal elements of the representation in a basic way recall that the figures illustrated initially were threatening and wanted to be honoured, especially if one refers to the *Mahabharata* fragments as a clue. If their protective function is considered, it must, however, be subject to certain conditions. Granoff referring to Book 3 of *Mahabharata* suggests that “the demons of childhood disease are often described as either animals or having

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<sup>25)</sup> Bautze (1987).

<sup>26)</sup> Joshi (1987: 160).

<sup>27)</sup> Bautze (1987: 27) describes them as “(...) goats, boars, buffalos and other such mammals.” Joshi (1987: 159), on the other hand, identifies the heads of an eagle, parrot, lion, tiger, bull, or all heads as bird-like (1972: 57).

<sup>28)</sup> *Sushruta Samhita, Uttarantra*, ch. 27, 28.

<sup>29)</sup> Mann (2012: 119).

animal heads.”<sup>30)</sup> However, I think the Matrikas accompanied by the Yaksha-like deity are unequivocally benign. The human-faced Matrikas in these panels with Yaksha do not necessarily carry children,<sup>31)</sup> they are also linked with other attributes, thus perhaps with other meanings. Still, the *abhaya* gesture is repeated and invariably appears to be the obligatory element.

Skanda-Graha as a threatening malignant star (Graha) or demon and at the same time the cause of diseases of infancy as a companion of the Matrikas, usually illustrated using a repetitive pattern, in a standing position, with a characteristic attribute – a spear – in the left hand, with his right hand in the *abhaya* gesture. Even in a metal pendant, excavated in Sonkh (Government Museum Mathura, No. SO I 173), depicting the deity in a couple with feline headed Matrika, both deities make the *abhaya* gesture.<sup>32)</sup> It can be concluded that even such small items, probably serving as protective everyday equipment, present such details. These features and deities equipped with appropriate gestures/attributes (the male figure has a vessel/cup; the female figure holds an infant in the same way as the Matrikas in the panels) argue in favour of linking the images with medico-ritual ceremonies aimed at counteracting threats and securing successful reproduction. It is also evidence of the possible connection of Skanda-Graha with another character that may threaten the health of a child and/or with one who is asked to take care of him, or offer a blessing upon his birth. It is an example of the creation of a strong couple of deities delegated to act in the medical and religious spheres, and perhaps the image gets a slightly different message than the Matrika-Yaksha pair. Certainly, it is also worth paying attention to the infant, which is held by a woman in her left hand, because she makes the *abhaya* gesture with her right hand. The message about the function of the image is clear, as well as the very action of the supernatural being imagined in it. I believe that this type of representation clearly reveals the purpose of producing cult images. In the context of fear of life and health of offspring, they were most likely used to protect the interests of a family, creating tangible evidence of worshipping these supernatural beings. The introduction of many characters builds a comprehensive picture, where Skanda could not be ignored, as before

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<sup>30)</sup> Granoff (2003: 188–189).

<sup>31)</sup> To my best knowledge, only the No. C.8 in Government Museum Mathura and No. IM A25083/9282 at the Indian Museum Kolkata depict a female deity without a child in her arms/lap, but holding a small object.

<sup>32)</sup> Joshi (1987).

in mythical stories he was given the role of the leader of the divine army and the son of Shiva, he was one of the most harmful Grahas, the personification of childhood diseases. Perhaps the connection of Skanda with Agni in the stele (Government Museum Mathura, No. 40.2883, approx. 49 cm high, Fig. 6), illustrating both deities with their right hands raised in the gesture of dispelling fear and offering care, is associated with the message of the relationship in which Skanda is defined as the son of Fire God.<sup>33)</sup> Importantly, characteristics of Agni relate the deity to procreation and children. Sinha<sup>34)</sup> cites verses from the Vedas which show Agni as the addressee of the requests for offspring<sup>35)</sup>, for protection from evil forces, especially those that lie in wait for women<sup>36)</sup> and children<sup>37)</sup>. Washburn Hopkins,<sup>38)</sup> however, still looks for the deity's origin in these primal beliefs and fears: "Skanda is a composite god. First there is Agni Kumāra, the 'ever youthful' with whom first Skanda was formally identified. On the other hand, as son of Agni, Skanda was identified with all burnings (fevers) and other afflictions." In addition to Mann's works, this is more evidence to present Skanda as a harmful being in a medical context. But the role of Agni in beliefs is also emphasised, so the linkage of deities in this stele can be considered in a medical sense, and therefore definitely with their protective functions in the foreground.

The *abhaya* gesture was given not only to the sitting goddesses holding a baby, one example might be an object in the Musuem für Asiatische Kunst (No. I 10175, 2nd century CE, h. 24.2 cm) identified as Shri Lakshmi,<sup>39)</sup> probably due to the lotus held in the figure's left hand. It is not a child that is included here, but a female deity has a canopy above her head (like many human-headed Matrikas in group and individual representations), flanked by two smaller female figures, with a flower-umbrella behind the left one<sup>40)</sup>

<sup>33)</sup> Rangarajan (2010: 52).

<sup>34)</sup> Sinha (1979: 9–10).

<sup>35)</sup> *Rigveda's* verse 3.1.23 in Griffith's (1896: 318) translation: "As holy food, Agni, to thine invoker give wealth in cattle, lasting, rich in marvels. To us he born a son, and spreading offspring. Agni, be this thy gracious will to us-ward."

<sup>36)</sup> *Atharvaveda's* hymn 8.6.

<sup>37)</sup> *Rigveda's* hymn 10.162.

<sup>38)</sup> Hopkins (1986: 229).

<sup>39)</sup> Härtel & Lobo (1986: 61–62).

<sup>40)</sup> Several bas-reliefs show standing figures of a woman holding a slightly larger lotus, often described as a lotus umbrella. Some researchers associate such representa-

and a *chauri* in her right hand. Such items indicate the inferior status of companion characters, as well as the role of the goddess. Before her, there is one more figure partly preserved, probably a worshiper. It is, therefore, a different version of the scene in the sanctuary, in which the goddess, related directly to abundance and fertility, offers protection not limited only to children, but addressed to every worshiper who turns to her.

The standing pose was also assigned to the goddess Ekanamsha, depicted in the Vrishni Triad together with her mythical brothers Krishna and Balarama (e.g., Government Museum Mathura, No. 67,529, h. 19 cm). Although the *abhaya mudra* in ancient sculpture is one of the most commonly used elements of divine images (not only in the Mathuran art of the Kushana period discussed here), linking it with this goddess also becomes special. She is one of characters functioning in the area of child protection. Due to her connection with the cult of Krishna and inclusion in the stories recorded, among others, in *Harivamsha*, her role in saving the baby Krishna during his birth is emphasised.<sup>41)</sup> This spirit-deity tells her follower not to be afraid, drives away his fear and ensures him that she will take care of even the unborn child, just as she did in the case of her brother Krishna. Additionally, Ekanamsha has the same element above her head as the above-described Matrikas and Shri, which in the literature is most often called a canopy or an arch. In addition to the *abhaya* gesture, it is probably also employed to reinforce the message of the deity's readiness to extend protection over the devotees. Perhaps more emphasis is placed on the connections of this deity with fertility when using this symbol.<sup>42)</sup>

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tions with the goddess Vasudhara, as fish and/or vessels are also a part of an image. In Government Museum Mathura: No. 27.28.1695, 2nd century CE; No. 1583, 2nd century CE; No. 18.1411 (e.g., Joshi 1966: Pl. 34; Bawa 2013: 155, Pl. 3.3.1). What is also common to these images and what is worth emphasising is the placement of a canopy/arch above the head of the character, exactly as it was depicted in Matrikas' reliefs.

<sup>41)</sup> Joshi (1967–1968); Srinivasan (1981); Couture & Schmid (2001).

<sup>42)</sup> Vemsani (2016).

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#### IV. CONCLUSION

The above overview aimed at providing evidence of the use of one of the most widespread but also significant gestures in ancient Indian art. For the creation of iconographic types of individual deities, it could also be useful in the sense that the cult images at their base were to make an image of a supernatural being that, having no original material form, suddenly received it. Therefore, it was necessary to carefully develop a form that best suited both the characters and functions of the deities and the needs of the followers who decided to fund the image and place it in their environment. Not surprisingly, the *abhaya* gesture was considered an image feature with great potential. I believe that one of the main and most popular qualities of a deity, regardless of specialisation, has been and still is the provision of protection and help. The visual means to invoke divine shelter and reassuring viewers/users of a work that a deity is watching over them are here based on a simple gesture with clear message. Group representations, such as the panel in the Government Museum Mathura (No. 34.2520, 2nd century CE, h. 19 cm, w. 25 cm, Agrawala 1949: 142), are again an interesting proof of the universality of this gesture. The artefact shows four standing figures with their right hands in *abhaya mudra*. The deities are identified as follows: Shiva-Ardhanarishvara, Vasudeva-Krishna, Gajalakshmi, and Kubera. This relief groups some figures specialised in securing various human interests and operating in different areas, so it varies slightly from the above-mentioned deities delegated to patronise abundance and fertility. However, it argues for two important conclusions: 1. the connection of deities in one image strengthens its message and impact – i.e., it helps to secure concurrently as many cases as possible in the most comprehensive and readable form; 2. the *abhaya* gesture is appropriate for any deity, regardless of specialisation, and this also proves that it was not only the happiness, prosperity, wealth and healthy progeny that mattered to the followers. The use of symbols allows, even the contemporary viewer, to trace how attempts were made to develop a universal form that influences the user in the intended way, strengthening his sense of agency, dismissing his fear. For this purpose, I believe, the *abhaya* gesture was included in the image. Dispelling fear, bringing relief, may be supportive in overcoming adversity. It would be reasonable to borrow from

Srivastava<sup>43</sup>) the category he invented “Auspicious Divinities in a Group”<sup>44</sup>) to name the deities according to their function, especially when joined in couples or larger groups like, for instance, in the Matrika-Yaksha panels. On the other hand, Matrikas and Grahas put together may prove the belief in the influence of supernatural beings decisive for effective reproduction, due to the mental state of a woman associated with the enormous burden linked with giving a birth of a healthy child, preferably of male gender, and giving it good care. The message and assurance of protection offered by the deity, which is invoked by the follower, and expressed here in the *abhaya* gesture, is strong and explicit in the case of every character, beginning with the Yakshas, which were used to create the earliest large-size cult images placed in shrines. The gesture of protection, however, acquires special significance when forming deities dealing with the protection of offspring.

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<sup>43</sup>) Srivastava (2011: 139).

<sup>44</sup>) Although the researcher uses it to describe much later depictions linking Gajalakshmi, Ganesha, Kubera, it seems to me that the main idea remains the same.



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1. Linga representing five aspects (Panchamukha), State Lucknow Museum, No. H.4, 131x81 cm, 2nd BCE, Bhita, photo © Agnieszka Staszczuk.



2. Naga Deity, University of Pennsylvania Museum, No. 29.64.5, 25x24x6 cm, 2nd-3rd CE, Mathura region, photo © Agnieszka Staszczuk.



3. Female Deity in the Matrika Type, University of Pennsylvania Museum, No. 29.64.12, 2nd-3rd CE, Mathura region, 18x22.2x5.5 cm, photo © Agnieszka Staszczuk.



4. Abundance and Fertility Group, Government Museum Mathura, No. C.30, 2nd-3rd CE, Mathura region, h.16.5 cm, photo © Agnieszka Staszczuk.



5. Abundance and Fertility Deity in the Matrika Type, Government Museum Mathura, No. F.26, 2nd-3rd CE, Mathura region, h. approx. 23 cm, photo © Agnieszka Staszczyk.



6. Skanda with Agni Government Museum Mathura, No. 40.2883, h. approx. 49 cm, photo © Agnieszka Staszczyk.