

Plan of Hirapur temple, Orissa

SIXTEEN kilometers from Bhubaneswar, on the road to Pipli and Puri, a diversion to the left leads to the Hirapur Yoginis. The local population refers to it as the Mahamaya Temple, an apt name, as the ten-armed Mahamaya is the presiding deity of the shrine.

The shrine itself is a circular structure in sandstone with a very narrow opening facing east. Its inner wall spans close to 76 feet in circumference and stands at a height of 77 inches. The structure has no covering dome. In technical parlance, it is hypaethral, or open to the sky.

The inner wall is adorned with exquisite statues of the *yoginis* carved out of dark, shining chlorite stones, placed in oblong niches and spaced equidistant from each other. It is likely that this marvellous shrine, undoubtedly a tantric *peeth* (a place of initiation and practice), was commissioned by Hira Mahadevi, the queen consort of Shanti-Kara-II, during the rule of the Bhouma-Karas in the ninth century AD. *The village Hirapur takes its name after the queen who is believed to have been a patron of the shrine. Apparently she also constructed a large pond there for the convenience of ritual ablutions. With an ancient structure standing at its

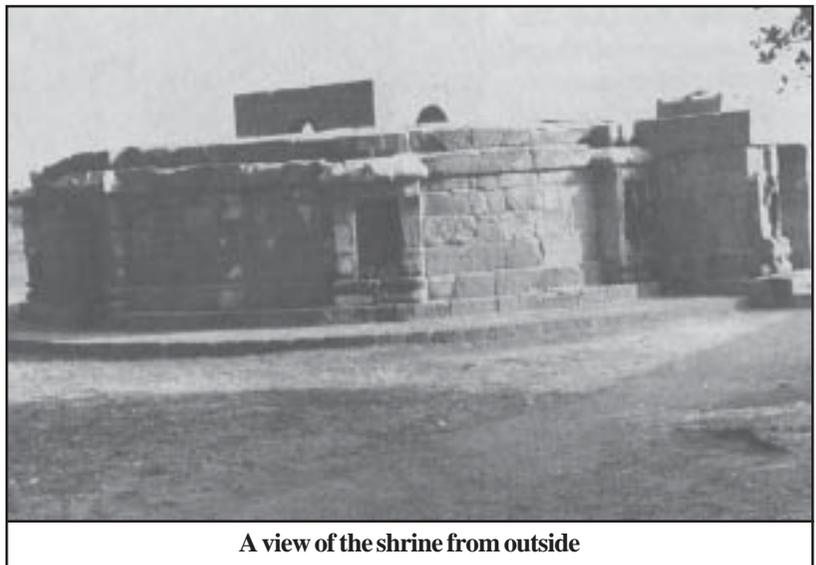
Shiva and His Consorts The Yoginis of Hirapur

○ Prithwiraj Misra

centre, the lovely pond is still there.

There are sixty *yoginis* on the inner wall encircling the *devi mandap* (an elevated platform for the performance of tantric rituals). The *mandap* is adorned ' with chlorite statues of ten-armed Swacchanda Bhairava (Blissful-fearsome Shiva) and the four-armed Ekapada Bhairava (Shiva standing on one leg), both with *urdhvalinga* (erect phallus) and both facing east towards the narrow entrance. A similar pair of statues faces south. The western and northern faces of the *mandap* contain three more chlorite *yoginis*. One of the original 64 *yogini* statues is missing, having been stolen by thieves.

Discovered only as late as 1953 by historian K.N.Mahapatra, the *yoginis* are endowed with physical plenitude and marked beauty. They have exquisite hair-dos, often tied into elaborate chignons, secured with jeweled chains and pins. Their faces are delicately carved, often with gentle alluring smiles. And yet, there are variations to this theme. Chamunda, for example, with her drooping breasts, shriveled abdomen, sunken eyes and a garland of human skulls is truly horrifying. There are also Vighneswari, the elephant-headed *yogini*, and Varaahi, the sow-headed *yogini* - the juxtaposition of their monstrous heads



A view of the shrine from outside

and fulsome figures challenge the viewer's amorous gaze.

Those who have seen them usually agree that of the two *yogini* shrines in Orissa, the *yoginis* at Hirapur are far more aesthetically pleasing than the ones at Ranipur-Jharial. The Hirapur *yoginis*, standing at an average height of 22 inches, exhibit an artistry of a superior order. These figures are varied and no one statue is the same as the other. The voluptuous form is common to all *yoginis*, with the single exception of fierce Chamunda. The *peeth* at Ranipur-Jharial in Bolangir district, though much larger in dimension and more awesome in its impact, lacks Hirapur's consummate artistry. The Ranipur *yoginis* are all uniformly large and they are depicted in more or less the same postures. In the words of one observer they are "monotonous, tiresome..."²

At Hirapur, the *yoginis* are shown in a variety of postures, each standing on a different creature as her identifying vehicle. The *yogini* shooting an arrow is Veera-Kumari, the huntress, who stands on her *vahana* (vehicle), a hog. The *yogini* on a parrot is Kamakshi, the parrot being the *vahana* of Kama, the god of amorous love. There is the beautiful Mayuri on a peacock; on the tortoise is Yamuna, and on the lizard is Gauri. Experts have so far identified nearly 34 *yoginis*, including Indrani, Nandini, Ganga, Sitala, Kaumari, Maheswari, Brahmani, Tarini, Gandhari and Agnihotri. Most of these figures have two arms, while some have four. Only Mahamaya is ten-armed and her sculpted form is larger than the rest. She is none other than Shakti herself, manifested as Durga, whom the Gods endowed

with supreme energy. She is Durgeshnandini, the slayer of the demon Mahisasura, who called upon the energy of the *yoginis* to help her eliminate demonic forces.

The narrow entrance to the *peeth* is not dissimilar to the passage of the *yonis*, constricted at the opening, but widening into an open circle (a womb) that embraces *urdhvalinga* Shiva Bhairava at the centre. A perusal of some of the texts written by experts leaves one surprised by the total absence of any such observation of the structure in terms of *yonis*-*linga* union, even though the shape quite naturally suggests this.³

The shrine's outer walls bear images of gracious ladies sculpted in sandstone. These icons could be of queen Hira Mahadevi and her retinue, standing on smiling heads,

under royal umbrellas. There is a similar figure of a nymph standing on a head, shaded by an umbrella and holding wine in a human cranium. Intoxication and tantric sexual practices were inseparable. In fact, one of the chlorite *yoginis* is identified as Surapriya (fond of wine).

The rise of tantric traditions in Orissa was the basis of the supremacy of Shiva. Countless shrines were built between 600 and 1000 AD, in honour of the god worshipped in the form of a *linga*. Orissa was the land of Shiva temples par excellence. Shiva's beauty, his love of intoxication and his preoccupation with love-making were celebrated in Oriya inscriptions. For instance, one reads, "the God whose matted locks of hair are touched by the soft rays of the moon with his tender hands (beams) resembling the clean fibres of lotus stalk... Locks in which the particles of ashes are separated by the overflowing water of the Ganga... Locks loosened by Parvati's grasp during love-making."⁴

During this period, most of the rulers of Orissa were ardent worshippers of Shiva. Copper plate grants of the era commended the pursuit of eros and gloried in the King as Kama. The Oriya rulers envisaged their sovereign domain as the 'pleasure garden' of the God of Love. One such charter of their capital city, aptly named Yayati Nagar (Yayati, the narcissitic king in the *Mahabharata*, who wanted to remain forever young in order to remain attractive to women) reads, "Where the enjoyment of love is being continuously intensified and still more intensified by the



Yogini Veerakumari

close embraces of lovers by which fatigue is removed... the ardent young couple show their skill in the various processes of conjugal enjoyment, with their eyes dilated and their minds subdued and fascinated by amorous thoughts.”⁵

‘This personification of the King as a second Kama,’ writes Donaldson, “and the increasing erotic nature of the iconography and the secularisation of activities within the temple complex certainly reflect the increasing popularity of Tantric cults.”⁶

The history of the early Orissa dynasties is obscure and there is still a great deal of uncertainty about the ruling families that appeared on the royal stages between the seventh and the tenth centuries. But there is absolutely no disagreement amongst the scholars that Shiva reigned supreme in temple and textual iconography of the period. Shiva is seldom depicted alone; he is most often depicted in union with Shakti. Shiva usually takes the form of Bhairava, and Shakti, the form of Bhairavi (Chamunda, Chandi). The worship of Chamunda was particularly popular during the Bhauma period, especially along the Prachi River, an area permeated even now with tantric worship.⁹ Chandi images are numerous and are worshipped under various names - Balichandi, Harachandi, Charchika, Mangala, Jagulai and Ugrachandi. The age was permeated with tantric cults, and the realm’s sovereigns were extolled as incarnations of Kamadev, and their queen consorts were depicted in their alluring forms in the walls of shrines and temples.

Chronologically, the Pasupata and Kapalika tantric sects preceded



The elephant-headed yogini Vighneswari

the Shakta order, the last of which ascended in the later centuries of the previous millenium. These practices were all systematised in texts of the period, and took place under the close supervision of the Guru. In fact,



Tantra implies system. A practice could not be called tantric unless it was conducted systematically, and carried out in the presence of the guru, whose blessings were crucial to the success of the *sadhaka*, or practitioner. Tantra does not juxtapose *bhoga*, or enjoyment, with *mukti*, salvation, of the soul. On the contrary, the tantric view is that both enjoyment and liberation are interfused. But this in no way means that the way of the tantric is merely hedonistic, though there are texts that might even suggest that it is.⁷ The *sadhaka* has to be in a higher state of evolution through the practices of yoga, in a position of great detachment, before the guru would induct him or her into the ‘charmed circle’ of the *mandala* and *maithuna*, coitus.

There is hardly any doubt that the central aspect of tantric communion is sexual intercourse. The male and female practitioners mentally identify themselves with Shiva and Shakti respectively. In prolonged sexual union, the couple realizes *mahasukha*, or supreme bliss.⁸ This union of opposites, this overcoming of two polar aspects of creation, and arriving at non-duality, at Oneness, is the true core of tantric endeavour.

The *peeth* at Hirapur comes as no surprise since the concept of the Shiva-Shakti union lies in an earlier conception of the cosmos as a dynamic duality between *purusha*, or generative matter, and *prahriti*, or consciousness, ever in opposition, ever uniting, ever splitting to reunite, ad infinitum. This concept introduced a new way of thinking about the world. Purusha, or the male, can never be an active

agent of creation. Prakriti, or the female, composed as it is of three basic qualities, or *gunas* -*sattva* (purity), *rajas* (activity) and *tamas* (torpor, lethargy, inertia) - is the basis of generative action. It is the female energy, *shakti*, that brings forth creation and movement. The male counterpart *purusha*, Shiva, is the still point, dormant and immobile, yet the crucial catalyst only when in union with Shakti, *prakriti*. As Adi Shankaracharya, in his *Saundaryalahiri*, says of Shiva - "On his own he has not even the power to move."

The foundation of this system of thinking is attributed to Sankhya philosopher Kapila, a sage who preceded the Buddha. In Richard Garbe's words, "for the first time in the history of the world, the complete independence and freedom of the human mind, its full confidence in its own powers were exhibited. It is the most significant philosophy that India has produced."¹⁰ The spirit-principle, *purusha*, and the nature-principle, *prakriti*, interact continually.

Having thus contextualised the creation of Hirapur in terms of its philosophical background, we return to the significance of the *yoginis* themselves. Who were they? Why did Mahamaya have to call upon their energies? Why would Shiva have suffered without their presence? And finally, why did they number 64, the square root of which is eight, and what does this have to do with the origin of the *yoginis* in their 64 forms?

It was during the period of the *Puranas* (4th to 7th centuries AD) that Shaktism attained unprecedented popularity. The *Puranas* - *Vayu*, *Brahmanda*, *Vishnu*, *Markendeya*, *Matsya*, *Vamana*, and *Kalika*, to name an important few - all mention the

importance of Shakti in exalted epithets. According to one of the oldest, the *Markendeya Parana*, Shakti in the form of Devi is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. She is born out of the concentrated energy of all the gods to destroy the demon Mahisasura and his powerful associates. The same *Purana* also narrates the origin of the *yoginis*. The story unfolds that the *matrikas*, mothers of Shiva's son Kartikeya, or *yoginis*, helped goddess Durga to slay the demon Raktabija, who possessed the curious power of regeneration. As the blood oozed from his wounds and fell to the ground, a demon sprang up from every drop. The *yoginis* were called upon to drink the blood before it fell to the ground and thereby prevent the powerful Raktabija from multiplying. In this way, they finally destroyed him.

A similar tale is told in the *Matsya Purana*. Shiva and Parvati (Shakti), while in union, were disturbed by the demon Andhaka. A fierce battle between Shiva and

Andhaka ensued. Shiva finally discharged his powerful weapon,

pasupata, and slew the demon. From Andhaka's dripping blood more demons sprang into life. A helpless Shiva, unable to quell the demons, created the *yoginis* to drink the falling blood. Once Andhaka had been slain, the *yoginis* (wives of Shiva), bored by their subsequently mundane existence, began a campaign of destruction by assuming terrifying appearances. Shiva sought help from Narasimha (Vishnu), who in turn created more divine *yoginis* to pacify the unruly ones created by Shiva.

In the *Kalika Purana*, there is a story about Mahamaya Yoganidra. Mahamaya created two demons, Madhu and Kaitaba, out of Vishnu's ears, and sent them to fight the god. The outcome of the battle was a truce in which the demons demanded to be slain by Vishnu, but only on land. Vishnu, in the form of Varaha (the boar), plunged into the ocean to raise the mountain on which he slew the demons. After this, Mahamaya decided to help create stable material out of the great flux of water upon which Vishnu lay. She busied herself with the creation and



Early morning women worshippers at the shrine

sustenance of living beings.

In the *Puranas*, stories regarding the *yoginis* are usually linked with the slaying of demons, be it Raktabija, Andhaka, Madhu or Kaitaba. Some demonic trait seems to have been perceived as a serious threat to tantric practices. This could not be more clearly suggested than in the story about Shiva and Parvati. Tantric texts have provided some clues concerning the identities of these demons. It is clearly stated in a number of texts, particularly in *Kaularnava Tantra*, that only when the tantric form of sexual union overcomes all traces of lust, does it acquire the powers of supreme bliss and rejuvenation. The demons then are demons of lust, of concupiscence. The fact that they spring up with such ease from drops of blood indicates that this demonic force tends not only to be powerful but also immortal, and quite capable of overwhelming the *sadhakas* despite all their weaponry. To annihilate these demons, an energy of a different order is called upon, a force which is feminine in nature and takes the sixty-four forms of Shakti.¹¹ □

Notes

1. There is uncertainty regarding the chronology of the rulers in Orissa. K.C. Panigrahi in his *Chronology of Bhoumakaras & Somavamsis* thinks both the dynasties ruled contemporaneously, the Bhoumakaras in Utkal (coastal Orissa) and the Somavamsis in Kosala (upper regions of the Mahanadi river). Both K.C. Panigrahi and S.N. Rajguru in *Inscriptions of Orissa: Vol.1* are of the opinion that the Bhaumas began their rule around the middle of the 8th Century. Accordingly, they place Shantikara-II's rule around 850 AD, the time when the tantric *peeth* at Hirapur was consecrated. Pandit Binayak Mishra in his *Orissa Under the Bhauma Kings* places the dynasty between 660-790 AD, and the rule of Shantikara -II and Queen Hira



A view of the shrine from inside

Mahadevi between 720-790 AD. I think it is safer to accept the former chronology. Vidya Dehejia in her *Early Stone Temples of Orissa* thinks the Bhauma rule began around 736 AD.

2. Charles Fabri: *History of the Art of Orissa*

3. Regarding the shape of the shrine, Vidya Dehijia's contention that the circularity has something to do with Buddhist (stupa) symbolism, is way off the mark. See her preface to *Yogini Cult and Temples : A Tantric Tradition*. Even Thomas Donaldson in his monumental *Kamadeva's Pleasure Garden: Orissa* seems to have ignored this aspect of the *yogini* shrines altogether.

4. Quoted in S.N. Rajguru's *Inscriptions of Orissa Vol - I*

5. Quoted in Donaldson's *Kamadeva's Pleasure Garden*

6. Lakulisa was the revered guru of the *Pasupata* tantric order. His seated *urdhvalinga* images are present in the outer walls of the temples Parsurameswar and Sisireswar (Circa seventh-eighth century AD). It is around this time that the images of the *saptamatrikas* (seven seated images of the mothers of Kartikeya) also make a prominent appearance in the iconography of these temples. These Shakti images are of Brahmani, Maheswari, Kaumari, Vaishnavi, Indrani, Varahi and Chamunda. Later Bhairavi joined the seven to become *ashtamatrikas* (eight mothers). Amorous couples, *alasya kanyas* (indolent maidens) of seductive charm, and couples in coitus made their appearance on the temple walls. The other eminent guru of the time was Matasyendranath renowned for *Sahaja*

(easy, effortless) Tantrism. It is believed that he had some influence in the construction of the Ranipur - Jharial *yogini peeth* in Bolangir district of Orissa.

7. Two passages quoted from ancient texts by Handiqui in his *Yasastilaka & Indian Culture* of the Kaulacharis (Shakti as *Kula*, Shiva as *Akula*, the union of the two is *Kaula*) may encourage such a belief. *Yasastilaka* by Somadeva says, "One should, after indulging in meat and wine, worship Shiva with wine in company with female partner sitting on one's left during the rites: the worshipper is to play the role of Shiva united with Parvati and exhibit the *yoni mudra*." In another text quoted by Handiqui, the adherent of the *Kaula* way declares, "drink wine, enjoy women and go forward to salvation. The Kaulamarga is charming as its only requirements are a hot strumpet for wife, plenty of meat and wine and a pelt to serve as bed."

8. The *Kaularnava Tantra* says: "The world is made only of Shiva and Shakti. When separated they, strive to unite, when united *mahasukha* is the result."

9. As the crow flies, the Hirapur *yoginis* are located next door.

10. Richard Garbe: *Philosophy of Ancient India*. Vidya Dehejia however credits Isvarakrishna as the originator of the *Sankhya*. See her essay in *Devi* (Smithsonian Institute). M.Hiriyanna in his *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* writes, "The earliest book of authority on classical *Sankhya* we have is the *Sankhya Karika*, which is a work of fifth century AD. Roughly contemporary of Kalidasa." Vidya Dehejia, however,

thinks Isvarakrishna to be a first century thinker. Dr. Radhakrishnan in his *Indian Philosophy* regards *Sankhya* as a notable departure from what he called the “formalistic habit of the mind.” He lauds the system as it undermined “the foundation of supernatural religion by substituting evolution for creation.”

11. *Ayurveda* mentions 64 diseases that afflict the human body. It is possible that 64 yoginis represent these diseases as well as their cure. The mention of Sitala as one of the yoginis (causes and cures smallpox) is a pointer to this effect. *Kamasutra* recommends 64 positions for coitus. Most are yogic by nature, that is to say they demand that the bodies of the couple be supple and flexible in order to get into and enjoy the 64 positions. This number also makes its appearance in *The Laws of Manu*, Manu says if a *shudra* is found stealing he should be punished 8 times, a *vaishya* 16 times, a *kshatriya* 32 times and a *brahmin* 64 times ! Perhaps more relevant to us is that fact that early Shiva temples carried Shakti images in the form of *matrikas* (mothers), better identified as *saptamatrikas* (seven mothers) which included Chamunda. The seven were soon joined by Bhairavi, a fierce form of Shakti, to match the appearance of Shiva as *urdhvalinga* Bhairavas. Together the *ashtamatrikas* (eight mothers), also called *yoginis*, kept up their numerical expansion to match Bhairavas: 8 became 16, 16 became 32, and 32, 64. For 64 yoginis there were equal number of Shiva Bhairavas, a number crucial to the tantric cults of the era. Any one can say that 64 can double itself to 108, and that’s a possibility that tantric *mandalas* welcome. But double of 108? That has no relevance to the creation of Tantric *mandalas* (magic circles). The equation between Shiva and Shakti cannot go beyond 108. Why? The ancients knew it, and now modern chemistry offers us the great answer. The Earth herself, this Mother of us all, contains only 108 elements. It *cannot* accommodate more. Ancient tantra and modern science, how wonderfully they concur.

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Merge

(for my father)

*Babi, I am your mapmaker, the holder of
your atlas, the messenger of destination
or beginning. We are new cartographers,
shrinking California into simple dots with
squares, making artery roads to the heart
of the myth*

Babi, you never allowed me to give directions.
You refuse to trust signs, locks, neon lights,
all the things that sometimes show the way.

And you would not let me drown where I wanted.
You did not have me lie with strangers. You could not
see me leap out of planes, crash into cars. You would
not make me drive or swerve.

The theories of separation and distance are what
you know best. Circles are enigmas, but
you engineer infinities of parallels, eternal
sequences in perpendiculars, points of momentary
intersection. A surgeon of angles and radius,
no dangerous curves, you measure intimacies
in diagonals, straight lines that cut across but
do not join. Stay their own.

Stay your own, you said,
Keen on the special effects of math,
Lessons from love's biography. This
is what you taught me, Babi,
do not merge

Anurima Banerji