

# UNKNOWN FIGURINES FROM INDIA:

## Votive Offerings for the Goddess Maui/Mariai

By Bengt Fosshag

*In the last few years, small figures carved in wood cropped up now and again, usually representing worshipping women, but also female water bearers, mothers, or pregnant women. These pieces are made in the simple traditional manner so as to be affordable for the lower-income strata of the population. And it is precisely the implied simplicity that makes these figures attractive.*

When Indian art is mentioned, most people tend to think of the art of the temples and the Mogul dynasties. Usually, little importance is attached to tribal art or folk art.

The materials used in tribal and folk art, such as wood, for example, have a short life span. The objects in question are worthless after their use for ritual purposes and some of them are subsequently intentionally destroyed (Mode, 1984: 25). The tribes are under pressure from the Hindu society that surrounds them and often the works of art required are manufactured by Hindu handicrafts castes on behalf of the tribal community.

Today, economic and political exploitation leave little room for artistic creation. Outstanding artworks are rare and often kept concealed from foreign eyes.

Nevertheless, quite astonishing art works keep on cropping up, such as in the middle of the 20th century, when the lively painting of the women in Mithila in Bihar first came to light (Mode, 1984: 32) or the famous Kondh bronzes that became known in the mid-1980s. The bronzes are carefully kept protected in baskets, away from the scrutiny of outsiders. As a consequence, they had been forgotten, even though they had first arrived in Europe at the end of the 19th century. Their more recent discovery has to do with the Kondhs' conversion to Christianity. For them, the figures then became worthless (Mallebrein, 1993: 464-507). Not much later, the marvelously carved Santal lutes and simi-

lar musical instruments made by other indigenous groups in India were first discovered by the West, although V. Elwin had already emphasized their importance in his 1951 monograph on *The Tribal Art of Middle India* (see also Fosshag, 1992: 78-84 and 1996: 62-72).

In the last few years, small figures carved in wood cropped up now and again, usually representing worshipping women, but also female water bearers, mothers, or pregnant women. These pieces are made in the simple traditional manner so as to be affordable for the lower-income strata of the population. And it is precisely the implied simplicity that makes these figures attractive.

Dealers tend to term such figures « dolls » or « putli idols », more or less implying that they are toys. In fact, all too often we refer to things that we do not understand as toys. After all, for example, in Orissa, toys are first offered to the gods at the Prathama tribal festival and then become consecrated toys. Yet this profane purpose is secondary (Fischer, 1980: 132). Only a hundred years ago, commentators thought that the Kondh at the end of a marriage procession bore metal toys for the husband. In actual fact, these were valuable parts of the dowry for the bride that no one ever played with (Mallebrein, 1993: 492-498; 1998: 64-87; Mode, 1984: 26).

In the surrounding region of Chandrapur in the State of Maharashtra in Central India the wooden beam constructed like covered shrines and covered with tiles (fig. E) contains

Fig. 1-2-3-4:  
Maui Sculptures,  
slender type with  
ill-defined breasts.  
Slanting head-  
dress, long skirt.  
H.: 23 cm.  
Slanting head-  
dress, long skirt.  
H.: 24.5 cm.  
Arrow-shaped  
headdress, legs.  
H.: 29.5 cm.  
No headdress,  
praying hands  
with intimated  
fingers or skirt  
with rounded  
structure.  
H.: 21.5 cm.  
Photo M. Ehrhart.

around the statue does not necessarily mean that the stone has been broken and glued together again, but may be due to the natural erosion of an oxidized sedimentary stratum.

### Conclusion

When a collector is interested in an art work, one of his primary concerns is to establish its authenticity. This is based on several subjective factors (experience, pedigree, expert opinion) to which are progressively added, depending on the importance of the work, criteria based on a number of scientific studies: stylistic analysis, thermoluminescence or carbon 14 dating, a dendrochronological study, spectroscopic or microscopic analysis, etc. Alongside these technical tests, which focus mainly on the visible parts of the work or on a few samples, CT scanning is an absolutely non-destructive test that has the advantage of describing the inner state of the object, examined this time as a whole.

CT scanning – or computed tomography – can therefore provide valuable information about an art work's background by:

- revealing its contents,
- showing how it was made,
- clearing up doubts about its general condition,
- generalizing the findings of one-off analyses,
- revealing the nature and extent of restoration work,
- supporting a conservation report,
- detecting fakes.

CT scanning is thus a valuable aid for people with various interests in art, such as collectors, dealers, art experts and historians, museum curators, anthropologists, ethnologists, paleontologists, stringed instrument makers, and scientific archivists, but it can also be of use in a wider context, in restoration workshops, auction rooms, legal offices, insurance companies, and even forensic science laboratories.

### Inner Vision

An exhibition of CT scans of art works, entitled « Inner Vision » will be held at the Belgian Antique Fair from 6 to 15 February 2004.

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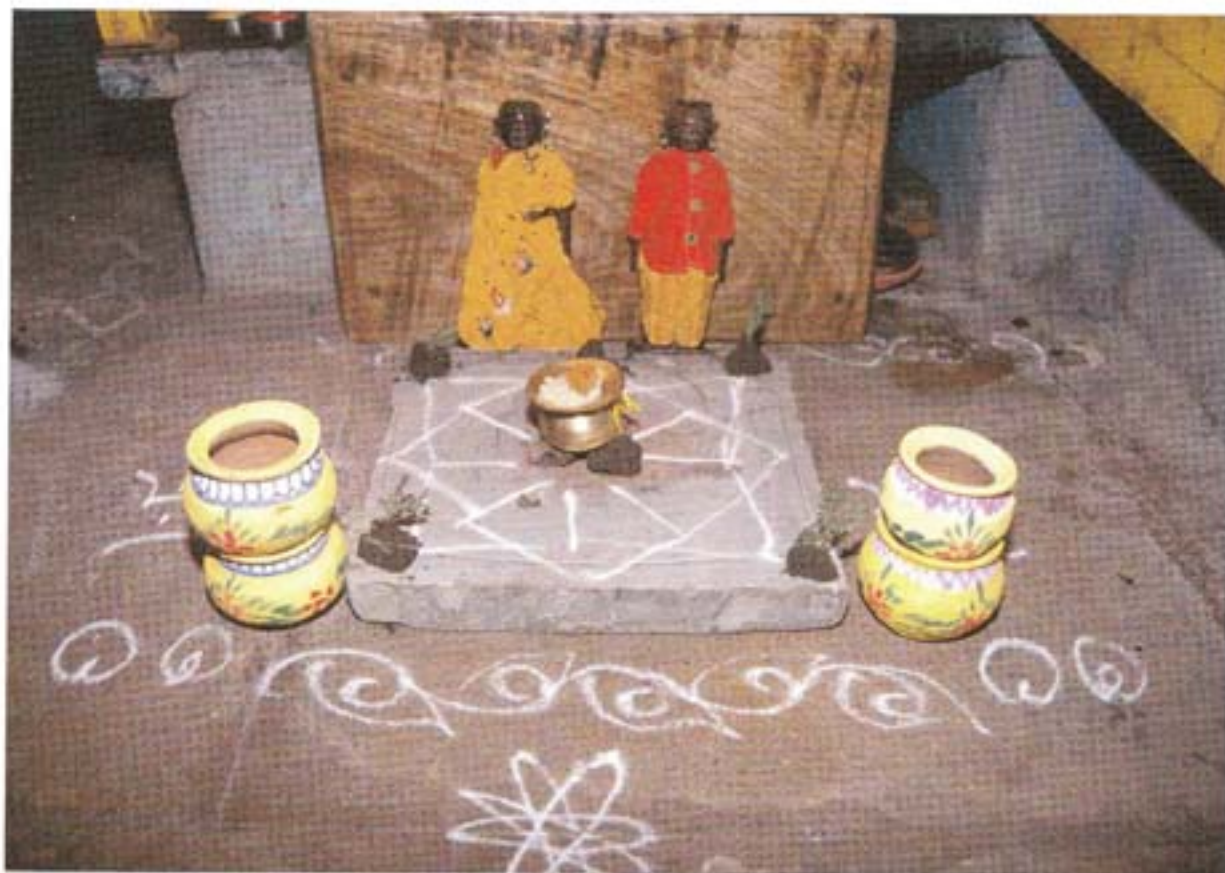




Fig. A: Votive offerings for a tree goddess, Chandrapur District.  
© Photo C. Mallebrein.

Fig. B: Mauli representations, Chandrapur District.  
© Photo C. Mallebrein.

Fig. C: Two figures in an open shrine beneath a tree, Chandrapur District, Maharashtra.  
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wooden sculptures about 80 cm high carved from wood logs. Short bent wooden legs bear long torsos, whereby the figures hold their hands in a position of worship. They wear short skirts, divided into segments with rounded edges at the bottom. Their heads are often topped with a headdress which often can take various forms: triangular, rectangular, round, or stepped. Some of the sculptures bear a water pot on their heads (fig. 23, 24, 25). Only the front of the sculptures is carved, whereas the rear has been left untreated. These wooden sculptures are also placed next

to stone reliefs of the goddesses and like these decorated with red paint and fabric placed around their hips (fig. B). Alongside the finely hewn stone figures, the wooden figurines seem truly archaic. The transient nature of wood means that the latter are constantly being recreated on the basis of the one that went before and thus they are probably closer to centuries-old figures than the stone figures made by members of the hand-craft castes.

With these wooden figures, the legs are concealed beneath long skirts. Before them stand



ladders and their ornamental headdress often bears a lattice of woven bamboo from which fresh mango leaves can be hung. The ladders are intended to help the gods reach the families and fulfill their wishes more swiftly. Ant hills can be seen in front of the sculptures (fig. F). Here, sacrificial offerings have been placed that were then eaten by the ants or possibly by snakes. On the ground stand round vessels in which resin is burned. Ant earth can be discerned on the skirts of the sculptures.

In her book *Die Anderen Götter* (« The other gods »), published in 1993, Cornelia Mallebrein writes (pp. 122-123): « In almost every village in the southern district of Chandrapur one can find a hut erected specially to house the wooden votive statues of the Goddess Mauli/Mariai, called *mata ka thana* or "place of the mother". Not only the

Fig. 5-6-7-8:  
Sculptures in  
worshipping,  
stance broad type.  
Intimated head-  
dress, long skirt,  
ill-defined breasts.  
H.: 22 cm.  
Triangular head-  
dress, long skirt,  
no breasts.  
H.: 22.5 cm.

No headdress,  
oval breasts,  
long skirt, with  
carved pattern.  
H.: 18.5 cm.  
No headdress,  
breasts formed  
like a bodice,  
long skirt.  
H.: 20.5 cm.  
Photo M. Ehrhart.



Fig. 9-10:  
Sculptures with  
lower arms angled  
upwards.  
Heavy, angular  
form, residues of

blue paint, ill-  
defined breasts.  
H.: 19.5 cm.  
Intimated head-  
dress, nose or sty-  
led hair, legs sup-

ported by a rec-  
tangle, ill-defined  
breasts. H.: 20 cm.  
Photo M. Ehrhart.



wooden statues of the goddess, but also those of her male partner Pujalin are placed in it; he is considered her brother. Maulimata is felt to be very strong and powerful. So it is an easy task for her to avert the misfortune that may be falling over a family or conversely to inflict it on the family. She protects primarily against illnesses such as smallpox, cholera, dysentery and eye diseases, not to mention animal sicknesses. And if she feels neglected she may chose to inflict the same on a family. The goddess is worshipped above all on Sundays, when a little turmeric, some red kunkum and oil is daubed on her forehead. Childless women make her the promise (navas) that they will erect a wooden statue in her honor if she fulfills their wish for a child. Maulimata is honored at all weddings: a piece of cloth from the wedding dress is tied around here — into which the bride has placed rice,

and then tied with the wish is made that the goddess grant her fertility. On the occasion of the pola festival, she is offered buffalo toys made of clay. In dry periods water is poured over her statues to persuade her to send rain. She also receives offerings in thanks before the fields are sown and after the harvest. Goats, sheep and chicken are sacrificed, and blood sprinkled over the fields. Rice steeped in blood is sown in the hope that it will ensure the grain grows copiously.

The goddess Mauli/Mariai combines the virtue and dangers of the seven sisters (satbahini), seven goddesses who are revered in Nagbhir near Chandrapur. They are closely related to diseases that are experienced as « heat ». This explains why the statues of the goddess Maulimata are made from the wood of a nimba tree (*Azadirachta indica*). The wood is considered to have curative properties and

Fig. 11-12-13-14: Sculptures with arms pointing straight downward.

Intimated head-dress, semi-circular round breasts, skirt. H.: 20.5 cm. Head tapers sharply, pierced ears, sari intimated, reverse somewhat carved, ill-defined breasts.

H.: 19.5 cm. Wreath on the head, drilled eyes, neck jewelry, sloping shoulders, narrow cloth over the hips, vulva intimated, ill-defined breasts.

H.: 25.5 cm. Fully rounded, semi-circular breasts, strongly worn down but still visible, long cloth from the waist down, strongly carved rear section.

H.: 22.5 cm. Photo M. Elrhart.





Fig. 15-16-17:  
**Motherhood.**  
 Choli and skirt,  
 plait on the rever-  
 se, breasts only  
 intimated.  
 H.: 21 cm.  
 Choli and skirt  
 with intimated  
 folds, semi-circu-  
 lar breasts, long  
 plait on the back.  
 H.: 22.5 cm.  
 Mother with five  
 children, patterns  
 skirt, long plait,  
 powerful round  
 breasts.  
 H.: 25.5 cm.  
 Photo M. Ehrhart.

the tree's leaves are felt to be cooling. Irrespective of membership in the caste or tribe involved, all inhabitants of a village venerate the goddess; if an epidemic breaks out they all join together in a communal rite and pray for help. »

Many of the small and large representations of Mauli resemble one another. Figures 1 and 2 are almost identical with fig. C. In all cases, there is no mouth above the pronounced chin. In fig. 4, there is an intimation of the fingers of the folded hands, Figures 3 and 4 both show the short bent legs, and figure 4 has the folded skirt also to be seen in fig. C. The asymmetrical head dress in fig. 1 and 2 can be seen in Mallebrein 1993: fig. 64.

For the small wooden figures described here, a variety of dark hardwoods are the usual choice. Although the wood is very hard, often the statuettes miss a nose, ears or arms. Many

of the faces have been worn down to a point where they reveal no detail. It is not known how this strong but essentially unintentional wear occurred.

Since the small figures are not found in shrines, we can assume that they are only placed before the goddess for a short time, or perhaps solely used for devotional purposes within the home, placed there as votive offerings.

Above all, most of the figurines with a worshipping stance appear to have been purposefully designed after the same pattern. Only the front of the statues has been shaped, with the obverse left in a board-like state. A backward line of wood runs from the elbow to the headdress — in the case the statue has any —, divided by the incisions for the upper arms, ears and ear rings as well as head ornamentation. From the elbow, the line





Fig. D (a and b): Koya ancestral stele in a forest clearing in the Malkangiri District. It represents the deceased. Only special members of the village receive such a commemorative pole.  
© Photo C. Mallebrein.



of the wood runs horizontally from the two upper arms across the stomach usually to culminate as a triangle or rhomboid in the reverent stance of the carved hands. The breasts tend to be bereft of close definition and are only suggested. Here, we can make a distinction between post-like (fig. 1 & 4) and a slightly broader section of wood (fig. 5 & 8). The former can be located primarily in the Chandrapur district.

Some of the figures may conform with the traditional pattern but differ in terms of details. For example, fig. 7 has pronounced

horizontally-positioned oval breasts as is common in figures from Gujarat. The face is youthful. On fig. 8, the breasts are represented by a triangle running from the waist to the shoulders almost like a bodice, with the principle of the sideways strip of wood being abandoned.

In terms of patina, the figures differ greatly alongside the grayish brown smoke patina (fig. 6) some pieces are coated with a thin transparent film (fig. 5), while fig. 1 features smooth/polished and coarse sections close to one another.

Fig. E: Shrine for the goddess Mauli/Marial, Chandrapur District.  
© Photo C. Mallebrein.



Fig. F: Inside a shrine, Chandrapur District.  
© Photo C. Mallebrein.



There are also figurines such as figures 9 and 10 in which the lower arms angle upward. They still have flat backs, but otherwise the shape is somewhat different to that of the statues just described. There are also figures with arms that simply hang downwards. Figure 11 has semi-circular rounded breasts and a flat back. Figure 12 is made of a branch as solid as ivory, and the rear reveals a certain degree of work.

The back of the female figure (fig. 13), carved by a layperson, has also been shaped somewhat, while that of figure 14 is completely

rounded. Two semicircular-shaped breasts can be vaguely discerned, and surprisingly the rear section has been carefully carved. The figure bears a cloth that hangs down from the hips between its legs. These last few figures can definitely be attributed to other regions or social strata.

Illustrations of Tirupati wooden dolls or Tirupati koya bommalu are by no means rare, named after the city that is a pilgrimage destination, they are usually manufactured in neighboring villages. Originally, in the early 20th century, the craft of carving was exer-

cised by the Visvabrahma community, which made extremely simple figures with few decorative patterns. Today, more elaborate « dolls » are also valuable. The « dolls » are sold as souvenirs to millions of pilgrims who attend the shrine of Lord Venkateshwara in Tirumala. Here, "souvenir" does not designate something taken home as a memento, but items with a strong retroactive religious function. The way figures that the pilgrims take home with them can continue to be used is apparent from figure B: in the center of a shrine stand « bride and bridegroom » dressed in clothes specially sewn for them. Some stones and a pot are placed on the stone slab set on the ground in front of them, with four more pots in front of this. The entire setting is decorated with white line drawings, such as

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women throughout India draw in order to protect their houses and families. This tradition is encountered only among rural communities (komti caste; [vaishya]). A ritual for the well-being. In the midst, on a heap of cow dung, is a pot containing milk. As part of the rite, the milk has to flow from the pot. Then rice and cane sugar is placed in a bowl. And then everyone says that in the future the food in the family should flow as richly as the milk of a cow. Around the objects, tulsileaves or dhurva grass is placed in the cow dung. The two figures are a man and his wife, the ritual resembling that of a wedding, and the two pots on the edges are vessels depicting wealth/fullness (symbols of good luck). Red sandalwood is the material used here, a wood with a deep burgundy brown hue that grows far darker with age. In the past, san-

talín or red dye was extracted from it (Jain & Aggarwala, 1989: 204).

These figurines stand on small plinths, and show no signs of wear (see also Mode, 1984: fig. 368, 369). Like various gods, they also represent riders and women with children. The older items tend to have been deliberately rubbed off to such a point that they can no longer stand on their rounded bases. Sometimes, the bases have completely disappeared or only half the figure remains. It would not be wrong to assume that the wood

Fig. 18-19: Stele to motherhood. Mother with a child, strongly worn down, chips removed at the level of the



**mother's head and stomach; a female figure on the reverse represents the vulva at birth. H.: 27.5 cm.**

Photo M. Ehrhart.

was rubbed off to be used as powder, be it for cosmetic, ritual or medical purposes. Be that as it may, in Alleppey in the state of Kerala, wooden votive offerings are said to have been used to heal the sick, when the figures are used to slowly rub the diseased parts of the body, they are said to radiate an energy that heals the illness (Huyler, 1994: 196).

The representation of mother and child is widespread throughout India, and encountered in the full gamut of techniques and materials. The theme recurs in many forms,

be it on the « Santal marriage litter » or its musical instrument the dhodro banam, or even cast in bronze in the idiosyncratic depiction of maliah kondh. The examples shown here are strongly reminiscent in iconographical terms strongly of the images of Tirupati, but in formal terms attest to different makers (fig. 15 & 17). Unlike the Mauli statues, the rear of these figurines has been carved. Both the mothers long braids and the leg of a child are visible.

The wish for a child is no doubt especially emphasized in the stele (fig. 18), the reverse of which shows a woman, presenting her vulva and the act of birth (fig. 19). The Bison Horn Maria erected columns that depicted similar squatting women.

All these mother figures have been strongly worn smooth and in many instances damaged. Chippings have been cut out of the stele and on the mothers side, at the level of the head and the stomach.

There are not only representations of birth and motherhood, but also examples of pregnancy. The stomach of the fully-carved female figure bulges up over her loincloth (fig. 21). On the reverse she boasts a marvelous broad that runs down to her hips. This figure was originally painted in blue, as can be seen from the residues of pigment. In figure 20 only the slightly rounded lower body and the supportive position of the hands indicate pregnancy. In rural communities, water often plays an important role and is a symbol for fertility per se. The female water carrier shown here has been partly turned (fig. 23 & 25) and then carved. The sculpture with the two pots is particularly striking regarding the red oil paint used for its face. The face of figure 24 is only intimated by the eyebrows and nose, whereas that of figure 23 is ornamented with metal jewelry in her nose, and at her waist, arms and legs. There is again a wide range of different representations of this motive, with some water carriers being naked, others wearing a cloth round their hips, or being completely clad. The hair is at times tied in a knot or pinned up, as in the style of wearers of saris.

At present it is usually impossible to establish where these figures originated and for what purposes they were used, as most have passed through various hands before finding their way into the market.

If we compare figure 27 with figure 12 from Elwin (1951), then we could perhaps identify it as a young girl from the Bison-Horn Maria in Mokhpal, Bastar. Both have a typically heavy hair knot. In other tribes, the knots are smaller and round. Both wear short cloths



around their hips, with a fold at the front. They are otherwise naked. In figure 13 we could also perhaps see a Bongo girl. The typical element here is the silhouette, slanting from the neck to the shoulders and not to be encountered in any of the other sculptures discussed here. The Bongo girls wear so many necklaces and neck rings (often, they go over their chins) that this would be the typical silhouette. Only the neck ring that goes over their mouth is intimated here, the remainder simply depicted as merging with the sloping shoulders. They wear their hair cut short, and wrap ribbons round their heads, something perhaps represented by the figurines small bun. A narrow strip of cloth is set around the waist, which has been slipped upwards on the statue in order to be able to depict the vulva (Elwin, 1951: fig. 16).

If we want to get away from the domain of speculation then we must hope that in the future a greater amount of scholarly material will become available. After all, academic interest lately increased in favor of tribal and folk art. If there were more intensive research (as has been conducted for bronze figures, for example) then we could probably also look forward to surprising discoveries regarding the Indian wooden figures.

I would like to thank Dr. Cornelia Mallebrein for her expert advice and the permission to publish her field pictures. My thanks also go to Michael Ehrhart for producing the pictures of the figurines.

Fig. 20-21-22:  
Pregnancy.  
Semi-circular  
breasts, hands  
supporting the  
slightly bulging  
stomach,  
« attached arms  
and legs ».  
H.: 19.5 cm.  
Fully rounded  
figure, richly  
carved necklace,  
protruding stom-  
ach, arm and foot  
rings, powerful  
plait held by  
collars, residues of  
gray/blue color.  
H.: 21.5 cm.  
Relief with  
pregnant woman.  
H.: 17cm.  
Photo M. Ehrhart.



Fig. 23-24-25:  
Female water  
bearers.  
Fully rounded,  
turned water ves-

sel, pierced ears,  
metal jewelry,  
notched necklace,  
unclad.  
H.: 24 cm.

Reverse slightly  
carved, face  
intimated only by  
raised eyebrows  
and nose, hair

knot, residues  
of red paint.  
H.: 22 cm.  
Turned, face and  
hair knot carved,

attached arms lost,  
residues of red  
pigment.  
H.: 20.5 cm.  
Photo M. Ehrhart.





Fig. G (a and b): Village goddess near Gulbarga. The seven sisters visit illnesses upon those who annoy them, but can also heal sicknesses. The sisters are so dangerous that their shrine has been built outside the village at the edge of a road. They also protect the animals in the fields.

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Fig. 26-27: Female figures

Naked, holds a solar symbol in front of the stomach, broad, powerful nose, plait on the back. H.: 26,5 cm. Cloth round the waist, heavy, large hair knot, breasts only intimated. H.: 24 cm.

Photo M. Ehrhart.



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